CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY ENTERING THE MIDDLE WAY

What if Paul had gone to Beijing instead of to Rome? What if Christian theology had developed on Indian, Chinese, Korean and Japanese soil, instead of around the Mediterranean and European worlds? What if the Upanishads and the Gita or the Buddha and Confucius had provided the dominant philosophic categories for Christian theology rather than Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus? This book is concerned with these questions not only in order to inquire after historical curiosities, but for the sake of Christian theology and mission in the twenty-first century. More specifically, it is directed toward exploring what Christian theology might look like amidst and after an intensive dialogue with Buddhist traditions. In this opening chapter, I begin by situating the dialogical efforts of this book within the broader context of the Christian-Buddhist encounter (1.1), proceed to discuss methodological issues (1.2), and overview the argument and goals intended (1.3).

1.1. THE CHRISTIAN ENCOUNTER WITH BUDDHISM: WHENCE AND WHITHER?

While Paul himself never made it to China, it is certain that Nestorian Christians did, by no later than the early seventh century, C. E. There is evidence that the mission flourished for a few hundred years, producing a creative and arguably orthodox articulation of Christian ideas within the context of T’ang dynasty (618–907) religiosity on the one hand, and perhaps even influencing developments in Chinese Buddhism to the point of Buddhism being accepted within the more dominant Confucian-Daoist synthesis on the other. Yet persecutions of foreign religious ideas by the

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Confucian elite during the middle of the ninth century spelled the beginning of the end for the Nestorian mission. Medieval interactions between Christians and Buddhists along the Silk Road, while generating even formal debates between apologists on both sides and while leaving behind a few documents especially from the thirteenth century reflecting each side's attempts to contextualize and include the other within its own horizons, did not result in Christianity's taking root either there or in the Far East.3

The Protestant missionaries who traveled East during the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries brought Christians into contact with Buddhists once again. Unfortunately, a pattern of events replicated itself wherever the missionaries landed. Aggressive Christian proclamation inevitably motivated Buddhist resistance, polemics, and hostilities, leading occasionally to violence. Ironically, Christian zeal in many cases resulted not so much in converts as in the revival of Buddhist convictions, commitments, and even organizations (like the Sangha).4

It is certainly the case that what had been generally assumed about Buddhism either being of the devil or being merely a worldly philosophy


4 For an overview of the modern Christian missionary encounter with Buddhism, including how such encounters have fostered what might be called a "revival" of Buddhism amidst the forces of modernization and globalization, see Whalen Lai and Michael von Brück, Christianity and Buddhism: A Multicultural History of Their Dialogue, trans. Phyllis Jestice (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001); cf. Wenchao Li, Die christliche China-Mission im 17. Jahrhundert: Verständnis, Unverständnis, Missverständnis—eine geistesgeschichtliche Studie zum Christentum, Buddhismus und Konfuzianismus, Studia Leibnitiana Supplemen ta 32 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2000), esp. chs. 4 and 5.