

EXCERPT

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**Seeking Church**  
*Emerging Witnesses to the Kingdom*  
Missiological Engagements Series

October 1, 2019 | \$32, 224 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5105-8

New expressions of church, including so-called insider movements, are proliferating among non-Christian religious communities worldwide. Drawing on the growing social-scientific work on emergent theory, Darren Duerksen and William Dyrness explore how all Christian movements have been and are engaged in a “reverse hermeneutic,” where the gospel is read and interpreted through existing cultural and religious norms.

## Is the Church in Crisis?

The relationship of the church to other religions has been a point of much discussion and debate, particularly in recent years with the rise—and certainly not the decline—of the so-called world religions. Does the church stand out from its surrounding religious communities as a Christian “city on a hill,” distinct and unrelated to all that surround it? Or is it the new “bread” that emerges when the leaven of the gospel enters into and infuses the very religions and cultures it encounters? Or is it some combination of these?

It has only been since the 1990s that some evangelicals have begun to reassess the ways in which the church may understand and relate to other religions. In 1992 a commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship met in Manila and discussed, among other topics, the issue of other religions. At that time writers such as Clark Pinnock and John Sanders had begun to propose ways in which the Holy Spirit may be at work in other religions. This influence was seen in the Manila conference where, while affirming a strong commitment to the authority of Scripture and the uniqueness of the person and work of Jesus Christ, participants were still unable to reach a consensus on the question of whether people may “find salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ although they do not consciously know the name of Jesus.” As a result, the declaration called for further study on the question. That this group was willing to acknowledge a lack of consensus on this point and called for continued dialogue signaled an openness, however reluctant, to a development of thought in the way churches understood other religions.

In the decades since the Manila conference the global public has been confronted with many realities and developments with regard to religions. The most prominent singular event was arguably the Muslim terror attacks on September 11, 2001, which catapulted into the global awareness the reality and challenges of Muslim terrorist groups. Religious radicalization, however, did not start or end with 9/11. Rather, as many have observed, globalization has caused various religious communities to reaffirm their beliefs and identities over against the threat of others. This process of “sacralization” often causes religious communities to return to what they see as their fundamental and core values and to solidify differences between them and others. In extreme cases such communities use physical, political, and psychological violence to protect their communities and beliefs from others. Accompanying, and often sparked by, this resurgence are increasing levels of voluntary and forced migration, bringing people of different religious backgrounds into closer proximity with each other and increasing the sense of threat on all sides.

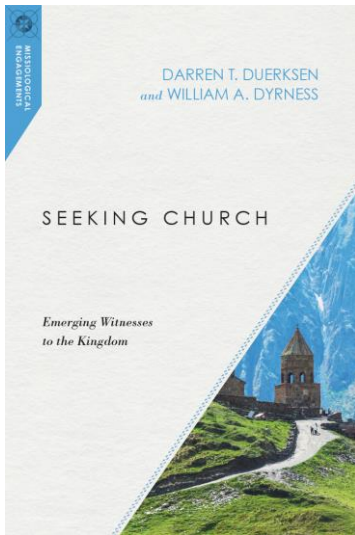
How does the church, and particularly evangelical churches, understand itself and its relationship to other religions in this context? The 2010 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization at Cape Town, South Africa, provides an interesting barometer and contrast to the Manila conference nearly twenty years earlier. Whereas Manila opened up the possibility of discussion regarding how God may be at work in other religions, Cape Town makes no mention of this. Instead, the Cape Town Commitment strongly affirms the classic and important “truth” of Jesus Christ as the “Savior, Lord and God,” how this truth combats “relativist pluralism,” and that other religions “replace or distort the one true God.” However, the commitment also seeks to affirm these statements from a place of humility, declaring, “We repent of our failure to seek friendships with people of Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and other religious backgrounds. In the Spirit of Jesus, we will take



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**Darren T. Duerksen** (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary) is associate professor and program director of intercultural and religious studies at Fresno Pacific University. He has worked and conducted research in India and is the author of *Ecclesial Identities in a Multi-Faith Context: Jesus Truth-Gatherings (Yeshu Satsangs) Among Hindu and Sikhs in Northwest India*.

initiatives to show love, goodwill and hospitality to them.” It also rejects “lies and caricatures about other faiths” and affirms the “proper place for dialogue with people of other faiths.” Thus, the statements of Cape Town (in contrast to Manila) seek to affirm the theological and religious boundaries between Christianity and other religions while coupling this with a posture and attitude of love toward persons of other faiths.

The understanding of the relationship between the church and other religions articulated at Cape Town 2010, however, is not representative of all Protestants and evangelicals. Some European and North American mainline Protestant churches have given increased attention to interfaith dialogue and partnerships, particularly with Muslim communities in those nations. Among evangelicals, there have been several theologians that have begun to explore the continuity between Christianity and other religions and the ways in which God’s church may have constructive relationships with other religions. Missiologists have increasingly employed the concept of cultural contextualization, which, as we will note, analyzes the cultural forms of other religions that can be meaningfully contextualized to Christianity.

Overall, however, in recent years there has not been a wide and sustained conversation among mission and ministry practitioners, particularly among evangelicals, about the ways in which other non-Christian religions may have some continuity with the church. As mentioned above, much of this can be explained by increased globalization, the move among many to strengthen their own religious communities and commitments, and the fear of the religious “other” that this generates. In a climate generated by fear, there is little motivation to consider if and how there is continuity between Christianity and other religions and religious communities. Rather, discontinuity becomes a sociological and theological default, strengthening and hardening the boundaries between communities and religions in a world whose boundaries feel increasingly threatened.

The development of the fraught relationship between the church and religions raises a fundamental question that calls for treatment here: What do we mean by religion? This question surely constitutes a major factor confounding the conversation about church and religions. Part of the problem lies with the word itself. How does the church reflect a religion? What exactly does it reflect in doing so? Defining religion is similar to the proverbial problem of defining time—it seems self-evident until one actually tries to put words to it. But for all the various definitions of religion—and there are many—there are at least two things upon which contemporary scholars agree. The first, as scholars such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Clifford Geertz, and J. Z. Smith have suggested, is the idea that religion was, and to some degree continues to be, a concept that comes from outside of religions themselves and does not adequately describe various religious traditions. As Richard King has noted, early Greco-Roman uses of the concept referred to ritual practices and paying homage to the gods. With the rise of Christianity, however, it was redefined as “a matter of adherence to particular doctrines or beliefs rather than allegiance to ancient ritual practices.” This model tends to emphasize a theistic belief and a “fundamental dualism between the human world and the transcendent world.” Such conceptions reflected particular ways of understanding the Christian religion in the West but did not and do not always adequately describe the religions of other contexts.

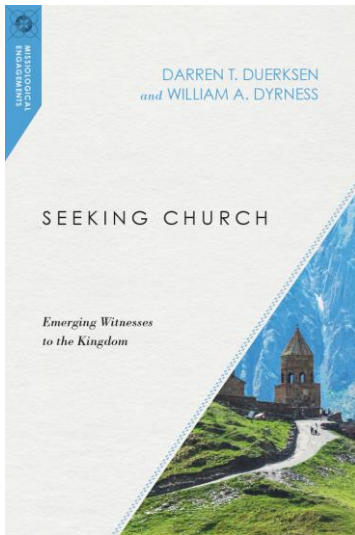
The second area of agreement is that the idea of “world religions” is also largely a Western concept born out of the Enlightenment and responds to the need to make sense of a changing world. As Tomoko Masuzawa demonstrates in her



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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: Art and the Visual in Christian Worship, Reformed Theology and Visual Culture*, *Changing the Mind of Missions* (with James Engel), *Theology Without Borders* (with Oscar Garcia-Johnson), and was a general editor of the *Global Dictionary of Theology*.

influential book *The Invention of World Religions*, until the mid-nineteenth century Europeans and North Americans typically described the world as made up of Christians, Jews, Muhammadans (Muslims), and the rest. Western affinities for taxonomy began to be more specific about “the rest” in subsequent decades, but it was only in the wake of World War I and the uneasy calm before World War II that American universities started to write texts that categorized and studied what became known as “world religions.” The context is instructive: the West was increasingly aware of a globalizing world where an event in one part of the world could have great, even devastating, effects on another. In order to navigate this new era it was imperative to become more educated and aware of the various religions that were at work in these countries as these were impinging on the West.

What this required, however, was to somehow define and order in Western and Christian terms that which often defied categorization. An important example is the “religion” of Hinduism. As H. L. Richard and others have shown, historically the non-Muslims of the Indian continent did not understand themselves as sharing a common set of beliefs and practices known as Hinduism, much less call themselves Hindus. In the eighteenth century onward, however, and particularly through interaction with British Christian colonialists and missionaries, Britons and then Indians started to categorize the widely ranging traditions of the subcontinent as an identifiable religion.

This signals an important point that we intend to explore in this book—that from a social science perspective the category of religion itself is an elastic concept and is not as self-evident as one may assume. Missiologists and Christians who would try to distinguish the church from surrounding religions can thus run the risk of creating a category that, for members of that community at least, does not accurately describe them or what they value and the place this has in their lives. This can also run the risk of trying to arbitrarily separate the church and its members from something that God can and does use to shape the church in unique ways.

—Adapted from chapter 1, “Is the Church in Crisis?”



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