

A Comparative Study of Religiocentrism among Christian, Muslim and Hindu Students in Tamil Nadu, India

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Abstract

This article presents a theoretical framework for religiocentrism that is suited to cross-religious comparisons between Christians, Muslims and Hindus. Religiocentrism is defined as the combination of positive attitudes toward the religious ingroup and negative attitudes toward religious outgroup(s). Empirical research proves the relevance of the construct 'religiocentrism' among Christian, Muslim and Hindu college students in Tamil Nadu. Full score comparability is possible for positive ingroup attitudes but is hampered in the case of negative outgroup attitudes because of the specificity of outgroup prejudice to each religious group. Cross-religious differences between levels of positive ingroup attitudes can be explained in terms of the differential effects of socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-religious characteristics. This topic calls for further reflection, taking into account contextual factors such as majority versus minority position and specific religious convictions for each religious tradition, more particularly within the context of Tamil Nadu. The article ends with a discussion of the findings.

Keywords

comparative research, religiocentrism, religious prejudice, social identity theory, Christians, Muslims, Hindus

1 Introduction

On the basis of theoretical studies of ethnocentrism, this article seeks to offer a theoretical framework for religiocentrism that is functional for comparative research among Christians, Muslims and Hindus. The research population consists of college students belonging to Christian, Islamic and Hindu traditions in Tamil Nadu, India. The bifactorial structure of religiocentrism (positive ingroup attitudes combined with negative outgroup attitudes) presents some challenges in comparing scores on religiocentrism between

Christians, Muslims and Hindus, because measurement equivalence is not easy to achieve.

Previous research has shown that social identity and personal characteristics affect such factors as ethnocentrism, religiocentrism, nationalist attitudes and exclusionist reactions (Allport, 1979). More recently, these attitudes at the individual level were shown to differ between social categories. It is rather novel, however, to focus on variations in religiocentrism from the perspective not only of differences at the individual level but also of differences according to religious traditions. The aim, in other words, is to describe and explain differences in terms of a cross-religious comparative format. We use the term 'cross-religious comparison' to indicate comparisons between different groups of respondents according to religious affiliation. This article will show that a cross-religious comparable measuring instrument for religiocentrism is problematic, since ingroups and outgroups differ depending on the respondent's tradition. Nevertheless, such a comparison is not impossible.

In the second section we elaborate the theoretical framework of our research. In this section we define the concept 'religiocentrism' and explain the phenomenon by describing its origins from the perspective of social identity theory.

In the third section we describe the empirical research: define the research questions, explain the construction of the measuring instruments, touch on the research sample and comment on the analysis procedure appropriate to answering our research questions. Naturally, the chief focus is on the results of the analysis in relation to the research questions.

In a final section we summarise the findings and discuss the results, focusing on some possible explanations of cross-religious differences in the levels of religiocentrism.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 *Religion, Ethnocentrism and Religiocentrism*

Empirical studies show that the demonstration of a causal connection between religiosity and ethnocentrism (the latter being defined as the combination of positive attitudes toward the ethnic ingroup and negative attitudes toward ethnic outgroups) is problematic. Early in the 20th century William G. Sumner had already indicated this two-dimensional structure of ethnocentrism — positive attitudes toward ingroup, negative attitudes toward outgroup. Ethnocentrism is 'the technical name for this view in which one's own group is the centre of everything and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it' (Sumner, 1906, p. 12; Felling, Peters, & Schreuder, 1986;

Verberk, 1999). One's own social group is considered superior; social groups with which one does not feel oneself to be affiliated are considered inferior.

Results from a study of social and cultural developments in the Netherlands, among others, indicate that ethnocentrism coincides with two other factors that are important in this context: authoritarianism and localism (cf. Eisinga & Scheepers, 1989, pp. 133-150, 165-182). Three significant characteristics of authoritarianism in relation to ethnocentrism are conventionalism, authoritarian submission and authoritarian aggression. Conventionalism refers to a rigid adherence to conservative (i.e. traditional) values and norms. In relation to ethnocentrism, it entails clinging to the exclusive, positively evaluated values and norms of the ingroup and rejecting the (supposedly) negative characteristics of outgroups. Authoritarian submission may be defined as an uncritical attitude toward human and suprahuman authority and unquestioning submission to it. It is tied up with social identification with an ingroup that is perceived as superior. Authoritarian aggression refers to the tendency to condemn or denounce and punish people who do not respect authority and who violate one's own values and norms. Authoritarian aggression amounts to social contra-identification with the 'inferior' outgroup because the members of this outgroup do not live up to the values and norms of the ingroup. Localism, finally, is a tendency to identify with the local community (cf. Roof, 1974).

In this study we measured not ethnocentrism but religiocentrism. We were dealing with religious notions which (at least in principle) cut across the boundaries of ethnicity. Religiocentrism — by analogy with the concept 'ethnocentrism' — implies the combination of a positive attitude toward the religious ingroup and a negative attitude toward the religious outgroup. Before one can speak of religiocentrism, therefore, two criteria must be fulfilled. The first is that members of a religious community should subscribe to the positive attributes assigned exclusively to members of their religious tradition — in other words, they should favour their own group. The second criterion is that they should hold negative prejudices against other religious traditions, agree with negative attributes assigned to the outgroup. We accordingly speak of religiocentrism when there is a combination of positive attributes assigned to members of the respondent's own religion and negative attributes assigned to members of other religions.

2.2 *Explanations of Religiocentrism from the Perspective of Social Identity Theory*

More interesting than definitions of religiocentrism as such are the explanations of the origins of positive ingroup attitudes and negative outgroup attitudes. Social psychology regards both individual-related and context-

related explanations of religiocentrism. Such a combination of individual- and context-related explanations is a matter for concern, since empirical personality psychology has failed to find specific personality traits for specific exclusive religious attitudes like, for instance, fundamentalism — unless you define fundamentalism in terms of specific personality traits like, for instance, authoritarianism (Robins & Post, 1997; Hood et al., 2005). Taken the other way round, conversion to fundamentalist and exclusivist faiths fails to produce basic personality changes (Paloutzian, Richardson & Rambo, 1999). For this reason there are probably better grounds for an approach that connects the attitudes of individuals to the ideas of the communities they relate to (social psychology) or an approach that relates individuals to groups in terms of religious identity construction (social identity theory).

From the perspective of social psychology, religiocentrism is inherent in religion because religion establishes an identity both for individuals and for groups. Simply because religion establishes an identity, it already has the potential to lead to religiocentrism, and to ethnocentrism in so far as religious communities are defined by ethnicity. This being said, social identity theories differ from the so-called realistic group conflict theories in their interpretation of the origin of conflicts. The latter presume that conflicts are rational: hostility toward outgroups is aimed at obtaining the means to realise the ingroup's goals. Intergroup conflicts arise from competition over scarce resources and values. Conflicts arise from specific reasons and are therefore called 'rational' and 'realistic' (Sherif, 1967; Austin & Worgel, 1979). Social identity theories, on the other hand, are generally doubtful as to whether competitive intergroup relations are a necessary condition for intergroup conflicts. Tajfel (1981) proved with his so-called 'minimal group experiments' ('minimal' because there was neither a conflict of interest nor a history of hostility between the groups) that mere group identification is sufficient to lead to ingroup favouritism and outgroup discrimination. Tajfel (1981, p. 2, 21) defined a group on the basis of both internal and external criteria. Internal criteria refer to an individual's identification with the group, while external criteria refer to the fact that others perceive individuals as members of a common group on the basis of characteristics those others do not themselves possess. Both internal and external criteria are necessary for group identification. Social identity theories attempt to explain intergroup attitudes like religiocentrism by way of the psychological processes of cognitive perception underlying group identification. We pay some attention to this theory, because it is relevant to the construction of a measuring instrument for religiocentrism in religiously mixed populations.

Commenting on social identity theories, Coenders, Gijsberts, Hagendoorn and Scheepers (2004, p. 9ff) describe several linked concepts which can be

helpful in explaining why the development and maintenance of an individual's identity in relation to a group identity has a potential for leading to prejudice. Coenders et al. (2004) develop their theory in the context of ethnic and national identities, but it is also applicable to the formation of religious identity in individuals and groups. In other words: social identity theory concerns not only the construction of national and ethnic identities but the processes of individuals relating to groups of any kind whatsoever. Here we distinguish three concepts that are helpful in explaining religiocentrism: social categorisation, social identity and social comparison.

In *social categorisation*, differences between members of the same group are seen as peripheral while similarities between members of the same group become more central. In addition, similarities between members of the outgroup are evaluated as more important than similarities in one's own group. In short, members of the outgroup are perceived as having shared ideas and feelings, whereas the characteristics of the ingroup are considered more diversified and nuanced. Tajfel (1981) terms it the 'depersonalisation' or 'dehumanisation' of the outgroup. Because of this tendency to generalise, education that is intended to reduce religious prejudice should avoid presenting religious traditions as fixed entities, pointing out instead the contingency, the internal dynamics and the internal plurality of unknown religious traditions and world views. Unless it is made clear that there is a diversity of notions and beliefs among members of each tradition, education about different religious traditions could end up having the opposite effect to what is intended (namely a decline in negative prejudice) (cf. Stenhouse, 1982; Duckit, 1992; Sterkens, 2001).

Social identity has to do with the fact that every individual derives his self-image from 'his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership' (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255). Individuals will always strive for a positive self-image by attempting to join the groups they evaluate positively and reduce identification with group(s) they evaluate negatively, even those they actually belong to. In social identification the positive stereotypes are applied to oneself, while social contra-identification consists in resisting the generalised negative characteristics of the groups one does not belong to or want to belong to (cf. Brown, 1995). 'Social identity' refers to the fact that the identity formation of an individual goes hand in hand with processes of social inclusion and exclusion.

Favourable *social comparisons* between the characteristics of the ingroup and relevant outgroups can also promote positive self-esteem. Individuals describe the features of the ingroup as 'more valuable' or 'better' than those of the outgroup. Positive stereotypes are applied to oneself and the ingroup(s), negative

stereotypes to members of outgroup(s). Thus prejudice is first of all a matter of relations between groups, and individuals think of themselves as belonging to this or that social group. Whether prejudice is the cause or the effect of group formation is, from the perspective of social comparison, a theoretical question. The two go hand in hand. While some conflicts result from sharply distinct group identities, at the same time the distinctions between groups are established through conflict. In the former case, the different social constructions of needs and satisfiers in the distinct groups compete and frustrate relationships. In the latter case, conflicts are the means of making social comparison and social identity construction possible and strengthening the internal cohesion of the various groups (cf. Coser, 1956; Blumer, 1958).

Although social identity theory starts with a critique of realistic group conflict theories, it integrates rather than refutes realistic group conflict theory. Competitive conditions and an awareness of a distinctive identity are not merely 'additive' when conflicts arise. An 'additive' approach would mean that competitive conditions on the one hand and identity construction on the other are independent factors that accumulate during emerging conflicts. Social identity theory recognises extensive interdependences between competitive conditions and identity construction. On the one hand, intergroup competition for scarce resources (such as economic wealth or political power) presupposes a minimal consciousness of the existence of groups. On the other hand, competitive conditions can strengthen group identity formation by social processes of inclusion and exclusion. For that reason it remains important to study the context in which identity is constructed, and to study it more specifically in terms of the kind of interests at stake and the societal conditions under which competition arises. Nevertheless, apart from 'realistic' competition over resources, identity construction as such already explains the origins of religiocentrism (cf. Eisinga & Scheepers, 1989; Turner, 1999).

3 Empirical Research

Having clarified the theoretical framework of the concept we want to measure, we now turn to the empirical findings of our research. In the first place, we define the research questions we seek to address. Secondly, we explain the construction of the measuring instruments based on our theoretical framework. Thirdly, we touch on the research sample; and fourthly, we comment on the analysis procedure appropriate to the construction of a comparable model of religiocentrism. Finally, we present the results emerging from the data analysis.

3.1 *Research Questions*

With reference to our theoretical framework of religiocentrism, we can formulate the research questions as follows:

1. (a) What comparable understanding of religiocentrism emerges among Christian, Muslim and Hindu students?
- (b) Are there significant differences in the levels of religiocentrism between Christian, Muslim and Hindu students?
2. (a) Which personal (socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-religious) characteristics are related to the level of religiocentrism among Christian, Muslim and Hindu college students respectively?
- (b) Which personal characteristics may be regarded as predictors for religiocentrism among Christian, Muslim and Hindu students?

3.2 *Measuring Instruments*

We measured religiocentrism by means of a list of positive and negative statements about Christians, Muslims and Hindus. Respondents could indicate the measure of their agreement on a four-point Likert scale. The list consisted of four items comprising positive pronouncements about members of the religious ingroup and two groups of five items attributing negative characteristics to members of religious outgroups (five negative attributes assigned to the first religious outgroup, five negative attributes assigned to the second religious outgroup). Respondents were presented with different items depending on the tradition to which they subscribed, because the 'religious ingroup' and 'religious outgroups' differ according to the respondent's religious self-definition. Since the questionnaire was anonymous and we did not know in advance which religious tradition each respondent would belong to, all respondents actually received the same questionnaire. However, the part on religiocentrism had three different sections to be filled in by Christians, Muslims and Hindus respectively. In these sections, Christian students received items assigning positive attributes to Christianity (i.e. Christians) and items assigning negative attributes to Muslims and Hindus. Muslim students were presented with positive attitudes toward Islam (i.e. Muslims) and negative attitudes toward Christians and Hindus. Hindu students were given positive statements about Hinduism (i.e. Hindus) and negative statements about Christians and Muslims.

The positive attributes assigned to the religious ingroup were the same for all respondents, regardless of the religious tradition to which they belonged. Examples of positive ingroup attitudes are: '[X] respond to God most faith-

fully'; 'Thanks to their religion, most [X] are good people'; and '[X] are best able to talk meaningfully about God. '[X]' should be replaced by 'Christians', 'Muslims' or 'Hindus', according to the religious ingroup of the respondent. Note that the qualification 'positive' in the so-called scale on positive ingroup attitudes is not a normative qualification. 'Positive' does not mean that it is advisable or even desirable to agree with this kind of statement. It simply expresses the 'positive' side of the bifactorial structure of religiocentrism, operationalised as ingroup favouritism.

The negative attributes assigned to the religious outgroup may differ according to the outgroup concerned *and* according to the respondent's religious tradition. They may (but not necessarily will) differ because religiocentrism can be seen as a function of religious identity construction which entails processes of social inclusion and exclusion and their mutual influence. As already stated, the origins of religiocentrism relate to social categorisation, social identity and social comparisons that involve the ingroup and the relevant outgroups. Consequently the specific content of negative outgroup attitudes may differ depending on the (in)group that 'constructs' the relevant attributes assigned to the outgroup. After all, the prejudice does not necessarily refer to a (negative) quality of the outgroup but results from the interrelationship between a specific ingroup and a specific outgroup. Hindus and Christians may have different negative attitudes toward Muslims; Hindus and Muslims may have different negative attitudes toward Christians; and Muslims, finally, may have prejudices about Christians that differ from those that Hindus have. The negative attributes assigned to a specific religious outgroup are always chosen from the perspective of a specific religious ingroup, based on widespread prejudices that can be found within that ingroup. We tried to keep the attributes the same as far as possible, but in a few cases we evaluated a negative prejudice about a religious group as not being appropriate from the perspective of all the religious traditions that make these judgments. A general item that we applied to all religious outgroups is: '[Y] are often the cause of religious conflict', where '[Y]' should be replaced by 'Christians', 'Muslims' or 'Hindus' according to the religious outgroup. Examples of items assigning negative attributes to Christians are: 'Because of their religion, Christians are westernised' (from a Muslim perspective); and 'Because of their religion, Christians lack a sense of national belonging' (from a Hindu perspective). Examples of negative attitudes toward Muslims are: 'Muslims are often the cause of religious conflict'; and 'When it comes to religion, Muslims are intolerant'. Examples of negative attitudes toward Hindus are: 'Because of their religion, many Hindus remain poor' (from the perspective of Christians); and 'Hindus are very caste-minded' (from the perspective of Muslims).

Because there are three groups of respondents (Christians, Muslims, Hindus), and attributes are assigned to three religious traditions (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism), the measurement of religiocentrism comprises nine different scales. Christian respondents are questioned about their positive attitudes toward Christianity, their negative attitudes toward Islam and their negative attitudes toward Hinduism. Muslim respondents are questioned about their negative attitudes toward Christianity, their positive attitudes toward Islam and their negative attitudes toward Hinduism. Hindu respondents are questioned about their negative attitudes toward Christianity, their negative attitudes toward Islam and their positive attitudes toward Hinduism. Table 1 shows an overview of the measuring instruments according to the respondent's religion and the religious tradition the items refer to. The rows refer to the three groups of respondents according to their religion. The columns refer to the religious traditions the attributes are assigned to. Thus each cell refers to a specific scale, i.e. the different items with the attributes assigned to a specific religious group (column) from the perspective of the specific religious tradition of the respondent (row).

Table 1: Synopsis of instruments for measuring religiocentrism (as a combination of positive ingroup attitudes and negative outgroup attitudes) according to the respondent's religion (rows) and the religious tradition the attitudes refer to (columns).

Respondent's religion	Religious tradition the attitudes refers to		
	Christianity	Islam	Hinduism
Christians	Positive ingroup	Negative Muslim outgroup	Negative Hindu outgroup
Muslims	Negative Christian outgroup	Positive ingroup	Negative Hindu outgroup
Hindus	Negative Christian outgroup	Negative Muslim outgroup	Positive ingroup

As we shall consider in greater detail in the section on scale construction, the distribution of different measuring instruments according to the respondent's religious tradition poses a problem for cross-religious comparability.¹ Two

¹ The religiocentrism instrument discussed here is an adapted version of an earlier instrument testing the effects of an interreligious curriculum on religiocentrism among Christian, Muslim and Hindu students (Sterkens, 2001). While this instrument was suitable for comparison

alternatives would have been possible: the distribution of a questionnaire with all the items identical for all respondents; and the distribution of a similar questionnaire with all the items expressed in more abstract terms, using 'my religion' and 'members of other religions' to indicate ingroup and outgroups respectively.² However, these alternatives also have disadvantages.

The first alternative would have been to give all items to all respondents, with the same positive and negative attributes (irrespective of their religious tradition). Apart from the fact that this makes the questionnaire considerably longer, this alternative implies a loss of specificity in the (negative and positive) attributes; in that sense the measuring instruments would be less commensurate with our theoretical framework of religiocentrism as an effect of a specific relation between ingroup and outgroup. Next, this alternative can have a detrimental effect on test reliability. The research group comprised Christian, Muslim and Hindu students; obviously, each of these subgroups of respondents has a different religious ingroup and different religious outgroups. Hence, if all respondents were given the same questionnaire, they would also be confronted with items that assign negative attributes to their religious ingroup. This we wanted to avoid, since respondents might be affronted by such items. Irritation of this kind could impair the reliability of the measuring instrument. Tajfel (1981, 109), for instance, states on the basis of an empirical study that some measure of irritation can cause extreme judgments. This argument regarding irritation also applies to respondents' possibly unfavourable reaction to negative statements about the religious outgroup. Since we could not omit negative outgroup statements, we tried to avoid irritation by including a number of items assigning positive attributes to the outgroup. The latter also serve the purpose of breaking down 'response set'. Since these items are not part of the measuring instruments, they are not mentioned in the tables.

between pre- and post-tests within religious groups, it does need evaluation and adaptation for comparison between religious groups.

² An alternative method of organising the survey (not related to the measuring instrument itself) would also have been possible. We could have distributed different questionnaires according to the respondent's religion, taking up only the relative 'positive ingroup attitudes' and 'negative outgroup attitudes'. Although in this case the measuring instruments would still differ according to the religious self-description of the respondents, the latter would not need to choose a specific section in the questionnaire. However, professors and lecturers who participated in the study said that they did not know what the religious self-descriptions of students would be (Christian, Muslim, Hindu or otherwise). Because the question about religious self-description was administered anonymously, it was not possible to distribute different versions of the questionnaire according to the respondent's religious tradition.

The second alternative would have been to construct items in more abstract terms, by using 'my religion' and 'members of other religions' to indicate ingroup and outgroups respectively. This would imply using attributes that are reasonably applicable to all religious traditions. Here, too, negative attributes would be less specific and in that sense less commensurate with our theoretical framework. This alternative would not make it clear which religious outgroup the items address, and that would be problematic in our research population that includes three religious groups. In such a context, items could be interpreted in different ways according to the respondent's association with a specific outgroup. Whether the drawbacks of these alternatives outweigh the shortcomings of our measuring instrument is disputable. Obviously, the choice of either of these alternatives would depend on the research questions one seeks to resolve.

3.3 *Sampling and Data Collection*

Since the sampling and data collection procedure has already been described in previous articles (Anthony et al., 2005; 2007) — as part of a wider research project on interreligious participation and conflict — we shall now restrict ourselves to 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 difference 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 conducive to a participatory or conflictive approach to other religions on the part of students belonging to the three major religions in Tamil Nadu, a questionnaire containing the instruments described above was administered to students attending the 16 colleges and Madras University in January 2004.

The demographic characteristics of our 1920 respondents reveal the adequacy of our sampling procedure. Our respondents represent the genders rather equally: 55.6% are women and 44.4% men. As for religious affiliation, 45.3% are Christians (28.1% Catholics, 12.8% Protestants, 4.4% from other Christian denominations), 41.1% are Hindus and 13.3% Muslims, with a handful (0.4%) of Jains or 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 is due to the fact that they rarely attend colleges other than their own, which are also fewer in number.

Almost all the respondents (98.4%) are between 17 and 25 years of age. 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 were going to continue to postgraduate levels. Only 13.7% of our respondents are postgraduate students and a few (0.3%) are engaged in advanced studies (MPhil. and PhD).

3.4 *Data Analysis Procedure*

On the basis of previous research which has proven the bifactorial structure of both ethnocentrism and religiocentrism (positive toward ingroup versus negative toward outgroups), and on the basis of social identity theory describing religiocentrism within the specific interaction between groups, we conduct a confirmative factor analysis of positive ingroup attitudes and negative outgroup attitudes for the respondents of each religious group separately. The measurement of the concept of religiocentrism in a research population comprising three religious traditions thus results in nine scales: three scales for 'positive ingroup attitudes' containing four items each; and six scales for 'negative outgroup attitudes' containing three items each. We have separate scales of 'negative outgroup attitudes' for each religious outgroup concerned, and for every religious group of respondents.

Secondly, we make a cross-religious comparison of the scores on positive ingroup attitudes and negative outgroup attitudes in so far as the constructed scales allow. We will check whether the cross-religious differences are significant by means of a Scheffé test (and a subsequent T-test for all significant intergroup differences) for positive ingroup attitudes; and by means of a T-test for negative outgroup attitudes.

Thirdly, we relate the scores for positive ingroup attitudes and negative outgroup attitudes to some background characteristics of the students. In doing so, we describe the social location of religiocentrism in relation to socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-religious student characteristics.

Finally, we conduct a linear regression analysis in which we define the student characteristics as independent variables and the aspects of religiocentrism (positive ingroup attitudes and negative outgroup attitudes) as dependent variables (method: Enter). In other words, we explain the differences in religiocentrism in terms of the differential effects of some student characteristics. We shall only enter those variables in the regression analysis that showed relevant ($r \approx .20$) and significant ($p < .000$) correlations, in at least one of the religious groups, with the religiocentrism instruments concerned (positive ingroup attitude or negative outgroup attitude).

3.5 *Results of Empirical Analysis*

We now proceed to discuss the results of the empirical analysis by referring to the research questions formulated above. First, we briefly explain the construction of the measuring scales for religiocentrism. Second, we compare the scores on positive ingroup attitudes and negative outgroup attitudes between the different groups (as far as possible). Third, we relate the scores on positive ingroup attitudes and negative outgroup attitudes to some student characteristics. Finally, we try to explain the variance in positive ingroup attitudes and negative outgroup attitudes by means of a regression analysis. By doing so, we hope to find inspiration for an explanation of and reflection on the differences between Christians, Muslims and Hindus with regard to their levels of religiocentrism.

Research question 1:

- (a) What comparable understanding of religiocentrism emerges among Christian, Muslim and Hindu students?
- (b) Are there significant differences in the levels of religiocentrism between Christian, Muslim and Hindu students?

To answer the first part of the question, we checked whether the construct of religiocentrism, as a combination of positive ingroup attitudes and negative outgroup attitudes, occurs among the members of the three religious traditions involved in this research. As explained above, the negative attributes assigned to the religious outgroup may differ according to the outgroup concerned and according to the respondent's religious tradition. Because the items are not exactly the same (although similar) for each group of respondents, it is not possible to create one overall scale for the whole population (Christians, Muslims and Hindus together). In particular, the items that measure negative attitudes toward Christians are different for Muslims and Hindus. We did check whether the construct of religiocentrism occurs among all religious groups by conducting a confirmative factor analysis for each scale in every religious group: 860 Christians, 772 Hindus and 254 Muslims. This analysis confirms the structure of positive ingroup attitudes and the structure of negative outgroup attitudes for all three religious traditions. The measurement of the concept of religiocentrism in a research population comprising three religious traditions thus results in nine scales: three scales for 'positive ingroup attitudes', containing four items each; and six scales for 'negative outgroup attitudes', containing three items each. The criteria for the confirmative factor

analyses (Principal Axis Factoring, Oblimin rotation method) were mineigen $>.1$; factor loadings $>.30$; commonality (h^2) of the items $>.20$. The result proves that no hidden or latent concepts are concealed by the factors. Technically this is called 'construct equivalence', which means that measuring instruments in different religious groups refer to the same concept, though the stimuli to measure the concept are not necessarily the same in all these groups (cf. van de Vijver & Leung 1997, 7-26; Harkness et al. 2003, 14 and 143-156).

To answer the second part of the question, we have to discuss the comparability (or equivalence) of the measuring instruments in greater detail. Because religiocentrism is a combination of positive ingroup attitudes and negative outgroup attitudes, we can discuss three types of cross-religious comparison: (1) cross-religious comparison of the scores on positive ingroup attitudes; (2) cross-religious comparison of 'negative outgroup attitudes' in general; and (3) cross-religious comparison of negative attitudes toward one specific outgroup.³ Only measuring instruments that use identical (positive or negative) attributes for all respondents function at the same ratio level in each religious group and therefore reach so-called scalar equivalence. In table 1 we present the reliability (α) of each of the scales. Since each measuring instrument contains three items only, we regard the reliability levels as acceptable.

Table 2: Reliability (Cronbach's α) of the religiocentrism measuring instruments (positive ingroup attitudes and negative outgroup attitudes), and percentages of explained variance according to the respondent's religion (rows) and the religious tradition the attitudes refer to (columns).

Respondent's religion	Religious tradition the attitudes refer to		
	Christianity	Islam	Hinduism
Christians	.70 [1]	.55 [2]	.48 [3]
Muslims	.56 [2]	.62 [1]	.60 [3]
Hindus	.57	.60 [2]	.65 [1]

Measuring instruments with identical attributes for all respondents are indicated by the same number between brackets: [1], [2] or [3]. These instruments reach scalar equivalence suitable for cross-religious comparison.

³ One could also discuss the comparability (or equivalence) of the measuring instruments from the perspective of comparison within one religious group of respondents or, more specifically, the comparison of scores on negative attitudes toward different outgroups from the perspective of one religious group. For instance: are Christians more negative about Muslims than they are about Hindus? Since this type of comparison is not a part of our research question, we shall not discuss it in this article.

We now discuss positive ingroup attitudes and negative outgroup attitudes among Christians, Muslims and Hindus, starting with positive ingroup attitudes.

Positive Ingroup Attitudes

With regard to the level of *positive ingroup attitudes*, average scores on the positive ingroup attitudes for Christians, Muslims and Hindus may be listed separately. Since this is a measurement on an ordinal level (without an absolute zero point in the scale), the score as such is relative and has limited meaning. It only becomes meaningful when related to the levels of positive ingroup attitudes in other religious groups (a question we deal with here), or to specific personal characteristics (something we shall discuss under research question 2).

Cross-religious comparisons of the scores on positive ingroup attitudes are easy to do, because these were measured using the same attributes for all groups. Still, such a comparison assumes that the words we used for the positive attributes have the same meaning for all the groups involved and are equally applicable to all. The same assumption is also made, of course, for other (known and unknown) respondent characteristics such as gender, age, educational level, and so forth. In principle, then, this assumption is not different from the assumptions we make for any measuring instrument in any survey. Technically it means that the measuring instrument contains no uniform or non-uniform bias related to religiosity. We trust that this is the case, since we cannot think of any specific reason why religiosity should lead to different interpretations of the words we have chosen.⁴ Of course, this does not mean that different groups will automatically show equal levels of positive ingroup attitudes. Their opinions may differ.

Positive ingroup attitudes do indeed differ according to religious tradition. Muslims (mean 3.54; standard deviation .58) are more positive about their own religious tradition than Christians (m 3.23; sd .74), while Christians in turn are more positive toward their own religious tradition than Hindus (m 2.84; sd .86). Consequently, Muslims (m 3.54; sd .58) are strongly more positive about their own religious tradition than Hindus (m 2.84; sd .86). A Scheffé test shows that these differences are significant (F-value: 99.14; $p < .000$), confirmed by the T-test of the concerning groups which show significant intergroup differences. We will account for these results in the discussion.

⁴ The construction of a (cross-religious) comparative scale on the related concept of exclusivism (Anthony et al., 2005) showed intergroup differences similar to those we find here. This supports our assumption that no bias occurs in our measuring instrument.

Table 3: Levels of agreement (mean and standard deviation) with regard to *positive ingroup attitudes* for Christian, Muslim and Hindu students, and comparison of means between religious groups of respondents (T-tests for significant inter-group differences in Scheffé's test).

	N	Mean	s.d.	Muslims (t-value)	Hindus (t-value)
Christians	860	3.23	.74	20.41 (p < .000)	29.20 (p < .000)
Muslims	254	3.54	.58		63.45 (p < .000)
Hindus	772	2.84	.86		

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

Negative Outgroup Attitudes

With regard to *negative outgroup attitudes* among Christian, Muslim and Hindu respondents, a more elaborated and nuanced answer is required. Theoretically one should distinguish between two types of cross-religious comparisons with regard to the negative side of religiocentrism: (1) cross-religious comparison of negative outgroup attitudes in general; and (2) cross-religious comparison of negative attitudes toward specific outgroups.

First, an overall cross-religious comparison of 'negative outgroup attitudes' is impossible from the very start, for two reasons. A comparison of 'negative outgroup attitudes' is too general, because each religious group (Christians, Muslims, Hindus) has been questioned about its attitudes toward *two* distinct religious outgroups (which are obviously always different, depending on the religious group the respondent belongs to).

A general comparison of negative outgroup attitudes would only have been possible if items were formulated with an inclusive indication of outgroups (e.g. 'members of other religions'), combined with negative attributes that are reasonably applicable to all religious traditions.⁵ This alternative, however, leads to multi-interpretable items — because respondents do not know which outgroup the attribute refers to, and because they might agree or disagree depending on the religious tradition they have in mind.

Second, the cross-religious comparison of negative attitudes toward specific outgroups is possible for negative attitudes toward Muslims as well as for negative attitudes toward Hindus; but with the measuring instrument to hand it

⁵ One might say that the sum (or average) of the scores on both negative outgroup attitudes would be a proper indication of more general negative outgroup attitudes. But this sum (or average) is not comparable, since the outgroups are different depending on the group that makes the judgment, and attributes differ according to the outgroups concerned.

is not possible for negative attitudes toward Christians. In the latter case, our operationalisation assigns different negative attributes toward the outgroup (namely Christians) depending on the ingroup which makes the judgment (in this case Muslims or Hindus). Why did we do this? For the Christian outgroup we gave priority to the specificity of the items (according to religious outgroup) over scalar equivalence. After all, the attribution of negative characteristics results from a specific interaction between groups. Negative attributes do not necessarily say something about a specific outgroup, only about how that group is perceived by a specific other group. They stem from social processes of exclusion regarding the construction of the identity of members of the relevant ingroup who hold these opinions. In the Tamil Nadu context, different negative attitudes toward Christians from the perspective of Muslims and Hindus are a case in point. While Hindus often see Christians as preoccupied with converting others to their religion and negative about local cultural practices, Muslims sometimes picture Christians as religiously intolerant. Therefore we can give the scores on negative attitudes toward Christians from the perspective of Muslims and Hindus respectively, with the explicit remark that these two scores are not comparable. On the items measuring negative attitudes toward Christians, Muslims scored (on average) 2.61 (sd .79). On the different items measuring negative attitudes toward Christians, Hindus scored (on average) 2.37 (sd .79). We can, however, compare negative attitudes toward Muslims from the perspective of Christians and Hindus, because the same attributes were used — with the presupposition, of course, that the words used do not have different meanings for different groups of respondents. In our research population, Christians (2.51; sd .75) are significantly more negative about Muslims than Hindus are (2.32; sd .85). We can also compare negative attitudes toward Hindus from the perspective of Christians and Muslims: Christians (2.78; sd .72) are more negative about Hindus than Muslims are (2.69; sd .79). A T-test shows these differences are significant. These results will be accounted for in the discussion.

There is still one type of cross-religious comparison that we have not mentioned, namely a comparison of attitudes toward different outgroups from the perspective of different ingroups. The only meaningful comparison of this type in our research is between the opinions that members of specific religious traditions have about each other. In other words: what are the mutual negative attributions?⁶ With the measuring instrument to hand, we can only say that

⁶ Since only three religious traditions are involved in our research, the description of mutual negative attitudes is the only one possible. Even apart from the number of religious traditions involved, this mutual negative attribution might be the only one that can be meaningfully inter-

Christians think more negatively about Muslims (2.51; sd .75) than Muslims about Christians (2.37; sd .79). This result, too, will be discussed in brief.

Table 4: Levels of agreement (mean and standard deviation) with regard to *negative attitudes toward Christians* among Muslim and Hindu students, *negative attitudes toward Muslims* among Christian and Hindu students, and *negative attitudes toward Hindus* among Christian and Muslim students, and T-tests (where possible) of means between religious groups of respondents.

	N	Mean	s.d.	Muslims (t-value)	Hindus (t-value)
<i>Negative attitudes toward Christians</i>					
Muslims	243	2.61	.79		No comparison possible
Hindus	771	2.37	.79	No comparison possible	
<i>Negative attitudes toward Muslims</i>					
Christians	848	2.51	.75	–	4.75 (p < .000)
Hindus	769	2.32	.85	–	–
<i>Negative attitudes toward Hindus</i>					
Christians	853	2.78	.72	1.43 (p < .000)	–
Muslims	247	2.69	.79	–	–

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

Research question 2:

- Which personal (socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-religious) characteristics are related to religiocentrism among Christian, Muslim and Hindu college students?
- Which personal characteristics may be considered predictors for religiocentrism among Christian, Muslim and Hindu students?

preted anyway. What, for instance, could one say about the observation that Christians are more negative about Muslims than Hindus are about Buddhists? In some cases, though, such a comparison would still be meaningful, more specifically when these scores are related to background characteristics or to the context. It could, for instance, be useful in cross-national comparative research. To take the example of religiocentrism: levels of religiocentrism in religious groups could be compared not from the perspective of the religious background of the respondent but from the perspective of minority or majority position. The level of prejudice is likely to be influenced by the self-consciousness individuals have (or don't have) about their religious identity as a consequence of its minority or majority position. The levels of negative attitudes toward Hindus among Muslims could be quite different in Pakistan and India, to give an obvious example (cf. Sen, 2006, 54 and 298ff).

The first part of this research question concerns the social location of religio-centrism. Where do we find religiocentrism among our respondents? What are the personal characteristics of people who hold religiocentric attitudes? We will look at these personal characteristics for Christians, Muslims and Hindus separately. The descriptions can help us interpret the significant differences we have found between Christians, Muslims and Hindus with regard to religiocentrism. Of course, such an interpretation is not a statistical causal explanation; but we hope that correlations between religiocentrism on the one hand and personal characteristics on the other will help us formulate further hypotheses on the significant differences we did find.⁷ The following types of personal characteristics are included: socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-religious. In the category of socio-cultural characteristics we include age, gender, language (i.e. whether the respondent speaks Tamil or not), urbanisation and field of educational specialisation. Next, we consider the following socio-economic characteristics: caste, occupation of mother, occupation of father, educational level of mother, educational level of father. In the category of socio-religious variables we include the number of years the respondent spent in a religiously affiliated school of his or her own religion, and the respondent's evaluation of the (favourable or unfavourable) part played by some socialising agents in the religious domain. The socialising agents in question are: mother and father (parents), relatives, friends, religious community, teachers/professors of the students concerned, and the electronic media (radio and television).

The second part of the question can be answered by means of a linear regression analysis (method: enter, using SPSS 15) in which we define the student characteristics mentioned above as independent variables and the subspects of religiocentrism (positive ingroup attitudes and negative outgroup attitudes)

⁷ The comparison (and interpretation) of the association measures in the different religious groups is legitimate. Uniform bias does not affect the association measures, independent of whether only one or both variable(s) is (are) characterised by uniform bias. Under uniform bias the items result in different scores for different groups, but the scores show a linear transformation. An example will make this clear: the absolute frequency of church attendance (for Christians) and mosque attendance (for Muslims) cannot meaningfully be compared, because they have different meanings in these respective traditions. But a comparison of the correlation between church attendance and religiocentrism among Christians on the one hand, and the correlation between mosque attendance and religiocentrism among Muslims on the other hand, still makes sense! If construct equivalence for the variables involved is reached, cross-religious comparison of correlations between the variables is possible, since uniform bias does not affect the association measures (cf. van de Vijver & Leung, 1997; Harkness et al., 2003).

as dependent variables. In other words, we explain differences in religiocentrism in terms of the variety of some student characteristics. We discuss only those variables that showed relevant ($r \approx .20$) and significant ($p < .000$) correlations with the religiocentrism instruments concerned (positive ingroup attitude or negative outgroup attitude) in at least one of the religious groups. We do not demand this level of association for each of the groups, because we expect different predictors in distinct religious groups. However, to guarantee comparison of the analyses, we include the student characteristic in the regression analysis of each group of respondents (Christians, Muslims, Hindus) as soon it proves to be relevant for one of these groups. The regression analysis results in an explained variance (coefficient of determination R^2) in which the independent variables assume certain significant weightings, expressed by the standardised regression coefficient β .

We will follow this procedure for Christians, Muslims and Hindus separately, as well as for the positive ingroup attitudes and negative outgroup attitudes (two outgroups for each group of respondents). First we discuss the positive ingroup attitudes, then the negative outgroup attitudes. Because respondents with more than one missing value were excluded from the analysis, the exact number in the regression analyses varies slightly, but about 810 Christian students (from a total of 869 Christian respondents), 725 Hindu students (from a total of 789), and 220 Muslim students (from a total of 255) are included in the analysis.

Positive Ingroup Attitudes

We have already seen that Muslims (mean 3.54) have stronger positive ingroup attitudes than Christians (m 3.23), who in turn have stronger positive ingroup attitudes than Hindus (m 2.84). Note that the items 'positive ingroup attitudes' are not an expression of pride in the religious affiliation but a measure of the perceived superiority of the ingroup. We will relate (by means of simple bivariate analyses) positive ingroup attitudes to the three groups of characteristics: socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-religious characteristics. The findings are summarised in the table below.

For Christian respondents, the following *socio-cultural* characteristics show significant correlations with positive ingroup attitudes. Younger students show, on average, slightly more positive attitudes toward their own Christian tradition. Second, we find that Christians who have Tamil as their mother tongue show higher levels of positive ingroup attitudes (m = 3.33) than students who have any other language as their mother tongue (for instance, Telugu, Malayalam) (m = 2.89). Next, we see that Christian students who have lived most of their lives in urban areas show lower levels of positive

Table 5: Social location of *positive ingroup attitudes* among Christian, Muslim and Hindu students. Correlations (person's r for ordinal variables, eta for nominal variables) between positive ingroup attitudes on the one hand and some personal characteristics on the other.⁸

	Christians	Muslims	Hindus
<i>Socio-cultural characteristics</i>			
Age	-.08*		.10**
Gender		.22**	
Language	.25**	.15**	.13**
Urbanisation	-.16**		-.18**
<i>Socio-economic characteristics</i>			
Caste	-.17**	-.18**	-.19**
Education mother	-.17**	-.30**	-.17**
Education father	-.14**	-.14**	-.21**
<i>Socio-religious characteristics</i>			
Parents	.13**	.27**	.13**
Relatives		.19**	.07*
Friends			.11**
Religious community	.09*	.18**	.18**
Teachers/professors	.08*	.16*	.21**
Media	.17**	.14**	.23**

Correlations are significant at $p < .00$ (**) or at $p < .05$ (*) level.

ingroup attitudes. The variable 'urbanisation' indicates where the respondents lived for at least three quarters of their lives: in villages, in towns or in bigger cities. With regard to *socio-economic* characteristics, we find a surprising negative correlation between 'caste' and positive ingroup attitudes. This means: the higher the caste the Christian respondent belongs to, the less he or she agrees with positive ingroup attitudes. The educational level of the parents (as a general indicator of the socio-economic situation of the respondent) points in the same direction. Weaker positive ingroup attitudes can be found among students whose parents have higher educational levels. With regard to *socio-religious* characteristics we can say that relatively strong positive ingroup attitudes are found among students who evaluate the role of socialising agencies as favoura-

⁸ The following characteristics did not show significant correlations for any group of respondents: number of years spent in schools affiliated with one's own religion, educational level of respondent, occupation of father and occupation of mother. These variables are not mentioned in the table.

ble. This is true of all the socialising agents mentioned, in order of importance: the media, parents, religious community and teachers/professors.

In our Muslim research group we find two *socio-cultural* characteristics that have relatively strong correlations with positive ingroup attitudes: gender and language. Male Muslim students are significantly more positive about Islam ($m = 3.66$) than their female colleagues ($m = 3.40$), a finding that holds true for the Muslim population only. Next, Muslims who have Tamil as their mother tongue show higher levels of positive ingroup attitudes ($m = 3.65$) than those who speak another language ($m = 3.46$). With regard to *socio-economic* characteristics, we find the same significant variables as among the Christian population. For Muslims, too, there is a negative correlation between 'caste' and positive ingroup attitudes: Muslims belonging to lower castes have stronger positive ingroup attitudes. Next, there is also a negative correlation between the educational level of parents and positive ingroup attitudes. The educational level of the mother is the most significant: the lower the educational level of the mother, the stronger the positive ingroup attitudes. With regard to *socio-religious* characteristics we can say that relatively strong positive ingroup attitudes are found among students who evaluate the role of the following socialising agents as favourable: parents, relatives, religious community, teachers/professors and the media.

With regard to positive ingroup attitudes among Hindus, we find significant correlations with age, the Tamil language and urbanisation among the *socio-cultural* characteristics. Older students (and not younger ones as among Christians students) show, on average, more positive ingroup attitudes than their younger colleagues. Second, just as for Christian and Muslim students, speaking the Tamil language is related to higher levels of positive ingroup attitudes ($m = 2.90$) compared to Hindu students who speak another language as their mother tongue ($m = 2.64$). And Hindu students who have lived most of their lives in rural areas show higher levels of positive ingroup attitudes. When it comes to *socio-economic* characteristics, Hindus belonging to lower castes have stronger positive ingroup attitudes. When we consider the educational level of parents as a socio-economic characteristic, we find a similar correlation: lower educational levels of parents (both father and mother) are related to stronger positive ingroup attitudes. Finally, among Hindus also we find stronger positive ingroup attitudes among students who evaluate the role of socialising agents as favourable, even if the specific socialising agents are somewhat different than among Christians and Muslims. We find a positive correlation between positive ingroup attitudes and the following socialising agents: media, teachers and professors, religious community, parents, friends and relatives.

To see whether the differences in positive ingroup attitudes are also explained by personal characteristics, we conducted a linear regression analysis (method: enter) in which the personal characteristics are defined as independent variables and the positive ingroup attitudes as dependent variables. We included personal characteristics which showed relevant ($r \approx .20$) and significant ($p < .000$) correlations with positive ingroup attitudes in at least one religious group. In this way we can see whether these characteristics can be regarded as predictors for positive ingroup attitudes. The table below summarises the results.

Table 6: Regression analyses for *positive ingroup attitudes* with weights (β) for each variable and total explained variance (R^2 and Adjusted R^2) for Christian, Muslim and Hindu students separately.

	Christians	Muslims	Hindus
<i>Socio-cultural characteristics</i>			
Gender (male 1; female 2)	.03	-.15*	.01
Language (Tamil 1; other 2)	-.22**	-.08	-.03
<i>Socio-economic characteristics</i>			
Caste	-.11**	-.18**	-.14**
Education mother	-.08*	-.20**	-.01
Education father	-.08*	.07	-.14**
<i>Socio-religious characteristics</i>			
Parents	.14**	.26**	.10*
Teachers/professors	.03	-.03	.09*
Media	.15**	.08	.16**
R^2	.14	.20	.12
Adj. R^2	.13	.17	.11

Standardised regression coefficients (β) are significant at $p < .00$ (**) or $p < .05$ (*) level.

The total explained variance (R^2) of the regression analyses on positive ingroup attitudes varies according to the group of respondents. It is highest among Muslims ($R^2 = .17$), followed by the Christian group ($R^2 = .13$), and lowest for Hindu students ($R^2 = .11$). The standardised regression coefficient (β) expresses the relative weight of the variable concerned in the total explained variance. Since we inserted personal characteristics that showed relevant and significant correlations with positive ingroup attitudes in any of the religious groups, it is not surprising that some independent variables are neither significant nor relevant for certain religious groups. However, to guarantee comparison we

did include the same dependent variables in the regression analysis for all religious groups. We can point to the following predictors in the different religious groups, presented in order of importance.

Among Christians we find that Tamil as mother tongue predicts higher positive ingroup attitudes (β -.22). When it comes to socio-religious characteristics, we see that the respondents' perceptions of the influence on religious socialisation of the media (β .15) and their parents (β .14) are relatively good predictors for positive ingroup attitudes. Finally, a lower socio-economic status is associated with stronger positive ingroup attitudes. This is true of all three socio-economic characteristics: caste (β -.11), educational level of mother (β -.08) and educational level of father (β -.08).

Among Muslims, the favourable role of parents in religious socialisation (β .26) has by far the strongest influence on positive ingroup attitudes. Next, the socio-economic status and more specifically the educational level of the mother (β -.20) and caste (β -.18) predict positive ingroup attitudes: a low socio-economic status is associated with relatively high positive ingroup attitudes. Finally, gender (β = -.15) can be identified as a predictor for positive ingroup attitudes: men have considerably higher positive ingroup attitudes than women.

For Hindus the favourable role of the media (β .16) is the strongest predictor for positive ingroup attitudes. As for Christians and Muslims, lower socio-economic status is associated with more positive ingroup attitudes, specifically caste (β -.14) and the educational level of the mother (β -.14). We will account for the major results in the discussion.

Negative Outgroup Attitudes

To answer our research question on the social location and origins (or prediction) of negative outgroup attitudes, we follow the same statistical procedure as for positive ingroup attitudes. To describe the social location of negative outgroup attitudes among Christian, Muslim and Hindu students, we relate (by means of simple bivariate analyses) negative outgroup attitudes to several types of personal characteristics: socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-religious characteristics. Our findings showed significant and relevant correlations only for Muslim students in their negative attitudes toward Christians. The first is in relation to gender (η .38). Muslim men (m = 2.64) are considerably more negative about Christians than Muslim women (m = 2.04).⁹ Next,

⁹ We also find a correlation (η .19) between gender and negative attitudes toward Hindus: Muslim men (m = 2.82) are considerably more negative about Hindus than Muslim women (m = 2.53). Among Christian and Hindu respondents too we find higher negative outgroup attitudes among men than among women, though the significant correlations are lower in these religious groups.

we find negative attitudes toward Christians especially among Muslims whose parents have lower educational levels: there is a negative correlation with the educational level of the mother ($r = -.22$); and a negative correlation with the educational level of the father ($r = -.21$). Finally, evaluation of the contribution of teachers and professors ($r = .20$) to religious socialisation as favourable, and socialisation by the religious community ($r = .15$), are related to negative attitudes toward the Christian outgroup.

But do these correlations imply that the differences in negative outgroup attitudes can be explained by personal characteristics? To find predictors for negative attitudes toward Christians among Muslim respondents, we then conducted a regression analysis, using gender, educational level of mother, educational level of father and socialisation by teachers and professors as independent variables.¹⁰ We did find the following significant standardised regression coefficients (β) contributing to the total explained variance ($R^2 = .18$; Adj. $R^2 = .16$): gender ($\beta = -.31$); socialisation by teachers and professors ($\beta = .09$); educational level of mother ($\beta = -.09$); and educational level of father ($\beta = -.08$). However, only the standardised regression coefficient (β) of gender proved significant on $p < .00$ level.

4 Findings and Discussion

Under findings we summarise the responses to our research questions. In the discussion we interpret and discuss the cross-religious differences in religio-centrism levels by looking at the differential effects of student characteristics on the levels of religiocentrism.

4.1 Findings

The first research question is: (a) what comparable understanding of religio-centrism emerges among Christian, Muslim and Hindu students? (b) Are there significant differences in the levels of religiocentrism among Christian, Muslim and Hindu students? Religiocentrism proves to be a construct that occurs among Christian, Muslim and Hindu students in Tamil Nadu. All groups of respondents show, to some degree, a combination of positive ingroup attitudes and negative outgroup attitudes. Because negative outgroup attitudes

¹⁰ Since we did find low correlations between personal characteristics and negative outgroup attitudes among Christian and Hindu respondent groups, regression analyses would lead to levels of explained variance too low to say anything meaningful within these groups. Therefore we did not conduct any other regression analysis.

(negative prejudices) emerge in a specific interaction between religious traditions, it is difficult to make cross-religious comparisons of the levels of negative outgroup attitudes. For positive ingroup attitudes we found comparable scales with scalar equivalence. Muslims show higher positive ingroup attitudes than Christians, and Christians in turn show significantly higher positive ingroup attitudes than Hindus. With regard to negative outgroup attitudes, Christians are significantly more negative about Muslims than Hindus are, just as Christians are more negative about Hindus than Muslims are. Christians are also more negative about Muslims than the other way round.

The second research question is: (a) which personal (socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-religious) characteristics are related to religiocentrism among Christian, Muslim and Hindu college students? (b) Which personal characteristics can be regarded as predictors for religiocentrism among Christian, Muslim and Hindu students? On the whole, the correlations between student characteristics and religiocentrism show remarkable similarities for the three religious traditions in our research, but sometimes there are differences as well. In the discussion we will reflect on cross-religious similarities and differences in the social location of religiocentrism and how these could contribute to the interpretation of different levels of religiocentrism. For positive ingroup attitudes we could also point to some specific predictors: Tamil language for the Christian respondents; caste (as a socio-economical category) for all religious groups; education of mother for Muslims; and education of father for Hindus. Finally, the influence of socialising agents such as parents (for all religious groups) and the media (for Christians and Hindus) is a good predictor for positive ingroup attitudes. For negative outgroup attitudes it proves far more difficult to find predictors with statistical certainty.

4.2 *Discussion*

The discussion contains a further interpretation of differences in religiocentrism among Christians, Muslims and Hindus in Tamil Nadu in terms of the possible differential effects of personal characteristics within these groups.

With regard to the *socio-cultural characteristics* of respondents we have seen that, in terms of gender, male students show higher levels of religiocentrism than their female colleagues. This is true of all religious groups, but statistically the correlation is most significant for Muslim respondents. Markus & Oyserman (1989, 101ff) generally state that women's identity is more characterised by 'connectedness' than that of men, while masculine self-identity is relatively more characterised by 'separateness'. Gender differences also arise when men and women communicate about religious experiences and religious conversion.

While the majority of men use adventurous metaphors and focus on themselves as the central character, women use more peaceful metaphors and more often focus on someone else in describing these experiences (Knight et al., 2005; cf. Nanda, 2000). These general observations might indeed explain why women are more open to a religiously plural environment and consequently have lower levels of religiocentrism. But we can also give a more specific explanation related to the Indian context. Women in Tamil Nadu easily go beyond the confines of their own religious tradition when seeking solutions to health problems (for themselves and their children) as well as for other material and spiritual needs. For the latter they also have recourse to the sacred figures, rituals and places of other religions. Furthermore, in a strongly patriarchal society like India, the cultural and religious self-definition of women is mostly dependent on that of men in the family and particularly on the husband's identity. Women quite commonly change their religion in order to marry a man belonging to another religious tradition. This is far more usual than the other way round. Indian women, in other words, cross the boundaries of religious traditions more easily than men. This might explain why women in general are less religiocentric.

Then, the Tamil language as mother tongue proves to be significantly related to religiocentrism. Christians, Muslims and Hindus who have Tamil as their mother tongue show higher levels of positive ingroup attitudes, and in the case of Christians it is also related to higher levels of negative outgroup attitudes. Having the Tamil language as mother tongue is also a significant predictor for positive ingroup attitudes in Christians. Why should that be the case? It is rather characteristic of Tamils to be attached to their language. Constant resistance to the Sanskritisation process and the defence of their Dravidic language identity over at least two millennia has made them a distinct group. This is manifested in their resistance (at times violent) to the national language Hindi, which derives from Sanskrit. Perhaps this 'linguistic pride' has an effect on positive ingroup attitudes. For Christians and Muslims, speaking the language can give them an awareness that their religious tradition is fully part of the local culture. Moreover, speaking the local Tamil language is an indication of 'localism' or the tendency to identify with the local community. Localism in turn has a direct influence on ethnocentrism, as has been proven empirically in several surveys (cf. Roof, 1974; Gijssberts et al., 2004; *supra*). For Hindus there is a considerably weaker correlation with positive ingroup attitudes and no proof of influence within the regression analysis. This might have to do with the ambiguous feelings that are involved in the relationship between Tamil language on the one hand and Hindu identity (especially positive ingroup attitudes) on the other. Hinduism is dominated by the Sanskrit

textual traditions of the Vedas and Upanisads, as well as the Dharmasastras, the big Sanskrit Epics and the Puranas (cf. Flood, 2005, pp. 68-198). On the other hand, the Tamil Hindu literature is enormously diverse, perhaps easier to define in terms of what it excludes than on the basis of a central 'Hindu' doctrine. It contains, among other things, the Tamil Vaisnava and Saiva Saints' texts. Nevertheless the recognition of this Tamil literature is under permanent pressure from stricter Hindu schools who aspire to a clear canonisation of texts. Perhaps this specific position of the Tamil Hindu literature explains that, among Hindus in particular, the influence of Tamil as mother tongue has no influence on positive ingroup attitudes (cf. Cutler, 2005).

When it comes to *socio-economic characteristics*, we found caste to be a relevant category related to religiocentrism. Belonging to a lower caste is associated with higher positive ingroup attitudes and, less strongly, with negative outgroup attitudes. To understand the meaning of this relationship, we have to explain exactly what we mean by 'caste' in this context. Our research was too limited to reflect the complexity of the thousands of existing traditional castes (*jatis*) and even the more limited system of *varnas* in Indian society. Besides, for a quantitative survey of this kind it would have been inappropriate, if not illegal, to ask about this type of caste as a background characteristic. As early as the *Lex Loci Act* of 1845 and the *Caste Disabilities Removal Act* of 1850, restrictions with regard to occupation and other types of discrimination resulting from the traditional caste system were declared illegal (cf. Rodrigues, 2006, pp. 60-65). The classic divisions of Hindu society that can be traced back to the Rg-Veda (x, 90) comprise four castes (*varnas*): *Brahmana* (priestly caste), *ksatriya* or *rajanya* (the military caste), *vaisya* (landholders and merchants), and *sudra* (cultivators and menials). Although its original intention was to ensure the harmony of the complex social fabric, the caste system gradually deteriorated into a divisive and discriminative force. Based on the division of labour, castes later indicated groups engaged in various professions, which gradually became hereditary. The wide variety of specific occupations in time gave rise to numerous subcastes (*jatis*) which were not strictly hierarchical. The systems of *varnas* and *jatis* still coexist and overlap to a certain degree. But it needs to be said that the connection between the *jati* system and Hinduism is a complicated one, certainly not a one-to-one relationship (Dumont, 1980; Quigley, 2005). In the contemporary context, although the Indian constitution formally condemns the caste system as untenable, the government recognises that social inequalities are partially due to the hegemony of the caste system. With a view to rectifying the socio-economic imbalance, the government has introduced the strategy of 'reservations'. This policy facilitates the entry of grossly under-represented groups into the educational and professional

fields. Paradoxically, among other criteria such as religion and gender, caste serves as a basic criterion for the identification of underprivileged classes. The Indian Constitution (Articles 341 & 342) identifies Scheduled Tribes (ST) — originally considered ‘outcastes’ — comprising over 24% of the Indian population — and Scheduled Castes (SC) as groups who have historically suffered oppression and denial of equal opportunity. The government proposes to reserve a certain percentage of jobs in the public sector for Scheduled Tribes (7,5%) and Scheduled Castes (15%). Later on, reservations were introduced for Other Backward Castes (Constitution article 340). The detailed division of castes and the percentage of job reservations can vary according to states. In the state of Tamil Nadu, a further distinction was made between Backward Castes (BC) and Most Backward Castes (MBC) in 1971. Currently this state reserves 69% of job positions for about 87% of the population. Paradoxically, this ‘positive discrimination’ revives the illegal caste system in a new form. In our research we followed the classification used by the Tamil Nadu government: Scheduled Tribes (ST) are traditionally identified with *adivasi* (original indigenes); Scheduled Castes (SC) are identified with *dalit* (untouchables and outcasts). Most Backward Castes (MBC) and Backward Castes (BC) are consequently the better end of the disadvantaged groups. Those who do not belong to these categories and cannot claim reservations are said to belong to the Forward Castes (FC). We also included the category ‘Other Castes’ (OC), since there may be respondents who do not associate themselves with these categories. The latter category was filled in by very few respondents and was afterwards coded as a missing value. With the help of these categories, we found a significant (negative) correlation between ‘caste’ and religiocentrism. In other words: lower castes show higher levels of positive attitudes toward the religious ingroup; higher castes show lower levels of positive attitudes toward the religious ingroup. At first sight, this negative correlation between caste and religiocentrism, and the significant negative influence of caste on positive ingroup attitudes in the regression analysis, might seem surprising. Would one not rather expect people belonging to higher castes to be more positive about their religious tradition? And why are both correlation and influence not significantly stronger among Hindus than among Christians and Muslims? The results prove that the so-called caste system, operationalised according to the legal definitions of the Tamil Nadu government, is deeply imbedded in the Indian culture — independent of religion. It is a socio-economic characteristic rather than a religious standard. This is remarkable, since a widespread prejudice against Hindus is precisely that ‘they are very caste-minded’.

Another correlation that we found among all groups of respondents was a negative correlation between the educational level of parents (both the mother

and the father) and positive ingroup attitudes: a low educational level for parents goes hand in hand with high positive ingroup attitudes. There is also a negative correlation between the educational level of parents and negative attitudes toward Christians among Muslims. All these negative correlations are meaningful in the regression analyses as well. For Muslims the educational level of the mother is the strongest predictor for religiocentrism (both positive ingroup and negative outgroup attitudes), while for Hindus the father's education is the strongest predictor for positive ingroup attitudes. The mother's educational level in particular can be seen as an indicator of the economic position of Muslim respondents. The low participation of women in higher education is a problem in India. The literacy rate in 2001 was recorded as 64% but, even while the gap is narrowing, there is still a significant difference between female (54%) and male (75%) literacy. Only 1% of women attend a university or college versus 3% of men (Departments of School Education, Literacy and Higher Education, 2007). Although education is free, parents have to provide for textbooks, uniforms and transportation. The mother's level of education is a strong indicator of a higher economic status for the family. For all students, a higher educational level for the mother is a relatively strong predictor for lower levels of religiocentrism. In other words: higher socio-economic status is associated with lower levels of religiocentrism. The influence of socio-economic status is evident both in educational level and in caste. How to account for this? Students from higher economic classes will have more opportunities for exposure to cultural and religious plurality: they might travel more and have greater access to both the written and the electronic media. Since these opportunities can lead to a better understanding of other groups, students whose parents have a higher educational level may show lower levels of religiocentrism. Empirical research has also shown that even under similar conditions at college, socio-economic status still has an effect. High-status students interact more frequently than their low-status colleagues. This can lead to differences in learning outcomes, including attitudes. High-status students (who talk more) learn more, even when the differences in status are irrelevant to the task (Cohen & Lotan, 1995). And a student who learns more in interaction with others might be better able to differentiate opinions and feelings about other religious traditions. Perhaps this reduces religiocentrism?

With regard to *socio-religious characteristics* we find that there is an effect of the perceived favourable influence of some socialising religious agents on positive ingroup attitudes. In other words, the more favourably one evaluates a specific socialising agent in its effect on one's understanding and practice of religion, the more likely one is to hold positive ingroup attitudes. This is

especially true of parents and the media, and it applies to all the religious groups involved. The religious community plays a significant part among Muslims and Hindus; religious socialisation by the media plays the most influential part among Christians and Hindus. There is no such clear causal effect of socialising agents in the case of the negative outgroup attitudes, however; though here too, among Christians and Muslims, we find a positive correlation between religious communities, teachers and professors and the media on the one hand and some negative outgroup attitudes on the other hand. Socialising agents seem capable of strengthening the religious identity of students. The influence of socialising agents leads to positive ingroup attitudes, especially the influence of the parents.

Finally, let us reflect on these findings from a social psychological perspective against the background of the specific situation in Tamil Nadu. Social psychology indicates that higher levels of religiocentrism (like ethnocentrism) can be related to the minority position of a group rather than to the cultural or religious convictions of this group. In an empirical study of anti-racist education, Stenhouse et al. (1982) found that among students belonging to a minority group, negative outgroup attitudes *increased* under the influence of interventions designed to reduce prejudice. In other words: for the minority group, the effect of the intervention was the opposite of its intention. For members of the majority group, the intervention did lead to the intended decline in ethnocentrism. Stenhouse comments that this unwanted effect on the minority group could be attributed to confrontation with the prejudice of the majority, which also surfaced in the lessons. From this perspective it is not strange that members of a minority group show higher levels of religiocentrism compared to members of majority groups. In our research population Muslims (and in the second place Christians) show significantly higher positive ingroup attitudes than Hindus. Next, Christians are more negative about Muslims than Hindus are. This would mean that different levels of religiocentrism do not necessarily relate to religious convictions (even when these are not excluded), but can also relate to a minority position. Another study that can be cited in this context is that of Finchilescu (1988), who examined the effects of participation in integrated as opposed to segregated training programmes on the attitudes of black and white trainee nurses in South African hospitals. After integrated training, the white group rated the blacks relatively more favourably. By contrast, blacks showed more ingroup favouritism as well as greater awareness of race as an important factor in the way they were being treated. According to Finchilescu and a comment by Duckit (1992), the intergroup contact increased black trainees' awareness and resentment of

discrimination against them and consequently it did, among the 'minority group'¹¹ lead to greater ethnocentrism.

Nevertheless, it may well be possible that cross-religious differences in religiocentrism relate to specific *religious convictions* and more specifically to the religious truth claims of Christians, Muslims and Hindus. Perhaps Christians and Muslims in our research population have stronger religious truth claims than Hindus? As elaborated in a previous publication (Anthony et al., 2005), we did indeed find that Christians and Muslims in this particular research population show significantly greater agreement with 'monism' (compared with Hindus). Agreement with monism implies the absolute validity of one's own religion. This validity claim can be exclusive or inclusive. In an exclusive variant, there is no truth at all in other religions. In an inclusive variant, other religions may have some partial truth compared to one's own religion. In terms of the exclusive truth claim, other religions are evaluated positively only in so far as they show similarities to one's own tradition, which claims universality and absolutism. In terms of the inclusive truth claim, other religions are evaluated positively inasmuch as they display — according to the tradition concerned — signs of divine revelation. Such truth claims can nourish intolerance, because they contradict the conditions for recognising other traditions. Genuine recognition necessarily entails the willingness and skills to understand other traditions in terms of their own premises, and a decrease of religiocentrism. According to this theory, religion potentially fosters religiocentrism in so far as exclusive or inclusive truth claims contribute to intolerance between religious groups.

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¹¹ 'Minority' in this context does not refer primarily to numeric minority (even when this was also the case within the group of nurses) but to their lower social status as generally perceived by others.

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Appendix

Measuring instrument: Religiocentrism

Section to be answered only by Christians (Catholics, Protestants, and those of other Christian denominations). Some statements concerning your religious group and other religious groups (Hindus and Muslims) are given below. Do you agree or disagree with them? Your answer can be one of the following: (A) Agree, (TA) Tend to Agree, (TD) Tend to Disagree, (D) Disagree.

Christian respondents

Christian ingroup positive

1. Christians respond to God the most faithfully.
8. Thanks to their religion, most Christians are good people.
14. Christians are best able to talk meaningfully about God.

Muslim outgroup negative

5. Muslims are often the cause of religious conflict.
7. Muslims may talk about doing good deeds, but they do not practise them.
9. When it comes to religion, Muslims are intolerant.

Hindu outgroup negative

4. Hindus talk about high spiritual ideals, but they do not practise them.
6. Hindus believe in fanciful myths.
11. Hindus are often the cause of religious conflict.

Muslim respondents

Muslim ingroup positive

The items of this scale are similar to the scale '*Christian ingroup positive*'. Obviously, "Christians" should be replaced by "Muslims".

Christian outgroup negative

7. Christians talk about doing good deeds, but they do not practise them.
9. When it comes to religion, Christians are intolerant.
13. Christians are often the cause of religious conflict.

Hindu outgroup negative

4. Hindus talk about high spiritual ideals, but they do not practise them.
6. Hindus believe in fanciful myths.
11. Hindus are often the cause of religious conflict.

Hindu respondents

Hindu ingroup positive

The items of this scale are similar to the scale 'Christian ingroup positive'. Obviously, "Christians" should be replaced by "Hindus".

Christian outgroup negative

4. Christians talk about doing good deeds, but they do not practise them.
6. Christians are too much worried about converting others to their religion.
18. Christians practice many foreign rites and disregard local cultural practices.

Muslim outgroup negative

5. Muslims are often the cause of religious conflict.
7. Muslims may talk about doing good deeds, but they do not practise them.
9. When it comes to religion, Muslims are intolerant.