

# Karl Ludvig Reichelt's Pilgrimage: From Conservative Lutheranism to Experiments with Dialogical Outreach to China's Buddhist Monks

by Notto R. Thelle



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## *Missionary Conversions*

He had gone out to change the East and was returning, himself a changed man. He had a special calling to preach the gospel to Buddhists in China, but had discovered that they had a message for him as well. As a missionary, he wanted to change the society which he had come to serve, but was himself changed in the process, and became an important mediator between the East and the West.

My expressions are adapted from an American observer who described the “conversion” of some Protestant missionaries who went to China around the year 1900.<sup>1</sup> They did not convert to Buddhism, Taoism, or Confucianism, and did not worship ancestors, but they did experience a mental change from a total rejection of Chinese religion and culture towards a positive evaluation and fascination. They had to redefine their understanding of Christianity, taking seriously the biblical expectation in Acts 14 that God had not left himself without testimony in the world, searching for points of contact for preaching, and creating an open space for integrating Chinese insights and experiences into their own theological universe.

Such a “conversion” was not possible without mental struggle and inner tensions, at times leading to spiritual confusion. Some missionaries lost their motivation, admitting that China did not need Christ; some searched for a harmony that relativized the Christian faith; some discovered that Buddhism or Eastern philosophy gave more meaning than Christianity. But most of them continued their missionary work with new enthusiasm. They wanted to use their new insight to show that Christ did not teach an alien Western religion, but that Christianity would grow and flourish if it were deeply rooted in the Chinese soil.

## *Spiritual and Cultural Background*

Karl Ludvig Reichelt (1877–1952) belonged to the last group. He grew up in the small provincial town of Arendal on the south coast of Norway, went to middle school, spent one year at a teachers' college, and got his theological training at

the Mission School of the Norwegian Missionary Society (1897–1902). He came to China in 1903 as a traditional Lutheran missionary, nurtured and deeply motivated by a warm pietistic tradition.

One might wonder how this background could prepare a young boy for this type of missionary work in China: a small provincial coastal town in southern Norway, dominated by a rather narrow-minded pietism, and then a rather exclusivist Lutheran school with a strictly defined dogma. I have to limit myself to a few brief points.

In spite of being a modest port town with a population of 2,500 inhabitants, Arendal had the largest merchant fleet in Norway, and it was widely open to the world. More than a hundred years before Reichelt was born, sailors from the district had visited China and even published books about the country. China was part of the lore of the town. Reichelt describes his orientation towards China as the young boy's romantic exodus-dream which was transformed to a clear call for mission.<sup>2</sup>

He grew up in a home that was characterized by an atmosphere of a warm, somewhat strict, revivalist pietism, aptly described by the biblical expression "godliness with contentment" (1 Tim. 6:6). His home was open for visiting preachers and home meetings. The warm atmosphere of spiritual dialogue, friendship, Bible study, and preaching had almost something "sacramental" about it.<sup>3</sup>

He had a remarkable teacher who became a sort of spiritual guide for the young boy. She helped him when the impressions from the revival meetings in the so-called prayer houses became too heavy. He "met God" in these meetings, he commented later,

but mostly the Yahweh of Sinai. The atmosphere was serious and gloomy, or one-sidedly emotional. Everything was accompanied by an inexpressibly oppressive feeling. I realized that this was not *the totality of God*.

The teacher, who was only a few years older than the boy, helped him through the various crises, and nurtured his spiritual growth. One decisive element from this religious background continued to be a vital element in his spiritual experience: the sense of guilt and contrition and, along with that, the tremendous experience of gratitude for the forgiveness of sin. When he arrived in China for the first time in 1903, he expressed his excitement with the characteristic words: "I don't think I have been so happy since I [for the first time] was able to believe that my sins were forgiven" (*Jeg ved ikke, jeg har været saa lykkelig, siden jeg fik tro mine synders forladelse*).<sup>4</sup>

Another formative experience was his close relationship with the surrounding nature. When he was alone—and he was a solitary boy—he roamed the mountains and woods as his own sanctuary. The silent fir trees, the golden pine stems, and the

white birches were his congregation. He preached to them, prayed with them, and blessed them. "Up there I experience the most inexpressible religious sense of being grasped, under the living spiritual breath of Nature," he recalled later.

Perhaps his relationship to nature also prepared him for his fascination with the sacred geography of Buddhism and its mountains in China which he visited on his many travels as a missionary pilgrim. This type of experience probably also stimulated his contemplative and mystical inclinations, expressed in a sense of divine presence in natural phenomena and a feeling of unity with all things.

### *Pioneer Missionary*

I have to skip Reichelt's experiences as a pioneer missionary in Ningxiang, Hunan, (1903–11), and also his career as a teacher of the New Testament at the newly established Lutheran Seminary in Shekou, Henan (1912–20). It is, however, obvious that his experiences as a traditional pioneer missionary in those formative years prepared him for a different type of approach, and gradually convinced him to initiate a new strategy for missionary outreach to the Buddhist monastic community in China. In Nanjing in the 1920s, later in Hong Kong in the 1930s, and until his death in 1952 he established so-called "Christian Monasteries for Buddhist Monks." He and his colleagues were not monks, but the "monasteries" were spiritual centers inspired by Buddhist monastic traditions, where Buddhists and Christians could meet in mutual friendship and openness, in an atmosphere adapted to Chinese culture. He never concealed his wish to guide his Buddhist friends to Christ, not by conquering Buddhism but by guiding Buddhists "from within" towards Christian faith.<sup>5</sup>

Reichelt's dialogical relationship with the Chinese Buddhist community in the 1920s initiated a different type of pioneer work. It was welcomed by Buddhists as well as Christians as a refreshing missionary adventure: finally, there was a missionary who broke the pattern of wholesale condemnation. He not only wanted to respect Buddhism and write learned books, as some missionaries had done before him, but he evidently felt a strong attraction to its religious life and gave his own home constituency a new appreciation of the greatness of Buddhist piety. With all his fascination with Buddhism, however, Reichelt was driven by an intense missionary calling and consistently wanted to convert Buddhist monks to Christianity.

Such a combination of missionary zeal and dialogical sympathy may seem paradoxical, or even self-contradictory and unacceptable to some. But the fact that people like Reichelt contributed to the changing relationships between Buddhism and Christianity in China and in the West invites further investigation of the dynamics behind the changes and of the hermeneutical keys that made him an intermediary between two civilizations.

I will introduce the institutions in some detail later. First, I will say a few words about the process that motivated Reichelt's "conversion," then describe the theological and philosophical ideas behind the strategy, and finally show some of the practical manifestations of the strategy.

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### *Mental Conversions*

#### **A Conversion from the Western Contempt of China**

Most nineteenth century Western attitudes to China were permeated by a lack of respect for Chinese culture. The earlier European fascination with China as the great civilization of the East no longer seemed adequate.<sup>6</sup> China was regarded as stagnated, self-sufficient, and without vitality. More important was the constant political and military humiliation represented by Opium Wars, imperialistic policies, and unjust trade regulations. The years from 1840 to 1905 have appropriately been characterized as "the age of contempt for China."<sup>7</sup> The new generation of missionaries toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was part of a movement that rediscovered the greatness of China and committed themselves to serve the new China.

#### **A Conversion from Missionary Prejudices**

Part of that contempt was the rejection of paganism as a dark and diabolical superstition. The scholarly types of missionaries admitted that it might be useful to study paganism, but only to clarify its contradictions and absurdities in order to let the truth of Christ shine through.<sup>8</sup> You might find positive elements in Buddhism, but basically it was "a science without inspiration, a religion without God, a body without a spirit, unable to regenerate, cheerless, cold, dead and deplorably barren of results."<sup>9</sup> Some of you may remember Hudson Taylor's appeal: "There is a great Niagara of souls passing into the dark in China. Every day, every week, every month they are passing away! A million a month in China are dying without God!"<sup>10</sup>

Reichelt's conversion happened as a gradual realization as he visited monasteries and got to know some abbots and spiritual leaders. He saw clearly the weakness of Chinese Buddhism, the corruption and moral decay, and the need of reform. But he was impressed by the beauty of the buildings, the atmosphere of worship, the sincerity of some of the monks, and the depth of some of its sacred scriptures. At the same time, he was frustrated by the communication gap—his attempt to preach the gospel did not touch the monks. They understood every word he said,

but not the meaning. They seemed to live in separate worlds. Gradually he felt the calling to bridge the gap and find ways to approach the Buddhist community in a meaningful way.

### **Pilgrimage into Buddhism**

In this way his conversion from missionary prejudices became a pilgrimage into Buddhism, a spiritual search for its essence, if it is acceptable to use such a word. His approach began with study and friendship. He traveled, observed, listened, and dialogued. He became a pilgrim missionary—preaching and sharing his faith but also being open for finding truth among the others. He published several books where he described Buddhism as it was practiced, not as Western constructions of rational doctrines. He was particularly touched by the piety of the Pure Land Buddhism with its emphasis on faith in Amitabha, the Buddha of light and life who would embrace all who took refuge in him. He was moved by the way people took refuge in Guanyin, the compassionate "goddess of mercy." He discovered that the central message of Mahāyāna was the vision of a universal salvation, beautifully expressed in the vow of the *bodhisattvas*: to abandon even the bliss of Nirvana in order to contribute to the salvation of all sentient beings. He was particularly impressed by the warm spirit of worship and devotion.<sup>11</sup>

It may sound paradoxical, but it seems clear to me that his own pietistic spirituality, with emphasis on the experiential and emotional aspect of faith, prepared him for his fascination with Buddhism. His own experience of sin and grace and his warm devotion to Christ as savior, enabled him to recognize the depth of Buddhist piety. In spite of all differences, it was familiar. Somehow, they were brothers, friends on the way, touched by God. He began to look forward to a time when the Buddhists could move into Christ's great temple and "take their place there as gleaming jewels in his crown."<sup>12</sup>

### ***Not To Destroy but To Fulfill***

Let me mention three points in order to clarify the theological and missiological position implied in Reichelt's process towards his new understanding of a mission to Buddhists.

#### **Religions as a Preparation for Christianity**

The first is familiar to anyone who has studied the history of Christian mission and theologies of religions. Reichelt was influenced by the fulfilment theologies that had become popular in many missionary traditions. Just as Jesus did not come to destroy the law and the prophets but to fulfill them, the religions of the world were regarded as a sort of Old Testament that were to be fulfilled by the New. The religions were stepping-stones or preparations for Christianity, part of an evolutionary process that led from primitive religions toward the highest in Protestant Christianity.

One of his favorite symbols of this process was the Nestorian "lotus cross," depicting a Christian cross placed on a lotus, the lotus being a central symbol of Eastern spiritual search. The symbol may be interpreted in many ways: as an image of harmonious coexistence of Buddhism and Christianity; as a triumphalist symbol of the cross replacing the lotus; or as a symbol of the need of Christianity to be rooted in and responding to the spiritual search of the East. Reichelt clearly opted for the last interpretation. He was convinced that the deepest aspirations in Buddhism were fulfilled in the cross of Christ. The cross in the lotus expressed his hope that "all the religious systems of the East will find their redemption and fulfillment in the religion of the cross, Christ becoming all in all."<sup>13</sup>

Figure 1. The lotus cross from the Nestorian Monument



Figure 2. The lotus cross used by Reichelt's Mission to Buddhists



### A Johannine Perspective—Reichelt's *Logos* Christology

The biblical basis for Reichelt's position was the classical verses referring to a general revelation outside Christ, such as Acts 14:16–17 and 17:26–29, and Romans 1:19–20. But his favorite basis was what he called the Johannine perspective from the Prologue of John, developed further by the second century Apologists and Church Fathers: the divine *Logos* (The Word) that was in the beginning and was incarnated in Christ, was spread like grains of seed (*logoi spermatikoi*) in the world, and was to some extent available to anyone who was searching for truth and meaning.<sup>14</sup>

In China, this became particularly powerful since the *Logos* was rendered with *Tao* in the Chinese translation of the Gospel of John. Reichelt never tired of appealing to people that their search for truth (*Logos/Tao*) would open up to a search for the ultimate truth that was incarnated in Jesus Christ. That is why the name of the mission in Chinese was the Christian "Society of Tao-Friends," and the institution was often called a Brother Home. They were all united as friends and brothers in their search for truth. The *logos* theology enabled Reichelt to be Christ-centered and Christ-open at the same time.

### The "Higher Buddhism"—The Hidden Christianity in Mahāyāna

An additional element in such a fulfillment theology was the growing awareness in China that Mahāyāna Buddhism had many elements that seemed more "Christian" than the original Buddhism: the tendency to divinize the Buddha, the emphasis on faith and compassion, the awareness of sin and lostness, abandonment of "self-power" and dependence on "other power," the grace of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas as sort of divine saviors. One of the early pioneer missionaries, W. A. P. Martin, suggested that "Mahāyāna is a form of Christianity in Buddhist nomenclature." Another missionary pioneer, Timothy Richard, who studied Buddhism with the reformer Yang Wenhui, translated some of the central Buddhist scriptures, and described them as "The New Testament of Higher Buddhism."<sup>15</sup> Several scholars suggested that Mahāyāna must be a result of early contact with Christianity in Western Asia in the early centuries of the church. The new ideas and concepts applied by Mahāyāna were, so to say, borrowed from Christianity. Reichelt learned from Richard to translate Buddhist concepts using Christian expressions. And in turn, he felt free to use Buddhist terms in preaching and liturgies. That was not primarily an attempt to adapt Buddhist rhetoric for Christian purposes. From Reichelt's point of view, he was just reclaiming notions and concepts that had originally come from Christianity, and in this way regained their original meaning.<sup>16</sup> That was, in particular, the case with Pure Land Buddhism in which, according to Reichelt, some of the "most precious gold of Buddhism and Christianity" had been included.

### Transforming Lofty Ideas into Concrete Strategies

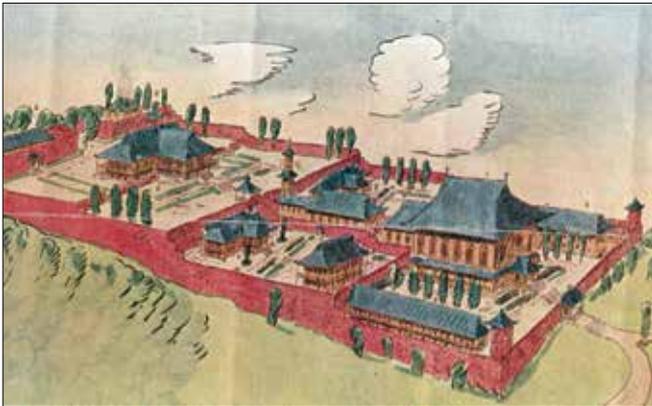
These ideas were shared by many contemporary missionaries. Reichelt's unique contribution was his consistent attempt to convert lofty ideas into concrete strategies by establishing Christian monasteries for Buddhist and Taoist itinerant monks and other religious seekers.

### Pilgrimage as a Spiritual Journey

A Buddhist "pilgrim" or itinerant monk is called *yunsui* (Japanese *unsui*), literally "cloud-water," indicating that they were drifting with the clouds and flowing with the water in search of a master who could guide them towards insight. A

Christian monastery for these monks would have pilgrims' halls for the itinerant monks, and facilities for introducing them to a new master, Jesus Christ. It must be a spiritual center where they could feel at home, with a rhythm of worship, meditation, and dialogical reflection in an atmosphere of trust and friendship.

*Figure 3. The first amateur blueprint of a Christian monastery for Buddhist monks, 1919–20*



Reichelt's encounter with the young monk Kuandu in Nanjing in 1919 was decisive for his future. During a visit to a monastery in Nanjing he had met this monk who almost spontaneously responded to his presentation of Christ as an answer to spiritual searching. Buddhism had failed to solve his questions, now Christ might relieve his agony. A dramatic process ended with Kuandu's conversion. So, Reichelt ended up with a different type of conversion story—not the traditional account of a person who is saved from the misery and darkness of paganism into the light of Christianity, but a person who comes from the light of Buddhism and, inspired by those glimpses of wisdom, is guided toward the true light in Jesus Christ. In the skeptical conservative missionary circles in Norway, this dramatic conversion story had a much stronger appeal than his theoretical presentations of inclusiveness, logos Christology and "higher Buddhism." Here was a concrete "proof" that the strategy worked.<sup>17</sup>

The first monastery in Nanjing was a modest institution in borrowed facilities, rather poor compared to Buddhist monasteries (see photo, p. 99). But in the years from 1922 to 1927, the little "monastery" (*conglin*) was visited by approximately five thousand monks and other religious seekers. They could stay in the pilgrims' hall (*yunsuitang*) as they were used to in their own monasteries, participate in the liturgical rhythm, dialogue with Christians who respected their traditions, and engage in a deeper study of Christianity, if they so wanted. The Sunday worship service was regularly visited by Buddhist monks, from two or three up to twenty monks, who participated wholeheartedly and joined for a vegetarian meal afterwards. Those first

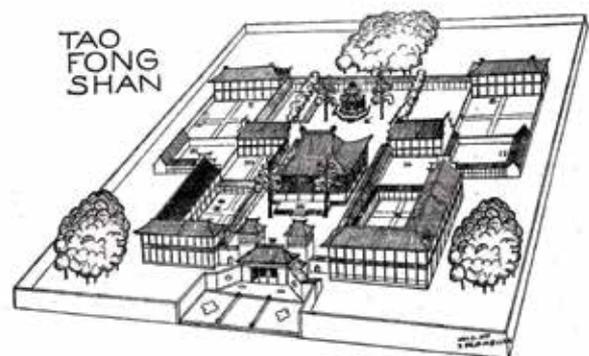
years were, in many ways, a living laboratory where Reichelt and his colleagues developed the traditions that were further developed in Tao Fong Shan, Hong Kong, in the 1930s.

### Liturgical Spirituality

Reichelt came from a Norwegian Lutheran background where liturgical worship was a central aspect of spiritual life. In contrast to most other Protestant missions, except the Anglicans, the Norwegian Lutherans regarded a rich liturgy as an important asset for appealing to the Chinese, who had a deep appreciation of rituals. Both in Nanjing and Hong Kong, daily life was structured by worship, morning and evening prayers every day, hours of silence and meditation, teaching and preaching, and manual work. Every Saturday there was a special session for contrition as preparation for the high mass on Sundays.<sup>18</sup>

The liturgies were structured as a traditional Lutheran mass, but heavily influenced by Buddhist traditions, as already mentioned. The altar was beautifully made in Chinese style, with a red lacquer finish and richly adorned with golden symbols. The liturgies were adapted to Buddhist expressions, with incense, candles and bells, prayers, hymns, and music inspired by Buddhist conventions, but with a clear message about Jesus Christ as the way and the truth. As stated in the constitution, the ritual was meant "to contain what is essential in the Christian doctrine and on the other hand include some parts of the Mahāyāna ritual which are in perfect harmony with the Christian doctrine."<sup>19</sup>

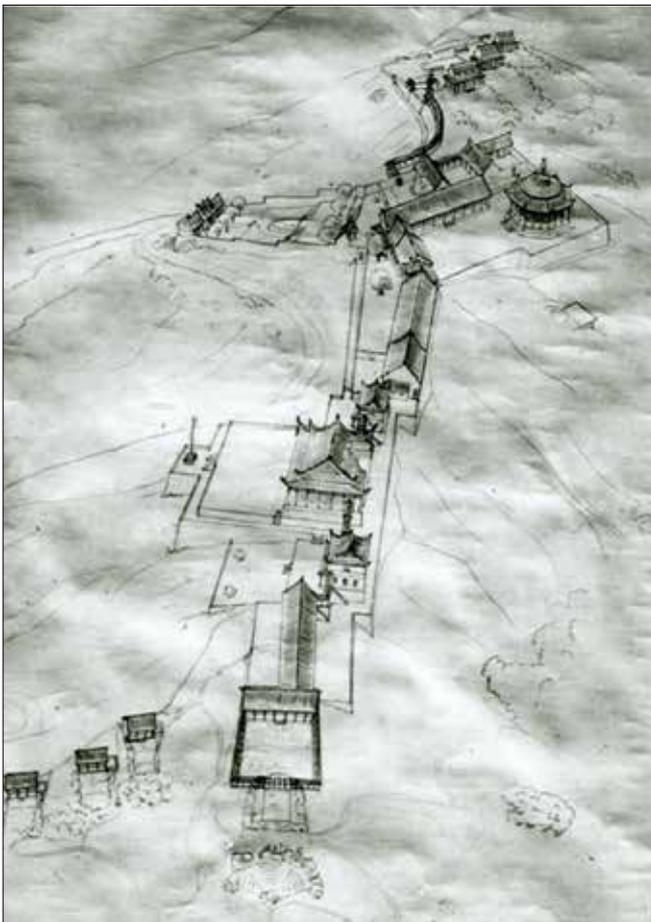
*Figure 4. The architect's initial drawings of the planned "monastery," 1929–30, following the traditional structure where all buildings are placed symmetrically behind a rectangular wall*



A few words about the prayers and hymns. They sounded like classical Christian prayers when they were translated, but those who knew Chinese Buddhist rhetoric would see that traditional Christian terminology stood side by side with Buddhist expressions. One hymn—with its melody—had been taken directly from the common Buddhist ritual book, only two characters were replaced with the Chinese characters for Christ. The

calligraphic inscription above the altar had the first sentence of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word," which in Chinese became: "In the beginning was Tao." The inscription on the left side of the altar had an inscription with classical Buddhist symbolism, referring to the ship of grace that leads over to the other shore, interpreted as Christ's grace leading to salvation. The Buddhist expression for taking refuge in the three treasures—I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha—was used for the dedication to the trinity. The content was clearly Christian in its use of traditional expressions about the creator, about Christ as the ransom for sin, and the Holy Spirit, but it was mixed with Buddhist or Taoist expressions.

Figure 5. The architect's solution, placing the various buildings of the "monastery" along the narrow ridge of Tao Fong Shan, 1931.



### The Theology of Architecture

Now, almost a hundred years after the beginning in Nanjing, Reichelt is primarily associated with Hong Kong and Tao Fong Shan, the beautiful new "monastery" that was built in the 1930s on a hill above Shatin in the New Territories of Hong Kong. Tao Fong Shan added one new dimension to Reichelt's work: it was not a poor institute in rented facilities as in Nanjing,

but a manifestation in beautiful architecture of his vision that Christianity must be rooted in Chinese culture. The Danish architect, Johannes Prip-Møller, was an expert on Buddhist architecture, and used his skills to create a Christian institute where all the elements of a classical Buddhist monastery were integrated: a pilgrims' hall for visiting monks, a meditation crypt, a beautiful sanctuary, educational facilities for visiting monks, and all buildings in classical Chinese architecture.

Figure 6. C. C. Wang's watercolor sketch of Tao Fong Shan



Buddhist monasteries were usually built on a rectangular flat site, or in terraces on a slope of a hillside, surrounded by a wall, with the buildings placed symmetrically, one behind the other. That was also how the original plans for the institute were designed. But that was impossible on the narrow ridge of hill in Hong Kong, so Prip-Møller had to redesign the entire structure of the institute organizing it as a garland of buildings in a zigzag movement along the ridge. He had studied the Chinese tradition of *fengsui* (wind-water) with its awareness of the balance between *yin* and *yang*, and the innumerable rules about directions and the shape of the landscape. He chose to trust his own artistic sensitivity and his sense of harmony between buildings, open spaces, and the landscape. Together with Reichelt, he "put his ear to the ground" in order to listen to the message that slumbered under the turf. He believed that everything was "prepared in advance in the very formation of the hill, in the human mind—created by an invisible, powerful and loving hand."<sup>20</sup> Their dream was to create an institution that harmonized Eastern and Western traditions in a way that had never before been accomplished in the mission history of China.<sup>21</sup> Even today, ninety years later when the traditional work of the Mission to Buddhists has been reorganized as the Areopagos Foundation, which is involved in other types of dialogical approaches, the institute at Tao Fong Shan remains as an architectural reminder of the need to integrate Christianity in the Chinese culture.

To this sacred mountain, monks came from all over China, participating in training courses aimed at preparing monks to become preachers and pastors who in turn would be sent back to their earlier communities in order to share their new faith. That was symbolically expressed by small figures on the roof of the church. Instead of the traditional animals and mythical figures so common on Chinese roofs, the figures were people on their way out to the world with their new message.

*Figure 7. The Christ Chapel and other structures of Tao Fong Shan*



### *Success or Failure?*

All of this collapsed with the Japanese attack on Hong Kong in December 1941, the same day as the attack on Pearl Harbor. After the war, and with the Chinese revolution in 1949, everything changed, and it was impossible to continue as before. The classical period of Reichelt's Mission to Buddhists was over, and one had to search for new ways.

It would not be appropriate for us today to render judgment on whether or not this approach was successful. But the fact that during the four and a half years in Nanjing, the humble institute was visited by a steady stream of Buddhist and Taoist monks and other religious seekers, suggests that it had a tremendous attraction. Hong Kong was somewhat outside the pilgrim routes, but Reichelt had established a network of contacts throughout China, and even in Hong Kong monks came from all provinces. Toward the end of the 1930s, the dream seemed to be fulfilled: a good staff of Scandinavian and Chinese coworkers; the school had forty students as originally planned; and a vibrant spiritual life attracted visitors both locally and internationally.

There were certainly Buddhists who reacted negatively against the venture, describing Reichelt as a sheep-stealer who borrowed Buddhist traditions in order to convert the monks. At times, there were violent protests. Some scholars have branded his venture as naïve and uncritical, even crude and offensive, and describe him as a "Bible-waving missionary who fraudulently adopted Buddhist guise."<sup>22</sup> But most Buddhists were positive to this radically new type of friendship and openness—missionaries who never concealed their commitment to Christ, but regarded the monks as brothers, truth seekers, and friends. Their only contact with Christianity before had been missionaries and pastors who defamed their religion and ridiculed the monks. Here they met

Christians who not only respected their religion, but combined knowledge with a deep fascination, even allowing them to bring some of their sacred treasures into the sanctuary of Christ.

Some missionaries and Chinese Christians rejected Reichelt's approach and accused him of syncretism and idol worship. One of his Norwegian colleagues denounced his combination of "Christian and pagan rituals" as repulsive and unacceptable. After more than twenty years of service in the Norwegian Missionary Society, in 1925–1926 he had to leave the mission and establish a new organization to support his work, The Christian Mission to Buddhists. But a great number of Chinese Church leaders and missionaries reacted with enthusiasm. "Just as Indian Buddhism had been transformed by the encounter with China, Christianity must adapt to a Chinese garment," commented a pastor from Shanghai when the work was introduced. He was happy to see a mission that was ready to undertake this task in the encounter with Buddhism. Even missionaries from non-liturgical traditions were deeply moved when they participated in the worship services. "Never ever in China have I seen a deeper devotion than in this simple, little room," wrote the Quaker missionary Henry Hodgkin. Here Buddhist truth-seekers could come and find the rest that "no alien structure with a foreign ritual and faith could shape."<sup>23</sup> From his Zen Buddhist observation post in Kyoto, D. T. Suzuki wrote with enthusiasm about the work in Nanjing, referring in particular to the form of worship with its "refined, religious atmosphere indigenous to the religious soul of China."<sup>24</sup>

*Figure 8. The figures on the roof of the church symbolizing the return to the world with the message*



This must do for now. I have tried to introduce some of the central elements in Reichelt's missionary experiment with Buddhism in China. There are so many aspects that need further comment. I am sure some of the responses will open up further elaboration and discussion. And we will be able to share new perspectives and viewpoints. **IJFM**

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Earl Herbert Cressy, "Converting the Missionary." *Asia* (Journal of the American Asiatic Association), vol XIX:6, (June 1919): 553–556; Lian Xi, *The Conversion of the Missionary: Liberalism in American Protestant Missions in China, 1907–1932*, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); Notto R. Thelle, "The Conversion of the Missionary: Changes in Buddhist-Christian Relations in the Early Twentieth Century," in *Ching Feng: A Journal on Christianity, Chinese Religion, and Culture* (New Series) 4:2 (2003): 1–25; Notto R. Thelle, "Crossing Religious Boundaries: Christian Mission and Global Transformations," in *Religion in a Globalized Age: Transfers and Transformations, Integration and Resistance*, edited by Sturla S. Stålsett, (Oslo: Novus Press, 2008).
- <sup>2</sup> Reichelt describes his background in a brief account written in 1928, "Fra mitt vita" (From my life).
- <sup>3</sup> The classical definition of a sacrament is, according to Lutheran traditions, "a visible sign of God's invisible grace." In this case the visible signs were not water or bread and wine, but the fellowship of concrete persons.
- <sup>4</sup> *Norsk missions Tidende* (Norwegian Missionary Journal, 1903: 479–81).
- <sup>5</sup> Among major studies of Reichelt, see Håkan Eilert, *Boundlessness*, (Aarhus: Forlaget Aros, 1974); Filip Riisager, *Forventning og Opfyldelse* (Expectation and Fulfillment), (Aarhus: Forlaget Aros, 1973) and *Lotusblomsten og korset* (The Lotus and the Cross), (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 1998); Tao-vindens bjerg (The Mountain of the Tao Wind), (Frederiksberg: Forlaget Areopagos, 2010); Eric J. Sharpe, Karl Ludvig Reichelt: Missionary, Scholar, and Pilgrim, (Hong Kong: Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Centre, 1984); Notto N. Thelle, Karl Ludvig Reichelt – en kristen banebryter i Øst-Asia (Karl Ludvig Reichelt: A Christian Pioneer in East Asia), (Oslo: Buddhistmisjonens Forlag, 1954); Rolv Olsen, "Prevailing winds": An Analysis of the Liturgical Inculturation Efforts of Karl Ludvig Reichelt, (Uppsala: Studia Missionalia Svecana, 2007), 104.
- <sup>6</sup> E. L. Allen, *Christianity Among the Religions*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), 33–48.
- <sup>7</sup> Harold Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds: American Views of China and India*, (White Plains, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1980), first published in 1958. See also Lian Xi, *The Conversion of Missionaries: Liberalism in American Protestant Missions in China, 1907–1932* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 176.
- <sup>8</sup> Xi, 176–181; Paul A. Varg, *Missionaries, Chinese, and Diplomats: The American Protestant Missionary Movement in China 1890–1952*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958); Stephen Uhalley, Jr. and Xiaoxin Wu, eds., *China and Christianity: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2001).
- <sup>9</sup> Ernest J. Eitel, *Buddhism: Its Historical, Theoretical and Popular Aspects*, (London: Trübner & Co., 1873, first published in 1872), 1–2, 74, 122.
- <sup>10</sup> Varg, *Missionaries, Chinese, and Diplomats*, 68.
- <sup>11</sup> Thoroughly documented in Reichelt's first two books, *Kinas religioner* (China's Religions) from 1913 and *Østens religiøse liv* (Religious Life in the East) 1922. Published in English as *Religion in Chinese Garment*, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951); and *Truth and Tradition in Chinese Buddhism*, (Shanghai: The Commercial Press, 1928).
- <sup>12</sup> Reichelt, *Truth and Tradition*, 7–8.
- <sup>13</sup> Reichelt, *Østens religiøse liv* (Religious Life in the East), 1922, 90.
- <sup>14</sup> Reichelt's logos theology is a recurring theme in most of his writings.
- <sup>15</sup> Timothy Richard, *The New Testament of Higher Buddhism*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1910).
- <sup>16</sup> In *Chinese Buddhism: Its Historical, Theoretical, and Popular Aspects* (London: Trübner & Co., 1893), 2–3, Joseph Edkins comments that Mahāyāna got its central concepts from Persia and Babylonia, and refers to studies by S. Beal, B. Hodgson and E. Burnouf.
- <sup>17</sup> *Kinas buddhister for Kristus* (China's Buddhists for Christ), a popular booklet that described the conversion of Kuandu, Stavanger: Det Norske Missions selskaps Trykkeri, 1921.
- <sup>18</sup> For a thorough description of the concept of such a monastery for Buddhist monks and a detailed analysis of the liturgies and art work, see Notto R. Thelle, "A Christian Monastery for Buddhist Monks 1: Karl Ludvig Reichelt's Sacred Mountains" and "A Christian Monastery for Buddhist Monks 2: Buddhist Rhetoric in Christian Liturgies," *Ching Feng* (New Series), 6:1 and 6:2, 2005.
- <sup>19</sup> Paul D. Twinem, "A New Brotherhood," in *The Chinese Recorder* (1923): 644.
- <sup>20</sup> *Buddhistmissionen* (monthly journal of the Christian Mission to Buddhists, 1930): 110–11.
- <sup>21</sup> *Buddhistmissionen* (1931): 166–67.
- <sup>22</sup> Whalen Lai, "Why is there not a Buddho-Christian Dialogue in China?" *Buddhist-Christian Studies* (1986): 93.
- <sup>23</sup> *Kamp og seier* (Struggle and Victory, 1924): 363. Hodgkin was at this time secretary of China Christian Council.
- <sup>24</sup> *The Eastern Buddhist* 4:2 (1927): 196.

# Presentation Responses

## Responses to Notto Thelle's presentation, "Karl Ludvig Reichelt's Pilgrimage: From Conservative Lutheranism to Experiments with Dialogical Outreach to China's Buddhist Monks"

### Amos Yong: Response One

I am particularly thankful for the opportunity to engage Dr. Thelle,<sup>1</sup> in part because I noticed that he wrote a book with a title that very much warms my heart: *Who Can Stop the Wind? Travels in the Borderland between East and West*, from 2010.<sup>2</sup> For those that are familiar with my work on the Holy Spirit, I have a book subtitled, *The Spirit and the Middle Way*, which considers the possibility of the divine wind blowing along the Buddha's (so-called) "middle way" or way of moderation.<sup>3</sup> So, I've read some of Dr. Thelle's works, including *Who Can Stop the Wind?*, with great interest in seeing how he used and engaged with new motifs in his own journey, as indicated in his book's subtitle about travels in the borderland between east and west, which is of course very much what this conference's theme is also about. I would also note that Dr. Thelle published *Who Can Stop the Wind?* in the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue series, a point I will comment on later.

My interest in this lecture series is also clearly tied to Karl Reichelt as a missionary to China. I think many of you know that I'm of Chinese descent, born in Malaysia but then immigrated to the United States.<sup>4</sup> It is perhaps in a sense unfortunate that I was raised in Malaysia a (former) British colony where, in the mid-1960s in a Chinese household, I grew up speaking mainly and almost only English. My parents had learned English in school and raised my brothers and I in that medium. The only person I spoke Chinese with was with my grandmother, only a bit of Cantonese, but that was when I was very young.

I've always had a dream, now into my adult years, and particularly as I've developed as a theologian, thinking it would be wonderful at some point if I could learn the Chinese language and maybe even do work theologically with Chinese sources on the history of China and its philosophical and religious traditions. My dreams so far have not become a reality. I took a couple of years of Chinese at a community college at one point about a decade and a half ago, but, unfortunately, I wasn't able to keep that up in ways that actually sustained my learning

of the language. Who knows, maybe the Lord will make it possible at some point in the future for me to return and pick this up. But in any case, Reichelt as a missionary in China, was someone who actually had been to the homeland of my ancestors and devoted his life and his passions to learning its culture and engaging with its traditions. So, he lived the dream that I still at some point and in some ways hope to be able to live.

But for my last set of comments this morning, I want to press into the section on Dr. Thelle's description of Christian monasteries for Buddhist monks. And, again, he's talking about Reichelt's experiment, so avant-garde and controversial in his time. Surely, we can all understand why that was controversial almost one hundred years ago, and even still today. So here we are talking about Buddhist-Christian encounter, the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, not just in the abstract, meaning not just relative to ideas, and not just related to interesting philosophical and conceptual notions in which people can sit in circles and engage in theoretical arguments or speculative considerations. Such exercises are great. I've been trained in philosophy and theology and these heady encounters with Buddhists are some of the most dense and robust engagements of my own journey as a theologian.<sup>5</sup> But Christian monasteries for Buddhist monks invites us into something deeper, certainly more embodied, more fundamental even than engaging only "above the neck" (so to speak).

**Our dialogue emerges from our  
experience of sitting together,  
meditating together,  
contemplating together—  
it's a dialogue of practice.**

What happens when we sit together not just to talk, but to meditate, to contemplate, and then to share our experiences in these monastic contexts? These monastic contexts are certainly dialogical, but they're dialogical in a deeper way because we're invited into that dialogue through our bodies—through sitting together and being in the presence of one another. Therefore, our dialogue emerges from our experience of sitting together, of meditating together, of contemplating together. In other words, it's not just a dialogue of ideas, but a dialogue of practice. For Buddhists and Christians, for Reichelt, this was in part what led him down the path that he took, because he began to embody and live and experience this monastic reality in ways that he wouldn't have if he had just engaged at the level of abstraction.

So, how does what Reichelt did apply to today? It would not just be entering into a *sangha* of Buddhists and meditating in their halls, but it would also be for Buddhist monks to come into our churches and our halls of worship. Now in times of the coronavirus we are all meeting digitally, and as we reopen, Buddhist monks are even less likely to feel welcome in our halls of worship, even as we're probably less likely to feel like we belong in a meditation hall of a *sangha*. So, this is the level of dialogical engagement that Reichelt lived out in his own journey a century ago, and it remains controversial even now.<sup>6</sup> I'll develop some of these thoughts further in my response to Dr. Thelle's second lecture.

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*Amos Yong is a Malaysian-American theologian and missiologist who currently serves as Dean of the School of Mission & Theology at Fuller Seminary. He has written more than 50 books including two on Buddhism: The Cosmic Breath: Spirit and Nature in the Christian-Buddhism-Science Trialogue and Pneumatology and the Christian-Buddhist Dialogue: Does the Spirit Blow through the Middle Way? One of his most recent books is The Amos Yong Reader: The Pentecostal Spirit. He has both participated and served in leadership in the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies.*

### Rory Mackenzie: Response Two

**T**hank you, Dr. Thelle, for your excellent introduction to the life and ministry of Karl Reichelt. And thank you also for all the other papers you have written in English, thus making Karl Reichelt visible to us who don't read the Scandinavian languages. There is a sense in which visibility means a possibility, at least for many of us. Those of us who engage with the Buddhist world, especially in the West, will probably find ourselves coming into contact with New Agers, members of the Theosophical Society, followers of pagan traditions, healers and shamans. I'm speaking today from Edinburgh and if I were to take you for a walk five minutes down the road, we would come across a shamanic center for world healing. A little bit further on, there is a spiritualist church, and then if we cross the road and walk a bit further, we come to a Zen priory. So, we live in a pluralistic society which holds out many opportunities for engaging with the

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religious "other." It strikes me that some of these fraternities have commonalities with Buddhism, and since we speak the language of Buddhism there is the potential to engage with these folks on issues such as meditation, *karma*, and enlightenment.

One of Reichelt's detractors told me at a conference in Denmark that Reichelt read widely and, in some cases, with considerable approval in the area of the Theosophical Society. Reichelt apparently appreciated the cosmic dimension of Christ taught by writers in that particular tradition, and he tried to shape his christological understandings to these mind-sets so that they would be open to seeing Jesus as the Christ and as a central figure of their belief system. I also heard that one of the national leaders of these fraternities, who became a good friend of Reichelt, came to see things from Reichelt's perspective and stepped down from the leadership of the organization. I cannot find anything written in English on this so I wondered, Dr. Thelle, if you could comment. I really intend to make the point that we evangelicals rightly offer a stout defense of the uniqueness or supremacy of Jesus, yet the context is often restricted to churches. These evangelical affirmations of faith also need to be done in a nuanced manner in the context of friendship with those from the so-called New Age backgrounds, or creation spirituality. And I guess that defense would challenge some of the esoteric teachings from Jesus when viewed as one of many messengers or projections into this world of the cosmic Christ or solar logos. I will end my comments here, and I suppose my question is to what extent Reichelt engaged with non-Buddhist and the more esoteric traditions.

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*Rory Mackenzie has taught Buddhism and Practical Theology at the International Christian College, Glasgow. He lived and served in Thailand for 11 years and is presently involved with the Thai community in Edinburgh. His 2017 publication, God, Self and Salvation in a Buddhist Context, is informed by Karl Reichelt's contextualized approach, and advocates friendship with Buddhists while maintaining a clear witness to Christ. In 2007 he also wrote New Buddhist Movements in Thailand: Towards an Understanding of Wat Phra Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke (Routledge Critical Studies in Buddhism).*

### Terry Muck: Response Three

**T**hank you very much, Dr. Thelle, for a wonderful presentation of Reichelt's overall ministry; it's so beautifully written. I can't wait for the biography—except that the biography is in Norwegian and I don't speak Norwegian! I'm hoping that part of your plan is to have it translated into English so we can all benefit from it. My response is a question. Since I don't speak Norwegian and much of what Reichelt wrote was in Norwegian (only a few of his books

have been translated into English), I wonder if you could comment on what of his work should be translated? If you were king for a day and could determine this and have them translated, what writings of Reichelt are we English speakers missing out on the most? And what would you recommend as being the ones that should initially be translated into English? That's my only response, but I look forward to the ongoing discussion here. Thank you.

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*Terry Muck (PhD, Northwestern) is professor emeritus of World Religions at Asbury Theological Seminary. Formerly he was the editor of Christianity Today and the Dean of the E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission also at Asbury. He has been a long time participant of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies and was the editor of their journal.*

### Notto Thelle Replies

**W**ell, thank you for the responses. How many hours do we have? I will try to respond but I missed a few comments in my notes. First of all, I am very grateful that you have taken your time to do this.

Dr. Yong, I like your comments about the wind. Actually, Tao Fong Shan was the *Tao*-wind, and as mentioned one of my books is *Who Can Stop the Wind?* (See book review, p. 188.) The wind, of course, in Chinese all the way back from the Nestorian tradition, was used for the Holy Spirit. So, the *Tao*-wind is also the wind of the spirit of *Tao*, and the spirit of Christ. I think I have not read the book you mentioned writing, but I think in our theology of religion sometimes we have been too concentrated, or one-sided, too concentrated on the second article on Christ, sometimes forgetting the first article (God) and the third article of the Spirit which is blowing through the world. We may return to that later.

But then the question about establishing monasteries. I agree that there is a difference between the abstract academic dialogue between Buddhists and Christians, which happens in many places, also in the East. . . . I've participated in a lot of that type of philosophical discussion in Japan, and also as it develops in the West. It is in spirit very challenging and inspiring. But, as you say, when it comes to a monastery where there is a sort of spiritual practice, we do things together. That is another dimension of dialogue. So, there are at least three or four different types or aspects of dialogue; you have the theoretical, doctrinal or philosophical dialogue. You have the sharing of spirituality—what happens when you meditate with Buddhist monks, or when Buddhist monks sit in European or American Benedictine monasteries and participate in what happens there. Or this can take place in a more person-to-person setting where sometimes it happens that Christians and Buddhists pray together. That is a much

different type of approach. And then of course there's the daily everyday dialogue between neighbors. Sometimes this everyday dialogue is not regarded as important, but I think there is a wisdom among people living their daily lives with neighbors. These shared experiences sometimes may be more important than the high philosophical dialogues.

Reichelt was nurtured by a very strong faith commitment to Christ. But he was not triumphalistic in his faith; sometimes perhaps he was, but when they had services, or when sitting in the Pilgrims' Hall meditating with Buddhist monks, he had a strong awareness that God was present there and he did not use that as an opportunity to argue. He had a deep expectation that when you sit together and sort of return to your spiritual roots, that Buddhists would perhaps discover, that in the depths they would realize that Christ was there, that the Logos was there, and would realize that Jesus Christ was the deepest or the real incarnation. Of course, he was present in Buddhist worship services, and he was very impressed by the ordination services. He was fascinated with Buddhist worship, but I don't think he ever directly participated, and I don't think (as many do now 100 years later) that he was participating actively in Buddhist meditation, as some of us have done. But he had strong convictions that God is there. I don't know whether that is an adequate response to Dr. Yong, but at least that is some of my reflections.

**He had a deep expectation that when you sit together, Buddhists would perhaps discover that Christ was there, that the Logos was there, and that Jesus Christ was the deepest or the real incarnation.**

Now Dr. Mackenzie. Yes, my experiences are basically from Japan, and through research, also China, but of course I live in Norway, which in many ways I think must be close to the situation in Scotland. When I was a student in the 1960s, there was one Buddhist in Norway and there was one Muslim. And all of us knew where he lived. I had a friend who knew a friend who practiced yoga. So, the European setting, the American setting, has radically changed, and of course, as in Edinburgh, there are religious fraternities and all sorts of practices on every street corner.

I don't often do this anymore, but for many, many years I participated in large spiritual fairs, alternative fairs, and had a lot of contact with different groups. We live in a pluralistic society.

When I returned from Japan in 1985, I discovered a Norwegian community where the East was present in a different way than before. Previously the East had been a special interest for people with exotic interests or academic interest. Now there were not only all sorts of Indian practices (Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and his Transcendental Meditation), Zen masters, all sorts of Buddhist masters and so on, all with a lot of New Age emphasis which, as far as I could see, to a very great extent had borrowed or integrated aspects of Buddhist or Eastern traditions. These were often popularized, often simplified, and often were not so much religious or spiritual practices as technologies for getting things done.

## I wonder if Reichelt had known the Celtic traditions . . . this sense of our place, our situation where there is just a thin layer between this world and the other world.

So, it has become an Eastern focus, rather thin, but it's still there. For the Christians in Norway, it has been realized that it is important to engage these new traditions with a dialogical curiosity, with respect for the people, not with a wholesale condemnation of everything. I think in the New Age Movement you can find the best and the worst of people. There are a lot of committed people who really struggle in their lives and have found some answers which have helped them, and yet many of them are quite open to dialogue.

I could say more about that, but you also asked about Reichelt's connection with theosophists, anthroposophists and what you have referred to as esoteric traditions. On one of the first days after he arrived in Nanjing to start mission work among Buddhists, Reichelt got into contact with an indigenous Chinese version of an esoteric tradition. This group did not have contact with the international Theosophical movement, but it was a sort of theosophical esoteric tradition which accepted five religions: *Taoism (Daoism)*, Buddhism, Confucianism and I think Mohammed was also there, and then Christ. Reichelt was deeply fascinated because these people called their institute *Taoyin*, which means the Institute of Tao, which Reichelt called the Logos and the Logos Institute. Their fascination with Tao as the deepest aspect of truth led Reichelt to a life-long contact with this group.

They had some occult practices which Reichelt didn't like (automatic writing messages from the other side and so on), but Reichelt was fascinated. One aspect of his spirituality was an intense feeling that he was somehow in contact with what was on the other side. I think he was inspired by the theosophists, and he used some of their rhetoric. He was very interested in the veil, as in Madame Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled*, the Theosophic interest in what is on the other side of the veil. I wonder if Reichelt had known the Celtic traditions . . . this sense of our place, our situation where there is just a thin layer between this world and the other world. . . . So, I think Reichelt felt a sort of communication link in their interest in the cosmic dimension and our relationship to what is on the other side.

When Reichelt went to Shanghai in the interim time between Nanjing and Hong Kong, he came into contact with international Theosophical communities as well as Chinese Theosophists, and it seems that here he began to realize that maybe not all Buddhist monks were very spiritual. There was a lot of corruption and power struggles, and he discovered that not all Buddhist monks were true seekers. But he discovered that among the Buddhist laity and also among these groups of esoteric societies there were genuine truth seekers. These were very committed people, and he started to discover that maybe one should commit more energy to relating to these types of people.

When Reichelt came to Hong Kong, there was a very vibrant international Theosophic society there, and in those ten years in Hong Kong in the 1930s he made very close friends with Theosophists and some anthroposophists. And he was invited several times every year to give lectures to the Theosophical Society.

Central in his preaching was Christ as the ultimate truth and Christ as the center of religion and so on. But he was attracted to them, and they were attracted to him, maybe because he had also a sort of language which was wider than the traditional doctrinal language of Christianity, the cosmic dimension, and so on. His disappointment, both with the Chinese Logos Society (Taoyin) and also the Theosophical society, was that they never seemed to follow him in his emphasis on Christ as the unique incarnation of Tao and the Ultimate Truth. He discovered that people belonging to the Taoyin or Logos Society never understood that he could be so exclusive in his attitude, that he could not see that they accepted Christ as an incarnation of the Tao, but only as one of several such manifestations.

I would have to investigate more your question about one of the leaders of an esoteric society stepping down and becoming a Christian. I haven't seen that, and I think Reichelt was disappointed that they did not seem to accept that Christ was the truth and the way and the life, not only one of many. But all

the way to the end of his life, he felt that they were somehow brothers (well, there were very few sisters in this tradition, so sorry about that), that they had a basic spiritual friendship which was wider than the commitment only to Christ. You can be spiritual friends without having the same opinions about things.

To Dr. Muck's question. Some of Reichelt's books are translated, as you know. One of his books about Chinese religion, one of his first actually, and also a second book about Chinese religious spirituality. I don't know whether all three of his last books, written during the war and published in the 1940s, have been translated yet. I think at least *The Transformed Abbott*, and maybe one other, are in English. I'm not sure what to say about his language. His rhetoric was so flowery, so full of pious language which somehow belongs to a different age. So, I'm not sure that any other of his books should be translated, or if they were translated that they would be read very much. Maybe his beautiful book from 1941 or 1942, *The Sanctuary of Christ-Life*. Even this has a lot of flowery language of cosmic Christianity, the Cosmic Christ. But many Christians found it was too inaccurate, too flowery, while others loved it because it was flowery and used the cosmic language. But I'm not sure it would sell if translated. **IJFM**

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Thanks to H. L. Richard and Brad Gill for transcribing and providing an initial edit of the recording of my talk; I provided further edits for clarity and added a few footnotes.
- <sup>2</sup> Notto R. Thelle, *Who Can Stop the Wind? Travels in the Borderland between East and West* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2010).
- <sup>3</sup> See Yong, *Pneumatology and the Christian-Buddhist Dialogue: Does the Spirit Blow through the Middle Way?* *Studies in Systematic Theology* 11 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012); I am not sure I had read Thelle's *Who Can Stop the Wind?* when I published my own volume.
- <sup>4</sup> I describe some of this experience of migration in my article, "The Holy Spirit, the Middle Way, and the Religions: A Pentecostal Inquiry in a Pluralistic World," *Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue* 2:2 (Spring 2012): 4–15 and 25–26, available at <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/featured-article-the-holy-spirit-the-middle-way-and-the-religions/>; reprinted in *New Life Theological Journal* 2:1 (2012): 8–25.
- <sup>5</sup> See for instance my review essay, "On Doing Theology and Buddhism: A Spectrum of Christian Proposals," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 31 (2011): 103–18.
- <sup>6</sup> For example, Marianne Moyaert and Joris Geldhof, eds., *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue: Boundaries, Transgressions and Innovations* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

*Reichelt in the Pilgrims' Hall in Nanjing, China, meditating with visiting monks, a snapshot taken by Thelle's father around 1924 or 1925. The facilities were a replica of what the monks were used to on their journeys to various temples.*

