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Research Paper

Spiritual Continuity and Religious Identity: A Qualitative Study of Orphanage Upbringing and Adoption in an Indian Context

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines how early religious upbringing within Christian or Hindu orphanages shapes spiritual identity into young adulthood, regardless of later adoption or the adoptive family's faith. Using narrative inquiry and semi-structured interviews with twelve individuals aged 18 to 25, the study explores how institutionalised faith-based care embeds spiritual templates that persist as identity-defining belief systems. The analysis includes an autoethnographic account of the researcher's own experience of cross-faith adoption. Data were interpreted through Erikson's psychosocial theory, Bowlby's attachment theory, and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Findings suggest that early religious socialisation establishes emotional and cognitive frameworks that persist across changes in caregiving environment and religious affiliation, functioning as stabilising anchors for identity even where formal belief later changes. The study contributes to discourse on religious identity formation in post-institutional and post-adoption contexts within South Asia.

Keywords: *Religious Upbringing, Spiritual Identity, Orphanage Care, Adoption, Narrative Inquiry, India*

Religion often functions as a core developmental scaffold in caregiving environments where biological parental presence is absent. In institutional settings such as orphanages, structured religious routines, prayers, moral teaching, and ritual can offer children a sense of rhythm, safety, and symbolic belonging. In India, many orphanages are faith-affiliated, with Christianity and Hinduism the most common frameworks imparted to children in care. Existing literature on religious identity in adoptive contexts centres largely on Western populations and rarely addresses the intersection of spiritual formation and institutional upbringing in non-Western, pluralistic societies.

This study explores how religiously affiliated orphanages in India shape long-term spiritual identity among individuals who were adopted into families of the same or a different faith, or who were never adopted. Rather than focusing on doctrinal retention or conversion, the research is concerned with how children emotionally and cognitively integrate early faith exposure into an evolving sense of self. The study also incorporates an autoethnographic narrative from the researcher, whose own experience of spiritual continuity following cross-faith adoption offers a firsthand account that deepens the reflexivity of the analysis.

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Background

Religiously affiliated orphanages in India often function as dual systems of care, providing food, shelter, and education alongside religious routines such as daily prayer, festival observance, and moral instruction. These environments frequently offer theological explanations for suffering, purpose, and love that are especially salient for children navigating abandonment and loss. Children raised in such settings may come to experience religious figures such as Jesus or Krishna as emotionally significant attachments, particularly where stable human caregiving is inconsistent (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004; Mahoney, 2013). Early exposure to religion during formative years may therefore produce a form of religious imprinting, a semi-permanent psychological and emotional association with a faith tradition that can persist even after adoption into a family of a different religion or a secular household.

Theoretical Framework

Erikson's (1950) psychosocial theory frames identity development as a series of relational and moral conflicts, most notably trust versus mistrust in early childhood and identity versus role confusion in adolescence. Religious ritual and metaphor may scaffold both stages, particularly for children lacking secure human attachments. Bowlby's (1969, 1988) attachment theory holds that in the absence of consistent, emotionally attuned caregivers, children seek alternative attachment figures; religious figures may serve as symbolic surrogates offering perceived protection and unconditional love. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory adds that cognition and identity develop through social interaction and shared cultural tools, positioning religious ritual and collective worship as vehicles through which children internalise meaning, even without explicit doctrinal instruction. These three frameworks were applied post hoc to interpret themes generated inductively from participant narratives, rather than to predetermine them.

Aim and Objectives

The central aim of this study is to explore how early religious upbringing in Christian or Hindu orphanages shapes long-term spiritual identity, irrespective of adoption status or the adoptive family's religious affiliation. The specific objectives were to document the lived experiences of individuals raised in religiously affiliated orphanages in India; to examine the influence of early exposure to Christianity or Hinduism on moral development, emotional attachment, and spiritual identity; to explore how adoption into families of the same or a different religion alters or reinforces early spiritual beliefs; and to interpret these patterns through the lenses of psychosocial development, symbolic attachment, and sociocultural learning.

Research Questions

1. How do individuals raised in Christian or Hindu orphanages experience and internalise spiritual beliefs during early development?
2. What happens to those beliefs following adoption into families of a different or similar faith tradition?
3. To what extent do early religious teachings persist, evolve, or dissolve over time?
4. How do religious rituals, symbols, and figures function psychologically in the absence of secure caregiving?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative narrative inquiry design supported by thematic analysis. Participants shared their life stories with a focus on religious experience, emotional development, adoption trajectory, and current spiritual identity. The researcher's own experience is incorporated through autoethnographic reflection. The narrative approach allowed temporality, emotional depth, and cultural nuance to emerge organically, consistent with the study's aim of capturing longitudinal processes of spiritual identity development.

Participants

Twelve participants (8 female, 4 male) aged 18 to 25 years were recruited from Ahmedabad and Bengaluru, where both Christian and Hindu orphanages are prevalent. All had lived in a religiously affiliated institution for at least three years during childhood. Some were adopted early, others later, and three were never adopted.

Sampling

Purposive sampling ensured representation across religious tradition, adoption status, and gender. Snowball sampling through NGOs and care-alumni networks facilitated further recruitment, with diversity in region and familial transition intentionally sought to maximise analytic variation.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person or by phone and lasted between 45 and 70 minutes. Key prompts invited participants to describe remembered religious practices from the orphanage, their emotional relationship to religious figures and rituals, what happened to those beliefs after adoption or leaving the orphanage, and how they would describe their spiritual identity today. A reflexive journal maintained throughout data collection was later integrated as an autoethnographic data source.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes were generated inductively from participant narratives and subsequently mapped onto conceptual categories informed by Eriksonian identity crises, attachment substitutes, and sociocultural learning. Themes were reviewed iteratively with attention to the persistence of belief systems over time, the emotional salience of early religious experience, and the adaptive or conflictual negotiation of differing religious environments. Triangulation was achieved through the integration of participant data, theoretical perspective, and the researcher's autoethnographic narrative.

Findings

Table 1 summarises participant demographics and religious trajectories.

ID	Orphanage Religion	Adopted	Age at Adoption	Adoptive Family Religion	Current Spiritual Identity
P1	Christian	Yes	Infant	Hindu	Mixed (Christian roots, Hindu practice)
P2	Hindu	Yes	5 years	Hindu	Hindu
P3	Christian	Yes	3 years	Secular	Christian

ID	Orphanage Religion	Adopted	Age at Adoption	Adoptive Family Religion	Current Spiritual Identity
P4	Hindu	Yes	4 years	Christian	Both (dual spiritual path)
P5	Christian	No	N/A	N/A	Christian
P6	Christian	Yes	Infant	Hindu	Christian emotional bond, Hindu ritual
P7	Hindu	No	N/A	N/A	Hindu
P8	Hindu	Yes	6 years	Secular	Hindu (personal rituals maintained)
P9	Christian	Yes	7 years	Hindu	Reclaimed Christian identity
P10	Hindu	Yes	Infant	Hindu	Hindu
P11	Hindu	No	N/A	N/A	Hindu (strong emotional tie to rituals)
P12	Christian	Yes	2 years	Christian	Christian

Autoethnographic Reflection

I was adopted as an infant from a Christian orphanage into a Hindu household and was unaware of this background until the age of four. On learning of my origins, I began to feel a subtle but persistent connection to Jesus, at times praying privately or experiencing emotional resonance with Christian narratives. This dual affiliation is consistent with Bowlby's attachment theory: early attachment may not have formed to a biological mother but to the routines, voices, and religious symbols present in the orphanage. It also resonates with Erikson's identity versus role confusion stage; during adolescence, I experienced tension between my social role within a Hindu household and private spiritual impulses oriented toward Christianity, eventually coming to understand my spiritual identity as a mosaic rather than a binary choice. From a Vygotskian perspective, values associated with my earliest Christian environment, such as compassion, humility, and service, appear to have been internalised as part of my worldview despite never being consciously taught after adoption. Conducting the interviews for this study became, in turn, a process of recognising fragments of my own trajectory in participants' accounts of hidden prayer and negotiated faith, reframing what I had once experienced as fragmented as a coherent narrative of spiritual continuity.

Theme 1: Early Religious Exposure as Psychospiritual Imprinting

Across participants, religious experience during the orphanage years functioned as more than instruction; it operated as an emotionally anchoring template that persisted through later change in belief or environment.

Rituals as Emotional Architecture

Structured religious ritual, whether prayer, chant, or festival observance, offered a rhythmic foundation during a period of otherwise chaotic emotional experience, and became associated with safety and belonging.

> *"I didn't have a mom or dad, but I had Jesus. Sister Maria used to say, 'He watches you when no one else does.'"* (P3)

This finding is consistent with Bowlby's account of symbolic attachment, in which predictable and emotionally charged symbols come to serve a compensatory regulatory function in the absence of consistent caregiving, and with Erikson's trust versus mistrust stage, in which structured nurturing environments support the development of basic security.

Divine Figures as Substitute Attachment

For participants who experienced inconsistent caregiving, religious figures were frequently described as active, substitute caregivers rather than abstract objects of belief.

> *"Krishna was like my invisible best friend. I told him all my secrets. It felt like someone was listening, even when no one was around."* (P10)
>
> *"During Diwali, the lights made me feel like the gods cared about me. I felt seen."* (P7)

These accounts illustrate how, in institutional care where physical caregivers may rotate or be emotionally unavailable, spiritual figures can become stable objects of emotional projection, soothing distress and supporting a sense of being watched over.

Residual Spiritual Reflexes

Even among participants who no longer practised their orphanage religion, involuntary emotional and behavioural reflexes persisted, particularly under stress.

> *"When my dog died, I prayed. I hadn't done that in years, but it just happened. I didn't even think."* (P11)

This pattern reflects what might be termed an implicit, embodied form of spirituality, learned through early social participation (Vygotsky, 1978) and reactivated as an emotion-regulation tool independent of current belief.

Theme 2: Post-Adoption Spiritual Conflict and Duality

Adoption frequently introduced a renegotiation of religious identity, particularly where the adoptive family's belief system differed from that of the orphanage.

Hidden Beliefs and Guilt

Several participants described secretly maintaining their orphanage religion where it was not accepted within the adoptive household, often accompanied by guilt or a sense of divided loyalty.

> *"My adoptive family were very religious Hindus. I still kept a small Bible hidden in my drawer. I was afraid they wouldn't understand."* (P1)
>
> *"They told me idol worship is nonsense. I used to love lighting the diya. I stopped because I didn't want them to think I was stupid."* (P4)

Hybrid and Interfaith Identity

Participants adopted into more pluralistic households more often described a hybrid religious identity, drawing selectively from both traditions rather than treating them as mutually exclusive.

> *"Now I celebrate both Christmas and Diwali. I don't see a problem with that."* (P8)

This form of spiritual synthesis is consistent with Erikson's account of a healthy resolution to identity conflict, in which self-authorship replaces binary choice.

Suppression and Adolescent Rebellion

Where adoptive families actively discouraged prior religious practice, participants described resentment and, in some cases, active rebellion during adolescence.

> *"I had to suppress who I was spiritually. It made me angry as a teen, like I was betraying my past."* (P4)

Where a child's prior religious identity was invalidated rather than acknowledged, participants described a form of double alienation, disconnected from both the adoptive family's religion and their own spiritual origins.

Theme 3: Religion as Resistance and Reclaimed Autonomy

A number of participants described religious instruction within the orphanage as coercive rather than nurturing, particularly where compliance was tied to reward or punishment.

Resisting Imposed Belief

> *"I was forced to pray and read the Bible. It made me hate religion for a while. But later, I made peace with it on my own terms."* (P9)
>
> *"I remember crying during prayer because I didn't understand why I had to do it. They said God would be angry if I didn't. That scared me."* (P9)

Consistent with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), coercive religious instruction appeared to produce external compliance alongside internal resistance, culminating in later disidentification.

Reclaiming Faith on One's Own Terms

Several of the same participants who resisted or rejected imposed religion in adolescence later returned to spiritual practice voluntarily in adulthood, often during periods of grief or crisis.

> *"I hated church for years. But when my mother died, I found myself lighting a candle. It brought me peace. I think it's different now."* (P9)

This trajectory reflects a shift from extrinsic to intrinsic religiosity (Allport & Ross, 1967), associated in the literature with greater wellbeing and a more personally authentic spirituality.

Ethical Reflection

With the benefit of adult reflection, some participants questioned the ethics of religious instruction delivered to children who were not in a position to give informed consent.

> *"I think it's wrong to make orphans pray a certain way just because they're vulnerable. That's manipulation, not faith."* (P5)

Theme 4: Religion as Surrogate Family and Moral Authority

For many participants, religion in the orphanage was inseparable from community and relational belonging, filling a void left by the absence of biological family.

Shared Ritual as Bonding

> *"We all sang bhajans together every night. That was the only time the dorm felt like home."* (P4)

> *"We had nothing else in common, different backgrounds, languages, but we all prayed together. That was the glue."* (P7)

Caregivers as Moral Architects

Religious caregivers, whether nuns, priests, or ashram staff, were consistently described as early moral educators whose influence persisted long after the caregiving relationship ended.

> *"Sister Angela wasn't my mother, but she was the only one who tucked me in and said, 'God loves you.'"* (P1)
>
> *"Even now, when I lie, I hear Sister Rose's voice saying, 'God hates lies.' It makes me pause."* (P12)

These internalised voices function, in Eriksonian terms, as an enduring moral compass, and reflect the broader process by which significant adult modelling becomes part of an individual's internal dialogue (Vygotsky, 1978; Kohlberg, 1981).

Religion as Social Identity

> *"Being a Christian in the orphanage gave me something to call mine. We were all the same. No one had parents, but we had faith."* (P5)

Religion functioned here as a form of shared cultural capital, offering a sense of legitimacy and collective identity that partly compensated for the absence of biological ties.

Theme 5: Faith as a Framework for Meaning-Making and Forgiveness

Religious and spiritual belief offered several participants a moral and emotional vocabulary through which to process abandonment and, in some cases, to move toward forgiveness of birth parents or of themselves.

Cosmic Meaning and Purpose

> *"I used to ask why I was left behind. Now I believe it was so I could become strong. God doesn't make mistakes."* (P10)

This teleological interpretation of early loss mirrors an existential need for coherence, offering a form of psychological containment even where formal religious belief later changes.

Prayer as Dialogue and Forgiveness

> *"I talk to God about my mother. I tell Him I'm angry but I don't hate her anymore. Maybe she had no choice."* (P8)

Private prayer appeared, for some participants, to function as a form of imagined dialogue that allowed for symbolic closure in the absence of any real contact with birth parents.

Recasting the Self Through Religious Metaphor

> *"They said Jesus loved the lost sheep most. That became my story. I wasn't forgotten. I was special."* (P1)

Such reframing offered participants an alternative to a purely deficit-based self-narrative, supporting what Frankl (1959) describes as the construction of meaning through, rather than despite, adversity.

DISCUSSION

Taken together, these findings indicate that early spiritual exposure within religiously affiliated orphanages produces a durable form of religious identity that is not simply erased by later adoption into a differently, or non-, religious household. Erikson's psychosocial theory helps explain why spiritual identity is revisited and renegotiated most intensely during adolescence, when the individual is actively reconciling inherited belief with an emerging sense of self. Bowlby's attachment theory clarifies why divine figures so often came to function as surrogate caregivers in these accounts, offering an internal working model of protection where consistent human caregiving was absent. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, in turn, explains how ritual and religious language operated as cultural tools that were internalised early and reactivated across the lifespan, independent of current belief. Read alongside one another, these frameworks support the view that religious identities formed in institutional care are both psychologically resilient and culturally embedded, whether they are ultimately retained, hybridised, suppressed, or consciously reclaimed.

Significance and Expected Contribution

This study contributes to psychology, religious studies, and adoption research by demonstrating that orphanage-based religious exposure carries long-term implications for identity and emotional regulation. The findings suggest that adoptive families and care providers stand to benefit from acknowledging and, where appropriate, integrating a child's spiritual history rather than treating it as incidental to placement. They also point to the need for trauma-informed approaches to spiritual care within institutional and post-adoption settings more broadly.

CONCLUSION

Religious upbringing within orphanages exerts a lasting influence on belief systems that is largely independent of whether, or when, a child is subsequently adopted. Participants in this study retained psychological and emotional ties to their earliest faith environment that continued to shape moral reasoning, emotional coping, and spiritual self-understanding well into adulthood. Read through Erikson's, Bowlby's, and Vygotsky's theories, these findings suggest that the sacred foundations laid in early institutional care persist beneath the surface of later religious change, forming what might be described as a hidden but enduring compass for identity.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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