

Review

Insider Jesus: Theological Reflections on New Christian Movements

William A. Dyrness

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Until now, the Insider Movement (IM) has lacked a sustained, in-depth theological justification- *Insider Jesus: Theological Reflections on New Christian Movements* by William Dyrness, offers one theologian's unique approach to meet this need. Evangelical theologies of mission are sometimes filled with either proof-texting or philosophy that never even touches on the biblical text; *Insider Jesus* is neither of these. Dyrness, [professor of theology and culture at Fuller](#), moves easily between the biblical text, hermeneutics, and the context- it is a surprisingly easy read for such a complex subject. There is a lot of repetition around the main points, but that is understandable, considering that this is a book encouraging a paradigm change in theology of religion and mission.

Here are in-depth chapter summaries of each of the six chapters that I have posted on my personal blog:¹

[1: Intro- The Rise of Contextualization](#)

[2: How Does God Work in Creation and Culture? A Theological Proposal](#)

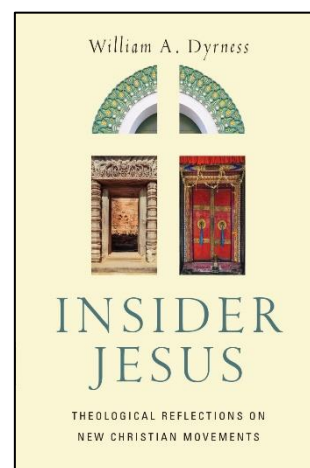
[3: Religion in the Biblical Narrative](#)

[4: Case Studies of Insider Movements Today](#)

[5: Religion and the Mission of Christ](#)

[6: Conclusion- Is God Doing Something New?](#)

There is much to learn from *Insider Jesus*, and those interested in theology of mission, regardless of their view on IM, should interact with it. The IM train is nearly at full speed now, especially with the publication of books like [Understanding Insider Movements \(UIM\)](#) and [Boundless](#). Of course, there are people trying to derail IM (I recently reviewed a chapter in a forthcoming book that is a rebuttal of [UIM](#)), and yet in our future discussions, I earnestly pray



¹ See <http://muslimministry.blogspot.com/search/label/Insider%20Jesus>

that we can avoid the unhealthy polarizations of the past. Thankfully, Dyrness' writing is amicable and irenic, and it provides a good model for dialogue.

If you read through the chapter summaries above (I won't repeat them here), you will notice some excellent discussions in *Insider Jesus*. Dyrness' presentation of the emergence, and short-comings, of the current "contextualization" paradigm is very insightful. In fact, the limitations of contextualization are the starting point for how Dyrness conceptualizes God's work among the world's cultures and religions. To a large extent, contextualization is about how an outsider adapts biblical faith so that it is appropriate for new context. But what if instead we were to assume God was already working in other religions? Might this allow us, in some settings, to see how appropriate local theologies are organically emerging inside of contexts, not at the initiative of outsiders? *Insider Jesus* seeks to show the biblical-theological possibilities inherent in such a framework.

For instance, what was unique about the Old Testament Israelite community was not their religious practices, but the God they worshipped. Circumcision, dietary restrictions, and animal sacrifices were already common to many ancient Near Eastern peoples. Israel's religion was a means to know Yahweh, not an end in itself. This explains why Paul, to take one example, would enter the framework of another religion and see how God is already at work, even while bearing witness to the resurrection and preaching repentance (Acts 17). According to Dyrness, religion is a natural part of all cultures, and a change in religious affiliation is not a necessary consequence of redemptive faith in Christ.

Going deeper into this discussion, let me propose a synthesis of Dyrness' overall argument. *Insider Jesus* operates on four main theses which act as hermeneutical lenses through which we can view both new movements to Christ today *and* the Bible:

1. Religion, basically a good thing almost indistinguishable from culture, is a man-made construct which represents humanity's honest yet broken response to God. All religions, including Christianity, have a mixture of good and evil, positive and negative, God-directed and idolatrous.
2. Religious practices, "Christian" and non-Christian, serve as indispensable hermeneutical spaces for people to work out what it means to know God in Christ. Form and meaning are nearly arbitrary, and old forms can and should be infused with new meanings. A perfect religion is not God's goal and religion does not save; that is Christ's work alone.
3. Christ did not come to supplant religions but to transform them from within (there is continuity and discontinuity in each context). God's goal in creation and redemption is for his glory and human flourishing, and religions are included in part of that goal if they lead to God in Christ and serve the holistic benefit of humanity.
4. It is an evidence of the Holy Spirit's work outside the Church when non-Christian peoples consider and incorporate Jesus and the Bible into their faith systems, i.e. in conversation with Muhammad or Buddha, even when, initially, it is largely unorthodox.

Dyrness skillfully argues for these theses in *Insider Jesus*, and my own thinking has been challenged in significant ways. I appreciate his epistemology and his tolerance for ambiguity on issues that are often over-simplified in theology. However, these theses still feel to me like presuppositions that one can bring to the discussion; not necessarily provable, but also, not necessarily disprovable, either. This is an extremely important point.

For instance, [Doug Coleman's review of Insider Jesus at TGC](#)² claims that Dyrness' view of religious practices (i.e. "they must be in some way capable of being included in God's project of renewing and restoring the earth" p. 39) is simply "a non-sequitur." But rather than labelling it a fallacy, I believe it is simply a *presupposition*. Coleman's own work asserts that Islamic religious practices are idolatrous. But he also relies on a presupposition, incorporating a post-Enlightenment conceptualization of religion (essentialized and monolithic). If Dyrness conflates religion and culture (and I think he comes close), then [Coleman does the same with religion and idolatry](#).³ I would argue for more nuance than both Coleman and Dyrness offer- a way that draws some distinction between religion and culture, but which also recognizes that not all contextual aspects of non-Christian religions are necessarily idolatrous. These hermeneutical assumptions on religion play a determinative role in our biblical understanding of idolatry.

In *Insider Jesus*, Dyrness sits clearly at [W4 on the W-Spectrum](#),⁴ and the insiders he writes about are squarely in the "reinterpreting Insider" expression of the [Complexity of Insiderness model](#).⁵ Dyrness' proposal would have been stronger if it included reflection on insiders who are not necessarily reusing rituals or trying to stay inside their "religion." Depending on the context, you can still be an "insider" with little regard for Muhammad or Buddha, and never attend the mosque or temple. Dyrness' narrow portrayal of insiders is a weakness of the book. I believe that in a general sense, IM remains ill-defined on a theoretical level.⁶

There are many examples of legitimate insiders (genuine believers who are not trying to become "Christians") who operate quite differently. In the spirit of [2 Cor. 6:14ff](#), they seek to avoid some of the potentially spiritually dangerous theological and ritual insiderness exemplified in *Insider Jesus*. In this sense, Dyrness comes close to essentializing insiders/insiderness at an extreme position. I do share, with Dyrness, the view that religions are not fixed entities and religious boundaries are quite fluid and open. However, in the Complexity of Insiderness model, I use "dual-belonging" somewhat differently than his case studies in chapter 4, meaning someone belongs to the Body of Christ and also belongs to their *local community*, not necessarily "religion."

This vexingly elastic concept of "religion" is a major part of our problem. Dyrness is to be commended for his nuanced and well-argued theology of religion. However, he is highly optimistic concerning the value of non-Christian religions in the role of the mission of God today. Many may disagree with Dyrness as to the extent of sin upon humanity because of the fall. Consider Islam, for example. In my experience, Muslim religiosity is sometimes used (depending on the context!) not for human flourishing but *to manipulate God and keep him at*

² See <http://themelios.thegospelcoalition.org/review/insider-jesus-theological-reflections-on-new-christian-movements>

³ Coleman, Doug. 2015. "The Idols Temple and the Insider Movement Paradigm: An Examination of 1 Corinthians 8-10." *Global Missiology* 3(12). See <http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/view/1783/3960>

⁴ Farah, Warrick, and Kyle Meeker. 2015. "The 'W' Spectrum: 'Worker' Paradigms in Muslim Contexts." *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 51(4). See <http://muslimministry.blogspot.com/2016/04/the-w-spectrum.html>. The W1-W4 Spectrum compares, contrasts, and describes four types of cross-cultural workers found in the Muslim world. This spectrum is distinguished from the C1-C6 Spectrum which is descriptive of indigenous fellowships in the Muslim world made up of local believers.

⁵ Farah, Warrick. 2015. "The Complexity of Insiderness." *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 32(2):85-91. See http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/32_2_PDFs/IJFM_32_2-Farah.pdf

⁶ I do not intend to imply that IM is a uniform paradigm. Many IM proponents approach the issues much differently than *Insider Jesus*, just as traditionalists are not identical. As the W-Spectrum shows, there are more than two sides of the debate.

distance- he is aloof and exalted but very eager to punish if you leave the straight path. In instances like this, many Muslim background believers have a difficult time re-appropriating Islamic rituals for spiritually positive purposes. However, in fairness to Dyrness, he is clearly not advocating that IM is the only way the Holy Spirit is at work in non-Christian contexts; it is just one of the ways.

As *Insider Jesus* is not intended to be a book on practical discipleship but a theological treatise on (his approach to understanding) IM, the case studies were only illustrative and brief. Dyrness is a [top-notch evangelical theologian](#). But for missiological purposes, I really wanted more info. I'm all for seeing the gospel expressed, understood, and embraced in the logic of a local context, but what is really happening on the ground? Furthermore, what happens to these movements twenty years down the road? The IM discussion could benefit from more longitudinal research. However, this missiological discussion is beyond the scope of this theological book. The recent book by Prenger, [Muslim Insider Christ Followers: Their Theological and Missional Frames](#),⁷ may meet this need for empirical data, and it deserves some serious attention.

Overall, *Insider Jesus* is a valuable book that ties together many important theological themes concerning mission in “non-Christian” contexts today. Your presuppositions about the nature of religion will largely influence how you evaluate Dyrness’ approach. Nevertheless, the globalizing church is indeed in the midst of a paradigm shift on how we understand mission after Christendom, especially in frontier settings, and *Insider Jesus* helps us reflect on our paradigms.

⁷ Prenger, Jan Hendrik. 2017. *Muslim Insider Christ Followers: Their Theological and Missional Frames*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey.