

Review

Eric J. Sharpe. *Karl Ludvig Reichelt: Missionary, Scholar & Pilgrim*. Hong Kong: Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Centre, 1984.

The author of this intriguing biography earlier announced its subtitle as “Missionary, Scholar & Heretic.” The subtitle eventually chosen better focuses the figure of Reichelt (1877-1952)—though “man of dialogue” might be more apposite than “scholar.” He was certainly a pilgrim, leaving behind the securities of home in order to find his God in unfamiliar surroundings and a wider experience of community. Though dubbed a heretic by his critics, he was probably incapable of conceiving, much less insisting on, a basic distortion of traditional Christian faith. Had he been an Anglican, his visionary ecumenism might have been found quite compatible with high church orthodoxy. Unfortunately, the Norwegian Lutheran Church had drawn up its theological battle lines in a way that subsumed Reichelt’s enterprise under the damning category of “liberalism” from the start. Reichelt had not the leisure or theological sophistication to fully disentangle the nets in which his armchair critics caught him, and chose instead to insist stubbornly on his God-given mission and vision.

His Johannine theory of Mahayana Buddhism as a revelation of the Word which would find its fulfillment in Christianity has many aspects which today seem quaint, notably a claim that Nestorianism influenced the rise of Mahayana and a hermeneutically naive “matching of concepts” in which Tao and Logos are identified, and the Blessed Trinity correlated with the three bodies of the Buddha, the triple refuge, or three Pure Land deities. This theory shaped his activities as a “Christian Mission to the Buddhists.” But his practice of befriending and conversing with Buddhists, and pursuing scholarship of Buddhism as a religious quest, perhaps points beyond the limits of this conception and makes him one of the patrons of present ventures in interreligious encounter. Many others developed similar theories of the relation between Christianity and Eastern religion, but Reichelt’s witness has a particular pungency, as the product not of speculation, but of personal encounter and a study motivated by passionate curiosity and prophetic anticipation. As a theological thinker and a Buddhist scholar he was rather amateurish, but his courageous venture of dialogue had a seminal impact which makes it worthy of commemoration.

Reichelt’s successors in Tao Fong Shan, and all others working in the field in which he was a pioneer, will find food for reflection on the motives and possibilities of their work in Sharpe’s book. It is clear that Reichelt did not

bequeath any procedures to be imitated or ideas to be applied. His initiatives were far too experimental and revisable to constitute such a legacy. He was a pioneer, not a founder. His fulfillment theory licensed a great opening then, but to cling to it today would have the reverse effect. Christians may continue to see Christ as the fulfillment of Buddhism and indeed of all things, but they are no longer confident that Christianity as it has been constituted in western categories offers a normative anticipation of how that eschatological fulfillment may be hoped to come about. They are also beginning to ask themselves if it might not be said with equal validity that the Buddha-nature or universal enlightenment is the fulfillment of Christianity and of all things. If one apprehends the absolute eschatologically, both faith-traditions can be understood as imperfect historical pointers to it. The encounter of the two traditions is an epochal event for both, summoning each to deconstruct and reconstruct its heritage in light of the other. Rather than ask Buddhists to attend to the Gospel, the Christians' task now seems to be to register the critical, purifying impact of Buddhism on their faith, allowing it to shear that faith of longstanding tendencies to metaphysical and devotional delusion. Such a transformation of Christianity in light of Buddhism is a condition of any possible future sharing of the New Testament with Buddhists. One-way fulfillment theories thus yield to a mutual challenging to growth, whereby one becomes increasingly aware of the embodied finitude of one's tradition, the irreducible pluralism introduced by the coexistence with it of another no less valid tradition, and the fact that the absolute to which both traditions point must be *semper maius*. It may be that the idea of *Deus semper maior* idea to which one can only pay lip-service as long as one is confined within the horizon of a single religious tradition.

Reichelt's character remains rather enigmatic. In his orphaned boyhood, he was drawn to a revelation of God in nature and in the Orient. His spiritual formation was in the Pietist mode, marked by intense devotion to the Savior, spiritual and intellectual *Anfechtungen*, and a vivid sense of community with his fellows. His visit to Weishan monastery in 1905 was remembered as the determining experience of his life:

The whole of the wonderful universality and breadth of the Gospel of John began to dawn on my soul. ...I understood that in my impatience and ignorance I had not followed the psychological laws that God had established, that I had not used the material which he through his Spirit and his Word had for thousands of years been establishing. To do this would call for serious study.

Another significant moment was his encounter in 1919 with a young Buddhist monk called Kuantu, whom he baptized on Christmas Day that year:

Nor will any of us ever be able to forget the Christmas services which followed, at which Kuantu, bright and confident, gave his testimony.

It was the old, the eternal Gospel which we heard, though with that peculiar charm and sacred uniqueness which only one of the sons of Asia, trained in the highest religious mysticism of the East, could have expressed.

Kuantu provided a symbolic and sentimental focus of Reichelt's vision of a new church emerging from the East. But although there were eighty-two baptisms in the first ten years of the mission (1926-1936), there was no substantial confirmation of Reichelt's vision. Kuantu's conversion could not save him from a tragic fate of schizophrenia; and if one insists on measuring missionary success by the number of conversions, Reichelt's mission to the Buddhists was a failure.

Reichelt's group settled at Tao Fong Shan in Hong Kong in 1930. Fund-raising lecture tours and practical difficulties consumed much of his energies. During the war he spent his time there writing. He retired to Norway in 1946, but returned to Hong Kong in 1950 and was buried on Tao Fong Shan two years later. Today the controversy that dogged his life continues to surround his heritage, divided between those carrying on the dialogal work of the Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Centre, and a foreign-based conservative group determined to reduce or eliminate the leading role played by the Centre in interreligious dialogue. The latter group may perhaps appeal to Reichelt's conscious intention of converting Buddhist monks, but the former seems closer to the true meaning of Reichelt's life as it emerges in retrospect. "The cause of Thy Kingdom, Jesus, shall be my greatest glory," runs the hymn for which he is best remembered, and the service of that cause made him less a teacher than a learner, less a converter than a man of dialogue, less the builder of a grand synthesis than one who stumbled on unanswered questions.

He envisioned the cross emerging from the lotus, but the cross of Christian-Buddhist encounter is first of all a stumbling-block to western assurance, both Jew and Greek, both biblical and metaphysical. The humbling riddle of religious pluralism may be part of that foolishness of God which is infinitely wiser than human prevision. The blank face which China and Japan continue to turn to Christianity challenges us not to a renewed self-assertion but to a still more radical self-questioning. At some future date there may be a way of sharing the Gospel with these nations without cultural insensitivity. For the present, however, these nations are forcing us to learn the Gospel anew, as so much of our habitual claims and postures fall flat, and are shown up as hollow imports, when we attempt to insert them into the rich texture of Sinitic or Japanese culture. Science and technology have imposed themselves in these cultures, as has western art to some extent, but the path of the Gospel has been blocked, and its preachers find themselves bereft of the right words for communicating it. Any future inculturation of the Gospel demands first a process of deculturation, an ongoing realization of how deeply the Gospel is shaped and limited by the cultures and languages which have been the vehicle

of its historical

transmission, a practice of detachment and divestiture in regard to this heritage so that Christian faith will be free to take root in new forms in Asian contexts.

One could say that it was a dissatisfied mind and a dissatisfied heart that brought Reichelt East. His successors might retrieve and build on his dissatisfaction, looking to the East not as a “mission-field” (a concept they now sense to be insultingly complacent) but as the place of a possible fuller future revelation, to enlighten the mind and gladden the heart. Like Reichelt, they are bound to be learners much more than teachers as they seek for this Asian face (or faces) of God.

Joseph S. O'LEARY

Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture