Anita Yadala Suneson

Indian Protestants and their Religious Others
Views of Religious Diversity among Christians in Bangalore
To my parents
Dissertation presented at Uppsala University to be publicly examined in Sal IV, Universitetshuset, Biskopsgatan 3, Uppsala, Friday, 17 May 2019 at 10:15 for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Faculty of Theology). The examination will be conducted in English. Faculty examiner: Professor Chad Bauman (Butler University).

Abstract

This study gives an in-depth insight into ways that ordinary Christians in a multireligious context think about religious plurality. It examines how Indian Protestants reflect upon other religions and upon the situation of religious diversity.

Methodologically, the study relies mainly on qualitative interviews with Pentecostal and Church of South India (CSI) lay members and pastors from Bangalore, south India. The interviews are analysed through thematic analysis.

The study reveals a theological diversity among interviewees. The major differences are found among the clergy, while the views of Pentecostal and CSI lay interviewees show many similarities. The dominant theological perspective is evangelical and this forms an “evangelical lens” that colours attitudes to other religions. Additionally, a general Protestant perspective emerges that reflects a typically Protestant emphasis on Christ and the Bible, as well as a liberal Protestant perspective which focuses on social issues.

Salvation, primarily understood in terms of eternal life for the individual, is central to the ideas interviewees have about the difference between Protestant Christianity and other religions. Perceptions of Hinduism reveal stereotypical views which portray it as an antithesis to Christian faith. Views of Islam are more positive, and similarities with Protestantism are perceived. Attitudes to different Christian traditions, and to Catholicism in particular, illustrate that the line between religious self and other can be drawn also between different forms of Christianity.

An important finding of the study is that the use of religious images is a central issue for these Protestant Christians which affects their views of other religions and that it signals religious otherness to them. The dichotomy between religious self and other refers primarily to salvation and religious efficacy, not to everyday life. As people, Muslims and particularly Hindus are portrayed in a positive light. Interreligious friendship and unstressful everyday interaction characterise interviewees’ depictions of relations with religious others in Bangalore. The religious minority status becomes plainly evident in relation to mission. Interviewees negotiate between an ideal of active evangelism and social considerations. This study reveals that it is possible to combine theological exclusivism in theory with respect for the religious other in practice.

Keywords: Hindu-Christian Studies, Christian-Muslim Studies, Protestantism, Pentecostalism, Church of South India, Christianity in India, Bangalore

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Abbreviations

AG – Assemblies of God
BD – Bachelor of Divinity
BJP – Bharatiya Janata Party
CPM – Ceylon Pentecostal Mission
CSI – Church of South India
EFI – Evangelical Fellowship of India
IPC – Indian Pentecostal Church
KCD – Karnataka Central Diocese (of the Church of South India)
KJV – King James Version
MTh – Master in Theology
NIV – New International Version
NRSV – New Revised Standard Version
OBC – Other Backward Class
SABC – Southern Asia Bible College
SAIACS – South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies
SC – Scheduled Caste
ST – Scheduled Tribe
TPM – The Pentecostal Mission
UTC – United Theological College
WCC – World Council of Churches
1. Introduction

“I think Jesus is the only way to salvation, to eternal life,” Chinni said with great conviction. Chinni is a young woman, one of the Indian Christians I have interviewed for this study, who expressed her belief that a person “could be good; [he] could be doing the most wonderful things on earth … but I think ultimately if he doesn’t know Jesus as his only saviour, he’s missed it all.”¹ This is a common conception among Christians worldwide, but what are the consequences of it in a context where the great majority of people who one daily interacts with are not Christian? That is one of the questions that this study will illuminate.

As the title of this dissertation states, it examines views of religious diversity among Protestant Christians in Bangalore, south India. The “religious others” of the title refers to people of other religious traditions. This includes Hindus and Muslims, and also Catholic Christians, whose religion is in significant ways perceived as “other” by many of the Protestants I have interviewed. In the dissertation, I analyse their views of other religions and their thoughts about subjects such as Christian mission and everyday interreligious encounters.

While Christians constitute the largest religious group in the world, Indian Christians are one of the largest Christian minorities in the world. On a global scale, Christians are second only to Hindus in being the religious group where the highest percentage live as part of the religious majority in their country.² Indian Christians, on the other hand, constitute a small minority of their country’s population. Only 2.3 per cent of the Indian population are Christians, according to official figures. But this proportionately small minority is the second largest Christian minority in the world, surpassed only by Chinese Christians.³

In recent decades, the growth of Hindu nationalism together with increased anti-Christian rhetoric and violence have highlighted interreligious conflict and the precariousness inherent in the minority status of Indian Christians. India is a secular, democratic country, but “anti-conversion” laws in some

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¹ Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.
² According to a 2012 report by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. See http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/
³ According to a 2011 report on the world’s Christian population by the same forum. See http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-majorities-and-minorities/
states and rhetorical and physical attacks on minorities impinge on the freedom of religion. Outbursts of violence directed at Christians in Gujarat in 1998 and in Odisha (then Orissa) and Karnataka in 2008 have caught the attention of national and international media, while smaller-scale harassment continues without much media coverage. But at the same time, everyday interactions and cordial relations often prevail when Christian Indians go shopping for the day’s vegetables in the market, greet their colleagues at work, receive sweets made for a special occasion from a neighbour, or invite Hindu friends and relatives for a wedding. This is the latest phase in a long history of religious diversity on the Indian subcontinent which has sometimes been violent but mostly relatively peaceful. “South Asia has, on the whole, long been the context for a ‘live and let live’ pluralism, of parallel living of the various traditions,” Elizabeth Koepping remarks.

In view of this complex history leading up to the present situation, it is unsurprising that interreligious encounters and interaction have been central to religious studies of Christians and Christianity in India, of both historical and contemporary empirical varieties. Mission, inculturation, contextualisation, or religious hybridity, and conflicting views of conversion are some factors that have been significant. The relationship to Hinduism particularly has also been a focal point in Christian theology in India, from early Indian Christian theology attempting to anchor the gospel in India with the help of textual sources of the Hindu religious elite to the work of theologians from or based in South Asia who have made prominent contributions to the theology of religions. As important has been the more recent development of Dalit theology where the relation to Hindu traditions is viewed from quite a different angle.

While conducting field studies and living in south India, I have noticed a gap between theological scholarship and the empirical reality, or the thoughts and beliefs that non-academic Protestant Christians that I have encountered actually express. Many of the developments in academic theological circles—for example reflections on gender, environment, and interreligious relations—seem to have had little impact on church life in local congregations. Students and alumni that I have met during my stays at the United Theological College (UTC) in Bangalore have told me about the new perspectives that they have gained there on matters such as the Bible, gender roles, and other religions. But they have also told me about the difficulties in sharing those new perspectives once they go back to work in their local churches. Many of their new insights are not appreciated among their congregations whose perspectives on these matters differ greatly from those found in Indian theological literature.

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4 See Joshi 1999 on the violence in the Dangs, Gujarat, and Akkara 2009 and 2010 on the violence in Kandhamal, Orissa.
5 See e.g. the reports produced by the Evangelical Fellowship of India: http://www.efionline.org/
6 Koepping 2011: 36. Koepping also observes that “This does not always survive modern state politics, exacerbated by the sometimes divisive attitudes of diaspora South Asians.” (ibid).
and the foremost theological seminaries. These academic perspectives also differ greatly from the attitudes that I encountered among my interviewees while conducting the empirical study. This impression has been confirmed by my personal experiences of living periodically with CSI congregations in Telangana, south India, during the past five years.

In order for the two spheres of academia and local Christian believers to communicate more effectively, I believe that it is necessary for scholars to study carefully the attitudes among the latter by bringing the voices of engaged but non-academic Christians to the academic discussion. To gain insight into these perspectives, I have conducted qualitative interviews with lay Christians and pastors from a few selected churches in Bangalore. My purpose has been to obtain in-depth accounts of their understanding of other religions, religious others, and the role of the Christian minority in this religiously diverse context. The focus in the interviews is on religions in Bangalore, relations between Christians and people of other religions, and on theological views of religious diversity. I have then proceeded to analyse this material thematically and present it in this dissertation. I have opted to limit the scope of the study to Protestant churches although I include both Pentecostal and mainline Protestant interviewees. This methodological choice has led to the emergence of a distinctively Protestant perspective, where other Christians, notably Catholics, are also included in the category of the religious other.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to understand views of religious diversity among lay Protestants and local pastors in an urban context in India. With “views of religious diversity” I refer to views of the religions and religious groups that form this diversity. I also refer to perceptions of the interreligious relations that this plurality entails, theological beliefs about the relation between Christianity and other religions, and ideas about the role of Christians in the context of religious plurality.

This purpose leads to the following research questions:

- **How do Indian Protestant Christians reflect upon other religions in India?**

- **How do they reflect upon the situation of religious diversity in which Christians form a minority, and how do they perceive their role in this context?**

To these overarching questions can be added these more specific sub-questions:
- What themes can be identified in interviewees’ descriptions of other religions?

- What theological norms do their ways of speaking about other religions reveal?

- What attitudes to people from other religious groups do they express, and how do they view their relationships with these religious others?

- How do they balance the perceived obligation to witness for Christ with concerns related to their situation as a religious minority?

My main approach to these questions has been to conduct qualitative, semi-structured interviews involving laity and pastors from four churches in Bangalore. Two of these are Pentecostal churches – “Mega AG” and a branch of The Pentecostal Mission (TPM) – and two are congregations belonging to the Church of South India that for this study I designate “CSI City” and “CSI Tamil.”

It is my hope that the resulting insights into the views of ordinary Protestant Christians on religious plurality, mission, and interreligious coexistence will contribute to ongoing discussions about these issues from secular as well as theological perspectives. I hope to contribute to a bridge between local congregations and academic theology, by bringing ordinary Christians’ voices to scholarly attention.

**Methods**

My methodological approach for this dissertation has been to rely mainly on semi-structured qualitative interviews and analyse them through thematic analysis according to a hermeneutic perspective with inspiration from data-oriented methods. Here, I will describe the different phases of the process, starting with the periods of field studies when I produced the empirical material in collaboration with my interviewees and other participants.

**Field Studies**

The basis for this study consists of empirical material produced during field studies conducted in Bangalore from December 2010 to March 2011 and from January to March 2012. During these times, I stayed in the guesthouse of the United Theological College (UTC), a milieu which was beneficial to my understanding of the context and the subject of my study. Being “in the field”

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7 These are pseudonyms for real congregations.
involved exposure to a constant flow of impressions of ideas and practices among the people I met. During these periods, I maintained a curious and inquisitive openness and recorded as many of my thoughts and impressions as possible. In the later stage of analysis, after coming home from Bangalore, I systematised these impressions, selecting among the material and analysing it from a more distanced perspective.

I was relatively new to and unfamiliar with the environment during my field studies although I had done a first pilot study a few years earlier, during six weeks in 2008. In my interaction with interviewees and other informants, I generally took the role of a young, innocent person — rather than present myself as an expert I was someone who wanted to learn about this religious context. Obviously, I accounted for my position as a PhD student in theology from Sweden.

During the process of working on this dissertation, my relation to south India has changed and deepened. This was especially true after the conclusion of the actual field studies when I married a pastor in the Church of South India whom I met at the UTC but who was not related to the congregations included in this study. At that time I took up residence in Telangana and have since spent part of the year living among CSI Christians there. This development has made me aware of the great difference between staying in a foreign culture as a field study researcher and as a private person. Particularly, it has taught me about the distinctive mentality of a field study researcher, especially in shorter field studies or in the first phase of long field studies: The maintenance of openness and curiosity about cultural differences and the focus on absorbing as much information and gaining as much understanding as possible. In my later, private role, personal feelings about, for instance, women’s roles in churches have become more central. A practical example of this is my differing attitudes to covering my hair in church during field studies and after. During the field studies, I had no qualms about covering my hair in churches where that was the dominant female norm, or about partaking of the Communion together with the other women after the men had received it, as was the practice in CSI Tamil.

My deepened experiences of south India after the field study phase have had an impact on my analysis, since I have acquired a broader understanding of the cultural context and an increased ability to perceive nuances of cultural significance in the material. I have, however, taken care to analyse the interview material and other field study material in its own right, and to distinguish between the Telangana context where I live and the Bangalore context of my study.

Although my position during the field studies was that of a cultural outsider, I also had something important in common with my interviewees in my Protestant religious identity. Interviewees often asked for my church affiliation. When they heard that I am a Lutheran belonging to the Church of Sweden, they were approving or — in the case of some Pentecostal interviewees —
semi-approving, and they were satisfied that I was enough of a religious insider to understand important religious beliefs to which they referred. Denominationally, I have a closer affinity to CSI interviewees than to Pentecostal interviewees.

This affinity increased after the conclusion of the field studies when I, as a consequence of my marriage, gained membership in the CSI. I would not say that this has made my attitude to the CSI less critical – rather the opposite is the case since as an insider one naturally gains a clearer insight into the negative as well as the positive sides of a church. It does mean, however, that I have more insight into the CSI at large than Indian Pentecostalism, and that I identify with the CSI to an extent though I have tried not to let these differences in position lead to any bias in my presentation of the material. I have attempted to present and analyse the views of Pentecostal as well as CSI interviewees in a way that does justice to them. This is not to say that interviewees would necessarily agree with all my interpretations. A researcher should not present thoughts of interviewees in a distorted or unfair way, but she has the right to her own interpretations of what they mean on a more abstract level and in relation to wider issues.8

Participant Observations
In addition to the interviews, I also made participant observations of different activities in the churches, such as Sunday services and Bible studies. “Participant observation” can refer to the long-term immersion of a researcher into a culture but here I mean it in a more specific sense referring to my participation in and observation of specific church activities.9 During these occasions, I took careful notes, participating to as full an extent as I could without being dishonest. For example, I received the Eucharist in all the churches and joined in hymns or songs sung in English. But I did not attempt to speak in tongues or pray out loud during prayer sessions in the Pentecostal churches, since that is not part of my usual religious practice and would have been mere acting on my part, an imitation of what to other participants was a genuine religious experience which would have been disrespectful. On the other hand, I covered my hair with my dupatta (shawl) when I attended church services in TPM and

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8 Anna Davidsson Bremborg maintains, “the integrity of the researcher’s interpretation” should also be considered, in addition to the ethical obligations towards interviewees. As Bremborg implies, the researcher cannot “just be a spokesperson for the interviewees” but her “task [is] to present the interviewees’ statements in a new light through theoretical lenses.” Bremborg 2014 (2011): 320.

9 Graham Harvey comments that long stints of field research are unusual among scholars of religion, who are usually focused on a specific aspect of religious life, and who commonly focus methodologically on particular activities, even when they study how people perform their religion, rather than their reflections on it, as I do here. Harvey 2014 (2011): 219-220. For a classical anthropological understanding of participant observation, see Bernard 2011 (1988): 275-31.
CSI Tamil, something which I saw as a respectful adjustment to the practices in those churches. The time I spent with interviewees outside of the interview situation, and with other people in Bangalore, also constitutes a type of participant observation. During these times, I had many opportunities to learn things related to the subject of my study.

My experiences of participant observation differed in the four different churches. In the church belonging to The Pentecostal Mission, a denomination of a radical holiness Pentecostal type, my legs got stiff from sitting cross-legged on the floor during the four hours long Sunday services. On the positive side, I could understand the preaching and had ample time to take notes of it, since it was translated from Tamil into both Kannada and English. In contrast, in CSI City, a church originally founded for the British during colonial times, the form of the Sunday service as well as its length was much more familiar to me.\(^\text{10}\) Also in contrast to TPM, the time-effective worship in Mega AG, a neo-Pentecostal church with a number of worship services every Sunday, made a refreshing change, especially its music and its preaching which was both entertaining and pedagogical.\(^\text{11}\) In CSI Tamil, a smaller CSI church whose members are descendants of migrant labourers from Tamil Nadu, the pastor had known beforehand that I was coming and so I received a warm welcome complete with garlanding on my first visit. My participant observations there entailed anything but a complete grasp of what was being said, since Tamil was the only language used in church.

Likewise, the reactions to my presence – and the extent to which it might have changed what happened – differed between the churches. Depending on such factors as the size of the congregation and the extent to which they were used to foreign visitors there, my presence was conspicuous to differing degrees. I was most noticeable in CSI Tamil which was usually only visited by its Tamil members, receiving Tamil-speaking newcomers now and then as a result of migration to Bangalore. There, I received much (positive) attention but the order of worship and the preaching went on in Tamil relatively undisturbed I presume. Neither did the lay participants noticeably change their behaviour because of my presence. My purpose for participating in these Tamil services while not understanding the language was to make contact with people for interviews and come to understand essential characteristics of the church they belonged to. In the TPM church, although its congregation was larger and I was not clearly visible to all of them while sitting down during the service, I also received a fair amount of curious attention especially from those sitting closest to me. But I did not perceive any marked disturbance

\(^{10}\) I have since realised how much this was related to the urban context of CSI City. In the CSI Diocese of Dornakal, where I have lived part-time for more than five years, worship services around three hours long, including hour-long preaching, are common at least in the bigger churches in towns. Sitting on the floor is the usual practice, as one of many regional traditions.

\(^{11}\) Purposely so; as one of my Mega AG interviewees said, after a hard working week, people like to be revived with a few laughs during the Sunday service.
among churchgoers due to my presence there either except among those sitting just next to me. Foreign visitors are more common in CSI City and Mega AG so I received less attention there. It was usually easy to strike up conversations with other churchgoers there who were politely curious about my presence, but I was not treated as a curiosity. I was least noticeable in Mega AG where a large number of people attend every service and no churchgoer has a full view over all the other participants.

The possibility of interviewees or informants attempting to convert the researcher is a well-known challenge for those who conduct empirical research among religious people. In my case, this happened only with the pastor in TPM who asked about my beliefs in order to ensure they concurred with TPM doctrine while supplying me with literature produced by the church and encouraging me to study it. The pastor expressed his wish that I understood the importance of immersion baptism and received it during my time in Bangalore. I visited the church in 2008, between 2010 and 2011, and in 2012, and the pastor’s attempts became less and less intense, perhaps because he gave up on me. Other interviewees often asked me about my denominational affiliation and beliefs, usually after the formal interview was concluded. But they did not prompt me to strive for spiritual development as they understood it. A TPM interviewee once kindly said, by way of encouragement, that she believed I would receive baptism in the Holy Spirit if I desired it.

For writing the dissertation, I have used the participant observations mainly as a background to my wider understanding of theology and praxis in the churches where I found my interviewees. Only in a few cases have I used the observations directly in the text as sources. In this study, I rely heavily on the thoughts of individuals as expressed in interviews. The purpose is to understand what people think rather than what they do. Had the purpose been the latter, participant observation should have been the primary method.

Qualitative Interviews

Instead of participant observation the most important method has been qualitative, semi-structured interviews with sixteen individual church members and four pastors. I chose the qualitative interview method because of its potential for producing knowledge about ordinary Christians’ thoughts about religious plurality. Anna Davidsson Bremborg observes:

Qualitative interviews within religious studies are useful for studying people’s complex conceptions of religion and beliefs. They allow individuals to express their personal and intimate views and thoughts in substantial ways. The method allows us to have a dynamic and exploratory attitude, with new knowledge being brought into theory building.

12 Harvey 2014: 223-224.
In my use of interviews, I have relied on the guidelines provided by Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann in their much cited book on the subject. A qualitative, semi-structured interview, as it is described by Kvale and Brinkmann, is characterised among other things by an interpretation of the meaning of central themes in the interview, deliberate naivety or “bracketing of presuppositions,” a focus on specific themes, sensitivity, and its being an interpersonal situation. Knowledge is produced in the concrete interview situation through the interaction between interviewer and interviewee.

The semi-structured character of such an interview means that it is conducted with the help of an interview guide, which gives an overview over topics and suggestions for interview questions. It is not standardised but characterised by openness and flexibility, with many follow-up questions about the issues that the interviewee chooses to bring up. For my interviews, I used an interview guide which I looked over and revised before each new interview. For example, I introduced topics which had been brought up in a previous interview or adapted the questions according to which interviewee that I was going to meet. The most important difference was between interview guides for pastors and for laity. Many questions recurred, for example when I asked the interviewees to describe the religious groups present in Bangalore and how members of those groups practised their religion. But I did not ask exactly the same questions of all interviewees, and the interviews developed in different directions depending on the varying interests and areas of knowledge of the interviewees.

The length of the interviews differed depending on the time available to the interviewees and the time it took to exhaust the topics discussed. I generally found somewhere around one and a half to two hours to be a suitable length. I interviewed some of the interviewees more than once if the first occasion had not allowed sufficient time to discuss all the topics I wanted to cover. An advantage of this was that I could process the first interview during the intermediate time and then had more time to think of relevant follow-up questions than in the immediate interview situation.

The interviews took place in the homes or offices of interviewees, in my room at the guesthouse, or in other quiet places, for example in church on a weekday. This last was the case particularly with male interviewees whom it would have been culturally inappropriate to meet with alone in their homes or in my room.

I recorded the interviews with the help of an mp3 recorder and later transcribed these recordings. Two of the interviewees were not willing to let me record the interviews. The first was the pastor in The Pentecostal Mission,

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14 Kvale and Brinkmann 2009.
15 Ibid: 28-32. (Quotation from p. 31.)
16 Ibid: 2.
17 Ibid: 130.
who said that he would have been obliged to ask permission from his superiors in the church first and found it simpler that I record our interviews in written form. The other was a young woman from CSI Tamil, who was more comfortable with my recording the interview only by taking notes. In both cases, the result showed the superiority of audio recording. Where I could not do this, the natural flow of the interview was hampered by my taking of notes. Also, the resulting interview transcripts were much shorter and covered fewer topics than those based on audio recording, since time had been consumed by my note-taking. Another exception to my usual method was that in one case a friend of the interviewee was present and helped translate her responses to my questions from Tamil to English. Although this interviewee could speak English, she was self-conscious and wanted the support of her friend. I judged that these interviews, despite their methodological drawbacks, were still worth including in the study although I have used them less extensively than other interviews.

After an interview was concluded, I sat down as soon as possible to check the audio recording, take notes of my impressions of the interview situation and write down as much as I could remember about interesting statements and important topics that the interviewee had brought up.

For this method, establishing a good relationship or rapport with interviewees is crucial. The results will be better if the interviewee is relaxed and comfortable with the interviewer. According to my own estimation, I had a good rapport with almost all the interviewees and in several cases a very good one. There were a few cases where the interviewee made a reserved or self-conscious impression. The consequence of this was that the content of these interviews was less rich than that of other interviews. But these interviewees still brought up interesting points which contributed to my understanding of the subject of my study. In other cases, the interviewee expressed their appreciation for our interview/s which had prompted them to reflect on the discussed issues more deeply than they found time for in their daily life. I also spent time with most of the interviewees outside of the interview situation and in some cases met them repeatedly during my time in Bangalore.

The majority of the people that I have interviewed are from a relatively privileged middle-class or upper middle-class background, while a few are from a lower middle-class or working-class background. The interviews were conducted in English. Although Bangalore is a city where English is spoken by people from different socioeconomic backgrounds, the choice of the English language excluded people from the least educated segment of society from the study. It was partly a practical choice to select interviewees who could express themselves relatively well in English. It meant that I could avoid the added complications of involving a translator. But it was also an ethical choice. I wanted to find interviewees who would feel comfortable with me and

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18 See Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 128.
with the interview situation, with expressing themselves in English and speaking to me on equal terms. Another factor which helped create relatively equal relationships between me and the interviewees was that English is not my own first language. The most frequent mother tongue among interviewees was Tamil, and English was the first language of a few.\footnote{Eleven interviewees spoke Tamil as their mother tongue, three spoke Kannada, three had other mother tongues, and three spoke English as their first language.} The interviewees were all able to communicate in English and in almost all cases they could do so well.

I found people to interview among the churchgoers of the four churches I had selected for my study. In my selection of churches I attempted a diverse but not too disparate range which was why I limited myself to Pentecostal and CSI churches. I knew the Pentecostal churches from my pilot study and they represent two different strands of Indian Pentecostalism. I chose the CSI since it is the most populous mainline Protestant denomination in south India. I selected one congregation from among the “elite” CSI churches in Bangalore, and one whose congregants come from different, less privileged life circumstances. In three of these churches, there was only one pastor and I interviewed him. In the fourth there were a number of pastors and I chose to interview one of them whom I was introduced to by a church member and who held a central position in the church with a long experience of working there and with good insight into various aspects of the church’s life.

I used purposive sampling to find interviewees I thought would be interesting for this study.\footnote{See Bernard 2011: 160-162.} I found the interviewees by approaching people in the churches and at the UTC where I met a few people who belonged to the churches in question. It was also at the UTC that a student suggested that I include CSI Tamil in my study. He was familiar with the church and gave me its pastor’s phone number. In this way, I was sometimes introduced to an interviewee by another person but in most cases I found the interviewees myself usually by speaking to people in church after a service. I chose not to use the “snowball” method, whereby one interviewee leads the researcher to the next.\footnote{See Bernard 2011: 162-163 for the snowball sampling method.} Although this method is practical and could be necessary for interviewing a large number of people, I thought that finding the interviewees myself would introduce me to a wider variety of social circles in the congregations. For the same reason, I did not ask for assistance in finding interviewees from the pastors.

I tried to find interviewees of different ages, both male and female, and with different levels of involvement in the churches. Some are pastors, some hold other positions of leadership such as that of a Sunday school teacher or a leader of a youth group or a Bible study and prayer group, and some mainly come to church for Sunday service. Younger women are slightly more well-
represented than any other single age or sex group, which is related to the relative ease with which I could establish good and comfortable rapport with them, as a young woman myself. I do not see this necessarily as a disadvantage since the presence of their voices balances those of the pastors who are all male and, in three cases out of four, middle-aged. In effect, it counters a certain bias towards male perspectives in much of research and academic literature in general. I interviewed twenty people for a total of twenty-six interviews. This number includes three interviews from my pilot study in 2008, which I included in the material for this dissertation. In two cases, I interviewed a married couple together which worked out well.

The interviewees do not represent a random selection of church members. For one thing, I interviewed people who approached me on their own initiative or who reacted positively when I approached them, and thus they were all people who were confident about and/or interested in speaking to an international outsider who came to church to ask questions of people there. Moreover, they are all active churchgoers. I do not see that as a problem, as some selection must be done in a qualitative study. The fact that they are active churchgoers means that they are just such people whose views I am interested in, that is, people who are involved in church life but not professional theologians. Members of the clergy can be regarded as professional theologians in a practical, pastoral sense; however, the pastors interviewed here do not participate in setting pivotal theological agendas by publishing theological works or participating in discussions on high levels in churches and ecumenical organisations. Nevertheless, my selected interviewees have reflected on issues relating to theology and religious plurality, which makes them valuable sources for this study.

In addition to the pastors, three other interviewees had formal theological education which made a difference to the interviews both in terms of my questions and their answers. I asked pastors and lay members different questions. I asked pastors not only about their individual views but also about their congregations and church activities to a larger extent than I asked of lay members. Pastors also spoke from a different position than lay members did, as representatives and leaders of their churches. There were, however, marked differences between the positions taken by the different pastors. With the CSI pastors, it was clear that when they expressed an opinion or a belief they did so as individuals whereas the Pentecostal pastors spoke for their churches. The pastor from The Pentecostal Mission even spoke as a representative for what he considered the “correct” Christian belief and practice, for the teaching of which his denomination sees itself as superior to other churches. Pastors can also be more conscious or strategic, in other words less open and unguarded about what they choose to tell a researcher. This was most evident with the

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22 This corresponds to a common number of interviews in interview studies, according to Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 113 and Bremborg 2014: 314.
pastor from Mega AG whereas my impression was that the young pastor from CSI Tamil spoke very open-heartedly.

As this is a qualitative study, I make no claim to generalisation in the sense that my results would be statistically quantifiable. Many factors would be different in a rural context for example. However, my experience of south Indian church life, including encounters with south Indian Protestants outside of the study group, has given me no reason to doubt my sampling of interviewees or the validity of my results and their relevance to a wider south Indian context.

Transcription and Presentation of Interviews

I transcribed the recorded interviews almost verbatim. In view of how I was going to use the interviews, I omitted many “ums” and “ahs” but transcribed all proper words. This was a time-consuming task but a rewarding one since during this stage much of my initial assessment of the material and first tentative identification of themes occurred. It was also a good way to evaluate aspects of my interview style not least of which meant noting my mistakes. This was occasionally a frustrating experience but also one that I learnt much from. While working on the transcriptions, I began to form an intimate familiarity with the interviews that I further developed by rereading them a number of times.

When I started to quote the interviews in the dissertation text, I realised that an extremely literal method of quotation was not the best way of representing what the interviewees had said. Spoken language differs from written language and a certain degree of “translation” from oral to written form was needed in order to justly present the thoughts expressed. A transcription itself is already an interpretation of a recording and this applies even to punctuation marks that do not feature in the original oral interview but must be meaningfully inserted by the person transcribing it. There are also homonyms to be disambiguated and other cases where the person doing the transcription has to practise her judgement in order to interpret the intention of the speaker.

Practically, this translation from oral to written form means that I have omitted non-lexical words or sounds such as “eh” and I have often elided terms such as “like” or “you know” that seemed simply to be elements of oral language that the speaker would also exclude from his or her written expression. I have also omitted unnecessary repetitions that I have not understood to be stylistic or rhetorical but rather the type of repetition that happens naturally when a person speaks, perhaps while deliberating on exactly how to express a thought. Bremborg comments that “a totally unedited quotation might portray

23 See Braun and Clarke 2006: 87-88.
24 See Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 180.
25 See Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 177-178 on the interpretive character of transcribing oral interviews.
the interviewee in a negative light and obstruct the aim of the quotation. To remove ‘hm’, ‘well’, and repetitions of words facilitates reading and does not change meaning.”

I have not noted sighs, laughter or pauses in my citations of interviews. This is related to the translation from oral to written language and also to the fact that I am not doing a linguistic analysis but rather my focus is on the thoughts and themes expressed in the interviews. I have also corrected some obvious grammatical mistakes, for example changing “was” to “were.” However, I have not taken the freedom to make more substantial changes when quoting the interviews. In some cases, I have judged the language as not doing justice to the interviewed person’s thoughts. In such cases, I have preferred to paraphrase the meaning of the interview excerpt that I want to use, rather than quote it directly. Except for these small editorial changes, when I omit a few words from a quotation I indicate this with … and when I omit sections longer than that I indicate it with /---/. A word written in italics indicates that the interviewee has stressed it especially. Certain words not commonly used in English texts, for example puja, are also written in italics.

It should be noted that the cited interview excerpts still reflect spoken language and that the interviewees would probably have expressed themselves differently in writing. Another factor which may influence a reader’s perception of the interview excerpts is the Indian English spoken by the interviewees with its specific expressions and use of terms, syntax and grammar. Some things that would be considered erroneous or unconventional in British or American English can be common forms in Indian English. When necessary, I have tried to explain any peculiarities of Indian usage.

Interviewees frequently quote or make references to Bible verses in their statements. In many places, I refer to these Bible verses in a footnote. The purpose is to convey to the reader how suffused with biblical language their discourse is. Where I quote a biblical verse, my principle for selecting a Bible translation is that I use the New International Version (NIV) for Mega AG and the King James Version (KJV) for TPM, since these are the most frequently used English translations in these churches. For the CSI, where the use of Bible translation varies more, I use the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) as I do if a reference to the Bible is my own rather than an interviewee’s. I make exceptions to this principle if, for example, a CSI or Mega AG interviewee quotes a biblical expression that is found in that form in the KJV.

26 Bremborg 2014: 319. See also Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 187 on the ethical considerations involved in quoting interviews in their literal oral form.

27 By “Indian English” I refer to the English that I have encountered in different parts of India but especially in Bangalore and in Telangana. In Bangalore, English is spoken by people from various parts of India.
Informal Interviews

Apart from the formal interviews, I have held conversations or informal interviews with many people from the churches including my interviewees and other people in Bangalore, including many people at the UTC, where I stayed. I recorded these by writing down important points from memory soon after concluding the conversation.28 These cannot be used in the same ways as recorded, formal interviews and have mainly served to increase my background knowledge on subjects relevant to the study. Whenever I have drawn on such an informal interview in the dissertation, I refer to it as “Conversation with…” in the footnote.

Written Material from the Churches

In addition to the material I have myself produced together with the interviewees, I sometimes use printed material from the churches, or information from their web pages. The first type of material I have used especially in relation to TPM which has a homogeneous, centrally controlled theology covered by booklets on many subjects that are essential to their theology. I have used information from the CSI web page as a source of that denomination’s profile. In the case of Mega AG, there is much online material which might have been fruitful to study but the use of such a method is hampered by the anonymisation of congregations in this study and so I have opted to concentrate on the interview material.

Thematic Analysis

My practical method of analysis was thematic analysis, which is “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data.”29 A theme can be defined in the following way: “A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set.”30 Further: “Each theme has an ‘essence’ or core concept that underpins and unites the observations.”31

A first explorative search for themes in the material led to a number of preliminary codes, or brief summaries of interesting features of the material that could possibly be developed into themes.32 I then proceeded to decide on

28 This corresponds with how Russel Bernard describes “informal interviewing”: Bernard 2011: 171-172.
29 Braun and Clarke 2006. (Quotation from p. 79.)
30 Ibid: 82.
31 Clarke and Braun 2018: 108.
32 See Braun and Clarke 2006: 89.
overall themes and their major subthemes. This was not a straightforward procedure but needed reviewing and revising throughout the process of analysing the material and writing the dissertation. While working on each chapter, I extracted the data related to that chapter’s theme through rereading the interviews while maintaining a focus on the theme in question. During this work, I continued refining the subthemes. I then went through this data again summarising the main point or points in each interview extract and collating these summaries into subthemes which together formed the overall pattern of the chapter. In a similar way, the thematic chapters together form the overall pattern of the dissertation. Writing the dissertation was the final and major phase of the analysis. Here, I have tried to clearly articulate my observations and analytical arguments, illustrating these with examples from the interviews. Although I have paid equal attention to all interviews in my development of themes, I have not aimed at equality in terms of how often I refer to each individual interviewee. The examples I have included in the dissertation are those that best illustrate a point I want to make in relation to a theme.

This thematic organisation of the interview material is not just a way of presenting my analysis but rather it is the main method of analysis. These themes did not simply occur spontaneously in the material. I have played a key role in developing the themes by identifying and selecting them. There are a number of possible ways to organise such empirical material thematically. The way have I chosen to do it is related to the purpose of my study and my interpretations of what is important.

Moreover, I have had an active part not only in identifying and selecting the themes that shaped my analysis of the material, but also in the earlier production of the material. Already at this stage, I had a major influence upon the themes that I would later finalise, through my questions to the interviewees. Some themes were initiated by me to a higher degree than others. The clearest example is the subtheme about whether Muslims worship the same God as Christians for which I asked this question of interviewees to test the result of it. Other themes came as a surprise to me such as the centrality of the theme of religious images. Some were a little of both such as the theme of salvation for which I often initiated the discussion though interviewees’ own emphasis also confirmed my pre-understanding of its importance. It is from this dynamic meeting between my own ideas and those of the interviewees’ that I have developed the themes.

33 In this process, I have largely followed the guide provided by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke in Braun and Clarke 2006. However, I have done the more detailed thematic analysis chapter-by-chapter rather than selecting all the subthemes before starting out on the process of writing the report, as in their guide. I did, however, have a good idea of the main themes, or the major pattern, of all the chapters before starting to write. Braun and Clarke state that “analysis is not a linear process of simply moving from one phase to the next. Instead, it is more recursive process, where movement is back and forth as needed, throughout the phases.” (p. 86)
34 See Braun and Clarke 2006: 80 on this point.
The decision to analyse and present my observations thematically means that my presentation follows the themes and not the individual interviewees. But I refer to the individual interviewees (with pseudonyms) throughout the dissertation and it is possible for the reader to follow them throughout the different chapters. Their personalities play a role in the presentation when I refer to their opinions, theological emphasis, or worldview as a way of contextualising their statements. A list of interviewees is included at the end of the dissertation.

Methodological and Epistemological Approach to Analysis

Having presented my practical methods for producing and analysing the material I now turn to the underlying epistemological ideas behind this project which inform my methodological approach.

In my approach to analysis, I have found inspiration in data-oriented methods such as grounded theory and other inductive ethnographic methods, especially in their emphasis on empirical material and its careful processing. Close and detailed attention to the interviews has been a high priority of mine while working on this dissertation with emphasis on the time-consuming, systematic analysis of the empirical data in my research process. I have done this out of a conviction of the importance of thorough empirical analysis and a wish to let the material stand in the foreground rather than being subsumed under theoretical models.

But data-oriented empiricist methods tend to underemphasise the impact of subjective interpretation and pre-existing conceptual frameworks, the theoretical element that is always already involved in the generating of data. As Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann express it in an apt metaphor, the researcher is not a miner digging up “knowledge as a given substance” just lying around “waiting to be found,” as Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss’s classical grounded theory implies. Any reference to the empirical material is itself already the result of interpretation rather than an unmediated representation of reality.

For that reason, my approach is complemented with an awareness of the hermeneutic dimension of analysis. In this I have been inspired by Mats Al-

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35 See Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018 (2000): 68-114. Note that I do not actually do grounded theory as such here though I am inspired by its emphasis on the empirical material.
36 Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018: 74.
37 Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 48-49, 300.
38 Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018: 11, 14.
39 Bremborg observes that: “Qualitative interviews have similarities to the hermeneutical tradition within textual analysis.” Bremborg 2014: 311.
Alvesson and Kaj Sköldberg and their discussion of different approaches to analysis in qualitative research and how insights from them can be combined.\textsuperscript{40} Alvesson and Sköldberg propose that although grounded theory and hermeneutics are different and in some ways incompatible schools they each contain important principles that contribute to qualitative research. Grounded theory, while emphasising the importance of empirical material (often overlooked in other approaches), in its turn underemphasises the role of the reflective researcher. There is always a significant hermeneutic element of interpretation of the material.\textsuperscript{41} The hermeneutic circles between parts and whole, text and context, pre-understanding and understanding have informed my reading of the interview material and moved my interpretation forward in a spiral-like movement.\textsuperscript{42} I follow hermeneutical principles about reading the material as text, contextuality, a dialogic relationship to the text, and a dialectic view of sub-interpretations and the overarching pattern of interpretation.\textsuperscript{43}

The hermeneutic element of my analysis is especially pronounced since my work – in contrast to the classical type of anthropological study and “thick ethnography” – is focused on qualitative interviews rather than on observations and the experience of life in the studied context. While these latter are important to me, they are more a background to the analysis of interviews and contribute to the pre-understanding from which I interpret the interviews. I do not attempt to capture the whole of religious life in the context I study or the whole of interreligious encounters as expressed in interviewees’ lives but rather I concentrate on the thoughts expressed in interviews. I read the interviews as “texts” and attempt to reach a valid understanding of them\textsuperscript{44} that embraces both the meaning consciously expressed by an interviewee and theoretical interpretations that move beyond the interviewee’s self-understanding.\textsuperscript{45} An example of going beyond the interviewees’ conscious meaning can be seen in my reading of the process of othering of the Hindu religion that appears in the material as a whole. These different interpretative levels manifest the meeting between “the reader’s horizon and the horizon of the text” that is inherent in hermeneutic reflection.\textsuperscript{46}

An important element in my analytical approach – which is stressed in my academic discipline of World Christianity and Interreligious Studies – is that

\textsuperscript{40} See Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018, especially pp. 13-15 on the relative merits of the approaches and how important ideas from them can complement each other.
\textsuperscript{41} Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018: 14. Alvesson and Sköldberg add the dimensions of awareness of the political-ideological character of research (emphasised in critical theory), and problematization of the researcher’s claims to authority (emphasised in postmodernism) as contributions to their reflexive methodology.
\textsuperscript{42} Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 210-211.
\textsuperscript{43} Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018: 125-132.
\textsuperscript{44} Kvale and Brinkmann 2009: 50-51.
\textsuperscript{45} Kvale and Brinkmann 2009 discuss these different levels of interpretation in relation to interview material (p. 212-216).
\textsuperscript{46} Gilhus 2014 (2011): 276.
I see the empirical material in the context of a given society. This means that an awareness of the implications of the specific sociocultural context influences my interpretation of the material. According to Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, “The range of acceptable readings of religious texts is … limited and should not exceed the bounds of interpretation that are dependent on the text’s cultural and social contexts.” I agree with this statement in relation to my study for which a sensitive and empathic contextual reading of statements made by interviewees is necessary. In this case, the interview transcripts form the text and must be understood in their social and cultural context. For example, attitudes to Hinduism expressed by interviewees should be understood in relation to an individual or communal historical relationship to that religion as well as in relation to certain tenets of their Protestant faith. To take a specific example, a subtheme about jewellery that I identify in the material on views of Hinduism has clear cultural contextual implications.

The broad cultural context of south India is not the only context that shapes the material; the Protestant Christian tradition, with evangelicalism as a sub-tradition, forms the most important context for my reading of the material. Additional contextual aspects could be added; for example, I have repeatedly had reason to note how the urban, middle-class context influences the range and emphasis of themes in the material. For example, a total avoidance of participation in Hindu festivals can be more difficult in a rural context than it is for my interviewees. There are always multiple contextual angles from which a text, in this case consisting of interview transcriptions, can be read. Gender and caste backgrounds of interviewees are also factors that have impacts on the material. Another factor is the minority situation which becomes central to the analysis of the theme of Christian mission and evangelism but not so in relation to other themes. In this way, certain contextual aspects can alternate between the centre and the periphery of the analysis.

Theoretical Conceptual Frameworks

There are different approaches to the use of theory in qualitative research. My approach could be called “theory light” since the main contribution this study

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47 Ibid: 282. This statement refers to the contexts of communities of readers of a text as well as to its original author.
48 See e.g. Kuhlin 2015: 48. The dilemma of financial contributions to Hindu festivals concerned Kuhlin’s rural informants but not her urban informants. John Carman and Chilukuri Vasantha Rao report a much more active participation in a Hindu festival among rural CSI Christians in their study than my interviewees describe as acceptable: Carman and Vasantha Rao 2014: 60-61. There are socioeconomic implications of participation or non-participation in traditional village festivals connected to the agricultural cycle. See Diehl 1965 for an analysis of these in the middle of the twentieth century.
49 Gilhus 2014: 276-278.
makes lies outside the theoretical field.\textsuperscript{50} My ambition to concentrate on a rich analytical description of the empirical material is the reason why I do not place theoretical discussions in the foreground. I wish to interpret the material in a way that is not predetermined by certain theoretical postulates and therefore I do not use theory as a pre-set model applied to the material.\textsuperscript{51} But one way in which I do find theory useful is in the terms and concepts it provides that help further the analysis. For the purposes of this study, theory refers to conceptual frameworks, that is, terms and concepts which relate my observations to larger contexts and bigger issues. I use the following main sets of conceptual frameworks in this dissertation: “evangelical,” “general Protestant,” and “liberal” Protestant perspectives, the first of which forms an “evangelical lens” that constitutes a dominant perspective on other religions, and “the religious other” and “othering” or “religious othering.” These conceptual frameworks help me interpret the data that I have produced together with my interviewees.\textsuperscript{52}

I did not select these conceptual frameworks at the beginning of the research process but rather they grew out of my interpretation of the material. In this way, the encounter between the empirical data and my pre-existing theoretical knowledge led to an identification of conceptual frameworks or theoretical patterns that could fruitfully explain the findings. I use the concepts of “religious other” and “othering” because I have detected such ways of relating to other religions in the material. I did not initially set out to find this and it was not a theoretical hypothesis in the initial phases of my work.

This approach can be defined as abductive in its epistemology.\textsuperscript{53} Abduction refers to a process of alternation “between (previous) theory and empirical facts (or clues) whereby both are successively reinterpreted in the light of each other.”\textsuperscript{54} As Alvesson and Sköldberg note, this corresponds with the way much empirical research is carried out in practice.\textsuperscript{55} Like induction, it has its starting point in empirical observation but it does not deny the influence of pre-existing theories. Through abduction, the researcher finds (theoretical) patterns which provide good explanations for the empirical case and adjusts these patterns in the light of more empirical data. Unlike deduction, theory is used here “not as a mechanical application on single cases, but as a source of

\textsuperscript{50} Avison and Malaurent 2014.
\textsuperscript{51} Although I do not believe in the possibility of a purely inductive, “theory-free” approach. See e.g. Timmermans and Tavory 2012: 170.
\textsuperscript{52} On a more basic level, theoretical conceptual frameworks are involved already in the establishment of the data since theoretical preconceptions inevitably inform the process of generating data. See Jensen 2014 (2011): 44, 47. Theoretical concepts inform the formulation of research questions and interview questions. Such theoretical preconceptions are, for example, ideas about what constitutes a religion and what the central characteristics of a religion are.
\textsuperscript{53} See Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018: 4-8, Timmermans and Tavory 2012. The term abduction (in the epistemological sense) was created by the philosopher Charles S. Peirce.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid: 5.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid: 4, 5.
inspiration for the discovery of patterns that bring understanding.” Abduction can be explained as theoretical agnosticism rather than theoretical atheism, as in inductive grounded theory, whereas theoretical monotheism would best apply to deduction via a “favourite theory” irrespective of its suitability. Although abduction is not simply a combination of induction and deduction, both are parts of the abductive process. In my approach, the major emphasis is on the inductive side.

Evangelical, General, and Liberal Protestant Perspectives

In the first thematic chapter of this dissertation (Chapter 3), I will discuss central characteristics of interviewees’ Protestant faith since these are fundamental to understanding their attitudes to other religions. There, I will identify three theological streams that together encapsulate the beliefs and theological ideas that interviewees expressed. These streams are evangelical Protestant, general Protestant, and liberal Protestant. To define “evangelical,” I will use David Bebbington’s quadrilateral definition of evangelicalism which describes evangelicalism as conversionist, activist, biblicist, and crucicentric. I discuss Bebbington’s definition further in Chapter 3. My aim is not to contribute to a theoretical discussion about the definition of evangelicalism or an evangelical Christian but to use this term to highlight the main convictions that inform interviewees’ understanding of their own and other religions.

As will be seen, my claim is that what most clearly distinguishes an evangelical point of view from other Protestant points of view is the first trait in Bebbington’s quadrilateral, conversionism, which refers to an emphasis on the personal born-again experience. The emphasis on the universal necessity of this experience distinguishes evangelical interviewees from other Protestant interviewees. Evangelical and non-evangelical interviewees share other significant ideas and, except for conversionism, the specifically evangelical view can be seen as an amplification of more general Protestant ideas. Geoffrey Oddie makes a similar observation about evangelical and other Protestant missionaries in the nineteenth century, noting the difference between them as being “largely a matter of priorities” and “not always a sharply-defined one but more a matter of degree.” I will refer to a “general Protestant” perspective as denoting chief Protestant assumptions spread beyond evangelical Protestantism among my interviewees as well as among Protestants universally. In the context that I study here, the foremost marks of such a “general Protestant” perspective are Christocentrism and bibliocentrism. The importance of placing Christ at the absolute centre of Christian faith and of avoiding religious

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56 Ibid: 5.
57 Timmermans and Tavory 2012: 169.
58 Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018: 4-5.
60 Oddie 2006: 18, 20.
practices that risk displacing him from this position is a recurring concern. Likewise, the Bible is at the centre of these Protestant Christians’ beliefs and practice. My use of the term “liberal” Protestant perspective will be further explained in Chapter 3. Briefly, I use it to denote a stream of Protestant theology which focuses less on individual salvation to eternal life, which is a central concern among evangelical interviewees, than on the social consequences of Christian faith.

In Chapter 3, I will discuss a number of themes which I have found to be fundamental aspects of how interviewees understand their own Protestant Christian religion. When these are seen together, a dominant view on religious and interreligious matters will crystallise. This dominant view forms an “evangelical lens” through which many interviewees view other religions. But throughout this dissertation, views formed by this evangelical lens will on several occasions be challenged by interviewees who view religious diversity through a liberal Protestant or general Protestant lens. With the term “lens” I refer to a cluster of underlying assumptions that shape ways of viewing religious diversity. This is not an attempt at discourse analysis; my reason for not selecting such a theory-driven approach is my wish to give the empirical material more epistemological priority.

Othering

A second conceptual framework that I use in my analysis is that of the religious other and othering. As I discuss below, I use these terms according to a broad definition. First, let me give a brief background to the terms. The other (or the Other) has been a key concept in twentieth century philosophy and in postcolonial theory, where it has been used to analyse the construction of a binary distinction between coloniser and colonised and the establishment of the superiority of the former. The logic behind this type of self-other dichotomy is that the normative “self” (here, the coloniser) needs an “other” through which to mirror itself. Descriptions of undesirable and strange behaviour in the other serve to clarify what is normal among one’s own group (the “self”). The image of the other, meanwhile, is constructed by portraying them as characterised by traits considered inferior to those normative to the self. The identity construction of the self and the construction of the other are thus mutually dependent.

The related term “othering” was coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak for the process whereby the colonising European subject consolidated his power and identity through constructing the colonised subject as the inferior other.

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61 Cheetham 2013: 27.
For Spivak, “establishing the ‘native’ as self-consolidating other” is an epistemological violence “that will ‘mean’ (for others) and ‘know’ (for the self) the colonial subject as history’s nearly-selved other.” In Spivak’s original version, othering is a multi-layered process bound up with the mechanisms of colonialism in which the subjectivity of the colonised other is constructed through a mirroring in the colonising “Other.” However, the term has come to be used in a wider variety of ways for processes of constructing an other who serves to reinforce norms of the self.

Othering is a term used when discussing, for example, the construction of negative stereotypes of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs of South Asian descent in the United States, or negative perceptions of the United States in Latin America and of Western Europe in the Balkans. Othering can describe the temporary designation of a Christian mother and child as “Muslim” after childbirth in Ethiopian Amhara culture. It also refers to the subversion of a hegemonic self-other relationship in strategic “allegorical othering” of a majority by a minority. In its wider usage, othering refers to a process of establishing difference between “self” and “other” and of excluding “others” from the collective identity (or “self”). It is in this wider sense that I use the term.

To use Spivak’s original concept of othering could mean overplaying the parallel between colonial Christian attitudes to colonised people and my Christian interviewees’ attitudes to other religions. It might also mean seeing the identity construction of interviewees as mirrored in a Western, neo-colonial, powerful Christian Other. Either emphasis would be a misrepresentation and so I will use the term in its broader usage when I find the phenomenon to be apparent in the material. As with the term “evangelical,” my aim is not to focus on the theoretical discussion about othering but to use this well-known term to make certain patterns in the material clear. The term is helpful to illustrate constructions of stereotypical images of others and of how, in such a process, the other is not seen for herself but rather becomes an ideal mirror image and a means for strengthening the self-image. I use the term “religious othering” for processes of othering emphasising specifically religious differences.

Regarding the relation between Christians and their religious others, particularly Hindus and Muslims who are the main religious others in this study,

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63 Spivak 1985. (Quotations from p. 250 and p. 255.)
64 Spivak is influenced by Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic theories. In Spivak’s original version of othering, she (following Lacan) distinguishes between the colonising “Other” and the colonised “other.” Many of her followers, however, do not make this distinction. See Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2000: 139-141.
65 Joshi 2006. Joshi analyses how this process is intensified by the “racialization” of these groups’ religious identities.
66 Buchenau 2012. Regarding the Balkan, Buchenau sees a very high “‘othering potential’ between Orthodoxy and the West” but concludes that, due to historical political factors, “religious othering” has mainly occurred between different nations within the Balkan region (p. 379).
67 Hannig 2014.
68 Ochoa 1999. Also referring to the phenomenon as “other-speech,” Ochoa finds that Toni Morrison employs a strategic othering of white Christianity in her novel Beloved.
the question of “Orientalism” will inevitably arise. Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, in which he introduced a new, theoretical use of the term, is an influential postcolonial reading of self-other polarisation.⁶⁹ Orientalism, for Said, is the discourse through which the West produces knowledge about and establishes authority over the East by representing it as its binary opposite, ascribing to Oriental cultures characteristics such as irrationality, passivity, and backwardness.⁷⁰ Since then other scholars have discussed this concept in relation to India and Indian religions.⁷¹

It is important to differentiate between Orientalist and colonial types of othering and those which I have observed in my data. Although the views among the Christians I have interviewed show certain affinities with colonial tropes – no doubt at least partly due to an ideological inheritance from Western missionaries – when their attitudes to people of other religions show signs of othering it is of a different variety. The Hindu other, in particular, that these Indian Christians relate to is other to them in the sense that she is perceived as different. She represents their own individual or collective religious past, a past that they have become estranged from. But she is not considered racially and/or culturally inferior as is the case in colonial and Orientalist othering. The theories of othering and Orientalism that have emerged from readings of colonial material suppose a certain power dynamic. To conflate present-day Indian Christians with a colonial or neo-colonial perspective would be to enter a Hindu nationalist discourse in which the Hindu represents genuine Indian culture and the Christian represents Western colonial or neo-colonial culture, perpetually other in India.⁷² What my study reveals instead is a minority strengthening of the religious self-image through othering of the majority.

The Religious Other

It is important to note that a negative process of othering is not the only way of relating to a religious other – that is, a person with a different religious affiliation. In my material, I have found tendencies towards othering, broadly defined, but I have also found different ways of relating to the other since interviewees are not only othering their others. They are also pointing out similarities between themselves and others and ascribing positive qualities to the other. Therefore, in addition to the concept of othering, I need a more varied and flexible concept of the other.

In its colloquial usage, the term other can have neutral or positive connotations. The “other” is not necessarily the opposite of the “self” but can belong

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⁷¹ See e.g. King 1999.
⁷² See Sarkar 2007: 357.
to the same class of subjects, as in “Krishna and the other Gods,” or “Christianity and other religions,” where the term in itself does not say anything about the valuation of the other. The expression “significant other” is a positive usage for an other who is close and dear to the self. It is not only in colloquial language that other can have positive connotations; the encounter with the other has often been understood positively in Western philosophy. In a volume introducing three “grammars” of identity/alterity (or self and other), Andre Gingrich advocates a “soft” or “weak’ and non-binary, a multidimensional and fluid approach to identity/alterity,” as opposed to binary, “strong” and essentialist understandings of self and other. Along with binary modes, such “softer,” non-binary conceptualisations of the relationship between a Protestant Christian self and a religious other are also present in my material. My understanding, then, of the concept of the other, specifically the religious other, is therefore “multidimensional and fluid.”

By “religious other” I refer to a person of a different religious identity to the Protestant Christian identity of my interviewees, and this includes another Christian identity. The term itself does not necessarily denote any normative evaluation of otherness although religious others have often been viewed negatively in the history of Christianity. In my use of the term religious other I have been inspired by the anthology Understanding Interreligious Relations, particularly Part I, which discusses views of religious others in the history of several religions. In the chapters entitled, for example, “Christianity and the Religious Other” and “Hinduism and the Religious Other,” abstract theoretical discussion about the concept of the other is bracketed in favour of insightful discussions of particular, if internally diverse, religious perspectives. The relation to the religious other here refers to religious/theological attitudes to other religions and their adherents. Another example is an article by Francis X. Clooney entitled “Hindu Views of Religious Others: Implications for Christian Theology,” where Clooney’s notion of “religious others” encompasses “positions on religious pluralism” and “attitudes toward other religions.”

Attitudes to the religious other can be positioned on a wide spectrum from demonising or condemning the other to welcoming the other as a “significant other” for religious people who are deeply involved in interreligious dialogue

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73 Cheetham 2013: 27.
74 Gingrich 2004. (Quotations from p. 13 and p. 16.)
75 Schmidt-Leukel 2013: 130-139.
76 Schmidt-Leukel 2013.
77 Long 2013.
78 Cheetham, Pratt, and Thomas 2013 (eds.). David Cheetham provides a theoretical discussion in the section’s opening chapter: Cheetham 2013.
79 Clooney 2003. (Quotations from p. 306 and p. 308.)
80 As in some of the different forms, or phases, of religious fundamentalism discussed by Douglas Pratt in his contribution to Understanding Interreligious Relations: Pratt 2013, esp. pp. 256-258.
and for whom encountering a religious other can lead to spiritual enrichment and a deeper understanding of their own faith.\textsuperscript{81} Some Christians have even internalised the dialogue with the religious other as is the case with dual religious belonging.\textsuperscript{82} My definition of the term religious other is necessarily broad in order to cover a wide spectrum of attitudes to people of different religious affiliations. It carries connotations both from theoretical discussions of binary relationships between self and other and from colloquial and theoretically “softer,” multidimensional usage, where connotations can be positive, negative or neutral. It will be seen in the following chapters that both usages have their bearing upon my material.

A term related to religious other is “other religion,” which in practical terms in this dissertation refers to Hinduism, Islam, and sometimes also Catholicism. The relation between views of other religions as alternative religious systems, on the one hand, and religious others or the people who adhere to them, on the other, is a central subject in this dissertation. Religious others can be Christian others, people who belong to Christian churches different to those of interviewees. The matter of Christian religious others is an important supplement to that of Hindu and Muslim religious others and illustrates the multifaceted dynamics of interreligious attitudes in this context.

Lastly, I should clarify a terminological choice regarding my use of “other” uncapitalised. This is to allow for different nuances of the term and to illustrate that I do not presuppose that a negative, stereotyping othering is the only way in which interviewees relate to their religious others. The upper-case “Other” would signal more of a theoretical deduction about a dichotomy between Other and Self which is one but not the only way of relating to religious others in my material.\textsuperscript{83}

**Ethical Considerations**

During the processes of producing the material for this study and reporting my observations in this dissertation, three areas related to research ethics have been important: Informed consent, confidentiality, and consequences of publishing. I informed all interviewees about the main purpose of the study, how I planned to use the interviews, and that they could withdraw their participation at any time, and ensured myself of their oral consent. I informed them that my study would be published in a book which would reach some libraries in India and that, although I would give them pseudonyms, a person familiar with their church might recognise them. At this point I had not yet made the

\textsuperscript{81} Moyaert 2013: 214-215.
\textsuperscript{82} Drew 2011 gives an insight into this phenomenon in her interview-based study on Buddhist-Christian practitioners.
\textsuperscript{83} The upper-case “Other” could also signal a more psychoanalytically inspired theorizing in Spivak’s tradition.
decision to anonymise the congregations. Here, some interviewees said that they would not mind if I used their actual names but I clarified that I would use pseudonyms for all participants. A few interviewees asked me to withhold certain pieces of information which they considered sensitive and I have complied with their requests.

To protect interviewees’ anonymity, I have given them new names. I have also given pseudonyms to the four specific congregations which interviewees belong to but not to the denominations. In the case of the TPM church, I call it by its denominational name since this congregation does not have any individual name but is simply called X branch where X stands for a part of Bangalore. I have also left out certain information about interviewees and congregations which could identify them but which I deemed as not being of essential relevance to my research objectives. To simplify for the reader, all interviewees’ pseudonyms start with the same letter as the pseudonym for the church. It has not been possible to check these pseudonyms against the names of all lay members of the churches but in the case of pseudonyms for the pastors I tried to ensure that there was no pastor with the same name in that church or in the CSI diocese at the time when I decided on the pseudonyms. But this could change and thus the reader should remember that no interviewee appears here with his or her actual name.

The direct consequences of the interviews for the interviewees were, as far as I could judge, mostly positive. Some interviewees said that they had appreciated being interviewed since it stimulated them to reflect more upon the issues I had asked them about. For me, the most serious ethical considerations relate to questions of publishing some of the views expressed by interviewees which could cause offence to readers who are already critical of Christianity and Christian mission. At the same time, while this dissertation covers sensitive topics, these topics are already discussed and debated publicly in literature, newspapers, journals, magazines, pamphlets and online. I do not reveal anything here which cannot be easily found in other ways – through an online search or through public sermons that are sometimes broadcast through loudspeakers. Information about Christian evangelisation strategies, for example, is available through practice-oriented missiological research published online and material distributed and published online by mission organisations. Loud, open-air revival meetings make more provocative attitudes known more effectively than my publishing of this dissertation does. It is my conclusion that

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84 To control against the actual names of pastors in CSI Central Karnataka Diocese, I used the latest ministerial roll available on the CSI webpage.
this makes the benefits of publishing outweigh the possible negative consequences.85 During my work on this project, I have followed general guidelines to research ethics as described by the Swedish Research Council.86

Previous Research

Empirical Research on Christianity in India

One field with many points of connection to this study is that of empirical studies of Christianity in India. Interaction with other religions is key here and relates to questions of conversion and interreligious relations as well as questions of religious hybridity or contextuality, among others.

In ethnographic research about Christianity in India, relatively much attention has been given to local or popular forms of Catholic Christianity. Rowena Robinson,87 Selva Raj,88 and David Mosse89 have made important contributions to this field which offers fascinating insights into local, often rural, forms of Catholicism and their interconnectedness with and ways of differentiating from local Hindu traditions after centuries of contact. Studies have often focused on the oldest Indian Catholic communities in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, or Goa. The contextual nature of Catholic religiosity in India is often more obvious than is the case with Protestant religiosity. In Catholic practice, scholars often find affinities with Hindu religion while also discussing the ways in which boundaries distinguishing Catholicism from Hinduism are maintained. One example of such parallelism is the chariot processions – similar to Hindu chariot processions – that Joanne Punzo Waghorne discusses in a chapter90 in the anthology *Popular Christianity in India: Riting Between the Lines*, edited by Selva Raj and Corinne Dempsey.91 This volume significantly includes only three chapters on Protestant Christianity but six chapters on Catholic Christianity92 and the editors describe the common theme for the chapters on Protes-

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85 As stated in the guidelines to ethical research published by the Swedish Research Council, a central objective of research ethics is to find a reasonable balance between different, sometimes contradictory, legitimate interests, such as the interests of producing new knowledge versus the possible risks involved. Vetenskapsrådet 2017: 7.
86 Vetenskapsrådet 2017.
87 E.g. Robinson 1995, 1998, and 2013. (Robinson also includes much historical analysis.)
89 Mosse 1994, 2006, and 2012. (Mosse’s approach is diachronic and includes much historical analysis.)
90 Waghorne 2002.
91 Raj and Dempsey (eds.) 2002.
92 In addition, one chapter discusses questions of interreligious interaction arising from the study of traditions surrounding three saints and their shrines in Kerala. One of these is a Catholic saint: Dempsey 2002. (The other two are a Jacobite Christian saint and a Jewish woman who lived before Christ but who is believed to bestow miracles upon those who petition her in an Orthodox church.)
tantism as “alternative forms of leadership” rather than religious hybridity although the contextuality of Protestant practice becomes apparent in these contributions too. In two more recent anthologies of predominantly ethnographic studies, one focused explicitly on Dalit and tribal forms of Christianity and the other on questions of identity, nationality, and caste, there is also something of an emphasis on Catholic Christianity. Here, questions of caste and of nationalism have come to the fore. Christianity in India: Two Thousand Years of Faith by Indian Catholic scholars Leonard Fernando and George Gispert-Sauch can also be mentioned here. Their book aims at presenting Indian Christianity to Indian readers from other religious groups and as such offers an interesting perspective on Indian Christianity and its relation to Indian culture and other Indian religions. Although inclusive in its scope, it lays an emphasis on Catholicism and thus offers an insight into Catholic Christian self-understanding from an unusual angle.

The Christian tradition with the most long-standing presence in India is the St. Thomas Christian tradition of Kerala. This tradition, which has over the past five centuries split into several denominations, has a special history of inculturation into Hindu majority society which includes the early acquisition of high caste status. Interreligious accommodation and cultural integration is more typical of its pre-colonial history than rivalry or conflict. Susan Visvanathan’s The Christians of Kerala: History, Belief and Ritual among the Yakoba is an important empirical contribution to the study of this Christian tradition. Another ethnographic book on St. Thomas Christianity in Kerala is Corinne Dempsey’s study of Keralite saint cults which discusses related issues of interreligious relations and hybrid Christian identity. The St. Thomas Christian tradition does not, however, play any substantial part in this dissertation. This is because, although there are St. Thomas Christian congregations in Bangalore, and although two of my interviewees have a family background from Kerala, interviewees did not relate to this Christian tradition in any significant measure.

Pentecostal Christianity in India, one of the Protestant traditions included in this dissertation, attracts a growing ethnographic interest. Among Indian Pentecostals, contextuality and Hindu-Christian parallelism is usually more ambivalent and unacknowledged than among Catholics or St. Thomas Christians. A seminal work in this field is Michael Bergunder’s comprehensive *The

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94 Robinson and Kujur (eds.) 2010. Questions of conversion and Hindu nationalism are central to several contributions in this volume.
95 Bauman and Young (eds.) 2014.
96 Fernando and Gispert-Sauch 2004.
97 Visvanathan 1993.
South Indian Pentecostal Movement in the Twentieth Century which gives regional historical as well as thematic contemporary overviews. A book which focuses specifically on interreligious dynamics is Chad Bauman’s *Pentecostals, Proselytization, and Anti-Christian Violence in Contemporary India*. As the title makes clear, this book focuses on problematic aspects of the relationship between Christians and the Hindu majority and discusses how and why Pentecostal Christians are particularly vulnerable to anti-Christian violence. It also discusses the attitudes to Pentecostals among mainline Christians in India, and vice versa. Nathaniel Roberts’s *To Be Cared For: The Power of Conversion and Foreignness of Belonging in an Indian Slum* is the result of an extensive field study of Pentecostalism in a Chennai slum. The book gives fascinating insights into the meaning of Pentecostalism in poor, Dalit, primarily female slum-dwellers’ lives. This monograph also includes interesting observations of how the relationship between Christianity and Hinduism is understood in the slum. This understanding differs from a typical Pentecostal attitude to other religions, according to the available literature. There are also regional studies of Pentecostalism in specific parts of India among them Wessly Lukose’s study of Pentecostalism, mission and the minority situation in Rajasthan. This book is written from a confessional angle and aims at constructing a contextual Pentecostal missiology while also offering ethnographic insights.

In addition, some scholars of Pentecostalism include India in books with a wider geographical scope. Allan Anderson places Indian Pentecostalism in an international context in his general introduction to Pentecostalism. He devotes considerable space to India in a volume which focuses on the Pentecostal movement’s missionary character, its rapid global expansion and manifestations in the “majority world.” Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori include India as one of their research sites in their book which focuses on Pentecostal social ministry rather than, as is otherwise often the case, the evangelistic side of Pentecostal mission.

Regarding mainline Protestantism which is the other broad Christian tradition studied in this dissertation (in the form of the Church of South India), important early contributions include Carl Gustav Diehl’s *Church and Shrine: Intermingling Patterns of Culture in the Life of Some Christian Groups in South India* and P.Y. Luke and John Carman’s *Village Christians and...“The majority world” refers to “the South,” or Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Miller and Yamamori term this emerging Pentecostal stream “Progressive Pentecostalism” (p. 2).
These studies focus on rural CSI Christians, in Tamil Nadu and Telangana (then a part of Andhra Pradesh), respectively. A follow-up to the latter title has been published by John Carman and Chilkuri Vasantha Rao. Two developments seen in this newer study are the impact of the growth of Pentecostal and independent churches and the emergence of new multi-caste CSI congregations. A title of special relevance to my study is Lionel Caplan’s *Class and Culture in Urban India: Fundamentalism in a Christian Community* which studies CSI Christianity in Chennai (then Madras), the divergent worldviews and theological outlooks among upper and lower middle-class CSI Christians – including beliefs shared with Hindus – and the attraction that Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity had on some of them. Although now over thirty years have passed since its publication, Caplan’s book is frequently cited as a reference to contemporary mainline Protestantism in India. The urban context is particularly relevant in connection to my study. Not a few of Caplan’s observations still strike me as relevant. Naturally, important developments have occurred since its publication, notably the emergence of Dalit theology and the continued growth of Pentecostal and independent churches and their influence on mainline Christianity, a development which Caplan noted in an earlier phase. A more recent ethnographic study is Anderson Jeremiah’s book on Paraiyar Christians in rural Tamil Nadu. Other empirical studies of CSI Christianity include a contribution by Eliza Kent in the aforementioned anthology *Popular Christianity in India* and the work of ethnomusicologist Zoe Sherinian.

**Historical Literature and Literature about Conversion**

The object of my study is the contemporary, twenty-first-century context, however, to understand this, insights into the historical background can be

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109 Caplan 1987. The “fundamentalism” of the title refers to Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity.
110 Jeremiah 2013. The Paraiyar, a Tamil Dalit caste group, are also the focus of theologian Sathianathan Clarke’s *Dalits and Christianity*: Clarke 1998. (See reference to this book below.)
111 Kent 2002. Kent discusses the role of Bible reading in the CSI and the status involved in showing familiarity with the Bible there. She analyses this in relation to the status of reading and literacy in the CSI, and especially the empowering potential of scriptural literacy as illustrated through the life and work of one Bible woman. This essay is interesting and highly relevant in its analysis of gender and negotiation of status within the CSI, but not closely related to the theme of my study.
112 Sherinian 2014. Sherinian employs ethnographical methods to study Dalit theology and the assertion of identity expressed through the Tamil Christian folk music of composer, theologian and CSI pastor James Theophilus Appavoo, including the reception of it in Tamil villages. The interreligious factor here centres on the attitude to Sanskritised Hinduism and the preference of vernacular Dalit cultural expressions over the former.
helpful. Interreligious questions have been an important component of historical studies of Christianity in India. A title of special relevance to me has been Geoffrey Oddie’s *Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism, 1793-1900*. This book offers a good insight into missionary attitudes to Hinduism which reverberate in Indian churches to this day. To understand the caste dimensions involved in Indian Christian identities and that are decisive to their interaction with other religious groups, John Webster’s *The Dalit Christians: A History* is a valuable overview which also takes in the present century. Robert Eric Frykenberg’s *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present* is a detailed survey of Christianity in India with much reference to its various modes of contextualisation. Frykenberg has also edited or co-edited two volumes which focus on interreligious and intercultural questions. For a discussion of gender dimensions in relation to colonial Christianity, see Eliza Kent’s *Converting Women: Gender and Protestant Christianity in Colonial South India*.

Regarding the history of the Pentecostal movement in India, Bergunder’s aforementioned monograph includes an extensive historical overview of south India. Roger Hedlund has written about forms of Pentecostalism that are indigenous to India. A book chapter on early twentieth century Pentecostalism in India and China by Allan Anderson also deserves mentioning here since it focuses specifically on attitudes to other religions. There are numerous other examples of historical literature on mission in India, missionary views on Indian religions, and the ways that indigenous Christians have negotiated Christianity with their religious and cultural heritage. I have, however, chosen not to concentrate on historical connections or parallels in this dissertation but have tried to understand my interviewees in their present-day context.

In historical studies, a central question has been that of conversion to Christianity and the changes this entails which brings to the fore questions of colonial and missionary power versus indigenous agency. In the twenty-first-century context, conditions have changed but conversion is an equally relevant subject. On a political level, the question of conversion is at the centre of anti-minority antagonism directed at Christians. Literature discussing conversion to Christianity and the opposition from the Hindu majority this phenomenon

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113 Oddie 2006.
115 Frykenberg 2008b.
118 Bergunder 2008.
120 Anderson 2009.
Theological Literature

Although I do not aim to make a theological contribution of my own in this study, theological questions are important to the views interviewees have of other religions and I hope that the results of this study can be beneficial to theologians. Interreligious concerns have been of significance to much of Christian theology formulated in India since its early days. In early Indian Christian theology, figures such as Krishna Mohan Banerjee and Brahmabandhav Upadhyay used Sanskrit resources in their attempts at theological inculturation. Twentieth-century theologians Vengal Chakkarai, Pandipeddi Chenchiah and other members of the “Rethinking Christianity Group” are known for having challenged Hendrick Kraemer’s concept of discontinuity between Christian revelation and other religions at the 1938 International Missionary Council conference in Tambaram. They, together with A. J. Appasamy and others, continued the tradition of seeking to relate Christianity to a Hindu religious/cultural heritage. Other theologians such as Paul Devanandan and M.M. Thomas saw interreligious issues from a socio-political perspective. Theologians of religion like Raimundo Panikkar and Stanley Samartha in different ways sought to conceptualise the relationship of Christianity to other religions with the help of Hindu philosophical resources.124

Dalit theology emerged in the 1980s much as a reaction to what its proponents saw as the elitist, Brahminical bias of earlier Christian theology in India. Arvind P. Nirmal is considered to have initiated Dalit theology with a paper he presented at the United Theological College in 1981 entitled “Towards a Sudra Theology.”125 Dalit theologians reject the Sanskrit scriptural sources which inspired earlier Indian Christian theologians but which they consider irrelevant to the Dalit majority of Indian Christians. Dalit pathos, the Dalit experience of caste-based oppression, the identification of God with the suffering Dalit, and indigenous Dalit traditions instead form the basis of Dalit theology.126 This theology is characterised by “its use of a conflict rather than

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121 Kim 2003.
122 Robinson and Clarke (eds.) 2003.
123 Barua 2015.
124 See Mundadan 1998 for an overview over Indian Christian theology.
126 Webster 2009: 297-304.
an organic model of Indian society”\textsuperscript{127} and a view of Hindu Brahminical religion as oppressive rather than inspiring for (Dalit) Christians. Contextualisation is therefore envisioned in terms of “Dalit religion” rather than Hinduism. An illustrative example of this is Sathianathan Clarke’s influential \textit{Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India}.\textsuperscript{128} Peniel Rajkumar provides a helpful introduction to key issues in Dalit theology as well as a constructive theological contribution in \textit{Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Paradigms and Possibilities}.\textsuperscript{129} The anthology \textit{Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century} also illustrates more recent developments within Dalit theology.\textsuperscript{130}

Against this background, my project offers some specific contributions. First, it includes both mainline Protestant and Pentecostal Christians. This approach is not primarily comparative but selected with the purpose of creating a wide enough yet still specific scope for study. But the inclusion of both groups will offer insights into the similarities and differences between them. Indian Protestantism, especially that of the mainline denominations, is relatively underexamined in empirical studies of contemporary contexts. Second, my study is situated in an urban context among middle-class (if this term is defined broadly) Christians from different caste backgrounds, both Dalit and non-Dalit.\textsuperscript{131} It adds another piece to the puzzle of studies of Indian Christianity which should include all parts of the spectrum, from the religious and academic elite to the absolute grassroots. My interviewees are privileged in relation to the Christian grassroots in Dalit villages or slums in the city. But in relation to professional Christian theologians and those who write the theological agendas of churches and Christian organisations, they are “ordinary Christians” whose perspectives are rarely accounted for. Third, in this study I focus on the expressed thoughts and theological reflections of ordinary Christian laypeople and local pastors. By studying questions of relevance to theology, this empirical study might hopefully offer a resource to theology. Fourth, by focusing neither exclusively on interreligious conflict nor exclusively on interreligious harmony or similarities, I attempt to show in this study how theological convictions about the uniqueness of Christ are negotiated with everyday interreligious relations.

\textsuperscript{127} Webster 2012a: 211.
\textsuperscript{128} Clarke 1998. Clarke employed ethnographic methods with the ultimate aim of constructing theology.
\textsuperscript{129} Rajkumar 2010a.
\textsuperscript{130} Clarke, Manchala, and Peacock (eds.) 2010.
\textsuperscript{131} Thus, my study is one qualitative contribution to the studies of urban Dalit Christians which, as John Webster notes, have been few: Webster 2009: 213.
Terminological Clarifications

This section explains my use of some terms that recur frequently in this dissertation or that otherwise need explanation. Most of these terms are common enough for readers not to need definitions of the terms themselves. Instead, the presentation here focuses on how I use the terms in this dissertation. Several of the terms are “-isms” that may seem to suggest an essentialist view on the phenomena in question. I do not view them as monolithic or static, or as entities existing in their own right without the socially constructed delineation of them. Terms such as these are needed for pragmatic reasons and can be seen as “convenient mental shorthand” for fluid phenomena.132

Hinduism. The understanding that a wide variety of Indian religious traditions form one religion called Hinduism has a relatively recent history. How this term came to be used as a catch-all designation for various traditions which had in common that they were not Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, or Jainism is well-documented in literature.133 Hinduism is probably the clearest example illustrating a deconstructionist inference about all “religions,” namely that they are not monolithic entities with an unchanging essence. However, I consider it unproblematic to use the term “Hinduism” in this dissertation since interviewees relate to a phenomenon they call “Hinduism.” They operate within a contemporary discourse that sees Hinduism as one religion, if an internally diverse one. Although I have a non-essentialist view of Hindu religion, my interviewees express more essentialist views and it is their perceptions that I discuss here.

Religion/religions. If the ideological background to the establishment of the term “Hinduism” has been thoroughly discussed in academic literature, this is even more true of “religion” and “religions.”134 Practically, “religion” in this dissertation refers to phenomena that both the interviewees and I characterise as religious. These phenomena are primarily beliefs about God/s as well as ritual and devotional practices. Although there may not be any transhistorical essence to the phenomenon we call religion,135 Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity are still regarded as “religions” in the eyes of my interviewees. Therefore, as with the term “Hinduism,” I see no problem in using the terms in this dissertation without problematising them further although the matter of distinguishing “religion” from “culture” or “tradition” will be touched upon later.

Protestantism. I include both Anglicans and Pentecostals under this term. Some Anglicans might have problems with this term but the Anglican elements in the CSI are typically not of a high church or Anglo-Catholic character. Pentecostalism is sometimes treated separately from Protestantism in

132 The quotation is from Noll 2015: 73.
133 See e.g. Oddie 2006, King 1999: 96-117.
134 Smith 1991 (1962) and Asad 1993 are two influential titles here.
135 See Asad 1993.
presentations of different Christian traditions, perhaps because of its unique trajectory in terms of growth and spiritual emphasis. However, it has clear roots in Protestant revival movements and continuing points of connection with other forms of Protestantism.

**Pentecostalism.** Due to the dynamic nature of Pentecostal Christianity, scholars sometimes find it difficult to specify exactly which churches and Christians should be included in the term. However, that is not the case with the Pentecostal churches and individuals in this study. They are self-designated as Pentecostal and also show typical characteristics of Pentecostalism such as the emphasis on the Holy Spirit manifested through charismatic gifts such as speaking in tongues, among others. In this dissertation I occasionally refer to one of the Pentecostal churches, Mega AG, as *neo-Pentecostal*. Although the Assemblies of God is one of the main classical Pentecostal denominations, it is appropriate to classify certain individual congregations like Mega AG as neo-Pentecostal. It was founded during the neo-Pentecostal wave of the 1980s and shows many neo-Pentecostal characteristics such as an emphasis on healing and this-worldly blessings. But the classification of different types of Pentecostal churches is not essential in this dissertation, since intra-Pentecostal differences in interviewees’ views fade in relation to the differences between Pentecostal or Protestant Christianity and other religions.

**Mainline Protestantism.** This term usually refers to historically well-established non-Pentecostal denominations, for example, from the Lutheran, Anglican, Calvinist, Methodist, and Baptist traditions. In India, these were formed as a result of mission undertaken by denominational or interdenominational mission societies during colonial times. Prominent examples in present-day India are the Church of South India (CSI) and the Church of North India (CNI). Mainline Protestant churches are sometimes assumed to advocate a more liberal theology compared to Pentecostal and independent or non-denominational churches. In practical terms, mainline Protestant churches in this dissertation are any non-Pentecostal Protestant churches, particularly the CSI.

**Evangelical.** This term, which is pivotal to my analysis, has already been discussed in this chapter though it will be further elaborated in Chapter 3. I write “evangelical” in lowercase since I use it mostly as an adjective. It is not a denominational designation but rather denotes a stream within different Protestant denominations and church traditions. The use of the lowercase demonstrates this in relation to my material in which an evangelical Protestant perspective exists alongside liberal and general Protestant perspectives.

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136 See Noll 2015: 81. See also https://mattmellema.com/2018/06/12/evangelical-uppercase-or-lowercase/ for a helpful discussion on the question of lowercase ‘evangelical’ or uppercase ‘Evangelical.’

137 Although some Catholics may also identify as evangelical in a wider use of the term, I limit it to Protestantism. See further discussion of the term in Chapter 3.
Ordinary Protestants. I find this term useful to designate church members who are not professional academic theologians and whose views it is my object to bring into the academic discussion. The word ‘ordinary’ is not intended to carry any negative connotations. It is often used in academic literature to signify those who do not belong to the religious or academic elite.138 Four of my interviewees are pastors working in the congregations, three of whom have a formal theological training, and an additional three have received an academic theological education. These interviewees occupy an interesting middle position between professional theologians and ordinary lay members without theological education.

God/s, god/s. In my own comments, I use the capital form for all Gods, so as not to distinguish normatively between the Christian or Abrahamic ‘God’ and other ‘gods.’ But when I quote or paraphrase interviewees, I use the capital form for the Christian God but the lower-case form for Hindu deities, since this most accurately reflects their understanding of the relation between the deity that Christians believe in and other deities.

Dalit. This is a self-designation coined by social reformer Mahatma Jyotirao Phule in the nineteenth century for people belonging to what was previously known as “untouchable” caste groups. These groups are officially categorised as “Scheduled Castes” by the Indian Government. This category, however, does not include Christian Dalits. The term “Dalit” means “beaten down” or “oppressed” and it signals an awareness that social structures rather than their karma have caused their sociocultural and economic conditions.139 I am aware of the political connotations of the term but I prefer it to other alternatives with more negative connotations. “Dalit” is presently the most commonly used term for people from this caste background in Christian theology and religious studies about Christians in India.

Tribal. I use the term “tribal” rather than the alternative term “Adivasi” (which means first or original inhabitants). The term “tribal” is less negatively charged in India than are alternatives to “Dalit” such as “low caste” or “untouchable.” The Oxford Encyclopaedia of South Asian Christianity, for example, has entries for “Tribal Christian Theology/Theologizing,” “Tribal Cultures,” “Tribal Religion,” “Tribes in India,” and “Tribes in Northeast India” as well as for “Adivasi Theology.”140 Compare also the title of an anthology

138 See for example Meredith McGuire who focuses on “ordinary people,” i.e., not “official spokespersons” in her analysis of lived religion: McGuire 2008: 12. My approach here is, however, more focused on outspoken beliefs and theological viewpoints than lived religion approaches are. In the field of biblical hermeneutics, Gerald West has coined the term “ordinary readers” for untrained readers of the Bible. While his motivation is to understand how marginalised communities read biblical texts and the way in which their readings can be liberating, I believe that it is important to also understand how “ordinary readers” occupying a position of relative privilege, such as my urban middle-class interviewees, interpret the Bible and their Christian faith at large. See e.g. West 1999 and West 2007a and 2007b.

139 Webster 2012b: 212.

140 Hedlund (ed.) 2012.
edited by Rowena Robinson and Joseph Marianus Kujur entitled *Margins of Faith: Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India*.\[141\] I prefer to use “tribal” here since it is more transparent than “Adivasi” to non-Indian readers.

**Outline**

After this first introductory chapter, Chapter 2 offers brief information about the Christians included in this study and the context that they live in. There, I summarise basic information about Christianity in India, the contemporary interreligious situation, and the city of Bangalore. In that chapter I also introduce the interviewees who have participated in this study and the congregations they belong to.

After this, the main part of the dissertation begins. Here I discuss the subject of my research divided into seven major themes. The first of these themes, discussed in Chapter 3, is the understanding interviewees have of their own Christian faith which is a necessary basis for our understanding of their views of other religions. Central topics in this chapter relate to ways in which many interviewees consider Christianity to be unique in relation to other religions. I have named this chapter “An Evangelical Faith” after the dominant theological tendency in the material.

In Chapters 4 through 6, I discuss the interviewees’ perspectives on Hinduism, Islam, and different forms of Christianity, respectively. These chapters cover subjects such as difference and affinity between Christianity and other religions, rationality versus irrationality, spiritual power or efficacy, and religious openness or relativism versus religious exclusivism. They also cover differences in worship and missiology, as well as in views of holiness and religious images.

The subject of religious images is so crucial to interviewees’ understanding of other religions that I decided that it deserved a thematic chapter of its own. Thus, the subject of Chapter 7 is views of religious images.

In Chapter 8, I shift the focus from the views interviewees hold of other religions to their views of religious others, which is to say people belonging to other religious groups, and of social relations between these others and Christians. By focusing mostly on everyday interreligious interaction and social aspects of religious diversity, this chapter will give a balance to the focus of previous chapters on the theological valuation of other religions.

The last thematic chapter, Chapter 9, centres on the question of Christian mission and evangelism and how this is negotiated with social and political concerns. This subject is key to my overall subject of Christian views of religious diversity, since mission has been and often still is a major feature of the

\[141\] Robinson and Kujur (eds.) 2010. Both the terms “tribal” and “Adivasi” are used in the volume.
way Christians relate to other religions. In this chapter, I first discuss interviewees’ perceptions of the minority situation of Christians. I then examine views and praxis of mission in the four churches included in the study, before studying negotiations between evangelism and social harmony on an individual level.

In the final chapter, I discuss some questions of further relevance which have emerged from this dissertation.
2. Protestants in Bangalore

This chapter introduces the Protestants in Bangalore who, through their participation in qualitative interviews, have helped me produce the empirical material for this study. I also present here the larger context in which the study is located. First, I introduce the reader to significant aspects of the history and present situation of Christians in India, and the minority situation in which they live. After presenting this essential background information, the chapter focuses on Bangalore, especially the four churches from where I have selected interviewees. Lastly, I introduce the interviewees as a group, with individual information where it is relevant.

Christians in India

History

Christianity has been present in India since sometime between the first and fourth centuries. Christians arrived in waves of migration from West Asia and the Persian Empire to present-day Kerala throughout the first millennium CE to form the community known as St. Thomas Christians. According to tradition, the apostle Thomas came to India in 52 CE and established Christianity there. These Christians developed their own distinct traditions and patterns of integration in a Hindu society. Their deep acculturation was demonstrated in their avoidance of “pollution” from people with a lower caste status, rites in connection with death and funerals, celebration of traditional festivals, and church architecture modelled after Hindu temples, among many other examples. They maintained their own unique identity by practising endogamy. The St. Thomas Christians had a high caste identity and functioned as

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142 Koepping 2011: 14. Robert Eric Frykenberg contends that there is no reason to doubt the presence of Christians from at least the second century and that they were certainly established by the third and fourth centuries: Frykenberg 2008b:103, 115.
145 The St. Thomas Christians also distinguish among themselves between the “Northists,” believed to descend from Brahmans converted by St. Thomas, and the “Southists,” descendants of later immigrants from Syria since the fourth century. These two groups have traditionally not intermarried. Visvanathan 1993: 13.
one among other local caste groups. Contact with Catholic and later Protestant missions as well as internal schisms has led to the division of this tradition into several churches; in addition to the Orthodox Syrian and “Jacobite” churches, there are Syrian rite Catholics, who now form the majority among Christians in Kerala, and the Mar Thoma Church, a reformed church of the St. Thomas tradition. Membership in the St. Thomas Christian churches is still largely linked with ethnicity and churches exist where Malayalam-speaking Christians have migrated, for example in Bangalore. However, the Mar Thoma Church, a reformed church of the St. Thomas tradition, engages in mission actively with programmes in various parts of India.

Roman Catholic missions arrived with the Portuguese colonisation from the early sixteenth century. Mission during this period was tightly connected with trade and military conquest. It usually followed the pattern of mass conversions in the conclaves along the southern coast which the Portuguese controlled. However, the Indian converts developed their own responses to their new religion. As a result, India has centuries-old Catholic traditions with distinctly local characteristics, especially in Goa and along the Fisher Coast in Kerala and Tamil Nadu where some caste groups converted early and have developed specific ways of integrating Catholicism with local traditions. This creative integration continued as Catholicism spread geographically over subsequent centuries, especially in south India. Catholics now form the largest category of Christians in India overall as well as in south India.

The history of Protestantism in India began in 1706 with the arrival of Lutheran Pietist missionaries Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plütschau from Halle, Germany, to the Danish colony of Tranquebar in present-day Tamil Nadu. Ziegenbalg started the Protestant missionary tradition of Bible translations and studies of Indian religion and thus initiated the Protestant interaction with Indian culture, religion, and society. Other mission organisations joined, particularly from the early nineteenth century onwards. Their relations to the colonial powers varied. Almost all varieties of Protestant traditions have sent missionaries to India. American Pentecostal missionaries arrived in India in the early twentieth century but had been preceded by Pentecostal-like revivals in Tamil Nadu, the northeast, and Maharashtra. Protestant missions have been active in various parts of India but have been

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146 Visvanathan 1993: 2-3.
147 Dempsey 2001: 5-8.
149 Robinson 2013: 133-146.
152 Frykenberg 2008b: 146-151.
153 Webster 2009: 43.
most successful in south India and particularly in the northeast states of Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya. In these states, a majority of the population is now Christian.\textsuperscript{155} In south India, mass movements during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries led to large numbers of Christians among some Dalit caste groups. There were also a few non-Dalit groups which converted in large numbers.\textsuperscript{156}

Since Indian Independence in 1947, there have been political and juridical restrictions on conversion and on missionary activities, especially regarding the presence of foreign missionaries. Indian Christians, however, continue to evangelise. Unlike other Christian traditions, Pentecostalism has continued to grow numerically in south India.\textsuperscript{157} “Classical Pentecostal” denominations such as the Assemblies of God (AG) are present in India along with “indigenous Pentecostal” denominations like the Indian Pentecostal Church (IPC) and The Pentecostal Mission (TPM), and a number of small independent churches.\textsuperscript{158}

Demographic and Sociological Factors

According to official figures, Christians form 2.3 per cent of the Indian population.\textsuperscript{159} Many commentators agree that the official number does not mirror the reality. Alternative sources estimate the number to be 4.8 or even 5.8 per cent.\textsuperscript{160} Evangelical calculations are often optimistic and result in a higher number of Christians than the official statistics, not only in India and so a realistic figure may be somewhere in between. The main factor behind the misleading statistics is that Christian Dalits – who form the majority of converts to Christianity – lose their right to Scheduled Caste (SC) status and the accompanying welfare and reservation benefits, such as special quotas to educational seats and government jobs, if they officially change their religious affiliation to Christianity.\textsuperscript{161} A different phenomenon is “Christ bhaktas,” devotees of Christ, who worship Christ through traditional Hindu forms of devotion but do not belong to an institutionalised church.\textsuperscript{162} The Christian population is concentrated to northeast India and south India. These two regions are together home to around 80 per cent of India’s official Christian population. The north Indian Hindi-speaking belt, by contrast, has 40 per cent of India’s

\textsuperscript{155} Snaitang 2012: 501-502.
\textsuperscript{156} See Webster 2009: 40-92.
\textsuperscript{157} Bergunder 2008: 18.
\textsuperscript{158} For Pentecostalism in south India, see Bergunder 2008. For an overview over indigenous forms of Pentecostalism in India, see Hedlund 2005.
\textsuperscript{159} http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/C-01.html
\textsuperscript{160} See https://www.lausanne.org/lgc-transfer/number-of-christians-in-china-and-india-2 The “Lausanne Global Analysis” of the evangelical Lausanne Movement here refers to numbers from the \textit{Atlas of Global Christianity} and \textit{Operation World}.
\textsuperscript{161} See Webster 2009: 210-211, Carman and Vasantha Rao 2014: 25.
\textsuperscript{162} See Jørgensen 2008 on this phenomenon.
total population, but only 10 per cent of the Christian population. In south India, home to around half of the country’s total Christian population, Christians are particularly numerous in Kerala and Tamil Nadu.¹⁶³

In terms of socioeconomic development, the Christian community as a whole does relatively well in comparison with other religious groups. Christians have comparatively high rates of literacy, education, employment, household income, and access to assets and amenities.¹⁶⁴ For example, Christians have a higher literacy rate than any other religious groups except Jains, a small and relatively wealthy religious community with a high caste status.¹⁶⁵ However, among Christians as well as in the Indian population at large, patterns of socioeconomic development follow lines of caste and tribal belonging. Just how great the socioeconomic differences are between Dalit and tribal Christians on the one hand, and the remainder of the Christian population on the other, is impossible to ascertain, since there is no statistical data for this.¹⁶⁶

**Caste Among Christians in India**
The caste backgrounds of Christians in India follow the historical trajectories of the early Christian immigrants from West Asia and later the missions initiated from Europe. The St. Thomas Christians still have a high caste status. Western missionaries during colonial times held varying attitudes to caste. The early Catholic missionaries were generally tolerant of the phenomenon, and the Church retained old caste structures. Protestant missionaries varied in their attitudes to caste and in how far they compromised with Indian converts who themselves emphasised caste differences. As a rule, Protestant missionaries were more opposed to caste than Catholic missionaries.¹⁶⁷

Since it has been mostly Dalits and tribals who have converted to Christianity, particularly to the Protestant churches, more than half of the Indian Christians come from a Dalit background, and 15 to 20 per cent from tribes. “Upper-caste” Christians constitute about a quarter of the total number, but are, with few exceptions, geographically and denominationally limited to the St. Thomas Christians in Kerala and old Catholic communities along the Konkan coast in the southwest.¹⁶⁸ It must be added that there is probably a large number of unofficial Christians who primarily come from a Dalit background.

During the past five hundred years, whole caste groups as well as individuals have converted to both Catholic and Protestant Christianity, partially motivated by the hope of social mobility. Despite certain improvements such as education and a new positive sense of identity, caste remains a divisive factor

¹⁶³ Robinson 2013: 167.
¹⁶⁸ Robinson 2013: 167.
both within the churches and in society at large. For instance, Christian Dalits often still live in a separate part of the village or in a Dalit neighbourhood in the city along with others from the same caste background, and many people from other caste groups still discriminate against them, although less bluntly than previously. There are, however, also Christian Dalits who belong to the growing Indian middle class. They live in mixed-caste middle-class neighbourhoods, own cars, work in government or private sectors as, for example, teachers, doctors, or engineers, and some have children who have moved to the US, the UK, or Australia. Such a middle-class Dalit Christian presence is a reality not only in the big cities like Bangalore but also in smaller towns though these Christians rarely feature in empirical studies of Christianity in India. John Webster notes that “urban Dalit Christians and the Dalit Christian elite have been almost totally ignored” in research.

Despite the numerical predominance of Dalits among Indian Christians, they are still underrepresented in positions of leadership, particularly in the Catholic Church. In the Church of South India, struggles between Dalit and non-Dalit Christians in church politics are particularly observable in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, where there are larger groups of non-Dalit Christians. Divisions also persist between different Dalit caste groups within the churches. Although caste-related problems persist in churches, these are not usually examples of untouchability but of caste being a basis for association and alliances in church politics, or of an intersection of caste and class. This is especially so in urban contexts. The urban elite and middle-class Christians, whether Dalit or non-Dalit, have been in control of church resources and institutions, Webster writes. However, there has been an increasing awareness of Dalit concerns in the churches since the 1990s.

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169 Webster 2009: 221-234.
170 See Roberts 2016, especially pp. 47-70 for an urban example and Jeremiah 2013, esp. pp. 43-73 for a rural example of Dalit Christian experiences of segregation and discrimination. Roberts’s informants themselves assign discrimination to class rather than caste and say that casteism is a problem in villages but not in the city. This is despite the fact that the intersection between caste and class is clear, even if caste discrimination does not mean untouchability. The “class idiom,” Roberts writes, is “not merely a euphemism for caste” but “a theoretical challenge to it,” motivated by a desire to leave caste behind, in the village. (Quotation from p. 65.) Jeremiah observes more openly caste-based conflict and oppression.
171 Webster 2009: 213. This Dalit Christian middle class has emerged as a result of Christian education and Christian institutions providing professional employment before and around Independence in 1947, Webster writes. Since Christian Dalits were denied the same rights to compensatory discrimination as other Dalits in 1950, new opportunities for upward mobility have drastically decreased. Webster 2009: 209, 219-220, 234.
172 In a volume from 2011, Elizabeth Koepping reports that only six of the 160 Roman Catholic bishops in India were Dalits. 14 of the 26 CSI bishops were Dalits. Koepping 2011: 29. See also Webster 2009: 227-228.
173 Webster 2009: 221-234. Webster observes that the clearest examples of intra-Christian untouchability and a view of caste as sacred have been found among rural Catholics (p. 225).
Gender Among Christians in India

Another factor which greatly adds to the inequalities among Christians in India is gender differentiation. While Christian women face the same patriarchal structures that affect Indian society at large, statistics show some positive aspects among Christians. The literacy rate among Christian women is high compared to other religious groups, and the gap between male and female literacy is relatively small. Christians are the only religious group in India with a positive sex ratio, that is, where the total number of women exceed that of men. In other communities, this measure is negative because the social structures that make parents prefer sons over daughters has led to a situation where selective abortion and even infanticide has caused an unnatural deficit of women in India. Sadly, the trend among Christians has changed so that in the youngest age groups there is a negative sex ratio.

In Indian churches, women participate along with men in worship, lay leadership and, in some denominations, ecclesiastical leadership. However, their full and equal participation is obstructed by what Aruna Gnanadason calls a “domestication of Indian Christian women by the church and the Indian Christian family structure.” Preaching, behavioural patterns, and male leadership in Christian churches often reflect gender conservative values. Domestic violence remains a problem among Christians as well as among other religious groups.

If Dalits are underrepresented on positions of leadership in Indian churches, this is even more the case with women. Pentecostal churches often do not allow women to be pastors or to preach to other Christians. In the CSI, although the church has decided to ordain women as presbyters, not all dioceses practise women’s ordination and female clergy are far outnumbered by male clergy in the dioceses that do. In the CSI in Bangalore at the time of my field studies, male clergy dominated. However, there were female pastors whose status appeared to be far more equal with that of the male clergy than is the case in the mostly rural diocese where I have lived since. One sign of changing attitudes is that in 2013 a woman was elected as a bishop in the CSI for the first time. The CSI runs programmes for gender equality which are

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175 Robinson 2013: 178.
177 Gnanadason 2016: 76. Gnanadason is previous director of the programme on Women in Church and Society in the World Council of Churches.
178 Koepping 2011: 37.
179 Bergunder 2008: 204. However, women are allowed to preach to “those who are not born-again Christians” and Pentecostal women “play a decisive role” in mission. Ibid. Moreover, the common Pentecostal prohibition against women’s preaching and leadership is often overcome in practice. Bergunder writes (p. 205).
180 The technical term for a pastor in the CSI.
181 Bishop Pushpalalitha of Nandyal Diocese.
initiated at a central level. Regarding Pentecostalism, scholars often analyse its positive consequences for women in terms of unofficial empowerment through practices such as praying, testifying, and prophesying.\textsuperscript{182}

In urban churches in particular, differing attitudes to the roles of and expectations of women meet and sometimes clash. In the churches in this study, indications such as style of dressing and seating arrangements reflect more conservative values in CSI Tamil and in TPM than in Mega AG or CSI City, although male leadership dominates in all four churches. Women participate both as pastors (in Mega AG) and as lay leaders.

\section*{The Interreligious Situation}

India has a long history of interreligious coexistence and this has, on the whole, been relatively peaceful. The encounter with Western colonialism led to the emergence of Hindu nationalism or Hindutva, an ideology which sees an intrinsic link between the land, the people, the Hindi language, and the Hindu religion.\textsuperscript{183} In independent India, Hindutva parties and organisations represent anti-minority ideology and politics which target both Muslims and Christians. Although India has a secular constitution, the advances of the Hindu nationalist movement in recent decades is a cause of concern for many Christians and others who are critical of its agenda.

The question of conversion is at the centre of Hindu-Christian conflict in India. Hindu nationalist discourse portrays conversions to Christianity as a great threat to the Hindu people and the Indian nation, they are seen as undermining of Indian culture and as a sign of disrespect for Hindu religion.\textsuperscript{184} Several Indian states, but not Karnataka, have implemented laws restricting conversion, so-called “freedom of religion” bills. Negative views of conversion to Christianity are widespread in India, far beyond Hindutva adherents.\textsuperscript{185} Many Hindus understand Hinduism, in contrast, as a non-proselytising and tolerant religion whose tolerance they do not consider reciprocated by Christians engaged in evangelism.\textsuperscript{186}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{182} See Roberts 2016: 10-11, 203-213 for an Indian example.
\item \textsuperscript{183} See Jaffrelot (ed.) 2007.
\item \textsuperscript{184} See Jaffrelot (ed.) 2007: 233-254 for an introduction into Hindutva views of conversion and Kim 2003 and Barua 2015 for discussions of Hindu-Christian debates about conversion in India.
\item \textsuperscript{185} Kim 2003: 182.
\item \textsuperscript{186} This is an ideological representation. The portrayal of Hinduism as uniquely tolerant hinges on a definition of “tolerant” as “non-missionary” and an understanding of mission and conversion as essentially intolerant and disrespectful of the religious other. See Barua 2015: 18, 21-22. Moreover, as Sumit Sarkar observes, Hindu missionary activities are rarely labelled as such: Sarkar 2007: 357-358.
\end{itemize}
Many factors combine to produce a situation where members of the Hindu majority target Christians with violence and other forms of harassment. Violent attacks on Christians have increased drastically since the 1990s. These attacks have, as Rowena Robinson remarks, “affected the sense of security of the community as a whole” and made Christians in India aware of their vulnerability as a religious minority. Incidents occur somewhere in India on an almost daily basis. At work here is not only the religious factor, but also other factors such as inter-caste rivalry.

Karnataka, especially the area around Mangalore, witnessed a dramatic outburst of violence in 2008 following the large-scale violence perpetrated against Christians in Odisha the same year. Churches were vandalised and Christians were attacked. Although the scale of the attacks has since decreased, incidents continue where churches are vandalised, pastors are arrested, Christians are assaulted or their worship forcefully stopped, also in Bangalore and its outskirts. During the years 2009-2012, Karnataka was even the state in India with the highest number of incidents, according to the Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI), which documents testimonies about violence and other forms of harassment of Christians in India.

Despite this, the everyday situation for most Christians in Bangalore is normally characterised by peaceful coexistence. Big inner-city churches like those featuring in this study are rarely targeted, a factor which influences the perceptions of the situation among my interviewees. Unfortunately, the situation appears to have deteriorated further since the time of my field studies, as Christian organisations report more incidents of anti-Christian attacks. A report from the EFI called the year 2017 “one of the most traumatic for the Christian community in India since the mass targeted violence of the Kandhamal pogrom in 2007 and 2008,” although Karnataka is no longer one of the states with the highest number of reported incidents.

However, while a number of Christians face such hardships and constrictions on their freedom of religion – and, disconcertingly, it seems to be a growing number – an even larger number still live and practise their religion in an environment of tolerance by their neighbours of other religions. This dissertation will exemplify how Indian Christians show awareness of their

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187 Robinson 2013: 165-166.
188 See Bauman 2015 for an analysis of anti-Christian violence in India, and especially the question of why Pentecostal Christians appear to be particularly targeted. See pp. 2-3 on the frequency of incidents.
190 http://files.constantcontact.com/523942c3501/97b6149d-8264-458e-9a98-352cb5a55857.pdf The “Kandhamal pogrom” refers to the mass-scale violence in that region in Odisha. See also Chapter 9 in this dissertation.
vulnerability as a religious minority, especially in their practices of mission, but it will also demonstrate how they portray their everyday interaction with religious others as peaceful and amicable.

Bangalore

Bangalore, capital of the south Indian state Karnataka, is a metropolitan city characterised by cultural and religious diversity. Its population was recorded as 8.4 million in the 2011 census, which made it the third largest city in India.\textsuperscript{191} It was officially renamed Bengaluru in 2014, but the old name is still widely used. Since Bangalore was the official name at the time of my field studies and the one interviewees used, that is the name which appears in this dissertation.

Although there had been an earlier village at the site, Bangalore was founded as a town around 1537 by the chieftain Kempe Gowda who built a fort at the site and made it his capital.\textsuperscript{192} The British established a military cantonment in Bangalore in 1809 and thereafter the city developed with two cores: the old Indian city and the British cantonment.\textsuperscript{193} This history is still highly visible in parts of the modern city and reflected in names such as Cantonment Railway Station, Frazer Town, Cubbon Park, Richmond Road, or East Parade Church. Since Indian Independence in 1947, the city has experienced massive growth as a result of migration. At least 40 per cent of Bangalore’s inhabitants hail from other states.\textsuperscript{194} Financially, Bangalore has vastly benefited from the IT boom that began in India in the 1990s and the city is nicknamed the “Silicon Valley of India.” Signs of affluence and international influence are everywhere to be seen; in luxury restaurants, designer boutiques, bars and night clubs, coffee chains, and wealthy neighbourhoods. The traffic has long since outgrown the roads planned for a smaller city, and cars, motorcycles, and autorickshaws throng the roads along with the occasional bicycle. At the same time, poverty makes itself known through the presence of beggars and slums although the latter are relatively small and few compared with other major Indian cities. In between the extremely poor and the affluent, the city houses representatives of all classes: daily wage labourers as well as government employees and young people working night shifts in one of Bangalore’s many call centres.

The official language in Karnataka is Kannada, but due to the large-scale immigration from other parts of India, Bangalore is multi-lingual. The city is near to the border of Tamil Nadu and the Tamil population is sizeable. Three

\textsuperscript{191} http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/paper2/data_files/India2/Table_2_PR_Cities_1Lakh_and_Above.pdf
\textsuperscript{192} Kamath 2008: 6.
\textsuperscript{193} Singh 2008: 49.
\textsuperscript{194} Mohammad-Arif 2014: 290.
of the four churches in this study are Tamil-speaking or have large Tamil congregations. English is the lingua franca in Bangalore, and relatively well spoken among large parts of the population in comparison with India at large.

India’s religious diversity is manifest in Bangalore which is home not only to Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, but also to Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Parsis, Bahais, and a few Jews. Bangalore also reflects India’s diversity of Christian groups. Catholics, various mainline Protestant denominations and Pentecostal churches, and the St. Thomas Christian churches from Kerala are all present in Bangalore. In some congregations, such as Mega AG, one of the churches in this study, people from all over India and even abroad attend the services. Other congregations have a distinct ethnic character consisting of, for example, Baptists from Nagaland or Presbyterians from Mizoram. The percentage of Christians in Bangalore is relatively high compared to India at large: 5.6 per cent according to the 2011 census. Several old churches and Christian institutions are well-known landmarks in the city.

The United Theological College

One of the old Christian institutions in Bangalore is the United Theological College (UTC), which was founded in 1910. References to the UTC will sometimes occur in this dissertation. The two CSI pastors included among interviewees were educated there and a third interviewee, Madhu from Mega AG, was undergoing his BD studies there at the time of our interview. The UTC also symbolises a liberal theological agenda that a few other interviewees trained in Pentecostal or evangelical theological colleges (Reverend Matthew and Chakradev) position themselves against. Moreover, I stayed at the guesthouse in the UTC campus during my field studies and interacted with many people there. The academic milieu of the UTC has therefore exerted a certain influence upon my impressions of Christianity in India and the subject of my study.

The UTC was founded by a number of Protestant mission organisations of various denominational affiliations. Its purpose was to train Christian “leaders with a broader outlook and a deeper commitment to ecumenism.” In the present day, students at the UTC include Orthodox Christians, mainline Protestants and Pentecostals, but not Catholics. The UTC offers education from bachelor’s to doctoral levels as well as shorter courses. The library and the archives are extensive and well-known, and books and journals are published from the college. The UTC has been a pioneering force behind both interreligious dialogue and, later, Dalit theology. Its social engagement is noticeable through, for instance, the frequent references to “the poor and the

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196 Sebastian 2012: 710-711. (Quotation from p. 710.)
“marginalised” and “the weak and the vulnerable” in the daily morning devotions. Students participate in regular societal engagement programmes, such as tuition for underprivileged children, as well as annual intensive field education programmes with, for example, Non-Governmental Organisations working with slum dwellers.

The Churches

In the part that follows, I give a general presentation of the churches from where I selected interviewees for this study. This will provide the reader with a basic understanding of the church context that forms a background for each interviewee’s reflections on religious diversity.

Two of the churches belong to the Church of South India, which was formed in 1947 through a union of Anglican, Reformed, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregationalist churches. It has 23 dioceses in the five states of south India and one in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. The CSI is the largest Protestant church in India. The CSI diocese to which Bangalore belongs, Karnataka Central Diocese (KCD), is a largely urban and, comparatively speaking, wealthy diocese. Due to Bangalore’s multilingual nature, CSI churches using various languages are present in the city. In addition to Kannada-, Tamil-, and English-speaking congregations, there are also Malayalam-, Telugu-, and Hindi-speaking congregations.

The two other churches are Pentecostal churches, one belonging to the Assemblies of God, and one to the indigenous Pentecostal denomination The Pentecostal Mission. The history and special characteristics of TPM will receive a longer treatment here, since it is probably less known to readers unfamiliar with the Indian Christian scene.

Church of South India (CSI) City

CSI City was built for the British during Bangalore’s time as a cantonment city. It lies in close proximity to the busy commercial centre of the city. The church has a distinctly European look with a stained glass window and a nineteenth century organ. Wooden pews line the aisle. This means that, unlike many other south Indian churches where seating possibilities consist of loose plastic chairs, it is not possible to sit on the floor in a traditional manner. Surrounding the church building are other smaller houses built in the same colonial style, among them the spacious parsonage.

197 https://www.csisynod.com The five south Indian states are Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana. Telangana was formed as a separate state through a division of Andhra Pradesh in 2014.
198 Jeyakumar 2012: 183.
The presbyter-in-charge of CSI City at the time of my field studies was the only pastor working in the congregation and had been there for two years. In the CSI, pastors are assigned to churches for a limited time. CSI City is the kind of prestigious congregation that is usually assigned to more experienced pastors and, in keeping with this, Reverend Chand is a middle-aged man with pastoral experience from rural as well as urban parts of the diocese.

The congregation is geographically spread out in Bangalore. Around seven hundred families belong to the church, perhaps four hundred of whom are regular churchgoers according to the pastor’s estimation. CSI City is sometimes described as one of the “elite” CSI churches in Bangalore. Many congregation members belong to the upper middle class. In addition to Anglo-Indians, there are other church members who also speak English as their first language, something which is unusual even in Bangalore. The congregation also consists of Kannada speakers. Many families have belonged to CSI City for generations and some members attend other churches nearer to their home on a regular Sunday but keep their membership in CSI City out of loyalty to their parents’ church.

Every Sunday morning, the church conducts two worship services, one in Kannada and one in English. The English service is attended by more people than the Kannada one and it lasts somewhat longer, around one and a half hours. Additionally, there is an evening service in English. Old European hymns are sung accompanied by organ music. Charismatic influences appear in the form of “praise and worship” songs sometimes performed by younger church members. There are few clearly indigenous elements in the worship.

In the English services, the sermons are frequently held by invited guest preachers and range from evangelical messages by lay preachers to academic homilies by UTC professors. Activities in CSI City include youth fellowship, women’s fellowship, Bible studies, house prayer meetings, and choirs and Sunday school in English as well as Kannada.

Male leadership dominated at the time of my field studies, also at the lay level. Unlike more conservative CSI churches, there is no separation between men and women in the pews and all go together to receive Communion.

Church of South India (CSI) Tamil
Like CSI City, CSI Tamil is located in the central part of the city where the present church building dates from the twenty-first century. The history of the congregation goes back to the 1930s when a Tamil lay leader joined with British missionaries to start a prayer fellowship for poor Tamil migrants in one of Bangalore’s slum areas. On a normal Sunday, approximately a hundred and fifty to two hundred people participate in the service. The church pews hold around two hundred people with no seating on the floor. As the congregation’s

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199 Conversation with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17.
financial situation has improved over the years prior to my field studies, and the Pastorate Committee had been successful in securing outside funding, the church has been able to invest in a keyboard, a sound system, and a screen and projector which it makes liberal use of during services. It is a sign of the church’s improved financial circumstances that it can afford employing a sexton who lives with his family in a small house on the church grounds.

CSI Tamil’s congregation has experienced considerable upward socioeconomic mobility since its early days. A number of the church members still support their families through daily wage labour such as painting, loading and unloading goods, plumbing or doing household work in more affluent people’s houses. But unlike the older generation, many of the young members are studying at college or university, and some of the children attend prestigious schools. The congregation includes members from different walks of life: Lawyers, manual workers, teachers, housemaids, and retirees are some of the professions represented. At the same time, the socioeconomic conditions of the congregation as a whole is still far below that in CSI City and other “elite” churches in Bangalore.

During my longest field study period in 2010-2011, the presbyter was a young man called Thangam, a recent graduate from the UTC. In 2012, he had been transferred and the church had received a new pastor.

The Sunday services in CSI Tamil last longer than those in CSI City and start less punctually. In both these respects, they are closer to rural and semi-rural practices. The music is of a traditional Tamil type, livelier than the solemn hymns usually heard in large historical churches like CSI City. A number of people typically prefer to mingle with others outside the church rather than sit inside. The church service provides ample opportunities for offering money, for instance, birthday offerings and special thanksgiving offerings in addition to the regular collection.

During the time of this study, some traditional gender-related practices were retained in the church. Women received Communion only after the men had finished. An overwhelming majority of the women covered their hair for the Communion, and many did so throughout the whole service. Men and women sat on separate sides in church, although this seating division had started to loosen up and a few women sat on the men’s side. Although most of the leading laypeople in church were men, there was one prominent laywoman among them.

200 In this, they may be representative of Dalit Christians in cities. John Webster remarks that although the middle classes “are most conspicuous, the larger proportion of urban Dalit Christians are skilled workers or daily wage labourers.” Webster 2009: 221.
Mega Assemblies of God (AG)

Mega AG is one of the largest Pentecostal churches in Bangalore, and is situated in an exclusive area in central Bangalore. The whole street where the modern multi-storey church building is located changes on Sundays when there is more traffic, people crowd the church steps for the next service, and many beggars are present hoping for donations from the churchgoers. The main worship hall is surrounded by balconies and often full to capacity during Sunday services. In the basement, separate services are held or alternatively people follow what is going on upstairs on TV screens.

The church was founded in the 1980s by the man who is still the senior pastor. As the name suggests, Mega AG is affiliated with the originally American Assemblies of God (AG), one of the world’s largest Pentecostal denominations which has been present in India since the 1920s. Over the following thirty years, the church has grown and now attracts thousands of churchgoers each week. Many Christians who formally belonged to other churches attend services and prayer meetings there. The founding pastor’s renown among Christians in Bangalore and other parts of south India is a source of pride in the congregation who idolise and admire him as a great spiritual example. He now leads a number of pastors. The pastor I have interviewed, Reverend Matthew, is the church’s “executive pastor.” This is one of several examples of the use of business language in Mega AG.

The message that meets the churchgoer in Mega AG illustrates the effectiveness of prayer for blessings that can be seen in everyday life. The preaching focuses on concerns for people’s salvation to eternal life along with more this-worldly concerns for such things as good jobs and good marriages. The outward appearance and lifestyles of the pastors also promote this ideal. The church can be described as part of an international strand of Pentecostal churches oriented less towards holiness and more towards a theology of this-worldly blessings, with American spirituality and lifestyle as an ideal. A central aspect of Mega AG’s profile is its embrace of modernity. The church promotes itself on the internet and produces several televised programmes which are broadcasted on networks in India and abroad. Television seems to function as a symbol of Mega AG’s up-to-date, prosperous image even in its physical form in which a prominent feature of the worship hall is its abundance of TV screens. The congregation has its fair share of Bangalore’s IT professionals, but poor people also attend the church, especially its Tamil services.

Another important feature of Mega AG’s self-image is that it is part of a global network of churches fighting for the same cause of saving souls and evangelism is a clear and well-articulated focus. The importance of “bringing souls” to Christ is one of the most emphatic themes in its preaching and church growth is underscored as a sign of the church’s dynamic nature. The church

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201 Bergunder 2008: 27.
has many international contacts and often receives visiting preachers from abroad. During my field studies in 2012, there were pastors and other employees from West Africa and South America.

Mega AG has many Sunday services in several languages each week. Modern charismatic hymns are sung accompanied with electronic instruments like drums, keyboard, and guitar. The church also has numerous other services including special services for women, men, children, youth, widows, elderly people, and people with disabilities. Special fasting prayers are a common element on the programme. Another important activity involves the cell groups, small prayer and Bible study groups that meet every week in homes throughout the city.\(^{202}\) It also has a number of programmes for mission and social work, and facilities such as a “24-hour prayer power line” and a “Spiritual ambulance” telephone line.

Mega AG pastors include both men and women, although the latter are a minority. Although the Assemblies of God in South Asia do not formally allow women as pastors but only as “Bible women,” women are called pastors in Mega AG. There is a special “Women’s church” service each Saturday, but women can preach on other occasions as well, although men dominate the major activities.

The Pentecostal Mission (TPM)

This church lies in a middle-class neighbourhood in a central part of Bangalore and from a distance it is not distinguishable as a church at all. Passers-by must come close to see the signs announcing “The Pentecostal Mission (Church)” in Tamil and English in TPM’s typical blue letters on a white background. The interior of the building consists of a hall with walls which are decorated with quotations from the Bible in various Indian languages as well as English.

Each Sunday, believers gather here for a service which lasts for four hours. Carpets have been rolled out on the floor and on them women sit on the right side and men on the left. Most of the women carefully cover their hair and wear only white clothes although exceptions are more frequent towards the back of the hall. Songs in six languages, accompanied with indigenous instruments, are interspersed between prayer, testimonies, prophesies and preaching. The atmosphere among the churchgoers becomes more and more intense during the course of the service. At an appointed time, both men and women stand up to prophesy. During the last part of the service, the pastor preaches, dressed in a simple white garment. He makes regular breaks in his preaching so that it can be translated from Tamil into Kannada and English.

The denomination that this church belongs to was founded in 1923 as the Ceylon Pentecostal Mission (CPM) in present-day Sri Lanka, as a breakaway

\(^{202}\) The system with cell groups has been a popular strategy for church growth among Pentecostal churches worldwide: Kay & Dyer (eds.) 2004: 189.
group from the Pentecostal movement initiated by Western missionaries to Sri Lanka. The founder of CPM was born Ramankutty in a Hindu Dalit family in Kerala in 1881. After experiencing visions of Christ, he converted to Christianity in 1902 and received the name Paul. He worked as a catechist for the Church Missionary Society before founding the CPM following his baptism in the Holy Spirit. Paulson Pulikottil notes that CPM was the first church to be led by a Dalit.

The church grew and spread, first to south India and then elsewhere beyond the subcontinent. The denomination now has branches in nineteen countries in all continents of the world. In India, the name was changed from Ceylon Pentecostal Mission to The Pentecostal Mission in 1984. Pulikottil writes that TPM has “reversed the direction of cross-cultural world mission” in that it is “the only Indian church that has branches in foreign countries that are governed from India.” Its successful mission has made it “one of the largest Pentecostal movements in the world” according to Roger Hedlund. Out of its 848 branches over the world in 1998, 708 were located in India.

One sign of The Pentecostal Mission’s South Asian origins is that traditional forms of worship, such as sitting on the floor and using traditional instruments have been practised from the early days. Its main appeal has been its healing ministry. Other distinct characteristics of TPM are its eschatological focus and ascetic ideals. The church stands clearly in the holiness tradition and teaches perfection by renunciation of the world. It sees itself as unique in the way it prepares its followers for the imminent Second Coming of Christ. The church teaches that only by strict adherence to TPM doctrines can the believer reach full perfection and thus earn the right to be raptured at the Parousia. During my field studies, I observed that the preaching always revolves around the same central eschatological themes. The strict rules regarding separation from the world are more radical than in other south Indian Pentecostal churches. For example, church members should take off their jewellery and preferably wear only white in church while dressing in an understated or demure way elsewhere too, for example by not wearing jeans or

204 Pulikottil 2005: 245.
206 Pulikottil 2005: 245.
208 Ibid: 246.
209 Bergunder 2008: 73.
210 Pulikottil 2005: 252. Bergunder notes that members of the church in other countries are mostly migrants from India: Bergunder 2008: 74.
211 Hedlund 2005: 220. The information about the number of branches is from 1998: see notes 23 and 26, p. 240.
213 See Bergunder 2008: 181-190.
other clothes considered provocative. The white dress is significant; tradition-
ally it is worn by Indian widows and, in TPM’s birthplace of Sri Lanka, Bud-
dhist devotees wear it when they visit temples.\textsuperscript{214}

TPM’s ascetic ideals are personified in its clergy. Except for pastors who
are all male, there are “sisters,” women who, like the pastor, have dedicated
their lives to the ministry and who live in celibacy in the church building and
always dress in simple and traditional white clothes. The pastors have no for-
mal theological training but serve as “brothers,” disciples of a pastor, before
becoming one themselves. This system is based on the Indian guru-shishya
(teacher-disciple) tradition.\textsuperscript{215}

From my first visit to the church in 2008 to my last in 2012, the pastor was
the same. He lives in a simple room behind the main church hall where he also
receives church members and others for prayer and counselling. He told me
that he only sleeps for two hours each night since he has to be constantly avail-
able for the believers who come to him for advice or special prayers. Through
his austere lifestyle, the pastor embodies TPM’s strict ascetic ideals and is
seen as a role model in world-renouncement and spirituality. He is much ad-
mired in the congregation and his prayers are believed to be especially pow-
erful. One brother, the pastor’s disciple, also lives in the church, as do the
sisters. They sleep on the upper floors but spend much of their time in “the
women’s area”, a part of the ground floor which consists of a kitchen and
another simple room. The sisters told me that they spend much of their time
in prayer, starting from early morning, and only sleep for two or three hours
each night. Like the pastor, the sisters’ dedication is considered to make them
suitable to inspire and guide the laity. The organisation of TPM is extremely
centralised.\textsuperscript{216} TPM’s hierarchical ideals are mirrored at the branch level. The
sisters perform their practical chores and spiritual exercises such as praying
and studying the Bible under the supervision of the senior sister and the pastor.
The pastor is the highest authority in the individual branch, and answers to his
own seniors in the church hierarchy. This hierarchical control was made clear
when I was not allowed to interview a sister without the pastor’s approval, and
not to record the pastor without permission from his seniors.

According to the pastor, about eight hundred to nine hundred people come
to each Sunday service. Education, socioeconomic status, and knowledge of
English differ between the congregants. There is a clear majority of women
among the churchgoers, even more so than in the other churches. Apart from
Sunday services, the church’s activities include Bible studies in church and in
homes throughout the area the branch covers. There are also special so-called

\textsuperscript{214} Hedlund 2004: 193.
\textsuperscript{215} Bergunder 2008: 74.
\textsuperscript{216} Ibid: 211.
tarrying meetings, when the participants tarry in prayer waiting for the Holy Spirit’s presence, or in other words pray for spirit baptism.217

The Interviewees

The following is a general overview of the interviewees. In some cases where it is relevant, I will provide individual information about theological education, theological profile, or position in church. The reader may also find basic information about each interviewee in the list of interviewees at the end of the dissertation. Out of consideration for interviewees’ anonymity, I do not provide more detailed information about, for example, age or profession.

Interviewees come from the lower to the upper middle classes, although one or two could possibly be categorised as belonging to the working class. A few have not studied beyond secondary education, while others hold good degrees and work in, for example, colleges or international companies. Most interviewees live in comfortable but not luxurious flats or houses in middle-class neighbourhoods. None belong to the extreme socioeconomic elite, although the Mega AG pastor’s lifestyle shows signs of relative affluence.

In CSI City, all the lay interviewees are influenced by evangelical theology to a large extent. This observation is not necessarily quantifiable but it exemplifies the presence of this theological influence in an urban mainline Protestant church. Here, some interviewees have joined the congregation after marrying a member or after moving to Bangalore. Others belong to families who have been members of CSI City for one or several generations.

The interviewees from CSI Tamil are generally from a working-class background and this corresponds with the congregation’s socioeconomic profile. Their overall level of education is lower than in the other churches and a few interviewees here speak a more limited English than other interviewees. However, like other members of CSI Tamil, they participate in the process of upward social mobility. Thus, they are in a better position than previous generations in terms of education and professional occupations. One interviewee, Thomas, is an important lay leader in the congregation as secretary of the Pastorate Committee and his family has held significant positions in the church for three generations. Like him, most interviewees from CSI Tamil come from families that have belonged to the congregation for one or two generations. One person, however, is a newcomer having joined a few years ago. The interviewees in CSI Tamil are overall less influenced by evangelical theology than the interviewees from the other congregations.

In Mega AG, all interviewees are converts, from Hinduism or from another Christian tradition. This does not mean that all members of the church are

217 This is a common practice among south Indian Pentecostals, Bergunder notes: Bergunder 2008: 140-141.
converts to Pentecostalism. Nevertheless, this reflects on the active outreach that the church explicitly focuses on. Mega AG is, moreover, a relatively new church and therefore, unlike the other three churches, it does not have adult members whose families have been members for several generations. One interviewee, Malini, retains membership in her native Catholic Church along with her membership in Mega AG. She participates in service or mass in both churches although at the time of our interview she was more frequent in Mega AG than in her Catholic church. The most extremely evangelical (some might say fundamentalist) among my interviewees belong to Mega AG, namely Mohana and Michael. They hold the most dichotomous views on the relationship between (evangelical) Christianity and other religions.

In TPM, not all lay interviewees agree with every aspect of the church’s radical theology although they all adhere to its ideal of sanctification and admire the main representatives of it, the pastor and the sisters. TPM interviewees usually have parents who have converted to the church from another Christian background. They have different levels of involvement in the church, from a lifelong member who is a Sunday school teacher (Pansy) to a newcomer from another Pentecostal church (Phoebe). Notable regarding TPM is that all the lay interviewees are young women. One reason for this is the adherence to conservative values in this church where men and women are not encouraged to mingle much with each other. Nevertheless, I will express some self-criticism here. In retrospect, although the young women from TPM were excellent interviewees, I should have tried harder to achieve a better age and gender representation among the interviewees from this church.

One important variation among interviewees is that some of them have studied theology at academic institutions which influences their way of reflecting upon the questions discussed in this dissertation. In addition to three of the pastors, three lay interviewees have studied theology. These three all belong to CSI City. Cecil was, at the time of our interview, studying for a Master’s degree from a theological college in Bangalore, having already earned his Bachelor’s degree. Cauvery and Chakradev have both studied at well-established evangelical theological institutions. Cauvery holds a Bachelor’s degree from a theological college in Karnataka, and Chakradev a BD and an MTh from two reputable evangelical colleges in India. Cauvery is a Sunday school teacher in CSI City and a teacher in its rural “outreach place,” and preaches at Women’s Fellowship gatherings. Chakradev has sometimes preached in the main church service. In addition to being active members of CSI City, they are engaged in independent ministry. This means, for example, conducting prayer meetings, counselling people and, in Chakradev’s case, giving presentations at special programmes, courses, or workshops, usually about interreligious issues. Chakradev is both a lay member of CSI City and an independent pastor, and thus holds a dual lay/pastoral position that is unique among my interviewees.
Among the pastors, Reverend Matthew from Mega AG has studied at Southern Asia Bible College (SABC), the Assemblies of God’s educational institution in Bangalore. Both CSI pastors have graduated with a Bachelor of Divinity degree from the UTC. Reverend Chand has, additionally, a Master’s degree in Theology from abroad. Apart from both having studied at the UTC, both CSI pastors were also born and grew up in Bangalore. With this urban and educational background, they are not representative of CSI clergy in general. Pastor Pradeep from TPM is the only pastor without any academic theological education. Instead, he has been trained according to TPM’s traditional _guru-shishya_ method which is a more narrowly focused training than the academic training the other pastors have undergone. For this reason, he does not possess the same overview of broader theological and social issues as they do though he is an expert in TPM doctrine.

The four pastors speak from significantly different positions. Both Pentecostal pastors express the official theology of their respective churches. Once, pastor Pradeep asked me why I enquired about his views on a certain topic when another pastor had already provided the answer in his sermon at a meeting that he knew I had attended. The CSI pastors are also representatives of their church, but it was clear during our interviews that they expressed their personal opinions and made no claims to speak for their church as a whole. Unlike the Pentecostal pastors, pastor Pradeep in particular, they do not represent a homogenous theological line that all the ministers of a church are supposed to adhere to.

This chapter has aimed to provide the reader with insight into the larger societal context as well as the more specific church milieus that form the background against which interviewees in this study speak. The presentation and analysis of their views of religious diversity will commence in the next chapter, starting with their understandings of their own Christian faith.
3. An Evangelical Faith

The chapters immediately following this chapter will discuss interviewees’ attitudes to other religions and other Christian traditions whereas this chapter will discuss their attitudes to their own Protestant Christian faith. This sequence is necessary since their views on their own religion form the basis for perspectives on other religious traditions and the related subjects of Christian mission, interreligious relations, and the use of religious images.

The Unsaved Father

A recurring theme in my material is an interviewee’s concern for a family member who has not “accepted Christ as personal saviour” (to use an expression borrowed from emic language). Typically, this last remaining family member is the father. This theme illustrates important aspects of the way interviewees view their own Christian faith in relation to other faiths, and the consequences of this in their own lives. Below, I describe three examples of interviewees with concerns about their father’s faith and salvation, a theme that I call “the unsaved father.”

Mohana’s family is a good example of this theme. Originally Hindu, she and her sister Monisha converted to Christianity as young women. Their mother also became convinced about Christianity at the same time although her husband’s opposition meant there was a delay before she could start going to church and receive baptism. Of the four of them, Mohana’s father was the only person who had not converted. In Mohana’s conversion story, her father’s negative attitude to Christianity was initially a great challenge. He especially disagreed with his own family members disobeying him by leaving their Hindu traditions to embrace Christianity. His daughters had experienced his rage but their mother had been especially targeted, functioning as a buffer between her daughters and their father’s violence.

At the time of my interview with Mohana, her father’s outlook had changed and he had come to fully accept their Christianity, she said. He respected the importance of their attending church on Sunday mornings and even searched for marriage proposals from Christian grooms for his daughters, something which had earlier been unthinkable. He had changed not only in his attitude to the conversion to Christianity his wife and daughters had undergone but also
in his personal behaviour and in his own relation to Christian faith. His drinking habits had improved, which Mohana interpreted as a “miracle” and “deliverance.” She saw “God … working on him slowly.” Now he allowed his daughters to pray for him and told them about his problems “because he believes that we pray for him and things change,” Mohana said. When improvements followed, it gave them the opportunity to tell him that it was because of Christ. Another important sign of what Mohana saw as progress in her father was that around ten months before our interview he removed all his images of Hindu Gods and placed them in a bag – “all by himself” she pointed out – and his daughters disposed of them. On seeing that, he was upset at first, thinking that the photo of his parents was also gone but, once assured that Mohana and Monisha had saved it, he agreed not to perform puja for it. (Thus, while the two sisters clearly see images of Hindu Gods as dangerous objects, a photo of their father’s parents could be harmless as long as it did not inspire the Hindu tradition of performing puja for the ancestors.) Whenever he met a pastor, Mohana’s father would say that he was a believer and that he believed in Jesus.

While she saw all these as hopeful signs, there still remained reasons for Mohana to worry about her father. She said: “But then sometimes I see him watch those Hindu stories on TV.” (There are popular renditions of Hindu classics such as the epics Mahabharata and Ramayana broadcast on Indian television.) I asked if it was possible that he watched them just for entertainment without believing in them. She replied that she did not think that her father “totally believes” [in Christianity] or has totally “left those things,” meaning Hindu beliefs and practices. “Because just now my sister was telling me – he’d not worshipped any idols – and it seems just this morning she saw something.” Monisha had seen their father doing something with an “idol” and applying something to his forehead. “I’m a little worried, upset about it now,” Mohana told me. She was not convinced that her father had fully taken the step from Hindu to Christian beliefs. “Not that he goes searching for it [Hindu religion] performing pujas and all that, but I would believe the day he would pick up the Bible and say ‘Jesus, you have to help me.’ When he would turn unto Him and say ‘you are the only God.’” She said that she was “very much … concerned about his soul.” The reason for her concern was that she was absolutely convinced that confession of Christ was the only way that her father’s soul could be saved.218

In addition to the themes of salvation and the perceived differences between Christian and Hindu faith, Mohana’s story also illustrates a change of family power dynamics. Earlier, Mohana and Monisha had been dependent on their father and he had expected to make decisions for the family and be obeyed by his wife and daughters. Now that his daughters had jobs with sufficient salaries, they could rent their own flat and this had initially upset their father. They were no longer dependent on their father’s money or his house.

218 Interview with Mohana 2010-12-14.
Their mother could stay with them if she preferred that to living with her husband. Although they still partially lived in their father’s house, they now had another option which meant they could be Christians openly and it was their father who felt that he had to perform Hindu practices discreetly if he wanted to do so. As I noticed by the attempted secrecy about bringing their mother with them to church when I visited their house one evening, their father was still not completely happy about his wife’s attendance. But they were no longer afraid of violence from him. It was then around fifteen years since their conversion and probably their father’s advanced age, changes in his physical health, and his subsequent increased dependence on his children also played a part in these shifts in the power relations in their family.

Mohana expressed, on the one hand, great confidence in having found the true God and the way to salvation through Jesus Christ. She is assured of this salvation for her own part. On the other hand, she expressed great concern about her father’s salvation. She did not see him displaying the full break with his Hindu past which she believes is required for salvation, along with complete commitment to Christian faith. Love for her father expressed itself through anxiety about his salvation and a belief that she had a part to play in advancing his chances to be saved, through means such as praying for him and discouraging him from performing Hindu religious practices or keeping images of Hindu Gods in the house. Mohana’s view on her father illustrates a more generalised concern many Christians have for their religious others’ salvation to eternal life. This is a central theme for most interviewees except for the CSI pastors and a few CSI lay members.

Mohana’s father is a Hindu but an unsaved father does not have to come from another religion, he could also be a Christian from another church, as in Reverend Matthew’s family. Reverend Matthew told me about his concern for his parents’ salvation, especially his father’s. Although the parents are Christian and belong to the Syrian Orthodox tradition, he felt that their personal faith was not of the kind required for salvation. His father was ninety-three years old and had suffered a stroke the previous year that made it difficult for him to walk. On the positive side, the pastor considered his father was “very open now” compared to before, and often called his son asking for his prayers. But when I asked whether the father had had a “born-again experience,” the pastor expressed doubt: “I’m not so sure,” he said. Reverend Matthew, as well as his sister who “also is very concerned about it,” had repeatedly asked their father to “pray the prayer of faith.” When they asked him to pray he did but Reverend Matthew said: “I don’t know whether it has really… made an impact. I don’t know.” Reverend Matthew’s mother was “more open,” he said. He replied in the affirmative when I asked him if he meant “open to the gospel,” which was what he usually referred to when he spoke of “openness” in a positive sense. His mother was “very religiously” active, reading the Bible and praying every morning. Still, he was not certain about her either, “whereas my brothers and sisters I know very well.” In their cases, he was sure that their
faith is of the right calibre. The reason for his doubt regarding his parents was that “we expect, you know, if they really change, then the way they talk” should mirror this change. His parents did not show the signs of such a change in the way that they talked or prayed. Because of these doubts, Reverend Matthew was concerned for the salvation of his parents: “It’s my prayer for all these many years. … I want to see that they should know before they die … that exactly is my prayer.” He was hopeful that the change would come: “I’m sure something should happen.” His preferred method was prayer because if he and his siblings were to “keep pushing them” too much they would “get fed up.”

To some readers, it may seem strange that Reverend Matthew should be so worried about his parents when they are actually Christians. Especially in the case of his mother who showed clear signs of an active spirituality – praying daily, reading the Bible and attending church regularly. (She attended a Syrian Orthodox church; her husband was not able to go because of his health problems.) But the pastor’s experience leads him to believe strongly in radical change as a consequence of personal faith. Against this background, when his parents do not show the expected signs of praying, speaking, and behaving differently that he believes should follow such an insight, this leads him to worry about them. It makes him doubt that they have really experienced the genuine change of heart that he thinks should follow conversion to personal faith, the total change of perspective, of “seeing everything in a different light” that he himself experienced after “coming to know Jesus” in his youth.

In Reverend Matthew’s family, the distinction between saved Christian believer and unsaved religious other occurs at the boundary between two different church traditions – Pentecostal and Syrian Orthodox. But the same distinction could be made between people within the same Christian denomination, even within the same congregation, as in the case of Cecil’s father.

Cecil and his wife Chinni are members of CSI City who emphasise the importance of the born-again experience. Even though Cecil’s father is “a regular churchman,” more regular to church than Cecil himself in fact, he was a cause of concern for the young couple. Chinni described their doubts about him: “We pray for his father. We don’t know if he has had the experience, but we pray that he will if he hasn’t. We don’t know, maybe he has and he doesn’t show it out. I don’t know.” Cecil’s mother, on the other hand, had become “quite a prayerful woman” after recovering from a serious illness a few years earlier. They believed that she had a more personal relationship with Christ since that time. The uncertainty regarding Cecil’s father was something that Chinni and Cecil thought about much and talked to each other about. Although the father had been a regular member of the church since birth, he did

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220 Quotations from interview with Rev. Matthew 2008-02-29.
221 Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.
not show the expected external signs of “the experience” of personal conversion, and this led his son and daughter-in-law to worry about him. It was obviously a sensitive issue, since they did not talk to Cecil’s father himself about it.

What these three cases have in common is the way that the interviewees worry about their fathers because they do not believe them to have had the necessary born-again experience, or the experience of personally encountering Jesus Christ and confessing their sins and accepting Jesus as their saviour. Because they link this experience to the prospect of salvation to eternal life, they are anxious when their fathers do not show the expected signs of the born-again experience. As they all express in different ways, they expect the experience to lead to visible manifestations in the way a person acts, speaks, and prays. Having had this experience themselves, they are assured of their own salvation but remain concerned for the salvation of others, not least their own fathers.

These interviewees speak about their fathers in similar ways whether the father is a Hindu, belongs to another Christian church, or is a member of the same congregation as their own. This reflects the importance in their belief system of the difference made by the born-again experience. It distinguishes those Christians who see themselves as born-again not only from people of other religions but also from Christians who are not perceived to be born-again – because they themselves do not conceive of their faith and salvation in such terms or because they do not show the expected signs of the experience. As seen here, the line between saved Christian believers and unsaved others can be drawn within a family, even in a family where all belong to the same congregation. The vital difference is the born-again experience and this places Christians who are not believed to be born-again together with Hindus in the category of religious others.

As seen above, CSI as well as Pentecostal interviewees expressed concern for a father (or father-in-law) whose salvation they felt unsure of. On the other hand, a person can belong to a Pentecostal church that emphasises the born-again experience and still be able to live with the fact that his father is a Hindu without being very anxious about him. This is the case with Madhu from Mega AG.

Madhu was the first person in his family to become a Christian. Initially it led to a “great clash” in the family but in time his family members accepted his conversion and eventually his mother, brothers and sisters-in-law followed his example, leaving only the father still a Hindu. Although Madhu said that his father was still in the Hindu fold, he also described him as having faith in the Christian God. He said that his father “loves God” and that he goes to church whenever he visits Bangalore. In fact, his father “loves to go to church,” Madhu said, and “he likes the gospel.” He also prayed regularly and listened to Christian songs. “But he has … his own limitation and … that’s why he’s not fully coming up and accepting” Christianity formally. “But I’m
glad that at least he loves God, and he has faith,” Madhu said. His father has not converted “traditionally, he did not take baptism and all. But he loves God. That’s more than enough. Like, he has accepted Christ by faith.” The main difference between the father and the rest of the family was that he was not baptised and did not attend church regularly. Madhu said that he has “never insisted” that his father be baptised. “I’m not trying to force him. I just want to show God’s love, you know. Through our deeds, through our action, not only simply talking.” Madhu said he prayed for his father without focusing on the question of baptism. “But I want him to fully accept Christ and have more faith in Christ. And then he should be able to decide. And it’s God’s will,” he said, referring to John 6:44: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them” (NIV). “And that is God’s will, and I’m praying that God will choose my father also.”

In our interview, Madhu expressed more hope and trust than anxiety about his father. It was illustrative when he said that he found it “more than enough” that his father “loves God,” even if he prays for him to overcome his “limitations” and “fully accept Christ.” It is also interesting to note that it is God’s action – to choose Madhu’s father and draw him to Christ – that Madhu describes as the last remaining step to make his father a Christian. His expectations are centred on God rather than on his father. He does not blame his father for not responding to God’s call; it is God that he expects to do more.

Madhu described his father as having partly accepted Christian faith, although without having made the final step of converting formally or of “fully accepting Christ.” Triveni’s Hindu father, on the other hand, showed no interest in Christian faith but she remained optimistic about his salvation. Triveni is from a Catholic-Hindu background with a Catholic mother and Hindu father. After moving to a hostel for her studies, Triveni joined some of her friends there in attending a CSI church. She subsequently started going to CSI Tamil, received confirmation there and became a regular churchgoer there, attending Sunday services and Bible studies. As a child, she accompanied her father to the temple as well as her mother to church but she has not gone to any temple after understanding that the “real God is Jesus” she said. She dissociated herself from the Catholic element of her childhood as well. Looking back now, she thought that she had been worshipping “idols” when she accompanied her mother to a Catholic church whereas now she worships “Jesus only.” She prefers the CSI to the Catholic Church finding the faith “good” there and the prayers effective. In Triveni’s words, she is the only person in her family who “believes” even though her parents worship in a Catholic church and Hindu temple, respectively. She found that she herself came to personal faith and knowledge of God only after her introduction to the CSI.

Although Triveni wants her family members to read the Bible, join her church and become Protestant believers, she is not overly anxious about their

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222 Interview with Madhu 2008-03-03.
eternal fate. When I asked about her Hindu father, she said that she wants him to become a Christian and to know Jesus and follow his way. But she believes that if a Hindu or Muslim dies without knowing Christ then God will accept them because all people are God’s children. She feels that God might in fact be angrier with her than with her father because she has not more forcefully tried to convince him to come to church. She does, however, have faith that, just as God has brought her to Protestant Christian faith, God will bring her father also.223

Madhu and Triveni share an optimistic view of the prospects of salvation for their fathers. Although they want them to become Christian believers, they express little anxiety about their eternal fate. Instead, they emphasise their trust in God either to convince the father of the superiority of Christian faith or to give him eternal life anyway. Compared to Mohana, Reverend Matthew, and Chinni and Cecil, they hold more optimistic or generous beliefs about salvation in general and do not emphasise the born-again experience. In this, they represent another view of salvation and of the relationship between Protestant Christians and their religious others which is also present in the material and which counters the dominant view that the first three cases represent. Thus, the differences in the way these interviewees speak about their unsaved fathers mirror differences in overall attitudes to the relation between Christianity and other religions, found throughout the material. Something which unites these interviewees across their differences is the belief that as Christian believers they have a duty to try to share their faith with religious others.

A Unique Relationship with God

In various ways, interviewees often emphasise the unique relationship with God which, they believe, can only be found in Christian faith. The relationship between Christian believer and God is related to the question of salvation to eternal life, as illustrated by the concern of some interviewees for their fathers. There is also a strong this-worldly dimension to their faith with consequences seen in everyday life.

Christ is what makes all the difference in the world. … For example, for me now, because I know Christ is there, because I know Jesus is there, I’m not worried about anything, I can go through anything. But at the same time, for a person who has no Christ in his life, everything is his problem. Everything, he has to worry about everything. … But I don’t have to worry about anything, because I know Christ is there in the centre of my life. So, no matter what, He would lead me.224

223 Interview with Triveni 2011-03-24.
224 Interview with Pansy 2008-02-16.
Pansy’s words quoted here are representative of the general picture conveyed by my material of a strong belief in a personal, loving God who is always close to the individual believer and whose presence is felt in her daily life. Interviewees testify to the positive consequences of a personal relationship with God which they perceive in the forms of various blessings and miracles, answers to their prayers, guidance through their lives, and an assurance of having found the way to salvation.

The personal nature of the relationship between God and Christian believer is emphasised by the way that interviewees speak of God’s guidance in their lives. God is repeatedly referred to as intervening directly into the individual believer’s life. For example, a person sitting on a bus could experience being prompted and interpret this as an instruction from God to look down on the floor, which she did in time to see that some important papers had fallen from her lap while she dozed off.225 This example illustrates the way that interviewees expect God’s guidance in everything from everyday matters to matters of decisive importance in life. Some examples of divine guidance have involved receiving baptism,226 refusing or accepting a marriage proposal,227 staying at a particular job228 or, in connection with conversion from Hinduism, eating food containing eggs (considered non-vegetarian and therefore prohibited to some Hindus).229 God speaks to the individual believer through Bible passages, messages preached in church, or the words of other people who – consciously or unconsciously – convey a message from God. An additional way that God speaks particularly to the Pentecostal believer, and this is especially emphasised in TPM, is through prophecies in church. A congregation member could interpret a certain prophecy as directed at her personally.230

The One True God

Many of my interviewees express as a fundamental tenet of their faith that the God with whom they enjoy such an intimate relationship is the only true God. “You can have a relationship with God only in the name of Christ. Anything else is what you assume. I mean, that’s the truth, that’s the basic line,” Mohana said, clarifying that, in her view, all other religious beliefs are based on false assumptions.231 She is not alone in this belief. Most other interviewees agree with her that a genuine relationship with God can be experienced only through Christian belief. For example, Cecil did not think that Muslims could be said to worship the same God as Christians do, because: “At the end of the day

225 The example with the bus is from the interview with Pansy 2008-02-16.
226 Interview with Mohana 2010-12-14.
227 Interviews with Pansy 2008-02-16, Mohana 2010-12-14.
228 Interview with Michael 2011-03-10.
229 Interview with Mohana 2010-12-14.
230 Interview with Pansy 2008-02-16.
231 Interview with Mohana 2010-12-14.
there’s only one God, so if you’re not worshipping Him, you’re not worshiping God.” Like Cecil, the majority of interviewees spoke with certainty about the Trinitarian God that Christians believe in as the only God truly in existence. Some explicitly contradicted the popular Hindu belief that all Gods are different faces of the one Divinity. For example, Michael thought that some Hindus of his acquaintance were “confused. So they believe that there is a Christian God as well as their other gods, and all the gods are one. That’s what they believe. … So when we separate that Jesus Christ is the God, he is the only God, is when they backfire.”

In explicit or implicit comparisons with other religious beliefs, interviewees stated that only Christians worship the “true” or the “real” God, “the real God of love,” as Thomas said. Additionally, interviewees repeatedly emphasised that “our God” or Jesus Christ is “alive,” “the true living God,” or the “living God,” a quality that was especially important in contrast with Hindu God-images.

The Only Way to Salvation

As there is only one God so there is only one way to salvation, according to most of my interviewees. This dominant line of thinking about salvation is well illustrated by a few statements by Chinni and Cecil. When I asked them why they would like their friends from other religions to come to the Christian faith, Cecil replied: “The main reason is I would like to see them in heaven.” Chinni said: “You could be good; you could be doing the most wonderful things on earth, which even a so-called Christian, born in a Christian family-

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233 Interviews with Pansy 2008-02-16, Mohana 2010-12-14, Rev. Matthew 2011-01-11, Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13, Phoebe 2011-03-19, Priya 2011-02-09, Michael 2011-03-10, pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20, Thivy 2012-01-24, Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08. In addition, Christina 2011-01-25 and Thomas 2012-02-02 expressed their belief in the inexistence of Hindu Gods, specifically. Triveni 2011-03-24 and Tarun 2011-02-04 referred to Jesus as the true or real God but did not expressly say that there is no reality behind other Gods. (I did not expressly ask interviewees whether the Christian God is the only true God or the only God in existence.)
234 Interviews with Pansy 2008-02-16, Michael 2011-03-10, Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-10.
235 Interview with Michael 2011-03-10.
236 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
Christian … would not be doing what this Hindu is doing, but I think ultimately if he doesn’t know Jesus as his only saviour, he’s missed it all.” To my question if this hypothetic Hindu would be condemned then, she replied: “Yeah, because Jesus tells, no? It’s only through him that you can attain eternal life.”

The question of individual salvation is an important issue for most of my interviewees. The theme surfaced in discussions on various other matters. For example, on the question of interreligious marriage, Christina said that a Christian should marry a Hindu only if he or she has a firm intention to make the Hindu spouse a follower of Jesus. The Christian spouse should consider “eternal life” rather than “this world’s life” and thus try to save the soul of the Hindu spouse. An interreligious marriage could be a God-given chance to bring about the salvation of a soul to eternal life, she suggested. Phoebe approvingly described the core of TPM’s teaching: “And the only intention is that you have to reach Zion, the eternal Kingdom. You should be seen. What is the purpose of living? You should be seen in heaven.”

Like Phoebe, Christina, and Chinni and Cecil discussed above, most interviewees spoke of salvation in terms of eternal life for the individual. To describe the fate awaiting the person saved by faith in Christ, they used expressions such as “a life in eternity” or “a place in heaven.” The opposite fate was mentioned a few times as being “hell,” “eternal damnation,” “Hades, the lake of fire,” or “no eternal life.”

The Born-Again Experience

As stated above, most interviewees are firmly convinced that belief in Jesus is the only way to salvation. Many of them express this in terms of the necessity of a personal conversion experience. They use a few different expressions for this; a person who has undergone the experience can be called “born-again,” “saved,” or a “believer.” They understand the born-again experience along the following lines: Each individual must reach a realisation of her sins and of the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross. She must make the personal decision to confess her sins and accept Jesus Christ as her only Lord and Saviour. She is then expected to live in the light of this experience, maintaining her personal relationship with Christ and doing her best to follow the teachings of the Bible as those are understood.

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240 Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.
241 Interview with Christina 2011-01-25.
242 Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19.
243 These two quotations are from the interview with Pansy, 2008-02-16. (Other interviewees, too, spoke of salvation in terms of eternity, eternal life, and heaven.)
244 Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19.
245 Interview with Priya 2011-02-09.
246 Interview with Michael 2011-03-10.
247 Interview with Christina 2011-01-25.
The emphasis on the born-again experience means that those who adhere to this theological principle make an essential distinction between those who are born-again and those who are not. On a theological level, this distinction overrides all other distinctions, including religious belonging. A Christian who has not personally encountered Christ is no more saved than a Hindu. Mohana expressed this dichotomy in the following way: “There are only two groups of people: one group who knows the Father, and the one who is disillusioned and has gone away from the Father.”

There are interviewees who adhere to this view who, before their born-again experience, were more affirmative of religious plurality. But with their born-again experience came a conviction that Jesus Christ is not only their personal saviour but the only and universal saviour. They now affirm with certainty that the experience of being born again in Christ is a universally necessary requirement for the relationship with God that brings blessings in this life and salvation to eternal life.

For Reverend Matthew, the change brought about by his conversion experience involved just such a change from a theologically pluralist view to one which sees an opposition between “life” for a person who is born again in Christ and “death” for a person who is not. He had been taught by his liberal Christian parents that a person’s faith would save her, whatever faith that was, and had believed in the value of being “all-inclusive” and accommodating of other people’s faith, until he “was confronted with the need of the Saviour, our Lord Jesus Christ. That made all the difference.” He became convinced that “this is it. There’s no more to it.” In his “early days, before coming to the Lord,” his attitude to other religions had been more influenced by the open, pluralist spirit of Hinduism, he said. But after his salvation experience, he saw the difference as being “between life and death, between light or darkness.” It was the personal encounter with Christ which made the difference: “If I had not known Christ in a very personal way,” he would have said that all religions are good, because they all teach good values such as “how to respect people.” “Nobody ever teaches ‘evil is good.’” But “the crux,” he said, is “which way leads to Heaven.” Reverend Matthew’s born-again experience entailed a change from the “very liberal … follow your conscience, anything goes” Christian faith that his parents had brought him up within, to a Christian faith which emphasises the need for Jesus Christ the unique saviour.

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248 Interview with Mohana 2010-12-14.
249 Interviews with Rev. Matthew 2008-02-29 and 2011-01-11, Mohana 2010-12-14, Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
250 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2008-02-29.
252 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2008-02-29.
Among the interviewees, there are those who, according to the view outlined above, see the born-again distinction as absolutely crucial as differentiating true Christian believers from all others. Some of them have converted after a Hindu, Catholic, or Syrian-Orthodox upbringing. But conversion from another religious background is not necessary for this born-again experience; one could remain in the same church and experience the instantaneous or gradual change of heart associated with it. This reflects two different (if related) uses of the term “conversion.” To avoid confusion about this, I prefer the term “the born-again experience” for the experience of spiritual regeneration. This also conforms better to emic use since interviewees only use “conversion” in reference to change of religious affiliation.

There are also interviewees who view the relationship between Protestant faith and other faiths in terms of gradation rather than dichotomy. These interviewees, having themselves undergone a religious change from a Hindu and/or Catholic to a Protestant affiliation, testify to a consequent spiritual growth. They distinguish between Protestant “believers” and people of other religions or other Christian traditions, but this distinction is not all-important to them and they do not rule out the possibility of salvation without confession of Christ. Additionally, in the course of his studies at the liberal United Theological College in Bangalore, Madhu started to question the dichotomy between those who are born again in Christ and those who are not. He was torn between the belief that the Bible stated that confession of Christ is a requirement for salvation and the possibility that there could yet be “salvation beyond Christ.”

For a third group of interviewees, the born-again distinction is not essential in their theological thinking. That does not necessarily mean that they personally have not had a born-again experience only that they do not speak in such terms when discussing the relation between Christianity and other faiths. Those interviewees who emphasise the born-again experience have undergone

253 Mohana, Michael, and Reverend Matthew from Mega AG, Pansy, Priya, Phoebe, and pastor Pradeep from TPM, Chinni, Cecil, Cauvery, and Chakradev from CSI City. Priya differs here in that she does not see rejection of her own religious past as necessary, and thus she downplays the difference between the before and after being born-again. Although she has converted from the Catholic Church to TPM and sees the latter as superior, she still ascribes some positive value to the Catholic Church.

254 Mohana, Cauvery and Chakradev.

255 Michael and Priya.

256 Reverend Matthew.

257 Malini and Triveni from CSI Tamil. Malini is a unique case among my interviewees in her dual affiliation. She retains her membership in the Catholic Church while also having membership in Mega AG.

258 Interview with Madhu 2008-03-03.

259 Thivya, Tarun, Thomas, and Reverend Thangam from CSI Tamil, Christina and Reverend Chend from CSI City. Like the first category of interviewees, Christina laid much emphasis on the importance of salvation through faith in Christ. She did not, however, speak about the born-again experience as something that separates different categories of Christians from each other.
it themselves but for those who do not emphasise it one cannot automatically conclude that they have not undergone it.

God’s Grace and the Human Response

Interviewees believe that the born-again experience results in this-worldly blessings, however, of equal if not more importance to them is the promise of salvation that it entails. As I have described earlier, belief in salvation for the individual is central to the faith of most interviewees. They have clear ideas about how this salvation occurs. Among these Protestant Christians, the sola gratia principle is often expressed along these lines: the initiative to salvation must come from God. God reveals the truth to a person and opens their eyes to the reality that they must “come to Christ.” The ability to save a person lies ultimately with God.

Several interviewees emphasise the point that salvation ultimately comes about neither by the activity of the person herself nor through people around her but by God’s grace. For example, Reverend Matthew said: “We have to keep praying, asking God [to save others] … Our job is to say, but our job is not to save.” That “job” is God’s: “He only can save, or He can bring them to reality. The Holy Spirit can make this. But our job is – I should not be found guilty of not having spoken to them. That’s the only thing. At least in their lifetime when I met them I would have spoken.”

One way of expressing the necessity for God’s initiative in the salvation process is to say that people need to be “touched by God.” Phoebe, for example, said that for people to accept Christ, “God should touch them. Only then they’ll be saved.” The touch of God is seen not only as something that convinces people from other religions to adopt Christian faith, it is also needed by those born in a Christian family to awaken them to a personal faith. Chinni told me: “We have a friend who always calls us. He’s born in a Christian [family] and he’s CSI, but unfortunately, he hasn’t had the touch of God yet. /---/ So that’s sad, we think about him, and we hope that one day he will actually experience Christ.

In the light of the importance ascribed to salvation through belief only in Christ, the surrounding context, in which an overwhelming majority worships other Gods, could be disheartening. Priya, for example, said how she felt “very sad, I feel horrible” and got “goose bumps” on seeing funeral processions for people who had not died as Christians, thinking “there’s another soul going to

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262 Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19.
263 Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.
eternal damnation without knowing Christ.”264 But, stronger than such dejection, there is a current of hope in the material. A number of interviewees, Priya included, express a firm belief that God will reach out to every individual with the offer of salvation at least once in that person’s lifetime.

When I asked Chinni and Cecil how they felt when they considered that, according to their belief, the vast majority of people around them would be condemned, Cecil replied:

Sometimes I wonder why. You know, He can use different kinds of methods to reach them better, I don’t know why He uses us. First of all, we are not good enough to be used, and He uses us. So that is always a question, I think it’ll be there till I die. But what I feel is that He doesn’t leave, He doesn’t let anyone die without giving them the opportunity to know Him. And if they can’t take it, then I don’t know.

I asked how this opportunity would be offered and Cecil said: “I don’t know, I think just reasonably, if I say my God is a reasonable God, I think He would allow that to happen.”265

Several interviewees reason the way Cecil does, that God is fair and the implication of God’s fairness is that God will reach out to each person at least once and give her an opportunity to choose salvation through Christ. Their conviction of this stems from their trust in God’s love for, and just treatment of, each human being. Descriptions of God as “fair,”266 “just,”267 “reasonable,”268 “faithful,”269 “merciful,”270 “knocking at our doors every day,”271 “[knowing] what He’s doing” and “[doing] his duty”272 recur.

Eschatological visions in the Bible provide one source for this optimistic view.273 According to Mohana, “The Bible says that … the world will not come to an end until everyone has heard the gospel.274 So God wouldn’t lie. There is a point in a lifetime that everyone hears about Christ.”275

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264 Interview with Priya 2011-02-09.
265 Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.
266 Interviews with Mohana 2010-12-14, Priya 2011-02-09.
267 Interview with Priya 2011-02-09.
268 Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.
269 Interview with Pansy 2008-02-16.
270 Interview with Michael 2011-03-10.
271 Interview with Mohana 2010-12-14.
272 Interview with Mohana 2010-12-14.
273 Michael and Phoebe alluded to Philippians 2:10-11 and Mohana to Matthew 24:14 and took them as assurance that the message of Christ would reach every person on earth. Interviews with Mohana 2010-12-14, Michael 2011-03-10, Phoebe 2011-03-19.
274 See Matt. 24:14: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” (NIV)
275 Interview with Mohana 2010-12-14.
A specific version of this theme is the idea that the chance to choose salvation through Christ can come in the last moment of life, if it has not come before. Christina believes that such last-minute changes “probably” happen often. She said, Hindus and Muslims as well as Christians are “God’s children” and will be offered an opportunity to eternal life: “At the last moment also they can convert, they can change their mind and their belief.” Here, an old Christian motif of repentance and salvation in the last moment works as a way of reconciling the firm belief in God’s love and justice with the equally firm belief that confession of Christ is the only way to salvation while also seeing the empirical reality that only a small minority of the people living around them actually confess Christ.

From descriptions given by interviewees of how salvation happens, a pattern with a clear tripartite division of responsibilities emerges. God offers salvation to each individual, the Christian has a part to play in mediating God’s offer of salvation through her witness, and it is up to the individual to accept or reject this offer.

Several interviewees emphasise that God has given humankind a free will to accept or reject salvation through Christ. While God gives every person one or several chances to choose Christ, it is up to each individual how they respond to that opportunity when presented with it, they argue. Once a person has made the decision for Christ, one can expect this change of heart to leave its imprint on her behaviour. She is expected to speak about God and matters of faith in a new way and to adopt a different, more intense approach to prayer. She should also develop a new understanding of the Bible as the guiding principle in life. A person who has adhered to another religious tradition should dissociate herself from her previous faith and, after being saved, a person is also expected to share her faith with other people who are not yet saved.

Although interviewees understand the main parties in the salvation process to be God, who offers salvation, and the individual, who accepts or rejects the offer, they often involve a third party in the person of the Christian who has an obligation to “share the gospel” with those not yet saved. The motivation for this is clear, as expressed by Michael: “Each time I get an opportunity to

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276 Interviews with Mohana 2010-12-14, Christina 2011-01-31.
277 Interview with Christina 2011-01-31.
278 In Western culture this motif occurs, for example, in Graham Greene’s Brighton Rock (1938), where Greene uses repeated references to a line in a verse by Elizabethan scholar William Camden to suggest the possibility of last-minute repentance and redemption. (In Greene’s version, “Between the stirrup and the ground, he mercy sought, and mercy found,” a slight paraphrase of the original.)
279 Interviews with Pansy 2008-02-16, Mohana 2010-12-14, Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13, Pheobe 2011-03-19, Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08, Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16.
280 In the case of conversion from Catholicism, a minimum expectation is the cessation of certain practices perceived as particularly problematic such as the use of religious images or the veneration of Mary.
speak to my old friends I openly share to them. Yes, because I know that eventually we all have to face God, whether we are Christians or Hindus or whatever. We have to face God and that’s the bad part of it or the good part of it.” “One of the principles in the Bible,” he said, is that, as Christians “that is our duty, to share the word of Christ.”

In addition to “speaking” or witnessing to other people about Christ, the Christian can also help induce other people’s salvation by praying for it. Interviewees pray for family members and friends who, according to their understanding, are not saved. They understand this as an important part of the process.

The ideal is to witness actively, to share the gospel with those of other faiths so that as many souls as possible can be saved. The incentives are clear but in practice it is not a straightforward matter. There are obstacles, not least within a political discourse where conversion is a highly contested issue with vociferous opponents. In an Indian context, Christian evangelism is a controversial and at certain times and places even a dangerous activity. Additionally, there are more day-to-day social concerns to consider.

Alternative Views

As outlined above, the material reveals a strong tendency to view Christianity as possessing unique claims to both truth and salvation. According to the outlook of many interviewees, the main criterion for distinguishing between Christian self and religious other is whether or not the person exhibits a personal faith, a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and a commitment to the belief that only Jesus saves. In other words, the main division is between those who are “saved” or “born-again” and those who are not, and even Christians can fall under the second category. Salvation to eternal life for the individual is ascribed great importance and is a question that affects interviewees’ personal lives closely, as seen in the recurrent theme of the unsaved father. According to this view, it is usually possible to identify a saved person from signs such as her way of speaking, praying, and relating to the Bible. Additionally, the Christian has a part to play in furthering the salvation of others.

This constitutes what I call “the dominant view” on salvation and the essential difference between Christianity and other religions. In the material, there are departures from this dominant view in two directions, one more exclusive and one more inclusive. The first requires more of the individual than to be born again in Christ and is found in interviews with Pentecostals, primarily from TPM.

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281 Interview with Michael 2011-03-10.
282 This theme will be further expanded in Chapter 9 about mission and evangelism.
Pentecostal Additions: Immersion Baptism and Sanctification

In the Pentecostal churches, a person who has had the born-again experience is expected to follow up on this by receiving immersion baptism. The practice of baptism by immersion, also called “water baptism” in emic vocabulary, is one way in which the Pentecostal churches distinguish themselves from many other churches. In Pentecostal rhetoric, immersion baptism is seen in opposition to so-called “sprinkle baptism” and infant baptism, as practised for example in the Catholic Church and the CSI. TPM interviewees referred to biblical accounts of the baptism of Jesus to argue for the correctness of immersion baptism as opposed to “sprinkle baptism.” Pastor Pradeep particularly emphasised this. He explained to me that immersion baptism is a necessary step which enables a person to continue on their spiritual career; only after undergoing immersion baptism can a person receive the Holy Spirit and have a chance to “partake in the Second Coming,” that is, be raptured. Mega AG’s Reverend Matthew emphasised the issue less, but repeatedly referred to baptism in Mega AG as “water baptism,” thus implicitly distinguishing it not only from Spirit baptism but also from infant and “sprinkle” baptism.

The emphasis on baptism in the Holy Spirit (or Spirit baptism) is characteristic of Pentecostal Christianity. My Pentecostal interviewees see the experience of Spirit baptism as a desirable additional spiritual step and a sign of a close relationship with God. But generally, they do not understand it as an absolute requirement to be acknowledged as a genuine and saved Christian.

The theology of TPM corresponds with the dominant view on salvation in many ways and I have used interviews with TPM members for my presentation of that discourse. But in addition, TPM theology stresses the importance of sanctification with “perfection” as its ultimate goal. A Bible verse with special meaning to TPM, its “motto” as pastor Pradeep called it, is Colossians 1:28: “…we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus” (KJV). This verse is highly significant to self-understanding in the church where the focus is on

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283 The obvious exception is the Baptist churches. The Baptist presence in India is considerable with an estimated number of nearly 3.5 million Baptists in India in 1995. The Baptist presence is especially pronounced in northeast India and in Andhra Pradesh and is considerable also in cities such as Bangalore. Hedlund 2012: 73-74.
285 Interview with pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20.
287 Baptism in the Holy Spirit refers to an experience of a personal encounter with the Holy Spirit. Pentecostals (unlike evangelicals) see this experience as distinct from the experience of salvation. Many Pentecostals, especially those adhering to North American classical Pentecostal denominations, see speaking in tongues as a necessary consequence of Spirit baptism, but not all Pentecostals agree with this view. See Anderson 2004: 187-195. On beliefs and practices related to Spirit baptism among Pentecostals in south India, see Bergunder 2008: 140-143.
288 The special Pentecostal emphasis on and understanding of the Holy Spirit will be discussed in Chapter 6 about views on other Christian traditions.
289 Interview with pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20.
teaching perfection through renunciation of the world. The white-clad, celibate pastors and sisters are examples to lay members in their rejection of worldly temptations. Worldly temptations such as television, make-up, rock music, and the internet are all considered Satan’s devices to lure people away from the right side. Emphasis on white clothes and the removal of jewellery highlight TPM’s contextual South Asian version of the holiness tradition.

According to TPM theology, salvation is only a first step towards the ultimate goal of perfection. The church teaches that only those who achieve full spiritual perfection will receive a full reward at the imminent end time. Only perfect people will partake of the rapture at the Second Coming, or the “Secret Coming,” pastor Pradeep explained; those who are merely saved will be left behind for the tribulation of seven years that will follow.

Alternative Views of Salvation

Thus, TPM’s theology represents an exclusivism that is stricter than that of the dominant view since, according to TPM beliefs, it is not enough to be saved through the born-again experience, a person must also strive for perfection. On the other side of the spectrum, some interviewees, primarily the CSI pastors and laypeople from CSI Tamil, express alternative views that are more inclusive than the dominant view.

Three laypersons from CSI Tamil hold views that differ radically from the dominant view of salvation. Rather than stressing the fundamental difference brought about by the experience of being born again in Christ, they emphasise similarity across the borders of religious identity. Whether Hindu, Muslim, or Christian, all people are God’s children or God’s creation, they said, and God does not distinguish between people based on their religious identity.

Although they all three believe that Christianity has unique claims to truth, they do not think that God will judge people from other religions harshly for failing to realise this. Thivya and Triveni expressed optimistic views of salvation for people from other religions. Until Judgement Day, we do not know what people’s eternal fate will be but “our God is a great forgiver,” Thivya said. Triveni connected the question of salvation with moral qualities:

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290 These and other examples can be found in the TPM booklet “Worldliness: What it is & How to Avoid It.” On TPM’s holiness teachings, see also Bergunder 2008: 182-183.
291 Interviews with pastor Pradeep 2011-01-28 and 2012-01-20. Lay member Pansy also explained TPM’s dispensational premillennialism to me at some length: Interview with Pansy 2008-02-16. TPM’s eschatological teachings can be studied in booklets such as “Deeper Truths,” “The Great Tribulation” and “The Second Coming of Christ.” For an introduction to Pentecostal premillennial eschatology and “secret rapture” beliefs, see Anderson 2004: 29-30, 217-220. For TPM’s teachings on eschatology, see Bergunder 2008: 64-65.
292 Interviews with Triveni 2011-03-24, Thomas 2012-02-02.
293 Interview with Thivya 2012-01-24.
294 Interviews with Thivya 2012-01-24, Thomas 2012-02-02.
296 Interview with Thivya 2012-01-24.
Christians are not morally superior to other people, she maintained, and all will be judged by God. Thomas is positively assured that there will be salvation also for people who do not confess Christ. Conversion to Christianity is “not at all . . . necessary,” he believes, “even if you’re not a Christian, you’re doing a good deed, sure you will be in heaven.” He is aware that some Christians hold a different view on this. “But to me, if you’re God’s children, irrespective of religion, irrespective of nationality, irrespective of your – any divisions – you do the will of God, or do the good things to the humankind, you are children of God. Whether you have the name of Rama or you may have the name of Allah or Jesus, whatever it is.” If you do that “you will go to heaven,” he believes. Thomas’s belief that salvation hinges on doing good to humankind reveals a more community-oriented focus than the dominant view’s individualist focus on the born-again experience.

If the majority of interviewees are clearly exclusivist, according to the classic typology of beliefs about salvation presented by Alan Race, then the three interviewees above can be categorised as inclusivist. They believe that (the Christian) God will save not only those who have confessed Christ but also people of other religions. But unlike pluralists, they do not ascribe inherent value or truth to other religions and the final destination they envisage is the Christian concept of salvation, or heaven.

There are also a few interviewees who diverge from the dominant theological perspective in expressing what can be labelled as soteriological agnosticism (which does not feature in Race’s typology). These interviewees are convinced that Jesus Christ offers a way to salvation although, on the question of whether adherents of other religions could be saved without faith in Christ, they freely admit their uncertainty. This stands in contrast to the majority of interviewees, who are convinced that the answers to questions of salvation are clearly spelled out in certain key Bible verses. Along with Reverend Thangam from CSI Tamil, two Pentecostal interviewees express soteriological agnosticism, namely Malini and Madhu from Mega AG. At the time of our interview, Madhu was undergoing theological training at the United Theological College and he spoke about the liberalising influences the college was having on him, which made him question previous truths about religion. Both Malini and Madhu stated that, according to the Bible, there is no salvation without Christ, but at the same time they also stressed the element of human ignorance.

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297 Interview with Triveni 2011-03-24.
298 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
300 Since the publication of Race’s book, soteriological agnosticism has begun to emerge as an alternative in theology of religions, along with a shift in focus from the question of salvation to other issues. See e.g. Catherine Cornille 2017.
302 Interview with Madhu 2008-03-03.
303 Interviews with Madhu 2008-03-03, Malini 2011-03-21.
Social Focus

Reverend Chand from CSI City departs from the dominant view on salvation by not concentrating on the question of salvation to eternal life at all. In his view, it is of essential importance for every human being to have an active spirituality. However, this spirituality is not necessarily Christian faith, nor does he see its function primarily in relation to the hereafter. What is important is that “there should be a faith to drive you” that forms “the basis of doing good” in society.304

Reverend Chand explicitly contradicted the view of salvation for the individual as superior to other concerns. Rather than emphasising “salvation,” he spoke in terms of holistic “transformation,” social, economic, and spiritual liberation; he opposed a one-sided spiritual focus on “just knowing about Christ’s love.” For Reverend Chand, it is necessary to view things from “a political angle” also, with a view to the “evils in the society, like the structures of the rich and the poor, the caste system [with] the upper caste and the lower caste; the different systems are there – oppressive structures.” He pointed out that, in addition to spiritual experiences, there were also socio-political reasons behind conversions to Christianity (which mainly occur among Dalits and tribals). Speaking of mission, including that of the CSI in rural areas, he said: “The church believes, or the evangelical radical priest, that they are coming to the Lord. But along with that I feel that it is also the caste system, which is very much oppressive. So they want to come out of the caste system and to find a God who is a liberating God, which is Jesus Christ.”305

To shift the theological emphasis, as Reverend Chand does, from individual salvation to transformation of society is an exception to the dominant focus on the faith and salvation of the individual. This approach to Christian faith is present almost exclusively among CSI church leaders.306

Like Reverend Chand, Reverend Thangam is more concerned about society issues than about saving individual souls. He said that while he would be happy to see his Hindu friends becoming Christian, he was not unhappy with them remaining Hindus. He is more worried about interreligious relations on a society level than about the eternal fate of Hindus: “What will make me worry is when these differences start becoming more visible and we see each other as a threat. … The Hindu starts looking at the Christian as a threat. The

305 Interview with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17.
306 Examples of leaders are of course Reverend Chand and Reverend Thangam, and also Thomas who as a member of the Pastorate Committee held a position as lay leader in a CSI church. Triveni, neither a church leader of any sort nor theologically educated, also expressed a socioeconomic aspect of her faith. In addition, Madhu expressed a pronounced concern for social transformation which he saw as a result of his UTC training. Cauvery and Chakradev, also theologically educated, added a social perspective to the dominant view on salvation and said that “eternal life and social change” are “interlinked.” (Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev, 2012-02-08.)
Christian starts looking at the Hindu as a threat. I think that should worry me. Reverend Thangam prioritises peaceful interreligious coexistence over evangelism.

Triveni, a member of CSI Tamil, expressed a socioeconomic perspective on faith otherwise rare among lay interviewees. She explained her Christian belief by way of her poor background. Politicians favour rich people and do not do much to help the poor, she said, but she has faith that God will help her family. She received financial help towards her studies from church. Triveni expressed her belief that God is there to support people like her, that even if she does not read the Bible or pray God thinks of her every second. God is not only coming for the rich people, she said. On the contrary, when God asks a rich person to leave everything and come to Him, that person will not leave all his belongings to follow God. God is coming to save the poor, she concluded. Triveni here expresses a view of salvation which refers to this-worldly support as well as eternal life. She contributes a unique angle to the question of salvation when she argues that, in contrast to politicians who favour the rich, God favours the poor.

The views presented above challenge the dominant view of the central function of Christian faith and its relation to other faiths. They offer alternatives to the dominant view’s stress on faith in Jesus Christ as the essential difference which brings salvation and distinguishes Christianity from all other faiths.

The Centrality of Scripture

It is not only the personal encounter with Jesus Christ that many interviewees describe as vital. They also see a personal encounter with the Bible as central to the experience of personal salvation. The born-again experience is the beginning of a close relationship with the Bible, characterised by diligent reading of biblical texts and a sense of reverence for the Bible as holy and authoritative scripture, according to this ideal.

“The Bible says,” “the word of God says,” or similar phrases recur frequently in interviews. Bible verses are often quoted or alluded to and are referred to as authoritative statements about what a Christian must and must not do. They are also used to explain the world at large as well as phenomena occurring in interviewees’ immediate surroundings, including other religions, all interpreted through a biblicist lens. Interviewees also allude to biblical expressions without directly quoting or referring to Bible verses. In their references to the Bible, there is little sense of distance between the contexts of the

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309 Interview with Triveni 2011-03-24.
biblical texts and their own contemporary context. Biblical descriptions are applied directly to their surrounding environment.

A quotation from the interview with Michael is telling: “The Lord says that one day every tongue will confess, no? And one day everyone will bow down at the feet of Jesus Christ.” Here, he does not distinguish between what “the Lord says” and what is written in the Bible. God and the Bible become all but synonymous in such uses of scripture where it is understood as directly conveying the voice of God. The ways interviewees refer to the Bible repeatedly demonstrate their belief in the authority of the scriptures.

In addition to showing their views on the authority of the Bible in the way they referred to it, interviewees also made these views explicit, as when Mohana said that “the basic rule is the Bible” or Chakradev said that “I am a Bible-believing Christian, the Bible is my basic law.” Chakradev, who repeatedly referred to himself as “a Bible-believing Christian,” expressed himself radically about biblical authority. He even expressed himself as if the Bible was the main foundation for his convictions, and his belief in Jesus a consequence of his belief in the Bible: “As I said, I believe in the Bible. When I believe in the Bible I have to believe in Jesus, because I believe it is his word.” Chakradev described his conversion from Hinduism as initially brought about by his encounter with the Bible: “Suddenly when I lost all the hope in other gods and goddesses, this God, Bible, talked to me.”

The way that several interviewees ascribe absolute truth to the Bible can be illustrated with an example from the interview with Michael. He told me about a debate he had had with some school friends who were Buddhists. (Michael’s childhood was spent in the Himalayan region of India.) When a friend had argued that there was no absolute truth, Michael replied that, on the contrary, “there is truth. And the truth is in the Word of God.” Comparing biblical narratives with those of other religions, Michael said that other mythologies could be partly correct (where they tallied with biblical accounts) but the biblical version is “a hundred per cent correct.” This view is not restricted to the Pentecostal churches. The CSI pastor Thangam told me that he had been brought up to think that the narratives of other religions are “all mythical stories,” that is, not literally true, whereas the biblical narratives are literal accounts of history. With his studies at the UTC, Thangam’s perspective on the Bible changed. “Genesis was explained as a myth in UTC, not outside UTC,”

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310 Interview with Michael 2011-03-10. For the biblical references, see Isa. 45:23, Rom. 14:11, and Phil. 2:10-11.
311 The biblical verses closest to Michael’s allusion are to be found in a Pauline epistle, not in a prophecy or a direct statement by Jesus, which makes his initial statement “the Lord says…” all the more significant. See Phil. 2:10-11, where Paul directly names Jesus Christ. Here and in Rom. 14:11 Paul refers to Isa. 45:23.
312 Interview with Mohana 2010-12-14.
313 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
314 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
315 Interview with Michael 2011-03-10.
he said. Now, since his education at the UTC, he puts critical questions to the biblical texts.316

To summarise the way that most interviewees view the Bible, they ascribe it great authority and literal truth, and see it as providing vital guidance in life. They attribute little or no importance to the difference between the contexts in which the biblical texts were written and their own present-day context. They often show their familiarity with the Bible by referring to it in interview situations. This way of relating to the Bible is far from unique for my interviewees. Philip Jenkins describes the mainstream of Christianity in Africa and Asia as distinctly biblicist. He refers to “a much greater respect for the authority of scripture” compared to Christians in the West and “a tendency to literalism” among the “range of conservative themes” that are common among African and Asian Christians. In these continents, he writes, the Bible has “credibility as an authoritative source and a guide for daily living.”317 According to Allan Anderson’s description of the dominant view of the Bible among Pentecostals, they tend to have a literalist understanding of it and to closely relate the biblical texts to their daily lives and personal experiences. Generally, Pentecostals believe “that the Bible contains all the answers to human questions and must simply be read, believed, and obeyed.”318

An Enchanted Worldview

Another area in which my interviewees show similarities with other Christians in India as well as globally is their belief in the active presence of good and evil supernatural forces in the world. In different ways, interviewees express beliefs in a close connection between supernatural and material levels of reality by which both benevolent and malevolent powers can directly affect a person’s life.

A dualist worldview, in which the evil power of Satan is at work in opposition to God, underpins the theology of both Pentecostal churches in the study. A view of the world as a stage for the cosmic battle between God and the devil, where Christians should participate on God’s side through spiritual warfare, is characteristic of much of Pentecostalism worldwide.319 But among the interviewees who express this dualist worldview are not only Pentecostal interviewees but also some from the CSI.320

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316 Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03.
320 Interviews with Rev. Matthew 2008-02-29, Mohana 2010-12-14, Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13, Tarun 2011-02-04, Michael 2011-03-10, pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20, Cauvery and Chakravadev 2012-02-08 and 2012-02-10. Moreover, a dualist worldview is central to the theology of TPM, which both Pansy and Priya adhere to. They did not, however, explicitly touch upon the dualism of God and the devil in the interviews.
Evil is personified not only in Satan. Belief in other malevolent spiritual beings or “evil spirits,” the existence of “black magic” or “witchcraft,” possession by evil spirits and deliverance from them (or exorcism) sometimes surfaces in interviews. These subjects occur in my material but are not of high importance there. Exceptions to this rule are the two Pentecostal pastors who described healing and exorcism as important practices in their churches, along with other “signs and wonders.” (Divine healing is connected to this theme since in India supernatural causes are often suspected behind physical or mental ill health and other misfortunes.) These themes would probably have been more prominent in a rural context. In my material, a rationalist discourse is also represented and offers competing interpretations of subjects such as the causes of misfortune or the (im)possibility of contracting harm through contact with rituals and objects used in the practice of other religions.

The close connection between supernatural and mundane levels of reality receives more emphasis in my material in connection with the benevolent power of God. Many interviewees expect divine guidance and divine intervention in individual lives and believe in the concrete power of prayer. They expect tangible answers to prayer in the form of healing or other miracles as well as in solutions to problems and fulfillment of needs or wishes. Beliefs regarding prayer also refer to the ability of some people to pray more powerfully than others. Practices such as fasting and, in TPM, celibacy, are believed to enhance the power of prayer. In relation to healing sickness, TPM doctrine opposes materialist solutions by teaching that believers should rely only on divine healing and reject professional healthcare and medicine.

The themes outlined above are particularly pronounced in a Pentecostal worldview but they are found outside Pentecostal churches as well and this is reflected in my material as well as in global Christianity. Literature on Pentecostalism provides ample discussion of the centrality of beliefs and practices connected with spiritual warfare, evil spirits, healing and exorcism, and the power of prayer. But, as Jenkins points out, mainline churches in Africa and Asia also incorporate spiritual warfare ideas, and belief in spiritual healing is widespread in mainline denominations as well as Pentecostal ones. With regard to rural India in particular, Chad Bauman notes that many mainline Christians too believe in divine healing, and that the popular demand for spiritual healing is a major cause of the Pentecostalisation of mainline churches.

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321 Interviews with Mohana 2010-12-14, Rev. Matthew 2011-01-11 and 2012-02-16, Malini 2011-03-21, pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20, Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08 and 2012-02-10.
322 This was the standard attitude to “modern medicine” among early Pentecostals: Anderson 2004: 232. For a discussion of this doctrine in TPM, see Bergunder 2008: 166-170.
324 Jenkins 2006: 105, 118.
325 Bauman 2015: 33, 97, 104. At an earlier stage of the growth of Pentecostalism in India, Lionel Caplan noted that Pentecostal churches offered solutions (in the form of healing and
Evangelical Christianity

In this chapter, I have described major theological themes that I have identified in interviewees’ expressions of their faith. Most of my account of their faith concerns beliefs related to salvation. The centrality of the theme of salvation here is partly due to a methodological choice on my part: I asked questions about salvation since I found them relevant to the overall subject of my study. This resulted in an abundance of interview material on questions related to salvation. It turned out that interviewees had much to say on the matter. Questions of salvation to eternal life proved to be of vital importance to many interviewees, especially those who are converts or who share with converts an emphasis on the necessity of a personal experience of salvation. This group shares certain theological assumptions that colour not only their own Christian faith but also the way they relate to other faiths, including other varieties of Christian faith. A suitable term for this dominant theological perspective among interviewees is “evangelical Christianity.”

There are many ways to define the terms “evangelical” and “evangelicalism,” including the characterisation found on the World Evangelical Alliance’s webpage: “an evangelical is someone concerned for the gospel.” For academic purposes, a more precise definition is necessary. A well-known and much used definition is the one provided by David Bebbington in his Evangelicalism in Modern Britain.

Evangelicalism According to David Bebbington

In Evangelicalism in Modern Britain, David Bebbington identifies a “continuing set of characteristics,” four features that defined the evangelical movement from its inception in the 1730s to the 1980s (the scope of Bebbington’s study): Conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism. Although other ideas have also been important to evangelicals, and although the evangelical movement has undergone historical changes, these four “common features” of evangelicalism – and, among major theological trends, only these...
four – have been constant over time, according to Bebbington. It is a matter not only of content but also of emphasis: Evangelicalism “gave exclusive pride of place to a small number of leading principles,” Bebbington writes, and conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism “form a quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of Evangelicalism.”

Conversionism, the first of Bebbington’s principles, denotes a belief in the necessity of personal conversion, the often emotional experience of turning away from sin in repentance and turning towards Christ in faith. “The line between those who had undergone the experience and those who had not was the sharpest in the world,” Bebbington writes, and the latter category included “nominal Christians”: “It was a fundamental premise of Evangelicals that many who went by the name of Christian were not true believers.” A common term for the conversion experience was to be “born again.” Conversionism is connected with an emphasis on justification by faith, salvation by faith alone and grace alone, seen in opposition to salvation by works. Another side of conversionism is the belief in assurance of salvation: “Once a person has received salvation as a gift of God, he may be assured, according to Evangelicals, that he possesses it.” This view of assurance of salvation as a normal accompaniment to conversion was a novelty introduced by the evangelical movement. “The confidence of Evangelicals had its roots in the inward persuasion that God was on their side,” Bebbington further notes, a sentiment also noticeable among those of my interviewees whom I define as evangelical. In his definition, Bebbington includes both conversion as a sudden crisis, a datable event, and conversion as a gradual process of which the subject may not even be conscious while it is in progress. However, he notes that there have been different views of this among evangelicals, some of whom have stressed the instant character of conversion.

The second characteristic in Bebbington’s definition (or “Bebbington’s quadrilateral”) is activism which he describes primarily as evangelism but also social concern or philanthropy. Bebbington describes activism as a result of conversionism: One’s own conversion leads to a desire for the conversion of others.

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330 Bebbington 2005: 15, 16. For the description of Bebbington’s quadrilateral, in addition to Evangelicalism in Modern Britain, I also draw from an article by Bebbington from 2014, where he presented it again.
333 Bebbington 2014: 8.
335 Ibid: 23. See also pp. 86-100 on the doctrine of assurance.
Bebbington’s third principle is biblicism, defined by him as “devotion to the Bible” as a “result of [the evangelical] belief that all spiritual truth is to be found in its pages.” Although the belief in divine inspiration in the Bible is a shared evangelical trait, the interpretation of what this means has differed. Some evangelicals – but not all – have insisted on the infallibility and verbal inspiration of the Bible.339 A “frequent experience among Evangelicals” was that after conversion the Bible seemed “entirely new.”340

Crucicentrism, the last of Bebbington’s four principles, denotes “a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross”341 or an “emphasis on the death of Christ as the source of salvation.”342 The atonement was the most important evangelical teaching and should be emphasised over all other doctrines.343 The atonement led to a “quest for sanctification” – spiritual growth and a holy way of life.344

Bebbington’s quadrilateral definition has proved broad enough to find resonance across historical and geographical contexts.345 Bebbington himself remarks that different sides of the quadrilateral have been emphasised at different times in the history of evangelicalism.346 There is, as Mark Noll points out, an essentialist quality to Bebbington’s quadrilateral. Bebbington capitalises the word “Evangelicalism” and portrays it as a coherent movement with a continuous essence even when it changes subject to history. As Noll puts it, this is to see evangelicalism as “an entity with agency.”347 But Noll also stresses the usefulness of the quadrilateral and his view of terms such as evangelical/evangelicalism as “convenient mental shorthand referring to bundles of specific traits characterizing specific people, communities, or traditions”348 is one that I find helpful. All definitions try to capture fluid phenomena and Bebbington’s quadrilateral captures important elements in my material.349

339 Ibid: 33, 35-36. Bebbington writes that while in the early period there was “remarkable fluidity in ideas about the effects of inspiration on the text,” from the 1820s there was an opinion for “inerrancy, verbal inspiration and the need for literal interpretation of the Bible. /---/ Attitudes to the Bible drew apart until, in the wake of the First World War, the Evangelical world divided into conservatives and liberals primarily on that issue.”
341 Ibid: 16.
345 Darren Dochuk comments that Bebbington’s quadrilateral “remains serviceable because of its concreteness and its pliability.” The quadrilateral, he writes, is “determinative but also broad enough to allow for subtle distinctions and shifting priorities.” Dochuk 2015: 64.
347 Noll 2015: 77.
348 Ibid: 73.
349 Where Bebbington has portrayed evangelicalism as a radically new phenomenon, other historians have pointed out the continuity of the evangelical movement with earlier movements, especially Puritanism and continental Pietism. See Hutchinson and Wolfe 2012: 26-32. The exact historical genesis of evangelicalism is, however, not of importance to my study.
There is also an element of affiliation; an evangelical is someone who belongs to the Protestant church traditions. There exist, for example, Catholics agreeing with all the four points of Bebbington’s quadrilateral but Catholics are rarely included in the term “evangelical.”

Pentecostal Christians as Evangelical Christians

The Pentecostal movement grew out of charismatic revivals among evangelical Christians. Its theological roots can be traced to the holiness movement and the missionary movement. While it is inapt to define Pentecostalism simply as a subcategory of evangelicalism, the shared theological characteristics (with the Pentecostal additional emphasis on the Holy Spirit and its charismatic expression) cannot be denied. Admittedly, the Pentecostal movement is so diverse that there may be local churches that can be characterised as Pentecostal without corresponding to Bebbington’s quadrilateral definition of evangelicalism. That is not, however, the case with the Pentecostal churches in this study which show the traits of evangelical Christianity (in the case of TPM, particularly of the holiness variety). By classifying Pentecostal interviewees as evangelicals, my intention is not to say that Pentecostalism on the whole is nothing but a form of evangelicalism, only that the theological standpoints of these interviewees on questions of relevance to this study aligns them with some of the CSI Christians in a theological stream that can best be termed evangelical.

CSI Christians as Evangelical Christians

Defining Christians belonging to the Church of South India as evangelical could possibly raise more questions. On a denominational level, the CSI and other “mainline,” “mainstream” or “ecumenical” churches (e.g. the Church of North India and the Lutheran churches) are often distinguished from evangelical and Pentecostal churches. The CSI is in its nature diverse, perhaps even

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351 In addition to the Azusa Street revival, there were early charismatic revivals in other parts of the world as well, notably in Wales, India, and Korea. See Anderson 2004: 35-38. For early revivals in India, see McGee 1999.
352 Bergunder 2008: 3-9. See also Noll 2014: 22 about the historical connection between Pentecostalism and evangelicalism.
354 Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong writes about a heavy Pentecostal reliance on conservative evangelical theology as a background to his own attempt to create a distinctly Pentecostal-charismatic theology of religions. Yong 2000: 30, 184-187. (Yong here refers mainly to the North American context.)
355 See Bergunder 2008: 239-240 for the importance assigned to evangelical principles within the south Indian Pentecostal movement (despite the lack of practical cooperation between evangelical denominations or organisations and Pentecostals: pp. 238-239).
356 E.g. Bergunder 2008: 238–241; Bauman 2015: 5-8; see also footnote 6.
more so than most other churches, as it is a union of churches belonging to several Protestant traditions. Within the CSI, evangelical influences are present alongside more liberal theological influences. From a historical perspective, this is not surprising since, as Bebbington remarks, “The missionary movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was the fruit of the Evangelical Revival.”

The roots of the CSI go back to Methodist, Congregationalist, Presbyterian, and Anglican missions. With regard to the Anglican parts of the CSI, a significant heritage comes from the evangelical Church Missionary Society. Lionel Caplan observes that, among Protestant missionaries in colonial south India, “there was a common basis of evangelicalism” despite their denominational differences. In his ethnographic research, Caplan noticed a continued evangelical heritage characterised by traditional piety and morality, biblicism, and an emphasis on individual salvation and evangelism, which dominated among “ordinary” CSI Protestants and “the lower clergy” and stood in opposition to the liberal and social gospel theology popular among church leaders and elite congregations. According to my observations, much of Caplan’s analysis is still relevant thirty years later.

Not only from a historical perspective but also from a comparative contemporary perspective, the evangelical influences within the CSI are unsurprising. In his broad overview of Christianity in Africa and Asia, Philip Jenkins portrays the faith of the majority of Christians in these continents as theologically and morally conservative and biblicist. Although Jenkins rarely uses the term “evangelical,” other commentators do. In reference to Christians in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, Harold Netland remarks that, political connotations aside, “when defined theologically, large numbers of Christians

357 Bebbington 2005: 32.
358 Sundkler 1965 (1954): 22-23. “The Church Missionary Society mediated the Evangelical influence to the mission fields, not least to south India, which generally speaking was Evangelical,” Sundkler writes (p. 22). Sundkler also notes that the evangelical movement stood for “common features” among the sending churches behind what would later become the CSI (p. 19) and that there was “a common basis of Evangelicalism in piety, forms of worship and zeal and methods of evangelism” among missionaries from different church backgrounds (p. 25).
360 A striking difference between Caplan’s research and my study is, however, that Caplan’s evangelical “ordinary Protestants” are lower middle-class people whose beliefs and attitudes contrast with those of upper middle-class Protestants. Obviously, the dynamics of class in India have changed since the publication of Caplan’s book. In my study, the evangelical influences are strongest among interviewees from the upper middle-class CSI City while attitudes among interviewees from the lower middle-class and working-class CSI Tamil are more liberal and socially oriented. No quantitative assumptions can be made from my study but what qualitative studies can do, and this is true of my own, is point to the need for further research in this area of popular theology among ordinary Protestants from all socio-economic classes.
361 Jenkins 2006. See e.g. p. 7: “biblical and theological conservatism clearly represents the Christian mainstream across Africa and Asia...”.
362 Jenkins’s reluctance to use the term may be related to its political connotations in a North American context. He writes: “In the modern U.S. context, the term ‘evangelical’ is well on the way to acquiring such connotations [similar to those of ‘fundamentalist’], as a label for intolerant (white) social conservatives.” Jenkins 2006: 11.
worldwide are evangelicals.” Scott Sunquist also notes that “What Western Christians would call ‘mainline’ churches (Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran and Anglican) are growing, confident and very evangelical in much of Asia.”

A person’s theological orientation is influenced by more than her denominational affiliation or her near social and geographical context. Influences come from many directions and, in the present age of globalisation, a person can be subject to evangelical influences through various media: Christian music, television, YouTube and other online channels, travelling preachers, and revival meetings. These all inspire the individual in addition to – and in many cases perhaps more than – their local church. Moreover, parachurch organisations like “Campus Crusade” (or Cru) engage people from various denominations.

Nevertheless, although evangelical theology can be found in many local congregations as a result of both historical and newer influences, it does not dominate among the CSI voices who set the theological agenda on a churchwide or international level, such as theologians, teachers in prominent theological colleges, scholars in research institutes or in international ecumenical organisations. The presentation of the CSI on its official website and centrally produced CSI material such as sermon outlines and the lectionary do not typically reflect an evangelical theological discourse but rather one of ecumenism and liberation theology. As my study illustrates, this cannot automatically be taken as representative of the theology popular among CSI members.

The Use of “Evangelical” among Interviewees

To categorise a majority of the interviewees as “evangelical Christians,” it is helpful if this usage does not collide with an emic understanding of what constitutes an evangelical Christian. The term “evangelical” is used only by interviewees with a theological education; it is not a well-known term among laypeople.

363 Netland 2011: 46.
365 Some non-evangelical CSI theologians of international repute are the late Stanley Samartha (pluralist theologian and first director of the WCC sub-unit of interreligious dialogue), prominent Dalit theologian Sathianathan Clarke, Christopher Duraisingham, Jayakiran Sebastian (all three at theological seminaries in the US), and Peniel Rajkumar (at the WCC). All of them are or were CSI presbyters and have been both students and faculty members at the UTC, Bangalore. See e.g. Samartha 2000 (1991), Clarke 1998, 2014, Duraisingham 2010, Sebastian 2014, Rajkumar 2010a, 2017.
Chakradev used the term about himself (although with an understatement) when he said that although others, even Christians, could view the matter differently, “I believe … [a] person should transform according to the teachings of Jesus. That’s all [that] can take him to eternity. … in that sense I am a little bit evangelical.” Before their marriage, Cauvery had worked for the organisation Union of Evangelical Students of India.367

Mega AG’s Reverend Matthew preferred the term “evangelistic” to describe the church, thus stressing the activist side of Bebbington’s quadrilateral in accord with Mega AG’s special emphasis on evangelism: “‘Evangelistic’ meaning … our whole aspect is in terms of sharing the gospel, bringing somebody to the Lord. So that’s our number one focus, is reaching out to the lost.”368 He later used the term “evangelical” in a description of the different varieties of theological institutions in India. Although initially professing reluctance to use the term, he was at the same time unable to avoid it: “What has happened is the – how would I put it, we won’t use the word ‘evangelicals’ – have kind of overtaken the Bible schools … [most] Bible schools that are in India are all evangelical.” He described this as a positive development: “Before … it’s all Serampore and UTC and a few of those places … so nationally you produce people who kind of question Christianity, so … they didn’t make any impact. It’s now the new generation is coming.” The “new evangelical” generation of Bible colleges, including the AG’s Southern Asia Bible College in Bangalore, nurture the students’ personal spirituality, train them for evangelism in their own neighbourhoods – with a sensitivity to the multi-religious context – and teaches practices like healing. (The pastor’s ambivalence towards the term “evangelical” could be related to his familiarity with its connotations of US politics – in “American politics,” he said, a politician must be “evangelical” to be successful.)369

Madhu, who attended Mega AG and led one of the church’s cell groups while pursuing his theological studies at the UTC, defined Mega AG’s theology as “more evangelical” compared to the “more liberal” theology taught at the UTC. At the UTC, he said, “the focus is on social work. Social transformation. There [at Mega AG], the focus is evangelical, like more spiritual … [bringing] souls and all.” Madhu referred to the same contrast between two varieties of Protestant theology in India that Reverend Matthew did, but Madhu valued them differently, seeing merits in both. He said that he was “trying to balance” his evangelical AG faith with the more liberal, social change-oriented UTC influences.370

Reverend Chand and Reverend Thangam, who belong to the more liberal wing not only of Protestantism in India but of their own denomination, the

367 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
368 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2008-02-29.
370 Interview with Madhu 2008-03-03.
CSI, and who both received their theological education at the UTC, used the term “evangelical” about other Christians. (One of his classmates at the UTC had been “too evangelical” to be agreeable, Reverend Thangam told me, but continued: “But I think the biggest thing UTC teaches is we should learn to accept the others … and their viewpoints.”)371

Since my understanding of the term evangelical, derived from Bebbington’s quadrilateral definition, agrees with the way some of the interviewees themselves used it, I will continue to use it when referring to the dominant theological position in my material.

Bebbington’s Quadrilateral in Relation to this Study

Among Bebbington’s four characteristics of evangelicalism, conversionism – beliefs related to the conversion or born-again experience – is the one that I have allowed a central place in my representation of interviewees’ faith. I have devoted much space to the theme since I have found it to be an important indicator of a more general difference I could see between interviewees in regard to their theological standpoints. Some interviewees have experienced a specific born-again experience and induce people according to a binary division: Those who have personal salvation, and those who have not. Conversionism is often seen as essential to the definition of an evangelical Christian. The “‘born-again experience’ [is] supposedly the essence of evangelicalism,” Molly Worthen writes. Worthen herself questions its usefulness as the mark of an evangelical since the necessity of an “instantaneous rebirth” is not a view shared by all evangelicals.372 This is, however, a narrower definition of conversion than Bebbington’s own. To Bebbington, conversion or the born-again experience can be either an instant event or a gradual process373 and I concur with this more generous definition. The way I understand it, the experience, whether instant or gradual, once complete should entail a sense of a clear differentiation of life before and after conversion together with a sense that there is an essential difference between “saved” or “born-again” Christians and all other people.

Some non-evangelical interviewees maintain that one cannot in this life know who will be allowed into heaven, but among born-again interviewees there is a belief that it is possible to identify those who have personal salvation. This is evident in the concern some interviewees feel for their fathers who are already Christians but do not show the expected signs of salvation. This is related to what Bebbington writes about the evangelical belief in assurance as

372 Worthen 2015: 83.
an accompaniment to salvation. Salvation is seen not as uncertain but as something tangible that is promised to those who confess their sins and “give their life to Christ.” It follows that the confidence of this assurance should somehow reflect upon a person.

Of Bebbington’s four features of evangelicalism, activism, especially in the form of evangelism, is the one most directly related to the subject of my study. Although it is an essential part of interviewees’ understanding of their faith, in an Indian context it is controversial, it encounters opposition and it can even possibly be dangerous. This problematic nature of activism makes it all the more relevant to seek to understand how interviewees who stress the importance of evangelism solve the dilemma. As I have discussed earlier in this chapter, biblicism is an important element in my material. It not only shapes the way interviewees understand their own faith but also in many ways informs their attitudes to other religions.

I have not said much in this chapter on the subject of crucicentrism, the fourth of Bebbington’s key characteristics of evangelicalism. The theme of atonement through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross recurs in the material. It is spoken of as an integral part of Christian witness, although interviewees often prefer to open with the love of God or the power of prayer to achieve healing and other miracles. More than once, interviewees pointed out that Christ is the only God who died for the sins of humanity which in their view distinguishes him from other (so-called) gods. But the cross, or atonement, is in the material as a whole less noticeable than other key theological themes. In my inductive analysis of interview material, I identified the other three characteristics as major themes, but not crucicentrism. Although it occurs in the material, its importance is not on a par with that of the other three. Redemption through the cross is a part of evangelical interviewees’ faith, preaching, and witness to others, but it is less significant than conversionism, activism, and biblicism.

This reflects a change in evangelical theology more generally. The earlier strong emphasis on atonement through Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross has been replaced, at least partially, with an emphasis on the uniqueness of Christ. The main theological opponents are now pluralist theologians who

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374 Bebbington 2005: 23.
375 For an extended discussion on the theme, see Chapter 9.
377 In the CSI, theological emphases differ depending on the individual preacher. Eliza Kent describes the theology of the CSI as crucicentric: Kent 2002: 193. This is, however, not the case in the two CSI churches where I have done my field studies, nor usually in contemporary material produced by the CSI centrally (such as, for example, the lectionary).
378 Bebbington writes that in the early period of evangelicalism, crucicentrism was the most heavily stressed principle, together with conversionism, while later developments led to shifts in emphasis to a focus on biblicism and, later, activism. The belief in substitutionary atonement
maintain that salvation (or other ultimate ends) can be reached in other ways than through Christ. “Jesus is the only way to salvation” is a principle tenet of this (academic and popular) exclusivist evangelical theology. Christ’s sacrificial death is still assumed – it is the way in which he saves – but less heavily stressed than his uniqueness.\(^{379}\)

A terminological clarification about “evangelical” is necessary in relation to the Indian context. One needs to distinguish between an earlier English usage of the term, where it was largely synonymous with “Protestant,” and the later more specific usage which connects it with the revival movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the type of theology which Bebbington has defined in his quadrilateral.\(^{380}\) The earlier usage is still reflected in German and certain other Germanic languages, for example Swedish. The German *evangelisch* is largely synonymous with the English “Protestant,” rather than with the English “evangelical.” The name of the Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church, for example, reflects the German and Swedish usage. When I use “evangelical,” I refer to it in the narrower sense, in line with Bebbington’s definition.

A last point to be noted is the difference between using the word “evangelical” in an Indian context and in a Western and especially a North American context where the term has specific political and cultural connotations not inherent in Bebbington’s definition. Molly Worthen notes that in Bebbington’s quadrilateral “there is no hint of the political connotations or the anti-intellectualism that have sent so many Christians running from the evangelical label.”\(^{381}\)

In a comparison between the four churches in this study based on how interviewees align with Bebbington’s quadrilateral definition, a pattern emerges where TPM is the most homogenously evangelical and CSI Tamil the most homogenously non-evangelical.\(^{382}\) In CSI City, only the pastor is clearly non-evangelical while most of the lay interviewees can be clearly identified as evangelical.\(^{383}\) Interviewees from Mega AG are generally evangelical but among them there is one who cannot be easily categorised as evangelical.\(^{384}\)
and one who is clearly not so.\textsuperscript{385} Although some interviewees can be defined as evangelicals while others cannot, this does not imply an absolute division among them in terms of beliefs and attitudes. Several interviewees who do not fulfil all of Bebbington’s criteria share important evangelical assumptions, particularly in their emphasis on biblicism, activism, and on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

In this categorisation, I have defined interviewees as evangelical when they fulfil all sides of Bebbington’s quadrilateral but I have paid special attention to conversionism.\textsuperscript{386} I find it easier to pinpoint this characteristic than biblicism or activism. This is because biblicism is somewhat vague as a foundation for classification\textsuperscript{387} and if activism includes social work motivated by the gospel, it can define even the most liberal Christians who are otherwise decidedly anti-evangelical. In a scathing criticism of Bebbington’s quadrilateral and particularly of the way it is used in US political debate, Timothy Gloege writes: “Like using water to define Kool-Aid, Bebbington’s definition confuses common, ill-defined, features of Protestantism or Western Christianity for evangelical particularities.”\textsuperscript{388} This criticism calls attention to a valid point; one could argue that Bebbington’s traits can be found not only in the evangelical movement but in Protestantism more widely. For example, it is a key characteristic of Protestantism in general to lay great emphasis on the Bible. However as I have discussed above, in relation to my material I have found conversionism more useful in identifying a distinct evangelical stream. An emphasis on conversionism, or the born-again experience and personal faith as the means to theologically distinguish between self and other, is a tendency found among some interviewees which other interviewees implicitly or explicitly oppose. But a stress on the Bible and on the centrality of Jesus is found in the material more broadly and represents a more general Protestant perspective.

Also, evangelicalism is defined by the simultaneous presence of all four traits.\textsuperscript{389} Evangelicalism is thus characterised by an enhanced emphasis of more general Protestant beliefs. Evangelical Protestantism stands out in sharper relief in contrast to another type of Protestant theology which is also represented in my material. I have called such a theology “liberal,” reflecting a common contextual distinction between liberal and evangelical theology in theological circles in India. Taught at the UTC, for example, it has been informed by the social gospel, Indian Christian theology, ecumenism, pluralist

\textsuperscript{385} This is Malini.
\textsuperscript{386} In line with the abductive approach of this study, I did not initially concentrate on whether or not interviewees could be defined as evangelical and did not plan the interviews so as to investigate this.
\textsuperscript{387} See Worthen 2015: 83. She finds “biblicism” too vague, since it can be defined in a variety of different ways, even by “conservative Protestants” themselves.
\textsuperscript{389} Bebbington 2005: 15.
Indian theology, and later by Dalit and feminist theology. I use this emic term to denote a theological stream that is broader than more specific fields such as inclusivist or pluralist theology of religions, Dalit and Adivasi theology, feminist theology, or eco-theology, all of which can be found within it. It is not a uniform theology but consists of diverse theological orientations where advocates of one can direct criticism against another. In any of its forms, it is socially oriented and as such not infrequently criticised by evangelical Christians for what they perceive as a neglect of spirituality and evangelism in favour of social issues. In my material, this liberal theology is primarily represented by the two UTC-educated CSI pastors and sometimes stands in direct opposition to the dominant evangelical perspective. Its most important characteristic in relation to the subject of this study is that it focuses on social issues rather than on the salvation of the individual. In this dissertation, I will refer to these three categories: Evangelical, general Protestant, and liberal Protestant, when it becomes relevant to distinguish between different perspectives found among interviewees.

An Evangelical Lens

In the presentation of interviewees’ faith, I have identified certain points of most significance. The beliefs and assumptions of the dominant view outlined in this chapter form an “evangelical lens” through which most interviewees view matters of religion and it is through this lens that they view other religions as well as their own.

The evangelical lens can be summarised as follows:

- Salvation, understood as eternal life with God for the individual, is of vital importance.
- Only the God worshipped by Christians and written about in the Bible is “the true living God.”
- The Bible is true and authoritative for all human beings.
- Only Christian beliefs and practices are true.
- A personal encounter and continuing personal relationship with Jesus Christ is necessary.

390 An alternative term could be “liberation theologies,” the current principal’s preferred term for the present theological orientation of the UTC: personal communication with Prof. Chilkuri Vasantha Rao. That term, however, does not include earlier Indian Christian theology with its emphasis on interreligious dialogue and on inclusivist or pluralist theology of religions, and is therefore not suitable for my purposes here.

391 Since, as I have said, there is no absolute division between clearly evangelical interviewees and other interviewees, several assumptions are shared more widely among interviewees than only among those classified as evangelicals. But there are also points where some interviewees explicitly oppose the dominant view, as in the alternative views on salvation presented in this chapter.
- God offers salvation to every person. It is the responsibility of each individual to respond to the offer and the Christian has an obligation to function as a mediator in this.
- In the Pentecostal version of the evangelical lens, every person has the potential to experience the Holy Spirit in a special way and the presence of the Holy Spirit is connected with charismatic gifts.

The evangelical lens outlined above brings together key beliefs expressed by most interviewees. An additional point in conclusion to this chapter is that I have observed a division of responsibilities between three parts: God whose responsibility it is to offer salvation to each human being; the as yet unsaved individual who can accept or reject the offer; and the Christian whose responsibility it is to act as mediator in this process by witnessing to the gospel. This division of responsibilities allows the Christian to acknowledge that the liability for the final result (ultimately, heaven or hell) does not fall on her shoulders alone. Still, she is understood to have an obligation to tell others about the gospel. God’s grace is offered to individuals in different ways and Christian witness is one of these. The chance for a person to accept Christ can also come, for example, through healing or another miracle, or through a powerful encounter with the Bible or a Christian pamphlet. (But also in these cases there is usually Christian agency involved in some way.) The Christian who has had the born-again experience cannot disclaim her duty to witness to others, according to this view. There is a strong imperative for evangelism, which becomes problematic in relation to the strong suspicion of Christian mission and conversion to Christianity in India.
4. Perceptions of Hinduism

Hindus and Hinduism constitute the dominant religious other to the Protestant Christians in this study. Hindus are not only dominant in terms of demographics and political power, they are also the most often mentioned religious other in my material. Although no absolute distinction can be made between attitudes to Hindus and to Hinduism, it is possible to functionally differentiate them for the sake of analytical clarity. This reflects a differentiation in the empirical material; while the dominant tendency is to view Hindu religion as radically other, the same cannot be said about attitudes to Hindu people. In this chapter, I concentrate on interviewees’ views on Hinduism as a religion, their views on its beliefs and practices.

When Pastor Pradeep of TPM wished to explain to me “the grave difference between Christianity and other religions,” he gave the following description: “All other gods are only statues; they are not living. We are not criticising them, but the fact is this. In our church there is no statue, no picture, no photos, because God is spirit, God is alive.” Pastor Pradeep represents a radical church, but his description of “other gods” as “only statues” and his contrast of these, perceived as dead objects, with a living Christian God is far from radical among my interviewees.

A common assumption that permeates the attitudes to Hinduism of many interviewees is that Hindu religion is in its essence misguided. In this view, Hinduism does not connect the believer to any real deity or power. It is not only Hinduism that receives this overall evaluation; most of my interviewees consider all other faiths to be essentially misguided, an assumption that is intrinsic to the evangelical lens presented in the previous chapter. But Hinduism stands out as the clearest instance of a religion whose beliefs and practices most exemplify what interviewees think that religious practice should not be like. Due to Hinduism’s demographic dominance – and perhaps also due to its visual otherness – every interviewee had something to say about it.

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392 Interview with pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20.
Religious Images

The most striking element in the descriptions of Hinduism that my interviewees give is that for most of them, Hinduism is synonymous with “idol worship.” Even some of those who would not use such terms nevertheless associated Hinduism with this notion albeit using different words or without condemning or criticising it. Some acknowledged that there is a common notion of Hinduism as synonymous with idol worship but criticised this notion on the grounds that there are other forms of “idols” than the Hindu Gods and the images of them, such as caste, race, political power positions, or television serials. They argued that, since Christians are not immune to the allures of these other “idols,” they should not so easily accuse Hindus of idol worship.393

The Hindu use of religious images, understood as idol worship, is implicitly and explicitly contrasted with Christian devotion to “the true living God.” Michael, for example, made the same contrast between Hindu and Christian worship as Pastor Pradeep, quoted earlier. On the subject of Hindu religion, Michael said: “If you see a statue, it is just made of mud. A statue that is crafted with nose and hands and eyes and ears, but they do not speak. But we worship a God who’s living, and we know that God is spirit.”394 Pastor Pradeep and Michael both occupy leadership positions in a Pentecostal church – the first as pastor, the latter as the leader of a cell group, but the polarity they mentioned is considered important by other categories of interviewees as well. One example is Christina, who is a regular CSI churchgoer but who does not occupy a key position in the church.395

In addition to the worship of manmade objects, the worship of animals or other objects found in nature is also frequently cited as evidence of Hinduism as idol worship. Taking examples from nature, Phoebe told me that Hindus would worship practically anything: “a stone they’ll consider as god, a tree, a snake – you name it, they’ll worship, that is god for them.”396

Since this subject of religious images, understood as idol worship, is so important in the descriptions of Hinduism, it deserves a more thorough discussion and I will return to it in Chapter 7. For now, it is good to bear it in mind, as a key idea underlying views of Hinduism among my interviewees, while looking at some other common elements of those views.

Ritualism

The dominant tendency in the material is for interviewees to regard Hindu beliefs and practices as radically other than their own. For the most part, their
descriptions of Hinduism do not centre on scriptures or philosophical concepts but on Hindu religiosity as they have observed it in their neighbourhoods, among friends and acquaintances, and in some cases in their own past. Vasudha Narayanan has observed that, contrary to textbooks on Hinduism, “the epic stories, the variations of the stories, the varieties of devotional activity, the celebrations of festivals, and the fuss about food seem far more important than doctrine and philosophy in the practice of the Hindu traditions.”

In accordance with this observation, the Hinduism that interviewees refer to is, for the most part, strikingly physical. Although beliefs, ideas, and philosophical concepts are sometimes brought up, the primary points of reference are rituals and festivals, places and objects. Rather than abstract philosophical concepts of the ultimate, it is Hindu deities who appear in their visible forms as theriomorphic or multi-limbed Gods and Goddesses. Impressions of Hinduism such as these are interpreted by interviewees through their evangelical or general Protestant lens. Moreover, Hindu ritual ways of approaching the divine, as interviewees observe them in neighbourhood temples, at work, or in Hindu friends’ homes, are markedly unlike the Protestant Christian worship services familiar to them. The *puja* (worship) centred on the God-image, with offerings and burning incense, differs radically from the Protestant worship, centred on the Word and with communal singing and praying.

For a person interested in interreligious dialogue, this very otherness, the radically different qualities of Hindu *puja* and Christian worship service, can be positive and mutually enriching. Wesley Ariarajah, previous director of the WCC’s sub-unit of dialogue, recounts a personal experience of participating in Hindu temple *puja*, followed by a Hindu friend’s participation in Ariarajah’s Methodist church service. This resulted in both parties feeling enriched not only by the experience of a different type of religious worship but also by the other person’s positive reaction to their own worship. Ariarajah enjoyed the intense “catering to all the senses” in the Hindu *puja* and his friend appreciated the collective nature of the Christian service with its integration of teaching with worship. To Ariarajah, this experience illustrates “how dialogue leads to mutual correction, mutual enrichment and mutually helpful self-criticism.”

However, when Hinduism is viewed through the evangelical lens, such a positive mutual exchange with Hindu religion is unthinkable. This othering of Hinduism is not limited to an evangelical perspective. For most interviewees, the otherness that they see in Hinduism means that they cannot ascribe meaning to Hindu worship but rather see it as futile and superstitious ritualism. Priya aptly summarised this idea of Hindu worship as regulated by superstition when she said: “It’s like anything that they fear or anything that gives them prosperity becomes their god.”

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398 Ariarajah 1999: 45–48. (Quotations from p. 46 and p. 48.)
399 Interview with Priya 2011-02-09.
Cauvery took Hindu belief in the power of the *tulsi* (holy basil) plant as an example of what she saw as the irrationality of Hindu beliefs. According to her understanding, Hindu ideas about the *tulsi* plant offer a chance for a more rational Christian to try to convince the Hindu of the truth:

For example, they worship this *tulsi* plant. … And let them see plant will die, for example. When that dies, then how can you say it is a god? If it is a god, it has no death. You know, make them to think or help them to think. See, that plant needed fertile soil and the water and the sunlight to grow. That is just humanly thinking only, no? You think that, if that dies, behind that there’s a God, one who created this plant. So you should think beyond the plant, not [that] the plant itself is a god, no? /---/ Then in that thinking God may give the light to understand the true Creator, not the creation.  

She wanted Christians to “make them [Hindus] to think, help them to think around that.” Then she thought that Hindus could be convinced about what she saw as the faulty line of reasoning behind believing that “all Gods are the same” or worshipping the *tulsi* plant. Cauvery here clearly opposes a rational Christian faith to an irrational Hindu faith in the belief that rational thinking can lead Hindus towards a realisation of the truth. Her thoughts here reflect a rationalist, intellectualist side of Protestantism, a side which scholarship has traditionally highlighted.

Reverend Thangam juxtaposed what he perceived as Hindu superstition with Christian rationalism in a similar way. Like Cauvery, he took the practice of walking round the *tulsi* plant as a way of contrasting Hindu beliefs with what he saw as more enlightened Christian beliefs: “They’ll say something ‘oh, my daughter-in-law has not had a child for all these years. That’s why I’m rounding this tree.’ You know that there’s no connection between that daughter-in-law not conceiving and this lady going around one tree.” The Christian knows this because “we believe in something scientific,” he said. I challenged this view of a “scientific” Christian mindset, as opposed to a superstitious Hindu one, by asking if belief in resurrection is scientific. Reverend

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400 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-10.
401 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-10. The *tulsi* or *tulasi* plant or “holy basil” is considered sacred in Hindu tradition and often planted in a pot in the courtyard of a Hindu home or on the balcony of a flat.
402 The links between the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and rationalism have often been emphasised in the historiography of Protestantism and modernity in the West: Walsham 2008: 497-499. This historiography, heavily influenced by Max Weber but also by early Protestant self-understanding, has become increasingly problematised: Walsham 2008: 500 ff. Enlightenment ideas have strongly influenced evangelicalism in particular, although scepticism about rationalism has had a strong impact on evangelical discourse as well. According to Bebbington, the emergence of the evangelical movement should be understood in the context of the Enlightenment (and not primarily as a counterreaction), particularly via the influence of John Locke’s epistemology. (More widespread evangelical antagonism to science was a later, twentieth century development.) See Bebbington 2005: 96-143, especially 100-116, 263, Bebbington 2014: 14.
Thangam first laughed and said, “you have trapped me now.” Then a discussion ensued in which he concluded that the practice of prayer (including Hindu prayer), for example, could be defined as scientific because of the effects it has on the believer’s mind, if nothing else. This line of thinking made him concede that there could be some practical rationale behind Hindu rituals too. Going back to his example with the tulsi plant, he said: “So maybe there somebody invented a system like that because at home there are too many people. Indian families were huge. You can’t find peace at home. Go out, round the tree and come [back], devotion is clearer now.” But even if the original reason was a rational one, that meaning has been lost in contemporary ritualistic practice, Reverend Thangam thought: “But what gained importance was rounding the tree rather than saying the prayer. So that’s what it’s come to now.”

Thomas held a similar view of the ritualistic and “superstitious” processes that he believed regulate Hindu worship. He also described Hinduism as “different” from Christianity:

Their concept of religion is different. Their concept is … belief in god[s] of different kinds. And each god emerged in a different situation. And wherein there are sources it’s been made as a superstitious, rather than radical [rational?] thinking of religion is not there. Like, … they’ll say: “this is for the sake of religion we have to do it.”

However, unlike most other interviewees, Thomas clearly stated that there had been an original spiritual “meaning” behind Hindu rituals:

All the prasadam [consecrated food] in Hindu mythology has got its own meaning. Suppose like, if they break that coconut, it symbolises to say, “the coconut is pure, so let my heart be pure.” When they light the candles, it says, “let the darkness go out of it.” This is what the Sanskrit meaning and mantras they say. But nobody realises the inner meaning. They just do it as a puja [worship].

In the last two sentences here, Thomas differentiates between an “inner meaning” and the puja itself, noting that people can carry out rituals without necessarily contemplating on the “inner meaning” behind them. (Or they may ascribe their own meaning to it, not necessarily the same as Thomas or another person critical of popular Hinduism would regard as the “actual” inner meaning.) In addition to the contrast interviewees make between what they see as a rational, well-founded Christian faith and what they portray as irrational, superstitious Hindu beliefs and practices, this is another, related point of criticism: They see Hindu religiosity as characterised by an emphasis on the rituals in themselves rather than on the underlying spiritual meaning. Hindu religious

403 Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03.
404 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
405 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
practice is here portrayed as motivated by uncritical performance of rituals for their own sake or by an unfounded magical thinking.

Tradition

An idea connected with the view of Hindu religious practice as superstitious ritualism is the notion, which Thomas expressed, of contemporary Hindu practice as a deviation from an original meaning. This is an idea with old roots and with links to a Protestant devaluation of tradition in favour of textual sources. Going back “to the sources” (ad fontes) was a key ambition of the Reformation. Inherent in the ideal of a return to the sources are assumptions about the genuineness of the sources and the corrupting nature of the history between those sources and the present. Protestant ideas about the centrality of scriptural sources and the preference of scripture over ritual, tradition, or iconography has had a profound impact on the Western understanding of the concept of religion and subsequently on the understanding of Hinduism.406 In colonial India, Western missionary and orientalist ideas deeply influenced the Hindu reform movements which were formed during the nineteenth century and which have had a lasting influence on the modern conceptualization of Hinduism among Hindus themselves as well as among others.407 Western orientalist and missionary scholars and Hindu reformers shared the idea of a golden age in which an originally meaningful and monotheistic Hindu faith existed which had deteriorated into the superstitious, ritualistic “idolatry” they saw in contemporary Hinduism.408 For example, Ram Mohan Roy, often called “the father of modern Hinduism,”409 expressed astonishment at Brahmins and other Hindus whom he found “incapable of justifying that idolatry which they continue to practise. When questioned on the subject, in place of adducing reasonable arguments in support of their conduct, they conceive it fully sufficient to quote their ancestors as positive authorities!”410 Here, Roy clearly does not see the tradition of the ancestors as a good rationale for religious practice.

Although few interviewees share the idealistic belief in an original monotheistic Hinduism, there are echoes of these ideas in their negative attitudes to traditions and views of contemporary Hinduism as following superstitious, ritualistic traditions. Thomas, for example, explained what he saw as superstition with the following of traditions: “Lot of traditional things have been followed. Sometimes that may lead to superstition things. Like in olden days, if some measles or something comes, they keep a burnt seed, they’ll literally

burn a rod, keep it here. Thinking that it will go. But … it is not so."411 Other interviewees also said that Hindus worship the way they do because they follow the traditions of their parents and ancestors.412

The negative attitudes to tradition that I discuss here are of two types. There are, on the one hand, those who idealise original sources (the Bible or the Vedas) and dislike tradition for what they see as its corrupting nature and the changes it brings: Protestant and Hindu reformers, scholars, and certain missionaries. Among my interviewees, only Thomas implicitly holds this view when he speaks of the “sources” which have been transformed into “superstitious” practices, and when he refers to an “inner meaning” which “nobody realises.” Interviewees more frequently speak of tradition rather as a static, unchanging and passive repetition of rituals inherited from parents and ancestors. These interviewees stress what they see as the fundamentally erroneous nature of Hinduism and do not make a distinction between original and contemporary Hinduism. For them, an idealist view of religious sources relates only to the Bible.

This view of Hinduism as the passive repetition of traditions is obviously not an objective description of the religious reality. In an article based on extensive field studies in Bangalore, Tulasi Srinivas shows how dynamic “popular Hinduism” actually is in this urban context, and how Brahmin temple priests “act as ‘religious entrepreneurs’ and agents of change” in the competitive multireligious context of the city.413 Srinivas’s description of a dynamic Bangalorean Hinduism characterised by change and contextualisation in accordance with the needs of the believers contradicts the notion of it as static tradition inherited from parents and forefathers. One explanation why many interviewees adhere to the latter view is that while they usually have a general picture of how Hindu rituals are practised, they lack detailed insight and the interest which could enable them to notice changes. Thinking of Hinduism as the repetition of inherited rituals also offers an ideal antithesis to their own self-image, the image of themselves as Protestant Christians who know and follow the truth. In contrast to this, they associate Hinduism with the following of traditions and ignorance of the truth.

The association of Hinduism with ignorance is common in my material. Interviewees refer to Hindus as not knowing what they are doing, not knowing “the true living God” or “the real God” or as lacking a coherent grasp even of

411 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
413 Srinivas 2006. (Quotations from p. 321.) Srinivas points out that the “popular perception that ritual in Hindu temples is static and unchanging /---/ has been given a certain credibility by the textual bias of ‘Indology.’” She argues that “ritual innovation” in Hinduism has been devalued by scholars as part of “popular” religion which is subordinated to “official” scriptural religion (p. 323). The changes that Srinivas observe include incorporation of new technology, international imagery, new international or secular festivals, and new ways of distributing the prasadam, understood as more hygienic.
the doctrines and ethical principles within their own religion. In this view, Hindus follow the traditions of their ancestors because they are unaware of the truth assumed to be found only in Christianity. Phoebe shared her thoughts on why it is that not more Indians have become Christians: “The first thing is the lack of education. Education and ancestors, what they were doing. That is, you know, they are just following blindly. /---/ And [in] India I think because of the ancestors and all that, they are still following the same thing. And many of them don’t know yet.”

Like Phoebe, other interviewees too associate Hinduism with ignorance or with the related concept of blindness. When Pansy told me of her reflections on seeing images of Hindu Gods, she referred to a biblical passage which deals with blindness or inability to see:

The verses from the Bible come to my mind … which say: ‘They have eyes to see, but they cannot see. They have ears to hear, but they do not hear.’ … I don’t feel ‘Oh, bad’, or I don’t have bias in my mind. I’m not biased about it. But then I just feel ‘Lord, if I was born as a Hindu I would definitely [have] fallen for those gods. But thank you Lord for saving me.’

This biblical passage was also quoted or paraphrased by two other interviewees. Christina shared similar thoughts and, like Pansy, expressed her thankfulness for being born in a Christian family. She said that she was “thankful to those foreigners and British people” for letting her forefathers and foremothers know about Jesus. Without them, “we would be in some idol worship and … not know anything, rules and regulations and all,” she said. During our interviews Christina returned repeatedly to the theme of Hindu ignorance. She seemed to feel a sense of pity for Hindus, who “unknowingly” perform pujas and believe in “some small, small gods.”

When these interviewees express their thankfulness for having been delivered out of the ignorance of Hindu traditions through knowledge of Jesus, it is first and foremost an affirmation of their faith in Jesus: They assume that a person is by definition blind or ignorant until she has encountered the truth in Jesus. Hinduism, in its visual otherness, its polytheism and its use of religious imagery provides an opposite to Christian truth.

415 Interview with Phoebe 2011-01-19.
416 This passage can be found in Isa 43:8, Ezek. 12:2, and Ps. 115:5-6. The verses in Psalms are immediately preceded by a description of “idols,” Ps. 115:4 (KJV). A similar quotation in Isa 6:9-10 is quoted in Matt. 13:14-15.
417 Interview with Pansy 2008-02-16.
418 Interviews with Michael 2011-03-10, Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
419 Interview with Christina 2011-02-01.
The image of Hinduism in the material here conveys a certain passiveness, as if Hindu religiosity is not the consequence of any conscious choice or genuine religious experience but is simply a matter of following in the footsteps of parents by repeating rituals. By portraying Hinduism as characterised by an adherence to traditions, interviewees emphasise the difference between Hinduism and an ideal Protestant faith. This opposition to tradition can be linked both to a general Protestant aversion to tradition, not least to its status in the Roman-Catholic Church, and to the evangelical emphasis on personal salvation. Among evangelical Christians there is, as discussed in the previous chapter, an emphasis on the born-again experience when, according to evangelical belief, a person is enlightened by a genuine religious experience and then makes the conscious choice to follow Christ and, if necessary, reject old traditions in the process (in the case of conversion from another religious background). This ideal is seen as valid regardless of whether it is also in the individual’s family tradition to have the experience. In this way, evangelicalism is, on theological grounds, against tradition being a primary reason for the practice of religion. The idea of tradition is connected with a nominal, lukewarm, or formalised Christianity, where traditions are relied on too heavily, taking attention away from the original revelation found in scripture.\textsuperscript{420} The view held by interviewees of Hindu religiosity as defined by a passive following of ancestral tradition clashes with the evangelical ideal of personal salvation and thus functions via opposition to reinforce the self-image of their own active, personal Christian religiosity.

Mythology

Not only Hindu practices but also Hindu beliefs could provide a contrast to Christian faith. Michael used the concept of “mythology” to describe Hindu religion, implicitly comparing it with Christian doctrinal awareness: “Their concept of doctrines is totally vague. They have more of mythology.”\textsuperscript{421} Reverend Thangam spoke in similar terms: “These fellows are all worshipping something very mythical,” he said about Hindus. He used the term “mythical” to signify something which is untrue, a fictional story. As an example of such a “mythical” tale he took the story of how Ganesha received his elephant head after his original human head was severed from his body.\textsuperscript{422} Without using the terms “myth” or “mythology,” Malini made the same comparison between biblical narratives as true accounts of events that really happened and Hindu mythology as fictional, “old stories only.”\textsuperscript{423}

\textsuperscript{420} Cf. Wolffe and Pierard 2014: 91.
\textsuperscript{421} Interview with Michael 2011-03-10.
\textsuperscript{422} Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03.
\textsuperscript{423} Interview with Malini 2011-03-21.
In everyday usage, myth is often associated with falsehood or made-up stories.\textsuperscript{424} When these interviewees use the category of the mythological and say that Hindus believe in “mythical” stories or “have mythology” rather than any concept of doctrines, they clearly connect the notion of myth with misdirected belief in fictional stories. It also carries connotations of superstition and naivety, belief in fantastical tales such as the one of a deity in human form with an elephant’s head. The connection of Hinduism with mythology, in the sense of fantastical and false tales, is one more way of othering Hinduism in relation to Protestant Christianity, which these interviewees regard as rational and true.

Hinduism as Opposite

The themes of ritualism, tradition, and mythology discussed above all function as ways of othering Hinduism. These depictions of Hinduism can be contrasted with evangelical and general Protestant ideals: Hinduism is seen as idol worship and superstitious ritualism where Protestant Christianity is seen as devotion to the one true God based on rational, well-founded faith. Hindus are portrayed as following traditions and believing in mythical stories where Protestants experience personal salvation and are convinced of the truth. As seen in some of the examples above, interviewees sometimes made direct comparisons between Hindu and Christian religion. In some interviews, this underlying theme of Hinduism as other became even more explicit.

According to Christina, there are:

Many, lot of differences, for Christians and Hindus. Entirely different, just opposite. They will do – whatever we believe they won’t believe, like that. I mean, they will do good things … giving, everything, they’re helping poor people; they’re doing everything other, whatever the good things they will also … do. But the only thing [is that] in the worshipping of God and believing in God only they are [making a] mistake I think. Because they don’t know … which is the true God.\textsuperscript{425}

To Christina, there is a paradox in need of an explanation; why Hindus, who on a human or moral level are as good as Christians, still worship in faulty ways. Her answer emphasises ignorance: Hindus are good people who make

\textsuperscript{424} Nevertheless, as a theoretical concept in the study of religion, while myth may not be easily defined, a basic aspect of it is that it is a story which is meaningful in a religious or other ideological context. In what way it is meaningful – what its function is or has been – has been much debated. But from a theoretical perspective, to classify something as a myth does not necessarily mean that one regards it as untrue. See Segal 1999 and Lincoln 1999 for theoretical discussions of myth.

\textsuperscript{425} Interview with Christina 2011-02-01.
mistakes in their religious belief and practice out of ignorance, not out of wilfulness. If Hindus knew the truth about the Christian God, they would be good believers, she thought.426

Christina also said that there are, however, certain Hindus whose religiosity cannot be explained by ignorance. She distinguished between people who follow Hindu traditions “unknowingly” and those who do it “purposely.” As a typical example of an “unknowing” Hindu, she took an illiterate villager who performs Hindu rituals because that was what their parents did. She differentiated such people from Hindus who follow Hinduism “purposely,” pandit scholars who may have PhDs and who read the Ramayana and Mahabharata and argue for the validity of Hindu beliefs. Such Hindus “will do arguments and discussions” saying that it is Muslims and Christians who are ignorant of the “correct” or supreme God.427 Christina here reproduces two different stereotypes of Hindus as other.428

Malini said about Hindus that “they are not like us,” that there are a lot of differences between Hindus and Christians. She thought that, unlike Christians who attend church, pray, and know the contents of the Bible, Hindus do not have a chance of knowing God by experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit. She said: “What we are is totally different than what they are. I don’t know about Muslims, but I am talking about the Hindus.” She then exemplified this opposition by comparing the Hindu practice of offering milk libations to Gods to the Christian (particularly Pentecostal) emphases on “salvation” and on an internal experience of “the Spirit of the Lord.”429 Chinni and Cecil told me how they had observed Hindus in temples worshipping in “strange ways” and doing “really different things,” for example, lying down and rolling on the floor. This made them feel pity for them, they said. Chinni explained it as an expression of desperation: “I think they’re feeling bad, so they just want to roll, and worship god, hoping something good would happen.”430

By contrasting Hinduism with Christianity, and by characterising it as idolatry, superstitious ritualism, ignorant traditions, and fantastical mythology, views on Hinduism held by interviewees recall colonial missionary accounts.431 But there are important differences. Discussions by interviewees about Hindus are not marked by racism and essentialist polarisation between East and West. They do not express open antipathy or even demonisation of Hindus, as missionaries have done particularly in the case of Brahmins.432 In the interviews, it is clear that it is the Hindus’ perceived ignorance of spiritual

426 Interview with Christina 2011-02-01.
427 Interview with Christina 2011-02-01.
428 In this, her views are mildly reminiscent of colonial missionary depictions of Hindu masses versus Hindu religious leaders (Brahmins). See Oddie 2006: 99-101, 171-174, 223-224, 342-343.
429 Interview with Malini 2011-03-21.
430 Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.
431 See Oddie 2006 for an overview over colonial-time British missionary views of Hinduism.
matters that makes them other or the opposite of Christians. The conclusion is that Hindus would be good worshippers if they only knew the Christian truth. Hindus are essentially other only in their religious beliefs and practice. A Hindu who becomes a Christian is completely equal with other Christians. That is to say, unlike missionaries during colonial times, interviewees do not assume any innate differences between Christians and Hindus. Christina made clear this potential for religious others including Hindus to become fully identified with the Christian self: “All the human beings are God’s [creation] only, God’s children only.” Originally, no one in India was a Christian, she continued, only with the coming of foreign missionaries did Indians convert from Hinduism, Islam, or other religions. “But now they are fully believing, and they are obeying, and they are full Christians.”

In the material that I have discussed so far in this chapter, there is a mirroring of Christian self in Hindu other in more than one way. There are the direct statements about Hinduism as “different” to or “opposite” from Christianity. There are also depictions of Hinduism as adherence to ritual, tradition, and myth, which are implicitly or explicitly contrasted with Protestant Christian faith. The accounts of Hindu ritualism, tradition, and myth all oppose a perceived Christian rationality to a perceived Hindu irrationality. As noted earlier, this can be linked to a Protestant emphasis on rationality.

Apart from this emphasis on rationality and intellect, Protestantism, not least the evangelical movement, is also characterised by an emphasis on emotion and experience. This has been historically a tension within the evangelical movement. According to the evangelical ideal, a person does not grasp the truth through rational thinking but through a powerful emotional experience, the born-again experience. In my material, it is above all in descriptions of Hinduism that the rationalist aspect of the Christian self-image is emphasised. Conversely, in descriptions of the encounter with Jesus Christ, for example, emotions are more significant. No opposition is, however, perceived between intellect and emotion – Christianity is portrayed as both intellectually and emotionally superior while Hinduism is depicted as neither rational nor emotionally or spiritually satisfactory.

The fundamental problem with Hinduism, according to the evangelical lens, is not that it is superstitious or irrational but that it is not true; it is not the way to reach God. The main problem that interviewees have with Hindu rituals is not that they find them irrational (although they do that too) but that they are convinced these rituals do not work. Therefore interviewees can suggest to Hindu friends that they try coming to church or praying to Jesus; because

433 At least in theory; in practice, the churches that interviewees belong to are, like other religious and social institutions, not free from class, gender, caste, and other status markers which affect those who are Christian from birth as well as converts.
434 Interview with Christina 2011-01-31. In this historical account, she clearly disregards or is unaware of the earlier St. Thomas Christian tradition.
they believe in the effect of Christian prayer but not of Hindu worship. The most pressing question here is not one of rationality versus irrationality but of true versus false belief and which spiritual power is the strongest.

**Strongest Spiritual Power**

Consider, for example, what Chakradev and Cauvery said on the subject of Hindu fear, a fear that might potentially be interpreted as superstitious and irrational. They described their impression of Hindus as more liable to anxiety because of Hindu religious traditions. Hindus believe in “witchcraft,”**436** they said, and one consequence of that belief is that they become afraid if they see a lemon in their house, thinking that somebody placed it there with the object of performing witchcraft against them. Whereas a strong Christian belief works as an antidote to such fear; if Chakradev himself found a lemon in his house he would simply utilise the fruit by making juice of it and drink it without considering it as something harmful, he said.**437**

While this seems to imply a comparison between superstitious Hindu and rational Christian ways of viewing a lemon, Chakradev and Cauvery did not actually portray this Hindu fear of witchcraft as irrational. In their view, harmful spiritual powers do exist but a person with a strong faith in Christ is protected from the potential harm of witchcraft thanks to her conviction that Christ is “above all other powers, and he is saviour and protects us, so it cannot hurt us.”**438** The point is not that a modern, rationalist Christian worldview does not acknowledge the existence or power of witchcraft, and so provides psychological protection from anxiety about it. Rather, the Christian believer is allied with a stronger spiritual power which is capable of protecting her from such menaces. Chakradev’s calm comes not from the conviction that there is no such thing as witchcraft, but rather from the conviction that there is a divine power which can protect him from witchcraft.

Cauvery and Chakradev are not alone in affirming the existence of potentially harmful supernatural beings, and not all interviewees are as free from the fear of witchcraft as Cauvery and Chakradev professed themselves to be. Malini told me about an incident that had recently occurred to her in her house one day when she started to feel anxious that something bad would happen.

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**436** In the following, I will use this emic expression, which is one of the terms used among Christians in this context.

**437** Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-10. Michael Bergunder quotes another account of a lemon used as a tool for “witchcraft.” This account was given by a Pentecostal church leader in Kerala. Bergunder 2001: 104. Lemons or limes (the terms are often used interchangeably) are otherwise often used as protections against evil. See e.g. Carman and Vasantha Rao 2014: 64-68. The difference between “dark” (malevolent) and “light” (protective) magic in Hindu popular religion matters less to Christians who dissociate from all such practices. To Christians like Chakradev, both types become “witchcraft.”

**438** Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-10.
She could not say exactly what but she could sense a kind of warning in relation to her kitchen. Suddenly and unexpectedly her pressure cooker, which stood on the stove with a vegetable stew, burst. Fortunately, Malini was not in the kitchen at the time but sat praying in her bedroom. She prayed to God to “take control of” the situation because she could sense the threat but was not able to “analyse” the specific nature of it. Malini saw her escape from this potentially harmful accident as a miraculous proof of God’s protection. She felt that some “other power is in my house and trying to … bring some type of disaster or some type of dangerous things.” She was not sure of how or why this “other power” had entered her house. It could be because of people who perform “black magic,” or “enemies,” or hostile spiritual powers. One possibility was that when her children had come home late at night “some type of evil could have entered my place.” Without knowing the exact reason for it, she understood that there was some malevolent supernatural force in her house, which would have made “something bad” happen if not for the presence of God. “Because if God was not there … something should have happened that day,” she thought and it would “definitely” have been worse. According to Malini it is necessary to have the protection of supernatural aid against the threats of malevolent supernatural forces: “for these things we need some power of God.”

The examples above illustrate an important point about the relationship between Christianity and Hinduism in India. Behind the rhetoric of a rupture with the Hindu past, many Christians in India still share certain underlying beliefs with their Hindu neighbours. For that reason, the perceived relationship between Hinduism and Christianity is not simply one of a binary opposition between a superstitious Hinduism and a rational Christianity. Criticism of Hinduism as superstitious is present in my material but at the same time several interviewees operate within an ontological framework that to a large extent is held in common with Hindus. According to this ontology, there are evil powers which humans can utilise against other humans. The beliefs that many Christians and Hindus share centre upon threats to health and wellbeing, and the role of supernatural agency and religious experts in averting such dangers or restoring health. This is an important area since physical, psychological, or emotional problems are common reasons for first coming to a certain church, as in the case with some of my interviewees or their parents.

Many Christians in south India believe in witchcraft and evil spirits as invisible elements of reality, as do many Hindus. Such beliefs are not just traces of Hindu ideas that can be seen among individual converts but are be-
liefs prevalent also among those whose families have been Christian for gen-
erations. They signify a contextuality that is usually not openly acknowledged,
much less offered as something positive. From an etic perspective, however,
this common ground can be seen clearly and it contrasts with interviewees’
openly expressed antagonism towards Hindu beliefs and criticism of con-
scious theological contextualisation. There is a tension here between an ex-
plicit dissociation from a Hindu worldview as false and a sharing of parts of
the same. Arun Jones notes the same contradiction when he writes about Pen-
tecostal and Charismatic Christianity in north India. Although Pentecostal and
Charismatic rhetoric is rigidly exclusivist, Pentecostalism is actually “a highly
adaptable religious and social movement” with an openness to local ideas and
practices. He sees this openness as an explanation for the popularity of this
type of Christianity; it takes the ideas among “ordinary Indians,” about evil
spirits for example, seriously, and incorporates them in its ideology and prac-
tice in the form of healing and exorcism.441

Other scholars of Pentecostalism note the same phenomenon of shared be-
liefs in malevolent spiritual beings and similar practices for dealing with
them.442 The Pentecostal movement with its emphasis on signs and wonders
seems to invite such ethnographic observations. But even within Indian Prot-
estantism, these links to popular Hindu beliefs are not restricted to Pentecostal
churches but are present in mainline churches as well.443 Neither is it a phe-
nomenon unique to India; similar beliefs are common among Christians glob-
ally, not least among Pentecostals.444 Over the world, many Christians believe
in malevolent supernatural beings as the causes of misfortune – but they also
believe that the Christian can overcome such powers in the name of Jesus.

441 Jones 2009: 509. What he writes about Pentecostalism is plausible but Jones also makes a
contrast between Pentecostal/Charismatic and Catholic Christianity on the one hand and main-
line Protestant Christianity on the other hand. He writes that the former is outwardly conserva-
tive and exclusivist but in reality more open and malleable whereas the latter is outwardly lib-
eral but actually rather closed “sociologically and ideologically.” Mainline Protestants, he
writes, are mostly middle-class, “generally not anxious to welcome low caste, poor people into
their churches,” and largely unresponsive to local expressions of religiosity such as the belief
in evil spirits, at least from an official point of view (p. 509). Although Pentecostal and, partic-
ularly, Catholic contextuality may be more obvious, I am not convinced that this generalising
contrast holds, at least not from my experience of south India, and especially not in rural or
semi-urban contexts. It is definitely wrong to categorically state that mainline Protestants in
India do not “welcome low caste, poor people into their churches” since such people form the
bulk of many mainline Protestant congregations.


emiah 2013: 92-96. However, Jeremiah observes that, in addition to local tradition, the more
recent Pentecostal influence could also inspire beliefs in evil spirits among the rural CSI Chris-
tians he studies (p. 95).

444 Jenkins 2006: 98-127, Westerlund 2009a: 2. Bergunder observes the phenomenological par-
allels between Hindu and mainline Protestant folk religiosity in India and American Pentecos-
As the discussion above illustrates, among the Christians in this study – as among many Christians globally – the explicit attitudes to other religions (in this case Hinduism) are predominantly negative but there are more underlying contextual similarities than many are prepared openly to acknowledge. It is admittedly always difficult to see one’s own contextuality and here Christians can easily choose to refer to the Bible rather than to a culture shared with Hindus since evil spirits are legion in the Bible.\textsuperscript{445} Beliefs about malevolent supernatural beings are perhaps the area where this often unacknowledged contextuality is most obvious. But there are also other areas where contextual links to a Hindu worldview become apparent to an etic observer.

The Religious Significance of Jewellery

The religious significance of gold and jewellery is one such area. Reverend Matthew told me about Hindu beliefs in stones with special powers such as the rings with precious or semi-precious stones which are popular with Hindu businessmen who wear them “to attract wealth to them[elves].”\textsuperscript{446} For many Hindus, not only stones but also, and especially, gold is loaded with religious significance. Gold is considered auspicious\textsuperscript{447} and the golden \textit{thali} (wedding necklace) is a sign of the auspiciousness of the married woman.\textsuperscript{448}

The question of jewellery is significant not only in relation to Hinduism but it also has a bearing on an important intra-Pentecostal discussion. In south India, the question of jewellery has been a hotly debated issue, a focal point in negotiations of Pentecostal attitudes to materialism.\textsuperscript{449} Removing jewellery has been an important sign of holiness and sanctification, seen as evidence of leaving materialistic worldliness behind. The cultural significance of jewellery is one explanation for this. In India, jewellery is an important status symbol and clear proof of the social and economic standing of the wearer. Insistence on the removal of jewellery was initially a common stand with in south Indian Pentecostalism where strict views of holiness dominated throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Everything categorised as worldly, including jewellery, was seen as sinful and satanic, and the need for separation from the world was emphasised. While this theology still prevails in The Pentecostal Mission, in other parts of the south Indian Pentecostal Movement attitudes have changed over time.\textsuperscript{450} Taking a liberal view of jewellery is a significant sign of belonging to a newer and less world-renouncing strand of Pentecostalism that has emerged in south India.

\textsuperscript{445} See e.g. Mark 5: 1-20.
\textsuperscript{446} Interview with Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16.
\textsuperscript{447} Klostermaier 2007: 129.
\textsuperscript{448} Nagarajan 2007: 91.
\textsuperscript{449} See Bergunder 2008: 181-188.
\textsuperscript{450} Ibid: 182-183.
While TPM epitomises the conservative, ascetic type of south Indian Pentecostal church, Mega AG is a good example of the more world-affirming type of church. Reverend Matthew does not see any problem with churchgoers wearing jewellery. Unlike “the early Pentecostals” in India who had rules against wearing gold, Mega AG has no such proscriptions: “Women will wear [gold], yeah; it’s not a problem at all,” he said, and referred to the culture, which encouraged women to wear a lot of jewellery and really “deck themselves up … if that’s what they want to do, and they feel good, go ahead.”

For certain other Indian Pentecostals, however, this relaxed stand on jewellery would be grounds for criticising Mega AG for materialism or worldliness, similar to the way in which Reverend Matthew criticised popular Hinduism for those same values. In light of this, it is significant that the most clearly expressed criticism of Hinduism as materialistic should come from the pastor in this particular church. Not only in regard to jewellery, but in other ways too, Mega AG embodies an ideal of affluence which could provoke accusations of spreading the prosperity gospel, of belonging to a materialistic branch of Christianity where praise and prayers are offered in exchange for blessings from God. Here, the pastor ascribes this superficiality and materialism to Hinduism, placing it firmly there, with the religious other.

For those Pentecostals who see jewellery not as adiaphoron but as sinful or at least an obstacle to sanctification because of its connection with worldly prestige, the vigorous repudiation of it may, ironically, reflect a view that is shared with Hindus, namely that gold carries invisible powers. Jonas Adelin Jørgensen argues that the importance given to gold in the more ascetic branch of south Indian Pentecostalism, albeit with a negative value, is a sign of the interdependence of the spiritual and material aspects of religiosity. Using ethnographic material from Chennai, Tamil Nadu, he argues that gold is not simply “dead matter” to south Indian Pentecostals; it retains its power but with conversion its value changes from positive to negative. Now golden objects are dangerous and can be connected with illness and possession. That contradicts the explicit rhetoric affirming that gold is insignificant, a part of the external materiality which is inferior to internal spirituality. So, the aversion to jewellery in parts of the Pentecostal movement is multi-layered. It is not only a question of holiness and renunciation of worldly materialism but also of dissociation from Hindu beliefs about gold and jewellery. Although, as Jørgensen shows, such beliefs in fact live on reversed in a Pentecostal version.

Reverend Matthew told me about an incident a few days before our interview when he visited a house and “had to tell those guys we don’t believe in that [the power of jewellery] at all.” He felt compelled to explain this clearly because they asked him if a piece of jewellery that the senior pastor wore was

451 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16.
452 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2008-02-29.
453 Jørgensen 2012.
invested with some power. Here, Reverend Matthew differentiates between the cultural and the religious properties of jewellery: It is uncontroversial for him that churchgoers wear jewellery for cultural, aesthetic, and status-related reasons but he distances Mega AG from Hindu beliefs in the power of jewellery. Culture dictates that people, especially women, wear jewellery and it is unproblematic for the pastor that his churchgoers also adhere to this norm. But that which arguably falls under the category of “Hindu religion” rather than “Indian culture,” such as belief in the supernatural powers of jewellery, is incompatible with his Pentecostal faith.

The question of jewellery in relation to Hinduism is not an issue of interest only to Pentecostals. The Christians that I met in Bangalore sometimes claimed that a fondness for wearing much jewellery is a typically Hindu trait. CSI interviewees also expressed such statements. From the perspective of a European outsider, this seems to be a cultural characteristic rather than a religious one since most Christians appreciate jewellery much to the same degree as Hindus. But what they are expressing is a self-image which says that, although they wear jewellery, they do not ascribe the same meaning to it as Hindus do. Even Christians who do wear golden jewellery dissociate themselves from Hindu beliefs about the power or religious significance of such jewellery. And these Christians share the belief that they should not become too attached to jewellery since material things, if valued too highly, could provide an obstacle to spirituality. Thivya, for example, expressed her opinion that, while Christians can wear jewellery, it is important for them not to love it since they should love God first and foremost and not forget God by becoming “addicted” to jewellery.

Jewellery thus symbolises a materialism that Christians see in Hinduism and that they contrast with their self-image on two levels: As a preoccupation with superficial things contrasted with the deeper, spiritual focus of the Christian believer, and as a belief in the magic of certain material objects which the rationalist Protestant Christian rejects.

Here, interviewees ascribe great difference to a phenomenon that to an etic observer looks similar. This illustrates how Christians who wear jewellery are aware that their use of it outwardly resembles the attachment to jewellery that they ascribe to Hindus. This awareness induces them to emphasise that although for Hindus jewellery has religious significance, for them jewellery is secularised; it is just jewellery and its value is purely aesthetic and cultural. It is perceived as important to draw a line between shared cultural values, which they consider acceptable, and religious beliefs, where they consider it important to maintain boundaries.

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454 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16.
455 Cauvery in interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08, Thivya 2012-01-24. Such opinions have also come up in informal discussions with different people.
456 Interview with Thivya 2012-01-24.
Christian and Hindu Devotion

Emotional spiritual devotion to God, or a God, is another example of where Hindu and Christian phenomena may look similar to an etic observer, but where interviewees expressly denied any resemblance between the two religions.

Chinni told a story which illustrates this reluctance to see similarities between Christianity and Hinduism. She had a teacher who was from Russia and who converted to Hinduism because she came to believe in the teachings of ISKCON. “So she came and had a long discussion with the class, how fascinated and how blessed she is to follow Hare Krishna. … So she said she has had this powerful feeling of God really touching her.” Chinni’s classmates, all Hindus, then said: “Oh, we’ve never experienced it being actual Hindus. We just pray and come [back]; we have never gone through any personal experience.” These classmates are typical Hindus, in Chinni and Cecil’s view. Except for this teacher, neither of them could remember ever having heard any Hindu (or other “non-Christian”) relating any experience of a personal relationship with the divine.457 This perceived lack contrasts with the couple’s own evangelical belief in the importance of personal salvation and a personal relationship with God. Concerning her teacher’s experience, Chinni thought that “it’s just some kind of a feeling she’s going through … not actually the hand of our God.” She considered that there was “some power” behind the experience, but not necessarily “a spiritual power.” Cecil added that “not all experiences are necessarily right or true.”458 Here, they hint at the possibility of a more sinister explanation for the teacher’s experience.

This example demonstrates an unwillingness to acknowledge any affinity between Hinduism and Christianity. This is a general tendency in the material which Chinni and Cecil’s interpretation of the teacher’s experience illustrates. They claim that it is extremely unusual (not to say impossible) to experience a personal relationship with God through Hindu faith. Interviewees who are converts from Hinduism adhere to this view and see their own Hindu past as lacking in genuine spiritual experiences.459 This is not surprising given that they are converts. In the face of this conviction, Chinni’s teacher’s witness to just such a relationship is dismissed as mistaken. This is so despite similarities that may look obvious to an etic observer, such as the verbal resemblance in the way the experience is described: the “powerful feeling of God really touching her” (in Chinni’s retelling). The “touch of God” was, as mentioned in the previous chapter, an expression that interviewees, Chinni among them, used about the Christian experience of personal salvation. But this experience, and subsequent experiences of closeness with God, are the only possible spiritual

458 Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.
459 Interviews with Madhu 2008-03-03, Mohana 2010-12-14, Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
experiences felt to be genuine for a person who views religion through the exclusivist evangelical lens. According to Chinni and Cecil’s understanding, the teacher’s experience can by definition not be genuine since it is experienced within a Hindu religious framework. Since it is Krishna and not Christ that the teacher is devoted to, they believe her devotion must be misguided.

The ample testimonies of an intimate relationship with God within Hinduism – not least within the long-standing and influential bhakti tradition – is not really the concern here.460 There are points of connection between Christian and Hindu faith which other observers have seen, for example the emphasis in bhakti on faith, love between devotee and God, emotional personal experiences of God, and questioning of caste and gender hierarchies. However, when Hinduism is seen through the evangelical lens these fade in significance in view of the categorical dichotomy between saving Christian faith on the one hand, and misleading Hindu beliefs on the other.461

Hindu Religious Openness

The estrangement from Hindu expressions of spirituality that is manifest in attitudes to Hindu devotion also characterises interviewees’ views on another aspect of Hindu ways of relating to the divine: religious openness. By this I mean an acceptance of other religions as true or valid, an acknowledgement of the existence of different Gods, also those outside the Hindu pantheon, and an eclectic readiness to incorporate new Gods into one’s worldview. This religious openness or (to use concepts that originate in a Christian context) theological inclusivism and/or pluralism, common if not predominant among Hindus,462 differs considerably from the theological exclusivism dominant among my interviewees, if not among evangelical Christians worldwide.

460 See Narayanan 2007 and Prentiss 1999 on the long and diverse history of bhakti Hindu traditions especially on their Tamil varieties, and Goswami and Schweig 2012 and Dwyer 2004 on Krishna bhakti in ISKCON as in Chinni’s story.
461 Approving nineteenth century orientalist scholars such as Horace Hayman Wilson and Monier Monier-Williams emphasised these points of connection and saw bhakti as “an Indian version of Protestant Christianity.” Prentiss 1999: 3. Appreciation of bhakti for its perceived points of resemblance to Christian faith was also expressed by Protestant missionaries in India in the early twentieth century: Ariarajah 1991: 21-22. Bhakti has also inspired Indian theologians in their attempts at contextualising Christianity in India, e.g. Appasamy 1952. Many interviewees show more affinity with a binary polarisation between Christianity and other religions reminiscent of that of Karl Barth or Hendrik Kraemer. See Ariarajah 1991: 54-68. Cf. George 2006: 164-173 on the similarity between the dominant theological attitude to other religions within Indian Pentecostalism and the theologies of Barth and Kraemer.
462 See Long 2013. Both pluralist and inclusivist features are prominent in Hindu theological approaches to other religions, approaches which can be defined as pluralist in their acceptance of other religions as true and as different paths to the same destination, and as inclusivist in their view of other religions as, basically, other varieties of Hinduism. (pp. 37-38, 55-62) “Sharp distinctions between inclusivism and pluralism are difficult to make with regard to specific Hindu traditions, or even specific Hindu thinkers,” Long writes (p. 56). This inclusive approach
Christian as well as Hindu theologians, scholars of religion, or other commentators often appreciate the inclusive and tolerant side of Hinduism, its religious openness as I have called it, sometimes connecting it with political tolerance.463 But what such writers see as an admirable acceptance of difference and an affirmation of plurality, interviewees primarily interpret as relativism. What Arvind Sharma describes as a “Hindu self-relativization in its quest for the ultimate,” both “a moral quality” and “an epistemological virtue,”464 to interviewees signifies a confused relativism. This opposition between Hindu pluralism and Christian exclusivism may be a simplistic “platitude” but it influences the way of thinking among ordinary Christians such as my interviewees, several of whom replicate it.

Again, some interviewees contrast Hinduism with Christianity here, distinguishing between this perceived Hindu relativism and Christian committed monotheism. Christina thought that Hindu polytheism and religious openness reflect a Hindu transience of mind: “Many gods they will believe, no? If with one god their ambition is not fulfilled, they will jump for the next god. So it is not a conformed [confirmed?] mind they are having. /---/ Hindu people have a very fluctuating mind. Because … [they believe in] more than three to other religions has, however, coexisted within Hindu history with more excluding attitudes. In the present context, Hindu exclusivism manifests itself mainly on social and political, rather than theological, levels (p. 37, p. 55).

463 For example, Indian Christian theologian Stanley Samartha appreciates the “normative plurality” and “mood of ‘tolerance’” he describes as characteristic of India. Exclusivist claims about the uniqueness and normativity of one religion above others are therefore more “rude, out of place, and theologically arrogant” in India than anywhere else, Samartha writes: Samartha 2000: 91, 94. Hindu scholar of religion Arvind Sharma values the “open mind” and theological pluralism of his religion. Sharma contrasts a Western predilection for the absolute, “certain and firm” or “static and rigid” with a Hindu emphasis on the universal as “consensual and fluid,” “broad-based and dynamic” or, if valued negatively, “wishy-washy and unsteady.” Sharma 2009: 11-15. (Quotations from pp. 11, 12-13.) Sharma portrays this as a contrast between Western and Hindu thought, but – as evident from my material – it can also be a contrast between Indian evangelicals and Indian Hindus. Indian politician and author Shashi Tharoor, in a popular book on Hinduism motivated by a wish to reclaim the religion from the Hindutva vision of it, advocates the “acceptance of difference” and “undifferentiated respect for all the various ways of worshipping God, whether Hindu or not” that he describes as essential to Hinduism. Tharoor 2018: xi, 32-35. (Quotations from p. 32.)

464 Sharma 2009: 12.

465 Barua 2014: 78. In this article, Barua argues that the predominant modern Hindu position on religious plurality is better described as hierarchical inclusivism than pluralism (p. 81). Note that I refer to a perceived Hindu “religious openness” here primarily in the sense of a flexible readiness to approach other Gods. I do not refer to political tolerance in the form of acknowledging the right of the religious other to be other. Political tolerance would mean, for example, Hindu acceptance of Christian theological exclusivism and evangelism. Barua rightly criticises the assumption of an automatic connection between theological exclusivism and religious violence and, conversely, “between religious pluralism and hospitality towards the religious alien.” (p. 78, see also pp. 86-87) See also Barua 2015, where he discusses these issues in greater depth.

466 I have heard a confusion of “conformed” with “confirmed” many times in India.
thousand gods.” She explained a typical Hindu methodology as she understood it: Hindus would apply to “all the gods,” she said, and if the application to one is unsuccessful they would “jump” to another. Christians, on the other hand, trust in only one God irrespective of how long their God waits before fulfilling their prayers.

According to the understanding of many interviewees, Hindus are prepared to recognise any God or, indeed, anything as a truly existing deity. In Christina’s words, “Everything they will treat as a god, Hindus,” including elements of nature such as wind and rain. Interviewees also brought up the Hindu polytheistic multitude of “thousands,” “so many crores,” or “numberless” Gods. The Hindu readiness to accept other Gods is seen in relation to its polytheism, the reasoning being that, since Hindus have so many deities already, one more can easily be accommodated into their worldview. Cauvery and Chakradev also referred to a Hindu belief that “all Gods are the same,” that there is the one God or Ultimate Reality underlying all the different conceptions of God/s in all religions. Unsurprisingly, since such a belief stands out as the very antithesis of their evangelical emphasis on the uniqueness of Christ, they depicted this as a fundamental misunderstanding. Some interviewees spoke of Hinduism as an inclusive, syncretistic religion. Hindus, they claimed, incorporate “anything” or any element of another religion into their own religious worldview and practice if they “need” that element or if it strikes them as “convincing.”

In relation to Christianity, this inclusiveness means that Hindus accept Christian claims about the divinity of Jesus and include him among the ranks of the Gods, according to several interviewees. Here, they have observed a form of Hindu religious openness where Hindus not only accept other religious expressions as valid ways for the other, but frequently also incorporate elements from the other’s religion into their own system of belief and practice. Hindus often display a readiness to cross religious boundaries which are generally perceived more acutely by the Christian and Muslim religious minorities. Consequently, interviewees encounter Hindu religious openness in the form of a willingness to go to Christian churches, and to approach Jesus

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467 Interview with Christina 2011-01-25.
468 Interview with Christina 2011-02-01.
469 Interview with Christina 2011-02-01.
471 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-10. It is often claimed that Hinduism is “really” monotheistic underneath its polytheism. Hindu understandings of the relationship between monothesism and polytheism are complex: see Fuller 2004: 30-31.
472 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16.
473 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
474 Interviews with Madhu 2008-03-03, Mohana 2010-12-14, Rev. Chand 2010-12-17, Rev. Thangam 2011-01-28 and 2011-03-03, Michael 2011-03-10, Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
475 See Long 2013: 59.


477 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2008-02-29.

478 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2008-02-29.


480 Tulasi Srinivas describes patterns of devotion among middle-class Hindus in Bangalore: “By shopping around, as it were, the middle-class devotees hope to maximise the sacred benefits ritual is designed to bestow, certain temples being renowned for their efficacy in mitigating specific social or psychological problems.” Srinivas 2006: 327.


482 Narayanan 2004: 23. Narayanan points out that the Hindu interest in Christian sacred places such as the Infant Jesus Shrine is not the sign of “a simple ‘mushiness’ of confusing religions and rituals” (p. 28) – not, as many of my interviewees would have it, an unselective relativism. Narayanan describes how Hindus are selective in their incorporation of certain Christian practices and places in their own religious practice, and they are well aware of the distinction between the Christian and Hindu religions (pp. 28-29).

483 Srinivas 2006: 327. Srinivas observes that this flexible Hindu attitude in contemporary Bangalore entails crossing of traditional intra-Hindu sectarian boundaries, when Vaishnavite devotees worship in Shaivite temples and vice versa (pp. 327-328).
Interviewees who have converted from Hinduism concur with the view of Hinduism as religiously open and eclectic, and also with the evaluation of this openness as a misunderstanding of the true nature of God. Something that they had previously seen as a strength in Hinduism, its respect for all Gods and religions, has since been replaced in them by an emphasis on monotheism and on the uniqueness of Christianity’s claims to truth and salvation. Chakradev’s example illustrates this reversal. Before his conversion, he had tried to persuade a Christian friend of the superiority of the Hindu “broad-minded concept [over the] Christian narrow exclusive way of understanding” God. But after conversion, he found that biblicism obliged him to deny all other gods because of biblical verses such as a saying of Jesus whose meaning Chakradev interpreted as “I am the only way.” It is not surprising that converts from Hinduism should hold such views; had they agreed with Hindu pluralism and seen Jesus as one among the many Gods, or one of the many faces of the one God, they would not have felt the need to convert as acutely.

As is evident here, the same phenomenon can be understood as openness, inclusivism, an experimental approach, or as relativism, depending on how one values it. Hindu religious openness is strange to most interviewees, who cannot appreciate the Hindu readiness to see God in a multitude of forms. To them, it appears as a relativistic inability to distinguish the true God from God’s creation or from idols. When they encounter Hindu pantheism and worship involving images, they interpret it as a sign of relativism, evidence that Hindus worship practically anything. Hindu openness clashes too profoundly with their own emphasis on monotheism and commitment to the one God for them to understand it in positive terms.

There is however, one notable exception here. Reverend Thangam, alone among interviewees, expressed an explicit appreciation of Hindu religious openness. Christians, he said, sometimes restrict themselves due to fear of contact with other religions; for that reason they can decline a Hindu’s invitation to a picnic, for example. But Hindus are “more open … they have very few religious taboos. I mean they’re more friendly, I would say. … I appreciate their friendliness, which comes out of … probably it’s because of the religion.” Hindu religious openness is not in itself advisable for Christians to imitate to the extent that they will worship one God one day and another the next day, he thought. But the social consequences of it are positive, and he thought

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484 Interviews with Madhu 2008-03-03, Mohana 2010-12-14, Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08 and 2012-02-10.
485 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
486 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-10. He was probably thinking mainly of John 14:6, a verse often used to argue for exclusivism.
487 Long 2013.
488 Bergunder 2008: 125.
489 Interviewees did not themselves use the term “relativism,” but it sums up a common attitude to this dimension of Hinduism among them.
that Christians should be inspired by Hindus in that regard. This is a clear expression of appreciation of an aspect of Hindu religion: Reverend Thangam says that Hindus are friendlier people than Christians not *despite* their religion but *because* of it.

In the dominant view, although the evangelical and general Protestant emphasis on monotheism and biblicism prevents a positive theological evaluation of Hindu religious openness, it is not viewed in a wholly negative light. On a social level, it is sometimes referred to as positive because of its consequence of making Hindus more receptive to Christian witness.

But Hindu religious openness can be problematised on this level as well. According to Reverend Chand, the Hindu acceptance of all religions is a challenge to Indian Christians because Hindus expect others to share their attitude to religious diversity whereas the monotheism of Christianity compels Christians to “deny other gods.” His statement touches upon the political implications of Hindu religious openness. Irrespective of its possible historical connections to India’s secular democracy, Hindu theological pluralism is, ironically, sometimes used as an argument by those who wish to limit religious freedom for others. Sumit Sarkar observes that “the notion of Hinduism as supremely and uniquely tolerant” is often linked to the idea that “Conversion from Hinduism is always unfair, since it has been a uniquely unproselytizing religion,” a notion which helps Hindutva adherents portray proselytising Christianity as a threat. In this way, religious tolerance can be used as an argument against political tolerance of religious minorities. The Hindutva rhetoric of religious tolerance as a sign of the superiority of Hinduism over Christianity is a reversal of the dominant view among my interviewees. Both sides, Hindu and Christian, here use the same contrast for mirroring themselves in their religious other (although, given the majority-minority situation, with considerably different political consequences).

From the aspects of interviewees’ attitudes to Hinduism that I have discussed in this chapter so far, it is clear that these attitudes are predominately negative. This can be understood against the background that the Hinduism they describe is either one that they have dissociated themselves from through conversion or one that they cannot relate to, perceiving it as essentially different from their own Protestant Christian faith. This basic assumption makes it difficult for them to form appreciative views of Hinduism or to observe affinities between Hinduism and Christianity. According to my observations, many Protestants in India form an early habit, taught for example in Sunday school,

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490 Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03.
491 Interviews with Christina 2011-01-25, Phoebe 2011-03-19, Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16.
492 Interview with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17.
494 Sarkar 2007: 357. Similarly, Jeffery Long notes that “the danger always exists that the inclusivist approach of Hinduism can itself be subverted into a Hindu nationalist argument for Hindu superiority – and such rhetorical moves are, in fact, routinely made.” Long 2013: 62.
of seeing Hindu religion as fundamentally other. It is often assumed to be in essence idol worship and worship of other gods, a contravention the first of the Ten Commandments, rather than a different way of approaching the same God or Ultimate Reality as Christians. As the themes discussed in this chapter so far demonstrate, not many of my interviewees have met Hinduism in the form of a theology that they could appreciate for its points of connection with Christianity. What they have encountered is a practised, lived Hinduism that they interpret through a biblicist lens. They are, in general, either unaware of, or uninterested in, the theologies behind it. Their knowledge of Hinduism is mostly based on observations of Hindu rituals and their understanding of these is often filtered through Christian polemic portrayals of Hinduism. In the case of converts from Hinduism, their knowledge of it is naturally more extensive but interpreted through the experience of conversion, of casting aside the old for the new.

In contrast to views of salvation, for example (see Chapter 3), regarding views of Hinduism there is no clear alternative to the evangelical lens. Although there are variations in terms of the strength of interviewees’ endorsement of the dominant view of Hinduism, there is no coherent counter image of a positive kind. Reverend Chand from CSI City expressed a radically different view of Hinduism but his attitude to it is also critical. His criticism of Hinduism is, however, based on different grounds, namely caste structures.

**Hinduism and Caste**

The attitudes to Hinduism discussed so far in this chapter have been critical for reasons related to human ways of understanding and approaching the divine. Hindu beliefs and religious practices are here perceived as faulty, superstitious, confused and futile. In the material there is also, but to a lesser extent, a criticism of Hinduism on account of inter-human structures. Hinduism is here seen as fostering non-egalitarian relationships between humans, particularly in the form of caste oppression.

The criticism of Hinduism from this angle was expressed mainly by Reverend Chand from CSI City. His view of Hinduism sees caste as the central issue. Overall, he focuses on matters of caste to an extent unparalleled by any other interviewee because he sees the caste system as an intrinsic part of Hinduism, a factor which in his view makes that religion intrinsically problematic. He said that although caste-related segregation is present among all religious groups in India, the caste system is “rooted in Hinduism … it comes from Hinduism, it’s not from any other religion.” In his view, Hinduism differs from other religions insofar as caste is essential to it. In the case of Christian practices of caste segregation, he sees them as a human corruption uncorrelated with the actual teachings of Christianity. But in the case of Hinduism,
Reverend Chand’s view on the role of caste in Hinduism resembles that of B.R. Ambedkar, whom the pastor often referred to, proclaiming him a hero. Reverend Chand here expresses a negative image of Hinduism as a religious system which has created and perpetuates caste oppression, along with a pessimism about the possibility of reforming it. Such thoughts are not unique to him but are represented in Christian Dalit theology and in Dalit movements more broadly. To understand this, one must remember that the vast majority of Christians in India come from Dalit or tribal backgrounds, from groups which have historically suffered from various forms of discrimination and oppression within traditional caste structures, and that these problems are by no means eradicated in the present day.

A few interviewees told me about personal experiences of Hindu caste-based prejudice against Christians. Christina was mocked in school by Hindu children for her Christian name even though she attended a Catholic school. And one of her friends asked her if she belonged to a backward caste since her friend’s father had told her that “all Christians are converted from backward caste only.” The question hurt Christina’s feelings and made her stop going to that friend’s house. Cauvery and Chakradev experienced how caste-related

495 Interview with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17.
496 Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956), Dalit leader, lawyer, scholar, politician, and major architect of the Indian Constitution. In 1956, Ambedkar publicly renounced Hinduism and converted to Buddhism along with hundreds of thousands of his followers, giving rise to “Ambedkar Buddhism,” a modern form of socially engaged Buddhism. Ambedkar’s popularity with Dalits is evidenced in the common sight of pictures of him in their neighbourhoods. For Ambedkar’s views on Hinduism and caste oppression, see e.g. Ambedkar in Joshi (ed.) 1986: 28-31.
497 In Dalit theology, Hinduism is often portrayed primarily as hegemonic, dominated by Brahminic or “caste Hindu” (i.e., non-Dalit) ideology. For example, in Dalits and Christianity, Sathianathan Clarke is critical of Hinduism and non-Dalit Indian Christian theologians for developing Christian theologies that harmonised with their caste Hindu heritage thus perpetuating hegemonic caste ideology within the Christian churches: Clarke 1998: 35-43. Clarke argues that, given the exclusion of Dalits by caste Hindus, traditional Dalit religious traditions should be seen as distinct from Hinduism (pp. 60-61). Through this distinction, Dalit religion becomes a resource for Christian theology while Hinduism becomes the hegemonic system. However, Clarke also nuances the picture by pointing to a softening of boundaries between Dalit and Hindu, self and other, through hybridity, in other words selective Dalit borrowing from caste Hinduism (pp. 126-127). A well-known non-Christian Dalit rejection of Brahminic Hinduism as hegemonic along with a distinction between Hindu and Dalit worldviews and identities is Kancha Ilaiyah’s Why I Am Not a Hindu: Ilaiyah 1996 (which Clarke in his turn refers to). However, repudiation has not been the only critical Dalit approach to the Hinduism of the dominant castes. There are also examples of reclamation of Hinduism or subtle alterations of dominant Hindu discourses: Rajkumar 2010b: 55-62.
498 Wilfred 2014: 39-40, 42. Felix Wilfred notes the “opposition of the Dalit movement in general to Hindu tradition as the ideological backbone of caste oppression,” which has made it sceptical of traditional types of indigenising Christian theology (p. 40).
499 Interview with Christina 2011-01-31. In this situation, it might have been used as a pejorative, but “Backward Class/Caste” (BC) or “Other Backward Class” (OBC) is also one of the official categories used by the Government of India.
stigma made their Hindu families disassociate themselves from them after their conversion to Christianity. Pansy explained how the renunciation of jewellery by TPM members becomes more of a sacrifice because of the prejudices this exposes them to: “Because I do not choose to wear [jewellery], people will look down on me. It’s so difficult … especially for an Indian woman … to not have all those things. There’s like: ‘ooh, yuck,’ kind of. They look down on you. … Maybe they think you’re poor, maybe they think you’re that lower caste.” As Pansy expresses here, according to the majority view in society – not necessarily endorsed only by Hindus – there is something repulsive about the absence of jewellery which is also a conspicuous sign of Christian identity, specifically of a Pentecostal/evangelical orientation, or else it is indicative of a poor financial status. Malini brought up a more practical difficulty, namely that her sister, in a love marriage with a Hindu man, found it difficult to arrange marriages for her children because of their unclear caste status.

Some interviewees mentioned that Hindus ascribe untouchability or feel antipathy to Christians due to the Christian (and caste-related) practice of eating meat, particularly beef. This is not, however, something that they have experienced personally. These examples illustrate some ways in which caste and the identification of Christians with Dalit and other “low” castes negatively affect Hindu-Christian relations in contemporary urban contexts. It can be noted that the caste identities of those of my interviewees who are converts from Hinduism do not correspond with the more typical Dalit background of many converts to Christianity.

To return from these individual experiences to Reverend Chand’s structural criticism of Hindu casteism, his caste-centred perspective differs from the majority view on Hinduism in more than one way. In addition to criticising it on different grounds, Reverend Chand also stands out in his non-judgemental attitude to Hindu religion in other ways. In a significant departure from the evangelical lens, he said that “Hinduism, except casteism … it’s all fantastic.” With the exception of caste, he sees much to appreciate in Hinduism. On environmental concerns, for example, in his view Hinduism has the “best” teachings, which Christians could learn much from. “But,” he continued, “the evil of it is … [the] caste system.” The problem of caste cannot be ignored; caste structures are “central to the whole idea” of Hinduism, he believes.

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500 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08. More on this in Chapter 9.
501 Interview with Pansy 2008-02-16.
502 I use “Pentecostal/evangelical” here, because removal of jewellery for reasons of piety can be found outside Pentecostal churches.
503 Interview with Malini 2011-03-21.
504 Interviews with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13, Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08, Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16.
Although critical, Reverend Chand’s view of Hinduism differs radically from the dominant view especially in his appreciation of some of its teachings and his acceptance of Hindu rituals and imagery which other interviewees perceive as ritualism and idol worship. Such an attitude is possible because Reverend Chand does not view Hinduism through the evangelical lens. He emphasises social issues rather than the universal necessity of placing Christ and the Bible at the centre of one’s faith. But, while not adhering to the evangelical criticism of Hinduism, he has his own strong criticism of it.

Glimpses of More Positive Views

As stated earlier, there is no clear positive alternative in my material to the evangelical lens’s critical view of Hinduism although there are a few glimpses of more positive views. While these are not substantive enough to constitute a coherent alternative view (or, in other terms, a counter discourse), they show that the negative assessment of Hinduism is not monolithic.

Most of these glimpses reflect an appreciation of human efforts to communicate with the divine. In different ways, some interviewees said that they have noticed such efforts in Hindu religious practice. Some spoke approvingly of what they perceived as a general tendency towards spirituality or religious devotion among Hindus although they still considered this spirituality misguided. More concretely, a few interviewees expressed appreciation of Hindu religious discipline seen, for example, in the way that Hindus observe fasts or rise early in the morning to bathe and perform puja. In more theological terms, Chakradev spoke of a natural human longing for salvation which, among Hindus, appears as a longing for moksha. Here, a Hindu theological concept, seen as corresponding to a Christian concept, is valued for reflecting an inherent human spirituality or aspiration, shared across religious boundaries, to reach the ultimate.

In line with this, Priya suggested that Hindu religion could be preparatory for Christian faith. She referred to some friends in church who are “strong Hindu Brahmin girls, no eating non-veg and doing all the pujas, and God touched them. So if you’re very devout in the way you worship God, God will

506 Interviews with Mohana 2010-12-14, Rev. Matthew 2011-01-11, Christina 2011-02-01. Christian observations of a strong spiritual mentality as characteristic of Hinduism and as a point of contact upon which to build the Christian witness have a long history. Such observations were prominent already in the responses by missionaries in India to a survey carried out in preparation for the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh 1910. See Ariarajah 1991: 21-22.

507 Interviews with Tarun 2011-02-04, Phoebe 2011-03-19. Phoebe linked this observation of Hindu religious practice with self-criticism directed at Christians: If Hindus, who have misconceived notions about God/s, worship so devotedly, Christians, who know the true God, should do so much better (i.e., spend more time in prayer and worship), she said.

508 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
definitely touch you. That’s what I believe.” Although Priya considers it misguided, she recognises in Hindu religious devotion a genuine aspiration to reach God and she expects God to respond to this by “touching” the person. She thus ascribes to Hindu belief a positive function, that of preparing a person for the encounter with (the real) God.

A related theological concept that some interviewees ascribe to Hinduism, thereby mitigating the absolute polarisation between it and Christianity, is partial truth through general revelation. “I believe there is a general revelation in Hinduism,” Chakradev said, and that therefore, there are “very good teachings” and “light” in Hinduism. Other strongly evangelical interviewees too perceived partial truth in Hinduism, where it resembles biblical accounts. However, in these interview contexts, partial truth is understood not primarily as a positive element but as a shortcoming in comparison to Christian full truth. Interviewees used Romans 1 as a biblical source for their reasoning, in particular Paul’s judgement of those who have access to revelation through nature but fail to worship God as they ought.

If the above examples have a point in common, Malini offered a distinctly different perspective on Hinduism. She told me how, when she visits Hindu temples, she feels the presence of a “power” which “moves around” during “a type of prayer that they do” (the recital of mantras, perhaps). The power present during Hindu temple worship cannot be denied, she claimed, although Christians might interpret it as evil or foreign spirits to “fight out” through prayer. But she does not subscribe to the belief that all powers at work in Hindu religion are evil: “There also good powers are there. We cannot deny that” and say that there are only “devils” connected with Hindu worship. In Hindu religion too, “there are some good powers when you pray [with] the good intentions. There too miracle could happen.” Her emphasis on “power” as an important element of religious practice is further clarified in the following reply to my asking her if Hindu prayer also worked: “Definitely. There are so many people who dedicate so much into the religion, hour to hour they sit and they meditate, they do yoga, do you think they don’t have any power in it?” While crediting Hinduism with some spiritual power, Malini considers Christian faith superior in terms of truth, salvation, mode of worship, and the

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509 Interview with Priya 2011-02-09.
510 As I understand Priya, it is the devotional feeling itself, the individual’s love and longing for God, which has prepared her for the encounter with Christianity, rather than any truths found in the Hindu religion as such. She expressly said that “there’s no truth” in Hinduism: Interview with Priya 2011-02-09. Still, in Priya’s example, Hindu faith prepared these girls for the encounter with Christ by inspiring them to worship God with devotion, so it must have provided them with enough understanding of God to do so.
511 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
512 Interviews with Mohana 2010-12-14, Michael 2011-03-10.
513 Interviews with Mohana 2010-12-14, Rev. Matthew 2011-01-11, Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-10. See Rom. 1:18-25. Note the contrast of worshipping God with worshipping images in v. 23. This type of reasoning has a long history in Protestant thought on religious others: see Schmidt-Leukel 2013: 126.
power of God. Still, she believes that spiritual devotion can be effective whichever God it is directed to. A person who has faith – whether Hindu, Christian, or Muslim – can move a mountain, she said. “But,” she added, “in our Bible it says in the last days even the frogs can do miracle … in Revelation.”  

Malini is undecided on the exact nature of the powers that she has seen at work in Hindu religion, but the important point here is that she ascribes spiritual potential to Hinduism. For her, there are supernatural powers at work during Hindu rituals and Hindu religious practice has efficacy in the sense that a “miracle” can occur within the religious framework of Hinduism too. This efficacy is an important factor. Malini’s emphasis on the “power” of a religion illustrates a phenomenon found in the Indian context more broadly, namely that it is felt to be important that a religion works. To many people, the potential of a religious institution or a religious functionary to heal or bring about other miracles is indispensable to their relevance. This phenomenon would probably emerge more distinctly in a poorer or more rural context than that of this study. Another significant point here is that Malini contradicts the assumption that the power she has sensed during Hindu worship is all due to satanic influence or malevolent supernatural beings, and thus disputes a common Christian spiritual warfare discourse. (See Chapter 3.) In addition, the material offers a few other examples of appreciation of Hinduism for teaching values such as love, morality, holiness, truthfulness, compassion, and charity.  

It is possible to identify a pattern from these glimpses of more positive attitudes to Hinduism. Firstly, as there is criticism of Hinduism on an inter-human level on account of the caste system, there is also some appreciation of Hinduism on this inter-human level where it is ascribed the function of teaching moral values. But most of the more positive statements relate to the human side of religious interaction with the divine since interviewees appreciate Hindu aspirations to reach God. They appreciate the religiosity that they have observed among Hindus and, among interviewees, there is a favourable view of religiosity in general. They appreciate when religious others show an interest in things religious, spend time in religious activities, and practise their religion regularly, even where the particular form of religiosity is considered misguided. In addition, Malini constitutes a significant exception here in

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514 Interview with Malini 2011-03-21. See Rev. 16: 13-14 – where the frogs referred to are “demonic spirits” (NIV).
515 Malini alternated between statements with a possibly inclusivist purport – as when she said that “God is taking control of every religion” and that “maybe our own God is there in that religion” – and henothistic-sounding statements which seemed to acknowledge the (possible) existence of Hindu Gods (if inferior in power to the Christian God).
517 I am aware that the term “religiosity” can have negative connotations especially when juxtaposed with “spirituality” but I use it here in the neutral sense of “strong religious feeling or belief” (Oxford Dictionaries).
her affirmation of a metaphysical reality behind Hindu religious practice, the “power” that she feels comes of the interaction between human and divine.

Conclusions

In this chapter, it has become evident how, in various ways, the evangelical lens outlined in the previous chapter colours the view of Hinduism among my interviewees. But negative ideas about Hinduism are common also among non-evangelical interviewees and can be seen in relation to the general Protestant emphasis on the centrality of Christ and the Bible. A majority of interviewees underline the importance of Christ and the universal authority of the Bible which impedes a positive understanding of Hindu religion because they see its beliefs and practices as conflicting with a biblical, Christ-centred faith. Here, the evangelical lens converges with a general Protestant perspective. Both discourage a sympathetic understanding of Hindu darshan of Gods in the form of images, for example. Interviewees express little understanding or appreciation of such a spirituality focused on the immanent side of the divine. A common assumption among them is that God should be approached through prayer and Bible reading, not through elaborate rituals which they equate with superstition, or through sacramental objects, and most emphatically not through images. Religious images is an important theme in interviewees’ discussions of Hinduism, so important that it will be discussed in a chapter of its own (Chapter 7).

The interviewees who are least influenced by evangelical theology and who speak from a general Protestant perspective largely agree with evangelical interviewees in their views of Hinduism. They disagree with the evangelical dichotomy between the consequences of Christian versus Hindu religion: salvation through Christ or no salvation (see Chapter 3). But in their understanding of Hindu beliefs and practices as such, these two perspectives unite in a shared lens. This Protestant/evangelical lens constructs a binary opposition between Christianity and Hinduism around a number of contrasts. There is the dedicated monotheism of Christianity and the relativistic polytheism of Hinduism, the true God of Christianity and the false gods or dead objects of Hinduism, and Christian biblical faith distinct from Hindu ritualistic idol worship. Other contrasts are, the Christian relationship with God and Hinduism as a misguided religion, and the powerful effect of Christian prayer and the futility of Hindu worship. The main opposition assumed is between true and false belief. In this regard, this othering process construes not only Hinduism but all non-Protestant (in some cases, even all non-evangelical) religion as other since it is all understood as false belief. But the othering of Hindu religion is more particular than the othering of other religions, with an elaboration of a number of specific themes. It is also more absolute, exhibiting fewer mitigating factors than the othering of Islam or Catholic Christianity.
This othering process concerns specifically Hinduism as a religion, not Hindus as people since although there is a predominately negative attitude to the religion, this is not true of the attitude to its followers. They are understood as children of God just as Christians are. (This is a point some interviewees emphasised in Chapter 3. The view of Hindus – as distinct from Hinduism – will be discussed in Chapter 8.) Along with the process of othering Hinduism, there is also a process of de-othering Hindus. It is visible when Pansy thanks God for not being born in a Hindu family because then she would also have “fallen for those gods,” or when Christina points out that no Indians were originally Christian but also that they can become fully Christian. Here, Christina denies an essentialist, definitive dichotomy between Christians and Hindus. This is so despite their differences in religious belief and practice, not because she is prepared to admit to any affinity between Christianity and Hinduism. This distinction summarises the dominant attitude to Hinduism on the one hand, and Hindus on the other, as it appears in the material as a whole.
5. Perceptions of Islam

This chapter focuses on perceptions of Islam, the second largest religion in India. Although, in relation to Christians, Muslims form a significantly larger part of the population, Islam and Christianity are both minority religions in India. They are also both Abrahamic religions, an affinity which colours interviewees’ perceptions of Islam, especially when viewed in relation to the more radically different Hinduism. As seen in the previous chapter, views of Hinduism are starkly critical and portray Hinduism as in many ways an antithesis to Christian faith. In contrast, views of Islam are decidedly more balanced and respectful. When I thematically analysed the interview material on this subject, it was the recurrence of positive impressions that most struck me. This is particularly so given my own background in Europe where the mainstream attitude to Islam can hardly be described as appreciative. Among my interviewees, positive views of Islam dominate over negative ones although the majority of them consider Islam to fail what they see as the ultimate test, that of its ability to save individual souls.

Appreciation of Religious Practice and Spirituality

The favourable views of Islam that recur in my material are based on appreciation for practices such as regular prayer, fasting, and reading of scripture, which correspond with Christian ideals of spirituality. Unlike Hindus, whose religious devotion is rarely recognised as such, Muslims can be characterised as “spiritual” and “devout.”

When asked about Islam and how it is practised, several of my interviewees responded that they have little or no knowledge of Islam. Interviewees generally have less close contact with Muslims than with Hindus. Not only is there a greater social distance between Christians and Muslims but restrictions for people from other religions to enter mosques were mentioned as further reason

518 Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19.
519 Interview with Priya 2011-02-09.
why Christians are less likely to learn much about Islamic religious practices. However, despite this professed lack of familiarity with Islam, interviewees – including those who claimed to know little or even “nothing” about it – did have impressions of it to share with me.

Several interviewees expressed appreciation of what they perceived as spiritual devotion and disciplined religious practice among Muslims. Muslims were said to have “very good discipline” in connection with their religious practices, and to be “very spiritual.” Thivya had the impression that Muslims pray more than Christians and that they read the Quran very faithfully. She also observed a singular practice among her Muslim co-workers, namely that they never stand and drink water rather they always drink sitting down. She approved of this since, for her, it shows gratitude to God for the gift of water which is necessary for survival. She clarified that the Muslims do not “worship” the water, only “respect” it. It is telling that she found it important to make this distinction given the emphasis on so-called “idol worship” and worship of objects of nature in the perceptions of Hinduism among her and other interviewees.

Interviewees told me about specific Islamic religious practices, including four of the five pillars of Islam: prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage (although no one used the term “pillars of Islam”). The Islamic declaration of faith was not mentioned but interviewees were aware of the Muslim belief that God, or Allah, is the only God and that Muhammad is God’s prophet or messenger.

Those interviewees who talked about Islamic prayer also specified that Muslims perform this prayer five times daily. At Phoebe’s office, the high frequency of Muslim colleagues’ prayers even led to “clashes” between them and similarly prayer-oriented Christians. Together with some other Christians, Phoebe had formed a prayer group at work and they found a small space where they could gather for prayer. Since Muslim colleagues used the same space for prayer, it sometimes happened that both groups wanted to pray at the same time. The Muslims “are very spiritual” Phoebe concluded.

Christina expressed appreciation for the devotion to prayer that she has observed among Muslims. While Christians postpone many prayers to the next

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522 Interview with Malini 2011-03-21.
523 Interview with Tarun 2011-02-04.
524 Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19.
525 Interview with Thivya 2012-01-24.
528 Interviews with Tarun 2011-02-04, Priya 2011-02-09.
529 Interviews with Tarun 2011-02-04, Thomas 2012-02-02.
530 Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19.
day, Muslims are different, she said, committing themselves to frequent and punctual prayers. If the time for prayer comes while they are at a bus stop, for example, they will lay down a cloth and pray there. Christians do not do that, she said. In a later interview, she again told me how she liked the punctual attitude to prayer among Muslims. Neither for “problems” nor for “party” would Muslims “leave those times for the namaz” she said; they would follow them “perfectly.”

Tarun said he admires Muslim fasting practices. Some Christians claim to be fasting but drink water and juice, he said, but Muslims abstain from everything from early morning until evening during their fast and do not even swallow their own saliva. He has observed this way of fasting among Muslim colleagues and neighbours and concluded that it is “very good.” Tarun also noted that fasting is a practice that Christians, Muslims, and Hindus share. Another sign of what Tarun labelled “very good discipline” is that Muslims enter the mosque only after washing themselves thoroughly – washing even the nose – wearing a cap and removing their shoes.

In contrast to these favourable comparisons with Christians, Priya expressed a somewhat different opinion of Muslims devotion. “Most of the Hindus and the Muslims are not strong” in their religion, she said, at least not among her young contemporaries who think that only “the mummies and the grannies follow the religion.” Hindu girls do not know much about pujas, according to Priya, and Muslim girls secretly eat in college during the Muslim month of fasting. In response to a follow-up question on the level of devotion of her Muslim friends, Priya was doubtful: “devout to their religion? I don’t think so … I had … three or four Muslim friends, and they used to just keep the fast for the sake of keeping it” but they did not show much interest in God. “There are a couple of girls who are really devout, again. They keep acknowledging God in everything… There are Muslims who get up early in the morning and read their Quran every day, but the general youngsters, no.” However, soon after this, she had the following to say about Muslims:

In Bangalore especially, I think they’re all very devout. Because if you go to the shopping centres … in Commercial Street and [places] like that, all of them [the shop owners] are Muslim. And Friday afternoon all the shutters are down, because they all go to worship in the mosque. And for Ramzan [Ramadan] they keep their fast very sincerely. And the girls, I think they have to read the Quran early in the morning, four o clock every day; I think they do that pretty sincerely. Like, I know a couple of colleagues who are very sincere in that.

Although this seems to contradict what she said before about Muslims not being strong in their faith, perhaps she sees a generational difference as well.

531 Interview with Christina 2011-01-25.
532 Interview with Christina 2011-02-01.
533 Interview with Tarun 2011-02-04.
534 Interview with Priya 2011-02-09.
as a class difference among Muslims, where shop owners differ from her college friends. However, this would not account for the religious sincerity of her colleagues at the college where she works as a lecturer.

These mostly positive perceptions of Islamic religious practice and spirituality stand in striking contrast to the way most interviewees spoke about Hindu religion. Views of Islam are not only more positive than views of Hinduism they are also more respectful in that they do not portray it as a stereotypically false religion. While perceptions of Hinduism are coloured by stereotyping it as idol worship, descriptions of religious practice among Muslims are more specific. Unlike Hinduism, Islam is not treated primarily as an antithesis to the Christian faith but viewed more on its own terms.

Similarities with Christianity

The practices that interviewees have seen and appreciated among Muslims – frequent prayer, generous offerings, reading of holy scripture, and fasting – are practices that are also valued within their own Christian faith. Similar practices are performed by Hindus as well, but it is obviously easier for my interviewees to recognise them in Islam. In a number of interviews, similarities between Islam and Christianity were also made explicit.

Islam, according to Chakradev, as one of the religions within the “Judeo-Christian-Islamic” tradition, is “almost the same” as Christianity.535 TPM’s pastor Pradeep also referred to the shared roots of the Abrahamic religions when he said that Muslims and Christians are “one father’s children, Abraham’s seed,” adding that while Hindus “are worshipping statues,” Muslims “are just like us.” Like Christians, Muslims pray and worship God, he continued, and like Christians they are monotheists with one central scripture: they have “only one Quran” and “only one Allah.” 536 Similarly, pastor Pradeep’s colleague from CSI City, Reverend Chand, referred to Islam as one of the monotheistic, exclusivist religions, together with Christianity and Judaism. These religions differ from open, inclusivist Hinduism which, Reverend Chand said, “accepts every religion.”537

Reverend Matthew from Mega AG agreed that, compared to Hinduism, Islam is more like Christianity “in terms of belief” because of its monotheism. But he also pointed to the strong influence of the Sufi tradition on Islam in India. Sufism, he said, teaches “accommodation of every religion” and includes worship of saints (or “worship of the dead” as he called it) as a practice.538 So rather than contrasting Islam with Hinduism, he sees Islam in India

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535 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
536 Interview with pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20.
537 Interview with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17.
538 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2011-01-11. His reference to “worship of the dead” presumably refers to the worship of Sufi saints at dargahs, the shrines dedicated to them. A dargah is
as similar to Hinduism in these respects due to the Sufi tradition. The Mega AG pastor was the only person to bring up this aspect of Islam in India. Other interviewees emphasised monotheism and exclusivism and noted that Islam shares these characteristics with Christianity. Muslims are “similar to the Christians only,” Christina said, and do not believe in other gods. “They only trust in Allah … as how we [do]” whereas she thought that “Hindu people [have a] very fluctuating mind” and “more than three thousand gods.”

A side of Christianity that is often considered problematic in India is its missionary nature. Michael mentioned this as another trait which Islam shares with Christianity but not with Hinduism: Muslims also “do a lot of evangelism” he said. “Hindus, I doubt it … It’s funny because only I think the Christians and the Muslims, they preach. Hindus, they don’t.”

Similarities between the Quran and the Bible were mentioned in a few interviews. My interviewees themselves had not noticed these resemblances but rather Muslim acquaintances had told them. In both scriptures some of the same stories could be found with small differences in the pronunciation of names. Malini – basing her understanding on information she has received from Muslim neighbours – even overstated the similarities between Islamic and Christian faith. When I asked her to describe how Muslims practise their religion, she said that “the practising is something like our own Bible. Our own Bible only they are also worshipping.” Note her expression that Muslims “also” (like Christians) worship the Bible. Malini also said that like

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539 Interview with Christina 2011-01-25.
540 See Jaffrelot (ed.) 2007: 233-254 for an introduction to the Hindu nationalist view of conversion. The view of Christian mission as problematic is, however, widespread beyond Hindutva adherents, as Sumit Sarkar observes: Sarkar 2007: 356. See Chapter 9 in this dissertation for more discussion on issues of mission and conversion.
541 Interview with Michael 2011-03-10. This is a popular notion, also among Hindus themselves. See Sarkar 2007: 357. For a discussion of mission in Hinduism, see Sharma 2011. Arvind Sharma concludes that Hinduism can be defined as a “missionary” but not as a “proselytizing” religion (pp. 133-134). This conclusion can be questioned, however. As Sumit Sarkar observes, the view of Hinduism as non-proselytising is ahistorical and fails to explain, for example, the spread of Hindu religion over much of Southeast Asia. Moreover, “From the late nineteenth century onward, Brahminical Hindu expansion directed toward marginal groups and tribes became increasingly organized, yielding the invention of a battery of innocent-sounding words” such as “reconversion” or “paravarta” (returning home). The notion of Islam and Christianity but not Hinduism as proselytising is sustained by obscuring Hindutva semantics. Regarding Hindu activities, “One hears or reads continually about ‘sanskritization’ or ‘cultural integration,’ but the bad word ‘conversion’ is never used”: Sarkar 2007: 358.
544 Interview with Malini 2011-03-21.
Christians, Muslims believe in the Holy Spirit (but not in the crucifixion of Christ). 545

Some interviewees referred to similarities between Christian and Islamic eschatological beliefs.546 Just as Christians believe in the Second Coming of Christ, so Muslims also believe that either Allah Himself547 or Christ548 will come again, they said.549

As mentioned in Chapter 4, the Hindu use of religious images – referred to as “idol worship” – proved to be an important aspect of the views of Hindu religion held by most interviewees. This theme surfaces again in connection to Islam, when interviewees refer to the absence of the use of religious images (understood as idol worship) as a similarity between Christianity and Islam and a positive characteristic of the latter.

As seen here, not only is Islam ascribed positive attributes idealised in interviewees’ own Christian faith, it is also explicitly assumed to have similarities with Christianity. This contrasts with the portrayal of Hinduism which is attributed with characteristics that are the opposite of Christian ideals. The affinity between Islam and Christianity is emphasised when seen against the background of Hinduism. When interviewees describe similarities between Christianity and Islam, their shared distinction from Hinduism is a recurring theme. The common denunciation of religious images (perceived as idol worship) in Islam and Protestant Christianity is contrasted to the prominent place of God-images in Hindu religion. Christian and Islamic monotheism is contrasted with Hindu polytheism. The central place of the holy book is also appreciated as it harmonises with an evangelical emphasis on the centrality of scripture which contrasts the book with the idol.

The recurrence here of appreciative observations of similarities between Islam and Christianity, expressed by evangelical as well as non-evangelical interviewees, contrasts with evangelical attitudes to Islam observed in many other contexts. For example, when Asonzeh Ukah analyses attitudes to Islam within the Pentecostal Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) in Nigeria, he finds that Islam is demonised and stereotyped as idolatrous and inspired by Satan. This is mostly done indirectly due to the threat of violent reactions.550 In contrast to this, demonising of Islam cannot be found in my material. (Here it should be remembered that, unlike the situation in Nigeria, Muslim-Christian communal violence is not a problem in Indian society although both Hindu-Muslim and Hindu-Christian violence is.) However, members of Mega AG – the one among the churches in my study that most resembles the

545 Interview with Malini 2011-03-21.
546 Interviews with Christina 2011-02-01, Michael 2011-03-10, Phoebe 2011-03-19.
547 Interviews with Christina 2011-02-01, Phoebe 2011-03-19.
548 Interview with Michael 2011-03-10.
549 For a short introduction to eschatological beliefs in Islam, see “Eschatology” in Esposito (ed.) 2003.
RCCG\textsuperscript{551} — tend more than other interviewees to express a dualistic worldview. This dualistic worldview posits a binary opposition between evangelical Christianity and all other religions, including Islam.

**Theological Exclusivism**

Another area where Islamic beliefs are seen to harmonise with Christian ideals and where both are contrasted with Hinduism is exclusivism. By this, I mean here a non-recognition of other Gods, strictness in worshipping and acknowledging only one God and the conviction that one’s own religion is the only or supremely true one.\textsuperscript{552} This principle, which interviewees perceive among Muslims, is mostly interpreted in positive terms as steadfast faith in one God without straying outside the boundaries of one’s religion.

Several interviewees spoke of Muslims as being firm in their adherence only to Islam without any interest in other religions. This is accentuated in contrast with the more religiously open, theologically pluralist Hindus. Lay church members have noticed this tendency among their Muslim acquaintances. Phoebe, for example, had not invited any Muslim to the Christian prayer meetings at her work. She did not think that they would accept the invitation, “and I know that they are very spiritual also in what they do.” She compared Muslims with Hindus:

Even if you talk [to a Muslim] there’s no point. I have not tried with any Muslim co-workers … What I feel is, especially when you go and talk to Hindu people … if they are a little blind, if they are not knowing about their gods, when you talk about your God Christ they will take it. /---/ They will try to convert or something, if something happens then they will obviously come. In case [of] Muslims it is not the same, because … I think they are rooted so much that even if you go and talk they will not. /---/ That is how they are raised, I think. From childhood they are grown like that, because you have to pray, you have to do this, do that. Like, nobody can – even if [people of another religion] go and talk they will not take it easily.\textsuperscript{553}

Christina expressed similar views. Like Christians, Muslims “won’t believe” in other gods, she stated, and immediately compared this with the “fluctuating mind” that she sees in polytheistic Hindus. She has had Muslim classmates in school and college, “but they are very religious” and do not offer Christians

\textsuperscript{551} I am familiar with this denomination having studied one of its branches in Sweden during my Master level studies in theology.

\textsuperscript{552} See Thomas 2013 for an introduction to Islamic theological attitudes to other religions, particularly to Christianity, which include openings towards inclusivist or pluralist thinking although the paradigm of Islam as superior has dominated and still does. (See esp. pp. 154-156, 171.)

\textsuperscript{553} Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19.
any possibility of sharing their faith with them. Christina said that, as Christians do, Muslims say that they will be saved to eternal life and resurrection through their religion and that they are the ones who follow the original, correct faith prescribed in the word of God and who have a relationship to God. When I asked, Christina clarified that it was not that she saw no need for Muslims to convert to Christianity but that they are reluctant to do so: “they won’t believe in other gods.” Christina appreciates this about them: “I like one thing that] is Muslim. Because in the spirituality Muslims are very pukka … they are very firm.” She returned to this point in our last interview, saying that she likes their loyal adherence to their faith, “without … fluctuating their mind. … Constantly they are keeping their own God only.”

Above, both Phoebe and Christina express a belief that Muslims would not be open to Christians sharing their faith with them because they are “very spiritual” or “very religious.” They see spirituality as interlinked with monotheism and a lack of interest in the witness of other religions. That a Hindu can be spiritual and open to a plurality of Gods is not taken into account. Such an open, pluralist religiosity is not interpreted as spirituality but as “fluctuating,” not being “rooted” in their faith, whereas Islamic monotheism and exclusivism are seen as “pukka” spirituality.

Thomas described the same phenomenon in less positive terms. He said that, unlike Hindus, Muslims are not willing to have “a dialogue or a conversation in terms of God. … They will only speak about their God, and they will not be willing to exchange any points or views about their God or any other God.” Muslims have more “religious rigidness,” he observed. Thomas has both Hindu and Muslim friends with whom he talks about religious subjects like festivals, but he has found that it takes more time for Muslims to open up and listen to Christian perspectives.

That Muslims are generally not receptive towards such Christian evangelism, especially in comparison with Hindus, is a view that pastors hold as well. Pastor Pradeep said that Muslims do come to church to consult with him, and that the conversion issue is not such a problem with Muslims as it is with Hindus. But he also said that normally Muslims will not convert. Very few TPM believers are from a Muslim background, he said.

Reverend Matthew’s experience is similar. Unlike Hindus, who “are willing to go anywhere,” Muslims “are closed” he said. “For them ‘this is it, and nothing else.’ Islam is the only one. So until they’re confronted, they are desperate, they have no other way, nothing else to do, then they’ll say ‘ok, let’s give it a try.’” Like Phoebe, he referred to the religious training that Muslims receive from childhood. “One of the things [about] Muslims,” he said, is

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554 Interview with Christina 2011-01-25.
555 Interviews with Christina 2011-01-25, 2011-02-01.
556 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
557 Interview with pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20.
558 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2008-02-29.
that “they are taught well.” From childhood, they go to the mosque and are
taught by *maulvis* and learn to memorise things. In that way, they learn a
“standard kind” of argumentation against Christian theology, saying, for ex-
ample, that “God cannot be three.” Because of the Trinity, “they very strongly
believe that we [Christians] are very idolatrous, and we believe in the idols. /-
--/ So these are the contentions which come in. Straightaway they’ll ask us.”\(^{559}\)
Here, in relation to Islam, Christians are at the receiving end of the accusation
of “idolatry” which they themselves level at Hindus.

Because of this resistant attitude, Mega AG – the most evangelism-oriented
of the four churches in this study – has not concentrated on Muslims in their
outreach. Things are starting to change, however, according to the pastor. “Is-
lam,” he said, “it’s always been the most difficult thing to penetrate, but there
are a lot of Muslims also coming to the Lord … in the city we do see.”\(^{560}\)
Madhu, the theology student leading a Mega AG cell group, also said that new
people coming to Mega AG included Muslims.\(^ {561}\) Michael, another Mega AG
cell group leader, told me that his wife has a special calling to mission among
Muslims. “She has been in that ministry for over ten years now,” he said. She
had not yet started this ministry in Bangalore, being relatively new in the
city.\(^ {562}\) These examples from Mega AG are exceptions from the general pic-
ture of Muslims as being less receptive to evangelism and less inclined to par-
ticipate in Christian prayers or worship than Hindus.

The material on the whole shows an ambivalent attitude towards the phe-
nomenon of theological exclusivism among Muslims with its non-receptive-
ness towards other religions. On one hand, it is appreciated as “*pukka*” spirit-
uality, a commendable monotheistic loyalty to one God. On the other hand,
this makes it difficult for Christians to reach Muslims with the gospel which
is after all, according to the dominant view among interviewees, the only true
way to salvation. Islamic exclusivism is seen as the reverse of Hindu religious
openness which is not appreciated as a theological value in itself but which
interviewees can still value when it results in making Hindus more likely to
approach Christ.

**Egalitarianism**

Islam can be appreciated not only from a theological perspective but also from
a social one. In view of this some interviewees mentioned egalitarian teach-
ings and practices within Islam. The specifically South Asian phenomenon of
caste is important here.

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\(^{559}\) Interview with Rev. Matthew 2011-01-11.

\(^{560}\) Interview with Rev. Matthew 2011-01-11.

\(^{561}\) Interview with Madhu 2008-03-03.

\(^{562}\) Interview with Michael 2011-03-10.
Like several other interviewees, Reverend Chand had more positive words for Islam than for Hinduism. His reasons are, however, different from those of most other interviewees. Due to his focus on caste issues, his main criticism against Hinduism is not the use of religious images and other ritual practices but the casteism that, according to him, is inherent in its nature. He emphasises the socio-political dimension of religion as a motivating force towards working for the common good. Here he finds Islam preferable to Hinduism, since he believes that casteism is essential to the latter. In his view, the case of Islam is the same as the case of Christianity, that casteism is present within it but not essential to it. Reverend Chand’s more favourable view of Islam than of Hinduism is mainly due to the centrality of the anti-egalitarian phenomenon of caste in Hinduism.

Where he sees Hinduism as controlled by the upper caste elite, Reverend Chand views Islam as on a more equal standing with Christianity, socially. In a conversation I had with him and a fellow Dalit activist and scholar (also from the CSI), they criticised early Indian Christian theology for its “bias towards Hinduism,” while Islam and Buddhism are actually “more subaltern” religions, they claimed. When it comes to Human Rights issues, they said, there are no differences between Christian and Muslim Dalits since both groups face the same issues.

Egalitarian teachings within Islam have not only made Reverend Chand form a relatively positive personal view of it. He also sees in such teachings a ground for Islam’s growth worldwide. The influence of Islam is growing, not least in Europe, he said, because of its message of “equality.” “Europe has caught up with [Islam] totally. Because that’s … one religion which – may have distinction between male and female – but their religion talks about brotherhood, and that’s a real perfect religion people would go into,” Reverend Chand, who in our interviews and conversations concentrated largely on the social aspects of religion, clearly appreciates Islamic teachings about “equality” and “brotherhood” to the extent that he characterised it as “a real perfect religion.”

A few other interviewees also spoke of social and egalitarian aspects of Islam. According to Thivya, religious festivals bring out a community feeling among Muslims. During festivals, Muslims, especially the men, meet and greet every other Muslim they encounter, including strangers; “they feel that they are the same.” Thomas spoke about the seating in mosques. No differentiation is made between people of different classes, he said. Everyone sits

564 Conversation with Rev. Chand and a CSI Dalit activist and scholar 2011-03-18.
565 Interview with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17.
566 Interview with Thivya 2012-01-24.
on the floor since there are no chairs or permanent seating arrangements. Nobody can reserve a particular place in the mosque; all must sit in the same rows and a rich person can sit next to a mechanic. In some Christian churches, on the other hand, differentiation based on caste can still be found below the surface, he said. (It can be noted that Thomas would naturally know more about covert caste differentiation in Tamil churches than in mosques.)

The Position of Women

The view of Islam is not one-sidedly positive and focused on similarities with Christianity. There are also areas where differences between the two religions are pointed out and where Christianity is considered superior to Islam. One such area is the position of women.

As seen in a quotation above, there was one exception to Reverend Chand’s strong praise of Islam as “a real perfect religion,” namely the “distinction between male and female.” The position of women and differentiation between men and women are themes that recur in the descriptions of Islam. Several interviewees brought up the exclusion of women from mosques, saying that only men go to pray in the mosque while Muslim women pray at home. Christina pointed this out as a difference between the otherwise similar religious practices of Islam and Christianity. When asked to describe similarities and dissimilarities between Christian and Muslim worship, she said that “usually there is no difference I think,” except for the separation at the time of prayer when Muslim women stay at home. Among Christians it is not so, she said, both men and women go to church and worship there.

In other ways, too, the position of women is an area where interviewees point out differences between Islam and Christianity. Chakradev said that Muslim “ethics are sometimes extreme,” “suppressing” women while “men [are] free.” To illustrate the difference between Christian and Muslim lifestyles, Priya told me that Muslims “can have many wives. And many wives, that means you can marry again and again – the guys, the girls cannot. And they believe in divorce … if the guy doesn’t like the girl, if he just says it thrice, ‘talaq, talaq, talaq,’ she has to leave him.” Priya compared Christianity favourably with both Islam and Hinduism regarding the position of women.

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568 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
569 Interview with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17.
571 Interview with Christina 2011-02-01.
572 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
Among Hindus, too, women are not permitted to enter certain places, for example, the temple devoted to Ayyappan at Sabarimala in Kerala, and Hindu women are prohibited from entering temples and eating *prasada* during their “period of the month,” she said. Offering one more example of interpretation of Hinduism through a biblicist lens, Priya saw a parallel between Hindu belief in the ritual impurity of menstruating women and impurity laws in the Old Testament. Thus, she said, “I feel it’s more equal in Christianity.” She did not, however, deny that there are certain gender-differentiating practices in her own church such as not allowing women pastors or only allowing TPM sisters to preach in the absence of qualified men. She found arguments for such practices in New Testament verses about the submission of women in church. Priya here differentiates between the idea of gender complementarity, which she sees no reason to question in her own denomination, and gender-related practices in other religions that she sees as suppressive of women. She includes Hinduism as well as Islam in this criticism.

The subject of the position of women in Islam, brought up mostly by female interviewees, stands out in relation to the peripheral status of gender issues in the material as a whole. The theme of gender roles, or the position of women in religion, is otherwise not frequently touched on. It comes to the fore in descriptions of Islam and comparisons of Islam with Christianity.

The Non-Threatening Nature of Islam

The position of women is one area where negative generalisation about Islam and Muslims is common in the West. Another such area is the presumed association of Islam and Muslims with fundamentalism and terrorism, or with threats to democratic values and human rights. This theme is relatively peripheral in my material.

A few interviewees contrasted Islam negatively with Christianity in regard to the allowance made for critical thinking and questioning, and criticised what they perceived as a tendency to fundamentalism within Islam.

The subject of terrorism is relatively rare in interviews. Phoebe was an exception when she associated Islam with the attack on the World Trade Center in New York as well as wars in other countries, and when she referred to Muslims using violence in the name of Allah. Additionally, when I asked Chinni

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573 In 2018, a historical but disputed Supreme Court verdict, leading to protests and counter-protests, ruled that also women of menstruating age should be allowed to enter the temple in Sabarimala.
574 Interview with Priya 2011-02-09.
576 Interviews with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17, Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
577 Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19.
and Cecil if there had been any terrorist incidents in Bangalore, they mentioned a bomb threat for which Islamic groups were suspected.\footnote{Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.} Reverend Matthew said that, although there is a “fantastic” ethical side to Islam, there is the possibility of bad theology becoming more influential and inspiring terrorism. But he also mentioned resistance to this within Islam and related terrorism to socioeconomic factors, saying that Muslims are “disadvantaged … treated [as] third class.”\footnote{Interview with Rev. Matthew 2008-02-29. For a discussion about the marginalisation, social exclusion, and discrimination of Muslims in India, see Robinson 2008.} The discrimination against Muslims in India is, however, not on a par with the Islamophobia common in Europe and North America, according to the pastor.

Reverend Thangam also brought up the motif of a connection between Muslims and terrorism. He referred to a popular image of Muslims as terrorists, but criticised it. Although he believes that most terrorists are Muslims, he wants Christians to refrain from collective accusations of Hindus as idol worshippers and Muslims as terrorists.\footnote{Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-01-28.}

Reverend Thangam has observed an international Islamic influence on Muslims in Bangalore. This influence has led to an intensification of Muslim emphasis on their religious identity, he said:

As far as the Muslim faith is concerned I think there’s an impact from outside. … There’s a global Muslim faith which has its impact on the faith of Muslims in India. For example, ten years back, you couldn’t find Muslims so easily. Because [a person] may be a Muslim but you wouldn’t find external signs like the beard, or the burqa.\footnote{The burqa that he speaks of is on the streets of Bangalore more frequently a niqab, which is often called “burqa” by Indian Christians.} Of late there are more and more Muslim women, at least in Bangalore … that too well to do Muslim women, who can wear the best designer saris, they are choosing to wear burqas. And men, I see more and more men with beard. /---/ They’re emphasising their identity.\footnote{Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-01-28.}

Reverend Matthew likewise brought up an international, more radical Islamic influence on Indian Islam. This radical and exclusivist influence has not, however, prevailed over the traditional Indian Sufi-inspired version of Islam, he maintained. Islam in India, he said, is “not the jihadist kind of a thing, which is now slowly … brought in, and that’s the problem that we are facing now. Otherwise there’s more of a Sufi kind of a thing – accommodation of every religion; all the good.” Lately, more strictly exclusivist “monotheistic” messages that “you should only worship Allah and nobody else” have started to spread, he said. But “even if they believe [that] they will keep it to themselves … still on the overall, when you look at Indian Muslims [they] are far better than … especially Pakistan.”\footnote{Interview with Rev. Matthew 2011-01-11.}
Note how monotheism and exclusivism, otherwise central theological doctrines to the pastor, here have more negative connotations of fanaticism or fundamentalism, whereas pluralism or “accommodation of every religion” is accorded positive value, as something that makes Indian Muslims “far better” than those elsewhere (in Pakistan). In his description, Indian Muslims are associated more with an Indian spirit of religious tolerance that he ascribes to Hinduism than with Pakistani Muslims. Pakistan (a nation in a state of mutual antagonism with India ever since Partition) here represents a case of a more aggressive Muslim identity lacking the religious tolerance found among both Hindus and Muslims that makes India a preferable society for a Christian minority. And while active evangelism is his ideal for Christianity, since he regards Christianity as the only true religion this ideal is not applicable to other religions for which accommodation is preferable.

Another international outlook was offered by Reverend Chand, who has travelled in Europe and noted the presence of Islam there. “I was shocked on my recent trip to Europe,” he said, by “the amount of Muslims rising, and the Christian Church is not even having a voice there. … You could see the presence [of Muslims] there, whereas the Church has no presence.” He did not portray this presence as a threat but as something that should push the European churches to be more vocal in public debate in Europe. He saw European Christians as making concessions to secularised society and failing to stand up for their own beliefs. “When the secular person comes and challenges your faith you say: ‘Ok, no problem, sir.’ /---/ Whereas Islam is making a clear stand in Europe. Whatever they believe in, they make a clear stand. Whereas the Church, on any issue, take human rights issue, and they’re just silent about it.” On the other hand, in Indian society, which is religiously diverse and rarely secularised (in the sense of being non-religious or less visibly religious) he finds that church leaders have learnt to express their beliefs clearly just as he saw Muslims doing in Europe.585

As seen here, in Reverend Chand’s view the great threat is not Islam but secularisation. The pastor believes that a “secular attitude is very dangerous” and that “there should be a faith to drive you” towards doing good. Reverend Chand emphasises the similarities between Islam and Indian Christianity rather than between Christianity in Europe and in India. He portrays European churches as passive in the face of secularisation and unfavourably compares them with both Islam in Europe and churches in India. Mega AG’s Reverend

584 On the situation for the Christian minority in Pakistan (close to the time of this interview), see Sada 2009 and Haider 2009. Christians in Pakistan are economically, politically, and legally vulnerable. For example, between the adoption of Pakistan’s blasphemy law in 1986 and the time of Sada’s writing, “hundreds of Christians have died because of this law”: Sada 2009: 102. And in contrast to the situation in India, Christians in Pakistan are socioeconomically disadvantaged with a considerably lower literacy rate than the general population especially among women: Haider 2009: 110.

585 Interview with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17.

Matthew is also strongly critical of the secularisation of Europe which he sees as a spiritual vacuum and the reason why Europe is more susceptible to Islamic radicalisation than India.587

Contrasting Indian and US Evangelical Views of Islam

As seen here, although Islam is occasionally associated with fundamentalism and terrorism, this is infrequent in my material whether from evangelical or non-evangelical interviewees. My material here differs radically from the situation in Western countries, for example the US, where a perception of Islam as a threat and negative stereotypes of Islam are common, not least among evangelicals and especially in the post-9/11 context.588 “In our current socio-political and cultural context, … Islam is demonized” and Muslims represent “the dangerous other,” Khyati Joshi writes of the US.589

In an empirical study of attitudes to Islam and Muslims among US evangelicals, Amit Bhatia found that fear of Islam and Muslims was prevalent among his interviewees and focus group participants who viewed Islam and in many cases Muslims as “evil.” “[A]ll of the American evangelical respondents … articulated negative perceptions of Muslims and Islam along with attitudes characterized by mistrust, fear and suspicion,” Bhatia writes. Among his focus group participants who worked with ministry directed towards Muslims, “all of [them] strongly emphasized Islam as an evil religion. No one mentioned if there were any ‘good’ or ‘true’ aspects within Islam.”590 Compare this with my interviewees who, although they generally agree with Bhatia’s focus group participants in seeing Christianity as unique in terms of salvation and truth, still ascribe good values to Islam. And unlike Bhatia’s evangelical interviewees they do not express fear of Muslims or Islam. One important difference here is that while to many US American evangelicals the

588 For a discussion of the predominately negative attitudes to Islam among American Christians, see Grafton 2017. An “Evangelical Biblicist” attitude to Islam is the dominant view of Islam among Americans and views Islam as “cultural despotism,” Grafton writes (p. 406, p. 409). Evangelical Islamophobia in the US is also discussed by e.g. Johnston 2016 and Brown 2004. In a 2014 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life of feelings towards different religious groups among Americans, the feelings for Muslims were rated more negatively than the feelings towards any other group. White evangelicals were more negative than any other group towards Muslims. See http://www.pewforum.org/2014/07/16/how-americans-feel-about-religious-groups/. According to another study by the same forum from 2009, 52 per cent of Americans felt “very concerned” about the possible rise of Islamic extremism in the US, while an additional 27 per cent were “somewhat concerned.” See http://www.pewforum.org/2009/11/18/modest-rise-in-concern-about-islamic-extremism/
590 Bhatia 2017: 29, 32, 35.
presence of Muslims in their own daily lives is a relatively new phenomenon. Muslims and Christians in India have a long history of coexistence with each other and with other religious groups.

Further, as Martha Nussbaum remarks, the Western “clash of civilizations” view of Islam as incompatible with “Western” values such as democracy does not correlate with the situation in South Asia. This is seen, for example, in the small presence of fundamentalism and the absence of “ties to international Islamic radicalism or to terrorist organizations” among Muslims in India, and in the participation of Muslim citizens in India’s democratic system.

Still, an image of Islam and Muslims as a great threat does exist in India not in Christian but in Hindutva discourse. Here, Islam and Muslims are portrayed as a major ideological and demographic threat to the integrity of a Hindu Indian culture viewed as a monolithic entity where Hindu religion and Indian culture are inextricably linked. Christians are portrayed as the second-most threatening religious other after Muslims. To Christians in India themselves, the major threat is not Islam but Hindutva. Muslims and Christians are both minority groups and both are targeted with suspicion and violence by Hindutva forces.

Theological Differences

As discussed above, criticism and negative views of Islam are found in the material especially in regard to the status of women, fundamentalism, and a connection between Muslims and terrorism. Criticism on these points is, however, expressed by relatively few interviewees. Appreciation of Islamic beliefs and practices is a more prominent theme in the material. This is especially pronounced in comparison with the predominantly negative views of Hinduism in my material. Islam and Christianity are seen as relatively similar to each other in contrast to Hinduism which is perceived as more radically different. This is not the whole picture, however, since most interviewees also see important theological differences between Islamic and Christian beliefs.

Michael said that, while Islam is “more similar to Christianity” than Hinduism is, Muslims “believe more of the Old Testament than the New Testament.” Thomas also said that Muslims “go mostly with the Old Testament”

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592 Nussbaum 2007: 4-5.
593 On the pre-Independence history of the idea of Islam and Muslims as a threat within Hindutva ideology, see Jaffrelot (ed.) 2007: 13-16. In the post-Partition context, the Muslim threat has been conceived of primarily in terms of a suspected alliance with Pakistan among Indian Muslims. See Pandey 2007: 168-172.
594 Sarkar 2007: 356.
595 Interview with Michael 2011-03-10.
when he wanted to emphasise the difference between Islam and Christian-
ity.596

Phoebe referred to the tradition that Muslims descend from Hagar and
Ismael to emphasise the difference between Islam and Christianity. She
seemed to see theological significance in the divergence of genealogies since
she brought it up immediately after stating the vast difference between Chris-
tian and Islamic belief.597 Reverend Thangam, on the other hand, spoke about
it in connection with the social distance between the two groups which per-
sists, he said, despite the religious similarities between Islam and Christianity.
He mentioned “this problem with Ismael” as a possible explanation for why
intermarriage between the two groups is so rare, while intermarriage between
Christians and Hindus is more frequent. “Maybe this problem with Ismael is
troubling their minds,” he speculated, adding, “Oh, these fellows are descend-
ants from that side, Hagar’s son Ismael’s descendants’ … So maybe that
thought is troubling some people, I don’t know.” 598 Other interviewees also
referred to Isaac and Ismael, but with the shared Abrahamic descent as a sim-
ilarity rather than as a difference between the two religious groups.599

Unsurprisingly, the most frequently mentioned dissimilarities between the
two religious traditions turned out to be the different ways of understanding
God and Jesus Christ. That Muslims do not believe in the Trinity,600 the divin-
ity of Jesus601 or his crucifixion and resurrection602 (although Jesus is an im-
portant prophet for them) came up in many interviews. These differences
turned out to be crucial for the ultimate theological evaluation of Islam among
several interviewees.

Do Muslims and Christians Believe in the Same God?

A theological question that often surfaces in connection with Christianity’s
relation to Islam is whether it is the same God that Christians and Muslims

596 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
597 Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19. The motif of Hagar and Ismael occurs in Christian think-
ing about Islam in other contexts too. It has been used in Pentecostal/Charismatic demonising
of Islam in Nigeria which in its turn leans upon nineteenth-century evangelical missionary
598 Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03.
600 Interviews with Rev. Matthew 2011-01-11, Christina 2011-01-25, Thomas 2012-02-02,
Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08, Priya 2011-02-09.
601 Interviews with Rev. Matthew 2011-01-11, Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13, Thomas 2012-02-
02, Priya 2011-02-09.
602 Interviews with Michael 2011-03-10, Malini 2011-03-21.
believe in.603 This has been a theological “key issue” in the interreligious dialogue between Christians and Muslims.604 Unlike much of the above material that originates from open questions about the character of Islam, the material on this theme originates from more direct questions from me. I wanted to find out to what degree my interviewees saw similarities between Islam and Christianity. Would they be willing to say that Muslims worship the same God as Christians, or that Allah can be said to be synonymous with the Christian understanding of God the Father (since it was repeatedly stated that Muslims do not believe in a Trinitarian God)? The question was mostly answered in the negative.

Thomas answered with a decisive “No!”605 Cecil, although agreeing that there are more similarities between Christian and Muslim faith than between Christian and Hindu faith, replied in the same way. “Their whole understanding of God is a little different from ours,” he said, and he was not willing to say that the Muslim understanding of God could be compared with God the Father. “What God do they worship then?” I asked. Cecil’s conclusive reply was that “At the end of the day there’s only one God, so if you’re not worshipping Him, you’re not worshipping God.”606 Thivya also responded in the negative, adding that “our God is great.”607 Priya was less decisive when she said that it “could be [or] could not be” the same God, she did not know. But she seemed to lean towards the negative when she continued by saying: “But actually it’s [Islam is] very different.”608

In the interview with Reverend Thangam, the question was phrased more generally, not specifically about Islam and Christianity but about all religions in relation to pluralist theology. We had been talking about his theological studies and I asked his opinion on the theological viewpoint that – simply put – “in the end [all religions] worship the same God, but in different shapes.” His answer steered the discussion into the specific question of the Muslim’s God and the Christian’s:

On this particular sentence, I … see, it’s a tricky situation. I would personally not agree saying all gods are the same. Personally, I won’t agree to it. But I don’t mind telling the other friend: “Look man, if you have faith in Allah, you go on and worship your Allah. I’m not forcing you to come here. But don’t force me to worship Allah. I worship my God. And I believe this is the thing.”609

603 For example, when American president George W. Bush said that he believed Muslims and Christians worship the same God this caused a controversy that inspired a series on the question in the magazine The Christian Century which included contributions by Wesley Ariarajah (2004) and Lamin Sanneh (2004).
605 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
606 Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.
607 Interview with Thivya 2012-01-24.
608 Interview with Priya 2011-02-09.
So in this hypothetical discussion with a Muslim, he implies that Allah and “my [Christian] God” are different Gods.

Phoebe was clear on this point. When I asked her if Muslims worship the same God as Christians, her reply was: “That is what they say, but it is not the same.” In support of this, she spoke of terrorism in the name of Allah. (While she conceded that Christians also do fight, they do not fight in the name of God, according to her.) Thus Allah “is not the same” as the Christian God. “They say it is the same God, but I don’t think so.”610

Like Phoebe, Christina had heard Muslims say that they worship the same God as Christians but compared to Phoebe she was more open to the idea herself. Muslims, Christina said, “will give more preference to only the Father. Allah. ‘Allah’ means, that is Father, like that. Jehovah … Same God, Father, like that they will tell.”611 Unlike Phoebe, she did not oppose this belief. Chakradev said of the Muslim understanding of God:

Allah is the same Creator God, they believe. … [Their concept is] almost similar to the Christian concept of God, except accepting this Trinity concept, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. … See, all are worshipping the same God. But the way we worship is different. … There is only one God. Even the Bible says there is only one God. We all are trying to worship one God, but it is not the way the Bible demands. That is the only difference.612

In this way he expressed a definite positive answer to the question of whether Muslims and Christians believe in the same God and he was the only interviewee to do so. Not only Muslims, but all people – of whatever religious affiliation – strive to reach the one God, according to Chakradev. (They are able to do so because of general revelation, present in every religion, he believes.613) However, it is not the similarities with Christianity but the differences that determine Chakradev’s ultimate evaluation of Islam, an evaluation that he shares with several other interviewees.

As seen here, although Islam is viewed more positively than Hinduism, when it comes to important theological questions of truth, it is not accorded equality with Christianity. Appreciation for Islamic monotheism is a recurring motif in the material. But when interviewees are asked directly if Islam’s God is the same as Christianity’s – when provoked to take a position on the question – most of them are unwilling to go that far in their acknowledgement of Christian-Islamic affinity. On the other hand, although Islam’s God is generally not acknowledged as the true God, neither is Allah portrayed as a rival malevolent spiritual power.

610 Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19.
611 Interview with Christina 2011-02-01.
612 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
613 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
Christ and the Bible

Two subjects proved to be essential to the theological evaluation of Islam, especially among the most clearly evangelical interviewees: different views on Jesus and the Bible held by Christians and Muslims. There are similarities as well as differences here too since Jesus is an important figure in Islam and there are many points of contact between the Bible and the Quran (as some interviewees noted). Nevertheless, to evangelical interviewees, the differences are more critical here and they affirm the uniqueness and superiority of Christianity. This is an emphasis they share with many evangelical and Pentecostal Christians across the world who stress the “born-again” distinction.614

When Chakradev said that the Islamic concept of God is “almost similar” to the Christian one, “almost” proved to be crucial; from his perspective, the small differences between Islam and Christianity override the similarities. When he said that Muslims “are closer to the biblical perspective than Hindus,” he continued: “but still … half-truth is full wrong.” His view of truth is strict, which he illustrated with a mathematical example: If “10 is the answer for a sum, you got 9.999 … that doesn’t mean it is mathematically correct. But you are closer to the answer, but still you are wrong.” On important theological issues, one’s understanding has to conform completely to the truth, he thought. For Chakradev, that truth is found in the Bible which is his “measure roll.”615

Mohana has an even more binary view on truth and falsehood in religion. “A lie is a lie,” she said, and therefore you cannot say that one religion, like Islam, is more similar to Christianity than another religion is. “It’s like, when God says … this is the rule, there cannot be anything less than that rule which can be the rule.” She illustrated this point with a person who must jump across a pit:

If you have to jump across, you have to jump across. If you missed the mark and you fall into the pit, you cannot say: “I almost reached.” But you’ve fallen into the pit. You cannot say “I’ve almost…” – it doesn’t matter how far away you are. Either you’re in the pit or you’re out of the pit. So, that’s it. So, either you accept Christ. If not there’s no other thing. It’s a lie. There’s nothing close to Christianity.616

Like Chakradev, Mohana measures truth in religion according to what she sees as its conformity with the Bible: “You should not categorise things as Hindu, Muslim, this is the rule, that is the thing. The basic rule is the Bible. It speaks about a relationship. Everything else that has come, has come as a diversion from the basic. Islam came, it was a diversion from what God intended in the

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614 See e.g. Ukah 2009: 103-108 for a Nigerian example and Westerlund 2009b: 197-199 for a Swedish example.
615 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-10.
616 Interview with Mohana 2010-12-14.
beginning.” Mohana is certain that, although a Muslim may believe that she has a relationship with God, that “is not really a relationship. You can have a relationship with God only in the name of Christ. Anything else is what you assume. I mean that’s the truth, that’s the basic line.”

Together with Michael, Mohana is the most extreme among interviewees in her position on the relationship between Christianity and other religions. She makes an absolute dichotomy between the truth of Christianity (or, as she would rather have it, the truth of the Bible) and the falsehood of other religions and she does not concede any common ground. But, although she expresses her views in more extreme terms, her emphasis on the vital difference that faith in Christ and following the Bible makes – a difference which makes irrelevant any similarities between Islam and Christianity that could otherwise be found – is shared by other clearly evangelical interviewees.

Pastor Pradeep, for example, emphasised the “grave difference” between Christianity and all other religions, the difference that the atoning death of Christ makes. According to Phoebe, although Muslims claim that their faith is “the same, like Christ” and that “the Bible and the Quran are almost similar,” Christians know better: “But we know what Christ is, and it is entirely different. /---/ It is not the same. But they say it is similar.” Reverend Matthew also emphasised the difference that a relationship with Christ makes. Muslims, he said, “think that their relationship is straight to Allah … by doing the set of rules. … They follow the frame of the prayer, and the alms … But we, knowing [what we do], we say: ‘No, we need to have a relationship with God! With Christ.’ God is immanent … He’s not just so far away, removed. … Because for them Christ is [a] prophet, he’s not a God.”

Here, the pastor stresses the difference that, in his view, the Christian understanding of Jesus makes for the possibility of a close and personal relationship with God. He also introduces the theme of ritualism to the description of Islam and sets Islamic ritualism in opposition to Christian relationship with God. This is an opposition previously seen in the descriptions of Hinduism among interviewees. Here, Islamic punctuality in prayer and generous giving of alms – practices that other interviewees expressed appreciation of – are given a more negative value as a ritualistic adherence to a “set of rules.”

Like Reverend Matthew, Cecil and Michael also see ritualism in Islam and set it in opposition to a personal relationship with God through faith in Christ. Cecil had a Muslim colleague with whom he used to discuss religious matters, but “actually, about his relationship with God he hasn’t mentioned. It’s more like he feels because this is his religion he has to pray that many times, so.” Michael said that Muslims are “like the Pharisees that pray more, or give

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617 Interview with Mohana 2010-12-14.
618 Interview with pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20.
619 Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19.
621 Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.
more, but then they don’t have a true heart for God. It’s just doing their religious acts.”

The principle of faith in Christ and the Bible is absolutely fundamental to evangelical faith. One could add that this is true for Protestants and Christians in general. But the universal necessity of confessing oneself to Christ and of following the precepts of the Bible is particularly emphasised in evangelical Christianity and it is a central tenet of the faith of evangelical interviewees. In view of this, any religion which does not accept Christ as unique saviour and the Bible as uniquely true scripture becomes essentially other.

Conclusions

On the subject of attitudes to Islam, this study has yielded a result that I, at least, had not foreseen before I began with it. It turned out that there is a considerable appreciation for Islamic religious practice and also for Islamic beliefs in monotheism and theological exclusivism. Negative views of Islam, connecting it with fundamentalism, terrorism, and gender inequality, are present in my material but these are overshadowed by appreciation of Islamic disciplined religious practice and monotheism. The position of women, for example, so important to public discussion of Islam in Europe, is not central here, although the theme occurs. On the other hand, a theme of egalitarianism in Islam – an aspect of Islam not commonly stressed in Western discourse – occurs here. Theological exclusivism in Islam, although strategically unpractical, since it makes Muslims less receptive to Christian witness than Hindus, is appreciated in itself. Although Muslims are considered to have misunderstood Jesus and the Trinity, their theological exclusivism is appreciated as faithful commitment to their God. It has a parallel in Christian monotheism and the evangelical as well as general Protestant ideal of steadfast faith in the one God.

The image of Islam that emerges here is more balanced than that of Hinduism. Positive sides are brought up together with similarities as well as differences between Islam and Christianity. While some critical views are expressed so are appreciative, even admiring, ones. This stands in contrast to the views of Hinduism which are, as seen in the previous chapter, more one-sidedly critical with few positive glimpses. The relatively more respectful attitude to Islam among many interviewees is also reflected in the way that while some interviewees claimed to know little about it, they actually show more familiarity with some definitive elements of Islam than with Hinduism. This shows more humility in regard to Islam than to Hinduism; in the case of Hinduism, the attitudes of interviewees often reflect a belief that they know what they consider to be important about it, namely that it is erroneous idol worship.

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622 Interview with Michael 2011-03-10.
Hinduism is frequently dismissed as idol worship, false religion; it is stereotyped and associated with biblical verses condemning idolatry and worship of other Gods. Islam, on the other hand – although it is also considered ultimately misguided by most interviewees who ascribe unique truth and salvation to Christianity – is not subject to negative stereotypes to the same degree. Bible verses are not used as tools for criticizing Islam as they are for Hinduism. In discussions of Islam during interviews, Bible verses were rarely referred to while they were frequent in discussions of Hinduism.

Appreciation of Islam can be seen in relation to a general appreciation of the visible practice of religion in which interviewees show an appreciation of the display of religiosity in the public sphere. This is reflected, for example, in the way Christina spoke with admiration of Muslims praying at the bus stop. To her, this signals spiritual devotion, an admirable religious “discipline” (to borrow a term from Tarun), a seriousness regarding one’s religion. A reaction such as Christina’s would be rare in a more thoroughly secularized society such as for example Sweden, I suggest. In Sweden, institutionalized Christianity has lost ground, most people are not visibly religious and a common opinion is that religion should be practised in private. There, an overt display of Islamic religion in public such as a Muslim man laying down a prayer mat to pray while waiting for the bus, would be less likely to produce a reaction of admiration. It might even be interpreted as fanaticism. Among my Indian Christian interviewees, on the other hand, visible religiosity could be appreciated in Hinduism too when little else could (see Chapter 4).

Interviewees’ appreciation of the visibility of religion can be seen in relation to a particularly Indian version of secularism which, Rajeev Bhargava argues, “admits a distinction between depublicization and depoliticization … Because it is not hostile to the public presence of religion, it does not aim to depublicize it.” Secularism in India does not aim for total exclusion of religion from the public sphere. India is constitutionally secular but it is not secularised in the sense that the significance of religion has noticeably diminished either in private or in public life. The Indian vision of secularism, as Bhargava represents it, allows for this. The Indian approach to secularism is also reflected in the way my interviewees can show appreciation for public displays of religious practice.

Although the theme of this chapter is Islam, Hinduism has proved to be a major topic as well. Views of Islam are connected with views of Hinduism both in the material itself and in my interpretations of it. Interviewees themselves make comparisons between Islam and Hinduism. For example, they

623 Sweden ranks as the second most secularised country in the world (after Japan) according to the World Values Survey categorisation of traditional versus secular-rational values. See http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp
624 Bhargava 2011: 104. Based on the Indian example, Bhargava has developed the conception of “principled distance” between state and religions as a basis for secularism. See Bhargava 2011: 105-108.
compare Islamic monotheism to Hindu polytheism, the absence of religious images in Islamic worship to the abundance of religious images in Hindu worship, and a perceived Muslim rootedness in faith to a perceived Hindu ignorance about their own religion. From my perspective, the material invites comparisons between attitudes to Islam and to Hinduism, especially between the generally negative view of Hindu religion and the recurrent appreciation of Islamic religion and how this relates to interviewees’ own ideals. Views of Islam in many ways contrast with views of Hinduism except on points of ultimate theological concern. Similarities rather than differences between Christianity and Islam here stand out in sharper relief against the background of Hinduism. For these Christians in Bangalore, the main religious other is the Hindu rather than the Muslim. That is, the religious beliefs and practices of Hindus are considered to be more radically different than those of Muslims. On a social level, interviewees expressed more affinity with Hindus (this will be discussed further in Chapter 8). Islam is not perceived as a threat among the Christians in my study; a greater threat is felt to come from Hindu nationalism. (Even that threat, however, was not perceived acutely in their lives but mostly located to other parts of India and Karnataka. More on this in Chapter 9.)

Regarding Hinduism, the evangelical lens as well as a general Protestant perspective leads to a negative evaluation and othering of Hindu religion. But in regard to Islam, basic traits of Islam and affinities with Protestant Christianity are appreciated. Interviewees perceived in Islam the emphases on one holy book, one God, personal piety and active spirituality, ideals that are shared with evangelical Christianity, and Protestantism more broadly. Theological exclusivism is also appreciated and contrasted with Hindu polytheism and pragmatic pluralism.

However, the evangelical lens leads to a negative final evaluation of Islam, as well as of any other religion that is not evangelical Christianity. Even non-evangelical Protestants are considered nominal Christians. Although positive sides of Islam can be acknowledged, in the ultimate test it falls short of evangelicalism since it cannot lead to salvation, according to this view. A few interviewees who hold most intensely to the dichotomy between evangelical faith and all other religion are unwilling to concede any affinity between Islam and Christianity. They emphasise instead the essential difference made by faith in Christ as saviour which they think renders all possible similarities irrelevant. Interviewees more generally do not consider that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. This illustrates how, on important theological questions of salvation and the true God, the dominant view considers Christianity superior to all other religions. This is one essential point in common for views of Hinduism and views of Islam. After all, only faith in Christ saves, according to the exclusivist paradigm that dominates among interviewees. Islam is considered to ultimately fail, since it does not acknowledge the cruci-
fixion, resurrection, and divinity of Jesus. The evangelical emphasis on cruci-centrism and conversionism steps in here: The only way to salvation, according to this belief, is to personally confess the atoning death of Jesus Christ, which Islam does not teach.

Biblicism, on the other hand, leads to a certain appreciation of Islam, whose Quran, although it is not the same as the Bible, was occasionally referred to as similar to it. The same principle could hypothetically apply to Islamic activism, or mission (dawah), although that theme occurs only once in the material. Biblicism, however, also leads to the ultimately negative evaluation of Islam, since the Quran is after all not the Bible and Islam is not considered to follow the rules understood as clearly prescribed in the Bible. (Crucially, that each individual must confess Christ as saviour.)

Thus, in the evangelical lens, Islam is subject to the othering that befalls any religion that does not encourage salvation through the born-again experience. But this othering of Islam is more generic than the othering of Hinduism. Unlike the othering of Hinduism, the othering of Islam is not founded on specific oppositions ascribed to its relationship with Christianity. The othering of Islam centres on the general dichotomy between evangelical faith in Christ and any other religion, rather than on specific other or different traits ascribed to Islam. This differs from the situation in several other societies where many evangelicals perceive Islam and Muslims in particular as a primary religious other. But, in the context of this study too, there is one vital specific difference, namely, the differing views on Jesus. The understanding that this difference makes Christianity superior to Islam is shared also by non-evangelical interviewees, since soteriological exclusivism and Christocentrism are shared by interviewees more widely.
6. Perceptions of Christianity

To understand the subject of this dissertation, how Protestant Christians view their religious others, it is important to study their views of other Christians and other Christian churches. The metropolitan context in which my interviewees live is marked by a diversity not only of several “world religions” and their varied expressions but also of various Christian churches. The question of Christian attitudes to other Christians is an inherent part of the discussion of Christian attitudes to religious diversity. The boundary between Christian self and religious other does not necessarily follow the line between Christian and non-Christian. This is clearly illustrated by the othering of Catholic religion found in my material, where implicit and explicit contrasting of Catholicism with Protestantism recurs. The tendency towards othering of Catholicism is, in fact, more marked than othering of Islam. (I refer here to the religious/theological level; on a social level, interviewees express much more affinity with Catholics than with Muslims.)

Having presented perceptions of Hinduism and Islam among my interviewees, I now turn to their perceptions of Christian traditions other than their own. This theme differs from the previous since, in the major part of the chapter, there are two groups (Pentecostal and CSI Christians) who view each other’s religious beliefs and practices, rather than one group (Protestant Christians) who view those of another. My Pentecostal interviewees are from two churches which represent radically different types of Indian Pentecostalism. Therefore, I include a presentation of how interviewees representing these two types of Pentecostalism view the relation between their own type of Pentecostalism and the other one.

On the two Christian traditions from which I have selected interviewees for this study, the material is ample. The CSI is the largest mainline Protestant church in south India and known to the Pentecostal interviewees. Other Protestant denominations, like Lutheran and Baptist churches, are also mentioned and sometimes Pentecostal interviewees refer to mainline Protestant

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625 Perry Schmidt-Leukel notes: “There have always been different ‘orthodoxies’ and different Christians accusing each other as false believers. Such division created an internal ‘othering’ within the Christian family, so to speak.” (A division which has included violent persecution and religious wars.) Schmidt-Leukel 2013: 131. In the pre-modern history of Christianity, a “standard triad” of religious others believed to be excluded from salvation was composed of “heretics” or “schismatics;” (i.e., other Christians with “false” beliefs), Jews, and pagans (p. 125).
churches, including the CSI, as a group. Both Pentecostal churches are also widely known among interviewees. Additionally, Catholicism is frequently referred to. But the fourth main – and oldest – church tradition in south India, the St. Thomas Christian tradition of Kerala, features very sparsely in the material. Sometimes its absence is conspicuous, as when pastor Pradeep did not include it in his account of different types of Christianity.\textsuperscript{626} Others, though aware of its presence, did not have much knowledge or any definite opinions of it.

In a few interviews, St. Thomas Christianity figures a little more but still not as a prominent theme. For Reverend Matthew, it is the religious tradition in which he was brought up and from which he has converted, and which did not lead him to the personal salvation experience he considers necessary. One theme recurs in two interviews, namely that of the high caste status of St. Thomas Christians and related practices of casteism in their churches.\textsuperscript{627} Chakradev said that caste distinction in churches is more obvious in Kerala.\textsuperscript{628} Reverend Chand, with his usual focus on caste issues, also brought up the theme by noting that the Syrian Christians are highly caste-oriented and still maintain their “high-caste identity” by means of social exclusion.\textsuperscript{629} He also said that the St. Thomas Christian churches, which are clearly “higher-caste churches,” are more affected by casteism than the CSI which is known as a “lower-caste” church.\textsuperscript{630} But among the majority of interviewees, the absence of pronounced opinions about this Christian tradition stands in contrast to the clear views they have of Catholicism. One obvious explanation for this is the demographic proportions of Catholics and St. Thomas Christians in Bangalore. An additional explanation is that, unlike the Catholic Church but like, for example, the Naga Baptists also present in Bangalore, the St. Thomas Christians have a distinct ethnic character which sets them apart from almost all interviewees.

**Views of Catholicism**

Attitudes to Catholicism among my interviewees illustrate how Christians can see also other types of Christianity as essentially other. Their religious othering is not reserved for non-Christian religions. In this case, the othering of Catholicism is primarily related to its perceived similarities with Hinduism.

\textsuperscript{626} Interview with pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20.
\textsuperscript{627} The St. Thomas Christians of Kerala, unlike most other Christians in India, are accorded a high caste status. They have managed to maintain this identity partly through segregation from other, “lower” castes. See Forrester 1980: 97-117.
\textsuperscript{628} Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
\textsuperscript{629} Interview with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17.
\textsuperscript{630} Conversation with Rev. Chand 2011-02-24.
Occasionally, interviewees brought up similarities between Catholicism and their own Protestant faith: a closeness to the CSI in their style of worship (except for “when they pray to Mary” and use incense), the same concept of salvation, and the celibacy of priests and nuns (as for TPM pastors and sisters). A few interviewees spoke approvingly about the Charismatic movement within the Catholic Church. But the dominating tendency is to emphasise the differences between Catholicism and Protestantism.

A central problem that many interviewees perceive in relation to Catholicism is that it shows too much – or the wrong kind of – religious hybridity. Roman-Catholics are just like Hindus, pastor Pradeep said, and supported this statement by referring to their use of religious images, chariots, jewellery, and the bindi. They practise all sorts of “nonsense,” the pastor concluded and he is not alone in his view of the resemblance between Catholicism and Hinduism. The more obvious inculturation and hybridity of Catholicism in India, compared to the Protestant churches, is a recurrent theme.

A basic aspect of the attitudes of many interviewees to Catholicism is that they perceive it as syncretistic. Catholics, they think, do not guard the boundary between Christianity and Hinduism well enough. Interviewees who reflect on this topic in relation to their own churches do not have a problem with contextualisation or inculturation as it appears in their own Protestant church traditions. They acknowledge contextual elements in their own churches which find expression, for example, in the marking of a house with crosses

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632 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
633 Interview with Priya 2011-02-09.
634 Interviews with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13, Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16.
635 He refers to the practice of processions where the image of Jesus or a saint is pulled on a chariot, similar in style to chariot processions for Hindu Gods. See Waghorne 2002 for a description of Catholic chariot processions and their points of similarity as well as dissimilarity with Hindu processions.
636 Interview with pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20.
637 This is also reflected in academic research. Contextual elements of Indian Catholicism and its parallels with Hindu traditions are discussed and analysed by scholars of religion more frequently than is the case with Indian Protestant Christianity. See e.g. Mosse 1994 and 2012, Busby 2006. A telling illustration of this difference between Catholic and Protestant Christianity in India (or of a common academic understanding of it, or both) is that in an anthology about popular Christianity in India, all the essays in the part that most explicitly deals with religious hybridity discuss Catholic Christianity, and the part devoted to Protestant Christianity instead treats of “alternative forms of leadership” (p.4): Raj and Dempsey (eds.) 2002. The editors of this volume also explicitly compare Catholic and Protestant Christianity on this point: “Distinct from Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity, Protestant traditions typically steer away from religious syncretism and thus do not test the parameters of hybrid affiliations.” (p. 4) Robinson 2009 also reflects this tendency; in her discussion of research on popular Christianity and its interaction with other religions, most of the examples analyse Catholic Christianity and references to Protestant Christianity are rare. (Robinson herself in this essay highlights ways in which boundaries are maintained, to question a frequent focus on harmonious Christian – i.e., mostly Catholic – assimilation of Hindu elements.)
using a turmeric-based paste during a house-warming prayer, or the celebration of Harvest Festival in church as a parallel to the traditional Tamil Pongal festival. They understand this as acceptable cultural contextuality, however, among interviewees in general, Catholic contextuality is understood as not only cultural but religious hybridity, or syncretism.

Interviewees perceive this syncretism on several levels, from the everyday appearance of Catholic women to worship practices. The bindi (the red dot on a married woman’s forehead) was sometimes referred to as an example of inappropriate hybridity. In south India, Catholic women often wear the bindi, but it is rare among Protestants. Although the bindi is not the exclusive property of Hindus, to my interviewees it primarily represents Hinduism. A few interviewees referred to syncretism in relation to Catholic worship and interfaith programmes. Reverend Chand finds deliberate Catholic inculturation as well as Catholic interfaith programmes problematic since, in his view, they endanger the individuality and distinctive character of each religion. In his opinion, every religion should guard its distinctive identity, and deliberate interreligious encounters should take the form of practical cooperation for the common good without involving blending of ritual practices.

Regarding deliberate Catholic efforts at inculturation, another reason for criticism is that they have not maintained sufficient critical distance from the non-egalitarian sides of Hinduism in the form of caste oppression and high-caste hegemony since the Hindu culture that has inspired them is that of the dominant castes. Reverend Chand expressed this point of criticism. He criticised Catholic interfaith initiatives on the same grounds, that the Hindu participants are usually from Brahmin or other dominant castes. Reverend

638 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16.
639 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
640 Interviews with Rev. Matthew 2011-01-11, pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20, Thomas 2012-02-02. Reverend Matthew, however, said that since the bindi could be accorded cultural as well as religious significance, Mega AG leaders take a pragmatic view on it and do not press the point with new believers or women whose husbands were still Hindus.
641 Interviews with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17, Thomas 2012-02-02.
642 Interview with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17.
643 A point of criticism which is common from the perspective of Dalit theology. See Collins 2007: 92-93, 178-180 and Gravend-Tirole 2014: 120-123. In Bangalore, a particularly clear example of Catholic liturgical adaptation of Sanskritic Hindu practices can be found in the worship services conducted at the National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Centre (NBCLC), a centre which aims to “promote inculturation, interculturation, and interreligious dialogue.” Samy 2012: 469. See Collins 2007: 149-153 for a discussion if the “Mass for India” composed at the NBCLC. Collins concludes that the level of knowledge of Hindu scriptures among the Catholic grassroots does not correspond to the advanced references in the Mass for India (p. 153). He rightly points to “the extensive plurality of cultures in India, and . . . the need for different forms of worship for use in different regions and different socio-religious contexts.” (p. 152)
Chand is generally sceptical of institutional inculturation and interfaith initiatives including at Protestant institutions such as the UTC since he questions their relevance to Christians at the grassroots level.

But the supposed sign of Catholic syncretism that recurs most frequently in my material involves the use of religious images and the practices associated with them such as lighting candles in front of them. Such use of images reminds interviewees of Hindu religion and many denounce it as “idol worship.” Many such practices are universal Catholic practices, but my interviewees emphasise the similarities with Hinduism. The use of religious images is a major theme in their discussions of Catholicism which will be examined in more detail in Chapter 7.

Another problem that particularly Pentecostal interviewees perceive in relation to Catholicism is that they doubt its capability of saving souls. For example, Phoebe said of a relative: “He’s not yet saved. He still goes to Roman-Catholic Church … he’s not exactly converted to Pentecostal or he’s worshipping Christ. He still worships Mary.”645

The assumption that Catholics will not be saved by Catholicism is demonstrated by the fact that Mega AG had evangelism directed at Catholics. At the time of one of my interviews with Reverend Matthew, there was an ongoing programme to distribute music CDs in Catholic churches. “We are giving over fifty thousand CDs to all the Catholic churches in Tamil Nadu, and also Bangalore.” The CDs also included information about the seven sayings of Christ on the cross and “how to receive the Lord Jesus Christ.” Catholics were obviously considered as in more urgent need of such messages than mainline Protestants. When I asked the pastor if they distributed the CDs in CSI churches, he made his assessment clear: In the CSI, people “have some chances to receive [salvation?] – I mean, they hear the gospel proper.” (Note the implicit comparison with the Catholic Church.) He estimated the chances of CSI Christians to “at least fifty per cent.” In the Catholic Church, he later clarified, it is “only the Charismatic Catholic … groups” that have a chance to hear the gospel properly.646

But even from a Pentecostal perspective, the assumption that a Catholic is by definition not saved could be questioned. Priya had a Catholic family upbringing and while she, her sister, and her mother have converted to TPM her father is still a Catholic. She called her father “a pious man” and “a true Christian,” describing her feelings for him as follows:

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645 Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19. She uses “saved” here to refer to the born-again experience. (See Chapter 3.) The understanding here is that the born-again experience is synonymous with salvation.

646 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16. Here he represents a more positive view of the Catholic Charismatic movement than is otherwise common among south Indian Pentecostals, according to Bergunder: Bergunder 2008: 239-240. This could hypothetically reflect upon a change in attitudes over time since the 1990s of Bergunder’s field studies, but it is impossible to draw general conclusions from an individual case.
I personally want him to be ... saved and join us; take [immersion] baptism, because that’s what the Bible says, you have to be born of the spirit and of water. /.../ But I wouldn’t condemn him saying that “he’ll go to hell because he’s not doing all this.” ... I would not say that. Because I know he believes in Jesus, he reads the Bible every day, he’s a good man. He’s great. /.../ I feel if he is already such a good man, if he was saved, he would be a much better man.

Here, she defines her father as not yet “saved.” But when I asked her about this, she said: “I would call him saved now. But then according to – maybe some other people they think like ‘oh, if you’re still a Catholic you’re not saved.’ But then the Bible says anybody who believes in the name of Jesus is saved.647 So I believe my dad is saved, yeah.”648

Priya here uses the authority of the Bible to question the dominant TPM view of Catholics and their chances of salvation. This illustrates how Bible verses and biblicist arguments can be used not only to exclude people from salvation but also to include them. Priya blurs the common distinction between born-again evangelicals (including Pentecostals) on the one hand, and other Christians, especially Catholics, on the other hand. Although her father is not visibly “saved” in the sense that applies to a Pentecostal/evangelical Christian belonging to a certain type of church (a “born-again church” as Priya said), she believes that he is saved to eternal life anyway.

As seen here, Priya counts her father’s personal belief in Jesus and regular reading of the Bible in his favour. These are rare themes in connection with Catholics, whose religious practice is usually depicted as centred on images and Mother Mary. This dominant understanding of Catholic religiosity is the main explanation for the assumption among some interviewees that Catholic faith does not lead to salvation.

A specific problem that interviewees see in relation to the salvation of Catholics is that they believe that they are genuine Christians and already saved although they are in fact as much in need of salvation through Christ as Hindus, according to this line of thinking. Phoebe expressed this view having found that Catholics resist Pentecostal evangelism (which she obviously considers necessary). It is “very difficult” to “talk about Christ to a Roman-Catholic,” she said; it is much easier “to talk to a Hindu person, than talking to a Roman-Catholic. They will ... never give up.”649 But Reverend Matthew holds the opposite view after finding that “Catholics are very open to the miracles.” Mega AG has seen “a lot of Catholics ... come to the Lord,” the pastor said, adding that at one time most of the church’s newcomers had been Catholics, rather than Hindus, as now.650

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647 See Acts 2:21 and Rom. 10:13: “whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” (KJV)
648 Interview with Priya 2011-02-09.
649 Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19.
650 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16. Catholics who start attending Mega AG also, unlike mainline Protestants, tend to change their official affiliation and receive water baptism,
Reverend Matthew’s description of Catholics as “open to miracles” is reminiscent of his remarks on Hindu religious openness. This illustrates how parallels between Catholics and Hindus are not always based on a negative assessment but rather the two groups can also be ascribed the same positive characteristics. Priya offered another example of positive parallels between Catholics and Hindus with her view that their religion can prepare them for the chance of salvation through the touch of God if they practise it sincerely. Just as her previously Hindu friends in church had been touched by God thanks to their religious devotion, so the same thing could happen to a Catholic: “The Bible says it’s like if you’re sincere in your religion, God will touch you. So that’s what I believe. My mom was very sincere in worshipping Mother Mary, and God touched her.”

The assumption that some interviewees make, that Catholicism does not guide the believer towards salvation, is primarily due to what they perceive to be replacing faith in Jesus with faith in Mary, saints, and images. Interviewees have similar misgivings with Catholicism as those they have with Hinduism: They criticise Catholic use of pictures and statues as well as Hindu reverence for God-images, seeing both as idol worship. They see the profusion of Catholic saints as well as the abundance of Hindu deities as a transgression against the commandment to monotheism. And they see the veneration of Mother Mary as worship of someone other than God, analogous to the worship of Hindu Gods and (of particular relevance here) Goddesses. This perceived similarity between Catholicism and Hinduism is understood as a central problem with Catholicism. Although Protestant Christianity in India is also culturally and religiously hybrid in a number of ways, it is rarely as spectacularly so as popular Indian Catholicism can be. My interviewees generally understand religious syncretism – crossing of the wrong boundaries, those understood as religious rather than cultural – as a characteristic of Catholicism, and as something that Protestant Christians are more careful to avoid. Nevertheless, Catholicism can be compared with Hinduism from positive angles too, for example due to its perceived religious openness.

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according to the pastor: Interview with Rev. Matthew 2011-01-11. His description differs from what Michael Bergunder writes about the statistical rarity of conversions from Catholicism to Pentecostalism in south India generally. Just above five per cent of members of Pentecostal churches in south India were converts from Catholicism, according to Bergunder’s statistics. Bergunder 2008: 231–232.

651 See Chapter 4.

652 Interview with Priya 2011-02-09.

653 See, for example, Selva Raj’s descriptions of tribal Santal Catholicism in Bihar and West Bengal and of popular practices at the pilgrimage sites of St. John de Britto and St. Antony in Tamil Nadu: Raj 2002a, Raj 2002b, Raj 2004.
CSI and Pentecostal Views on Each Other

The views of mainline Protestantism among Pentecostal interviewees, and vice versa, are less deprecating than those of Catholicism. They still emphasise differences as well as similarities, and (naturally enough) favour their own branch of Christianity. But in the mainline Protestant and Pentecostal views of each other, the othering that is seen in relation to Catholicism is replaced by a gradation in which the differences are conceived of as pertaining to quality rather than essence. CSI Christians and Pentecostals recognise each other as genuine Christians. Or at least potentially so, because according to a common Pentecostal view many mainline Protestants are nominal Christians.

Even then, it is not the mainline Protestant belief system – the Protestant religion in itself, so to say – that is considered faulty. The perceived problem is instead that few mainline Protestants are born-again and personally dedicated to those beliefs (so Pentecostals believe). The basic mainline Protestant religion is accepted as genuine Christianity, that is, genuinely biblical and Christ-centred, but mainline Protestants are not considered to be following it well. Mainline Protestant clergy are included in this criticism, even as its particular targets, and the quality of teaching in mainline churches is considered inferior to that in Pentecostal churches. Still, if mainline pastors were to uphold the essential tenets of their faith then the Pentecostal view is that this problem would be remedied since those tenets are largely recognised as the same as those of Pentecostalism. One important aspect perceived as lacking in mainline Protestant teaching is the high importance of the Holy Spirit with accompanying charismatic gifts and vibrant worship. But in general, Pentecostal interviewees regard mainline Protestants as in need of revival rather than conversion from one religion to another – unlike Hindus, Muslims and Catholics. (Unless otherwise specified, when I write about Pentecostal views of mainline Protestantism, this refers to mainline Protestant churches in general since they form a distinct category of which the CSI is one – if the principal – representative.)

CSI Christians have their own points of criticism against Pentecostalism and consequently see CSI Protestantism as qualitatively superior to Pentecostalism. For example, CSI Christianity is considered more democratic, more theologically sound, and more orderly both in terms of order of worship and in terms of proper management of its finances so as to avoid corruption. But CSI interviewees express no doubts about the genuine Christian faith of Pentecostals.

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654 Conversation with Rev. Chand and a CSI Dalit activist and scholar 2011-03-18, interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
655 Conversation with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17, with Rev. Chand and a CSI Dalit activist and scholar 2011-03-18.
656 Interviews with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13, Christina 2011-02-01.
657 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
Emphasis on the Spirit and Immersion Baptism

From a Pentecostal perspective, there are two subjects which show important differences between Pentecostalism and mainline Protestantism and prove the superiority of the former, namely the centrality of the Holy Spirit and baptism praxis.

The special Pentecostal emphasis on the active presence of the Holy Spirit, in the life of the church and of the individual, and conceptions of how it manifests itself, colours their view of mainline Protestant churches that are generally held to neglect the Holy Spirit. In TPM and Mega AG, as in other Pentecostal churches worldwide, the baptism in the Holy Spirit, with the accompanying charismatic gift of speaking in tongues, is an important and sought-after manifestation of the personal relationship with God. Malini differs from other Pentecostal interviewees in the sense that, while she emphasises the importance of the Holy Spirit as a guiding force in life, and said that she had learnt about it in Mega AG and not in the Catholic Church, she also affirms that “every praying church” of “any denomination” (including the Catholic Church) has the presence of the Holy Spirit. To other Pentecostal interviewees, the manifest presence of the Holy Spirit distinguishes Pentecostal churches from other denominations. Mainline Protestants are perceived as lacking the Holy Spirit and consequently not seen as spiritual. Some Pentecostal interviewees expressed their view of a direct connection between charismatic gifts, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and spirituality, in the sense that “being spiritual” means displaying charismatic gifts.

Pastor Pradeep made the most radical statements about this difference, affirming that for him, “nominal churches” like the CSI are “not spiritual.” To him, their hospitals and orphanages are signs that they engage in the “commercial” side of things rather than the “spiritual.” But mainline Protestants are at least better than the Catholics who use religious images and have other similarities with Hinduism, in the pastor’s view. The “main problem” for mainline Protestants as he sees it is that they do not ascribe importance to the Holy Spirit. According to his analysis, mainline Protestants try to live according to the Bible but are unable really to do it due to their lack of the Holy

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658 There is a discussion on the importance of speaking in tongues as “initial evidence” of baptism in the Spirit to Pentecostals worldwide, and in India. It was a central doctrine in early classical Pentecostalism, especially in the US: Anderson 2004: 34-35, 188-195. In India, it was questioned already at Pandita Ramabai’s Mukti Mission: McGee 1999: 656-658. In a contemporary context, “[t]he great majority of the south Indian Pentecostal movement holds to the position that tongues should be seen as initial evidence for baptism in the Spirit,” Bergunder writes, and adds that he has not encountered any single example of the opposite view: Bergunder 2008: 142. Bauman, however, has found variation on this point and that many neo-Pentecostal pastors in India do not consider speaking in tongues a necessary initial evidence of the baptism in the Spirit: Bauman 2015: 30-31.

659 Interview with Malini 2011-03-21.


661 Interview with pastor Pradeep 2011-01-28.
Spirit. This is connected to the question of baptism; only after undergoing immersion baptism will a person “receive the Holy Spirit” (that is, the baptism in the Spirit), according to the pastor.662 Child baptism and “sprinkle baptism” are among the “doctrinal errors” of “nominal churches,” he said.663 People can be saved in mainline Protestant churches but not reach perfection, he said, and therefore they will not be eligible for rapture.664 Here, pastor Pradeep sees a problem parallel to what Phoebe saw in relation to Catholics: As Catholics believe that they are real Christians although they are actually not (in Phoebe’s view), mainline Protestants believe that they are really baptised although they are actually not, according to the pastor.

Laypeople hold similar views on non-Pentecostal churches. For example, Michael obviously did not expect the presence of the Holy Spirit – perceived through the visible sign of charismatic worship – in non-Pentecostal churches because, when he had recently attended a Baptist service, he was “surprised that they also have the Spirit of God in them. And … they worship like we do.” But Pentecostal churches are still on a “higher level” than Baptist churches, in Michael’s view, because “a Baptist pastor, he won’t preach with … shouting and screaming and tongues and all that.”665

These examples illustrate a Pentecostal view of mainline churches as qualitatively inferior to Pentecostal churches because of their lack of the visible presence of the Holy Spirit as evidenced in the form of charismatic worship. However, unlike the case with Catholicism, the basic capability of mainline Protestant churches to save souls – the fundamental demand on any Christian church, according to the evangelical lens – is not questioned. Although, according to Pentecostal interviewees, there are many individual cases of neglect of salvation in mainline Protestant churches.

From a CSI perspective, the Pentecostal emphasis on the Holy Spirit can amount to an overemphasis with a resulting neglect of the Father and the Son. According to Christina’s experience of their churches, the Pentecostals “worship only the Holy Spirit” and the “message is only regarding the Holy Spirit … but they won’t give [much] preference to Jesus and the Father.”666

Differences in Worship

An area where the differences between Pentecostal and mainline Protestant Christianity come to the fore, and where their differing value systems clash, is worship. From a Pentecostal perspective, mainline Protestant worship is seen as ritualistic or at least following an inflexible liturgy, it is dull, marked by passivity on the part of the lay members, and lacking evidence of the active

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662 Interview with pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20.
663 Interview with pastor Pradeep 2011-01-28.
664 Interview with pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20.
665 Interview with Michael 2011-03-10.
666 Interview with Christina 2011-02-01.
presence of the Holy Spirit. This is contrasted with the charismatic, active, Spirit-filled, and powerful Pentecostal worship.

What attracts newcomers to Mega AG, according to Reverend Matthew, is “the vibrant worship … it’s vibrant worship. And then the Word, the preaching. And the great emphasis on prayer.” The appeal of their worship to members of mainline churches is understandable, in the pastor’s view: “Sundays … should be enjoyable, you come to worship, it’s not dead service.” He remembered personal experiences of “looking out for some church” while on holiday. “We would finally end up going to … a CSI kind of [church], one of those dull services. We feel so bad. We feel, you know, you feel like a part of you is missing. They are used to it. Those people who come there, they are so used to it,” but it is difficult for a person who knows “something different.”

Similarly, Phoebe gave a critical description of mainline Protestant worship which she had experienced in a CSI church and a Methodist church:

There they will all come full posh … [wearing] short skirts. They won’t even carry a Bible; they will just get one wallet, that’s it, put ten rupees offering. That’s it. Then praise God, worship, they won’t even lift their hands. They will just pray. … Not even say hallelujah lifting their hands. They’ll just come, pray, sit, and they go. It should not be – if you’re worshipping God, you worship in spirit and in truth.

Several points of criticism emerge here, implicitly or explicitly. The “dressing sense” is different in mainline churches, Phoebe said, adding that, while she did not necessarily agree with the strict TPM restriction against jeans, “at the same time, you should dress up decently. You should know how to dress. Not expose also.” Short skirts (definitely considered as “exposing” in India) presumably do not fulfil this claim to decency. Other points of criticism are the scanty offerings, the lack of importance given to the Bible, and not least the lack of enthusiasm in worship. The failure to even take a Bible to church or lift their hands in praise and say “hallelujah” here signifies a failure to “worship in spirit and truth,” and provides a contrast to Pentecostal worship.

From a CSI point of view, Pentecostal worship can be noisy and chaotic in contrast to the orderly and serene CSI worship. Christina has sometimes attended small independent Pentecostal churches near her in-laws’ home when she has been unable to go to the CSI church. She found that the Pentecostal congregations made “so much noise” while praying, and there was excessive handclap. “It was irritating … too much noise. Because in the CSI our worship is different.” The CSI order of worship is “best,” she concluded. She found the “message ok,” or even good, in the Pentecostal churches, although the

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669 Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19.
preachers were “not pastors” but rather “evangelists.” Although she found that the Pentecostal preachers emphasised only the Holy Spirit in their sermons, the message was a part she could “accept. But while praying, that time only too much noise.” For that reason, she “didn’t like” Pentecostal worship. Thus, of her two points of criticism for Pentecostal churches – the overemphasis on the Holy Spirit and the noisy worship – she accepts the theological difference more readily than the difference in worship style.

Chinni had experienced Pentecostal worship, both of the indigenous type when she visited the Indian Pentecostal Church (IPC) and in Mega AG. Of the former, she said:

The IPC was not a very comfortable experience for me. They were just screaming and shouting, and I couldn’t take it. Yeah, it was just too much of noise and you don’t feel like you’re actually worshipping God there. … It’s more like just making noise, and you don’t want to hear the still small voice of God. Everyone else’s voice, and the pastor’s voice, and the neighbour’s voice, everything’s heard, but you’re not given time to let God speak to you.

She found the Mega AG worship better but still lacking in the orderliness of the CSI:

When I initially came into church and attended the first half of the service, I liked it. But then I’m not used to it, so I kind of felt a little out of place. Again, with that pastor’s style of preaching and my pastor, or the pastors we’ve heard so far, are different. Our pastor has his points, and he preaches in an orderly manner, which is absent there. So I think that’s more chaotic there. We are more organised. … I prefer the organised way of worship.

Chad Bauman refers to similar types of mainline Christian attitudes to Pentecostalism as a partial explanation for the marginalisation of Pentecostals within Indian Christianity, though this is less explicit than other reasons. Loud and enthusiastic Pentecostal worship clashes with Indian expectations of socially respectable behaviour and “identifies [Pentecostals] with lower-caste and disreputable people.” If the caste implications are de-emphasised here, a more class-related feeling of social respectability may well be relevant.

Reverend Matthew too referred to Pentecostal worship, particularly that of Mega AG, as a style that does not appeal to everyone. Some people prefer to worship in other churches, because “ours is more vibrant and stronger preaching. Some people don’t like … a lot of noise.” But when he said this he was

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670 This may reflect what the preachers in those churches actually call themselves, or Christina’s impression of preachers without clerical garb.

671 Interview with Christina 2011-02-01.

672 The “still small voice” refers to 1 Kings 19:12 (KJV).

673 Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.

674 Bauman 2015: 71.

675 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16.
referring to the worth of the church as full of the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit. Although from a middle-class and higher-caste background, he has obviously converted to an appreciation of lively, socially non-conforming behaviour in worship. His urban neo-Pentecostal church also displays socio-economic status in other ways, for example with its attractive location, latest technology, and international connections.

The Pentecostal and CSI interviewees quoted here agree on the nature of the differences between Pentecostal and CSI or mainline Protestant worship, but they disagree on the valuation of it. Whereas a Pentecostal distinguishes between “vibrant” and “dead” or “dull” worship, a CSI member sees “noisy,” and “chaotic,” or “orderly” and “organised” worship. Chinni’s comment that in the Pentecostal church “you’re not given time to let God speak to you” reverses the Pentecostal understanding that whereas Pentecostal worship is full of the active presence of the Holy Spirit – manifested in what Chinni and Christina perceive as “noise” – the Spirit’s absence is felt in the passive ritualism of mainline Protestant worship. In Chinni’s view, the “noisy” Pentecostal worship silences the voice of God, while from a Pentecostal perspective, the presence of God is conveyed by precisely that “noisy” or “vibrant” worship, and God’s voice heard not (only) as “the still small voice” but through prophecy and other audible charismatic gifts.

The Appeal of Pentecostal Churches

As seen so far, both Pentecostals and mainline Protestants acknowledge their affinity as Christians although both sides prefer their own church and its style of worship, preaching, and relative emphasis given to the Holy Spirit. This may seem as the foundation of a relatively harmonious agreement to disagree about the best Christian practice, whereby each person can follow her own preference. But relations between Pentecostals and mainline Protestants are not unproblematic in India. Growth of Pentecostal congregations, partially at the expense of mainline churches, is an important reason for this and it has a bearing on the churches in my study.

The appeal of Pentecostal churches not only to people from other religions but also to Christians from other denominations is one of the factors that cause tensions between Pentecostal and mainline churches in India in general.676 Pentecostal interviewees referred to irritation among mainline Christians, particularly church leaders, about the phenomenon,677 while CSI interviewees were largely silent on the matter.

The explanations given by Pentecostal pastors for this phenomenon illustrate the images of their churches that they wanted to present. They portrayed

676 See Bergunder 2008: 239, Bauman 2015: 92, 157, 178. See also Jeremiah 2013: 120-121 for a specific example from a Tamil village.
their own churches as superior in terms of teaching and preaching,\textsuperscript{678} worship style,\textsuperscript{679} and most especially in terms of the power of prayer. Both Pentecostal pastors highlighted the area of healing, exorcism, and miraculous answers to prayers as vital to their churches and a key explanation for their growth. They said that healing and other miracles are central to the attraction that both TPM and Mega AG hold both for people of other religions and for Christians of other denominations.\textsuperscript{680} The comparison with mainline churches is implicit in the emphasis on the power to heal and perform other miracles in Pentecostal churches. Belief in Pentecostal superiority in terms of healing and powerful prayer has led to religious change in Phoebe’s family. Her previously Hindu father and CSI mother converted to an AG Pentecostal church after the father experienced a miraculous healing subsequent to the prayer of a Pentecostal pastor. Later, the family were attracted to TPM because of their belief in the special effectiveness of the TPM pastor’s prayers.\textsuperscript{681} From a CSI perspective, Thomas offered another explanation as to why mainline Protestants are drawn to Pentecostal churches. People are attracted to the way “each person is given importance” in Pentecostal churches, he said, and they are impressed with Pentecostal pastors who “make frequent visits” to people’s homes.\textsuperscript{682}

### Conflicting Views of Mission

Other areas for comparison between the CSI and Pentecostal churches are the differences in theological emphasis on and prioritisation given to mission work. Whereas differences in worship are important to laypeople, differences in mission are a concern of pastors. Laypeople, both CSI and Pentecostal, are concerned about the parts they individually have to play for Christian evangelism. They conceive of themselves as having a responsibility to witness, in word and deed, about their Christian faith to people of other religions. But the subject of mission on a structural church level is not a significant theme in my interviews with them, and mission and evangelism do not constitute an area for mutual contrast between Pentecostal and CSI laypeople. For some pastors and theologically educated interviewees, on the other hand, this is an important topic.

From the CSI side, there is criticism of Pentecostal churches for what the CSI interviewees perceive as their neglect of social involvement and a one-

\textsuperscript{678} Interviews with Rev. Matthew 2011-01-11, pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20.
\textsuperscript{679} Interview with Rev. Matthew 2011-01-11.
\textsuperscript{681} Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19.
\textsuperscript{682} Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
sided focus on evangelism leading to numerical growth. This criticism is expressed both from a liberal and from an evangelical perspective. Another point of criticism is that Pentecostals, according to these CSI interviewees, hurry mission and use problematic methods in their missionary work. Chakradev used a metaphor to illustrate what he considered a common Pentecostal overemphasis on salvation to eternal life over social concern: “If somebody fell into a well, you cannot throw the tracts first. You have to throw the rope or something to save that person.” Some would throw tracts about Jesus into the well so that the person could read and go to heaven instead of hell, but “any sensible person tries to save the person” first. Concern for salvation “should be balanced” with social concern, Chakradev maintained, and his metaphor implies that in critical situations social issues must be dealt with first.

From the Pentecostal side, there is the reverse criticism of mainline churches as neglecting evangelism and teaching about salvation, to focus exclusively on social and this-worldly concerns. The focus on evangelism and numerical growth was something that Mega AG’s Reverend Matthew highlighted as a positive aspect of his church, as one of its specialities which ensures it a leading position among churches in Bangalore. According to him, losing sight of evangelism in favour of a one-sided focus on social work is a common failure of other churches, one which he presented Mega AG as being careful to avoid. Mainline Protestant churches neglect not only the souls they could have saved through more active evangelism but even the souls of their own church members, Reverend Matthew concluded. They do this through their omission of outspoken teaching about the way to salvation. Although there are positive individual exceptions, most CSI pastors stand for a “very humanistic” and “liberal” theology and “their teaching will be all based on present-day world things,” he said.

A criticism of the CSI made by Reverend Matthew as well as Cauvery and Chakradev, who have a double insider-outsider perspective on the CSI, is that the leadership lacks a vision for outreach. According to their understanding, individual CSI pastors who challenge the church’s approach to mission through a more active interest in outreach would be punished by transfers to less attractive rural posts.

As with the conflicting views of ideal worship, contrasts between Pentecostal and mainline mission work reveal the same opposition from both sides.

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683 Conversation with Rev. Chand and a CSI Dalit activist and scholar 2011-03-18, interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
684 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
685 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
688 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16.
689 Interviews with Rev. Matthew 2011-01-11, Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
From a CSI perspective, Pentecostals are considered to neglect social involvement in favour of an exaggerated focus on evangelism, and in addition they are felt to use aggressive and unsuitable evangelistic methods, which (it is implied) risk aggravating Hindus. But from a Pentecostal (and critical CSI) perspective, mainline Christians are considered to neglect vital evangelism in favour of social work and preaching on issues concerning mundane matters, perhaps out of a desire to avoid controversial subjects.

Caste in the CSI and in Pentecostal Churches

Another point of comparison between Pentecostal and mainline churches such as the CSI is the role of caste, a problem specific to the South Asian context which has been a major issue for the Christian churches in their encounters with Indian culture. A self-image represented in both Pentecostal churches says that caste is not a problem there, although it is in other churches. Reverend Matthew held the view that it is better not to talk about caste, to avoid stirring up problems which are otherwise not there. This self-image can be seen in relation to the strong discourse of rupture, a break with the past, in Pentecostal churches. To admit an influence of caste in their churches would be to admit a failure to accomplish this rupture with problematic aspects of the Hindu past. Reverend Chand agreed that there are less problems with casteism in Pentecostal churches than in the CSI. His explanation was not the superior teaching and more complete regeneration in Pentecostal churches but that their members are almost all from a “lower-caste” background.

The CSI faces more caste-related problems, according to several CSI interviewees who referred to casteism in their church. “A lot of people in our church follow the caste system,” Chinni said, for example. When I questioned these interviewees more closely, the implications of caste discrimination that they specified related almost exclusively to the arrangement of marriages: they said that many CSI church members avoid arranging marriages for their children with people from other caste backgrounds.

See Webster 2009 and Forrester 1980 on the history of Christian churches’ attitudes and practices in relation to caste in India.


Conversation with Rev. Chand 2011-02-24. It should be added that Reverend Chand proudly asserted his own Dalit identity, so there is no element of caste prejudice in this comment.

Interviews with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17, Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13, Christina 2011-01-31, Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.

Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.

Interviews with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17, Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13, Christina 2011-01-31, Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03. In his study of CSI Christians in Chennai (then Madras), Lionel Caplan reaches similar conclusions about the continued impact of caste there but with an added emphasis on its political role. No longer given ritual significance – for example through Communion, seating arrangements, or acceptance of pastors – the importance of caste identity was
The urban context is of chief importance here since the role of caste in church is much more pervasive in rural contexts where people often live segregated based on caste and where many churches have clear caste identities.\textsuperscript{698} In Andhra Pradesh, for example, the Madiga Christians of a village and the Mala Christians, both Dalit, may go to a Baptist and a CSI church respectively. In Bangalore too, some Tamil churches draw their membership only from people from a specific geographic origin coinciding with a specific caste background, Reverend Thangam said.\textsuperscript{699} But in the CSI churches included in this study, caste discrimination is primarily an issue of the arranging of marriages, according to interviewees. Casteism in mainline churches is not a noteworthy topic in interviews with Pentecostals either, where the main points of criticism for mainline churches (at least the ones on which interviewees were outspoken) relate to other themes.

Ecumenical Cooperation and De-emphasis of Difference

As seen above, Pentecostal and CSI Christians criticise each other on several points. Criticism is particularly serious from the Pentecostal side where mainline Protestant churches like the CSI are recurrently referred to as lacking in spirituality. But this criticism is less severe than that of other religions and of Catholicism. Additionally, there are also examples of a de-emphasis of denominational difference. The heart of the matter here is that it is not really denominational affiliation that matters, according to the evangelical lens, but whether or not a person is born again in Christ.

In line with this, Reverend Matthew looked favourably on the chances of finding the way to salvation in the CSI in comparison with the Catholic Church, because CSI members would “hear the gospel proper.” Moreover, the likelihood of CSI members gaining salvation are furthered by the presence in the congregations of more evangelical people, he thought: “there are always in the congregations a lot of … strong believers.” There is also a minority of CSI pastors who are “strong believers.” But “the biggest problem,” according to Reverend Matthew, is that “in the CSI church it is not … the pastors” but

\footnote{Several interviewees pointed out that problems with caste segregation in churches in general and the CSI in particular are worse in other parts of south India than in Bangalore: Interviews with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17, Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13, Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03, Thomas 2012-02-02, Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.}

\footnote{Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03. (In southern Tamil Nadu, members of non-Dalit caste groups, mainly Nadars and Vellalars, form a substantial portion of CSI members.)

mainly seen in church politics. It was also of central importance for arranging marriages. When Indian Protestants speak about the evils of caste, Caplan notes, “they have in mind not so much the existence within the church and community of a Hindu counter-theology of hierarchy, pollution, and the like, but the intense rivalries generated by and/or expressed in terms of caste hostilities.” Caplan 1987: 124, 156-163.
“the laypeople” who stand for the evangelical drive. The mainline Protestant churches are in need of a revival, he believes.700

My interviews with members of the CSI illustrate the theological differences within the CSI that the Mega AG pastor refers to. Particularly in CSI City, these differences can be observed in the differing attitudes to issues such as salvation or mission and evangelism among interviewees such that lay members represent a more evangelical theology which is closer to that of Mega AG than the pastor’s liberal Protestant theology is.

On the one hand, Pentecostal depictions of mainline churches as nominal and lukewarm recur whereas some interviewees refer to certain churches as “born-again churches”701 – the implication being, of course, that other churches are nominal churches, a term which pastor Pradeep used explicitly.702 But on the other hand, to Pentecostal as well as to evangelical CSI interviewees, the most important distinction (at least on a rhetorical level) is not really based on denomination but on adherence to evangelical ideals. Denomination affiliation is not of primary importance, several deeply evangelical Pentecostal interviewees maintained.703 Priya, for example, clarified her position: “when it comes to the end of it, Anita, I wouldn’t say it’s like the Pentecostal church or the Catholic Church, or this church or that church. It’s like if you live according to the Bible, that’s good enough. So that is your law.”704 Similarly, Phoebe said that “wherever you are, whichever community, if you are Christian you follow Christ, and you should be seen on the Day of [Judgement]. … If you’re holy, if you’re true to God, that’s more than enough.”705

Bergunder observes a similar phenomenon: Pentecostals “charge the members of established churches with nominal Christianity, lack of holiness, lack of the Spirit, lack of missionary endeavor, and theological liberalism.”706 Pentecostal interviewees in my study echo these charges. But at the same time, Bergunder notes that Pentecostals “attribute little significance to church membership. If anyone has experienced Christian rebirth, received baptism by immersion, and now follows the norms of Christian holiness, he will be recognized by Pentecostals without further ado, even if he is officially a member of an established church.”707 My Pentecostal interviewees quoted above go further than this and declare that not only is official membership irrelevant, a person can attend any church and still be saved, as long as she has the right

700 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16.
701 Interviews with Priya 2011-02-09, Michael 2011-03-10.
702 Interview with pastor Pradeep 2011-01-28.
704 Interview with Priya 2011-02-09. She added that “I think out of the many churches that I’ve seen this church follows it pretty well,” to explain her preference for TPM over e.g. the Catholic Church.
705 Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19.
706 Bergunder 2008: 239.
707 Ibid.
private relationship to Christ and the Bible. The central distinction is a person’s adherence to evangelical norms.

My evangelical interviewees (Pentecostal and CSI) subject other Protestant churches to less othering than they do Catholicism because they perceive among other Protestants at least a certain chance of the born-again experience. In addition to the evangelical lens, a general Protestant lens, which places less emphasis on the born-again experience, is also represented among CSI interviewees. From this perspective too, other Protestant churches are perceived as less problematic than Catholicism, because Catholicism is believed to dislocate the centrality of Christ and the Bible. CSI interviewees recognise some basic theological tenets, such as the authority of the Bible and the lack of problematic practices related to religious images, in Pentecostal churches, and vice versa.

Another factor which contributes to the ecumenical relations between Pentecostals and mainline Protestants is the political climate. Increasing anti-Christian harassment in Karnataka has brought churches into ecumenical cooperation through the formation of an organisation called “All Karnataka United Christian Forum for Human Rights.” Reverend Chand told me that the churches which have come together for this include isolationist but vulnerable churches like TPM. Through this organisation, they benefit from the association with more well-connected churches like the Catholic Church and the CSI, he said. Reverend Chand expressed this in a drastic manner: The Chief Minister, he said, “doesn’t care two hoots for The Pentecostal Mission, whether they exist or not. But he can’t say to the Church of South India, which is a prime church, or the Roman-Catholic Church, he can’t say: ‘Get lost from my sight.’”

In his study of Pentecostalism in India and its relation to mainstream society, Hindus, and Christians from other churches, Bauman argues that one reason why Pentecostal churches are particularly vulnerable to anti-Christian violence is that they are marginalised by mainline churches. Mainline Christians dissociate themselves from Pentecostals because of the latter’s more aggressive evangelism, but also (less explicitly) because of social, economic, and caste-related dynamics, Bauman writes. In my material, however, this mainline dissociation from Pentecostal Christianity is not a significant tendency. One explanation for this is the types of Pentecostal churches included in my study; they are not small, independent rural churches but urban churches belonging to well-established Pentecostal denominations. Bauman also notes that classical Pentecostal, largely urban, denominations like the AG are less

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708 Interview with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17.
709 Bauman 2015: 93, 178.
targeted with anti-Christian violence than are certain other Pentecostals and Pentecostalised evangelicals.\textsuperscript{711}

One factor which is not highlighted in Bauman’s book, however, but which my material illustrates, is the significant influence of evangelical theology within mainline denominations in India (especially among those who do not form the theological elite in these denominations). Their theological agreement with Pentecostals on many points, such as the imperative for each Christian individual to witness about Christ to her neighbours,\textsuperscript{712} might make them less disposed to distance themselves from Pentecostals. They also have a less acute sense of vulnerability in the urban context of Bangalore, and the Pentecostals included in my study have a socioeconomically respectable status.\textsuperscript{713}

To summarise, views of each other among Pentecostal and CSI Christians are characterised by markedly less othering than their views of other religions, including Catholicism. Contributing reasons for this are the presence of a shared external threat in the face of which the churches need each other,\textsuperscript{714} the chances for salvation that Pentecostal interviewees ascribe to mainline Protestant churches, and the influence of evangelical theology in the CSI.

\textbf{Intra-Pentecostal Views}

The two Pentecostal churches included in this study are so different that it is relevant to include a discussion of their views on each other, or on the type of Pentecostalism that each church represents. Here, differences are perceived as less dramatic than in relation to non-Pentecostal churches and they boil down to differing opinions on which church or which type of Pentecostalism offers the best teaching and practice. But from both churches, there is a recognition of affinity between them. As Phoebe’s case illustrates, an individual layperson can prefer certain aspects of TPM and other aspects of an AG church and alternately attend services in both denominations.\textsuperscript{715} Both TPM and Mega AG interviewees acknowledge each other as genuine Pentecostal Christians. Although from a TPM perspective, most especially its pastor’s, TPM is seen as clearly superior even to other Pentecostal churches because of its unique ability to prepare people for the coming rapture. Still, other Pentecostal churches such as Mega AG are acknowledged as the next best thing.

Comparisons between indigenous Pentecostal churches like TPM (distinguishable to outsiders primarily by the white clothes and prohibition against

\textsuperscript{711} Ibid: 40.
\textsuperscript{712} More on this in Chapter 9.
\textsuperscript{713} It is worth recalling here that the branch of TPM included in this study is located in a middle-class neighbourhood in Bangalore.
\textsuperscript{714} Although, as Bauman argues, this threat can also lead to a dissociation from Pentecostals from a mainline Christian side. Bauman 2015: 93.
\textsuperscript{715} Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19.
wearing jewellery) and churches like Mega AG centre around three interrelated issues: Holiness, isolationism, and teaching.

Holiness is indispensable to the self-image in TPM as something that sets it apart from and elevates it above other churches. TPM church members see their celibate TPM pastors as positive examples of total devotion and renunciation emphasising the difficulty of the radical lifestyle that TPM’s holiness principles demand of both pastors and lay members.716 From a Mega AG point of view, on the other hand, TPM’s holiness teaching is considered extreme. The individual freedom of choice allowed to members in Mega AG, in relation to the style of dressing, for example,717 is considered a more balanced approach and a better position to take in relation to mainstream society.718

A specific issue related to holiness is jewellery. TPM insists on the removal of jewellery among its members (as do other similar Pentecostal churches in India). As discussed in Chapter 4, jewellery has social, economic and religious significance in India, and abstention from wearing jewellery has a special spiritual significance in certain Pentecostal churches.719 From a TPM perspective, removing one’s jewellery is an essential sign of the holiness principle of setting aside worldly temptations for God’s sake. Priya said that she finds it also helps her focus her attention on God rather than on distractions in the form of material things.720 To Mega AG members, removal of jewellery is not necessary to be a good Christian and could even draw attention away from God and constitute a distraction in the form of envy of other people who wear jewellery. Removal of jewellery could also provoke Hindu family members.721 This illustrates how, for people outside the Pentecostal tradition, removal of jewellery is likewise highly symbolic insofar as it signals a strange, other religious identity and deprecation of Hindu/Indian culture.722

Madhu criticised TPM and similar indigenous Pentecostal churches for isolationism. Their mentality of separation from the world has led to their isolation and a shift from being churches within society to “sectarian groups,” he

716 Interviews with Pansy 2008-02-16, Priya 2011-02-09.
717 Here, both Priya, a long-time TPM member and Phoebe, a newcomer to TPM, agreed with Mega AG interviewees that TPM’s prohibitions on what clothes to wear are exaggerated: Interviews with Priya 2011-02-09, Phoebe 2011-03-19.
718 Interviews with Madhu 2008-03-03, Mohana 2010-12-14.
719 See Jørgensen 2012 for an analysis of the role of jewellery in this type of south Indian Pentecostalism.
720 Interview with Priya 2011-02-09.
721 Interview with Mohana 2010-12-14. During her conversion process, Mohana had first been in contact with a pastor from an indigenous Pentecostal church who insisted on removal of jewellery before baptism. This was a reason why she decided not to receive baptism in that church.
722 Jewellery can also become a dividing line between different Indian cultures. Wessly Lukose describes how the issue of jewellery has been a cause of “intercultural tension” between Keralite Pentecostal leaders and local Pentecostals in Rajasthan: Lukose 2013: 138-139.
Moreover, it has led them to an unnecessary dissociation from Indian culture. In Madhu’s view, the purpose of the church is not “to convert the culture,” which indigenous Pentecostal insistence on white clothes and removal of jewellery signals. Madhu’s AG Pentecostal view of indigenous Pentecostal churches mirrors views of Pentecostals as provocatively countercultural among Hindus and mainline Christians. The removal of jewellery is a specific example of this provoking countercultural stand.

Just as Pentecostal interviewees consider Pentecostal churches as offering more profound teaching on Christian faith than other churches, so the attitude in TPM is that its teaching is still more advanced than in other Pentecostal churches. Pastor Pradeep made a distinction between TPM and other Pentecostal churches and emphasised the uniqueness of TPM. In a comparison with Mega AG, he said that while that church is good for its “standard,” for him it would not be good “to go there and dance with them.” You cannot be in the “first standard” [or first grade] all your life, he continued. In Mega AG, there is salvation but not perfection, he said.

Condescending as pastor Pradeep’s view of Mega AG is, there is a marked difference between his views of Mega AG on the one hand, and of mainline churches on the other. He affirms that Mega AG is good for its level and that it teaches the way to salvation, and he does not express sharp criticism as he does of other churches (not least through his designation of them as “nominal”). Although he places the other Pentecostal church on a lower level than his own, as the “first standard” or elementary level of school, he still recognises it as working within the same school system (to use his own metaphor). His gradation of churches is clear: The Catholic Church is the worst, the mainline Protestant churches are a little better but still inadequate, Pentecostal churches other than TPM are better yet, and TPM is perfect and perfecting.

This view is not wholly contradicted by Mega AG’s Reverend Matthew. He does find the strict TPM teachings exaggerated. “But,” he said, “at least we know one thing: CPM [TPM], though they are a little extreme, but at least salvation and things are very strong.” The Mega AG leaders are not overly bothered if some of their churchgoers go over to TPM, he said, because their souls will be saved, “that’s for sure.”

Bergunder describes an ambiguity in TPM’s relations to other Pentecostal churches. Although the church “refuses contact with other Pentecostal churches and has a whole range of church-dividing doctrines,” their teaching does not cause much concern among other Pentecostals. “On the contrary, many pastors and evangelists greatly value the teaching of the Mission.” Many members of other Pentecostal churches attend TPM’s conventions, and vice

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723 Interview with Madhu 2008-03-03.
725 Interview with pastor Pradeep 2011-01-28.
versa. So, the practical interaction between TPM and other Pentecostal churches is more extensive than TPM’s isolationism suggests.\textsuperscript{727}

The differences between TPM and Mega AG reflect the contrasting views on how to relate to the world in these two very different Pentecostal churches, one with exceedingly strict views on holiness and one with a world-affirming, neo-Pentecostal approach. The world that Mega AG affirms is a highly modern, technologically advanced, and international one. This can be seen through, among other things, its worship services and pastors’ lifestyles as is evident, for instance, from their Facebook accounts. Despite differences, both these ways of relating to the world can be regarded as provocative in an Indian cultural context. Not only the distancing from the world visible in TPM’s insistence on the removal of jewellery and wearing of white clothes (thereby voluntarily taking up the traditional appearance of a widow) but, as Bauman observes, also Western connections and Western style can provoke cultural sensitivities among members of mainstream society.\textsuperscript{728} However, this problem must be much more marginal in the metropolitan context of Bangalore where clothes such as jeans and t-shirts (also on girls and women) and other signs of Western influence on lifestyle are widespread far beyond the ranks of Pentecostals. The differences between their churches that TPM and Mega AG interviewees brought up centre very much on this positioning in relation to the world. Additionally, from a TPM point of view, TPM’s teachings are considered superior to those of other Pentecostal churches (doctrinal depth is here seen in conjunction with or as synonymous with strictness about holiness principles). But both sides recognise their affinity and acknowledge each other as genuine Pentecostal churches teaching the way to salvation which, in the final analysis according to the evangelical lens, is the main responsibility of any Christian church.

Conclusions

This chapter illustrates the variation in Christian attitudes to Christians from other denominations. The most important demarcation line is here drawn between Catholic and Protestant Christians by which Catholics are portrayed as religious others and essentially different from the Protestant Christian norm. Or rather, Catholicism is portrayed as a radically other type of religion. Othering of Catholicism, while not as pervasive as othering of Hinduism, stands out more markedly in my material than othering of Islam and is primarily due to a perceived likeness between Catholicism and Hinduism. My Protestant interviewees generally perceive Catholicism in India as a syncretism of Christi-

\textsuperscript{727} Bergunder 2008: 236.
\textsuperscript{728} Bauman 2015: 86-87.
anity with Hinduism. They themselves practise a considerable amount of othering of Hindu religion but think that Catholics do not guard the boundaries of Christianity well enough against influences from this primary religious other. According to these Protestant Christians, Hindu religion is not sufficiently other to Catholics.

Blurring of religious boundaries between Catholicism and Hinduism is a phenomenon observed not only by my interviewees. And not only Protestants disapprove of ritual hybridity at the level of popular Catholicism. As Selva Raj points out, hybrid ritual practices are often opposed by the Catholic Church hierarchy as it tries to “reinforce the sanctity of religious boundaries.”729 Local priests, according to Raj, often occupy an uncomfortable middle ground between official and popular Catholicism.730 Scholarly observers have often analysed the phenomenon in more positive terms and Raj is a good example of this appreciative position. He advocates popular Catholic religious hybridity as an exemplary form of “grassroots dialogue” or “dialogue on the ground,” “the living ecumenism of the laity” or “dialogue in action.”731 Raj finds in ritual hybridity at the grassroots level – as illustrated for example in tribal Santal Catholicism or in ritual practices at Catholic pilgrimage sites – a model for dialogue vastly superior to “contrived” deliberate inculturation and dialogue initiatives taken by the Catholic religious elite at Catholic institutions.732 Catholic inculturation at this institutional level, too, is criticised in my material, by Reverend Chand who has had some experience of such types of Catholic ecumenical and interfaith programmes while most other interviewees have primarily met Catholicism at a popular level.

Specific problems with Catholic religion as it is viewed through the evangelical and general Protestant lenses are that – according to many interviewees – Catholicism neglects the central doctrine of monotheism and the centrality of Christ and the Bible. Several interviewees interpret Catholicism as having marginalised these Christian absolutes in favour of other religious elements in the form of Mary, the saints, and religious images, which are all seen as quasi-Hindu.

However, although there are othering processes in relation to Catholicism, these are not as thoroughgoing as the othering of Hinduism. If Hinduism is regarded as the negative opposite of Protestant Christianity, Catholicism is regarded as a distorted form of Christianity which has been too influenced by Hinduism. Catholicism is still recognised as showing (some) Christian characteristics: Jesus and the Bible have their place in Catholic belief and practice even if that place is unduly marginalised according to several interviewees. A basic assumption when religious syncretism is understood as a problem, as it

is here, is that there are two distinct religions whose boundaries should not be blurred. When interviewees understand Indian Catholicism as having overstepped the line to Hinduism, they implicitly acknowledge Catholicism’s basically Christian nature.

Regarding the question of religious hybridity, interviewees do not predominantly express a naive view of the relationship of religion to culture, a belief that the gospel can be “unsullied” by culture. A few interviewees reflect upon the difficulty of drawing an exact line between religion and culture but to draw a line is consistently seen as important, and it is a common opinion that Catholics overstep the line. A recurring idea here is that Indian, regional, or local cultural influences are acceptable in church and must be distinguished from clearly religious Hindu influences which should be avoided. This relates particularly to practices that risk breaking the biblical commandments against “idol worship” and worship of other gods. The problem perceived is not with religious/cultural hybridity in itself as much as with specific practices. This is also why interviewees can show a significant degree of appreciation for Islam, where they do not see these specific practices which they regard as problematic.

The process of othering or emphasising difference is less significant in the major part of this chapter where the religious other is a Protestant Christian from another Protestant tradition or another church within the same tradition. Here the relation between religious self and other is instead perceived in terms of gradation. To Pentecostal interviewees, this means that the more conformity to the evangelical lens a church shows the better it is. This relates particularly to the evangelical emphasis on the need of a personal born-again experience. Here, there is a degree of othering of mainline Protestant churches as “nominal,” since they are considered often to neglect this emphasis. But mainline Protestant churches are, at the same time, acknowledged as better than the Catholic Church – Pentecostal interviewees do not consider them as entirely nominal since they recognise evangelical strands in them. A TPM addition, particularly central to the pastor but important to lay members as well, is the emphasis on holiness and perfection in which TPM is seen as unique, at the apex of the ranking of Christian churches.

The emphasis on the Holy Spirit is a universal characteristic of Pentecostalism. In my material, it emerges most clearly in comparison with other Protestants. In relation to other religions and to Catholics who are perceived as focusing on their devotion to Mary, saints, and images, Christ is highlighted as the main difference. But in relation to other Protestants who are also Christ-centred, Pentecostal interviewees emphasise the active presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of Pentecostal churches and individuals.

The CSI interviewees who also view religious diversity through the evangelical lens have other criteria for evaluating the quality of a church. Some comparisons between the CSI and Pentecostal churches centre around common themes with opposite interpretations from both sides: differences in style
of worship, opinions on and practices of mission, and the place of the Holy Spirit. While a few CSI interviewees, both liberal Protestant and critical evangelical, criticise Pentecostalism for hurried and one-sided evangelism, this is not a general concern among lay CSI interviewees whose main reservation with Pentecostalism is related to its worship style, considered to be noisy and chaotic. Here, orderliness and discipline, perceived in the CSI liturgy, are preferred ideals.

This chapter is the last of three chapters discussing interviewees’ perceptions of the three religions in their surroundings that they have most contact with: Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. Together, these three chapters illustrate the complexity of Christian attitudes to other religions. Boundaries to the religious other do not automatically follow the line between Christians and non-Christians; as discussed above, on a theological level, Catholicism is here perceived as radically other to Protestant Christianity. As illustrated here, Protestant Christians can direct severe criticism towards Catholicism while showing considerable appreciation for Islam. Hinduism constitutes the implicit and sometimes explicit third party in comparisons between Protestant Christianity on the one hand and Islam and Catholicism on the other. Interviewees’ criticism of Catholicism has parallels with their criticism of Hinduism, and their approval of aspects of Islam mirrors their disapproval of the opposing aspects of Hinduism. The use or absence of religious images is a crucial issue to interviewees’ perceptions of all three religions and is the subject of the next chapter.
In the preceding chapters, it became apparent that the use of religious images, understood as “idol worship,” or the absence thereof, is an important theme in my interviewees’ descriptions of other religions. In perceptions of Hinduism, other characteristics ascribed to Hindu religion, such as superstition and futility, are connected with the overall criticism of idol worship. Many interviewees also disapprove of Catholic use of religious images. The absence of religious images in Islam, on the other hand, is grounds for more positive views of that religion. The criticism of religious images as idol worship not only emphasises the difference between Hinduism and Christianity, but also between Catholic and Protestant Christianity. Thus, it is fundamental to interviewees’ understanding of what is distinctive in their own religion not only within the interreligious spectrum but also in relation to other Christians in south India. In this chapter I will look deeper into the significance of religious images and the notion of idol worship in this context.

It is necessary to say something first about the meaning of terms such as “idol,” “idol worship,” and “idolatry.” The worship of “idols” is an important motif in the Bible. As the first of the Ten Commandments, the commandments against having “other gods” and against making and worshipping an “idol” have occupied a major place in Christian history. The biblical concept denotes worship of objects or of false gods instead of the biblical God. The writers condemn, warn against, and repeatedly ridicule such worship, reminding their readers of the superiority of the biblical God in comparison with “idols.” The concept of idolatry has been a key feature not only of Christianity but of the other Abrahamic religions as well. Diana Eck calls it a “deep-rooted Western antagonism to imaging the divine at all.” She writes that “[w]orshiping as God those ‘things’ which are not God has been despised in Western traditions as ‘idolatry,’ a mere bowing down to ‘sticks and stones’” adding that the Abrahamic religious traditions “have trusted the Word more than the Image as a mediator of the divine truth.” Within Christianity, this is “a particularly Protestant position,” Eck notes.

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733 Ex. 20:3-4, Deut. 5:7-8 (NRSV). These can be counted either as the first two commandments, as in Orthodox and Reformed tradition, or together as the first commandment, as in Catholic and Lutheran tradition.

734 The theme can be found in many places, e.g. in Psalms, Isaiah, and Jeremiah.

In contrast with this biblical understanding, and with contemporary Europe, in the general Indian context the terms “idol” and “idol worship” do not necessarily carry negative connotations. In India, “idol” can be used as a neutral word for a Hindu depiction of a God used for ritual functions. The Hindu, for example, one of India’s largest English-language daily newspapers, often features articles where “idol” is used as a neutral word for Hindu statues.736 “Idol worship” is less negatively charged than its always pejorative synonym “idolatry,” a term in which condemnation or disapproval is inherent. For example, Hindu writers J. K. Bajaj and M.D. Srinivas see a problem in Christian condemnation of idol worship, including use of the pejorative term “idolatry.”737 “Idol-worship,” on the other hand, is used as a descriptive term for Hindu worship in their article. So, although many would argue that it is a misunderstanding to say that Hindus worship “idols” as such rather than the Gods they depict,738 in an Indian context, the term “idol worship” can be less negatively charged than in a European one.

However, although my interviewees mainly use the term “idol worship” rather than the more clearly pejorative “idolatry,” in their use, “idol worship” is usually negative. “Idol worship,” to most of my interviewees, is not a neutral description of Hindu (or Catholic) worship of the divine through the use of images but refers instead to the Abrahamic idea of “idolatry” as a fundamental human error. Within Christianity, this negative attitude to images and other ritual or devotional objects is more pronounced among Protestants than among either Catholics or Orthodox Christians. The basic problem, according to this concept, is that “idolatry” means replacing God with God’s creation, or worshipping creation instead of the Creator. Thus, it presupposes a distinction between the two, a presupposition which is not shared with the Hindu Advaita tradition, for example. The “idols” in “idolatry” are mostly manmade objects, but can also refer to animals or to nature.

The Centrality of Images

When I began my field studies, I soon realised that the idea of idol worship – something that I had never given much serious thought to until then – was important to many of those I met and interviewed and virtually all of them discussed it at some point.739 It seemed to function as a sort of antithesis to

739 I did not have a question about “idol worship” or religious images in my interview guide, but almost all the interviewees brought it up. The exceptions were Rev. Chand, who focused
good Christian faith, and many interviewees in different ways emphasised that to practise one’s religion by addressing devotion to images is wrong and misleading, a mistake that human beings easily fall prey to but which a Bible-centred Protestant believer abjures. They frequently referred to biblical verses condemning idolatry. To them, the Hindu religious images are inanimate objects in contrast to the “living God” who is the object of their own devotion. The idea of idol worship is central to the descriptions not only of Hinduism but also of the other two religious traditions that our interviews focused on, Islam and Catholicism. Other traditions were mostly unremarked, notably the Syrian Orthodox churches with their special iconography.

The importance of this theme to my interviewees corresponds with the importance of images in Hindu religion as it is practised around them. My interviewees encounter Hindu religious images throughout the day when they drive past temples, enter into shops owned by Hindus, or climb the stairs of their apartment buildings and pass the homes of their Hindu neighbours. Images occupy an important place in Hindu worship. In Hindu terminology, an iconic image of a deity is called a *murti* and many Hindus believe that the *murti* not only represents the deity, it contains the deity’s power and the very presence of the deity. When a Hindu places herself in front of a consecrated image of Vishnu, for example, and looks into his eyes, she performs *darshan*. This means that she sees the deity in the image and is, in turn, seen by him. *Darshan* is “the single most common and significant element of Hindu worship,” Eck writes. Temples housing especially famous and powerful *murtis*, such as the image of Lord Venkateswara (a form of Vishnu) in Tirumala, Andhra Pradesh, are important pilgrimage sites which attract many thousands of people daily.

The theme of religious images is key to views of all three main other religions that interviewees relate to, namely Hinduism, Catholicism, and Islam. It is particularly important to ways of understanding Hinduism, and I will return to this topic after first discussing the theme in relation to views of Islam and Catholicism.

Islam and Images

The absence of religious images is an important factor in interviewees’ appreciation of Islam and is the key reason behind their perceptions of an affinity between Islam and Protestant Christianity. Views of Islam in relation to the

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740 Fuller 2004: 60-61.
741 See Eck 1998 for an exposition of *darshan* and the role of images in Hindu religion. (Quotation from p. 1.)
topic of religious images reveal a crucial dichotomy, namely a perceived opposition between using religious images and worshipping God.

Thomas expressed his sense of this dichotomy when he said: “Muslims, they don’t have any idols. They do believe in God.” Their places of worship are characterised by an absence of images: “They don’t have any … image or any photo, nothing. Their masjid will be a plain wall.” Pastor Pradeep too, saw an opposition between religious images and God: “Hindus only are worshipping statues. But Muslims, they are just like us. They have prayers, they are worshipping God.” Christina, when asked to compare Christian and Islamic worship, said: “Usually there is no difference I think /---/ and in both castes [groups] there is no idol worship.” Muslims do not have images of God at home, she said, because like Christians believe that “only two or three people … in the Old Testament,” like Moses, have seen God, Muslims also believe that “nobody has seen God,” so they follow “God’s words” instead.

On the related topic of pantheism, Chakradev found Muslims to be “closer to the biblical perspective than Hindus.” Unlike Hindu non-dualist pantheists, Muslims, who belong to the Abrahamic traditions, make a distinction between nature and Allah as the Creator of nature, he said.

In contrast with the views of my interviewees, in certain other contexts, Christians see Islam as idolatrous. In an Indian context, it is not inconceivable that dargahs (shrines of Muslim saints), for example, could be objects of such Christian criticism. But in these interviewees’ perceptions, Islam stands out as non-idolatrous in explicit contrast with Hinduism.

The idea of similarity between Islam and Christianity, discussed in Chapter 5, is at its most affirmative here, in relation to the question of religious images. Interviewees use expressions which suggest not only similarity but sameness such as that Muslims are “just like us” and that there is “usually … no difference” between Islam and Christianity. Even the pastor in TPM, a denomination so exclusivist that it considers itself to be the only church which teaches the correct Christian doctrine, says that Muslims “are just like us.” The absence of what is perceived as “idol worship” is essential here; beside the dramatic otherness of Hindu “idol worship,” Muslim worship can be seen as nearly identical with Christian worship. Interviewees make such observations specifically when thinking of the absence of religious images in Islam. When their thoughts turn to Christ, the Bible, and salvation, they do perceive important distinctions between Islam and Christianity.

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742 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
743 Interview with pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20.
744 Interview with Christina 2011-02-01.
745 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-10.
746 See e.g. Ukah 2009: 104-105.
There is an inherent ambiguity in the material here: When pressed on the subject, most interviewees conclude that Christians and Muslims do not worship the same God, as seen in Chapter 5. But in relation to religious images, some of the same interviewees express a basic assumption that worshipping idols is the antithesis to worshipping God and, since Muslims do not worship images, the logical conclusion is that they worship God. This ambiguity demonstrates how views of religious difference or affinity are not rigid but depend on the specific aspect of another religion that stands in focus.

Catholicism and Images

While Islam is appreciated on this point, there is one other tradition that is criticised for its use of religious images almost as frequently as Hinduism, namely Catholicism. Several interviewees explicitly called Catholic practice “idol worship,”748 said that Catholics “worship idols”749 or “[follow] an idol,”750 or they called Catholic devotional images “idols.”751 There is a heritage here from a more widespread interreligious and intra-Christian historical pattern, since, as Birgit Meyer observes: “Protestant critiques of religious pictures as unsuited representations of divinity have tended to be mobilized in clashes with other, more ‘thing-friendly’ religions such as Catholicism and indigenous religious traditions.”752

In my material, Catholicism is associated with idol worship mainly because of two related phenomena, the veneration of saints and the use of images, especially statues, in Catholic devotion. According to the understanding of many interviewees, Catholics let Mary and the saints take the place of or marginalise Christ and God. It is a chief tenet of their own faith that only God should be worshipped and they interpret Catholic veneration of saints as worship of them. Thus, they understand Catholic religiosity as worship of Mary and of saints along with or even instead of God. The statues of saints in Catholic churches and shrines, and popular devotional practices in relation to them, are taken as physical proof that Catholics worship idols. Religious images and practices linked to them associate Catholic worship with Hindu worship in the eyes of many interviewees, and this link is also understood as indicative of idol worship.

Specific Catholic practices were referred to as faulty and as signs of “idol worship,” the most obvious one being the display of religious pictures and

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748 Interview with Christina 2011-01-25.
750 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
Some interviewees pointed out the practices of placing candles in front of images, decorating them with garlands, or lighting incense in front of them as indicative of idol worship. Others brought up processions with chariots carrying images of saints, or Catholic shrines with statues representing the infant Jesus. Chinni, for example, thought that candles should not be placed “in front of an idol” as Catholics do. That, she believes, is “like worshipping the idol and giving respect to the idol,” in contradiction with the First Commandment. “If they keep it in front of Jesus, it’s their style of worship, that’s ok. But if they start bowing down to Mary and praying at Alphonsa’s feet and all those things, that I think is the problem.”

Mary and the Saints

The veneration of Mary and of saints is a major theme for my interviewees when they describe Catholicism as idol worship. The presence of images of Mary and the saints in Catholic churches and homes together with the religious practices connected with them are often understood to mean that Catholics worship Mary and the saints and their images. Like images of Hindu Gods, those of Catholic saints are frequently labelled “idols” by interviewees. This categorisation underlies Chinni’s differentiation between images of Jesus on the one hand and images of Mary or Saint Alphonsa on the other. Lighting a candle in front of an image of Jesus is an acceptable form of worship, but when a Catholic venerates a saint through embodied worship in front of the saint’s image, in Chinni’s view she has crossed a line dividing Christian worship from idol worship. Here, it is partly the image in itself and practices associated with it, but particularly what it depicts, which is considered problematic and indicative of idol worship.

Some interviewees emphasise the central position of Mary in Catholic devotion. They consider the Catholic relationship to Mary problematic since they understand it as worship of someone other than God. A related problem is that the important role given to Mary, in their understanding, jeopardises the position of Jesus Christ at the centre of Christian faith. According to Phoebe, Catholics “give more preference to Mary” although she clarified that

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755 Interview with pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20.
756 Interview with Michael 2011-03-10. He was perhaps thinking of Christmas cribs.
757 St. Alphonsa lived between 1910 and 1946 and was a Syrian Catholic nun from Kerala. In 2008, she became the first female Indian saint to be canonised. See Dempsey 2001 on her cult in Kerala.
758 Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.
Catholics do worship Jesus too. “They worship both. But first preference they give to Mary.” While Mary could be given respect as the mother of Christ, she should not be worshipped because “she’s not God.” Phoebe disapproves of Catholic religiosity which she understands as worship of Mary: “It is not good; I feel it is not correct what they are doing.” Sometimes, when she cannot go to a Protestant Sunday service, she goes to a Catholic church to pray instead. “I will go, pray for some time and then return. But I will not worship Mary. No matter what.” Thomas also finds the centrality of Mary in Catholic practice indicative of idol worship:

No, Catholic worship is not good; I cannot say it is good. Their way of worship is like if they give prominence for Mother Mary – their consideration, their supplications and prayers through Mary, and they give importance to Mary. Mary was chosen by God as an instrument. That’s all. But she is not God. She can be blessed among women, but making her to be the main thing in worship is not … It again becomes following an idol. You’re not giving importance to God.

For Thomas, the emphasis on Mary is problematic since he understands it to divert the spiritual attention from God. “All the importance should be given to God,” he said.

According to Catholic doctrine, Mary and the saints are neither divine nor objects of worship. But this Protestant (mis)perception of Catholic religion as worship of Mary reflects a profound difference in theological emphasis and in interpretations of the principle of monotheism. The Catholic relationship to Mary clashes with the emphasis on the direct personal relationship to Jesus that is so essential to Protestantism, and particularly to evangelical Protestantism. Indian Catholic scholars Leonard Fernando and George Gispert-Sauch write: “Some Catholics may invoke and relate to Mary more often than they do to Jesus or to God. They have been told that Mary leads ‘automatically’, so to speak, to the Son of God and therefore to the Father.” This relationship can, clearly, grate on Protestant sensibilities. Popular beliefs and practices rather than official beliefs form the foundations for interviewees’ perceptions of Catholicism. And they observe Catholics relating to Mary and to saints as though they were Gods. The term “Marian bhakti,” which Fernando and Gispert-Sauch use about the Indian Catholic relationship to Mary as it finds

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760 Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19.
761 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
762 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
763 See Fernando and Gispert-Sauch 2004: 262-268 for an Indian Catholic explanation of the role of Mary and saints in Catholicism.
764 Ibid: 263.
expression on popular pilgrimage sites,\textsuperscript{765} indicates the phenomenological similarities with Hindu practices.\textsuperscript{766}

But while the dominating tendency is to view Catholic veneration of Mary and the saints as a form of idol worship, there are exceptions to this. Chakradev nuanced the criticism of Catholic veneration of saints. He challenged the dominant view by saying that Catholics “have the same concept” of salvation through Christ as Protestants. The only difference, he said, is that Catholics believe in saints as “mediators” through whom they “can approach Jesus.” Chakradev considers “saints worship” and belief in mediators other than Jesus misguided and unbiblical. But he concluded that what ultimately matters is that Catholics believe in salvation through Christ.\textsuperscript{767} His position agrees with the evangelical and general Protestant emphasis on Christocentrism which leads several other interviewees to view Catholic worship involving saints and their images as erroneous. But the evangelical emphasis on personal salvation leads Chakradev to a more forgiving view of this perceived error; he acknowledges Catholic faith as genuine Christian faith since it affirms the tenet at the absolute centre of evangelicalism, that of salvation through Christ.

Stricter Pentecostal View of Images

For some interviewees, the problem with Catholic images is not only what they depict but the images in themselves. This aversion to images is stronger in the Pentecostal churches and among Pentecostal interviewees than among CSI interviewees. The latter generally depict Catholic images as problematic because of their motifs (of saints) and because of certain practices that remind them of Hindu devotional practices, but Pentecostal interviewees can speak of images as in themselves carrying a problematic potential to induce idol worship. Moreover, the profusion of images in Catholic churches contrasts with the aesthetics in Pentecostal interviewees’ own churches, characterised as they are by an absence of images, even of Jesus. Instead, Bible quotations adorn the walls or are displayed through audio-visual media. In CSI church buildings, on the other hand, depictions of Jesus are common.

Some interviewees explicitly emphasise the point of contrast between Catholicism and their own Protestant faith that they find in the differing attitudes to religious images and saints. This contrast is also represented among CSI interviewees, but is especially pronounced among Pentecostal interviewees. Madhu from Mega AG thought that Catholics worship “their saints” rather than God. According to him, it is in their use of images that Catholics “differ

\textsuperscript{765} Ibid: 264.

\textsuperscript{766} Admittedly, this is a way of explaining Christian devotion in Hindu terms and understandable to Hindus. Still, Protestants with the same aim might speak of “Jesus bhakti,” but not “Mariam bhakti.”

\textsuperscript{767} Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
from Protestants.” When I pointed out that Protestant Christians also have images, he responded that he did not think that Protestants worship the images, which he suspected Catholics of doing. In his Pentecostal church, by contrast, “we don’t have any cross, any picture, no rosary, nothing.” The church is decorated with biblical quotations, because the “Bible is our source and the Holy Spirit is our source, to link us with God.”68 Like Madhu, a few other interviewees also contrasted Catholic worship, understood as worship of Mother Mary769 or of “idols” in the form of saints,770 with Pentecostal worship according to biblical principles771 or with CSI worship centred only on Jesus.772

To some Pentecostal interviewees, the idea of images, especially in a religious context or with religious motifs, is intimately connected with the idea of idol worship. This became obvious for example when I asked Michael for his opinion on contextualised Christian art and our conversation soon turned to the risks of idol worship. It was as though Michael could not discuss the topic of images without emphasising that one must not worship the images. Whenever he spoke of pictures, he emphasised that one should not worship them. Michael sees a dichotomy between worshipping God in “spirit and truth”773 and the use of devotional images. Pictures of Jesus are acceptable to him but only as long as nobody shows signs of worshipping the picture such as adorning it with a garland or placing candles in front of it. Naturalistic depictions of Jesus are harmless until “you offer sacrifices, you start worshipping it. Then that will be totally evil.”774

A Pentecostal view of images as potentially harmful exists in other geographic contexts as well. Birgit Meyer discusses Pentecostalism in Ghana where, despite the fact that mass-produced pictures of Jesus are vastly popular, they are also commonly associated with spiritual peril. Some Ghanaian Pentecostals own pictures of Jesus but they are careful to distinguish them from “idols” or “fetishes” by referring to them as “symbols,” not to be worshipped. To others, even pictures of Jesus are wrong, since they carry an inherent danger of enticing people into worshipping them. Moreover, many Pentecostals believe that even a picture of Jesus can become possessed by evil spirits or appropriated by Satan. In Meyer’s analysis, this “slippage” whereby pictures of Jesus can go from “symbols” to dangerous “idols” illustrates “an entanglement of Christianity and indigenous traditions, in which the latter hides and flourishes behind the former, while the former stresses its superiority.”775

[^68]: Interview with Madhu 2008-03-03.
[^69]: Interview with Priya 2011-02-09.
[^70]: Interview with Triveni 2011-03-24.
[^71]: Interview with Priya 2011-02-09.
[^72]: Interview with Triveni 2011-03-24.
[^74]: Interview with Michael 2011-03-10.
In my material, images of Jesus are never specifically pointed out as liable to such possession, but the idea that the devil can use images to lure a person away from God is present. As Meyer points out in reference to Ghana, such notions indicate a continued belief in the power of religious things despite the modern Protestant rhetoric of objects being powerless. And, as Meyer also stresses, this contradiction was present already in historical evangelical missionary attitudes to objects used in indigenous religions.776

Perceived Parallels with Hindu Worship

Implicit in the criticism my interviewees direct at Catholic “idol worship,” and specific practices such as lighting incense in front of images or conducting chariot processions, is the point that these practices involving images make Indian Catholicism resemble Hindu religiosity.777 Like the belief in the potentially harmful power of religious objects, this aspect of Indian Protestant attitudes to Catholic religious images has old roots. The British colonial civil servant and historian John William Kaye wrote: “The Christianity of Madura under the Jesuits was indeed disguised idolatry. Except that the image of the Virgin Mary was worshipped in the temples and paraded upon the cars, there was little change in the old ceremonies and processions of Hindooism.”778

Among my interviewees, this similarity between Catholic and Hindu image-centred practices is sometimes explicitly referred to as an explanation for why Catholic churches are popular also among Hindus. Chinni explained the popularity of Catholic churches among Hindus in this way: “It’s similar to the temples. In the style of idols, lot of idols, and lot of photos [pictures], and candles, and people standing at statues’ feet and praying. It’s very similar to what the Hindus do. They also bow down to statues and pray at statues’ feet and light candles in front of [them].”779 Thomas has studied in a Catholic school where he observed the incorporation of Hindu traditions into the Catholic worship. He considered some of these elements problematic, such as the offering of coconuts or decorated vessels or pots to God, disapproving of it since “that becomes again an idol.”780 According to Reverend Matthew, Catholic practices are a cause of confusion among prospective believers since, when they hear of the Pentecostal doctrines prohibiting certain uses of religious images, “many a times they will point out Roman-Catholicism where they worship idols again.”781

777 See Chapter 6 for more discussion of views of Catholic religious hybridity and similarities with Hinduism.
778 Kaye 1859, quoted in Wagorne 2002: 11.
779 Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.
780 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
781 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16.
Interviewees find what they perceive as further evidence of idol worship in Catholic practices similar to practices observed among Hindus, for example the adorning of images with garlands or bodily prostration and other such physical gestures. They contrast both Hindu and Catholic worship involving images with their own Protestant faith which they see as properly Bible-grounded and Jesus-centred.

Some of those interviewees who speak of Catholicism as “idol worship” see it as a relatively minor error, but others are so critical of such practices that they consider Catholicism outside the boundaries of authentic Christianity. Michael, for example, said that many Hindus go to Catholic churches “because they believe that the statue and the decorations and all that is real Christianity,” a belief that he obviously disagrees with. These views of Catholicism as “idol worship,” less biblical or less genuinely Christian than Protestantism, were expressed also by interviewees with a Catholic background or with experience of attending Catholic schools. Although some interviewees did not discuss the notion of Catholicism as idol worship with me, the dominant view is that Catholic worship is problematic in its use of religious images and veneration of saints, practices which, according to some interviewees, raise doubts about Catholicism as a true and saving Christian faith.

Strong tendencies towards othering of Catholicism become evident in this focus on the Catholic use of religious images. Elements of Catholic religiosity clearly clash with the evangelical lens as well as with a general Protestant perspective which emphasises scripture and Christocentrism. Catholicism is here considered to neglect the centrality of Jesus Christ and the Bible and to let them be obscured by Mary and the saints as well as popular devotional practices associated with them. Devotion directed towards anything other than God, including saints, is identified as idol worship, especially when this devotion is expressed through the use of images. Religious devotion involving images is here understood to stand in opposition to biblical faith. It is seen not as an alternative way of worshipping God but as the error of idol worship, a phenomenon recurring through human history and condemned in the Bible. Both evangelical and general Protestant perspectives posit the Word against

782 A view of Catholicism that is implicit in the perceived need to evangelise among Catholics. (See Chapter 6.)
783 Interview with Michael 2011-03-10.
785 It did not come up in interviews with Mohana, Pansy, Priya, Reverend Chand, Reverend Thangam, Tarun, or Thivya. This does not necessarily mean that none of these interviewees shared such an idea. The semi-structured form of the interviews mean that all subjects do not occur in all interviews.
the image and, under the influence of this biblicocentrism, many interviewees find that Catholics revere the image at the expense of the Word.

However, although the idea of Catholicism as idol worship is a recurring theme represented by interviewees from all four churches, it is less pervasive than the idea of Hinduism as idol worship. All interviewees relate to this in one way or another whereas they do not all discuss the idea of idol worship in connection with Catholicism. And although many interviewees criticise Catholicism for its use of religious images and devotion to saints, this criticism is less pervasive than the criticism of Hindu religion. After all, interviewees can see not only the reverence for Mary and saints and their statues but also devotion to God in Catholic religion. While they sometimes affirm that Catholics know Jesus Christ at least to some extent, interviewees also see a threat to his centrality posed by Mary and the saints. Phoebe’s attitude to Catholic church buildings illustrates how the othering of Catholic religion is less extensive than the othering of Hindu religion. Although she emphatically clarified that when she went there, she would worship only God and not Mary, she still considered the Catholic church a proper place for prayer, possibly even a holy place. This view is in contrast to her attitude and that of several other interviewees to Hindu temples.

An Alternative View of Catholic Images

On the theme of the Catholic use of religious images and its possible implications of idol worship, there is a clear oppositional voice. Malini, the only person among my Protestant interviewees who is also a member of the Catholic Church, disputed the common Protestant use of the term “idol worship” for Catholic practice. She dislikes Pentecostal criticism of other churches: “‘You go to [the] Catholic [Church] there’s only evil because of idol worship,’ they say. Then when you go to CSI, they say … there’s no power in that church.”

Regarding the Protestant accusation that Catholics worship Mary, Malini sees it as a misunderstanding. She argued in defence of the Catholic reverence for Mary, using biblical references to clarify that “it is not … idol worship”:

“Hail thee Mary full of grace, the Lord is with you.” It’s a biblical word only, no? We make ten times that. That is wrong, they [say]. When it comes to Bible they [Protestants] say only once and they leave it. During Christmas they keep talking about Mother Mary, and they forget it. But here it is not that. They [Catholics] keep remembering her.

786 Interview with Malini 2011-03-21.
787 The prayer is derived from Luke 1:28.
788 Interview with Malini 2011-03-21.
She also referred to Jesus’s first miracle at the wedding in Cana.789 The fact that it was initiated on his mother’s request is proof, for Malini, of the strong relationship between Jesus and Mary and of the importance that Jesus himself ascribed to his mother. She is aware that the Catholic saints are another reason for Protestant criticism of Catholicism as idol worship, a criticism that she finds misplaced since she regards the lives of saints as historical realities which cannot be denied.

Malini is not against the censure of idol worship as such but disagrees that it applies to Catholicism. “Idol worship is not at all right thing. I agree to it.” But when a Catholic looks at a crucifix, for example, she does not think of “that idol” but of God, she said, and asked rhetorically where the prayer goes – “into that idol” or to God? Since the prayer is directed to God, it cannot be called “idol worship,” she argued. The images are there to remind the worshipper of God.790 Note her neutral use of the term “idol” for Catholic images.

Malini’s conscious opposition to the identification of Catholicism with “idol worship” indicates that this way of viewing Catholicism is frequent among her Pentecostal and other Protestant acquaintances. Among my interviewees in general, the use of religious images is a prominent theme in descriptions and othering of Catholicism since, in the eyes of many interviewees, the use of images locates Catholicism dangerously close to or past the boundary defining authentic Christianity. An important factor in this view of Catholic religion is that through references to the use of religious images, Catholicism is ascribed parallelism with the Hindu religion which is the main religious other for interviewees.

Hinduism and Images

While perceived parallels with Hinduism inspire the association of Catholicism with idol worship among my interviewees, early Protestant views of Hinduism were, conversely, influenced by attitudes to Catholicism. Geoffrey Oddie observes of early Protestant missionaries:

> no matter how much Catholics opposed idolatry, Protestants still saw them as using images in worship. Indeed it is quite possible that the Protestant aversion to the use of ‘idols’ in Hindu worship was intensified by the fact that this practice and other rituals reminded them of much of what they had so vigorously opposed and attempted to abolish during the Reformation.791

Negative statements about Hindu religion as “idol worship” or “idolatry” abound in historical missionary material. Oddie writes that “the very nature,
centrality and evil character of idol worship” was a common and paradigmatic assumption of eighteenth and nineteenth century Protestant missionaries. 792 

So, from the time the first Protestant missionaries came to India and had firsthand experience of Hinduism, there was this presupposition about it as characterised by ungodly “idol worship.”

In India, it was also an important theme for Hindu thinkers like Ram Mohan Roy and Dayananda Saraswati, who wished to reform Hinduism into a faith which would not be characterised by “idolatry.” 793 The modern Hindu reform movement during colonial times – as well as the Hindu nationalist movement that grew out of it – was deeply influenced by the encounter with European Christianity, in regard to this as well as to other issues. It was from this encounter between East and West that the modern concept of “Hinduism” emerged, not least from the perceived need to defend Hindu religion and culture from Christian influence. 794 This negative valuation of religious images is part of the evangelical heritage among Protestant Christians in contemporary India, as this chapter demonstrates.

The notion that Hindu religion constitutes “idol worship” and is in its essence more or less synonymous with the worship practices of surrounding nations and peoples described in the Bible, is an underlying assumption behind descriptions of Hinduism in my material. This idea is well-represented among interviewees from all four churches for whom the use of religious images is a focal point in their discussions. Worship involving images is described as wrong and futile, and a recurring notion is that Hindus perform it out of ignorance. An underlying assumption is that the “idol” is powerless to achieve anything for the devotee, in stark contrast to the Christian God. To remove Hindu religious images kept in the house is described as an important step in the process of conversion from Hinduism to Christianity. The way that Hindu worship is understood as idol worship can also inspire self-criticism. Phoebe thought that if Hindus, who “worship idols,” perform their rituals faithfully by getting up early in the morning, taking their bath and praying, then Christians, who worship “the true living God” should thus be more intense in their worship, and may need to question whether or not they themselves do even the same as Hindus. 795

As I discussed in Chapter 3, views held by evangelical interviewees of religious diversity are heavily influenced by their reading of biblical texts. Certain Bible passages prove to be central to these interviewees who interpret them in relation to their surrounding multireligious context. This is particularly so in relation to the theme of religious images. Interviewees refer to their

793 King 1999: 123.
794 Regarding the construction of the term and concept of Hinduism, see e.g. King 1999 and Oddie 2006.
795 Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19.
reading of biblical texts about “idols” with the explicit use of quotations from and allusions to the Bible. A biblicist understanding of “idol worship” also functions as an underlying point of reference in their views of other religions.

Many interviewees find support for their disapproval of religious images in biblical condemnations of idolatry. Sometimes they referred to the Bible in general terms, saying for example that worship of statues “is a sin according to the Bible.” Unsurprisingly, some referred to the commandments given to Moses in Exodus 20:3-5 and in Deuteronomy 5:7-9, where worship of “other gods” and of “idols” is prohibited. A few interviewees explicitly pointed out what they perceived as similarities between accounts of idol worship in the Old Testament and specific practices in contemporary Hindu religion.

Interviewees often said that Hindus worship statues, stone, pictures or “photos” (a word often used for “pictures”). It was common for them to say that these are “just manmade” and not invested with any real beneficial power, in contrast with the Protestant Christian’s own faith in the “true” and “living” Christian God. A Protestant, Bible-centred faith in a transcendent God is here portrayed as the positive antithesis to worship of Hindu deities, and frequently also to Catholic veneration of Mary and saints. Perhaps inspired by the Pentecostal emphasis on the Holy Spirit, a few Pentecostal interviewees pointed out that, according to their belief, God cannot be captured in an image, since “God is spirit” and must be worshipped in “spirit and truth.”

Soon after telling about how Christ had touched his life, Madhu said: “Idols, always I feel that … idols, that is someone’s creation. Like you can also make, if you are a sculptor, you can also make. But that is your creation, ok? And how can a man or woman make god and goddesses?” His words echo certain passages in Isaiah where the human manufacture of “idols” is described and the reader is assured of their impotence. For example, in Isaiah 40:19: “An idol? – A workman casts it.” Similarly, Michael said: “if you see a statue it is just made of mud. A statue that is crafted with nose and hands and eyes and ears, but they do not speak. But we worship a God who’s living, and we know that God is spirit.” In addition to the concluding reference to a New Testament verse, he paraphrases a passage that recurs several times in the Old Testament, and which was quoted by two other interviewees to illustrate Hindu ignorance, comparing it to their Christian faith.

796 Interview with pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20.
798 Interviews with Christina 2011-02-01, Priya 2011-02-09.
800 Interview with Madhu 2008-03-03.
801 E.g. Isa 2:5-22, 40:18-20, 44:9-20 (among many other examples).
802 Interview with Michael 2011-03-10.
804 Interviews with Pansy 2008-02-16, Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
said that when she sees statues of Hindu Gods, “the verses from the Bible come to my mind … which says ‘they have eyes to see, but they cannot see. They have ears to hear, but they do not hear.’”805 Such biblical texts originally asserted Israelite confidence by contrasting their living God with the lifeless manmade “idols” of other nations.806 Here they assert a Christian minority faith in opposition to the Hindu majority other.

Pantheism and Reverence for the Cow and Snake

In addition to statues and pictures of Hindu Gods and the worship associated with them, pantheism and reverence for certain animals are understood as present-day equivalents of practices described as idolatrous in the Bible.

Several interviewees gave Hindu veneration of the cow or of bull images as a specific example of idol worship.807 The cow and her offspring have an important and visible place in Hindu culture. The elevated position of the cow in Hindu tradition is well known also in Western popular imagination; a “sacred cow” is an expression for something traditionally held in respect and exempt from criticism, often irrationally so. In India, there are many aspects of the politics of cow veneration and protection of the cow and of the caste implications involved in the eating of beef.808 Chinni brought up the dietary aspect in a discussion about the ways in which the caste system is still practised in contemporary India. Many Hindu families do not like to enter Christian homes or for Christians to enter their homes, she said, because Christians cook beef, whereas for Hindus the “cow is their god” which they “worship.”809 It can be added that the eating of beef is traditionally connected with certain “polluting” Dalit caste groups.810 In addition to the respect shown to living cows and the taboo against killing them, representations of cows and bulls can be seen in many places, especially in the form of Nandi, Shiva’s vahana (“vehicle” or mount, or associated animal). Most Shiva temples feature images of Nandi and in Bangalore, Nandi’s own temple, the “Bull Temple” with a large statue of the divine bovine, is one of the most famous religious sites in the city.

805 Interview with Pansy 2008-02-16. The quotation can be found in Ezek. 12:2, Ps. 115:5-6, and Ps. 135:16-17 and in a slightly different version in Isa. 43:8. In Psalms it is in connection with “idols.”


808 There is legislation restricting the slaughter of cattle in most Indian states.

809 Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.

810 An exception on this point is Goa, where the special history of Portuguese colonialism has led to a situation where eating beef is generally considered a mark of high status among Catholics of various castes: Robinson 2013: 143.
The cow and the calf have a prominent place in Michael’s theory of the origins of idolatry. He expressed his belief that it originates from a misunderstanding of some “miracle” performed by God, perhaps a cow gave birth to a calf of an unusual colour and people who saw that then started to offer sacrifices to the calf and worship it. That is how Michael understands the idolatry of the surrounding nations that Old Testament texts testify to, and he believes “that’s the reason why [God sent] Israelites to these countries, to these nations, to teach them” and also “warned them, that ‘I’m giving you the promised land and I’m sending you there, but do not be like these people.’” Worship of a cow or a calf here stands for a primeval idolatry, in a way symbolising the very essence of idolatry.

During my field studies in Bangalore, I regularly passed a window on MG Road in the city’s commercial centre where a shining brass statue of Nandi was displayed, usually hung with a garland. Seeing that image, I often reflected that it was not surprising for many of the Protestant Christians I met to be reminded of biblical texts such as Exodus 32 (the story of the Golden Calf) when they encountered such images. For Priya, the parallel between biblical texts and Hindu practices is obvious: “In Moses’ time they worshipped the cow. So Hindus worship a cow. [In] Moses’ time they had the brazen serpent on the cross. They worship the snake.”

Worship of snakes is another practice that some interviewees chose as an illustration of the strangeness of Hindu worship. As with veneration of the cow, this could be understood as analogous to biblical texts and as a contemporary equivalent of practices that have existed since biblical times. Christina took the examples of images of snakes and bulls to illustrate similarities she sees between the idol worship referred to in the Old Testament and that which people in India still perform. “How it was in the Bible … they were making the idols in the Old Testament, that snake idol and … hogs, bull, like that only here also” she said. The worship of snake deities is an ancient tradition in India where snake gods or Nagas are still part of the Hindu pantheon. Images of snakes carved in stone can be seen outside temples and under trees, also in some public parks in Bangalore. Living snakes, especially cobras, are also understood to be sacred, and it is believed that they should not be killed. Priya thought that the veneration of serpent deities is related to fear. She told me

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811 Interview with Michael 2011-03-10.
812 Interview with Priya 2011-02-09. The “brazen serpent” refers to Num. 21:9, where Moses (by the command of God) “made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole” (KJV). The bronze serpent later came to be used as an idol by the Israelites, according to 2 Kgs. 18:4.
814 Interview with Christina 2011-02-01.
815 Dalal 2006: 324. The Naga deities are associated with power, wisdom, and fertility, and other Gods are often connected with them. Ibid.
about a place with “lots of snakes” where “people are scared of those snakes, so they make it the snake goddess and they worship.”

Some interviewees discussed the related topic of pantheism and worship of nature and phenomena such as stone, rain and wind, and the *tulsi* (holy basil) plant. Chakradev used philosophic concepts to explain it: “Hindus believe in non-dualism [which] means creation and Creator is one.” Hindus understand creation as the expansion of Brahman, he said, and referred to Paul’s discussion of the revelation to be found in creation. Such revelation could have provided a correction to Hindu pantheistic belief, he thought: “Then they could have understood that this tree is not a god, there is a God that created this beautiful tree. This flower is not a god, there is a Creator who created this beautiful flower.”

Pantheism, reverence for living animals, and *darshan* of religious images are all interpreted as signs of idol worship by the majority of interviewees. To them, the crux of the problem is twofold: First, such beliefs and practices signify worship of matter instead of the transcendent divine, or, in Christian terms, of creation instead of the Creator. Second, with regard to images, for interviewees the problem is not only with the images in themselves but also with what they represent: the Hindu Gods. These are understood as false in the sense of non-existent or as false in the sense of dangerous. Those who understand them as dangerous consider contact with them through, for example, participation in Hindu rituals, potentially harmful.

Marking the Boundary with Hindu Rituals

The charged nature of Hindu religious images is evident from the way that the maintenance of boundaries that define places, objects and rituals connected with such images emerges as an important theme in my material. Many interviewees find it important to avoid close contact with Hindu religious images, especially in connection with Hindu rituals. Hindu temples, festivals, dances, the names of Hindu Gods, and, in particular, *puja* (worship) and *prasada* (consecrated food), are brought up as sensitive areas connected with Hindu reli-

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816 Interview with Priya 2011-02-09.
817 Interviews with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13, Christina 2011-02-01, Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-10.
818 Rom. 1:18-23.
819 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-10. Chakradev relates here to non-dualist Hindu philosophy (*Advaita Vedanta*), one of the main Hindu philosophical schools. See King 1999: 118-142 for a discussion about the great impact of Advaita Vedanta on modern ideas about the essence of Hinduism, in the West and in India.
region, or “idol worship” as interviewees often refer to it. They are avoided because of the strict prohibition on idol worship that most interviewees understand as central to Christian faith.

For a few interviewees, the possible dangers connected with Hindu worship are such that they consider it unwise even to step into a Hindu temple, at least for a person who does not possess an unusually strong faith.\(^1\) According to pastor Pradeep, a mature believer can go to a temple but if a young boy goes he will be corrupted. Mature, senior believers can go, he said, but they never do, because “why should they?” A mature believer would want to distance himself from Hindu worship and would see no reason to go and participate in it.\(^2\) When Mohana’s sister heard that I was planning to visit the famous temples in Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, she became upset and urged me to be careful. It was more common, however, to meet with Cecil’s view that a Christian could visit a temple as long as he or she did not actively participate in the puja or partake of the prasada.\(^3\)

**Puja and Prasada**

The question of prasada (Kannada) or prasadam (Tamil), eatables offered to Hindu deities in puja rituals, proved to be an important practical issue related to Hindu worship. Several interviewees told me that they avoid eating prasada, the reason being that they see it as related to idol worship. Triveni said that she does not eat it since she has been taught in the CSI Sunday school not to receive items used in another religion’s rites.\(^4\) Cecil thought that although it is “fine” to visit a temple and watch the rituals performed there, to actually receive the prasada “would go into syncretism,” it “would be going beyond the line” because it would be like saying that the Hindu God worshipped there is equal to the Christian God.\(^5\)

His pastor in CSI City, Reverend Chand, did not hesitate to eat prasada. When I offered him a consecrated sweet I had bought at a recent visit to Bangalore’s large ISKCON temple, he took it gladly saying that he found their sweets tasty. He appreciates the ISKCON movement more than many other Hindu traditions because of its subversion of the caste system. He also told me that they sometimes donate free lunches to schools run by CSI churches and he saw no problem in this.\(^6\) (It is part of ISKCON practice to offer eatables to Krishna.)

Reverend Chand is, however, quite alone in his relaxed stance on eating prasada. It is more common for interviewees to be uncomfortable with the

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\(^1\) Interviews with Michael 2011-03-10, pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20.
\(^2\) Interview with pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20.
\(^3\) Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.
\(^4\) Interview with Triveni 2011-03-24.
\(^5\) Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.
thought of consuming eatables that have been consecrated to a Hindu deity, or in other ways actively to participate in Hindu pujas. My interviewees have different strategies for when they are offered prasada by friends, neighbours and colleagues. Christina has sometimes been in situations where she has been offered prasada, especially at her previous work where they had weekly pujas in the office. Then she, along with another Christian woman, used to stand with crossed arms to make it clear that they would neither receive the prasada nor the fire that was offered. 827 Another recurring situation is when Hindu neighbours come to her house during Hindu festivals to offer eatables. If the eatables have been placed in front of a Hindu deity for consecration then Christina does not eat them. She told me that she receives the offered food, thanks the neighbour for it and then discretely disposes of it when her neighbour cannot see, to avoid ruining the friendship. 828 Tarun explained how he handles the situation when a friend invites him for a puja. He accepts the invitation rather than hurting his friend and, once there, he silently in his mind addresses prayers to Jesus while the Hindu ritual is going on. If he joins the puja in this way he also does not receive the prasada, kumkum powder or the fire. 829 Usually it is not a problem, since his Hindu friend will not insist on him receiving those items and, while accepting the invitation, Tarun tells his friend that he will not “take the fire,” “take the dot,” or “eat the prasada.” 830

Hindu friends’ understanding of Christian avoidance of these parts of Hindu ritual is something that Triveni also brought up. When Hindu friends invite her for a puja, she attends, and her friends do not try to insist that she eat prasada or receive kumkum powder since they know that as a Christian she will not. They do not feel offended, she told me. 831 Reverend Thangam had similar experiences. He spent his childhood in a neighbourhood where his family was almost the only Christian one, surrounded by Hindu families. Problems involving prasada did not arise since their Hindu neighbours already knew that his family did not eat it and consequently it was not offered. He emphasised that this had not been an obstacle for good neighbourly relationships. The knowledge that Thangam’s Christian family did not want to receive prasada did not stop their Hindu neighbours from exchanging other, unconsecrated, food with them. 832

827 The fire refers to the waving of an oil lamp, where the flame “symbolizes both the deity’s embodiment during puja … as well as the deity’s transcendence of its embodied form.” The worshippers cup their hands over the fire before touching their own eyes. This symbolises the merging of worshipper with the deity during the puja. Fuller 2004: 73.
828 Interview with Christina 2011-01-25.
829 Kumkum refers to a powder that Hindus often apply to their foreheads when they visit a temple or participate in a ritual.
830 Interview with Tarun 2011-02-04.
831 Interview with Triveni 2011-03-24.
832 Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03.
Reverend Thangam pointed out that “the prasadam is not the only time when you interact. There are other times. When they fall sick, go and help them. They want a bottle of blood [for a blood transfusion], quickly give that bottle of blood. That way you can show your love.” He advises his church members to show their Hindu neighbours and friends that they are friendly even if they do not want to receive prasada:

You may probably not accept their food which they gave during festivals, because you think they offer it to the idols. But God will leave you another opportunity [to help them]. [If] somebody [is] sick in their home, somebody needs blood, be the first one to go and do it. Then he will recollect – he or she – “this fellow did not receive that [prasada], but when it comes to this, when it comes to help, when it comes to humanity, he’s the first one to come.” Get that name; try to earn that name. Life does not stop with eating food. That’s not the last thing. There are so many other things.

Regarding the advice that he gives to his church members on the issue of eating prasada, he said, “I leave it to them” to decide. He said that while it may be “very easy for me to preach” on the point, since he as a pastor would usually not be offered prasada, his church members have to “face the situation every day.” So, “I have not told them ‘receive it’ or ‘don’t receive it.’ I told that ‘confusion will prevail for you. It prevails for me also.’”

Interviewees do not only experience problem-free situations in which Hindus understand their Christian unwillingness to partake of prasada. If the Christian who refuses prasada or other objects related to Hindu ritual is a new convert from a Hindu family then the situation can be more conflicted. This was the case in Mohana’s family when her father and brother had not wanted to accept the newfound faith in Christ of Mohana, her sister and their mother. Initially, there had been a difficult period of what Mohana labelled “persecution.” One of the issues that the conflict centred around was prasada. At that time, her father was involved in the construction of a temple. “So the temple [Brahmin] – the person who would perform the puja, he would bring the things that were offered to those idols. And daddy would insist that we eat those things. And it wouldn’t be ok … now we were really, really living for the Lord. We couldn’t compromise on anything.” Mohana’s father had insisted that her mother performed puja and “he would tell her to use the coconut that was offered to the idols.”

Mohana’s experience illustrates the specifically problematic situation that can arise when a member of a Hindu family starts believing in Christ instead of the family’s traditional Hindu Gods and wants to dissociate from ritual

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833 Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03.
835 Interview with Mohana 2010-12-14.
practices connected with them. This can create a dilemma for the new Chris-
tian believer if she no longer wants to participate in pujas or eat consecrated
food but is pressured to do so by family members who do not accept her con-
version. As in Mohana’s family, the first convert is often a woman, whose
vulnerability is enhanced by the hierarchic patriarchal family structure.

I discussed this general issue with Reverend Matthew who said that the
church leaders in Mega AG consider the circumstances when they counsel
believers. Sometimes, a person who openly refuses to participate in pujas
could face severe repercussions from her family. There could be complex sit-
uations with children involved, for example, which make it understandable
that some people are not ready to openly oppose their families by refusing to
participate in Hindu worship. In such cases, the pastor advises them to “lay
low” and “just worship God in your own self.”836 Cauvery and Chakradev take
a similar position. They knew a woman from a Hindu family who believed in
Christ but sometimes had to participate in pujas because of pressure from her
in-laws. She did it “not with a genuine heart” but only “to satisfy them,” Chak-
radev said. I asked for their opinion on the situation and Chakradev said that
“it has to be done, in a family context.” They would not discourage it, since
their priority is that the family should be peaceful and stay together. As a lone
Christian in a Hindu family, “you have to do some of these things. Otherwise
you are out of the family.”837

As seen here and earlier in Reverend Thangam’s discussion, the pastoral
attitude to the dilemmas that can arise when a Christian encounters expecta-
tions from Hindu family members or friends that she participate in puja or
receive prasada is generally pragmatic. These pastors do not insist on an ab-
solute prohibition but are flexible in view of the social conditions.

In line with this tolerant stance, a few interviewees used Paul’s discussion
of “food sacrificed to idols” in 1 Corinthians 8 as a biblical resource for guid-
ance on the issue of prasada. Based on this Bible text, they reasoned that a
Christian with a “weak conscience” or in the presence of another Christian
with a weak conscience had better avoid eating prasada.838 Chakradev ex-
plained: “Like Paul says, if somebody gives puja or some things which [have
been] offered, you can eat if you are strong; you have a strong conscience,
thinking that it cannot harm you … If you have a weak person with you [or]
if you don’t have a strong conscience, please avoid it.”839 Here, he directly
applies Paul’s discussion about eating food offered to “idols” to his own con-
text. Paul, writing from another historical and geographical context, does not
mention Hindu puja or prasada, but in Chakradev’s reading the text’s original
context converges with his own.

837 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-10.
839 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-10.
Chakradev said his own conscience varies: “Sometimes I won’t eat because my conscience is weak.” If offered prasada on such a day, he can receive it but later dispose of it in private. But on other days when his conscience is strong, he can eat prasada, thinking of it simply as food, without paying attention to its spiritual connotations. Reverend Thangam referred to the same biblical text and thought that it would be unwise of him to eat prasada if he was in the presence of another Christian who may ascribe negative significance to it and whose faith could be damaged by seeing him eat it.

A factor implicit in these discussions of the Pauline text is that many Christians in India believe in a potential for harm associated with eating prasada. According to the interviewees quoted here, this risk can be overcome by a “strong conscience,” which means an assurance that faith in Christ prevails over any other potential spiritual influences, or a rationalist perspective which views the prasada as simply food, not imbued with any spiritual significance. But, they believe, even a Christian with such a strong conscience should take care in the presence of other Christians, many of whom believe in the (negative) power of prasada. Here, a Protestant view of a world inhabited by conflicting spiritual powers, which is particularly widespread among Pentecostals and other evangelicals, encounters a likewise Protestant emphasis on rationalism. This rationalist perspective on prasada and other objects and rituals associated with Hindu worship downplays the importance of avoiding contact with them. The person who most distinctly expressed such a view is Thomas, the clearly non-evangelical secretary in CSI Tamil. Thomas questioned the common Christian unwillingness to eat prasada by offering an example that illustrates the practical impossibility of avoiding anything that is at all connected with Hindu pujas:

If we think in that way, we have got this river Kaveri, which takes its birth in Kodagu district, Talakaveri. There is a small opening, and there is a Hindu [temple]. Every day he makes the puja and opens the gate. Then only it comes to the dam. From the dam it comes to Bangalore to drink. Were we to say “He has performed the puja there. Then why should I drink the water?” So I don’t believe in that thing.

His example is striking; if puja is performed for the very water that one uses daily, it is not possible to maintain an absolute separation from anything dedicated to Hindu deities. On the question of prasada, Thomas takes a pragmatic view. If a Hindu “gives the prasadam as a friend,” he considers that the Christian can “take it and eat” since there is no harm in it. The situation often arises in the workplace, he explained. For example, pujas are performed for new machines in the presence of the staff who work the machines. At such times,

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840 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-10.
842 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
the owners usually offer the workers a financial bonus as well as sweets and then many Christians accept the money but are reluctant to receive the sweets consecrated as *prasada*. Thomas finds such an attitude ill-advised and potentially harmful to professional relations. A better practical solution, in his opinion, would be to ask the manager for a sweet pack that had not been placed directly in front of the image of a Hindu God and thus become *prasada*. Thomas said that in the context of a *puja* ritual, as a Christian he should not actively “perform the *puja*” and offer the eatable to the Hindu deity, but just receiving it and eating it is not a problem. He does not share the belief that eating *prasada* could be harmful because of underlying spiritual realities.

“There is nothing like that” he said, the “only … point is hygienic, whether it is hygienic or not. That is more important rather [than] whether it has got values or not.”

The question of *prasada* illustrates differing views of Hinduism and of the nature of reality represented among my interviewees. Viewed through the evangelical lens, *prasada* is potentially dangerous, at least for a Christian whose faith is not strong enough to withstand any possible spiritual attack. Viewed from a rationalist perspective, it is harmless, and the only consequences worth considering is the effect that eating it or refraining from eating it will have either on the Hindu who offers it or on other Christians who witness it.

**Other Avoided Phenomena**

Except from *prasada*, another controversial area connected with Hindu religion relates to Hindu festivals taking place in the streets. Reverend Thangam said that normally Christians do not go to see Hindu festivals, like “rallies” and village festivals where chariots bearing images of deities are pulled. He added that personally he would not mind being present and watching Hindu festivals. His attitude is different from older people of his grandfather’s generation, who would warn against Hindu festivals, since they believed that “some spirits keep moving around” at such times. “We have heard of cases where somebody was caught up with the spirit and their life changed after that,” they would say. But Reverend Thangam said that he would not mind watching a Hindu festival “as a cultural factor,” to learn about Hindu beliefs and build relationships with Hindu people. When I asked him what his congregants in CSI Tamil would think if they saw him participating, he responded that in “this particular congregation,” the majority would not mind it.

In other congregations, even uttering the names of Hindu Gods in church could be perceived negatively. In Reverend Thangam’s previous congregation, he received the impression “that they liked radical sermons.” But when he used the names Krishna and Rama in an illustrative story about two friends, a few families afterwards asked him why he had used those names. “They

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843 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
were … a little upset … because they don’t even want Hindu name, especially Hindu gods’ names, to be used in church.”

Traditional Indian dances can also be an issue. Christina studied in a Catholic school where she took compulsory classes to learn such dances. She felt uncomfortable because the dances involved greetings to earth and rain Gods, which she felt contradicted what she had learnt in Sunday school, that “idol worship is wrong, we should not worship other gods, only the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit we have to praise.” She felt the Holy Spirit pricking her conscience and she solved the dilemma by claiming that she suffered from leg pain so that she could skip the class.

To summarise, the general tendency is to consider it important to avoid contact with Hindu rituals. With the exception of a few persons who reason from a liberal and rationalist perspective, interviewees express a wish to dissociate from rituals and objects connected to Hindu worship, which they interpret as biblically prohibited “idol worship.” The most pressing question here, since it is one that Christians frequently face, is about prasada, food offered to a Hindu God-image and subsequently distributed among human participants in the ritual. Interviewees generally wish to avoid eating prasada.

Lionel Caplan, writing about “ordinary Protestants” in the urban context of Madras (now Chennai) in the 1970s and 1980s, observes similar attitudes to Hindu rituals among them: “These Protestants, by and large, take immense care to avoid participation in Hindu rituals, an abstinence originally imposed on converts by their missionaries. /---/ Protestants are adamant in refusing to take prasad because, as they frequently remark, ‘it has been offered to idols’.”

Studies from rural contexts, however, describe decidedly more ritual entanglement with Hinduism among ordinary Protestants there. Carl Gustav Diehl’s classic study from 1965 demonstrates how not only worldviews shaped by village Hindu religiosity but also socioeconomic structures made it difficult for the Lutheran Christians he studied to dissociate from Hindu rituals. In regard to prasada, Diehl reports that it was said to be common for

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845 Interview with Christina 2011-02-01.
846 Caplan 1987: 182-183. Caplan writes about “ordinary Protestants” belonging to the lower middle class here. He describes elite, upper middle-class Protestants and “the higher clergy” as more accommodating of Hindu traditions (p. 184). These class distinctions are not seen in my material, where representatives of both lower and upper middle classes express similar attitudes to Hindu rituals.
847 For example, neither bonded labourers nor daily wage labourers with few options about how to support themselves could easily avoid participating in the Hindu rituals their employers stipulated. Nor could these rural Christians escape the social pressure to participate in, or at least contribute financially to, worship of Mariyamman (a Goddess believed to be able to cure smallpox and other diseases) at the outbreak of an epidemic. Many Christians still performed their hereditary, caste-related ritual roles, in addition to participating in Christian worship. Diehl 1965: 50-52, 45, 54, 40-42, 46, 48-49, 171, 174.
Christians to eat it during Hindu festivals, for more than one reason: “In many cases sheer poverty will be an instigation not to miss a good meal. In some cases the power added to the food will give a secret satisfaction.”

Another observation in Diehl’s study of special relevance to the theme of this chapter, is his observation that Christianised versions of Hindu traditions included garlanding crosses or pictures of Jesus and making vows in front of them.

Another study from the 1960s, P.Y. Luke and John Carman’s study of rural Telugu CSI Christians, describes much Christian participation in Hindu rituals. The explanations given here are similar to Diehl’s: Hereditary caste duties, social and economic pressure, occasionally even physical coercion, and “a sense of solidarity with the rest of the village,” where non-participation would exclude the Christians and their children from the enjoyment of festivals and, it was believed, risked bringing calamity on the village.

A follow-up study fifty years later found that several of the congregations included in the original study had suffered much clerical neglect, and that this in combination with intermarriage with Hindus had led to the decline of Christian worship in favour of Hindu practice. However, there were also new Christian congregations in the area, both independent churches and a few new CSI congregations. Here, the new Christians dissociated themselves from the traditional Hindu rituals, despite initial pressure from their Hindu relatives. Carman and Vasantha Rao note “the influence of modern education and urban culture” which means that these Christians, unlike earlier generations, do not see evil spirits or a vengeful smallpox Goddess behind sickness. There are similar differences regarding partaking of prasada during feasts hosted by Hindu relatives. While members of the older CSI congregations often ate it, members of the newer congregations usually wished to avoid it, but knew that many of their Hindu neighbours and relatives would consider this exemplarily rude. This led to various “adjustments and compromises,” often from the Hindu side, where Hindus would, for example, cook special dishes for their Christian relatives. Carman and Vasantha Rao observe a similar hospitality and understanding among Hindu relatives as my interviewees report among their Hindu friends and neighbours.

848 Ibid: 46.
849 Ibid: 81. Diehl explains this practice with reference to a continuity of mindset: “They will stick to the custom of garlanding stones and images. … The innate need of a sacred object, representing the deity, and the not less urgent need for a means of doing it a substantial honour in order to have a real deal with divine factors come very clearly to the fore in this argument. The custom is ‘christianized’ by being applied to Christian objects.” However, he later contradicts this emphasis on continuity by stating that: “The idea of realizing God’s presence without seeing him or anything that represents him is very soon brought home to [new converts].” (p. 176.)
851 Carman and Vasantha Rao 2014: 86-88, 133, 182-184. The fieldwork for the study was done by Vasantha Rao and a group of students in 2008.
Diehl’s as well as Luke and Carman’s now historical studies show how socioeconomic structures and the importance of social cohesion in a village or caste group made it difficult for Christians to sever ritual ties with Hinduism totally. Frequently, a continued adherence to traditional beliefs, overlaid with the new Christian beliefs, also made it undesirable. In the present day, processes of modernisation and urbanisation have affected rural contexts too, as Carman and Vasantha Rao’s study illustrates. In an urban context such as that of my study, it is easier for Christians to dissociate themselves from Hindu rituals. The earlier studies also refer to relatively newly converted groups, whereas my interviewees are more firmly rooted in a Protestant worldview and more estranged from their Hindu background. This is so whether they were born Christians or Hindus. For most of them, theological exclusivism makes ritual association with Hindu traditions undesirable. Moreover, the social pressure from Hindus to participate is less pronounced. However, it is still a factor, and leads to compromises from both Christian and Hindu sides.

Alternative Views

Although the critical view of practices involving religious images as idol worship – which functions as a key element in the othering of Hindu and Catholic religion – dominates my material, it is not unchallenged. A few interviewees oppose the polemic way that other Christians refer to Hindu religion as “idol worship.” Some offer, instead, a metaphorical understanding of “idol worship” as primarily relating to things other than Hindu darshan. The point of this approach is to emphasise other, more acute aspects of conflict with Christian principles than the use of images in worship.

Opposition to Idol Worship Polemic

While not going so far as to acknowledge Hindu darshan as a valid way of communicating with the ultimate, a few interviewees strongly emphasised that it is wrong to call people “idol worshippers” or to openly express the opinion that Hindu worship is idol worship. Chakradev told me that historical missionary polemic against Hinduism was part of the reason for interreligious tensions in India prevalent to the present day. He sees a problem with certain Christian preachers who speak about Hindu religion in an insensitive and condemnatory way, something he has observed among pastors working in tribal areas. Chakradev advocates more empathetic ways of communicating with Hindus:

We never should abuse them and their culture. Rather approach them with an appreciative attitude. Appreciate that they are also human beings, they have

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852 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-10.
also sentiments, they believe in their gods because of their conviction. We should not hurt them. They have passion but no knowledge, most of these tribal pastors. So they abuse them, abuse the Hindu customs and cultures.\[853\]

Reverend Thangam regards Christian denigration of Hindu religious images as a considerable problem for interreligious relations. This became apparent when I asked him an open question about whether he used to preach about “interfaith issues.” His immediate reply to the question concerned the negative use of the term “idol worshipper” among Christians:

> When we talk about interfaith, what normally I try to focus upon is: Be a good witness among them. Accept them and love them. I mean we must stop, I use to say, you know: “Let’s stop using words like ‘idol worshippers’ and all that.” I’m against that. Let’s stop branding these people.\[854\]

This is obviously a central question in the field of interreligious issues, in his view. He returned to it in our second interview: “Let’s not differentiate or discriminate them with terms. It’s as good as calling someone with his caste name.” He has a firm conviction that Christians need to abstain from depreciating Hindus by the use of negative terms:

> If somebody, some Christian calls them as idol worshippers I’ll correct them there itself: “Shut up your mouth, don’t say that. Don’t say that. He may be better than you in the workplace. Don’t say idol worshipper now. He may work more faithfully than you.” That’s what I say. Yeah: “Don’t label people.”\[855\]

The difference between these interviewees and others has less to do with a view of Hindu worship as such, rather they primarily oppose offensive expressions of the dominant view. It is not the very idea that it is wrong to worship with the use of statues and pictures that they oppose, but they see such worship as a less grave mistake than interviewees who express strong criticism of it do. Moreover, most of the interviewees who expressed negative views of Hindu darshan to me would not do so openly to Hindus. The pastors in the two Pentecostal churches, where negative discourse about idol worship is strong, showed awareness of the impropriety of openly expressing it. It is part of Mega AG’s outreach strategy not to comment negatively on Hindu traditions but to focus on the Christian message instead:

> We tell people also: “When you are preaching about Christ, don’t kind of berate and tell the others are not gods and” … don’t talk about that. Just talk about Jesus. … Because all [their] life this person has believed in something which

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\[853\] Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
\[855\] Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03.
was so dear to them. And then all of a sudden you come and tell them “all these are nothing but idols” and this. They are not going to accept it.856

Similarly, pastor Pradeep told me that TPM ministers do not criticise anyone for possessing religious images when they speak to Hindus who have approached the church: “That time we will never tell that the Bible says that you should not keep idols.” They wait until people are ready for baptism, when they need to give instruction about the special “clauses” the church has for a person about to be baptised.857

Metaphorical Use of the Term “Idol”

Another way to challenge the dominant view of Hindu and Catholic religion as idol worship is to refer to “idols” or “idol worship” in a metaphorical way, to underline the point that the major sins of humanity are not to be found in their relationship to religious images. A few interviewees used this alternative, symbolic definition of “idol” to argue that the self-satisfaction evident in the dominant polemic against idol worship is misplaced. Thomas thought that people should direct their attention towards other issues than whether or not to eat prasada and how to avoid anything connected to Hindu pujas:

My belief is like this: Statue or an offering means you might be crazy about your power, position, all this, these are all the idols which we humans are having now. Forget about the idols which are manmade … [There are] people who are living in the clutches of caste, religion, colour, and then power position, political, where they have got so many idols, because of ego.858

Apart from this metaphorical use, he also used “idol” in a literal sense for Hindu, and Catholic, devotional objects. While he does not actually approve of their use, in his opinion there are worse problems in society worth focusing on. Chakradev similarly questioned the Protestant habit of accusing Catholicism of “idol worship” when he noted that “even many Protestants are also idol worshippers” because “they make other thing as a god in their life.”859

Such alternative uses of the concept of “idol” can be seen in many different contexts, historically and today. For example, an affirmation on mission and evangelism by the World Council of Churches uses “idolatry” to denote belief in an unjust global economic system of free growth, a free market, and exploitation of the poor.860

857 Interview with pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20.
858 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
859 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
In the Bangalore context, such a use downplays the negative mirroring in the religious other, and instead calls attention to faults within the speaker’s own community. However, since the metaphor alludes to a physical “idol,” it still associates Hindu (and Catholic) worship with a human tendency to wrongfully elevate something mundane to a divine or semi-divine status.

This ambiguity is illustrated in a discussion I had with Reverend Thangam. He compared Hindus who use religious images with Christians who follow TV serials devotedly: “Why do you want to call them as idol worshippers? Don’t we have idols? You have your favourite TV serial. Every day 9.30 p.m. you want to sit in front of that and watch that particular serial. That’s become idols for you. I mean, why don’t we accept it?”861 This comparison, while expressing a more tolerant view of Hindu worship than the dominant one, still falls short of reflecting positively upon Hindu worship. Reverend Thangam’s point here is not so much to question the negative valuation of Hindu worship as such, but rather to relativise it in relation to other human errors: “Why do you want to force them or accuse them, saying ‘don’t worship Ganesha’ and all? He’ll say ‘mind your own business.’ We have enough faults among ourselves which he can point [out] tomorrow.” When I asked him about the seeming implication here, that worshipping Ganesha is one among other human faults, he replied that it is not a moral fault but a result of ignorance: “No, it’s not a fault because he does not know … he does not know what he’s doing … he thinks that is a true living God, so he’s worshipping.”862

The implication is still that the worship of Ganesha through an image is a mistake, albeit not grave enough to earn complacent scorn from Christians who are themselves far from faultless. However, Reverend Thangam then once again questioned Christian self-satisfaction by adding that:

> “Who knows, that devotion which he has may be higher than the devotion which I have towards Jesus Christ. And the commitment decisions which he makes in front of the idol – so-called idol – Ganesha or Shiva or whoever it is, maybe he’ll keep that till the end. And we who come to church and say “Jesus, [I will] do this and do that”, the moment we go out of the church we’ve forgotten it.”863

Here, he is open to seeing an authentic value in Hindu _darshan_, or at least positive consequences of it. He added that a person shows her value not only through her worship but also through her way of life: “Of course you have the Ganesh on one side, then what you are after that. And these things probably should be seen, discussed and told to the people.” He apparently sees a need

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862 Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03.
863 Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03.
to spread this kind of criticism of the binary opposition between Hindu “idol worshipper” and “Christian believer” that is common among Christians.864

As I have shown in this discussion on views of Hinduism and religious images, the dominant tendency, sustained by evangelical biblicism, is to identify Hindu religion with idol worship. This is offset by an alternative liberal view that questions the essentialist othering of Hindus as idol worshippers. However, positive views of worship involving religious images as such are absent. Alternative views express, rather, tolerance or silence on the matter. That Hindus worship material objects in the form of images is a basic assumption that both sides share.

A Misunderstanding of the Hindu Image?

Is this Protestant criticism of Hindu worship and its use of images, then, based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of such images and their meaning to devotees? That would be the claim within a symbolic understanding of these images, where they are seen as ways of making the divine accessible and relatable to worshippers by representing it. Symbolic readings of Hindu religious images have been common in the scholarship.865 The question is, then: Is it the image as such that Hindus worship or the deity represented by the image? Many contemporary scholars of Hinduism would say that it is the deity as the image. Hindu scriptures, writes Diana Eck, “suggest that the form is its essence” and that “the murti is a body-taking, a manifestation, and is not different from the [divine] reality itself.”866 C.J. Fuller describes the relationship between a God and its image as complicated and ambiguous. While “some more theologically sophisticated Hindus” see the image as a location for the deity’s power, not synonymous with the deity, yet “this distinction … must not be overplayed” and “there can be no absolute distinction between an image and its corresponding deity.” His conclusion is that “worship is addressed to a deity whose power is in an image and also to a deity as an image.”867

Compared to a Protestant mentality, this represents a radically different way of thinking about the presence of the divine in material objects.868 While

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864 Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03.
867 Fuller 2004: 60-61.
868 Within Christianity, an antithesis to the Protestant attitude to images can be found in Orthodox iconic theology. The Orthodox use of icons seems to invite comparisons with Hindu darshan, and some scholars have observed similarities as well as differences between the two. See e.g. Cirulao 2013 and Gamberti 2017. The question of Orthodox iconography is not discussed here since it is not a subject that my interviewees relate to, despite the presence of Syrian Orthodox churches in Bangalore.

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certain Hindus would deny the need for images, it could be argued that many other Hindu worshippers do in fact worship the image, because to them the image is the deity. For them, the divine is not only transcendent but also immanent and material; thus material objects can be worshipped since the divine is present there. In an article proposing the need for acknowledgement of difference, especially in historiography, Sanjay Seth writes about the religious icon as a site of difference wherein the Hindu image illustrates a way of thinking that differs dramatically from a “modern” Western and Christian one. “Most observers have found it difficult to concede that Hindus may actually regard their religious icons as gods,” he writes. But “for most Hindus idols or murtis are not, in fact, ‘representations’ of gods that reside elsewhere for most Hindus, [the murti] is a god.” According to Seth, for a Hindu the image does not originate as a symbolic representation of a belief that first existed in the mind, independent of the material; rather belief comes from the physical manifestations of the Gods in images.

Gregory Price Grieve writes that in addition to reducing Hindu worship to “idolatry,” in other words immoral and irrational worship of mundane man-made objects, another common strategy has been symbolism, the reduction of religious images to symbols of a transcendent divine. The strategy is employed not only by Western outsiders but also commonly by neo-Hindus and Hindu nationalists, as a defence against accusations of idolatry. Writing under the influence of Jacques Derrida, Grieve notes that “idolatry” polemic and symbolism are both strategies for scripturalist mediation of Hindu religion. These strategies serve to confirm a scripturalist worldview privileging “the Book” and understanding the divine as transcendent, “super-sensible, non-material, dichotomous and self-creating” – “the Christian creator God.” Both strategies “deny the materiality of god-images” and reduce them to at best supplements, at worst deterrents “to a real understanding of the divine,” expressed more accurately in scripture, according to the scripturalist worldview. But the material element of a Hindu religious image is important, Grieve writes. He bases his argument on fieldwork in Nepal where a “stone god” can better be understood as “a humanly constructed material deity.”

Scholars like Seth and Grieve call attention to an important factor in Western – Christian or secular post-Christian – ways of relating to Hindu religion, particularly those informed by the Protestant tradition. Criticism of Hindu darshan as idolatry, as well as symbolic readings of Hindu God-images, are both

870 Seth 2004: 50.
871 Grieve 2003: 63-64.
872 Ibid: 60-61.
873 Ibid: 60, 62.
ways of refusing to fully acknowledge the otherness of the religious other. Symbolic interpretation, although ostensibly a more sympathetic attitude, is a taming of the otherness of religious images that forces them into a Protestant – or elite philosophic Hindu – scheme by refusing to accept the importance of their material character. This is arguably a misconstruction of everyday Hindu religious practice, of lived Hindu religion.875

However, to the Protestant interviewees in my study who oppose worship of images, even the distinction between worshipping an idol and worshipping God or a God through the symbolic use of an image would not be significant. They would argue that even if Hindus do not worship the image as such but the deity it represents through the image, this worship is based on the false assumption that a transcendental God can be worshipped in that way, in the form of a material object. In relation to the worldview underlying Hindu darshan, these interviewees represent a radically different view of images, ritual objects, and the materiality of the divine in general. “We know that God is spirit,”876 is a key claim that expresses this view succinctly. Interviewees are generally so moulded by a scripturalist Protestant worldview favouring transcendental understandings of the divine that to see the divine as immanent within material objects is deeply other to them. The evangelical lens as well as the general Protestant perspective posit the “true living God,”877 who is spirit, against material objects, and Word against image.

Among my interviewees, the dominant view on religious images reiterates an old Protestant idolatry polemic and is not respectful of the other religions targeted by this accusation. But neither is it based on a total misunderstanding of the function of the image. It is, rather, based on an opposing attitude to the image in particular and the overall role of material objects in religion.

875 A similar argument can be made in relation to the use of cult statues in the original Greco-Roman context of the New Testament texts. Nijay Gupta writes that, while many scholars have tended to see ancient Jewish and Christian idolatry polemics as misrepresentations of actual Greco-Roman thoughts and practices, what the polemics really reveal is, rather, opposing understandings of the nature of statues. According to Gupta, would-be sympathetic scholars employ the strategy of symbolism to understand the meaning of cult statues to the ancient Greeks and Romans. But, Gupta argues, while Greco-Roman understandings of their Gods did not reduce them to their cult statues, neither can the function of the cult statues be reduced to symbolism. Greeks and Romans did hold the views that Jewish idolatry polemics accused them of, Gupta concludes. Gupta 2014.
877 Jer. 10:10, 1 Thess. 1:9. The latter verse contrasts a “living and true God” with “idols”: “…and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God.”
Scripture and Objects

In addition to religious images, certain other objects also prove to be sensitive. Embedded in a universal Protestant scepticism towards the materiality of religion, there is a more context-specific scepticism towards a special category of objects, namely objects associated with Hindu religious practices.

Thus, Thomas found some of the practices in his Catholic school problematic, for example practices involving coconuts. For him, this type of inculturation with its use of these specific objects risks becoming idol worship. Ritual breaking and offering of coconuts is a common feature of Hindu, and popular Catholic, religious practice. A more general problem, in Thomas’s view, is that too extensive a use of objects diverts the focus from God. His reasoning illustrates the view of objects as risky and underlines the dichotomy between material objects and a transcendental God inherent in the Protestant scripturalist worldview discussed above. The dividing line here is drawn not only between Christian and Hindu religion but also between scripturalist religion and sacramental or iconographic religion in its affirmation of sacred value in material objects such as images or coconuts. This latter category includes the Catholic religion.

If offering coconuts is considered inappropriate, images are what occupy the prime place among the concerns of interviewees about religious objects. The charged nature of images is evident in the story of how Mohana’s father removed all his images of Hindu Gods, which his daughters considered a spiritual breakthrough. He kept another image however, the photo of his parents. This case illustrates the distinction between objects perceived to be dangerous such as images of Hindu Gods, and objects considered neutral, in this case the photo of the parents. But also illustrated here is the fluidity of the boundary between these two categories when we recall that Mohana and her sister made their father promise not to perform puja in front of his parents’ photo. This shows how an ostensibly neutral, secular object like a photo of one’s parents can acquire ritual significance and thus become an “idol.”

Another category of objects that recurs in the material as a sensitive issue is prasada (consecrated food). For several interviewees, avoiding prasada is a way of maintaining the boundary between Christianity and Hinduism. The concern over prasada is intertwined with the concern over religious images, since the perceived problem with prasada is that it has been “offered to an idol.”

One reason why contact with “idols” through prasada for example is avoided, is that these “idols” represent the “other gods” prohibited in the First

878 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
879 See Chapter 3.
880 1 Cor 8:4. Paul’s permissive attitude in this passage is only referred to by a few theologically educated interviewees and even these emphasise the part where Paul advises caution, lest eating it in front of another Christian risks disturbing that person’s faith.
Commandment and thus ritual contact with them is understood as breaking with the principle of monotheism. But some Protestants, as well as other members of the Abrahamic religions, have also understood the prohibition of idolatry as a prohibition against visual depictions of their own God.\footnote{See Morgan 2005: 117.} This view is represented among my interviewees, especially those from the Pentecostal churches.

However, this Protestant ideal of refraining from any depictions of the divine is not without its inconsistencies since, in practical terms, any practice of a religion involves the use of objects. Regarding images in particular, the popularity of mass-produced pictures of Jesus in “popular Protestantism” contradicts the iconoclastic Protestant rhetoric.\footnote{Meyer 2010: 113. David Morgan observes that there has been an “explosion of Protestant visual piety during the last two centuries.” Morgan 2005: 145-146.} In south India, the Catholic Sacred Heart of Jesus motif is vastly popular among Protestants who do not necessarily connect it with Catholicism.\footnote{Meyer observes the popularity of this motif in Ghana. Meyer 2010: 114.}

But the clearest sign of an inherent paradox in the Protestant aversion to material embodiments of the divine lies in Protestant attitudes to the Bible. Among my interviewees, the Bible is an object that is considered unproblematic, even in its materiality. It is a generally unquestioned point of reference. Not only faith in God as “spirit” but also the Bible – as abstract Scripture \textit{and} as material object – functions as the positive antithesis to the Hindu or Catholic “idol.” Christian faith in the Bible as in itself an absolute revelation of God has sometimes been criticised as a form of idolatry focused on the Bible.\footnote{E.g. Smith 1987: 58. “Bibliolatry,” “idolatry of the Bible,” is a special risk to Protestants, he writes.}

The Bible is a physical object as well as abstract text. David Morgan discusses this and refers to “the iconicity of the biblical text” within Protestantism.\footnote{Morgan 2005: 10.} Protestants, he writes, have employed different means of experiencing this iconicity: The display of the Bible in a prominent place in the home, the red-letter Bible, and ornate bindings for the Bible are some examples.\footnote{Ibid: 10.} Moreover, if the Bible is, as literalist readings maintain, God’s “definitive self-revelation,” it is, in a sense, an image of God.\footnote{See Morgan 2005: 10-12. Morgan presents John Calvin as a prime example of this paradox. While Calvin’s attitude to images was more negative than any other theologian’s, he understood “the Holy Spirit to have imprinted (‘stamped’) itself in the words of scripture” and claimed “that the biblical word is the only proper image of the Holy Spirit.” (p. 12.)}

There is another inherent paradox in the dominant view of religious images among interviewees. Although worship involving religious images is described as futile and the images as powerless, images are also portrayed as dangerous. In a discussion of the idolatry concept, Wilfred Cantwell Smith writes that it has usually taken into account only the mundane aspect of the
worshipped image and has not acknowledged the transcendental one. To a certain point, this observation corresponds with the thinking expressed by my interviewees. They find it difficult to believe that the transcendental divine can be present in the material form of images. Religion which sees the divine in images – or which openly acknowledges that it does so – is strange and other to them.

This is not the whole picture, however. For a few interviewees who argue from a rationalist perspective, the risk inherent in images and other ritual objects is that they divert attention from the transcendental God. But for others, objects associated with Hindu worship are perilous in themselves. According to some interviewees, there is a power present in or behind the Hindu images which is key to why they are problematic. From this perspective, Hindu images are loaded with religious significance and power though this power is understood negatively. For that reason, the act of emptying the house of Hindu religious images after converting to Christianity is not only a symbolic activity. To some interviewees, Hindu “idol worship” is problematic not only because they understand it as worship of meaningless objects, but because they understand it as worship of objects that are connected to a malevolent supernatural power. The belief in the potential danger of Hindu images reflects spiritual warfare thinking and a Christian version of traditional beliefs in spiritual powers able to cause misfortune. Belief in the potential danger of images as associated with evil spiritual forces is not unique to this context. Meyer observes that in the encounter between missionaries and traditional religion in Ghana, an encounter which still influences Ghanaian Protestant attitudes to images, the missionaries viewed objects associated with traditional religion as either powerless or filled with malevolent power. “In preaching the Gospel,” Meyer writes, “the missionaries shifted easily between a view of ‘fetishes’ and ‘idols’ as ‘false’ in the sense of fake or unreal, and ‘false’ in the sense of ‘wrong,’ and hence real, yet devoted to satanic powers.” The same ambiguity occurs in my material.

Conclusions

Criticism of the ritual use of images is a core concept among interviewees. They relate to Hinduism, and often also to Catholicism, by identifying it with the biblical concept of idol worship. Negative views of these religions centre around religious images and their use in rituals and popular devotion. In the case of Catholicism, the roles accorded to Mary and the saints are taken as

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889 David Morgan observes that no religion truly operates without images or iconic objects. Morgan 2005: 117.
indications of idol worship or worship of that which is not God. Images of saints and devotional practices associated with them are interpreted as visible signs of this, and similarities with Hindu practices reinforce this interpretation.

The idea of idol worship is central to the religious othering of Hinduism and Catholicism. Through a focus on the issue of religious images, differences rather than similarities are highlighted. Hinduism is portrayed as quintessential idol worship, and Catholicism as at least dangerously close to the border between Christian faith and its antithesis, idol worship. Protestant faith, on the other hand, is understood as Bible-centred monotheism. Nevertheless, the danger of drifting into idol worship is never far away. Therefore, interviewees recurrently express their belief in the importance of not incorporating images or ritual practices that would signify idol worship in their Protestant worship. Moreover, interviewees generally consider it important to avoid contact with rituals and objects connected with Hindu image-centred worship, which means avoiding active participation in puja in the forms of receiving the sacred fire or eating prasada. Some interviewees dissociate themselves also from Catholic religiosity interpreted as idol worship. An example of this is Phoebe’s assertion that, although she sometimes prays in a Catholic church, she never worships Mary. Her statement is, at the same time, an acknowledgement of a certain affinity with Catholicism despite its supposed propensity to idol worship, since she identifies the Catholic church as a place suitable for prayer.

In relation to Hinduism, the notion of idol worship serves as grounds for dismissing that religion almost entirely in a way which is not the case with Islam even though neither of these religions can save souls, according to the evangelical lens. Even those interviewees who sometimes sharply criticise the dominant polemic against Hinduism as idol worship do not question the basic assumption that Hindus worship images or “idols.” They do, however, offer an alternative metaphorical use of the terms “idol” and “idol worship,” thereby emphasising that, in their view, social evils are worse problems and that Christians should direct their critical gaze towards these instead.

In relation to Catholicism, the idea of idol worship usually invites serious criticism but the severity varies. To some interviewees, the perceived problem is serious enough to locate Catholicism outside the boundaries of true Christianity whereas to others, it is an error, but they still consider Catholicism a form of Christianity. And, as Phoebe’s example shows, views of the question can be ambiguous. It is clear, in any case, that to most interviewees, Catholicism hovers close to the border between Christianity and its other, idol worship.

However, as the perceptions of Hinduism and Catholicism focus on the issue of images and this leads to an othering of them as religious systems, conversely, the othering of Hinduism and Catholicism is specifically focused on religious images and associated beliefs and practices. In the case of Hindus and Hinduism, othering focuses exclusively on tangible religious practices,
notably the use of images in worship. Unlike the past colonial missionary othering of Hindus and Hinduism, it does not include other aspects of Hindu culture or Indian society – a society of which these Christians are an inherent part. Hinduism and Catholicism may be othered but the Hindu and the Catholic are not perceived as other in their essence.

Moreover, there is an ambiguity underlying interviewees’ relation to Hindu God-images. Their gaze on the Hindu Gods differs from those of early missionaries or other foreign visitors to India, or even from Christians from other parts of the world visiting India in the present day. Compared to foreign visitors, my interviewees have a somewhat different view of Hindu deities in the sense that although they do not believe in them they are still familiar with them. Ganesha, Durga, and the other Hindu Gods are not exotic in the way that they were to the early missionaries, who viewed them with a fascinated horror. To my interviewees, these deities are a well-known part of their surroundings since childhood. Specific descriptions of the images themselves are absent, perhaps because seeing Hindu deities is not for them as shocking an encounter as it was for early European travellers. This familiarity is, however, contradicted by an evangelical negative mirroring of the Hindu worship of “idols,” taught since childhood and Sunday school. Here, social familiarity meets theological othering. For my interviewees, Hindu God-images are simultaneously familiar and profoundly other.

The evangelical lens posits the Word against image, scripture against ritual object. Eck’s observation of a “deep-rooted Western antagonism to imaging the divine at all,” quoted in the beginning of this chapter, no longer refers to a uniquely Western phenomenon. As Protestantism has spread around the world so has its scripturalist worldview and its scepticism of ritual objects, images not least among them. The centrality of the theme of religious images illustrates how important to the worldview of interviewees a distinctively Protestant perspective is. Thus, this chapter offers an example that illustrates the global spread of a specifically Protestant sensibility. An emphasis on disassociation from religious images is not unique to evangelical interviewees since it is also a general Protestant concern. The negative view of religious images is, however, particularly pronounced in the Pentecostal churches.

The biblical prohibition against “idolatry” has a strong hold among these ordinary Protestants and they understand biblical references to “idols” as

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891 See Eck 1998: 17-18 for a rendering of early European shock in the face of Hindu religious images. See also Mitter 1992 (1977) on European reactions to Hindu images, architecture, and aesthetics, especially pp. 1-31 on early European travellers’ interpretations of Hindu God-images as representing demons and monsters (an idea which persisted into the modern period). Such representations, Mitter remarks, had little to do with actual Hindu iconography but all the more to do with preconceived European ideas about India, informed by a convergence between classical traditions about monsters in the East and Christian demonology (pp. 6-10).

speaking to their daily life. When interviewees apply biblical polemic on idolatry to their own religiously diverse context, this constitutes a form of contextual Bible reading revealing highly contextual concerns and emphases. Biblical texts referring to idols – originally about the worship performed by other groups surrounding the Israelites in the Old Testament, and the Jews or early Christians in the New Testament – are understood to apply directly to Hindu religious images and to Catholic statues. Such biblical texts are read as offering guidance in relating to this context where the presence of religious images is overwhelming. That this is a contextual Bible reading does not necessarily mean that it is a constructive way of relating to religious plurality, as interviewees who oppose this dominant viewpoint out.
8. Views of Interreligious Relations

In this chapter, the focus shifts from views of other religions to views of religious others. The discussions in the previous chapters have concerned interviewees’ understandings of and theological reflections on religious beliefs and practices. The subject of this chapter is, instead, Hindus and Muslims as people and the interaction with them. Rather than the way religious others relate to the divine, the topic here is how they relate to other human beings, especially Christians.

Reflections interviewees have on religious others are not limited to their religious beliefs and practices. This chapter will demonstrate that negative views of other religions do not automatically lead to negative views of religious others as people. Regarding Hindus and Hinduism, in particular, attitudes to Hindus as people contrast radically with attitudes to Hinduism as a religion. Even if the clash between a Hindu way of relating to religious images and a Protestant sensibility makes appreciation of Hindu worship difficult, a religious other is not defined solely by her way of worshipping. Reverend Thangam brought this point out clearly when he said of Hinduism: “You may not like idolatry, but the fellow who is involved in that, how can you give him up? He may be your neighbour, and you have to love him. ... you say ‘I love my neighbour … more than myself.’ Having taken up all this … you can’t condemn that fellow, or that lady. You appreciate them.”

My interviewees’ reflections on Hindu religion are mostly negative. But this negativity does not reflect upon their depictions of life in a religiously diverse city with a large majority of Hindus. They frequently dissociate from Hinduism on theological and ritual levels, but they do not dissociate from Hindus. The normality of living close to people from other religious groups, especially Hindus, is recurrently expressed in the material. Although many of my interviewees firmly believe that truth and salvation are unique to Christianity, this usually does not reflect on their daily interactions with Hindu and Muslim friends, neighbours, and colleagues, as they depict them. Usually, they prioritise friendly relationships over their perceived duty to share the gospel.

894 Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03.
895 More on this in Chapter 9.
In Bangalore, and in south India in general, the Christian minority is generally well integrated in society. Although there are areas called “Church Compound” or “Mission Compound,” with predominantly Christian inhabitants, it is common to live in religiously mixed neighbourhoods rather than in Christian enclaves. Also, Christians share mother tongues with Hindus, which is not the case with Muslims whose mother tongue is often Urdu, although there are exceptions to this rule.896

Coexistence with people from other Christian denominations is a non-issue in my material. Although many interviewees regard Catholicism as less than genuine Christianity, they include Catholics as a social group in the Christian fold. Catholics have, for example, been targeted with Hindutva violence, something that many of my interviewees are aware of. Interviewees refer to Catholic schools as Christian schools. These schools often have good reputations, and Protestants also send their children there. Several of my interviewees have attended Catholic schools. There is a difference between a theological level and a social level here. Theologically, interviewees perceive Catholicism as significantly different on account of religious practices such as the use of religious images and the veneration of Mary and the saints. On a social level, on the other hand, they do not consider Catholics to be different from Protestants in any significant way. Neither are Catholics perceived as distinct from Protestants in society at large; both groups are categorised as belonging to the Christian religious community.

Religious Others as Good People

Unlike Catholics and Protestants, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians are categorised as distinct, separate religious communities in contemporary India. The categorisation of people along religious lines, which historians trace back to the colonial British census system, has gained in importance in modern times and led to the modern phenomenon of communalism.897 Religious communalism is often mobilised for political ends, a phenomenon which some interviewees have observed.898 The essential nature of religious identity, and the hard boundaries between different religious identities, is a cornerstone of Hindu nationalist ideology. However, although the growth of this political ideology in recent decades has made religious identity a central issue in the public debate in India, my interviewees generally oppose an essentialist understanding of Hindus, Muslims, and Christians as characterised by radical difference. Although they belong to different religious communities, there is not much

896 In Bangalore, there are Gujarati-, Tamil-, and Malayali-speaking Muslim groups, in addition to Urdu-speakers: Mohammad-Arif 2014: 290.
difference between Christians, Hindus, and Muslims on an individual level, according to the predominant view among interviewees.

In regard to their human qualities and morality, religious others, particularly Hindus, are described in a positive manner by many interviewees. Several interviewees expressly deny the idea that there is any significant difference between Christians and their religious others as people. They state that Hindus, for example, show the same signs of morality as Christians do. Christina made it clear that, to her mind, the crucial difference between Christians on the one hand, and Hindus and Muslims on the other hand, concerns the coming life, not this present one: “I’m not telling [you that] Hindus [or] Muslims are bad. They are also very good. In their customs. They are good only, they are also having helping nature, humanity, everything.” Christians have the upper hand “only [in] this question of eternal life, resurrection, baptism,” she believes.

Tarun from CSI Tamil expressed the opinion that among Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, the latter are the best at maintaining what he called “discipline” continuously. With “discipline,” he meant good behaviour according to common Indian and pious Christian moral standards, refraining from such things as swearing, fighting, smoking, and drinking. But he emphasised that this is according to his personal understanding, and also that there are “very good people” among Hindus too.

Although interviewees sometimes speak about this-worldly aspects of salvation, they generally understand salvation primarily in terms of eternal life and do not usually draw the conclusion that a saved person is a better person than one who is not saved. In Christina’s remarks quoted above, she explicitly distinguishes between a good moral character and salvation to eternal life. Michael is an exception to this general tendency. He stresses the born-again distinction heavily and sees it as reflecting also upon earthly life.

According to Michael’s understanding, a person who is not born-again can never be truly “righteous,” although he or she may outwardly appear to be so by doing good deeds. The only way to righteousness, Michael believes, is through Christ and with the help of the Holy Spirit. Of Muslims, he said: “The way they practise is – the thing is, they have more love and they give more, and they pray more, right? Like, they support the poor more. But it’s like /---/ people like the Pharisees that pray more, or give more, but then they don’t have a heart, a true heart for God. It’s just doing their religious acts.” Their laws are correct, but their beliefs are not, and their love is directed

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900 Interview with Christina 2011-01-31.
901 Interview with Tarun 2011-02-04.
902 Participant observation of Mega AG Care Cell meeting 2011-02-09 led by Michael.
mostly at other Muslims and not universal like the love of Christ, he thought.\textsuperscript{903}

Michael is speaking in theological terms here. Unlike other interviewees referred to above, he does not base his view of the difference between Christians and religious others on his observations of the latter in everyday life, rather he refers to the theological principle of justification by faith following salvation through Christ. Michael is unusual in being so heavily influenced by the evangelical lens that he views even the quotidian difference between Christians and religious others in dichotomous theological terms. Mohana, who shares Michael’s worldview in many ways, agreed with him that it is not sufficient to show morality outwardly, a person must also inwardly “have the heart of Christ,” as she phrased it. Mohana expressed an even stricter view of righteousness than Michael; according to her, not even all born-again Christians “have the heart of Christ.” Consequently, most people of all religions are hypocrites, acting as if they “live side by side happily” but really carrying “animosity” in their hearts, she believed.\textsuperscript{904} Her pessimistic view of Christians as well as others contrasts with the more positive view of humanity, across religious boundaries, that predominates in the material.

Mohana and Michael are exceptions since the predominant tendency among interviewees is to portray religious others and the coexistence with them in a positive light. Some interviewees use theological terms to emphasise similarity between Christians and religious others. Malini illustrated the point with a practical example: If a person has suffered an accident and another person, of whatever religion, donates blood to save the first person, “whoever does that … shows the culture of God only. Whichever god.”\textsuperscript{905}

A theological emphasis among some CSI Tamil lay interviewees is that all human beings are the children of God or the creation of God.\textsuperscript{906} According to Thomas, “God does not differentiate ‘he is a Hindu or a Muslim or a Christian.’ In God’s sight everybody is human.” Thivya expressed the same conviction. Thomas believes that God is “pleased” with any person who does good to others, irrespective of religious affiliation, and displeased with many Christians who do not live according to Christian ethics.\textsuperscript{907}

Similarly, Chakradev finds that a self-righteous contrast between Christian and Hindu would be the wrong consequence of salvation. Although he believes that salvation will lead to a positive transformation in values – such as renunciation of casteism and of devaluation of daughters – he also stressed similarity between Christians and others. According to him, “ultimately we are all brothers and sisters since God is the Creator,” and the “only difference

\textsuperscript{903} Interview with Michael 2011-03-10.
\textsuperscript{904} Interview with Mohana 2010-12-14.
\textsuperscript{905} Interview with Malini 2011-03-21.
\textsuperscript{906} Interviews with Triveni 2011-03-24, Thivya 2012-01-24, Thomas 2012-02-02.
\textsuperscript{907} Interviews with Thivya 2012-01-24, Thomas 2012-02-02.
[between] those who know Jesus and others” is the awareness of the true identity of their Creator God. “They don’t know; that is the only difference we can see [between] me and a Hindu brother.” Even radical Hindutva adherents are at heart good people, according to Chakradev, who was familiar with the RSS before his conversion to Christianity: “I know that [RSS] people are not very bad people. They are good people. They’re honest and disciplined. The only thing is they have some misunderstanding [about] Christians.”

Experiences my interviewees have of living close to Hindus, in particular, have led them to form positive or neutral views of them as a group. They generally do not criticise the behaviour or lifestyle of religious others as they do their religious worship and beliefs. The dominant tendency among them is to locate religious difference mainly on the level of an individual’s eternal fate.

Representations of Hindus among interviewees lead me to reflect upon the general question of who “the Hindu” represents to the Indian Christian, how she is represented in Indian Christian theological reflections. In Dalit theology – presently the most influential form of Christian theology in India – the caste Hindu has often been represented as the oppressing other to the Dalit – or as the dominant “Self” to the subjugated Dalit “Other.” The opposition between “Hindu” and “Dalit” which has characterised Dalit theology is grounded in a suspicion of “ideological co-option” under the hegemonic Brahminic ideology that has oppressed Dalits. This “binary polarity” between a homogenous Dalit self and a caste Hindu other is, however, being questioned within Dalit theology, as it ignores the existing “heterogeneity of Dalit identity” and hybridity between Dalit and Hindu traditions, and it “hinders interrelatedness,” as Peniel Rajkumar expresses it. Rajkumar calls for an engagement with the non-Dalit “Other” which has largely been missing in Dalit theology.

In this respect, the ways my interviewees represent Hindus show more affinity with the work of the pluralist theologian Stanley Samartha, representative of an earlier phase in Indian Christian theology focused on theology of religions and interreligious dialogue. To Samartha, Hindus belong to the category “neighbours of other faiths.” Samartha’s successor at the WCC, Sri Lankan pluralist theologian Wesley Ariarajah, relates his childhood experiences of close relations to his Hindu neighbours. He describes them as “ethically conscious” and as having extended a “warm and loving friendship” to their Christian neighbours. Ariarajah entitled the book in which he tells this, Not Without My Neighbour, so as to refer to his feeling that “I wouldn’t want

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908 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-10.
909 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
913 See e.g. Samartha 2000.
to be in a heaven where our neighbours were not.” Since childhood, he has been convinced “that it would be unfair on the part of God to receive us, the Christian family, into heaven and send our next-door Hindu neighbours to hell.”

My interviewees’ views of Hindus are closer to those expressed by Samartha and Ariarajah, Hindus as good friends and neighbours, than the representation of the caste Hindu as “Other” in much of Dalit theology. However, they do not draw the same theological conclusions from their experiences of friendship with Hindus as Ariarajah does. It should be noted here that Dalit theology has grown out of a specific set of Dalit experiences which not all of my interviewees share. Not all of them are from a Dalit background and none of them have experienced Dalit life in a village, where blatant caste-based discrimination is still more common.

**Interreligious Friendship**

The impressions interviewees have of religious others as people are based on extensive contact with them. It is generally the case that religious plurality is a characteristic of interviewees’ schools, colleges, and workplaces. Most of them told me about personal friendships with people from other religions. They have Hindu and Muslim friends and, in a few cases, also Sikh, Jain, and Buddhist friends. They have known Hindus and Muslims from school, college, work, and as neighbours. Some of them have Hindu relatives or close family members, as a result of their own conversion from a Hindu background, or of an interreligious marriage in the family.

Although interviewees sometimes express concern for the salvation of their friends, they do not portray this as reflecting on their everyday relations with them. Most of them say that they usually avoid discussions about religion with friends who are not Christian. In that way, their interreligious friendships remain harmonious.

Descriptions of childhood friendships illustrate the normality of close and friendly relations between Christians and people from other religious groups, particularly Hindus. Reverend Thangam grew up surrounded by Hindu friends, since his childhood was spent in a neighbourhood where his was almost the only Christian family. He described this as totally unremarkable. His

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915 Chinni told me that she had Sikh, Jain, and Buddhist friends, and Madhu had Sikh friends. Interviews with Madhu 2008-03-03, Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.
916 The normality of close relations and frequent interaction with Hindus, also to theologically exclusivist Christians, is illustrated also in another interview study that Julia Kuhlin made with north Indian Pentecostal theology students. All of her interviewees “had Hindu family members or close Hindu friends with whom they frequently interacted.” Kuhlin 2015: 41.
parents never said anything about the religious identity of his friends. Although he was aware of certain restrictions about participating in Hindu rituals, this had not been a problem:

We avoided certain things, like … they have some photos [religious images] and all that. You just look at it and keep quiet, that’s all. You know that it’s their place of worship. And they also know that you won’t – you know, sometimes for festivals they put that sindoor [powder used by Hindus] and all that. They know that we don’t take it. And they won’t force you either.917

Christina shared similar experiences of easy childhood friendship with Hindus. Her best friend had been a Hindu girl. At that time, Christina had not questioned Hindu beliefs, she said. It seemed natural to her that just “as we are worshipping Jesus,” her friend’s family worshipped Hindu Gods. She had simply observed that there were many different religious groups in India. Her parents had not commented on her friend’s religion either. She and her friends had invited each other for religious festivals. Her Hindu friends “loved” Christian festivals “very much,” she said, because Christians gave them so many eatables.918 As this example indicates, festivals are an arena for interreligious interaction.

Interreligious Interaction at Religious Festivals
The time of a religious festival is one occasion when, for interviewees, friendship with religious others can lead to interreligious interaction with distinctly religious overtones. Religious festivals, celebrated in public and at home, prove to be an important field for interaction with people of other religious groups where religion does play a central role rather than being side-stepped for diplomatic reasons. Several interviewees testified to the way festivals are occasions for learning about other religions through first-hand observation, since they are invited there and see how their friends perform their prayers or pujas. This theme is restricted to CSI interviewees, probably due to a greater Pentecostal emphasis on dissociation from the practice of other religions. This emphasis is not limited to Pentecostal Christians but can be found among evangelical Christians in general, as illustrated by the near absence of the voices of evangelical interviewees in relation to this theme.

Reverend Chand brought up festivals as key instances when his congregants have practical experiences of other religions when they attend festivals celebrated by other religious groups and also invite friends from other religions to Christian festivals. This is also the case for him personally, with his

917 Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03.
918 Interview with Christina 2011-02-01.
Hindu friends and acquaintances. Christin is a good example of this phenomenon. Although she stated that she did not find it important to have knowledge about Hindu religion, she also said that a certain degree of knowledge is inevitable, since Hindus will, as she said, make Christians know about it at the time of festivals. She described Hindu festivals as occasions when Hindus would take a bath, wear new clothes and perform puja on an empty stomach. They would prepare food and enjoy it together with the friends they had invited. A Hindu festival is similar to a Christian festival, she agreed when I asked her; it is the “same thing” except for the nature of the worship. Another instance of the importance of festivals for interacting with other religious groups is Reverend Thangam’s way of maintaining contact with old Muslim friends by calling them during Bakrid (Eid al-Adha, a major Islamic holiday) and wishing them “Eid Mubarak.” His gesture has been reciprocated at Christmas when his Muslim friend calls to wish him a happy Christmas.

Festivals can also motivate conversations on religion; Chinni said that the only time she asks her friends from other religions about their faith is when she asks about a specific festival and why they celebrate it. Similarly, Thomas described the topic of festivals as a way of relating to other religions. He talks to Hindu and Muslim friends about religious festivals and draws parallels between their festivals and the Christian ones, for example between the Hindu celebration of Pongal (Tamil harvest festival) and the Christian harvest festival celebrated in church. According to Reverend Thangam, festivals are occasions that unite people despite religious differences.

As the foregoing shows, religious festivals emerge as important occasions for interaction with other religions. However, many Christians set limits to this interaction, as seen in the discussion in the previous chapter on receiving prasada and other issues related to Hindu worship. Festivals are thus a scene of interreligious interaction as well as of the maintenance of religious boundaries. As my study suggests, the role of religious festivals in interreligious relations and interactions is a subject that deserves academic attention.

Religious festivals are one of the physical, embodied dimensions of religion that attract a growing interest due to the questioning of traditional text-based study of religion. Scholars of religion increasingly focus on popular and lived religion and its practice through, for example, festivals. An example relevant to the Indian context is Joyce Flueckiger’s book, Everyday Hinduism,
in which she observes the importance, prevalence, and diversity of Hindu festivals, devoting a chapter to the subject.\[^{927}\]

During religious festivals, the contextuality of Indian Christianity becomes evident. For example, both Catholic and St. Thomas Christian festival processions show similarities with Hindu processions.\[^{928}\] Christians in India celebrate culturally and religiously hybrid festivals, where borrowing from local Hindu traditions is manifest. An example familiar to me is in the CSI Diocese of Dornakal. There, in addition to traditional, universal Christian festivals such as Christmas, and secular holidays invested with a Christian liturgy, like Independence Day, church members celebrate local festivals such as “home festival,” a parallel to the Hindu *Diwali* festival. Another example is the Christian *jathara* festival, with many parallels to the local Hindu *jathara* festival, celebrated by CSI Christians in the Dioceses of Medak and Karimnagar, purposely aiming at local contextualisation.\[^{929}\] Christian versions of traditional festivals also signify theologically motivated efforts at inculcation in academic settings. An example of this is the celebration of Christian Pongal and other Christian versions of traditional Hindu and tribal festivals at the UTC.

Studies from rural India have found Christian participation in Hindu festivals, on different levels, from financial contribution\[^{930}\] to full-scale ritual participation.\[^{931}\] In rural contexts, boundaries drawn along lines of caste can influence patterns of interaction more substantially than those drawn along the lines of religion. This is so also in relation to festivals, as illustrated by Zoe Sherinian’s study of a rural Tamil context where Hindu and Christian Dalits celebrate each other’s festivals but are effectively excluded from a Hindu festival in the non-Dalit part of the village.\[^{932}\]

As Sherinian’s example shows, festivals can act as illustrations of interreligious friendship but can also reveal inter-caste segregation. In another example, interreligious and inter-caste dimensions intersect and show how festivals can become sites of interreligious competition. The rural (Dalit) Paraiyar Christians in Anderson Jeremiah’s ethnographic study place great emphasis on celebrating Christian festivals in a grand manner to “outshine” the local Hindu festivals organised by the dominant Reddys. Through this competitive strategy, Jeremiah writes, the Paraiyar Christians “claim a position that was denied to them in Hindu religious practices.” In addition, Christian harvest festivals “have caused serious tensions between the Paraiyar Christians and local high-caste landlords.”\[^{933}\] In this conflict, the caste aspect appears to be more important than the religious aspect. But religious festivals can also

\[^{927}\] Flueckiger 2015. (See esp. p. 2 and pp. 123-144.)
\[^{933}\] Jeremiah 2013: 139-140.
demonstrate interreligious tension of a communalist variety, where religious identities are highlighted. Flueckiger remarks that “Hindu and Muslim religious processions [at the time of festivals] have historically been, and continue to be, one way for different communities to claim public space and perform communal identities; and these processions have periodically created tensions (even violence) between communities.”

However, as my interviewees’ statements about festivals demonstrate, they are not always conflict-ridden. Festivals might also provide a fruitful resource for interreligious dialogue. Pramod Aghamkar observes this potential in an essay in which he proposes a Christian version of Diwali as a method for communicating with Hindus. Aghamkar’s essay offers an illustration of the negotiations involved in such interreligious borrowing of a festival. He describes a Christian celebration of Diwali in the US which met with resistance from both Hindus and Christians. Some of the participants – Christians of Indian descent – were concerned about the “non-Christian” origins of the festival. In a parallel to the dissociation from “idol worship” by my interviewees, a special concern was over “decorative iconography,” and Aghamkar specifically clarifies that the Indian decorative items used did not include images. The motivation behind this essay is evangelistic; in Aghamkar’s vision, “Diwali can serve as a bridge between Hindu and Christian communities for communication of the Gospel message.”

Also scholars with a more affirmative view of religious plurality observe the potential of festivals for interreligious dialogue. For example, Selva Raj highlights festivals honouring Catholic saints involving participants from different religions as existing examples of “grassroots dialogue.”

To sum up, religious festivals are sites of interreligious interaction and occasions for learning about the religion of others. They are also sites of interreligious interaction on a more implicit level through borrowing and integration of components from other local religious traditions. Because of their dynamic nature and their location as interreligious meeting grounds, festivals are potential resources for interreligious dialogue, however, this is a complex phenomenon. Although festivals can be occasions for acting out interreligious friendship, as in examples cited by my interviewees, they can also be sites of interreligious (and caste-related) tension. Festivals are, moreover, occasions when religious boundaries are tested, as when Christians in Bangalore must decide upon their response to the offer of prasada or sindoor powder from their Hindu friends during a festival, or when Indian-American Christians must decide upon their response to a Christian Diwali festival. Festivals are thus a meeting ground between religions that is sometimes harmonious, occasionally conflictual, and frequently negotiated.

934 Flueckiger 2015: 137.
935 Aghamkar 2011. (Quotations from p. 149 and p. 156.)
936 Raj 2004. (Quotation from p. 42.)
Less Contact with Muslims

Most of the statements quoted or referred to regarding religious others as good people and interreligious friendship are about Hindus. This corresponds with a general tendency in which my interviewees more frequently told me about personal relationships with Hindus than with Muslims. Although several people mentioned Muslim friends from school, college, and work, friendship with Muslims is, in the material as a whole, a much less noticeable theme than friendship with Hindus. This can partly be explained by the demographic situation. Muslims constitute 13.9 per cent of the population in Bangalore, and Hindus 78.9 per cent. Another likely reason is the marginalised position of the Muslim minority in Indian society. The segregation between Muslims and other religious groups, and the “ghettoization” of Muslims in Indian cities, is increasingly raising both scholarly and public concern. Reverend Matthew referred to the phenomenon when he said that Muslims tend to keep to themselves and live in “clusters” in Muslim areas in the cities, partly because they feel threatened. The phenomenon of Muslim residential clustering for the sake of security, particularly as a consequence of Hindu-Muslim riots, has been observed in other cities in India.

However, in Bangalore, there is a “relative sense of ease” among Muslim inhabitants according to Amina Mohammad-Arif’s ethnographic research. This is so despite the fact that there are Muslim residential enclaves there too. Mohammad-Arif studies the Bangalore neighbourhood of Shivaji Nagar which is a prominent example of a Muslim enclave. People from other religious groups frequently visit Shivaji Nagar for shopping and there is considerable daily interreligious interaction there.

Although there appears to be more socialising between Muslims and others in Bangalore than in many other Indian cities, they are nonetheless relatively segregated and socioeconomically marginalised, and this is a likely explanation for the greater sense of social distance my interviewees have from Muslims than Hindus. While several interviewees have Hindu relatives or

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939 See Robinson 2013: 209-220.
940 Susewind 2017: 1287. Susewind himself complicates the prevalent view of “ghettoization” as an automatic consequence of residential segregation. In Bangalore, for example, Muslims live relatively segregated from others geographically, but experience less ghettoisation than Muslims in many other Indian cities, according to ethnographic studies: Susewind 2017.
941 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2008-02-29.
942 Susewind 2017: 1287.
943 Mohammad-Arif 2014: 295, 302. See also Susewind 2017: 1296, 1300.
944 Mohammad-Arif 2014: 304.
945 Ibid: 308.
family members, not one of them told me about such kinship ties with Muslims. Some interviewees are either born as Hindus themselves or have parents or grandparents who were, whereas there are no cases of religious change from a Muslim background in their families. The other main reason for religiously mixed families, interreligious marriage, rarely occurs between Muslims and either Christians or Hindus, according to my interviewees.

Several interviewees testify to a limited degree of contact with Muslims. Christina, although she said that she had had Muslim friends in school and college,946 also said that Christians “are not moving very closely with the Muslim people.”947 Other interviewees confirm this observation and share Christina’s experience of less close contact with Muslims than with Hindus. Pansy, for example, has “a lot of friends who are from Hindu background,” but only one Muslim acquaintance.948 Likewise Reverend Thangam, despite currently living in a predominantly Muslim area, said that “somehow I don’t have many Muslim friends, because I didn’t come across many Muslim friends,” although he did have a few.949

Malini offered an explanation for the low degree of contact with Muslims and particularly with their religion. Although Christians and Muslims can “get along” at work and privately, there are limits to Christian familiarity with Muslim religious practice. Christians can freely visit Hindu temples, she said, and this happens sometimes when they are invited by friends or relatives, but access to Muslim places of worship is restricted since, “when it comes to Islamic [mosques] you cannot go like that inside.” She did not know the reason but only that Muslims refer to “certain rules” that they must follow. Since Christians “cannot enter … freely there” this creates a distance: “So we don’t know what it is … so we are far away from that.”950

Malini herself does not mention the gender aspect of this limited access to mosques although she does speak as a woman who feels that she cannot “enter … freely” into a mosque. If she were to have that interest, gender restrictions and perhaps a feeling of social distance make it difficult for a Christian woman like Malini to learn about Muslim religious practice through observing it in its place of worship. She cannot easily enter there as she can into a Hindu temple or a Christian church. (There are restrictions in some Hindu temples, where only Hindus may enter the inner sanctum. Additionally, in rural contexts, where Dalits live segregated from people from other caste backgrounds, unofficial restrictions can prevent Dalits of any religion from entering temples in the non-Dalit part of the village.951 But these are obviously not restrictions

946 Interview with Christina 2011-02-01.
947 Interview with Christina 2011-01-25.
948 Interview with Pansy 2008-02-16.
950 Interview with Malini 2011-03-21.
951 See Sherinian 2017: 67 for an example.
that Malini has encountered in Hindu temples which she has occasionally visited at the invitation of her Hindu sister.)

Interviewees generally hold more positive views of Hindus as people than of Hinduism as a religion, but with Islam and Muslim, the case is the reverse. In addition to the sense of less social affinity with Muslims than with Hindus, interviewees occasionally express an impression of Muslims as potentially more prone to violence than other religious groups.952

Although, as I stated in Chapter 5, the existence of negative views of (or prejudices about) Islam and Muslims is not a central theme in my material, it is still an existing theme. The greater sense of social distance from Muslims than from other religious groups is a probable explanation for such prejudice and perhaps partially caused by it. Phoebe expressed stronger negative views of Muslims than any other interviewee. She explained her lower degree of contact with Muslims with reference to negative ideas about them: “I don’t gather with Muslims,” she said, “I don’t get along well with Muslims. I will just say hi … I don’t know, I’m like that. But if I see Christians and Hindus, I’ll be very friendly; I’ll go talk to them. Muslims, I don’t know why … I feel they are kind of bad people.” Phoebe’s negative impression of Muslims draws primarily on an international context conveyed in images through the media, rather than her own experience. On a personal level, she made individual exceptions to her negative view of Muslims as a global collective. You cannot “judge” all Muslims collectively and say that “all the Muslims are the same,” she added. “There’s one guy in my team – very good guy. Very good guy, Muslim.”953

Phoebe is quite alone among interviewees in expressing negative stereotypes of Muslims so openly. Reverend Thangam has encountered prejudices about Muslims that connect them to terrorism and this he opposes.954 Reverend Matthew spoke about criminality among Muslims, which he explained with reference to their socioeconomic marginalisation.955

On a personal level, interviewees testify to a greater social distance from Muslims than from Hindus or other Christians. However, they portray Christian-Muslim relations on more large-scale levels in a more positive light. On a local community level, Reverend Chand told me about CSI City’s school which is located in a poor area with a large Muslim population. He said there is a “tremendous relationship” between the church and the Muslim community. Nationally, he added, “Islam doesn’t have problems with Christianity”

953 Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19.
955 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2008-02-29. Some signs of their socioeconomic marginalisation are that Muslims have the highest numbers of households beneath the poverty line, the lowest average income, and the lowest literacy rates among religious groups in Bangalore. They are also underrepresented in both government jobs and political representation: Mohammad-Arif 2014: 291-292, 294
in India. This is a view that several other interviewees also expressed, including Phoebe, who stated that Christians and Muslims “get along in India.”

**Interreligious Marriage**

A practical sign of the closer social relations Christians have with Hindus than with Muslims is that interviewees usually discuss interreligious marriage as between a Christian and a Hindu. There are a few cases of Hindu-Christian marriages in interviewees’ families, love marriages as well as an arranged marriage. Cases of interreligious marriage with Muslims, on the other hand, are only referred to by a few interviewees. Rowena Robinson notes that the “kinship networks and marital circles” among Muslims are often “close” and “tight-knit.” According to Reverend Thangam, interreligious marriage between Muslims and others is extremely rare, and the reason is that Christians as well as Hindus find themselves culturally incompatible with Muslims. “Cultures won’t match” between Hindus and Muslims, he said, and “somehow the frequency doesn’t match” with Christians either.

In cases of Hindu-Christian marriages, it is said to be more common that the Hindu spouse converts than that the Christian one does. There are also cases where both retain their original religious affiliation, interviewees say. Unsurprisingly, the interviewees who refer to this phenomenon see it as preferable that the Hindu spouse converts to Christianity. In the rare cases of interreligious marriages between Muslims and others, on the other hand, the implication of Islamic exclusivism is said to be that in such cases, the non-Muslim partner has to convert to Islam or that only Muslim men can marry from another religious group since the bride is expected to join her husband’s religion.

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956 Interview with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17.
957 Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19.
959 Triveni’s Catholic mother and Hindu father had a love marriage, and both retained their original religious identity. Malini’s Catholic sister had a love marriage with a Hindu man and converted to Hinduism. A marriage had been arranged between Phoebe’s mother, belonging to the CSI, and her father, a Hindu. Both had later converted to Pentecostalism.
962 Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03.
964 Interview with Christina 2011-01-25.
965 Interview with Priya 2011-02-09.
Several interviewees speak of interreligious marriages as potentially problematic. Some reasons that they give are the upbringing of children and the question of burial, arguments about where to worship, and the question of salvation to eternal life. Pentecostal interviewees in particular refer to theological arguments against interreligious marriage. Their reasoning is that since marriage is a union in spirit as well as in body, both sides should be committed to Christ and to following the Bible. The “Word of God says you have to be married to a believer,” Mohana stated. In her own case, her father had initially persisted in suggesting Hindu matches for marriage even after accepting her conversion to Christianity. But God had advised her against it, Mohana said, and “then after a few years I saw that scripture: ‘Do not be unequally yoked to a non-believer.’”

A difference between CSI and Pentecostal interviewees is noticeable here. Although neither of the groups finds interreligious marriage recommends itself, Pentecostal interviewees more heavily emphasise the biblical and theological arguments against it. CSI interviewees tend more often than Pentecostal interviewees to speak of interreligious marriage as something that occurs in their social circles, although they also consider marriage between two Christians to be preferable. This indicates a difference in priorities in which Pentecostal interviewees find it more important that the intended spouse is a “believer,” a born-again Christian. In the CSI, there are apparently more young people who are willing to disregard this factor if they fall in love with a Hindu person. In addition, cases of arranged marriages between Christians and Hindus indicate that in such cases, other considerations (such as caste background) are given equal or more importance than religious affiliation.

Michael compared Pentecostals with mainline Christians in this regard and said that interreligious marriage is more common among the latter. These Christians believe that Christ will one day lead their spouse to Christianity, he said, though he thought “that is also a very vulnerable scheme. Because you may fall [to] the other side.” The difference between Pentecostal and CSI lay attitudes to interreligious marriage correlates with a difference in pastoral attitudes to it in which the Pentecostal pastors take a stricter view. Both CSI pastors expressed acceptance of the idea of a church member leaving the church to join a Hindu spouse’s religion, although they said that such cases are more unusual than the opposite.

968 Interview with Madhu 2008-03-03.
969 Interview with Christina 2011-01-25.
971 Interview with Mohana 2010-12-14. She refers to 2 Cor. 6:14.
972 Interview with Michael 2011-03-10.
said that Mega AG’s pastors tell church members that marriage should be “between believers” and that only then the marriage is “mandated by God” and leads to God blessing the couple. If a person marries a non-believer, “you’ll go down your way, you have to fend for yourself and, you know, that’s all the odds against you.”974 In TPM, pastor Pradeep said, love marriage of any sort is prohibited and is punished when it happens.975

The effects of interreligious marriage can, in other places in India, vastly differ from the picture portrayed by my interviewees. This is clearly illustrated in John Carman’s and Chilkuri Vasantha Rao’s study of CSI Christians in a rural part of the Diocese of Medak in Telangana. In the pastorate they study, frequent intermarriages between Christians and Hindus contribute to decreased numbers of active church members. Contrary to assumptions made by my interviewees about what usually happens in Bangalore, in this rural context, a Christian bride who marries a Hindu usually fully joins in her husband’s family’s religious practices, whereas a Hindu bride does not as a rule completely abjure her Hindu religious practices. In those cases, because of the insufficient pastoral presence in this pastorate, these newcomers into Christian families receive little or no teaching in Christian faith. The result is that children of both types of interreligious marriage are often brought up to follow Hindu traditions.976

Intermarriage with Hindus is one of the ways in which these rural Christians demonstrate their sense of social affinity with Hindus – their relatives and neighbours – that surpasses the sense of social affinity that my urban interviewees express. The effects of intermarriage on the active membership in these small and rather neglected congregations contrast with what my interviewees have to say about the Hindu spouse, regardless of gender, as being more likely to change religious affiliation after interreligious marriage. This idea is linked with assumptions about Hindu versus Christian religiosity.

The subject of interreligious marriage confirms larger themes discussed elsewhere in this dissertation. As a religion, Hinduism is othered to a higher degree than Islam is. However, the case is reversed with Hindus and Muslims as people, and this is illustrated by the tendency of Christians to marry (and arrange marriages with) Hindus more readily than with Muslims. Also relevant here are views of Hindu religious openness versus Christian and Islamic religious exclusivism.977 It appears natural to interviewees that if a Christian marries a Hindu, the Hindu spouse is more likely to change religious affiliation, since interviewees regard Hindus as more religiously fluid or relativistic than Christians. By the same logic, a Muslim spouse would be unwilling to convert to Christianity due to Islamic theological exclusivism.

974 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2008-02-29.
975 Interview with pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20.
977 See discussions about Hindu openness in Chapter 4 and Islamic exclusivism in Chapter 5.
Everyday Coexistence

Intermarriage is a far-reaching form of interreligious interaction. Interviewees depict more casual daily interaction with people from other religious groups as a normal and unstressful part of their lives. The predominant image that they convey is one of easy relationships and daily interaction, undisturbed by communalism.

Reverend Chand described the normality of good relations between different religious groups in everyday life: “We live our life with the faith communities, different kinds of … and we don’t distinguish. Say I go to a shopkeeper; I’d never ask him what religion he is. It’s very mutual.” Malini agreed with his point that people in Bangalore do not let religious identity be divisive in everyday situations. Normally, people do not consider religious belonging in daily interaction. For example, when “I go in the bus, I don’t see the religion and go and sit next to a person.”

The church leaders in CSI Tamil also emphasised the normality of peaceful everyday coexistence. Thomas, the church secretary, said that normally the relations between Christians and other religious groups in India are good, “except at the time of some issues which become politicised. Then only we’ll have some communal problems.” As for their church members, he said they do not face any such problems: “Nothing, no linguistic problems, no religion problems.” With their neighbours of other religions, “they are all on good terms, and we don’t have any communal clashes or language clashes.”

Thomas described a sense of interreligious solidarity, manifested for example in financial contributions to the church from Hindu “well-wishers” for special causes.

CSI Tamil’s members live in close proximity to their Hindu neighbours and this influences their attitudes to religious diversity in practice, according to Reverend Thangam. Church members “are living very much in a Hindu set-up,” he said. “And some of them have a Hindu temple very close to [their homes]. They listen to those bhajans [Hindu devotional songs] and songs whole day, whole day. So they happen to just learn to live with them, that’s all.”

Reverend Thangam portrayed CSI Tamil’s members as more skilled at practical coexistence than the upper middle-class Christians in his previous congregation, where some members more clearly expressed a wish to dissociate from Hinduism. Through practical experience of living with other religious groups, CSI Tamil’s members learn “just living together, coexisting,” he said. In their religiously mixed and spatially crowded neighbourhoods, Christians and others get used to each other’s religious sounds, whether from a Hindu

978 Interview with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17.
979 Interview with Malini 2011-03-21.
980 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
festival with devotional songs playing loudly in the loudspeakers from early morning, or from Christian funeral drums. In such a way, CSI Tamil’s members and people from other religious groups learn to live close together and tolerate each other’s religious practice, even when it is loud and disturbing, according to their pastor. They have “no issues, they’re living happily.” While disputes between neighbours occur, they are not over religious issues or along religious lines. For example, quarrels over the water tap are common, but not related to religious identity, Reverend Thangam said.

That several interviewees speak about everyday interaction with people of other religions, particularly Hindus, as completely ordinary, is hardly surprising, given the religious demography of Bangalore. As Pansy pointed out, daily contact with people from other religious groups is virtually inevitable: “I meet them almost every other time, like when we get out of home, the moment you’re out, you’re travelling in the bus, in your college, when you go to the shop, every other minute … you meet them.” Thomas highlighted the practical inevitability of contact not only with people of other religions themselves but also with their religious rituals. When we discussed the matter of eating prasada, he explained why he attends pujas at the workplace. Almost all employers are Hindus, he said, and Hindu employers organise pujas which they expect their employees to attend.

A few interviewees touched upon a political aspect of the subject of peaceful coexistence when they stated that it requires acceptance of the right of religious others to practise their religion. Malini found it unnecessary to create “issues” over religious diversity, since “we are living in a…democratic country” in which people can live with religious difference: “Their religions they believe, and they are ok with it. We believe in our religion, we are ok with it.” Reverend Thangam advocated the same “live and let live” approach: “You’re fine with Allah, you’re fine with Krishna, please go on and worship. But let me also share some examples, what I have experienced. You listen to that also. I also will listen to what you have to say. Let’s make the choice, and let’s allow each other to make our own choices. Live and let live.” The principle of religious freedom, included in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, has been a central argument on the Christian side in Indian Hindu-Christian debates over conversion. “Freedom of religion” is a contested concept in India since legislation restricting conversion, called

982 Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03. The funeral drums probably refer to the Parai drums, made from cow or buffalo hide, played by the Dalit Paraiyars. Traditionally, it has been their caste-determined duty to play the drum for various occasions, funerals among them. See Sherinian 2017: 65.
983 Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03.
984 Interview with Pansy 2008-02-16.
985 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
986 Interview with Malini 2011-03-21.
987 Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03.
“freedom of religion acts,” defines it as freedom from conversion rather than freedom to convert. The interviewees quoted here relate to religious freedom not only as protection of the rights of Christians as a religious minority, but also as a principle that obliges them in their turn to respect other people’s freedom to their religion.

Interviewees describe a range of occasions for interaction with people of other religions, from purchasing items in shops belonging to Hindus or Muslims, to sitting next to them on a bus, to interreligious cooperation and close friendship. Regarding closer interaction with people from other religions, some interviewees describe a generational change.

Reverend Thangam told me that there is a change of attitude among Christians in regard to socialising with people from other religions:

Now it’s changing, you know, Christians don’t keep themselves aloof from these people. They go around with them. Sometimes they even eat with them. [Others] invite [Christians] for lunch; we too will invite them for lunch. And the mingling is there. Especially among the youths I’d say I don’t think this difference is there. They’re quite ok.

His comment about Christians and others “sometimes … even” eating together could refer to a liberalisation of traditional restrictions from eating together across caste boundaries. It could also describe a relaxation of Christian uneasiness about eating food prepared in a Hindu house, food that might have been dedicated to Hindu Gods if the invitation is for a special occasion. Thomas spoke about the latter issue. Like his pastor, he has seen an increase in closer Hindu-Christian relations: “Now presently the changes which I have seen,” he said, is that others invite Christians to their homes for religious festivals. “And now Christians also participate. Previously there was a barrier: ‘I should not go to Hindus, he should not come to my house.’ Now that is all not there. All get together, all mixed up, and … if they wish to eat their food they eat, otherwise they don’t eat.” “They” in this final remark are Christians, some of whom are willing to eat prasada and some not. Madhu has also noticed a generational change, especially from the Hindu side: “It’s not a barrier now among the youth, young generation. But with the old generation, still we have this concept that Christian means like … he has entered into our house and now he will share the gospel and will try to convert us into their own religion.”

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991 The issue of eating prasada has been discussed in Chapter 7.
992 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
993 Interview with Madhu 2008-03-03.
Pentecostal Isolationism

A few interviewees describe a phenomenon that runs counter to these developments towards closer interreligious interaction portrayed by other interviewees. They say that certain Christian attitudes and behaviours, particularly common among Pentecostals, can obstruct close friendly relations with people of other religions.

According to CSI member Thivya, while some people have easy friendships with people from other religions, Pentecostals “expose” the fact that they are Christian. This makes Hindus and Muslims hesitant to form friendships with them, since they think that the Pentecostals are too different, she claimed. For example, Hindus and Muslims find it strange that Pentecostals do not wear jewellery, she said.994

Thivya does not differentiate between different types of Pentecostals here, but as I have discussed in Chapter 6, the attitudes to holiness and separation from the world, with jewellery as a central issue, distinguish different Pentecostal churches from each other. Mega AG and TPM represent two vastly different Indian Pentecostal definitions of holiness and worldliness.

The Pentecostal Mission’s strict holiness principles can in certain situations prevent its believers from mingling freely with other people. Its radical holiness doctrines lay heavy emphasis on separation from the world, which can divert and defile a believer.995 TPM’s teachings of separation from the world do not bear only upon relations with people of other religions but with people considered “worldly” in general regardless of their religious affiliation. “There are levels of separation,” Priya explained. “I have friends who are of the world. It’s not like ‘get away from them,’ but you should be different. … If they all are going to have a smoke, you can’t join them. If they all are going to get high on alcohol, you can’t be one of them, because God doesn’t want you to be.”996 Similarly, Phoebe told me that her colleagues organise many “team outings” and parties but she does not join them for any such events. She “won’t mingle” with them for that, she said.997

TPM is far from unique in objecting to the practices that these interviewees take as examples of the isolationism that holiness entails. But, as Thivya’s statement implies, a noticeable dissociation from mainstream culture visible through other, “stranger” signs, such as not wearing jewellery, can lead to inhibitions that hinder a Hindu or Muslim from associating closely with Pentecostals. Possibly, behind such inhibitions there is an underlying worry that there will be efforts to convert.

Mega AG leaders, on the other hand, try to prevent the isolation from religious others that a Pentecostal desire for spiritual growth and holiness can lead

994 Interview with Thivya 2012-01-24.
995 See Bergunder 2008: 182-183 on TPM’s understanding of “the world.”
996 Interview with Priya 2011-02-09.
997 Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19.
to, according to Reverend Matthew. He explained that new converts usually retain their old friends for about two years. After that, they tend to become so “Christianised” that they lose contact with their old friends and only have Christian friends. While such isolation in Christian circles is good for “moulding” their character, it prevents their reaching out to others with evangelism. Therefore, the church leaders encourage their churchgoers to mingle with other groups, for example through joining a social club or a gym, rather than “closing themselves” within an exclusively Christian social network, he said. In Reverend Matthew’s own life too, his conversion from Syrian Orthodox Christianity to Pentecostalism entailed a change from much interreligious friendship to losing touch with many of his friends who were not Christians.998

A counter ideal to Pentecostal isolationism comes from the CSI side where Reverend Thangam emphasised the importance of mixing socially with people from other religious groups. Christians in Bangalore, who live surrounded by people of other religions, “have to go and live among them,” he believes. He had recently heard his bishop make a “very important point” regarding this, addressing a large gathering of youths. The bishop said that, as Jesus had been “sent into the world, not into the church,” so these Christian youths “were also sent into the world, not to the church,” and should therefore “go outside the church, come out of it.” Reverend Thangam agreed with his bishop on this. Being “in Christ means … being within, inside the society, not outside the society,” he said.999

This reasoning contrasts with the world-renouncing teaching of The Pentecostal Mission. TPM, and distinct from it the CSI as represented by Reverend Thangam and his bishop, each stand for different interpretations of what it means to live “in Christ” in a religiously diverse society. As Reverend Matthew’s statements show, Pentecostal isolationism is questioned also within Pentecostal churches though in this case it is mostly for evangelistic reasons. However, it is a relatively peripheral theme in the material. Even in the case of TPM interviewees, with the exception of the pastor, TPM’s world-renouncing doctrines do not appear to have much of an obstructing effect on their daily interactions with religious others.

The question of Christian isolationist holiness as an ideal, or the alternative ideal of interreligious socialisation, is not simply a question of Pentecostal versus mainline Protestant views. The latter ideal, in particular, is also a question of evangelical versus non-evangelical views. Regarding everyday coexistence, almost none of the interviewees to whom I have referred belong to the evangelical category. Unproblematic everyday coexistence, undisturbed by religious difference, is more of a non-evangelical theme. The highlighting of peaceful coexistence, where religion does not get in the way, reflects more of

999 Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03.
an ideal for liberal and non-evangelical\textsuperscript{1000} interviewees although evangelical interviewees also appear to live so most of the time. For them, however, leaving religious difference aside is not an ideal, since they experience a more pressing calling to tell others about Christ. Pentecostal, particularly TPM, isolationism is a countertrend to the dominant picture of close and cordial inter-religious relations. However, Pentecostal interviewees, from TPM as well as from Mega AG, also told me about personal friendship with people from other religions.

I want to turn now from my interviewees’ experiences to the big picture of Indian society where commentators observe what Martha Nussbaum refers to as “the clash within” – the clash within India between the values of religious nationalism on the one hand, and pluralist democracy characterised by a respect for religious difference on the other.\textsuperscript{1001} The growth of Hindu religious nationalism means that people’s identities are increasingly perceived in terms of religious affiliation, and these identities are seen as divisive.\textsuperscript{1002} The problem of divisive attitudes, notes Elizabeth Koepping, “affects the pluralism of everyday life” that has by and large characterised South Asia.\textsuperscript{1003} My interviewees refer to the communalist and nationalist influence upon Indian society, particularly as it impacts Christian mission praxis.\textsuperscript{1004} But in relation to daily life, they portray it as primarily characterised by a respect for religious plurality. They witness to a resilience of “the pluralism of everyday life” that colours their experiences of life in a religiously diverse context.

Respect for Christians

As I have described above, my interviewees portray their lives alongside people of other religions in Bangalore in terms of friendship and stress-free coexistence rather than interreligious tension and aggression. They generally describe Hindutva antagonism to Christianity as an exception to normal interreligious attitudes. Several interviewees told me that except for cases of Hindu nationalist antipathy other religious groups usually regard Christians with appreciation and respect. Reverend Chand, for example, said that “99 per cent of Hindus accept Christians. They have no problems with [them],” and Christians are “the most respected people in India” because of their social and educational work.\textsuperscript{1005}

\textsuperscript{1000} I say “non-evangelical” rather than “general Protestant” here because the interviewees who are most noticeably not evangelical emphasise this ideal rather than those who show agreement with some but not all evangelical tenets.
\textsuperscript{1001} Nussbaum 2007.
\textsuperscript{1002} See Thapar 2014, especially pp. 108-163 for a discussion on this, and Sen 2006 for a discussion which connects the question of Indian communalism to a global perspective.
\textsuperscript{1003} Koepping 2011: 36.
\textsuperscript{1004} This will be discussed in the next chapter.
\textsuperscript{1005} Interview with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17.
Remarks made by interviewees on this topic often reflect a Christian self-image. Some have had experiences of people from other religions admiring Christian lifestyle, habits, and behaviour.\textsuperscript{1006} Some said that Christians are known for their peacefulness.\textsuperscript{1007} Priya listed a number of virtues that she believes others associate with Christians: kindness, honesty, love, peace, and joy.\textsuperscript{1008} A few interviewees referred to Christian social service as a major reason for appreciation from other religious groups.\textsuperscript{1009}

Malini agreed that other Indians feel respect for Christians but she gave a different explanation. Rather than Christian virtues and morality, or contributions to society, she referred to the esteem that both Hindus and Muslims have for Jesus which she said translates into a respect also for Christians: “They respect Christians. … It’s because of Jesus. It’s not because they look at us and say we are Christian, it’s because of Jesus; they respect Jesus. They definitely respect Christianity.”\textsuperscript{1010} While Muslims respect Jesus as a prophet, among Hindus in India, he is popular as one among other Gods. It is not unusual for Hindus to display images of Jesus along with those of Hindu Gods.

Established Christian Presence in Bangalore

Interviewees as a rule hold positive views of interreligious relations and of the attitudes to Christians among people of other religions. With the exception of Hindu nationalists and some other Hindus who are wary of Christian mission, other people hold a high opinion of Christians, according to several interviewees. While they voice some concern for the Hindu-Christian situation at a national level, they express a sense of security in relation to their own situation.\textsuperscript{1011} Several of them relate this sense of security to the urban context and say that the city is a safer place for Christians than the village.\textsuperscript{1012} Although incidents of harassment against Christians and churches had occurred also in Bangalore and its outskirts during the years prior to my field studies, these are not typical of the normal state of affairs in Bangalore city, according to my interviewees. They portray Bangalore as a place where people from different religions are habituated to living together peacefully.

\textsuperscript{1006} Interviews with Christina 2011-01-25, Tarun 2011-02-04, Priya 2011-02-09.
\textsuperscript{1007} Interviews with Tarun 2011-02-04, Priya 2011-02-09, Phoebe 2011-03-19.
\textsuperscript{1008} Interview with Priya 2011-02-09.
\textsuperscript{1009} Interviews with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17, Priya 2011-02-09.
\textsuperscript{1010} Interview with Malini 2011-03-21.
\textsuperscript{1011} These topics will be discussed in more length in Chapter 9.
\textsuperscript{1012} Interviews with pastor Pradeep 2011-01-28, Tarun 2011-02-04, Priya 2011-02-09, Michael 2011-03-10, Phoebe 2011-03-19, Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16. In Kuhl in’s interview study of views of Hindu-Christian relations among north Indian Pentecostals, those from an urban background similarly emphasise Hindu-Christian tension in rural areas. This irrespective of the fact that her interviewees, urban as well as rural, had much more personal experience of anti-Christian harassment than my interviewees. Kuhl in 2015: 50-51.
The Christian presence is not only relatively old but strong and visible in Bangalore. There are many Christian institutions and imposing and well-known church buildings in the city. A few interviewees referred to the historically established presence of Christianity in Bangalore as an explanation for the peaceful interreligious relations that characterises the city. In Bangalore, Reverend Thangam said, “Christianity is not strange or new to these people. So unlike Orissa, where in some villages Christianity is being newly introduced, [in Bangalore] you see Christianity all over. You see the huge cathedrals, and the churches speak for themselves.” Bangaloreans have become used to Christianity, in other words. His comparison with Orissa (now Odisha) is significant, since it was the site of mass-scale violence against Christians in 2008.

Priya similarly referred to the history of Christianity in Bangalore especially its embodiment in Christian educational institutions where many people from Hindu and Muslim backgrounds have also studied. Priya’s own childhood and youth was spent in Christian schools and colleges with a majority of Christian students. There had been a few Hindu and Muslim classmates, but their religious affiliation was never a topic of conversation, she said. What Priya told me made me realise how strong the Christian position in Bangalore could appear from an insider perspective. Her understanding of the proportional number of Christians in India had differed greatly from the reality, and she had not understood what a predominantly Hindu country India was until she left it to study abroad:

I didn’t know how many Hindus existed in India till I went [abroad]. Because … when I studied I was in a Christian school, I was in a Christian college, and it was a completely Christian environment, so all my friends were Christian. But when I went [abroad], I [met] so many Indians there. And [we were] like, two Christians. And all the other Indians were Hindus. And I was like: “Oh my God … I didn’t know there were so many Hindus.” … Yeah, that’s when I realised there are so many Hindus. And Muslims as well.

The school and college where Priya studied as well as the college where she now works are all Christian institutions so most of her friends in Bangalore are Christians although she does have some Hindu and Muslim friends too.

As these examples illustrate, the dominant impression of their position as a religious minority that my interviewees convey is not one of vulnerability but of a confident religious minority whose daily interactions with other religious groups are normally peaceful and friendly. At the same time, their potential vulnerability is actualised in relation to mission, which is the subject of the next chapter.

1014 Interview with Priya 2011-02-09.
Conclusions

I have made very few references to the evangelical lens in this chapter. This goes to show that the evangelical dichotomy between born-again Christians and all others relates primarily to salvation to eternal life, not to everyday life. There is a widespread belief among interviewees that Christianity is unique among religions in leading to salvation. However, they generally do not translate the contrast between Christian believers as saved and religious others as not (yet) saved into a perceptible contrast in daily life with regard to morality and behaviour. They refer to everyday consequences of salvation such as blessings, a close relationship with God, an inner peace, or a new liberating identity, but usually there is no mention of a saved person being a better human being than others.

Nevertheless, there is a difference between the evangelical and the non-evangelical perspectives, namely that the latter more strongly emphasises interreligious coexistence without disagreements over religion. Living in interreligious harmony without letting religious difference get in the way is more of a liberal Protestant and non-evangelical virtue. This is not the case for an evangelical Protestant whose ideal is, in a way, to let religion get in the way, since the imperative to active evangelism encourages her to try share with others her own conviction about Christ as unique saviour. An evangelical perspective is also distinguished by a greater emphasis on dissociation from active or passive participation in the practice of other religions, for example, by being present during religious festivals. In practice, evangelical as well as non-evangelical interviewees balance the imperative to Christian witness with their wish to avoid interreligious controversy, a negotiation which I will discuss in the next chapter.

The attitudes interviewees have to religious others differ markedly from their views on other religions. On a theological level, there are strong tendencies to othering of both Hinduism and Catholicism, as seen in earlier chapters. This chapter has shown that on a social level, othering stands back in favour of an emphasis on similarity and friendly relations.

But theological and social levels are interlinked. The theological reflections of interviewees concern not only questions of truth and salvation – where the dominant tendency is to emphasise difference between Christianity and other religions – but also views of other human beings. They use theological terms both to stress similarity between Christians and religious others, and, in a few cases, to stress the consequences of the born-again experience to a person’s character. Two interviewees refer to the born-again experience and a conscious Christlikeness as the only way to be truly good. But the more common tendency is to see human goodness as transcending religious boundaries. According to this theological line of reasoning, being a child of God – which all human beings are – is sufficient basis for being good in this life, even if it does not lead to eternal salvation.
Interviewees occasionally express an explicit de-othering of religious others, as when Christina says that Hindus and Muslims demonstrate the same moral characteristics as Christians, and that Christians distinguish themselves from them only in relation to eternal life.\(^{1015}\) This de-othering is particularly marked in relation to Hindus, since it contrasts with the othering of Hindu religion. Christina again offers a good example by referring to Hindu worship and beliefs as the “only … mistake” of Hindus, while placing them on the same moral level as Christians by clarifying that they do the same “good things” as Christians.\(^{1016}\) On a more implicit level, de-othering of Hindus in particular is demonstrated through social association with them, which occasionally goes as far as intermarriage and other family connections. Almost all interviewees testify to friendship with people of other religions and to unproblematic daily interaction with them.\(^{1017}\)

One sign of interreligious friendship is when interviewees participate in the Hindu festivals of their friends, and vice versa. Religious festivals prove to be an important site of interreligious interaction – but also a contested ground. Religious festivals are occasions for participating in the practices of other religions, at least by watching them. They are also occasions for negotiating religious boundaries because then Christians must decide upon their level of participation in the festivals of other religions. Religious festivals are also sites of interreligious interaction on an implicit level through religious borrowing and hybridity.

Participation in the festivals of Hindu friends exemplifies the point that, taken as a whole, my material demonstrates an oscillation between theological exclusivism, even polemic – in the case of religious images – and positive relations to religious others as people, including a pragmatic acceptance of their religions in practice.

Socially, interviewees associate more closely with Hindus than with Muslims, although they view the Hindu religion as more different from their own than Islam, even as its opposite in several ways. The relations between their views of Hinduism and of Hindus, on the one hand, and of Islam and Muslims, on the other hand, are reversed. They see Hindus as better than their religion while Muslims are seen rather as worse than Islam since interviewees occasionally express views of Muslims as potentially more aggressive than Hindus or Christians. However, on a national level, they consider Hindu-Christian relations to be more problematic than Christian-Muslim relations, which they refer to as unproblematic at this level. A stereotypical connection of Muslims with violence has some representation in interviewees’ views of Muslims in their local context although, in a wider context, Hindus stand for the most

\(^{1015}\) Interview with Christina 2011-01-31.

\(^{1016}\) Interview with Christina 2011-02-01.

\(^{1017}\) The exception here is pastor Pradeep, who spoke of interaction with people from other religions only in terms of their applications for his prayers. Living in celibacy in the church as he does, he is the clearest example of a Pentecostal isolationist attitude among my interviewees.
substantive aggression against Christians both from the perspective of interviewees and in the political reality of India. This political reality has hardened since the time of these interviews. Since they were recorded, the Hindu nationalist party, the BJP, has won the national election and governed the country for several years. Christian institutions and organisations are facing increasing restrictions and control and violent attacks on Christians have risen in number.\textsuperscript{1018} That interviewees, at least some of them, were acutely aware of their minority position already at the time, becomes clear particularly in relation to the subject of mission and evangelism, which is the theme of the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{1018} See e.g., the Evangelical Fellowship of India’s “Persecution Watch” Report for 2017, available at: http://files.constantcontact.com/523942c3501/97b6149d-8264-458e-9a98-352cb5a55857.pdf See Chapter 2 for more discussion.
9. Views of Mission and Evangelism

The question of how to shape their mission and evangelism is arguably one of the most burning issues for churches and individual Christians in India today. Some Christians emphasise interreligious dialogue and view the church’s mission primarily in terms of social work. Others view evangelism – expressly telling others about Christ – as a vital aspect of their faith. These ambitions clash with an aversion to Christian evangelism expressed in radical terms by the influential Hindu nationalist movement. Thus, there are conflicting views of Christian mission and evangelism both in society at large and among Christians themselves. As will be seen in this chapter, individual Christians can also face conflicting impulses. Interviewees who, motivated by the evangelical emphasis on active evangelism, believe in the importance of telling others about Christ, must weigh this against the need to maintain good relationships with the religious others they interact with. Between the individual and societal levels stand the pastors and lay church leaders each of whom faces the task of balancing their own church’s missionary vision with the political situation.

My terminology in this chapter follows key documents on mission and evangelism from the ecumenical World Council of Churches and the evangelical Lausanne Movement.1019 “Mission” stands for a broad concept that includes not only telling others about Christian faith but also health care and other social services. It can also include socio-political engagement such as challenging existing power structures. “Evangelism” refers more specifically to telling others about Christian beliefs, or “sharing the gospel” with others as it is often expressed in Christian, especially evangelical, terms.1020

This chapter deals with three main themes. In the first part, I discuss interviewees’ perceptions of their situation as a religious minority in a society where criticism of Christian mission and of conversion to Christianity is prevalent. In the second part, I present the conception and praxis of mission in the


1020 E.g., The Cape Town Commitment: 7.
four churches, in other words, their practical missiology. The third part examines both the belief that each Christian is obliged to engage in evangelism as well as the negotiations necessary between this evangelistic ideal and social and practical considerations. The chapter opens with a discussion of the minority situation since it shapes the conditions for the following themes about the thinking behind and praxis of mission and evangelism.

The Minority Situation and Opposition to Christian Mission

Of the interviews I use in this dissertation, the first were conducted in early 2008. At that time, the first riots involving Hindus and Christians in the district of Kandhamal in Odisha, beginning at Christmas 2007, had recently occurred. But the worst outbreak of violence was yet to come in August 2008. Numerous Christian Panas (a Dalit caste group) were targeted with violence which included sexual violence and murder. The next month, the wave of anti-Christian violence reached Karnataka, especially the area around Mangalore where churches were vandalised and Christians attacked. There were also attacks on churches in the Bangalore district and incidents have continued in Karnataka during subsequent years. During the main field study periods, from 2010 to 2011 and in 2012, the large-scale violence that had taken place in 2008 heavily influenced interviewees’ perceptions of the situation for Christians at the national and state levels. The government of Karnataka from 2008 to 2013 was led by the BJP and the central government from 2009 to 2014 was led by the Congress Party. This also affected interviewees’ perceptions of the situation at state and national levels. In early 2008, state and central governments were both led by the Congress.

Interviewees generally saw anti-Christian violence as something that mainly affected other parts of India, especially north India and rural places, and saw peaceful, unproblematic coexistence as the normal state of Hindu-Christian relations in Bangalore. Still, the influence of Hindutva discourse on public debate in India and the related threat of violence influenced their views and practices of mission and evangelism.

Most interviewees did not see aggressive anti-minority Hindutva ideology as having a major influence on the Hindus they interacted with in their daily lives. Although Hindus were often said to be wary of Christian conversion attempts, there was no general sense among interviewees of a widespread dislike of Christians in Indian society (at least not in south India). Interviewees sometimes spoke of Hindu nationalists or “Hindu fundamentalists” who dislike Christians and adhere to the Hindutva notion that Indian national identity is linked with Hindu religious identity, but this was not portrayed as the predominant attitude among Hindus. Julia Kuhlin has noted a similar tendency
among her north Indian Pentecostal informants, who described the majority of Hindus, or “normal Hindus,” as generally tolerant of Christianity, and the relations with these “normal Hindus” as generally peaceful and free of conflict. “Hindu leaders” and “strongly religious Hindus,” on the other hand, were perceived more negatively and said to spread negative views of Christians among “normal Hindus.”

Among my interviewees, Chakradev brought up the risk of Hindutva rhetoric influencing “secular Hindus” by spreading fear of Christian conversion as a threat to Hindu culture. To help counteract this, he participated in courses for pastors that included training in how to approach such “secular Hindus” and deal with their “misconceptions” about Christianity. Reverend Matthew noted that BJP communal politics had succeeded in creating strong “polarisation” in voting behaviour along religious lines.

BJP antagonism to Christians is a theme that recurs a few times, and some interviewees compared the BJP with the Congress Party, all agreeing that the situation for Christians is worse when the former are in power. These comparisons refer mainly to the state level of government, which can be explained by the fact that the BJP led the government of Karnataka at the time of these interviews, and that interviewees perceived the party’s influence on the situation in the state. The key Hindutva perception of Christians as associated with the West and of Christianity as a foreign religion came up in some interviews. A few interviewees explained these negative views of Christianity with reference to the historical background in which British colonisers forcefully imposed their culture in India and disrespected Indian culture.

Violence against Christians

The material for this study was produced not long after one of the worst phases of Hindu-Christian relations in Karnataka, referred to above. In spite of this, interviewees did not express much personal anxiety about anti-Christian violence. It was a subject that recurred when I asked about interreligious relations on a national level, but it was predominantly seen as something that occurred at a distance from their own surroundings.

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1021 Kuhlin 2015: 41, 46–47. Hindu nationalists or “Hindu-biased people” were not directly identified with the Hindu group by Kuhlin’s informants but rather seen as “a part of society one feared somewhat but had to live with and adjust to.”
1022 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
1023 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16.
1024 Interviews with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17, Priya 2011-02-09.
1027 Interviews with Madhu 2008-03-03, Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-10.
Interviewees generally spoke about Hindutva aggression and Hindu antipathy towards Christians as an exception to the norm, especially in their own context of Bangalore. North India was said to be worse than south India in this regard,\footnote{Interviews with Priya 2011-02-09, Phoebe 2011-03-19.} and Christians in villages to be more exposed than those in the city.\footnote{Interviews with pastor Pradeep 2011-01-28, Tarun 2011-02-04, Priya 2011-02-09, Michael 2011-03-10, Phoebe 2011-03-19, Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16.} In addition to the lethal assaults on Christians in Kandhamal, Odisha, the murder of Australian missionary Graham Staines was mentioned as an example of violence from north India.\footnote{Interviews with Priya 2011-02-09, Phoebe 2011-03-19.} Some interviewees also remarked that Hindu-Muslim tensions constitute a more severe problem in Indian society than either Hindu-Christian tensions or Muslim-Christian tensions.\footnote{Interviews with Priya 2011-02-09, Michael 2011-03-10, Phoebe 2011-03-19, Malini 2011-03-21.}

Several interviewees referred to the city of Bangalore as a good place for Christians to live.\footnote{Interviews with Rev. Thangam 2011-01-28, Tarun 2011-02-04, Michael 2011-03-10, Phoebe 2011-03-19, Thomas 2012-02-02.} One reason for this was given as the old and well-established Christian presence in Bangalore. Michael, who had moved to Bangalore from north India, said that he was pleasantly surprised by the visible presence of Christianity in Bangalore and in south India generally. He said that “the reason I like this city” is that there is “a lot of Christianity” there. “And there’s freedom to preach, there’s freedom to share.”\footnote{Interview with Michael 2011-03-10.} A few interviewees referred to the urban Bangaloreans as sophisticated and peaceful, not likely to turn to violence.\footnote{Interviews with Tarun 2011-02-04, Michael 2011-03-10. Along similar lines, Priya said that educated people are generally tolerant of other religions: Interview with Priya 2011-02-09. This positive image of Bangaloreans as sophisticated and peaceful was shaken in 2012 when fear spread among people of northeast Indian origin in Bangalore after (unsubstantiated) rumours of planned riots aimed at them. Large numbers of people fled Bangalore by train. See Srivatsa and Kurup: “After rumours, northeast people flee Bangalore,” \textit{The Hindu} 2012-08-16, Chaudhry: “Mystery of the NE exodus: Why Bangalore?” \textit{Firstpost} 2012-08-16.} Another explanation for why the city is seen as a safer space is that any attacks on churches in Bangalore city would attract media attention, unlike the case in rural locations.\footnote{Interviews with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17, Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16.} Generally, interviewees conveyed an image of Bangalore as a relatively safe place for Christians, where interreligious antagonism and aggression are unusual. It was an exception when Mohana

\footnote{\textsuperscript{1028} Interviews with Priya 2011-02-09, Phoebe 2011-03-19.\textsuperscript{1029} Interviews with pastor Pradeep 2011-01-28, Tarun 2011-02-04, Priya 2011-02-09, Michael 2011-03-10, Phoebe 2011-03-19, Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16.\textsuperscript{1030} Interviews with Priya 2011-02-09, Phoebe 2011-03-19. Graham Staines was murdered along with his two young sons when the car they slept in was set on fire by a group of Hindutva sympathisers. See e.g. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/261391.stm. The tensions underlying the outbreak of violence in Kandhamal were multidimensional; it was not a simple case of Christian evangelism causing reprobation. See Clarke and Peacock 2010, Bauman 2010. Most of my interviewees were probably not aware of all these dimensions but knew of the Kandhamal attacks as a case where the growth of Christianity had led to physical assault, including murders and rapes.\textsuperscript{1031} Interviews with Priya 2011-02-09, Michael 2011-03-10, Phoebe 2011-03-19, Malini 2011-03-21.\textsuperscript{1032} Interviews with Rev. Thangam 2011-01-28, Tarun 2011-02-04, Michael 2011-03-10, Phoebe 2011-03-19, Thomas 2012-02-02.\textsuperscript{1033} Interview with Michael 2011-03-10.\textsuperscript{1034} Interviews with Tarun 2011-02-04, Michael 2011-03-10. Along similar lines, Priya said that educated people are generally tolerant of other religions: Interview with Priya 2011-02-09. This positive image of Bangaloreans as sophisticated and peaceful was shaken in 2012 when fear spread among people of northeast Indian origin in Bangalore after (unsubstantiated) rumours of planned riots aimed at them. Large numbers of people fled Bangalore by train. See Srivatsa and Kurup: “After rumours, northeast people flee Bangalore,” \textit{The Hindu} 2012-08-16, Chaudhry: “Mystery of the NE exodus: Why Bangalore?” \textit{Firstpost} 2012-08-16.\textsuperscript{1035} Interviews with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17, Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16.}
expressed a more negative view of the situation in Bangalore by saying that “there was a time when they persecuted many pastors,” also in Bangalore.\textsuperscript{1036}

Most other interviewees spoke of violence against Christians as an exception to the normal state of affairs even when they referred to national or regional levels. Michael’s view that 2008 was an “extreme season” and that things had subsequently calmed down was shared by others.\textsuperscript{1037} Malini, for example, was optimistic. Although people in India normally respect Christians, “disasters” had happened in recent years, she said. “There are some types of people who very strongly hate Christians. /---/ It was happening more and more for some years.” But, she continued, “I think everything will get controlled now.” She expressed her trust in God to take control of the situation and bring peace.\textsuperscript{1038}

Evangelical and liberal Protestant perspectives lead to partly different interpretations of the causes of violence against Christians. The evangelical Reverend Matthew and the liberal Reverend Chand demonstrate this difference. Reverend Matthew sees anti-Christian violence as a reaction to the growth of Christianity. Even before the worst outbreak of violence in August 2008, he said that there was “more persecution now than ever before” because there were “people coming … to Christianity or to the Lord, as never before … even in north India.”\textsuperscript{1039} Later, he found that after the “huge crisis” in 2008, the situation had improved as a result of protests and media attention; open violence was rare, he said, at least in the city.\textsuperscript{1040} It is clear from Reverend Matthew’s discussion that his church belongs to the category of churches which are less vulnerable to attacks. Occasional incidents of anti-Christian violence, he said, were carried on surreptitiously “in some corner somewhere.”\textsuperscript{1041}

Like Reverend Matthew, Reverend Chand links attacks on rural Christians to the growth of Christianity, but his analysis includes the added dimension of caste. Dalit conversions to Christianity provoke reactions from members of the Hindu majority, especially the upper castes worried about losing their privileges and this, he suggested, contributes to the growth of Hindu nationalism.

Reverend Chand voiced an additional concern over a risk that church leaders in comfortable positions in city churches such as his own are reluctant to get involved in the issue of attacks on more vulnerable Christians. In his opinion, the more well-connected churches, themselves not the main targets of anti-Christian attacks, are not outspoken enough on these problems that mainly affect rural areas. In such areas, Pentecostal and small independent churches are particularly vulnerable and subject to harassment in the form of

\textsuperscript{1036} Interview with Mohana 2010-12-14.
\textsuperscript{1037} Interview with Michael 2011-03-10.
\textsuperscript{1038} Interview with Malini 2011-03-21.
\textsuperscript{1039} Interview with Rev. Matthew 2008-02-29.
\textsuperscript{1040} Interviews with Rev. Matthew 2011-01-11 and 2012-02-16.
\textsuperscript{1041} Interview with Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16.
violence, destruction of churches, and arrests of pastors, he said. In addition, Reverend Chand found the tendency to embrace martyrdom among some of the targeted pastors unfortunate. Due to this mentality, some pastors refrain from reporting incidents to the police, thereby contributing to incorrect statistics of anti-Christian violence, he said.1042

Chad Bauman’s analysis of anti-Christian violence confirms some of the impressions shared by my interviewees. Rural Pentecostals and “Pentecostalized Evangelicals” are the most targeted, Bauman writes, while mainline denominations like the CSI and well-established, often urban Pentecostal denominations such as the AG are less so. Bauman’s analysis also supports Reverend Chand’s criticism of the passive stance of well-established churches towards the violence perpetrated against more exposed Christians. According to Bauman, the dissociation of mainline Christians from Pentecostals contributes to the latter’s vulnerability to anti-Christian violence.1043

Local Incidents and Local Precautions
The churches in this study had not themselves met with violence or attacks. It was instead mostly due to the general threat of anti-Christian violence and certain precautions that the churches then took that church members noticed the hardening political climate. Although interviewees did not see any immediate risk threatening the churches they belonged to, I was told of some incidents at the local level.

Mega AG, the most actively evangelising of the two churches, has met with the threat of violence and political sanctions on evangelism more directly. Reverend Matthew told me of two incidents. One was when local politicians suddenly withdrew permission for the church’s big outdoor Christmas programme in 2010. With the help of good connections together with threats of legal action, the church had the permission reinstated. Another time, Mega AG members who distributed lunches in a school as part of the church’s mission work met with opposition and threats from RSS members who had been alerted to the situation by some teachers and/or students. A “sensible person” mediated and the Mega AG people could leave before any violence occurred. An aggravating factor had been that the lunch included eggs.1044

As a precaution against accusations of forceful conversion, Mega AG made Hindu baptism candidates sign an affidavit stating that they were not coerced into it.1045 Another safety measure was that the pastor and others involved in mission carried a badge with the words “Human Rights Protection,” given to

1042 Interview with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17.
1044 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16. Eggs are considered non-vegetarian and therefore against the dietary restrictions of some Hindus, especially from the “upper castes.”
1045 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16. Bauman observes that the CSI in Karnataka takes the same precautionary measure. Bauman 2015: 158.
them by an NGO, which helped them against possible problems with the police. Precautions against violence had been taken by or in relation to CSI City as well. Chinni and Cecil told me how the critical situation a few years earlier had led to tangible consequences for their church, since it had received police protection. Another consequence of the changing political climate was that they had stopped going for Christmas carolling at night, “for fear of being attacked,” going earlier in the evenings instead.

Dissociation from Insensitive Evangelism

The matter at the heart of anti-Christian rhetoric and violence in India is that of conversion to Christianity. Hindus who oppose Christian mission and particularly evangelism interpret it as a neo-colonial project of imposing Western Christian culture and religion on the rest of the world, including India. International Christian campaigns aiming at the evangelisation of the whole world and using militaristic and triumphalist language do little to change this understanding. As a group, Christians in India face much suspicion linked to conversion. Against this background, some interviewees dissociate themselves from insensitive and rhetorically aggressive forms of evangelism and sometimes eschew the term “conversion.”

“The moment a Hindu hears about Christian mission, the first thing comes to their mind is conversion,” Chakradev said. “Whether it is charity, whether it is social work, or a church, or if you go and make a friendship with them, they think ‘oh, this person is coming to convert. I have to be careful.’ They will be on defence.” On a national level, this suspicion against Christian mission is a major factor in interreligious tension and anti-Christian rhetoric and violence. On a personal level, it leads to consequences such as Christians being particularly suspect if they breach office regulations against discussing religion, or it could even result in Hindu unwillingness to socialise with Christians. According to Madhu, the mentality among “the old generation” of Hindus (unlike younger Hindus) is that if a Christian enters their house, “he will share the gospel and will try to convert us into their own religion.”

Such suspicion against Christians is fuelled by the methods and language that certain Christians use, according to a few interviewees. For example, Ma-
lini said that when “Hindus strongly believe that their God is true” but Christians “try to collect a lot of souls” for salvation, then violence or harassment follows. This is because of Christians who “talk about Jesus” in an arrogant way and denigrate Hindu Gods as “evil.” “This type of talk only [leads to] this type of trouble.” Malini thinks that Christians should never express verbal abuse of Hindu Gods when they speak to Hindus. Instead, she believes they could invite Hindus to church or suggest that they read the Bible, whereby “they themselves will realise what is real God.”

Similarly, Madhu sees “a big problem in Christianity” that some preachers “condemn more other religion and less they preach about their own,” adding that it is Pentecostal preachers who do so. “Some charismatic fundamentalists also we have in Pentecostal, not all [are like that].” He took as an example a preacher he had heard who always condemned and demonised other religions, which led to him being “hit very badly” by Hindu nationalists. Demonising of other religions has “created a really unhealthy atmosphere,” Madhu said, however, he went on to say, “I can see a great change in Pentecostalism also, because they have given up all these things, and they really try to reform themselves. … But there are some charismatic conservative preachers who speak against other religion. Jesus never spoke against other religion. He [preached] the love of God, he preached the Kingdom.”

Here, the criticism interviewees direct against certain forms of evangelism centres on the tendency of some Christian preachers or evangelists to demonise Hindu Gods publicly or in conversation with Hindus. They consider this an inappropriate form of evangelism which hurts Hindus and might lead to violent retaliation. These opinions reflect larger intra-Christian debates in India about the objects, urgency, and appropriate modes of evangelism. Some Christians emphasise interreligious harmony over evangelistic zeal, and find more assertive and confrontational forms of evangelism inappropriate. As Sebastian Kim shows in his book about Indian debates on conversion, the intra-Christian discussion on evangelism has been linked with political developments in India as well as broader international developments in Christian theology.

1053 Interview with Malini 2011-03-21.
1054 Interview with Madhu 2008-03-03.
1055 Kim 2003, Bauman 2015. Bauman argues, however, that while violence against Christians is routinely explained – by Hindus, other Christians, and the targeted evangelists themselves – as caused by aggressive evangelism, there are probably other less outspoken reasons behind the violence as well. Aggressive forms of evangelism are often carried out by Pentecostals, and they provoke in other ways as well; through their class and caste affiliations, countercultural posture, breaking of traditional Indian norms, and in their implicit disruption of caste hierarchies. He also sees the same reasons as part of the explanation for why other more socially established and less assertively evangelistic Christians dissociate themselves from Pentecostals. As my examples illustrate – and Bauman also notes – the debate about appropriate modes of evangelism is also an intra-Pentecostal one. Bauman 2015: 70-93.
1056 Kim 2003.
However, in Indian public debate generally, it is not only overly aggressive or assertive evangelism that meets with criticism since Christian mission in any form is often seen as problematic. Although this is specifically true of Christian mission explicitly aiming at conversion, other forms of mission, such as medical services, are also censured because they are perceived as inducements to conversion.\(^{1057}\) The phenomenon of conversion to Christianity (or to Islam) is highly contentious, the term “conversion” itself being laden with negative connotations of “force, fraud, and inducement.”\(^{1058}\)

In view of this, a few interviewees made a point of distancing themselves from the term “conversion.” Pastor Pradeep strongly wished to dissociate his church from it, emphasising that they do not engage in it. Conversion, which he defined as “force from another person,” is a problem in India and not something that TPM does, he said. People change their religious affiliation not because TPM clergy try to force them but because they experience blessings from Jesus Christ. What TPM does, according to the pastor, is show them “the true living God.”\(^{1059}\)

Chakradev also dissociated himself from “conversion,” at least from the term as understood in the Indian context. “I never try to convert people,” he said. “I don’t believe in conversion.” From an etic perspective, this could seem surprising, given his firm belief in the Bible and Jesus Christ as unique guides to truth and salvation. But in India, “conversion” is understood as a change of identity manifested in outward signs like change of name and appearance, he explained. He distinguished between this and the required inner transformation that follows a person’s acceptance of Jesus and his teachings. Outward change is not necessary; it is the inner change that matters and that can save a person to eternal life. When Chakradev holds classes for pastors and missionaries, he advises them against hastening the process of outward change and official change of religious affiliation that Indians associate with conversion. An ill-advised focus on “numerical conversion” makes many Christian missionaries boast of their fast church growth, but this alarms Hindus.

I will always try to change the perspective of conversion, especially the numerical conversion. I always encourage them to be a witness. See, that is what actually the Bible demands from us. Not conversion. Conversion belongs to God. Only God can convert. I always tell the pastors and missionaries: “We can witness to the people, you [don’t] need to convert the people; God will do the conversion. If God cannot convert the people, nobody can change them.”\(^{1060}\)

One of the points Chakradev makes here is that God is the actual agent behind a person’s embracing of Christian faith. Phoebe made the same argument in


\(^{1058}\) See e.g. Kim 2003, Barua 2015, Bauman 2015: 51-69.

\(^{1059}\) Interview with pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20.

\(^{1060}\) Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
reference to Christians who tell others about God. They are not “asking them to get converted,” she said, but aiming at their “getting saved.” Hindus misunderstand this and commonly accuse Christians of converting people, because “they really don’t know that it is God who is dealing in their life.” As Phoebe sees it, it is the “touch of God” which convinces people, but Hindus who are against conversion see only the results of human agency.\(^{1061}\)

These interviewees interpret Hindu reactions to conversion as being based on a misunderstanding of the real nature of conversion. This interpretation reflects conflicting Hindu and Christian understandings of the phenomenon. These conflicting views can be understood in relation to an argument that Sebastian Kim and Ankur Barua both make in their respective books about Hindu-Christian debates on conversion, namely that these debates reveal fundamentally opposed theological ideas and conflicting truth claims.\(^{1062}\) A reason why change of religion appears unnecessary and even offensive to many Hindus is that an influential Hindu belief posits that all religions contain a measure of truth and moreover that the spiritual quest to direct oneself towards Ultimate Reality can continue over several lifetimes. Therefore, it is needless to change religious affiliation, according to this understanding.\(^{1063}\) As Barua convincingly argues, contrary to Hindu polemics, Hindu-Christian debates on conversion do not really reflect a Hindu tolerance of religious difference that can be contrasted with Christian intolerance. Rather, the debates reflect two conflicting views of truth in which both strive to establish their own truth as superior. The “real debate,” Barua contends, “is over which is, in fact, the true Religion.”\(^{1064}\) Moreover, since Christianity is associated with the former colonial powers, the missionary project is often seen, especially by Hindutva ideologues, as totally symbiotic with the colonial project, and conversion to Christianity as an undermining of Hindu Indian culture, even of Indian subjectivity.\(^{1065}\) These conflicting truth claims, and historical links between Christianity and colonialism, underlie statements made by interviewees that while conversion is really about salvation, Hindus believe that it is about a change of identity.

**Family Opposition**

Resistance to conversions to Christianity is not only a question of Hindutva adherents beating up Christian evangelists, or of communal violence aimed at tribal and Dalit Christian groups and enacted by Hindus of other caste backgrounds who see their socioeconomic privileges threatened. It also takes place at home where converts to Christianity frequently meet opposition, sometimes

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\(^{1061}\) Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19.

\(^{1062}\) Kim 2003, Barua 2015.

\(^{1063}\) Barua 2015: 1-10.

\(^{1064}\) Ibid: 39,115-146. See Kim 2003: 85-86 for a similar argument.

\(^{1065}\) Barua 2015: 12-16.
taking the form of physical violence, from their own family members.\textsuperscript{1066} Some of my interviewees have had such personal experiences of family opposition: Mohana, Cauvery, Chakradev, and Madhu – that is, all interviewees who are converts from Hinduism.\textsuperscript{1067}

Cauvery had been a secret Christian believer, “hiding and reading Scripture” against her family’s wishes, when a Bible verse convinced her that she should confess her faith openly: “‘If you are not confessing about me in front of people here, in heaven also I won’t confess you are my child.’\textsuperscript{1068} Somehow these words were convincing me that I should live a public Christian life.” Her open proclamation of this decision led to her having to leave her parents’ house with nothing but the clothes on her back and her Bible. Her wealthy caste Hindu family saw it as a great shame that she wanted to convert to Christianity, she said. It was particularly shameful that she as a girl did not obey her parents’ wishes and, to make things worse, Christianity associated her with “low caste people.”\textsuperscript{1069}

Mohana explained her father’s attitude to the conversion of his daughters along similar lines: “In his mindset, change of religion is something like being rebellious.” He thought that they were “brainwashed and converted” and was extremely angry that his daughters defied his authority by taking such a step.\textsuperscript{1070}

In my material, it is a recurring topic that some people are not free to be open about their newfound Christian faith because their family members will not accept it. The new Christian believers are often young and/or female and, given the power structures in the family, cannot, or do not want to, openly defy their parents, husbands, or in-laws. Interviewees had friends or neighbours in that position or knew such people who attended their church. In several cases, these people could attend church because while they worked in Bangalore, their parents lived elsewhere in India.\textsuperscript{1071}

Both the Pentecostal pastors are pragmatic on this point, aiming to understand the power dynamics in families that make it difficult particularly for women, who are often the only or the first persons in a family to convert, to take all the steps ideally involved in conversion. Therefore, they reason, such signs as openly abjuring family puja or removal of jewellery (in TPM’s case) are not compulsory unless a woman’s husband or other influential family

\textsuperscript{1066} Bauman notes that it is common for converts to Christianity to meet violence from family members in connection with their conversion. Bauman 2015: 8.

\textsuperscript{1067} With the possible exception of Triveni, who was from a Hindu-Catholic background, all interviewees who are converts have encountered family resistance. Triveni’s father had already accepted her mother’s Christian faith, and that Triveni accompanied her mother to church.

\textsuperscript{1068} Refers to Matt. 10:32-33

\textsuperscript{1069} Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.

\textsuperscript{1070} Interview with Mohana 2010-12-14.

\textsuperscript{1071} Interviews with Tarun 2011-02-04, Priya 2011-02-09, Michael 2011-03-10, Phoebe 2011-03-19, Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-10.
members have accepted her conversion. For example, Reverend Matthew said that Mega AG pastors never openly preach against women wearing bindi. “Because we know that … if the husband is still not a believer, but she’s a believer, she will continue to wear because her husband wants her to wear.” They counsel women who face such marital “compulsion” that they are “not going to lose [their] salvation because of that kind of thing.”

Conversion and Caste

One of the reasons why Hindu family members might oppose conversion to Christianity is that Christianity is generally associated with Dalits as well as other “low castes” and tribal groups. This is one of the ways in which the question of conversion to Christianity is entangled with questions related to caste. Another is that, according to a common analysis (not least within Dalit theology), conversion to Christianity, as a socially disruptive action, threatens the dominance of the upper castes which is one of the major reasons for anti-Christian violence. A few interviewees brought up this aspect of Hindutva opposition to conversion.

Reverend Chand – whose views of Hindu-Christian relations centre around caste oppression – links anti-Christian aggression to “the liberating process” of conversions, and to Christianity’s (at least ideal) disruption of caste structures. When “low caste” or tribal people convert, it upsets members of dominant castes, he said. “So when they [get] upset they oppress.” He sees the dominant castes in fear of losing their power which is a driving force behind anti-Christian mobilisation. Reverend Chand understands conversion to Christianity as offering a degree of liberation from caste oppression via empowerment in a new religious identity. This understanding stands out in relation to the material as a whole, where conversion is primarily envisioned in terms of salvation to eternal life. Reverend Chand’s language in relation to conversion is closer to the discourse of Dalit theology.

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1074 E.g. Clarke & Peacock 2010: 178–179, 181. Bauman notes: “Many social activists in India understand anti-Christian violence primarily as anti-dalit violence, that is, as violence against members of low-caste communities by local elites (but using interreligious provocation as a convenient excuse and rallying cry).” In Bauman’s own analysis, resentment at social and economic advancement of Dalit and tribal Christian converts is one part of the explanation for anti-Christian violence. Bauman 2015: 80, 81-82.
1075 Interview with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17.
1076 See e.g. Clarke & Peacock 2010: 188–191. Similar analyses are common also in historical studies of conversion movements in India that emphasise the agency of converts. See Webster 2003 for an example where the aim of conversion is described as gaining “an ‘emancipatory identity,’” even if the converts’ actual conditions did not improve markedly. (Quotation from p. 373.)
Chakradev agreed with the analysis of caste dynamics as a cause behind opposition to Christian evangelism. “When you convert the low caste, naturally it threatens the high caste,” he said, because the “high caste” people’s power and status depend upon the “low castes” remaining in their lowly positions. His solution to the problem differs, however, from Reverend Chand’s who focuses on Dalit empowerment through conversion to Christianity. Chakradev thinks that such a focus on the “low castes” in Christian evangelism is one-sided and must be complemented with an additional focus on the “high castes.” Since the “high caste” and “orthodox” Hindus control India politically, financially, socially, and culturally, he considers that Christian evangelism must reach out to them also. He referred to Roberto de Nobili as a forerunner in this approach of concentrating on the elite strata of a caste-based hierarchic society. People from caste groups with lower status would “naturally” follow the “high castes.”

The problem, however, is that Indian Christians, usually from a “low caste” or tribal background, have an “inferiority complex” in relation to the “high castes,” according to Chakradev. He sees a need for Christians to gain confidence about their social status and to approach Hindus – including “high caste” Hindus – with that confidence. “I always say: ‘We are the Brahmins now.’ … Those who follow Jesus are the true Brahmins. /---/ You should not walk like a low caste. … We are actually high caste. Christians. That confidence level we have to raise in the pastors.”

This is another vision of empowerment through Christian identity, although unlike Dalit theology it is expressed in the language of traditional caste hierarchy. Chakradev also envisions subversion of the caste system but brought about by directing Christian outreach towards “high castes.” Once a “high caste” person experiences the radical transformation that “accepting Jesus” entails, he believes, their mentality will change and they will realise that “there is no caste” and that they need not feel threatened by “low caste” empowerment.

The thoughts Chakradev expressed on mission and conversion are not, like Reverend Chand’s, noticeably coloured by Dalit theology, rather they reflect an evangelical and praxis-oriented school of missiology as is represented at institutions such as the South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies (SAIACS) in Bangalore. H.L. Richard, for example, observes that “Christianity is effectively locked out of thousands of Hindu castes and communities in modern India, with ongoing mission work still very much focused on the many and various Dalit people groups.” There are those who aim at reaching out to Hindus from the “higher castes,” but the challenges facing such attempts need to be understood in relation to the success of Christianity among Dalits.

1077 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
1078 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
Among those who focus their evangelism on “higher caste Hindus,” Roberto de Nobili’s methods are “well known and almost iconic,” Richard notes.1079

Cauvery and Chakradev have personally experienced how caste-related stigma and prejudices could colour Hindu people’s views of conversion to Christianity. As mentioned above, it was a factor in Cauvery’s expulsion from her family home. For Chakradev also, “community problems are there. Sometimes they won’t … accept us as their own.” For example, they are not invited to the weddings of close family members. “Because they feel that it is a shame. They don’t want to tell others that ‘he became a Christian.’” The main reason for their family members’ feelings of shame is that Christians are perceived as “low caste.” Chakradev said that his Hindu “high caste” family members are “very careful” around him, because they suspect that “he may try to convert some others.” “One leper needs another leper,” he said, in order to explain their way of thinking (with a biblical reference to untouchability).1080 Cauvery and Chakradev, with their insiders’ view of caste-related Hindu attitudes to Christians, emphasise caste issues more than any other interviewees except for Reverend Chand whose views on Hindu-Christian relations are heavily influenced by Dalit theology.

It is also in relation to this association of Christianity with Dalits together with the low status of Dalits in Indian society that another interviewee’s remarks about her father’s conversion must be understood. Christina appreciated her father for converting to Christianity despite not being from a “lower caste” background.1081

Conversion and Loss of Scheduled Caste Status

In my material, two ways in which a person can be disadvantaged by becoming a Christian are described. One is that “high caste” Hindus who convert risk being ostracised from their families. Another is that Dalits who convert risk economic loss. If a person from a Scheduled Caste (SC) background officially converts to Christianity, they lose their SC status and the related benefits which can be substantial.1082 Quotas for educational seats and jobs reserved for people with SC papers constitute the most substantive chance for upward

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1079 Richard, H. L. 2011: 173. See also Fowlkes and Verster 2006 for an example of evangelical missiological writing where the goal is to reach “forward caste” Hindus (or all Indian castes rather than mainly Dalits and tribals), and where the identification of Christian churches with Dalits is seen as posing a problem for reaching this goal.

1080 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.

1081 Interview with Christina 2011-01-31.

1082 “Scheduled Castes” is the government’s official term for the groups traditionally considered lowest in the caste hierarchy (Dalits). The same consequences do not follow conversion for a person from a Scheduled Tribe (ST) background. ST status is independent of religious affiliation.
social mobility available to Dalits. This dilemma can be handled in different ways. Some people choose not to change their religious affiliation in their official papers. This practice causes some controversy in churches, not least among the laity.

While church leaders are understanding or even sympathetic to the phenomenon, CSI lay member Christina is critical of what she sees as hypocrisy: “One worst [kind] of thing I will tell you. In our India … some converted Hindu Christians are there, no? They will convert to the Christian [faith]. But they will keep the certificates of Hinduism only. That is very bad. I don’t accept it.” They do it for jobs, she said, because to the Scheduled Castes, “the government will give the first preference: for the jobs, and education, loans, for everything. … So they will keep their certificate for the jobs and for eating and everything. For worshipping is Jesus.” She strongly dislikes that, because she considers it wrong to have one God “for eating” and another “for worshipping.” As Christina’s example indicates, feelings of injustice exist among Christians who cannot claim SC benefits, as well as among people of all religions belonging to other categories, who demand changes in the reservation system or resent the whole system of caste-based reservation.

Mission in the Churches

This second part of the chapter presents reflections on the practice of mission in the four churches included in this study. It presents mission work organised on a church level, and ideas in relation to this, mostly from pastors and church leaders but also from laypeople commenting on their church’s work with mission and evangelism. These missiological viewpoints reflect the scope in theological orientations among the four congregations, from liberal Protestant to evangelical perspectives.

CSI Tamil

In CSI Tamil, the pastor is liberal, and the congregation members can be labelled as general Protestant. This orientation is reflected in the views of mission expressed by CSI Tamil interviewees. Here, mission is defined not in terms of evangelism but in terms of social and financial service to its own church members.

CSI Tamil is a congregation with limited financial resources. Reverend Thangam said that unlike larger CSI congregations in Bangalore, CSI Tamil

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1083 See Webster 2009: 209-221 on this problem. See also Carman and Vasantha Rao 2014: 24-25.

1084 Interview with Christina 2011-01-25.
cannot afford to earmark a specific budget for mission, outreach, or evangelism. Both he and Thomas, the secretary of the Pastorate Committee, stressed the socioeconomic needs within the congregation. Those needs are the focus of CSI Tamil’s mission work which can be described with the theological term diakonia (Christian social service).

Thomas described the mission of the church in the following way: “Our dream is everybody should be educated. Everybody should have the basic things like shelter, food, clothing, and a work for their living. And what best the church can do [for] this, we are daily working on that. … And apart from that, of course the spiritual thing is another side of it.” The spiritual side means teaching members about church programmes and involving them in church activities. Practically, the church helps members through financial contributions, for example towards school or college fees. Church leaders also participate in “community programmes.” They have joined with people from a CSI hospital in a project for spreading awareness about issues like cleanliness and family planning in slum areas. Another project involves college students giving evening classes to school dropouts in slums. Through such measures, “slowly, step by step … the community developed,” Thomas said.

This practice, in which mission means mainly diakonia among existing church members, is partly due to the existing needs within the congregation and partly due to the political climate. The political situation compels them to avoid outreach activities, Thomas said. Newcomers to CSI Tamil mostly consist of Christian migrants to Bangalore. In a few cases, Hindus who have come to the church on their own initiative and participated in services and teaching there have been received into the church as members. Thomas emphasised that these had been long processes, around a year in length.

The low profile in terms of mission and evangelism practised in CSI Tamil on a congregational level also characterises the CSI’s approach to mission on a diocesan level, according to Reverend Thangam, who prefers the term “witness”:

I see these two as two different things, “witnessing” and “mission.” Why? Because witness is something which you can get to do every day. With your neighbour, in your place of work. I mean you can share, not necessarily by mentioning the name of Jesus, but still you can show the love of Jesus. … Through your actions. Words and thoughts. That’s what I believe is witness. Mission is … something you put it in paper first, you earmark a budget for it. That I think is mission, which is not very appreciable in our diocese. … There is a mission department. There are missionaries in the diocese. But it’s not something overwhelming. … We don’t have proud figures to boast of, that “so many people were baptised” and all that. It’s just existing, that’s it, yeah. The

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1087 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
reasons are there for that. Not that we are slack. Sometimes it’s the … government situations. The BJP is ruling here now. It’s not very easy to hold out your cross and go out on a procession and say: “Come on, let’s all accept Jesus Christ.” … You would receive a whacking. I think instead of that, involve them in community development projects. Ok, RSS seems to be a Hindu wing – no problem, join hands with them, try to organise some community development project. I would definitely join that, rather than calling those fellows and telling them “become Christians.” They’re already looking at us like villains because of the word … conversion … of late it’s been used a lot by the politicians, saying that “these people are converting us.”

Over more assertive forms of mission such as evangelism, Reverend Thangam prefers what Lissi Rasmussen has termed diapraxis, practical cooperation, social engagement, and friendship across religious boundaries.1089 His CSI colleague Reverend Chand also advocates diapraxis, in his case especially over more formal forms of interreligious dialogue.1090 Reverend Thangam proposes this approach even with radical Hindutva groups. In his emphasis on diapraxis and on witnessing through action rather than words, Reverend Thangam represents one view of mission among Christians, which envisages it in social terms rather than in terms of an urgency to save as many souls as possible. He counters a view of the CSI held by other Christians that it is “slack” with regard to evangelism. In his view, it is open proclamation that is inappropriate or even irresponsible in the current political climate, since the risks are too great. Reverend Thangam’s reflection here points to conflicting views among Indian Christians in general regarding what mission or Christian witness should be.

Christians should aim at social unity with other religious groups, is Reverend Thangam’s opinion, again demonstrating his emphasis on diapraxis. He described a pastor’s mission in the following way: “Make sure the people are living united. You know, live in fellowship. You live as good witnesses in society. Let something good come out of the church. This is what I believe. That’s why you are sent.” He also referred to Jesus’s saying “I have other sheep” (John 10:16).1091 The reference to this Bible verse is unique in the material, where verses such as John 14:6 or Matthew 28:16-20, which in these readings inspire theological exclusivism and evangelism, are more frequently quoted or referred to.

Among all interviewees, Reverend Thangam is the most drastic in his discouragement of evangelism as proclamation. He advises his congregation members along the same lines, he said: “Remember we are a minority here. Remember we are a minority. They can do anything to us. It’s not a security

1089 Rasmussen 1988.
1090 Interview with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17.
1091 Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03.
issue. See, through love we win their hearts.”1092 There is an inherent paradox in this short statement, but it reflects his view of discreet witness as preferable on several accounts; not only as safer but also as more effective and socially appropriate.

The concern about safety is clear in Reverend Thangam’s reflections on mission. The aim, he said, is not to try “to arrive at a position where everybody is Christian. No, that’s not an aim.” He asked: “What are the risk factors?” and continued: “Are you ready to die as a martyr? Now, if we start doing that, what will happen is what happened now in 2008 and all that.1093 Somebody will get killed for what you all did. Somebody’s house will get burnt for the evangelism which you carried out.” It is better, he concluded, to lay low: “You have a set of Christians, worship quietly, go. Once in a while do some charity, do some old age home or something. Help people out, be kind to them.”1094

The case of CSI Tamil shows how Christian mission in an Indian context can take the shape of diakonia among existing church members rather than outreach to religious others. The missiology expressed by church leaders in CSI Tamil represents one side of the intra-Christian discussion on mission and evangelism in India. This side emphasises interreligious harmony over evangelistic zeal. The minority situation has an evident impact here on missiological thinking and practice. The non-evangelical theological profile of church leaders also contributes to this missiological orientation.

CSI City

In CSI City, while the pastor is liberal, with a clear influence from Dalit theology, the lay members I interviewed view religion mainly through the evangelical lens. This theological difference comes to the fore in their views of mission and evangelism and leads to tensions in the material on this topic.

Regarding Reverend Chand, his inspiration from Dalit theology is clearly reflected in his missiology. In addition to social work and evangelism, he sees another important element in the church’s mission in a multi-religious society: To be a voice in society and protest against social evils, both within and outside the church. Primary among these is caste oppression: Churches “need to challenge other faiths also /---/ especially the caste system. Which is the most evil thing in the whole society.” The caste system “has to be challenged within church and also outside. And that’s very important for the church to take a stand on it. If not, they’re not in the mission of God.”1095

When he was transferred to CSI City, Reverend Chand took over the responsibility for two mission programmes which he had not initiated himself:

1093 His reference to 2008 refers to the anti-Christian violence in Kandhamal and Karnataka during that year.
1094 Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03.
1095 Interview with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17.
a school and an “outreach worship place” in a village. The school is situated in a poor area in Bangalore city. Most of the pupils are from a Dalit and/or Muslim background, Reverend Chand said. He clarified that although the motivation for running the school is based on Christian faith, there is no agenda of evangelism: “We are not there saying that ‘we will convert you all.’ Our motive is totally different. Our motive is to reach out to people; to transform with the love of Christ. So we are not here to convert four hundred children into Christians.”

The “outreach place” is different since there the aim is to tell people about the gospel. They have an evangelist there, and on a regular basis a bus departs from CSI City so that members of the urban church can go and participate in the worship in the “mission field,” as the place is often called. In the outreach place, the “evangelist goes around, meets people, shares about Jesus. It’s quite a direct process of evangelism,” Reverend Chand said. He noted that this outreach was not initiated by him but by his predecessor in the post as presbyter-in-charge of CSI City and that it does not reflect his own theological outlook: “My approach is totally different … from [the pastor] who started the mission work.” While that pastor’s motive had been to “have an evangelist directly tell about the love of God,” Reverend Chand’s aim is holistic “transformation” which includes social, economic, and spiritual factors (rather than just spiritual), and, not least, liberation from caste oppression. The overt attraction of the evangelist’s mission is often healing. But Reverend Chand considers the caste system a fundamental underlying reason: “From the oppressed caste they move to … a religion which accepts them. So that is a very clear phenomenon when evangelism takes place. … So the evangelist may not know that about it, but he truly … with a sincere heart talks about Christ.” Reverend Chand had plans to send the evangelist to a theological college, because “his theology has to be shaped” so that he could gain a clearer understanding of the Bible and of “his purpose” in the mission field. “Not denying the basic mission of God that he’s carrying on; I would still encourage him to go, baptise, and convert.” The evangelist overemphasised healing, Reverend Chand said, adding that he himself did believe in healing, but that it should not be seen as the “main thing.”

The views of lay interviewees regarding the mission field are more unambiguously positive. They understand this type of project as proper mission and, if anything, wish for more of the same. Chinni and Cecil have visited the mission field and confirmed the difference between the evangelist’s profile and Reverend Chand’s. In the mission field, the preaching and worship is “kind of like the AG style,” Cecil said. He too brought up the topic of healing: “I think it’s easier for people to be reached … in rural settings, rather than in urban. … Take for example if someone is sick. /---/ There’s no doctor for them to go to there. While over here you can go to how many ever doctors and be treated

1096 Interview with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17.
before you think of going to anyone to be prayed for.”

Another interviewee, Cauvery, was a teacher in the mission field. Evangelical church members wish for a more active missionary spirit in the church. However, Cecil found that the situation had improved, and that the church was more involved in mission now, since the foundation of the mission field.

The youth wing of CSI City, where Chinni and Cecil were active members and teachers, had previously had an “outreach team.” The team visited schools, colleges, and sometimes churches to sing songs and perform dramatic skits which conveyed Christian messages. And “we [told] them; the Word of God [was] preached to each one of them there,” Chinni said. The outreach team had been called “Armed and Dangerous” which signified, “armed with the Word of God and dangerous to the forces of evil,” Chinni explained.

The spiritual warfare language here stands in contrast to Reverend Chand’s discourse of multi-dimensional transformation, the mission of God, and challenging social evils.

CSI City’s mission field illustrates the theological diversity within the CSI. Reverend Chand’s comments on it make clear the theological differences between him and the rural, less educated evangelist as well as the previous presbyter-in-charge of CSI City. It also illustrates the difference between the pastor and some of his congregants: On the one hand, there is Reverend Chand making it clear that the initiative was not taken by him and wanting to reform it. On the other hand, there is Cauvery, one of the teachers there, and Cecil, who regards it positively as an improvement of the church’s mission work. Thus, there is a tension here between the pastor’s missiology and that of lay members.

The subject of the mission field also brings out the matter of healing and the attraction it has on people of other religions. Reverend Chand clearly holds a different view of the importance that should be ascribed to it than the evangelist does. Moreover, in CSI City it is the rural context which is seen as the main site of evangelism, literally the “mission field.” In the city, Chinni had tried direct, door-to-door evangelism when she participated in a Campus Crusade campaign but it had proved an ineffective method. The identification of the rural context as the mission field is related not least to the greater need for healing there. In villages especially, healing often includes exorcism since belief in evil spirits as causes of illness is pervasive there, more so than in cities. This explains a comment by Reverend Chand, that spiritual warfare is needed in villages but not in the city.

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1097 Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.
1098 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
1099 Interviews with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13, Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
1100 Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.
1101 Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13, Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
1102 Conversation with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17.
CSI City’s two different programmes embody the two main sides of mission as understood among Christian churches: social engagement or *diakonia*, and evangelism. On the latter, views differ between the pastor and lay interviewees. Evangelical lay interviewees appreciate the type of mission that CSI City’s mission field represents, while the liberal pastor finds the focus on healing and salvation to eternal life one-sided. These opposing views indicate divergent opinions on the conceptualisation of mission within the CSI as a whole.

**Mega AG**

The missiology in Mega AG has a clear evangelical orientation with a special emphasis on the evangelical tenet of activism here understood primarily in terms of evangelism. In Mega AG, mission is perceived in terms of a striving for constant growth in the number of church members. This ambition distinguishes it from the other churches in this study. However, mission is not understood *only* in terms of evangelism. The church also shows awareness of social issues, especially poverty. This connects it with a trend for social involvement that Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori have identified within global Pentecostalism.\(^{1103}\) Moreover, the church balances the imperative for evangelism with adjustments appropriate to its minority situation.

However, the most marked side of Mega AG’s missiology is its self-proclaimed focus on evangelism. The aim of mission is expressed in terms such as “reaching out to the lost,” “bringing people to Christ,” and “bringing souls.” Helping people to faith in Christ is conceived of in relation to eternal salvation and the cosmic battle between God and Satan. The Mega AG leadership have an outspoken interest in numbers. According to their own figures, their services attract an impressive and continuously growing number of people. Constant growth is the objective: “Evangelism *has* to be there, continually. If we don’t do it, we will get stuck in this crowd. And there’s all possibility of losing but not [gaining]” churchgoers. Since the church continues to emphasise evangelism, “even if people are leaving we continually are getting new people.”\(^{1104}\)

Internal criticism of Mega AG’s preoccupation with increasing the size of its congregation was expressed by Madhu, who said that “their main focus is bringing souls to Christ, and I don’t know how they are taking it.” He referred to “pastors, and even the congregation … only they are focusing on the quantity, not the quality” of the believers, he suggested. With “quality,” he meant deeper knowledge of the Bible and of God.\(^{1105}\)

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\(^{1103}\) Miller and Yamamori 2007.

\(^{1104}\) Interview with Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16.

\(^{1105}\) Interview with Madhu 2008-03-03. He took some of the edge off his statement by adding that Mega AG did conduct cell group meetings, such as the one he led, where the Bible studies were more in-depth.
Mega AG’s theological focus on evangelism has been mirrored in practice. Their missionary work is ambitious, to say the least. They have built churches in other South Asian countries, especially in Nepal. They have also financially supported other churches, pastors, and missionaries in India and South Asia. Reverend Matthew also told me that the Mega AG pastors “travel a lot … all over India” to conduct programmes on church growth and to participate in big revival meetings. Mega AG’s outreach is directed also towards Bangalore city. They conduct evangelist-led services in different parts of Bangalore every Sunday. In certain areas, discretion is needed. “We are not doing it like blitz the place and make a lot of noise” since if you do that, “naturally you are going to create problems.” In this way, Mega AG adjusts its outreach to the minority situation.

In addition to their more directly evangelising projects, Mega AG also has extensive “social concern” programmes, which they advertise on a sign outside the church. These include “poor feeding” (distribution of food packets in slum areas), free tailoring classes and computer classes to improve “underprivileged” people’s chances of a decent livelihood, and medical check-ups in schools. At times of natural disaster, the church has also organised “flood reliefs,” sending truckloads of goods to people in affected areas.

While the pastor affirmed that social service was an integral part of any church’s mission, he also stressed the importance of not allowing that to overshadow the imperative for evangelism:

> The “Bible is very clear. We have to take care of the poor and the needy. /---/ In the Bible it says if you know what is right to do and you fail to do it, it’s sin. So social concern is part of the church. … Any church. We have to do it. The only thing is, it should not become only social. Then it goes out of the biblical mandate. /---/ The soul … of the person needs to be saved.”

Loss of the sense of the urgency of evangelism is what usually happens when a church loses its initial revivalist zeal, Reverend Matthew concluded. Maintaining the centrality of evangelism is important to Mega AG – and to its self-image, in comparison with other churches: What usually happens in other churches over time, Reverend Matthew said, is that their evangelism “starts to decline – you will have your social programme going, but not your mission programme. So we make sure that that is part of it, we can’t miss that. We’re very strong, and the reason for our growth is we have a very strong evangelistic mode.” Reverend Matthew also emphasised healing and other miracles as

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1107 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2008-02-29.
1110 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16.
1111 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16.
a reason for the church’s growth. Unlike Reverend Chand, he thought that healing could never be overemphasised.\textsuperscript{1112}

In Mega AG, active evangelism is seen as something that every Christian should engage in. Messages in church emphasise evangelism and pastors encourage churchgoers to share the gospel with people and to invite them to church. Not only the pastor but also lay members expressed evangelistic zeal.\textsuperscript{1113} The church teaches the so-called \textit{oikos} method of evangelism, where individual believers reach out to people close to them, such as family members, friends, neighbours and colleagues.\textsuperscript{1114} Church leaders have also taught churchgoers about “person to person” evangelism, because it has proved to be the most effective method, Reverend Matthew said. They have a clear teaching on how to go about inviting people to church, where the first step is prayer: “Target your people, pray for them, then make friendship.” The next step is to help them practically by performing “care acts” for them. Only after following these steps should they proceed to invite them to church or for a prayer meeting at home. The \textit{oikos} evangelism efforts of churchgoers culminate in the annual \textit{oikos} Sundays, one for each of the languages in which the church conducts worship services, when churchgoers are supposed to bring newcomers.\textsuperscript{1115}

Additionally, the church plans special programmes, for example for “corporates,” and asks church members working in such companies to invite colleagues to those. Holidays like Christmas, Easter, and New Year are also good opportunities to invite new people. On such occasions, the church conducts big events with attractions such as dramatic performances to draw people.\textsuperscript{1116}

Mega AG’s self-image is that of a leading Indian church and this reflects not least upon the area of mission. Here, activity is not limited to the local level, but extends to national and even international levels, and the pastors participate in training programmes for church leaders who have been less successful in attracting new members. This self-image is represented also among the laity. Michael said that if he were to go back to one of his previous (Catholic or Baptist) churches now, it would be “if the Lord leads, yes. Why: so that

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{1112} Interview with Rev. Matthew 2011-01-11.
\footnote{1113} Interviews with Mohana 2010-12-14, Michael 2011-03-10. This is not, however, a uniform tendency among the interviewed Mega AG lay members since Madhu, as a result of his ongoing theological education, balanced it with social concern and had started questioning whether there could possibly be truth in other religions. Malini, who is a special case with her dual belonging and differs from Mega AG’s usual theological orientation in several ways, did not express the same evangelistic zeal although she does believe in the positive consequences of spreading the Christian faith.
\footnote{1114} The name is taken from the Greek word \textit{oikos}, meaning family, house, or home. The \textit{oikos} method is an established evangelical missiological strategy. Others also promote this method of evangelism in India: See Fowlkes and Verster 2006. Mega AG’s \textit{oikos} method is more broadly defined than is the case in this article which mainly focuses on the extended family. Mega AG’s \textit{oikos} strategy includes other networks than the traditional family structure.
\footnote{1115} Interview with Rev. Matthew 2011-01-11.
\footnote{1116} Interviews with Rev. Matthew 2011-01-11 and 2012-02-16.
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I could impart the knowledge and the gift that has been given to me so that people would be edified through it.”  

Although Mega AG’s missiology does not focus exclusively on evangelism, it strongly emphasises evangelism and numerical growth. Its missiology stresses that all church members should actively engage in attempts to “bring souls” to Christ. Mega AG’s methodology for evangelism is not, however, insensitive to the political situation. The employment of the oikos method shows consideration of the minority position and constitutes a more careful approach to evangelism than outright proclamation to strangers. Evangelism is directed to near and dear ones and not conceived of in terms of mass conversions. The pastor’s reflections on evangelism demonstrate his awareness of the need to balance the perceived obligation to evangelise with concerns for the safety of his church members and the church’s responsibility not to aggravate interreligious tensions.

The Pentecostal Mission

The theology in TPM also reflects evangelical principles though these are of a radical holiness variety. This makes the attitude to mission in TPM different from that in Mega AG. TPM focuses on the perfection of those already saved as distinct from evangelism with its emphasis on salvation of those not yet saved. In addition, the minority situation has a clear impact on TPM’s mission practices. These two factors are the reason for TPM’s outreach being directed primarily at other Christians.

In our interviews, the pastor concentrated on sanctification, in which he sees the church as possessing unique competence, rather than on the preceding step of salvation which he considers is being taught in other churches as well, especially in other Pentecostal churches. This theological focus was confirmed by lay interviewees, who described perfection but not evangelism as central to the church’s teaching. Pansy said that TPM pastors refer to telling people about Jesus, “but that is not the main thing. … But then we always believe that we’ve received something. Something good. So share it with others; let them also get to know. That is, like, general. But they don’t really emphasise on that.”

The pastor maintained that it is not necessary for TPM to actively go out and try to bring people. Instead, the church’s reputation for powerful prayers is sufficient to attract people to church on their own initiative. Every week, new people come to church in the hope of healing or relief from various other problems, the pastor said. Many people, including Hindus, approach TPM

1117 Interview with Michael 2011-03-10.
1118 Interview with Pansy 2008-02-16.
1119 Interview with pastor Pradeep 2011-01-28.
with a wide variety of prayer requests. They can be seeking relief from mis-
fortunes such as sickness, witchcraft, sorcery, or possession. They may desire 
marriage or a new job, or request the TPM pastor’s prayer for a new vehicle 
or a new house. People approach TPM “for everything,” the pastor con-
cluded. In this context it is worth remembering that TPM pastors live in 
celibacy, which is traditionally believed to enhance spiritual power.

The Pentecostal Mission does have some organised outreach which they 
direct primarily towards Christians from other churches. I became aware of 
this strategy when I met a white-clad TPM member handing out leaflets out-
side Mega AG after a Sunday service. Both Reverend Chand and Reverend 
Matthew told me that, to their irritation, TPM members had sometimes wanted 
to stand outside CSI City and Mega AG to hand out material to the churchgo-
ers there. Pastor Pradeep confirmed that, while they do not directly evan-
gelise among Hindus, they do try to explain the truth to other Christians, and 
they invite Christians from other denominations whenever they hold big meet-
ings. He added that inviting Catholics and Protestants to hear “true doctrine” 
is “not conversion.” Clearly, this strategy of focusing on Christians from 
other denominations is at least partly a concession to the political climate, as 
is the pastor’s statement that there is no need for TPM to actively go out and 
proselytise, since people come of their own accord, and hence his emphasis 
that TPM is not engaging in “conversion.”

This impression was confirmed by Priya. She said that anti-conversion laws 
in other Indian states have made the church wary about directing their evan-
gelism to Hindus. “If we have a convention we can’t give those handbills to 
the Hindus,” she said, which is why they target other churches instead: “So 
we go from church to church and we give, and our bill will also have a line 
saying: Only for Christians.” This line is there for the government’s sake, she 
said, and clarified that the government did not explicitly demand such a reser-
vation, but the church had put it there “to be on the safer side,” otherwise the 
pastor risked being arrested. For the same reasons, they refrain from handing 
out their invitations in public places like shopping streets: “It’s not that it’s 
not allowed, but if some person who is a staunch Hindu gets that notice, and 
he creates a scene and causes trouble, we’re all in trouble. So we stop our-
selves from doing that.” This restraint is in response to a change in the political 
climate over the past few years, Priya said: “[On the] shopping street, we used 
to have that liberty. But for the past, say, four years we don’t have that lib-
erty.” Phoebe had a similar impression; during the last few years she 
thought that the frequency of large prayer meetings or “conventions” as well

1120 Interview with pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20.
1121 This belief is widespread among south Indian Pentecostals, Bergunder writes: Bergunder 2008: 159.
1123 Interview with pastor Pradeep 2012-01-20.
1124 Interview with Priya 2011-02-09.
as the posters or banners advertising such events had decreased drastically.1125

Regarding Hindus, it is better to invite them if they are personal friends or relatives who are willing to come, “so that you know that they won’t cause a problem to you later,” Priya said.1126

Unlike Mega AG and the CSI, TPM does not engage in much social work. The TPM sisters cook and distribute the lunch that is offered to all churchgoers every Sunday after the worship service, something which in itself represents a great expense, Priya noted, adding that they conduct prison ministry and Sunday schools in orphanages.1127 This de-emphasis on social service can be seen in relation to the belief, especially pronounced from the pastor, in the power of prayer. Prayer is what pastor Pradeep sees as the effective and divinely sanctioned method for solving all sorts of problems, including medical ones. TPM prohibits certain other methods for solving problems, notably the use of medicine, doctors, and hospitals for health problems though this does not necessarily stop church members, even long-standing ones, from using them.

In TPM’s missiological practices, the impact of the political climate is clear. Negative attitudes to Christian evangelism and the real risk of problems such as police interrogation lead the church to refrain from conspicuous evangelism addressed to Hindus and instead direct their evangelism towards other Christians. This strategy also correlates with TPM’s self-image as offering a higher teaching compared to other churches. While a person can learn the foundations of Christian faith that lead to salvation elsewhere, to reach perfection and earn the chance for rapture, she must come to TPM, it is believed. Their claims to a truth that they consider unique even among Christian churches means that in TPM, the strategy of aiming their evangelistic efforts towards other Christians can be seen as less of a compromise than it would be for the other denominations.

The minority situation and the political climate in which Christian mission leads to much opposition, sometimes of a violent nature, affect ways of thinking about and practice of mission in these four churches. Adjustment to the political climate is particularly notable in CSI Tamil and The Pentecostal Mission. CSI Tamil refrains from any direct outreach, preferring social service to its own congregation members instead. TPM explicitly directs its outreach to Christians from other denominations. Adjustment to the minority situation is least noticeable in CSI City which is more well-connected than CSI Tamil and less provocative than Mega AG. Sensitivity to the situation, to the religious sentiments of others, and discretion in certain situations are held up as guidelines for Christian evangelism, both organised and individual, in all four

1125 Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19.
1126 Interview with Priya 2011-02-09. “Causing a problem” would mean complaining that the church had attempted to convert them.
1127 Interview with Priya 2011-02-09. I would classify these activities as evangelism rather than social service.
churches. Contrary to a common image of Pentecostals as overly provocative in their evangelism, these two Pentecostal churches show awareness of the political climate by actively forming strategies to avoid aggravating Hindutva sensibilities. There are, nonetheless, theological differences which are particularly pronounced between CSI and Pentecostal pastors. Reverend Thangam really seems to be advocating something that Reverend Matthew criticises in other churches, namely a tendency to abandon evangelism and focus only on the social side of mission. According to Reverend Thangam, the Christian need not even mention the name of Jesus in her encounters with religious others. These pastors express two radically differing views of mission, but both view their understanding as the most responsible and appropriate in a religiously diverse society.

Every Christian Called to Witness

I now turn from mission at the church level to the theme of the perceived evangelistic role of every individual Christian, pastor as well as layperson, and how this is negotiated in relation to political and social realities.

The Imperative for Evangelism

According to David Bebbington’s definition of evangelicalism (see Chapter 3), one of its chief characteristics is activism, which Bebbington describes primarily in terms of evangelism, the effort to spread the Christian faith. Strictly this means to spread the evangelical faith, since evangelism can be directed also towards other Christians. According to Bebbington, activism follows as a consequence of the assurance of salvation inherent in the evangelical born-again experience: Once a person is assured of her own salvation, she can direct her efforts towards attempting to help others reach the same state.1129 This forms an imperative for each Christian to try to share her faith with those not yet saved. The belief in this imperative is strong among my interviewees. Their understanding of evangelism often resembles that which is expressed in The Lausanne Covenant, an important expression of modern evangelical views of mission and evangelism.1130

The belief that every Christian is obliged to try to spread her faith to others is widely held among interviewees many of whom believe that others need to know about Christ, since only he can save them for eternal life as well as answer their prayers in this life. Telling religious others about this is a duty prescribed by God in the Bible, as they see it. Some expressed it as their “burden”

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1128 See e.g. Jones 2009: 507-508.
1130 The Lausanne Covenant, 1974.
of evangelism. The conviction that every Christian believer has an obligation to share the gospel, and should seize opportunities to do so, is widespread among interviewees, although they expressed varied degrees of emphasis on the point. This is true for CSI as well as Pentecostal Christians, and evangelism is a central theme for several CSI interviewees. For example, Christina prays for her only son to “become God’s servant,” to take the Bible and go to a remote forested or mountainous area and preach there as an “evangelist or missionary or pastor.”

A recurring motive for sharing the gospel, in addition to concern for the religious other and her salvation, is that the Christian will be held accountable for her evangelism on Judgement Day. Christians must tell others about Jesus, Thivya said, because at the time of judgement, God will ask about the number of people they have told, and they should be ready to answer. She expressed her fear of Judgement Day and her sense of not being “ready,” still having much “work” to do before she could face God’s judgement. She explained these thoughts as an enduring influence from her Sunday school days when the teachers had exhorted the children to “tell other people” because “God will ask.”

In several cases, personal conversion experiences have led interviewees to a strong sense of the urgency of evangelism. Madhu combines evangelical Pentecostal beliefs with liberal ideas acquired at the UTC, but the experience of conversion provides evangelistic motivation for him as well. On the one hand, his UTC studies have influenced him to the point of his entertaining the possibility that there could be truth, salvation, and a relationship with God beyond Christianity. But on the other hand, his personal experience of conversion motivates him towards evangelism. Looking back on the time before he accepted Christ, he now feels that “I was in darkness. I didn’t know. The way I am now, and the way I build my relationship with my Creator God is more appropriate now than the previous, and that is what I’m thinking for others also.”

**Alternative Views**

The interviewees who most consistently depart from the dominant perspective in their views on the necessity of evangelism, or on the reason for it, are CSI church leaders Reverend Chand and Reverend Thangam, both educated at the UTC, and Thomas, the secretary of CSI Tamil.

Thomas differs from the dominant evangelical view in the motives he sees for Christian evangelism:

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1131 Interview with Christina 2011-01-31.
1132 Interview with Thivya 2012-01-24.
1133 Interviews with Rev. Matthew 2008-02-29, Mohana 2010-12-14, Michael 2011-03-10, Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
1134 Interview with Madhu 2008-03-03.
Why do we want people to know Christian religion? … The reason is … we have [been] given the opportunity by God Himself to be His children. So let us develop that quality and these characters and make others also to know. That’s the reason why we want to make others also as Christians. … Whatever the blessings and whatever the benefits of God we are enjoying, let them also take the privilege.

But it is not necessary for the sake of salvation, he thought: “Not at all, not necessary; even if you’re not a Christian, you’re doing a good deed, sure you will be in heaven.” He said that if more people become Christians, “their religion and community will not come in as a barrier” in the work for social uplifting. “They can have a little more closer relationship. Not only with God, with their fellow humans also. … And they can lead many others to know the love of God. The real God.” Even though he thinks that Christianity can bring people “nearer to God,” Thomas does not share the sense of urgency about evangelising to people of other religions. “Even if you leave them as it is also, they will be good only,” he said.1135

Both CSI pastors also differ radically from the dominant view in their view of the role of Christians in a multi-religious society. Reverend Thangam’s emphasis on maintaining good interreligious relations leads him to an almost complete non-emphasis, even discouragement, of evangelism. Reverend Chand emphasises Dalit empowerment via a new religious identity and the potential for transformation and liberation through Christ. In contrast to the dominant evangelical view, which highlights the individual and spiritual dimension, the liberal view espoused by these CSI pastors underlines social dimensions.

Negotiations with the Evangelistic Imperative

As explained above, many interviewees have strong theological incentives for evangelism. They see evangelism as an obligation not only of the church but of each Christian. But they also consider it important to show respect to others. It is a dilemma to combine these two requirements, especially for interviewees who are strongly convinced of the uniqueness of Christianity’s truth and salvation claims and of the accompanying importance of convincing others of this. Cecil expressed this dilemma: “Them as people we don’t want to disrespect them. But if you disrespect their religion, they take it as disrespecting them as people.”1136

Sharing the Faith

For the reasons outlined above, several interviewees reported having repeatedly tried to convince friends, family members, or colleagues about the truth

1135 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
1136 Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.
they themselves see in the Christian faith. “Yes I do,” Priya said when I asked her if she talked to her Hindu and Muslim friends about religion. “Because it’s my job, right? To tell them about the good news that I have, that Christ is there for everybody of the world, not just for Christians, for Hindus and Muslims, so whenever I get a chance to talk about this beautiful God who’s so good to me, I would definitely embrace the option to tell them.”

Like Priya, other interviewees also said that they tell friends and acquaintances about basic tenets of their faith such as the love of God, the atoning death of Christ, and about God or Christ as the only God who is true and alive. This includes telling others about the Bible and quoting verses from it or relating biblical narratives. They also use their own life as an example and share with others about the miracles of God they have seen. They encourage friends and relatives to read the Bible, preferably beginning with Psalms or the New Testament, and to pray. They invite them to church or to prayers in their home. Festivals like Christmas or other special occasions such as birthdays are considered good opportunities to invite friends or neighbours from other religions to church or home prayers.

Both Pentecostal and CSI interviewees have actively tried to share their Christian faith, but they do not do this indiscriminately. Some of them have caused irritation or hurt feelings when they have openly criticised, discouraged or joked about other religious practices, particularly Hindu. But for the most part, they prefer to adjust their way of speaking about religion to fit the social situation and avoid such provocation.

Sharing with Consideration

The importance of showing sensitivity about how and when to witness to Christ is central to interviewees’ discussions of evangelism. There are social, practical, and safety considerations to take into account.

A recurring theme that came up is that it is sensible not to appear to be excessively assertive or forceful. As Chinni said: “In the work set-up we can’t go and preach the gospel there. We can, but … it’s just going to become unpleasant. And it’s like forcing that person, it’s like nagging him.” She has actually done this, though: “Whenever I have had the opportunity to share the gospel in the office I’ve done it.” It has earned her some negative comments: “Sometimes I’ve had it in my face: ‘Hey, forget it. Who’s going to listen to you?’” Sharing the gospel in a “nagging” way is not only socially awkward, it is also considered ineffective. Cecil said: “We don’t want to push them

1137 Interview with Priya 2011-02-09.
1138 Interviews with Malini 2011-03-21, Thomas 2012-02-02, Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16.
[friends] away. You know, you see some people trying to push down the gospel, and then this resentment is built up." Christina, who, like Chinni, has occasionally attempted to share the gospel in a more forward way than is otherwise usual, has sometimes been disappointed with the result: “If I’m telling also they won’t listen. … If I’m telling also they will tell: ‘Ok, I will praise, I will give respect to Jesus, I will give respect to your rules and regulations …’ But they won’t come over to the Christian [religion]” after all. Several interviewees emphasised that one should not be too direct in one’s evangelising attempts; patience and sensitivity are needed. Too direct or confrontational a strategy risks leading to irritation, argument, or even loss of friendship.

A recurring point is the inadvisability of criticising the other’s religion, or “going down to debasement” as Reverend Matthew phrased it. Several interviewees underscored the injudiciousness of hurting people by openly sharing one’s views of their religion. “You have no authority to go and tell them that it is wrong, unless and until that person comes to a situation that will [make them] aware that it is wrong. /-/-/ I am nobody to judge and tell that ‘what you are doing is wrong’ even though I know that,” Chakradev said.

While refraining from an overly assertive evangelism is generally considered the most prudent course, the negative side effect of this approach is that it can lead to a bad conscience. Michael, for example, had had two elderly Catholic relatives in Bangalore whom he had visited in an old age home. “Sometimes I would go and try and pray for them, or read a word, but they were very strong, very adamant, especially the elder sister.” After that relative’s recent death, he said, “sometimes I feel [that] I didn’t do the right thing, like keep on praying for her or sharing a message. So sometimes I also feel accountable for that.” This illustrates the constant dilemma between the evangelistic imperative and social considerations that interviewees face. Some of them emphasise the first side more, and some the other. Some interviewees have occasionally been more direct in expressing to Hindus their belief about the ineffectiveness of Hindu religion, but that is not the dominant tendency.

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1141 Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.
1142 Interview with Christina 2011-02-01.
1144 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2008-02-29.
1146 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-10.
1147 Interview with Michael 2011-03-10.
1148 Interviews with Mohana 2010-12-14, Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13, Christina 2011-01-25, Michael 2011-03-10, Phoebe 2011-03-19, Malini 2011-03-21. Malini has been direct particularly when she has spoken to her sister, who converted from Catholic Christianity to Hinduism in connection with her marriage.
Consideration for their own minority situation and related safety aspects also come into play here although social consideration is the central factor behind evangelistic restraint. A clear illustration of this is how even Reverend Matthew from the church with most evangelistic zeal, Mega AG, refrains from persistently speaking to his own parents – who are in fact Christian – about their personal salvation. As described earlier, anti-Christian violence is generally not regarded by interviewees as an immediate risk in their environment, rather it is talked about as located elsewhere particularly in rural environments and north India. In addition, there are practical considerations to take into account, for example that some schools and workplaces do not allow pupils or employees to discuss religious matters or to attempt to share their Christian faith.

Strategies for Sharing and Negotiation

I have identified two main strategies in the way interviewees approach the perceived individual obligation to witness to Christ among religious others: To wait for the right opportunity to arise, and to rely on prayer for the salvation of others. They function both as strategies for evangelism and as strategies for helping the individual Christian to negotiate the evangelistic imperative with social, practical, and safety considerations.

The first strategy means to refrain from telling others about Christianity until a favourable chance arises and to seize upon that chance when it does. To wait for the right opportunity could mean that one needs to reach a certain closeness to a person before one can share the gospel with them. An opportunity for sharing one’s Christian faith could be when another person asks about Christianity or initiates a discussion on religion. Another type of opportunity mentioned is when the signs of the times become evident from current events. World news about, for example, the Euro or earthquakes and tsunamis could be interpreted as such.

But the most opportune opening for evangelism is when a friend or acquaintance faces a problem or crisis. Interviewees from all the four churches brought this up as an opportunity for introducing Christianity. Such a situation offers a chance to listen, offer counsel and practical help, and to introduce the friend to Christian prayer and to the Bible. Since interviewees sincerely believe prayer to be effective, they are convinced that this will show

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1149 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2011-01-11
1153 Interview with Priya 2011-02-09.
their friend the power of God in practice. The problems mentioned vary: mar-
tital problems or obstacles to getting married, childlessness, work-related
stress, financial problems, and – most frequently – health problems. Critical
situations are thought to make people more receptive to suggestions and willing
to try new religious practices, such as praying to Jesus or attending
church.\footnote{1155}

This led a few interviewees to speak about the crises of friends as God-
given opportunities for sharing Christian faith, as when Chakradev said that
he told Hindu family members about Jesus when they were in “desperate need
of some miracle to happen. … Sometimes we have to wait for such a situation
that God brings, that we have to take such [an] opportunity and tell about Je-
sus.”\footnote{1156} Reverend Matthew even described the situation of a friend facing a
crisis as something to pray for, so that there would be “some opening”
whereby God could “convict them” of the truth.\footnote{1157} If such statements sound
cynical, the firm belief these interviewees have in the power of prayer must
be kept in mind – the end result envisioned is that the friend or family member
is both relieved of their immediate problem and saved to eternal life.

Sickness in the family is the most commonly recurring example of an oppor-
tunity to suggest addressing prayer to Jesus, “the great physician,” at a time
when the friend would be open to such a suggestion. Priya has suggested to
friends that they come to church when they are facing a problem, “because I
know that it works, basically. If I’m sick, if you pray in church, it works.” The
abundance of difficulties people face in life offer ample opportunity for intro-
ducing Christianity, she said: “You know, in India most of them are into some
kind of a problem, either financial, or health wise, or no peace in the family
or broken families, or some problem. So if you identify that problem and start
praying for them, and God listens to them, that’s how they get to know the
true God.”\footnote{1158}

In addition to praying for and with an afflicted person, some interviewees
brought up the importance of offering practical help, for example by taking a
sick neighbour to the hospital.\footnote{1159} They reasoned that their message about
Christianity will not be credible unless they show it in practice. “We cannot
just share about Jesus unless we show his love,” Chakradev said.\footnote{1160}

In addition to waiting for the right opportunities, the other, and related,
main strategy is to pray for others to come to faith in Christ and gain salvation.

\footnote{1155} Interviews with Rev. Matthew 2008-02-29 and 2011-01-11, Christina 2011-01-25, Cauvery
and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
\footnote{1156} Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08.
\footnote{1157} Interview with Rev. Matthew 2012-02-16.
\footnote{1158} Interview with Priya 2011-02-09.
\footnote{1159} Interviews with Rev. Matthew 2008-02-29, Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-08 and 2012-
02-10.
\footnote{1160} Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-10.
“I can only pray, God can do wonders,” Malini said with reference to her sister’s salvation. Interviewees have prayed for others to be “touched” by God, or “get a clear chance to receive the Lord.” Before Mohana and her sister and mother’s conversion, her cousins, who were secret Christian believers, “were praying for almost ten years for us to come to the knowledge of Christ.” Mohana understood this as a sign of the power of prayer. Chakradev summarised three requirements “to bring a person to Christ”: God’s grace, prayer, and a sensitive and empathetic attitude. This is an apt summary of the general approach to evangelism among interviewees.

Prayer is here perceived as a performative action and a powerful method. But the importance interviewees ascribe to it also illustrates their understanding of the limits of their own ability: another person’s acceptance of Christ is ultimately not in their hands, even if they should do their part by seizing opportune chances to be mediators. Prayer is also an evangelistic strategy that can be practised in private, without provoking anyone. Even those who are hesitant about broaching the subject of religion out of fear of social awkwardness can use the concrete method of prayer.

Another strategy is to live as a witness, to witness to Christ through one’s life, through actions and behaviour, such as showing helpfulness and honesty. It resembles the strategy of waiting for the right opportunities, particularly the part of offering practical help at a time of crisis. But the interviewees who spoke of witnessing to Christ through life and actions generally did so in a less strategic way, not necessarily portraying it as a first step before telling the other about Christ. For Reverend Thangam, particularly, it is a method preferable to witnessing through words. This approach to Christian witness could be contrasted with more assertive evangelism: “We believe [that rather] than preaching, better we do something by actions and practice,” Thomas said of the leaders of CSI Tamil. “I want them to know the truth. But that truth … I want them to know through our Christian life, rather than imposing Christianity on them,” Madhu said. “I don’t want to impose Christianity, but I want to build a witness.”

Interviewees generally consider overly assertive evangelism, especially at the wrong time, to be both socially uncomfortable and ineffective. The strategies discussed here, which are adjusted to social considerations and developed in relation to a specific context, are considered more effective. The strategies of waiting for the right opportunity and prayer are connected, since suggesting

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1161 Interview with Malini 2011-03-21.
1162 Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.
1163 Interview with Rev. Matthew 2008-02-29.
1164 Interview with Mohana 2010-12-14.
1165 Interview with Cauvery and Chakradev 2012-02-10.
1166 Interviews with Rev. Thangam 2011-01-28 and 2011-03-03.
1167 Interview with Thomas 2012-02-02.
1168 Interview with Madhu 2008-03-03.
prayer is an important part of seizing the right chance. Waiting for the right opportunity has two sides; it implies both utilising the chance when it comes and refraining from evangelising until it does.1169

Individual Negotiations
The question of a negotiation between the imperative towards evangelism and contrary social and political considerations is a central one in this dissertation. It demonstrates the reflective, flexible and sometimes contradictory or conflicting ways in which these Christians relate to their religiously diverse context. Because of the importance of the question, I dedicate the following part to four more detailed examples of how interviewees manage this negotiation in different ways. Note that I discuss here what interviewees say that they do, not what they actually do. The subject here is ordinary Christians’ reflections on how to carry out Christian mission in a religiously diverse context.

Waiting Patiently
The case of Cecil from CSI city illustrates how the theological imperative for evangelism often has to stand back due to social considerations. When I interviewed Cecil (together with his wife Chinni) and later when I analysed the interview, I was struck by the discrepancy between Cecil’s theoretical commitment to evangelism and his restraint from it in practice. Christians are God’s chosen method to lead others to salvation, Cecil believes, and he wishes for his friends from other religions to become Christians because then he would “see them in heaven.”

However, since Cecil does not want to estrange his friends by attempting to shove the gospel down their throat, he has preferred to wait patiently for the right opportunity to arrive. “I see it as an opportunity to share when they are inquisitive,” he said. If the chance were to arise, he would first find out their point of departure, and if they seemed interested in learning about God, he would explain about Christian beliefs to them and give them a Bible, asking them to start with the New Testament. He would “tell them clearly that Jesus is the God we worship, and there’s only one God we worship.” This was all hypothetical; so far, he had never come across an opportunity favourable enough to compel him to share the gospel with another person. Neither had he ever invited anyone from another faith to church.

1169 To choose the right objects and methods for evangelism – and to refrain from the wrong ones – was a strategy used by Julia Kuhlin’s north Indian Pentecostal informants as well. Although evangelism was considered vital, it was “not a primary way in which they interacted with Hindus,” she writes. The majority of her informants thought that Christians should share the gospel with people they already knew, and were critical of street evangelism. Since they were aware that Christian exclusivist beliefs were offensive to Hindus, they preferred to witness to Christ through their actions, and aimed their evangelism primarily at family and friends. Kuhlin 2015: 49.
Cecil’s narration of his earlier interaction with a Muslim colleague illustrates his reluctance to cause controversy. The two of them had often discussed religion, and Cecil “learnt a lot” about Islam in this way. But they had “avoided” theological issues because “it is a bit sensitive … I don’t know, I just don’t want to end up in a conflict I guess, so I avoided it.” They had talked about similarities between their beliefs, but Cecil did not want to bring up the differences: “For the sake of not trying to confuse him or not trying to bring up a controversy I didn’t go into what is Trinity or anything like that. … Because we are so close religion-wise, you know, that anyway we believe in one God but somehow we are a little different. So it shouldn’t … become controversial.”

Cecil’s example shows how waiting for the right opportunity could mean waiting indefinitely. This seems to relate to social considerations and individual personality more than to the minority situation. In the practical interreligious encounter with a Muslim, he found it unnecessary to stir up a controversy over relatively small differences when the two religions are similar on the whole. This is despite his belief in the crucial importance of these variances as the difference between eternal life or not. But in that actual personal interreligious encounter, points of commonality and the maintenance of relations took precedence over difference, soteriological beliefs, and the evangelistic imperative. Cecil’s case shows that strongly polarised theological views on the relationship between Christianity and other religions need not mean that one cannot in practice live peacefully and respectfully with people of other religions.

Finding the Right Balance

As with Cecil, Phoebe’s case shows the tension involved in negotiating between the perceived obligation to evangelise and social considerations. But while Cecil’s practical strategy centres around waiting, Phoebe’s reflects a constant negotiation between caution and action.

An incident the previous year had made Phoebe reflect on her evangelistic duty. She explained that in college, when most of her friends were Hindus or Muslims, she “never used to talk much about Christ.” Then, the year before our interview, she had met one of her old college friends in church. The girl, who had been a Hindu, dispelled Phoebe’s surprise at finding her there by explaining that she had “got to know about Christ” and “got saved” thanks to another Christian girl. On hearing this news, rather than feeling happy, “then I felt so bad,” Phoebe said. She had “so many good friends … but I did not talk to anybody about Christ” and had “not even made anybody to get saved.” She felt remorseful because “when you get a chance to talk about Christ, you should talk and make use of that. And so then now I started talking about

God.” Later, she had more to say about this meeting and its influence upon her:

When I got to know [about] that one girl who got saved because of the other friend, I said: “What have I done, being a Christian? I’ve not saved even one person in my life.” … You know, when you go to heaven in the Day of Judgement, God will ask how many you have saved, how many people you have got to Christ. At least one who was saved. Then I was thinking about that. … Then that is when I started sharing about the word of God.

We will be asked “how many people we gathered”, Phoebe said. “And people are just going to hell. Why, at least to people who don’t know Christ, at least we can share a little [about] God.” She particularly wanted to utilise the prayer meetings at work as opportunities to share the gospel with people.

However, there are challenges to a more active evangelising approach at work: “At times I’m a little scared. What if they tell or comment?” Since there are restrictions against speaking about religion at her office, she needs to be cautious.¹¹⁷¹ When I asked about her friends outside the office, she initially reasoned in a way similar to Cecil:

Imagine … if she’s a Muslim, I’m a Christian. I will start talking about my Lord Christ, and she will talk about her God. Where will [we] land? We will land up nowhere else. She’ll think that her God is superior. I will tell my God is more superior. There’s no point in talking. … It should not land up somewhere and land into some mess.

It is better not to discuss religion, she concluded, however, this social caution is contradicted by a sense of evangelistic urgency instilled by eschatological beliefs. Thus, Phoebe soon rectified this last statement, because, at the same time, “you can’t wait also for the chance. If you keep waiting, then that’s all – God will come, and then you can’t tell that: ‘God, I was still waiting for the right [chance].’” “These are the last days,” Phoebe believes. “So even now, instead of keeping quiet, why don’t we just go ahead and tell? Let’s not … ask them to get converted. You just tell who’s the living God, why he died for us, for our sins.” Christians should share these beliefs with others, “especially when we get a right chance.” There should be some opening: “At least just one kind of mustard seed chance, you go talk.” At the same time, she and the other Christians at her office “should be very cautious” about what they say and to whom, in their evangelising efforts. She has advised the others: “I was telling that you should be careful. /---/ But at the same time, you do. You do your parts and God will take care of the rest.”¹¹⁷²

¹¹⁷¹ She and other employees had signed the company’s policy against speaking about religion, along with other topics considered sensitive, such as caste, race, and handicaps.
¹¹⁷² Interview with Phoebe 2011-03-19.
I have selected Phoebe’s case here since it well illustrates the tensions that many interviewees refer to between the imperative to evangelise and other conflicting considerations. Phoebe is constantly negotiating between two poles that are both important to her. On one hand, there is a sense of evangelistic urgency fuelled by eschatological expectations and the belief that she will personally be held accountable for the number of souls she has helped save. On the other hand, she is aware of a need for caution, in her case especially because of office prohibitions where she works.

**Evangelising Straightforwardly**

I have taken Cecil and Phoebe as examples of interviewees who, with different results, balance the evangelistic imperative with social considerations in their personal lives. Their cases illustrate both the perceived obligation to do their part by sharing Christian faith with others, and the need for sensitivity and adjustment to social and practical considerations. Mohana, on the other hand, represents an extreme on the spectrum of approaches to personal evangelism.

Mohana said she had personally undergone a dramatic conversion experience and had ever since felt a strong passion for sharing the gospel with others. Soon after her born-again experience, she read Revelation one night and it had a strong effect on her:

> I felt I couldn’t put the Bible down; I just went on reading and reading and reading. And there I realised what happens to someone who worships idols. And when I read it I was filled with a burden. … That’s when the real thing happened. I said: “God, what have I done? That you have picked me up from this kind of an idol worship?” And then I started telling God: “You have to use me to share the gospel with everyone I come across.”

Mohana emphasised that this imperative applies to every person who has undergone the born-again experience to follow up on this with evangelistic activism:

> On one side … the people who know Christ are such a limited few. And if they would walk the way God wants them to walk, they can make so much of a difference. And on the other side people are just … perishing, not knowing the things. Just living in the lie. It’s this group who knows Christ who should be impacting this [other] group. [Christ] is the only answer. It is so important that every man realises [that] that relationship is so important. And the only people who can share Christ are the ones who are born-again. And if we ourselves don’t share it, then the very purpose of the church is not … there.

Unlike other interviewees, Mohana did not stress the importance of waiting for the right opportunity. Instead, evangelistic urgency impels her to a more forward approach: “When I meet a Hindu, the first thing is I get a burden, I feel: oh, how sad that this person is in the darkness. And then I start explaining every doubt that I had [before conversion], as a gospel to them. I would give
the gospel in a perspective that they would understand.” She probably did not literally mean that she did this every time she met a Hindu – that would be highly unpractical, given the demographic dominance of Hindus – but she expressed her ideal.

Mohana said that she “shared” with somebody “almost every day. … it could be people at work; it could be people on the streets.” She has approached hawkers she has met on the street, as well as prostitutes. “And it’s the same gospel to all of them.” Unexpectedly, for me, she claimed that this practice of approaching strangers with the gospel has rarely caused irritation. She said that people “take it so well. … I’ve never seen anyone get angry so far. Except for one person in an auto, he told me: ‘You keep your religion with you.’ Only one.” She said that people become emotionally affected when she shares the gospel with them, and when she sees that, she teaches them to repeat “the confession prayer.” Mohana clearly sees salvation as an instant event, and her ambition is to be prolific in leading people towards it. In the case of a prostitute that she had recently spoken to, a minute and a half were enough to reach out to her, she said, although usually “it takes fifteen minutes actually to tell the whole thing.”

Mohana’s employment of this method of speedy evangelism directed at unknown people is an exception in the material. The only other person who told me of similar methods is Pansy, who referred to a recent incident where she shared a message about Christ with a person who was almost a stranger to her; she added that she had done this many times. Michael is also among the interviewees who professed most evangelistic activity. Unlike Mohana and Pansy, he prefers to evangelise to his friends, often through Facebook or other social media – probably a less intimidating method – but said that he does so almost every time he is in touch with them. These three interviewees all profess to have been too afraid or embarrassed to share the gospel with people earlier, but after coming closer to God and feeling a more active presence of God in their lives, they have now gained the courage and wisdom to do so, they said. Mohana said that she does not worry about people’s reactions to her evangelistic attempts, “because I go when the Holy Spirit tells me to do that.”

For most other interviewees, Mohana does not embody an evangelistic ideal. The imperative to tell others about Christ, which is more theoretical to other evangelical interviewees, is in her case motivation for daily interactions with religious others. However, it is not only out of personal discomfort that other interviewees do not attempt to share the gospel in the way Mohana said

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1173 Here, this refers to the prayer in which a person for the first time confesses her sins and her beliefs in Jesus Christ as the Lord and Saviour who redeems her from them.
1174 Interview with Mohana 2010-12-14.
1175 Interview with Pansy 2008-02-16.
1176 Interviews with Pansy 2008-02-16, Mohana 2010-12-14, Michael 2011-03-10.
1177 Interview with Mohana 2010-12-14.
that she does, but also because they do not consider it effective, or wise in the socio-political context.

**Witnessing Only through Action**

Compared with Mohana, Reverend Thangam represents the other end of the spectrum of approaches to personal evangelism. As seen earlier in this chapter, he does not recommend direct evangelism at all, instead he wants Christians to witness to Christ through their life and actions rather than through directly sharing the gospel in words.

Reverend Thangam repeatedly returned to the point of “winning the hearts” of people from other religious groups and “living as witnesses” among them, showing love and helpfulness, rather than provoking them by explicitly or implicitly criticising their religion through evangelism. He offered an example from his own life: At a previous “secular job,” he had maintained the accounts scrupulously, even down to 25 paisa, he said. This excessive honesty had surprised others, it had earned him the nickname “Gandhi,” and made his Hindu colleagues trust him with money.

I believe I have won their hearts there. And I believe I have spoken what is Christian love and Christian principles, I have spoken about honesty to them. I think I preached without preaching. And that’s my priority. All may not agree with me. Some may say: “Come on, unless you use the name of Jesus you have not preached.” Ok, you use, I don’t want to use. … I mean if you want to, you can do it, but … I think this, examples, are more powerful.

He thought that helping people out practically, without pressing them to accept Christian faith, is “better” and leads to “more results.”

The following remark of Reverend Thangam’s illustrates the radical difference between him and most other interviewees regarding evangelism: “Rather than condemning that fellow because he’s worshipping Ganesha, let him worship Ganesha.” The first part of this sentence all other interviewees would agree with while fewer would accept the second part. This was not an isolated, carelessly expressed statement; Reverend Thangam also said:

Why do you want to force them or accuse them, saying: “Don’t worship Ganesha” and all, he’ll say: “Mind your own business.” /---/ I don’t want to hurt him by saying: “But my God only is the true living God.” Definitely I won’t go tell him that. That’s my belief. I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of the true living God. So for that matter I don’t have to make one big [procession] through the whole town saying: “My God is the true living God,” no. If he comes to know, he’ll come to know through our life. /---/ These fellows are all worshipping something very mythical. But why to tell him? He might get hurt. … And we also have to live in this country only, India. … Why to hurt that

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1179 Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03.
fellow? If he wants to worship Ganesha, let him worship Ganesha. The thing is, the conviction within our own Christian field has seemed so enough and sufficient. We don’t have time for all this, for the other faiths. “Ok, fine, you believe in Ganesha. You believe that Ganesha lives. You believe all this, I have no problem. I believe that Jesus Christ lives. You’ll also be happy, I’ll also be happy.” That’s it; no interference.\footnote{1180}

Reverend Thangam’s case demonstrates both similarities and differences with prevailing patterns in the material. The importance of not hurting the religious sentiments of others is a common theme. What sets Reverend Thangam apart is his approach of witnessing \textit{exclusively} through life and action and his prioritising of social and political concerns only. The theological underpinning of this approach is the agnosticism about other religions that he expresses towards the end of the quotation above and elsewhere in the interview. Refraining from speculating about the soteriological and epistemological claims of other religions leaves him scope to focus on concerns about positive interreligious relations and \textit{diapraxis}.

These four cases illustrate different approaches to the dilemma in which interviewees balance belief in the importance of witnessing about Christ among religious others on the one hand, with social considerations on the other hand. This negotiation is one of the most pressing questions facing the Christian minority in present-day India. These four cases range from the most assertive evangelism to the most restrained de-emphasis of it in a way that coincides with differences between Pentecostal and CSI affiliation. This is indicative of broader tendencies in the material that are not, however, uniform. Several CSI interviewees also emphasise the imperative for evangelism and a few of them describe themselves as quite assertive in their attempts to convince religious others about the truth that they see as unique to Christianity\footnote{1181}.

The Controversiality of Christian Mission and Evangelism

The three major areas discussed in this chapter all demonstrate how the minority position of interviewees influences their thinking and praxis in the area of mission and evangelism. It is in this, not in everyday interreligious relations, that the impact of Hindutva on Indian society becomes evident in my material. This is unsurprising, since Hindutva anti-Christian discourse is particularly \textit{anti-mission} and \textit{anti-conversion}. Hindutva anti-Christian rhetoric centres around criticism of mission.\footnote{1182} Conversion is a particularly disputed

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[1180]{Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03.}
\footnotetext[1181]{I refer to Chinni and Christina here. Along with them, all CSI interviewees except Reverend Chand, Reverend Thangam, and Thomas believe in the importance of evangelism.}
\footnotetext[1182]{Sarkar 2007: 356.}
\end{footnotes}
phenomenon not only for Hindutva adherents; “there has been a curious reluctance or hesitation even in many secular and liberal quarters regarding conversions,” Sumit Sarkar notes. While this has not generally deterred interviewees from wishing to engage in mission, it does lead some of them to dissociate themselves from the term “conversion.” While “conversion” is, in the material as a whole, used in a neutral or positive way, its negative connotations of “force, fraud, and inducement” has influenced some interviewees’ understanding of it.

Compared to, for example, public demonising of Hindu Gods, a type of provocation which interviewees reject, conversion – also seen as a provocation in large sections of Indian society – presents a more difficult dilemma. Interviewees in general do want to spread Christian faith and yet the problem they face is that Hindutva logic associates change of religion with undermining of traditional Hindu/Indian culture, and ultimately of the nation as such. The view of Christianity as foreign to Indian culture, and linked with Western imperialism, is widespread in Indian society. Even the legal status of conversion is not clear, since a Supreme Court decision in 1977 separated the right to propagate one’s religion (protected in the Constitution) from the right to convert, and there are “anti-conversion” or “freedom of religion” laws in several Indian states. To “convert” is frequently understood as something that somebody does to somebody else; for example, “Christian missionaries convert tribal people” in which case the person whose religious affiliation changes is not the subject but the object of conversion. These are the connotations of conversion that interviewees disclaim: Conversion as repudiation of traditional culture; conversion by force or inducement; and conversion as an act where the main agent is the already Christian missionary, not the convert in question or, as interviewees believe, God. The liberal Reverend Thangam is an exception since he advises restraint not only in the use of the term but in the practice of actively encouraging others to embrace Christian faith.

Interviewees do not feel personally threatened by Hindutva violence. The problems that some of them have experienced in connection with opposition to Christianity have been primarily located in the family. The interviewees who have converted from Hinduism have all met with opposition from their families. These examples illustrate how the religious freedom of the individual is restricted not only by legal means and through threats and violence from outsiders, but also informally and close to home by family ties and hierarchical family structures.

1183 Ibid: 356. See also Kim 2003: 182.
1186 On the Supreme Court decision, see Kim 2003: 79-80. Sarkar comments that this decision defies common sense, since: “Propagation makes no sense at all without the possibility of convincing others of the validity of one’s religious beliefs and rituals.” Sarkar 2007: 356-357.
However, Hindutva aggression and rejection of conversion to Christianity down to the family level is not the whole picture that my material conveys. Hindus are also considered generally open to new religious impulses, and therefore accessible to Christian evangelism (see Chapter 4). There is an interesting paradox in interviewees’ portrayal of the situation for a Christian minority that wants to bear witness to their faith. On the one hand, they live in a Hindu-dominated society often openly hostile to Christian evangelism, but on the other hand, they are surrounded by a majority of Hindus who are perceived as “open to the gospel.”\textsuperscript{1187} An additional paradox is that while my interviewees, although aware of their minority position, on the whole convey a lack of fear, Hindutva discourse reflects a great deal of fear of the Christian minority in India. This fear relates both to open proclamation and to charitable institutions, when the latter are suspected of covert evangelism.

As mentioned earlier, Christian medical and educational institutions are often criticised for constituting an undue inducement to conversion. However, a few interviewees have found that of the two important sides of Christian mission – evangelism and diakonia – while the first is perceived as problematic in India, the second is often appreciated. Reverend Chand said that Christians “are the most respected people in India” thanks to social work and educational institutions.\textsuperscript{1188} Roshen Dalal’s introduction to Christianity in India in The Penguin Dictionary of Religion in India summarises this ambiguity:

\begin{quote}
Christian missions continue to work with the underprivileged and to provide relief at the time of calamities. Christian hospitals, hospices, and educational institutions are highly regarded by all classes and communities. However, conversion, which continues particularly among Dalits and tribals, remains a controversial issue.\textsuperscript{1189}
\end{quote}

Undoubtedly, both appreciation and suspicion of Christian missionary social work exist. The double-sided attitude to Christian mission captured by Dalal is one that interviewees have perceived in their surrounding society.

\textbf{Pentecostal and CSI Mission}

Although even charitable institutions can be suspected of hidden agendas, the most controversial form of Christian mission is undoubtedly evangelism aimed at convincing others to accept Christ. Some Christians are more asso-
ciated with provocative forms of evangelism than others. Literature on Pentecostalism often describes evangelistic zeal, including the active participation of laypeople, as a typical characteristic of this branch of Christianity. Implicit or explicit comparisons with other Christian traditions are often made. Without denying this on a structural level, this study illustrates that overly simplistic contrasts between Pentecostal and mainline Protestant mission cannot be made. The picture of enthusiastically evangelistic Pentecostals or independent evangelicals and less eager mainline churches is complicated when, as in this case, there are clear evangelical influences in mainline churches as well.

While there are marked differences at the levels of institutional, organised mission and the missiology expressed by the pastors, Pentecostal and CSI laypeople employ similar or identical strategies for evangelism. Both groups conceive of it as their duty to tell others about Christ, an idea which could be inculcated in a CSI member at Sunday school. Both groups also face the difficult task of negotiating between this imperative and the necessary adjustments to the minority situation. And in a more practical sense regarding the life of the individual, they must consider how evangelism that is unwelcome might affect their relationships with Hindus at the level of daily interactions.

Even at the level of organised church mission, the comparison between more evangelistic Pentecostalism and less evangelistic mainline Protestantism is complicated by the fact that TPM mainly directs its organised evangelism at other Christians, while CSI City employs an evangelist at an “outreach place” or “mission field.”

The Attraction of Christianity: Healing and other Miracles

Another area frequently highlighted within Pentecostalism in India, with explicit or implicit comparisons with mainline Christianity, is divine healing. The subject of healing, exorcism, and other miraculous answers to prayer is related to the theme of mission and evangelism, since it is key to the attraction of Christianity to people in India. Bauman concludes that it is probably the most important reason why people “first affiliate with Christianity,” whether or not they eventually undergo full conversion. To someone who has heard a number of Indian testimonies about conversion to Christianity, this conclusion seems highly plausible. The more prevalent practice of healing and exorcism within Pentecostalism is thus a probable reason for why it is that Pentecostal Christianity grows faster than other varieties of Christianity in India.

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1192 Bauman 2015: 95.
1193 Bergunder 2011.
But here, again, this study reveals greater denominational differences between pastors than laypeople. The Pentecostal pastors described healing and exorcism as central to their ministry and important reasons why newcomers are attracted to their churches whereas the CSI pastors may not have engaged in practices of divine healing and exorcism to any substantial degree. It is difficult to draw an exact line here since they would pray for people to get well though they certainly engage in divine healing less than many of their colleagues in rural contexts where the Pentecostalisation of mainline Christianity is more noticeable. Healing prayers are allegedly a factor that draws people to the evangelist in CSI City’s rural mission field. A Pentecostal influence upon their evangelist can be discerned when Reverend Chand says of him that “he is trying to imitate the very popular healing thing”\textsuperscript{1194} and Cecil notes that the worship he leads is “kind of like the AG style.”\textsuperscript{1195}

But the importance of healing also becomes apparent on the level at which laypeople operate. Most importantly, some interviewees referred to physical or psychological problems as principal chances for leading other people to faith in Christ through the evidence of healing, an idea shared by CSI and Pentecostal interviewees. Although interviewees said that healing leads people to Christianity, in cases where interviewees have themselves converted from other religious backgrounds, physical healing was not a factor behind it. This fact should be seen in relation to the urban and largely middle-class context of this study.

I have not discussed mission to Muslims in this chapter. Although some interviewees told me about other people who concentrate on evangelism among Muslims, there is general agreement that this is a rare practice. When interviewees discuss how and when to share the gospel with others, the others are always Hindus or, for some, other Christians. These Christians can either be people from Christian families who are believed not to have personally experienced salvation, or – to Pentecostal interviewees – Christians from other denominations, notably Catholics. There are several reasons why Muslims are not included among the people interviewees have tried to, or want to, share Christian faith with. One is that interviewees have less interaction with Muslims than with Hindus or with other Christians. Another is that Muslims are seen as less receptive, as they are considered less open to new religious influences (see Chapter 5). A third explanation, which recurred less frequently than the first two, is a perception that Muslims could become aggressive if provoked.

\textsuperscript{1194} Interview with Rev. Chand 2010-12-17.
\textsuperscript{1195} Interview with Chinni and Cecil 2011-01-13.
Conclusions

This chapter has demonstrated how evangelical, liberal, and general Protestant perspectives lead to different views of the aims and emphases of Christian mission. From a liberal Protestant perspective represented by the two CSI pastors, the focus is on social issues. The understanding of mission can include evangelism, but social concerns take precedence. Reverend Chand’s main focus is on Dalit empowerment while Reverend Thangam’s is on peaceful and amicable interreligious relations. Because of my wide definition of the term “liberal Protestant,” this term can denote varying views on how Christians in India ought to relate to other religions, particularly to Hinduism. Reverend Thangam emphasises friendship and the importance of not offending Hindus, which in the worst case could risk the safety of other Christians in more exposed positions. Reverend Chand’s view is more confrontational; he believes that churches should raise their prophetic voices and “challenge other faiths,” especially in regard to the caste system.

When the religiously diverse context is viewed through the evangelical lens, active evangelism becomes a strong ideal. The evangelical emphasis on activism stipulates that every born-again Christian is obliged to do her part to spread the gospel to people who are still religious others – that is, those who have not had a personal experience of salvation. To the general Protestant, too, witnessing to Christian faith among religious others is an ideal, but a less pressing one than it is to the evangelical. According to the evangelical principle of activism, a person’s born-again experience should lead to diligent efforts to lead others to the same experience. This ideal is present among CSI as well as Pentecostal interviewees. With this comes a double motivation to actively try to lead others to salvation in Christ, not only for their sake but also because God will hold the Christian accountable, according to this belief. The practice of evangelical activism is not straightforward, however. The minority situation and widespread aversion to Christian evangelism renders it problematic. Evangelical activism must be negotiated in relation to the context, on both church and individual levels.

On an individual level, a principal way in which interviewees negotiate the evangelistic imperative with other considerations is through waiting for the right chance. According to the evangelical lens, each Christian has the obligation to seize upon the chance to act as a mediator between the religious other and God’s offer of salvation, when the right opportunity arises, which is an important qualification: It points to the perceived obligation to use the opportunity, but also to the advisability of waiting patiently until it arises. In other words, one should refrain from evangelistic attempts at the wrong times. To use a term from Christian theology, evangelical Christians in this context wait for Kairos, the appointed or favourable time to act.

Viewed through the evangelical lens, the religious other represents a potential self. Through undergoing the born-again experience, she can transform
from religious other to religious self. It is the belief in the universal potentiality of religious others to become religious selves that motivates evangelical activism. But already before this potential transformation, the religious other appears here not as an alien other but as a socially close other, often a family member or a friend. The stories of “the unsaved father” in Chapter 3 epitomise the relationship between an evangelical Christian and a religious other to whom she closely relates. Muslims form the exception here. Unlike Hindus and Christians from other churches or “nominal Christians,” Muslims are depicted neither as socially close nor as, in realistic terms, potential selves. These two factors are interrelated; because of less close association with Muslims, fewer Kairos moments arise in relation to Muslims.
10. Concluding Remarks

In this concluding chapter, I will first summarise an answer to the research questions. I will then proceed to further consider some issues which underly questions discussed throughout this dissertation.

The overall research questions for this dissertation were formulated in the following way: How do Indian Protestant Christians reflect upon other religions in India? And: How do they reflect upon the situation of religious diversity in which Christians form a minority, and how do they perceive their role in this context?

To summarise the answer to my research questions, the reflections of Indian Protestant interviewees on other religions are varied and reflect a theological diversity among them. There is, however, a dominant theological perspective which emerges clearly. This can be conceptualised as an evangelical lens colouring the dominant view of religious diversity among interviewees in this study. Seen through this evangelical lens, all other religions are fundamentally other insofar as they do not promote personal salvation through Christ. The main dividing line between religious self and other is here the one between born-again Christians and all others. Alternative views disagree with this dichotomous view on the relationship between Christianity and other religions and instead emphasise social issues. Religious othering processes emphasise differences between Protestantism on the one hand and Hinduism and Catholicism on the other. This othering focuses exclusively on religious beliefs and practices. The view of Islam is more nuanced, and similarities as well as differences are emphasised. But conversely, interviewees express more social affinity with Catholics and Hindus than with Muslims. Religious images constitute a focal point in reflections on other religions. Interviewees describe relations between Christians and other religious groups in Bangalore as generally characterised by unstressful coexistence. Interviewees predominantly understand their role as Christians in a multireligious society as entailing an obligation to witness to religious others about Christ. They negotiate this perceived obligation in relation to social considerations and thus demonstrate that it is possible to combine theological exclusivism with respectful practice.
Evangelical Religious Othering

In my analysis of the reflections of these Protestant Christians on other religions, religious othering has been a recurring theme. The centrality of the motif of othering is related to the nature of my research question and methodology: I have focused precisely on their reflections on religious diversity rather than their lived practice or their everyday coexistence with other religious groups. Had I focused on their everyday embodiment of religion in a lived religion approach, contextual cultural affinities with other religions would have been more prominent. Had I focused on observations of and interviews about everyday relations with other religious groups, other aspects of the interreligious encounter distinct from religious othering would have been emphasised. But already at the level of the declared reflections which I have studied here, it is clear that dichotomous othering is not the only way to relate to religious others. People from other religions are friends, colleagues, neighbours, or family members, with whom interviewees can form and maintain harmonious relationships despite their bleak theological views on other religions.

I chose to concentrate on qualitative interviews as my main method and to ask interviewees questions which stimulated them to make theological reflections on Christians and religious others. This methodological choice brought forth a dominant theological perspective which I identify as evangelical and which concentrates on the born-again experience as the dividing line between religious self and other. Here I will further discuss this evangelical othering model. The central evangelical trait of conversionism, emphasis on the importance of the born-again experience, entails a specific version of a binary opposition between self and other. This religious othering posits a dichotomy between those individuals who are saved or born-again and those who are (still) not. The category of the religious other therefore includes many Christians, those understood to be “nominal” rather than born-again Christians. This division is binary and absolute. According to the evangelical lens, the dividing line between born-again Christian believers and all others is, as Bebbington writes, “the sharpest in the world.”

A special characteristic of this evangelical othering is that it is only temporarily essentialist and dichotomous. According to the optimistic universalist ambitions of evangelical activism, every “other” has the potential to become one of “us” by undergoing the born-again experience; that is the fundamental

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1197 On the dominance of exclusivism and the importance of the question of salvation in evangelical theology, see Netland 2005.
logic behind evangelical conversionism. This means that evangelical exclusivism does not accept the otherness of the religious other in her present state but also that it does see a potential for full sameness in her, anticipating that her otherness is only temporary. Historically, such universalist evangelical attitudes could provide a counterweight to racist essentialist views of religious others prevalent at the time since (in theory) the question of a person’s salvation was more important than that of any other classification such as nationality or race. In my material, this universalist potential comes to fruition when interviewees emphasise that the difference in beliefs is the only difference between Christians and others.

This exclusivist universalist model differs from the universalism of, for example, Hindu inclusivist universalism, where conversion is not generally an aim. In the evangelical model, a pre-conversion dichotomy can turn into post-conversion sameness, whereas a Hindu inclusivist universal model is one of hierarchical inclusion even without conversion. And unlike Hindu inclusivist universalism, evangelical exclusivist universalism comprises only people, while other religions remain essentially and permanently other.

On the one hand, the material shows this tendency towards a categorical othering of all religion other than that of the born-again Christian. According to the exclusivist evangelical lens, all religion other than Christianity is “darkness” to Christianity’s “light” or ignorance to its truth. This tendency is clearest among interviewees with a strong evangelical conviction, but it was very rare that any interviewee expressed a thought implying that other religions could provide paths to the divine equal with the Christian. There is a strong tendency to exclusivism on the question of truth among interviewees in general.

On the other hand, there is more prevalent and more specific othering of certain forms of religion than others. This refers especially to Hinduism, but also to Catholicism, concentrating on specific traits of those religions understood to contrast with evangelical ideals. Islam, on the other hand, while placed in the general category of non-Christian religions, without saving power and ultimate truth, can be more appreciated for its specific traits. While in theory all other religions are the opposite of born-again Christian faith, the degree of othering differs between specific religions and depends (at least partly) on their perceived differences from, or similarities to, evangelical ideals. (On a less conscious level, majority/minority dynamics and other social

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1199 In less positive words, one could say that it is one of the “theological models that seek to replace the other with the self,” which Jeffery Long contrasts with the Hindu idea that “the other is to be affirmed in her otherness,” the acceptance of the continuing presence of religious others. Long 2013: 58.
1200 Robert Odén, in his analysis of late nineteenth-century representations of Indians and Ethiopians and their religions in a missionary periodical, provides a good example of this ambiguity: Odén 2013.
1201 See Long 2013.
1202 See Barua 2014.
factors might also contribute. The perceived similarities between Christianity and Islam which act as mitigating factors here obviously do not constitute obstacles to Christian othering of Islam and Muslims in other socio-political contexts, whereas the Hindu can represent a harmless or exotic other to the Christian self.\textsuperscript{1203} The material shows an interplay between these two models of religious othering, the generic and the specific.

The othering here is not of the type which the term most often refers to, namely majority marginalisation of minorities. Formation of a hegemonic discourse about religious norms (of the self) and those who break those norms (others) is not the case here in any real, practical sense, although Christians constitute a global religious majority. The Christians interviewed for this study belong to a group which constitutes a suspected religious other in a Hindu-dominated society. Although the establishment of the self as the norm is still very much at work here, this religious othering is instead a minority othering of the majority.

But another noteworthy tendency is the “de-othering” of religious others as people, when interviewees emphasise that religious beliefs and practices constitute the only difference between Christians and others. There is a conceptual separation of people and their religious affiliation here, an acknowledgement that religion is only one area of a person’s life. These Christians’ experiences of people from other religions are mostly positive. This tendency is clear in relation to the primary religious other, the Hindu. “The Hindu” here is predominantly not the oppressing other often implied in Dalit theology.\textsuperscript{1204} Nor is the Hindu mainly “the Hindu fundamentalist.” The Hindutva adherent threatening the safety of Christians is here depicted as an exception from the Hindu norm. My interviewees’ urban and middle-class social setting is an important factor here. Rural life in India is usually more caste-segregated and the caste aspects of the Hindu-Christian relationship are more in effect there. However, it is possible, if not usual, even for rural Dalit Christians living in caste-segregated areas to live as good neighbours to Hindus of the same caste. Another factor which breaks up the absolute dichotomy between religious self and other is when interviewees appreciate the piety of adherents to other religions. As seen in Chapter 4, several interviewees relate positively to the practice of Hindu religion in this regard, although not in many other respects. In relation to the appreciation of an active and visible religiosity, secularised or non-religious people are the most radically different religious other.

\textsuperscript{1203} See Joshi 2006: 217.
\textsuperscript{1204} See Rajkumar 2010a: 168-171.
Maintaining Interreligious Boundaries

A theme implicitly underlying several other themes discussed in this dissertation is the importance to interviewees of drawing and maintaining boundaries between Protestant Christianity and other religions. As David Vishanoff points out, the notion of clear boundaries between religions presupposes the notion of different religions as distinct, clearly defined entities, or parallel systems.\(^\text{1205}\) This is a modern way of understanding religion and religions, and it is shared by my interviewees. They generally think of Christianity as uniquely true; they do not find other religions equal with and in that way comparable to Christianity. But they do see Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam as parallel religious systems with boundaries between them, even if they do not conceptualise them in precisely these terms. (Catholicism could be added as a distinct religious system here, a question I will return to later.) These interreligious boundaries can be crossed completely, through conversion from one religion to another. From the individualist perspective from which interviewees speak of religious affiliation – an individualism inherent in evangelical conversionism – crossing the boundary from one religion to another is a personal choice (or rather, a personal choice to respond positively to the initial “touch of God”).

These religious boundaries are particularly manifest in relation to Hinduism which functions as the primary other religion from which Christian interviewees express a need to dissociate. The nature of the boundaries with Hinduism are relevant to their perceptions of Catholic Christianity and Islam. This is because the problem with Catholicism, as interviewees see it, is that Catholics neglect those boundaries and that Catholicism therefore crosses over towards Hinduism. Islam, on the other hand, is, like Protestantism itself, perceived to contrast with Hinduism in several important ways as well as to guard its religious boundaries with Hinduism. Indeed, Islam can be appreciated for precisely this. But there are boundaries between Islam and Christianity too. The role of Jesus is the most important difference and this is seen as crucial enough to constitute the boundary between the true, saving religion and an ultimately misleading religion. The negative reply I received from most interviewees when I asked if Islam’s God is the same as Christianity’s God demonstrates the limits to how far similarities can be seen, and in that way points to the boundary between both religions.

Another boundary interrelated with the religious boundary between Christianity and Hinduism is that between religion and culture, or between Hinduism and Indian tradition. The importance to these Protestant Christians of maintaining boundaries with Hinduism means that they must draw boundaries between Hindu religion and Indian culture in order to demarcate acceptable

\(^{1205}\) Vishanoff 2013: 342-343.
(Indian) from unacceptable (Hindu) practices. For example, they can categorise decorating the hair with flowers and wearing toe rings as an unproblematic Indian tradition but marking the forehead with a bindi as an inappropriate Hindu influence. These categorisations are not arbitrary, but they can never be absolute, rather they are always negotiated. The scholar who observes and reflects upon religion more or less from the outside can be satisfied, as I do, that it is neither possible nor desirable to draw an exact line between religion and culture. The religious practitioner can reflect but must also make pragmatic decisions. This is not least so for religious minorities who are concerned with safeguarding the unique identity of their religion. But boundaries are also based upon firm beliefs, such as the widespread conviction of the perilous nature of religious images or of relativising Christ in relation to Hindu Gods.

Since these boundaries are controversial and negotiated, there is no consensus on where to draw the boundaries between Hindu religion and Indian culture or between Hinduism and Christianity, neither among Indian Protestants in general nor among the interviewees in this study. For example, according to TPM beliefs (with their strict interpretation of holiness ideals in conjunction with an enchanted worldview), the thali or golden necklace a woman receives in marriage is associated with Hindu ritual and therefore spiritually harmful. To other Protestants, it is a harmless object associated with Indian traditional culture. But, although there is no general agreement about where to draw them, the presence and importance of interreligious boundaries is generally felt. In different ways, interviewees expressed their sense that there are boundaries between religions which must be guarded lest Christianity deteriorate into syncretism. As has often been observed, the notion of syncretism presupposes the idea of religions as mutually exclusive, distinct systems with clearly defined boundaries between them which are blurred or crossed in syncretism. That is exactly what interviewees express here: that Christianity is a distinct religious system which demands loyalty from its adherents, and this means excluding certain beliefs and practices too closely associated with other religious systems. There are, they assume, certain practices, aesthetics, and objects which are incompatible with the aim of preserving Christianity’s purity from syncretism.

Boundaries between Christianity and Hinduism are contested not only between different Christian denominations but also within them. What some members of a church see as contextual theology, others see as syncretism. For example, as students at the UTC pastoral candidates from the CSI can participate in hybrid practices, such as receiving sandal paste on their forehead as part of a contextualised liturgy. But such an exercise in contextualisation will

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1206 See e.g. McGuire 2008: 186-190.
1207 This is a concern they share with many Christian theologians: See Gravend-Tirole 2014: 125-126.
most likely not be practicable once they are assigned to work in a congregation outside the theological college.\textsuperscript{1208} Boundaries with Hinduism are not only contested but must be negotiated in everyday situations, as when interviewees must decide to what extent they will participate in Hindu \textit{pujas}.

Vishanoff points out that a religious difference becomes a boundary when religious people understand the difference as significant enough to constitute a boundary. While religious boundaries “are usually grounded in empirically observable differences … their status as boundaries depends on the human symbolic labour that constructs and maintains them.” Religious boundaries “emerge from religious people’s conscious or unconscious choice to highlight certain differences while overlooking equally real similarities.”\textsuperscript{1209} In the context that I study, attitudes to religious images have evidently attained the status of a crucial boundary which is why interviewees find Catholic image-related practices so objectionable: These practices do not just represent a \textit{difference} between Catholicism and Protestantism but a \textit{boundary} which Catholicism has crossed. This is, according to their way of thinking, the boundary between true Christian faith and quasi-Hindu idol worship. The significance of this boundary in the minds of ordinary Protestant believers is an important result of this study, and it highlights a need to engage with this issue in academic theological reflection.

The importance of religious boundaries is also demonstrated by the way that the attitude to them becomes an important difference in itself between Protestant Christianity and Hinduism. “For a boundary to be visible from both sides there must be some shared symbolic vocabulary that transcends and thus belies the boundary itself,” Vishanoff writes.\textsuperscript{1210} The differences between Christianity and Islam in the image of God and the role of Jesus is one such boundary: it is clearly seen and similarly understood from both sides. The “shared symbolic vocabulary” of monotheism and exclusivism makes Christians and Muslims disagree about the correct understanding of God. Both sides agree about the nature of their disagreement, which forms a theological boundary between them. But Hindu pluralist and polytheist understandings – at least as these are perceived by my interviewees – represent radically different ideas about where boundaries between religions should be drawn. These Protestants frequently understand Hindus as relativistic because they themselves emphasise a boundary which is less important from the Hindu side; that between “my God and your God/s.”\textsuperscript{1211}

\textsuperscript{1208} This example is from the interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-01-28.
\textsuperscript{1209} Vishanoff 2013: 350.
\textsuperscript{1210} Ibid: 347.
\textsuperscript{1211} Vasudha Narayanan remarks on theological pluralism and a readiness among many Hindus to appeal to religious power also when it is located in Christian religious sites and with Christian figures like Infant Jesus and Mother Mary: “It is perhaps this feature that distinguishes many Hindus from their Christian neighbors who may live and participate in a diverse, pluralistic society, but theologically be connected to a certain deity exclusively. Christians, after all, ordinarily do not go to Hindu temples.” Narayanan 2004: 28.
One reason why this boundary between “my God and your God/s” is less important to many Hindus than it is to many Christians is that the question so crucial to these Christians, that of salvation, or in more religiously neutral terms an individual’s post-mortem fate, is viewed in a radically different way by Hindus. As Ankur Barua writes, in Hindu thinking, “the doctrine of k\textit{arma} and rebirth allows a somewhat relaxed orientation to religious diversity.”

To many Christians, including my interviewees, a person’s post-mortem fate depends on staying on the right side of this religious boundary by professing only the one Christian God.

Another example of a religious boundary which is perceived as such from one side but not from the other is defined by the use of religious images. As has been seen in this dissertation, to Protestants it can constitute a boundary between genuine (Protestant) Christianity and Catholic “idol worship.” Catholics have other ways of conceiving of the boundary between “true” and “false” religion or between Christianity and "idol worship.” Their apparent inability to see the boundary that religious images constitute to many Protestants is a major factor in the Protestant othering of Catholicism that I have discussed.

The Contextuality of Indian Protestantism

As I have discussed in Chapter 6, many interviewees consider Indian Catholicism to be excessively religiously and culturally hybrid or “syncretic,” a term some of them use, and they think that Catholics therefore differ from their own way of being Christian in India. In this, interviewees represent a common conception among Indian Protestants. The observation that the Protestant churches in India uphold stricter boundaries with other religions and are less (visibly) contextualised than the Catholic and Orthodox churches, is also sometimes made by scholars, especially in relation to the mainline Protestant churches.

In some respects, my study confirms this since I have found a stronger emphasis on the need to uphold boundaries with Hindu religion among my interviewees than is visible, for example, among the pilgrims practising contextual

\begin{itemize}
  \item Barua 2014: 87. He does not bring up here the problem of the connection between \textit{karma} and caste.
  \item For example, Carman and Vasantha Rao note that Luke and Carman’s earlier study, which observed many signs of religious hybridity among rural CSI Christians, “was received with much consternation and some skepticism by Mr. Luke’s colleagues in the diocese” and that this “embarrassment may have been greater because the situation so resembled that of which Protestants in India had often accused Roman Catholics: a mixture of Christian and Hindu customs and a compromise of Christian principles.” Carman and Vasantha Rao 2014: 2-3.
  \item E.g. Raj and Dempsey 2002: 4, Jones 2009: 509. The clearest sign of this scholarly attitude to mainline Protestantism may be the relatively less scholarly attention paid to mainline Protestantism as contemporary local Christianity.
\end{itemize}
popular Catholicism at the shrine of St. John de Britto in Tamil Nadu. But one could also compare this with the scene described by John Carman and Chilkuri Vasantha Rao in which CSI church members, in a rural part of this Protestant denomination, actively participate in Hindu rituals during a Dasara festival. It is an interesting question how common such open disregard for the religious boundaries so important to others within the same church is. It contrasts strikingly with the urban Protestant (Pentecostal and CSI) attitudes that emerge from my study, where avoidance of active participation in Hindu ritual is important.

Also, as Robert Eric Frykenberg has pointed out, contextuality in India takes seemingly endless forms, many of which are controversial. Frykenberg lists, among many other examples, the use of the thali (wedding necklace) and the bindi (forehead mark), and the practices of sitting cross-legged during worship and of receiving communion only with the right hand. Some of these are practices upheld among the Protestant Christians in this dissertation, others are rejected by them, and the thali is worn by some and rejected by others. The Pentecostal Mission, which rejects the thali, similarly rejects Western influences on women’s style of dressing in favour of traditional Indian clothes. It incorporates other clearly contextual elements such as indigenous music styles, a guru-disciple system in place of institutional theological education, and an ascetic celibate ideal which converges with Christian holiness ideals.

Mega AG, on the other hand, relates to a global neo-Pentecostal culture, but incorporates typical Indian cultural elements as well, for example styles of music and dancing influenced by the Indian film industry. In the Church of South India, contextual practices are far from homogeneous but depend on many factors such as the urban/rural, geographical, cultural, and social settings of the Christians in question as well as their caste affiliation, and their attitudes to gender, the teachings of the missionaries who worked in that area, and so forth. One example, provided by Reverend Thangam, is how CSI Christians from the southern parts of Tamil Nadu use only a gold chain placed on a Bible during the part of the marriage ceremony dedicated to fastening the thali round the bride’s neck. The northern Tamil CSI Christians in Bangalore, he has observed, use a turmeric-coloured thread placed on a coconut (in closer accordance with Hindu traditions). The northern Tamils also observe traditions such as marking the corners of wedding invitations with turmeric and the pre-wedding ritual of applying a turmeric-based paste to the bridegroom’s body.

As has been occasionally indicated in this dissertation, culturally defined ways of thinking – of which belief in evil spirits or ideas about the religious

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1215 See Raj 2002b.  
1217 Frykenberg 2008a: 1118.  
1218 Interview with Rev. Thangam 2011-03-03.
significance of gold are just some examples – are often shared with people from other religious groups but given new Christian interpretations. A practice like women covering their hair for worship, which is standard in TPM and CSI Tamil, is motivated with reference to a biblical text but has clear parallels in other Indian religions as well. Not only the most obvious religious “borrowings” or continuity with pre-Christian religion constitute contextuality. It is also reflected in such everyday things as body postures or ways of dressing for worship. Some indications of contextuality may be so taken for granted that not only are they not understood as Hindu religious influences, they are hardly reflected upon as elements of Indian culture. Such examples could be removing one’s footwear before entering the church or approaching the altar, or receiving communion with the right hand.

My interviewees and other Indian Christians also show their local grounding not only in practices directly related to church and worship but also in various other ways: through their language, style of dressing, aesthetic preferences (except in relation to religious images), view of the family, body language, etcetera. In this dissertation I have discussed my interviewees more as Christians than as Indians – or as Tamilians, Kannadigas, women, men, members of certain castes, or from other aspects of their identities. This is because of my focus on religious/theological questions in this study, and it does not mean that other aspects of their identities are not important in the lives of interviewees on the whole. It is, of course, impossible to measure levels of contextuality; differences between Christian traditions are in the forms of contextuality and in locations of boundaries.

But the theological response to Hinduism here differs radically from popular Catholic hybridity as well as purposeful institutional Catholic inculturation in the form of, for example, Catholic ashrams. It differs also from deliberate academic Protestant inculturation like Christianised Pongal (traditional Tamil harvest festival) celebrations at the UTC, or rural Protestant dual practice like that of the Christians in Carman’s and Vasantha Rao’s study. And it differs from the form of contextual theology which is presently most influential in Protestant academic circles, namely Dalit theology, which in its turn criticises earlier inculturation for its “high-caste” bias. Inspiration from Dalit theology is not widespread among these ordinary Protestants. Among lay members, the evangelical “culture of piety” based on earlier missionary teaching which was observed by Lionel Caplan in Chennai still has a

1219 The UTC is an ecumenical and not an exclusively Protestant institution, but the Protestant element is so significant there that I see practices at the UTC as examples of what is practicable in academic Protestant circles in India.
1220 See Carman and Vasantha Rao 2014: 45.
1222 As has been seen in previous chapters, the obvious exception here is Reverend Chand, who holds a high degree in theology.
strong hold. John Webster as well as Carman and Vasantha Rao observe that, despite Dalit theology’s popularity in theological seminaries and official statements by church bodies, it is unclear how much it has influenced the thinking among ordinary Dalit church members.

The most obvious response to Hindu religious practice in my study centres on emphatic criticism of religious images and associated beliefs and practices. This is another version of contextual Christianity; the contextual response here takes the form of emphasising religious difference and dissociating from certain practices. It takes the form of boundary-marking rather than boundary-crossing (as in purposeful contextualisation) or of consulting a different map of boundaries than the conventional one (as in less deliberate contextuality/hybridity or in dual religious affiliation). But this emphasis on Protestant iconoclasm is a contextual form of Protestantism which is not the same as saying that it is a positive or constructive theological response to Hinduism. But I do maintain that it is a factor to consider in the production of contextual Protestant theology in India.

A Distinctively Protestant Perspective

It has emerged clearly that interviewees view other religions not only from a Christian but from a distinctively Protestant perspective. Not only do they relate to Catholic Christianity as markedly other than their own faith, their attitudes to religion in general and specific religions in particular reveal specifically Protestant ideas and emphases. Many of their views also reveal a particularly evangelical Protestant perspective. In accordance with my abductive methodology, it was after discovering this that I decided to use the term “evangelical lens” for the dominant view of religious plurality among interviewees. Although I have found “evangelical” to be the best designation for the set of ideas that underlie this perspective, specifically evangelical and more general Protestant ideas have not been easy to disentangle from each other. This problem reflects the nature of evangelicalism as I understand it, as basically an amplification of general Protestant ideals (see discussion in Chapter 3). Consequently, I have also found it necessary to complement the term “evangelical lens” with the term “general Protestant perspective” for ideas which are distinctively Protestant but represented also among clearly non-evangelical interviewees.

1225 Although European perspectives have played their parts in forming the historical background to this emphasis on images. On Protestant attitudes to Catholic images, missionary reactions to Hindu religious images, and missionary teaching against “idolatry,” see Oddie 2006.
One of the underpinnings of this general Protestant perspective is an emphasis on scripture.\(^{1226}\) I have shown how common views of Hinduism, Catholicism, Islam, and their own Protestant religion among interviewees posit the biblical Word against ritual object, particularly religious image. Other central Protestant ideas reflected in my study are those of individualism and voluntarism. Meredith McGuire describes these ideals succinctly: “voluntarism (i.e., the idea that belonging and commitments ought to be freely chosen) and individualism (i.e., the idea that the individuals, rather than family, tribe, or other relationships, ought to be the relevant unit for making such choices).”\(^{1227}\) These ideas are particularly evident in the evangelical emphasis on conversionism that some of my interviewees express.

Another important Protestant idea is the preference for belief over practice or ritual,\(^{1228}\) an ideal which is prevalent among interviewees. A typically Protestant emphasis on “right belief” as the only way to the ultimate goal of salvation, and a view of practice as potentially misleading, is well-represented among them. It is reflected, for example, in views of Hindu and Catholic religious practice. However, another idea expressed by interviewees is that of the practical efficacy of religion. This efficacy is channelled through certain practices – or rituals. Prayer and, to some interviewees, divine healing, are particularly important practices. Therefore, whatever Protestant rhetoric claims, I do not wish to overstate the difference between Protestant and Catholic perspectives on this point.

An illustration of the importance of these Protestant ideals is visible in the processes of othering Catholic religion which are more evident than in the case of Islam. This can be understood in relation to the emphasis on monotheism, scripture, and dissociation from religious images that interviewees perceive in Islam. Muslims are, as it were, “better Protestants” than Catholics are.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, boundaries between religions have no separate essentialist existence but are constructed, contested, and negotiated. Any definition of what constitutes a distinct religion is a construction supposed to help us navigate among the overwhelming diversity of religious expressions present in the world. An ongoing questioning of the notion of Christianity as a monolithic religion is reflected, for example, in the use of the plural form in book titles such as *Christianities in Asia* and *Constructing Indian Christianities*, reflecting Christianity’s geographical and cultural diversity.\(^{1229}\) In this dissertation, denominational diversity has come to the fore. It is worth reflecting over whether Protestantism and Catholicism – and Orthodox Christianity, although it falls outside the scope of this study – in certain contexts function more as separate, distinct religions than as one, at least at a popular

\(^{1226}\) See e.g. King 1999: 62.

\(^{1227}\) McGuire 2008: 11-12.

\(^{1228}\) See McGuire 2008: 39-41.

\(^{1229}\) Phan (ed.) 2011, Bauman and Young (eds.) 2014.
level. This study reveals a Protestant tendency to view them as such. In answering my research question about views on other religions, I found myself obliged to include other Christianities, particularly Catholicism, in that category. There are places where they are officially categorised as such: In China and Indonesia, Protestantism and Catholicism are legally defined as two different religions. As this study illustrates, there is a need to clearly distinguish between Catholic and Protestant Christianity.

I myself have fused two types of Christianity that are in several ways distinctively different from each other by discussing Pentecostal and CSI Christians under the umbrella terms “Protestants” and “evangelicals.” My reason for doing this is that in their theological reflections about other religions, Pentecostal and CSI interviewees show significant similarities. Although it is possible to make certain generalisations about differing theological outlooks in the four churches included in this study, similarities and differences between them also cut across denominational boundaries. The greatest theological differences are to be found among pastors rather than lay members. Views of mission and religious images are clear examples of this tendency. It should be noted here that both the CSI pastors interviewed for this study have been educated at the UTC and thus share a specific theological background. Their views are not necessarily representative of CSI clergy overall, and definitely not representative of the theological views among CSI members. But their voices, when heard alongside those of other interviewees, demonstrate the theological diversity present within south Indian Protestantism.

Epilogue

In the introduction to this dissertation, I wrote that I had noticed a gap between the theology taught at prominent Protestant educational institutions such as the UTC and spread through academic publications or conferences on the one hand, and what seemed to be practicable or “preachable” in local churches on the other hand. This gap is particularly noticeable with regard to mainline Protestant denominations like the CSI.

My study confirms the presence of major theological differences within the CSI. Despite the small number of interviewees in this qualitative study, they show a great variation in theological outlooks within the CSI. Theological views are more heterogeneous among CSI interviewees than among Pentecostal interviewees. The dominant view which has emerged in relation to questions of salvation and religious diversity is shared by CSI as well as Pentecostal interviewees. But if this study had included only the Pentecostal interviewees then it would have reflected more of the dominant view and if it had comprised only CSI interviewees that would have been less pronounced. Challenges to the dominant view often came from a CSI side, especially from the pastors and from members in CSI Tamil. However, sometimes Pentecostal
interviewees also challenged theological paradigms prevailing in their churches.

The influence of evangelical theology within the CSI, not least among laity, has become apparent in this study. As I have repeatedly had occasion to observe, it is the pastors who stand for the most liberal views and who stand closest to the theology expressed in official CSI material and developed by professional theologians from a CSI background. An implication of this is that by reading CSI publications or interviewing CSI pastors (especially urban, English-speaking, and theologically well-educated pastors), one cannot form conclusions about beliefs and attitudes among CSI members overall. This highlights the need for more studies of views among ordinary church members, urban as well as rural.

The study demonstrates how important the question of salvation can still be among ordinary Protestants, and not only among Pentecostals or members of independent evangelical churches but also among members of major mainline denominations like the CSI. My somewhat theoretically outdated interest in the question yielded such a rich result that its continuing centrality to the theological outlooks of many ordinary Protestants in this context became evident. This theological question has clear political implications, since it is the great importance ascribed to the question of individual salvation that fuels the Christian evangelism so provocative to sections of the Hindu majority. One implication, then, for theologians, pastors, and others interested in developing resources for more accommodating views of other religions, is the necessity of acknowledging the lasting importance of the issue of salvation, and the continued strong position of soteriological exclusivism among ordinary Protestants.

For theologians or pastors who wish to inspire more open views on other religions among ordinary Christians, one possible way to do this is through soteriological agnosticism, which leaves space to focus on other issues such as practical cooperation or diapraxis. As mentioned in Chapter 3, soteriological agnosticism is represented among a few interviewees. This indicates the possibility of exploring this route to a theology that can be preached also among ordinary Protestants and not primarily at theological conferences. Such an approach could be easier for church members to digest than promotion of either soteriological inclusivism or pluralism. But to lead the focus away from the question of salvation and the consequent dichotomy between Christian self and religious other, one must first acknowledge the present centrality of the question.

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1230 Malini and Reverend Thangam expressed soteriological agnosticism. The impossibility of knowing exactly who will be saved was mentioned by a few more interviewees, and more decided exclusivist interviewees conceded certain exceptions to the rule that salvation is necessarily entailed by confession of Christ. Such openings also break up the absolute dichotomy between assurance of salvation and definite damnation.
An important implication of my study is the need for more theological reflection on religious images and the perception of them among ordinary Protestants. A partial explanation of my interviewees’ view of religious practices involving images as the polar opposite of their own religion is a typically Protestant textual bias among them. Perhaps the same general textual bias in religious studies and academic theology has led to a comparative neglect of the importance of this question to interreligious relations in India. With this textual bias being increasingly called into question, the role of religious images is a subject worthy of more scholarly and theological attention.

Another non-textual element of religion that has surfaced occasionally in this study is the role of religious festivals. Festivals constitute occasions for interreligious interaction and interreligious encounters that necessitate negotiation, as with the question of receiving *prasada*. The role of religious festivals as embodiments of religion taking place in the “in-between”\textsuperscript{1231} is another area worth exploring. Interreligious interaction at festivals takes place in the public sphere as well as at home, where neighbours or relatives of different religions are invited.

A further area which has emerged as important to the understanding of religion among interviewees is the question of its power or efficacy. It is important to them not only that a religion is true and that it leads to salvation but also that it “works.” Interviewees recurrently portray this efficacy, or lack thereof, as a difference between Christianity and other religions. This aspect would probably have been more critical if I had conducted this study in a rural or semi-rural context, or among the urban poor.\textsuperscript{1232} My interviewees are, to a high degree, urban, middle-class and highly modern Protestants. To their co-religionists in Indian villages, who, for example, have less access to good healthcare, the “magical” or miraculous power of religion, such as its perceived power to heal, is even more important than it is to them.\textsuperscript{1233}

Nevertheless, in this urban context also, interviewees testify to how their religion “works” in their daily lives: it gives them comfort and strength, and they experience that their prayers are answered; they experience blessings and miracles as an outcome of their faith. Scholars of lived religion underline the importance of this aspect of religion to religious people across the world.\textsuperscript{1234} But religious power or efficacy, mediated through ritual action, is understated in official discourse among mainline Protestants, while being highly significant to Pentecostal worldviews.\textsuperscript{1235} The question of how Christians relate to

\textsuperscript{1231} See Cheetham 2013: 29-31.
\textsuperscript{1232} Nathaniel Roberts emphasises the centrality of this aspect, the efficacy of religion, to slum dwellers in Chennai, Hindu as well as Pentecostal Christian. Roberts 2016: 166-169.
\textsuperscript{1233} See e.g. Carman and Vasantha Rao 2014: 12-13, 170-188, Bergunder 2011.
\textsuperscript{1234} See e.g. McGuire 2008.
\textsuperscript{1235} See McGuire 2008: 33-41 for a discussion of the concept of religious power and changing Protestant and Catholic conceptions of it along with the rhetorical marginalisation of ritual action and the separation of proper religion from “magic” during the Long Reformation in Europe. See also Dempsey 2008 on contesting modern understandings of the miraculous and of direct
the concept of religious efficacy or power (which can be conceived of as stronger at certain places, with certain people, and through certain rituals) is a subject which falls outside the scope of this study. It is a subject which necessitates other methodological tools: observations of religious practice and other interview questions. But an outcome of this study is an indication of the importance of these themes. Especially relevant in relation to my research question is the importance of efficacy as a criterion for evaluating a religion, along with its truth and its capacity to save. The majority of interviewees view Christianity, often specifically Protestant Christianity, in these terms, as superior to other religions not only in terms of truth and salvation but also in terms of spiritual power and efficacy in daily life.

divine intervention in the world. Mainline Protestant and Catholic theologians have decidedly opposed miraculous worldviews since the mid-nineteenth century, Dempsey states (p. 9).
List of Interviewees

CSI City

*Reverend Chand:*
Age: 50-60.
Education: Beyond secondary education. He holds a BD from the UTC and an MTh from abroad.
Religious background: CSI.

*Caupery and Chakrdev:*
Age: 50-60.
Education: Beyond secondary education. Both have studied theology at well-established Evangelical theological institutions in India.
Religious background: Hindu. Both are the only converts to Christianity in their families.

*Chinni and Cecil:*
Age: 20-30.
Education: Beyond secondary education. Cecil holds a Bachelor’s degree in theology and is studying for a Master in theology.
Religious background: CSI City.

*Christina:*
Age: 30-40.
Education: Beyond secondary education.
Religious background: CSI.
CSI Tamil

*Reverend Thangam:*
Age: 30-40.
Education: Beyond secondary education. He holds a BD from the UTC.
Religious background: CSI.

*Tarun:*
Age: 30-40.
Education: Up to and including secondary education.
Religious background: CSI Tamil.

*Thivya:*
Age: 20-30.
Up to and including secondary education.
Religious background: CSI Tamil.
Other information: She did not want me to record the interview. Her aunt was also present.

*Thomas:*
Age: 40-50.
Education: Beyond secondary education.
Religious background: CSI Tamil.

*Triveni:*
Age: 20-30.
Education: Studying for a degree beyond secondary education.
Religious background: Catholic mother, Hindu father. Triveni started coming to another CSI church with friends when she stayed in a hostel. She has been going to CSI Tamil for about two years.
Other information: Her friend was present during the interview and translated between Tamil and English when Triveni preferred to speak Tamil. She does speak English, but she was self-conscious.
Mega AG

Reverend Matthew:
Age: 50-60.
Education: Beyond secondary education. He has studied theology at the SABC.
Religious background: Syrian Orthodox. He had a conversion experience in his youth and was part of Mega AG from its early days.

Madhu:
Age: 30-40.
Occupation: Beyond secondary education. Studying at the UTC with the view of becoming an AG pastor.
Religious background: Hindu. He was the first convert to Christianity in his family, but subsequently all his family members except his father also converted.

Malini:
Age: 40-50.
Education: Beyond secondary education.
Religious background: Catholic. She has double membership in the Catholic Church and in Mega AG.

Michael:
Age: 30-40.
Education: Up to and including secondary education.
Religious background: Catholic. After he had moved to Delhi in 2001 he started attending a Baptist church with some Northeast friends and later a Pentecostal church. His pastor in Delhi told him about Mega AG when he was about to be transferred to Bangalore.

Mohana:
Age: 30-40.
Education: Beyond secondary education.
Religious background: Hindu. She converted to Christianity around fifteen years earlier, along with her sister and mother but not her father.
The Pentecostal Mission

*Pastor Pradeep:*
Age: 50-60.
Education: Up to and including secondary education.
Religious background: Pentecostal.
Other information: He did not want me to record our interviews. For that, he would need the permission of those higher in the church’s hierarchy.

*Pansy:*
Age: 20-30.
Education: Beyond secondary education.
Religious background: TPM.

*Phoebe:*
Age: 20-30.
Education: Beyond secondary education.
Religious background: Christian. Her mother is from a CSI background and her father was a Hindu, but both converted to Pentecostalism after Phoebe’s father was healed of a serious condition in Phoebe’s childhood. They used to belong to an AG church and started going to TPM in January 2011.

*Priya:*
Age: 20-30.
Education: Beyond secondary education.
Religious background: Catholic. Her mother was “saved” in 1991 and started worshipping in TPM. In her eighth grade, Priya decided to worship there too.
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