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Book Review: *Hindu Christian Faqir: Modern Monks, Global Christianity, and Indian Sainthood*

Stephanie Corigliano
Humboldt State University

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from its Bengali roots, in my view. To recover this spirit for us may be Sardella's most significant contribution and kīrtan.

Michael McLaughlin
Old Dominion University

***Hindu Christian Faqir: Modern Monks, Global Christianity, and Indian Sainthood.* Timothy S. Dobe. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, 363 + xiii pp.**

HINDU Christian Faqir is a comparative work that examines the lives of two prominent saints in North India during the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries: the Protestant Christian convert, Sundar Singh (1889-1929) and the Neo-Vedantin Hindu, Rama Tirtha (1873-1906). Both came to be regarded as "saints," rose to international recognition, and challenged the on-going formation of their respective religions. Timothy S. Dobe's compelling study of these two figures highlights the influence of vernacular [inter]-religious practice, asceticism, and the individual agency of the men themselves to reconsider the meaning of sainthood in the Indian and global contexts.

Chapter 1, "Unsettling Saints," recounts the biographies of the two men, highlighting the religiously plural context of their early lives in the Punjab state of India. Interestingly, both men used the terms saint, sadhu (monk), and sannyasi (renunciate) interchangeably to refer to themselves and other ascetics in Indian and English contexts. Yet both favored the term faqir when speaking to Indian audiences. Faqir literally translates as "poor person," yet it is also commonly used to signify a Muslim holy person or Sufi. Faqir (like the term yogi) is widely used across religious boundaries, and its use reflects the complex and fluid religious identities of Punjab. Also, (like the term yogi) it came to

symbolize at once a person of relative honor and respect in indigenous contexts and a class of potentially dangerous degenerates in the colonial eye. For Dobe, faqir is indicative of Islam as a formative "third space" in the Hindu-Christian study of [pre/post]-colonial India, a space selectively ignored or rejected in the latter discourse of neo-Vedanta Hinduism and Indian Christianity.

In the context of Punjab prior to the partition between Pakistan and India, ascetics combined and transcended religious difference to underscore the selective authority of a leader, place, or particular practice. Thus, the faqir was often a public figure, a teacher and healer, credited with miracles and representative of the blurred lines of vernacular religious life. Chapter 2, "How the Pope Came to Punjab," portrays the centrality of ascetic work and self-determination in contrast with the Protestant (British) rejection of both Catholic monasticism and saints and North-Indian faqirs (and yogis). The earlier diversity of local practice became obscured in part through the introduction of colonial education that emphasized English language and the study of select religious texts.

Chapter 3, "Resurrecting the Saints," provides an excellent historical study of the early leaders of modern Hinduism within colonial India. By examining figures such as

Rammohun Roy, Dayananda Saraswati, and, Keshub Chandra Sen, Dobe looks at how these modern leaders incorporated colonial understandings into their own reconstruction of sainthood. Proponents of Neo-Vedanta reintroduced the ascetic sannyasi as monk, simultaneously critiquing Protestant Christianity and reclaiming Hindu texts and lineages for the modern movement. Rather than viewing this strictly in terms of eastern reaction to western influence, Dobe points to indigenous sources and questions the discourse of secular-religious dichotomies. As such, Chapter 3 makes an important contribution towards a more nuanced view of South Asian history.

Chapters 4 and 5 look at the significance of ascetic aesthetics and the way that modern Indian monks used religious dress, in particular the orange colored robes common to South Asian renunciate orders, to deconstruct colonial racism and to signify a new authority and autonomy for Hindu leaders. Chapter 4, “The Saffron Skin of Rama Tirtha,” highlights the “ascetic deconstruction of social selves” and the ways that Rama Tirtha’s particular teachings of non-dual Advaita philosophically unhinged racial bias.

Chapter 5, “Sundar Singh and the Oriental Christ of the West,” similarly looks at Singh’s choice to wear the orange robes in his role as a Christian missionary leader. As such, Dobe points to “Sundar Singh’s transformation from a dark colonial subject to a “Christ-bearing,” saffron-robed holy man, a black that whites longed to touch as he passed,” (181) as indicative of the profound agency and social power of South Asian sainthood.

The final chapters 6 and 7 examine the autobiographical writings of Rama Tirtha and

Sundar Singh. Chapter 6, “Vernacular Vedanta,” examines Rama Tirtha’s unique approach to personal narratives as demonstrative of non-dual philosophy. Thus his writing seeks to replace concepts of the individual self with that of the one universal self. Yet, as Dobe’s careful analysis reveals, “in the denial of the self, the self is realized, fulfilled, even asserted.” (222) Thus, Rama Tirtha’s “autohagiography” (a term borrowed from Robin Rinehart) is, therefore, a “performance of sainthood.” (183)

Chapter 7, “Frail Soldiers of the Cross,” looks at Sundar Singh’s earliest published works. These are largely fragmentary narratives that highlight moments of individual suffering and redemption and that serve as a critique of colonial missionary institutions. Protestant missionary work in India introduced Christianity as part of a modernizing or civilizing effort. By contrast, Singh retrieves an ascetic account of Christianity where the Christian martyr is heir to Indian modes of sacrifice, asceticism (or renunciation) and devotion. By highlighting parallels between the faqir/sadhu spirit and Catholic monasticism (vs. Protestant missions), Singh also contested the universal character of Christian missions in colonial India.

A major contribution of this book is that it pushes comparative study beyond the illusion of a two-part dialogue to encompass a plurality of local, “vernacular” traditions. Dobe takes a fresh look at asceticism and sainthood in India as an amalgam of bhakti (devotion), bodily practice, and a complex interplay between world renunciation and worldly/political power that crosses religious and social boundaries. Of particular interest is how he resists the often pejorative label of syncretism and instead employs the model of “code-switching” to

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.

Stephanie Corigliano
Humboldt State University

***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,