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Book Review: *Ecclesial Identities in a Multi-Faith  
Context: Jesus Truth-Gatherings (Yeshu Satsangs)  
among Hindus and Sikhs in Northwest India*

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emphasize the awareness and agency of the individuals who negotiate varied social and religious landscapes by alternating language, dress, and discourse as appropriate. In contrast to a posthumous image of sainthood reserved for the uniquely charitable or the spiritual elite, this approach emphasizes the creative role of the individual in constructing his/her own sainthood. It also underscores the constitutive role of local forms of asceticism. In other words, the individual in large part becomes a saint, or fakir, through practice and performance.

Timothy S. Dobe's innovative approach successfully incorporates bodily practice, ascetic performance, and a detailed understanding of context into his comparative textual study. By highlighting the multiple functions of sainthood in religious and social contexts and across religious traditions, *Hindu Christian Faqir* contributes to a broader approach to comparative study and more nuanced understanding of colonial religion.

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

**DARREN** Todd Duerksen's study of several Yeshu satsang (Jesus truth-gathering) communities in northwest India contributes new ethnographic data and valuable analytic frameworks to a spiritual practice that has been under-represented in academic scholarship. Although Duerksen's focus is likely to be primarily of interest to scholars of Christian theology, missiology, and ecclesiology, the detail and breadth of his study can be appreciated by scholars within fields like Indian Christianity, interreligious studies, and anthropology of Christianity—to name a few. His research is based on six months of ethnographic fieldwork in 2010 during which he observed several Hindu and Sikh Yeshu satsang communities and interviewed both leaders and *satsangis* (members of the satsangs).

The opening chapters in particular demonstrate a thorough grasp of the literature

on Yeshu satsangs and its overlapping fields. In particular, Duerksen focuses on the interculturation of Christianity in India. He demonstrates that, despite Christianity's long history in India, Christianity continues to be regarded by many as a foreign/Western religion, which lacks in 'Indianness.' Duerksen explains that much of the preceding literature on Indian Christianity sought to determine whether Indian Christian communities who maintained their Indianness could be classified as "authentically Christian" communities. This question of authenticity and purity when it comes to religious identity has become absolutely crucial in our increasingly pluralist societies. Considering both longstanding and emergent discussions of Christian doctrine and ecclesiology, Duerksen proposes that there is "a lack of clarity regarding the theological and sociological definition of 'church'" (30.) As such,

he suggests that a theoretical focus on the ways in which Yeshu *satsangis* shape their own identities and integrate both Hindu/Sikh and Christian culture is needed.

Seeking to combine Margaret Archer's critical realism and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, Duerksen draws from John Elder-Vass' emergentist theory of identity formation. In its essence, emergentist theory proposes that individuals make decisions and form their identities based on both the subconscious influence of their culture/s as well as the agency which comes with their own intentional reflection. Duerksen's skillful use of emergentist theory helps in formulating a new theoretical framework through which Yeshu *satsang* beliefs and practices can be better understood.

Duerksen situates the Yeshu *Satsang* communities within the history of Christianity in northwest India, noting in particular the ways in which groups resisted Christianity on the grounds that it seemed to be "a threat to Indian religious traditions and structures" (60). He explains how many institutionalised Christian churches were perceived by Hindu and Sikh communities as western/foreign, low-caste, and Pentecostal, and he describes how Hindu and Sikh communities accordingly tried to avoid association with churches.

Noting the prevalent belief by some Christian (and some Yeshu *satsang*) communities that non-Christian religions engage in demonic worship, Duerksen explores how Yeshu *satsang* communities navigated which elements of Hindu/Sikh practices could be retained, and which ought to be rejected. This included aspects such as whether to include devotional hymns (such as *Om jay jagadishi harai*) which hold distinct non-Christian connotations (78); whether to use the self-ascription of

"Christian," "Yeshu bhakta," etc. to describe one's religious affiliation, and whether to continue to identify as a member of one's caste community (90); or whether practices like the distribution of *prasad* or the act of bowing before Sikh scriptures should be encouraged (119-122). Such opinions differed among the Yeshu *satsang* communities. Showing these doctrinal differences helps to further situate Yeshu *satsang* communities as occupying the spaces between defined "Hindu/Sikh" and "Christian" communities.

Throughout the book, and especially in Part II, Duerksen provides descriptive, detailed case studies that continually remind the reader that the beliefs and practices being explored in his work are those of three-dimensional, diverse individuals within several distinct communities. He does, however, successfully identify four shared characteristics that he deems "prominent and often-interrelated themes." These are: "(1) a bhakti-influenced devotion to Jesus, (2) experience of God's blessing and power, (3) carefully discerning evil, and (4) witness" (146). This identification is a useful tool for individuals who wish to gain a broad understanding of Yeshu bhakti doctrine and ecclesiology.

Duerksen's self-proclaimed goal is to focus on the ecclesiological identity markers of Yeshu *satsang* communities, and he remains consistent with this throughout the book. While he focuses on biblical texts (namely the book of Acts) at a depth that might appeal strictly to those individuals within the fields of biblical studies or Christian theology, his attention to an array of ethnographic details can certainly engage anthropologists and other social scientists interested in anthropology of Christianity, Indian religions, or lived religion more broadly.

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Evidently, Duerksen also seeks to draw individual members of the Yeshu satsang communities into the folds of his target audience, as (in a somewhat unanticipated term) he concludes with some practical recommendations that are directed specifically at individuals engaged in Yeshu satsangs.

Like all scholarship, this book is not perfect. This being said, Duerksen is self-reflective and upfront about the inevitable limitations of his work. In addition to noting some of the limits of his chosen methodological approach (see p. 45

especially), Duerksen concludes the book by acknowledging that his own work can be viewed as a starting point, and recognises that further ethnographic engagement and more scholarly reflection on Yeshu satsang communities is needed. Recent scholarly works which also focus on hybrid forms of worship directed at Jesus will find a companion in Duerksen's monograph.

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***Sacred Groves and Local Gods: Religion and Environmentalism in South India.*  
Eliza F.Kent. Oxford University Press, 2013. 236 pages.**

**IN** sharp contrast to the conventional view that sacred groves are remnants of unaltered, pre-modern and non-dynamic forms of nature worship, Eliza Kent's book explores the religiously produced contemporary meanings of forested shrines in the Tamil-speaking regions in India. While recording non-Brahminic Tamil people's ecological sensibilities, it explores how they are embedded in local beliefs and practices that are not immune to the changes people experience at the intersection of education, development, NGO's sacred grove projects and Hindutva ideology. Its opening pages in the first chapter introduce to the North American readers John Muir's idea of groves in the US as 'God's First Temples' and demonstrates how they are different from the sacred groves in Tamilnadu in that the latter, relatively smaller patches of land, are also 'sites for political expression and the articulation of deeply felt pragmatic need.' (20) While making the western readers see the unknown in the light of the known, the author does not lose sight of the

particularities, nuances, complexities and cultural differences of the phenomenon under study—a superb display of ethnographically well-grounded scholarship in material religion as evidenced in the contents not only of chapter one but also of subsequent chapters in the book. Chapter 1, based on the study of sacred groves in the Madurai region, argues that the currently settled farmers such as Ambalakkarrars' and Valaiyars' understanding of sacred groves as deity's domain is an expression of their commitment to fierce deities who evoke two hundred year old communities' memories enacted in their various rituals to keep alive their original communal identity as hunters and warriors.

Chapter 2 takes the readers from the Madurai region to the Tiruvannamalai District. The locals here, especially the present young generation of the tribal people—who having gained access, through road, to the benefits of modern civilization such as education, employment, state-based rural developmental