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

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

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

1 INTRODUCTION  

The Indian subcontinent has long been a melting pot of a wide variety of  
religious traditions. Through the ages religious tolerance has been a hallmark  
of this multicultural and multireligious country. However, the resurgence  
of local cultural and religious consciousness under the influence of modern  
cultures and the concomitant process of globalisation is increasingly com-  
plicating the interaction between religious traditions. This tendency in the  
Indian context is in keeping with an international phenomenon: politicising  
of religious issues and mushrooming of extreme fanatic wings in various  
religious traditions. In some ways the global panorama in the new millennium  
throws the question of religious pluralism into sharp relief.
In societies where religious pluralism is a given fact people tend to develop a pragmatic approach to other religions, shaped by their own religious traditions and their particular socio-cultural susceptibility. Hence we can assume that adherents of the three major religions in India – Hindus (82.4%), Muslims (11.7%) and Christians (2.3%) – have a specific way of interpreting religious pluralism. Given that Christianity has a long history in South India, dating back to the time of St Thomas the Apostle according to local church tradition, we conducted our research into the interpretation of religious pluralism in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, where the proportion of Christians is as high as 5.7%, compared with 88.7% Hindus and 5.5% Muslims (Government of Tamil Nadu, Statistical Handbook 2003).

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

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

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