

# Reichelt's Inclusivism in Retrospect and Prospect: A Crisis for Mission?

by Notto R. Thelle

*Editor's note: This article was first presented at the Ralph D. Winter Lectureship in February 2021, and addresses the theme, "Buddhist-Christian Encounters: Today's Realities in Light of the Pioneering Work of Karl Ludvig Reichelt in China."*

I am not quite sure whether the words "retrospect" and "prospect" are adequate to express my intention in this presentation. *Retrospect*, in this context, is to look back on the history of Reichelt with a critical but also generous evaluation. *Prospect* is to look forward and ask ourselves about the enduring relevance of his legacy.

Based on my previous article (and considering also the responses), I want to reflect upon Reichelt's contribution to missionary work in China and to ask myself what we can learn—positively and negatively. Is the heritage from Reichelt more than an exciting history, interesting stories, and beautiful buildings? Are there insights, attitudes, and strategies that can still inspire and vitalize Christian mission? I believe so, but the entire tradition has to be examined carefully.

Some people say that hindsight gives the best insight. That is true to some extent. Now, almost one hundred years after Reichelt began his Buddhist mission in Nanjing, we know much more about China and about interfaith relations there; we see more clearly the limitations and prejudices that characterized missionary work at that time, including the mixture of missionary idealism and Western ideas of supremacy and triumphalism. We have to use our knowledge in order to come to terms with the history to which we belong, directly or indirectly.

As for Reichelt, it is easy to see that his understanding of Buddhism was limited and manipulated by dominant trends in the scholarship of his time. He embraced the idea that early Christianity had made a strong impact on the development of Mahāyāna, a theory that does not seem to be supported by modern scholarship. He learned from Timothy Richard and others to interpret Buddhist concepts and texts as if they expressed Christian ideas, and then borrowed such concepts in order to convey Christian ideas in preaching, hymns, and liturgies. Apparently, the strategy functioned to some extent and impressed many visiting monks who could approach Christianity in a new way. In hindsight, however, one has to admit that in this Reichelt did not take the "otherness" of Buddhism sufficiently seriously. His evaluation of Buddhism was overly influenced by his Christian perspective, ranking Pure Land Buddhism as the highest, since it was closest to Protestant Christianity.

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Some scholars have criticized his studies of Buddhism as superficial and too sloppy. To some extent they are right. He was an autodidact—a self-studied man without a classical critical training. His description of Buddhism and other religions as stepping stones towards Christian faith came from popular ideas about evolutionary processes that were part of Western triumphalism and the Christian superiority feelings of his time. In the previous article, I also referred to critical remarks from Buddhist and other observers: that his mission was a sort of proselytism using friendship and dialogue as a bait for catching the monks; or, as Whalen Lai remarked, he was “a Bible-waving missionary who fraudulently adopted Buddhist guise.”<sup>1</sup>

Such critical remarks need to be balanced by a more generous evaluation. In his studies of Buddhism, Reichelt did what many other Western scholars were unable to do in their protected Western libraries where they read and translated texts: his privilege was to describe what he observed and heard from actual life, with empathy and enthusiasm.

The Buddhists in China generally saw Reichelt as a friend who respected them, a Christian spiritual master who wanted to understand, and who regarded them as friends and brothers on the way. He was sincerely searching for the gold in Buddhism and was happy when he found profound wisdom. He admired the Buddhist reformers who combined zeal and piety, even when their aim was to conquer Christianity.<sup>2</sup> He wanted to use and integrate their wisdom in order to present Christ as a living reality. A leading expert on Buddhist reform movements described Reichelt as “a leading champion of Chinese Buddhism’s good reputation” in a time when Mahāyāna was generally regarded as a corrupt type of Buddhism by Western scholars.<sup>3</sup> And—perhaps most important—he never concealed his Christian motivation. He had no hidden agenda and was open about his hope to guide them towards faith in Jesus Christ. Even though he emphasized that the inner aspirations of Buddhism were fulfilled in Christ, he repeatedly maintained that conversion to Christ implied a break with the past.

I could have continued the list of strengths and weaknesses in Reichelt’s approach, but will rather continue by concentrating on a few central aspects of Reichelt’s legacy that I regard as relevant for the present time.

### *Theology and Anthropology*

The most important heritage from Reichelt is his theological praxis based on the conviction that God “had not left himself without testimony” (Acts 14:17), and corresponding insights from Acts 17, Romans 1, and the Gospel of John, as mentioned in the previous article. That gave Reichelt a generous openness toward other religions and cultures, and a

corresponding expectation that every human person—independent of religion, race, or nationality—is touched by God in a way that can open up to faith in Jesus Christ. My late colleague in Copenhagen, Theodor Jørgensen, described this as the “Christ signature” in every human person. Our foremost Norwegian hymn writer, Svein Ellingsen, who died recently, formulated a similar insight in the poetic words, “a prayer is hidden in the rhythm of the heartbeat.” One does not have to subscribe to the simplistic and triumphalist fulfillment theologies of Reichelt and his generation of missionaries in order to maintain the basic expectation of God’s active presence in the world.

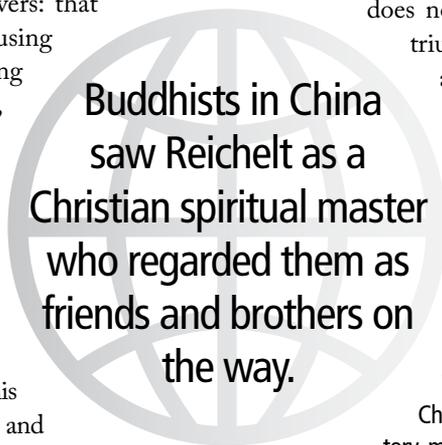
More than fifty years after Reichelt’s death, The Christian Mission to Buddhists (now Areopagos Foundation) developed a moderate, but still quite open, reformulation of such a position:

The faith which inspires proclamation of the Christ event as God’s central work in human history must be accompanied by faith in the creative and salvific work of the triune God even where Christ’s name is not known.... Hence any proclamation of Christ will be accompanied by a humble expectation that God has made himself known, and in various ways may be traced in the wisdom and religious experiences of all cultures. Therefore, mission is not only a one-way proclamation of Christ and his salvation, but involves an attentive listening to the presence of the triune God already there. All mission must consequently be dialogical: what is said and done must take place in an attentive and trusting dialogue, and with a deep respect for the cultures to which the message is communicated, and with an expectation that God also has something to say to the church and its theology through these cultures.<sup>4</sup>

A similar position is now shared by dominant trends among mainstream Protestant churches internationally. The WCC and other ecumenical councils refer to “the mission of God” as an expression of such a position, and corresponding attitudes are formulated in Roman Catholic and Orthodox theology. My impression is that conservative missionary communities (like the Lausanne Movement) that tended to be strongly exclusivist, have, in various ways, opened up to similar positions.

### *Contextual Theology*

Reichelt had a strong concern for making Christianity “indigenous,” rooted in the Chinese culture and growing in close interchange with the religious search of his time. His favorite symbol was the cross in the lotus. His famous missionary hymn, “Thy Kingdom, Jesus, ever shall . . .” expressed such a vision by describing the time of fulfillment when every nation and region with different tongues and languages would gather before the throne of God, worshipping God, “each with its own splendor as a sign.”<sup>5</sup>



He did so by a systematic use of Buddhist concepts and artistic expressions in preaching, worship, and architecture. As already mentioned, such a strategy was too direct and naïve in its way of borrowing—some would say stealing—Buddhist hymns and concepts, and hence is no longer adequate. On the other hand, it is inevitable that Christian mission has to use the religious language and artistic forms that are available when Christianity is introduced to new cultures. Reichelt's fascination with, and expectation for, the wisdom and experience of what he called "sacred religious material" may still inspire as a model for an expectant openness to other religions and cultures. At this point, he depended not only on classical theology, but he also shared the expectation of many Chinese who believed that Christian faith would be enriched and deepened if it were truly rooted in Chinese soil.

Such concepts as indigenization, accommodation, and points of contact are now generally replaced by such concepts as inculturation and contextualization. Reichelt was one-sidedly preoccupied with the religious dimension and the essence of religious life, while newer contextual approaches also relate to the broader connection with culture, politics, ideology, and social change. New insights from cultural anthropology and studies of cross-cultural communication have also broadened the scope. But the driving force in Reichelt's concern for indigenization was to make Christianity relevant in an alien culture and to develop the church and its theology in dialogue with the historical and religious experience of that culture. That process is still relevant.

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### *Meditation and Quietude*

One aspect of Reichelt's interests has often been undercommunicated: his concern for meditation and stillness. The spirituality of quietude had accompanied him all the way from his childhood, and permeated the liturgical rhythm in the places he established in China. From Pietism he was familiar with what was called the "closet" or "secret chamber" and "the quiet hour." Reichelt's contribution was to combine classical Christian spirituality with the inspiration from the East, as it was programmatically expressed in a lecture for Norwegian clergy in 1926.<sup>6</sup> Far ahead of his time, he argued for the need of retreat houses, centers for prayer and meditation, and

even pilgrimages. It is interesting that his final unfinished manuscript had the title "In quietude before the countenance of God."<sup>7</sup> Only in recent years have such practices been developed in Norwegian and Western Protestantism, with inspiration from pietistic traditions, Celtic, Lutheran, Anglican, Catholic, and Orthodox spirituality, and even from Eastern practices.

### *Dialogical Processes*

Reichelt did not use the word "dialogue" to describe his work—he was a missionary who through conversation and testimony wanted to convert the Buddhists. But he practiced dialogue in the sense that he had the ability to listen to his dialogue partners with deep sensitivity, and was willing to let himself be "converted" by the other in the sense that he had to integrate some of their wisdom into his own universe of faith. His mental horizon changed and was expanded by the knowledge about the other, but at the same time his Christian faith expanded and was deepened by his new knowledge.

Similar things have happened in the realm of interfaith dialogue that have gradually become a part of church life in Scandinavia and in many international contexts. Fifty or sixty years ago, dialogue was generally regarded as threatening or unacceptable in missionary communities. Dominant missionary circles argued that one had to choose—mission *or* dialogue. At least in Norway, those who were concerned with dialogue were generally related to the Reichelt tradition and regarded with suspicion. And the same tradition—now represented by Areopagos—has in recent decades contributed to interfaith dialogue by establishing forums for dialogue and spirituality. Now "dialogue" has been accepted as a central concern in church and missionary circles: dioceses establish dialogue centers and employ dialogue pastors; the Council of Ecumenical and International Relations organizes dialogues with other religions and secular humanists; interfaith dialogue has become an inevitable part of theological education and reflection; interreligious studies have become a part of theological education; and schools are often arenas for such dialogues.

In this process, the meaning of dialogue has somehow changed its character. The church- and mission-oriented dialogue was initially regarded as an effective means of evangelization. When the World Council of Churches in the 1950s and 1960s established international dialogue centers in Asia and Africa in order to prepare for the coming dialogue, it was generally implied that the purpose was to enable the church to have an effective testimony to other religions. The dialogue promoted from evangelical circles also tended to be part of a process to make Christian testimony more relevant and effective. So the missionary dimension will naturally be an inherent part of dialogue—the readiness to share one's faith. But my own experience and my conclusion from many years of observation has convinced me that real dialogue is a much more open process than merely a means for missionary communication. In order to be sincere, dialogue has to be a mutual process in which two or several persons meet without

hidden agendas or purposes, not just to change the other, but to participate towards mutual change or transformation.<sup>8</sup> Dialogue is thus not a mission strategy, but a basic human way of being.

## Friendship is a theological quality which may be more important for the communication of the gospel than intelligent theories, good arguments, and elegant formulations.

### *To Be a Pilgrim—Faith En Route*

What I mention here is just another perspective on the dialogical process. When Reichelt repeatedly described himself as a pilgrim, it was not only because he accompanied the Buddhist itinerant monks in order to share his faith with them. He wanted to be a seeker of truth and insight, listening and learning in order to have insight in the same way as they were searching for wisdom and clarity. He was deeply committed to his faith in Jesus Christ, but he was also informed and inspired by those he met on the way.

His own spiritual pilgrimage in China challenged and inspired him to reformulate his faith and integrate new insights. To me it is a reminder of the journey of faith most Christians experience as they encounter new situations and new challenges in life. Growing up in a traditional Christian environment, my impression was that Christianity was a package of truths, already defined and formulated, to be protected unchanged through life. What easily happens with such a position is that people at a certain stage in life discover that things have changed in such a way that the pre-defined faith seems irrelevant. Some end up by opting out of the church and abandoning faith. Others regain their faith by reformulating and redefining it, integrating new experiences and discovering that Christianity is a much larger universe than the little variety they happened to receive when they grew up. Faith is challenged and inspired by the journey through life; there are new things to discover beyond the next turn, and change is an important part of the realities of life.

### *The Gift of Friendship*

One unique aspect of Reichelt's work was never formulated as a strategy, but primarily appeared as a praxis in the encounter with others: friendship, friendliness, and a spontaneous and sincere curiosity for "the other." It was expressed in the name that was often used about the mission, *Taoyou-hui* (The Association of Tao-friends or Logos-friends) and *Xiongdì-hui* (Brotherhood). The idea was that every truth-seeker was a friend and a brother—sorry, there were few sisters then. Reichelt knew that one might be kindred spirits or spiritual friends without entertaining the same opinions or dogmas. He was, at times, accused of using friendship in order to proselytize, but he was always open about

his own faith and had no hidden agenda. The main impression is that he had a unique ability for friendship across the boundaries of faith and culture, expressed as an almost limitless curiosity and a friendliness that made a deep impression on those he met.

One aspect of this friendliness was Reichelt's almost naive confidence in people's good intentions. This could create problems. He was cheated by unfaithful servants; he was credulous/gullible in his expectations regarding the spiritual qualities of visiting monks; he thought it was possible to cooperate with both sides in the theological struggle between liberals and conservatives which was ablaze at the time in Norway; he wanted peace and harmony with all. The inevitable result was that he was disappointed and depressed when his expectations were shattered. His friendly confidence was vulnerable, and critics regarded his naivety as a weakness. When he still stuck to his friendly confidence, it was grounded in his theological anthropology. He believed that God was not far away from anybody, and appealed to the inherent longing for God and for truth in every human soul. That is certainly a vulnerable theology, a conviction that was bound to be betrayed by the realities of life. On the other hand, it was probably more life-affirming and powerful than the one-sided preoccupation with the depravity of humankind that has characterized great parts of the Lutheran and Protestant traditions.

Reichelt's work is a constant reminder that confidence is a basic expression of faith. Friendship is a theological quality which may be more important for the communication of the gospel than intelligent theories, good arguments, and elegant formulations.

### *Piety as a Meeting Point*

I have described friendship and friendliness as a central key to Reichelt's ability to establish a trusting relationship where his message could be heard. But even more than his natural ability for friendliness, it seems as if his deep piety appealed more strongly. There is a paradoxical ambiguity in the fact that religious experience was such a central aspect of his personality. I will try to explain the ambiguity with a few observations:

I have already mentioned his spiritual background in Norwegian pietism with its emphasis on religious experience molded by Lutheran tradition: the deep sense of sin and grace, the experience of guilt, a tremendous feeling of gratitude for the forgiveness of sin, and the strong sense of calling to share one's faith. That sensitivity remained a central part of his missionary career.

Paradoxically enough, it was this type of piety that enabled him to be so impressed by what he experienced in dialogues, in Buddhist sanctuaries, and on his journeys. What he saw was, according to traditional standards, alien, pagan, and idolatrous. But he experienced some sort of recognition, a deep feeling of resonance or response in his pietistic emotionalism. He was moved by the hymns and chants in temple worship, the sincerity of the rituals of penitence. He felt the warmth in their dedication to the Buddhas of compassion: Amitabh, Guanyin, and Dizhang.

He was reminded of the pain and joy of his own calling when he attended ordinations of monks who got nine burn marks on their shaven heads.<sup>9</sup> And he maintained a life-long relationship to Chinese and international esoteric movements because he recognized that their search for what was behind the veil that separates time and eternity was part of his own search.

Reichelt's pietistic upbringing and the Lutheran theology of experience (*Erfahrungstheologie*) which had been promoted in Erlangen, recognized the emotional aspect of religion. Both conservative and liberal theologians in Norway were preoccupied with religious emotions, the experience of the numinous and the holy as the very essence of religion.<sup>10</sup>

Reichelt took it one step further, and in unprotected moments he moved far beyond the boundaries of contemporaneous Christianity. He could write about the inner wellspring of religion, the common source where religious boundaries become blurred. One of his recurrent metaphors was to describe religion as silver ore in the mountain. The pure silver is found in Christianity, he argued, but silver is also found in other places. It may be mixed with stone and impurities, sometimes almost invisible among the layers of mountains, but we have to search for it wherever it is found. His critics used such metaphors to say that he failed to see the essential difference between Christianity and other religions. Silver is silver, even though it must be refined and extracted from the impurities.<sup>11</sup>

Reichelt was always willing to take a few steps back, affirming the essential differences, marking the boundaries, and confirming his commitment to Christ as the unique savior. Yet his Christ-centered theology, notably expressed in his use of the concepts of Logos and Tao, also made him familiar with a sort of universalism. And it was this sense of universalism that appealed to many deeply religious people in East and West and gave them a strong sense of affinity with Reichelt.

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Is this paradoxical ambiguity and potential tension between missionary zeal and fascination with the inner essence of Buddhism and other religions a part of the legacy of Reichelt? We may have different opinions about his understanding of religion, and there are now a wide range of theologies of religion.<sup>12</sup> And in any inclusivist theology there is an inherent potential for a universalistic conclusion. If God "is not far away

from any one of us," if it is true that "in him (God) we live and move and have our being," how can we maintain an inclusivism that excludes the possibility of a genuine relationship to God outside the boundaries of church and the Biblical revelation?

### *Implications for Mission among Buddhists*

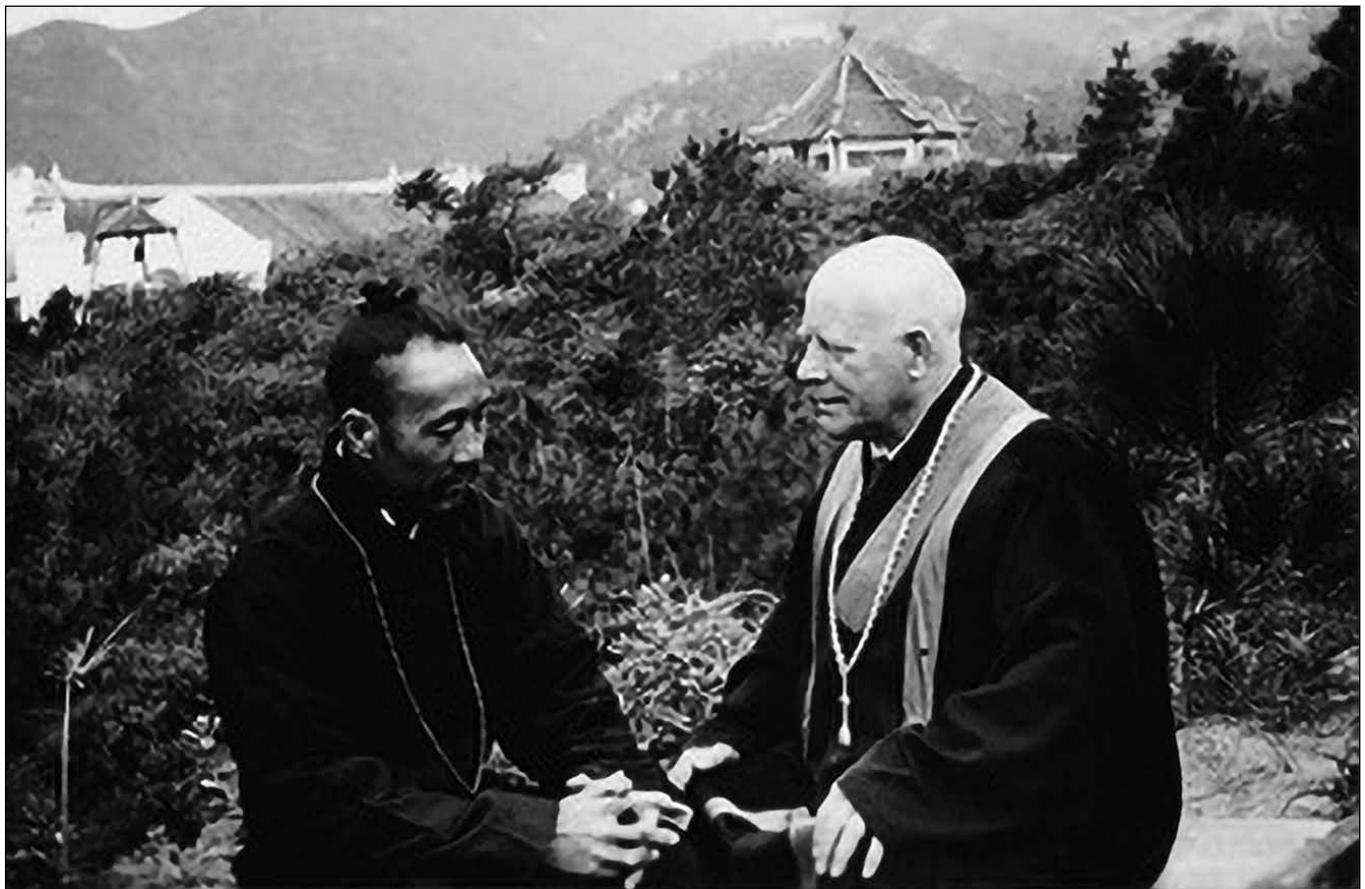
I am not able to spell out fully the implications for today of Reichelt's missionary work and my own observations about Buddhist-Christian relationships. But since we are concerned about mission among Buddhists, I allow myself to add a few comments I made in a book about changes in Christian mission between Edinburgh 1910 and the corresponding centenary meeting in 2010.<sup>13</sup> The context was different, but it may be relevant for our own further reflection:

- Mission is to share one's faith and conviction with other people, inviting them to discipleship whether or not they adhere to other religious traditions. Such sharing is to take place with *confidence* and *humility*:
  - *confidence*, because Christ invites and empowers people to turn to God and to their true humanity;
  - *humility*, because God "is not far from any one of us" (Acts 17:27), and has touched all creatures with his loving power.
- Mission to Buddhists should be accompanied by a deep respect for and understanding of the Buddhist way, with a sensitivity about the wisdom and insight God may have revealed in the Buddhist tradition. Such a sharing of faith should also go along with a willingness to listen to what God wants to teach the church through Buddhism.
- Mission to Buddhists should not primarily be focused on conversion, baptism, and inclusion in the Christian church, but on discipleship. Discipleship—to follow the Jesus way—will as a rule lead to baptism and church membership, but does not necessarily involve a break with the Buddhist community. In some cases, Buddhists will prefer to follow the Jesus way without abandoning the Buddha way, just as there are committed Christians who want to follow the Buddha way as Christians.
- In many cases the mission of the church would primarily be to establish dialogue and cooperation with Buddhist communities in order to deal with common moral and social challenges, such as conflicts, violence, discrimination, political oppression, disasters and health problems, poverty and injustice.
- Missionary and pastoral education for people who are expected to be in touch with Buddhist communities should take the study of Buddhism seriously in order to formulate Christianity in a way that is relevant and meaningful in a Buddhist context. The purpose of such a study should not only be to formulate an "effective witness," but to be open for mutual appreciation and sharing of spiritual gifts.
- Unless the church is able to embrace and nurture what is true, good, and honorable in Buddhism, it may not be desirable to engage in mission or to expect conversion. **IJFM**

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See Whalen Lai, "Why is there not a Buddho-Christian Dialogue in China?" *Buddhist-Christian Studies* (1986): 93.
- <sup>2</sup> A moving example of such admiration is his description of the zealous anti-Christian reformer Yinguang in *Frombetstyper og helligdommer i Østasia* vol 2 (*Pious Characters and Sanctuaries in the Far East*), (Oslo: Dreyers Forlag, 1948), 115–126; published in English as *The Transformed Abbot* (Lutterworth Press, 1954).
- <sup>3</sup> Holmes Welch, *The Buddhist Revival in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 240–241.
- <sup>4</sup> This translation is based on my own notes.
- <sup>5</sup> In Norwegian, "med hver sin strålekrans som tegn." "Strålekrans" could also be rendered as brilliance, radiance, aura. Unfortunately, the metaphor that every tribe and nation contributes with their unique "splendor" does not seem to be conveyed in translations. The Danish translation is rather triumphalist, "each with its victory wreath as a sign." In the English translations I have seen, the distinctive contributions of various cultures disappear in a general description of the glorious praise before the throne of God.
- <sup>6</sup> Karl Ludvig Reichelt, *Kristelig meditation* (Christian Meditation), (Oslo: Buddhistmisjonen, 1926).
- <sup>7</sup> "I Stillheten for Guds åsyn," unfinished manuscript, probably written around 1947–51.
- <sup>8</sup> Notto R. Thelle, "Dialogue—Study—Friendship," in *Japanese Religions* 25:1–2 (2000): 8–14.
- <sup>9</sup> The ordination of monks in China included the tradition of placing nine pieces of burning incense on the head of the monks as signs of their vow to renounce the world and commit themselves to the Buddha way.
- <sup>10</sup> Both Reichelt and many of his contemporary theologians were deeply impressed by Nathan Söderblom's and Rudolf Otto's descriptions of the encounter with Das Heilige / The Holy as the essential religious experience; Otto, *Das Heilige* (Breslau: Trewendt und Granier, 1917); Söderblom, "Holiness," in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings, vol. 6 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913).
- <sup>11</sup> Most clearly expressed in *Kristus—Religionens Centrum* (Christ—the Center of Religion), (Oslo: Buddhistmisjonens Forlag, 1927); and *Fra Kristuslivets helligdom* (From the Sanctuary of Christ-Life), (Copenhagen: Gads forlag, 1931/1946).
- <sup>12</sup> As described in e.g., Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 2002.
- <sup>13</sup> Notto R. Thelle, "Mission among Buddhists," in *Witnessing to Christ in a Pluralistic Age: Christian Mission among Other Faiths*, eds., Lal-sangkima Pachuau & Knud Jørgensen (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2011), 178–188. Quoted from my own manuscript.

### Reichelt in dialogue with a Taoist monk at Tao Fong Shan.



# Presentation Responses

## Responses to Notto Thelle's presentation, "Reichelt's Inclusivism in Retrospect and Prospect: A Crisis for Mission?"

### Amos Yong: Response One

I am very grateful for this opportunity to provide a second response to Dr. Thelle's second lecture,<sup>1</sup> and again, I want to pick up and press into some of what I said at the end of my response from yesterday. I want to highlight how Dr. Thelle has observed the manner in which Reichelt was in a full dialogue, what in pietistic circles, including the Lutheran sphere, and certainly in my Holiness and Pentecostal tradition, were called the holistic combination of heads and hands and hearts. Meaning, as Dr. Thelle has illuminated with regard to Reichelt's experiences, it was meditation, it was friendship, and it was piety: meditation engaging the mind and bodies; friendship engaging with interpersonal relationships; and piety expressed in embodied practices in these monastic or communal contexts. So, again, this is a multi-level, multi-dimensional dialogue of life, of ideas, of practices, of commitments, even religious commitments.<sup>2</sup> And, of course, when we engage in that dialogue and these multiple levels it becomes a dialogue of the hands, meaning we sit with each other, we interact with each other, we work with each other; and then the heart, we begin to feel, if you will, with one another. Again, that gets to where the dialogue that takes place in this monastic context really goes a lot deeper than thinking about ideas in the abstract. It's speaking out of a certain level of experience that has touched us below the neck, in our hearts. For me as a Wesleyan, a Wesleyan Pentecostal, heart-religiosity is really where we act out of our deepest sets of instincts, sensibilities, aspirations—and hopes, fears, and anxieties. As we engage in this dialogue of meditation, of friendship, and of piety, it means we're engaged with the religious other and the realities of religious otherness with our heads and our hands and our hearts.<sup>3</sup>

This certainly complicates the life of that dialogue, doesn't it? It doesn't allow us to sit in objective judgment, if you will, on the ideas as if we were engaging only at the level of our heads, meeting above our necks. When we engage at the level of friendship and if we engage at the level of our piety, like the friendships Reichelt developed with Buddhist monks, for instance, then all of a sudden, the Buddhist "other" is no longer

merely and only an "other-in-the-abstract." They are now part of who we are in the friendships we've developed, in the interactions forged over years if not decades, and that means that at the end of that day, through this process, we've been transformed, as we see Reichelt's own transformation.

Reichelt was certainly very interested in inviting Buddhist monks to consider the claims of Christ, to be transformed in the encounter with Christ, through he himself as one who bore witness to that living Christ. But, equally we can see that Reichelt exhibited in his relationships with Buddhist monks over years and decades that he had experienced his own transformation, if you will, his own being converted, perhaps not in the sense of formally giving up his Christian faith and becoming a Buddhist adept, but certainly converted in the sense of being transformed in his way of thinking, being transformed in his way of living, being transformed in the sense of who his friends were and how he interacted with them on a daily basis in the public sphere as well in the private spaces of the monastery.

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So, what we have here is a level of mutual transformation at the depths of our existence—our heads, our hands and our hearts. Reichelt invited the conversion of Buddhist monks to his community—an invitation, if you will, to the church of Jesus Christ—maybe not a church formally and organizationally or denominationally structured, but certainly the church that bore witness to God the Father in Jesus Christ, to a God who invited others to love him and to love their neighbors. I think Reichelt attempted to live this out as a result of his own deepened transformation through his journey, through encountering, if you will, the witnesses of others.

So, Reichelt did not cease to bear witness to Chinese others, but in the process of bearing that witness he himself was deeply affected, that affect being a deeper level than just the transformation of ideas in our minds, a level of affectivity that touches the depths of who we are.<sup>4</sup> It was in the process of being on this journey of transformation that Reichelt bore the transformed witness to others that he has left for our consideration. I want to thank Dr. Thelle for highlighting these

aspects of this particular Lutheran missionary witness in the first half of the 20th century, which still is very relevant for us today in the early 21st century.

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### Rory Mackenzie: Response Two

Thank you very much, Dr. Thelle, for that very helpful and penetrating analysis of Reichelt's engagement with the religious other and all of that, of course, building on the foundation you laid yesterday. You mentioned Reichelt learning from Timothy Richard, who was born some thirty years before Reichelt. As you know, Eric Sharpe quotes Reichelt saying "Timothy Richard is Spirit filled but often far too bold." Some of us might feel that Reichelt is being bold, but Reichelt himself thought that there was somebody much bolder than himself.

I'd just like to make some remarks about piety as a meeting point. Reichelt was moved by the sincerity and warmth of the devotion of Pure Land Buddhists to their Buddhas. He was moved by the chanting that he heard in their temples, and you point out that his background might have caused him to condemn what he saw, but somehow, in some way, he was impressed by their piety. This is a very interesting paradox worth reflecting on for our own practice. We know two things. First, Reichelt had a very high view of Pure Land and second, he had a lower estimation of other traditions. For example, he wrote in depressing terms of some Tibetan-style Buddhist monasteries he had visited in Mongolia where he refers to black magic activities behind the scenes. In the same year (1937) he visited Siam as it was then (now Thailand) and found the Theravāda tradition there narrow and unimpressive. This section in your talk, Dr. Thelle, challenges me to reflect on how I respond to and conduct myself during acts of attending Theravāda worship as I visit Thai temples and cultural events. So, four brief points as I reflect on my practice of engaging with the Theravāda traditions that I am close to.

First, sometimes in a ceremony we are invited in public to do something that we would rather not do. For example, not so long ago I was asked to offer up robes to the Buddha on behalf of deceased monks at a funeral service. That was meant as an honor for me, and I did it, and I appreciated being asked. But at the same time, there was a conflict in doing what I did. Second, as a Christian how can I best express respect for the

Buddhist tradition and the people who are there despite not approving of some of their practices, or the words that are being chanted? Reichelt was moved by the chanting and actually I'm moved by chanting, its melody and so on. But as I look at some of the words in translation from the Pali, they suggest that the Buddha is not just being venerated as a great teacher, but perhaps even worshipped as a God. Third, to what extent is it desirable to show that we are Christians who are being respectful of Buddhism, rather than being Buddhists? We may need to be mindful of converts from Buddhism to Christianity and how they may misunderstand our respect as worship. And I do think there are things we can do which show that we're not Buddhists, but respectful Christians. We don't really have time to go into that just now, but it brings me to my final point.

### To what extent is it desirable to show we are Christians who are being respectful of Buddhism, rather than being Buddhists?

These tensions in the area of worship indicate our commitment to God and our reaching out to the Buddhist world that we believe he has called us to. Perhaps God himself experiences similar tensions. You can take the boy out of evangelicalism, but it is harder to take evangelicalism out of the boy! At the risk of sounding a bit judgmental about Buddhism and Buddhists, let me close by looking at some words which are tinged with sadness, but at the same time hold out hope that our Buddhist fellow travelers will see the fullness of what God is offering to them and that they will come to faith. Jeremiah the prophet writes, "Lord, my strength, my fortress, my refuge." See, Jeremiah had gone for refuge. "In the time of distress, you are my refuge, and to you the nations will come from the ends of the earth and say, 'our fathers possessed nothing but false gods, worthless idols that did them no good. Do men make their own gods? Yes, but they are not gods.' Therefore, God will teach them his power and might, and then they will know the name of the LORD." Thank you, Dr. Thelle, for that very helpful paper.

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### Terry Muck: Response Three

**T**hank you very much, Dr. Thelle, for this paper. I ended my comments yesterday by saying I wish I would know more about what Reichelt was like. Because when you judge a person's theology or religiosity or spirituality, you're not just talking about their ideas, but you're talking about what they're like, how they come across as a person in a face-to-face conversation. You gave us a lot of that today, and you have this tremendous advantage of having known him and talked to him. You provided today a lot of what I have been longing for and I learned a lot from what you had to say in this paper.

What I wish is that I could have watched him interact with the learned Buddhist monks who came to the monastery, the special kind of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhist monk. I'll generalize. I know that Taoists and perhaps even some Confucians came also, but to focus on the monks for a minute. Learned, curious, willing to talk. You cannot have a dialogue with one person wanting to dialogue and be respectful and open, and another person not. Then dialogue doesn't work. So the kind of people who came and that Reichelt interacted with, at the very least, had a religious curiosity that they wanted to satisfy. I can imagine, at least try to imagine, what Reichelt was like in initiating those conversations. He probably was open to almost any kind of person. He strikes me as that kind of mission worker. He certainly wouldn't have said, "You sound to me like a fundamentalist Buddhist. Maybe you don't belong here. Maybe this isn't the right place for you."

He strikes me as the kind of person who would have said, "OK, well, that's where we'll start. Tell me what you believe and why you believe it." And then from there he would have also had an openness to an agenda that may very well have included theology and Buddhology, discussion of religious ideas and dogma, but more likely may have been about what it's like to be a Buddhist monk in a temple where you're interacting with other Buddhist monks and also with people who come for religious services of one sort or another. I would have liked to watch how Reichelt did that. That's just basic dialogue methodology, but I would have liked to have seen how he did it. He was committed to it, you can obviously tell that from his writings. But how he did it, there's a lot about it that you would have had to just sit there and watch and participate.

I also would have liked to ask Reichelt what he expected to come out of his dialogues. I have my own vision, that a dialogue is a conversation that never ends or that doesn't have an expectation of any kind of finality when it is done. And I'm wondering if he wouldn't have seen it that way also, that your use of him being called a "pilgrim missionary" would indicate that he probably did. He was always

learning. He was always open. When a person came to him, he would see it as another chance to learn to tell his story, the Gospel story. I doubt he ever hesitated at that; he would have been a bad dialoguer if he did. But to do that and how he did it—that would have been wonderful to see.

## What I wish is that I could have watched him interact with the learned Buddhist monks who came to the monastery, the special kind of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhist monk.

I would have liked to ask him some questions, whether he ever thought about how he would do mission to Buddhists if he wasn't in China. As we mentioned yesterday, the relationship among Buddhists and Christians differed depending on the culture and where they were. And I suggested that the China context has a certain openness to rational difference that many cultures don't. So, a dialogue even about the deepest things about Buddhism and Christianity may have been more possible there than it may have been in a more conservative culture, a culture that is not so open to religious difference and religious discussion. From what I read, I assume he would have said: "This is my calling; this is where I belong; this is what I'm good at; and this is where I've learned to relate to Buddhists." But, using the example yesterday of Sri Lanka, if he was in quite a different religious culture, I think he would have done just fine. He may not have felt he was called to that, and he may not have felt that was where he should be. Obviously, he didn't, as he went to China. But because of the way he approached mission and how he saw interpersonal interactions (you just said he didn't call it dialogue, but it sure looks like dialogue to me), I think he would have done just fine wherever he was. He's a model of how you shape missiological strategy to the religious context and cultural context in which you find yourself. You try and do the impossible, this paradoxical thing, talking about absolute truth and the finality of God in Christ in a way that makes it relevant to very, very different cultures and contexts. I have a feeling I would have learned so much. I've already learned so much just from reading what he had to say about these things, but I think I would have really enjoyed and profited from conversing with him about it on a day-to-day basis. I wouldn't have stayed in the monastery for a week, I would have stayed for six months and

just tried to talk to him about it. Anyway, thank you, Dr. Thelle for helping me with all of these questions that I've raised. You're a good substitute for Reichelt, so thank you for that.

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### Notto Thelle: Replies to His Respondents

**T**hank you, it's been very fascinating to listen to your responses. I don't think I can respond to everything, but I will to a few points at least. Dr. Yong mentioned the holistic attitude, body, mind and spirit, heart religiosity, and I think Reichelt had that. And, of course, he had his gifts, he had his personality, and I think in his basic personality he had some monkish attitudes. He loved to talk to monks. He was married, but for about half of his life in China, his wife was in Norway, and sometimes I wonder how he could do that. He was very kind to his wife, but there was something monkish about his way of being. This gave him the ability to approach Buddhist monks in a special way, and at the same time he had a wonderful ability also to meet other people, other types of people. He had an ability to meet children at the child level. This is maybe off the track, but when my elder brother was two years old in Tao Fong Shan, Reichelt was traveling and he wrote a letter to this little boy whose name also was Karl. I don't remember exactly, but he wrote to my brother Karl, "Dear Karl, my good friend, now you are two years old. But remember, don't be oppressed by the authorities, like your parents" and all these things. So he had this sort of humorous approach also to children and I think he had a sort of charisma. I've seen films of Reichelt and when he approached dialogue with monks, there is a very strange atmosphere. It is very quiet. His body movements were quite vital. I get the impression of a tremendous presence when he encounters other people. I've seen films that show one of his approaches when he talked to Buddhist monks. He always had this lotus cross on his breast, and he would pick up the lotus cross and show it to them. Then, starting from that point, I'm sure he would talk about what that monk was searching for and so on, thus appreciating the lotus spirituality of Buddhism.

As you know, the lotus grows up from the mud of a pond, and then as a miracle it opens to a brilliant white or blue or red pure flower from this muddy field, which is a beautiful expression. I think he often started with the longing of people. But he had his [limitations] . . . maybe I shouldn't speak about his limitations, but I think he used his potential, his gifts, one hundred percent.

Some of you may know or have heard about the Japanese social reformer Kagawa. He was a Japanese preacher-evangelist, burning with passion, and also a social reformer. He was very active among the poor in the slums of Japan, and he visited Tao Fong Shan at one time. He was very impressed by the entire setup, but he gave a speech to the students there and said, "It's good to be here, but you have to go out into the world." I don't know whether he felt that Tao Fong Shan was too closed of a community, I'm not quite sure about that. But the vision of Reichelt was to have people sent out and I think Kagawa wanted to affirm the body aspect or the social aspect of being a Christian.

I've discovered that even though the center of activity was on the spiritual level with worship and liturgical spirituality, dialogues about religious matters and all these things, at times whenever necessary Reichelt and his colleagues went out to the society and became very active. For instance in Nanjing, exactly when they were establishing this spiritual center, there was a civil war going on around Nanjing, and Reichelt immediately volunteered to go to the front as a Red Cross helper, and they sent coworkers and students also to help. Later there were other types of upheavals and they received refugees in their centers, filling Tao Fong Shan when the war with Japan started in 1937. A lot of refugees came and stayed at Tao Fong Shan.

**He always had the lotus cross on his breast. He would pick it up and talk about what that monk was searching for, thus appreciating the lotus spirituality of Buddhism.**

Now Dr. Mackenzie's quite interesting four points. I think anyone who has been in the East in connection with religious communities knows that sometimes these problems develop of what should we do and how can we express our respect without sort of crossing the boundaries of respect for our own tradition. Sometimes I feel perhaps we should not be so afraid. I think God is a God who has humor and generosity and I think he's not so strict about what we do. Of course, you have this relationship then to other Christians who may, to use Paul's expression, stumble because we do things which they don't expect us to do. But I think we should be quite generous in the way we show our respect. If I, in respect to the Buddha, bow in front of the Buddha, my Buddhist colleagues

would know that I'm not worshipping Buddha, I'm just paying respect. As Buddhists and Hindus here in Norway come to church, they want to receive communion. Not that they become Christians, but they want to express their respect. So what do you do when a Hindu is kneeling in front of the altar, expecting to receive communion. Should we just throw them out? I think my pastor friends say that hospitality is so vital and we have to share what we have even though the other one may not really know what we are doing. Then afterwards we can talk about it. So we have to find our ways forward in some of these sensitive areas. I think, if I understand you rightly, your final point was to say that there are some aspects of Buddhism which are problematic, and of course that is true. But you mentioned the word sadness in that respect, which reminded me of a seminar organized by the European branch of the Buddhist-Christian Studies Society in Liverpool at Hope University where the theme was hope in Christianity and Buddhism. What was shocking to my Buddhist friends was that the professor of Buddhist studies, a very knowledgeable and top expert on Buddhism, said that hope does not exist in Buddhism; it's not a central idea in Buddhism. Which is a reminder that (I and my Buddhist friends there did not totally agree) there are aspects of Buddhism where it is so much dependent on your own practice. . . . But there are other sides, like Mahāyāna Buddhists, who would emphasize that there is a compassionate aspects of Buddhist teaching, which also sometimes really takes over. But it's an interesting point to remember in dialogue with Buddhists, because there is a sort of instant Buddhism or Buddhism Lite which sometimes forget that transitoriness. Sadness is also part of a Buddhist spirituality.

Now to Dr. Muck. I'm sorry to say I was only a little boy when Reichelt was still alive. I didn't know him as an adult. He was a very old man to me. I have memories of his warmth and so on, but nothing that amounts to material for reflection. I think one of his real strengths was his charisma, his friendliness, his friendship, which was felt almost as an aura. I have met my old teachers, or other old people in Norway, who heard Reichelt preach, or who met him. They say, well, I don't remember anything of what he said, I can only remember the light which sort of surrounded him. I think that is a way of saying that he had that type of charisma or friendship and openness, and also Christian conviction which for many people was like a blessing. For some, a seed which was sown. I've said sometimes that the real dialogue begins when the last word is spoken. I think to me that is important because a lot of things that are said you are not immediately able to deal with, but it may stay with you, or it may stay with the other and sometimes it may grow and become more than what was said. I was not very clear about this, but I hope you understand my point. **UJFM**

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Much thanks to H. L. Richard and Brad Gill for transcribing and providing an initial edit of this recorded response; I provided further edits for clarity and added a few footnotes.
- <sup>2</sup> For more on this important theme of practice in the interfaith encounter, see my *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor*, Faith Meets Faith series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008); also, "The Buddhist-Christian Encounter in the USA: Reflections on Christian Practices," in *Ulrich van der Heyden and Andreas Feldtkeller, eds., Border Crossings: Explorations of an Interdisciplinary Historian – Festschrift for Irving Hexham*, Missionsgeschichtliches Archiv 12 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2008), 457–72.
- <sup>3</sup> My recent book on theological education is organized triadically according to the hearts-hands-heads structure: *Renewing the Church by the Spirit: Theological Education after Pentecost*, Theological Education Between the Times series (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020); for more on the important role of affectivity for Christian theologizing, see Amos Yong and Dale M. Coulter, eds., *The Spirit, the Affections, and the Christian Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016).
- <sup>4</sup> This is the affective level of the interfaith encounter; I elaborate on this dimension in two articles: "Hospitality and Religious Others: An Orthopathic Perspective," in John W. Morehead and Brandon C. Benziger, eds., *A Charitable Orthopathy: Christian Perspectives on Emotions in Multifaith Engagement* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2020), 183–95, and "Gladness and Sympathetic Joy: Gospel Witness and the Four Noble Truths in Dialogue," in Susan J. Maros and Eun Ah Cho, eds., *Missiology: An International Review* 48:3 (2020): 235–50.