

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.

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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).

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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 missiologists 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

and his colleagues conducted interviews with eighty-four *Yeshu Bhaktas* known to local pastors and determined that, though these people lacked knowledge in certain areas, they generally had “a wonderful clarity on the essentials of the Christian faith.”²² Hoefler then conducted a quantitative survey of 810 people to gather wider statistics regarding *Yeshu Bhaktas*. From the quantitative study Hoefler determined that perhaps five percent of Hindus and Muslims in Chennai were *Yeshu Bhaktas* and sixty percent of these women.

As indicated above, data from Hoefler’s book has helped to catalyze the current debate on Hindu insider movements. Of particular interest and importance to this study, however, are Hoefler’s ecclesiology and reflections regarding the ecclesial identity of the *Yeshu Bhaktas*. To understand this I will briefly review the background to, and context of, Hoefler’s study.

Hoefler’s interest in *Yeshu Bhaktas* began in the mid-1970s with his work with Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute in Madras (Chennai). During that time theologians at Gurukul were discussing recent articles and debates by Kaj Baago, M. M. Thomas and Leslie Newbigin regarding the identity of the Indian Christian church, and how baptism and conversion helped or hindered this identity. Kaj Baago, in his 1966 article “The Post-colonial Crisis in Missions,” asked several provocative questions, including:

Must Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims become Christians in order to belong to Christ? Do they have to be incorporated into church organizations which are utterly alien to their religious traditions? Do they have to call themselves Christians—a word which to them signifies a follower of the Western religion? Should they necessarily adopt the Christian traditions, customs and rites which often have their root in Western culture more than in the Gospel? Are all these things conditions for belonging to Christ?²³

consistent in this study.

22. Hoefler, *Churchless Christianity*: 61.

23. Baago goes on to answer his own questions, saying, “The answer is obviously ‘No.’ The Christian religion, to a large extent a product of the West, cannot and shall not become the religion of all nations and races. The resurgence and revival of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam has made that clear. The missionary task of today cannot, therefore, be to draw men out of their religions into another religion, but rather to leave Christianity (the organized religion) and go inside Hinduism and Buddhism, accepting these religions as one’s own, in so far as they do not conflict with Christ,

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A few years later M. M. Thomas published a landmark study that also critiqued the Indian church and proposed the need for a “Christ-centred secular fellowship outside the Church.”²⁴ Lesslie Newbigin entered the discussion, first responding to Baago²⁵ and then to Thomas. When Thomas responded to Newbigin’s critique a subsequent correspondence developed into the so-called “Thomas-Newbigin debates.”²⁶ A significant issue in these debates regarded the practice of baptism and the importance of an institution identifiable as a “church.” Both agreed that the social identity of the existing Christian church was problematic and that “radical questions need to be asked regarding the form of the Church.”²⁷ However, each had different answers for the radical questions they posed. For his part, Newbigin desired to uphold the visible and distinctive nature of the church.²⁸ Thomas, on the other hand, argued that Christians should recognize and encourage the presence of Christ-followers outside of the empirical church as what he called the “new humanity of Christ” or “Christ-centered fellowships.”²⁹ Such followers and any fellowships they may form should be distinct from the existing church and should not be constrained by the church’s institutions, rituals or doctrines. Thomas asserted, however, that these followers and fellowships are related to the church through their common focus on Christ.

Of particular interest in this discussion is Thomas’s articulation of a version of the classic visible/invisible doctrine of the Church. On the one hand, he affirms the historic and institutional Church and its various rituals as a visible expression of God’s kingdom. On the other, however, he

and regarding them as the presupposition, the background and the framework of the Christian gospel in Asia. Such a mission will not lead to the progress of Christianity or the organized Church, but it might lead to the creation of Hindu Christianity or Buddhist Christianity.” Baago, “The Post-Colonial Crisis of Missions,” 331–32.

24. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation*, 13.

25. Newbigin, “The Finality of Christ.”

26. See Newbigin, “Review of Salvation and Humanisation”; Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation*; Thomas, Newbigin, and Krass, “Baptism, the Church, and Koinonia”; Thomas, *Some Theological Dialogues*. For an overview, see Hunsberger, “Conversion and Community”; Richard, “Community Dynamics in India and the Praxis of ‘Church.’”

27. Newbigin, “Review of Salvation and Humanisation,” 76.

28. Newbigin summarizes his viewpoint, saying, “The New Testament knows nothing of a relationship with Christ which is purely mental and spiritual, unembodied in any of the structures of human relationships.” Newbigin, “The Finality of Christ,” 96.

29. Thomas, “Baptism, the Church, and Koinonia,” 73.

advocates for fellowships that exist outside of, and may not be as visible as, the institutional church, but are nonetheless part of God's kingdom.

As Hoefer and Gurukul's research institute engaged this debate, they conducted a series of conferences to discuss the issues of baptism and how it hindered "the expression of our solidarity to the new humanity in Christ which transcends all communal or caste solidarities."³⁰ In particular, Gurukul scholars considered the phenomenon of *Yeshu Bhaktas* as an example of Thomas's "new humanity." The church, they contended, should accept these *bhaktas* as Christ followers, even though they have not taken baptism in the existing church.³¹ Hoefer's subsequent *Churchless Christianity* further developed this theme, encouraging the Christian Church to recognize and accept *Yeshu Bhaktas* as a part of "Jesus' flock who are not in our fold."³²

As this background shows, Hoefer in *Churchless Christianity* engages relatively recent theological questions and debates regarding the identity of the church in India, and Hoefer's solution to these questions, in part, draws from and builds on aspects of Thomas's ecclesiology. Like Thomas (and Newbigin), Hoefer recognizes that *Yeshu Bhaktas* find it socially difficult to take baptism and join the institutional church. However, and also similar to Thomas, Hoefer believes that *Yeshu Bhaktas* are somehow a part of God's kingdom. Thomas's "Christ-centered fellowships," asserts Hoefer, provide a possible model, articulating that "fellowships" or various individuals can remain separate from the church sociologically and theologically, but have membership in the wider kingdom of God. As Hoefer states,

The (*Yeshu Bhakta*) cannot be considered members of the church (nor, I feel, can they be called "Christians," for that is a title ascribed to any who take baptism). Yet, they certainly are part of our fellowship in Christ through faith. They are the sheep of Jesus' flock who are not in our fold, but they are fellow-sheep responding to the voice of the same Master and entering in by the same gate (Jn. 10:9ff).³³

Thus, similar to Thomas, Hoefer asserts that God's kingdom has both visible and invisible "churches," and that *Yeshu Bhakta* should be

30. Philip, "A History of Baptismal Practices and Theologies," 321.

31. Rajashekar, "The Question of Unbaptized Believers," 323.

32. Hoefer, *Churchless Christianity*, 164.

33. *Ibid.*, 164.

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considered a part of a wider “faith community” that is related to but distinct from a visible “church community.”

Though many of the *Yeshu Bhaktas* that Hoefler has in view are individuals, he at times suggests that such individuals could meet together in local gatherings, such as a Bible study or new “Hindu” forms.³⁴ Such visible gatherings, however, are still not, in Hoefler’s view, the sociological or theological equivalent of the church. He says:

We also must distinguish between church communities and faith communities. The church is a faith community, but not all faith communities are churches. One can be a part of a Bible Study group or a prayer group quite separate from one’s congregation. A faith community may be a group with whom one relates face-to-face, or one may participate at a distance . . . The faith community is the classical “invisible Church,” with a capital “C.” One can be a part of the Church and never part of the visible church.³⁵

I find it important to note that though Hoefler is concerned to maintain a sociological and theological distinction between the *Yeshu Bhaktas* and the church, he makes a strong plea for the church to be open to and serve the *Yeshu Bhaktas*. In this he continues to articulate the original overall hope that he and his Gurukul colleagues voiced in the mid-1970s. Since churches and *Yeshu Bhaktas* are all a part of the same “fellowship,” Hoefler asserts, churches should seek to serve *Yeshu Bhakta* within the context of Hindu communities where they can remain influential, and not insist that they take baptism and thus leave those communities and thus lose their influence.³⁶

In summary, how helpful is Hoefler’s (and Thomas’) ecclesiology of the visible/invisible church for understanding the ecclesial identities of *Yeshu satsangs*? Though I recognize and appreciate Hoefler’s intent to create an ecclesial and eschatological space for the *Yeshu Bhaktas* and *satsangs*, his application of an ecclesiology that differentiates between a visible “church” and an invisible “fellowship” has, I believe, led Hoefler’s critics to misunderstand his “churchless Christianity,” and to dismiss people and groups such as the *Yeshu satsangs* as unbiblical.³⁷ Relat-

34. Hoefler, *Churchless Christianity*, 219.

35. *Ibid.*, 225.

36. *Ibid.*, 167.

37. For example, see Hedlund, “Present-day Independent Christian Movements,” 56–57.

edly, Hoefler's ecclesiology makes unclear the way groups such as *Yeshu satsangs* should read and apply biblical and theological resources that would be applied to visible "churches."

In light of the difficulties raised by an ecclesiology of the visible/invisible church, and particularly by a narrow and sacramental understanding of "church," I suggest that a better theological approach recognizes any gathering of committed Christ-followers as a church that are in turn related to each other as part of the universal church. Thus, in this study I proceed by affirming that, if and when *Yeshu satsangs* and the Indian Christian churches display a commitment to Christ and each other, they are both "church" in the theological sense.³⁸ Such an affirmation, I believe, allows me to affirm that there exists a plurality of ecclesial identities and expressions of "church" in India. Also, the conviction that a group committed to Christ and each other theologically forms a "church" allows me to look closely at the ecclesial identity of the *Yeshu satsangs* in and through a closer reading of their social and cultural context. This basis also then allows me to be more precise in analyzing the way the *Yeshu satsangs* are seeking ecclesial identities that contrast with the Christian church. I will further demonstrate the importance of and need for ecclesiological clarity below, particularly in reference to Dasan Jeyaraj. First, however, I will turn to a scholar who has championed and advanced aspects of Hoefler's work.

H. L. Richard

H. L. Richard is a missionary scholar who has published numerous studies related to Hindu followers of Christ, including books on the life of N. V. Tilak and K. Subba Rao.³⁹ Along with other insider movement advocates, Richard believes that movements of Christ-followers can and should spread "inside" religious communities.⁴⁰ Though Richard writes

38. This in part reflects my Anabaptist perspective of church, which theologically affirms as "church" any local gathering of believers who share a commitment to Christ and each other and express this through common practices. See Snyder, *From Anabaptist Seed*. However, though practices such as baptism are integral to this, I (and other Anabaptists) would place less emphasis on the actual form of the practice and more emphasis on the meaning ascribed by the community.

39. Richard, *Following Jesus in the Hindu Context*; Richard, *Exploring the Depths of the Mystery of Christ*.

40. As the reference to insider movements suggests, many of its advocates, including Richard, have been influenced by and expand upon the teachings of Donald McGavran, and particularly the concepts of the homogenous unit principle and people

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on various issues related to this, I will focus on two issues that have particular bearing on how to understand the ecclesial identity of *Yeshu satsangs*.

The first issue regards the nature of the Hindu religion. Richard asserts that Hinduism should not be viewed as a single “religion” but as a cultural community with a wide range of beliefs and cultural practices. As Richard says, “‘Hinduism’ is a complex amalgamation of phenomena that cannot possibly be sensibly understood as ‘a religion.’ At the very least, various ‘religions’ need to be recognized within the complexity of ‘Hinduism.’”⁴¹ Richard is particularly interested in contrasting many of the traditional, Christian views that portray Hinduism as a monolithic set of beliefs.⁴² Such views do not allow Christians, in Richard’s view, to appreciate and address the wide variety of beliefs that exist under the banner of “Hinduism.” Such views also lead Christians to misunderstand how they should interact with, evangelize, and conduct Christian worship among and for Hindus.

In addition, however, and of particular importance to my study, Richard’s nuanced view of Hinduism is important for understanding Hindu insider movements such as the *Yeshu satsangs*. In particular, Richard emphasizes the possibility that many peoples’ “Hindu” identity is as much based on cultural practices and family/community relationships as it is on commitments to religious doctrines. If such is the case, at least for some Hindus, then it is possible for such Hindus to be wholly devoted to a deity such as Jesus while retaining a “Hindu” identity. Though I would caution (as perhaps Richard would) against minimizing the importance of religious doctrine in Hindu identity, Richard’s assessment has support from a growing literature in the sociology of Indian religions that point

movements. See McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*. Though a discussion of McGavran’s concepts are beyond the scope of this study, it is important to note that one area of his teachings that insider movement advocates expand upon is the assertion that the Gospel can spread within a religious community, and not just ethnic/language/class communities. Kevin Higgins summarizes this by saying, “As I use it, the phrase ‘Insider Movements’ encompasses not only (McGavran’s) earlier descriptions of people movements but adds ‘religion’ to the . . . list of aspects of ‘togetherness’ or unity. In other words, I suggest that followers of Jesus can continue to embrace at least some of their people’s religious life, history, and practice without compromising the gospel or falling into syncretism.” Higgins, “The Key to Insider Movements,” 156. See also Lewis, “Insider Movements.”

41. Richard, “Religious Movements in Hindu Social Contexts,” 145n1.

42. Richard, *Hinduism*.

to the fluid and multi-centered nature of religious communities.⁴³ I thus build this study on Richard's assertion that people with a "Hindu" identity often select from a variety of religious, structural and cultural practices and meanings when expressing that identity. Because of this, a group of Jesus-followers can authentically claim and express a Hindu identity that does not conflict with their devotion to Jesus.

A second issue that Richard discusses regards the form and identity that would best facilitate a Christ-centered movement within the Hindu community. Though it is theoretically possible for Hindus to follow Jesus without leaving their Hindu community, what social or ecclesial form might this take? In 2007 Richard engaged Timothy Tennent in a discussion regarding Hindu followers of Jesus and ecclesiology.⁴⁴ The discussion was spurred in part by a 2005 article written by Tennent in which he critiques aspects of Hoefler's book (which also included an appendix by Richard). In his article Tennent raises several questions concerning ecclesiology, asking:

For example, can a Hindu or a Muslim or a postmodern American disillusioned with the institutional church come to Jesus Christ, accept him as Lord and Savior, and not unite with the visible church? Does someone have to use or accept the name "Christian" in order to belong to Christ? What is the meaning of baptism? Is it a public profession of one's personal faith in Christ, or does it also require incorporation into a visible community of believers?⁴⁵

To answer his own questions, Tennent reviews various theological traditions, as well as the Thomas-Newbigin debate and concludes that the "invisible" Christianity that Hoefler and M. M. Thomas advocate is contrary to biblical and traditional understandings of church. Further, Tennent states that such an invisible Christianity is not the only way for "Indian" forms of Christianity to develop, since there are many visible

43. For discussions regarding the constructed and multiple identities of historic and contemporary Hinduism see Pernau, "Multiple Identities"; Hedge, Bloch and Kep-pens, *Rethinking Religion in India*; Ludden, "Introduction"; Inden, *Imagining India*; Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*; Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*. For a contrasting view asserting that the beliefs and communities of Hinduism have long been distinct from others see Lorenzen, *Who Invented Hinduism?*

44. Richard, "Community Dynamics"; Tennent, "A Response to H. L. Richard's Community Dynamics"; Richard, "A Response to Timothy C. Tennent."

45. Tennent, "The Challenge of Churchless Christianity," 171.

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Christian churches in India that practice Indian traditions. He summarizes, “The churchless Christians should, in my view, be baptized and then, as members of a global movement (even if they continue to reject Westernized forms of worship), find creative ways to express their catholicity with the global church.”⁴⁶

In 2007 Richard responded in an article that, among other things, re-evaluated the Thomas-Newbiggin debate. In this he clarified that though Newbiggin was more committed than Thomas to a group or institution that could be identified as a “church,” Newbiggin was nonetheless aware of some of the unhelpful sociological meanings attached to the church in India. In addition, Newbiggin was open to Christ-centered fellowships that could exist outside of the existing Christian church and within Hindu society. However, as Richard shows, Newbiggin and Thomas’s debate became complicated in part because of differing but not well-defined ideas of what was meant by “Hinduism.” In conclusion Richard states, “The complex nature of ‘Hinduism,’ the complex nature of Indian society, the variety of expressions of existing ‘church’ in India, and the nature of the New Testament *ekklesia* cannot be brought together in any simplistically agreed manner.”⁴⁷ Nonetheless, Richard claims that Newbiggin and Thomas were closer in their overall agreement for “new patterns of corporate discipleship within Hindu cultures and communities.”⁴⁸

In his discussion with Tennent, Richard helpfully clarifies aspects of his understanding regarding the corporate nature of Christ-centered movements in the Hindu community. In response to Tennent’s charge that Richard and Hoefer encourage individual Christ-followers to remain isolated, Richard contends that he agrees with Newbiggin and opposes “the concept of individualistic discipleship to Jesus within the Hindu community.”⁴⁹ In addition, he indicates that a corporate identity or gathering is an important aspect of Christianity. He says, “I expect all followers of Jesus who take the New Testament seriously will agree with this. That there is a corporate aspect to discipleship is everywhere in the Bible.”⁵⁰

46. *Ibid.*, 174.

47. Richard, “Community Dynamics,” 193.

48. *Ibid.*, 193.

49. *Ibid.*, 192.

50. *Ibid.*, 192.

However, though Richard clarifies that he does not advocate an individualistic discipleship, in other writings Richard is clearly wary of establishing firm corporate identities. For example, in his discussion of the Newbigin/Thomas debate he highlights, and resonates with, Newbigin's distaste for what the latter calls "sectarianism" that hinders ecumenical relationships. In another article, Richard examines the Lingayat movement, the Vārkarī Vaishnavite sect, and the Kabirpanthis for possible patterns and forms for "church" among Hindus.⁵¹ Of these, the Christian church in India has most resembled the Lingayat sect, which has separated completely from Hindu caste society. In so doing, however, it has created a new caste and community and has become isolated from and uninfluential among other communities. Richard summarizes, "It is almost inconceivable that such an approach could result in anything but the birth of another, actually many, new castes and communities. Is this really a viable model for new Christ-centered movements?"⁵² More preferable, argues Richard, is the example of the Vaishnavites, a collection of sects who are broad, diverse and united by some core similarities. Using this as a possible model Richard asks:

Might it be preferable for Christ-focused people to become comfortable within their sociological communities, as seen in the Vārkarī Panth and other Vaishnava *sampradāyas* (sects)? Is it possible that the future shape of Christ movements in India will be less separated from Indian society, more incarnational, yet still opposed to hierarchical caste ideologically and (as far as is viable) in practice?⁵³

In the end, Richard concedes, "There are no simple answers to such questions, and history often takes turns that no one anticipates or plans."⁵⁴ He remains somewhat skeptical, however, of the ability of corporately identifiable followers of Christ to remain in close relationship with their own communities and castes.

One response to Richard, which I will build on, comes from one of the *Yeshu satsang* leaders of this study. Gaurav⁵⁵ has discussed the issue

51. Richard, "Religious Movements."

52. *Ibid.*, 144.

53. *Ibid.*, 144.

54. *Ibid.*, 144.

55. The names of all *Yeshu satsang* members and leaders have been changed to pseudonyms in this study for confidentiality purposes.

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of separate groups or “sects” with Richard and presented his own unpublished paper on the subject. Though short and undeveloped, Gaurav points to other, more recent *bhakti* sects in northwest India, such as the Radha Soami, who have developed a distinct identity, but have continued to attract people from a variety of religious and caste communities.⁵⁶ Some members of Radha Soami communities maintain dual identities with the Radha Soamis and their Hindu and Sikh communities. Further research is needed regarding the reasons for and means by which sects such as the Radha Soami continue to grow and form such identities. However, Gaurav’s thesis opens up the possibility that groups such as the *Yeshu satsangs* may be able to develop ecclesial identities that are identifiably unified and distinct in their devotion to Jesus while also closely identified with their Hindu and Sikh communities.

In summary, I find Richard’s discussion regarding the various sociological and religious aspects of Hindu identity important for a study of *Yeshu satsang* ecclesial identities. In this, Richard helpfully argues for the need to nuance and distinguish between the various meanings that people themselves give to a Hindu identity. In his discussion of corporate forms of identity, however, I find Richard theologically unclear. Whereas he agrees that a corporate element to discipleship is integral to biblical Christianity, he does not explain this theologically. Relatedly, though Richard helpfully and clearly discusses the dangers of associating a faith with one particular group or community, he stops short of placing this critique in conversation with an ecclesiology. He affirms a visible nature to discipleship, but is skeptical about how such a visible and corporate identity may impact the *Yeshu Bhaktas*’ ability to create a widespread movement. I appreciate these cautions, but theologically contend that a corporate identity is an integral aspect of ecclesiology. Further, and as Gaurav has suggested, I base this study on the belief that groups such as the *Yeshu satsangs* can provide a helpful model for how to be distinct from, yet sociologically related to, their Hindu and Sikh communities.

Dasan Jeyaraj

Dasan Jeyaraj is the Director for Training for Operation Mobilization, India. His doctoral research, conducted in 2001–2002 and published in 2010, followed a similar path as Hofer’s quantitative study in *Churchless Christianity*, investigating the presence and beliefs of what Jeyaraj calls

56. See also Juergensmeyer, “The Social Significance of Radha Soami.”

“followers of Christ outside of the church” in Chennai. An important part of Jeyaraj’s contributions are the analyses of a quantitative survey conducted with 12,166 respondents, of whom 390 respondents (3.20%) declared that they “follow Jesus Christ as their religious leader and that they do not associate with the Christian religion.”⁵⁷ He also collected interviews with pastors, first-generation Christians, and “mission leaders” regarding their views of followers of Christ outside the church.

Similar to Hoefler’s study, Jeyaraj’s research is helpful in providing data through which to better understand the numbers and profiles of people (in Chennai) that may be followers of Christ outside the church, the influences which led them to follow Jesus, and the common perceptions among Christian leaders about these people. Of particular importance to my research, however, are Jeyaraj’s ecclesiological reflections regarding this data. In this regard, the study suffers from a crucial lack of precision in two areas. The first is what Jeyaraj considers and labels a “movement.” There has been and continues to be, he asserts, a large “non-church movement” that goes back to the “early part of the nineteenth century.”⁵⁸ The thesis is striking and highly intriguing for those interested in insider movements. However, his only evidence for this are seven “non-church theologians” and one current “movement” whose lives and work span from the late nineteenth century to the present. Several of these leaders started groups and began or inspired the formation of *ashrams* (devotional centers). However, of these, only one group outlasted the founder, Subba Rao. Thus, though the leaders that Jeyaraj surveys provide important historical case studies of people who followed Christ in a Hindu context, they do not represent a “movement” in any sociological sense.

The second area of imprecision, and the one most relevant to my study, is Jeyaraj’s understanding of and use of the word “church.” Jeyaraj gives a definition of this at the beginning of his study, explaining that “church” refers to “the universal body of Christian believers and to local churches, and is here applied to the universal church and to all local churches in general.”⁵⁹ This definition emphasizes a theological understanding of church and highlights both its local and universal nature. However, he goes on to explain that those “outside the church” refers to

57. Jeyaraj, *Followers of Christ Outside the Church*, 241.

58. *Ibid.*, 42.

59. *Ibid.*, 31.

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those who “remain outside the organized church for various reasons.”⁶⁰ Jeyaraj acknowledges both the theological nature of the church, including its local manifestation, as well as the sociological, communal form that this has taken in India, and he seems to have in mind the latter when he speaks about a “non-church movement” and “followers of Christ outside of the church.”

Unfortunately, however, Jeyaraj’s distinctions are not always clear. For example, at one point Jeyaraj describes a well-known group of followers of Christ in the northern Indian city of Allahabad called the *Yeshu dabar*. This gathering began several years ago on the campus of a Christian agricultural university and has at times attracted thousands of people to worship, receive prayer for healing and hear the leader’s preaching about Jesus. Because the movement was not started through an existing church denomination, and because the leader uses some contextual forms for worship, Jeyaraj calls this an example of a current “movement outside of the church.” However, aside from its independent origins, it is unclear if or how its leader considers it “outside the church,” or how it differs from the many other churches that have started independent of any denominational affiliation. In such cases Jeyaraj blurs the distinctions between such groups and other “churches,” and further obscures the way these supposedly relate to the individual followers of Christ in Chennai.

In the conclusion of his study Jeyaraj more clearly defines his understanding of “church,” this time emphasizing historic and theological practices. The church, he says, is marked by baptism which, for him, is “the decisive step for joining the Christian community” and through which people “enroll themselves as members of the church.”⁶¹ In addition, a church is marked by regular worship, the verbal and non-verbal proclamation of the gospel, and the acknowledgement of its “hierarchy” or “church order” which people are meant to obey.⁶² Here Jeyaraj displays his own training and ordination in the Anglican Church and asserts that the 390 respondents, and many others like them, are staying out of this type of church. However, whereas Jeyaraj’s understanding of church is certainly valid, such a definition would exclude any number of believers, gatherings and “churches,” not just those who desire to in some ways remain in their Hindu communities.

60. Ibid., 33.

61. Ibid., 417.

62. Ibid., 418.

In summary, whereas Jeyaraj's study contributes helpful data regarding *Yesu Bhakta* in Chennai, and other Christians' views of them, I find that his lack of sociological and ecclesiological clarity in the area of "movements" and "church" hinders helpful discussion regarding such groups' ecclesial identity. Similar to what I stated above in regards to Hofer, in this study I thus seek to give greater theological and sociological clarity regarding the theological "church" identity of the *Yesu satsangs*, as well as how these seek to be sociologically distinct from the Christian churches in their area.⁶³

Roger Hedlund

Roger Hedlund has taught and researched in India since 1974, and many of his recent projects and publications have focused on what he calls "indigenous independent Indian churches."⁶⁴ Though Hedlund discusses many examples of such churches and offers various reflections based on these, I will focus on two particular contributions that he makes and how these relate to understanding ecclesial identities of *Yesu satsangs*.

The first of Hedlund's related contributions is his focus on New Christian Movements,⁶⁵ or the indigenous independent Indian churches (IICs).⁶⁶ Such churches, Hedlund shows, have been under-valued and under-researched because of their lack of association with historic, western-originated mission organizations and churches. The IICs, however, are examples of exciting and new Christian movements that in many ways are more "indigenous" to their historic counterparts. To help theorize and conceptualize the way the IICs relate to other Indian churches Hedlund adapts and uses the concept of "great" and "little" traditions.⁶⁷ In

63. A convention I use, in contrast to Jeyaraj, is to avoid phrases such as "outside of the church." As my research will show, even though the *Yesu satsangs* contrast themselves from local churches, their theological and sociological relationships to the church make labels such as "inside" and "outside" problematic.

64. Hedlund, *Quest for Identity*; Hedlund, "Introduction: Indigenous Christianity as a Field for Academic Research."; Hedlund, "The Witness of New Christian Movements in India"; Hedlund, "Present-day Independent Christian Movements: A South Asian Perspective."

65. Hedlund draws on the research and theories of Harold Turner on New Religious Movements. Turner, "Religious Movements in Primal (or Tribal) Societies."

66. I am introducing and using the acronym IIC based on Hedlund's "Independent indigenous Indian churches," though Hedlund himself does not use an acronym.

67. Hedlund adapts the concept of the great and little traditions as first developed by Robert Redfield. Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture*.

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the context of Indian Christianity, major denominational churches with foreign origins, such as the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Church of South India and Church of North India, represent the great tradition. In contrast, the little tradition “consists of lesser known small denominations, evangelical and Pentecostal movements, a host of independent churches and various fringe sects.”⁶⁸

As the above description suggests, an important differentiation between great and little tradition churches regards their indigeneity and independence from foreign origins. To help analyze their indigenous character, Hedlund makes a distinction between “indigenous” and “indigenized” churches. He explains, “Indigenisation, contextualization and Indianization are expressions of the effort by a non-indigenous body (one of alien origin and pattern) to reincarnate itself in the local culture and idiom.”⁶⁹ The prominent example of indigenization are the efforts of some of India’s great tradition churches to change foreign worship patterns and structures into those that reflect Indian culture.

Hedlund applauds the efforts of great tradition churches to indigenize, but contrasts this with churches that are indigenous by origin and nature. He explains, “Indigenous Indian Christianity is found in the Little Tradition of the so-called fringe sections largely (not exclusively) of Pentecostal, Charismatic or Evangelical origin.”⁷⁰

One of the reasons that the indigenous little tradition churches have been under-valued is that the great tradition churches have labeled them as sects. To better conceptualize their role in Indian Christianity, Hedlund argues that little tradition churches should instead be understood as “revitalization movements” within the larger Christian movement.⁷¹ Great tradition churches, Hedlund hopes, will recognize and embrace little tradition churches as important and new expressions of Christianity.⁷²

68. Hedlund, “Present-day Independent Christian Movements,” 51–52.

69. *Ibid.*, 51.

70. Hedlund, *Quest for Identity*, 3.

71. Hedlund develops the concept of “revitalization movements” as originally developed by anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace. See Wallace, “Revitalization Movements.” For further missiological examples and applications of the concept see Tippett, *Church Growth and The Word of God*; Tippett, *Introduction to Missiology*; Hiebert, Shaw and Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion*.

72. *Ibid.*, 18–19; Hedlund, “The Witness of New Christian Movements in India,” 19.

Hedlund's focus on "New Christian Movements" is, I believe, a helpful contribution to this and other studies. In particular, his application of revitalization movements helps highlight that many new churches and movements are responses to tension and stagnation in existing churches. However, I contend that his application and categorization of the great/little traditions, and his distinction between indigenized and indigenous churches can inhibit the conceptualization of the process of identity formation.⁷³ As some of Hedlund's own examples seem to show, the origins of a church may say very little about its actual identity and character and how this has been shaped. Though the categorization of great/little traditions and indigenous/indigenized churches has helped Hedlund shine a spotlight on an under-researched segment of churches, it does not conceptually advance research regarding the processes through which various New Christian Movements are influenced and shaped.

The second of Hedlund's contributions that relates to this study are his critiques of the *Yeshu Bhaktas* in light of the IICs. In earlier writings Hedlund cites work by Hoefer and acknowledges that "this category forms a significant component of South Indian religious life and represents one aspect of indigeneity of Christianity."⁷⁴ However, in more recent writings Hedlund questions "A widely-promoted but controversial 'churchless Christianity' project (that) attempts to circumvent the stumbling block of the church by plotting a new paradigm that does not take into account the ecclesial community."⁷⁵ Citing Hoefer and Richard, Hedlund summarizes that "Devotees of Christ are encouraged to retain their ethnic and caste community identity as practicing Yishu bhaktas without membership in a church."⁷⁶ Hedlund expresses reservations about such a "project" on several grounds. The core of his critique regards the importance of establishing gatherings known as "churches." He explains:

73. As anthropologist Steven Kaplan, in his introduction to *Indigenous Responses to Western Christianity*, summarizes, "The transformation of Christianity as a result of local initiatives has assumed diverse forms and has been guided by a variety of principles and motives. While blanket terms such as enculturation, adaptation, indigenization, and contextualization may be of some use in characterizing the general processes which occurred, when applied to specific cases they tend to obscure rather than clarify important distinctions." Kaplan, "Introduction," 4.

74. Hedlund, *Quest for Identity*, 70.

75. Hedlund, "Present-day Independent Christian Movements," 56.

76. *Ibid.*

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Biblically, the norm from Jesus onward has been the formation of communities of believers known as the “church.” *Theologically*, the church is the worldwide community of those who confess Christ as Lord and strive to express the values of his Kingdom. *Historically*, the church as the gathered faith community has existed for two thousand years. *Missiologically*, formation of visible fellowships of believers has been the outcome of missionary witness worldwide . . . *Strategically*, one must consider Hinduism’s capacity to absorb—witness the demise of Buddhism in the land of its birth as well as the disappearance of early Christian communities beyond Kerala.”⁷⁷

Hedlund highlights a theological versus sociological view of church. In this regard, and as my discussion of Hoefler and Richard showed, both of the latter would probably affirm Hedlund’s statements, including the importance of local gatherings and of the global and historic church. In addition, both would probably disagree with Hedlund’s assessment that they “do not take into account the ecclesial community.”

While Hoefler and Richard encourage *Yeshu Bhaktas* to remain outside of existing Indian churches in order to remain a part of their Hindu communities, they affirm the *Yeshu Bhaktas*’ membership in the worldwide church and encourage the idea of some form of gathering for discipleship. But are such gatherings a “church” theologically? Would these be an expression of an IIIC? Hoefler and Richard are unclear on this point. Unfortunately, and similar to Tennent, Hedlund’s critique becomes blurred over Richard and Hoefler’s ambiguity regarding what is and is not a “church.”⁷⁸ As such, Hedlund’s critique again highlights the need for greater theological and sociological clarity regarding the ecclesial identity of New Religious Movements such as *Yeshu satsangs*.

In summary, Hedlund helpfully highlights the wide presence of IIICs as expressions of New Religious Movements in India, and I concur that these can be viewed as engaging a process of revitalization in relation to their socio-cultural context and the existing church in their area.

77. *Ibid.*, 57. Italics original.

78. In email correspondence regarding the contents of this chapter H. L. Richard adds, “I have proposed affirming *ekklesia* of Yeshu groups while denying ‘church.’ Church simply has too many connotations that are problematic in both biblical (primary current meaning is a building) and current identity terms.” Richard, Jun 20, 2011. He thus affirms gatherings that are theologically shaped as “church,” but clarifies that the actual word “church” carries unhelpful sociological meaning. However, this “proposal” has not been outlined in any published documents.

However, though I find it helpful to highlight the distinctive characteristics and contributions of the IIICs, I contend that Hedlund's application of the categories of great and little traditions and the differentiation between indigenous and indigenized churches do not give adequate attention to the processes that, in actuality, blur these distinctions. In addition, Hedlund's particular critique of *Yeshu Bhaktas* further highlights the need for theological and sociological clarity when addressing the issue of ecclesial identity. In light of this, I suggest that a theory with attention to process, such as an Emergentist theory of identity formation, will add new theoretical dimensions and insight into discussions of ecclesial identity. Before turning to this, however, I will discuss the contributions of one additional scholar.

Jonas Adelin Jorgensen

In 2004, Jonas Jorgensen conducted an ethnographic study of a group of "Christ Bhaktas," or devotees of Christ, in Chennai. Coupled with a second study of Muslim "Jesus Imandars" in Bangladesh, Jorgensen interviewed twenty-three people who were a part of a mandali, or Christ Bhakta fellowship. Several of the bhaktas were also members of local "missionary churches," several attended services in local charismatic churches, and others participated exclusively in the mandali. Jorgensen analyzes the gatherings and narratives of these respondents to better understand their theology and practice, and the ways in which they engage in what he calls a "syncretistic process"⁷⁹ and the formation of "inter-religious hermeneutics."⁸⁰

Jorgensen's study traverses a wide range of theories and theoretical frameworks. Of particular importance to my study, however, are his foci on identity formation and ecclesiology. Regarding the former, Jorgensen gives attention not only to the identities of *Yeshu Bhaktas*, but also seeks to highlight the processes through which these identities were formed. In

79. In brief, Jorgensen contends that syncretism should be viewed as a process versus an outcome. He acknowledges that there is "some point" in viewing syncretism through the framework of "legitimate and illegitimate syntheses," but concludes that such a framework is simply a theological interpretation "of the outcomes and consequences of the process." Jorgensen, *Jesus Imandars and Christ Bhaktas*, 116.

80. The concept of "interreligious hermeneutics," according to Jorgensen, helps conceptualize "the theoretical understanding of religious communication across cultures and religions" (*ibid.*, 25). Though he focuses on the specific examples of Jesus *Imandars* and Christ *Bhaktas*, his overall interest is to conceptualize how these relate to the wider, globalizing Church.

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particular, Jorgensen discusses ways in which particular theologies and identities are the result of “syncretic” interactions with the ideologies and cultures of a context. It is important, he argues, to view this interaction as an ongoing process.⁸¹ However, though the theoretical basis of his theory is quite developed, it seems to be less helpful to him in interpreting the empirical data of the *Yeshu Bhaktas* of his study. For example, in tracing some of the main factors of the bhaktas’ testimonies, he finds and acknowledges that many, if not most, of the *bhaktas* “converted” from Hinduism, “became Christians” through Christian institutions such as schools and churches, and continue to be a part of some churches.⁸² He also indicates that the various practices, concepts and terms that the *bhaktas* use sometimes combine Hindu and Christian meanings. However, he does not probe the process through which the *bhaktas*’ practices and beliefs have been impacted by their interaction with Christian churches and teachings. Thus, whereas I concur with Jorgensen’s overall interest in the process of identity formation, I suggest that other theoretical frameworks may be more helpful for analyzing ecclesial identities of *Yeshu Bhaktas* and *satsangs*.

A second contribution related to this study is Jorgensen’s analysis and discussion of ecclesiology; or what he calls the *Yeshu Bhaktas*’ “ecclesiological ideal.” In this, Jorgensen’s analysis of what exists is clearer and more helpful than his discussion regarding the process of its formation. Regarding their present ecclesiology, Jorgensen—and perhaps the *bhaktas* themselves—are most articulate about what they dislike in the existing churches. In their view the local, institutional churches are characterized by their western and foreign practices and emphasis on structures and clergy. In contrast the *mandali* fellowships of the *bhaktas* are more “Indian” and focus on “fellowship and relations in opposition to structure.”⁸³ Relatedly, in observing their current *satsangs*, Jorgensen concludes that the *Yeshu Bhaktas* are using the “style” of Hindu *bhakti* but doing this within a “Christian theological universe” or Christian system of meaning.⁸⁴ This, he says, has important implications for the identities of the *Yeshu Bhaktas* and their fellowship. He says:

81. Ibid., 115.

82. Ibid., 333, 401–2.

83. Ibid., 383.

84. Ibid., 396–97.

[The] manipulation of symbols and elements has clear theological implications: the meaning of central Christian teachings gains new significance through refashioning of Hindu symbols. However, the refashioning of rites and symbols serves not only a theological but also a social purpose: it seems that indigenized rituals become tools in the release from and re-integration into Hindu society rather than into any Christian church. In this profound sense, the liminal *bhakti* groups facilitate a recovery not only of theological meaning but also of their Hindu social identity as truly and interiorly Indian.⁸⁵

This analysis of “symbols” and practices reflects Jorgensen’s symbolic anthropological framework, and seeks to account for the theological and social aspects of these practices. Jorgensen’s framework, however does not address questions regarding the interaction between this social identity, the influence from Christian churches, and their relatively new project of creating *Yesu Bhakta* identities. Such information is important to understand the formation of ecclesial identities, but unfortunately lies outside of Jorgensen’s framework.

In summary, Jorgensen has provided an important and pioneering study of a group of *Yesu Bhakta* and helpfully considers their beliefs and Hindu practices. He also gives attention to aspects of the current ecclesiology of this group of *Yesu Bhakta*, which he formulates through symbolic anthropology and other theoretical frameworks. However, though he proposes to look at the process through which the *bhaktas*’ beliefs and identities have been shaped, his framework and its application does not fully develop crucial questions related to this, including how and why their practices contribute to their ecclesial identity, and the influence that interaction with local churches have on the continuing ecclesial identity of the *satsang*. It is questions such as this that an Emergentist theory of identity formation will help address.

Summary of Recent Scholarship

In summary, early Indian pioneers such as Upadhyay and Subba Rao critiqued the church’s lack of cultural engagement and tried to offer conceptual and practical alternatives. As well, recent scholars have developed various sets of data regarding *Yesu Bhaktas* and theories to interpret this data. How does this contribute to and guide the current research

85. Ibid., 402.

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of the *Yeshe satsangs* in northwest India? First, the work of early Indian pioneers show that questions regarding an authentic expression of Indian Christianity are not new. Similar to what the *Yeshe Bhakta* expressed in the studies of Hoefer, Jeyraj and Jorgensen, the early pioneers were not comfortable with the way some churches called them to separate and disassociate from their Hindu communities. In response, both the early pioneers and the contemporary *Yeshe Bhakta* sought to retain aspects of their Hindu culture and practices while changing the object of their devotion to Jesus.

Second, though some studies have discussed various practices, identities and theologies of *Yeshe Bhakta* and *satsangs*, this survey highlights the need for greater precision when talking about ecclesial identities. Hoefer's ecclesiology, Hedlund's critique of this, the Richard/Tennent debates, and Jeyraj's discussions regarding "followers of Jesus outside of the church" have all, I contend, suffered in part from a lack of clarity regarding the theological and sociological definition of "church."

Third, there is a need for further theory and discussion regarding the processes through which groups such as the *Yeshe satsangs* form and shape their identities. How do *Yeshe satsang* leaders seek to shape their group's identities in relation to their culture? In what ways have their interactions with Christian and Hindu and Sikh contexts helped *Yeshe satsangs* emerge? Emergentist theory can help answer these questions and shed light on the ways in which the interaction of people with different structural and cultural properties lead to the emergence of new structures, culture and identities. In the next chapter, I will develop this theory and describe how it can help with understanding ecclesial identities.