

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

RESEARCH DESIGN

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

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

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

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

OVERVIEW

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SAMPLE