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Love for the Neighbour as Lived Theology

Beliefs and Practices among Ordinary Christians in India

Anita Yadala Suneson

Dr Anita Yadala Suneson is lecturer in World Christianity and Interreligious Studies at the Department of Theology at Uppsala University, Sweden.

Abstract

The aim of this article is to identify the theological potential for interreligious relations as embodied in the everyday life of ordinary Christians in South India. The empirical study that underlies the discussion is based on interviews with lay churchgoers and pastors from Pentecostal and mainline Protestant churches in Bangalore. The beliefs they articulate, as well as the practices they carry out in their daily lives, are defined as their lived theology. This is analyzed through the terminological framework of theology in four voices. Interviewees express beliefs that emphasize the superiority of Christianity over other religions and the importance of evangelism. Nevertheless, in everyday life they prioritize respect for religious others and maintenance of relationships with them over sharing an exclusivist message about Christ. Their lived theology emphasizes relatedness across religious boundaries and the priority of showing love for the neighbour in practice.

Keywords

Lived theology, interreligious dialogue, Christianity in India, Hindu-Christian relations, ordinary Christians

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My PhD dissertation is based on interviews with ordinary Christians in Bangalore, South India, about their views on religious plurality.[1] When I presented a draft based on my fieldwork in our research seminar, one of my fellow PhD students – a Swede with many years' experience of travelling to India and visiting and working with theological colleges, Christian research institutions, and NGOs there – was appalled. "They say such horrible things," he exclaimed. The negative attitudes to other religions and strong Christian exclusivism expressed in my empirical material were not what he had expected. They differed from his understanding of what Indian Christian theological reflection about religious plurality was like. As this incident illustrates, ordinary Christians' voices can be shocking. Yet they can also offer fresh perspectives and constructive insights – but these may not be phrased in the way that the professional theologian expects.

The Elite and the Everyday in Interreligious Dialogue

One reason why voices from the ground can provoke academics in this way is that academic discourse on interreligious dialogue and theology of religions primarily relates to religion on an elite level. It usually focuses on scriptures, systematic treatises of theology, and scholarly and philosophical endeavours to gain a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of religious plurality. Only rarely does it engage more deeply with ordinary people's lives and beliefs.[2]

This is so despite the valuable theological insights that ordinary people express in their practice of faith and daily life and in their reflections on the same. That ordinary people's faith practices embody theological meaning is a conviction shared by the group of theologians behind the methodological framework of "theology in four voices." The model is useful for understanding the different levels on which theology operates and

[1] Anita Yadala Suneson, *Indian Protestants and their Religious Others: Views of Religious Diversity among Christians in Bangalore* (Uppsala: Studia Missionalia Svecana, 2019) E-book available through open access. My interviewees are lay churchgoers and a few pastors in two Pentecostal churches and two churches belonging to the Church of South India (CSI). I use the term "ordinary Christians" to signify that they do not belong to an academic or institutional elite; see the use of "ordinary people" in the field of lived religion in e.g. Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[2] Overviews of the field of interreligious dialogue often pay less attention to ordinary people's lives than to interreligious engagement on elite institutional or scholarly levels. See, e.g., Catherine Cornille, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); and Terrence Merrigan and John Friday, eds, *The Past, Present, and Future of Theologies of Interreligious Dialogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). With some exceptions in individual contributions, on the whole the heavier emphasis in these volumes is on elite levels of interreligious interaction. By comparison, more space is given to studies of concrete contexts in Vladimir Latinovic, Gerard Mannion, and Peter Phan, eds, *Pathways for Interreligious Dialogue in the Twenty-First Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

the links between these levels. Therefore, I will employ the framework of theology in four voices in this article and briefly present it here: The *formal* voice refers to "the theology of the academy, of the 'professional' theologian"; the *normative* voice is that which "the practising group names as its theological authority," such as scripture or central church hierarchy; the theological views that a group of Christians articulate constitute their *espoused* theology; and their *operant* theology is that which they express through their practices.[3] As seen here, the formal and normative voices refer to an elite level of theological articulation, and the espoused and operant voices to ordinary people on a local level. These levels are not isolated from each other; they are "distinct, but interrelated and overlapping," and "we can never hear one voice without there being echoes of the other three."[4]

In the field of interreligious dialogue, a common ideal in formal theology is a genuine understanding and deep knowledge of other religions.[5] As Muthuraj Swamy points out in his critique of the academic discourse on interreligious dialogue, this ideal is problematic since "it promotes a strictly elite perspective on what is 'understanding' itself."[6] A second and related common ideal in interreligious dialogue is a sympathetic attitude to other *religions* as belief systems. It is this, rather than a sympathetic attitude to religious others, the *people* who identify with other religions, that has often been conceptualized as the goal. In formal theological discourse on interreligious dialogue, "religions" or "religious traditions" often appear as both subjects and objects of dialogue.[7] Since "religions" as such cannot act – only people and institutions who identify with them can act – what is actually referred to in this discourse on dialogue is usually the formal and normative voices speaking for said religions, in the forms of theologians, religious leaders, and representatives of religious institutions. An emphasis on ordinary people as subjects of dialogue is rarer. As Swamy writes, ordinary people are usually cast in the role of receivers of dialogue programmes initiated by dialogue experts and imparted to ordinary people from above.[8]

3 Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney, and Clare Watkins, *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM, 2010), 54–55.

4 Ibid., 53–54. The four voices model was developed as a methodological framework for Theological Action Research, but, as its authors point out, it has a wider relevance; ibid., 51.

5 See, e.g., Catherine Cornille, "Introduction," *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), xii.

6 Muthuraj Swamy, *The Problem with Interreligious Dialogue: Plurality, Conflict and Elitism in Hindu-Christian-Muslim Relations* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 167.

7 E.g., Cornille, "Introduction," xii–xiii.

8 Swamy, *The Problem with Interreligious Dialogue*, 161.

Due to the elitist nature of theology of interreligious dialogue, little emphasis is put on the interreligious insights that ordinary people express in their daily lives. Dialogue on different levels goes on between ordinary people as they carry out their daily lives in proximity to each other. This level of dialogue in practice is, I would argue, undervalued and not fully seen as the resource that it could be.[9]

There is, thus, a gap between formal academic theology and experiences on the ground, by which I mean beliefs and practices in local churches and the daily lives of churchgoers. In an Indian context, I have noted this gap on many occasions during my field studies and the subsequent years I spent living in South India. In terms of interreligious dialogue, the sympathetic attitude to and deep understanding of other religions as belief systems that I see in formal theology are rarely encountered in espoused and operant theologies on the ground. Other scholars have observed the same gap, and excellent examples of empirically grounded studies on interreligious relations have aimed to bridge it.[10]

To return to the "four voices" model, the four voices of theology are interrelated, but what is especially needed in theology relating to interreligious dialogue is to listen more closely to the theological voices on the ground: the espoused and operant voices of theology. This listening should entail hearing what they have to teach those active at formal and normative levels.[11] The ultimate aim must be a more effective interplay between the different levels of theology. With this article, I wish to contribute to this aim by presenting an empirical example that illustrates meaningful ways of interrelating with the religious other.

A useful concept for drawing out the theological potential of beliefs and practices embodied in a local context is "lived theology." As with "lived religion," the term denotes

[9] There are exceptions to this rule. For example, Latinovic, Mannion, and Phan observe that "too often the greatest progress in these dialogical interactions has been realized more at the grassroots level and in the periphery – especially in the so-called Global South – than at the hierarchical level and in the centre of the organisational structures and leadership offices of many religious communities." Latinovic, Mannion, and Phan, *Pathways for Interreligious Dialogue*, 6. Their emphasis is not, however, on the level of everyday interaction that I wish to highlight in this article.

[10] For recent empirical studies from India relating to interreligious issues, see Swamy, *The Problem with Interreligious Dialogue*; Anderson H. M. Jeremiah, "Dalits and Religion: Towards a Synergetic Proposal," *Black Theology* 17:1 (2019), 40–51; and Joshua Samuel, "Re-viewing Christian Theologies of Religious Diversity: Some Lessons at/from the Margins," *Current Dialogue/Ecumenical Review* 71:5 (2019), 739–54.

[11] See Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice*, 56. See also Swamy, *The Problem with Interreligious Dialogue*, 165, on this point, specifically in relation to interreligious relations.

a focus on ordinary people and their everyday practices.[12] Lived theology aims to "read enacted faith as theological text" and to "welcome the voices of ordinary women and men," recognizing them as "agents of constructive theology."[13] As with the four voices framework, an aim in lived theology is to strengthen the connection between academic theology and lived experience in local congregations.[14]

Lived theology is, as Charles Marsh points out, "messy."[15] Not only are there discrepancies between the formal and normative voices of theology – the elite level – on the one hand, and the espoused and operant voices – the lived theology level – on the other hand. On the level of lived theology, there can be tensions between espoused and operant theologies.[16] During my fieldwork, I found such dynamic tensions.

Espoused Theology: The Superiority of Christ

As I stated in the beginning of this article, ordinary Christians' voices from a given context have the potential to shock those who are mostly familiar with the theology expressed on formal and normative theological levels in that context.[17] When the Christians I interviewed in Bangalore articulate their theological views, most of them express, in different ways, their belief in the superiority of Christianity over other religions in terms of truth and salvation. These are both issues that have been central to formal theology of religions. The same issues are important to the ordinary Christians in my study, but their understandings of them differ from the pluralist theology often favoured in contemporary theology of high academic standing. Their beliefs about truth and salvation show more affinity with the theology of Karl Barth or Hendrik

[12] The difference between lived religion and lived theology is that lived theology primarily relates to a theological framework of interpretation rather than a sociological one. See Charles Marsh, "Introduction," in *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy*, ed. Charles Marsh, Peter Slade, and Sarah Azaransky (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 6–7. Within lived religion, there has been a tendency to see ordinary people's everyday experiences and practices in opposition to institutionalized religion: Nancy T. Ammerman, "Lived Religion as an Emerging Field: An Assessment of Its Contours and Frontiers," *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 29:2 (2016), 83–99. In a framework of theological reflection, the four voices model clarifies connections between lived theology and hierarchical levels of institutionalized religion.

[13] Marsh, "Introduction," 5, 16.

[14] Ibid., 2, 5–6. For a methodological discussion relating to ecumenical theology, see Muthuraj Swamy, "The Theological Potentials of Local Ecumenical Efforts in Ordinary and Everyday Life: An Ethnographic Study of South Indian Context," *Ecclesial Practices* 5 (2018), 138–56.

[15] Marsh, "Introduction," 10.

[16] In their introduction to the model, Cameron et al. note the possibility of tension between espoused and operant levels of theology: Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice*, 53.

[17] From Indian academic readers, on the other hand, I have sometimes met with the reaction that it is good that I write about this since it is "what people actually think."

Kraemer, or with present-day evangelical missiology. As I have seen during my field studies in Bangalore and while living in rural and semi-urban Church of South India (CSI) congregations for several years, evangelical theology is highly influential among ordinary Christians in South India.[18] Most of the Christians included in my study in Bangalore share a distinctly evangelical emphasis on the experience of personal conversion. The prevalence of theological exclusivism may well be related to the minority position of Indian Christians, as Joshua Samuel similarly observes in reference to a South Indian context.[19]

In addition to the questions of truth and salvation, interviewees' attitudes to the relation between Christianity and other religions are determined by a third factor, namely, its practical efficacy in this life. Christianity, they maintain, is superior to other religions in providing for a person's needs, whether it be a new bike, healing from disease, an end to childlessness, or the assurance of safety in traffic. This practical efficacy is an aspect of religion that is not often discussed in formal theology. It is, however, highly relevant to ordinary Christians' lives. To my interviewees in Bangalore, for example, answers to prayers, healing, and other miracles, and the loving presence of God that sustains them in their daily life are no less important than the prospect of salvation to eternal life. To ordinary Christians, the power and effectiveness they perceive in Christ when it comes to solving life's problems, averting its dangers, and providing its needs are signs of Christianity's superiority over other religions.[20]

Espoused Theology: Relatedness across Religious Boundaries

However, another theme that emerges from interviewees' espoused theology is the conviction that all people are children of God and thus equal in the eyes of God. Some interviewees emphasize this point. They express their conviction that although, according to their view, other religions may not be equal to Christianity, all *people* are equal since all people, across religious boundaries, are sisters and brothers. Note that this is a theological *ideal*; in reality, inequalities exist in every society, and in Indian society they notably

[18] Lionel Caplan observed this in the 1970s and 1980s in his ethnographic study of ordinary Protestants in Chennai: Lionel Caplan, *Class and Culture in Urban India: Fundamentalism in a Christian Community* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

[19] Samuel, "Re-viewing Christian Theologies," 749–51.

[20] This aspect of religion is probably even more important to people living in villages or in urban contexts marked by poverty than to the urban, mostly middle-class people that I have interviewed. Nathaniel Roberts emphasizes the importance of the efficacy of religion to both Hindu and Christian slum dwellers in Chennai: Nathaniel Roberts, *To Be Cared For: The Power of Conversion and Foreignness of Belonging in an Indian Slum* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 162–77. Joshua Samuel emphasizes the same aspect in a rural context: Samuel, "Re-viewing Christian Theologies," 749.

include caste inequalities. Inherent in the theological concept of universal siblinghood as children of God is a perception of relatedness with the religious other.

Moreover, interviewees in general are convinced that people from other religions are good human beings who possess the same moral qualities as Christians. This is a point that the Christians in my study recurrently emphasize. For example, one woman stated that ordinary people do not give much thought to differences in religious identity in everyday situations. Most people value others according to their morality and practical helpfulness, she said. She took the example of a person who donates blood to another person who has had an accident. That person, whether Muslim or Hindu, shows a godly character through saving the life of another, she said. "Whoever does that . . . he shows the culture of God." "Whichever god," she added.[21] Importantly, this insight of moral goodness and godly character as transcending religious identity comes from living in proximity with religious others. The conviction that religious others are far from "other" in every way derives from everyday experience of life lived in relatedness with them.[22]

Operant Theology: Everyday Relatedness

This sense of relatedness with the religious other is also embodied in practice. Interviewees' practices (or their operant theology), together with their articulated views (or their espoused theology), make up their lived theology. These practices carried out in a multireligious context constitute a lived theology of religious plurality. They embody ordinary Christians' ways of relating to God, the world, and other human beings. As Swamy has observed in relation to both ecumenical and interreligious interaction in a South Indian context, ordinary Christians' everyday lives and practices "carry theological potential" that deserves more attention.[23]

Everyday coexistence

When, during my field studies, the Indian Christians that I interviewed told me about their daily lives, one point that stood out was their close familiarity with people from other religions. My own cultural background is significant here – this familiarity is more noticeable in comparison with a European context, where the religious other is still often just that: an "other," a stranger. In literature on religious plurality, I often encounter descriptions of a new situation of religious plurality as a consequence of

[21] Interview with Malini.

[22] On this point, see also Roberts, *To Be Cared For*, 166; and Swamy, *The Problem with Interreligious Dialogue*.

[23] Swamy, *The Problem with Interreligious Dialogue*; and Swamy, "The Theological Potentials." Quotation from Swamy, "The Theological Potentials," 141.

globalization and migration.[24] Such discussions relate primarily to a Western context and less to those like South India, where a situation of close proximity to people of other faiths is not recent. In the Indian context that I met during my field studies and subsequently lived in, the religious other is often a neighbour, literally and, as I will argue in this article, in a theological sense as well.

In this context, people from other religions are neighbours, friends, classmates in school and college, family members, and relatives. Living as a small religious minority means that daily contact with religious others is nearly inevitable. As a young woman I interviewed stated, she meets them as soon as she steps out of her own home.[25] In many cases, it is not even necessary to leave one's own home, as religious plurality within the family is a common phenomenon. Where this is the case in my empirical study, such mixed families are the result of conversion to Christianity from a Hindu background or of Hindu-Christian marriages.

Although there are patterns of segregation based on both caste and religious affiliation in Indian society, South Indian Christians are often literal neighbours of Muslims and, in particular, Hindus. During the years I have spent in India, I have lived on streets in towns and villages where neighbours live in easy friendship without much thought to religious differences. "They happen to just learn to live with them," one CSI pastor said, talking about such easy conviviality with Hindu neighbours among his congregation members. He illustrated his point with examples, such as how Christian parents would send their children to relatives in another neighbourhood to study for an important exam if a loud Hindu festival happened to occur in their neighbourhood temple at the same time. The Hindu neighbours, in their turn, would not complain about the loud drums of (Dalit) Christian funeral processions, for example.[26]

Reminiscing about his own childhood and how there was no division among the pupils in his religiously mixed school, the same pastor said, "I mean, we still love our friends. We live together; they live with us, we live with them."[27] This statement sums up a common sentiment among the Christians in this study: Hindus and Muslims may be mistaken in their religion, but they are still our friends and neighbours, and as such we love them, as we should.[28]

[24] See, for example, Terrence Merrigan, "Introduction: Rethinking Theologies of Interreligious Dialogue," in *The Past, Present, and Future of Theologies of Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Terrence Merrigan and John Friday (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2.

[25] Interview with Pansy.

[26] Interview with Reverend Thangam.

[27] Ibid.

[28] See Matt. 22:34-40.

Refraining from negative speech about other religions

One practical way to show love for the neighbour is to refrain from speaking in such a way that it hurts them. The Christians I interviewed in Bangalore commonly emphasized that, even if they did not believe in claims about other religions' truth and effectiveness, they took care not to speak ill of another religion to their friends belonging to that religion. One reason for Christians in India to avoid negative speech about Hinduism in particular is that, as a small religious minority in a situation of growing communal tensions on a national and regional level, it could pose a risk to themselves or others to do so.

However, this is not the only reason these ordinary Christians have for not insulting their neighbours' religion. Another and at least equally important concern is that it is disrespectful to do so. Slandering your neighbour's religion is not a demonstration of good Christian ethics, of following Jesus' commandment to do to others as you would have them do to you (Matt. 7:12). Here, their operant theology again prioritizes the maintenance of relationships. As an expression of love for the neighbour of another faith, these ordinary Christians refrain from abusing the deities that their neighbour loves or their ways of showing devotion to those deities. They respect their neighbour's devotion, if not the objects of that devotion, in whom they see the "other gods" that the first commandment warns them against.[29]

Interreligious participation

Another way ordinary Christians enact interreligious relatedness in their lives is through their at least partial participation in other religions in practice, through presence at ritual events. In South India, many Christians participate in occasions like religious festivals and life-cycle events at the invitation of Hindu and Muslim friends or relatives. In my empirical study, such occasions prove to be an important location for learning about other religions. They also provide an opportunity for learning about what is similar across religious boundaries. As one woman observed, although the devotional aspects of a festival differ between Hindu and Christian ones, the social function is the same. Hindus as well as Christians invite their friends, prepare special food, and enjoy it together – the Hindus after first offering it to their god.[30] Other empirical studies of reli-

[29] With this, I do not wish to deny that in certain contexts there can be grounds for just criticism of another religion, for example in regard to the role of caste in Hindu scriptures and practices. My point here is not about whether criticism is or is not relevant, but that my interviewees prioritize good relations with their neighbours, irrespective of their own professed beliefs about those neighbours' religion.

[30] Interview with Christina.

gion in India testify to the various ways religious festivals play an important role in lived religion and interreligious relations.[31]

In my study, there are varying attitudes to this form of interreligious participation and the ritual and material aspects of another religion that one thereby comes into contact with. Unlike the case with formal theological writing on interreligious worship, ordinary Christians in India rarely see *spiritual* value in participating in rituals of another religion, according to my experience. Some see it as unproblematic to do so, reasoning from the viewpoint of a rationalist discourse that the ritual and material aspects of another religion – for example, the holy fire or the *prasadam*, the offered food, in Hindu *pujas* – are neither beneficial nor harmful. A more common attitude is, however, to wish to avoid, as far as possible, active participation in and direct contact with the material aspects of the ritual, such as the *prasadam* offered to Hindu deities. This leads to internal negotiations, since unwillingness to hurt the neighbour is a priority with these ordinary Christians, as is the perceived need to draw limits to their participation.

In such situations, ordinary people's everyday lives bear witness to adjustments from both sides. Christians who are unwilling to eat *prasadam* may refrain from openly disposing of it, to avoid hurting the Hindu neighbour who has offered it. Many Hindu friends, neighbours, and relatives on their side are aware of the limits their Christian friends set for participation and accept these limits, refraining from insisting on full participation.[32] In such cases, both sides show neighbourly benevolence through pragmatic adjustments out of consideration for their religious other's feelings. As with the avoidance of negative speech about other religions, ordinary Christians here show love and respect for their religious others and their religion in practice, even when they have little regard for other religions in their professed beliefs.

Interreligious participation in worship is a multifaceted phenomenon that occurs on many different levels, and the people involved in it may have many different purposes.

[31] See, for example, Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, *Everyday Hinduism* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015); John B. Carman and Chilkuri Vasantha Rao, *Christians in South Indian Villages, 1959–2009: Decline and Revival in Telangana* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014); Zoe Sherinian, "Religious Encounters: Empowerment through Tamil Outcaste Folk Drumming," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 71:1 (2017), 64–79; and Selva J. Raj, "Dialogue 'On the Ground': The Complicated Identities and the Complex Negotiations of Catholics and Hindus in South India," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 17 (2004), 33–44. The interreligious interaction that takes place at religious festivals is not always harmonious but can also reveal intercaste and interreligious tensions: see Anderson H. M. Jeremiah, *Community and Worldview among Paraiyars of South India: 'Lived' Religion* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 139–40; Flueckiger, *Everyday Hinduism*, 137.

[32] John Carman and Chilkuri Vasantha Rao have observed similar hospitable adjustment on the side of rural Hindus when they invite their Christian relatives for ritual occasions. Carman and Vasantha Rao, *Christians in South Indian Villages*.

One form is that of organized worship or prayer involving more than one religion, based on an underlying conviction about theological pluralism.[33] The motivation behind the form of interreligious participation in worship that I have written about here is different; it is based on the wish to be a good neighbour. This type of motivation is, I would argue, no less important than that of interreligious prayer organized at elite levels and should not be overlooked in academic discussions of interreligious worship. Ordinary people's interreligious participation – even if limited or even reluctant – is grounded in their own lived experience. In academic writing on interreligious dialogue, the question of "genuine" interest in the other religion is frequently a concern. In the context I discuss here, the intention behind interreligious participation is genuine in the sense that it springs from ordinary Christians' own everyday lives with religious others. Most importantly, the purpose behind it is to be a good neighbour to the religious other.[34]

Lived missiologies

The priority of being a good neighbour is central also to interviewees' practices in the area of mission and evangelism. The ideal of being a good neighbour shapes their missiological practices in two partly contradictory ways. First, their conviction about the superiority of Christian faith to other religions means that being a good neighbour involves sharing the good news of Christ with people of other religions out of consideration for their eternal fate as well as their wellbeing in this life. Second, however, being a good neighbour also means respecting the feelings of the other by refraining from potentially hurtful evangelism. An additional complication is that in the current political climate in India, overt Christian evangelism could pose a risk to the safety of oneself or other Christians.

To handle this constant negotiation, the committed ordinary Christians in my study have developed missiological strategies that function in this specific context. These strategies include waiting in prayer for a *kairos* moment for explicit evangelism. They also include witnessing to Christ through one's lifestyle, behaviour, and actions, such as offering practical help to a neighbour in need, rather than through explicit proclamation. While these missiological practices clearly relate to interviewees' espoused theology, they also express the priority of maintaining good relationships with the religious

[33] See, for example, Michael Amaladoss S.J., "Inter-Religious Worship," *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 94.

[34] Interreligious participation may also take place within less equal structures. For example, a Christian employee or labourer may participate in a Hindu *puja* so as not to offend an employer or landowner. Compared with such cases of unequal economic power structures, these cases where the purpose of participation is to maintain a good relationship with a friend or neighbour illustrate a more equal type of relationship and neighbourliness.

other that is inherent in their operant theology as a whole. These missiological practices are examples of contextual lived theology, "enacted faith."[35] They constitute what one might call a lived missiology of good neighbourliness. On the level of lived theology, spirituality is, as Swamy points out, not only "believing in scripture, dogmas, and beliefs"; it also takes the shape of "mutual respect, concern for the other, and taking care of the other."[36] The relation between these practices and professed beliefs is not a straightforward one. Interviewees express their need to negotiate a wish for harmonious relationships with a strong sense of the imperative for evangelism. Significantly, the maintenance of relationships is usually prioritized over evangelistic urgency.

To summarize my analysis of espoused and operant theologies among ordinary Christians in Bangalore, their practices (operant theology) express a more positive way of relating to religious plurality than their articulated beliefs (espoused theology). While the latter express Christian superiority and negative views of other religions, the former are characterized by respect and a sense of relatedness across religious boundaries. Other researchers who employ ethnographic methods to bring ordinary Christians' voices into the formal theological discussion have reached similar conclusions. Samuel writes that the rural Dalit Christians in his study "practise religious plurality in spite of self-professed theological exclusivism."[37] Swamy emphasizes that ordinary people possess resources that are more valuable for building interreligious relations than are programmes for interreligious dialogue initiated at an elite level. He highlights ordinary people's experiences of everyday relationships, shared identities, and strategies for conflict resolution.[38]

Conclusions

This empirical example has shown that it is possible to live with dynamic tensions between espoused and operant theologies. Even where the theology that a Christian person or group verbally articulates is exclusivist, this exclusivism can coexist with respectful practice, where love for the neighbour of another faith finds various expressions. In everyday life in a religiously plural context, such practical expressions of love for the neighbour are more important than interest in that neighbour's faith, I would argue.

[35] Marsh, "Introduction," 5.

[36] Swamy, "The Theological Potentials," 155.

[37] Samuel, "Re-viewing Christian Theologies," 753. What he refers to as practised religious plurality is a kind of religious hybridity, which is different from what I have discussed here. Having said this, my interviewees' Christianity is of course also contextual and hybrid, as is all religion everywhere. Anderson Jeremiah proposes that this be studied as "synergy" rather than "hybridity": Jeremiah, "Dalits and Religion."

[38] Swamy, *The Problem with Interreligious Dialogue*.

Contrary to a common assumption in formal theology, a benevolent attitude to other religions in the form of professed theological pluralism or inclusivism is not the only way toward constructive interaction with the religious other.[39] In her introduction to a volume on the subject, Catherine Cornille defines interreligious dialogue as "any form or degree of constructive engagement between religious traditions."[40] I suggest that in terms of ordinary people's lived theology, it is more relevant to focus on constructive engagement between *people* from different religious traditions.

To bring ordinary people's lived theology into the academic theological discussion, we need to not only observe how people live and how they practise their faith. We also need to listen to how they themselves reflect on their lives and beliefs. Operant theology, or practice, offers fresh perspectives, since it is often most different from formal and normative theology. However, it is important not to take practice as the only true key to what people's religion is "really" like, but to also listen to the beliefs and ideas that they articulate, their espoused theology. In my empirical study, the interreligious relatedness of ordinary Christians' daily lives is something that they not only practise but also reflect upon. In interviews, they express an explicit focus on maintaining relationships and showing love for their neighbours of other faiths.

It is important also to note the plurality of lived theologies. The Christians in my study are urban, mostly middle-class people, not what are usually referred to as people at the grassroots. Their lives differ in many ways from those of Christians in poor and rural contexts. Significantly, although several of my interviewees are Dalits, caste plays a less all-pervasive role in their lives, although it is not absent.

To summarize, the ordinary Christians in Bangalore whose voices have informed my discussion in this article offer valuable insights into interreligious relationships on an everyday level in a multireligious society. Their lived theology emphasizes relatedness across religious boundaries and the priority of showing love for the neighbour in practice.

[39] And as Samuel observes, in certain contexts, such as the structure of caste oppression that Christian Dalits in India face, it may not be the most relevant theological response to other religions: Samuel, "Re-viewing Christian Theologies."

[40] Cornille, "Introduction," xii.