

# Negotiating Priesthood in the Public Eye: A Sociological Study of Protestant Clergy in Dindigul District

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**Abstract:** *This study examines how Protestant priests in the Dindigul district of Tamil Nadu navigate their professional identity and perform their roles using personal and institutional resources. Drawing on Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory and a phenomenological lens, this qualitative study analyses life - history interviews with eight Protestant clergy. The findings reveal that priests undergo complex processes of professional socialisation, identity negotiation, and impression management as they balance their sacred calling with contemporary social expectations. The study identifies key themes such as emotional regulation, role distancing, and adaptation to modern technology and dress codes. While many priests enter the vocation through imposed choices or spiritual experiences, all eventually engage in active identity construction through social interaction. The research highlights the tensions between public performance and private self, showing how religious professionals mediate institutional expectations and lay community perceptions. This article contributes to the sociology of religion and professions by offering an ethnographic account of priesthood as both vocation and performance, suggesting that religious leadership is deeply shaped by context, interaction, and symbolic labour.*

**Keywords:** priesthood, professionalism, dramaturgy, impression management, Protestant clergy, identity, Tamil Nadu

## 1. Introduction

The distinction between an occupation and a profession has long intrigued sociologists of work. According to Weber (1947), while an occupation may be any form of paid labour, a profession demands specialised training, codified ethics, and public recognition. Ernest Greenwood (1957) further articulated five core attributes of a profession: systematic theory, authority, community sanction, ethical codes, and a professional culture. These characteristics are often invoked in analysing professions such as medicine, law, and education. Religion—specifically the vocation of priesthood—also fits within this framework, though it is often underexplored in sociological analyses of professional identity.

Within religious institutions, priests hold a unique position, acting as both spiritual leaders and organizational functionaries. In contemporary society, however, the priesthood is marked by an increasing tension between sacred duties and secular expectations. This is especially true in India, where Protestant clergy navigate a hybrid role shaped by theology, institutional demands, and local community dynamics. Unlike Catholic priests, whose celibate and centralized lifestyle has drawn significant scholarly attention (Schoenherr & Greeley, 1974), Protestant clergy in India are often married, embedded in their communities, and expected to maintain public visibility across diverse social domains.

This article examines how Protestant priests in Dindigul district, Tamil Nadu, experience and negotiate their professional identity. How do these priests reconcile their spiritual calling with the pragmatic aspects of everyday life? How do they manage their appearance, emotions, and social interactions to maintain their credibility and authority? What

institutional or cultural resources do they deploy to perform their priestly role?

Framing this inquiry within Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach, this study understands priesthood as a performance shaped by both audience expectations and institutional scripts. The research also draws from phenomenological sociology, particularly the emphasis on lived experience, to understand how priests interpret their transition from the profane to the sacred. By centering on Protestant clergy—a group less studied in the Indian context—this article seeks to expand the sociology of religion by attending to the everyday strategies, tensions, and negotiations involved in performing the sacred.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Understanding the priesthood as a profession requires an interdisciplinary approach that draws on theories of professional identity, symbolic interactionism, and phenomenology. This study primarily employs Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory of social interaction as the central lens, supplemented by insights from the sociology of professions (Weber, 1947; Greenwood, 1957) and phenomenological sociology (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Husserl, 1970).

### 2.1 Profession and Professionalism

Max Weber (1947) viewed professions as vocations grounded in rational - legal authority and sustained by formalized training and ethical codes. Building on this, Greenwood (1957) proposed that systematic knowledge, community - sanctioned authority, ethical codes, and a shared professional culture distinguish professions. Priesthood, though often seen as a sacred calling, also fits within this framework, especially

as it involves formal theological education, organizational hierarchy, and community service.

In the case of Protestant priests in Tamil Nadu, the profession is shaped by both institutional constraints and individual aspirations. Professional socialisation, defined by Merton (1957) as the process by which individuals internalise the norms, values, and skills of their occupational role, plays a crucial part in preparing clergy for public ministry. Abbott (1988) emphasised that such socialisation is not merely technical but ideological, instilling moral responsibility and a sense of calling. This is especially salient in religious vocations where identity and performance are inextricably linked.

## 2.2 Goffman's Dramaturgical Approach

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory provides the conceptual foundation for analysing how priests "perform" their roles in public. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman posits that social life is structured like a theatre, with individuals performing roles before an audience in a front stage, while rehearsing and preparing in the backstage. For priests, the front stage includes delivering sermons, leading congregations, and managing symbolic elements like dress, demeanour, and ritual behaviour. The backstage, by contrast, includes private family life, emotional vulnerabilities, and informal expressions of frustration or fatigue.

Central to this approach is the concept of impression management, or the conscious and unconscious strategies individuals use to control their perceptions (Goffman, 1959). Priests are expected to embody moral authority, compassion, and spiritual clarity—even when personal experiences may involve doubt, conflict, or emotional strain. Their ability to maintain this image, particularly under the scrutiny of the congregation and broader society, is a key concern of this study.

## 2.3 Phenomenology and Lived Experience

To supplement the dramaturgical framework, this study draws from phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of Protestant priests. Husserl (1970) and later Berger and Luckmann (1966) emphasised the subjective construction of reality, focusing on how individuals interpret and give meaning to their everyday lives. Through this lens, becoming a priest is not simply a career transition but a transformation of identity, worldview, and behaviour. The phenomenological approach allows the researcher to access the internal dimensions of priestly life—feelings of vocation, struggles with authenticity, and the negotiation of personal belief with public expectation.

By integrating these theoretical strands, the study investigates how Protestant priests in Dindigul embody and resist religious professionalism's normative expectations. It asks how their performances are shaped by institutional scripts, personal convictions, and social interactions while exploring the inner tensions and ethical ambiguities they navigate.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design rooted in interpretivist and phenomenological traditions, aimed at capturing Protestant priests' lived experiences, subjective meanings, and performative strategies. The focus is on understanding how these clergy members deploy personal and institutional resources to navigate their professional roles within the social context of Dindigul district, Tamil Nadu. A combination of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model and phenomenological sociology forms the analytical lens, allowing for both structural and experiential interpretations of priesthood.

### 3.2 Study Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in the Madurai - Ramnad Diocese of the Church of South India (CSI), which spans six districts, including Dindigul. This area offers a rich landscape for examining the professional lives of Protestant priests, who often serve diverse rural and semi - urban congregations. A total of eight Protestant priests participated in the study, including seven active and one retired clergy member. All participants were male, married, and had varying years of experience in ministry.

### 3.3 Sampling Method

The purposive sampling technique selected participants with relevant and diverse experiences. This method facilitated access to information - rich cases who could speak insightfully about their vocational journey, public performance, and community interactions. Sampling continued until thematic saturation was achieved.

### 3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi - structured, in - depth interviews in Tamil, the participants' native language. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was audio - recorded with informed consent. The interviews were later transcribed and translated into English by the researcher for analysis. In addition, participant observation was conducted during informal interactions and church events, allowing for triangulation of data and deeper immersion in the priests' social world.

### 3.5 Analytical Approach

The study employed thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and interpret meanings across the data. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) model, transcripts were read multiple times, coded inductively and deductively, and organized into themes reflecting both theoretical constructs (e. g., impression management, role distancing) and emic categories (e. g., "identity flaunting," "emotional control"). The analysis was iterative, allowing emerging themes to shape subsequent interpretation.

### 3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were maintained throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was ensured by using pseudonyms. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. Given the sensitive nature of religious vocation, special care was taken to represent their narratives with respect and contextual sensitivity.

### 3.7 Positionality

The researcher identifies as a local community member and a trained sociologist, which provided access and rapport but also necessitated reflexivity. Field notes were maintained to track researcher bias, and data interpretation was cross-checked through peer debriefing and triangulation.

## 4. Findings

Thematic analysis of interviews with eight Protestant priests in Dindigul district revealed complex negotiations of identity, role expectations, and performance in both public and private spheres. The findings are organized into six interconnected themes that reflect the multifaceted nature of priesthood as both vocation and profession.

### 4.1 Entry Into Priesthood: Imposition, Calling, and Acceptance

Participants entered the priesthood through varying pathways—some by personal conviction, others through parental pressure or spiritual experiences. Several priests reported having no initial interest in religious life but gradually accepted the vocation after personal or familial transformations. For instance, Rev. Kirubakaran recounted how his parents compelled him into ministry, believing it would bring social control and honour. Over time, he internalized the role, stating, *“I came to this profession with my parents’ compulsion, but as days went by, I accepted the Lord and started to involve myself in spiritual activities.”*

This supports Cooley’s (1902) looking - glass self theory, suggesting that the reflected appraisals of significant others influence identity formation. Priests reinterpreted externally imposed decisions as spiritual callings, thereby reconstructing their sense of self within the sacred domain.

### 4.2 Priest–Layperson Interaction: Bridging Distance with Strategy

Despite stereotypes that priests maintain distance from laypeople, the participants emphasized the importance of friendly, strategic interaction. Rev. Ravichandran shared that his non - Christian friends had assumed he would avoid their rituals, only to find him present and engaged: *“They are not looking at me now as a priest, but as their friend.”*

Priests used linguistic discipline, avoiding controversial words and maintaining a biblical tone in liturgical and informal spaces. This aligns with Goffman’s (1959) notion of “front stage” behaviour, where individuals control their expressions to maintain a desired impression.

### 4.3 Identity Performance: Balancing Humility and Symbolism

While some priests preferred low - key presentations, others felt compelled to visibly model religious identity. Rev. Prabudoss, for example, rejected overt displays, prioritizing humanitarian values: *“If I wanted to flaunt my identity, I may not allow myself to be involved in [community service]. Humanity is more important than identity.”*

Conversely, Rev. Kirubakaran emphasized performative fidelity: *“I have internalised Christ, so I’ve to be a living model to others.”* These contrasting views reveal how impression management varies by individual orientation and community context. The symbolic interactionist lens (Blumer, 1969) clarifies how the priest’s role is co - constructed through both personal intention and communal interpretation.

### 4.4 Emotional Management: Repression and Role Expectation

Priests reported significant emotional regulation as part of their professional ethos. Goffman (1959) described this as backstage tension—feelings hidden from public view to preserve professional integrity. Rev. Vedhamuthu shared: *“One of my family members passed away. . . I longed to cry, but I couldn’t due to my profession.”*

Anger, frustration, and grief were often displaced onto family members in private, revealing the psychological cost of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). This unspoken burden suggests a potential area of strain within the domestic sphere, raising questions about long - term well - being and occupational burnout.

### 4.5 Material Presentation: The Politics of Dress and Lifestyle

Participants described tight constraints around dress and appearance, especially in public spaces. Lay expectations dictate priestly presentation, limiting individual expression. Rev. Prasath noted: *“Whenever I wear a floral printed shirt, the lay people gaze at me like I’ve done a prohibited action.”* Another priest admitted he owned only four old T - shirts, worn strictly indoors.

These findings underscore the symbolic power of non - material culture (Geertz, 1973), particularly how clothing operates as a visible signifier of spiritual discipline and commitment. The performative function of dress is central to maintaining the boundary between sacred and secular identities.

### 4.6 Contemporary Engagement and Aspirations: Revolution from Within

Priests actively engage with modern culture, digital media, and contemporary issues despite structural constraints. Several mentioned watching movies, reading newspapers, and using social media to relate better with youth congregants. Rev. Prasath, for example, spoke of initiating a

“religious revolution” among younger generations by combining faith with cultural relevance.

Participants also expressed aspirations for egalitarian change, especially regarding caste hierarchies within church institutions. Rev. Vedhamuthu stated: “In this society, everyone is equal, and I wish to abolish caste practices and discrimination among the people.” Such aspirations reflect social action rooted in theological and sociological visions of equality (Weber, 1978).

## 5. Discussion

This study explored how Protestant priests in the Dindigul district of Tamil Nadu experience and enact their religious profession through strategic performance, emotional labour, and symbolic presentation. The findings illustrate that priesthood in the Protestant tradition—particularly in the South Indian context—extends beyond spiritual service into a highly managed public identity. These insights reinforce Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical model and deepen it by embedding performance within a specific cultural, religious, and institutional terrain.

### 5.1 Priesthood as Hybrid Profession

Though traditionally viewed as a sacred calling, Priesthood operates increasingly like a profession in modern society. Weber’s (1947) concept of “Beruf” (calling) suggests that modern professions, including religious ones, combine inner dedication with externally organized structures. The Protestant priests in this study embody this tension. On one hand, they internalise the notion of spiritual service; on the other, they face public scrutiny, behavioural expectations, and institutional pressures that align with the characteristics of professional life as outlined by Greenwood (1957).

Priests engage in professional socialisation by managing dress codes, linguistic conduct, emotional expression, and public behaviour (Merton, 1957; Abbott, 1988). These acts are not merely personal or spiritual; they are sociologically significant in cultivating authority, legitimacy, and community trust.

### 6. Dramaturgical Performance and Impression Management

Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical theory finds strong empirical grounding in the lived experience of these priests. Whether navigating funerals, social gatherings, or daily interactions, priests meticulously manage their front - stage behaviour to maintain an image of moral clarity and spiritual authority. The emphasis on material presentation—cassocks, formal dress, and modest attire—even in private spaces, indicates a total institution - like influence where the boundaries between private and public selves are blurred (Goffman, 1961).

Moreover, their self - surveillance and emotional regulation reflect deep acting (Hochschild, 1983), a hallmark of professions that require symbolic labour. Despite internal conflict, the reluctance to express grief or anger in public

reveals the emotional toll of constant impression management and the cultural script of clerical perfection.

### 6.1 Negotiating Modernity and Moral Authority

Priests’ selective engagement with media, technology, and contemporary trends reveals a nuanced negotiation with modernity. Unlike caricatures of religious leaders as detached or conservative, these priests embrace selective modern tools to connect with youth and remain relevant. This is indicative of what Berger and Luckmann (1966) term “secondary socialization”—ongoing processes through which individuals continually adapt their identities in response to shifting environments.

At the same time, the aspiration to foster egalitarian values and challenge caste structures suggests that Protestant priests in this region are not passive transmitters of tradition. Instead, they are moral entrepreneurs (Becker, 1963), actively reshaping their professional and religious domains from within. The priesthood becomes a site of both spiritual continuity and social reform.

## 7. Performing Equality, Managing Hierarchy

A particularly striking finding is the priests’ rhetorical and behavioural attempts to downplay hierarchy in favour of equality, even as they remain embedded within denominational structures that reinforce seniority and authority. Their strategies—such as eating last at community meals or dressing modestly—can be read as performances of humility that align with both religious expectations and contemporary ideals of egalitarianism.

This reflects a paradox in professional identity: while formal roles provide authority, informal performances often subvert that authority in favour of relational closeness and solidarity. The role of caste in shaping internal church dynamics further complicates the idea of priesthood as a purely spiritual domain. Instead, it underscores how intersectional forces (Crenshaw, 1989)—such as caste, class, and age—mediate religious professionalism in everyday practice.

## 8. Conclusion

This study investigated how Protestant priests in the Dindigul district of Tamil Nadu perform and negotiate their professional identity in contemporary society. Drawing on Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical model and a phenomenological approach, the research revealed that priesthood is not merely a religious vocation but a complex and dynamic profession requiring continual performance, identity management, and negotiation with social expectations.

The findings demonstrate that Protestant priests operate in a space marked by both sacred obligations and secular scrutiny. Their professional lives involve navigating emotional labour, regulating symbolic expression, and balancing institutional hierarchies with relational egalitarianism. These dynamics affirm Weber’s (1947) view of modern vocations as simultaneously spiritual and bureaucratic, while extending Greenwood’s (1957) framework of professionalism into the religious domain.



Importantly, this study shows that priesthood is deeply performative: it involves what priests do and how they are seen doing it. These clergy maintain credibility and authority among laypeople through impression management, dress regulation, and controlled emotional displays. Yet, beneath these performances lie genuine tensions between personal desires and public expectations, between tradition and modernity, and between hierarchical roles and egalitarian aspirations.

In doing so, Protestant priests in Tamil Nadu emerge as hybrid actors: religious professionals who serve both as custodians of faith and negotiators of contemporary social life. Their role in fostering community cohesion, spiritual guidance, and even social reform, particularly in confronting caste - based exclusions, positions them as key intermediaries in India's evolving moral landscape.

This article contributes to the sociology of religion, identity studies, and the sociology of professions by offering an ethnographic account of how religious leadership is enacted, sustained, and contested. It highlights the importance of context, symbolism, and lived experience in understanding vocational identity. Future research may expand on these findings by comparing Protestant and Catholic clergy, exploring the experiences of female religious leaders, or analysing the long - term psychological effects of emotional regulation among religious professionals.

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