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## **Christian values in education: Teachers in India narrate the impact of their faith and values on practice.**

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### **Abstract**

India's education system is complex because it has to meet the needs of a population which is culturally, geographically, politically, religiously and economically diverse. The principal investigator spent two summers in India talking with teachers and learners. This paper reports on the impact of Christian values in the secular but arguably Hindu nationalist education system. Working within an interpretivist paradigm and through an ethnographic lens an interpretive phenomenological analysis approach was adopted to make sense of thirty-four interviewees' narratives from five Indian states. The narratives were mapped onto an adaptation of the West-Burnham and Harris (2014) 'tree metaphor' to illustrate how values underpin decision making and action in the school context. Five of the narratives are presented as keyhole examples to exemplify the similarities and contrasts in reported beliefs, values and behaviours set within the context of teachers' professional practice. Findings reveal that all thirty four participants drew on their Christian faith, and Indian cultural context, in their decision making both in how they made sense of education policy, and how they interpreted school events and behaviours. Despite their common faith, (Christianity), the thirty-four interpretations, decision making and actions varied as demonstrated in the five selected narratives. We explore how the variance manifested and was influenced by the geographical, cultural, post colonial and school context.

Keywords: Christian schools; values in education; headteachers in India; faith and teaching; post colonial education

**Introduction:**

The lead researcher spent over two summers in various locations in India, investigating the impact of faith, values and culture on both the organisation of schools and the day-to-day lives of teachers, parents and children. Partially funded by St Christopher's Trust and the University of Cumbria visits were made to a sample of Christian foundation special schools and mainstream schools in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Assam and Mizoram- five Indian states which are very different politically, culturally and economically (British Council 2014).

While part of a larger project, the purpose of this article is to develop phenomenological insight into how the different teachers narrate the impact of their own faith and their school's Christian foundation on their practice.

The different elements of the impact of faith in our research can be understood with reference to West-Burnham and Harris (2014) who discuss policy into practice in terms of a tree metaphor where the headteacher's vision is underpinned by deep ethical roots. Our article uses the lens of the tree metaphor to illustrate how school leaders and teachers convert their deeply held principles, (the roots of the tree) into values, which inform their decision making (the trunk of the tree). The day-to-day engagement with the world (the branches) illustrate how the individual's ethics and values are lived out in action (West-Burnham and Harris 2014), and how the 'institutional body language' of the school (for example displays, school uniform and dress, how teachers interact with each other and so on), (Dadzie 2000) is revealed within the context of the Indian education system.

The research is set within the context of post colonialism, since India gained Independence in 1947. The problem facing post colonial states such as India is to build

an effective unity while avoiding the oppression of minorities, whose language, religion, culture and practices might clash with the dominant national mythology (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2000:175) which in India's case is Hindu Nationalism. Some post colonial states display a legacy of 'mimicry' (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2000) for example the Indian elite's mobilization could be described as an adaptation of powerful British parliamentary institutions with their classist and patriarchal ethos, and this might be expected to be reflected in education policy and school practice. Varma (2004) recognises his own nation's continued, post Independence, obsession with wealth and power and appalling indifference to the poor and marginalised. The subaltern (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2000), or in other words the lower castes, are described by both Varma (2004) and Young (2003) in hegemonic terms both in colonial and post colonial India because of their supposed accepting attitude towards their own subjugation. Similarly attitudes towards children with special educational needs can sometimes reflect attitudes which reflect the prevailing attitudes to power (Elton-Chalcraft and Cammack 2016). However the rising popularity of post colonial anti-Hindutva critiques (Ilaiah 2012) has illuminated the continued invisibility of the Dalits (lower castes) in the Hindutva Brahmin (upper caste) Indian education system; and in a call to fight this oppression, Ilaiah (2012), appeals to upper class Brahmins (whose culture dominates the education system), to celebrate the ways of life of the Dalit and include them more comprehensively and with open arms in all aspects of education. The current research project sought to investigate the way in which Christian teachers, navigated their professional roles in this post colonial context.

## **Literature and context**

### ***Post colonial national identity and India's education system***

In order to understand the narratives reported in this article it is important to contextualise them within post colonial National identity and the wider Indian education system which is one of the largest and most complex in the world with more than 1.4 million schools and more than 230 million enrolments (British Council 2014, 6). Indian education pre- and post-Independence drew on Western educationalists such as Vygotsky, Steiner and Piaget as well as Indian authors such as Gandhi and Tagore (Ellis 2012, 174). Legacies of both a paternalistic colonial and also philanthropic Christian mission are in evidence with contemporary Indian Christian missionaries endeavouring to maintain a Christian values system amidst growing desire from leading Indian nationalists to include Hindu, Muslim and secular ideas and philosophies into Indian schooling (Ellis 2012; Webster 2016). The data for this study were collected just after the coming to power of Narendra Modi, leader of the Hindu nationalist BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) with consequent Saffronisation of the curriculum in schools whereby 'being Indian means being Hindu' (Guha 2017, Nag 2014), thus continuing a Hindutva Brahmin ethos and perpetuating the marginalisation of lower caste Indians in post colonial India (Ilaiah 2012). In the May 2019 election Modi increased his majority and thus his policies are set to continue for a further five years (Crabtree 2019).

Prabhakar (2006) argues that India should celebrate her diverse religious heritage while others, including Paranjape (2009) believe the colonial influence especially the English language should be stripped away. Yet others, including Batra (2016) argue that colonialism's legacy and new politically inspired cultural nationalism have led India to a re-emphasis on patriarchy and a glossing over of inequalities based on caste, different ethnic groups and religions. She bemoans the fact that the once richly diverse India is being homogenised and she calls for a re-thinking of education as a

transformative process (Batra 2016). Young (2000) had advanced this idea in his description of post colonial India longing for a return to ‘the authenticity of a Golden Age’ with its ‘illusions of homogeneity’ (Young 2000:62) scarily reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Germanic ideas which Young evidences with reference to the popularity of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* for sale in Northern India. Young argues that the quest for a ‘pure’ Indian Hindu nation would exclude minorities such as Christians, Muslims and ‘fix Dalits and Adivasis’ (lower castes) into its ‘eternal racial hierarchy of caste’ (2000:62).

Thus, India is at a juncture where many academics, educationalists and politicians believe an overhaul of the Indian education system is necessary given the competing ideals of Hindu Nationalism and its opponents. Paranjape’s (2009) argument, while stemming from a linguistic perspective, nevertheless charts the move towards a reclaiming of Indian pre-colonial diversity through the current education system. This contextualises the situation in which I collected the data – namely Christian foundation schools which appeared to be rooted in Christian values and English-style education, which some, Paranjape included, might consider colonial. Such schooling persists but is increasingly coming under pressure from critical Hindu nationalism of the BJP (Guha 2017). Paranjape (2009) rails against colonial education as epitomised by the often cited Thomas Babington Macaulay, who imposed racist imperialism in his infamous claim in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that ‘a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia’ (Sharp 1920; Varma 2004).

So the legacy of rationalisation of the nineteenth century as well as the legacy of English Christian missionaries continues to appeal to some of the Indian elite, many of whose forebears abandoned their Indian cultural heritage for a modern, secular, British Christian education, agreeing with Macaulay’s colonial aim to create ‘a class of

persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.’ (Sharp 1920, Varma 2004). For example the European Christian missionary Marie Christlieb (1927:174) reports a Hindu Brahmin educationalist as saying “I must admit we need the Christian standards. We need them desperately. I am a Christian college man myself and I confess it has altered my standards for my whole life.”

Ramachandran (2016:91) challenges the two tier ‘warped’ education system in India because, on the one hand the poor, lower caste and marginalised children are required, since recent legislation, to attend government schools but the wealthy middle classes and elite no longer send their children to government schools preferring the fee paying English medium schools (often historically with a Christian foundation). So middle class and also high caste Brahmins pursue either a Christian foundation school or Hindu Nationalist inspired education. Such privileged education is criticised by many such as Ilaiah (2012) (who was born into the lower caste Dalit), because the high caste Hindu Nationalist haughty and callous system fails to acknowledge or value the voices of the marginalised.

The question must be asked why the post colonial elite were so receptive to ‘mimicing’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2000), the character of their colonizers? Varma argues that Indians were eager to be the model children of Macauley precisely because their pre colonial context bore resemblance to their colonizer’s hierarchy (Varma 2004:7). So while India as a post colonial state clearly has newly formed states which are not necessarily organised precisely along the lines of either the former Raj period states or the British colonies, nevertheless, Varma suggests that the Indian hankering for power and wealth by any means, (which in non-Indian contexts might be termed corruption) is still present. We would argue that this explains the creation of the two tier system which clearly distances the upper caste and post colonial middle classes

from their oppressed fellow Indians who are the majority receivers of governmental school education which Ramachandran (2016) describes as inferior despite legislative policies to improve it such as the inclusive Right to Education Act (RTE 2010). Varma confesses that Indians are often very keen to have lofty ideals and policies which in practice are not followed through. Indeed, Elton-Chalcraft, Cammack and Harrison (2016) have argued that while inclusive practice and improved teacher education are India's goals set out in the RTE 2010, the infrastructure precludes a realisation of such goals, and many families choose to withdraw their special educational needs (SEN) children from government schools and place them in more disciplined fee paying (often Christian foundation) special needs schools which are more able to meet the needs of their child. Singal (2019) also discusses the naivety of uncritically imposing Northern context policies (such as Inclusion), in Southern contexts. Singal cites the limited studies about Indian children with disabilities which overwhelmingly agree that Indian education requires an understanding of 'ways forward which are respectful of local priorities and realities' (2019:837).

There is a tension then, between on the one hand viewing fee paying Christian-foundation schools as part of the cultural diversity of India which provides much needed provision particularly for the elite and also for SEN children; and on the other hand viewing such institutions as being an undesirable legacy of colonial exploitation and higher caste manipulation, or part of the Indian attempt to perpetuate a two tier system, which has been criticised by Ramachandran (2016) as being divisive.

Another manifestation of conflict can be seen in the legislative framework (in the secular constitution) that prohibits the preaching of faith in schools and, the faith school's desire to represent and celebrate their Christian foundation. This study looks at how Christian teachers negotiated these tensions and the manner in which they drew on



their values, often utilising Biblical texts, in decision making and day-to-day behaviours.

### ***Christianity and Indian Education***

The extremely varied Indian Education system has to serve the needs of a diverse community where there are different castes, religions and ethnic groups (British Council 2014; Prabhakar 2006; Thapan 2014). Prabhakar (2006, 51) states that the plurality of India is often overlooked:

“Indian religiosity is not monolithic, but a multifarious web of interlocking layers and strands - both inter-religiously and intrareligious. Just as there are various strands and shades of Christianity, there are also different threads of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, etc. Indian culture can be said to be a carpet woven from all these threads; so also its Spirituality.”

There are also different Christian denominations in India. Despite being a minority religion Christianity has had, and continues to have, a significant impact on the Indian education system. For example, Christian missionaries and other philanthropic individuals, of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, endeavoured to meet the needs of marginalised children in India by setting up numerous Christian foundation schools (Jones 2012, Gilmour 2018).

Some Christian English educationalists also wanted to introduce their perceived superior education system on the impoverished Indian population and many elite Indians continue to be educated in Christian foundation schools where Western values

are transmitted, consciously or implicitly through schooling (Bhandari 2014; Thapan 2014).

According to Batra (2016) India's education system since the Right to Education Act 2010 (RTE) is influenced by issues of equality and betterment with a desire for teachers to transform the lives of their pupils. Since the RTE Act 2010 equality and social progress are universal values, whereas in the past, arguably, such moral commitments were found most prominently in Christian foundation schools, where Biblical norms were seen as democratic and progressive. Many of India's Christian foundation schools today continue to promote ethical guidelines rooted in the Bible because they share the vision of the missionaries, who founded Christian schools, and who sought to mould, to varying degrees, the child's character and nurture Christian virtues (Gilmour 2018). Niemi (2018:188) also discusses how in India secular 'universal' or 'general' values are communicated through studying various religions, and Religion is viewed as positive.

Our study explores, through listening to the teachers narratives, how Christian values are played out in Christian foundation schools where the majority of children are Hindu with some Muslims and Sikh pupils, whilst most of the teachers and nearly all the head teachers are Christian. However in the North Eastern state of Mizoram Christianity is the majority religion with only a small percentage of Muslim, Hindu and Sikh children.

This project adds to the insights of Indian researchers such as Longkumar (2014) who argues that teachers enact their beliefs and embody Biblical virtues to show the love of God to the children in their care and nurture children. She claims that although Christian teachers are not allowed to proselytise in schools nevertheless they can show by example that they espouse Christian values through behaviour. In addition, Thapan's

book *Ethnographies of schooling in contemporary India* (2014) presents a set of ethnographic case studies some of which are based in Indian Christian foundation schools. Bhandari's chapter (2014) unravels the dynamics between the Christian identity of the school and its attempt to impart citizenship education and she noted 'muted' citizenship education in contrast with the 'loud' citizenship education which was Christian based.

Similar tensions and dynamics were found in our project. Our larger study has the added advantage of a wider sample of data from over seventy adults and children and observations in schools from five Indian states over a two-year period, providing a bird's eye perspective of a series of ethnographic snapshots of values in action. In this article we provide five in depth personal narratives drawn from thirty four interviews which illustrate the diversity of Indian Christian teachers' responses to the challenges presented by the contemporary Indian education context.

## **Methodology**

Adopting an ethnographic qualitative research design and having gained ethical approval from her university the principal investigator visited five Indian states over two summers. She collected data (including school observations and interviews with over seventy adults and children), for three inter related projects concerning Inclusion, Christian values and how Indian/ Christian identity informs professional practice in Christian foundation schools. This current paper draws on data from thirty-four adults who spoke specifically about the impact of their faith and the influence of Christian values in their professional lives, with particular reference to their underlying values system and their decision making. Although the whole project was a collaborative venture, the data collection and initial analysis was undertaken solely by the principal investigator who lived in India over two consecutive summers.

### Data Collection and analysis

The principal investigator adopted an opportunistic sampling strategy (Savin-Baden and Major 2013, 315) because she travelled to India with her husband (who led a British Academy-funded ethnographic Biblical interpretation project) and she stayed in Theological training colleges using every opportunity to gain access to Christian foundation schools through lecturers, wives, husbands, children, friends or congregation members who were headteachers, governors, children or teachers at these schools. While not claiming to be representative this opportunistic sampling strategy provided flexibility to include a range of teachers from the different states, with a variety of age phase and subject specialisms, length of service, gender, Christian denomination affiliation and age.

An IPA (Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis) approach was adopted (Smith and Osborn 2004) which synthesised with the project's intersubjective, phenomenological approach. The principal investigator was keen not to produce an objective statement about Christian foundation schools' ethos, but rather the participant's perspective of how the Christian foundation and their own faith impacted on practice. Through semi-structured interviews, the participants narrated their understanding of the impact of their faith on their practice. In the data analysis, there was a double hermeneutic as the principal investigator endeavoured to 'make sense' of the participant 'making sense' of their experiences (Smith and Osborn 2004, 51). She combined what Smith and Osborn (2004) describe as 'empathetic hermeneutics', or 'what it is like to be in their shoes' with a 'questioning hermeneutics' and critical questioning of the data. Given time, opportunity and access constraints in India, the

phenomenological approach provided a snapshot insight into each participants' understanding of the importance they ascribed to their school's Christian foundation, and how their own faith impacted on their professional life (Gubrium and Holstein 2000). Following thematic analysis, three themes emerged from the data (see figures 1 and 2) which demonstrated where the thirty four participants narrated similar ideas to each other and also where their attitudes differed. It must be acknowledged that these three themes emerged as a result of the lead investigator's 'interpretation', however, she discussed ideas with the various gatekeepers in India, and the research team back in the UK, to attempt some form of trustworthiness of the interpretation and present 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1973). Of course any interpretation is subject to researcher bias or presence but given limitations of space the advantages and limitations of data collection as a female, white, non-Christian teacher educator in an Indian school context is discussed elsewhere (Elton-Chalcraft and Cammack 2017). So in the next section the three themes arising from an interpretative phenomenological analysis of the thirty four interviews are presented; then the five narratives are discussed using the personal pronoun in the ethnographic style of Sengupta (2016:22) who discusses 'only seven in a billion' and Dalrymple (2009: xv) who captures through 'nine lives' how 'religious vocation has been caught and transformed in the vortex of India's metamorphosis'.

## **Findings**

Three themes emerged from phenomenological analysis of thirty-four narratives from teachers in each of the five states. Even though part of a larger three part research project, these thirty four narratives were collected specifically to investigate how Indian/ Christian identity informs professional practice. The three themes are mapped on to West-Burnham and Harris tree metaphor (2014) in figures 1 and 2. In the thirty four interviews, all teachers spoke of God supporting them in some way, (theme one

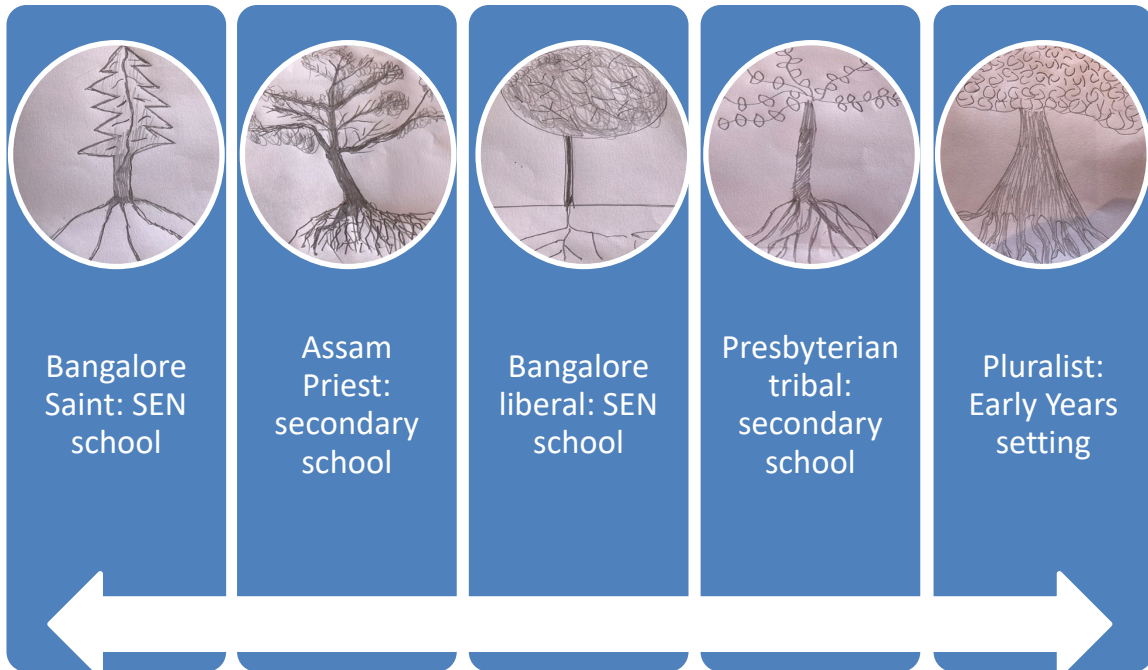
figure 1). Similarly, all made some mention of Biblical texts and Christian values underpinning their daily lives both professionally and personally (theme two figure 1). The display of Christian texts, quality and quantity of school resources, the attire of both pupils and teachers, and the interaction between them provided evidence of the ‘institutional body language’ (Dadzie 2000). Of the thirty four interviews five have been selected for deeper analytical study here (theme three figure 1 and also figure 2), and are discussed in the style of Dalrymple’s (2009) *Nine Lives* in order to exemplify a variety of Indian and Christian characteristics. We discuss these five teachers’ beliefs and attitudes, which, while recognisable as Christian are, nevertheless quite different to each other (theme three figure 1). Each narrative exemplifies a different emphasis often related to the narrator’s position in the school, type of school, different geographical state or different perceptions of Christianity (tribal, traditional Hindu, Church of India, Catholic, western liberal and so on). The five narratives, presented in the next section, were selected because they provide a snapshot of similarities and differences as outlined in figures 1 and 2. Some of the other interviews and observations are drawn on by way of exemplification, but predominantly we endeavour to capture how Christian Indian identity influences professional practice through the keyhole of five narratives.

Figure 1. Three findings mapped onto West-Burnham and Harris (2014) tree metaphor

| Theme from India data   | Tree metaphor  |
|---|--|
| 1. <b>God sustains and personal faith empowers</b> both in personal and professional life | <b>ROOTS</b> : <i>Christian values and ethics underpin decision making</i> |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>2. <b>Biblical texts guide behaviour</b></p> <p>teachers are inspired by Biblical values : obedience, love, honesty, humility, compassion etc ,</p> | <p><b>TRUNK</b> : <i>Biblical texts and Christian doctrine informs decision making</i></p> <p><b>BRANCHES/leaves</b> : <i>the day to day behaviour inspired by decision making</i></p>   |
| <p>3. <b>One faith, myriad interpretations</b> teachers' 'voices' illustrate elements in common but also significant differences,</p>                  | <p><b>DIFFERENT TREES:</b> <i>teachers' narratives are all Christian (not Hindu or Muslim) but different (eg Church of India, Presbyterian, 'tribal' Christianity</i></p> <p><i><del>Banyan tree, Indian Mahogany, Curry tree, Mango tree etc)</del></i></p> |

Figure 2. Same religion, Christianity (eg tree not a flower); Different interpretations of Christianity (eg Assam Catholic priest, Presbyterian tribal); Different trees (Indian Mahogany, Banyan tree, Mango tree)



## The Narratives and Discussion

### *Five narratives: One faith, myriad interpretations (Different Christian worldviews)*

Although the thirty-four participants confessed to be Christian, nevertheless, they exemplified myriad interpretations of beliefs and values in action (see figures 1 and 2).

Christianity is not homogenised. Over the course of two summers each interviewee narrated how their faith impacted on their professional life, with some aspects in common but others at variance often owing to their geographical and cultural identity as a Christian Indian from a particular state, caste and denomination. The five narrative titles sum up the narrator's perspective and these labels are not fixed or defining, rather they delineate what the principal investigator considered to be the five most contrasting positions. In her 'making sense of them making sense' (Smith and Osborn 2004), she endeavoured to capture the distinctiveness of narratives, what they chose to tell her;



what she heard; how she interpreted their body language; what she observed in their school/ their interactions ('the institutional body language' Dadzie 2000); thus illustrating the range of contrasting manifestations of Christian faith as expressed by these participants in the short time the principal investigator spent with them.

As discussed in the methodology section the principal investigator undertook the data collection and preliminary analysis and so the narratives are presented below in the first person to more effectively capture the personal engagement of the principal investigator in this part of the research process (Clandinin 2007).

***1. Western versus traditional Indian Christianity – the principal investigator meets the Bangalore liberal***

The Bangalore liberal is a vice principal of a special needs school who was a social worker before entering teaching later in life. I [principal investigator] worked with her over the two summers and she became my gatekeeper for the wider project, by negotiating access and accompanying me during the interviews with parents, children and teachers at her SEN school on the outskirts of Bangalore, Karnataka. The Bangalore liberal is thus named because of her Western views and appearance in contrast to the 'traditional Indian Bangalore saint' described in narrative 2 below. She was keen to let me know that although she had been born into a Christian family and her father was a pastor she felt she 'chose to follow Christ' and it was a 'personal decision' because she decided to be Christian not because she was forced to do so. This independent mind-set underpinned her own and also other teachers' approaches in their professional lives – not only did they not actively proselytise because governmental directives forbade them to actively convert, but rather these teachers felt strongly that children should 'come to God' of their own volition. This belief in personal decision making was evident in her

attitude towards drinking and smoking, informed by her husband's autonomous attitudes as seen below.

“We were brought up to think it's not OK to drink and smoke, and I didn't do these things. I wasn't the kind of child who would use foul language either. My husband, he's a pastor too, a very different pastor, he was very radical in the way he thought. He would ask me – why do you think it is wrong to smoke or drink, have you tried it? So, we did silly things, like once I did try a smoke, after marriage, and I did try a drink ... and then he said ‘now decide do you want to do it or you don't want to do it?’ And I said no ‘I don't like it.’ So, my thinking changed. Even things like going for movies, especially in India down South, there are a group of people who believe it's wrong to go to a cinema theatre and watch a movie. And there's no reason for it actually because the same movie is fine at home but it's wrong in a theatre because you are a bad witness. That's how it is perceived here in India. So I was brought up that way but over a period of time I learnt you need to have a personal conviction why you are doing things in a way. So one principle I follow in my life is that Christ is with you wherever you go.”

Going to the movies is seen by Varma (2004) as a unifier of North and South India, because popular culture and Indian film music is enjoyed by the majority of Indians from the lower castes in particular, although as the Bangalore liberal acknowledges, the Church of South India is still reluctant to endorse cinema going which is frowned upon because of Bollywood film's Hindu Nationalist ethos from which South India Church Christians are supposed to distance themselves.

This liberal stance impacted on her professional practice because she talked of encouraging her SEN pupils to take more personal responsibility, not mirrored in other SEN and mainstream schools I visited where the hegemonic hierarchy subjugated the marginalised. In the Bangalore liberal's eyes both children and adults should make their own decisions informed by a synthesis of Biblical texts and one's own interpretation of these. Such spiritual democracy is in direct antithesis to what Ilaiah describes as Hindu spiritual fascism (2012:137). The Bangalore liberal's Principal, another of the thirty four I interviewed, vehemently attacked Hindu tradition for its oppression of the poor and lower castes, its callous derision of those with a disability and its obsession with rituals which she believed were akin to dangerous superstitions. The Bangalore liberal (who as gatekeeper attended all interviews) vigorously nodded her head in agreement with her Principal's values. These findings support Varma's (2004), Sangupta's (2016) and Ilaiah's (2102) descriptions of the oppression of Hindutva Brahmanism, however the negative attitude towards disability is notably absent from their discussions. It is only Dalrymple (2009:241) who describes how the 'blind minstrel' thwarts the negative attitude of Hindu Nationalism towards disability seeing it as an advantage, because he can 'pick up songs more quickly....I see with my ears'. In a similar vein the Bangalore liberal, and other teachers I interviewed at her school, interacted with their learners looking at what they could achieve rather than shunning them because of their disability. Many of the thirty four interviewees mentioned drawing on the inspiration of Jesus who listened to, ate with and healed people from the margins, such as a despised tax collector, prostitute and those with a disability.

The Bangalore liberal felt it was God's will that she was appointed at her current Special needs school and her liberal attitudes underpinned her decision to ask for a higher salary and part time working. She told me that teachers, especially women,

usually take a position unconditionally. Varma (2004), Young (2003) and Dalrymple (2009) all cite similar examples of Indian women's inferior hegemonic status. But, when she was offered the post at the SEN school she put forward some conditions to the open-minded Principal about hours and salary:

“I wanted to be part time so I could still help my husband out in the ministry. Previously when I worked here the salaries were very low and I felt that it wasn't right because I mean when you do things out of, what you say, service, it's different, but when you're doing it as a profession it is different, I felt that that shouldn't be mixed. People shouldn't be taken advantage of. And so I came for the interview and I spoke and they agreed with whatever I asked for.”

The Bangalore liberal gave freely of her time to support her husband's ministry for no financial gain, but in her professional role as a teacher she wanted fair pay for her work. The 'institutional body language' (Dadzie 2000) revealed a well-resourced school in contrast to the sparse and worn equipment and resources of the Bangalore Saint's school. The Bangalore liberal epitomises the antithesis of Paranjape's (2009) image of traditional India because she had short hair and did not wear a sari, and her Christian value of equality inspired her to seek appropriate working conditions and pay and she promoted the use of English in school because SEN children needed to communicate in the lingua franca for their economic independence. Varma (2004) recognises the cultural capital afforded to Indians who have a command of the English language and have been educated in Christian foundation schools – particularly 'convent schools'. He cites a matrimonial advertisement which unashamedly requires the future bride to have 'convented education' (ie educated in a nunnery), thus having 'shed enough of her

Indian ethnicity in favour of Western mannerisms’ to be ‘an asset to her educated husband’ (Varma 2004:133). Such prospects may well be out of reach of many of the poor and severely disabled at the liberal Bangalore’s SEN school but, for a few who were escaping the bullying of mainstream Hindu Nationalist ethos governmental schools this English medium SEN special school provided a haven and much improved prospects for an autonomous life and marriage.

## ***2. Compassion and obedience- – the principal investigator meets the Bangalore saint***

The Bangalore saint is Principal of an SEN school in central Bangalore which was poorly resourced. In contrast to the Bangalore liberal described above, the Bangalore saint wore a sari, had plaited long hair and while recognising the injustice of lack of funding and low pay her attitude was to ‘accept and rise above testing times’. Selflessly, like a saint, she drew on her faith to sustain her in dealing with external stakeholders; she had little sponsorship compared with the more affluent SEN school the other side of the city; however, the Bangalore saint remained optimistic:

“But God said [to Jonah] ‘you must go to that city and change the people there and do something for that city’, so I should put away doubts. I think He has a plan. You know, sometimes I think I should leave this job, but then I said to God – ‘it is Your calling that I do this work, I will work until you have given me the time, I work for the children’. It was hard in my job because when you go to the authorities and governors they are always negative. I overcome it – I work with the opportunities, what God wants me to do.”

The Bangalore saint told me about the origin of her special needs school: for poor, ‘mentally retarded’ and disadvantaged children.

“So the bishop, the governors and the Presbyterian Church started a school linking with the National Institute of Mental Health. Doctors and church leaders identified 20 children mostly from poor families. The Christian foundation is important because the diocese wanted to have outreach programmes, so starting a special school was part of their outreach programme. They had lots of other types of schools but not a special needs school. Here in India, parents want the children to go to a Christian school irrespective of what caste or religion they come from. Indian people often send their children to a Christian institution because they like the value-based education [which] is provided in a Christian institution and also discipline is good.”

The Bangalore saint is well aware of the social disadvantage of being poor, from a lower caste with the additional handicap of disability, echoed by numerous scholars eg Singal (2019) and Elton-Chalcraft, Cammack and Harrison (2016). Thus the mission of the Presbyterian Church and her own values of compassion defy the common Hindu Nationalist obsession with deference towards the disadvantaged.

Her beliefs inspired her to support ‘mentally retarded’ children from poor families to become ‘an earning member of their family’, being obedient to their employers and obeying ‘as King David had obeyed his father’. She drew on the Biblical text of King David from the Old Testament when speaking to children in her school ‘David was like you he obeyed his father after the anointing’. Yet she also drew on yoga techniques – a Hindu practice in origin, using ‘deep breathing and gradually the

whole body to improve the children's hand to eye coordination.' Such a return to Indian cultural past with the synergy of intellect, emotion physiological and intellectual aspects of self would appeal to Paranjape (2009). The Bangalore saint did not feel engaging the children in yoga practices contravened Christian values she claimed it 'is Indian, [and] not related to a particular religion.' Thus fulfilling Prabhakar's (2006) woven carpet made up of different threads. This Hindu practice would not have been acceptable at the Bangalore liberal's school.

The Bangalore saint drew on her father's Christian values which underpinned her actions and decision making:

"My father said 'you should expect not to receive anything from other people you should always give'. We help others, despite difficult times in our lives.

One morning I was reading about Jonah [*who was severely tested*]. Sometimes I am escaping from God to do certain things – so the Bible can help you understand your situation."

Obedience to a higher moral purpose and a life of dedication to raising the life opportunities of the children in her school underpinned the Bangalore saint's decision making. In the visits to this school over two summers I observed a dedicated team of teachers and a seemingly content group of SEN children. She emphasised issues of equality in contrast to mainstream schools 'in most Indian schools there is hierarchy'. While, sometimes frustrated by the leaders of the church and governors who did not always share her passion and non-hierarchical values, she worked like a saint with her team of mostly untrained but enthusiastic teachers to support the disadvantaged children in their care using the local language of Kannada. Her teachers were not highly

educated and had limited command of English and she translated for me when I interviewed a dedicated teacher (one of the thirty four), who expressed a desire to help the children in her care while realising that realistically they had little hope of attaining anything more than a subsistence level existence and many would remain totally dependent on their families for the rest of their lives. The Bangalore saint was one of the few Indians I met who did not quiz me about my *aquat*, translated as status by Varma (2004:23) in his discussion of this pervasive Indian preoccupation of determining a person's standing and prospects. In one discussion I had with an administrator who was Christian and who found a seamstress to hem up my newly bought sari, I was asked about my father's occupation, what kind of a house I lived in and she tried to persuade me to tie my hair up in South Indian style. The Bangalore saint, in contrast, paid no attention to my flowing locks (apparently only prostitutes in South India wear long hair loose!) The Bangalore saint showed compassion and love towards each learner at the school allowing parents, she told me, to skip fee payments if their economic circumstances took a down turn through ill health or bad business.

### ***3 Hospitality trumps everything – the principal investigator meets the Mizoram ideal host***

The Mizoram ideal host worked in a fee-paying private school in Mizoram – one of the North Eastern states of India which is predominantly Christian and whose inhabitants wear western clothes and short haircuts, in contrast to the Southern states. Although the school did not have a Christian foundation the Mizoram host described the ethos as Christian because '80% of Mizo are Christian, it used to be 90%', the majority being Presbyterian denomination'.



The Mizoram host said that some students at her school were Hindu but nevertheless they still followed ‘devotion’ [confessional assembly] ‘they don’t mind.’ She went on to say ‘in our society Christianity is the norm, if you don’t go to church you are odd’. Thus despite not having an explicit Christian foundation the Christian ethos and values were transparent because the majority of students and all teachers were Christian, in contrast to other Indian states which are predominantly Hindu and where most schools adhere to the non-proselytising governmental policy.

Together with a strong Presbyterian influence, the Mizoram ideal host also described the impact of her ‘tribal culture’ on her personal and professional life (Behera 2014). For many Mizo people their indigenous tribal culture synthesised more easily with the missionary Presbyterian influence in contrast with other states in India which she told me are ‘very different’. Her geographical, political and religious context impacted on her Christian value system which influenced her professional life. In all the discussion I had with Mizo adults and children I felt there was not an embracing of the West in terms of a colonial missionary values system, rather a distancing from the Hindu Nationalist Indian values. So, for the Mizoram host, tribal culture and Christian faith are inseparable, and both impact on behaviour. The Mizoram host explained the importance of the school’s Christian ethos and tribal ‘host’ culture impacting on behaviour.

“The church influence is so great in Mizoram, but also we’ve grown up with the tribal culture which is also important, the things we used to practice [*from tribal culture*] are the same [*as what we now practice in Christian faith*]. For example, we have an open society, we know each other very well, we crack jokes, and we

are not apart. We are in and out of each other's houses. We are so sociable [laughs] unlike non-tribal we are so close.”

I had first-hand experience of this ‘close’ tribal culture because the small house in which my family and I stayed on a theological training campus was sometimes ‘invaded’ by intending pastors, catering staff and other families on the campus, who often did not even knock at the door, but wandered in ate food from our fridge and sat to watch TV with my children as was their custom. This closeness and hospitality were characteristics of the Mizo tribal/ Christian faith as evidenced by Behera (2014) in the concept of *thianglo* (taboo) where being inhospitable and not sharing are to be avoided. The Mizoram host constantly talked of hospitality and having a caring nature which she exemplified in her personal and professional life, she explained that all children in her school ‘attend morning devotion, even Hindu children who are in the minority’. She also spoke of the former tribal practice of hunting animals which was banned by the government because India is predominantly Hindu and vegetarian. This echoes Ilaiah’s (2012) argument of the Brahmin Hindutva disregard for culture which is not their own, especially the meat eating tribal Indians. Mizo Christians eat meat because of both their tribal heritage and also their distancing from Brahmin vegetarianism with its strict laws on pollution and purity (Ilaiah 2012).

But also she felt that modern day tribal and Christian values required schools to teach children to care for animals ‘ we are more concerned about nature now than we were before’.

The tribal host explained that the caring nature towards humans and animals was also tempered with discipline. When describing the impact of her Christian faith, synthesised with her tribal culture, on her work in school with ‘problem children’ she said:

“Christians have to be kind, but without discipline, we cannot be kind. Most [problem children] have a bad background- family broken, so many problems. There are dropouts, some bunk classes. But when we look into their personal life we find out they have bad family. If parents didn’t teach good manners we see it in school: it is due to bad parenting.”

So, ‘problem’ children were disadvantaged because their parents had not adhered to their Christian and tribal values.

***4 Exemplifying God’s love through procreation or celibacy – the principal investigator meets the Assam Catholic Priest***

I was taken to a Catholic high school in Assam by my courteous gatekeeper who took time out of his lecturing schedule to drive me and my children to the school on a blisteringly humid 46 degrees centigrade day. The headteacher, an Assam Catholic Priest, was very busy and was unable to make the allotted time and so we waited for half an hour for him. As discussed earlier this could be interpreted as a hierarchical muscle flexing of the headteacher over a theology lecturer and a female English researcher when contrasted with another interview where an equally busy headteacher in Tamil Nadu state delayed another appointment to make time for my interview.

At the outset of the interview he was keen to convey that he was a priest first and teacher second so his faith was of ‘upmost importance’. A picture of the current Pope hung on the Assam Catholic Priest’s office wall. He was proud that his parents and grandparents had been Christian and that he wanted to be a priest since he was in class 5 (10 years old). He explained his vision for the school was to provide discipline

and moral values. He told me that the school's Christian ethos was evident from the beginning of the day where the assembly included a prayer to Jesus as God "the children have moral science where they learn about good and bad". His aim was to educate the 1500 students at the school to be 'simple, honest and sincere.' The Assam Catholic Priest's rhetoric was reminiscent of Jesus being surrounded by adoring children, a popular stereotypical Sunday school depiction, which was the impression I felt he was trying to create.

"I love the children. All the children wherever I go they surround me. If I go out all the children come out. So I do the same - love and be honest, it is biblical ... Yes, they simply want to come to me – they make one excuse or another to simply come to me. And they'll bring all kind of complaint and I sort them out. As a general rule, they are well behaved. Some they are naughty and they do not know what they are doing, I just give them a little punishment and they tell me 'I am very sorry I will not do again.' That is very good thing."

This espoused image of an adored individual was born out in practice to some extent after the interview, when I visited the 9 and 10 year olds classrooms and the Assam Priest was greeted with smiling faces. However, the interview was disrupted, half way through, by a 15 year old who brought his work to show his headteacher and I interpreted the Assam Priest's behaviour as dismissive and indifferent towards the boy and his work, an interpretation corroborated by my co researchers who were also present. However, his behaviour could also be interpreted as an endeavour to demonstrate authority and discipline, which is commonplace in Indian schools (Thapan 2014; Varma 2004). Nevertheless, the institutional body language (Dadzie 2000) of this

school exemplified equality. Teachers at the Assam Priest's school, endeavoured to challenge hierarchy through wearing the same uniform which they claimed 'demonstrates equality' in contrast to many of the mainstream schools I visited where some female staff dressed in elaborate saris denoting their status. The women teachers, (part of the thirty four interviewees) were thus challenging the Indian preoccupation with hierarchy and status endemic in India (Varma 2004, Sangupta 2016) preferring the leaners in their care to emulate Jesus' non prejudicial and non-hierarchical attitude.

It was a short visit and no conclusive judgements can be made about the Assam Priest's style of leadership. This feeling of dissonance between espoused rhetoric and actual practice was evidenced when the Assam Priest claimed that SEN children and slow learners were usually 'only' children, 'single' children, who had no siblings and are thus problematic:

"Yes, there are so many [SEN] children they are very slow and maximum [majority of] children are only children, single children – no brother no sister so they are not normal children ...and these children are really problematic, they don't have anybody to play and share. They come to this school and they behave abnormal and they want to have attention from everybody and so these children we have to handle with GREAT care and parents will come and they tell me 'Father, father my child is not obeying not listening'; and I say 'what is the reason?' and I find out the background [is] what is the reason. The reason is they are alone. This child has so much comfort ... so they don't know anything ... The child has to have a tutor to himself on his own and he does a full class and goes home and his parents cannot scold, cannot punish , because he is only one child and there are so many of this kind of children."

The Assam Priest narrated his Catholic perspective on procreation chastising my gatekeeper for having an only child but I was ‘blessed for having three children’. When I asked about this viewpoint, he said:

“Some say with lots of children there is no money; they are rich enough with only one or two. Others say it is very difficult to take care [for more than one child] I am not able to take care not able to look after [more than one]. ‘My wife shouldn’t have so many children’ – this is the reason they give. And this is a direct question I ask nehhh? Some families they have got a lot of money but still they don’t want more children.”

Thus, the Assam Catholic Priest suggests that it is a duty if you are married, to have lots of children and educationally an ‘only’ child is problematic. The procreation stance is corroborated in Catholic doctrine as Kendzia (2012) argues that a Catholic priest sees procreation as a vocation of a married person, so an ‘only’ child is not acceptable practice. Similarly, the Assam Catholic’s vocation as priest is celibacy and should not be compromised by being a family man. Kendzia explains the four roles

1. A priest- communicating God’s message/ ministry and administering the Holy Sacraments,
2. A nun or monk – chastity, poverty and obedience
3. Single person - can be a complete person on your own
4. Married person - to have children, procreative

(Kendzia 2012)

The Assam Catholic priest’s adherence to such values impacted on his attitude towards children in his school:

“‘Only’ children are spoilt and are the cause of ill-discipline. If you teach proper moral values then the others [‘naughty’ children] come in to line...”

His explanation challenges what Sangupta (2016) and Varma (2004) describe as an Indian desire for wealth. The Catholic Priest’s values suggest it important to not over indulge children – as many middle class Indian families seem to be doing in post colonial India, rather the aim is for the Catholic parents to have large families of obedient and hard-working children.

*5 All ways lead to God – the principal investigator meets the pluralist early years principal Assam*

In a city in the North East state of Assam I interviewed the Principal of an early year’s unit affiliated to the Theological College where we stayed as a family. The pluralist early years Principal told me that the Baptist foundation nursery was very popular not only amongst the theological college staff and students, but also the wider city and rural community sent their children including Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist and Jain parents. As with many other private schools I visited, this nursery operated a variable fee dependant on the family income.

“We don’t have much fees, we have children from teachers, businesses and labourers’ children and those who can’t afford can still come. There is a concession for faculty [theological college] students who send their children.”

She attributed the popularity of the nursery to word of mouth. Parents came to know about the high quality learning and values based education through their friends, the medium of teaching was English, (most other local nurseries conversed in Assamese). Parents particularly liked the outdoor space, discipline was good and ‘parents trust us’ she said. As with all the Christian foundation schools I visited this

nursery's staff were trusted by parents because, I was told, they avoided taking bribes – a common practice in India where parents often paid extortionate fees to get their children into a 'good school' (Varna 2004; Sengupta 2016).

As with many other schools, uniform was worn which the parents 'buy from the market and stitch themselves', this facilitated a more equal status for all children thus obscuring to some degree their diverse backgrounds.

The pluralist early years principal emphasised the legacy of the first Principal, an English Baptist missionary who had been influenced by Montessori's ideals of outdoor space and practical learning (Hyde 2011), synthesised with Christian prayer, cleanliness, discipline and use of English medium. This nursery, founded in 1986 by the Baptist missionary bore close resemblance to many British Early year's settings in terms of the structure of the learning, resources, teacher philosophy and practice. The teachers were mostly Christian and the songs were a mixture of traditional British nursery rhymes and Christian songs and prayers, with phrases such as 'tiffin time' and traditional English public school style uniform providing the 'institutional body language' of a preparatory school in England, viewed by many parents as providing their children with the social capital necessary for gaining entrance to esteemed high schools and universities, a finding echoed in Thapan (2014) and Sengupta (2016)

This pluralist early year's principal was keen to demonstrate her pluralist philosophy which I saw enacted in practice in my observations in several classrooms in the school.

"If they know about the love of God, they will know about Good and Bad.

Everyone has a different religion, I cannot say Hindu is bad. God is present everywhere. We all worship the same God.... We don't want to force them [to convert to Christianity]. So far parents don't have any objection [to the Christian



ethos – Christian singing, prayers etc] Parents come to the Christmas celebration, the gift exchange, refreshment and all. We start with a prayer, an exhortation. We share why we have Christmas. It is the only time we can show them our concern. So we teach the parents [about Christianity]. Some of them [parents] they don't know and don't give importance [to Christian foundation and ethos].”

Her stance contrasts considerably to that of the Bangalore Principal and Bangalore liberal in narrative one above, who, like Ilaiah (2012) aim reject and subvert Hindu Nationalist ethos and religion. The pluralist early years Principal, like the Mizoram host, seems less threatened by the dominant hierarchical Brahmin philosophy (Ilaiah 2012; Varma 2004). The pluralist early years principal stressed throughout her interview, her desire to witness to the parents and their children and she saw education and imparting Christian values as of equal importance.

“From 2 years when they hardly talk and write, slowly, slowly, we teach them about colours, shape, painting, we sing Christian songs have prayers; we bring them in fear of God. Discipline, habits, respect, etiquette all are very important. Our nursery is different to other nurseries – we teach them from a Christian perspective. Also, most nurseries don't have a playground – parents prefer space.”

She echoed what I had heard in numerous other interviews – that while fee paying schools paid low salaries teachers preferred to be employed in Christian foundation schools because of the job satisfaction it afforded in comparison with the

higher salaried government schools which afforded low job satisfaction owing to ill-discipline, poor administration and high absenteeism of fellow teachers which echoes Ramachandran's findings (2016). Another issue in common with other interviewees concerned non-proselyting, 'we can direct but we cannot force them'. Also, she stressed the need for patience when dealing with children but, unlike other interviewees, she did not explicitly mention prayer to God for direction, sustenance or support. However, this may have been due to the intake of the school – two and a half to five year old children from families who are dedicated to education may not present the same challenges as children in special schools or schools with older pupils whose parents are not as sympathetic towards education. The headmistress talked of the sacrifice parents made to send their children to fee paying Christian foundation schools. Many interviewees spoke of the advantages a good education afforded disadvantaged, particularly lower caste children in terms of social mobility.

## **Conclusion**

This study reveals the depth and richness of varied expressions of the impact of the Christian faith on teaching and learning in post colonial India. The myriad voices of the thirty-four teachers, principals, lecturers and ex-pupils who participated in this study, and the in depth five narratives, reveal complex and diverse ways in which Christian faith impacts on their teaching and learning, in some respects dependent on the political, religious and geographic contexts.

This study shows that teachers in Christian foundation schools felt that their Christian faith had a profound impact on their personal life and their professional role as teacher, as shown in figures 1 and 2. Firstly, in the private domain, the teacher's own Christian faith, to varying degrees, was articulated as a source of sustenance, guidance

and justification for action in both their personal and professional lives, it formed the ethical roots of the tree (West-Burnham and Harris 2014). Secondly, they saw themselves as role models and their faith informed their professional conduct and their decision making, which forms the trunk (West-Burnham and Harris 2014). Thirdly, to varying degrees and with different emphases, their Christian values contribute to their schools' institutional body language (Dadzie 2000) the outworking of values and decision making in practice, which form the branches of the tree (West-Burnham and Harris 2014). The findings also reveal the contrasts between Christian and Hindu Nationalist Indian values as depicted in some ethnographic studies (Varma 2004, Dalrymple 2009; Ilaiah 2012; and Sangupta 2016)

It is anticipated that these findings will enlighten and provoke reflection for both teachers in India and other countries. It can be argued that all professional practice is underpinned by beliefs, whether religious or secular, and this study attempts to make sense of the interaction between beliefs, values and actions, (in the wider political, social, religious and geographic context), in the professional practice of these teachers. In particular, this study suggests that personal beliefs can impact on and inform teachers' conduct in India despite governmental attempts to restrict the influence of Christianity in schools.

There is an inherent conflict between the teachers' desire to introduce their youngsters to Christian texts, values and principles and the shared Christian values espoused through the teaching and learning and the schools' institutional body language on the one hand, and the imperative of adhering to governmental directives to refrain from proselytising on the other hand. The participants attempted to resolve this conflict by asserting that although they made their faith explicit in their work in the school, they did not coerce children to convert to Christianity.

India is a diverse country and if the education system is to improve, which many think it should (Das et al. 2012; Ramachandran 2016) then some recognition of the variety of both teacher and governmental directed values would seem appropriate because, as West-Burnham and Harris (2014) argue, values underpin decision making and action. It is a highly complex situation with historic legacies of colonialism, Hindu Nationalism and the plurality of religions and ethnic/community groups. The teachers in this study all seemed dedicated to furthering the opportunities and life chances of the young people in their care and Christianity has relevance to this because Christian values lay at the root of these Indian teacher's decision making and action. The extent to which they can successfully fulfil their aim given such competing value systems remains to be seen. But Varma (2004:146) is hopeful for his fellow Indians, 'given our capacity to muddle through, and to convert weakness to strength, the future appears to be more rosy than bleak.'

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Figure 1. Three findings mapped onto West-Burnham and Harris (2014) tree metaphor

| Theme from India data   | Tree metaphor  |
|---|--|
| <p>4. <b>God sustains and personal faith empowers</b> both in personal and professional life</p>                                      | <p><b>ROOTS</b> : <i>Christian values and ethics underpin decision making</i></p>  |
| <p>5. <b>Biblical texts guide behaviour</b> teachers are inspired by Biblical values : obedience, love, honesty, humility etc ,</p>   | <p><b>TRUNK</b> : <i>Biblical texts and Christian doctrine informs decision making</i></p> <p><b>BRANCHES/leaves</b> : <i>the day to day behaviour inspired by decision making</i></p> |
| <p>6. <b>One faith, myriad interpretations</b> teachers’ ‘voices’ illustrate elements in common but also significant differences,</p> | <p><b>DIFFERENT TREES</b>: <i>teachers’ narratives are all Christian (tree not a flower) but different (eg Bayan tree, Indian Mahogany, Curry tree, Mango tree etc)</i></p>            |

Figure 2. Same religion, Christianity (tree not a flower); Different interpretations of Christianity (eg Assam Catholic priest, Presbyterian tribal); Different trees (Indian Mahogany, Bayan tree, Mango tree)

