

Insider Jesus: Theological Reflections on New Christian Movements

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“In a day when many too quickly give a thumbs-up or thumbs-down response to new movements of followers of Jesus who try to retain much of their religious and cultural heritage of birth, this study offers a wealth of biblical, historical, and theological insight to help us all give a more informed and constructive response.”

—J. Dudley Woodberry,
School of Intercultural Studies,
Fuller Theological Seminary

Following Jesus in Every Culture

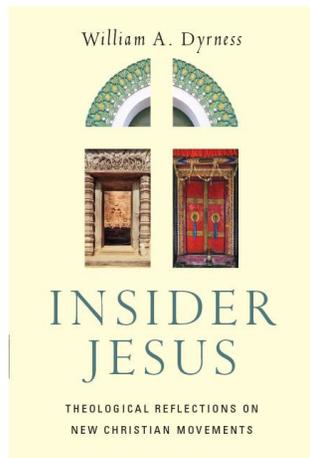
Amid the variegated spread of global Christianity, followers of Jesus are showing up in unexpected places. Known as “insider movements,” these culturally embedded Jesus followers in Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and other cultural fabrics elude conventional theological categories and elicit wonder and debate. Are these authentic expressions of Christian faith?

William Dyrness engages this question in *Insider Jesus* by building a theological framework for considering insider movements. Moving from general inquiry to the concrete, Dyrness also assesses case studies to uncover possible ways that God is working both within Christianity and in other religious settings.

Dyrness, professor of theology and culture at Fuller Theological Seminary, brings a rare blend of cultural and theological engagement to his reflections. *Insider Jesus* challenges common reactions to insider movements while laying the groundwork for further theological conversation about these movements’ presence throughout church history.

Insider Jesus seeks to understand emerging forms of the church by answering of the following questions:

- If insider movements are authentic expressions of Christian faith, how should we understand them?
- Could it be that our own understanding of what God is doing in the world is culturally shaped and needs recalibrating?
- How might the story of Israel and the early emergence of Jewish followers of Jesus provide helpful perspective on what we are seeing today?
- What is God already doing amid a culture and people before the missionary arrives?
- How might Western Christians need to rethink the nature of religion?
- Why does the language of “contextualization” need to be revised to properly engage insider movements?
- How does God work in creation and culture?
- Is God doing something new in these insider movements?
- Can we say these insider movements are part of the Christian church?
- How might we think about God working beyond the borders of the church?



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Insider movements, what are they?

Hardly anything has proven more contentious in recent years than the proliferation of new forms of church and mission within non-Christian religions and religious cultures, and even within Christianity itself – so-called emergent or insider ecclesial forms. They are often maligned by prominent figures both in Christianity and in these other religions. Seen from another angle, hardly anything is more interesting and promising than to imagine that God might be doing a new thing in these contexts. Specifically I have in mind movements among people in Islam who call themselves Muslim believers in *Isa al Masih* (“Jesus” in Arabic); these have appeared in Bangladesh and many places in Southeast Asia. There are also Hindu and Sikh followers of Jesus called *Yeshu Satsangs* (Jesus Gatherings), small groups in North India who seek to stay in their Sikh or Hindu communities. Movements of this kind have been called insider movements, which are defined by Scott Moreau as “movements to obedient faith in Christ that remain integrated with or *inside* their natural community.”

Meanwhile, many Christians in non-Christian settings are exploring ways to encourage faith practices that are more sensitive to longstanding cultural practices that have traditionally divided families and communities. Here one might note Christian groups in Japan seeking new ways to think about ancestor veneration or Christians in Buddhist countries who are paying visits to the temples with their families. Responsible consideration of these many efforts is complicated by the fact that many – indeed most – of these groups must remain hidden from the (religious and political) authorities, so reliable information is difficult or impossible to attain. Still they call out for attention.

It is not hard to see why so-called insider movements are threatening to many Christians. They relate centrally to the person and work of Christ, and they raise questions about the nature of the community that he intended to gather in his name. Indeed, in the end they touch on the nature of the salvation that God promised to the Jewish people in the First Testament and that the apostles claim was revealed in Jesus, whom they called the Christ. Though these are, in the end, critical issues, it strikes me that dealing directly with them is the wrong way to go about addressing, especially, the controversial aspects of these movements. For what underlies these concerns are conflicting cultural codes and multiple conceptions of religion, and it is here I think that the conversation should begin. Even here, I will argue, theological issues are at stake that I want to track down and highlight.

The work of transforming us into Christ’s image is an act of the Spirit working in and through the experiences and patterns of our lives. Though it will not be complete until we stand perfected in God’s presence, it always begins with the impressions of faith and religious experiences that we bring with us. That work of transforming people into Christ’s image is a central aspect of the larger work of God that we call the kingdom or the reign of

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William A. Dyrness (DTheol, University of Strasbourg; Doctorandus, Free University) is professor of theology and culture at Fuller Theological Seminary. He is the author of many books, including *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture* (with Jonathan Anderson), *Senses of the Soul, Reformed Theology and Visual Culture*, *Changing the Mind of Missions* (with James Engel), and *Theology Without Borders* (with Oscar Garcia-Johnson), and was a general editor of the *Global Dictionary of Theology*.

God. I contend that all the groups we consider – what we call insider and emergent movements – must be seen and evaluated not initially in the light of the Christian church but in terms of this larger redemptive rule of God in the world. I say “initially” because eventually we will have to ask how these should relate to the worldwide body of Christ we call the church – and this is something we will attempt to answer in the concluding chapter. To begin with, we need to be clear about our priorities. What is of supreme value to God, what we called in the second chapter the proper work of God, is the renewing of creation in Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit so that it comes to fully reflect God’s glory. The church of course is meant to play a critical role in this project, but we need to recall that it is the kingdom that creates the church, not the other way around. Moreover, God’s purposes and renewing activity extend beyond the confines of the church. God seeks nothing less than a new creation when

the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea. (Is 11:9)

It is for this reason I have insisted on holding together “insider” and “emergent” movements, for these together in their many forms evince the larger work of God, wherein the Spirit is drawing all things together in Christ.

– Adapted from the introduction and chapter six, “Conclusion: Is God Doing Something New?”