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# New Faces of the Church: An Indian Case Study

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## Introduction

'Matta, Pitta, Guru, Devam,' is an oft quoted maxim in India. It simply means, 'Mother, Father, Teacher, God,' and signifies the order of priority that many adopt in their lives. In the Indian view of life, therefore, fidelity to one's family and caste community is of paramount importance. Not only is this the foundation of life as known in the present but it also represents the route for the life hereafter.

Standing alongside that allegiance lies an equally pervasive perception that Christianity is not an Indian religion, rather it has been forced on India by westerners. Becoming a Christian therefore entails turning your back on thousands of years of religious and cultural heritage, rejecting the role your family plays in your present and future life and, not least, jettisoning the caste system on which India's social life is based.

It will be obvious to the reader that these attitudes and practices have far-reaching implications for Christian discipleship, not least membership in the church.

ing such sensitive issues of fidelity to one's community and membership in an institutional Church has been *Churchless Christianity*. Theologically speaking, of course, this is a misnomer. A disciple of Christ is by definition a member of the body of Christ, the church. However, since the phenomenon itself was rather novel, its coinage seems to have made sense.<sup>1</sup> The term 'Non Baptised Believer' and the term 'Yesu Bhakta' (Devotee of Jesus) are also employed to refer to this group of people. An able proponent of this form of discipleship, Swami Muktanand, avers:

To become a Christian means that one has to leave one's birth community and join another community. It also means that one has to reject one's culture (one's way of life). However it is not a necessity that to be a follower of Christ one has to become a Christian. This false teaching has come from the Europeans who saw the Hindustani life as demonic and convinced people that in order to become a follower of Christ one has to reject the Hindustani lifestyle and adopt a European lifestyle... A Hindu follower of Jesus also known as a Yesu Bhakta stays in his Hindu

## Yesu Bhaktas

One distinctive approach to negotiat-

<sup>1</sup> Herbert Hoefer, *Churchless Christianity* (Madras: GLTC&RI, 1991), p. xiv.

community practicing his Hindustani culture and giving allegiance to Christ and Him alone.<sup>2</sup>

This brief paper seeks to first describe this phenomenon and then discuss some issues it raises.

### How do Yesu Bhaktas come to be attracted to Christ?

It is instructive to note that many come to learn of Christ from their neighbours and often attending a Christian school is seen as influential. This initial knowledge of Christ through personal relationships is often further strengthened when prayers to Jesus are answered and healing for sickness is received. Growth in morality and an assurance of forgiveness of sins also figure prominently in their spiritual biography. Clearly then many Yesu Bhaktas have a deep spiritual experience of Christ; theirs is not a case of syncretism, the practice of praying to all gods, considering them equal and valid paths to one ultimate goal.

### Yesu Bhaktas and the Institutional Church

While on the one hand, if Yesu Bhaktas desire to have a relationship with the church, it appears to be a strained one, on the other hand it seems that many have little connection with the institutional church. One description of this phenomenon is helpful here.

The businessman does not go to Church, but reads his Bible and

prays before a picture in his home. He had studied in a Christian school and thereby learned of Jesus. He has experienced Jesus' help in response to his prayers. He listens to Christian Radio programmes. He celebrates only Pongal. (N.B. Pongal is the three-day festival in January which is primarily a social event involving the whole village community. Many village Christians also participate in the festivities though avoiding the one or two traditional home rituals).

When queried further about the nature and reasons for these practices, the businessman and his friend admitted:

They fear the reactions of relatives if they take baptism.

They want to have a Christian burial. They attend Christian public meetings but their wives do not come along.

They expect Jesus to take them to heaven and to take care of their children.

They do not feel bad about not taking baptism, nor do they feel that God is displeased because of it.

God expects of them that they lead a decent life as a follower of Jesus.

They feel they should go to church.

If they take baptism, they feel that they should leave going to the cinema, smoking and other bad habits.

They do not try to persuade their wives to join their Christian faith, as it would only cause conflict in the home and among the relations. Now they are still accepted by their caste people and family members.

The best way to reach their wives would be through Christian litera-

<sup>2</sup> <http://margdarshan.blogspot.com/2007/10/hindu-devotee-of-yeshu.html> Last accessed January 8th 2009.

ture, if there were Bible women, they could possibly speak with them, otherwise, only prayer for them is possible.

They would not be interested in joining a cottage prayer meeting even if it was nearby.

They understood Jesus as teaching us to avoid a sinful life and to do good to others.<sup>3</sup>

Men and women, young and old believers in Christ are legion, but are largely invisible to the general population.<sup>4</sup> They all seem to have in common an allegiance to family and community, a deep attraction and devotion to Jesus Christ and a genuine desire to forge a mode of discipleship that will enhance personal and family spirituality but yet avoid the stigma of being considered as outcasts of their community. They seem to be attempting the impossible; holding together the complex socio-religious context they inhabit and their indisputable devotion to Jesus.

Identity that is integrally linked to family and community among other things, finds in the institutional church and all that it represents an existence that robs them of their socio-religious mooring and security, indeed an offence to their sensitivities. Instead of either submitting themselves to this existential violence or being content to remain in their old state, in their own ingenious manner Yesu Bhaktas are seeking a mode of existence that does not shake and threaten family and

community anchors but yet allows the deep yearning for the spiritually fulfilling and meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ to flourish.

### How do Yesu Bhaktas nourish themselves spiritually?

Most of the time, these believers in Christ relate to Christ only in their private prayers and meditations. Occasionally they venture to church but do so anonymously. For the most part however, they are on their own. More recently though, Christian radio programs and Christian TV have come as a boon to Yesu Bhaktas, who relish this unobtrusive and perhaps safe way of being fed spiritually.

### What is the numerical significance of this movement?

With regard to demographic distribution of these non-baptised believers one researcher comments that, '[t]he most dedicated followers of our Lord, then among the "other sheep" are to be found among teenagers, the housewives, the high schools educated and the poor, from all caste communities.'<sup>5</sup>

In Chennai alone:

Statistics have shown that there is a solid twenty-five percent of the Hindu and Muslim population in Madras city which has integrated Jesus deeply into their spiritual life. Half of the population have attempted spiritual relationships

3 Herbert Hofer, *Churchless Christianity*, pp. 5-6.

4 Also see Andrew Wingate, *The Church and Conversion: A Study of Recent Conversions to and from Christianity in the Tamil Area of South India*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), pp. 139-151.

5 Hofer, *Churchless Christianity*, p. 110

with Jesus and had satisfying and learning experiences through it. Three fourths speak very highly of Jesus and could easily relate to Him as their personal Lord if motivated. In addition to this population we have ten percent who are 'of the fold', formally Christian. It would be fair to say that a good one-third of the Madras city population relate to Jesus fairly regularly and deeply in their spiritual life.<sup>6</sup>

It seems therefore that Yesu Bhaktas do not represent a few isolated and idiosyncratic cases; they seem to represent an influential movement.

### Ministering to Yesu Bhaktas

Since the discovery of these Yesu Bhaktas, effort has been expended to cater to their needs in relevant ways.<sup>7</sup> Assuming the title of an older movement, 'Rethinking Christianity', contemporary activists see a lot of promise in these patterns of discipleship. Seminars and practical efforts at contextual witness and contextual forms of worship are being encouraged. Some critical reflection also seems to have been initiated. Recently, a whole issue of a journal was dedicated to this movement, where a select group of leaders addressed some of these important issues. The evident 'success' of a Hin-

duised devotion to Christ has prompted them to subscribe to one basic assumption: 'I am convinced that the Christian faith will permeate India only as part of Hinduism, what I call "Christ-ized Hinduism"'<sup>8</sup> For his part, H.L. Richard, another leader, echoes that sentiment when he says, 'The Rethinking agenda will never die and western Christianity will never deeply impact India.' He goes on to declare, 'One of the lessons of history...seems clearly to be that deeply Indian Christianity will not arise from the existing Churches.'<sup>9</sup> It is salutary to note that this deep disappointment with the church is akin to a sentiment one notices among well-known pioneers of Indian Christianity and is perhaps reminiscent of their effort to advance contextually relevant forms of discipleship. In that sense the Rethinking group is to be encouraged, for their motive seems laudable.

However, it appears that in their eagerness for reform, some basic notions are not being sufficiently thought through and the grand alternatives being proposed seem to lack a rigour that would in actual fact help their case. First, if the vast majority of the church is painted with the same brush and thought to have had a negligible impact on the nation, the very notion of discussing alternative shapes to Christian discipleship will be superfluous since the Christian presence will be so miniscule it will perhaps attract little attention in its own right, let alone effort to rethink its shape. For

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<sup>6</sup> Hoefer, *Churchless Christianity*, p. 109. It must be noted however that the statistics mentioned here have not been made public and therefore this claim could be contested.

<sup>7</sup> It must be said that my attention here is devoted to one vocal section of the Protestant effort alone, though there are significant movements in the Catholic Church, particularly in Hyderabad and Varanasi.

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<sup>8</sup> Herbert Hoefer, *Jesus, My Master*: Jesu B

<sup>9</sup> H.L. Richard, 'Rethinking "Rethinking": Gospel Ferment in India among both Hindus and Christians', *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 19.3 (Fall 2002), pp. 7-17, pp. 9.

good or bad, the fact that Christianity, and one has to take the whole of the church into account here, is a well known, viable and live option for many in the region is testimony to the impact that it has had on the nation. As it is often said in the popular press, though only about three percent of the nation's population, the impact Christianity has had has been significantly more than its numerical strength will have us believe. The 'ferment' that the gospel has unleashed is testimony to the power of a little yeast. It appears then rather myopic to declare on the back of that: 'The real move toward an indigenous Christian faith can never come from the Christian community. It must grow out of the "Churchless Christianity", with the help and encouragement of the church.'<sup>10</sup> Strong language indeed; stressing that point he once again notes:

If the Rethinking goal of deeply contextual discipleship to Jesus in Hindu contexts is to be realised it will surely only be through new movements that are born in Hindu society. The way of contextual discipleship to Jesus in the Hindu world must be through the birthing of Christ centred movements within Indian cultures and communities.<sup>11</sup>

The lack of appreciation for the diversity, vitality and legitimacy of the existing forms of Christianity, it seems, smacks of a less than noble approach

that affords little patience for alternate visions. Though it contributes a great deal to the discussion of contextual discipleship and perhaps even offers a possible way forward, if the zeal of this proposal, as encapsulated in the above comments, is allowed to overtake its more sober intents it may eventually end up with no different a fate from its progenitors found early in the last century. Zeal for growth is to be tempered with patience and forbearance, a virtue Christ preached and exhibited in his own life. Furthermore, if indeed these leaders have discovered a successful approach that prides itself on its contextual suitability, is it not ironic that in such a pluralistic milieu like India, it is promoted as the 'only' approach for the gospel to impact the nation?

### The Way Forward

Clearly this is an important development in Indian Christianity and close attention must be paid to the phenomenon of *Yesu Bhaktas*. We cannot afford the luxury of assuming that conventional methods and patterns will alone suffice in our mission effort. Yet it would not be helpful to reinvent the wheel, as it were, as far as the church is concerned. A mature dialogue is necessary for a healthy approach that seeks the welfare of the people concerned as well as the long term theological and spiritual health of the church.<sup>12</sup> It is indubitable that close study and action arising from such informed perspectives is the need of the hour.

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<sup>10</sup> Richard here quotes Herbert Hofer. H.L. Richard, 'Rethinking "Rethinking"', p. 15. Emphasis mine.

<sup>11</sup> H.L. Richard, *Rethinking "Rethinking"*, p. 16.

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<sup>12</sup> It is encouraging to note that one scholar pursuing research in this area is Dasan Jeyaraj of OM, India.