

Athens Redux

Some of you may have caught the subtitle of Ian Johnson's new book on China: *The Return of Religion after Mao*. The *kairos* moment we're witnessing in the growth of the church in China is part of a broader phenomenon: old religions are renewing in the vacuum of Mao's massive secularization. Johnson describes in vignette after vignette a fresh dynamic across this old frontier.

Frontier Missiology. It's a crucial modifier. A dynamic modifier.

We publish on the assumption that mission frontiers present *boundaries or barriers beyond which we must go—yet beyond which we may not be able to see clearly*. Those boundaries may even be *disputed* or *denied*, and require *study, evaluation* and *reevaluation*. But, most crucial for today, those barriers are not just evaporating in an age of globalization. They are intensifying and renewing as global conditions shift. Barriers make a difference—not necessarily the same difference over time—but overcoming them has everything to do with the advance of the gospel.

The theme of this issue is “frontier theologizing,” which reflects the theological challenge of these barriers. The articles range from Africa to Asia, across Buddhist and Islamic contexts, and from the 7th to the 21st centuries. However, such a small collection can only begin to portray the theological exercise required in frontier mission.

Consider the biblical precedent. When the Apostle Paul was hauled up the hill called the Areopagus there in Athens (Acts 17), he faced no small challenge. His own theology may have been clear, but its transmission demanded translation into the mental maps of the Greek philosophers—and idols were everywhere in the wake of a new religious pluralism. Luke's summary of this strange sermon is a wonderful example of “frontier theologizing.” Andrew Walls has reminded us that, again and again throughout history, we've witnessed this same challenge—an “Athens Redux”—where the gospel encounters the accumulated wisdom and coherent thought of an unreached civilization.

That same exercise is reflected in David Cashin's missiological interpretation of Martin Palmer's work on the Jesus Sutras (p. 175). These 7th century documents were initially translated by Nestorian missionaries to reach into a Taoist Chinese world. While others may respond to them differently (p. 190), Cashin has done us all the favor of tying this significant piece of mission history to the discussion of insider movements today.

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John Kim has also dipped back into history with his analysis of the Korean movement to Christ (p. 167) that emerged in the 19th century. While not theology per se, Kim calls the church to reconsider the essential groundwork laid during that early movement. Kim's concern is one heard across the global church, especially in the West where a "stained glass barrier" calls for a re-contextualization of the gospel into new ecclesial forms. Proximate but resistant populations, often representing other religions, will demand the same theologizing we witness with Paul on the Areopagus.

The conditions of these frontiers are dynamic, not static. Globalization goes before us, creating new predicaments, moods, and reactions that complicate the way we theologize. Howell and Thompson have looked at the way honor/shame in both Africa and among American millennials requires us to draw upon another historical slant on the atonement (p. 157). Their thesis demonstrates the speculative nature of our frontier theologizing—like Paul we pull from any and every corner of truth to present the gospel.

Our systematic theologians may get nervous with all these uses of religious concepts; any Athens Redux threatens our established categories. Todd Pokrifka gets it—he teaches systematic theology and empathizes with those who may take offense. His work among Buddhists has pressed him to discern ever more carefully just how the fluid worlds of the Christian and the Buddhist can intersect in the identity of a believer (p. 149). He felt the need to coin the term "frontier theologizing" for this crucial exercise. He calls both the systematic theologian and the mission practitioner to collaborate with indigenous voices and select indigenous concepts to see the gospel transmitted.

These articles are being published just before the 2017 joint gathering of the Evangelical Missiological Society (EMS) and the International Society for Frontier Missiology (ISFM) in Dallas, TX, September 15–17 (see emsweb.org). This year, the focus is on majority world theology, theologians and theological education. William Dyrness, systematic theologian at Fuller Seminary and author of *Insider*

Jesus, will be the plenary speaker for the ISFM portion of the program (see Duerksen's review on p. 184 and Warrick Farah's commentary on p. 190). And Henk Prenger's three sessions on his recently published theological analysis of insider movements will certainly frame the challenge of frontier theologizing in the Muslim world. We hope to see you there, but if you can't make it, we intend to publish many of the papers in the upcoming issues of the journal.

Frontier conditions are dynamic and call us to deepen and expand our editorial reach, to stay ever more vigilant and alert to the realities of globalization, and to find ways to make substantive missiology more available to a rising generation in mission.

In Him,



Brad Gill
Senior Editor, *IJFM*

The **IJFM** is published in the name of the International Student Leaders Coalition for Frontier Missions, a fellowship of younger leaders committed to the purposes of the twin consultations of Edinburgh 1980: The World Consultation on Frontier Missions and the International Student Consultation on Frontier Missions. As an expression of the ongoing concerns of Edinburgh 1980, the **IJFM** seeks to:

- ☞ promote intergenerational dialogue between senior and junior mission leaders;
- ☞ cultivate an international fraternity of thought in the development of frontier missiology;
- ☞ highlight the need to maintain, renew, and create mission agencies as vehicles for frontier missions;
- ☞ encourage multidimensional and interdisciplinary studies;
- ☞ foster spiritual devotion as well as intellectual growth; and
- ☞ advocate "A Church for Every People."

Mission frontiers, like other frontiers, represent boundaries or barriers beyond which we must go yet beyond which we may not be able to see clearly and boundaries which may even be disputed or denied. Their study involves the discovery and evaluation of the unknown or even the reevaluation of the known. But unlike other frontiers, mission frontiers is a subject specifically concerned to explore and exposit areas and ideas and insights related to the glorification of God in all the nations (peoples) of the world, "to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God." (Acts 26:18)

Subscribers and other readers of the **IJFM** (due to ongoing promotion) come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Mission professors, field missionaries, young adult mission mobilizers, college librarians, mission executives, and mission researchers all look to the **IJFM** for the latest thinking in frontier missiology.