

# Book Reviews

*Ecclesial Identities in a Multi-Faith Context: Jesus Truth-Gatherings (Yeshu Satsangs) among Hindus and Sikhs in Northwest India*, by Darren Todd Duerksen (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015, pp. 292)

—Reviewed by Herbert Hoefler



Many years ago, I gave a presentation of my research in South India among “non-baptized believers in Christ” (who have subsequently wisely named themselves *Jesu Bhaktas*) at the US Center for World Mission (now known as the Venture Center) in Pasadena, California. In the discussion afterwards, the sainted Dr. Ralph Winter made his usual prescient

observation: “Perhaps you should have titled your book not “Churchless Christianity” but “Christianityless Churches.”

At the time of my research in the mid-70s, there were only a few gatherings of *Jesu Bhaktas*, notably gatherings of women in Sivagasi and Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu. However, forty years later, with the Holy Spirit blessing the efforts of a few Western missionaries and several *Jesu Bhakta* leaders, “Christianityless Churches” have been forming in many parts of India. Darren Duerksen’s book, *Ecclesial Identities in a Multi-Faith Context*, records how these church groups are functioning in Northwest India.

One consequence of the formation of these groups was a new reality “on the ground.” It was no longer a theoretical proposition or a few isolated individual instances. Initially, there was strong opposition from most Indian church leaders and a few missiologists. In my own case, it was the strong disagreement by our Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) partner church leadership over my involvement with *Jesu Bhaktas* that led to my removal as Area Director. The support within the Indian church came primarily from Indian mission agencies whose field missionaries reported the necessity of approaching caste Hindu evangelism in a less churchy way. Dalits want a non-Hindu form of church, and Dalit church leaders resented that a different form of church might develop that was not under their leadership. Once it had developed, it was a reality to be reckoned with and recognized.

Duerksen similarly reports that most of the *satsang* leaders he interviewed had developed this approach as part of their

mission outreach, indeed as an outgrowth of their church house groups. They did not seem to face opposition from their church leaders, so it appears that at least the church leaders in that region have recognized the necessity of this new form of church among caste Hindus and Sikhs. The churches in South India are more heavily Dalit, so the resentment and opposition are understandably greater there.

The sociological theory that Duerksen uses likewise focuses on the realities on the ground. He carefully looks for the visible markers that identify these groups as church (pp. 146–59). Duerksen systematically demonstrates how “emergentist” theory delineates criteria and guidelines for describing and evaluating a cultural development that is only emerging, in a state of flow and change (p. 123). In this regard, Duerksen provides a significant new tool and insight into the Indian insider movements. He demonstrates that a sociological tool such as this can be a great service to missiologists both in understanding what is happening and in interpreting it to others. In addition, his thorough, consistent use of this tool commends the book as a sociological case study.

Duerksen places the *satsangs* in the vast, ancient *bhakti* tradition of Indian religion, whether in Hinduism or Sikhism or Sufi Islam. Duerksen’s interviewees point out the considerable benefits of approaching Christian faith as *bhakti*:

- It crosses religious lines and adapts religious forms. (p. 52)
- It enables Christians to express their faith in a classical Indian form, thus affirming their common cultural roots and identity. (p. 58)
- It minimizes the huge evangelistic issue of Christianity being perceived as totally “Other” in the society (p. 69), remaining sociologically “Hindu.” (p. 87)
- It frees devotees to avoid simply demonizing all of Hinduism and Sikhism, embracing all that is good and helpful for their spiritual path. (p. 102)
- It provides a form of piety that does not contradict, but complements, traditional church piety. (p. 116)
- It promotes an emphasis on inner spiritual change, which frees devotees from the external changes expected in most church practices. (p. 148)
- It can utilize practices from church traditions, particularly Pentecostal, that complement a *bhakti* tradition. (p. 192)
- In summary: “the leaders seek to shape ecclesial identities that are ideologically aligned with Christian teachings from the Bible, but that are structurally associated to varying degrees to the Sikh and Hindu communities in their areas.” (p. 112)

On the other hand, emergentist theory recognizes that there is a great deal of tension and flux in the process of cultural change. Duerksen records the varying opinions and approaches of the *satsang* leaders in regard to how much church practice can be brought into the worship and still

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be authentically classical Indian bhakti. The practice of the biblical sacraments becomes particularly problematic, as these tend to be identifiers of Western church identity (pp. 133–35), but Western Pentecostal practices such as loud, long prayers and “Hallelujahs” have been brought into the satsangs (pp. 140–41).

Duerksen reports that the aspect of Pentecostalism that has had the most profound and positive effect has been the emphasis on the supernatural power of God (p. 149). The leaders recount how miraculous visions, dreams, healings, and answers to prayers were formative in their own commitment to Christ (pp. 164–73). They, in turn, boldly and regularly pray for the same in the lives of their worshippers. Indeed, such experiences are the typical way people come to Christ across the world among caste Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists (cf. Hoefler, “Gospel Proclamation of the Ascended Lord,” *Missiology*, Oct. 2005).

Duerksen’s interviewees express strong convictions concerning some of the critical markers of orthodox Christian faith. In his concluding chapter, he traces how the ecclesiastical markers of the satsangs are remarkably similar to those described in the book of Acts (pp. 202–39). He reports that “The *Yeshu satsang* leaders’ teaching on idol worship and the exclusivity of Jesus would thus be very similar to the teaching of other Christian leaders” (p. 113). Thus, Duerksen ably demonstrates that the common church accusation of syncretism has little basis in the facts on the ground:

The ways in which the disciple community’s ecclesial identity can reflect continuity and discontinuity with its traditions thus correlates with the dynamics that the *Yeshu satsangs* face as they seek a level of continuity with the Hindu or Sikh bhakti traditions of their context while also establishing clear Christological foci for their communities. (p. 215)

One important insight that surfaces in this research is that the satsangs cannot be reduced to a manipulative evangelistic strategy. Rather, the satsangs must be rooted first and foremost as an expression of authentic cultural identity. He quotes one follower of Christ, Swami Dayanand Bharati, who speaks of such cultural expressions of *Yeshu bhakti* as one’s “birthright” (p. 251). Another of the leaders expressed it this way: he “values the satsang practices both for the relationship it creates with his family and community, but also for their utilitarian function of bringing people towards faith in Christ” (p. 187).

Duerksen concludes his book with some speculations as to where and how these insider movements might develop.

The key development must be the eventual rising up of leaders from the satsangs themselves. As Duerksen points out, the current leadership has roots in the historic churches of India and its traditions. One would pray that the Spirit would raise up bhaktas (devotees of Jesus) who can lead their own people. In the history of missions, for example, the great movements to Christ typically occur only after the missionaries have left.

As stated above, Duerksen mentions briefly one such leader from South India, Swami Dayanand Bharati. There is another *Jesu Bhakta sannnyasin* running an *ashram* in Varanasi, Swami Muktanand. What one would pray for is the unfolding of *Jesu Bhakta* communities, ecclesial expressions, and leaders as ethnically diverse as India itself.

Theologically, a fundamental affirmation must be that these *Jesu Bhaktas* are indeed integral members of the body of Christ. In Scripture, the term “body of Christ” holds much more theological currency than the term “church.” In the classic passage on the body of Christ, St. Paul begins by identifying the one criterion for participation in the body: the testimony that “Jesus is Lord . . . by the Holy Spirit” (I Cor 12:3). Paul points out what Duerksen commends in his research: that there are many varieties of the Spirit’s expression, “together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours” (I Cor 1:2). **IJFM**