

“Prevailing Winds”: An Analysis of the Liturgical Inculturation Efforts of Karl Ludvig Reichelt: Summary and Conclusion

ROLV OLSEN

This article consists of the summary and conclusion of my doctoral dissertation “Prevailing Winds”: An Analysis of the Liturgical Inculturation Efforts of Karl Ludvig Reichelt, defended in Lund, October 2007.¹

Karl Ludvig Reichelt (1877-1952) is among the internationally best known, and the most controversial, Norwegian missionary.² Previous research on Reichelt has not sufficiently focused on such central questions as the contextuality of his liturgical inculturation work, of whether his methods were colonial or not, of the room given to contemporary Chinese Buddhist criticism, and to the use of Chinese language.³ I hope to contribute towards redressing this imbalance.

The problem I have studied is the following: *Was the liturgical inculturation work of Karl Ludvig Reichelt contextual, colonial, or both?*

The problem is further divided into three sub-problems:

- 1) *What characterized the liturgical inculturation approach of Karl Ludwig Reichelt? What were his stated intentions? How was it implemented? How was it perceived?*
- 2) *To what extent might it be considered theologically appropriate?*
- 3) *To what extent should it be seen as being colonial in nature?*

Against the background of this threefold problem I have tested a hypothesis which I also formulated in three statements, and which I towards the end of the summary will give a closer scrutiny, to determine its possible verification through my study:

The inculturation efforts of Reichelt should as such be regarded as a theologically appropriate approach to the contextual situation.

However, insufficient awareness of possible needs for liberation from oppressive patterns present in the context in which he worked made his approach open to uncritical adoption of such patterns.

Thus, the colonialism of Reichelt partly stems from the very contextuality of his approach.⁴

My main sources are: The Tao Fong Shan liturgies; Tao Fong Shan itself, the area, the buildings, and the symbols; the Reichelt/Tao Fong Shan diaries; CMB publications; Chinese Buddhist articles.⁵

My methodological approach has been historical-analytical; observation, analysis, and evaluation. For those purposes, relevant terminology is discussed and my understandings of them defined, and several sets of “methodological tools” developed. The key terms have been contextualization, liturgical inculturation, and colonialism.

I understand contextualization as: *“a way of Christian theological thinking and practice, where the gospel, its message and spirit, the church, its tradition and life, and the people, its culture and living conditions, are examined and reinterpreted, in order to achieve a more valid, relevant, and adequate understanding and practice of Christianity, in a particular context and as a universal entity”.*

My understanding of liturgical inculturation was: *“a process whereby pertinent elements of a local culture are integrated into the worship of local church; in order to create a form of worship which is culturally suited to the context; to enable active and intelligent participation in worship, springing from the people’s conviction of faith; with the means of rites and liturgies, artefacts and symbols, terms and concepts, liturgical actions and elements, etc..”*.

I suggested defining colonialism in a missiological sense as: *“Abuse of power, by imposing, consciously or unconsciously, from a position of superior strength, on dependent people, groups, communities, or nations, the adoption of one’s own traditions, practices, will, values, or beliefs, the introduction or perpetuation of oppressive structures or patterns, by exploiting imbalances of power for one’s own gain, or other similar forms of imposition.”*

To determine what characterized the liturgical inculturation of Reichelt, I employed my “tools of classification”, consisting of relevant systems of categorization, developed by prominent scholars. Those used are; the relationship between Christ and culture, outlined by H. Richard Niebuhr; models of contextual theology, according to Stephen B. Bevans; and approaches to liturgical inculturation, developed by Ancsar J. Chupungco.⁶

For the evaluation of theological appropriateness of the liturgical inculturation effort, it was measured against my “tools of evaluation”, namely credible, applicable, and empowering. The question of whether it represents colonialism was assessed against using another set of such tools, expressed as procelytism, paternalism, and exploitation.⁷

The context in which Reichelt lived and worked was manifold. Relevant contextual factors were arranged within four main groups: The socio-political context, understood as consisting of China and Hong Kong; the cultural and religious context, traditional Chinese religion as well as the “great traditions”; the Buddhist context, with emphasis on monastic Pure Land Buddhism; and the Christian context, notably Protestant mission to China, the development of the Chinese church, and relevant missiological trends.⁸

Karl Ludvig Reichelt (1877-1952) worked as a missionary in

China and Hong Kong. Early, he became convinced that Christ, the eternal *logos*, was present everywhere and that the “best” in Buddhism pointed towards Christ, felt the calling to the “special work” among the Chinese Buddhists, and studied Chinese Buddhism to communicate the gospel in ways that Buddhist monks could understand and accept. In 1922, he arrived in Nanjing. In 1927, however, the work was disrupted, and they decided to settle in Hong Kong, where, in 1930, their new centre, Tao Fong Shan, was built. More than 1.000 “religious seekers” visited, and approx. 130 monks, novices, and so on, were baptized. These years also witnessed a growing hostility from the Chinese Buddhists. The World War II and the Communist revolution put an effective end to the original work.⁹

The Buddhist critique of Reichelt, as expressed by Jingguan, mainly fell into four categories; of dishonesty in the feedback to his Scandinavian supporters; of discrepancy between his inner convictions and his practices; the deceptive use of Buddhist terms in order to conceal his intentions to lead people away from Buddhism; and procelytism, using dishonest missionary methods, in order to gain converts.¹⁰

The intentions of Reichelt were analysed through a selection of his books and articles. Focus was on his theology of religions, with *logos* as a key to his theology, his evolutionary view of religion, and his “meta-historical” creation-oriented theological outlook; his view of the relationship between Chinese religion and Christianity, notably Buddhism; and his understanding on inculturation and rationale for the liturgical inculturation approach of Tao Fong Shan. From that, attentions turned to the practical implementation in his liturgical work, how this was put into practice in his work at Tao Fong Shan, consider the physical environment and the liturgical rooms, the services themselves, and the various elements adopted from the Chinese tradition. He endeavoured to achieve a “*hjemmeekte*”, literally, “home-genuine”, Chinese Christianity.¹¹

The elements selected for analysis were divided in three parts; artefacts and symbols, visible and tangible elements of worship, the altar, the lotus cross, the baptismal font, the inscriptions surrounding the altar, and the use of incense and bells; linguistic ele-

ments, the term used for God, the concept of tao and christianised Buddhist terms; liturgical elements, the hymn of praise, the three-fold dedication formula and the confessional litany and prayer; and the services as such.¹² Reichelt worked within a traditional Lutheran liturgical tradition, expanding it by including various elements with traditional Chinese background, thereby giving it a distinct Chinese flavour without venturing very far from his Lutheran roots. The borrowings from, and adaptations of, the Chinese Buddhist tradition were numerous, consisting of symbols and other visual elements; terms and expressions, and hymns and liturgical elements. Other elements were of Nestorian Christian origin or influence.

Central for Reichelt's interpretation and use was his conviction that there is no difference in kind between religions, only in degree, that Buddhism reaches the ultimate fulfilment in the Christian gospel, and that the best in Buddhism points towards Christ. Thus, he felt no constraints against using material from traditional Chinese and Buddhist background, if it was otherwise compatible with the Christian message. A major concern was to express his Christian faith in a way that they may relate to, understand and accept. His approach was pragmatic and eclectic, similar to the Buddhist notion of "skilful means".

The critique may be summarized in three words; syncretism, superficiality, and deception. For those contemporary Christians critical to Reichelt, the main problem was that he went too far in his experiments, resulting in syncretism. Currently, the charge against Reichelt is rather the reverse, that his inculturation was too superficial. The main complaint from his Buddhist critics has been that of deception.

Reichelt gave much consideration to the visual, aesthetical, and emotional aspects of the services. In this, he may be regarded as a forerunner to and a pioneer for the liturgical renewal movements of the 20th Century. Even so, the inculturation represented in the Tao Fong Shan services, although enough to cause concern in his time, was, seen from a current perspective, not particularly radical or controversial. In his liturgical work, Reichelt sought to adapt the Christian worship to an audience with a background from popular, monastic Buddhism, basically of the Pure Land School. This enabled him to communicate with a significant por-

tion of the monastic Chinese Buddhist community. I found no evidence suggesting that Reichelt were consciously trying to deceive the visiting Buddhists to accept Christianity by representing it as another form of Buddhism. The adaptation to Chinese tradition was done from a conviction that Christianity was as valid for Chinese as for Norwegians. Some of the actual choices, however, were such that they might create an impression that such a deception was exactly what was intended.

The inculturation approach of Reichelt was conducted from a "Christ fulfilling culture"-understanding. Culture, like religion, is basically good and valuable, but not everything is of equal value. By making use of the available "points of contact", the "best", or the inherent aspirations, in a particular culture, it may be utilized to realize its potential. The other religions differ from Christianity in degree, rather than in kind, their ancient sages and prophets bringing witness of the truth they may only vaguely have realized, the truth finally revealed in Christ. Thus, to inculturate elements from various religions was actually to use them in their proper way. In theory as well as in practice, Reichelt alternated between what Bevans characterized as the translation model and the anthropological model. A tendency towards a more cautious approach may be traced in his later writings. His meta-historical outlook and his "Christ fulfilling culture"-approach was compatible with both approaches, leaving him free to combine them. The way he used the two models roughly corresponds with his use of dynamic equivalence and creative assimilation. The contextualization approach was limited to the inculturation aspects, with little or no regard for the concerns of oppression and liberation. His actual work, however, was conducted undertaken within a colonial context.

The theological appropriateness of the liturgical inculturation of Reichelt was assessed by its credibility, applicability and its capacity to empower.¹³ One can hardly claim that the inculturation of Reichelt should be lacking credibility. Admittedly, not all his choices were equally well founded. Still, the approach should be regarded as satisfactory. The very contextuality of his approach results in limitations to its applicability outside of its particular context. Within this framework, however, his approach was appli-

cable, though not without weaknesses, and possibly the only feasible way to obtain such results.

Considerable more doubts rests with to what degree his inculturation may be considered empowering for the people involved. This is mainly due to the low attention given to such concerns, a result of the emphasis on the spiritual and individual aspects of salvation. His approach may be considered a “classical” or “traditional” approach to inculturation, with its inherent strengths and weaknesses, giving minute attention to the cultural elements, but at the same time largely neglecting the socio-political framework in which he was operating, thus being insufficiently aware of the need to guard against possible abuse. Nevertheless, the inculturation work of Reichelt ought to be considered an acceptable approximation to theological appropriateness to the particular context. True, some of the practical applications made were clumsy or of little validity, as critics have pointed out. That, however, is to be expected of any pioneer work in any field.

The alleged colonialism of Reichelt was measured by the charges of proselytism, paternalism, and exploitation, with stress on the former. The available evidence did not indicate any conscious colonial *intent* in the work of Reichelt. On the contrary, his goal of establishing a Christian fellowship that simultaneously was truly Chinese and truly Christian, his insistence on inculturation, and his sensitivity towards the colonial issue shown in his concerns on Hong Kong, rather show anti-colonialism. Some of his attitudes and methods could be regarded as being colonial in their *function*. That is seen in his tendency to judge Buddhism according to an alien standard imposed on it rather than from its self-understanding; in his “hidden agendas”, perhaps hidden even to himself; in his tendencies towards paternalistic attitudes; and in the apparent insufficient awareness of the injustice behind the social unrest.

I did not find that the liturgical inculturation work of Reichelt in itself could be considered colonial. It took place, however, within a colonial framework. The Christian mission to China was perceived as part of a colonial project, and to a certain extent such a verdict is justified. Reichelt did not entirely manage to free himself from the consequences of such a heritage. Further, he adopted certain colonial pattern existent in the context in which

he worked, and, apparently, he showed insufficient consideration towards possible oppressive effects of those patterns. It is deplorable that a mission work, having friendship between Buddhists and Christians as one of its goals, caused bitterer and more lasting resentment among Buddhists than possibly any other Christian mission work. Lack of sensitivity may be one reason. The work also had little difficulties in fitting into the colonial structures of the time. It is difficult to avoid concluding that the work, at least to some extent, was an example of colonial *practice*.

I have arrived at the following assessment of the hypothesis formulated in the Introductory chapter and quoted on the first page of this summary: As to the first part of the hypothesis, making use of my set of criteria for theological appropriateness, the evidence basically supports that the inculturation efforts of Reichelt should as such be regarded as a theologically appropriate approach to the contextual situation, at least insofar as only inculturation aspects are considered. His approach should be regarded as credible, although some of the practical implementations were disputable. Within the particular context of his work, it proved applicable. With respect to empowerment, though, there were serious flaws in his approach. Thus, admittedly, his inculturation attempts betray serious weaknesses, and several of the actual solutions in retrospect appearing as rather misguided. This, however, is not more than ought to be expected in a pioneer work such as his. If infallibility was required, no human effort would ever pass the test for theological appropriateness.

Concerning the second statement, the evidence suggests that there are signs of adoption of oppressive patterns present in the context in which he lived and worked. Whereas it cannot be said to have been proven that this is a result of insufficient awareness of possible needs for liberation, such an answer seems to explain why his approach opened for such uncritical adoption of unhealthy elements. Reichelt does not appear to have sufficiently critically analysed possible implications of his combination of Western and Chinese styles of leadership, such as mutual strengthening of authoritarian tendencies in both, and a protracted state of dependency.

The third supposition obviously demands a descriptive rather than normative understanding of the concepts “contextual”, “contextualization”, and “colonial”. Otherwise, the question would have been meaningless, as an affirmative answer would have been logically impossible. Although Reichelt was far from a conscious colonizer, there are traces of colonial patterns in his work. As this partly seems to result from uncritical adoption of oppressive patterns, there might appear to be some basis for the claim that the colonialism of Reichelt partly stemmed from the very contextuality of his approach. It now appears to me, however, that this nice, paradoxical juxtaposition of contextual and colonial is influenced by a traditional understanding of inculturation, repeating the mistake of Reichelt by failing to give sufficient consideration to the issues of liberation, or empowering. Another interpretation seems to be better suited to fit the available evidence. Then, the colonial pattern stems not so much from the contextuality of Reichelt as from the deficiency of the same, according to the criteria of theologically appropriate inculturation. Although his inculturation efforts must be regarded as credible as well as applicable within its context, the neglect of the issues of liberation results in his approach being insufficiently empowering. The scope of his inculturation was too narrow. Although holistic as to liturgy and worship, his approach was not sufficiently holistic to adequately consider and address other needs and challenges. In other words, in these respects, Reichelt did not transcend his own time, its convictions, prejudices, and limitations. Probably, he did no more realize their existence than we those of our time.

From this follows that my hypothesis will have to be amended to:

“The inculturation efforts of Reichelt should as such be regarded as a theologically appropriate approach to the contextual situation.

However, insufficient awareness of possible needs for liberation made his approach open to uncritical adoption of oppressive patterns present in the context in which he worked.

The colonialism of Reichelt partly stems from this deficiency in his approach.”

For the Christian church, this conclusion raises a crucial question: How may the church, being missionary by its very nature, be contextual without becoming colonial, and thus remain true to its calling? As we by this move into the clearly normative sphere, I have postponed that discussion so far, but the problem is so closely interwoven with this study that it would be cowardice to avoid it altogether. That question will be addressed, and my tentative answers given, in the *Coda* or postscript.¹⁴

Noter

- ¹ See “*Prevailing Winds*”: *An Analysis of the Liturgical Inculturation Efforts of Karl Ludvig Reichelt*, Studia Missionalia Svecana CIV, Lund University, 2007: 213-219. The text is unchanged, but some explanatory notes have been added.
- ² For a biographical account of Reichelt, see Sharpe, Eric, *Karl Ludvig Reichelt: Missionary, Scholar and Pilgrim*, Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Centre, Hong Kong, 1984.
- ³ Previous licenciate and doctoral dissertations on Reichelt: Riisager, Filip, *Forventning og oppfyldelse* (Expectation and Fulfilment), Forlaget Aros, Hjørring, Denmark, 1973; Riisager, Filip, *Lotusblomsten og korset* (The Lotus and the Cross), Gads forlag, Copenhagen, Denmark, 1998; Eilert, Håkan, *Boundlessness: Studies in Karl Ludvig Reichelt's Missionary Thinking with Special Regard to the Buddhist-Christian Encounter*, Forlaget Aros, Aarhus, Denmark, 1974.
- ⁴ For a more comprehensive account of problem and hypothesis, see Olsen 2007:15-19.
- ⁵ See Olsen 2007:21-24.
- ⁶ See Niebuhr, H. Richard, *Christ and Culture*, First Published 1951, Harper & Brothers Publishers, New York, USA, 1956; Bevans, Stephen B., *Models of Contextual Theology*, Orbis, Maryknoll, New York, USA, 1992, Revised Edition, 2002; Chupungco, Anscar J., *Liturgical Inculturation: Sacraments, Religiosity, and Catechesis*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, USA, 1992; Chupungco, Anscar J., “Two Methods of Liturgical Inculturation”, in Stauffer, S. Anita (ed.), *LWF Studies: Christian Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity*, Lutheran World Federation, Geneva, Switzerland, 1996, p. 77-94.
- ⁷ For these methodological concerns, see Olsen 2007:28-60.
- ⁸ For an outline of the contextual framework, see Olsen 2007:61-93.
- ⁹ For a brief outline of the life and work of Reichelt, see Olsen 2007:94-107.
- ¹⁰ See Jingguan, “The Secrets of Tao Fong Shan”, *Buddhism in Hong Kong*, No. 438, November 1996:16-19; No. 439, December 1996:32-35; No. 440, January 1997:19-23. A brief review of the critique is given in Olsen 2007:111-119.
- ¹¹ See Olsen 2007.120-153.
- ¹² For my analysis of the inculturation approach of Reichelt, see Olsen 2007:154-190.
- ¹³ For my discussion and evaluation, see Olsen 2007:191-212.
- ¹⁴ See Olsen 2007:220-228.

Rolv Olsen, b. 1956. Cand.theol., Misjonshøgskolen, 1984. Theol.lic., Lunds Universitet, 2001, Teol.Dr. 2007. Misjonsprest, NMS, Taiwan, 1985–90. Studentprest, NMS, Oslo, 1990–92. Misjonsprest, Den nordiske Kristne Buddhistmisjon (DNKB), superintendent Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre, Hong Kong, 1992–98. Stipendiat, DNKB, 1998–2000. Instituttleder, Egede Instituttet, 2000–02 (vikar), 2004–. Høgskolelektor, KRL, 2000–. Førsteamanuensis 2007. Doktoravhandling: *“Prevailing Winds” An Analysis of the Liturgical Inculturation Efforts of Karl Ludvig Reichelt*, Lunds Universitet, 2007.