

Foreword

WILLIAM A. DYRNESS

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

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

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

Foreword

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

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