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Religious Practice and Religious Socialization: Comparative Research among Christian, Muslim and Hindu Students in Tamilnadu, India

Francis-Vincent Anthony^a, Chris A.M. Hermans & Carl Sterkens^b

a) Salesian Pontifical University, Rome

vincent@unisal.it

b) Department of Empirical Practical Theology at the Radboud University Nijmegen,

C. Hermans@theo.ru.nl

Received 1 December 2006; accepted 20 February 2007

Abstract

This article seeks, first, to offer a comprehensive theoretical framework of religious practice — based particularly on the works of Stark and Glock — that may be used in comparative research among adherents of different religious traditions. Secondly we clarify the role of the agents of religious socialization and their function as “reference others”, taking into account the contributions of Bajzek, Milanese and Schlenker. The empirical analysis of the data based on these theoretical considerations brings to light a model of institutional religious practice whereby Christian, Islamic and Hindu traditions may be compared. The results also underscore the association between the religious community and involvement in institutional religious practices in the case of the three religious groups and the differentiated impact of the other agents of religious socialization in the case of each religion. A further finding is that gender affects particularly the Christians in their institutional religious practices. The paper ends with a discussion of these findings.

Keywords

comparative research, religious practice, religious socialization, gender, Christians, Hindus, Muslims

1 Introduction

Since the initial attempt made by G. Le Bras (1931, 1955), there has been a growing debate over the components, typologies and indicators of religious practice. More recently, Glock (1954), together with Stark (1965), has figured prominently in this debate with his research into the multidimensionality of religiosity (Bajzek & Milanese 2006, 133-138). The present study seeks to shed some light on the structure of religious practice in a comparative perspective.

In *Section 2*, we explain how our theoretical framework expands on the framework provided by Stark and Glock (1968), making it more comprehensive and systematic, and placing it in relation to religious socialization. In *Section 3*, we present the research design and clarify how the measuring instruments were formulated on the basis of the theoretical framework; then we present the results emerging from the statistical analysis and in *Section 4*, we discuss their salient features.

An essential characteristic of our research is its comparative nature. It is not that the comparative perspective is absent in the works of Stark and Glock; they in fact draw comparisons between the Christian denominations and summarize the differences between Protestant Churches and the Catholic Church. They identify various dimensions of religiosity which they regard as basic and indicate the relevance of these for other religious traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. However, their empirical research is limited to Christian denominations in the United States of America (USA). By contrast, in our research we take the multi-religious context into account right from the elaboration of the theoretical framework and the operationalisation of the main concepts in the measuring instruments to the procedure of statistical analysis and discussion.

Before we present the theoretical framework and the research design, a word about the context of our research is in order. Although the strides made by India in the economic sector have recently hit the headlines, the country's most deeply rooted and long-lasting trait is its religiosity. For centuries, India has been the melting pot of diverse religious traditions. At the national level, in a population of over one billion, adherents of the three major religions are divided as follows: 82.4% Hindus, 11.7% Muslims and 2.3% Christians. In the southern state of Tamilnadu — where we situate our research — in a population of over 62 million, the proportion changes to 88.7% Hindu, 5.5% Muslims and 5.7% Christians (Government of Tamilnadu, *Statistical Handbook* 2003).¹ The presence of Christians and Muslims who have lived side by side with Hindus for centuries makes Tamilnadu a suitable place for a comparative study of religious practice. The dynamism manifested by these religions points to the strength of religious socialization in the Indian context. Yet one cannot ignore the impact of today's globalizing culture on religious socialization.

It seemed appropriate to use college-going youth as the subjects in our study to clarify the underlying connection between religious practice and religious

¹ See http://www.tn.gov.in/deptst/Tab16_3.htm (21/02/2005).

socialization in a multi-religious context influenced by modern/postmodern scientific culture.

2 Theoretical framework

Examining the interconnection between religious practice and religious socialization requires some theoretical lucidity with regard to these basic concepts. The focus of our research being religious practice, we begin by clarifying its multidimensional structure, before taking up the concept of religious socialization.

2.1 *Multidimensionality of religious practice*

The seminal work of Stark and Glock (1968) provides a good starting point for a theoretical framework of religious practice. In their view: “Beyond the differences in specific beliefs and practices, there seems to be considerable consensus among all religions on the general ways in which religiousness ought to be manifested. We propose that these general ways provide a set of core dimensions of religiousness” (p. 14). They then proceed to identify the basic dimensions: “Five such dimensions can be distinguished; within one or another of them all of the many and diverse religious prescriptions of the different religions of the world can be classified. We shall call these dimensions: *belief, practice, knowledge, experience, and consequences*” (p. 14). In their understanding, the “practice or worship dimension” includes two categories: *rituals*, referring to formal religious acts of worship, and *devotion*, referring to personal acts of worship. It should be noted that “belief dimension” is the revised term they now use, to avoid confusion and needless discussion, in place of what they originally called the “ideological dimension” (p. 15).

On the basis of their empirical research, Stark and Glock (1968) identify some secondary dimensions, namely particularism, ethicalism and relational aspect (p. 175), in addition to the basic or primary dimensions named above. However, although they identify the core elements of religiosity, they tend to be a trifle arbitrary in their attempt to deal with all the aspects of religiosity. We shall try to place the core elements identified by Stark and Glock — as explained below — within a systematic and comprehensive framework of religious practice, with a view to testing it in our empirical research.²

² From a psycho-sociological perspective, Huber (2003) has also successfully developed a scale to measure the centrality of the religious construct-system, taking into account the multidimensionality of religiosity identified by Stark and Glock.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of religious practice we need to examine it from at least the cultural and social perspectives. In the first place, religiosity cannot be lived in an abstract way: it needs to take a cultural form. This means we have to explore the cultural dimensions of religious practice. Secondly, from the social perspective, we need to consider the institutional and personal spheres of religious practice.

Understanding religious practice from a cultural perspective demands that we spell out the basic dimensions of culture. According to Ladriere (1988, 32-35; 1978, 7), culture in its specific sense can be understood in terms of cognitive, normative and expressive systems. The *cognitive system* refers to the whole set of representations (i.e. the concepts and notions) used to interpret and understand reality. Besides scientific representations — which have considerable cultural importance — the cognitive system also includes mythological, ideological, philosophical and religious representations. The evaluative or *normative system* is the whole set of values and norms that give direction to actions and in relation to which actions can be judged. The *expressive system* consists of all the mediations that make the circulation of meanings and values possible. In order to be communicated, meanings and values, which in themselves are abstract realities, have to be objectified, i.e. presented in a materialized form, in the shape of spoken and written languages, symbols and rites, artistic and aesthetic forms, and so on.

Since culture comprises cognitive, normative and expressive systems, we can describe religious practice as the way believers engage in the religious cognitive system, the religious normative system and the religious expressive system.

Turning to the social perspective, although Stark and Glock (1968) do not elaborate on religiosity as an institutional practice and a personal practice, this distinction is present in their understanding of religious worship as comprising ritual and devotional dimensions: “While the ritual aspect of commitment is highly formalized and typically institutional, all known religions also value personal acts of worship and contemplation which are relatively spontaneous, informal, and typically private” (p. 15). When comparing the different denominations of Christians, they affirm that “Catholics are more likely to exhibit institutional than private religious practice”, whereas Protestants are more likely to engage in “private rather than institutional religious practice” (p. 124).

Figure 1: The many dimensions of religious practice

CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE	SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE	
	<i>Institutional form</i>	<i>Personal form</i>
Religious cognitive system	Doctrinal knowledge	Belief outlook
Religious normative system	Ethical consequence	Moral consciousness
Religious expressive system	Formal ritual	Popular devotion

Taking into account the three specifically cultural dimensions and the two social spheres (as shown in Figure 1), religious practice with respect to the religious cognitive system can be understood as *institutional doctrinal knowledge* and *personal belief outlook*; with respect to the religious normative system, as *institutional ethical consequence* and *personal moral consciousness*; with respect to the religious expressive system, as *institutional formal ritual* and *personal popular devotion*.

These six dimensions of religious practice are to be found one way or another among the primary and secondary dimensions identified by Stark and Glock (1968). What we have termed institutional doctrinal knowledge stands for what these authors indicate as the knowledge dimension. In their understanding, this dimension refers to the “information about the basic tenets of their [religious persons’] faith and its rites, scriptures, and traditions” (p. 16). Similarly, the personal belief outlook in our scheme refers to the same dimension highlighted by the two authors. In their view, “The belief dimension comprises expectations that the religious person will hold a certain theological outlook, that he will acknowledge the truth of the tenets of the religion” (p. 14).

On the one hand, Stark and Glock (1968) identify ethicalism as only one of the secondary dimensions of religiosity, although at the outset they affirm that “Going to church, believing, and acting ethically are generally recognized as components of being religious” (p. 11). On the other hand, reserving it as a concern for a later study, they identify *consequences* for behavior and action as one of the primary dimensions: “religions prescribe much of how their adherents ought to think and act in everyday life” (p. 16). Bearing this in mind, and insofar as the ethical dimension can be viewed with reference to institutional and personal practice, we distinguish between *institutional ethical consequence* and *personal moral consciousness*.

With regard to the religious expressive system, following the distinction made by Stark and Glock (1968), we include the *institutional formal ritual* and

the *personal popular devotion*. This distinction also derives from the fact that it is in personal practice that religious expression tends to be more spontaneous and popular (Bajzek & Milanese 2006, 179-192). With these distinctions and interconnections, our framework provides a better structure to the dimensions of religiosity identified by Stark and Glock.³

We can therefore sum up our theoretical framework of religious practice as follows. It incorporates the cultural and social perspectives and employs six dimensions of religious practice. These are: institutional doctrinal knowledge and personal belief outlook, institutional ethical consequence and personal moral consciousness, institutional formal ritual and personal popular devotion. In *Section 3* (empirical research), we will clarify how these dimensions have been operationalized in the religious practice scale.

2.2 *Process of religious socialization*

Socialization can be described from two perspectives: that of the society acting upon the individual (objectively), and that of the individual responding to the society (subjectively). On the objective plane, socialization is “the process by which the society transmits its culture from one generation to the next and adapts the individual to the accepted and approved ways of organized social life” (Fichter 1973, 29). The accent here is on the persons, groups, agencies and mass media that transmit the systems of meanings, values, symbols, roles, etc. On the subjective plane, socialization is “a process of learning which goes on in the individual while he is adapting to the people around him” (p. 30). The emphasis here is on the social learning of the individual. Thus on the objective plane, religious socialization can be described as the process of transmitting religious meanings, values and expressions, both institutional and personal. On the subjective plane, religious socialization can be viewed as the construction of the individual’s religiosity in the process of adapting him or herself to the environment.

³ The only primary dimension not included in our framework is religious experience. The latter is to be distinguished from the religious cognitive, normative and expressive systems as something that precedes and/or follows these. In our research instrument, which was meant to examine religiosity in an interreligious perspective, religious experience or mystical experience was represented separately with the help of Hood’s Mystical Scale (1975). We hope to take up the results related to it in a later publication.

Without losing sight of these double perspectives, we briefly examine the role of principal agents of religious socialization as elucidated by Bajzek and Milanese (2006, 72-83): the family, the peer group, the religious community, the educational community and the mass media.

The family is the place of primary socialization and in it parents play a key role as models of identification on the normative plane. However, the family's role in religious socialization is determined by the significance of religion within society. In the traditional context, where religion has a central place in society and where the family itself is well integrated within the religious structure, religious socialization is to a great extent delegated to the family. But in a secularized context, where religion loses its central place in society, religious socialization in the family becomes ineffective. The attempts (if any) made by the family are easily neutralized by other agents of socialization.

Among contemporary youth, the peer group — which allows for a more egalitarian, reciprocal interaction — has emerged as an important agent of socialization. It serves as a place of transition between the family nucleus and today's complex and competitive society. As a spontaneous group it can play a positive role in religious socialization, yet in a cultural context of fragmentation and secularization, the peer group can distance itself from institutionalized religion, preferring the personal form of religiosity.

The growing absence of the family in religious socialization brings to the fore the role and responsibility of the religious community. The latter assumes the task of nurturing the personal commitment of the young through religious initiation and education. In the context of minority religious communities — as is the case with Christians and Muslims in Tamilnadu and in India as a whole — the risk of such religious socialization is that it may create a “ghetto” mentality that cuts off the young from the rest of the society and from other religious traditions in it.

Young people today spend a good part of their time in educational institutions: schools, colleges and universities. The socialization that takes place in contact with other students, teachers, professors, associations, etc., allows them to transcend the emotional ties with the family and interiorize social values and norms. Religious socialization in the educative community, however, depends on the centrality or marginality of religion in society and consequently in the curriculum. In multi-religious contexts, public educational institutions tend to take into account the dominant religious tradition, whereas in secularized societies they may exclude religious culture altogether. In such contexts, to ensure adequate religious socialization, religious communities — particularly the minority communities — may create religiously affiliated

educational institutions: for example, Catholic schools and colleges, Islamic schools and colleges. The risk again is that of promoting a “ghetto” mentality in a religiously pluralistic society.

The growing importance of the mass media in the socialization process is evident from the signs of crisis in the other agents of socialization. In a way, the mass media modify the authority of other agents of religious socialization and accelerate the process of subjectivity construction. The impact of the mass media on religious socialization is, again, determined by the place of religion in society. In a secularized or atheistic society, the mass media will tend to marginalize religious information. In a democratic and religiously pluralistic nation like India, the mass media pay particular attention to the dominant religion, making some room for minority religions as well. Minority religions in their turn seek to use the mass media to cater for the religious socialization of their own followers and to expand their sphere of influence in society. The mass media also permit religious minority groups (like Christians and Muslims in India) to be part of their worldwide communities. The mass media therefore play an ambivalent role in religious socialization. On the one hand they tend to undermine the role of traditional agents of religious socialization, while on the other they make religious socialization possible in global terms.

The theory of Schlenker (1985; 1986) on public and private self sheds further light on how these agents of religious socialization influence the young, particularly their subjective learning or the way they construct their own identity. According to Schlenker (1986, 22) the private and public selves are complementary facets of an individual's identity. He defines identity as “a theory of self that is formed and maintained through actual or imagined interpersonal agreement about what the self is like” (p. 23). “People's ideas about themselves are expressed and tested in social life through their actions. In turn, the outcomes of these ‘tests’ provide a basis for crystallizing, refining, or modifying identity based in part on how believable or defensible these identity images appear to be” (p. 24). Individuals construct their identity through repeated interaction with the same people over a considerable length of time. Based on this interaction they construct their “desirable identity images”, which “represent what people believe they *can be* and *should be* in particular contexts, and are influenced by personality factors, situational factors, and audience factors” (p. 25). Speaking of audience, Schlenker distinguishes three types. The first type is the inner self, i.e. the internalized values, standards and knowledge which give a person a basis for self-evaluation. The second type of audience consists of the people with whom one interacts directly. The third type is the so-called “reference others”. These are people whose opinions and

standards are sufficiently respected to be “evoked as exemplars and evaluators across a wide variety of situations, and not solely when actors interact or expect to interact with them. Examples can include parents, best friends, spouse, children, admired mentors, and reference groups” (p. 28). The category of “reference others” provides a theoretical basis for considering the influence of the agents of religious socialization. We deal with this in more concrete terms when we present the measuring instruments.

The traditional patriarchal orientation in religious socialization suggests some gender differences in religious practice, which may vary from one religion to another. The impact of modern/postmodern culture may further sharpen or diffuse the differences in the religious practice of women and men. Therefore, it seemed appropriate to include in this study an examination of the effect of gender in the religious practice of the young.

Thus with regard to religious socialization, our focus is on the impact of the “reference others” and that of gender on the religious practice of the young.

3 Empirical research

Having clarified the theoretical framework concerning the dimensions of religious practice and the process of religious socialization, we now turn to the empirical phase of our research. First we define the research questions that we seek to address. Secondly, we explain the construction of the measuring instruments based on our theoretical framework. Thirdly, we deal briefly with the research sample and, fourthly, we comment on the analysis procedure appropriate to comparative research in theology. Finally, we present the results emerging from the data analysis.

3.1 Research questions

With reference to our conceptual framework concerning the many dimensions of religious practice and the process of religious socialization, the research questions can be stated as follows:

(1) What comparable understanding of religious practice emerges among Christian, Muslim and Hindu students once group-specific differences have been ascertained?

(2) (a) What level of involvement is found with regard to the comparable religious practice among the college students as a whole? (b) Are there

significant differences in the levels of involvement of Christian, Muslim and Hindu students?

(3) (a) What is the configuration of the agents of religious socialization and what is the overall agreement as to their role? (b) What impact do the agents of religious socialization have on the comparable religious practice among the college students as a whole? (c) Are there significant differences between Christian, Muslim and Hindu students with regard to the impact of the agents of religious socialization on the comparable religious practice?

(4) (a) Does gender produce differences in the level of involvement in the comparable religious practice among the college students as a whole? (b) Are there significant differences in the levels of involvement when the male and the female, Christian, Muslim and Hindu students are considered separately?

3.2 *Measuring instruments*

Two measuring instruments were developed on the basis of our conceptual framework. The principal measuring instrument concerns religious practice, the other the agents of religious socialization. Each item in these is formulated in a generic manner, so that it is applicable to the different religious traditions involved.

The instrument meant to measure religious practice operationalizes the six dimensions of religious practice that emerge from the combination of cultural and social perspectives (see Figure 1): institutional doctrinal knowledge and personal belief outlook, institutional ethical consequence and personal moral consciousness, institutional formal ritual, and personal popular devotion. For a complete list of items representing these six categories of religious practice, see "Measuring instrument 1" in the Appendix.

In the religious cognitive system, three items represent institutional doctrinal knowledge and two represent personal belief outlook. Here is an example for each of the two categories: *Are you interested in learning more about the beliefs and doctrines of your religion?* (item 11); *Are you convinced that there is life after death?* (item 20).

In the religious normative system, three items represent institutional ethical consequence and two represent personal moral consciousness. Here we offer an example for each of the two categories: *Are you interested in learning more about the moral values upheld by your religion?* (item 18); *Do you seek God's forgiveness for your wrong doings?* (item 10).

Religious practice being particularly concrete in the religious expressive system, we have included five items to represent the institutional formal ritual and five to represent the personal popular devotion. Here is an example for each of the two categories: *Is it important for you to participate in the religious worship officiated by a priest or leader of your religion?* (item 12); *Is it important for you to wear a religious symbol on your body?* (item 13).

Besides the principal instrument for measuring religious practice, an instrument for examining the impact of agents of religious socialization as “reference others” was constructed. Based on the conceptual framework, the agents of religious socialization were operationalized as follows: *family* (mother, father, close relatives), *peer group* (close friends), *religious community* (religious leaders, religious groups or associations outside educational institutions), *educational community* (school teachers and college professors who provide religious or moral education, religious groups or associations inside the school and the college setting), and the *mass media* (religious figures appearing on TV or radio programs). The respondents were asked to indicate whether these agents of religious socialization had played a favorable or unfavorable role in their understanding and practice of religion. A complete list of items concerning this can be found in “Measuring instrument 2” in the Appendix.

3.3 *Sampling and data collection*

Since we have already described the sampling and data collection procedure in our previous article on interpreting religious pluralism (Anthony, Hermans & Sterkens 2005) — part of a wider research into interreligious participation and conflict — we limit ourselves here to the essentials.

A selective stratified sample, taking into account students’ gender, religious affiliation, area of residence and educational level, was drawn from 16 colleges and Madras University. Given the relevance of gender differences to our theme, eight women’s colleges were selected, the remaining eight being principally for men. Madras University, by contrast, has a fully fledged coeducational system.

As part of a wider inquiry into factors leading to a participatory or conflictive approach to other religions among students belonging to the three major religions in Tamilnadu, a questionnaire containing the instruments described above was administered to students frequenting the 16 colleges and Madras University between October 2003 and January 2004.

The demographic characteristics of our respondents (1920) reveal the adequacy of our sampling procedure. Our respondents represent the genders fairly

equally: 55.6% are young women, the remaining 44.4% young men. As for religious affiliation, 41.1% are Hindus, 45.3% are Christians (28.1% Catholics, 12.8% Protestants and 4.4% adherents of other Christian denominations), 13.3% are Muslims and a handful (0.4%) are Jains and Buddhists. As the study focused on Christians, Hindus and Muslims, students belonging to other religions were not included in our analysis. The percentages of students according to religious affiliation do not reflect the ratio in the Tamilnadu population. The smaller proportion of Muslims in our sample results from the fact that they rarely attend colleges other than their own, which are fewer in number than other colleges.⁴

Almost all the respondents (98.4%) belong to the 17 to 25 years age group, which qualifies them as youth. The vast majority (86%) are undergraduates, and 65.6% of these are in the final or third year of their studies. Our study focused on third or final year undergraduates, since not all of them would continue with postgraduate studies. Only 13.7% of our respondents are postgraduate students and a tiny group (0.3%) are engaged in advanced studies (MPhil and PhD).

3.4 *Procedure of data analysis*

As discussed in our earlier publication (Anthony, Hermans & Sterkens 2005), the comparative nature of our research necessitates an appropriate data analysis procedure. This is particularly true with regard to the first research question, which requires a series of analyses to substantiate the construction of a comparative category common to the three religions, without ignoring the distinctiveness of each religion. The aim of this analysis is to establish commensurability of the religious practice. To achieve this, we first construct a category for the adherents of all three religions by conducting a factor analysis of the scale for all respondents (Christians, Hindus and Muslims) together. In including all respondents in the same analysis we assume that their religious practice has the same structure. The second step is to examine the three religious groups separately. These separate analyses should show whether the overall structure of the first step holds good for each of these groups. In other

⁴ The slightly higher proportion of Christians follows from our need to have sufficient representation of Catholics, Protestants and adherents of other Christian denominations with a view to comparing the Christian groups, as part of a further study.

words, we wish to find out if the category of religious practice established in the overall analysis recurs in the analyses related to particular groups with all the items or with fewer.⁵ The purpose of this step is to uncover the inter-group differences. These differences are eliminated in the third step, where we determine the commensurable concept of religious practice after checking for structural differences between the models specific to each religious group. Since we can only compare a commensurable factor, we have to apply the sieve of commonality: what is distinctive is filtered out. Only in this last step can we speak of a comparable model of religious practice. In the next section we report only the results of the third-step factor analysis although we also account for the differences filtered out in the second step.

3.5 Results of empirical analysis

The procedures of scale construction and data analysis described above have led us to find answers corresponding to the four research questions.

Research question 1: What comparable understanding of religious practice emerges among Christian, Muslim and Hindu students once group-specific differences have been ascertained?

When a factor analysis (step one) was run on ten items⁶ manifesting strong correlations, one of the items (item 15) was found to have low commonality and was therefore eliminated. In the second step, when the factor analysis of nine items was done for the three religious groups separately, we found that five items (items 2, 5, 10, 14 and 20) had to be removed because they were not common to all three religious groups. Table 1 shows the third step, namely, the Principal Axis Factoring (Oblimin rotation method) of the four remaining items for all the students taken as a whole. We first present the results of this third-step factor analysis and then comment on the differences between the three groups that were filtered out in the second step.

⁵ The criteria used in the factor analysis are: mineigen value >1.00; commonality >.20; factor loadings >.30, and if items load high on two factors, the difference in factor loading should be >.15.

⁶ Items manifesting strong correlations in the correlational matrix: 2, 5, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 18 & 20.

Table 1: Factor analysis (Paf, Oblimin rotation), communalities (h²), percentage of explained variance, and reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of the comparable religious practices among Christian, Muslim and Hindu students as a whole

	F1	h ²
11. Are you interested in learning more about the beliefs and doctrines of your religion?	.77	.60
16. Is it important for you to read the sacred scriptures of your religion by yourself?	.70	.50
18. Are you interested in learning more about the moral values upheld by your religion?	.69	.48
12. Is it important for you to participate in the religious worship officiated by a priest or leader of your religion?	.65	.43
Cronbach's alpha	.80	
Number of valid cases	1911	

Explained variance = 49.9%

F1 = Institutional religious practices

¹ N = 1920

The factor analysis done for the whole sample in the third step (Table 1) results in a reliable measuring instrument that can be used for comparing different religious traditions with regard to “religious practice”. It may be noted that the four items of the comparable model of religious practice represent all three institutional dimensions: institutional doctrinal knowledge (item 11), institutional ethical consequence (item 18), and institutional formal ritual (items 12 and 16). In other words, the comparable model focuses on institutional religious practice rather than on personal religious practice. We will label it accordingly as “institutional religious practices”. Our empirical results (and observations), therefore, reflect only the tendency among Christian, Muslim and Hindu students with regard to institutional religious practices.

The reliability and the percentage of variance explained by the comparable religious practices are moderately high, when checked for each of the three religious groups separately. As can be seen in Table 2, the comparable model of institutional religious practice seems to be more reliable in the case of Hindus than for Christians and Muslims.

Table 2: Reliability of the comparable institutional religious practices, percentages of explained variance, and number of valid cases for Christian, Muslim and Hindu students considered separately

	Cronbach's Alpha	% of explained variance	Valid cases
Hindus	.77	46.6	785
Christians	.69	36.5	866
Muslims	.65	35.1	253

The foregoing model of religious practice represents only what is comparable between the three religious groups. When a factor analysis is done within each of the three religious groups separately (second-step analysis with nine items), we find that some items are not relevant for all three religious traditions. These items point to non-comparable aspects of the religious practice specific to one or two of the religious traditions.

In the second-step factor analysis for Christians, we found that the factor "religious practice" includes item 2 ("Do you sing and pray together with the followers of your religion?") with a rather high loading (.56). This means that the comparable model of religious practice under-represents the institutional formal ritual that is important for Christians. When we do a similar factor analysis for Hindus, we find that the emerging factor includes not only item 2 (factor loading .47), but also item 14 ("Are you convinced of the existence of God?" — factor loading .49). Therefore, for Hindus the comparable model not only under-represents the institutional formal ritual but also the personal belief outlook. When we do a similar second-step analysis for Muslims, we find that besides item 14 (factor loading .61), two other items are included: item 20 ("Are you convinced that there is life after death?" — factor loading .46) representing the category of personal belief outlook; and item 10 ("Do you seek God's forgiveness for your wrong doings?" — factor loading .51) representing the category of personal moral consciousness. The inclusion of three items representing personal religious practice in the case of Muslims suggests that the comparable model under-represents the personal form of religion more in their case than for Christians and Hindus.

These results underline, in the first place, that the comparable religious practice is institutional in character. Secondly, the results suggest that Christians' understanding of religious practice places greater emphasis on the institutional character and that personal religious practice is given more weight in

Muslims' understanding of religious practice, whereas that of Hindus falls between the other two groups. We shall take up these findings for further discussion in the final section.

Research question 2: What level of involvement is found with regard to the comparable (institutional) religious practice among the college students as a whole? Are there significant differences in the levels of involvement of Christian, Muslim and Hindu students?

As we can see in Table 3, the overall level of involvement in the comparable institutional religious practices tends towards "much" (mean 2.81). But when we calculate the involvement tendency of the three groups separately, we find that Hindus' involvement goes beyond "a little" (mean 2.26), whereas Christians and Muslims go beyond "much" (mean 3.16 and 3.29 respectively). The fact that there is higher level of involvement among Christians and Muslims than among Hindus is clear from the significant differences between their mean scores.

Table 3: Levels of agreement (mean and standard deviation) with regard to the comparable institutional religious practices of the sample as a whole and of Christian, Muslim and Hindu students separately, and T-tests of means of the three religious groups

	Mean	s.d.	Mean	s.d.	T-value	Sign. ($p \leq$)
All students together	2.81	.86				
Christians x Muslims	3.16	.68	3.29	.63	2.83	.05
Muslims x Hindus	3.29	.63	2.26	.81	21.00	.000
Hindus x Christians	2.26	.81	3.16	.68	24.32	.000

Scale: 1 (Not at all) 2 (A little) 3 (Much) 4 (Very much)

As we can see in Table 3, the strongest difference in institutional religious practices is between Hindus and Christians ($t = 24.32$), followed by that between Hindus and Muslims ($t = 21.00$). This highly significant difference between Hindus and the other two groups is also brought to light by the overall analysis of variance between groups ($\eta^2 = .53$, $p < .000$). Eta squared (.28) points to the proportion of variance explained.

Table 3 shows that there is a moderately significant difference ($t = 2.83$) between Christians and Muslims, the latter manifesting a slightly stronger involvement in institutional practice than the former.

Our analysis reveals that Hindus manifest the least involvement in the comparable institutional practices and differ significantly from the other two groups. Muslims manifest the strongest religious practice tendency and differ slightly from the Christians. It must be remembered that our comparable institutional model of religious practice under-represents the Muslims, particularly as regards personal religious practice. The stronger religious practice tendency among Muslims and Christians may be due to the fact that both are minority religions, each having followings of less than 6% of the population of Tamilnadu. Generally, the followers of minority religions tend to safeguard their religious identity by laying greater emphasis on their religious practice. Hindus' lesser involvement may be due to the fact that Hinduism does not stress institutional religious practice, from which one could assume that Hindus probably privilege personal popular religiosity. But when we check the mean scores of the five items forming personal popular devotion, we again find that, except for one item (regarding consulting astrology or horoscope), the involvement of Hindus is much less intense than that of Muslims and Christians. This may be because Hinduism does not stress religious practice, or it could be that Hindu college-going students are less keen on religious practice. It may also be due to the fact that adherents of majority religions are usually less fervent with regard to religious practice than the followers of minority religions. We discuss this question further in our final section.

Research question 3: (a) What is the configuration of the agents of religious socialization and what is the overall agreement as to their role in the understanding and practice of religion? (b) What impact do the agents of religious socialization have on the comparable (institutional) religious practice, when the college students are considered all together? (c) Are there significant differences with regard to the impact of the agents of religious socialization on the comparable (institutional) religious practice, when the Christian, Muslim and Hindu students are considered separately?

Following our conceptual framework, five sets of agents of religious socialization were operationalized in the measuring instrument. The influence of the peer group and that of the mass media were represented by single items. In the confirmative factor analysis of the groups of items representing other agents of religious socialization, we found that in the items representing family, one referring to close relatives had to be separated, leaving the remaining two items to represent parents. Thus we have three variables of religious socialization with one item each: close relatives, peer group and mass media. Two variables of religious socialization, namely, parents and religious community,

are represented by two items each and the variable of educational community is represented by three items.

In the confirmative analysis, the strength of the correlations (moderate for items representing parents and rather high for those representing religious community — see Appendix, Table 7) and the level of reliability (alpha rather high for the items representing educational community — see Appendix, Table 8) suggest that we can consider parents, religious community and educational community as specific agents of religious socialization along with others, namely, close relatives, peer group and the mass media (represented by single items). When we examine the agreement as to the role of these agents on the understanding and practice of religion for all students together, the mean scores — in descending order as shown in Table 4 — reveal that parents tend to play a very favorable role, whereas close relatives and the peer group seem to have a role that is “a little favorable”. Educational and religious communities also tend towards a role that is “a little favorable”. By contrast, the role of the mass media tends to be “a little unfavorable”.

Table 4: Levels of agreement with regard to the role of religious socialization agents for all the students together (in the descending order of mean) and correlations between involvement in institutional religious practices and the impact of agents of religious socialization, for the entire group of students and for Christians, Muslims and Hindus separately

	All students		All students	Christians	Muslims	Hindus
	Mean	s.d.				
Parents	4.61	0.68	.23**	.10*	.21*	.20**
Close relatives	4.05	1.11	.19**	.11*	.30**	.17**
Peer group	3.97	1.16	.20**	.08	.16*	.17**
Educational community	3.63	1.21	.34**	.15**	.17*	.22**
Religious community	3.54	1.42	.43**	.28**	.35**	.29**
Mass media	3.18	1.48	.26**	.18**	.24**	.25**

Scale (recoded): 1 (No contact with such persons) 2 (Very unfavorable) 3 (A little unfavorable) 4 (A little favorable) 5 (Very favorable). ** p = .000; * = .01

The correlation between institutional religious practices and the impact of religious socialization agents (see Table 4) reveals an interesting pattern of association. When we consider all the students together we find that all agents

of socialization (with the exception of close relatives) have a significant impact on students' religious practice, although the degree of their association varies considerably. Even though parents and close relatives are said to play a very favorable role in the general understanding and practice of religion in the case of all students taken together (see mean scores), we find a stronger association between the level of involvement in institutional religious practices and the impact of the religious and educational communities.

The religious community manifests a very strong association (.43) and the educational community a strong association (.34). The other agents of socialization, namely, the mass media, parents and peer group, are found to be quite moderately associated with the level of involvement in institutional religious practices of students.

When we consider the three religious groups separately (see correlations in Table 4), we find that the socialization agent that has the strongest association with involvement in institutional religious practices for all three religious groups is the religious community. It seems quite natural that involvement in institutional religious practices should be strongly linked to religious communities. This association is stronger among Muslims than among Christians and Hindus. It is to be noted that among Christians, the only strong association of involvement in institutional religious practices is with the religious community.

In the case of Hindus and Muslims, the mass media and parents have a relatively moderate association with institutional religious practices. Interestingly, close relatives have a fairly strong association with institutional religious practices only in the case of Muslims, and the educational community has a fairly moderate association only in the case of Hindus. It is strange that the educational community is associated with institutional religious practices only in the case of Hindus, when minority communities like Christians and Muslims run educational institutions specifically to promote the religious identity and religious practice of their followers.

Some interesting points for discussion thus emerge from the results presented above: the dominant role of the religious community on the institutional religious practices of the young when its influence seems to be doubted today; the limited influence of the educational institutions in the case of the minority communities when these are created specifically to promote religious formation of the young; the dominant role of close relatives in the case of Muslims. We shall take up these findings for discussion in the next section.

Research question 4: (a) Does gender produce differences in the level of involvement in the comparable (institutional) religious practice among the

college students as a whole? (b) Are there significant differences in the levels of involvement when the male and the female, Christian, Muslim and Hindu students are considered separately?

As we can see in Table 5, when all are considered together gender seems to produce no relevant difference in the involvement of the respondents in institutional religious practices. When we consider the three religious groups separately, it is only in the case of Christians that we find moderately considerable differences between women and men, with the former manifesting a higher involvement tendency. Gender thus seems to have some impact on the involvement in institutional religious practices of Christians in particular.

Table 5: Levels of agreement (mean, standard deviation) and group differences (eta) between women and men with regard to involvement in institutional religious practices for all respondents together and for Christians, Hindus and Muslims separately

	All respondents		Christians		Hindus		Muslims	
	Mean	s.d.	Mean	s.d.	Mean	s.d.	Mean	s.d.
Women	2.90	.86	3.31	.63	2.35	.83	3.24	.70
Men	2.70	.85	2.96	.71	2.16	.77	3.33	.57
Group differences $\eta = .12, p = .000$ $\eta = .25, p = .000$ $\eta = .12, p = .001$								

Scale: 1 (Not at all) 2 (A little) 3 (Much) 4 (Very much)

When we consider women and men of the three religious traditions as separate groups, we find that there is a highly significant overall difference among the six groups (see Table 6), with Muslim men manifesting the strongest tendency to be involved in institutional religious practices and Hindu men manifesting the least. We note that Muslim men, Christian women and Muslim women differ significantly from the other three groups (Christian men, Hindu women and Hindu men). Among the latter groups, Christian men differ significantly from Hindu women and men. Similarly, Hindu women differ significantly from Hindu men.

Table 6: Levels of agreement (mean, standard deviation) and group differences (eta) with regard to involvement in institutional religious practices of women and men of the Christian, Muslim and Hindu religious traditions

	Mean	s.d.	G1	G2	G3	G4	G5	G6
1. Muslim men	3.33	.57				*	*	*
2. Christian women	3.31	.63				*	*	*
3. Muslim women	3.24	.70				*	*	*
4. Christian men	2.96	.71					*	*
5. Hindu women	2.35	.83						*
6. Hindu men	2.16	.77						
Group differences	eta = .55, p = .000							

Scale: 1 (Not at all) 2 (A little) 3 (Much) 4 (Very much); G1-G6: the groups in the list in order; * = significant difference between groups.

These results bring to light two underlying questions: Why does gender affect involvement in institutional religious practices, particularly among Christians? What contributes to the higher involvement in institutional religious practices in the case of Muslim men compared to Christian and Hindu men? We discuss these in the next section.

4 Discussion and conclusion

Some interesting points for discussion have emerged from the results presented above. We take these up with reference to the two major themes of our research, namely, the significance of the comparable institutional religious practices (findings related to research questions 1 and 2) and the impact of religious socialization agents among the three religious traditions (findings related to research questions 3 and 4).

4.1 *The significance of the comparable institutional religious practices*

In our analysis we found that the model of religious practice comparable among Christian, Muslim and Hindu students is institutional in character. This comparable model, however, was found to under-represent the personal aspects of religious practice, particularly in the case of Muslims. Although

students as a whole tend to manifest “much” involvement in institutional religious practices, it was found that the Muslims and Christians exhibit higher involvement than Hindus. (It is heartening to find that, despite the modern scientific culture in which they are immersed, college-going youth in Tamilnadu manifest “much” involvement in institutional religious practice.)

In multi-religious contexts, it is quite natural that institutional religious practices should be given importance, since they express and guarantee the individual’s membership of a specific religious community. The difference in the understanding of religious practice among Christians, Hindus and Muslims seems to be in the integration of personal and institutional religious practice. Christians’ agreement with the institutional aspect is clear from the fact that their specific understanding of religious practice only further reinforces the comparable institutional model of religious practice. Their “much” involvement in institutionalized religious practice also confirms it. In the case of Muslims, the integration of personal aspects with institutional aspects adds a different connotation to the institutional character as being more associated with extended family structures, which was found to have a particularly strong impact on their institutional religious practices. This seems to explain the inner dynamics of growth and vigor of Islam, which is also confirmed in the comparatively higher involvement of Muslims in institutional religious practices.

We found that our comparable model of institutional religious practice is most reliable in the case of Hindus. However, Hinduism is not an institutionalized religion like Christianity, but as a dominant religion in India, it could be argued that the overall cultural tradition serves as an institutional basis. This is clear from the fact that Hindus differ significantly from Christians and Muslims, manifesting the least involvement in institutional religious practices, even though the scale is most reliable in their case. A dominant but relatively less institutionalized religion, like Hinduism, that is integral to the local cultural and societal context may not evoke high involvement in religious practice, as do the more institutionalized and minority religions like Christianity and Islam. In a way, minority religions that are extraneous to the local cultural context — as is the case with Christianity and Islam in India — might feel a greater need to nurture their adherents’ religious identity and religious practice to avoid assimilation into the majority religion, for their own survival and growth (Carrier 1964, 198-200).

From our brief discussion, we may conclude that the configuration of the comparable religious practices and the level of involvement in these are determined by the institutional character of these religions: less formal and less institutionalized Hinduism on the one hand, and on the other, strongly

institutionalized Christianity and Islam with clear rules and prescriptions for their adherents. The differing levels of involvement in institutional religious practices among the followers of the three religions can also be attributed to their minority or majority status in society. However, further research is necessary to shed more light on how involvement in institutional religious practices varies according to the majority or minority status of religious traditions in society.

4.2 *The impact of the agents of religious socialization*

The findings of our analysis have highlighted some interesting points for discussion with regard to the agents of religious socialization. We found that the “religious community” has the strongest association with involvement in institutional religious practices. This is especially understandable in a multi-religious context like India. This association was also noted in the case of Hinduism, even though it is less institutionalized than Christianity and Islam. Moreover, in an increasingly secularized world that relegates religion to a marginal position and undermines the impact of the agents of religious socialization, such as the family and educational institutions, it is significant that the institutional religious practices of the young are associated with the religious community. This may point to the re-emergence of the religious community as the primary agent of religious socialization in an increasingly multi-religious, secularized world (Bajzek & Milanese 2006, 77).

The fact that among Christians only the religious community has a moderate association with involvement in institutional religious practice points to the dichotomous situation in which these Christians live. They are to a large extent conditioned by a non-indigenous culture in the religious sphere and by an indigenous culture in the other spheres of life. In their case the impact of all the other agents of religious socialization does not seem to have any relevance for their involvement in institutional religious practices. Of the three religious groups, only Christians seem to reflect a “ghetto” socialization associated with their own religious community. This points to the necessity for greater inculturation by integrating the Christian faith with the local Tamil/Indian culture (Anthony 1997; 1999). It also suggests that the religious socialization of Christian youth is highly institutionalized within the Christian community, which perhaps reflects a highly institutionalized religion. In the Indian context, where religion is less organized and more spontaneous in its expression, a highly institutionalized religion like Christianity, with few roots in the local culture, might in the long run lose its relevance and thrust (Panik-

kar 1984). Even at a wider level, “[w]e are slowly recognizing the necessity of a new christian awareness, which is tied neither to christian (western) civilization nor to christian (institutionalized) religion” (Panikkar 1993, 152).

We found that educational community has a moderate association with institutional religious practices only in the case of Hindus. Given that Hinduism is the dominant religion, it is quite natural that the educative program in its overall cultural content should favor the institutional religious practices of Hindu students. However, it is strange that religiously affiliated schools and colleges belonging to Christian and Muslim communities do not play a significant role with regard to involvement in institutional religious practices. The educational institutions of the minority communities are intended to nurture the religious identity and religious practice of their adherents, and generally they have religious programs and facilities (such as time and place for worship) for this purpose. This again points to the dichotomous situation in which religiously affiliated minority educational institutions find themselves (Anthony 1999). The cultural basis of the dominant Hindu religion perhaps inspires the overall educational curriculum more than that of the minority religions.

It is peculiar that it is only among the Christian students that there is no association between the role of parents and the students’ involvement in institutional religious practices, whereas we find relatively moderate associations in the case of Muslims and Hindus. In a strongly institutionalized religion without the support of close-knit family groups (unlike among the Muslim students), Christian parents seem to play no relevant role with regard to the involvement of youth in institutional religious practices. This could also be the result of the greater impact of the process of secularization on Christian families, as is the case in the West.

It is again rather odd that it is only among the Christian students that the role of the mass media is not associated with involvement in institutional religious practices, whereas in the case of Hindus and Muslims we find moderate associations. It is understandable that the mass media is associated with institutional religious practices among Hindu students since Hinduism is the dominant religion. Although the opportunities are the same, the mass media does not play the same role with regard to institutional practice in the case of Christians and Muslims. This difference could point to the greater estrangement of Christian life and Christian community from the mass media culture in Tamilnadu.

Overall, it is among Christians that religious socializing agents manifest the least impact on institutional religious practices. This, as we have been

discussing, seems to derive from their being less rooted in the local culture and more affected by the secular modern culture. The faith-culture divide seems to be wider among Christians than among the other two religious groups in the Indian context.

This also seems to explain the impact of gender. We found that it was only among Christians that there is a significant difference between women and men concerning their involvement in institutional religious practices, with women manifesting a higher tendency towards involvement. As may be observed in the Western Christian context, one of the effects of secularization is the reduced involvement of men in the institutional spheres of religious practice. The fact that gender plays a minor role or none at all in Hindus' and Muslims' involvement in institutional religious practices perhaps points to the differing impact of modernity on these religions (Anthony 1997, 103).

Furthermore, when we classify the adherents of the three religious traditions into six groups on the basis of gender, we find that Muslim men manifest the highest involvement in institutional religious practices, whereas Hindu men manifest the least. This could mean that Muslim institutional practice is the most male-characterized. But then, as we noted among Muslims, there is no significant difference between men and women in institutional religious practices. When compared to men from the other two religious traditions, the higher involvement tendency of Muslim men must be attributed not only to differing influences of secular modern culture but also to religious socialization in the close-knit family groups that seem to characterize the Muslim community.

In concluding our discussion, we can affirm that this study has established a model of institutional religious practice that is useful for comparative research among Christians, Muslims and Hindus. Contrary to our expectation, the dimension of personal popular devotion is not included in the understanding of religious practice by any of the three religions; this calls for further investigation in this area. The fact that the religious community plays a key role with regard to involvement in institutional religious practices in the case of the three religious traditions dispels the pessimism frequently expressed about the role of the religious community in religious initiation and education.

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Appendix

Measuring instrument 1: Religious practice

- A.** In this section (items 1-10), you are invited to indicate how often you practice the following. Your answer can be one of the four: (N) *Never*, (R) *Rarely*, (O) *Occasionally*, (F) *Frequently*.
- B.** In this section (items 11-20), please indicate what importance, conviction or interest you attach to the following. Your answer can be one of the four: (NA) *Not at all*, (AL) *A Little*, (M) *Much*, (VM) *Very Much*.

Section A	N	R	O	F
Section B	NA	AL	M	VM
Institutional doctrinal knowledge				
11. Are you interested in learning more about the beliefs and doctrines of your religion?	–	–	–	–
1. Do you reflect upon questions related to your religious beliefs?	–	–	–	–
5. Do you explain your religious beliefs to those who are not of your religion?	–	–	–	–
Personal belief outlook				
14. Are you convinced of the existence of God?	–	–	–	–
20. Are you convinced that there is life after death?	–	–	–	–
Institutional ethical consequence				
18. Are you interested in learning more about the moral values upheld by your religion?	–	–	–	–
8. Do you help the poor and the needy in some way?	–	–	–	–
19. Is it important for you to help the sick and the suffering in some way?	–	–	–	–
Personal moral consciousness				
10. Do you seek God's forgiveness for your wrong doings?	–	–	–	–
7. Do you examine your actions to see if they are morally right or wrong?	–	–	–	–
Institutional formal ritual				
12. Is it important for you to participate in the religious worship officiated by a priest or leader of your religion?	–	–	–	–
2. Do you sing and pray together with the followers of your religion?	–	–	–	–

Measuring instrument 1: (cont.)

15. Is it important for you to pray at a particular time of the day or of the week?	-	-	-	-
16. Is it important for you to read the sacred scriptures of your religion by yourself?	-	-	-	-
6. Do you make pilgrimage to the holy shrines of your religion?	-	-	-	-
Personal popular devotion				
9. Do you perform devotional practices in your family environment?	-	-	-	-
13. Is it important for you to wear a religious symbol on your body?	-	-	-	-
3. Do you make thanksgiving offerings to God or to saints for the favors received?	-	-	-	-
4. Do you pray or meditate by yourself?	-	-	-	-
17. Is it important for you to consult astrology or horoscope?	-	-	-	-

Measuring instrument 2: Agents of religious socialization

What role have the following persons played in your understanding and practice of your religion? Your answer can be one of the five: (VF) Very Favorable, (ALF) A Little Favorable, (ALU) A Little Unfavorable, (VU) Very Unfavorable, (NC) No Contact with such persons or groups.

	VF	ALF	ALU	VU	NC
Influence of family					
1. Your mother	-	-	-	-	-
2. Your father	-	-	-	-	-
3. Your close relatives	-	-	-	-	-
Peer group influence					
4. Your close friends	-	-	-	-	-
Influence of the religious community					
5. Religious leaders of your religion (outside the school and the college setting)	-	-	-	-	-
6. Religious groups or associations of your religion (outside the school and the college setting)	-	-	-	-	-

Measuring instrument 2: (cont.)**Influence of the educational community**

7. Religious groups or associations inside the school and the college setting	–	–	–	–	–
8. Teachers who offer religious or moral education in the school	–	–	–	–	–
9. Professors who provide religious or moral education in the college	–	–	–	–	–

Influence of the mass media

10. Those who appear in the TV or radio programs linked to your religion	–	–	–	–	–
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Table 7: Correlation (Pearson) between the two items representing parents and that between the two items representing religious community, and the significance of these correlations for the entire group of students and for Christian, Muslim and Hindu students separately

	Parents (Items 1 & 2)	Religious community (Items 5 & 6)
All students together	.54*	.70*
Hindus	.58*	.73*
Muslims	.54*	.62*
Christians	.41*	.54*

* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 8: Reliability (alpha) of the educational community (factor with items 7, 8 & 9), percentages of explained variance, and number of valid cases for all the students together and for Christian, Muslim and Hindu students separately

	Cronbach's Alpha	of explained variance	Valid cases
All students together	.79	57.0	1886
Hindus	.78	55.6	778
Christians	.75	50.6	851
Muslims	.74	49.9	250