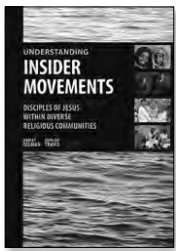


# Book Reviews

*Understanding Insider Movements: Disciples of Jesus within Diverse Religious Communities*, edited by Harley Talman and John Travis (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2015, pp. 679)

—Reviewed by Michael Pocock, Senior Professor Emeritus, Dallas Theological Seminary.



Very few readers of *IJFM* need to be persuaded that God is doing a remarkable thing in calling thousands of individuals and families in distinct socio-religious communities to a wonderful new life in Jesus. These followers of Jesus are experiencing the transforming impact of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Through their own reading and reflection on the Holy Bible, they are being changed, finding fellowship and worshipping among like-minded followers of Jesus, all without departing from their traditional communities of faith, whether of Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism. But there are many Christians who have heard of this phenomenon known as insider movements (IMs) and who want to understand it more fully in order to resolve serious questions it raises for them. This is exactly how this book will help those readers.

At almost 680 pages, this is a large book. As an edited work, it constitutes an anthology on the topic of insider movements. One of its great strengths is the representativeness of its contributors, almost a hundred percent of whom have enjoyed many years of life and ministry in Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and Jewish communities. The work includes fourteen detailed testimonies or articles by indigenous Jesus followers from the Majority World who have lived or continue to live connected to their sociocultural religious communities. There are chapters by veteran missiologists currently serving in fourteen North American, European and Majority World academic institutions, as well as by others who have gone on to their reward.<sup>1</sup> And there's a variety of denominational affiliations represented by those writers who fellowship in traditional church communities. So this work is representative. It deals fairly with objections that have been raised on various elements of the "insider movement paradigm" (IMP), although it does not contain chapters by avid detractors or critics of the movement. Its tone throughout is irenic.<sup>2</sup>

*Understanding Insider Movements* is helpfully divided into seven parts, each followed by discussion questions which makes this a valuable textbook:

1. Setting the Stage
2. Examples, Testimonies and Analysis
3. Biblical and Theological Perspectives
4. Contextualization, Religion and Syncretism
5. Approaches in Witness
6. Concerns and Misunderstandings
7. Matters of Identity

Let's look at each of these parts, albeit selectively in terms of individual chapters.

## *Setting the Stage*

This is a crucial read for understanding exactly what is meant by an "insider movement." It fleshes out terms or concepts that will be used throughout the book, and includes the historical development of IMs by editor Harley Talman and a FAQs section by editor John Travis and Dudley Woodberry. Joseph Cumming examines the whole question of whether there can be, or actually are Muslim followers of Jesus, and myths and misunderstandings about IMs are treated very helpfully by Higgins, Jameson and Talman. Len Bartlott urges us to deal with the reality that our own theological lenses, presuppositions, partiality and provincialism may affect our objectivity when dealing with newer developments like IMs.

Intrinsic to this whole discussion of insider movements is the recognition and description that what in fact is happening are spontaneous acts of the Holy Spirit<sup>3</sup> within previously resistant peoples. IMs are not a strategy or "silver bullet" developed by outsiders (primarily Westerners) in order to penetrate established religious communities. IMs are "happenings" that can be appreciated and encouraged by outsiders. As Higgins, Jameson and Talman assert: "It is fair to say that without foreigners affirming the legitimacy of retaining socio-religious identity, the movement probably would not have happened to the same extent (44)." Unfortunately IMs can sometimes be stifled or limited by the opinions of foreigners. The book later deals with the role of these "alongsiders" in more detail (John and Anna Travis, 455–466).

Controversy about IMs may seem like a singularly Western phenomenon, whether appreciative or judgmental in nature. Most of those who are MFCs (Muslim Followers of Christ) are often unaware of these controversies swirling about, but they in turn may be subject to criticism by traditional Christians who have left their communities under some form of pressure or persecution. These MFCs are simply and gladly following Jesus without seeing a need to separate themselves from their socio-religious community. Whether

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this is a transitory stage (short or long), or a permanent reality, may vary contextually.<sup>4</sup> Both in the New Testament and since, there have been movements which originated within synagogues or other established communities and which had no thought of leaving. Although eventually they were forced to leave, they did have a significant impact on their existing communities for a time

### *Examples, Testimonies and Analysis*

This is a fascinating section revealing the experiences of those who have become Christ followers and yet continue in their Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, or Buddhist socio-religious contexts. Timothy Tennant has elsewhere estimated some 160,000 *Jesu Bhakta* followers of Jesus in India, and 200,000 Muslim Followers of Christ who continue in Muslim communities.<sup>5</sup> The authors cite 5.9 million followers of Christ within the context of their own religious and cultural traditions (xxxv). In this section, we have seven testimonies or interviews with insider followers of Jesus, which may seem like a small sample of the many thousands cited, but the nature of their experiences is enlightening.

One of the most fascinating cases is of an earlier follower, Pandita Ramabai (1868–1922), daughter to a Brahman father. In a historical analysis of her life (143–148), H. L. Richard cites Nicol Macnicol's biography of Pandita, who captured the essence of a genuine follower of Jesus who remains within the context of a Hindu socio-religious community: "Her soul was in its texture Indian and in her we see what such a soul may be under the control of Christ."<sup>6</sup> The same could be said for other past and present believers cited in this section who are following Christ within their own communities. Their testimonies bear the ring of authenticity.

### *Biblical and Theological Perspectives*

Twelve chapters explore and apply Scripture and lay the theological basis for a positive evaluation of insider movements. Anthony Taylor first takes the kingdom of God as the biblical paradigm for mission (173–180). Taylor is clearly aware of Christopher Wright's emphasis on God's mission and kingdom, and he sees the church and Christian practice best in the light of the broader kingdom motif rather than in the particularities of denominations. This has significance for IM believers gathering as ecclesial communities yet without extracting their fellowships from their socio-religious communities.

Taylor begins by referencing those Europeans who upon coming to genuine faith in Christ, left the German

*Landeskirche* (state church) for what were considered more biblical "free" churches. Taylor's point is that they could have stayed within the "state" church, and I would suggest that this path has been taken historically to a considerable degree. Taylor's perspective has stimulated my thinking about those *gemeinschafte* (special, mutually committed groups of true believers) that have remained within larger established Western church traditions, where most members are quite nominal in their faith. But should we encourage Jesus followers in IMs to follow this pattern that we have witnessed historically of early Methodist "classes" that remained Anglican, or those European Pietists who were found among Lutheran churches?

Throughout church history there have been movements that were considered out of step with the "parent" group, but nevertheless stayed connected to them as long as it was possible. It could be argued that the vast movements of African Initiated Churches (AIC) were historically insider movements to their culture. They are considered completely African, with some marks of traditional religion still in them. They have persisted and grown, and now in some cases (e.g., the Zionist churches of Southern Africa) welcome deeper Biblical teaching from those who can come alongside in a more positive and uncritical manner than was previously the case.

It has been argued however, that there is a big difference between a *gemeinschafte* that remains connected to some type of church tradition and a new type of Jesus fellowship that remains connected to a Muslim community. This type of emerging movement within other religious worlds is further explored in the Hindu sphere by Darren Duerksen in his article "Ecclesial Identities of Socioreligious Insiders" (157–165).

The section continues with extensive treatments of Old Testament and New Testament examples of true believers who continued within their original socio-religious community, and who were apparently able or permitted to do so. Examples include Melchizedek, Naaman, Nebuchadnezzar and the Samaritans of John 4. The point remains that while both the OT and the NT inveigh against idol worship and evil practices among pagan gentiles, there are those who evidently lived within those communities without contamination, and were not condemned by Jewish or Christian contemporaries.

The essential convictions of an IM believer should be, and generally are, Christ-centeredness, biblical orientation, and Spirit dependence. Of these, Scripture is probably the most

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important since that is how we know of Christ, the Spirit, and the nature of ecclesial gatherings. Talman concludes:

The Scriptures alone should be the standard for evaluating and expressing theological truth, but each cultural context requires local theologians to express biblical truth indigenously so it can be meaningful and transforming. Nonetheless, self-theologizing should include dialogue with the global and historic body of Christ.<sup>7</sup>

### Contextualization

In a sense, contextualization goes beyond the particular study of insider movements, and addresses the whole question of what Christianity looks like throughout history. In what Philip Jenkins has famously called “The Global South,”<sup>8</sup> doctrines and practices familiar to northern Christendom are re-cast, and some biblical phenomena and practices almost forgotten in traditional Christendom have found new expression. Certainly the enormous AIC and other indigenous forms of Christianity in Latin America and Asia show both continuity and discontinuity with the traditions of Northern Christianity. I believe IMs are an extension of this phenomenon. So in this section of *Understanding Insider Movements*, the authors have introduced articles that deal with the question of how we are to distinguish between legitimate and biblically true contextualization and prevent any tendency toward syncretism. It deals first with the question of whether Christ needs to be “liberated” from the grip of historic Christianity. Historic Christian communities have defined the nature of Christ, his deity, and his relationship to the Father; according to Archbishop Gregoire Haddad, they have acted

like the only institution that owns Christ . . . Christ has become a captive of the churches, like a hostage they have locked up, and no one can get to him except through them. (302)

Haddad’s charges are really disturbing, but he forces us to ask ourselves whether we have become the *proprietors* of Christ rather than simply the *propagators*. If we are not the proprietors, then we need to give room for others to come to him and understand him in the ways the Spirit leads them. New believers and communities can do this in what Paul Hiebert has called “the hermeneutical community.”

Mark Young (317–326) points out that Western Christians are actually “bounded sets,” in Hiebert’s terms. Their emphasis has been on maintaining borders of sound doctrine and practice so that they know who’s “in” and who’s “out.” This creates closed systems, and is probably why Christianity today exists not only in different groups, but in mutually exclusive groups. Instead, a better way to categorize or

simply to understand the religiously responsive, is whether they have turned and are “headed towards (in)” and no longer “headed away (out).” This is what characterizes “centered sets,” where the essential center of a biblical faith is clearly Christ himself. Whether a person or a group is moving towards him or away from him is perhaps a more helpful way to understand a Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist follower of Christ. I rejoice with those moving toward Christ, and I try to help in any way I can, getting rid of as many obstacles as possible, and I go after the one headed away to see if there is any way I can turn him back toward the center. This orientation captures the essence of contextualization, and it is what the authors of this section explain most ably.

### Approaches in Witness

For some this may be the most important section of the book, because it gets down to the question of how we live and share the good news with those who don’t know Jesus. Every writer in this section, as with most authors in this book, has lengthy experience on the field, but the emphasis on indigenous people as the most effective evangelists and leaders raises a question about the role of foreign workers. John and Anna Travis introduce the role of the “alongsider” (455), a role they believe requires a couple of characteristics beyond a sense of calling, an understanding of the Word and the maturity of field experience: these alongsiders need to be “*kingdom-centered* rather than *religion-centered*, and they need to be willing to minister in obscurity” (455–56). I, personally, have certainly seen this to be true. Sometimes I almost weep at the *incredible significance* of what some alongsiders do which remains unknown to anyone but God and those among whom they minister. It is so very true, that “unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it abides alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). The Travises outline seven roles for alongsiders, all of it essential reading for those who hope to minister among those who have hitherto been unreached peoples.

### Concerns and Misunderstandings

Here’s where many of the criticisms leveled against the Insider Movement Paradigm are answered. Many readers will be aware of John Travis’ C1–C6 spectrum which was first introduced in 1998. His treatment of the issues surrounding this spectrum fifteen years later is very helpful, and especially when readers realize that each place on this continuum is a *descriptive observation* of particular realities of Christ-centered communities rather than a “bad to good” (or “good to bad”) evaluation. The spectrum is not a contextualization spectrum per se, although that is certainly involved

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in how these communities operate. Travis does a good job of clarifying many issues surrounding these designations which I believe remain helpful for our understanding of particular ecclesial groups. It's clear that no one place on this spectrum is considered a recipe or silver bullet for effective ministry.

The authors address questions as to whether the names and titles of supreme beings in other socio-religious groupings can be utilized legitimately by Christians. In particular, there is the question of whether Allah is equivalent to God in the Bible. Wheeler takes up the question, and his position is backed by many believers in Arab contexts, and asserts that indeed Allah is the God of the Bible and is the term appropriately used when speaking of God in Christian Arab and Muslim contexts (517–119). Many may have an inadequate view of his characteristics, but Allah is simply the Arabic word for the supreme being of the universe.

Talman takes up the question of whether a genuine believer in Jesus can remain in a Muslim context and honestly say the *Shahadah* (501–516). Having surmounted the obstacle of referring to God as Allah, there is still the question of Muhammad's identity, which is asserted in this confession. Can we say that he is a prophet? Is he *the* prophet, apostle or messenger of God? The answer involves a lot of historical consideration. The difference between declarations in the *Hadith* (traditions) and those of the *Qur'an* need to be examined and Talman does a thorough job pressing forward this inquiry. I will not go into that here, but it's essential reading for anyone before they consider saying this Muslim confession honestly in any particular context, or judging another because he or she feels she can honestly say it.

One area which the editors may feel has been adequately addressed elsewhere, and which, for that reason, they may have sidestepped, is the matter of the translation of familial terms (e.g., “father” and “son”) in Muslim idiomatic Bible translations. This has caused a great deal of concern for Wycliffe Bible Translators and other translation teams across the globe. It was more recently resolved to the satisfaction of many when the World Evangelical Alliance stepped in and helped bring a greater rapprochement between those who disagreed with each other (the WEA statement is in the Appendix).

I have a concern that the authors allowed to go unmentioned: the Muslim will assert that the New Testament (*Injil*) has been changed (corrupted), and it appears we are guilty as charged if we begin to alter these familial terms in order to be more compatible to the Muslim mind. Muslims historically have had difficulty accepting what they perceive to be a “corrupted” *Injil* at those points where it compares to the *Qur'an*,

and they therefore dismiss biblical assertions that Jesus was the Son of God, or that he was crucified for our sins; but, are our recent attempts to adjust the “stumbling blocks” of familial terms a bit of the same? Any theological consideration on using these terms in Muslim contexts has been debated in a growing literature beyond the contents of this book.<sup>9</sup>

### Identity

Writers in this text continue to deal with significant issues like the self identity of Muslim followers of Christ, and also of Christian workers among Muslims. Very much worth reading for those who doubtless will be asked, “So who are you? Are you Muslim?” The different dimensions of identity are introduced, and one's normal questions in the discipleship of new followers of Christ in other religious spheres are supplemented with new questions as to the contextual constraints of social and corporate identities.

By the end of the book the reader will admit that insider movements involve many thousands who are discovering and being dramatically changed by Jesus, yet who have been misunderstood by many across the global church today. Let's remember that Jonathan Edwards, who was a great preacher and exponent of the Great Awakening in America, had his detractors. In spite of the transformation in the religious landscape of the colonies, Edwards, Whitfield and the Wesleys had skeptics who questioned the validity or genuineness of their movement. Edwards had to explain and defend this awakening in two famous publications, *A Treatise on Religious Affections* and *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God*. He was still addressing this concern in his commencement address at Yale University, Sept. 10, 1741. In these works, Edwards showed that a genuine movement of God will manifest many surprising things which in themselves do not discredit the movement. If they are not of God, they will pass away. But he warned his readers and listeners not to commit the unpardonable sin of attributing this work of the Spirit to the Devil. He asked if it is not pride, or the lack of spiritual vitality, that causes the critics to assail this movement. In the same vein, any of us who are quick to criticize these emerging insider movements, or these Jesus followers in such different contexts, would do well to think on Edward's words. And I commend this book to you in the same spirit.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Henry Riggs, 1875–1943; E. Stanley Jones, 1884–1973; Ralph Winter, 1924–2009 and considerable reference to and appreciation of Paul Hiebert, 1932–2007.

<sup>2</sup> An example in addition to Part 6, “Concerns and Misunderstandings,” is Appendix 3, Brad Geer’s review of Douglas Coleman’s “Theological Analysis of the Insider Paradigm from Four Perspectives,” in the *EMS* dissertation series. Objective, irenic.

<sup>3</sup> Amazingly, the spontaneous multiplication and growth of Christian believers, with less control by foreigners and more dependence on the Spirit of God was a plea by Roland Allen on the basis of his Anglican service in China laid out in his *Spontaneous Expansion of the Church*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962. First published 1927. Allen’s observations are truly helpful in grasping the concept of IMs today.

<sup>4</sup> H. L. Richard, “Myths and Misunderstandings about Insider Movements,” p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Tennant, “The Hidden History of Insider Movements,” *Christianity Today*, vol. 57, no.1 January 2013, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> Richard, “Pandita Ramabai and the Meanings of Conversion,” *UIM*, p. 147 citing Macinol, *Pandita Ramabai. Builders of Modern India*. London: Student Christian Movement, 1926. No page cited.

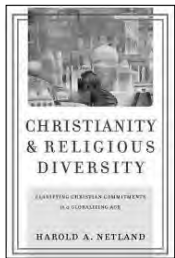
<sup>7</sup> Talman, “The Supremacy of Scripture,” p. 279.

<sup>8</sup> *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> See Scott Horrell’s treatment in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 172, No. 687, July–September, 2015, pp. 268–298. (Part one of two, the second to appear in No. 688.)

*Christianity and Religious Diversity: Clarifying Christian Commitment in a Globalizing Age*, by Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015, pp. 290 + xiii)

—Reviewed by H. L. Richard



This is an excellent book by a preeminent Christian scholar of the theology of religion. Harold Netland provides helpful insights into issues related to religion on the frontiers of mission today while also presenting a nuanced and compelling case for Christianity. His apologetic is sensitive to various religious traditions and to the ferment stirring

the world of religious studies. Such numerous such strong points will be noted in this review, but, as this is a missiological journal, it will also be pointed out that an apologetic orientation undermines missiological concerns and leaves the cross-cultural practitioner with unanswered questions.

A major feature of Netland’s book is to expose naive thinking about religion and religions. In his introduction he says,

Current discussions in theology of religions are sometimes problematic because they are based on flawed understandings of the concept of religion itself, the relation between religion and culture, or the nature of particular religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam. (x)

No one can read this study and come away with simplistic assumptions about religion/religions. Yet a consistent paradigm for thinking about religion itself is not developed and maintained. Netland finally falls back on the supposition that there is an *essence* to every world religion; “we must distinguish between beliefs or teaching that are essential to a religion and those which are not” (185). But this is not a sustainable idea, as Netland himself acknowledges in relation to Hinduism: “given the diversity within Hinduism, it is difficult to identify a set of core claims that all Hindu traditions embrace” (189). This statement on Hinduism is highly appreciated, for it represents the actual complexity of religions, but it is just glossed over and does not influence Netland’s overall discussion.

Modernization and globalization have compounded our problems in thinking about religion, and Netland’s extensive and helpful discussion in chapter two illustrates his point that “few subjects are as complex or controversial as religion in the modern world” (42). Particularly there is extensive discussion on Buddhism, which was integral to the author’s primary field experience in Japan. He introduces the various meanings of that term (chapter three), and the definition Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891, founder of Theosophy) provided is illuminating:

When we use the term Buddhists, we do not mean to imply by it either the exoteric Buddhism instituted by the followers of Gautama-Buddha, nor the modern Buddhist religion, but the secret philosophy of Sakyamuni, which in its essence is certainly identical with the ancient wisdom of the sanctuary, the pre-Vedic Brahmanism. (88–89, quoted from *Isis Unveiled*, Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, 1972, 2:142)

Blavatsky’s perspective was influential in the development of modern ideas about Buddha, and Netland reviews and critiques other modern interpreters of Buddhism like D. T. Suzuki as well. In light of such modern Buddhist apologists, Donald Lopez’ statement rings true: “The Buddha that we know was not born in India in the fifth century BCE. He was born in Paris in 1844.”<sup>1</sup> This surely should lead to a conclusion that speaking about Buddhism as a single tradition or religion is highly misleading; but, as already noted in regard to Hinduism, that is not the direction that Netland takes in his study.

The complexity of Christianity is noted throughout the book, particularly in the second half of the book which is focused on “Christian Commitments in a Pluralistic World.” Christianity is not just a set of beliefs or ideas.

Religion includes the social, cultural, and historical patterns of religious communities so that in speaking of Christianity we cannot entirely separate the gospel from the lived realities of actual Christian communities in particular times and places. (166)

This perspective leads towards Netland’s helpful statement that

the command is to make disciples, not to make Christians or to convert people to the religion of Christianity. In Christian witness, the most important thing is not the religious labels or

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categories that one adopts but rather becoming an authentic disciple of Jesus Christ. (236)

But the matter of “changing religion” is never really raised; it seems to be assumed that a follower of Jesus will change religions to Christianity, even though, as Netland states, that is not the mandate Jesus gave us.

The penultimate section of the book (“Apologetics and Religious Diversity,” 242–48) makes numerous helpful and necessary points.

Apologetics can take various forms and degrees of sophistication, and it should be adapted to fit varying cultural contexts. But whatever its form, it should always be faithful to the biblical witness, intellectually responsible, and culturally sensitive. (243)

Those engaging in interreligious apologetics must study other religious traditions carefully, making sure that they understand other religious worldviews accurately and are not merely addressing simplistic caricatures. This requires much time and intellectual discipline, mastering the requisite languages and literature and engaging intellectuals from those traditions in serious dialogue. Responsible interreligious apologetics must be fair in its treatment of other perspectives, willingly acknowledging what is true and good in them even as it points out what is false or otherwise problematic. (247)

The attempt to persuade religious others to change their fundamental beliefs and accept the core Christian claims as true can easily be perceived as an inappropriate exercise of power, especially if the Christian is associated with significant cultural, economic, political, or military frameworks of power. Any activity that is manipulative or coercive, or otherwise infringes upon the dignity of the other, must be rejected. In certain contexts historical factors make interreligious apologetics especially sensitive. (248)

The final section of the book is on civic virtue, and it is appropriate that this book would end with exhortations to sensitivity; but, however much sensitivity one employs, there still seems to be a fundamental “clash of civilizations” paradigm in place. This is where an apologetic focus will fail, and a more comprehensive missiological perspective is needed.

For followers of Jesus as revealed in the Bible, there is no doubt that “theology” or worldview or intellectual ideas are of great importance; what one thinks and believes about Jesus, God, creation, etc., is of utmost significance. The standard “world religions” perspective assumes this about all religions, that they likewise must have some essential beliefs. But this easily becomes a simple projection of biblical thought onto other traditions. (And even within “Christianity” there are such different views of Jesus that

some Muslim and Hindu views of Christ are closer to historic Christian teaching than are modernist Christian teachings!) An apologetic approach focused on “world religions” makes these uncomfortable truths avoidable, and this book is weaker for the omission.

In the end, this book is a case for Christianity argued from within an orthodox Christian worldview. Harold Netland presents a compelling case for Christianity, and his apologetic is alert to the ferment in both religious traditions and religious studies. It is probably necessary and good to have a well-reasoned presentation of the case for Christianity in the midst of religious diversity; but frontier missiology needs to move beyond this mindset.

Does biblical conversion necessarily involve a “change of religion”? What does “change of religion” even mean in faith traditions that do not put theological ideas in a central position? When there are clearly multiple worldviews within each of the major world religions, how does a shift to a biblical worldview impact religious belonging? These are just a sampling of questions compelled by experience on interreligious frontiers, questions that shift the theology of religions away from apologetics and towards sensitive cross-cultural understanding. Netland’s case for Christianity is needed in areas of the West where Christian faith is threatened, but a deeper engagement with issues involved in interreligious encounters is needed in frontier missiology. We can only hope that Harold Netland will direct future attention to the challenges facing people who are impressed by Jesus but perplexed (if not repelled) by Christianity in its many current expressions. Ambassadors for Christ on religious frontiers cannot afford the distractions that often accompany apologies for Christianity; new paths of discipleship need to be developed that focus on Jesus as a relevant figure among all the so-called “religious traditions” of the world. **IJFM**

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>p. 84, quoted from *From Stone to Flesh*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013, p. 3; the work of Frenchman Eugene Burnouf lies behind this statement.