

# Innovations in Buddhist-Christian Encounters: Karl Reichelt's Contributions

by Terry C. Muck

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**H**ow does Karl Reichelt and his mission work with Chinese Buddhists fit into the overall scheme of 2000 plus years of Buddhist-Christian mission interactions?

This is the question I was asked to address for this three-day virtual celebration of Karl Reichelt's life and teachings. It is a welcome question, and one I relish digging into. I might as well be up-front about my respect and admiration for Reichelt's mission methods to Buddhists. In my judgment, he was far ahead of his time. Yet I am also realistic about the answer I can provide, an answer that must immediately be qualified by the recognition that Reichelt was just one man with little institutional support either at home in Norway or from the wider Christian community. He chose to focus his ministry to an elite segment of the global Buddhist community, well-trained Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhist monks who shared Reichelt's passion for genuine, respectful dialogue with adherents of another religion, in this case Christianity. This qualification means we must be extra cautious about generalizing mission principles from a relatively small sample.

Further, my answer must acknowledge the reciprocal nature of missions when it came to Buddhist-Christian interactions. Both Buddhism and Christianity are missionary religions. That means that when looking at any specific interaction, we must look for evidence of, and information about, both Buddhist *dharmadhatu*<sup>1</sup> and Christian gospel teaching. This reciprocal nature of Buddhist-Christian missions makes more complex not only the historical narrative of the events but also what appear to be the effects or results of the encounters. Certain additional questions must be asked. Who "won" the encounters? How was "winning" viewed by both participants? Were the effects short-term or long-term? How did these encounters confirm and/or change prevailing Buddhist-Christian attitudes toward one another?

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Finally, a word about resources available to us. Reichelt wrote a good deal about his mission work and his thinking on missions to Buddhists, writing aimed largely to Christian audiences. Since he wrote in Norwegian, however, non-Norwegian speakers like me must rely on Reichelt's work that has been translated into English as well as secondary sources in English. These resources are noted in footnotes to the text.

### Axial Age

Buddhism and Christianity have many formal similarities. They are both founded religions—that is, they trace their beginnings back to a single religious innovator: Gautama Buddha and Jesus Christ, respectively. And both Buddhism and Christianity are transcultural religions, that is, they are not tied to the culture in which they arose but have become world religions, adaptable to almost every culture they come in contact with across the world.

But many argue that the most important similarity between Buddhism and Christianity is that they are both products of the same historical time period, the Axial Age, a roughly six-hundred year period from 800 BCE to 200 BCE. In 1948 a German philosopher, Karl Jaspers, hypothesized that during this time period the world and its cultures and its religions began a process of change that can rightly be called one of the primary hinges of our collective history.<sup>2</sup> The change was originally noticeable in three major civilizations, China, India, and the countries around the Mediterranean Sea, what the ancients called *mare nostrum*, or “our sea.” The most important of the changes that occurred during the “axial” time (for our purposes at least) was the founding of what came to be called world religions: Confucius/Confucianism and Lao Tzu/Taoism in China; the Upanishads/Hinduism and Gautama/Buddhism in India; and the Hebrew prophets, Greek philosophy, and Zoroastrianism around the Mediterranean.

Readers will note that Gautama Buddha, who lived from 563–483 BCE, falls dead center during that axial time period, but that Jesus, who lived from circa 3 BCE to 30 CE, does not. Yet Axial Age theorists consider Christianity an Axial Age religion because the formative thinking on which Jesus focused in his life and teachings was Axial Age emphasis on Hebrew, Greek, and Persian philosophies. In a similar way, the whole world was eventually changed by this thinking as the influences of China, India, and the Mediterranean spread to all lands and cultures.

What was this thinking that changed the world so decisively? Jaspers' teaching can be summarized in three main points. First, Jaspers discerned that during the Axial Age, “in every sense a step was made toward the universal.”<sup>3</sup> It was not that a single religion or culture came to dominate the whole world; the teachings of the religions and the *weltanschauungen* of individual cultures endured, and became even more sophisticated. But the collective influence of the religions and cultures of China, India, and the Mediterranean became universal, both physically and temporally: “Mankind is still living by what happened in the Axial Age, by what it created and what it thought.”<sup>4</sup> It was not a single faith or culture that came to dominate, but a universal experience of the world that all men and women recognized in one another.

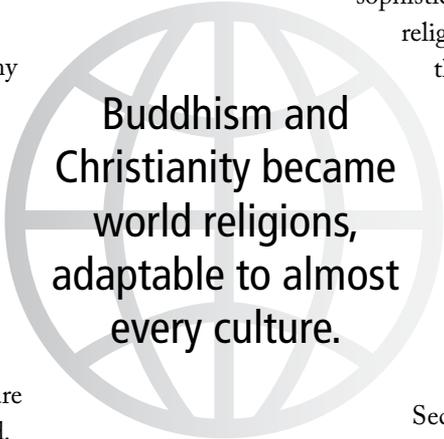
Second, Jaspers taught that, whereas pre-axial teachings limited human beings and their aspirations to what was dictated by their religions and cultures, Axial Age humans felt freed and liberated from what they interpreted as too narrow thinking. Human beings began to develop a consciousness that they could transcend “the arbitrary particularity of the *hic et nunc*.” In Christian terms, this meant that religions themselves became soteriological and focused on helping individuals and cultures escape the mundane world and achieve something transcendent: “Imprisoned in a body fettered by passions, man longs for liberation and redemption and he finds that he can achieve liberation and redemption in [and from] the world.”<sup>5</sup>

Third, when the worlds “that experienced the Axial Age meet with one another, a profound understanding is possible. They recognize when they meet that their concerns are the same.” Jaspers called this recognition a “summons to boundless communication.” And this summons acts like a

call to communication...[which] is the strongest force opposing the fallacy that any faith enjoys exclusive possession of the truth.... God has revealed himself historically in many ways and opened up many paths to himself.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, when two Axial Age religions meet one another, such as Buddhism and Christianity, they are predisposed to communicate—and understand—one another.

To apply this Axial Age thinking specifically to Buddhism and Christianity and their interactions, these two religions are competitors, yet competitors who are predisposed to talk to one another in such a way that brings understanding.



Buddhism and Christianity became world religions, adaptable to almost every culture.

That they are competitors cannot be doubted. Both founders explicitly charged their disciples with spreading their teachings far and wide. Jesus said,

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.<sup>7</sup>

Gautama said:

Walk, monks, on tour for the benefit of the people, for the happiness of the people out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the blessing the happiness of *devas* and men. Let not two of you go by one way. Monks, teach the *dhamma* which is lovely at the beginning, lovely in the middle, lovely at the end. Explain with the spirit and the letter the brahmar-faring completely fulfilled, wholly pure. There are beings with little dust in their eyes who, on hearing *dhamma*, are decaying, but if they are learners of *dhamma*, they will grow.<sup>8</sup>

And as we shall see, Buddhists and Christians everywhere attempted to fulfill these respective charges as best they could.

There is also no doubt that Buddhists and Christians have been conversationalists. The history we are about to recount, showing some of the highlights of Buddhist-Christian interactions over the years, will reveal an essentially peaceful, respectful, series of encounters, carried on by what we might call friendly competitors.

### *An Age of Personalist Engagement*

It was into this fascinating Buddhist-Christian reciprocal mission history that Christian missionary Karl Reichelt (1877–1952) stepped in the early twentieth century. As you know, Reichelt's *home culture*—where he was trained and from whence he was sent—was Norway. His *mission culture* was China, making him part of a narrative replete with some of history's most intriguing Buddhist-Christian interactions. His *theological culture* was Reicheltian through and through. He tried, and mostly discarded, much of the mission methodology he learned in his Norwegian studies. After an early mission journey to China that included successes and failures, institutional support and rejection, and theological fits and starts, he settled into an innovative mission approach to Buddhism and Buddhists that is still considered *avant guard*—prescient to some, retro to others, counter-productive to still others.

Once Reichelt attained his mature mission years, he championed a method of dialogue that involved bringing Buddhist *bhikkhus* (monks) to his retreat center, taking time to develop relationships with them, and showing throughout an openness to reciprocal discourse with an

agenda that changed as often as the parties involved in each discussion changed. Goals and methods were decided together, as were the measurements used to evaluate those goals. Reichelt seemed to intuitively realize the dialogical nature between the two religions as a result of their both being axial religions, “summoned to boundless communication” with each other.

Of course, Reichelt did not introduce his ideas in a missiological vacuum. The nature of the reciprocal missions taking place among Buddhists and Christians in China at that time, what we call “an age of personalist engagement,” had many things in common with Reichelt's approach, and is worth summarizing here.

In what follows we will go through a summary of the Buddhist-Christian narrative, highlighting some of the more interesting and important encounters these two religions had with each other. After summarizing each encounter, we will ask three questions:

1. Is there anything in Reichelt's mission history that approximates what is played out here?
2. Is there anything about what happened in each encounter—success, failure, respect, disregard—that can helpfully inform about Reichelt's mission methodology?
3. How would Reichelt have done mission to the Buddhists in this context?

**Buddhists and Christians are conversationalists, and their interactions over the years reveal peaceful, respectful encounters, carried on by what we might call friendly competitors.**

From this point on, when we mention Reichelt's mission methodology (his mature method practices at Tao Shan) we will be referring to a method with three main emphases which together might be summarized in a phrase, “Personalist Missions.” In general, Reichelt's “personalist missions” means that interpersonal relations among the missionaries and missionized are key. He provocatively notes in *Truth and Tradition in Chinese Buddhism* that the key to Christian missions is modeled by Pure Land Buddhist approaches to mission: get to know other Christians and Buddhists (147, 162), get to know personally Amitabha and Christ (155), and, above all, know “thyself” (152, 165, 291).

When it came to mission, personalist engagement emphasized:

1. *presence*, face-to-face encounters with Buddhists, Taoists, Confucians, and Christians whenever and wherever possible;
2. *dialogue*, a kind of interaction that honored power equality and honest intellectual exchanges; and
3. *amalgamation*, what social scientists call contextualization, historians of religion call syncretism, and what Christian theologians/missiologists call fulfillment.

One can get a sense for each of these three emphases and their importance to Reichelt's methodology by how (ironically) he admires each when he discovers them in his study of Chinese religions. For example, Reichelt illustrates *presence* when he discusses Pure Land Buddhism, which he considers the ultimate form of Mahāyāna Buddhism. He asks for his reader's permission to share his personal experience with Pure Landers:

We think of the many thousands of monks, nuns, and lay folk who either, in the monasteries or in private homes, have consecrated themselves to the special worship and special study which the Pure Land requires. It is only through these living human beings that one can come to any conclusions regarding this school's ability to form character or minister spiritual strength and comfort for life's battle and death's pain.<sup>9</sup>

Or, when he discusses a Chinese religious classic,

[This] is an illustration of the truth that men are always drawn to those who, by self-sacrificing love, give a living testimony to the power of religion and sincerity. It shows that in Buddhism, also, it is the persons that make the institutions.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, Reichelt, as we shall see below, makes the same argument in favor of personal, face-to-face missions using Christian sources and examples.

When Reichelt discusses Confucius' teachings, he admires his teaching method which was almost entirely *dialogical*:

We find him [Confucius] surrounded by about 3000 disciples. With enthusiasm they listened to him as he set forth various relations of life. Instruction was given mostly in the form of dialogue. Thoughtful questions were highly valued by Confucius.<sup>11</sup>

Again, as we shall see, Reichelt advocates dialogue as the primary means of interaction with those of other faiths, using Christian sources and examples. But his admiration of other religions and other religious who also champion dialogue is telling.

Reichelt illustrates *amalgamation* among Chinese religions and Christianity as mission strategies, in that he never tires of comparing the Johannine use of the Greek *logos* as a means of communicating Christ's centrality (an example of contextualization) and comparing/contrasting it to the central Chinese

concept of *Tao* (an example of syncretism). He posits how, in the end, all three conceptual areas lead to a broader, richer understanding of the Christian narrative, the *heilsgeschichte* (an example of his fulfillment theology—see below). As we shall see below, another one of this favorite areas of integration is the Christian understanding of the Trinity.<sup>12</sup>

We will divide the historical interactions among Buddhists and Christians into four principle eras and locations: *Silk Road Missions* (along the trading route, known as the Silk Road, from the Middle East to Central China around 150 BCE), *Syncretic Missions* (in China from the 7th to the 18th centuries), *Capitalistic Missions* (missions attending the colonial expansions of primarily European and North American countries from the 16th century to the 19th century), and *Agency Missions* (in what is called the Great Century of Christian mission: the 19th century).

### *Silk Road Missions—the Milindapañha*

The earliest example we have of Buddhist apologetics *vis-à-vis* Western philosophical/religious thought is a book, the *Milindapañha*. Translated from Pali to English as *The Questions of King Milinda*, the book is formatted as a “dialogue” between a philosophically savvy Greek king, Menander, and an erudite Buddhist *arabat*, an enlightened monk, named Nagasena. We know with some confidence that Menander was a real historical personage who ruled the eastern part of the Greek kingdom from circa 163–150 BCE, while Bhikkhu Nagasena was most likely a fictional character, created by an anonymous author to play the role of respondent to Menander's Greek questions about Buddhism. Their interaction took place on the Silk Road, the thousands of miles long trading route stretching from the Middle East to southern and central China.

I put the word “dialogue” in quotation marks above because the interaction between Menander and Nagasena is not really what we have come to think of as a dialogue—that is, an exchange of ideas characterized by respect and reciprocity. Instead, the format of the *Milindapañha* is simple: King Menander asks questions based on conundrums that arise when sophisticated Buddhist teachings are placed in the context of Greek philosophical thought. Nagasena answers Menander's questions successfully, clearing up whatever perplexities initiated them. Menander does not argue the points Nagasena makes nor does he attempt to assert the thinking of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, or others. He simply thanks Nagasena and moves on to his next question, one of 236 total queries.<sup>13</sup>

For example, in the first section of questions in the book, Menander asks Nagasena about morality (*sila*): “What is the distinguishing mark of morality?” Nagasena answers:

“The distinguishing mark of morality is that it is the basis of all wholesome mental states. . . .” Menander then asks for a simile, something he does often in these exchanges. Nagasena gives him one:

Whatever vegetable life and animal life come to growth, increase, and maturity, all do so by being dependent on the earth; even so do all these wholesome mental states develop by being dependent on morality.<sup>14</sup>

As you have surely noticed this is not strictly speaking an example of Buddhist-Christian interaction, but of Buddhist-Greek interaction. But since so much of early Christian dogma was shaped by Hellenistic thought forms, it is not difficult to imagine Menander asking questions very similar to ones Christians, in a few short centuries, would be asking when exposed to the *buddhadhamma*.

## How did Christianity and Buddhism evaluate one another's belief systems? How did they borrow terms and concepts without being theologically problematic?

For example, the core Buddhist teaching of *anatta* or no-self is clearly the central question of the *Milindapañha*, especially parts II and III. Menander struggles mightily with a teaching that runs so counter to Greek thought and their strong philosophical traditions centered on their belief in an immortal soul.<sup>15</sup> A Christian king surely would have struggled with the Buddha's teaching on *anatta* in the same way.

By the time part IV of the *Milindapañha* rolls around, Menander is no longer asking questions as an interested philosopher—we are told he has become Nagasena's pupil and a devotee of the Buddha's teaching. He has, the text said, “taken on the precepts and practices of a pious Buddhist lay devotee.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, Menander, under the influence of Dharmadhatu Nagasena, converted to Buddhism.

The results of the encounter related in the *Milindapañha* is clearly a win for Nagasena, the Buddhist monk. His conversation partner, Menander, becomes a Buddhist as a result of the questions he asks and the answers Nagasena gives. It is likely many such encounters occurred on the Silk Road in the early centuries of Buddhist missions, although most were not nearly as sophisticated as the story told in *The Questions of King Milinda* indicates. And we can assume that after the life story and religious teachings of Jesus began to spread beyond Palestine a few centuries later, that conversations

among Buddhists and Christians took place along the Silk Road. We can even assume, with some certainty I think, that sometimes Buddhists “won” such exchanges and sometimes Christians did.

The typical historical mission narrative in Asian, South Asian, and Southeast Asian countries, however, favored the Buddhists. Because Gautama lived a half a century earlier than Jesus, Buddhist missionaries always got there first. They taught the *dhamma* and established the *sangha* (the community of monks), usually combining in some form with whatever indigenous religious teaching was present at the time—Hinduism in India and Southeast Asia, Bon in Tibet, Confucianism and Taoism in China, Shamanism in Korea, and Shinto in Japan. Christian missionaries came later and had a lot of catching up to do.

What implications of Silk Road Missions can we imagine for Reichelt, who studied this history carefully? I think the exchange between Menander and Nagasena, while not strictly speaking a dialogue, would have appealed to Reichelt. Absent was a hard sell on Nagasena's part and defensive rejoinders by Menander. The exchange was civil, like most of Buddhist-Christian's interactions throughout history. Reichelt would have liked that.

### *Syncretic Missions*

Historically, the preponderance of Buddhist-Christian mission encounters took place in China. Thus, when asking questions about the implications of Karl Ludwig Reichelt's mission innovations in China, the Buddhist-Christian mission encounters in China should be given extra weight. We are choosing to call these collective efforts *syncretic* because they focus on discerning ways Christianity and Chinese religions, especially Buddhism have affected one another. How did they evaluate where one another's belief systems are comparable? How did they borrow terms and concepts when it seemed missionally effective without being theologically problematic?<sup>17</sup>

This history is long and complicated. So to begin to get a handle on some of its value in helping us assess Reichelt, we will limit ourselves to brief discussions of three major Christian missional incursions: The early Nestorian Eastern Christian missionaries in the 7th to 10th centuries, the Jesuit Missions in the 16th century (especially Matteo Ricci), and the more recent Protestant missions in the 18th to 20th centuries.

### *Nestorian Missions*

The early Nestorian Christians from Syria were probably the first formal group to mount a mission effort to China. Evidence for their early church planting comes primarily from a rock monument, commonly called the Nestorian Tablet or stele, discovered in 1625. This stele is inscribed with Nestorian

doctrines and lists of missionaries who attempted to apply them to the Chinese Buddhism they encountered. The Nestorians founded monasteries and churches and wrote tracts explaining how Christianity and Buddhism influenced one another:

The monument recounted the Christian message in Buddhist and Taoist terms . . . together, Buddhist and Nestorian scholars worked amiably for some years to translate seven volumes of Buddhist wisdom,

searching for ways they complemented one another.<sup>18</sup> The Nestorians came in the seventh century and were endorsed by the Emperor and enjoyed significant success off and on until the 13th century.

Reichelt learned much from the Nestorians. He believed the syncretism was two-way with both religions borrowing from the other. For example, he believed

that Pure Land Buddhism's focus on receiving salvation as a free gift as opposed to making merit through observing rituals, was partly due to the influence of the Nestorian Christian mission in China, and that he was simply building on the good work that God had done through that enterprise.<sup>19</sup>

As Reichelt himself put it, "It is as if some of the most precious heritage both from Taoism and the Nestorian Mission had in part been crystallized in this religious form."<sup>20</sup> One of those precious areas of exchange had to do with masses for the dead. As Reichelt notes, "In no other religion do masses for the dead play so large a part as in Buddhism."<sup>21</sup> Reichelt further observes that

it had not escaped the notice of the Buddhists that the Nestorian Church, largely because of its solemn masses seven times a day for both the living and the dead, had obtained a strong hold on the people.<sup>22</sup>

**It may seem odd to suggest Reichelt learned from Ricci. Reichelt came to love and respect Buddhist teachings; Ricci loathed them. But Ricci presaged what Reichelt ended up doing.**

### The Rites Controversy (Jesuit Missions)

Matteo Ricci was probably the most famous and successful Christian missionary to China. He was born in Italy, took a law degree, trained as a Jesuit, learned the Chinese language and customs in India, and finally arrived in China in 1583. He served in various cities and various administrative capacities until his death in 1610. He had many skills. He was a world class scientist with extensive knowledge of cartography, geography, astronomy, and mathematics.

Ricci's primary mission innovation is something missiologists have come to call *accommodationism*. Where possible, Ricci came to believe, the Christian missionary should engage Confucianist teachings and practices positively, learning about them and practicing them, as a way of showing how one could easily lead to the other.

For our purposes in this paper, that is, trying to discern how Reichelt used or didn't use other missiological approaches to Buddhists in China, it may seem odd to even suggest that he learned something from the way Ricci practiced. Reichelt came to love and respect Buddhist teachings; Ricci loathed them. When Ricci first came to China he realized that in order to avoid the appearances of Christianity being a foreign religion he had to change his appearance—he chose to wear the clothes of common Buddhists and Buddhist monks. Over time, however, he realized that Buddhism in China was the religion of the lower classes. If one wanted to reach the upper class leaders, he needed to identify with Confucian teachings.

Ricci came to view Confucianism, the dominant school of thought in Late Imperial China, as promoting a worldview similar to that advanced by Stoicism, the early Greek philosophy espoused by Epictetus, the first century Greek thinker eventually honored by Christians.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, the way to climb the social ladders in China was to master the Confucian classics. So Ricci began to dress like a Confucian *literati*, translate the classics into Latin, and join Confucians in disparaging Buddhism. Reichelt would have cringed at this lack of respect of Buddhists and Buddhism.

Yet, looked at another way, it does seem that some of what Ricci did presaged what Reichelt ended up doing. They both recognized the importance of showing how Christianity was not just a foreign religion, but one that had many, many similarities to Chinese religions. Ricci chose Confucianism for this task, while Reichelt chose Pure Land Buddhism. Both ran afoul of their mission sending agencies because of their commitment to amalgamation. Ricci and the Jesuits were attacked by their fellow Catholic orders, the Franciscans and the Dominicans. The resulting argument, what came to be called the *Rites Controversy*, was adjudicated back in Rome, and decided against Ricci and Jesuits. For his part, Reichelt was judged deficient in his missionary strategy by his sending agency, the Norwegian Missionary Society, (leading to Reichelt's resignation) and by some of the attendees at the wider Christian community at a worldwide mission conference in Edinburgh in 1910.

### Voluntary Missions

Individual Protestant missionaries began to come to China in the 17th and 18th centuries, bringing with them a distinctive approach to Buddhists. One example is a Brit named

James Hudson Taylor (1832–1905). Taylor's story was not unlike that of Reichelt's. He trained for missionary service, went out under a mission agency, the Chinese Evangelization Society, which he eventually found constricting, began to test his own ideas, and then founded his own mission society in 1865 which he called the China Inland Mission. He did this in the context of strong, often violent, anti-missionary feelings among the Chinese that at times threatened his life.

What did Taylor dislike about existing Christian missions to China? He disliked that the vast majority of Christian mission was practiced in the coastal cities of China so he went inland and named his mission organization accordingly. He disliked that the Western missionaries lived like Westerners so he began to dress like a lower class Chinese worker and lived his life accordingly. He thought that Christian churches and other buildings should be built in the Chinese style. In short, he practiced what we today call contextualization when it came to his lifestyle.

Reichelt did the same, and when he experienced life threatening violence, he attempted to live through it (as did Taylor), but when it became threatening to his life he moved his headquarters of operation to Hong Kong, just as Taylor eventually moved his to Singapore.

### *Capitalistic Missions*

Another type of missional interaction between Buddhists and Christians I call *capitalistic missions*, but I could just as easily call it *colonial missions* because it was the type of Christian mission to Buddhists carried out by the colonial powers in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries. An easily understood example of this kind of mission was carried out by three successive colonial powers in the island of Sri Lanka, called Ceylon during this time period. The three powers each dominated Sri Lanka for about 150 years, beginning with the Portuguese in 1505 until 1658, followed by the Dutch from 1658 until 1796, when the British came and established themselves in 1873, ruling Sri Lanka as a colonial power until 1900.<sup>24</sup> I call these missions *capitalistic* because the type of mission done depended to a large degree in the nature of the colonial powers' economic interests. Let's take a look at what happened missionally in Sri Lanka, using it as an exemplar of the kinds of things that happened all over Asia. These examples show that the type of missions practiced by the Christian colonial powers had a great deal to do with what was needed to enhance economic interest.

The Portuguese came in 1505 as a result of a sailing event:

A Portuguese fleet commanded by Lourenço de Almeida was blown into Colombo [the capital city of Ceylon] by adverse winds. Almeida received a friendly audience from the king of Kotte, Vira Parakrama Bahu, and was favorably impressed with the commercial and strategic value of the island. The Portuguese soon returned and established a regular and formal contact with Kotte. In 1518 they were permitted to build a fort at Colombo and were given trading concessions.<sup>25</sup>

The Portuguese were Roman Catholics, so the Franciscans, Jesuits, Dominicans, and Augustinians soon established mission enclaves throughout the island. Their first focus, however, was on providing Christian services for the Portuguese rulers. After this they provided services for the Sri Lankan nobility who converted to Christianity, largely for economic and political advantages. Because the Portuguese interests were based primarily on

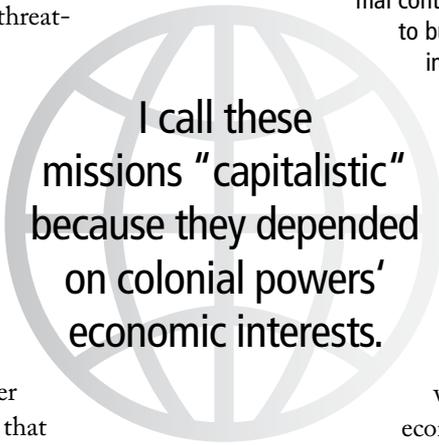
trade, that is, Sri Lankan laborers brought spices (cinnamon, pepper, areca nuts) and elephants to the coastal forts for payment, the Portuguese did not engage in deep relations with the social structures of Sri Lanka or the everyday lives of the Ceylonese. "The great majority of Portuguese clergy in this faraway enclave were there to attend to the spiritual needs of the Portuguese, their servants, and their slaves."<sup>26</sup>

The Dutch changed that:

Dutch rule in Sri Lanka was implemented through the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, commonly called VOC), a trading company established in 1602 primarily to protect Dutch trade interests in the Indian Ocean. Although the VOC first controlled only the coastal lands [with the forts the Portuguese had established], the Dutch gradually pushed inland, occupying considerable territory in southern, southwestern, and western Sri Lanka.<sup>27</sup>

This meant that the Dutch were not as interested in pure trade as the Portuguese tended to be, but also became deeply involved in the harvest of spices and capture of elephants. They expanded beyond trade to harvest.

The missional implications were several. First, the Dutch were not Roman Catholics but Reformed Protestants, which meant corresponding changes in missional strategies. But second, and perhaps even more important, by virtue of their interest in trade *and* harvest, they became much closer to the working class families of Sri Lanka, and, of course, the fact that they were Buddhists in need of Christianizing. Their "mission" thus became much more recognizable as evangelistic efforts towards adherents of another religion, rather



I call these missions "capitalistic" because they depended on colonial powers' economic interests.

than as primarily “chaplains” to Portuguese citizens, already Christian, even if in name only. In short, evangelism toward Buddhists was added to discipleship of Portuguese Christians as a way of enhancing not just the religious climate of Sri Lanka, but its economic advantage to the Netherlands as well.

The British further deepened the meaning of missions to Buddhists. Of course, their interest was still primarily economic trade. The British East India Company's conquest of Sri Lanka simply replaced the VOC as the ruling colonial interest. The harvest of spices and elephants as items of trade continued to be something the British were involved in. But the British developed a further third interest: growing tea in the highlands. They added to trade and harvest, planting and growth of the desired trading goods—Ceylon tea. They brought in workers from South Indian tea plantations to help develop their mountainous tea ranches. Both those families, many of them Hindu, and the indigenous Sri Lankan Buddhist families needed to be educated and missionized.

The British East India Company's missionaries were Anglican and Methodist. The Company was famously resistant to missions at first—their primary interest was economic, and they saw religion as a distraction. But the planting and harvesting of tea required a stable, educated workforce, and education always included religion. The theory was that workers thus civilized were more reliable partners in the economic interest of the British colonial power.

Tea and rubber attracted extensive capital investment, and the growth of large-scale industries created a demand for a permanent workforce. Steps were taken to settle Indian labour on the plantations.<sup>28</sup>

This settling involved missionary work to attempt to convert Hindus and Buddhists.

This religious motif did not go unchallenged by the local Buddhists, who, remember, were also mission minded. The resulting mission competition led to a famous public debate between Christian and Buddhist leaders in a town called Panadura in 1873. The debate, one of many, is remembered and notable largely because observers judged that the Buddhist participants “defeated” their Christian counterparts. It was a first and highlighted the fact that the Christianizing of Sri Lanka would not go unchallenged. Indeed, although the Christian mission and church is an established fact in present day Sri Lanka, it is far outnumbered by Buddhists: 70 percent of the population is Buddhist and seven percent is Christian.

What might Reichelt have learned about Christian mission to Buddhists in these capitalist missions, where evangelism took a backseat to colonial—read, economic—interests? Although he doesn't say much about these non-Chinese missions,

several observations surely occurred to him. First, relief that China was different. Not that the Western powers interested in China had no economic interest in trade—they surely did. But since China never came close to being fully colonized, no colonizing force could dominate Chinese culture. Second, that economic interests don't lend themselves very well to the kind of theological dialogue Reichelt was committed to in Hong Kong. Missions in these smaller, colonized Asian countries followed the needs of business and politics in a way they did not in China.

**The 1873 Sri Lanka debate is remembered because Buddhist participants defeated their Christian counterparts. Christianity would not go unchallenged.**

### *Agency Missions*

The nineteenth century is often called the Great Century of Missions. For those of us who are Western evangelical Protestants, it is easily the most studied of centuries of Christian missions. When, for example, Kenneth Scott Latourette wrote his magisterial *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* in seven volumes,<sup>29</sup> he devoted three of the seven volumes to the nineteenth century: *Volume Four—The Great Century: Europe and the United States; Volume Five—The Great Century: The Americas, Austral-Asia, and Africa; and Volume Six—The Great Century: North Africa and Asia.*

What made this century so unique? First, it was the rise of voluntary, parachurch mission agencies. What are parachurch agencies? Wikipedia defines them as:

Parachurch organizations are Christian faith-based organizations that usually carry out their mission independent of church oversight. Most parachurch organizations, at least those normally called parachurch, are Protestant and Evangelical. Some of these organizations cater to a defined spectrum among evangelical beliefs, but most are self-consciously interdenominational and many are ecumenical.<sup>30</sup>

In a way, parachurch mission agencies were evangelicalism's answer to diversity of mission methods used on the field. Whereas Roman Catholicism solved the mission diversity problem by creating mission orders within the church, Protestant evangelicals solved it by creating voluntary organizations outside the direct oversight of official denominations, thus allowing for more diversity in mission methods than would otherwise have been the case.

A second characteristic of the nineteenth century was its temporal proximity to the twentieth (and now the twenty-first). Mission events that occurred in the nineteenth century had direct, traceable consequences for the times and places that you and I live in. That gives them an immediacy that creates not only curiosity, but a willingness to learn simply because many of them are like the early parts of our own mission narratives. We identify with stories and we identify with nineteenth century mission stories because they are close enough to us to seem like part of our same story in a way that stories from biblical times and the middle ages do not.

The stories were/are moving. It was a century full of mission heroes who traveled the globe, no matter what the danger, to tell the story of Jesus to those who had never heard it. Although not a 19th century story, I think of Sushako Endo's book, *Silence*, the story of two Portuguese priests who traveled to 17th century Japan to find out the fate of earlier Christian priests and their followers who had fallen on hard times due to persecution of Christians by Japanese authorities.<sup>31</sup> And although the methods of torture used against Christians around the world may have changed, the fact of global religious persecution of Christians is as real as ever.

The missions that were carried out toward Buddhists in Reichelt's time and that we carry out today the world over are very often traceable in form and content to how missions were done in the Great Century.

**“Amidst darkness and confusion, and in a world of perversity and demonic powers, there are glimpses of light and fragments of truth shining with great beauty and strength.” (Reichelt)**

### *Reichelt's Theology of Religions*

In order to understand and evaluate fully Reichelt's mission innovations, we must begin with his theoretical and theological mission fundamentals. As we have seen, there are clear precedents to Reichelt's mission practices: his focus on “personalist engagements” involving *presence* with adherents of other religions, respectful dialogue with those same adherents, and a continuous search for amalgamating factors that open the doors to more satisfying *presences* and deeper dialogue. The earliest Nestorian missionaries were all about amalgamating Buddhism and Christianity; Matteo Ricci lived his mission life in the presence of first Buddhist leaders and then Confucian literati; and those same Confucians engaged in dialogue whenever and wherever they could find willing partners.

But recognizing the facts of his so-called innovations and their possible history in previous mission efforts in China doesn't answer two fundamental questions such innovations create. First, how theologically faithful were they? Second, how much can they be generalized to other mission settings? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to identify the theological and missiological principles on which they were founded. Such an examination requires more than we can do at the end of this paper; but we can make an abbreviated start by summarizing three of the most obvious theological commitments to mission that Reichelt consistently made in his writings: his theology *vis-à-vis* the world, *vis-à-vis* the religions, and *vis-à-vis* the Christian church.

### **Theology *vis-à-vis* the World: Universal Revelation**

Reichelt saw and emphasized the presence of God in the world everywhere—even in other religions. In fact, Reichelt saw God's revelation in all religions because they “meet, in a most remarkable manner, many of the great religious cravings of life which men in all times and all places feel more or less consciously.”<sup>32</sup> He frequently quoted the traditional revelation passages cited by Christian theologians,<sup>33</sup> and he quotes Martin Luther: “All men have the general knowledge that God exists, that he is just and punishes the ungodly and rewards the good.”<sup>34</sup> But his go-to passage was the first chapter of the Gospel of John, the logos passage, of which he says, “It is the Gospel of John, more than anything else, that gives us the necessary insight into God's revelation.”<sup>35</sup> It is the logos that is the “light which shineth in darkness,” and “amidst darkness and confusion, and in a world full of perversity and demonic powers, there are glimpses of light and fragments of truth shining here and there with great beauty and strength.”<sup>36</sup> That general knowledge of God shines through everything: “God reveals himself and speaks through Nature and some of the larger religious groups.”<sup>37</sup> We can say with confidence that God reveals himself universally throughout the world, and that this fact is the bedrock of Reichelt's theology of religions.

### **Theology *vis-à-vis* the Religions: Fulfillment Theology**

Universal revelation made other religions worth studying in some detail, which Reichelt did extremely well in regard to Chinese religions.<sup>38</sup> Great nuggets of gospel truth could be found through such study. But Reichelt went further than that. Karl Ludvig Reichelt was a fulfillment theologian which means in his eyes that the “larger world religions” were all part of one great human religious story, each one contributing chapter and verse to how God acts in the world, all of those chapters culminating in the final narrative, the story of Jesus Christ coming into the world. Fulfillment theology was used by theologians of Reichelt's day primarily as a way of explaining Judaism's relationship to Christianity. In Reichelt's hands it was used

to explain Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism's relationship to Christianity. In seeing in the other religions incipient truths that became fulfilled in the Christian story, Reichelt did not take a Pollyannaish view of Buddhism in China. His sometimes lavish praise of what he found in Mahāyāna Buddhism was always balanced by unsparing criticisms when those concepts seemed to him to run counter to Christian truth. For example, he criticized the Confucian literati,<sup>39</sup> the Confucian pantheon,<sup>40</sup> Confucian worship,<sup>41</sup> some Buddhist monasteries,<sup>42</sup> Buddhist apologetics,<sup>43</sup> and various aspects of the Buddhist feasts for the dead,<sup>44</sup> to name a few. Any criticisms of Reichelt for his generous endorsement of Mahāyāna (especially Pure Land) Buddhism need to be balanced by criticisms such as these. For Reichelt, God's truth, no matter where it manifested itself, was still God's truth.

### Theology *vis-à-vis* Christianity: Salvation through Christ Alone

Reichelt agreed with Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhists that the goal of human religion should be "the salvation of all living things" (*P'u chi chung sheng*).<sup>45</sup> But he insisted over and over again that salvation for all came only through Jesus Christ. Indeed, he insisted that all salvation came through Jesus Christ alone: "The special revelation of God, through Jesus Christ, in the New Testament signifies something wholly new and unique."<sup>46</sup> Yes, Reichelt was a fulfillment theologian, but he made clear that "all previous [to Jesus Christ] revelation had been fragmentary and partial."<sup>47</sup> It is Jesus Christ alone who brings salvation to any and all human beings: "Christianity is first of all a person and not a minutely worked out system of philosophy. The Christian religion is the historical person of Jesus Christ."<sup>48</sup> Revelation of God is universal, and our missional goal should be to present the gospel to all in the hopes of salvation of many, but that salvation comes only through Jesus Christ.

### Theological Conclusions

Given these three theological fundamentals, how innovative was Reichelt? Or perhaps, a better way to phrase the question is to ask how much of what he did with educated Buddhist monks in China can be generalized to other mission settings throughout the world? Which parts of his mission method can be generalized and which were specific to the Chinese context?

In general Reichelt's innovations are not universally generalizable. What Reichelt did in China worked because of the conditions he found in China, conditions that included (1) an active Buddhist monastic community; (2) an openness to

theological and Buddha-logical innovations and syncretism, i.e., religious heterogeneity; and (3) an almost paranoid fear of the political influence of foreign religions. Consider Reichelt's emphasis on monastic leaders. There are few places in the world today with the kind of Buddhist monastic communities Reichelt found in China in his day: a community led by educated monks interested in dialogue. There are exceptions.<sup>49</sup> But the majority of Buddhist-Christian interactions today—and even in Reichelt's time in non-Chinese settings, have primarily lay participants.



In China, the early Nestorian missionaries attempted to use Mahāyāna concepts to talk about the gospel.

Few places in the world were as open to religious pluralism as early twentieth century China, a result of its diversity of religions. The "big three," Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism especially, were in addition to the hundreds of local deities worshipped in family temples. The specifically Buddhist-Christian interactions had a similarly long openness to theological innovations, beginning as far back as the early Nestorian missionaries and their attempts to use Mahāyāna concepts to talk about the gospel. Matteo Ricci's efforts at accommodationism were popular in China, but not in the rest of the Roman Catholic world, as witnessed to by the Rites Controversy. Instead, anti-Christian sentiment in China was/is not aimed at religious heterodoxy but at the perceived threat of foreign political influence which the Chinese believed was made much more possible by foreign religious successes.

However, specific missiological innovations championed by Reichelt can be seen as having universal effect. First, and perhaps the most important was Reichelt's insight that mission strategies and practices must be tailored to specific contexts. That is, what worked in China works because China is China. What works elsewhere must be tailored to those times and places. Ironically, Reichelt's major universal missiological innovation was that there are no universal missiological innovations.

Second, Reichelt's openness to the history of religions approach to indigenous religions encountered by all missionaries was a model of how "competitor" religions need to be approached—and where possible, respected and appreciated—by Christians. His work on Chinese religions in *Religion in Chinese Garments*, although somewhat dated, is still essential reading for mission workers interested in China.<sup>50</sup>

### *Reichelt's Contributions to Today's Missiology*

What is the nature of Buddhist-Christian encounters today? And to what extent is Reichelt's practical methodology—*presence, dialogue, amalgamation*—being used or not used?

It is surely the case that all of the Christian approaches to Buddhists mentioned in this paper are being used somewhere in the world today:

1. Traditional mission approaches of gospel preaching, Bible study, and discipleship training.
2. Justice mission approaches that emphasize education, health care, poverty relief, and human rights.
3. Contextualized missions that seek to frame the gospel story in shapes dictated by local languages and cultures.
4. Scholarly, history of religion approaches, that seek to compare and contrast Christianity with the other religions.
5. Christianization of the civil sort as modeled by Western colonialists.
6. Dialogical interactions on a scale that would have warmed Reichelt's heart.

Of course, all these approaches are shaped by modern and postmodern issues that were never thought of in Reichelt's day or before. We live in a globalized world where politics and economics daily interact and influence us the world over. We live in a scientific world where the scientific method sometimes threatens to minimize man's spiritual nature. We live in a world where religion, if acknowledged at all, is seen as an avenue to soft-power influence, psychological health, and/or capitalistic energy, instead of its core purpose of connecting us to the transcendent beyond time and place. In such a world, where all different kinds of mission action are possible, how do *presence*, *dialogue*, and *amalgamation* stack up as preferred ways of presenting the gospel?

### Presence

We live in a time filled with the possibilities of presence. Oceanic voyages from Europe to Asia that could take as long as six months have been replaced by air flights of a few hours. Immigration and emigration, both forced and voluntary, make contact with almost anyone in the world possible. If I want to attend a Buddhist ceremony venerating the Buddha, I can hop on a plane and fly to Thailand—or I can drive ten minutes into downtown Oakland to the Buddhist temple. In both places, chances are very good that I, as a Christian, will be welcomed with open arms. In addition, I can make contact with individual Buddhists the world over without leaving my living room by using social media. We can raise the question as to what extent an email qualifies as social presence, but perhaps, when my daily “friends” on Facebook double or triple or quadruple a lifetime of contacts in the old physical way, we are splitting hairs. I don't have any statistics, but my suspicion is that if you asked in a local church service how many people there know a Buddhist, a large number of hands will go up. Personal encounter is a big thumbs up all over the world.

### Dialogue

I belong to a dialogue group, the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies. The Buddhist participants are mostly Western Buddhists, many with Christian backgrounds. In that sense it is quite different from what Reichelt experienced with his Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhist monks. We must also remember that Reichelt was operating in the days before inter-religious dialogue was really called that. In that sense Reichelt was a trailblazer in not just doing it, but in defining a way of relating to adherents of other religions. As dialogue became recognized as a respectful way of conversing with Buddhists, an issue arose among Christian missiologists regarding the relationship of dialogue to evangelism. Some thought (and many still think) that one precluded the other—one could either attempt to evangelize Buddhists or one could dialogue with them. As time went on a third position emerged, the idea that one could do both. It seems that Reichelt himself would fall in that camp. It is my position, so in this regard I am beholden to Reichelt. So are scores of dialogue groups today whose main reason for being is to talk respectfully and reciprocally to Buddhists.<sup>51</sup>

### Amalgamation

There can be little doubt that a great deal of borrowing among Christians and Buddhists takes place in our day and age. I was talking with a colleague recently about the growing number of Buddhist relief and development organizations arising in Asia, and that they seem to take the institutional form of Christian relief and development organizations with whom they have had contact. Many Christians seem enamored with things Buddhist: mindfulness meditation, for example, has attracted the attention of our tradition, perhaps because our once rich heritage of Christian meditation practices have fallen on hard times. There are many other examples of this two-way influencing among the traditions. Reichelt would have not only been sympathetic to this, but a strong advocate. As we have seen, he wrote a great deal about the comparability of grace-filled Christian theology and the teachings of Pure Land Buddhism. He was criticized for it both by historians of religion who were a bit disparaging of his real knowledge of Buddhism, and by missiologists who were suspicious of any suggestions of cross-overs between the two religions. As for the historians of religion, I find Reichelt's knowledge of Buddhism quite good, and, based as it was on his obvious mastery of language and his face-to-face conversations with Chinese Buddhists, it seems to me to be exemplary.<sup>52</sup> As for the discomfort it caused and still causes some missiologists, all truth is, after all, God's truth. If globalization and social media have taught us anything it is that God's general revelation of the divine self extends everywhere. Reichelt's openness to this surely is his greatest missiological and theological contribution. **IJFM**

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> *Dharmadhatu* means “teacher of dharma,” *dharma* being Gautama Buddha’s teaching. *Dharmadhatu* is sometimes used as the Buddhist equivalent of the Christian word “missionary.” Care must be taken to realize that while the two words “*dharmadhatu*” and “missionary” may be functional equivalents, the content of their respective meanings is different.
- <sup>2</sup> Jaspers’ original writing on the subject was an essay published in *Commentary VI* (1948), 430–435. The following summary of Jaspers’ thinking on the Axial Age is taken largely from that essay, which was reprinted in a collection of essays, *Identity and Anxiety: Survival of the Person in Mass Society*, eds., Maurice Stein, Arthur Vidich, David White (The Free Press 1960), 597–605, with the title “The Axial Age of Human History.” References in the following are referenced to that reprint. Jaspers expanded his thinking on the axial age in a book, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, Artemis, 1949, translated into English as *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans., Michael Bullock (Yale, 1953).
- <sup>3</sup> Jaspers, 598. See Robert Bellah and Hans Joas, *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (Harvard, 2012), 9.
- <sup>4</sup> Jaspers, *The Axial Age*, 602.
- <sup>5</sup> Jaspers, *The Axial Age*, 600.
- <sup>6</sup> Jaspers, *The Axial Age*, 604.
- <sup>7</sup> Matthew 28:18–20.
- <sup>8</sup> “Mahavagga,” *The Book of Discipline (Vinaya-Pitaka)*, vol iv, trans., I. B. Horner, (Luzac, 1971), 28. This charge appears in several different forms throughout the Buddhist Pitakas. Karl Ludvig Reichelt references one on page 209 of *Truth and Tradition in Chinese Buddhism: A Study of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism* (Munshiram Manoharlal, 1928).
- <sup>9</sup> Reichelt, *Truth and Tradition*, 147.
- <sup>10</sup> Reichelt, *Truth and Tradition*, 262.
- <sup>11</sup> Karl Reichelt, *Religion in Chinese Garments* (James Clarke, 2004), 37.
- <sup>12</sup> See Karl Reichelt, *Truth and Tradition*, 2, 31, 36–37, 199, 201 as just a few examples of this strong interest on Reichelt’s part.
- <sup>13</sup> There are several editions of the *Milindapañha*, both in Pali and in English translation. We will use as our reference an abridgement, N. K. G. Mendis, ed., *The Questions of King Milinda* (Buddhist Publication Society, 1993).
- <sup>14</sup> Mendis, *Questions*, 34.
- <sup>15</sup> Mendis, *Questions*, 9.
- <sup>16</sup> Mendis, *Questions*, 10.
- <sup>17</sup> We are using the concept of syncretism here in a neutral, history of religions approach, not as some Christian theologians use the term in a totally negative light. For the historian of religion, syncretism occurs when religions come in contact with one another. It is left to theologians and buddhalogians to determine the doctrinal value of the various encounters.
- <sup>18</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity* (HarperOne, 2008), 15.
- <sup>19</sup> Rory Mackenzie, *God, Self and Salvation in a Buddhist Context* (Wide Margin, 2017), 16.
- <sup>20</sup> Reichelt, *Religion in Chinese Garments*, 129.
- <sup>21</sup> Reichelt, *Truth and Tradition*, 77.
- <sup>22</sup> Reichelt, *Truth and Tradition*, 88.
- <sup>23</sup> R. Po-chia Hsia, *Matteo Ricci and the Catholic Mission to China: A Short History with Documents* (Hackett, 2016), 28.
- <sup>24</sup> The British actually ruled until Ceylon declared her independence in 1947, at that time changing their national nomenclature to Sri Lanka, meaning “noble island.”
- <sup>25</sup> “The Portuguese in Sri Lanka (1505–1658),” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed February 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sri-Lanka/The-Portuguese-in-Sri-Lanka-1505-1658>.
- <sup>26</sup> Hsia, *Matteo Ricci*, 22.
- <sup>27</sup> “Dutch rule in Sri Lanka (1658–1796),” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed February 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sri-Lanka/Dutch-rule-in-Sri-Lanka-1658-1796>.
- <sup>28</sup> “British Ceylon (1796–1900)” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed February 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sri-Lanka/British-Ceylon-1796-1900>.
- <sup>29</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, seven volumes (Harper 1937ff).
- <sup>30</sup> “Parachurch organizations,” Wikipedia, accessed February 2021.
- <sup>31</sup> Shusaku Endo, *Silence*, trans., William Johnston (Picador, 1969). Since made into a motion picture directed by Martin Scorsese.
- <sup>32</sup> Reichelt, *Truth and Tradition*, 1.
- <sup>33</sup> Romans 1:19–20; 2:15; Acts 14:8–18; 17:15–34. See for example, Karl Ludvig Reichelt, *Meditation and Piety in the Far East: A Religious/Psychological Study* (James Clarke, 2004 [1954]), 22–28.

- <sup>34</sup> Reichelt, *Meditation and Piety*, 22.
- <sup>35</sup> Reichelt, *Meditation and Piety*, 32.
- <sup>36</sup> Reichelt, *Meditation and Piety*, 33.
- <sup>37</sup> Reichelt, *Meditation and Piety*, 33.
- <sup>38</sup> See Reichelt, *Religion in Chinese Garments*.
- <sup>39</sup> Reichelt, *Religion in Chinese Garments*, 50.
- <sup>40</sup> Reichelt, *Religion in Chinese Garments*, 60.
- <sup>41</sup> Reichelt, *Religion in Chinese Garments*, 65.
- <sup>42</sup> Reichelt, *Religion in Chinese Garments*, 113.
- <sup>43</sup> Reichelt, *Religion in Chinese Garments*, 135.
- <sup>44</sup> Reichelt, *Truth and Tradition*, 93.
- <sup>45</sup> Reichelt, *Truth and Tradition*, 1.
- <sup>46</sup> Reichelt, *Meditation and Piety*, 45.
- <sup>47</sup> Reichelt, *Meditation and Piety*, 46.
- <sup>48</sup> Reichelt, *Meditation and Piety*, 46.
- <sup>49</sup> One thinks of the dialogue that arose between Tibetan Buddhist monks and Trappist monks in Gethsemani, Kentucky as a result of Thomas Merton's work.
- <sup>50</sup> I have found Notto Thelle's assessment of Reichelt's knowledge of Buddhism most balanced: "There is no doubt about Reichelt's deep knowledge of Chinese Buddhism. However, modern scholarship may tend to emphasize the limitations of his studies due to numerous inaccuracies in his writings. His missionary concern never seemed to weaken his sympathy toward Buddhism, but sometimes it distorted the perspective. He tended to read too many Christian ideas into Buddhist piety." Gerald H. Anderson, Robert T. Coote, Norman A. Horner, and James M. Phillips, eds., *Mission Legacies: Biographical Studies of Leaders of the Modern Missionary Movement* (Orbis, 1994), 216.
- <sup>51</sup> An additional note. In *Religion in Chinese Garments*, Reichelt notes that Confucius' "instruction was given mostly in the form of dialogue," 37. Reichelt seems to see this as a positive way of engaging his students and suggests it was perhaps a reason for his ability to attract over 3000 disciples.
- <sup>52</sup> As Notto Thelle notes in his essay, "The Gift of Being Number Two," (*IBMR* 32:2), "He studied Buddhism for almost twenty years when he began his Christian Mission to Buddhists in 1922." To be sure, he taught himself, but he based much of his studies on first hand experts in China.

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# Presentation Responses

## Responses to Terry Muck's presentation, "Innovations in Buddhist-Christian Encounters: Karl Reichelt's Contributions"

### Amos Yong: Response One

I am delighted to be able to respond to Terry's paper this morning.<sup>1</sup> I so very deeply respect and appreciate Terry (I call him Terry, but "Dr. Muck" might be more appropriate in this setting). I remember when I was a graduate student in the mid-1990s being exposed to the Buddhist-Christian dialogue and being engaged with the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, and then, again, as I began my own studies in comparative theology, engaging with Buddhist traditions,<sup>2</sup> that all along Terry was one of the few evangelical scholars—maybe singularly so—who were experts, having studied Buddhist traditions, and who had been standing in that space of Buddhist-Christian encounter as forthrightly evangelical, now for the last 40 years.

So, I have always reached out to him, even when I was just a green graduate student. I have always benefited from his wisdom, from his demeanor, from the way in which he engages with challenging ideas and realities, and then embodies them in his own life. So, I'm just thankful to be able to just say a little bit today about what a gift, Terry, you have been, not just to me but to so many evangelicals who have wondered about other religions and haven't had evangelical resources. You have been a trailblazer that has made it possible for others to follow along and to realize that we don't have to give up our commitments to Jesus Christ in order to really be transformed by our encounters with others—religious others—and other religious traditions. So, I wanted to just say thank you for your faithfulness as an evangelical in missiology—and in that space of Buddhist-Christian dialogue—of opening up and engaging with religious plurality, and doing so with a winsomeness and openness of heart, but also with the conviction of commitment to Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

**Our commitment to Christ is  
non-negotiable, and it is also a  
commitment to a living and personal  
Christ, not to some kind of system.  
Reichelt exemplified this.**

After all of that, then, I do think that your highlighting of Reichelt's fulfillment theology may be a bit more controversial today. We may even feel that it's rather tribalistic, in the sense of imposing our own perspective on the world, and indeed in this case, on all other religious traditions. And there are certainly other categories and ways in which we need to talk about how Christian faith relates to other religions. But, from a Christian perspective, there is also a sense in which our commitment to Jesus Christ will lead us to something like fulfillment thought, a sense in which it cannot be anything less than how Jesus Christ is the answer at some level to the deepest cries and yearnings of the human condition, regardless of what religious tradition any person finds him or herself in. For us to be Christians, followers of Christ, means that Christ is *the* answer in some fundamental respect. Reichelt called it fulfillment theology. Others might call it a kind of inclusivist theology, and so on.<sup>4</sup> Again, I think the labels are complicated and difficult, but I'm not sure we can completely get away from something along these lines.

On the other hand, I now want to circle back to something you have modeled in your own life, something which both you and Dr. Thelle mentioned in your presentations—I think Reichelt also exemplified this: Our commitment to Christ is in some fundamental respect non-negotiable, and at the same time, it is also a commitment to a living and personal Christ, not to some kind of system. And from that same perspective, if Christ is also the fulfillment for people of other cultures, then that fulfillment is achieved interpersonally and relationally through their specific contributions.

I think what you're saying with Reichelt, and what we're learning about in these couple of days, is that Chinese-ness—that expression of Chinese cultures, Chinese traditions, Chinese ideas, Chinese practices—will leave its own imprint on what it means to be Christ-followers. In fact, it has already left its own imprint for millennia, and has left a deep imprint through the life of our Lutheran missionary from Norway. This Chinese-ness will continue to leave an imprint on what it means to be fulfilled in Christ, because that fulfillment in Christ takes on the shape, the color, the sounds, the tactility, the embodied character of those cultures, those many nations, tribes, tongues, and languages that bring their gifts into the new Jerusalem (as the apocalyptic seer portrays it in the Book of Revelation). So Chinese-ness matters, after all, even in being fulfilled in Christ. In fact, there is no fulfillment in Christ without the fulfillment that is brought by the various cultures of the world, and in particular, for our themes these few days, brought by Chinese cultures and Chinese traditions. I think the discussion of Reichelt allows us to appreciate, on the one hand, why Christ is a fulfillment of the human condition, yet on the other hand, why our Chinese brothers and sisters (for which I praise God, being of Chinese descent myself) have a lot to say and a lot to contribute to how that fulfillment actually takes place.<sup>5</sup>

So, thank you again, Terry, for inviting others along the cultural and religious paths that you have walked, to both appreciate who Jesus is from your witness and to impact us by *how* you have borne witness, much like Reichelt did in his time on similar pathways.

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### Rory Mackenzie: Response Two

Thank you, Dr. Muck, for that very creative paper. I loved the way you drew so many strands of missionary endeavor together, all helping to set the scene for Reichelt's missionary work. I have often looked at practitioners who handle criticism and discouragement positively, who not only carry out their duty, but do so with the expectation that God will work, and also at practitioners who are vitalized by their practice. So, I came to your paper and engaged with it through that lens. And I was intrigued to see you make the connection between James Hudson Taylor and Karl Reichelt. They were both dissatisfied with the missionary context they found themselves in. They both brought about change. They were both criticized. Hudson Taylor faced huge challenges as he led a large group of missionaries from many different backgrounds in cross-cultural pioneer evangelism. And it was a worn-out Hudson Taylor who discovered the principle not to strive after faith, but to rest on the faithful one. And that changed everything for him. Hakan Eilert in his book *Boundlessness* writes that Reichelt held that

faith is much more than blind belief; faith means that a new faculty is set free in my life, a faculty with the most tremendous working radius, a faculty which brings me, an earthbound, feeble, limited being, into contact with the divine, the eternal, the boundless.

And so there are some commonalities between these two different statements. For both men, something is released deep within, and they're brought into contact with the Divine, the faithful one, the eternal, the boundless, and this gives them an expectation and a confidence in God. Later on, in your talk, Dr. Muck, you talk about three theological commitments to mission that Reichelt held, distinctive features of his understanding of his missional task, universal revelation, fulfillment theology, and salvation through Christ alone. These distinctive features are positive, and I couldn't help but ask myself if Reichelt drew energy from them to persevere in the face of criticism and hostility—criticism from missionaries on the field, from some Buddhists, from some supporters back home, and at least some negative comments from people whose opinion really counted, like Henrik Kraemer.

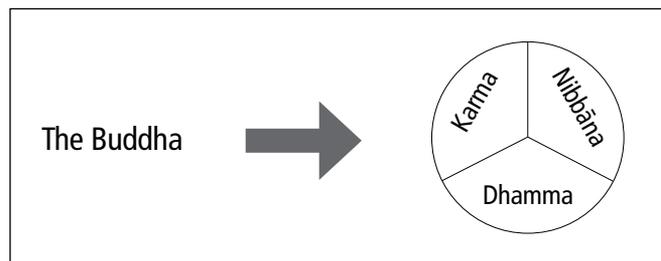
Those of us who do things a bit differently usually face criticism. And there is always a person whose opinion matters looking over our shoulder. I like to think that Reichelt drew strength for his journey through these theological commitments that you mentioned. And maybe they can also raise our expectations and re-enchant us in our own mission.

**I like to think that Reichelt drew strength for his journey through these theological commitments. Maybe they can also re-enchant us in our own mission.**

So, with regard to the first of Reichelt's theological commitments: universal revelation, or God at work in the world. The Father wishes all to be saved. His Son has made that possible. Perhaps then we should be expecting the Spirit to be at work in our neighborhoods and networks, drawing people to himself. Not necessarily in a sudden conversion, but on a journey of increasing openness to God. Can we have faith that some of the people we have known over the years, with whom we have shared, who have not yet begun to follow Jesus, are on a gradual journey to the Lord? Because God is at work in the world—indeed, our world, the world of our networks and neighborhoods.

Secondly, God at work in non-Christian religions. Did the Buddha point to God at work in the world? He pointed to the *dhamma*, *nibbāna* and *karma*. It was Winston King who asked the question, "Was the Buddha pointing to three aspects of God's governing actions?" Do not these core Buddhist beliefs respond to ultimate truth (*Dhamma*), liberation from suffering (*nibbāna*), and justice (*karma*): These were the three realities among many that the Buddha discovered and thought important to teach.

*Figure 1. Illustration of the Buddha pointing to God at work in the world.*



Here's the Buddha pointing towards these three things, perhaps functions of God in the world, ethical values that God would like to see in people. Take care over your actions as there will be consequences. Choose well. Look for truth. And really, can the fleeting nature of self be satisfied by what we strive after, which is also fleeting? So, there's an ethical component to the teachings of the Buddha, perhaps reflecting on how God would

want people to live in the world. And then Winston King goes on to say that, after the Buddha's *para-nibbāna*, somehow the Buddhists took him and the three things that he focused on in his teaching and put them together. And you can see how after a while something solidifies. So, did the Buddha point to God at work in the world through the teachings of Buddhism?

And then lastly, salvation is through Christ alone. Clearly, Reichelt believed that and expected to meet those both at the Brother house and on his travels who were experiencing exactly that—that salvation is in Christ. In 1937 he wrote an article on Buddhism in China today. He wrote,

We have one great aim, namely, to give the full Christian message, the full positive Gospel as it is revealed in the New Testament, using all the points of contact which psychologically may help the seekers after truth in East Asia to recognize Jesus Christ as the only way to the Father. We can afford to be broadminded because our work is through and through Christocentric. (Reichelt 1937, 166)

So, somehow, keeping Jesus at the center of who we are and what we do, means that we can be optimistic about our activities at the circumference, on the edge.

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### Notto Thelle: Response Three

I appreciate very much the presentation about Reichelt. It's interesting, fascinating, to see how positively he is evaluated. I was a little nervous about getting through this consultation or symposium. I thought there would be many more critical attitudes or reviews of Reichelt. So, I appreciated it, though I can't respond to all the points, but maybe pick up one or two of, Dr. Muck's points.

The first three points, dialogue presence and amalgamation. Well, Reichelt did not use the word dialogue that is popular now. But what he did was actually a sort of very friendly and open dialogue. I've sometimes thought about the dialogue you mentioned between Menander and Nagasena; is it a dialogue? Well, it's a question-and-answer thing which means dialogue may also be used, and has been used at least literally, as a way of arguing your point. When I was a student, we read the Socratic or

Platonic dialogues and the Socratic dialogue was not very dialogical, because Socrates knew exactly where it was pointing. He used dialogue as a way of manipulating the other. That's maybe an extreme way of saying it, but dialogues may be also not dialogical, but ways of manipulating. I've seen this in Japan, too, in the 16th century when the Jesuits came. There was one Japanese who later became a Buddhist, but first he wrote a book, a dialogue book between two persons. What he did was to manipulate the story to demonstrate how important and how much better Christianity was. Unfortunately, he converted to Buddhism afterwards, and they used the same arguments the other way.

So, I think we have to be very careful what we mean by dialogue. As a generous way of being concerned about others, listening and talking (we have two ears and one mouth), it is very important. I think presence is also very important. What you say about amalgamation and syncretism—I agree with very strongly. It has become very difficult to use the word syncretism because it has been almost demonized as a very negative thing. But I think we have to recognize how syncretistic Christianity is—I mean, not only on the so-called mission field, but through the whole history of Christianity. I think it's the theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg who said that Christianity is a syncretistic religion, and if it had not been syncretistic, it wouldn't have survived.

**We need to recognize how syncretistic Christianity is throughout the whole of history. "If Christianity had not been syncretistic, it would not have survived." (Pannenberg)**

What happened when Christianity was transferred from the more Hebrew Oriental context into the Greek context? It's a tremendous process of syncretism. Our entire theological, doctrinal language is not Hebrew, it's Greek. We're using Greek concepts, logos, *ousia* (essence), three persons are the Trinity, everything is expressed in Greek and Roman categories, and so the whole history of Christianity is a process of opening up, accepting, using, and then rejecting. So, I agree totally that Christianity is a syncretistic religion.

Sometimes I think it's become too syncretistic. Luther, in his time used the phrase The Babylonian Captivity of the Church. We have become so European or so Norwegian or so German, and so adapted to modernity that we often become very individualistic and we easily forget that Christianity is not an individualistic faith and religion. We forget that the central point of Jesus is not about individuals; yes, he challenges the person. What he was keen about was not an egoistic heaven, rather everything we learn about salvation in the biblical tradition shows that it is about a community;

it is not something for loners, it's a community thing. Well, my basic point is to support the use of syncretism as a way of understanding Christian history, but also in a very positive sense, but also that we should be critical in the way we come to accept almost everything and sometimes become captive to our own civilization.

I like the comparisons of the various periods with Reichelt. He commented on Confucianism, but he was not very attracted to Confucianism because he felt it was too rational. He didn't have the sort of emotional commitment that he found with Buddhism, while, as you said, the Jesuit, Matteo Ricci, did. Ricci rejected Buddhism because it was then thought of as a religion for simple people, and Ricci was interested in the elite. So, he became a sort of Confucian scholar, using all his scholarship as a missionary method.

One last comment about hospitality. My impression is that in most places where Christians came as missionaries, the Buddhists were extremely gracious, opening the temples, opening the monasteries, not only for Reichelt in China but in Sri Lanka or Ceylon and at that time the missionaries were allowed to preach in the temples. But gradually the relationship became more antagonistic. And I think one of the reasons is that the missionaries were quite aggressive in their preaching. So, the first dialogues in Ceylon were quite friendly, but ended up with this terrible antagonistic disputation, as you mentioned. So, I think Christians have a lot to learn from Buddhist hospitality, because hospitality, I think, is a basic Christian virtue.

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### Terry Muck: Replies to His Respondents

I'll be very brief as our time is gone. But I do think we should always have very good friends of mine give responses like Amos Yong because he says so many good things about me, and that's good.

The question that all three of you raised, either directly or indirectly, is the question of fulfillment theology. I have a little talk on what fulfillment theology is and what it's not, and if you're going to use fulfillment theology make sure you read up on it before you use it.<sup>6</sup> Because it can mean different things to different people, and it's important to know that.

Rory, thanks for the comments about how valuable commitments can be. Reichelt was a committed person and it's a mistake to think that because he believed in this certain approach that he was willing to give up on everything. No, not at all, and I appreciated your comment that it can be a healthy

way of handling criticism. Those of us who have been criticized over the years, sometimes we just have to retreat to our commitments, and that's the only way we can survive.

**In most places where Christians came as missionaries, the Buddhists were extremely gracious, opening temples and monasteries. But gradually the relationship became more antagonistic.**

Dr. Thelle, thank you for your comments on syncretism, and your other points as well. I realize I threw an awful lot at all of you in a very quick way and I appreciate your listening. Reichelt surely had weaknesses, and that is one of the reasons I want so much to read the biography you are writing, to find out a little bit more about what he was like as a person in interaction. I think that's very revealing about missionaries of all sorts, so I'm looking forward to that. And I hope also to have further conversations with you regarding the fact that you knew him and now have written a book about him. It just makes you an amazing resource for those of us who are interested in Reichelt. **IJFM**

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to H. L. Richard and Brad Gill for transcribing and providing an initial edit of my response provided from a set of notes; I further edited it for clarity and added a few footnotes.
- <sup>2</sup> One of the results of which was my book, *The Cosmic Breath: Spirit and Nature in the Christianity-Buddhism-Science Dialogue*, Philosophical Studies in Science & Religion 4 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012).
- <sup>3</sup> So much so that I dedicated one of my books to him: *The Missiological Spirit: Christian Mission Theology for the Third Millennium Global Context* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2014).
- <sup>4</sup> I opt for such an inclusivist model in my *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003; reprint, Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014).
- <sup>5</sup> Thus, my long-term engagement with Asian cultures and traditions for my own theological work, more recently in essays such as "Yin-Yang and the Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: An Evangelical Egalitarian East-West Dialogue on Gender and Race," *Priscilla Papers* 34:3 (2020): 21–26, and "Buddhist-Christian Dialogue on Human Becoming: Next Steps for Pneumatological Anthropology," in Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Elizabeth J. Harris, eds., *A Visionary Approach: Lynn A. de Silva and the Prospects for Buddhist-Christian Encounter* (Sankt Ottilien, Germany: EOS, 2021), 171–92.
- <sup>6</sup> It has been included as an article in this issue: Terry Muck, "Fulfillment Theology," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, 38: 3–4 (July–December 2021): 137–148, [ijfm.org](http://ijfm.org).

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