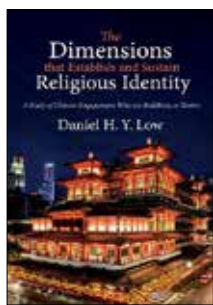


# Books and Missiology

*The Dimensions that Establish and Sustain Religious Identity: A Study of Chinese Singaporeans Who Are Buddhists or Taoists*, by Daniel H. Y. Low (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 166 pp.

—Reviewed by Todd Pokrifka



Identity—how it’s formed and how it’s sustained—has been studied for years. The more multicultural cities and countries become, so also the more pressing this question becomes. Religious identity is among the most controversial and important aspects of a person’s or group’s identity. In his published doctoral dissertation, Daniel Low (PhD, Cook School of Intercultural Studies, Biola University), focuses on the religious identity of Chinese inhabitants of the decidedly multicultural country of Singapore. The book’s topic overlaps in part with Low’s own sociocultural experience growing up in Singapore as a Malaysian Chinese Christian. At the heart of the book is the issue of the nature of religious identity and what establishes and sustains it. This is a complex issue which is of crucial missiological importance, especially for frontier missiology.

Just how do “spiritual realities”—which include spiritual beings or forces, sacred texts or scriptures, and spiritual practices (74, 142)—relate to a Buddhist’s or Taoist’s religious identity? Low contends that

religious identity is established and sustained as the adherents come to experience the enfolding presence and power of these [spiritual] realities through immersing themselves in the dynamic domains of recognition, appreciation, and dedication. (74; cf. 142)

These dynamic domains are distinct yet overlapping areas of life and experience that Low uses to categorize the data which emerged from his interviews and observations of Buddhist and Taoist adherents.

Low makes his case for this thesis in eight chapters. His first chapter summarizes the scope of the research. In subsequent chapters, he reviews existing research on Buddhism and Taoism and religious identity in Singapore. He then moves on to focus on studies or theories of identity and religious identity. He shows how his work will expand the concept of religious identity in contrast to views that reduce it to naturalistic factors (e.g., psychological, social or political), thus neglecting the role of spiritual realities. By chapter four, he begins to unpack his research methods and procedures, in particular, “grounded theory”—a kind of qualitative social-scientific research that aims to “ground” all theorizing and analysis from what naturally emerges in the research data. Low’s method uses interviews of religious adherents with observations from them in their religious activities.

Chapters four to six analyze the data in terms of three “emerging domains” or categories that Low believes came to light during his research. Each of these domains includes two or three subdomains. Low uses domains and subdomains to classify and discuss (with many helpful quotations) the experiences and statements of his thirty-two Chinese Singaporean interviewees: sixteen Buddhists and sixteen Taoists.

In chapter four, Low uses the domain of “recognition” to describe the experiences of participation and revelation that his interviewees had in their relationships to spiritual realities. Some told how divine beings appeared in their dreams or otherwise initiated interaction with them. In chapter five, he speaks of his adherents’ sense of “appreciation” to spiritual realities for the transformation, direction, and protection that they felt the spiritual beings offered. Many were grateful for increased happiness and well-being that they felt came from their connection to spiritual beings and teachings, both in everyday life and in relation to crises. In this chapter, Low also offers a fascinating summary of his interviewees’ negative impressions of Christianity and Christians in Singapore (117–122), and how this reinforces their appreciation for, and commitment to, their own religious traditions. Then, in chapter six, Low uses the domain of “dedication” to analyze the interviewees’ future aspirations concerning their spiritual life and their sense of obligation, especially to family, that confirm their long-term commitment to their particular religion and its ideas and practices.

In chapter eight, Low sums up his conclusions about the decisive significance of spiritual realities in establishing and sustaining the religious identity of Chinese Singaporean

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Buddhists and Taoists. After briefly noting how his conclusions relate to the societal or group dimensions of religious identity (140–141), he reviews his key conclusions concerning the three domains, outlines key implications of his study for both research and practice, and offers some recommendations for further study.

### *Low's Contributions*

What should we make of this book, particularly regarding its bearing on frontier missiology? Besides being exceptional in clear organization and overall persuasiveness, I believe the book makes several key contributions that deserve further reflection. All of them move away from certain typically Western ways of understanding and studying religious identity.

Most significantly, Low demonstrates compellingly how transcendent spiritual realities can be crucial in establishing and sustaining people's sense of religious identity. This contrasts with the tendency in much Western social science to understand religious identity, with attendant practices and underlying worldviews, in secular, rationalistic ways—such as reducing religious realities to immanent psychological or social factors. Such a tendency has also affected Western missiologists and missionaries.<sup>1</sup> This raises important questions for frontier missiology, questions that go beyond the boundaries of this review. How can we recognize the supernatural, spiritual dimension more adequately not only in our understanding of religious identity and commitment, but also in the processes of conversion to Jesus and discipleship? How does this spiritual dimension relate to the other dimensions, such as the societal/familial or intellectual or political, that also form and sustain a given religious identity?

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A second contribution is the method of Low's book: a grounded approach that listens deeply to the experience of actual adherents in a particular context. Low resists the tendency to impose prior, bookish generalizations or theories on the Buddhists and Taoists he interviews. He avoids the cultural imperialism that has often marked Western interactions with religious others. As Low himself emphasizes, his choice of method aims to express the virtue of listening deeply and

respectfully. Drawing from Duane Elmer's work, Low affirms that adequate understanding comes only when we move beyond "learning about others" to "learning from others" and "learning with others" (150–151). Whether or not we are explicitly employing Grounded Theory, as Low did, both scholars and practitioners can and should adopt its humility and attentiveness to distinct socio-religious contexts ways of describing faith. While not denying the importance for missiologists to frame and interpret data in terms of biblically-grounded theological categories (as noted below), we must follow the New Testament's call to humble servanthood and adaptability (e.g., 1 Cor. 9:19–23), both in our pursuit of understanding of others and our subsequent witness to them. How can missional research, practice, training, and theoretical reflection better express these virtues?

A third contribution of Low's book is how he pushes beyond the individualism that is prominent in Western accounts of religious identity (149; cf. 53). Without denying the importance of an individual's pursuit of self-fulfillment through religion, he notes that religious identity often includes important communal obligations, such as devoting oneself to "extend the spiritual benefits bestowed by spiritual realities for others—both the living and the dead" (149). While Low does not give extended attention to the corporate or social dimension of religious identity, these communal features crop up frequently in the interviewees' accounts of their experiences of spiritual realities. In frontier mission, how can we strengthen and enlarge our accounts of religious identity and encourage appropriate, non-individualistic ways of engaging in witness and discipleship?

### *Moving Beyond Low's Contributions*

Using Low's instructive contributions as a helpful springboard, what are ways that we can move forward to construct proposals for frontier missiology and mission among the Buddhists, Taoists, and other followers of non-Christian religions? How can we transcend Low's limits of scope and method to include other disciplines and perspectives to apply the results of his or similar research? Here are several proposals that I hope will build on Low's contributions and move the missiological conversation forward.<sup>2</sup>

First, we need greater attention on the amalgamate nature of religious expressions and practices, including varying degrees and forms of multi-religious belonging and identity. Despite Low's proper aim to ground his analysis in the actual experiences and self-perceptions of his interviewees, his chosen method sometimes led him to neglect the complexities of their religious identities, including potential multi-religious

influences on them. Without denying that the adherents interviewed identified themselves as either Buddhist or Taoist (Low was looking for those that identified as one or the other), it would be important to explore whether and to what extent their lives reflected elements of the “other” religion (i.e., Buddhists affected by Taoism or Taoists affected by Buddhism). It would be helpful to explore whether they saw themselves as following, or being influenced by, other religious beliefs and practices in addition to their main religious affiliation.

## Given that the historical trajectory of Chinese religions is one of amalgamation, how deep and wide is the reformist differentiation among the religious practitioners in Singapore?

Also, though the subjects of Low research were all Chinese Singaporeans, he neglected Confucianism, which is commonly connected with Buddhism and Taoism as one of the “three teachings” that are definitive for Chinese religion and culture. This neglect was palpable when Low’s interviewees frequently referred to the notion of “filial piety” as motivating their religious acts. This notion of filial piety has roots in Confucianism and has clearly penetrated Chinese Buddhism and Taoism. Low apparently justifies his choice to exclude “those who continue to practice a syncretic mix of Buddhism, Taoism, and Chinese folk religion” in his research (11) by noting that “in Singapore local Buddhists and Taoists have recently undertaken efforts to differentiate themselves from each other” in the context of reform movements (9; cf. 24ff). Yet, given Low’s own point that the historical trajectory of Chinese religions is one of amalgamation or syncretism (16–18, 21ff), how deep and wide is this reformist differentiation in the assumptions, beliefs, and actions of the religious practitioners in Singapore?

Recognizing that in other parts of East Asia Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism (especially with its widespread notion of filial piety), and various folk religions, coexist, we need further studies that highlight the dynamic and multi-faceted complexity of religious identity both in respect to the adherents’ self-understanding and in their actual beliefs and practices. Such future studies should also consider the degree to which the average religious adherent is or is not aware of the particular sources and influences of all of their views or practices (i.e., whether they have origins in Buddhism, Taoism, folk religion, or what have you). Further research that is sensitive to the multi-religious or amalgamated nature of much religious

expression would equip frontier missionaries and missiologists with a more adequate and accurate basis to develop appropriate forms of witness and engagement with religious others.

I believe such studies are best done by insiders, or at least in close partnership with insiders, who offer “emic” understanding of the religion and its place in life and society (a point to which we will return below). However, Low’s book shows that one etic to a religious world, like Low himself, can still carefully listen to, and faithfully and intelligibly describe, what those inside or emic to that religious world say and do. This can form part of the learning path of an outsider who wishes to become an “alongsider,” laying the foundations of understanding for fruitful, ongoing relationship with insiders.

Second, and related to my first proposal, I suggest that we pay more attention to different expressions and experiences of any given religion and how they would influence an adherent’s process of forming new belonging and identity as a follower of Christ. In particular, I propose that greater attention and clarity be given those expressions that are often designated as “folk religion” and “formal religion.” Low does use this distinction at times, but I see a need to take account of the significant complexity and differences that exist between different types of religious adherents. Going beyond the scope of Low’s study, it would be helpful to address two related realities sensitively: (1) how the various “spiritual realities” that Low and his interviewees identify are perceived and experienced differently by folk (animistic or mystical) Buddhists and Taoists versus formal (or philosophical) Buddhists and Taoists; (2) how these differences of perception and experience would bear upon the nature of conversion to Christ for such adherents.

My initial assumption would be that those whose religious lives lean toward animistic folk religion would focus more on practices that interact with and honor/appease spiritual beings (gods or ancestors). This would include most Taoists and some Buddhists. On the other hand, more intellectual-ethical reformist Buddhists or Taoists may focus more on understanding and living out classic religious texts (sacred texts are one the “spiritual realities” Low identifies). Perhaps further research could take the three main domains that Low employs—recognition, appreciation, and dedication—and overlay the folk versus formal distinction, yielding six categories by which to understand and assess insider perspectives on spiritual realities. In any case, further attentive research regarding folk versus formal patterns of religious life would be helpful in knowing how to engage missionally with diverse adherents of any faith or combination of faiths or worldviews.

In considering the effect of the folk-formal distinction on conversion, I would like to reflect on the experiences of Buddhist background people with which I am familiar.

Drawing from the stories of Buddhist believers who have come to Christ, both in Korea and among Vietnamese in the United States, my (Korean) wife and I have observed that the nature of “conversion” to Christ among Buddhists often varies significantly based on the kind of Buddhists the individuals were before they followed Christ. Buddhists, who are more mystical or folk Buddhists, are steeped in traditional, often animistic practices and awareness of spiritual beings, tend to break away from Buddhism sharply once they experience the power and presence of Jesus. They quickly regard Christ and the Holy Spirit as dramatically superior to the former spiritual powers or beings, which they now see as deceptive and demonic. By contrast, more “intellectual” Buddhists, closer to the teachings of formal Buddhism and perhaps influenced by recent Buddhist reform movements, tend to find ways to retain or reinterpret varying degrees of Buddhist belief or practice without necessarily experiencing great contradiction between them and their newfound allegiance to Christ.<sup>3</sup>

In the more formal philosophical Buddhists, then, one sometimes finds incidences of “dual religious belonging” or “dual identity,”<sup>4</sup> an important kind of religious identity that Low’s study does not have scope to consider. Without attempting to explain various forms of dual identity in their overlapping of spiritual, religious, and social dimensions, I observe that dual identity of certain kinds would allow for potential “insider movements” to Jesus among Buddhists or other religionists, an important but controversial subject among frontier missiologists.<sup>5</sup>

## The nature of conversion to Christ among Buddhists often varies significantly based on the kind of Buddhists the individuals were before they followed Christ.

Thirdly, I would like to explore the crucial role that witnesses to Christ—the missionaries or other messengers from a Christ-following community—have in determining the nature of the potential conversion and subsequent spiritual formation of religious “others” like Buddhists or Taoists. Again, for those Low studied, negative views of the Christian community—which they regarded as presenting views that were insensitive and inconsistent with reality—confirmed the adherents in their non-Christian commitments (117–123), but it does not need to be this way. I want to first focus on some key ways that the

witnessing community can shape new believers, starting with their conversion, and then I would like to offer initial thoughts on how the role of the witnessing community *should* appear.

Witnesses for Christ shape potential or actual new believers in various ways. One key factor determining the role of such witnesses on a socio-religious frontier is the community’s attitude toward and interpretation of non-Christian religions. Among other things, this factor affects what a conversion to Jesus would look like. If this witnessing and discipling community expresses strong, even insensitive, rejection of a person’s religion or spirituality of origin (as it apparently did in the case of the Chinese Singaporeans Low studied), then new believers would obviously be much more likely to reject and make a “clean break” from their “pre-Christian” beliefs and practices. If they are told that aspects of the traditions they grew up with are evil or demonic, they would typically want to reject these practices, and often their whole religious heritage, even at the cost of divorcing themselves from family and friends.

However, if the witnessing and discipling community welcomes and encourages indigenous contextual expressions of Christ-following, incorporating and reinterpreting certain elements drawn from non-Christian religions, then both the nature of conversion to Jesus and of the communities of Jesus followers can be contextually fitting while still showing true faithfulness to Christ and the Scriptures.<sup>6</sup> This option of response from the witnesses and their community would encourage a process similar to what Paul Hiebert calls “Critical Contextualization,” which could lead to new “contextual congregations.”<sup>7</sup> This process, involving Buddhist-background believers in Jesus and supportive alongsiders, would determine such things as how to avoid attachment or allegiance to gods or authorities other than the true God as well as which former practices must be rejected or reinterpreted.<sup>8</sup>

Given this background, what are some initial ideas about what frontier witness should look like in frontier contexts? First, frontier gospel witnesses should generally aim towards the second, more contextually-sensitive form of witness to unbelievers, without diluting a faithfulness to the full counsel of Scripture and to Jesus Christ as the unqualified Lord. This second option, with a more open view to the non-Christian religious heritage and its potentially positive elements, would allow new believers to maintain greater social ties with their family and friends, people whom they could readily lead to Christ. Cultural-religious insiders, whether existing followers of Jesus or the new believers themselves, would be in the best position to discern what is appropriate contextualization of the concrete details of their heritage. They are better equipped to understand the meaning and purpose of familiar beliefs and practices than an outsider. Yet, this role of discernment would require them to be growing disciples, increasingly grounded in

the Scripture-formed gospel and in a Spirit-filled life marked by abiding in Christ—a life in Christ that frontier missionary alongsiders could help to facilitate.

Second, witnesses would need to adapt and contextualize their approach to the particular nature of how religion—say, Buddhism—is expressed in a particular community or person. As noted above, the frontier witnesses' approach should vary depending on whether one is working with folk Buddhists or formal, philosophical Buddhists—especially in the initial phase of witness. With folk Buddhists, one would begin with seeking and demonstrating the tangible presence, power, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, often in power encounters. With the formal, more rational Buddhist, one would likely begin with dialogue and include a compelling and contextually-sensitive presentation of gospel and biblical worldview. If either kind of Buddhist comes to faith, then their mentors and disciples would need to build on their preferred expressions of faith and practice. This should lead them to a holistic grasp of the fullness of life in Christ which includes both spiritual power and grounding in the truth of the gospel and written word. Accordingly, frontier witnesses or missionaries and the believing communities with which they partner would need to be well-formed and well-trained in both their own Scripture-grounded faith and in the religious “worlds” of others to discern what approach is best for witness or discipleship.

My final proposal is to commend an essential missiological task that is necessary to enable these insights to serve the biblical requirements of frontier witness. This task must be both faithful to the gospel and to God and understandable and relevant to the new peoples and cultures into which the gospel is moving. This task is what I have called “frontier theologizing” (see Pokrifka 2016, 151–154).

Good frontier theologizing . . . would involve a mutual collaborative partnership between two groups in Christ's body, namely, between (a) the cultural “insiders”—the new, indigenous . . . believers . . . and (b) the missionaries or “outsiders” who could become “alongsiders” who walk with the indigenous believers. (Pokrifka 2016, 152)

Combining the local community's “self-theologizing” and insights gained from carefully contextualized and “translated” biblical perspectives of global outsiders offers hope for a God-given discernment that brings both cultural fit and biblical faithfulness. The Scriptures and the Holy Spirit lead all involved into the true abiding in Christ that alone brings lasting fruitfulness (John 15). With God's grace, this dynamic process of interpreting Scripture and interpreting a context's culture, including its religion, leads to faithful and fitting “critical contextualization.”

Frontier theologizing, as a part of frontier missiology, would play the crucial role of placing the social-scientifically derived “insider understandings” that Low's research uncovered into a framework that would allow the biblical gospel to penetrate into and flourish in any new insider context. Low rightly prioritized one aspect of what is needed, listening to and unfolding the insider's perspectives and experiences on their own (non-biblical) terms. But, as followers of Jesus, we are called to move beyond, to understand how Scripture, illumined by the Spirit, would lead us to interpret and assess those perspectives and experiences. Ideally, since frontier missionaries and other outsiders are largely etic to the social and religious world of the insiders, it would be best to have insider followers of Jesus to take the lead in this dynamic process of interwoven biblical exegesis and “cultural exegesis.” In this transformative conversational process, all people involved would “be transformed by the renewing of [their] minds” (Rom. 12:2) and would “take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). Locals and outsiders would join in humble, mutual submission to one another and to God to forge a new path of obedience in a frontier context, forming new, holistic forms of identity in Christ, which includes what Low calls religious identity.<sup>9</sup>

### Low rightly prioritized one aspect of what is needed—listening to and unfolding the insider's perspective and experience on their own non-biblical terms.

The frontier theologizing task and process is fraught with dangers, not least the often unnoticed syncretism and cultural imperialism of the messenger-witnesses on the one side and the native cultural domestication or syncretism of the receptors on the other. Yet it is a task that is required by our Lord's Great Commission and the larger missional purpose of Scripture. Without theological reflection, how can we bridge from the Scriptures into yet unreached cultures and worldviews, and without that bridge, how can we make disciples of all peoples?

Further, without engaging in this frontier theological task, the global theology and practice of the universal church misses the opportunity to be enriched with each novel and beautiful incarnation of the gospel in a previously unreached social-religious people. Despite the daunting challenges involved, we can have hope that the missional task—and thus the “theologizing” required by it—is ultimately God's and that he will fulfill it, empowering and guiding his people by his Spirit and his word.

## Conclusions

In sum, Low's significant research, together with proposals on how to extend and apply it, are important to frontier missions and missiology. Let me recap the contributions coming directly from Low's work and proposals that apply and extend it:

1. Spiritual realities must be understood and accounted for in grasping religious identity.
2. Methods of understanding of people's religious identity must be humble, contextually-fitting and adaptive.
3. Understanding of people's religious identity must transcend individualism.
4. Understanding religious identity and practice must be sufficiently complex and flexible to include appropriate amalgamated or multi-religious belonging/identity.
5. Efforts to understand and engage religious others on the frontiers must be sensitive to radically different forms and aspects of religious traditions, folk and formal expressions.
6. Witnesses to religious others, e.g., frontier missionaries and members of native churches, need to be aware of the decisive positive or negative affects they can have on new believers. They should be open to new contextual forms of Christ-following faith and community and adapt their ways of sharing the gospel to different kinds of religious practitioners.
7. Those in frontier situations should grasp the significance of frontier theologizing and embrace it as a crucial, God-dependent practice for navigating how to be both contextually fitting and faithful to God and his word.

In many ways, such culturally- and religiously-sensitive frontier theologizing is what is necessary to apply rightly the points that arise directly or indirectly out of Low's book. As missiologists and mission practitioners, in partnership with indigenous believers, learn to depend on God to navigate these seven aspects to understand and relate to religious others on the frontiers, the cause of God's kingdom will be greatly advanced.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Paul Hiebert, "Excluded Middle," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, 4th edition, edited by Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library), 407–414. This is Hiebert's classic article on the excluded middle. See also much of Charles Kraft's work. In the context of Buddhism, see Paul H. De Neui, ed., *Seeking the Unseen: Spiritual Realities in the Buddhist World* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that Chinese Singaporeans are not themselves an unreached people group, with a relatively high percentage of them being Christian, but we can learn lessons from Low's study of their Buddhist and Taoist members about what it might take to reach people on the religious frontiers.

<sup>3</sup> This lack of perceived contradiction between certain aspects of Buddhism and Christ-following may be due partly to how certain "Buddhist" mindsets (e.g., a karmic emphasis on "reaping and sowing") or practices (e.g., early morning prayer or some form of the honoring of ancestors) persist in the culturally-formed forms of Christianity among Koreans, Vietnamese or other Asian communities influenced by Buddhism, often without the conscious awareness of those Christian communities.

<sup>4</sup> See several publications of Kang-San Tang on dual Buddhist-Christian belonging, including his "Dual Belonging: A Missiological Critique and Appreciation from an Asian Evangelical Perspective," *Mission Studies* 27 (2010): 1–15.

<sup>5</sup> Chris Bauer, "The Fingerprints of God in Buddhism," in *Mission Frontiers* 36:6 (Nov/Dec 2014), <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/archive/the-fingerprints-of-god-in-buddhism>. This entire issue is well worth reading, but don't miss Chris Bauer's article for an affirmative perspective on insider movements. For a critique of this perspective, see the critical response to this issue in 2015 by leaders in OMF Thailand, together with a response to their written comments, published here: <https://www.missionfrontiers.org/blog/post/a-response-to-mission-frontiers-the-fingerprints-of-god-in-buddhism-issue>. For further reflection on the issues involved, see Todd Pokrifka, "Prospects for Indigenous People Movements in the Buddhist World," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 33, no. 4 (Winter 2016):149–156.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Thein Nyunt, *Missions Amidst Pagodas: Contextual Communication of the Gospel in the Burmese Buddhist Context* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Monographs, 2014), 10–17 in which Nyunt explores such issues in the context of Myanmar. The rest of the book is also quite valuable.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11, no. 3 (July 1987): 104–112, and Nyunt, *Missions Amidst Pagodas*, 14–17, where Nyunt refers to Hiebert several times.

<sup>8</sup> Despite the necessary amalgamation or mixing (perhaps "neutral syncretism") that are always involved in following Jesus in any culture, disciples of Jesus surely want to avoid problematic syncretism, incomplete or stifled discipleship, or what Charles Kraft calls "dual allegiance" to Jesus and to other entities or spirits. See Charles H. Kraft, "Three Encounters in Christian Witness" in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, 4th Edition, eds. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library), 449–450. In addition, the believing community (indigenous and expatriate) would eventually need to recognize and overcome unintended, lingering cultural-religious ideas and inclinations that are problematic and not yet transformed by the Spirit and the Word.

<sup>9</sup> From another perspective, frontier theologizing is the result of insider and outsider believers together undergoing the ongoing process of repeatedly walking through the "three encounters" that Charles Kraft has outlined: "power encounters" that bring freedom, "truth encounters" that bring understanding, and "allegiance encounters" that bring deeper relationship and commitment to the Lord (Kraft, "Three Encounters").

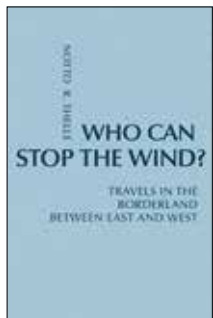
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***Who Can Stop the Wind?: Travels in the Borderland Between East and West***, by Notto R. Thelle, Translated by Brian McNeil (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 112 pp.

—Reviewed by Andy Bettencourt



In this short volume, Dr. Notto Thelle brings his Christian journey into conversation with Buddhism, Japanese culture, new religious movements, and his neighbors. This volume inspires readers towards more questions than answers. Some may even be startled by Thelle's missiological interactions and perceived lack of theological boundaries. However, Thelle provides critical experiential analysis for living out one's faith among persons of radically different religious and cultural backgrounds as well as understanding multiple religious belonging. Readers may find themselves making different decisions or arguments from Thelle along the way;

however, they should appreciate how his faith is much more than doctrinal assent. For Thelle, faith is always lived out in relationship to one's neighbors.

This volume is part memoir, part theological exploration, and part pastoral guidance to those who have had deep relationships with persons of other faith traditions and have found their own faith transformed through experiences in the borderland. The borderland is "where faith meets faith" and where persons dare to journey beyond "safe borders" (vii). Readers will see how Thelle's own faith, and the faith of his neighbors, changes throughout their experiences in the borderland (vii).

This book is crucial for our era of globalization, where the borderland no longer requires travel to a foreign country but is found within one's own neighborhood, city, and the digital spaces which we occupy. Indeed, one no longer needs to travel to come into close contact with the traditions and landscapes of other faiths and cultures. More than ever, it is important for us to follow Thelle in search of what he terms "a larger faith" that accommodates all dimensions of human life (102).

A larger faith does not close the borders but throws them open. A larger faith does not claim that it has God under lock and key in its own world but sees God's tracks everywhere... I crossed the border in order to bring God to new worlds—but I discovered God was already there. And naturally enough! How could he not be present in the world that was his own? It was he who blew the breath of life into the human person's nostrils so that Adam became a living being. How could one fail to perceive God's presence when the breath of life became deep and the heart beat strongly? All I could do was point. There he is! Look! And not least, I could point to the place, the time, and the person where God's own being and work shone out in transfigured splendor, namely Jesus Christ (101).

### ***A Brief Disclaimer for this Review***

Many, like myself, have not yet experienced a deep and protracted residence in the borderland like this author. We are a new generation looking for mentors on this borderland. Rather than offering a quick synthesis or extended critique as do typical book reviews, I offer a running summary of this book. Each of the chapters of this small book contain vivid stories, personal experiences, and thoughtful theology that go a long way to explaining aspects of Thelle's manner and approach to complex religious worlds like Japan. The way Thelle seeks to make sense of his own Christian faith as he engages with his Japanese friends and Buddhist monks will ring as authentic and real to a younger generation. He offers us a way to wrestle deeply and rigorously with those

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questions he raises about religion and the Spirit, both in our own lives and in those communities where we intend to serve. This review also provides a complement to Thelle's presentations at the recent Winter lectureship.<sup>1</sup>

### *The Inception of Thelle's Journey*

Thelle begins with his reasons for stepping into the borderland: unhappiness, longing to get away, adventure, curiosity, or perhaps a commission (vii). Thelle was commissioned as a missionary to serve in Japan, and along his journey, he met persons of other dispositions: wanderers, adventurers, curiosity-seekers, academics, monks, missionaries, and those near and far from home. Thelle takes a humble and emotive approach with his friends and neighbors throughout this journey. He is willing to give and receive. He is prepared for transformation and enjoys seeing others transformed.

**He enters the borderland more as companion than as a teacher. Perhaps it makes him less a preacher, missionary, or theologian, and more the best kind of friend, pastor, and discipler.**

On this journey, he desires an inside experience of other faith traditions, even if it challenges the traditions and claims of his own faith. Thelle is no stranger to inner conflict (ix). He admits that behind all our explanations and answers are more questions and puzzles; thus, truth for him is intuitive and comes "like a quivering joy" (ix-x). His approach is far from logical, yet he dialogues with, evaluates, and encounters other traditions with high respect and careful criticism. He notes how many religious adherents travel a much shallower path than their traditions offer; this could have been different had they only been willing to engage more deeply.

Perhaps, Thelle only wrestles deeply with Christianity because it is brought into tension with other faith traditions. His goal has never been to preserve his Christianity intact; instead, he searches for how to live out an authentic faith in context. He is honest that his book consists mostly of fragments and loose ends, and he insists that we will only be able to integrate all of life's fragments when we sense that these fragments also contain a pattern and meaning (x). Thus, he extends his invitation to enter the borderland more as companion and friend than teacher (x). Perhaps, this makes him less of a preacher, missionary, or theologian, and more of the best kind of friend, pastor, and discipler.

### *Towards a More Integrated and Abundant Life*

For Thelle, faith is more than logic or arguments. He gives the example of Kobo Daishi, a renowned master of Japanese intellectual history who, after leaving behind his aristocratic family and their wealth to become an itinerant monk, said, "Who can shatter my resolve? Who can stop the wind?" For Kobo Daishi, faith was a whole way of life which required him to abandon the security and comfort of his past and its frameworks.

He knew that he could find a more authentic life only if he encountered reality without any protective clothing. He could perhaps have drowned out this call and shut out the wind, but he knew that it would just keep on blowing. As a man of the spirit, he had no other choice. (4)

Each of us has many "good reasons to shut out the wind," but we also know that when we resist the wind of the Spirit, it keeps on blowing. We dare not allow fear of the unknown to hinder us from following the unstoppable path of the wind (5).

Thelle urges us to welcome doubt as "faith's companion" one that tests its genuineness. It allows the miracle of new life to be born after wreaking chaos within our deepest fears (6-7). He recounts a story from his childhood where it first became evident that "debates are not always decided by neutral evaluations" (8). He utilizes this instance to raise new questions about how we ought not to take inherited faith for granted. For Thelle, faith is not a secure framework. Nor is it absent of doubt. Nor is it neutral. Faith is discovered along the way as one attempts to live a truer and more integrated life in relationship to one's neighbors (9).

### *Searching Beyond the Forms*

Thelle initially wished to "enter the world of Buddhist wisdom, wrest their skill and learning from them, and 'strike them down' with their own weapons" (10). However, he was unprepared and shocked at what he discovered in Japan—both a watered-down Buddhist piety and, at the same time, a depth of religious experience that brought an "onslaught" upon his own faith (10-11). Growing up in a committed Christian family and his several years of in-depth theological studies had not equipped Thelle to understand the Buddhism he was encountering. He lacked the necessary depth of faith that could encounter the experiential world of Mahāyāna Buddhism (11). He began to perceive that "the only way forward was to set out on my travels, seeking to penetrate more deeply into Buddhism, hearing the meaning that lay behind the words, and grasping the life behind the outward forms." (11).

This meant closer contact through conversations, studies, spiritual dialogues, meditation, and a silent, faithful presence alongside Buddhist friends and masters. The knowledge and



theology that Thelle brought to the field had to encounter and engage with the wisdom and training of those whom he met on the field and eventually work itself into contextually appropriate spiritual practices.

He shares the joys of his experiences in this book, but he's also quite candid about his deep struggles. His engagement with a Zen master in Kyoto led to his collapse (14). His Christian faith appeared to be at stake, and his words were insufficient (12–4). However, this Zen master's intention was not to expose him or his Christian faith, but merely “to scrape away hollow explanations” to get to the heart of his beliefs (14).

In Zen, words must collapse if we are to encounter reality. This is a painful process because it opens the door to fear and despair. Zen speaks of “the great doubt” and “the great death;” it is only after these that “the great faith” comes. (14)

Thus, this task helped to form Thelle's discipleship rather than destroy it. It deconstructed previous explanations and left what really mattered, that which cannot be said in words (15). Christ “did not come to us as a word,” nor as an abstract theory but as a flesh-and-blood person who brought the kingdom of God (16). Words are not meaningless but can be used in wonderful ways as signposts to a reality beyond their boundaries (17). Thelle draws the analogy of the black and white brush drawings in Japan.

The picture is created not only by the strokes of the brush but also by the untouched white surfaces of the paper. When we describe our faith, we often want to fill out every last detail of the picture. Perhaps we ought to take the risk of simplicity, a few strokes of the pen, a few words and hints, so the white surfaces can come alive and the words can bear us further out, across the boundary of our words, into that silence where God's mystery is vibrantly alive. (17–18)

### *Are You against Buddhism?*

A fisherman in northern Norway once asked this author if he was against the Buddhists (18). In trying to answer that question, he found himself at a dead end and mused over the danger of allowing the wrong question to dictate what one says. Mission can become distorted when seen to be an activity directed against others. Members of different religious groups are allies united in their search for meaning in a complex and confusing world. Christians should not conceal their faith in the Triune God,

but this does not prevent us from listening to others. A new world is disclosed when we abandon our defense mechanisms and take the risk of touching the deeper yearnings and the unsolved puzzles. Our position changes and we discover a genuinely spiritual fellowship that transcends all our boundaries. (19)

Thelle is not saying that Christians don't have beliefs that contradict those of other religions; rather, he is saying that we can vulnerably journey alongside others who do not share our religious traditions and ponder our deeper thoughts and questions:

The words we employ take on a searching quality as we listen and ask questions. Our words become intriguing and dangerous. Our thoughts wrestle with those of others. Faith is shared and faith is put to the test. Life encounters life. (19)

Thus, Thelle encourages us not to enter simple Bible studies or meditation practices, but to enter a deeper engagement of the religious life, where our vulnerabilities and questions will be called to the surface. Having found deep spiritual community in Japan, even though he was in the religious minority, the author calls for a daring level of interreligious spiritual encounter. This level of interreligious community is exemplified in words like “friends” and “fellow pilgrims.” It also can encourage Christians as members of religious minorities to view spiritual community through a different lens.

**This Zen master's intention was not to expose Thelle or his Christian faith, but merely to scrape away hollow explanations to get to the heart of his beliefs.**

### *The Impact of an Eastern Landscape*

The author opens his second section by discussing the question of where one comes from, the very question the disciples asked Jesus (John 1:35–39) and which pilgrims often ask their Buddhist masters (22). He enlarges this to the Eastern religious concept of the *Tao* (or path), which he argues Christ himself demonstrated through his own life, suffering, and death (22–3). Christ provides a path for one to walk, a Master for one to follow, a cross for one to pick up, not merely a place to stay (23). Through this, readers see how Thelle has rooted the message of Christ more deeply in Eastern culture, an articulation that connects to that context more than some doctrinal utterances from the West.

The vast Eastern landscapes may seem to cause humanity to disappear. To the contrary, he argues, life acquires new dimensions as persons learn to “stand upright and breathe more freely because it is a part of this great totality” (23). These perspectives come from human beings who must find their place in a natural environment of monsoons and typhoons where “nature gives and nature takes away.”

It would never occur to the monsoon peoples to make themselves “lords” over the natural elements; their existen-

tial wisdom consists in living in harmony with the perennial rhythm of nature. (25)

Conversely, he notes how this environment “has paralyzed people’s energy and prevented any change” due to their fatalist resignation. “Critical questions are undesirable since protest destroys the harmony. It is not for nothing that many have experienced the Confucian idea of harmony as an intolerable straitjacket (26).”

Thelle encourages Westerners to listen to what people in the Far East say about our own landscapes. We in the West have been desensitized to nature’s mysteries by making humans the lords of creation and by seeing “nature as an opponent” to be conquered (26). The author challenges the Norwegian piety that isolates their spiritual universe to relationships between individuals and God. He argues that the Bible is primarily concerned with human fellowship rather than isolated individuals (28). Readers are encouraged to “see a larger landscape,” where humans are part of creation, and to live in “solidarity with all that God has created” (30). In this section, Thelle is widening his spirituality and theology by setting it within the larger cosmos. He is encouraging Christians to not only measure their interactions with persons of other faith traditions but also to think about how they interact with all of God’s creation. While he frames his faith in this wider context of relationships, he also critiques, evaluates, and brings Eastern cosmological understandings into conversation with his Western theological upbringing. He seems to enjoy bringing these traditions into conversation with each other and seeing how they interact.

### *The Christian Engagement with Buddhist Tradition*

He goes on to explore Buddhism’s gloomy connection with suffering, karma, causality, that “blind yearning that sets everything ablaze,” and the practice of withdrawal “for insight” (31–2). He notes how the “Buddha returned to human society” to share “insight with others,” just like the pious monks of Mahāyāna Buddhism return to share their insights with the world (32–4). Buddhism understands the world’s transitory nature and pain, that “withdrawal sets one free” from all ties to be purified and “transformed into a new vision of universal unity,” allowing withdrawal to be “replaced by a merciful presence” (35). He notes how few truly follow Buddha’s challenging path to its conclusion and compares it to how Christ expected few to follow His path, the narrow way (36). He notes how Buddha’s path and Christ’s path are described so differently, yet their paths often intersect and those following them “are surprised to see how much they have in common” (36). Thus, Thelle draws together the seemingly disparate paths of Christ and Buddha not by syncretizing them or reducing them down but by showing the intersections between the lives led and desired by their deepest followers.

Thelle introduces the experience of one student who visited the Zen master, Gasan, in Tenryuji and asked whether he could read the Sermon on the Mount to him. After hearing Jesus’ words about the lilies of the field who are clothed without spinning or toiling, and his gentle rebuke of us who worry about food and clothes (Matt. 6:25ff), Gasan then declared this speaker was “enlightened.” After hearing the verses “Ask and it will be given to you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you” (Matt. 7:7), the Zen master said, “Wonderful! The man who spoke these words is not far from the Buddhahood” (36). Over a hundred years ago, another Christian theological student (or Thelle speculates he may have been the same one as the first) who felt called by God to meditate under Gasan’s guidance, sought to enter but was thrown out again and again, having met with the common Zen rejections that test the seriousness of one’s religious search (36–7). At last, the student, Seitaro Yoshida, joined the monastery’s strict rhythms for three years before resuming theological studies and becoming a leading pastor in Japan’s Protestant church (37). Thelle notes that many Christians “were impelled by an inner force to put their faith to the test in the encounter with Zen” (37). Some of these returned to Buddhism and left Christianity behind, some returned to Christianity “with a new eagerness,” and others “discovered that Zen changed them,” making their Christian faith more receptive to Buddhist insights as well as manifestly more Japanese (37–8).

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Japanese Christians had a wide breadth of responses with their journeys into Zen. Thelle seems to approach these responses openhandedly and trusts the leading of the Spirit in these mysterious endeavors. Take the case of the Dominican priest Shigeto Oshida who late in life formed a small community north of Nagoya that was very influenced by the Zen rhythms of life. Oshida said, “I am a Buddhist who has met Christ.” Thelle insists that “everywhere in the East one meets ‘hyphenated Christians’ whose faith is formed in close contact with their inherited religion and culture” (38). He also notes the existence of many “hyphenated Buddhists” whose “existential attitudes are formed by Buddhism, but they are also friends and disciples of Jesus” (39).

Thelle refutes the notion that the introspection of Zen Buddhism would lead merely to a self-centeredness, commenting that “part of the point about finding oneself in Zen . . . is to tear away the mask from the false ego so that the ‘original face’ can emerge” (40). The bridge to dialogue between Buddhists and Christians is strengthened by the “awareness that the true human person is born when the ego dies” (40). He audaciously uses sacrament in this chapter’s title as a way to draw the radical simplicity of the everyday elements of Zen into dialogue with Christian attempts to live out simplicity in their faith (42–3). In so doing, he demonstrates the possibilities for Zen to enrich the lives of Christians who seek to abide in Christ—in his words, simply because Christ was a man who knew that “true life begins when the self dies” (43). Thus, he puts great effort into drawing the larger themes of Buddhism and Christianity into conversation with each other. He shows just how complex one’s religious heritage might be. Our commitments and upbringings are not simple things that fade away or can be put aside, but are the very elements to be brought into dialogue with one another in order to embody a larger faith.

## We must take a hard look at the faults and limits of our own tradition, as well as see both the bright spots and depth of other traditions before we can properly engage the two.

The author introduces the story of an American friend and non-traditional missionary (Ron) who encountered Japan with an open mind because of the advice a missionary leader had given him:

In Japan, you will receive more than you give. But it is precisely by receiving from the Japanese that you will be able to give. You are not going to Japan in order to export the religion of the West. It is not you who take Christ with you to Japan. He is bringing you there so that you can discover new depths of meaning and learn how you can receive in a new way the good news that God loves the world. (44)

This American began to go frequently to meditate in Daitokuji, one of Kyoto’s well-known Zen monasteries. For a very long time nothing happened.

But his eyes glow as he speaks about his conversations with the master. “As I sat there in desperation, the master gave me [Ron] a new question to work on, a new riddle: ‘From now on, I want you to breathe Christ,’ he said. He talked about breathing the Holy Spirit, about living in one’s breath, about breathing Christ.” He [the master] wanted Ron to understand what Saint Paul meant when he wrote: “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” (Gal. 2:20, 46)

Ron was able “to enter more deeply” into his Christian faith by stepping outside his own tradition to engage with a Zen master who helped this “unusual missionary” find new ways to live the Christian life (46–7).

Additionally, Thelle shares of another friend who made a film about Japanese worship, which portrays “the whole range of Japanese religion from the silence and simplicity in the meditation halls to the exuberant prayers and incantations of popular piety” (47). This friend, an Italian priest, had been more of the conservative bent, but had come to Japan to genuinely witness to the mystery of faith. Even though he saw more than he cared to of the “rotteness of Japanese religion,” his film cast Japanese worship in a tender light that enlivened his senses (49).

He was himself a man of prayer deeply rooted in the church . . . but the Christian faith did not shutter his doors: his piety and prayers had opened his senses. He saw God where others saw merely the worship of idols. He wanted to draw the veil aside, so that the others might at least sense what he himself saw—the presence of God. (48)

Thelle again emphasizes his preference for a realistic and deep engagement with other religious traditions. We are not helped by merely looking past the faults of other traditions, nor simply by seeing our own tradition as vastly superior to others. We must take a hard look at the faults and limits of our own tradition as well as see the bright spots and depths of other traditions before properly engaging the two. This led to Ron and Thelle’s deep enlightenment.

### *Undergoing a Buddhist Initiation Rite*

In one of the most striking stories of the entire book, Thelle shares his own experience on a pilgrimage up a sacred mountain, where he observed the symbolic initiation rites of Buddhist pilgrims. In this rite, they were suspended over a massive cliff by ropes held by human hands and asked to “commit their whole lives to seek the Buddha’s path and attain enlightenment.” When it was Thelle’s turn, it was optional because they knew he was a Christian.

How ought I to react if I were asked to make such a vow? . . . I felt confident that the master would respect my Christian faith even in this particular initiation rite. And so it turned out. As I hung over the sheer drop, the Buddhist master asked me, “Are you willing to sacrifice your life in order to create reconciliation between the races and religions? Are you willing to give everything in order to follow your Master, Jesus Christ?” I trembled on the edge of tears. It was a long time since I had been permitted to consecrate my life to him in such a decisive manner. (49–50)

This prompts a lot of questions. Thelle was stunned by how openly Buddhists shared their insight and world without demanding loyalty (51). His personal example challenges Christians to more greatly appreciate God’s presence by

engaging with the diverse cultures and religious traditions of the world, thereby discovering a depth to our own faith “that sets us free” (52). Thelle points Christians toward a radically hospitable faith that pushes beyond the boundaries of comfort and security. This should unsettle both the Christians who take up Thelle’s challenge and those who do not.

## Nishitani refused to be called a Buddhist, but was searching for something that lay beyond or beneath both Buddhism and Christianity.

### *A Socratic Buddhist—A Disciple of Christ*

The author then shares about one of Japan’s leading philosophers, Nishitani, someone who was shaped by Zen Buddhism, his study of the Bible, and the philosophies of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger (52–3). Thelle labels him “a Socratic Buddhist” (53). He recounts the philosopher’s struggles with meaninglessness and his great faith that “existence is borne up by a power that holds all things together” (53–4).

Nishitani was most reluctant to let himself be called a Buddhist but it was even clearer that he did not want to be a Christian. If pressed, he would say with a smile that he was en route to faith; it would be unthinkable for him to end up as a Christian. But when he spoke of Christ, his words expressed his love for the great Master whose friend and disciple he was. (54)

Nishitani refused “to be called a Buddhist” but was searching for “something that lay beyond or beneath both Buddhism and Christianity” (54). “Although he admired Christianity and not least Christ himself, Nishitani was a severe critic who asserted that there is no future for Christianity in its present form”—with the human person understood as the “absolute center of activity and thought” (55). Thelle goes on to say that

his criticism came from outside the church but it was born of his endeavor to penetrate the riddles of life. As a traveler, Nishitani made countless fellow-travelers his friends. He showed them new landscapes and taught them to see, ask, and wonder. (55–6)

Thelle dedicates his book to this man’s memory and shows respect for those who continue to engage a broader interreligious community with thoughtful criticism and conviction (56). In some ways, this philosopher plays with our understanding of the church by both criticizing it as well as welcoming many of its adherents into conversation, mutual learning, and friendship. Might this be a path forward for the church in a world becoming increasingly more religiously diverse?

### *Death of Buddha and Death of Christ*

In his next chapter, Thelle contrasts Jesus’ ravaged face as he hangs on the cross with “Buddha’s silent peace as he lies on his side, his face to the West” (56). The difference in these two deaths is often seen as an irreconcilable gulf between the two traditions. “Some maintain that Christians’ obsession with the cross is a sign of the sadistic tendency in the West—has not the West always stood for violence, brutality, and aggression?” (58).

Thelle notes that it is D. T. Suzuki who expressed this idea in the comparison he makes between the deaths of Jesus Christ and the Buddha.

Jesus died in a vertical position on the cross, while Buddha lay horizontally in silent meditation. “Christ hangs helpless, full of woe, on the upright cross. This is almost intolerable to an Eastern mind... The vertical axis expresses action, movement, craving. The horizontal axis, as in the case of Buddha, makes us think of peace and contentment.” (58)

Thelle’s belief is that the deaths of these two figures requires deep engagement.

Just as Westerners need time and guidance in order to recognize the warmth and tenderness in the apparently impersonal and cold universe of Buddhism, so Easterners too often need time to grasp the devotion and tenderness that Christians feel in the face of Jesus’ cross and death. If they come with their inherited ideals of harmony and inner calm, the emotional gulf is almost unbridgeable. The contemplation of the cross seems merely a repulsive contemplation of evil and suffering. But if they follow their Christian friends to the encounter with the crucified Christ, they experience empathy with a reality that is very close to them. (59)

He continues to argue that

the image of Jesus’s death speaks of an identification that brings the vertical and horizontal together. Traditionally, theology has called this “reconciliation.” God’s love knows no boundaries but is expressed and made a reality in the most inhuman suffering and evil. (61)

Thus, the deaths of these two figures requires an engagement that then grasps what they represent to their individual communities. Both deaths hospitably invite others onto the life paths of these figures.

### *Buddhist and Christian Symbols of Truth*

Thelle then unpacks symbols of truth in the Buddhist tradition: the diamond which represents the flawless, brilliant, shining truth, the hardest of minerals which can cut through everything yet cannot be shattered nor destroyed by anything; the lotus, sprouting up from the mud into “immaculate beauty” reveals the truth of the potential for growth and maturity because it always turns toward light; and the soft warmth of the womb which also stands for growth and

potential—prenatal growth, birth, and growth after birth (63–4). This symbolism allows us to look a little deeper at our own understanding of truth. He compares these Buddhist symbols to Christian symbols for the kingdom of God: the (perfect, shining) pearl of great price, the treasure in the field, and the tiny mustard seed that grows into a huge tree (64). The diamond also works as a symbol for Christians—truth that cuts through deception and darkness. All of these are images for the same thing, the reality of God’s kingdom (65). Christianity and Buddhism both use multiple images to capture deeper concepts within their traditions.

## He describes Buddhism as the religion of the eye that aims for insight, clarity, and enlightenment, whereas Christianity stresses the ear in order to hear and obey the Word in faith.

He dives into an exploration of the senses when he describes Buddhism as “the religion of the eye” aiming for the light of insight, clarity, and enlightenment, whereas Christianity, on the other hand, stresses the ear in order to hear and obey the Word in faith (65). He illustrates the Buddhist focus on searching for light and enlightenment with a story of the day Buddha became enlightened, a “Buddha” if you will. After meditating all night, Buddha awakens at the dawn to see the rise of the morning star. Thelle contrasts this with 2 Peter 1:19 where followers of Jesus are told to “hold fast to the message of the prophets which is like a ‘lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns, and the morning star rises in your hearts’” (67). But he also reminds us that “we live our faith with many senses: we want to hear but also to see. We need guides who can open our eyes so that the morning star may rise in our hearts” (67).

Thelle then references the ancient adage, “It is dark at the foot of the candlestick” (67). One must leave Kyoto, the great center of Zen Buddhism in Japan known as “the center of power” (represented by the light of the candlestick) and go away to the countryside to find true, living Buddhism (67). He compares the inverse in Jesus’ own birth and life in a poor, peripheral region before being condemned and crucified in Jerusalem, the center of religious and political power (68). Thelle acknowledges that we may need these centers of learning and power to shape society, construct systems, and protect religion from enemies; however, he questions this reality and wonders if religion might better be borne by a small, faithful

remnant of despised and forgotten people on the periphery (68–9). He appreciates questions over answers and offers nine of his own. While he acknowledges the fruit of these centers of religion, he questions the status quo of religious life. He consistently acknowledges the harm in religious traditions, whether Buddhist, Christian, or others. It’s a quest for a better way forward for himself and others, a way that searches and examines for greater fruitfulness. Might we do the same by abandoning stock submission to the traditions of our own religious past, being willing to examine a better way forward, and openly encountering the critiques, questions, and wanderings of other religious adherents?

### *Reactions from Thelle’s Friends*

The author addresses how “a *living* faith does not force itself upon anyone,” but must challenge and be challenged (70). He presents a man who was powerfully attracted to the Jesus of the Gospels, who was asking himself, “If this is Christianity, am I a Christian?” But when he traveled in Europe, he then asked himself, “Where is the Jesus I met in the Bible?” and he became confused (72). He then briefly touches on some of Japan’s new charismatic (non-Christian) religious movements with their startling gifts of speaking in tongues, healing, and mind reading, not to mention their mysterious focus on love and sacrifice. He recounts how “the dream of love’s sacrifice has many variations” and is chiseled into the faces of popular saints, gods, Buddhas, legends, and fairy tales (74). He also introduces the Buddhist concept of a *bodhisattva*, “a person who gives up his or her own salvation in order to help the helpless” (76), remarking how this idea is what draws Easterners into “the heart of the Gospel” and Jesus’ radiant model (77). He even shares the story of a “fanatical anti-Christian rabble-rouser” who had a “strange fondness for Jesus” (77). Buddhists are greatly attracted to the *kenosis* of Christ who emptied himself and thus allowed his ego to die—which from their perspective is what happened on the cross (79).

[Some Buddhists in Japan] think of themselves as travelers who are *en route* to the Christian faith, but who can never become Christians. To “become Christians” in the traditional understanding of this term would imprison them in a system where Christ himself is held captive, i.e., the Christian church with its foreign forms of worship, organization, and doctrine. They prefer to remain *en route*. (79–80)

Some in the Church question the understanding of Christ among these *en route*. But to these Buddhists, Christ is their friend, master, and a *bodhisattva*, whose “death and resurrection are not regarded as salvific events but as unique models of the sacrifice love requires” (80). Nevertheless, this has led some Buddhists to discover that Jesus “also belongs to the East—or rather, that his life and death break through all borders and call to everyone who belongs to the truth” (80).

Although Buddhists may find it hard to fit within the trappings, teachings, and doctrines of the church, they have a high regard for Jesus and may even see him as someone to follow in this journey of love and sacrifice. Thelle presents a common conundrum in mission: Buddhists appropriately contextualizing Jesus to their life and world, but Westerners' questioning Buddhists' views of Jesus and their efficacy for salvation. Most assuredly, this promotes conversation and the hope that both sides will be enriched by this dialogue.

Thelle speaks to allegations that Christian mission slices through the roots that are absolutely essential for life to be lived in its fullness (80–1). He acknowledges some validity of these allegations.

If the Christian faith does not help someone achieve a true relationship to his or her own self, it will always be borrowed goods, a foreign body that threatens personal development. Faith is meant to make people whole, not to make them spiritual refugees nourished on values borrowed from others. (81)

However, simply rebelling against family traditions and inherited values does not necessarily cause one to lose their identity.

It is impossible to have a whole relationship with oneself unless one has a living relationship to one's past. We can try to reject the past, suppress it, or forget it, but it doesn't go away: sooner or later, it will emerge with its demands. We must work with our past and integrate it—positively or negatively—into the life we live in the present and the future. (82)

After sixteen years in Japan, Thelle is passionate about the wrong done by demands on the part of Christian mission to break with past religious traditions. They failed to recognize that much of their past “was good, that God may have been present in it, and that most of the roots were good” (82). He concludes by commenting that Christian missionary work must earn the right to invite people to follow Jesus by first learning to understand and value what's happening in the heart of other religions and cultures. He admonishes us to be aware and to take care of those roots “if life is to be lived in all its fullness and meaning” (83). He encourages a deep engagement of other cultures and religions that can realize the fruit already born in them—where the Spirit has already been at work. We see his holistic view of discipleship, how Christ's disciples must learn to integrate their past experiences—whether positive or negative—into their present and future living. This manner welcomes and does not categorically reject what is true from their past religious traditions, but carefully, steadily, and faithfully disentangles from the false.

To strengthen this discipleship the author reasons that Jesus knew two forms of mission: he rejected the Pharisees' missional approach, which sought to produce copies of themselves, and he invited them into a discipleship that shapes lives by setting

them free to grow (83–4). Thelle notes the great gulf between Christianity and traditional Japanese consciousness. Japanese people may highly esteem Christianity, but they fail to be impacted at the deepest level (85–6). This has led people like Thelle's friend, Noriko, to say “I want to be a Japanese!” They decide to leave the church or to simply disappear through the back door (88–90). These stories help explain the difficulty of mission in Japan, and in Thelle's opinion, why the church has not had a noticeable and lasting impact on Japanese people and society.

He closes this section with the hopeful story of Akiko, who wrestled deeply with her family's Buddhist past after coming to a Christian faith:

She felt rootless and restless, with an unclear sensation of living in a vacuum. She had heard that people who had had a leg amputated often felt the pain in the leg that had been removed; and Akiko felt pain in the [Buddhist] roots that had been cut off. (90–91)

Eventually she began to “investigate her past. When she did so, her life gained wholeness and richness.” She integrated her heritage into her own life journey and became more secure in her Christian faith (90–1). This story resists a simplistic understanding of successful mission in Japan. Instead of presenting a story of mass conversions, Thelle typically tells the single story of an individual—in this case, a woman who experienced faith in Jesus at a deep level and lived it out in the context of her family's larger story. Thelle's rich relationships with individuals and his knowledge of their stories provides hope that, although from a human point of view it appears unlikely that the majority of Japanese people will ever know faith in Christ, some will indeed pursue this journey and find the morning star rising in their hearts.

**Christian mission failed to recognize that much of the Japanese past was good, that God may have been present, and that most of its roots were good.**

### *A Greater Faith*

Thelle begins his last section with the story of a Jewish man who travels to a distant land to discover a treasure “hidden in his own living room,” and he juxtaposes this with a similar journey of an American whom he met in Kyoto who came back to the Christian faith after engaging with the wisdom and

practices of Zen (94–5). Next, he unfolds his own journey, one where he traveled with people of different faiths who opened up their histories and shared their stories together (96–7). One was a former Christian, now a Buddhist, who still took Holy Communion as “one of Jesus’s disciples” (96–7). Another was a Hindu man (who had also grown up in a Christian home) who couldn’t “believe in a God who kept himself detached from the everyday life of the Hindus,” that community where he himself had experienced such “love and care” (97–8). Thelle wrestles with how one might engage spiritually and theologically in the context of one’s life experiences and encounters.

He introduces a lovely allegory regarding different “theological addresses.” Finding one’s way in Japan is not like Norway. The serried and exact numbers on a Norwegian street address is not the manner in Japan, where one uses local landmarks in giving directions—a temple, a school, a prominent tower. The context is used to find one’s way. The same is true for theology, which “must be lived in a larger context” and take shape as “neighbors become a part of our life” (98–100).

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Thelle concludes that a faith that forgets “the border zone” becomes too narrow. That is why he seeks a “larger faith” that does not shut its borders but “throws them open” (100–1). This greater faith is truly centered on Christ, and displays the same openness that Christ displayed (102). Thelle notes how the border zone exists as much in his own mind as it does far from his home. He himself needs a larger faith that accommodates human life in all of its dimensions, that grows through experience and ongoing interaction (102). It does not have final answers but always engages with those questions put to it by life’s circumstances. These questions emerge from encounters with friends, neighbors, and people who live in different locations with their different traditions. Indeed, some of these questions are provoked from within his own mind. They may come forth quietly or sometimes even erupt from his past, present, or envisioned future. One may disagree with Thelle’s “larger faith,” but one would most definitely benefit from a conversation with him about faith and mission. This dialogue would surely lead to a deeper humility for all involved.

### *My Conclusions*

Thelle shows us an example of a faith that must be lived out in the messiness of life and the difficulty of cross-cultural and interreligious encounters. He models for us a remarkable hospitality that abandons the comfort of secure frameworks. For Thelle, religious labels and doctrines matter less than how one lives one’s life. He seeks a path that works out the complexity of honoring Christ’s life and work in the context of difficult relationships. His expression, “a larger faith,” may initially worry many about its ultimate grounding; however, the largeness of this faith seems to be associated with its capacity for dialogue, complexity, growth, and life with others. In other words, it might be said that Thelle does not expand his faith but merely goes deeper into who Christ is by learning how to live out his faith in a community of diverse others, where relationships are complicated by differences of culture, religion and personal experience.

For Thelle, Christ becomes more authentic by engaging with other cultures and religions, because these cultures and religions shine a distinct light upon Christ that one may not see or fully appreciate from one’s own cultural or religious vantage point. He encourages us to take a road of difficult and vulnerable discipleship that does not seek an endpoint as much as to find a way of connecting and of making sense of the journey. Thelle allows others to take very different paths in their efforts to follow Jesus in their own contexts. Since each path attempts to integrate their identity and socio-religious tradition with the truth of the Word of God, he gives space for others to come to very different conclusions. Some will retreat from these difficult challenges altogether, and others may engage with more surface issues. However, Thelle will always engage at a deeper level. For Thelle, the shallow and the comfortable establishes an inadequate relational foundation. This more superficial orientation causes people to try to dominate and compete with one another rather than learn from each other.

This is not a work of systematic theology. It is a work that attempts to make sense of faith within one’s life story and the life story of others. Its transparent style raises many topics for fruitful discussion in the areas of missiology, theology, interfaith dialogue, and pastoral ministry. I highly recommend that one wrestle deeply and rigorously with this short treatise. **IJFM**

### *Endnotes*

- <sup>1</sup> Notto R. Thelle was one of the four presenters at the 2021 Ralph D. Winter Lectureship, due to his scholarship on the theme, “Buddhist-Christian Encounters: Today’s Realities in Light of the Pioneering Work of Karl Ludvig Reichelt in China.”