

ISFM 2012: Still an Exotic?

Must Insiders Be Churchless? Exploring Insiders' Models of "Church"

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Introduction

Discussions regarding "insider movements" have raised important issues regarding the nature of the Christian faith and its relationship to religious identity. One issue that has hovered in the background involves the question of "church." Is church an optional or secondary concern for those who follow Jesus inside their Muslim, Hindu, or other socio-religious community? What would a biblical theology of church suggest in this regard? In this paper, I explore some of the underlying issues raised by such questions through the lived experience of several groups in North India that are seeking to worship and follow Jesus within their Hindu and Sikh communities. These groups, as I will show, believe that it is possible for them to be a church, in a biblical sense, *and* stay within (or closely related to) their Hindu and Sikh communities. They do this, I argue, by defining the church as a social community and by highlighting people's ability to negotiate multiple identities.

Theological Principles

I begin by considering a fundamental question: What exactly do we mean by "church" in a Hindu (or Sikh) context? Herbert Hofer has discussed various theological principles—many of which reflect a Reformed or Lutheran perspective—that can guide an understanding of church in a Hindu context (Hofer 2001, 2007). For example, Hofer draws on Luther's distinction between the *universal, invisible* church and the *local, seen* church. Luther recognized that churches, as human-led institutions, often have people in them who are not truly Christian. So while the *seen* church is a mix of believers and non-believers, the *unseen* church, which only Christ can see, is the pure church. Luther thus raises the possibility that people may be followers of Jesus and part of the wider, unseen Church, but not part of a local, seen church. On this basis, Hofer argues that individuals who are outside of a local church (as is the case for those who stay inside their Muslim or Hindu communities)

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are not outside of the Universal Church (2001:164).

To this discussion I would like to add two principles from an Anabaptist or Believers' Church perspective.¹ First, we must be careful to not over-interpret our understanding of church via Western individualism. In the desire to accept and legitimate isolated Christians it is only too easy to make the mistake of bypassing the New Testament emphasis on relationship, gathering, and togetherness (Lofink 1982:99). As can be seen from Acts 2 and 4, from its inception the post-resurrection community of God was characterized by people who worshipped together and worked at relationship with each other and the wider world. Thus, while acknowledging the presence of a wider and unseen Church, the New Testament seems to primarily understand church as *gathered groups of disciples* that are visible to the wider community and who develop relationships with each other. The writer of Ephesians takes this one step further. In Ephesians 4 the writer says that the church is Christ's body-on-earth. Just as Jesus was incarnated as a visible human being, expressing God's love through the language and culture of the people, so he continues to be present and "incarnated" through his present body-on-earth—local churches. This, we can say, is the incarnation principle. To participate in a local group of believers is to participate in Christ. Thus, while it is possible to be a follower of Christ and not a member of a local church, Christ's ideal is for people to be committed to a local group of believers who together represent Christ to their context.²

Second (and implied above), a local group need not be large, organizationally complex, or widely networked to be considered a church in the biblical sense. A church, according to the New Testament, is first and foremost a locally identified group of believers who are committed to following Jesus and his commandments, and to doing this together. This is the

community principle, and it addresses some of the confusion often associated with the word "church" in the Indian context. For example, while a church is always expressed through cultural practices, by definition it is never tied to a particular culture. While many churches become quite institutionalized in their polity, they are never tied to or defined by particular institutional structures. A church is, quite fundamentally, a *community* that follows the commands and example of Jesus, including expressions of baptism and communion. In the New Testament this idea of community is often expressed through kinship language and practices.³ The church is a family whose members care for each other in familial ways.



Sociological Principles

If the above principles contribute to what we can call a church's theological or ecclesial identity, we also need to recognize that every church has a social identity, or multiple social identities (Ward 2012). Part of this identity will be the church's association with a religion or religious community—its religious identity. I will highlight three particular concepts that are important for understanding the nature of these religious identities as they relate to a local church.

First, religious identities are often—though not always or purely—socio-cultural. Many often overlook this point, preferring to emphasize or solely focus on the beliefs or ideologies of a

religion. However, though the latter is important, religions also often provide a social community with particular patterns of behavior (Netland 2012), and it is often these socio-cultural behaviors and identities that people will most value. For example, some people who identify themselves as Hindu have little personal commitment to a Hindu ideology or deity. For them, Hindu identity denotes their family heritage and a set of roles and practices that they are expected to fulfill when required.

Second, people and groups continually negotiate and modify social identities, including socio-religious identities; they are never fixed. Sociologist Margaret Archer develops this point through a framework of identity emergence. She argues that the identities of people and groups are continually negotiated in relation to their cultural and structural contexts (Archer 2000). An identity role is salient for a time; however, as people continually interact with new information or developments, they consider what in this new input merits greater and lesser levels of concern. When, in the course of their deliberations, people re-rank concerns, those concerns become "transvalued" and new aspects of their personal identity are forged (Archer 2000:236-42). People—and groups of people—can thus adopt and rearrange the relative salience of identities at various times in their lives by rearranging the importance they place on particular concerns and practices (see Peek 2005; Vryan, Adler, and Adler 2003).

Third, social identities are expressed and shaped through practices. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has shown that social practices are central to peoples' identities. In fact, people usually do not reflect deeply on their practices—they are simply "the right thing to do" (Bourdieu 1990:18). Archer agrees with Bourdieu concerning the importance of practices for identification, but argues that people consciously choose from among them to create

sets of practices that express their own concerns and interests. This becomes particularly important when new practices, ideas or concerns are introduced that disrupt current dispositions. While people normally conduct many of their activities, including their socio-religious activities, without much reflection, the disruption of these activities or introduction of new possibilities may initiate a reflexive process that causes them to evaluate—and potentially adopt—new practices and identities (McNay 1999:106–7).

In addition, social identities are not only *expressed* through practices, but also *shaped* through them. In her research on Muslim women's groups in Egypt, Saba Mahmood has demonstrated how Muslim women not only use practices to express a concern or identity, but also to shape or create an identity. This, she argues, is a theory of “exteriority as a means to interiority” (Mahmood 2005:134). For example, the Muslim women of her study did not view practices of modesty, such as wearing the hijab, as social impositions that constrained their desires and identities. Rather, these practices were, in a sense, the “scaffolding” that help them actualize their potential and desired selves (Mahmood 2005:148).

Hindu and Sikh Yeshu Satsangs (Jesus Truth-Gatherings)

How do these principles and concepts help guide an analysis of what church might look like among socio-religious insiders? To explore this question I now turn to a study of six groups in the Punjab region of Northwest India. The leaders of these groups conduct what they call *Yeshu satsangs*, or Jesus truth-gatherings. Since both Sikhs and Hindus are prominent in this region, my research included three satsangs among predominately Hindu communities and three among predominately Sikh communities.

To understand the identities and practices of these Yeshu satsangs, one must first understand something about their

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historical context. The leaders of these Yeshu satsangs are influenced by—and are often responding to—three particular legacies and characteristics of Christian churches in their area, which are perceived as *foreign*, *Dalit*, and *Pentecostal* in nature.

First, Hindus and Sikhs often accuse followers of Jesus of embracing and promoting a foreign religion. This perception is, in large part, the legacy of mission efforts to the area that began in 1818 and expanded throughout the nineteenth century (Webster 2007:40–48). Though the churches of the region have been Indian-led for decades, the testimonies of various Yeshu *satsangis* (satsang members) and Indian Christians indicate that this legacy and association remains. A second factor is the perception that Christians offer foreign-originated money and other incentives to lure converts, a belief that is common also in other parts of India.⁴

Second, Hindus and Sikhs often associate Christianity in the Northwest with the Dalit (so-called untouchable) castes. One historical reason for this was a series of mass conversion movements in the late 19th century that saw over 100,000 people from the rural Chuhra Dalit community convert to Christianity (Webster 2007:168). Not surprisingly the church in Northwest India became closely identified with the identity and economic challenges of the Dalits. While people from so-called higher castes have periodically become Christians and joined churches, the majority of Christians continue to be from Dalit castes (Webster 2007:323, 331–32). Indeed, some of the Yeshu satsang leaders themselves are from Dalit castes. Whatever their background, all of the leaders are sensitive to this perception and are trying to address

the ways in which it has prevented other castes from becoming followers of Jesus.

Third, many churches in the Northwest are currently being strongly influenced by a new, rapidly growing movement of Pentecostal-style churches.⁵ On the positive side, many people are attracted to charismatic leaders with gifts of healing and miracles, and as a result are hearing about Jesus (Webster 2007:298). However, the worship style of these churches is often distinct from that practiced in the historic churches as well as among Hindus and Sikhs. This Pentecostal style is often characterized by loud, simultaneous praying; the singing of short, lively choruses; standing; raising hands; and shouting words such as “hallelujah.” Such practices can appear foreign to Hindu and Sikh onlookers.

In summary, Hindus and Sikhs who know about the church's foreign legacy, Dalit character, and Pentecostal style regard the Christian churches as (what sociologists refer to as) an Other, something radically different from themselves (Riggins 1997:3). Christians, of course, dispute these assessments, in particular the churches' foreign reputation or Dalit character. Unfortunately, the churches are caught in a dilemma in that the worship of Jesus and proclamation of the gospel (as they practice it) invoke contradictory messages in the minds of Hindu and Sikh hearers. Although churches do not say that Christianity is Other, their identity and practices communicate this to Hindus and Sikhs, albeit unintentionally.

It is against this backdrop, and the contradiction that many of the Christian churches of the Northwest embody and perpetuate, that we can best understand the actions of the Yeshu satsang leaders.

The Shaping of New Identities

The above background is particularly relevant to the leaders of the Yeshu satsangs, since all came to faith in Jesus through, and were disciplined in, churches and/or Christian para-church organizations. Most led house churches for a time and eventually came into contact with teaching on cultural sensitivity from other Indians and/or missionaries. This teaching resonated with them and confirmed some of their growing discomfort with the contradictions in Christian identity and practices described above, and the barriers these contradictions created when sharing Christ with their Hindu/Sikh families and communities. In response, they started Yeshu satsangs or transitioned existing house churches towards more of a Yeshu satsang style. Using the theological and sociological concepts discussed above, I will describe and analyze the changes and practices that these leaders have sought to implement.

Incarnating Jesus

In what ways do the Yeshu satsangs seem to reflect Christ in their fellowship and to their wider context? First, each Yeshu satsang emphasizes the importance of honoring and studying Jesus' teachings. Through these teachings satsangis can learn how to better follow and reflect the character of Jesus in their lives. The Bible is thus given a high level of authority. Even where Yeshu satsang leaders have a respect for and know Hindu and Sikh scriptures, the Bible is emphasized as a higher and ultimate authority. The Bible pervades many of the Yeshu satsang meetings. In most it is read openly, from common Hindi or Punjabi versions, and satsangis are encouraged to have their own copies that they can read on their own. The teachings of the Bible are applied directly to the lives and situations of the satsangis.

Two key biblical teachings or examples of Jesus followed by Yeshu satsangs are the Lord's Supper and baptism. Most Yeshu satsangs celebrate the

Lord's Supper regularly and explain the practice from biblical passages. Some satsangs retain the Christian church symbols and names of the practice, such as using bread and juice and calling it *Prabhu Bhoj* (Lord's supper). However, because Christian churches sometimes practice the Lord's Supper in ways that seem strange to Hindus and Sikhs, some Yeshu satsangs sometimes modify it slightly. For example, some Hindu Yeshu satsang leaders call the Lord's Supper *Mahaprasad* (the great *prasad*, offering) or use the coconut, a common Hindu symbol. These leaders make subtle changes to aspects of the practice of the Lord's Supper to make it understandable and somewhat open to Hindus and Sikhs.



The practice of baptism is also important for the Yeshu satsangs. At the same time, the leaders are unhappy with the ways in which they feel baptism has taken on extra-biblical meanings. For example, many Christian churches in India believe that baptism signifies not only a commitment to God and to his people, but also a change of socio-religious community. In contrast, the Yeshu satsang leaders and satsangis tend to place less emphasis on the role of baptism in their lives and satsang. In some instances, the government requires people to register their change of socio-religious community and regard them with different laws and policies. In light of this, the Yeshu satsangs practice baptism as an indication of commitment to

God, but do not ask people to change their socio-religious community. In addition, the Yeshu satsangs sometimes change the names of the practice to "*jal diksha*, water initiation," "*naam daan*, name giving," or "*pavithra ishnaan*, holy immersion." These names reflect Hindu and Sikh practices and refer to types of initiations given to disciples by their guru. Yeshu satsang leaders thus draw on local practices and terminology but seek to reflect or incarnate their devotion to Jesus through them.

In addition to their emphasis on the Bible and attempts to contextually reflect the character and teachings of Jesus, the Yeshu satsangs also seek to be incarnational in their witness. Yeshu satsangs have incorporated various Hindu and Sikh practices and language, and have shaped them around Christocentric themes. Gaurav, one of the Hindu Yeshu satsang leaders, sometimes blows and makes a trumpet-like sound with a shell called a *shankh*, similar to the way Hindu priests use the *shankh* in the midst of a Hindu worship ceremony. In addition to being symbols and aids in their own worship and understanding of Jesus, these also help Gaurav's satsangis feel that the satsang is a setting to which they can invite their friends and relatives. One of Gaurav's satsangis shares,

Whenever we take our relatives or somebody else with us (to the *satsang*) they should not feel that this is a separate religion. (Some people say) that we have become Muslims, or another religion. But whenever my relatives came to the *satsang* they say, "No, they are as Hindus because they have a *shankh* and light *dijas*." ... So I like to take them with me.

The Yeshu satsang thus gives the opportunity for the individual satsangis to worship and reflect Jesus to their Hindu or Sikh communities, but in ways they feel the community will understand and accept.

Community

Another principal I suggested that has guided church identities is the

importance of a community committed to each other and to Christ. The Yeshu satsangs, though formed recently (most in the last 7-8 years) and small in membership, nonetheless have begun to function as small communities.

In addition to the primary focus on regular gatherings to worship Jesus, the leaders actively seek to foster a sense of community and commitment to each other. For two of the Sikh and one of the Hindu Yeshu satsangs, this sense of community comes quite naturally since they are primarily comprised of family groups who see the satsang as extensions of their family and its worship. It is natural for these groups to gather together at various times for prayer or meals. For one of the larger Hindu Yeshu satsangs, the leader actively finds ways for the satsang to share meals together, to go on outings, and to help give food or aid to the poor in their community. The Yeshu satsangs thus show signs of functioning theologically as a church-as-community.

Some may ask, however, “To what degree do the Yeshu satsangs identify and fellowship with the wider Christ-following community inside and outside of India?” It is true that many of the Yeshu satsangs do not actively seek to fellowship with other Christ-followers, stemming in large part from criticism from—and disagreement with—these groups. Such a stance towards other Christians could be seen as problematic, and some might object that the satsangs are not truly or fully church if they shun other groups of Christ-followers and remain somewhat isolated. Indeed, Timothy Tennent has emphasized that such Hindu followers of Jesus should be challenged to be baptized and identify themselves with the wider church (Tennent 2005:174). This is an important point. However, in this critique we need to be careful not to hold the Yeshu satsangs, or any other nascent insider groups, to a standard higher than we hold our own churches and denominations. The history of Western Christianity, after all, is replete

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with examples of churches breaking fellowship with other churches. And many of our denominations have painful schisms and differences in their backgrounds. While we should always work for greater levels of trust and cooperation, those of us from a Western background would be wise to not cast stones at others who are currently experiencing similar differences and pain. Perhaps we should be slow to judge the conflict and quick to pray for its reconciliation.

As the preceding examples show, the Yeshu satsangs do help shape, in many ways, identities that conform to what we may call biblical expressions of church—even while resisting some of the expressions modeled by the Christian churches of their area. But how are the Yeshu satsangs seeking to shape their *social* identities?

The first of the sociological concepts I outlined above suggests that religious identities are often social in nature, and that this social identity is often what is most important to members of the community. Among the Yeshu satsangs, many identify with their Hindu and Sikh socio-religious communities while remaining committed to Jesus. In this, they seek to make a distinction between Hindu/Sikh ideologies, on the one hand, and Hindu/Sikh social identity, on the other. Hindus and Sikhs sometimes accuse the Yeshu satsangs—on the basis of their devotion to Jesus—of changing religious identities and becoming Christians. In response, the Yeshu satsangs commonly respond, “I have not changed my religion, I have changed my heart.” Religion, in this case, is understood to be not so much a matter of doctrines, philosophies or spiritual beliefs, but of being part of a community and its culture. The satsangs thus argue that they can stay within

the Hindu/Sikh religious community while changing the focus of their personal devotion to Jesus.

One example of this can be seen in their self-ascription, or how they identify themselves in terms of their religious community. Some Yeshu satsangs and leaders from Hindu families refer to themselves as “Hindu *Yeshu bhakt*” (Hindu Jesus devotees). Ravi, a Yeshu satsang leader, reflects on this question of identity:

I always say it like this, “I am not a Christian; I am a Hindu *Yeshu Bhakt*.” Then I am ready for their questions, like, “You believe in Jesus, then how are you a Hindu?” Then I said, “On my (birth) form and my father’s it is written ‘Hindu.’ And I live in Hindustan (India) and I speak Hindi. That is why I am a Hindu. And also Hindu is not a religion, it’s a community.”

As can be seen from the above, once the satsangs pray to or mention the name *Yeshu*, many Hindus and Sikhs associate them with the Christian community. In response, Ravi clearly distances himself from the Christian community and embraces a Hindu identity based on his community.

The second social concept discussed above regards how people and groups are able to negotiate and modify social identities—including socio-religious identities—in light of new ideas and concerns. As they do so, they “transvalue,” or rearrange the relative salience of those concerns in order to express new identities and achieve new goals. The Yeshu satsangs display this process of negotiation and transvaluing, particularly vis-à-vis their devotion to Christ.

This is most clearly seen in the practices of some of the Yeshu satsang leaders themselves. First, the leaders have transvalued the relevance of a Hindu or Sikh identity, and some of the

related practices, in relation to certain Christ practices. For example, leaders sometimes quote stories, poems and concepts from Sikh and Hindu scriptures, interpreting them in the light of their understandings of biblical texts and teachings. The focus on the Bible, Christ, and Christ bhakti, has thus become a primary framework through which they understand and transvalue other Hindu/Sikh texts and practices.

While the leaders have rearranged their interpretive framework in this way, they have also reacted against Christian leaders in the area who, in their opinion, have sought to strip Hindu/Sikh texts and practices of any value, thereby eliminating the capacity of these things to impact socio-religious identity. As mentioned earlier, the Yeshu satsang leaders all received their initial teaching on following Christ from Christian pastors. Many of these pastors placed no value on Hindu and Sikh scriptures and practices. Sikhs, for example, venerate the original founders and gurus of the community. Navdeep, a Sikh Yeshu satsang leader, recounts a conversation between his first pastor and his father-in-law, a prominent Sikh leader. Navdeep says,

(My father-in-law told my pastor), "Yes, for you Christians Jesus Christ came just as Guru Gobind Singh came for Sikhs." The name "Guru Gobind Singh" was still in his mouth when (my pastor) banged on the table and said, "No, no, no!" And he objected, saying this and that. But because of that outburst my father-in-law became filled with bitterness.

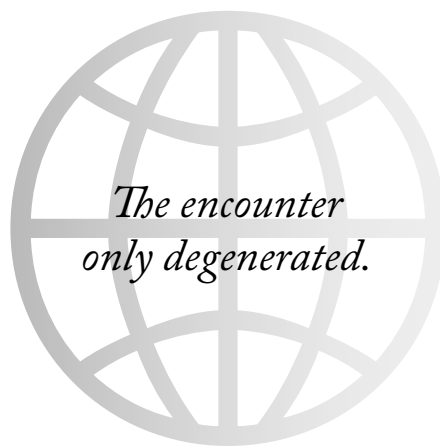
The encounter continued but, in Navdeep's eyes, only degenerated. Navdeep's pastor had devalued the Sikh gurus to such a degree that Navdeep's father-in-law was highly offended. It also reinforced the father-in-law's perception that Navdeep's identity was now highly disassociated from that of his family.

In response, Navdeep and the other Sikh Yeshu satsang leaders have reconsidered

and have raised their estimation of the Sikh gurus. This is particularly true regarding Guru Nanak, the first and most highly esteemed guru. Naveen, one of Navdeep's colleagues, says,

We talk about Guru Nanak and say that he was a good man because he had a fear of God. (And he taught that) God is in every place. Everywhere. So, because of this, we should search for that God who gave children to Guru Nanak (the Sikhs).

In this, Naveen has renegotiated his theology of God, positing that Guru Nanak actually received revelation from the true God, leading to the development of the Sikh community. Though Naveen is clear that true salvation is only found in Jesus—and that the Guru Nanak and his



scriptures should be interpreted through Jesus and the Bible—he also places value on Guru Nanak as a recipient of revelation, a claim that shapes his identity more closely to that of the Sikh community.

The third social concept explores the ways in which practices are central for both expressing and shaping identities. Yeshu satsangs have incorporated various Hindu and Sikh practices and language, and have shaped them around Christocentric themes. Many of these practices reflect the Hindu (and Sikh) emphasis on bhakti, which emphasizes the role of devotion and self-surrender—as opposed to knowledge or action—in obtaining salvation. One way in which the Yeshu satsang leaders express and promote the ideals

of bhakti devotion is through the use of *bhajans* (devotional songs, also called *kirtans* in Sikh satsangs). Bhajans are a particular genre of devotional music intimately tied to the Hindu and Sikh bhakti traditions (Dicran 2000). Because of this Hindus and Sikhs associate the sound and style of the bhajans with the Hindu/Sikh communities. For example, when deciding which types of songs and which songbook to use for his satsang, Ravi (mentioned above) rejected the common songbooks used by Christian churches and chose instead a book of bhajans compiled by Yeshu satsangs in another part of India. These, he explained, sound more like bhakti bhajans that the Hindu people in his area like. Not only would the songs help promote a Hindu identity to their neighbors, but such bhajans help some satsangis feel close to God in ways that others song styles cannot. For the satsangis, bhajans create a sense of peace and the "right" atmosphere through which to approach and relate to the divine. One satsangi, who enjoyed bhajans growing up, reflects on those she now sings in the Yeshu satsang,

When we sing *bhajans*, when we pray with the *bhajans*, then I feel very good at that time. Because we feel that we are not on the earth. It seems that we are flying in the heaven. I like this part (of the *satsang*) very much.

In addition to music, Yeshu satsang leaders use various symbols to create a sense of bhakti. Gaurav, a Hindu Yeshu satsang leader, sometimes uses a Hindu lamp called a *diya*. He explains to his satsangis that the lamp is a light, and represents Jesus as the light of the world. The lamp also helps his people feel that they are in a setting in which they can approach and worship the divine (in this case, Jesus).

Thus, such practices carry a dual role. On the one hand, they express valued identities. Through their practices the Yeshu satsangs seek to affirm their Hindu and Sikh identities and their relationships with the Hindu and Sikh communities. On the other hand, these

same practices are adapted and used to express their devotion to Jesus. Satsangis desire to be close to God and to have him heal, bless and instill his love into their lives; the practices of bhakti help them to eventually realize those desires.

Conclusion

The theological principles of incarnation and community can provide a grid for analyzing the ecclesial or church identity of groups such as the Yeshu satsangs, while the concepts of socio-religious identity, identity negotiation, and practices give a framework for understanding how such groups may seek to shape their socio-religious identities. The use of these frameworks demonstrates that, from a theological standpoint, groups of Jesus followers such as the Yeshu satsangs are developing the theological qualities and practices of local churches within and in relation to the wider Hindu or Sikh community identity. The Yeshu satsangs are, or strive to be, sub-groups within the Hindu and Sikh communities while being churches in the theological sense. In short, they seek to be a community-within-a-community. In this it is clear that these Yeshu satsangs are pioneering something generally quite unique for their context, and are attracting people who may not otherwise follow Jesus within the context of a Christian church and community. It is too early to say whether or not their model of being church will result in wide movements of Christ-followers. At the very least, there is reason to encourage the development of Christ-communities that adhere to the biblical contours of church while socially reflecting India's rich identities. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Anabaptists have often held that a "church" is any local gathering of believers who share a commitment to Christ and each other and express this through common practices (Snyder 1999).

² Timothy Tennant seems to agree with this understanding of church when he discusses the public dimension of the word *ekklesia* (Tennant 2005:174).

³ See, for example, Mark 3:33-35 and Ephesians 2:19.

⁴ Though it has not been studied carefully, several other factors may reinforce the perception of Christianity as a foreign-based religion, including the regular presence of foreign speakers and evangelists, and cable television channels such as the "God channel" that feature North American speakers.

⁵ I have adopted the nomenclature of what some Pentecostal scholars call "small-*p*" pentecostalism to refer to churches that do not necessarily identify with the institutional Pentecostal denominations but that display a commitment to a "Spirit-centered, miracle-affirming, praise-oriented version of Christian faith" (Jacobsen 2003:12; Smith 2010:xvii).

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