

Zeitschrift: Theologische Zeitschrift
Herausgeber: Theologische Fakultät der Universität Basel
Band: 50 (1994)
Heft: 4

Artikel: Professor Bo Reicke : a Biographical Appreciation
Autor: Kaye, Bruce N.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-878200>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 09.03.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Professor Bo Reicke: A Biographical Appreciation*

Born in Stockholm and having received his education and theological training in Sweden, Bo Reicke spent the greater part of his teaching life in Switzerland. For 31 years he held the chair of New Testament at the University of Basel. More than forty doctoral students made the pilgrimage to Basel to work under the supervision of Bo Reicke, and his work during that period is probably the best known aspect of his career, particularly to his students. However, his years in Sweden were of fundamental importance in shaping the professor who gained such endearing respect from both students and colleagues.

Bo Ivar Reicke was born on the 31st of July 1914 at the beginning of the first World War. He grew up in Stockholm, the son of a merchant in that city and was educated at the Gymnasium, where he received basic training in German, English, French and Latin. Military service was compulsory for all young men in Sweden, and students from Stockholm were sent to the north of the country to serve as subaltern officers or even officers. Reicke was no exception and he was sent to the quiet garrison city of Boden not far from the arctic circle. He used his spare time to teach himself Greek from a Langenscheidt course. The decision to study theology was taken during this time, not as the result of some conversion, but as the fruit of a growing interest in this field of study.

Reicke first matriculated at the University of Stockholm, spending three semesters studying history of religions. In 1935 he transferred to the University of Uppsala. While remaining in the Faculty of Arts, he took Classical Greek and Philosophy. Graduation in these three fields allowed him to enter the Faculty of Theology in 1938 without prior language courses. He must have started to learn Hebrew by himself early in 1937, since in August 1938 he took his first examination in Old Testament. He spent the whole of the following winter studying the New Testament and his examination in this subject went so well that Anton Fridrichsen, the professor of New Testament, offered him a place in his *Doktorandenseminar*. Reicke declined this offer preferring to finish his degree, taking examinations in New Testament, church history, systematic theology and practical theology. It was not until 1942 that Reicke returned to the offer of his New Testament professor and joined the circle of doctoral students. Before that,

* Von Frau Ingalisa Reicke korrigierter Auszug aus der 1993 in Atlanta (Georgia) erschienenen *Festschrift* für Bo Reicke (S. 193–200). Gedruckt mit freundlicher Genehmigung des Verlags Scholars Press.

however, he had undergone, after the graduation, a university-based training for the ministry of the church of Sweden and was ordained by the archbishop in December 1941. The bishop had given him leave to study for his doctorate and he was only to be called up for parish service in special cases.

Since the early twentieth-century theology and the life of the church in Sweden had been dominated by Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931), the former professor of *Religionsgeschichte* in Uppsala and Leipzig who, as the Archbishop of Uppsala, had arranged the first ecumenical meeting in Stockholm in 1925. The influence of Söderblom was felt strongly even after his death, and so it was quite natural that Reicke was first attracted to the study of the history of religions. The heritage of Söderblom was kept alive in Uppsala in the circle of academic teachers who formed the “Nathan Söderblom Society” of which Reicke was elected a member in 1947. Reicke shared Söderblom’s conviction that all forms of religion were worthy of interest and respect. Christian belief in the person of Jesus Christ, however, was to be seen as of a different quality. All syncretism was to be dismissed – the “living God” (the title of Söderblom’s Gifford Lectures) will solve any antinomy in the last days.

Most influential among the members and initiators of the Söderblom Society were Anton Fridrichsen (1888–1953), Professor of New Testament, and Henrik Samuel Nyberg, (1889–1974), Professor of Semitic Languages. Nyberg is best known internationally for his work on Iran, but his work also covered the Old Testament and he was a powerful adversary of literary criticism. Nyberg had inoculated generations of Swedish theologians against belief in the results of this literary critical method. Anton Fridrichsen was born and raised in Norway, coming from a family of pastors, where the typically Norwegian pietistic tradition was represented as well as the more outwardly church tradition such as one finds in the Dane, Grundtvig. Fridrichsen studied in Germany with Ernst von Dobschütz and obtained his doctorate from Strasbourg University, where this sociable Norwegian, with his gourmet taste, was an almost legendary figure. In his “realistic” method of exegesis we find many of the elements which are typical of his later students. He underlined such concepts as the Messianic consciousness of Jesus, the church as the body of Christ, and the role of the apostle in the later church. Nyberg and Fridrichsen were personal friends and in 1943 they invited Reicke, who was then a doctoral student, to be the secretary for the editing of a Swedish Bible encyclopedia. Reicke took the job and remained active (with the help of his wife) until the first volume appeared in 1948. The editorial work for this encyclopedia was taken over by Ivan Engnell.

Since Reicke’s name is associated with the so-called Uppsala school, of whom Ivan Engnell and his friend Geo Widengren, Professor of History of Religions, are the most well-known representatives, his name is also sometimes as-

sociated, somewhat inappropriately, with that of Engnell, and thus it is necessary to clarify the situation at the time. Widengren and Engnell were slightly older and already established in their academic careers. They were, in fact, never Reicke's teachers. He certainly received inspiration from the ideas dominant in the circle around those two professors, but he was never one of their close circle, and when giving attention to cultic factors he always put the accent differently.

On the other hand, Carl Martin Edsman did inspire Reicke and was also a friend. He also shared with him an interest in patristics. Edsman, a former doctoral student of Fridrichsen, was at that time a *docent* in the history of religions, and also, like Reicke, stood for a strong engagement with the church in theological work. Long before he was ordained Reicke was firmly convinced that theological research had to be seen as a service to, and in, the church.

In Sweden at this time, doctoral students were required to take an intermediate exam, the licentiate, which included a main field and also a second field. Reicke chose the New Testament as his main field and never hesitated that Old Testament would be his second. Professor Fridrichsen had a large group of doctoral students; some of the more well-known are represented in *The Root and the Vine*, edited by A.G. Hebert (1953). His methods as a teacher were unconventional. Some students with good training in Greek, such as Reicke and Harald Riesenfeld, were invited to help him with the revision of the Greek-Swedish dictionary of the New Testament. A characteristic mode of working would be that on an evening at Fridrichsen's home, an entry of the dictionary was thoroughly discussed and then the evening and the study exercise ended in the kitchen with a opulent meal from the refrigerator.

Reicke wrote his Testament paper for the licentiate on 1 Peter 3:19, and his professor simply gave him the credits without further examination. A year and a half of intense study followed, as his copy of the *Biblia Hebraica* bears witness with its many pencil marks and annotations. He also learned Syriac and published his first scholarly paper on "Joseph's Story in Genesis". The dissertation, *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism*, was written, translated into English with the help of a Scottish lady, and printed, during one winter. At the latest possible date, in May 1946, Reicke presented his dissertation. He had to defend his dissertation before the faculty, and the appointed opponent was Nils Dahl who was then professor in Oslo. The second opponent chosen by Reicke was C.M. Edsman. A position as *Docent*, with the obligation to lecture two hours per week and to pursue scholarly research, was open in the university and Reicke was appointed to the position. It was not a tenured position but was limited to a maximum of seven years.

A new period now began which was marked, above all, by many international contacts. Especially because of Fridrichsen's European horizon, Uppsala was a

mecca for travelling theological professors in the late 1940's. Contacts were also made by Reicke during journeys abroad. Among scholars who visited the Reickes in their Uppsala home were Old Testament professors such as H.H. Rowley (with whom Reicke corresponded for many years), S. Mowinckel, W.F. Albright, and also Rudolf Bultmann. At one point Bultmann was, in fact, a paying guest in the Reickes' spare room for three months. Other visitors were F. Schlier, J. Munck, A. Wikgren, A. Wilder, O. Cullmann, and J. Danielou. One should note the ecumenical as well as the international character of this group of visitors.

In the spring of 1947 Reicke spent six weeks in London and four weeks in Paris working in the British museum library and in the Bibliothéque Nationale. From London he visited Cambridge and Oxford and in the latter city he was able to take part in the first post-war meeting of the *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas*, to which he was, at that time, elected a member. In the summer term of 1948 he was a guest professor of the Evangelical Faculty of Theology at the University of Vienna. On the journey home he and his wife were able to visit Italy for the first time, spending two weeks in Rome.

Reicke was the first scholar in Sweden to react to the discovery of the Qumran documents. He immediately wrote an article on the finds and took up contacts with the finder, J.C. Trever, with W.H. Brownlee and M. Burrows. In 1952 his Swedish translation of the *Habakkuk Scroll* and the *Manual of Discipline* was published. His interest in the Holy Land was expressed also in his work for the Swedish Jerusalem Society. He edited its journal and wrote a number of articles for it himself. He was also the secretary of the society and as such handled arrangements for two or three missionaries. A Swedish theologian of high reputation, Bishop Gustav Aulén, was the president of the society, and remained in personal contact with Reicke even after the move to Basel.

On the retirement of Rudolf Bultmann the Faculty of the University of Marburg inquired of Reicke whether he would be interested in an appointment at Marburg. He thought it unwise to accept such a position because he was a foreigner who had not shared the pre-war and wartime experiences of Nazi Germany. In 1953 he first received an inquiry from the University of Leiden which was seeking a New Testament professor, but before the offer from Leiden had been officially communicated, Professor Cullmann visited Sweden and invited Reicke to join the University of Basel. In June he was interviewed by the Faculty in Basel and accepted the invitation. Much later the lost letter from Leiden turned up, which, thus, had not reached Reicke at the crucial time of the decision!

When in 1953 the Reickes moved to Basel they commenced a long and profound involvement with the city and the university. Within a year of their arrival they had managed to purchase the house in Spalentorweg 24, which is so well-

known to generations of students in Basel. Within the University of Basel Reicke played a full role as Professor of New Testament. When he arrived in Basel, it was a time of giants among the faculty members, Karl Barth, Oscar Cullmann, Walter Baumgartner, Walter Eichrodt, and the church historian Staehelin. Reicke worked closely with Cullmann and he soon took over various responsibilities in the faculty. In 1955 he became editor of the *Theologische Zeitschrift*, a position he occupied for nearly twenty-five years. He was Dean of the theology faculty in 1956 and on three subsequent occasions, and he served also as a member of the governing council of the university in addition to various committees. He took a particular interest in the house in which Karl Jaspers and his wife had lived and enjoyed his role as president of the committee which administered the house.

Reicke's publication output was extensive, to say the least. Numerous articles, papers, and a considerable number of books came from his pen. From the Uppsala days his dissertation, *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism*, was published (1946), and as well the monumental survey of the early church, *Diakonie, Festfreude und Zelos* (1951). After his arrival in Basel, he completed a commentary on the epistles of Peter and Jude for a Swedish publisher which, in expanded form, was subsequently published in 1964 as part of the Anchor Bible series: *The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude*. Throughout this period his writing on the early church and on New Testament topics is known through his survey, *Neutestamentliche Zeitgeschichte* (1964), and in its English translation, *The New Testament Era* (1968). The diversity of his interests is indicated by his book on the Ten Commandments, *Die Zehn Worte in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (1973), and even more so by his co-editorship of the four-volume *Biblisch-historisches Handwörterbuch* (1962–66). His book, *The Roots of the Synoptic Gospels*, published in 1986, reflects a continuing interest over many years in the synoptic problem, an interest which surfaced many times in lectures and seminars. It also indicates the originality of his approach to this critical question of New Testament studies, as well as his special and continuing interest in the Gospels. Reicke wrote in English, German, and Swedish, a testimony to his remarkable linguistic skills.

Reicke did not remain narrowly within the university when he came to Basel. He and his family were members of the Lutheran Church in Basel, and Reicke himself was President of that church. He later represented the Lutheran Church in the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft christliche Kirchen in der Schweiz*, which had been founded in 1972. In 1971 the whole family took up Swiss (Basel) citizenship, giving up their Swedish passports.

The contributors to this *Festschrift**, however, remember particularly Reicke the man and the teacher. His lecturing style was not the sparkling rhetorical

affair that one found in some others, but his range, his knowledge, and his sympathies were immense. He was at his best in smaller groups and in individual discussion, where the depth and quality of his knowledge became apparent. There was no doubt that he knew the material, that he had considered it in depth, and had arrived at his own independent judgments. He did not, however, force his judgments on his students. Rather, he made available to them the extraordinary resources of his scholarship and acumen so that they could reach their own conclusions in a properly scholarly fashion. It is because of these skills and qualities, that he attracted research students and was so successful a supervisor of doctoral students. Reicke never liked the expression *Doktorvater*, which is perhaps a sign of his willingness to let the doctoral student work along his or her own lines as long as the method was scholarly. Forty doctoral students at the University of Basel have reason to be grateful to him for his gentle guidance of their research.

Many aspects of Reicke's academic career and life and his contributions to the cause of theology and Christian culture could be noted at further length than has been done here. However, since this is a *Festschrift* presented by his doctoral students it is perhaps appropriate to conclude this biographical tribute on a more personal note. For the doctoral students represented in this *Festschrift*, and for this particular writer, three significant characteristics marked Reicke's work: his scholarship, his humanity, and his partnership with Mrs. Reicke.

From the earliest days Mrs. Reicke had been a fellow worker in the academic activities that occupied her husband. Their first publishing enterprise was a joint venture of editorial work. The editorship of *Theologische Zeitschrift* over many years was largely a joint enterprise. A linguist of the highest qualities, Mrs. Reicke contributed significantly to the publishing and academic activity of her husband. She has published translations of theological works in her own right as well. Spalentorweg 24 is a house with many associations for many doctoral students. Some have stayed there for periods of time; others have had the benefit of using some of the domestic equipment which was kept in the house for that purpose. Their chalet at Salvan, in the mountains of French-speaking Switzerland, has been for many of us a place to visit or a place for rest or for work. In all of their hospitality Mrs. Reicke ordered the household with a businesslike efficiency and a highly civilized courtesy.

Professor Reicke's scholarship was not of the aggressive kind but rather of a moderate and highly informed kind. He exposed his students to a depth of knowledge and an independence of thought which provided a model for their own work. He was content to promote discipline and scholarship with his students and aimed to cultivate scholarly method. Scholarly method was much more important to him than the opinion or the conclusions that the student might

reach. This reflected a modest sense that neither he nor others knew everything, and certainly not the whole truth. His interest in the Synoptic problem is perhaps a good example. Recent discussions among a group of New Testament scholars designed to restore to some broader acceptance the theory of Griesbach attracted his sympathetic encouragement although he himself was never really convinced by the Griesbach theory. He had developed a more independent line on the question reflecting to some extent his Swedish origins and his broad approach to questions of New Testament interpretation. The fruits of that reflection and a detailed explanation of his views has been made available to us in the *The Roots of the Synoptic Gospels*, already mentioned.

Because, in a certain sense, he stood in a mediating position on some critical matters pertaining to New Testament interpretation, Reicke did not attract vast popularity nor was he protected from criticism from those who would wish to take a more extreme point of view. One cannot but speculate as to whether his declining to succeed Bultmann at Marburg did not have something to do with his different outlook from that of Bultmann, combined with a certain respect for the integrity and continuity of the New Testament chair in that university. His presidential address to the annual SNTS meeting in 1982 was on an earlier Basel theologian, and one speculates that it held a certain autobiographical significance: "W.M.L. de Wette's Contribution to Biblical Theology." He had not been dismissed from any chair as de Wette had been, but he certainly was not without his critics, and his attempt to combine devotion and scholarship was, in many respects, very similar to that of de Wette.

For the contributors to the *Festschrift*, these three characteristics have been in varying degrees formative in their own scholarly development. The kind of scholarship which Reicke inculcated, his interests in the broad experience of humanity, and his capacity to work with people, as demonstrated in his partnership with Mrs. Reicke, were all significant elements in the kind of professor and teacher whom we seek in this *Festschrift* to honor. These characteristics were combined in a gentle humanity which endeared him to all those who came to know him. He was somewhat formal in manner but he revealed a generosity and a warmth to those who came to know him and a continuing and gentle encouragement for the development of his students after they graduated. When Reicke died unexpectedly on May 15, 1987, many colleagues and friends were deeply saddened. His doctoral students shared in that sadness, but at the same time they remember a teacher and a friend. This *Festschrift* is a testimony to the personal and scholarly qualities of our friend and teacher.

Bruce N. Kaye, Kensington NSW, Australia.