

***Insider Jesus:
Theological Reflections on New Christian Movements***

William A. Dyrness
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“Insider movements” are a growing phenomenon in the 10/40 window of Africa and Asia. These movements are groups of Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists who follow Jesus as their Lord and Savior but who still retain their cultural/religious identity in their original religion. They do not identify as Christian and they may still go to the mosque or temple. However, they are seeking to follow Jesus and studying the Bible as a sacred text.

These so called “insider movements” are controversial in the mission world. Is this syncretism or a transitional stage between their religion of origin and becoming part of the Christian community? In his book, *Insider Jesus: Theological Reflections on New Christian Movements*, William A. Dyrness contends there is a third option to consider. He encourages the reader to see these new expressions of faith as new hermeneutical spaces in which participants are formulating fresh expressions of *ecclesia* and new understandings of the gospel. Given the mission of Doctor of Ministry programs to develop theologically reflective practitioners, Dyrness’s book provides an excellent resource for encouraging students to consider fresh theological perspectives on God’s activity in a pluralistic world.

Dyrness is Dean Emeritus and Senior Professor of Theology and Culture at Fuller Theological Seminary. His depth of professional understanding in theology and culture throughout the book empowers the reader to think both theologically and culturally about this controversial topic. Teaching at Fuller also places him in a scholarly community that is actively researching and writing about insider movements. With his personal connections to the editors of *Understanding Insider Movements*, a seminal collection of sixty-four essays on insider movements, he had access to a prepublication version in writing *Insider Jesus*, enabling him to stand on the shoulders of that anthology adding his own fresh and insightful perspective and contributions to the subject matter. He also has international experience teaching in both the African and Asian context providing him a cross-cultural lens.

Dyrness begins *Insider Jesus* tracing the important historical development of contextualization in missiology. He then highlights the limitations of contextualization for understanding insider movements and champions the need to move beyond the contemporary approach of

contextualization. He continues on to expose the culturally conditioned assumptions about religion in Protestantism. With the Reformation, “religion had become not something that is to be done but something that is believed” (10) and consequently, contextualization was the important task of making “a particular set of beliefs about what God has done in Christ” (11) understandable in another culture. Since religion in the Protestant understanding is primarily internal and personal, the corporate cultural expressions of religion are minimized. Dyrness affirms that contextualization has been an important step forward in missions but he warns that it still possesses a colonial impulse. As communicators of the gospel, our view of the gospel is a contextualized understanding. Even the western quest for the original meaning of the text using the grammatical-historical method is a means of interpretation that “has been fatally infected with a modernist and Enlightenment ethos” (24). This rational approach to the text is foreign to African and Asian cultures that did not experience the Enlightenment and who approach sacred texts “in spiritual rather than rational categories” (25). Dyrness contends there should be “a change of focus from the ‘message’ that we carry with us to the presence and activity of God in these places” (27).

In chapters two and three, Dyrness moves into a biblical discussion of how God is at work in cultures and religion. Cultures both provide a particular logic for making sense out of the world and develop wisdom that is passed down from generation to generation to enable human flourishing. God endorses cultural wisdom as seen in Israel’s borrowing of cultural elements and religious practices from the surrounding cultures. Dyrness warns that the Reformation heritage and especially the evangelical tradition tend to dismiss all religions outside the Judeo-Christian tradition as merely human attempts to reach out to God. Consequently, religions “are all barriers to hearing the gospel” and “have so infiltrated and corrupted their cultures that nothing short of a complete uprooting and transformation of these religions—and these cultures—will be satisfactory” (40). Yet, Dyrness argues that “just as the various cultures have contributed their own special gifts to the human community (no culture has a monopoly on life-giving discoveries), so religions in those places often provides life-giving perspectives to people.” He is careful, though, to point out that even though they might provide life-giving perspectives, they do not provide any salvific capacity (40). The unique role of Israel then was to give witness to God’s redemptive work restoring humanity to himself and renewing work of forming “a community and society that, in their care for one another and for the earth, would embody and reflect the renewing and redemptive work of God” (53). Dyrness emphatically draws the line in asserting God, not religion, is the source of salvation. Consequently, “religion can be a witness to this God and this salvation, but it can also be an obstacle” (67). Dyrness contends that other religions “can offer their own spaces in which people can seek after God” and “potential places where Christ can be encountered” (67). In chapter four, Dyrness presents informative case studies of various insider movements to illustrate how this is possible. This includes both historical movements in Latin America and Africa as well as contemporary movements among Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims in Asia.

Dyrness returns to the discussion of religion in chapter five, building on the testimonial insights of the various case studies. He examines how religion intersects with the mission of Christ.

Based on Paul's address to the Athenians that God determined a set time and place for each group of people "so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him" (Acts 17:27), Dyrness sees religion as a hermeneutical space for people to look for and possibly even find God. Consequently, one might be able to view religions as places "where people are not only open to God's voice but also prepared (by the Spirit) for that word" (104). Unfortunately, due to the Protestant myopic focus on the intellectual aspect of faith, Protestants struggle to appreciate the cultural significance of religion to create identity through stories, artifacts and rituals, as well as the role external action can play in spiritual formation.

Dyrness is adamant that commitment to Christ is essential to insider movements as illustrated in each of the case studies. He suggests that religions function in the arena of general revelation, but the gospel and Scripture provides special revelation that "affirms, fulfills, challenges, and often overturns every religious situation that it encounters" (120). Though God is the primary agent in this, secondary agents who witness about the work of Christ and who make the Scriptures available to people are necessary as well. But he asks these secondary agents to consider that "Christ came ... not so much to do away with religion but to transform it from within" (121). Evangelical mission should be less focused on creating a perfect religion or new churches and more focused on God's re-creative work on earth where righteousness flourishes and people grow together into Christlikeness. In the final chapter, Dyrness reflects on insider movements, suggests a comparison with emergent movements, and concludes with a reminder that insider movements are characterized by four elements: devotion to Christ, a priority on Scripture, visible forms of worship, and sharing their faith in Christ in their natural relational networks.

Dyrness effectively turns the syncretism argument of the opponents of insider movements on its head. He uses the New Testament and church history to suggest that we should see these new expressions of faith in Jesus not as syncretism but as a new synthesis. A new synthesis can be seen in the different ways faith in Christ developed among Jewish followers and among Greco-Roman followers in the early church. While outsiders might see these expressions as syncretistic, cultural insiders would embrace these as valid cultural expressions in their particular culture. We must remember that "every Christian religious expression represents some combination of indigenous values and religious practices ... and the impact of the Christian gospel (the work of Christ as described in Scripture on this)" (125). Unfortunately, religious leaders across the centuries resist emerging religious forms, and past experience sets the norm for institutional structures. Dyrness observes that "the New Testament seems to portray a new way of thinking about religion that is oriented toward God's future—focused not on the God of our fathers but on the emerging faith of sons and daughters" (128).

Dyrness seeks to provide both biblical and cultural understandings of religion throughout the book. He exposes the blinders of his own Protestant and Evangelical religious heritage that restrict one's view of religion and the associated cultural components. He demonstrates how the Scriptures typically affirm or critique the moral dimensions of religions in light of justice rather than the cultic elements of religion. He shows how early Israel often borrowed from both wisdom and religious traditions of surrounding cultures in developing the forms of worship and

social patterns that “in themselves were not unique, but the way these were to be shaped was to uniquely reflect God’s renewing work” (51). Dyrness consistently points to Christ as essential and non-negotiable when considering the validity of insider movements. His central theme is that these movements do not necessarily need to be viewed as transitional but actually stand on their own as contributors to the kingdom of God providing new hermeneutical spaces for a fresh synthesis of Christ in a specific cultural context, a context in which the Spirit of God is speaking and working. These are valuable contributions in *Insider Jesus*.

In his attempt to show the value of Christ entering into the context of other religions, Dyrness leaves some unanswered questions regarding a biblical view of other religions. He does not address Paul’s warning to the Corinthians that sacrificing to an idol is a sacrifice to demons and Paul’s admonition, “I do not want you to become sharers in demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons” (1 Cor. 10:20-21). Furthermore, Dyrness seems to gloss over the strong admonition in the Old Testament to come out from among the surrounding nations and to not become entangled in neighboring religions. These biblical elements contribute to the complexity of understanding and evaluating insider movements. It would be helpful for Dyrness to directly address these passages as well. Though not all the questions have been answered, Dyrness is on point that God is at work among people in other religions and our theology may need to expand to embrace this reality. He aptly points out that in the early church, first the Spirit of God worked among the Gentiles who did not conform to the Jewish cultic practices. Then the apostles used testimonials as evidence for embracing this move of God, and lastly, they developed a theological framework for this new reality. The Spirit of God is at work in the earth in unexpected ways, and Dyrness challenges us to not be shaped by our past religious framework but to allow God to provide fresh theological perspective and local synthesis. Students in doctoral theological education will benefit greatly from wrestling theologically with these new emerging realities.