

Ecclesial Identities of Socioreligious “Insiders”: A Case Study of Fellowships among Hindu and Sikh Communities

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One of the contentious issues surrounding “insider movements” is the question of church. Is church important for those seeking to follow Jesus within their socioreligious community? If so, what does it look like in these settings? The issues are numerous and familiar to the myriad of missionaries and church leaders who have debated the degree to which churches should reflect local culture. The issues are made more complex, however, when the culture in question includes practices and identities closely related to a non-Christian religion. If, as I will assume for this article, churches are communities of Christ-followers with practices and beliefs that are distinct from their surrounding communities, is it possible for such churches to also reside “inside” a Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, or Buddhist cultural and religious community? How and why should an ecclesial community, for example, identify with its Hindu socioreligious community?

This article is based on a field study of several groups of Christ-followers in North India who are seeking to renegotiate their relationship with the wider Hindu and Sikh communities. Though they are relatively new in their formation, the experiences of these groups provide opportunity for fresh reflection on how Christ-followers understand the nature of other religious communities and how to “be church” in these contexts.

Theoretical Background and Issues

The debate regarding how Christianity should relate to the socioreligious context of India has a long and rich history. Recent iterations of this debate were ignited through Herbert Hoefler’s *Churchless Christianity* (2001).¹ In this study Hoefler and his colleagues identified people who professed faith in Christ but had not received baptism or joined a local church. Though Hoefler’s findings provoked much discussion, it was perhaps the book’s title that raised the most eyebrows. Was it possible, or acceptable, for people to be devoted to Christ but “churchless”? Hoefler’s title was not so much a theological statement as an observation that some people are following Christ outside of the existing sociological and institutional structures known as the Christian church. Nevertheless, his title highlighted what has sometimes been a weakness among those advocating close associations between Christ-followers and their non-Christian socioreligious community—namely, if and how a group of Christ-followers can cultivate both an ecclesial and a socioreligious identity. Can both be maintained, or are they mutually exclusive?

Religious studies scholars have long maintained that a view of world religions as bounded (i.e., as mutually exclusive, or nonoverlapping) is a recent development that reflects modernity and that such a view does not always agree with sociological

realities.² Furthermore, numerous anthropological studies have demonstrated ways in which religious boundaries tend to blur in the face of local terminology and practices.³ Such blurring and overlap become more apparent when researchers avoid imposing and reifying classic Western religious categories and identities, such as “Hindu,” “Muslim,” or “Sikh” and instead research religious practices and discourses as used by the communities themselves.

The critique of Western views of religions comes not only from the field of religious studies. In recent years evangelical leaders and theologians in various parts of Asia have begun to fault the ways in which Western evangelicals have characterized and interacted with other religions. For example, Japanese theologian Jin Arai discusses the difficulty some Japanese Christians have in reconciling their Christian and their Japanese identities, seeing their difficulty as stemming in part from Western perceptions of religions. “For Western scholars, non-Christian religions are ‘other’ religions, and never ‘their own’ religions. As a result, they try to establish dialogues with different religious groups, to cooperate for social justice, and to participate in ‘other’ religions in order to enhance mutual understanding. However, ‘other’ religions are not ‘other’ but rather ‘our’ religions for Japanese people. This represents a distinct vantage point.” Arai further suggests that the Western understanding of non-Christian religions as other has had an impact on the practices and self-understanding of Japanese Christians: “Japanese Christian churches . . . have not provided their members adequate opportunities to reflect upon the relation between Christian tradition and non-Christian traditions. As a result, a fragmentation of our identity as both Christian and Japanese occurs.”⁴

Such critiques suggest that groups of evangelical Christ-followers ought to consider ways of understanding and interacting with non-Christian socioreligious communities that lead not to fragmentation of identities but toward integration. But how can the ecclesial identity of a group of Christ-followers be both integrated with, and at the same time distinct from, the social identity of their wider socioreligious community?

Hindu and Sikh Yesu Satsangs

To answer such questions, we consider a group of Yesu Satsangs in Northwest India. *Satsang* (lit. “truth gathering”) refers to a religious gathering, often occurring in homes or meeting halls, whose purpose is to worship, pray, and listen to and embrace truth as revealed by the Scriptures and gurus. Such gatherings may include songs, discourses, and other worship rituals. This study focuses on several Yesu Satsangs, or Jesus truth-gatherings, located in Punjab, eastern Himachal Pradesh, and northern Haryana, all in Northwest India.⁵ Four of the Yesu Satsang leaders live in predominately Hindu communities, and four live in predominately Sikh communities. An experience common among all eight leaders is that they all came to faith in Jesus through, and were disciplined in, churches and/or Christian parachurch organizations. Most led house churches for a time and, at various times since around 2000, came into contact with other leaders who were uncomfortable with the identity and practices of Christian churches. In particular, all of these lead-



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ers began to disagree with the ways in which Christian church identities and practices were viewed as distinctly “other” by their Hindu/Sikh friends and family, and which created barriers between them and others when sharing Christ.

Countering Christian “Otherness”

Christian pastors and churches in Northwest India have often distinguished themselves not only through their distinct beliefs but also through the practices that they have embraced or rejected. For their part, the Yesu Satsang leaders agree with Christian pastors that Christ-followers should practice rituals and a lifestyle that focus on Christ. They disagree, however, regarding the types of rituals and lifestyles that Christ-followers should and should not embrace. In particular, the Yesu Satsang leaders argue that Christian pastors have often promoted practices and teachings that perpetuate the social otherness of Christian churches. For example, some Christian leaders and missionaries have at times requested converts to express their new faith by adopting new names, dress, and Christian ritual practices. Concurrently, believers have also been instructed to reject Hindu or Sikh burial practices, as well as to avoid participating in or attending prayers and other religious rituals. To counter this tendency, the Yesu Satsang leaders have created several strategies to minimize the otherness that certain practices can produce.

First, these leaders *reframe and adapt current church practices* to minimize some of their Christian associations. An example of such a change involves the physical handling of the Bible. In order to symbolize the centrality of the Bible in satsang teaching, leaders often place it in a central position on a *rehal*, a traditional wooden stand, exactly where Hindu groups place an idol and Sikh groups put their sacred text, the Guru Granth Sahib. In addition, the Sikh Yesu Satsangs refer to the Bible by the Sikh term *bani*, or “word,” and at least one of the Hindu Yesu Satsangs calls the Bible the *Pran Veda*, or Life-Word/Knowledge. In these ways the Bible is honored and referenced in ways that would benefit Scripture according to Hindus and Sikhs and that, more broadly, signal an association with the Hindu and Sikh communities. Similarly, the Yesu Satsangs adapt the forms of the Lord’s Supper and baptism in ways that allow Hindus and Sikhs to see them as somewhat related to their own socioreligious communities.

Another way in which Yesu satsangis (or members of a satsang) and leaders seek to minimize their social otherness is to *de-emphasize the need for a change of social identity*, emphasizing instead the need for internal change. Hindu and Sikh relatives, when hearing a satsangi pray to or talk about Jesus, sometimes suspect that he or she has become a Christian. In response, satsangis commonly respond, “I have not changed my religion, but I have changed my heart.” Here “religion” (*dharma* in Hindi) is used to refer to the duties and responsibility to a community and its culture, not necessarily to doctrines, philosophies, or spiritual beliefs. Some of the satsangis thus argue that they can stay within the Hindu/Sikh religious community while changing the focus of their personal devotion to Jesus.

A third strategy used by Yesu Satsang leaders is to *give new followers of Christ more time to change practices and lifestyles* than many Christian pastors advocate. Rather than insisting that Hindus and Sikhs quickly adopt a set of rules and changes when they begin following Jesus, they instead argue that leaders should be more patient and should place high emphasis on the gradual work of God to transform people. For example, while satsang leaders desire their satsangis to stop worshipping idols, they do not set a rigid timetable for this change but will give the satsangis

time to come to this decision on their own. Such an approach, the leaders assert, will bring about authentic changes in the person, perhaps also fewer disruptions between the believer and his or her socioreligious community. The Yesu Satsang leaders thus attempt to emphasize a process of change that, they hope, will not result in the type of otherness or estrangement created by some Christian churches and practices.

A fourth strategy of Yesu Satsang leaders is to *resist demonizing Hinduism and Sikhism*. Many Christians in Northwest India object to Hindu and Sikh practices not simply because of different ideologies, such as Hindu polytheism or devotion to the Sikh scriptures, but also because of the belief that Hindu/Sikh practices are intrinsically demonic and that any contact with them could allow evil power to enter the practitioners. Yesu Satsang leaders do generally believe in the power of demons to possess or influence people. They do not agree, however, that Hindu and Sikh practices and scriptures are in themselves demonic. For example, Navdeep, a Sikh Yesu Satsang leader, was told by a pastor to say, “Whatever Sikhs are doing, they are doing for Satan” (P).⁶ However, after learning about a Yesu Satsang from a friend, Navdeep came to believe that Sikh practices and scriptures were not inherently evil. In fact, such scriptures could contain “some truth” that agreed with the Bible. He thus rejects the sense that Sikh practices necessarily contain evil properties that affect people.

Padman, a leader of a Hindu Yesu satsang for his family and parents, also resists the idea that his people and family follow and worship Satan. Having heard pastors criticize his own Yesu Satsang, he says, “[We] are not taken into consideration generally by pastors. . . . And [my satsang] is, it is totally [labeled] as ‘Devil’s workshop.’ Openly! In churches it is opposed, and it is labeled as this. Not God’s. It is totally Devil’s. . . . So, if somebody will say to my father that you are worshipping a devil, so what will be the reaction?” (E).

In contrast, Padman draws from Acts 17 the idea that his Hindu family and community are worshippers of “the unknown God.” Just as Paul acknowledged that the Athenians’ interest in God was valid but incomplete, so Padman affirms the overall questing spirit and sensitivity of his community. They are not, he asserts, under Satanic influence, but they do need guidance toward a greater knowledge of God through Jesus.

Use of Hindu/Sikh Practices

Though the Yesu Satsangs retain and adapt certain practices that are shared with local and global Christ-following communities, they have also incorporated select Hindu/Sikh practices and in various ways are seeking to reidentify themselves with their Hindu/Sikh communities. Implicitly critiquing a bounded understanding of religion and religious community, they have chosen to follow various practices that involve language, *bhakti* (or devotion), and symbols.

Language. Many Yesu Satsang leaders have made changes in the way they identify themselves in terms of their religious community, including their use of greetings. One self-ascription used among Hindus is “Hindu Yesu bhakt” (Hindu Jesus devotee). Ravi, a Hindu Yesu Satsang leader, reflects on this phrase: “I always say it like this, ‘I am not a Christian, I am a Hindu Yesu Bhakt.’ Then I am ready for their questions, like, ‘You believe in Jesus, then how are you a Hindu?’ Then I say, ‘On my [birth certificate] and my father’s it is written ‘Hindu.’ And I live in Hindustan [India], and I speak Hindi. That is why I am a Hindu. And also Hindu is not a religion, it’s a community’” (H).

As this quotation indicates, many Hindus and Sikhs associate a Yeshu satsangi with the Christian community once the satsangi begins to pray or mention the name "Yeshu." In response, Ravi clearly distances himself from the Christian community and embraces a Hindu identity.

Just as some Hindu Yeshu satsangis call themselves Hindu, some of the Sikh Yeshu satsangis continue to call themselves Sikh. When I asked one satsangi about her Sikh identity, she responded that one of the literal meanings of "Sikh" is "learner." She went on to explain: "I am still Sikh. . . . People have said that 'you are now Christian.' And we have told them, 'We don't have any change in our clothes. So we change only our heart. We change only our life. So how you can say that we . . . are now Christian? We are still Sikh. We are learning'" (E).

In addition to self-ascriptions, the satsang leaders encourage the use of other local terms. While many Christians in Punjab often greet each other with "Jai Masih di" (Praise the Messiah), the Sikh Yeshu Satsang leaders encourage their satsangis to retain the Sikh greeting "Sat Sri Akal" (God is ultimate Truth). Instead of "amen," the Sikh Yeshu Satsangs use the Punjabi word *satbachan* (true word), and the Hindu Yeshu Satsangs use *tathaastu* (so be it). Likewise, "Satguru Yeshu" (True-Guru Jesus) often replaces "Prabhu Yeshu Masih" (Lord Jesus Christ/Messiah) as a title for Jesus. In each case the choice of language is designed to create association and identity with the Hindu/Sikh communities while also facilitating worship and teaching.

The path and worship practices of bhakti. Yeshu Satsang leaders generally shape worship gatherings to reflect the reverent and devotional gatherings of many Hindu bhakti groups or a Sikh *gurdwara* (temple). "Bhakti" refers to the tradition known as *bhakti marga*, which emphasizes the role of devotion and self-surrender in obtaining *moksha*, or salvation. Hindu bhakti sects and traditions are prevalent throughout India and vary in location and emphasis. In Northwest India, bhakti teachings helped to shape and inspire various leaders and movements, including those who would eventually identify themselves as Sikhs. While Hindu and Sikh bhakti may be directed to various gods, the Yeshu Satsangs direct their bhakti to Jesus.

One practice through which the Yeshu Satsang leaders express and promote ideals of bhakti devotion is the use of *bhajans*, or *kirtans*, which are a particular genre of devotional music intimately tied to Hindu and Sikh bhakti traditions.⁷ The use of bhajans shapes the ecclesial and social identity of the satsangs in two ways. First, since Hindus and Sikhs associate the sound and style of the bhajans with the Hindu/Sikh communities, the Yeshu Satsang leaders use bhajans to express their own Hindu/Sikh identities to their neighbors. One satsang leader, for example, refuses to use worship songs common among Christian churches of the area because they reflect "a Western style of worship." Instead, he uses a book of bhajans compiled by other Yeshu Satsangs that sound more like the Bollywood bhakti bhajans that the Hindu people in his area like. Such an association is important for him, since he is conscious that his Hindu neighbors hear the music that his Yeshu Satsang sings. The Hindu associations of certain bhajans thus help foster a social connection between the Yeshu Satsang and the surrounding Hindu community.

Second, in addition to the connection to the Hindu/Sikh communities, bhajans help some satsangis feel close to God by evoking feelings of peace and the "right" atmosphere through which to approach and relate to the divine. For example, one satsangi, who enjoyed bhajans growing up, reflects on those that she now sings

in the Yeshu Satsang. "When we sing bhajans, when we pray with the bhajans, then I feel very good at that time because we feel that we are not on the earth. It seems that we are flying in the heaven. I like this part [of the satsang] very much" (H).

Symbolism. Though Hindu sects of Northwest India use symbols less than those of South India,⁸ symbols still form an important part of most Hindu worship gatherings. For this reason the Hindu Yeshu Satsangs incorporate select Hindu symbols into their satsangs. For example, when preparing for Communion, some leaders use the *diya* (oil lamp), incense, and coconut. These objects, especially the coconut, are important symbols for some Hindus, creating an atmosphere that connotes worship of the divine.

In addition to using a coconut, satsang leaders always sit on the floor, use Indian instruments such as the tabla and harmonium, use a *rehal* for the Bible, and sometimes blow the *shankh* (shell horn), which is commonly blown in Hindu worship. When used, such Hindu symbols create a valued association with the Hindu community. One satsangi explains, "This is our Indian culture. That's why we are using this. [We] want to give the message to others that we can serve the Lord in an Indian style" (H). In these instances, Hindu symbols help to counter the contradictory message that followers of Jesus are not Indian, or are "other," having abandoned their Indian (Hindu) culture.

Achieving a New Ecclesial Identity

The Yeshu Satsangs of this study are still very new, and any analysis must be seen as provisional at best. Still, their use of practices and identity markers are consistent with some of the nonbounded, Asian definitions of religion highlighted by recent scholarship. In particular, Yeshu satsangis are seeking to identify socially with their Hindu/Sikh socioreligious communities through various practices that they are selectively adapting to shape a distinct, Christ-focused ecclesial identity. In these ways they seek to transcend and mend identity fragmentation.

The types of identities that the Yeshu Satsangs attempt to forge are similar to what sociologists have called an "achieved identity."⁹ These are identities that counter or modify the ascribed identities that they have received from their Hindu/Sikh and the Christian communities. To do so, they embrace what sociologist Margaret Archer has called "emergent properties."¹⁰ According to Archer, a people and a community derive their identity from any number of practices and beliefs. People select from and engage certain practices that they feel are important for relationship within the community and for creating or sustaining a personal and corporate identity. These practices thus have emergent properties that can accomplish particular social and cultural goals. The practices make up people's cultural repertoire, or "cultural toolkit," as sociologist Ann Swidler describes them,¹¹ which helps them successfully navigate and shape their own roles and identities.

The Yeshu Satsangs have created practices that, they hope, will accomplish at least two goals. On the one hand, they accept practices of Hindu/Sikh culture in order to affirm an ascribed identity that they share with the larger Hindu/Sikh community. On the other hand, they modify or reframe these practices to forge an identity that expresses their devotion and commitment to Jesus. They have thus sought to enlarge their repertoire to achieve an ecclesial identity (focused on Christ) that also affirms a wider and socially ascribed identity.

Why are the Yeshu Satsang leaders so concerned with questions of identity? First of all, such identity negotiation is important

for their *evangelism*. Yeshu satsangis talk about the desire to witness more effectively to their Hindu/Sikh friends and family by lowering what they see as unnecessary and unhelpful barriers put up by the Christian church. Evangelism is thus a major motivation. In addition, the attention to identity addresses many satsangis' desire for cultural belonging. Rather than accepting practices that place them in the "other" (Christian) socioreligious community, the Yeshu Satsang leaders seek to remain connected to the communities that gave them birth and social structure. I suggest that this latter reason provides rich material for theological reflection. Hindu/Sikh practices not only provide an opportunity to enhance evangelism, but they also in some sense express God's presence and activity within the larger culture. Rather than demonize these communities and their practices, the satsangis are open to consider how God has placed evidence of himself within these practices. Thus bhakti, for example, provides a helpful framework through which to pursue and express devotion to God. With such a sense, it is not a contradiction to embrace a Hindu/Sikh identity, and even celebrate it, while also embracing Christ as one's Savior.

In light of the attempt by Yeshu Satsang leaders to reembrace Hindu/Sikh practices while remaining committed to Jesus, we might question views commonly inherent in church practices among Western evangelicals.¹² For many evangelicals, these practices and their accompanying symbols are important primarily because of their missional value. Also, because Western evangelicals have often emphasized countercultural ecclesiologies, cultural practices are used and "contextualized" so as to present a clear and Christ-focused alternative to the prevailing socioreligious culture.

Though such concerns are important and valid, the Yeshu Satsangs are perhaps more positive in the view they advance of Hindu/Sikh practices and communities. Rather than viewing them with skepticism, we can imagine that Hindu/Sikh practices may contain aspects of God's goodness that await to be fully developed by the aid of the church. When a church sees itself in

a positive relationship with its context, it would seek to present not only an alternative world but a better world.¹³ In other words, the practices and identities of ecclesial communities represent the longing of people, not to counter their socioreligious context, but to fulfill it. In this respect there is perhaps merit in revisiting aspects of the classic fulfillment theology of Farquhar and others,¹⁴ not as an apologetic seeking to convince Hindus to follow Christ, but as a theology of how Hindu (and other) socioreligious communities possess symbolic longings that reflect God's presence and handiwork.

Conclusion

The Yeshu Satsangs of Northwest India, though relatively new and tentative in their formation, nonetheless help to address an important question regarding insider movements, or people who in various ways follow Christ "inside" their non-Christian socioreligious community. Not only do the satsangs show that such Christ-followers need not remain churchless, but they also raise a needed critique of bounded understandings of religious practices and identities. In addition, the way in which they frame religion and religious identities creates space for a church to develop a distinct and Christ-focused ecclesial identity while at the same time affirming a Hindu/Sikh socioreligious identity. Finally, the trajectory of the Yeshu Satsangs opens up helpful and rich theological possibilities regarding the ways in which God might use a church not only to counter aspects of culture but also to activate elements that he himself has built into that culture. The development of relationships with the larger Hindu/Sikh culture needs to be seen as more than just a means to the end of evangelism. It is quite possible that practices that encourage a greater level of congruity between a church's ecclesial and social identities will lay a strong foundation for understanding more deeply why and how to be church in the midst of a variety of multifaith contexts.

Notes

- Herbert Hoefler, *Churchless Christianity* (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 2001).
- See Jacqueline Suthren Hirst and John Zavos, "Riding a Tiger? South Asia and the Problem of 'Religion,'" *Contemporary South Asia* 14, no. 1 (2005): 3–20.
- See Kathinka Froystad, ed., *Blended Boundaries: Caste, Class, and Shifting Faces of "Hinduness" in a North Indian City* (New Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005); Peter Gottschalk, *Beyond Hindu and Muslim: Multiple Identity in Narratives from Village India* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000); Dominique-Sila Khan, *Crossing the Threshold: Understanding Religious Identities in South Asia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004); Harjot Oberoi, ed., *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994); and Margrit Pernau, "Multiple Identities and Communities: Re-Contextualizing Religion," in *Religious Pluralism in South Asia and Europe*, ed. Jamal Malik and Helmut Reifeld (New Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), 147–69.
- Jin Arai, "Religious Education in Christ-with-Culture from a Japanese Perspective," *Religious Education* 91, no. 2 (1996): 222, 223; see also Jonathan Y. Tan, "Rethinking the Relationship between Christianity and World Religions, and Exploring Its Implications for Doing Christian Mission in Asia," *Missiology: An International Review* 39, no. 4 (2011): 497–509.
- I became acquainted with some of the leaders of these satsangs while living and working in North India 2005–8 and then conducted research among them for six months in 2010.
- In this study I indicate the language of the original quotation by (E), (H), or (P) (English, Hindi, or Punjabi). All quotations are from my research in 2010.
- Ashok Da Ranade, *Music Contexts: A Concise Dictionary of Hindustani Music* (New Delhi: Promilla & Co., 2006), and John Stratton Hawley, "The Music in Faith and Morality," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52, no. 2 (1984): 243–62.
- Sikhism has had a profound impact on worship practices in Northwest India, particularly through its de-emphasis of symbols. As a result, many religious sects in the area use symbols much less than do groups in South India.
- Nancy T. Ammerman, "Religious Identities and Religious Institutions," in *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Michele Dillon (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), 207–27; Phillip E. Hammond, "Religion and the Persistence of Identity," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 27, no. 1 (1988): 1–11; Lori Peek, "Becoming Muslim: The Development of a Religious Identity," *Sociology of Religion* 66, no. 3 (2005): 215–42; R. Stephen Warner, "Work in Progress toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 5 (1993): 1044–93.
- Margaret Scotford Archer, *Structure, Agency, and the Internal Conversation* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), 5.
- Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review* 51 (April 1986): 273–86; see also her *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2001).
- In the following I draw on William Dyrness's recent discussion regarding practices of "poetic theology" (*Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011]).
- Ibid.*, p. 245.
- J. N. Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1913).