



Ecclesial Identities in a Multi-Faith Context

Jesus Truth-Gatherings
(Yeshu Satsangs)
among Hindus and Sikhs
in Northwest India

Darren Todd Duerksen



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among Hindus and Sikhs
in Northwest India*

Darren Todd Duerksen

Foreword by
William A. Dyrness



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Foreword

WILLIAM A. DYRNESS

ONE OF THE MAJOR challenges facing the Christian Church, especially in Asia, is the inescapable presence of multiple religious traditions. While this situation is not new, recent developments have given it a fresh urgency. On the one hand newly aroused strains of radical Hinduism and Islam (and, most recently, even Buddhism), throughout Asia, have begun to pose an existential threat to Christians. On the other hand various insider movements and notions of multi-religious belonging have forced a rethinking of relationships between Christianity and these faith traditions.

Among the questions this situation poses, theologically, is the nature of the Church. This question has recently become especially contentious—partisans range from those insisting on traditional structures and institutional forms on the one hand, to those seeking to dispose of such structures and forms in favor of indigenous practices on the other. While both sides are anxious to claim the biblical high ground for their views, practices of church in the New Testament are not as definitive as we would like: early believers, and even the Apostles, wrestled with issues of circumcision and food offered to idols. What are Christians to make of indigenous religious traditions and the cultural structures these have influenced? More crucially are cultural patterns, often with their religious overtones, to be used only as means of outreach, or are they critical to an emerging Christian identity? Finally, how is ‘church’ to be understood in such a setting?

These vital questions provide the substance of Darren Duerksen’s important research among the *Yeshu satsangs* (or Jesus truth-gatherings) in Northwest India. Darren shows how Christianity planted in this region

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came to be seen as a threat to indigenous religious traditions and cultural structures and was perceived as un-Indian and therefore unattractive, with the result that only a tiny percentage of the population became Christian—the chapter on this history is one of the most interesting of the book. His work studies the small but growing insider movement among the Hindu/Sikh population there, who follow Christ while refusing to identify as “Christian.” Making use of an emergentist theory of identity formation, he shows how these believers have inscribed new Christ centered properties on traditional Hindu/Sikh practices. Darren argues that this process is forming unique markers of ecclesial identity featuring a devotion to Jesus, experiences of power and healing, discernment of evil and vibrant witness. Finally he rereads the book of Acts with the same emergent categories and discovers deep resonance with the experience of these Indian believers.

No one can predict where these movements will lead and how they will find their place in the long history of Christianity. But seeing these groups in the light of that long history is one of the strengths of Darren’s argument. He notes that ecclesial identities are not fixed, but “emerge over the course of time as people, cultures and structures interact.” And his narrative makes a strong case for believing the Spirit of God is at work in this exciting process.

Preface

THERE ARE, IN MY opinion, few issues as important within missiological circles these days as theological understanding, clarity, and creativity regarding the nature of the church. The need for this kind of ecclesiological discussion is multiplied with the growth of non-Western Christianity, and the explosion of new forms of church that challenge and stretch the ecclesiological traditions of the West.

Such theological reflection can and is, of course, done by the academies of various contexts, using a variety of hermeneutical and theological tools developed at that level. However, the theological community has for some time recognized the legitimacy and importance of “vernacular,” or implicit theologies, particularly those expressed through the prayers, liturgies and practices of churches. The regular articulations of followers of Christ at local levels represent an important nexus between the lived-faith of the people and the contexts in which they are required to negotiate and articulate that faith. Though not framed in systematic, consistent ways, it is the lived theologies of people and their churches that provide resources for deeper reflection on the ways in which God is revealing himself and shaping church communities that are, as Andrew Walls has stated, both “indigenous” and “pilgrim” to their contexts and communities.¹

This study is a theological exploration of six “churches” in northwest India who are in various ways seeking to be Jesus-following communities within their wider Hindu and Sikh communities. The strategies and degrees of identification vary, but the ecclesiologies they are forming generally seek for ways to be a community-within-a-community. Of course, every church is a community of people who exist within a wider social community or, more accurately, within multiple social communities.

1. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*.

Preface

What makes the *Yeshu satsangs* (Jesus truth-gatherings) unique, however, is their attempt to negotiate this same type of relationship within the context of *religious* communities. As they negotiate how to be followers of Jesus in their Hindu and Sikh contexts, I find that these *Yeshu satsangs* display certain ecclesiological markers or themes that, should they be further developed, could lead to a new and exciting Indian ecclesiology that is both “evangelical” and deeply authentic to their socio-religious identities. A critical correlation of these themes with the Book of Acts begins to chart some of the ways in which these can be developed in relation to Scripture.

To trace these ecclesiological themes requires, I argue, attention to current practices as well as the histories and processes by which leaders developed these practices. Understanding the cultural and theological influences that helped shape present practices gives us insight not only into the practices themselves, but also the factors that influence the development of vernacular, or local theologies such as these. As such, in this study I use the tools of Sociology and Cultural Anthropology to more accurately understand the ecclesial identities that these groups are shaping.

Though I use sociological and anthropological themes and tools, this study is not primarily about the extension of such theories. Rather, my focus is squarely on analyzing the theological themes as expressed through the lived practices of these groups and their leaders. In addition, though this is primarily a theological study, it has important implications both for evangelism and missions. The ecclesiological themes, and the ways in which these are emerging among the groups, give insight into the processes that shape such groups, and offer instruction and suggestions regarding not only the development of vernacular theologies in general, but also the mission and development of *Yeshu satsangs* among Hindus and Sikhs in India.

Acknowledgments

WRITING A BOOK IS similar, I have found, to preparing and performing a good piece of ensemble music. The director is of course integral to the rehearsal and production, but is very dependent on a whole host of others who work with him in the effort to present a piece of art. I am very grateful to the many people who have added their encouragement and voices to help bring the present piece into the light of day.

To the *Yeshu satsang* leaders of northwest India, and particularly Gaurav, to whom I am grateful for the chance to be a part of their communities, sit at their feet, and learn from their incredible journeys of faith and experience. Some of them ventured into the unknown by allowing me, a person outside their communities, to come and be a part of them. They also bravely set aside the risk of yet again being misunderstood by other Christians, and opened up their lives and stories to me. I hope that this analysis and discussion will honor their generosity by enhancing further ministry among Hindu and Sikh communities.

To William Dyrness and Dan Shaw at Fuller Theological Seminary: thank you for your encouragement, wisdom and guidance as my doctoral committee. I also greatly appreciated the help and advice provided by Sherwood Lingenfelter in the early stages of my research, and the encouragement provided by numerous friends in the PhD program at Fuller.

Finally, my family has been a tremendous support. Though my children, Ethan and Asha, only vaguely understood what this thing called a “PhD” was, they provided cheers and encouragement each step of the way. My amazing wife, Shahna, was all-too-aware of what this thing called a PhD was about but encouraged me anyways, selflessly giving up various comforts and time with me so as to allow this dream to come to fruition. I love and appreciate you.

Abbreviations

BSP	Bahujan Samaj Party
CEP	Cultural Emergent Property
CS	Cultural System
IIC	Indigenous Independent Indian Churches
OBC	Other Backward Caste
S-C	Socio-Cultural Community
SEP	Structural Emergent Property
SS	Structural System

Introduction

IN RECENT YEARS, MANY missiological discussions have ensued regarding religious and cultural “insider movements” of various types and in various places. Within the Muslim context, for example, some followers of Jesus Christ have continued to identify themselves as “Muslim” and retain certain cultural practices. In the West, some “Emergent” churches have reshaped themselves to more closely identify with the contemporary younger-generation culture, with some rejecting the identity label “Christian” in favor of “Christ-follower.” In India, the regional focus of this present study, some followers of Jesus seek for ways to remain associated with their Hindu and Sikh families and communities. Though each context is unique, these people share a common tendency to distance themselves from some of the ways Christianity has been characterized and practiced in their culture, yet still seek ways to follow and worship Christ. If and when they pursue this with others, they form new church or ecclesial identities that, they hope, authentically express their faith identities in a culturally relevant way.

In this study I focus on the leaders and members of several churches or *Yeshu satsangs* (Jesus truth-gatherings) in northwest India. Over the last ten years an increasing number of studies have addressed people and groups in India who profess and practice a faith in Jesus outside of institutional churches. In this there have been two interrelated but distinct foci of study. The first and most discussed involves individuals whom Herbert Hoefler in his seminal study called “Non-Baptized Believers in Christ,” and who have since occasionally been called *Yeshu Bhakta* (Jesus devotees). These people, as Hoefler highlighted, are followers of Jesus who are sometimes unassociated with each other and who have chosen to remain unbaptized and unaffiliated with an institutional church. Hoefler’s qualitative research indicated that these people generally have

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an orthodox understanding of Jesus and the Bible while also maintaining a social relationship with their Hindu families and communities. His quantitative data suggested that a large number of such believers may exist throughout India.¹ Both premises have prompted further discussion and study.²

A second focus involves leaders who have recently begun evangelizing and discipling people toward the type of *Yesu Bhakta* faith and identity that Hoefler's respondents displayed, but without the isolation factor. These leaders are developing *Yesu satsangs* to provide fellowship and nurture, and that counter the teaching and identities promoted by Christian churches of their areas. To date only one such study, with a focus on a group in Chennai, has been conducted.³

Thus, whereas one prong of these studies regards the spontaneous movements of individual *Yesu Bhakta*, the second regards leaders that are creating *satsangs* whose identities and practices reflect the member's religious culture as well as their faith in Jesus. Because of my interest in ecclesiology and effective ministry among Hindus and Sikhs, I became particularly intrigued with the second of these: the existing *Yesu satsangs* and their *Yesu satsangis* (members).

My interest in *Yesu satsangs* reflects an overall conviction regarding the importance of the local church, and causes me to consider what "church" would look like for the type of believers that Hoefler highlighted. As I indicated, however, there have been few studies that have critically or extensively engaged questions of what "church" community may look like for such people. Because of this I have determined a need for a qualitative study that investigates the ways in which existing *Yesu satsangs* form new ecclesial identities.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of this study is to understand the ecclesial identities of *Yesu satsangs* in northwest India⁴ and how these emerge from and are shaped

1. Hoefler, *Churchless Christianity*.
2. See for example Jeyaraj, *Followers of Christ*; Richard, "Community Dynamics"; Richard, "A Response to Timothy C. Tennent"; Tennent, "A Response to H. L. Richard's Community Dynamics"; Tennent, "The Challenge of Churchless Christianity."
3. Jorgensen, *Jesus Imandars and Christ Bhaktas*.
4. In this study I focus on a particular region—northwest India—rather than a specific religious community. Though the study includes *Yesu satsangs* from Hindu and Sikh religious communities, I find many similarities in the ways the various *Yesu*

by their practices. My goal in this is to articulate a social theory and a biblical theology of ecclesial identity formation appropriate for Hindu and Sikh insider movements in particular, and contextual church movements in general. To achieve this I narrow the research to particular identity theories and formulate what I call Emergentist theory of identity formation. From a biblical theological perspective I investigate the ways in which the Book of Acts provides markers and themes for ecclesiological identity. In light of this the central research issue of this study is to analyze the ecclesial identity and markers of six *Yeshu satsangs* in northwest India through an Emergentist theory of identity formation and the Book of Acts.

Several research questions help guide this study. First, how does Emergentist and related social theories help us understand the formation of social identities? In particular, how does a composite Emergentist theory of identity help describe and analyze the ecclesial identities of *Yeshu satsangs*? Second, since practices are an important part of an Emergentist theory of identity, how do the leaders of six *Yeshu satsangs* in northwest India use, modify and resist various practices? Third, how do these practices shape and mark these *Yeshu satsang's* ecclesial identities? Fourth, in what ways did the *Yeshu satsang* leaders' Hindu and Sikh backgrounds and their interaction with Christian churches impact and shape the marks and practices of ecclesial identity evident in their *Yeshu satsangs*? Finally, and as I turn to a discussion of biblical theology, what are some of the practices and markers of ecclesial identity evident from the Book of Acts? How do these critically correlate with the ecclesial identities of the *Yeshu satsangs*? The research questions thus begin by identifying the choices, practices and contexts of the *Yeshu satsangs* and to then critically correlate scripture in light of these practices and identities.

OVERVIEW

In Part I, I provide the theoretical and contextual foundations for this study. In Chapter 1, I present the precedent literature regarding Hindu

satsangs are influenced by and seek to influence their respective communities. In addition, though the Hindu and Sikh communities often have many distinct beliefs and practices, in northwest India they also have many characteristics in common and share similar regional influences. For this reason I include both the Hindu and Sikh communities and their influence on the regional *Yeshu satsangs* in the same study. For further description of the relationship of Hindu and Sikh communities in northwest India see Appendix A.

Introduction

followers of Christ (or *Yeshu Bhakta*). Through this brief review I argue that, though recent scholarship has provided helpful perspectives on the theoretical issues facing Hindu and Sikh followers of Christ, there still exists a gap in knowledge regarding the nature and theology of “church” for these believers. In addition, there is a need for theory that focuses on the formation process of ecclesial identities. In Chapter 2, I introduce my integrated theoretical framework based on an Emergentist theory of identity formation. This addresses my first research question: How does an Emergentist theory of identity formation help describe and analyze the ecclesial identities of *Yeshu satsangs*? In Chapter 3, I outline the research methodology that I used in this study, including that which I used for data collection and analysis. In Chapter 4 I then give a brief introduction to the *Yeshu satsangs* and their leaders, describing these according to the particular religious communities with which they relate. In addition, because all of these leaders have interacted with the Christian church in the area, I briefly discuss the characteristics of the Christian church and their emergence through an Emergentist theory of identity formation

In Part II, I describe the findings from my ethnography regarding the ecclesial identities of the six *Yeshu satsangs*. In Chapters 5 through 7, I address my second research question: How do *Yeshu satsang* leaders in northwest India use, modify and resist various practices to shape their ecclesial identities? To answer this, in Chapter 5, I analyze the ways in which certain practices relate to Hindu and Sikh social structures, and in Chapter 6 the way in which *Yeshu satsang* leaders seek to inscribe new cultural meanings into these practices. In Chapter 7, I then examine the Christian practices that the *Yeshu satsang* leaders employ, and how they do and do not modify these for their purposes. In Chapter 8, I summarize the theological markers suggested by these practices. In so doing I address my third research question: What are the ecclesial identity markers of six Hindu and Sikh *Yeshu satsangs* in northwest India? To conclude this section, in Chapter 9, I look backward and analyze, or “retroduce,” the processes and interactions that occurred over time to help shape the present ecclesial identities of the *Yeshu satsangs*. This chapter thus addresses my fourth research question; How did the *Yeshu satsang* leaders’ Hindu and Sikh backgrounds and interaction with Christian churches help shape the ecclesial identity markers of their *Yeshu satsangs*?

In Part III, I address the final research question: How does a theological understanding of ecclesial identities based on the Book of Acts critically correlate with the ecclesial identities of the *Yeshu satsangs*? To

answer this, in Chapter 10, I analyze the *Yeshu satsangs*' ecclesial identity markers through the Book of Acts and further clarify and discuss the theological implications of the *Yeshu satsangs*' ecclesial identity markers. Finally, in my Conclusion, I discuss the contributions of this study to academic knowledge and theoretical conversations, and make recommendations regarding the ministry and formation of Hindu and Sikh *Yeshu satsangs*.

In summary, the purpose of this study is to understand the nature and emergence of the ecclesial identities of *Yeshu satsangs* in northwest India, and my central argument is that an Emergentist theory of identity formation and an analysis based on the Book of Acts will help me to identify the ecclesial identities of six *Yeshu satsangs* in northwest India. I now turn to the study of the ecclesial identities of *Yeshu satsangs*, beginning with the theoretical and contextual background for this study.

PART I

Foundations of the Study

CHAPTER 1

Precedent Literature

Early Pioneers and Present Scholars of Contemporary *Yeshu Satsangs*

IN THIS CHAPTER I will locate my research within the growing number of studies regarding Hindu Christ-followers, Hindu “insider movements,” and *Yeshu satsangs*. Much of this extends from debates regarding baptism and ecclesiology that originated in the 1960s and 1970s. Prior to this, however, several important and influential “non-conformist” Indian leaders critiqued and raised questions regarding the ways in which Christian churches related to Indian religious communities.¹ I will thus briefly discuss two important leaders, Brahmabandhav Upadhyay and Kalagara Subba Rao, and their ecclesial perspectives. I will then follow this with a more extensive analysis of recent scholars that have advanced concepts and studies that are pertinent to my focus on *Yeshu satsangs* and their ecclesial identity.

EARLY PIONEERS: BRAHMABANDHAV UPADHYAY AND KALAGARA SUBBA RAO

Since the nineteenth century followers of Jesus in various parts of India have critiqued the forms and theologies of established Christian churches

1. In their account of Indian church history Fernando and Gispert-Sauch speak about the protestant “non-conformist tradition” of the nineteenth century, consisting of various leaders who reacted to missionary Protestant forms of church with their own faith articulations and ecclesial forms (Fernando and Gispert-Sauch, *Christianity in India*, 163). Though I do not agree that the various leaders form a unified “tradition,” I find the general label of “non-conformist” a helpful descriptor.

Part I: Foundations of the Study

and offered their own variations. Though few of the ecclesial groups and institutions that these leaders founded actually outlasted them, several of these reflected on and wrote about their critiques and theologies of church. In this section I will briefly discuss two prominent leaders, Brahmabandhav Upadhyay and Kalagara Subba Rao.

Brahmabandhav Upadhyay

Brahmabandhav Upadhyay (1861–1907) was a pioneering leader in non-conformist ecclesiology.² Born into a high-caste Hindu Brahmin family in Bengal, Upadhyay was influenced by family members and friends involved in the nationalist movement. As a result, he joined the Brahma Samaj and became the disciple of its then-leader, Keshub Chunder Sen.

Upadhyay was influenced by Sen's openness to Christ and the rationalism with which he and the samaj approached religion. In 1890, through interaction with Church Missionary Society missionaries, Upadhyay became convinced of the divinity and supremacy of Christ and was subsequently baptized in 1891.³ Later that year he investigated and joined the Catholic Church, drawn in part through the Catholic's respect and regard for Hinduism, as well as their understandings of natural theology. Though he became a member of the Church, Upadhyay retained a strong desire to "clothe" Christianity in the garments of Hindu vedantic thought.⁴ In 1894 he literally clothed himself in the light red garments of a *sannyasi* (Hindu monk) and adopted a traveling itinerary and lifestyle, for a time, to more closely identify with the Hindu community, while remaining a part of the Catholic Church.⁵ An active writer and journal editor, Upadhyay regularly articulated his developing ideas regarding the

2. Upadhyay's contribution to Indian theology goes well beyond ecclesiology, particularly in his explorations of intersections between Christian theology and Hinduism. See Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*; Tennent, *Building Christianity on Indian foundations*. Felix Wilfred summarizes Upadhyay's overall contribution, saying he was "a pioneer in exploring creative ways of relating Christian faith with the culture, tradition, philosophy and genius of India" (Wilfred, *Beyond Settled Foundations*, 19–20).

3. Though he was baptized by an Anglican bishop, Upadhyay insisted on being baptized outside of a church so as not to be identified with the church of the colonizers. Jeyaraj, *Followers of Christ Outside the Church*, 59.

4. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, 64.

5. Upadhyay later left the Catholic Church towards the end of his life over disagreements regarding his openness to Hindu philosophy, his *sannyasi* identity, and his growing criticism of British rule in India.

Christian faith, Hindu philosophy, and politics. Though he did not begin an organization or ecclesial structure, he developed several important ecclesiological ideas and critiques.

First, Upadhyay was convinced of the integrity of the Christian faith, and that God had clearly given this to the Catholic Church. Though he increasingly conflicted with the Catholic Church, he retained a strong core faith in Christ and considered himself a member of the universal Church.⁶

Second, particularly in his earlier years, Upadhyay believed that the Indian culture, and Hindu religion, was “humid soil” in which the revelation of Christ could be planted and cultivated. Because of this he became convinced of the need to convert the whole of India to the Catholic Church.⁷ In this he had no misgivings about calling Hindus to become followers of Jesus as it was articulated through the historic teachings of the Catholic Church.

Third, though Upadhyay was firm in his Christology and affirmed the idea that God had “deposited” the truth of His revelation in the Catholic Church, he had serious misgivings about the way in which Christian churches, including Catholic churches, expressed their faith. If India was to be converted, Upadhyay felt, the Catholic faith needed to rid itself of its European practices and culture and adopt the “clothes” of the Hindu religion.⁸ As part of this Upadhyay regarded himself a “Hindu Catholic,” and never insisted that converts to Christ renounce their Hindu identity.

In order to hold these three points together, Upadhyay gradually refined and clarified his understanding of both “Church” and “Hinduism.” In line with Catholic doctrine, the “Church” for Upadhyay was ultimately a universal gathering of those committed to Christ Jesus, capable of incorporating a variety of Christological and ecclesiological expressions.

6. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, 83.

7. Upadhyay states, “(India) is sure to be converted. Was not the blood of the incarnate God shed for India, the fair land of the Aryans? Do not the prayers of St. Thomas and St. Xavier, the patron saints of India, rise incessantly to the throne of God for her conversions? India is sure to be, in the long run, brought over as an inheritance of Jesus Christ” (Upadhyay, “Conversion of India,” 15).

8. As one of Upadhyay’s disciples, B. R. Animananda states, “It is the foreign clothes of the Catholic Faith that have chiefly prevented our countrymen from perceiving its universal nature. Catholicism has donned the European garb in India . . . When the Catholic Church in India will be dressed . . . in Hindu garments then will our countrymen perceive that she elevates man to the Universal Kingdom of Truth by stooping down to adapt herself to his racial peculiarities” (Animananda, *The Blade*, 74).

Part I: Foundations of the Study

Regarding Hinduism, Upadhyay distinguished between two *dharmas*, or duties, of the Hindu. The *samaj dharma* are comprised of social duties, including customs, eating and dressing. The *sadhana dharma*, on the other hand, are the individual duties that focus on personal devotion and, ultimately, on personal salvation.

Both duties, asserted Upadhyay, are present in Hinduism and Christianity. However, in Hinduism it is the *samaj dharma*, or social duties, that are most important, while in Christianity it is the personal duties of devotion to Christ that supersede social rules and duties.⁹ Thus, Hindus could remain Hindu in their social duties and identities while following a personal devotion to Christ and expressing this devotion using Hindu terminology and philosophical categories.¹⁰ Upadhyay did not explicitly state the ecclesiological implications of this formulation. I will, however, suggest two. First, though Upadhyay affirmed the importance of receiving the sacraments during mass for personal devotion, he did not place high emphasis on the local gathered community of faith as an expression of Church. Rather, he begins to indicate that the “Church” could be manifest through a Hindu society committed to Jesus. Second, Upadhyay did not see a tension between a Hindu religious identity and a Christian identity. New Christians thus did not need to renounce their Hindu identity as a pre-requisite for becoming members of a Church.

Upadhyay’s theological formulations of a Hindu-Christian synthesis are recognized as important contributions to an early Indian Christian theology. However, the particular articulations were rarely adopted or developed by ecclesial communities. Indeed, as Jeyaraj has pointed out, the high philosophical nature of Upadhyay’s arguments rarely appeal to most Hindus, the vast majority of whom do not engage in deeply philosophical considerations of the Hindu faith.¹¹ However, though Upadhyay’s philosophy may have only appealed to a small number of elite Hindus, he identified and grappled with the commonly felt tension between the identity of the Hindu family and the identity of the individual Christian and the Christian community. One way of dealing with this, as I have described, was to divide the Hindu dharma between social and personal devotion and duties. Though many Hindus do not make

9. See Animananda’s summary of this teaching, *ibid.*, 200–201.

10. As well, for Upadhyay the Hindu identity was closely linked with Indian nationalism. To affirm the Hindu identity was to affirm an integral aspect of India’s identity and character.

11. Jeyaraj, *Followers of Christ Outside the Church*, 76.

such formal divisions, Upadhyay nonetheless posited that, in theory, they could be divided and that a disciple community could thus retain a Hindu identity. Unfortunately, the Catholic Church could ultimately not accept this proposition and distanced itself from Upadhyay. Over one hundred years following Upadhyay's death, a new group of scholars continue to debate similar tensions and suggest similar ways in which the Hindu and Christian faiths can be understood.

Subba Rao

Kalagara Subba Rao (1912–1981)¹² is unique among many leaders and thinkers of non-conformist ecclesiologies in that whereas most non-conformist leaders often began their work in the midst of Christian institutions and churches and gradually moved to the periphery, Subba Rao remained distant and critical of Christian churches from the outset.¹³ Born into a higher landowning caste (kamma) in Andhra Pradesh, Subba Rao gained a good education and became a teacher. He was familiar with but hated Christian priests and their teachings. However, one evening, while suffering from bad health, he had a spectacular vision of a being he later identified as Jesus. A line in a song that Subba Rao later wrote reflects on that experience and anticipates aspects of his ecclesiology.

Yes, I heard that you were the God of a religion. I also saw several churches beautifully built for you. I also heard that very many worship you there. Then what made you come here to me without gladly receiving their services? Have the very fanatics that destroyed you in the name of religion now made you an article of merchandise? Unable to tolerate them bartering you in the market of religion for their livelihood, have you come to me,

12. The principal early studies of Subba Rao were conducted by C. D. Airan and Kaj Baago in 1965 and 1968 respectively, based primarily on interviews with Rao and analyses of his songs. See Airan, *Kalagara Subba Rao*; Baago, *The Movement Around Subba Rao*. More recently K. P. Aleaz and H. L. Richard have contributed more extensive analyses of Rao, based primarily on his songs and biographies but, in Richard, supplemented with interviews with some of Subba Rao's followers and his widow. See Aleaz, *Christian Thought through Advaita Vedanta*; Richard, *Exploring the Depths of the Mystery of Christ*. In addition, Dasan Jeyaraj contributes further analysis via this material and further interviews with Subba Rao's followers. See Jeyaraj, *Followers of Christ Outside the Church*.

13. Jeyaraj, *Followers of Christ Outside the Church*, 152.

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this fallen atheist, as your refuge? Above all, how could you slip out of that impregnable fortress of religion?¹⁴

After later experiencing further miraculous events, Subba Rao began to preach about Jesus and to heal people in Jesus' name. Subba Rao soon began to travel around the region, preaching and healing people, eventually establishing prayer meetings in numerous places, including a main center in Vijayawada. As news spread about the effectiveness of Subba Rao's prayers, people began to come from long distances. His proclamations about Jesus also raised the interest of local churches and priests, who invited him to come to the churches and talk with them. However, he disliked the local churches and soon stopped going to them. As he told Kaj Baago, "Had I continued going (to the churches), I would have forgotten Christ long ago, for the churches won't tell us anything about Christ. They tell us about a religion called Christianity."¹⁵

This quote and the lines from the above song give indications regarding Subba Rao's developing ecclesiology. He remained intensely critical of local churches. In one of his more scathing works Subba Rao in particular criticizes various rituals, including baptism, which Christian leaders use as a form of power and exclusion.¹⁶ Instead, Subba Rao advocated an internal, personal experience of Christ that united Christ-followers with others in a universal church.¹⁷

14. Baago, *The Movement Around Subba Rao*, 11–12.

15. *Ibid.*, 15.

16. In one section Rao says, "Dear Padri, we are at our wits' end to understand the curious lives of your tribe. You have made religion a fashionable thing. Change of names, taking of oaths, daily prayers, Sunday gatherings, putting on attractive garb, observing festivals and several such things you do, except what the Lord preached and practiced. What the Lord said and did is made into a religion and transformed into a department. Decrying other religions is your religion. If all your books, your grand religions, your long laborious prayers, your thunderous sermons, your showy baptisms and all your customary gymnastics can't uplift your soul and can only be millstones round your neck, don't you realize that all of them are quite useless and even harmful?" (Subba Rao, *Retreat, Padri!*, 17).

17. There is no consensus among scholars regarding Subba Rao's Christology due to spurious evidence from his teachings and songs (Richard, *Exploring the Depths of the Mystery of Christ*, 146). However, Richard and Jeyaraj concur that one of Subba Rao's major weaknesses was that his teaching and theology were guided primarily by his experiences and visions, and only marginally by the Bible (Jeyaraj, *Followers of Christ Outside the Church*, 169; Richard, *Exploring the Depths of the Mystery of Christ*, 152–53).

In addition, Subba Rao's critique of the church mirrored an overall disdain for "religion." Though Subba Rao clearly used Hindu vocabulary to express his faith in Christ, he consistently preached against all religions whose leaders and rituals, he felt, kept people bound and alienated from true freedom.¹⁸ In like manner, Subba Rao critiqued the church for improperly making Christ into a religion through which people could only enter by way of rituals and the acceptance of a hierarchical leadership structure.

Subba Rao was particularly critical of Cyprian's claim that "there is no salvation outside the church." In response Subba Rao articulated an ecclesiology that was not limited by physical or institutional structures and instead emphasized the universal connection of all true followers of Christ. Such a church could not be properly characterized or identified by religious terms, including the term "Christian."

Summary of Upadhyay and Subba Rao

Upadhyay and Subba Rao are two important examples of leaders who formed ecclesiologies contrasting those of surrounding churches in their regions. Though from different regions, time periods and castes, each share some common features. First, both leaders criticized the European rituals and forms of church in their contexts. Upadhyay, more so than Subba Rao, attempted to operate from within ecclesial structures and frameworks, but shared with Subba Rao a disdain for the manner in which the churches distanced themselves from the Hindu masses through their unfamiliar rituals and language.

Relatedly, both leaders were generally clearer in their ecclesiological critiques than they were in their suggestions of what ecclesiology should consist of. However, neither leader advocated a strong separation between followers of Jesus and the Hindu community. Upadhyay was most clear in this through his adoption of the role of *sannyasi* (wandering renunciant) and his identification as a Hindu-Catholic. Subba Rao tended to avoid religious labels altogether but clearly advocated—even if somewhat unconsciously—the appropriation of Hindu vocabulary, poetry, song-forms, and mystical experiences common in popular Hinduism. For neither leader was there a discrepancy between Hinduism as a culture and a Christ-centered ecclesiology. The need for ecclesiology to more critically

18. Jeyaraj, *Followers of Christ Outside the Church*, 167.

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engage and identify with the Hindu social community is a theme that has remained important and crucial to various leaders since then.

PRESENT SCHOLARS: RECENT SCHOLARSHIP REGARDING YESHU SATSANGS

Upadhyay, Subba Rao, and several other Indian Christian leaders pioneered and laid the groundwork for non-conformist expressions of ecclesiology. However, though the communities begun by Subba Rao and others¹⁹ continue in various states to the present day, none have grown significantly nor have fostered continued dialogue on alternative forms of ecclesial communities. Very recently, however, interest and dialogue regarding non-conformist ecclesiologies has been renewed among mis-siologists and practitioners interested in “insider movements” and “New Christian Movements,” or “indigenous independent Indian Churches.” It is to this present discussion that I now turn.

Herbert Hoefler

Herbert Hoefler is a missionary scholar whose seminal study, *Churchless Christianity*,²⁰ has inspired and informed much of the current discussion regarding Hindu insider movements. Hoefler’s book is based on a qualitative and quantitative study that he conducted in 1980–1981 on people who professed a faith in Christ but had not taken baptism or joined a local church. Hoefler called these people “Non-baptized believers in Christ,” and later *Yeshu Bhakta* (devotees of Jesus).²¹ For qualitative data, Hoefler

19. Another important set of examples is the various Christian *ashrams* (spiritual hermitages) that were begun by Protestant and Catholic missionaries and leaders in the early twentieth century. Many of these were begun with a desire to shape new ecclesial communities that reflected Hindu culture. As one leader expressed it, “The Ashramas are the small circles which will reflect fullness of Christian life. Unless we discover the church in this sense, it would be impossible for the group life of Christians to permeate, regenerate the existing society and furnish it with ideals of a social order nearer to the heart of man and God. Ashramas reproduced in the *grahastha* (family) life will be the new church in the world” (Richard, *The Theology of Dr. Savarirayan Jesudasan*, 24). Unfortunately, except for a select few (such as Sat Tal ashram near Nainital or Matri Dham ashram near Varanasi) most have dwindled in size or have closed. Though these initiatives in themselves are important case studies in non-conformist ecclesiologies, a full discussion of these falls outside of the scope of this study.

20. Hoefler, *Churchless Christianity*.

21. Hoefler later uses the phrase “*Jesu bhakta*.” Because “*Jesu*” and “*Yeshu*” are alternative transliterations of the same Hindi word, I will use “*Yeshu bhakta*” to be