CHAPTER 5

Interpreting Religious Plurality

5.1 Introduction

The Indian subcontinent has long been a melting pot of a wide variety of religious traditions. Through the ages religious tolerance has been a hallmark of this multicultural and multi-religious country. However, the resurgence of local cultural and religious consciousness under the influence of modern cultures and the concomitant process of globalization is increasingly complicating the interaction between religious traditions. This tendency in the Indian context is in keeping with an international phenomenon: the politicizing of religious issues and the mushrooming of extreme fanatical wings in various religious traditions. In some ways the global panorama in the new millennium throws the question of religious plurality, into sharp relief. In societies where religious plurality is a given fact people tend to adopt a pragmatic approach to other religions, shaped by their own religious traditions and their particular socio-cultural susceptibility. Hence we can assume that adherents of the three major religions in India have a specific way of interpreting religious plurality.

The general problem considered in this chapter is: how do Christians, Muslims and Hindus interpret religions other than their own? This is a major question that has emerged in what is known as the theology of religions during the last century. In fact, different models of interpreting religious plurality have been identified. We shall reflect on this theory building, paying special attention to pluralist models (5.2). In our opinion the theoretical conceptualization of pluralist models often remains obscure. In outlining our empirical research (5.3) we clarify the structure of our measuring instrument and present the results of the empirical study undertaken among Christian, Muslim and Hindu college students in Tamil Nadu. Finally we discuss salient features of the findings and draw some conclusions about models of interpreting religious plurality (5.4).

5.2 Theoretical Framework: Models of Interpreting Religious Plurality

We have reached a stage in history when it seems almost unethical to think about one's religion in isolation from other religions in the world around us. In the latter half of the 20th century Christian communities woke up to this
imperative explicitly and consciously. Making sense of other religions from the perspective of the Christian faith gave rise to many theologies of religions.¹ Most authors in this field work with three models: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism (cf. D’Costa 1986; Wilfred 1995; Sterkens 2001; Amaladoss 2003; Phan 2004; Vermeer & Van der Ven 2004; D’Costa, Knitter & Strange 2011). There seems to be some agreement on the concepts of exclusivism and inclusivism. These two models also have a strong basis in the history of theology. Pluralism, however, is subject to growing debate: are there distinct theological models of pluralism? Does pluralism amount to relativism? Knitter (2002; cf. D’Costa, Knitter & Strange 2011) sums up various theological trends that shed some light on these questions. He perspicaciously classifies the approaches of Christian communities and theologians into four meaningful models: replacement, fulfilment, mutuality and acceptance. We give a short overview of these models, since they provide the basic framework for our research.

5.2.1 Replacement

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

¹ The key theological question around which the Christian theologies of religions revolve is the uniqueness and universality of Christ. Besides this Christ-centred focus, Christian theologies of religions generally also have an ecclesiocentric, theocentric, anthropocentric or soteriocentric focus (Thomas 1985; Knitter 1986; D’Costa 1990; Bühlmann 1990; John Paul II 1991; Dupuis 1991; Kutthinimattathil 1995; International Theological Commission 1997; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000; Serretti 2004).