Introduction

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India woke up to the new millennium with a terrorist attack on the House of Parliament on 13 December 2001. Every year of the first decade of the 21st century was marred by violence in some part of the Indian subcontinent, particularly in the cosmopolitan city of Mumbai. While in some cases violence was clearly economically or politically motivated, others were as clearly targeting religious minorities such as the violence against Christians in Jagatsinghpur in February 2004 and the Kandhamal riots in December 2007 and August 2008.

Are religions a source of conflict and violence? Recent works by Edna Fernandes (2007), Martha Nussbaum (2007) and Angana P. Chatterji (2009) trace the tragic events to Hindu nationalism, while Triloki Madan (2010) looks at the devastating effects of Hindu, Islamic and Sikh religious fundamentalism on social cohesion in India. Peggy Froerer (2007) focuses on the emergence and impact of Hindu nationalism in rural India. Although religions, being closely bound to politics and ethnic identities, can give way to violence, they all claim to favour harmony and human wellbeing. Recently, at the closing ceremony of the 150th anniversary of Swami Vivekanand's birth, Dr Manmohan Singh, the then prime minister of India – recalling Swamiji's address to the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 – underscored that true religion cannot be a source of hatred or violence, and that Hinduism with its syncretic, pluralist approach has inspired millions to view the human race as one family (*The Hindu*, 12 January 2014). A recent document of the Catholic Church's International Theological Commission (2014) questions the generally held opinion that monotheism necessarily implies violence and sheds some light on Christian monotheism and its opposition to violence. Likewise, there is no lack of Islamic authors who point out that their religion stands for peace and harmony. Asghar Ali Engineer (2012), for example, is quick to correct the misinterpretation of Islam as a code of regression and violence.

The history of religious traditions in India attests that while there have been sporadic conflicts between Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Muslims and Christians, there has been an underlying current of religious tolerance since the time of the Buddhist emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE. However, the political process that led to the independence of India (1947) was also accompanied by the struggle of various cultural and religious groups to define Indian identity and heritage, sparking off nationalism, fundamentalism and religiously motivated conflict. This culture of religious tolerance and conflict has marked the

history of Tamil Nadu, one of the fast developing states of contemporary India with all its contradictions (Drèze & Sen 2013). Realising that religion in a complex and pluralistic society can play a dual role with regard to violence and peace, we embarked on empirical research into religion and conflict at a relatively peaceful time (2003–2004) in Tamil Nadu, after an Anti-conversion Bill was passed by the local government in 2002.

In chapter 1 we clarify the focus and scope of our comparative research into religious conflict. Our focus is not the sporadic outbreaks of religious violence but the way Christian, Muslim and Hindu students understand conflict between religious groups. More specifically we study Christian, Muslim and Hindu students' perceptions of the causes of interreligious conflicts. We also examine how these perceptions are influenced by prescriptive beliefs like religiosity and mystical experience, and descriptive beliefs such as the interpretation of religious plurality and religiocentrism. Chapter 1 outlines the cultural and religious context of our research in Tamil Nadu. We trace the history of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity in Tamil Nadu, and the role of religion in the struggle to define Indian identity and heritage. We then present the research questions of our empirical study and describe the research variables, sampling and data collection and the design of statistical analysis.

Chapter 2 deals at length with a distinctive feature of our research, namely its cross-religious comparative perspective. It discusses fundamental theoretical issues and the core empirical methodological problems associated with cross-religious comparative research. We first clarify the rules that govern scientific comparative research, then go on to examine the various goals of comparative research. In expounding the notion of religion we tackle the thorniest issue in comparative research, namely insider-outsider perspectives: in what terms and to what extent can we understand and explain the religious beliefs, practices and experiences of other persons and communities? The methodological problem is that of establishing similarities and differences. We distinguish between different levels of equivalence in measurements in quantitative comparative research. Finally we look at the normativeness of such research. The chapter is a detailed exposition of the nature of cross-religious comparative research. We hope it will show the significance of the complex approach adopted in our study and the value of the findings.

After providing an overall view of the research and clarifying the complex issues involved in cross-religious comparative research, we proceed to analyse religious identity using a meaning system approach. For our purpose we selected two prescriptive and two descriptive beliefs as predictors of our respondents' perception of the causes of religious conflict. The prescriptive beliefs concern dimensions of religiosity (chapter 3) and mystical experiences (chap-

ter 4), the descriptive beliefs concern the interpretation of religious plurality (chapter 5) and religiocentrism (chapter 6). We describe these beliefs with a view to examining their role in the attribution of interreligious conflict to specific causes among Christian, Muslim and Hindu college students in Tamil Nadu. We have chosen these beliefs for their cross-religious comparability and for their potential explanatory power of conflict attribution. Moreover, we have selected scales which are validated in previous research. Each chapter is structured as follows: a brief introduction, leading to a detailed description of the theoretical framework, followed by the elements of empirical analysis, namely research questions, measuring instruments and empirical results, and concluding with a discussion of salient findings.

Chapter 3 sheds light on different dimensions of religiosity in a cross-religious comparative perspective. The seminal work by Rodney Stark and Charles Glock (1968) provides a starting point for a theoretical framework of religiosity. It comprises six dimensions deriving from a cross-classification of three cultural systems (cognitive, normative and expressive) and two social modes (institutional and personal). The empirical analysis provides a cross-religious comparative model of institutional religious practice and the impact of religious socialising agents, such as the religious and educational community and gender, on institutional religious practice.

Chapter 4 dwells on the concept of mystical experience. The theoretical framework of mystical experience by Walter Stace (1961) forms the basis of Ralph Hood's mysticism scale (1975). Our measuring instrument, based on Hood's work, yields a cross-religious comparative model of vertical mysticism with a higher reality. It also indicates the usefulness of distinguishing between vertical and horizontal mysticism in further theory building and empirical research.

Chapter 5 examines how followers of different religious traditions interpret truth in other religions. Based on a theoretical framework of so-called theologies of religion, our empirical analysis produces three comparative models of interpreting religious plurality, namely monism, commonality pluralism and differential pluralism. The model that proves to be most acceptable to the three religious groups is commonality pluralism; differential pluralism evokes an ambivalent response. The model that is contested by Muslims and Hindus is monism: whereas Muslims tend to agree with monism, Hindus disagree with it.

Chapter 6 elaborates on the concept of religiocentrism in the context of cross-religious comparative research. According to social psychology religiocentrism is inherent in religion because it establishes the identity of both individuals and groups. For some scholars mere group identification is sufficient to

lead to in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination. Our empirical analysis shows that all groups of respondents to some degree display a combination of positive in-group attitudes and negative out-group attitudes. Besides some personal characteristics, socialising agents such as parents and the media are found to influence in-group attitudes.

Chapter 7 presents the theoretical framework of four types of causes of interreligious conflict: socio-economic, political, ethnic-cultural and religious causes. The explanation of the first two types, derived from so-called realistic conflict group theory, is competition for scarce resources (economic wealth and political power). The other two causes (ethnic-cultural and religious) consider group identification sufficient reason for conflictive relationships. Our empirical analysis yields a cross-religious comparative scale comprising all four categories of causes of religious conflict, which we labelled 'force-driven religious conflict'. The results also point to a second scale: strength-driven religious conflict. The findings are evaluated from the perspective of the political theory of Hanna Arendt (1970; 1998) and Paul Ricœur's normative perspective on evil (1967; 1995; 2007).

Chapter 8 centres on our main research question: how do Christian, Muslim and Hindu students' prescriptive and descriptive beliefs influence their perception of interreligious conflict? The attribution of religious conflict is understood as an outcome expectation, influenced by religion as a complex and malleable meaning system that can engender both conflict and peace. Based on the theory of cognitive dissonance, we expect descriptive and prescriptive beliefs in a religious meaning system to display cognitive consistency. Our findings show differences between religious group regarding beliefs that inspire force-driven religious conflict, while the personal characteristics inducing agreement are identical. Among Christian students institutional religious practice induces attribution of religious conflicts to force-driven causes, while differential pluralism and positive in-group attitudes reduce it. Among Muslim students institutional religious practice and commonality pluralism contribute to the attribution of religious conflicts to force-driven causes. Among Hindu students five beliefs are found to influence force-driven religious conflict: institutional religious practice and negative attitudes towards Christians induce attribution of conflict to force-driven causes, while vertical mysticism, monism and positive in-group attitudes reduce agreement with force-driven religious conflict. The findings on personal characteristics are identical for Christian, Muslim and Hindu respondents: higher educational level of the mother and studying arts or social sciences relate to greater agreement with force-driven religious conflict.

Finally chapter 9 elaborates on the importance of force-driven and strength-driven religious conflict for theory development on the correlation between religious meaning system and religious conflict. We also consider the practical consequences for the educational process of college/university students. Three issues relevant to conflict prevention through education emerge from our findings: the need to foster critical reflection on beliefs that determine agreement with force-driven conflict in the religious meaning systems of Christians, Muslims and Hindus; the need to promote integration of religious education with citizenship education; and the need to promote successful citizenship education. Finally, we also briefly consider the competences that educators require to mould the next generation to live and act cooperatively in a plural society.

This cross-religious empirical study is the fruit of an international endeavour that led to critical collaboration between the authors, colleagues and research students of Radboud University Nijmegen (Netherlands) and the Salesian Pontifical University in Rome (Italy). Special mention must be made of colleagues, particularly prof. Stanislaus Swaminathan and prof. A.J. Christopher, and students of the Social Work Department of the Sacred Heart College, Tirupattur (India), who were involved in the initial stage of pilot testing and data entry. Above all we thank the students and staff, particularly the principals, of the 16 colleges and Madras University who generously collaborated in the process of data collection. Before the publication of parts of the present research in peer-reviewed journals and edited book series, papers were read and discussed at the biannual conferences of the International Society for Empirical Research in Theology (ISERT) in Bielefeld (2004), Bangor (2006), Würzburg (2008), Rome (2010) and Nijmegen (2012), as well as the biannual conferences of the International Academy of Practical Theology (IAPT) in Berlin (2007), Amsterdam (2011) and Toronto (2013). These international platforms of experts served as a sounding board for testing and refining our research outputs. We thank our colleagues for their insights and challenges. We thank those who rendered expert assistance in the statistical analysis of the data at various stages: Ms Lieve Gommers, Mrs Berdien Biemans and Dr William van der Veld (Radboud University Nijmegen). We also thank students of the MA course in Empirical Religious Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen for their comments on the draft manuscript of this book. Finally we are indebted to Prof. Dr Raymond Webb (University of Saint Mary of the Lake, Illinois, USA) and Ms Marcelle Manley (Pretoria) for checking the manuscript minutely and introducing linguistic improvements to make it more readable.

Earlier versions of all but two chapters in this book were published previously as independent articles in journals or contributions to edited volumes.

But most chapters have been thoroughly revised and updated, and overlaps in sampling and design of analysis were obviously removed to permit publication in a single volume. Chapter 2 was recently published as ‘Comparison in religion: a methodological contribution’ in the *Journal of Empirical Theology* (JET) 27 (Hermans & Sterkens 2014). Parts of chapter 3 were published as ‘Religious practice and religious socialization: comparative research among Christian, Muslim and Hindu students in Tamil Nadu’ in JET 20 (Anthony, Hermans & Sterkens 2007). An earlier version of chapter 4 was presented to an academic audience as ‘A comparative study of mystical experience among Christian, Muslim, and Hindu students in Tamil Nadu’ in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (JSSR) 49 (Anthony, Hermans & Sterkens 2010). A less detailed version of chapter 5 was published as ‘Interpreting religious pluralism: comparative research among Christian, Muslim and Hindu students in Tamil Nadu’ in JET 18 (Anthony, Hermans & Sterkens 2005). An earlier draft of chapter 6 appeared as ‘A comparative study of religiocentrism among Christian, Muslim and Hindu students in Tamil Nadu, India’ in JET 21 (Sterkens & Anthony 2008). Parts of chapter 8 were published a few years ago in a volume edited by Leslie Francis and Hans-Georg Ziebertz: *The public significance of religion* (Leiden: Brill), but this article contained results on Christian respondents only and was statistically less sophisticated (Hermans, Anthony, Sterkens & Van der Veld 2011). We express our heartfelt thanks to the publishers and editors of the journals and books in which earlier versions of the chapters in this book appeared, and also acknowledge gratefully the comments of three anonymous reviewers and the support and assistance offered by the publishers of the present volume.