

*The Rivers of Paradise*, edited by David Noel Freedman and Michael J. McClymond

Reviewed by [Leo D. Lefebure](#) in the [April 18, 2001](#) issue

Max Weber's early 20th-century sociological analysis of the ideal types of religious leadership is still a useful benchmark for discussions of founders of religious traditions. *The Rivers of Paradise* takes up Weber's challenge by exploring the foundational roles that Moses, the Buddha, Confucius, Jesus and Muhammad played in their respective traditions. Five authors (Carl S. Ehrlich on Moses, Richard S. Cohen on Shakyamuni Buddha, Mark Csikszentmihalyi on Confucius, Michael J. McClymond on Jesus and Daniel C. Peterson on Muhammad) provide informative and thorough summaries of the current scholarship on each of these figures. In the cases of Moses, Shakyamuni Buddha and Confucius, reliable knowledge of the life of the founder is extremely difficult or impossible to come by. Consequently, the discussions of these figures turn more on the memories of them in the later traditions. The sections on Jesus and Muhammad focus more on the information that can be established or at least debated concerning the historical individuals themselves.

In addition to the historical studies, the book presents an ongoing methodological dialogue with Weber about the meaning of religious leadership and the sociological process of "founding" a new religious tradition. The book concludes with McClymond's essay "Prophet or Loss? Reassessing Max Weber's Theory of Religious Leadership," which seeks to move beyond Weber by analyzing the dynamics of reaffirmation, radicalization, ritualization and responsiveness. McClymond argues that Weber's model isolated religious prophets from their religious and social contexts, viewing them as emerging from the margins of society. Instead, McClymond stresses the complex interchange between a religious founder, the earlier tradition and the founder's contemporaries, both disciples and adversaries. Each of the other authors provides a concluding response to McClymond, variously appreciative (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi) or critical (e.g., Cohen). These discussions are lively and stimulating.

The one problematic section is the rather idiosyncratic and misleading introduction by David Noel Freedman. Freedman presents Moses as representing "the source

river," dating to about 1200 BC, followed by the other four as tributaries. He stresses the chronological pattern of regular 600-year intervals between Moses and the Buddha and Confucius (both dated to the sixth century BC); after another 600-year period Jesus appears, who is followed after another 600-year interval by Muhammad.

For Freedman, these founders and their followers have set the framework for the world's religions. By presenting this schema he neglects Hinduism, which does not have an individual founder, as well as Taoism, whose founder may be legendary. Freedman also sidesteps the difficulties of knowing anything about the historical Moses of 1200 BC (Ehrlich cautiously judges that the literary figure of Moses is a product of later centuries). Moreover, the effort to label the Buddha and Confucius as tributaries of Moses strains credulity. But despite the weaknesses of its introduction, this important resource advances the comparative study of religion.