

# My Pilgrimage in Christian-Buddhist Encounter: From T. Lobsang Rampa to Mahatma Gandhi

by Terry C. Muck

*Editor's Note: This autobiographical account was originally presented at the Ralph D. Winter Lectureship in February 2021, under the theme, "Buddhist-Christian Encounters: Today's Realities in Light of the Pioneering Work of Karl Ludvig Reichelt in China." Each of the four missiologists who presented was asked to share his pilgrimage and to receive responses from the others.*



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When it comes to religion, I have always had imagination. If imagination is “forming new ideas about external objects not present to the physical senses,” then religion is especially susceptible to flights of imagination. Although the *effects* of religion are manifest in our actions (churches, liturgies, theologies, missions, etc.), the *essence* of religion (the spiritual) is not present to our physical senses. Thus, there are as many imaginings about religion as there are people—and for my part I contributed a double or triple share.

As you might imagine, my imaginings did not always sit well with those around me. My mother was horrified when I invited the Jehovah’s Witnesses who came to our door to come back again for further conversations. And she was forever checking up on what I was reading. Armchair religion is seductive, and I reveled in the extraordinary variety of books on religion of all sorts available to me. I couldn’t get enough, it seems.

To give you an idea, one of the earliest books on religion I can remember reading was by a so-called Tibetan Buddhist monk named T. Lobsang Rampa. The book was called *The Third Eye*. Rampa described his work as “the renowned story of one man’s spiritual journey on the road to self-awareness.” The “third eye” is a metaphorical description of an eye located in the middle of the forehead that can be used as a bridge to intuitive knowledge of *samsara* and *nirvana*. It was the first book I read about non-Christian religion. And I was hooked. How fascinating to learn about things people who are not Christian believe. How different they were from what I had been taught.

Now before you get the wrong idea about me and my religion, I must assure you that in most senses I was boringly traditional. I went to our Baptist church for Sunday morning worship and Sunday school, Sunday evening testimony time, and our midweek Wednesday evening prayer service. My father was an evangelistic speaker, and I went on the road with my mother and father, and usually

sang a solo in the service—“Bringing in the Sheaves” was my show-stopping number. I quickly learned—and wholeheartedly believed—and still believe—that the Westminster confession could be summed up in the question, *What is the chief end of man?* and its answer: *To glorify God and to enjoy him forever.*

**There are instances of faithful and unfaithful religions, faithful religions being the ones that seem to succeed at connecting us with God and unfaithful ones that don't. Our task, after all, is to “glorify God and enjoy him forever.”**

I suppose what I was learning at this early age was *an approach to difference* that has stood me in good stead the rest of my life. This approach has two aspects: The first is that difference is common and universal. And that *religious* difference is just as common and universal. The second is that difference is not to be automatically rejected—as if the way I do things and think things is necessarily the right way to do things and think things. The evidence that I was already learning these lessons from my reading came when I started to read the books not just out of curiosity, but I started to categorize them as good and not-so-good books.

The first really good non-Christian religious book I can remember reading was Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography, which he entitled *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. It has remained one of my all-time favorite books over the years. My favorite passage is when Gandhi relates his father's death. Gandhi was chosen to sit up with his father during the night as his life ebbed away, and Gandhi considered it a privilege:

My mother, an old servant, and I were his principal attendants. I had the duties of a nurse, which mainly consisted in dressing the wound, giving my father his medicine, and compounding drugs whenever they had to be made up at home. Every night I massaged his legs and retired only when he asked me to do so or after he had fallen asleep. I loved to do this service. I do not remember ever having neglected it. (89)

Since Gandhi can be a polarizing figure for both Indians and for those of us who study India, I should say at this point why I continue to admire him even when certain weaknesses are pointed out. It goes back to an early Christian theological teaching that has remained with me all these years. The teaching is about the sinfulness of all humanity. The teaching can be phrased this way: “We are all sinners saved by grace.” What this teaching has meant to me is that if you scratch hard enough at the details of a person's life, any person, Christian or non-Christian, you will find sin. And while we

should neither endorse or excuse that sin, we should emulate God who forgave sinners, and acknowledge that many are put back on the road to created greatness because of God's grace. Thus, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* should be judged by what it says, not automatically dismissed because of the apparent sin of him who wrote it.

This is an extremely important lesson for a historian of religion. Religion is about persons and their stories of the eternal, more than it is about provable truths, or admirable moralities, or aesthetic wonders. Religion is about the collective experiences all human beings have of the realm beyond time and space. When we study religion, we are studying the history of humankind and their various attempts to relate to the divine, however they might see and interpret the divine. The law of difference insists that we not be too quick to judge the relative merits of the religions, but it does not insist that we never make judgments. There are, after all, true and false teachings, and good and bad moralities, and beautiful and ugly aesthetic creations. There are instances of faithful and unfaithful religions, faithful religions being the ones that seem to succeed at connecting us with God and unfaithful ones that don't. Our task, after all, is to “glorify God and enjoy him forever.”

To be sure, the history of religions does not in itself provide us with a way of making those kinds of judgments. For that we need a theology. But what the history of religions does provide us with is a tool that gives us the raw material out of which such judgments can be made. The tool is called “compare and contrast.” I can remember as if it were yesterday my doctoral advisor at Northwestern University, Edmund Perry, beginning a lecture or a writing assignment or an exam with the admonition, “Compare and contrast such-and-such with so-and-so.” He usually designed the two elements, the such-and-such and the so-and-so, in such a way that they had plenty of similarities (the compare part) and plenty of differences (the contrast part). It may be that two elements could be found in two different religions that are exactly the same (all compare) or totally different (all contrast), but I doubt it. I never found any such compare and contrast.

Over the years I have found this history of religions research tool enormously helpful in doing mission. It seems to me that missionaries tend to be of two sorts—those

who are predisposed to recognize the similarities between Christianity and the mission religion in question, and those who are predisposed to see the differences. And my experience has been that those end-of-the-spectrum proclivities are not real—that a balance between the two is what is most true about a religious comparison.

I got an excellent education in the religions of the world at Northwestern University, but when it comes to Christian mission, a good education only gets us part way. What is absolutely essential is the realization that personal relationships with non-Christians are the *sine qua non* of mission effectiveness. I got my first taste of those relationships with Buddhists when I spent two years in Sri Lanka on a Fulbright-Hayes Research Fellowship.

Ostensibly, I went to Sri Lanka to do research for my doctoral dissertation, a comparison of the Christian monasticism characterized by the longer and shorter rules of St. Basil the Great with the Buddhist monastic rule, the *Vinaya Pitaka*. It was a compare and contrast dissertation on a large scale.

I spent my two years in Sri Lanka visiting Buddhist monasteries and interviewing Buddhist monks, asking questions about the ways they followed the *Vinaya Pitaka* rule. It was an eye-opening experience. I came to realize that I could study Buddhism in Northwestern University's library till the cows came home, but I would never really understand Buddhism until I *engaged Buddhists in conversation and shared life experiences* with them. It was in those conversations that I recognized the real similarities and the real differences between Buddhism and Christianity. To be sure, I was helped greatly in those conversations by two books written by a well-known Sri Lankan Buddhist monk, Walpola Rahula. Dr. Rahula came to Northwestern University to teach Buddhism for a year, and I became well-acquainted with him and his books, especially *What the Buddha Taught* and *Heritage of the Bhikkhu* (*bhikkhu* is the Pali word for monk).

Later in life I had another chance to confirm the importance of personal relationships in understanding a non-Christian religion. I taught for a year at Trinity Theological College in Singapore. One of my teaching assignments was an introductory class on Buddhism. Approximately 30 students signed up for the class—almost all of them had grown up as Buddhists and converted to Christianity. I began the course by giving the usual lectures on Buddhist history, Buddhist teachings, and Buddhist practices, the ones I used in my courses on Buddhism at seminaries in the United States. I discovered that my Singapore students knew almost as little about Buddhist history and Buddhist teachings as my US

students, but my Singapore students knew far more than I did about Buddhist practices—ways of worship, personal devotions, interpersonal ethics, and the like. For that part of the course, they became the teacher and I the student. And it was through personal conversations with them that my education in Buddhist practices took place.

After my experiences in Sri Lanka interviewing Buddhist monks, it gradually occurred to me that the conversations I was having with Buddhists there had a special character to them. This realization set me on a quest that consumed several decades of my academic life. It started with a book that I had given a cursory reading as an undergraduate, Martin Buber's *I and Thou*. It was a book about dialogue, the ways we relate to others, ways that should really be intimations of our relationship to God, the "Thou" of all "thous." It is a difficult little book, which is appropriate for its subject matter. Dialogue is a difficult topic. For evangelical Christians like myself, interreligious dialogue became controversial, especially as it pertained to another way of relating to people of other religions—evangelism, for example. The question was, "How are faithful Christians to relate to people of other religions, through evangelism or dialogue?" For a long period of time the question was seen as an either/or—one either practiced evangelism with non-Christians or one dialogued with them. It took many years for a third position to emerge: one could do both.

**I could study Buddhism in the library till the cows came home, but I would never understand Buddhism until I engaged Buddhists in conversation and shared life experiences with them.**

In the meantime, I had helped found a dialogue group, the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies. It was a group that met annually at the American Academy of Religion meetings in November. I became heavily involved, serving as an officer, editing the Societies journal, *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, for ten years, and eventually serving a term as president of the Society. The Buddhists we Christians dialogued with in the Society were mostly Western Buddhists, that is, former Christians from Europe and the United States who had converted to Buddhism. Membership in the Society has been a

wonderful experience for me. One of the things I discovered was that the most positive outcome of interreligious dialogue is neither agreement nor willingness to disagree pleasantly, but friendship—friendship pure and simple.

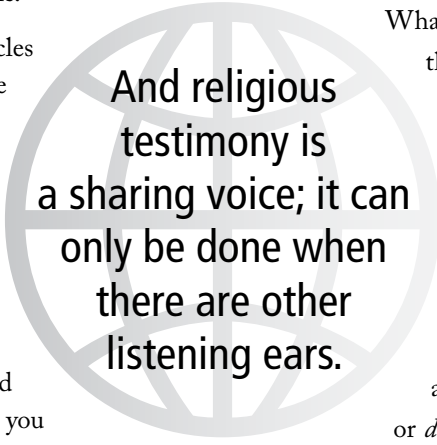
In the meantime, I wrote scholarly articles about dialogue and evangelism and the relationship, or lack thereof, between the two. As an academic, I had taken to heart the wisdom of a colleague, George “Chuck” Hunter, who insisted loud and long that unless you write, people will never really know what it is you are thinking. I took Chuck’s admonition seriously. I even took it one step further and became convinced that unless you write, you really don’t know what *you* are thinking.

How to summarize what I have learned about interreligious dialogue, both by studying it and by practicing it? The first lesson is that in doing dialogue, the setting is foundational. Dialogue participants must feel free and unthreatened by any power differences lurking in things like who organizes the dialogue, whose building it takes place in, what questions are considered for discussion, and many other such things.

The second lesson is that real dialogue never takes place unless the two participants enter into it with a certain attitude. Of course, the first requirement is that all sides to the dialogue actually want to have a free, unfettered discussion—that it is not just a camouflage for manipulation. You cannot force people to dialogue; they must sincerely embrace it. Beyond that, the dialogical attitude can be summed as the participants having “full respect for others and their religion and humility about themselves and their religion.”

And even if the setting is impeccable and the attitudes of the participants admirable, interreligious dialogue will go nowhere unless a certain voice is used, the voice of testimony. The third lesson is that in order to do interreligious dialogue, one must learn a way of speaking that is sadly lacking in our Western cultures today. That voice can be called many things, but I call it testimony, the voice of interreligious dialogue, the voice of religion. What is testimony? First, what it is not. It is not declaration, the voice scientists and rationalists use once they have digested the results of their experiments and syllogisms. And testimony is not advocacy, like the voice people around the world use to champion one of the myriads of moralities people around the world follow. It is not even the voice aficionados of art use to describe and judge paintings,

sculptures, poetry and music. Of course, religious may use all these voices—declaration, advocacy, judgement—in the day-to-days of their religion. But the dominant voice is testimony.



And religious testimony is a sharing voice; it can only be done when there are other listening ears.

What is testimony? Religious testimony is not the kind of testimony used in a court of law where one provides evidence to bolster the prosecutor’s claims of crime. No, religious testimony is a person’s relating his or her experiences of the divine in all its mystery and wonder. And religious testimony is a sharing voice—it cannot be done in isolation, but only when there are other listening ears to hear what God—or *dhamma*, or *brahma*, or Allah—has done in one’s life.

I was sitting the other day with my AirPods in my ears listening to Spotify’s rendition of Sting’s “Fields of Gold.” It is a love song and it recalled to mind a very warm time in my life. My heart filled up with pleasant memories, with reminiscences that I only occasionally enjoy. The feelings were so gratifying that I wondered to myself, “How can I share this with Frances [my wife]?” I cannot “declare” to her what a great musical composition “Fields of Gold” is—I do not have enough knowledge of music to make that kind of declaration and, besides, Frances knows much more about music than I do. And I certainly cannot “advocate” for the song, saying it is the number one song of all time, or some such silliness. And even saying “it is beautiful” is not quite enough, is it? No, the best way I can communicate with Frances about “Fields of Gold,” is to tell her how it is making me warm all over—and what wonderful things it is reminding me of—and leaving it at that. If I do that, she will probably smile, and (hopefully) look at me with love, and perhaps join me in listening to the song. **IJFM**

# Pilgrimage Responses

## Responses to Terry Muck's, "My Pilgrimage in Christian-Buddhist Encounter: From T. Lobsang Rampa to Mahatma Gandhi"

### Rory Mackenzie: Response One

Well, thank you, Dr. Terry, for that thought-provoking and imaginative paper. They say that the difference between a good communicator and a great communicator is imagination. It's a great gift. First, I want to say I was inspired to search for "Fields of Gold" by Sting, and I listened to the song. Sting looks like the worship leader in our church, so that made me feel comfortable and at home and I enjoyed the song. But your story about this song is a great example of a critical aspect of dialogue, and it just made me think again about our own experience of God, how God makes me feel, and what effect he produces in me. This reminded me of growing up in an evangelical mission hall where the leader would sometimes call on someone to give a testimony. "Now, John will come and say what the Lord means to him." If John were to stick to his brief, then he perhaps would not go into what the Lord had done for him, although there's clearly a connection. If John were sincere and the audience were open, then something might happen as John tells his audience what the Lord means to him. If that were to continue, a dialogue might start after the end of the meeting and beyond the Mission Hall. I think you made that point yesterday, that dialogue starts after the last word is said.

**I used to think that the testimony approach was outdated, but sharing from our experience and how we feel is actually quite contemporary. (Mackenzie)**

I used to think that the testimony approach was outdated, but sharing from our experience and how we feel is actually quite contemporary. This reminded me of Eric Sharpe's four categories of dialogue, and I'll just use my own words here.

He talks about discussing doctrine, just being friends, and cooperating on an issue of common concern or interest (secular dialogue as Sharpe calls it). Then he talks about interior dialogue, which is often reserved for monastics of different traditions meditating together and sharing their experiences. The idea here is that these people have been trained in their spiritual exercises, know how to interpret them, and have the language to describe what has taken place. But if I understand you correctly, you suggest sharing what God means to you and the effect that he has on you. I think this belongs to that category of interior dialogue. I think that's really quite special, so I loved that connection between dialogue and testimony. Also, what you said about tone; the tone of what we say. Tones are very important in Asian languages, but tone is important in all languages. But I wondered if you wanted to make the connection between testimony and inner dialogue, which is often perhaps reserved for practitioners who have the experience, the expertise, and even the language to discuss what they are experiencing, or feeling about God.

**It's not encouraged in many places to tell what's in your heart, and I think that's what we do in interreligious dialogue at its best—we reveal what is in our hearts. (Muck)**

### Terry Muck Replies

Yes, thank you for that. As I mentioned, most Sunday nights, in the church I grew up in, were testimony meetings where the pastor would invite whomever wanted to get up and basically say what God had done for them during that week. Some people were good at it, and some people were really bad at it. I knew somebody who would always get up, and we would all roll our eyes and realize we were in for it. But the service overall never failed to move me. The people talking weren't good speakers, so some of it was pretty rough, but it was *real*. It was what they felt. I think we have lost the capacity, or maybe it's just the occasions we've lost, where we can do that in our culture anymore. We're so calculating and so intent on affecting you in a good way that we forget to tell what's in our hearts, or we're not allowed to. It's not encouraged to tell what's in your heart; it's encouraged to be smart and to say what's clever. It's not really encouraged in very many places that I can think of to tell what's in your heart, and I think that's what we do in interreligious dialogue at its best—we reveal what is in our hearts.

Once a Zen monk stayed in a Benedictine monastery.  
 Early Easter morning, he ran through the corridors,  
 beating a drum, shouting again and again,  
 "I want to see Christ risen among you!"

#### Notto Thelle: Response Two

Thank you for your presentation. There were a lot of interesting ideas, and I was also moved by your final comment about testimony, which I think is very true. There's something with testimony that is. . . Well, you end up speaking about your wife, so it's a love language. I was reminded of a story about Norwegian meetings ending up with personal testimonies, sometimes very strange. There is a moving little story where there was a couple sitting there, old people, and she rises and says "He has been so good to me, he has been so good to me." And then the husband was a little embarrassed, so he rose and said, "Well, she's speaking about Jesus." So, as you say, it's a forgotten thing or under-communicated thing.

This also reminds me about something which I did not experience myself, but a very good friend of mine, a Belgian monk, told what happened. There had been a sharing of Japanese and Zen monks and European Benedictine monks

for many, many years, and there was a Japanese Zen monk who had stayed for three weeks in a Benedictine monastery. His last week there was Easter week. He did not understand everything that was happening, but he followed the Benedictines as they prayed all day and all night. He followed the rhythm through the silent week (as we call it) and Easter week, all the happenings with Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and Saturday and then the last Easter night with worship services and prayers and so on. But then, early in the morning on Easter Day, this monk was running through the corridors of the monastery beating on a drum, shouting again and again, shouting and shouting and shouting, "I want to see Christ risen among you! I want to see Christ risen among you!" Isn't that what should happen in a real dialogue? Even though he probably did not say very much, he had followed the rhythm. He had followed everything that was happening, and he was inspired and challenged. **IJFM**