

INTERPRETING RELIGIOUS PLURALISM: COMPARATIVE RESEARCH AMONG CHRISTIAN, MUSLIM AND HINDU STUDENTS IN TAMIL NADU, INDIA

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Abstract

How do Christians, Muslims and Hindus interpret religions other than their own? The theoretical framework of the research is models of religious pluralism developed by scholars in the field of theology of religions, especially Knitter. The authors pay special attention to pluralistic models, which have so far remained rather unclear. Special attention is paid to gender as a factor influencing levels of agreement with models of religious pluralism. Empirical research undertaken among Christian, Muslim and Hindu college students in Tamil Nadu in 2003 reveals three common models of religious pluralism that can be found among the adherents of these traditions: monism, commonality pluralism, and differential pluralism. Christian and Muslim students have much the same approach to religious pluralism, measured according to these three models; Hindu students differ from both Christian and Muslim students. Especially among Muslim students gender influences the level of agreement with the monism and commonality models. The article concludes with a discussion of the fruitfulness of comparative research (among members of different religious traditions) based on models derived from Christian theology.

Key Words: Comparative research, religious pluralism, gender, Christians, Hindus, Muslims

1 INTRODUCTION

The Indian subcontinent has long been a melting pot of a wide variety of religious traditions. Through the ages religious tolerance has been a hallmark of this multicultural and multireligious country. However, the resurgence of local cultural and religious consciousness under the influence of modern cultures and the concomitant process of globalisation is increasingly complicating the interaction between religious traditions. This tendency in the Indian context is in keeping with an international phenomenon: politicising of religious issues and mushrooming of extreme fanatic wings in various religious traditions. In some ways the global panorama in the new millennium throws the question of religious pluralism into sharp relief.

In societies where religious pluralism is a given fact people tend to develop a pragmatic approach to other religions, shaped by their own religious traditions and their particular socio-cultural susceptibility. Hence we can assume that adherents of the three major religions in India – Hindus (82.4%), Muslims (11.7%) and Christians (2.3%) – have a specific way of interpreting religious pluralism. Given that Christianity has a long history in South India, dating back to the time of St Thomas the Apostle according to local church tradition, we conducted our research into the interpretation of religious pluralism in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, where the proportion of Christians is as high as 5.7%, compared with 88.7% Hindus and 5.5% Muslims (Government of Tamil Nadu, Statistical Handbook 2003).¹

The cultural and religious significance of Tamil Nadu on the Indian scene is attested by its long history of over 6000 years and its status as the nucleus of Dravidian culture, which antedates Aryan culture in India by almost a thousand years (Manorama Yearbook 2004, p. 682). With its capital Chennai (Madras), Tamil Nadu also played an important role during the colonial period and continues to do so in the socio-political, cultural and religious development of independent India.

In the context of Tamil Nadu we saw fit to study approaches to religious pluralism among college students, since they have a leading role to play in society as a whole and in their own cultural and religious communities. In due course they will join the ranks of the elite in all spheres of society: science, the arts, public media, the economy, government, et cetera. Thus knowing how students interpret the other religions with which they are in constant contact can tell us something about the dynamics of present-day society and offer clues to its development in the foreseeable future.

We judged gender to be a pertinent factor in interpreting religious pluralism for the following reasons. Firstly, concrete interaction between religions occurs in relations among adherents of different religions or religious groups. When it comes to interpersonal relations there is growing evidence that women are more open to 'the other' than men (Markus & Oyserman 1989). This gender difference could well influence the interpretation of religious pluralism as well, because it affects the social sphere of inter-group relations. The second reason for this focus is the changing position of women in the sphere of religion. This change is well documented in the case of Christianity, but there is enough literature to suggest that it applies to most religions all over the world. For these reasons our research focused on young women and men belonging to different religions and currently engaged in higher studies. If there is in fact a gender

difference, then it must be proved among students attending universities and other tertiary institutions.

The general problem considered in this paper is: how do Christians, Muslims and Hindus interpret religions other than their own? This is a major question that has emerged in what is known as theology of religions during the last century. In fact, different models for interpreting religious pluralism have been identified. We shall reflect on this theory building, paying special attention to pluralistic models (section 2). In our opinion the theoretical conceptualisation of pluralistic models remains often obscure. In outlining the research design (section 3), we clarify the structure of our measuring instrument and the design of data analysis suited to the comparative nature of our study. Then we present the results of the empirical research undertaken among Christian, Muslim and Hindu college students in Tamil Nadu in 2003 (section 4). Finally, we discuss salient features of the findings and draw some conclusions about models for interpreting religious pluralism (section 5).

But before dealing with these aspects of our research we need to explain our reasons for studying the attitudes of Christians in comparison with those of Muslims and Hindus. The first is an empirical reason relating to the globalisation of religion. In a globalised world adherents of different religions live side by side in the same geographical area; in India this has been the case for centuries. In interaction with adherents of other religions living in the same context, people tend to construct or reconstruct their religious views and values. The second reason for making this a comparative study is conceptual. Theology, like any other science, tries to develop concepts and theories which can be generalised to a large set of phenomena. In practical theology this is done by studying the practices, beliefs, values, hopes and desires of Christians. By including adherents of other religions in our research we put our Christian theological concepts to test. We presume that these concepts can afford some insight into the mindset of adherents of other religions, but this assumption obviously has to be confirmed by empirical research. We start with concepts derived from Christian theology, because our research is meant to contribute to theological theory building (see Duffy 1999; Knitter 2002). But we hope to do more than that. If these concepts can be generalised to other religions, we will also have contributed to the comparative study of religions. In other words, we will have identified concepts that are applicable to other religions and can be useful for comparative religious research.²

2 INTERPRETING RELIGIOUS PLURALISM: MODELS

We have reached a stage in history when it seems almost unethical to think about one's religion in isolation from other religions in the world around us. In the latter half of the 20th century Christian communities woke up to this imperative in an explicit, conscious manner. Making sense of other religions from the perspective of the Christian faith gave rise to many theologies of religions.³ Most authors in this field work with three models: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism (see Race 1982; Coward 1985; D'Costa 1986; Wilfred 1995; Sterkens 2001; Amaladoss 2003; Vermeer & Van der Ven 2004). There seems to be some agreement on the concepts of exclusivism and inclusivism. These two models also have a strong basis in the history of theology. Pluralism, however, is subject to growing debate: are there distinct theological models of pluralism? Is pluralism equal to relativism? A recent work by Paul Knitter (2002) that sums up various theological trends certainly sheds some light on these questions. Knitter perspicaciously classifies the approaches of Christian communities and theologians into four meaningful models: replacement, fulfilment, mutuality and acceptance. We give a short overview of these models, since they provide the basic framework for our research.

The first model, the *replacement model*, entails exclusive affirmation of one's own religion as the only true religion, hence replacement of all other religions by one's own as the final solution. This approach, which characterised church history up to the 16th century, is epitomised in the famous dictum of the early church fathers, Origen and Cyprian: "*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*" (outside the Church, no salvation). In contemporary Christianity, according to Knitter, Protestant evangelicals and fundamentalists now occupy this position. Within this model Knitter distinguishes between those who hold out for total replacement and those who recognise a need for partial replacement. The latter group, while acknowledging the possibility of revelation in other religions, denies that they offer salvation. In the contemporary context we realise that similar claims can be made, explicitly or implicitly, by other world religions with a universal view of salvation, such as Islam and Hinduism. In the theological debate this model is generally known as the exclusivist model.

When Christians attempt to combine their affirmation of God's presence in other religions and the non-negotiable aspect of salvation through Christ alone their approach falls under the *fulfilment model*: other religious traditions will find their final fulfilment in one's own. This perspective,

which was already adopted by some of the early church fathers (Justin Martyr, Tertullian) in their dealings with the Graeco-Roman world, has been revived by the mainline churches: Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist, Anglican, Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic. According to Knitter the pioneering works of Rahner clarify this new trend, which acknowledges that God's grace is active in other religions and views them as possible channels of revelation and salvation. At the same time, since Jesus Christ is God's ultimate revelation and the final cause of human salvation, those who receive grace in their own religions are unwittingly oriented to Christianity and hence can be considered 'anonymous Christians'. The documents of the Second Vatican Council (*Nostra Aetate* 2; *Ad Gentes* 9, 11, 15, 18) stopped short at this position by acknowledging the presence of 'rays of Truth' and 'seeds of the Word' in other religious traditions, which are thus seen as 'preparation for the Gospel' (*Lumen Gentium* 16). Any further concession would jeopardise the non-negotiable uniqueness and universality of Christ. The existence of non-negotiable elements in other religions suggests that the fulfilment perspective is to be found among adherents of other religious traditions as well. In theology of religions this is generally known as the inclusivist model.

The underlying dilemma of religious pluralism is how to reconcile the universality and diversity of religions. All world religions have a universal perspective, and in their particularity or uniqueness give rise to religious diversity. In the replacement and fulfilment models outlined above the accent on the uniqueness and universality of one's own religion is so heavy that all other traditions are either totally or partially invalidated. In other words, these two models have a monistic perspective: the absolute validity of only one religion – one's own. In our research, therefore, we call them replacement monism and fulfilment monism.

Setting aside the non-negotiable elements, the third model, the *mutuality model*, prefers to focus on the underlying common elements of which the various religions are diversified expressions and to which they can make a contribution. To relate across the apparently irreconcilable differences, religions need to discover the elements that they share. Knitter describes the mutuality model in terms of three complementary perspectives.

The philosophical-historical perspective highlights the historical limitations of all religions and the philosophical possibility of one Divine Reality underlying all religions. According to John Hick (2003), who represents this trend, lack of a common source or goal would mean that religions are going in different directions. In his view the *noumenon* is always more than the phenomenon that is accessible to us. In other words,

all human knowledge is historically conditioned or socially constructed. Thus different religions point to differences in the manner of experiencing, conceptualising and living in relation to the ultimate Divine Reality that transcends the capacity of any one religion. In this sense religious symbols and metaphors represent particular religions rather than define the ultimate Divine Reality itself. To avoid falling into the trap of relativism, Hick suggests that the value of religions be gauged by the extent to which they promote self-sacrificing concern for the good of others.

The religious-mystical perspective holds that the same Divine Reality which is accessible in the mystical experiences of various religions is greater than anything that can be experienced in any one of them. Raimundo Panikkar's view of 'cosmotheandric experience' (1993) is said to exemplify this trend. According to Panikkar, mystical experience is based on a necessary interrelationship among three components: the divine, the human and the material world. Although different in many ways, the three cannot exist in isolation from each other. Besides, this divine-human-material interrelatedness is dynamic; it grows and changes. One is called to live out this relationship in ever deeper, life-giving ways in order to further the unfolding of history and the continuation of creation. Insofar as the divine does not exist without the human and the material, the divine itself is as diverse as the religions. Behind the diversity of religions there is this one religious fact. The differences between religions, then, are opportunities for mutual fecundation and growth.

The ethical-practical perspective points to the common challenge of alleviating the needs and sufferings of the poor and the oppressed. This global responsibility gives religions an opportunity for understanding themselves and others. The ethical agenda provided by human and ecological suffering is common to all religions, as recognised by the World Parliament of Religions in 1993 and 1999. It follows that the concept of salvation/liberation which is at the heart of religions necessarily includes a reference to the human plight and the plight of the planet. The truth and goodness of religions should be measured by their ability to promote peace, justice and unity. As the experiences in Basic Human Communities confirm, involvement in a common liberation process creates an opportunity for understanding each other's religious beliefs.

With these three complementary perspectives the mutuality model represents a kind of pluralistic encounter among religions based on underlying – often amorphous – commonalities, which entails a risk of religious relativism. Besides, it tends to disregard the fact that common grounds are often identified from the perspective of one's own religious framework.

For example, we cannot deny that even the notion of justice – viewed as the responsibility of all religions – is decisively shaped by the Judaeo-Christian cultural tradition. In this sense the model promotes a veiled imperialism. In the theological debate this model is frequently referred to as the pluralistic model. Since it focuses not so much on *mutuality* as on *commonality* that allows for plurality, we prefer to call it *commonality pluralism*.

The commonality pluralism model is so concerned with underlying universal aspects that it tends to disregard the relevance of the particularity or uniqueness of religions. The *acceptance model*, which according to Knitter is characteristic of the post-modern era, underscores that differences between religions are real and that their particularities are opportunities for reciprocal enrichment and growth. In the acceptance model there is the conviction that different religions can be interrelated, connected and brought into unifying relationships, but ‘the many’ cannot be melted down to ‘the one’. The cultural-religious filters are so different that we cannot measure one religion according to the measuring system of another. It is believed that by seeking to remove diversity we will end up destroying the vitality of religions. Knitter identifies three different perspectives in this model.

Post-liberal cultural-linguistic perspective: George Lindbeck, who launched this trend, sees it as one of three different ways in which religion can be understood (the other two being the propositional-cognitive and experiential-expressive perspectives). In the cultural-linguistic perspective religion is viewed as a cultural and/or linguistic framework that shapes one’s entire life and thought. In other words, religious experience is shaped by religious language. Our experience is determined by the common religious worldview into which we are born. In this perspective there can be nothing truly common to all religions; rather they point to different experiences. Religious words and experiences are ‘true’ only within the given texts or language systems of particular religions. Insofar as religions claim to offer the ultimate meaning they serve as a framework for understanding everything else. But this framework cannot be fitted into another framework. What is possible is a kind of dialectical process which can lead to mutual learning and self-correction. Here there is no attempt to impose one’s own grand theory on others.

Plurality of ultimates perspective: S. Mark Heim, who represents this line of thought, holds that differences between religions are not just language-deep; they reach into the very soul of religions, into their ultimate elements. Religions can be moving towards different destinations or sal-

vations. In the same way, differences in religions may also point to differences in the Divine Ultimate. Real differences between religions open up possibilities for learning something really new.

Comparative theological perspective: In the views of Francis X. Clooney and James Fredericks, who represent this trend, the foundations for a theology of religions are to be found in dialogue rather than in theology. According to them, a Christian theology of religions must be a comparative theology. Better understanding of one's own religion might follow from a better understanding of others. It requires commitment to one's own religion and at the same time openness to the truths found in others. Comparative theologians are open to the tension arising from 'double claims' "between our commitments to the Christian tradition, on the one hand, and, on the other, to the allure of other religious traditions" (Fredericks 1999, 169).

The acceptance model with its three complementary perspectives underlines the importance of diversity, but in so doing tends to ignore the underlying common elements shared by the world religions. Given that this model focuses not so much on *acceptance* as on *differences* that need to be accepted in a pluralistic context, we prefer to call it *differential pluralism*. The model that Vermeer and Van der Ven (2004, 43-44) call dialogical pluralism comes close to this model, although its focus is more on the need for dialogue.

Although Knitter stresses the relativistic tendency in his mutuality model, he does not present relativism as a separate model. In his view the philosophical-historical perspective (represented by Hick), the religious-mystical perspective (represented by Panikkar) and the ethical-practical perspective (represented by liberation theologians) within commonality pluralism conceal a relativistic tendency. Relativism thrives on commonalities that tend to be so vague and amorphous as to accommodate anything within its sphere without the need to discern and distinguish between underlying nuances and differences. As Knitter (2002, 162) puts it with a touch of humour, "Relativists are people for whom the notion of truth is either so broad, or so diversified, or so distant, that they can never trust themselves to know whether they, or anyone, really have the truth. Relativists live in a kind of twilight world in which all cats are grey." Since such a tendency is generally suspected in the Indian Hindu context, we have included it in our theoretical framework as a distinct model: *relativistic pluralism*. In the relativistic pluralism model all religions are held to be of equal value and significance, irrespective of any common elements and differences that may exist among them.

Thus our theoretical framework comprises five models for interpreting religious pluralism, based on a conceptual analysis of Christian theologies of religions, which we hope will prove valid for adherents of other religious traditions as well: replacement monism, fulfilment monism, commonality pluralism, differential pluralism and relativistic pluralism.

3 EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Having clarified our theoretical framework, its models for interpreting religious pluralism and the underlying question of comparative theology of religions, we now proceed to the empirical phase of our research. First we define the research questions to be investigated from the perspective of our conceptual analysis. Secondly, we describe how the measuring instrument was structured within the conceptual framework of models of religious pluralism. Thirdly, we outline the strategies used to draw our sample of college students and collect the required data from them. Fourthly, we clarify the data analysis procedure based on our understanding of comparative research in theology. Finally, we present the results emerging from the data analysis.

3.1 *Research questions*

In keeping with the conceptual analysis of religious pluralism in the previous section, the research questions are as follows:

(1) Which comparable common models for interpreting religious pluralism are present in the consciousness of Christian, Muslim and Hindu students, after checking the models for group-specific differences?

(2) How do these comparable common models for interpreting other religions interrelate (a) in the sample as a whole, and (b) within the respective groups of Christian, Muslim and Hindu students?

(3) What is the level of agreement with the comparable common models for interpreting other religions (a) in the sample as a whole, and (b) within the respective groups of Christian, Muslim and Hindu students? Are there significant differences between the three groups?

(4) Does the gender variable effect any significant difference in level of agreement with the comparable common models for interpreting other religions within the respective groups of Christian, Muslim and Hindu students?

3.2 *Measuring instrument*

The measuring instrument used in our comparative research comprises the five models for interpreting religious pluralism derived from Christian theology of religions (see section 2). Each model is represented by four indicators referring to four basic dimensions. Each dimension is formulated on a general level, that is to say, the formal status of the dimensions is the same in each religion, although the language, ideas and symbols representing the ultimate referents in these religions can be very different (Vroom 2003).⁴ Three of the indicators represent the basic dimensions of religions and the fourth the overall relationship of that religion with the others. Formally each religion can be viewed as characterised by three basic dimensions: normative, experiential and transformative. The normative dimension reflects the truth claim of the religions, the experiential dimension the human being's experience of Ultimate Reality (God), and the transformative dimension the adherent's becoming or self-realisation. The tendencies in these three dimensions shape the overall relational dimension – the relation of one religion with others.

In the fulfilment monism model, for example, the dimensions are operationalised as follows: “Compared with my religion, other religions contain only partial truths” (normative dimension); “Other religions do not offer as deep a God-experience (*anubhava*) as my religion” (experiential dimension); “Compared with other religions, my religion offers the surest way to liberation (salvation, *mukti*, paradise)” (transformative dimension); “Other religions will eventually find their fulfilment in mine” (relational dimension).

Since this is a comparative study of Christian, Muslim and Hindu students, we had to be careful to use general categories without losing sight of the nuances of specific categories in each religion. We tried to resolve this in the following ways.

In operationalising the experiential dimension, we saw fit to include in brackets the term '*anubhava*', meaning 'God-experience' or 'experience of God'.⁵ *Anubhava* is a Sanskrit term used in most Indian languages, with some variation. Thus in Tamil, the official language of Tamil Nadu, it is *anubhavam*. *Anubhava* as a reference to 'God-experience' has a strong cultural resonance among all religious traditions linked to India. The term is specific to the Indian religious context.⁶

To represent the transformative dimension, we used terms specific to each religion. Although the ultimate transformation proposed by religions can be expressed by the general abstract term 'liberation', we included in

brackets the terms for ultimate transformation in each religion so as to evoke its specific meaning in that tradition: ‘salvation’ in the case of Christianity, ‘paradise’ in the case of Islam, and ‘*mukti*’ in the case of Hinduism.

The normative dimension (referring to the truth claim of religions) and the relational dimension (referring to the overall relation of a particular religion to others) were operationalised in an abstract and generic manner. Thus the overall relationship among religions implied in the five models was formulated as follows: “*Eventually my religion will replace other religions*” (replacement monism); “*Other religions will eventually find their fulfilment in mine*” (fulfilment monism); “*The similarities among religions are a basis for building a universal religion*” (commonality pluralism); “*Differences between religions are a basis for mutual enrichment and growth*” (differential pluralism); and “*Although there are many religions, at the deepest level there are no real differences*” (relativistic pluralism).

Following this scheme, each of the five models for interpreting religious pluralism was operationalised in four items. Thus our religious pluralism scale comprised 20 items (see appendix A): replacement monism (items 19, 6, 1 and 4), fulfilment monism (items 3, 10, 5 and 8), commonality pluralism (items 7, 14, 9 and 12), differential pluralism (items 11, 18, 13 and 16) and relativistic pluralism (items 15, 2, 17 and 20).

We assumed these models for interpreting religious pluralism to be logical options in each of the religions under investigation. Establishing the extent to which people actually subscribe to these ideas is the aim of our research. For example, the premise of the commonality pluralism model is that all religions refer to the same Ultimate Reality. In Christianity the main exponent of this model is Hick, but there are modern Hindu and Islamic scholars who seem to expound much the same idea. Fredericks cites Bithika Mukerji, who refers to a universal religious experience common to all religions. He quotes Mukerji’s view (1990, 233) that “Christianity in the reflection of Hinduism is yet another dimension in which God has disclosed himself to his People”.⁷ In modern Islam he quotes Mohamed Talbi (1990, 101), who, reflecting on the dialogue between Islam and Christianity, affirms: “Thus when all is said and done, we find ourselves faced with the unfathomable mystery of God’s Plan and of man’s condition.” From these examples one concludes that the underlying idea of the commonality pluralism model as formulated in terms of Christian theology of religions is not completely alien to recent developments in Hinduism and Islam.

3.3 *Sampling and data collection*

According to the Statistical Handbook (2003)⁸ of the Tamil Nadu government this state has 19 universities and 441 colleges for general higher education (arts and sciences) attended by over 459,000 students. Of these colleges, 60 are run by the state, 134 are subsidised colleges run by Christians, Muslims and other minority communities, and 247 are self-financing. Our research population consists of all students attending colleges or universities in the Federal State of Tamil Nadu, India.

As clarified below, 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 difference to our theme, eight women's colleges were selected, the remaining eight being principally for men.⁹ Madras University, by contrast, has a fully fledged coeducational system.

With a view to the religious affiliation of educational institutions, Madras University and two government colleges were chosen to represent the category of secular higher educational institutions, although the great majority of students are Hindus. Since only a few (6) of the aided colleges have an explicit Islamic affiliation, we chose two of them. Muslim students are generally concentrated in Muslim colleges. Among the 32 colleges explicitly affiliated to Christian communities, eight Catholic and two Protestant colleges were chosen. This was because we can expect no more than an average of 25% of students at Catholic colleges to be Catholics, whereas Protestant students tend to be concentrated in denominational colleges. Of the remaining aided colleges at least 42 have an explicit Hindu orientation. We chose only two Hindu colleges, since Hindu students constitute a great majority in both public and Catholic colleges. We did not include self-financing colleges in our sample, since aided colleges represent the religious thrust and government colleges the secular thrust in education more adequately. Besides, some of the aided colleges also have self-financing departments.

Given that colleges are generally concentrated in urban areas and particularly in the state capital, we selected ten colleges and Madras University in Chennai, and three colleges in the other three major cities, Coimbatore, Tiruchy and Madurai. To complete the picture we included three colleges in semi-urban areas (Tirupattur, Cuddalore and Vellore).

As part of a wider inquiry into factors leading to a conflictive or participatory approach to other religions among students belonging to the three major religions in Tamil Nadu, a questionnaire containing the instrument

described above was administered to students at the 16 colleges and Madras University between October 2003 and January 2004.¹⁰ About 130 questionnaires were distributed at each of the centres of higher education selected for our research. Of the 2180 questionnaires thus distributed to college students, 2012 were returned, of which 1920 were found to be valid.

The demographic characteristics of our (valid) respondents reveal the adequacy of our sampling procedure. Our respondents represent the genders almost 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% from other Christian denominations), 13.3% 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 Tamil Nadu population. The smaller proportion of Muslims in our sample results from the fact that they rarely attend colleges other than their own, which are also fewer in number.¹¹

Almost all the respondents (98.4%) are in the 17 to 25 age group, which qualifies them as youths. The vast majority (86%) are undergraduates, 65.6% of these 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%) is engaged in advanced studies (MPhil. and PhD).

3.4 *Data analysis*

Obviously the data analysis has to accord with the comparative nature of our research. The first research question requires a series of analyses to substantiate the construction of comparative categories common to the three religions yet taking into account the distinctiveness of each religion. The aim of this analysis is to establish similarity or commonality. How do we achieve this? The first step is to construct categories for the adherents of all three religions by conducting a factor analysis of the models for interpreting religious pluralism for all respondents (Christian, Hindu and Muslim). In including all respondents in the same analysis we are assuming that their interpretation of religious pluralism has the same structure. The second step is to investigate the three religious groups separately. These separate analyses will show whether the overall structure of the first step holds good for each individual group. In other words, we

want answers to the following questions: Do the same factors (i.e. overall models) established in the overall analysis recur in the analysis of each group? And if so, do they include all the items in each factor?¹² The purpose of this step is to determine inter-group differences. These differences are eliminated in the third step, where we determine the commensurable common models after controlling for structural differences found in each religious group's specific model. Since we can only compare commensurable factors, we have to apply the sieve of commonality: what is distinctive is filtered out. Only in this last step can we speak of common, commensurable models among the three religious groups.

In the next section we report only the results (factor analysis) of the third step. We also account for the differences filtered out in the second step (see above). This ensures that we only compare what is commensurable.

3.5 *Empirical results*

The results of the data analysis (conducted according to the procedure described above) provide answers to the four research questions that define the scope of our research. We deal with them one by one, presenting the results pertaining to each.

Research question 1: Which comparable common models for interpreting religious pluralism are present in the consciousness of Christian, Muslim and Hindu students, after checking these models for group-specific differences?

As described in the section on data analysis, the procedure to answer the first research question comprised three steps. We first present the results of the third step: the factor analysis conducted on all students after filtering out differences between the three religious groups. Then we describe the differences between the religious groups that were filtered out after the second step.

Table 1 shows the Principal Axis Factoring (Oblimin rotation method) of 13 of the 20 items in our measuring instrument (see appendix A). In the first step of analysis four items were removed due to low commonality (11 and 18) or multiple loading (15 and 17), which further enhanced the reliability of the factors. In the second step, three more items had to be removed (12, 16 and 20) which were peculiar to one or another of the groups.

Contrary to expectation, four items meant to represent replacement monism and three items meant to represent fulfilment monism cluster together under factor 1. The two models share a monistic view of religion, namely belief in the universal validity of one's own religion only. The

two items (5 and 10) with the highest factor loading belong to the fulfilment model, which is a milder form of monism than the replacement model. Accordingly we label factor 1 *monism model*, with a certain emphasis on fulfilment.¹³

Factor 2 covers four items, three of which (7, 9 and 14) were meant to represent commonality pluralism and one (item 2) relativistic pluralism. The item with the highest factor loading clearly represents the model of commonality pluralism. Item 2 can also be understood in a non-relativistic way, if we assume that respondents put the accent less on “equally” and more on “profound experience of God”. Hence we retain the name *commonality pluralism* for this factor. At the same time we have to take into account that one item of the commonality model (the one referring to building a universal religion (item 12) – had to be eliminated after the second step of our analysis. This suggests that acceptance of commonality among religions does not necessarily imply universal commonality or moving towards a common religion. We shall attend to this question in our discussion.

Confirming our hypothesis, two items (13 and 16) that were meant to represent differential pluralism cluster under factor 3. These two items suggest the necessity of accepting differences between religions as part of God’s plan to save the world and as an opportunity for reciprocal enrichment and growth.¹⁴

Table 1. *Factor analysis (Paf, Oblimin rotation), commonalities (h²), percentage of explained variance and estimated reliability (alpha) of the interpretation of religious pluralism by (Christian, Muslim and Hindu) students as a whole*

	F1	F2	F3	h ²
5. Compared with other religions, my religion offers the surest way to liberation (salvation, <i>mukti</i> , paradise).	.81	.01	-.01	.63
10. Other religions do not offer as deep a God-experience (<i>anubhava</i>) as my religion.	.77	-.01	.01	.62
19. The truth about God, human beings and the universe is found only in my religion.	.74	-.01	-.01	.59
3. Compared with my religion, other religions contain only partial truths.	.72	-.01	.01	.54
1. Only through my religion people can attain true liberation (salvation, <i>mukti</i> , paradise).	.69	-.12	-.01	.57
6. Other religions do not offer a true experience of God (<i>anubhava</i>).	.69	-.13	.01	.60
4. Eventually my religion will replace other religions.	.69	.12	.01	.40

Table 1 (cont.)

	F1	F2	F3	h ²
7. Different religions reveal different aspects of the same ultimate truth.	.01	.81	.01	.58
9. Every religion contributes in a unique way to the ultimate liberation of human beings (salvation, <i>mukti</i> , paradise).	.01	.68	.01	.46
2. All religions provide an equally profound experience of God (<i>anubhava</i>).	-.20	.58	-.01	.56
14. Different aspects of the same divine reality are experienced in different religions.	-.01	.55	-.15	.43
13. Differences between religions are part of God's plan to save the world.	.01	.01	-.64	.41
16. Differences between religions are a basis for mutual enrichment and growth.	-.01	.01	-.62	.42
Cronbach's alpha	.90	.79		
Pearson correlation (p < 0.01)			.38	
Number of valid cases	1869	1873	1894	

Explained variance = 52.4%

F1 = Monism model

F2 = Commonality pluralism model

F3 = Differential pluralism model

¹ N = 1920

The factor analysis establishes that the three religious groups (Christians, Muslims and Hindus) are comparable in respect of the models of monism, commonality pluralism and differential pluralism. As mentioned already, we only did this factor analysis for the whole sample after investigating the three religious groups separately and included only items that had passed through the sieve of commonality.

The separate factor analysis for Christians revealed that in the monism model the items for fulfilment monism have the highest factor loadings. Item 8, which refers specifically to fulfilment monism,¹⁵ is also included in the overall monism model. It suggests that the Christian monistic model is strongly characterised by a fulfilment tendency. The commonality pluralism factor also includes item 20, representing the relativistic view that at the deepest level there are no real differences between religions. Allowing for the fact that commonality pluralism already contains item 2, which has a relativistic tendency, we conclude that Christian commonality pluralism tends towards relativism. The configuration of Christian differential pluralism is no different from the configuration of this factor for the sample as a whole.

The factor analysis for Muslims shows that the monism model emerges with all eight items (as in the case of Christians). However, the items representing fulfilment and replacement monism do not cluster in higher and lower factor loadings respectively. Does this imply that in affirming the exclusive validity of one's own religion, no distinction is made between 'weak' and 'strong' forms of monism? The commonality pluralism and differential pluralism factors contain the same items as the comparable common models (see Table 1).

The factor analysis for Hindus reveals the same result for the monism model as in the case of Muslims: the items representing replacement and fulfilment model are jumbled together. Differential pluralism remains unchanged, as in the comparable common models. The main differences found among Hindus pertain to the commonality pluralism model. Firstly, the Hindu understanding of commonality pluralism includes the idea of building a universal religion (item 12). Secondly, like Christians, they include the relativistic view that at deepest level there are no real differences between religions (item 20). Inclusion of these two items suggests a stronger universalistic and relativistic tendency in Hindu commonality pluralism.

Table 2. *Reliability of the common models and explained variance percentages for Christians, Muslims and Hindus*

	Monism (Alpha)	Commonality Pluralism (Alpha)	Differential Pluralism (Pearson's r)	% Explained variance
Christians	.87	.81	.43	51.5%
Muslims	.91	.73	.42	52.4%
Hindus	.84	.76	.33	43.8%

The reliability of the scales for the three religious groups appears in table 2. The reliability (alpha) of the monism scale and commonality pluralism scale is very high, whereas the reliability (Pearson correlation) of the differential pluralism scale is moderate for Christians and Muslims, and low for Hindus. The level of explained variance is high for all groups, but lowest for Hindus (43.8%). In other words, the models fit Christians and Muslims better than Hindus. We shall discuss this finding further in the next section, but it can be explained to some extent as resulting from the second step of our analysis when we filtered out inter-group differences in order to make them comparable. We shall look into these differences, focusing first on Christians, then on Muslims and Hindus.

Thus the comparable common model seems to fit first Muslims (with only item 8 filtered out) and Christians (with items 8 and 20 filtered out) and then Hindus (with items 12 and 20 filtered out), as confirmed by the percentage of variance explained by the factors (see Table 2). In the case of Christians and Muslims only some small differences were filtered out to arrive at common comparable models. In the case of Hindus, a strong universalistic and relativistic tendency (two items) in commonality pluralism was filtered out and is not represented in the common comparable models.

Research question 2: How do these comparable common models for interpreting other religions interrelate (a) in the sample as a whole, and (b) in the respective groups of Christian, Muslim and Hindu students?

Correlation analysis gives us some insight into the relation between the monistic and pluralistic models. For each of the correlations between the models we first give the results for the sample as a whole (Table 3) and then those for the differences between the three religious groups (Table 4).

Table 3. *Correlation (Pearson's r) between the common models for interpreting religious pluralism for all respondents*

	Commonality pluralism	Differential pluralism
Monism	-.50**	-.07*
Commonality pluralism		.34**

Correlation significant * at 0.01 and ** at 0.000 level (2-tailed)

Table 4. *Correlation (Pearson's r) between the common models for interpreting religious pluralism for Christians, Muslims and Hindus*

	Christians		Muslims		Hindus	
	Commonality pluralism	Differential pluralism	Commonality pluralism	Differential pluralism	Commonality pluralism	Differential pluralism
Monism	-.51**	-.21**	-.48**	.04	-.37**	.14**
Commonality pluralism		.46**		.20*		.21**

Correlations significant * at 0.01 level and ** at 0.000 level (2-tailed)

Examining the relation between monism and commonality pluralism in the responses of the sample as a whole (see Table 3), we find a strong negative correlation between monism and commonality pluralism (-.50). It means that monism and commonality pluralism are opposing models:

those who view their religion as the only universally valid one tend to disagree with the possibility of common features among religions. This negative correlation is confirmed by the separate analyses for the religious subgroups (see Table 4), although the negative correlation is somewhat weaker in the case of Hindus than in that of Muslims and Christians.

The analysis for the sample as a whole yields no relevant correlation between monism and differential pluralism (see Table 3). It means that monism and differential pluralism are not opposed: those who view their religion as the only universally valid one can either agree or disagree with the view that differences between religions offer an opportunity for enrichment and growth. However, the analyses for the subgroups show that Christians differ from Muslims and Hindus (see Table 4). In the case of Christians, there is a weak negative correlation between monism and differential pluralism. Although the correlation is weak (-.21), the two models seem to exclude one another. In the case of Hindus and Muslims the correlations are too weak to allow any relevant theoretical interpretation.¹⁶

Commonality pluralism has a moderately positive correlation with differential pluralism when all respondents are considered together (.34; Table 3). When we take the three religious groups separately, we find significant differences in the strength of this correlation: it is strong among Christians (.46) and weak among Muslims (.20) and Hindus (.21). The two models of pluralism are very positively linked in the minds of Christians, but only weakly in those of Muslims and Hindus.

We can sum up the results from the perspective of the three religious groups as follows. Among Muslims and Hindus there is a fairly strong negative correlation between monism and commonality pluralism, no relevant correlation between monism and differential pluralism and a weak positive correlation between the two pluralist models. Among Christians there is a strong negative correlation between monism and commonality pluralism, a weak negative correlation between monism and differential pluralism and a strong positive correlation between the two pluralist models.

Research question 3: What is the level of agreement with the comparable common models for interpreting other religions (a) in the sample as a whole, and (b) within the respective groups of Christian, Muslim and Hindu students? Are there significant differences between the three groups?

First we compare the level of agreement with the common models in the sample as a whole with the agreement indicated by Christians, Muslims and Hindus (see Table 5).¹⁷ Then we examine whether the differences between the three groups are significant.

With regard to the monism model, the mean score of the sample as a whole is in the area of doubt (2.37; Table 5). However, there are great differences between the three groups. Christians are generally doubtful about the monism model, although their ambivalence tends towards agreement (2.76). Muslims agree with the monism model (2.89) and Hindus generally disagree with it (1.79). Hindus differ significantly from both Christians and Muslims (see Table 6). Hindus seem to favour the monism model least. By contrast the difference between Christians and Muslims is not significant. It means that, although there is some difference in the mean scores of Christians and Muslims, this can be coincidental. Hence we cannot draw any conclusion from it.

Table 5. *Level of agreement (mean and standard deviation) of sample as a whole, and of Christians, Hindus and Muslims separately*

	All respondents Mean (s.d.)	Christians Mean (s.d.)	Muslims Mean (s.d.)	Hindus Mean (s.d.)
Monism model	2.37 (.99)	2.76 (.91)	2.89 (.98)	1.79 (.76)
Commonality pluralism model	3.15 (.84)	3.02 (.88)	2.93 (.85)	3.37 (.74)
Differential pluralism model	2.63 (.94)	2.62 (.96)	2.50 (.85)	2.70 (.92)

Scale (recoded): 1 (Disagree) 2 (Tend to disagree) 3 (Tend to agree) 4 (Agree)

Table 6. *T-tests of means of the monism model for Christians, Muslims and Hindus*

	Hindus	Muslims
Christians	23.66 (p < .000)	1.86
Hindus		15.97 (p < .000)

Table 7. *T-tests of means of the commonality pluralism model for Christians, Muslims and Hindus*

	Hindus	Muslims
Christians	8.75 (p < .001)	1.45
Hindus		7.21 (p < .001)

Table 8. *T-tests of means of the differential pluralism model for Christians, Muslims and Hindus*

	Hindus	Muslims
Christians	-1.72	1.73
Hindus		2.87 (p < .01)

The mean scores of the three groups for commonality pluralism fall in the area of positive agreement (see Table 5). In a multi-religious context it seems reasonable to expect religions to share some fundamental features. Although the three groups agree with the commonality pluralism model, Hindu respondents differ significantly from both Christians and Muslims (see Table 7) in that they seem to be most open to the underlying commonality of religions. This is further confirmed by the fact that in the case of Hindus commonality pluralism is under-represented.

The mean scores of the three groups for differential pluralism fall in the area of doubt. Among Hindus and Christians there is a tendency towards agreement, whereas for Muslims the ambivalence is between agreement and disagreement (see Table 5). There is no significant difference between Christians' and Muslims' level of agreement with differential pluralism. Similarly, the difference between Christians and Hindus is not significant, suggesting that the overall level of agreement is the same for all groups (see Table 7). However, there is a significant difference between Hindus and Muslims, the former being more favourably disposed to differential pluralism than the latter. We note that the attitude towards differential pluralism is very different from the level of consent to commonality pluralism. How do we explain this difference? Differential pluralism implies active involvement in religious differences. Active involvement is certainly more demanding than recognition of commonality in God-experience or Ultimate Truth. Viewed thus, it seems logical that the level of agreement with commonality pluralism should be higher than agreement with differential pluralism. Besides, the area of doubt about differential pluralism can probably also be interpreted as an area of debate.¹⁸

Research question 4: Does the gender variable effect any significant difference in level of agreement with the comparable common models for interpreting other religions within the respective groups of Christian, Muslim and Hindu students?

Analysis of the impact of gender difference on agreement with the three models shows no difference between women and men among Christian students (see Table 9). Among Muslim students there are two significant

and very relevant differences between the two genders. On the one hand Muslim women agree significantly less with the monism model (mean 2.51, s.d., 1.09) than men (mean 3.21, s.d., .75). Muslim men agree with monism, whereas Muslim women doubt it. On the other hand, Muslim women agree significantly more with commonality pluralism (mean 3.20, s.d., .80) than Muslim men (mean 2.69, s.d., .82). Here the levels of agreement are reversed: Muslim men indicate doubt, whereas Muslim women indicate broad agreement. This result accords with the idea that women are more open to 'the other', that is adherents of other religions, while men focus on their own religion.

Table 9. *Gender differences (etas) relating to agreement with the common models for interpreting religious pluralism among Christians, Muslims and Hindus*

	Christians	Muslims	Hindus
Monism	.07	.35	.17
Commonality pluralism	.13	.30	.20
Differential pluralism	.14	.04	.06

Similarly, Hindu women (mean 3.51, s.d., .68) agree significantly more with commonality pluralism than Hindu men (mean 3.21, s.d., .78). Although both indicate agreement, Hindu men tend towards ambivalence, whereas Hindu women show definite agreement. The difference between Hindu women and men is weak, whereas among Muslim students it is moderate. We shall deal with this finding in the next section.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this concluding section we highlight the salient features of our findings. In the first part we focus on the findings relating to the research questions: the conceptual structure underlying the models for interpreting religious pluralism among Christians, Muslims and Hindus, and the differences between these religious groups. In the second part we consider the four discussion points emerging from our findings.

Common models for interpreting religious pluralism

Our research brought to light three significant common models for interpreting religious pluralism: monism, commonality pluralism and differential

pluralism. The conflation of replacement monism and fulfilment monism into a single model suggests that, although replacement and fulfilment are theoretically distinguishable (particularly in the case of Christians), their underlying perspective on religious pluralism is the same – monism. There seems to be growing consensus on this point.¹⁹ It means that in the context of comparative theology of religions and interreligious dialogue, the usefulness of the distinction between the non-pluralistic categories of replacement and fulfilment (exclusivism and inclusivism) is very limited. Christians display a kind of ‘weak’ monism, characterised by a strong tendency towards fulfilment. In the case of Hindus and Muslims the fulfilment and replacement tendencies blend almost indistinguishably within the monism model.

In confirming the pluralistic models (commonality pluralism and differential pluralism) our research also sheds some light on two distinct pluralistic approaches to religions: the first focusing on the underlying commonality and the second on the differences between religions. Hence it would be more correct to speak of specific and distinct pluralistic models than of ‘pluralism’ in general, as has been the tradition so far. Confirming the existence of two distinct pluralistic models in the conceptual framework of young people living in a multi-religious context can be considered an important finding. At the same time we must admit that the scale measuring differential pluralism consisted of only two items. In the second part of this section we offer some suggestions for improving our measuring instrument for subsequent research. In addition we noted that the universalistic tendency in commonality pluralism was absent in our comparable model (although it was present in the model specific to Hindus). From a theoretical perspective we included it in the commonality pluralism model. We return to this point below.

It is noteworthy that relativistic pluralism does not emerge as separate model. Does this mean that relativism should not be regarded as a separate model? Certainly this conclusion calls for further research. What complicates the interpretation of this research further is the fact that Hindus differ from Christians and Muslims in manifesting a universalistic and relativistic tendency in commonality pluralism. This suggests that there is something in the Hindu mind and philosophy which links the perception of commonality among religions with universality and relativism.

Relationship between the models

We found a strong negative correlation between monism and commonality pluralism. This result is understandable, because monism is a non-pluralistic

model that allows for little or no common ground among religions. The positive correlation between commonality pluralism and differential pluralism suggests that they are complementary models. The correlation between the two pluralistic models is positive but very moderate when all respondents are considered together. Yet there is a clear difference between the three religious groups: in the case of Christians the two pluralistic models are strongly linked, whereas among Muslims and Hindus the relation between them is very weak. It means that one cannot definitely affirm that the two pluralist models are connected in the minds of Muslims and Hindus, whereas they are linked in the understanding of Christians. In the sample as a whole monism is unrelated to differential pluralism. Here Christians are an exception, because there is a weak negative correlation between the two models. It is significant that among Christians the monistic model and the two pluralistic models emerge as opposing models, and the two pluralistic models as complementary models. The implications of these interrelationships for a theology of religions will be discussed below.

Degree of agreement with the models

The model that emerges as most acceptable to the three religious groups is commonality pluralism. In a traditionally multi-religious setting like Tamil Nadu commonality pluralism seems a natural choice. This choice could also have been favoured by the overall Hindu cultural context shared by the other two religions. Hindus in fact not only express significantly stronger agreement with commonality pluralism than Christians and Muslims; they also differ significantly from the other two groups in disagreeing with the monistic model. Muslims agree with monism, whereas Christians are generally ambivalent, inclining towards agreement. Although the three groups' attitude towards differential pluralism falls in the area of doubt, the highest level of agreement is found among Hindus and the lowest among Muslims, with the Christians in between.

When one compares tendencies among the three groups, Hindus are conspicuous for their greater agreement with the pluralistic approaches (commonality pluralism and differential pluralism) and greater disagreement with the non-pluralistic approach (monism). Conversely, Muslims and Christians are conspicuous for their greater acceptance of the monistic approach and lesser acceptance of commonality pluralism. With regard to differential pluralism, only Muslims express significantly less agreement than Hindus: there is no significant difference between Christians and Hindus. We note a clear difference in the approaches to religious pluralism

of the 'monotheistic' religions of Semitic origin (Christianity and Islam) and the 'polytheistic' religion of Indian origin (Hinduism).

Impact of gender difference on levels of agreement

Among Muslims and Hindus we find that women tend to incline more positively to commonality pluralism. Muslim women agree with commonality pluralism, whereas Muslim men disagree with it. Muslim women doubt monism, whereas Muslim men strongly agree with it. Although Hindu women and men agree with commonality pluralism, Hindu women express significantly more agreement than Hindu men. This research finding can be explained in terms of the difference in female and male self-concepts. If the self-identity of women is characterised by 'connectedness' and that of men by 'separateness', then women should be more open to their social environment (Markus & Oyserman 1989, p. 101). Connected selves are more responsive to their social environment, which in Tamil Nadu is multi-religious. This explains Muslim women's stronger agreement with commonality pluralism (i.e. other religions reveal different aspects of the same Ultimate Reality/Ultimate Truth/Ultimate Liberation) and lesser agreement with monism (i.e. one's own religion is the only true religion). A question that still needs clarification is why this tendency is found only among Muslim women, and not among Christian and Hindu women. We shall consider this question in the next part of our discussion.

As noted above, some of our research findings raise further questions, which we shall discuss briefly. The four points of discussion that emerged from our results are the following.

Comparative theology of religions

We based our conceptual analysis on Knitter's classification of theologies of religions. Although the source of conceptual models was Christian theology, we posited that these models can be generalised to Muslims and Hindus as well. The comparable common models of monism, commonality pluralism and differential pluralism seem to pass this test of generalisation. It means that a theology of religions specific to one religion can offer concepts and models useful for a comparative theology of religions. We have come up with three models based on Christian theology that are valid for comparing other religions. As noted above, the common models tend to under-represent tendencies specific to particular religions. It means that not all elements specific to a particular religion will play a prominent role in comparative theology, although they certainly need to be kept in mind. But common elements are the building blocks of a comparative

theology of religions. However, we found that the interconnections between these models differ among the three groups. The underlying interconnections seem to apply to Christian theology of religions more than to those of other religious groups. Similar empirical studies using concepts and models from Islamic and Hindu theology of religions will broaden the picture that we have outlined. Concepts and models verified in multi-religious research like ours can become the scientific basis for interreligious dialogue. Compared to the proposals of Clooney and Fredericks that comparative theology should be based on interreligious dialogue, our notion of a comparative theology based on empirical research may prove fruitful, as it takes into account both emerging theoretical reflections and the concrete religious experience of many people living in multi-religious contexts.

Universalistic and relativistic tendency in commonality pluralism

As mentioned above, the characteristic tendencies of specific religions have a place in comparative theology of religions. In our commonality pluralism model we found that the tendency towards a universal religion is found only among Hindus. This universalistic view of not taking a defensive stand with regard to one's own religion but working towards a universal faith based on common elements among religions seems to explain their stronger relativistic tendency. This typically Hindu universalism allows it to be tolerant of other religions and assimilate them in the process of transforming itself. Hinduism is more intent on the search for truth than on defending the truths it represents (Mukerji 1990, 233). For this reason Hinduism does not regard internal divisions and contrasting views among its adherents as threatening its existence. We realise that a conceptual framework drawn from Christian theology cannot fully reflect the Hindu perspective. Further research into this model could reveal a 'weak' and a 'strong' position within commonality pluralism, with Christians and Muslims representing the former and Hindus the latter. 'Strong' commonality pluralism may reflect a more universalistic and relativistic tendency.

Improvement of the measuring instrument

On the basis of our findings a comment on our instrument would be useful for further research. Of the 20 items in our instrument, 13 form part of the common comparable models (step three). Three more items (8, 12, 20) were included in the models specific to each religious tradition (step two). In the factor analysis of all 20 items of the instrument for the sample as a whole (step one) four items were removed due to low commonality (11 and 18, meant to represent differential pluralism) and multiple loading (15 and 17, meant to represent relativistic pluralism).

The two items which did not cluster under differential pluralism (factor 3) represent the dimensions of truth and God-experience. Unlike other items in the instrument, these two had a negative tone (item 11: “discovering the truths ignored by my religion”;²⁰ and item 18: “challenge the idea that God is one”).²¹ At the same time these items represent the aspects of differential pluralism that are most difficult to understand and accept: seeing plurality in God, which conflicts with the general understanding of just one Ultimate Reality; and learning from other religions, which implies acknowledging the limitations of one’s own. These may be the reasons why the two items did not cluster together with the other items. More positive and accessible formulations could be: “*Differences between religions are an opportunity for discovering new religious truths*” (item 11) and “*Differences in God-experience (anubhava) made possible by different religions point to the existence of more than one Supreme God*” (item 18).

Items 15 and 17, which were meant to represent relativistic pluralism, have multiple loadings: they cluster under both the commonality pluralism factor (.48 and .50 respectively) and the monism factor (.33 and .32 respectively). The expressions “equally valid paths to liberation” and “equally valid ways to ultimate truth” seem to have misled some respondents into affirming the validity of their own religion, even though the items refer to “all religions”. These two items could be reformulated as “*Other religions are equally valid ways to ultimate truth as my own*” (item 15) and “*Other religions are equally valid paths to liberation as my own*” (item 17). Item 2, which also tends to load under two factors, could be reformulated as: “*Other religions provide equally profound experience of God as my own*”.

Characteristic tendency among Muslim women

The fact that only Muslim women and men differ significantly with regard to correlated models of commonality pluralism and monism suggests that among Christians and Hindus the impact of modern culture, particularly feminism, has influenced the male mentality to the extent of levelling differences between men and women. Did our Muslim research population avoid or ignore the impact the modern culture of feminism (cf. Talbi 1990, 87)? Further research is needed to verify or falsify this question.

In the dynamic rapport between religions in Tamil Nadu explored in this study the approach that is most acceptable to Christians, Muslims and Hindus is commonality pluralism; the most contested one is monism; and the one that creates doubt and debate within each of the three groups is

differential pluralism. Besides, the differences that we observe among the three religious traditions with regard to monism are found to correlate strongly with differing levels of agreement with commonality pluralism. On the basis of the interconnections among the three models, we may conclude that a two-pronged approach of commonality pluralism and differential pluralism would benefit interreligious and intra-religious dialogue among Christians, Muslims and Hindus in Tamil Nadu.

APPENDIX

Measuring instrument:

Please express your agreement or disagreement with statements that represent different ways of understanding your religion and the other religions. Your answer can be one of four: (A) Agree, (TA) Tend to agree, (TD) Tend to disagree, (D) Disagree.

	A	TA	TD	D
Replacement monism				
19. The truth about God, human beings and the universe is found only in my religion.	-	-	-	-
6. Other religions do not offer a true experience of God (<i>anubhava</i>).	-	-	-	-
1. Only through my religion people can attain true liberation (salvation, <i>mukti</i> , paradise).	-	-	-	-
4. Eventually my religion will replace other religions.	-	-	-	-
Fulfilment monism				
3. Compared with my religion, the other religions contain only partial truths.	-	-	-	-
10. Other religions do not offer as deep a God-experience (<i>anubhava</i>) as my religion.	-	-	-	-
5. Compared with other religions, my religion offers the surest way to liberation (salvation, <i>mukti</i> , paradise).	-	-	-	-
8. Other religions will eventually find their fulfilment in mine.	-	-	-	-
Commonality pluralism				
7. Different religions reveal different aspects of the same ultimate truth.	-	-	-	-
14. Different aspects of the same divine reality are experienced in different religions.	-	-	-	-
9. Every religion contributes in a unique way to the ultimate liberation of human beings (salvation, <i>mukti</i> , paradise).	-	-	-	-
12. The similarities among religions are a basis for building up a universal religion.	-	-	-	-

(Cont.)

	A	TA	TD	D
Differential pluralism				
11. Differences between religions are an opportunity for discovering the truths ignored by my own religion.	-	-	-	-
18. Differences in God-experience (<i>anubhava</i>) made possible by various religions challenge the idea that God is one.	-	-	-	-
13. Differences between religions are part of God's plan to save the world.	-	-	-	-
16. Differences between religions are a basis for mutual enrichment and growth.	-	-	-	-
Relativistic pluralism				
15. All religions are equally valid ways to ultimate truth.	-	-	-	-
2. All religions provide an equally profound experience of God (<i>anubhava</i>).	-	-	-	-
17. All religions are equally valid paths to liberation (salvation, <i>mukti</i> , paradise).	-	-	-	-
20. Although there are many religions, at the deepest level there are no real differences.	-	-	-	-

NOTES

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

2. The main problem of comparative research is the generalization of concepts appropriate for describing and analyzing different religions. We shall address this problem in the construction of measuring instrument (3.2) and the data analysis design (3.4).

3. The key theological question around which the Christian theologies of religions revolve is the uniqueness and universality of Christ. Besides this Christocentric focus, Christian theologies of religions generally also take an ecclesiocentric, theocentric or anthropocentric-soteriocentric focus (Thomas 1985; Knitter 1986; D'Costa 1990; Bühlmann 1990; John Paul II 1991; Dupuis 1991; Kuttianimattathil 1995; Commissione Teologica Internazionale 1997; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000; Serretti 2004).

4. Jensen distinguishes four modes of comparison: form, function, structure and meaning (Jensen 2003, pp. 124-125). The four dimensions which we use in each model belong to the category of function of religion in the life of individuals and communities.

5. *Anubhava* in the Hindu tradition of Sankara refers to the integral mystical experience in which all thinking is nullified and the knowing subject becomes one with the object of knowledge (*advaita*) (see Van der Zwan 1994, p. 128; Panikkar 1993, 120-133; Le Saux 1982, pp. 161-175; Samartha 1991, 103-111).

6. Language offers a cultural framework in which people think. The term *anubhava* referring to 'experience of God' is part of the language of all the respondents in our research, be they Christians, Muslims or Hindus. Being part of the same cultural framework, this term offers a bridge for comparison although we do not claim that the use of the same term solves all the difficulties related to comparison.

7. Quoted in Fredericks 1995, p. 74.
8. See http://www.tn.gov.in/deptst/Tab16_4.htm (21/02/2005).
9. Women are now being admitted in small numbers in some traditionally men colleges.
10. Except in the case of three women colleges (where the college administration preferred to do it), the questionnaire was administered personally by the researcher to groups of selected students or to the gathering of all selected students of a specific college.
11. The slightly higher proportion of Christians follows from our need to have sufficient representation of Catholics, Protestants and adherents of other Christian denominations with the view to comparing the Christians groups, as part of a further study.
12. 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.
13. A similar tendency was found in Vermeer and Van der Ven (2004).
14. In the final section of this paper we shall try to clarify the reason why the other two items, namely, 11 and 18, did not load under this factor.
15. Item 8: "Other religions will eventually find their fulfilment in mine".
16. Pearson's r is lower than .20.
17. We interpret the means in the following way: a score between 1 and 2.20 is interpreted as "disagreement", a score between 2.21 and 2.80 as "doubt" and a score between 2.81 and 4.00 as "agreement". The rationale behind this interpretation is that the middle of the scale (2.50) does not enable us to say whether respondents agree or disagree with a model. We have used a four point scale with a forced choice without a middle category [see Appendix A: (1) *Agree*, (2) *Tend to Agree*, (3) *Tend to Disagree*, (4) *Disagree*]. A score of 2.51 is not yet agreement; it still expresses doubt, although in the direction of agreement.
18. Against the backdrop of the mean scores that showed the tendency with regard to this model among the three groups to be in the area of doubt, it is revealing – when we consider the three models as nominal variables and calculate the percentages of scores representing disagreement, doubt and agreement (see the previous footnote) – to observe that almost half of Christians (47.8%) and Hindus (49.7%) agree to differential pluralism while one third of these two groups disagrees with it (Christians 33.2%, Hindus 31.8%). Among Muslims, an equally strong proportion, i.e., two-fifths, agree (41.4%) or disagree (40%) with the differential pluralism approach. Opposing trends with regard to the differential pluralism model seems to be the strongest among Muslims. It is noteworthy that 40% to 50% of the three religious groups are in agreement with this approach to religious pluralism. It becomes thus clear that the area of *doubt* in the case of differential pluralism model actually stands for the area of *debate*.
19. This has also been confirmed in the research done by Vermeer and Van der Ven (2004, 47), where items representing exclusivism and inclusivism models cluster under the same factor, named by them as monistic model (cf. Sterkens 2001).
20. Although the commonality is low (.15), it has its highest loading (.27) under the differential pluralism factor.
21. Although the commonality is low (.18), it has a high loading (.42) under commonality pluralism factor. Probably the negative formulation has created some problem with regard to understanding its meaning.

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