Religious Pluralism and Multi-Ethnicity: a threat or opportunity for peaceful coexistence in Sri Lanka – A study

P. Sachithanantham

Department of Comparative Religion & Social harmony, Eastern University Sri Lanka

Correspondence: Sachith72@yahoo.com

Abstract:

This study focuses on how religious pluralism and multi-ethnicity influence peaceful coexistence in a multi-cultural society. Sri Lanka is one of the multi-ethnic and multi-religious countries in South Asia where religions and ethnicity play a significant role in determining the stability of peaceful coexistence, politics, economy, and other socio-cultural changes. The positive impact of religious pluralism and multi-ethnicity is to promote peaceful coexistence by breaking down the barriers and bringing a better understanding of other cultures enrich lives, and encourage tolerance. In Sri Lanka, due to the negative consequence of the religious plurality and multi-ethnicity, it has experienced religious fundamentalism, racism, prejudice, and discrimination, and conflict in the past, and peaceful coexistence has threatened. Scholars in the study argued religious plurality and multi-ethnicity have been impacting positively and negatively in the process of peaceful coexistence in the country. The secondary data pertaining to the study have been collected from the various published source's books, research papers, and other literature in this background. This Research has carried out by reviewing of pieces of literature survey analysis through descriptive and comparative analysis methods. In conclusion, Sri Lanka is an ideal place for practicing religious pluralism through multi-cultural practice to promote coexistence, but that threatens various factors such as political power, ethnocentrism, religious extremism, and other negative impacts on peaceful coexistence.

Keywords: religious pluralism, extremism, coexistence, ethnocentrism

1. Introduction to Religious pluralism and ethnicity

Religious pluralism has several meanings, such as theological, sociological and Philosophical. In theological perspective, the religious pluralism assumes that other spiritual paths are correct and actual. Pluralism means religious plurality or diversity that has different groups. The conception of religious pluralism refers to peaceful interaction among individuals and groups of different religious faiths and non-believers.

Religious pluralism means people of various religious faiths are living together in a particular community where that society has the rights, freedom, and safety to worship or not. The same way multi-ethnicity has interpreted a community (as Sri Lankan) made up of multiple ethnicities. In Sri Lankan context' religion and ethnicity are considered as many or plural no single. At this point, referring to the writing of Imran Bagi (2013), "The word Pluralism was defined closely to the meaning of toleration such as, "the existence of a variety of different people, opinions, or principles within the same society, system, or philosophy." Suitable to understand religious pluralism and tolerance. This type of tolerance allows people from different communities to live in a coexistence manner and is reflected in religious pluralism because pluralism is interpreted as people of different religions living together. "This clearly shows that religious pluralism naturally connected with coexistence.

Moreover, to understand the pluralism, referring to the etymological meaning of the term as the new dictionary of ideas states, "pluralism derives from the Latin *plures*, meaning "several" or "many." Religious

pluralism teaches multiple truth that there are more than one. And El Christan (2019) writes religious pluralists means the people believing in different creeds and belonging to different communities need to learn to live together. He quoted the Petal ideas as Religious Pluralism is neither mere coexistence nor forced consensus.

Religious pluralism isn't trying to teach that all religions are the same. Still, it demonstrates that religions have powerful commonalities, even though they each come to those shared values along their paths. "Each religion has something unique to say about universal values through its particular set of scriptures, rituals, and heroes." Going back to Hick's theological definition of religious Pluralism, He personally interprets the Interfaith Youth Core approach as substituting "shared values" for "God," which has the added advantage of bringing secular people into the conversation.

Religious pluralism, according to the S.R Bhatt, is leading to religious diversity and secularism. He mentioned the transcendence of religion. The unification of multiple religions pays away for bridging between religions in a multi-religious society, enabling each to cross over their diversity barriers. According to Thomas Benchoff, religious pluralism refers to the pattern of peaceful interaction among diverse religious actors and groups who identify with and act out of particular religious traditions.

2. Research problem

A country with multi-religious and multi-ethnic heritage has an ethnically and religiously pluralistic environment, which provides an opportunity to adjoin the living and spontaneous interaction with other communities with multi-facets of religiosity cultural diversity. Is it potential for peaceful coexistence? or instigate conflict?

3. The objective of the Research

The study's objective is to investigate the influence of religious pluralism and multi-ethnicity on the peaceful coexistence in Sri Lanka. Investigate the supportive factors of religious pluralism and peaceful coexistence. Examine the negative aspects that contribute to social disharmony. Assess the positive and negative impact on Religious Pluralism and peaceful coexistence.

4. Hypothesis

Related literature refers to religious pluralism that motivates the peaceful coexistence among the multi-ethnic communities, and the affirmative relationship between religious pluralism and ethnic diversity motivates peaceful coexistence.

5. Methods and Materials:

This study is primarily using the related literature survey. The data have been collected from the various research papers related to religious pluralism and multi-ethnicity and textbooks and journal articles.

6. Discussion

The discussion part split into two, one is religious pluralism, and its potential factors for ethnic cohesion and other one is threatening factor. Sri Lankan constitution and other legal frameworks support religious

Pluralism in Sri Lanka, and long historical records show the inter-religious and inter-ethnic cohesion prevailed in the country. Factors such as religious synchronization, inter-religious festivities, sacred places, and heritage sites unite the different communities together. Further Religious leaders and religious organizations contribute to inter-ethnic cohesion. People interact with other communities beyond their religious faith in the same way that the religiously inspired riots were also recorded in Sri Lankan History. From 1883 to 2019, Sri Lanka has various riots and ethnic conflicts, and that is also widening the gap between the communities.

6.1. Religious Pluralism and Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is a significantly important place in south Asia for religious pluralism and multi-ethnicity. Sri Lanka is a place where Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity are the primary spiritual practices and inhabited multi-ethnic groups for Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim, and other indigenous communities. Generally, Religious Pluralism and multi-ethnicity promoting coexistence and breeding of conflict in a country. The people living adjoining in urban or city increase the interaction and tension due to the suspension and mistrust of each other. Moazzam Ali, Dr. Shabbir Ahmad (Abul Hasan) quotes. The Harper Collins Dictionary of Religion to refresh "religious pluralism" as "the problem and opportunity of the simultaneous presence of different religious traditions within a single society." In the Sri Lankan context Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims live since independence in a intermingle manner. From 1983 to 2009, ethnic violence made mistrust and suspension among the Sinhala and Tamil communities; after 2009, Sri Lanka experienced another type of communal riots from2014 to 2018against the minority communities.

On the other hand, Ethno- religious nationalism and its movements resurgent with the extremist ideology that politized the country's religion. In this background, the government has become a pander to the nationalist movements to sustain political victory. Then religious pluralism and multi-ethnicity are restricted and threatened. Scholars Rajesh Venugopal and David Smock state a line between religion and ethnicity that is often blurred in Sri Lanka because race and religion closely overlap.

Religion and ethnicity have been a determining force and threat to peaceful coexistence since ancient times. Historical rerecords show ample evidence. Sri Lanka is a religious country where religions play an essential role in neutralizing violence and restores compassion and kindness qualities; religious pluralism is a part of the country. It has contributed to shaping and transmitting anew from generation. Buddhist, Hindus. Christians and Muslims have had and will have their daily lives influenced by the religious persons of different religious communities. (John C Carter 1978).

Ethno- Religious identity polities revolved around the ethnic identities of Sinhala Buddhists. For example, Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil Hindu revivalism started with Anagarika Dharmapala and Arumuga Navalar, respectively, in the latter part of the nineteenth century in Sri Lanka. These identity polities led the county to violent conflict. The religiosity of Sri Lanka shows religious revivalism. That is characterized as "Buddhist revivalism", which occurred in the latter part of the nineteenth century and traces the history of the process beginning from that period to one whole century, ultimately culminating in violent ethnic conflict (Tambiah 1992: 3, Obeyesekere 2006, Tambiah 1986).

Religious sentiments always played an important secondary role in the identity formation and became the primary fault line in some instances, as in Kotahena riots between Buddhists and Catholics in 1883 and the Sinhala-Muslims riots in 1915. These religiously inspired conflicts were explosive and violent in the short run

triggered by sentiments relating to the actual or assumed desecration of sacred sites, sacred objects and sacred personnel by religious rivals running high (Tambiah 1996). In 2018 riots clearly show that the ethnoreligious sentiments in the incidents took place in Kandy Ampara and Minuwangoda, and some other parts of the Island.

Even Buddhism shall be given the foremost place by the state constitution of Sri Lanka to provide a ground in favor of particular religion; for example, Article 09 of the 1978 and Article 6 of 1972 constitutions declare a foremost place to Buddhism. And other religions, as guaranteed under the Articles 10 and 14(1)(e), state: "Every person is entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice." and Every citizen is entitled to the freedom, either by himself or in association with others, and either in public or in private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice or teaching. And Article 12 stresses the equality of all.

The Sri Lanka constitution is supporting the practice of religious pluralism; for example, Articles 10 and 14 assure all religious rights. Particularly Article 12(2) states clearly, no citizen shall be discriminated against on the ground of race, Religion, language, cast, sex, and the birthplace. Through this article, equality of citizen ensures in addition to the local legal framework. Sri Lanka is a member in the U.N and it is a signatory of the international treaty of Human rights. These are very supportive legal frameworks for religious Pluralism in Sri Lanka.

The term 'Ethnicity' is interpreted as the cohesive group of people formed based on kingship. Sri Lankan population's coherent living includes two major components: ethnicity and religion. The following chart shows the Ethnic and Religious landscape of Sri Lanka according to the 2012 census.

Ethnicity	Ratio	Religions	Ration
Sinhalese	74.9	Buddhist	70.2
Tamils	15.3	Hindus	12.6
Muslim	9.2	Islam	9.7
Christian	-	R.C.&NRC	7.4

The ratio mentioned above of the ethnicity and religious plurality numerical ratio shows the imbalance majority of the ethnic groups follow the Buddhism others are ethnic numerical minorities, and their minority religions are minor in number. This disparity ethnic ratio instigates most people to think their beliefs and culture are superior and suitable for other's cultures wrong and inferior. This majority alliance of religiosity and ethnicity is influencing political power. On the ground, the governing politicians seek the support of the majority to win in the election. It has started in1956 with S.W.R.D. Bandaranayake's ethnos-religious propaganda continues in previous election propaganda, and it has proved in the 2020 election. To form a Government, Politicians seek the support of the ethnoreligious majorities. Therefore, they show themselves as guardians of religion and ethnicity and get help from majoritarianism. Where other religious people are minorities in number So, there is no equal footing of religious faith. It leads to religious disharmony.

6.2. Religious complexity and Interreligious Syncretism in Sri Lanka

Religious complexity and syncretism are one of the viable moods to practice religious Pluralism in Sri Lanka. Religious complexity unites the people from the colonial time. For example, the religious complexity associated with the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, Adam's Peak, or Kataragama. Studies of religious

syncretism in Sri Lanka have by and a significant focus on the interaction between Buddhism and Hinduism (Goonesekera 2007, Kapferer 1997, 1991, Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, Pfaffenberger 1979).

Sri Lanka has a potential for religious syncretism because major religious faiths have interconnectivity in many ways, such as theistic, rituals, festivals, etc. For example, the Influence of Hindu deities is directly transformed to Buddhism due to socio-cultural, economic, and political interrelation between two countries since the 12th century (Dharmadasa, 1994; Soratha, 1993). Thus, the beliefs in Gods and interrelated rituals have become prominent and salient features of later Buddhism. Nevertheless, the Buddha is the highest position of Buddhist religious pantheon though the beliefs of gods and Hinduism rituals influenced Buddhism. As Obeyesekere (1966) states, the Buddha is the pantheon's presidential deity; he is perceived as pure benevolence.

Another primary religious ideology has attempted to change Buddhism's nature further; mainly, the Hindu influence gradually establishes subordinated micro-religious practices and cults. According to Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988), the emergence of popular cults such as Kataragama, Hùniyan, and kāli can be considered as new changes. In addition to that, the Sinhala and Tamil areas Pattini is propitiated in annual post-harvest rituals known as Gammaduva in Sinhala and Vaikacicatanku in Tamil. (Obeyesekere 1984). And Jonathan Walter (1991) pointed out that religious syncretism merely points to elements' coexistence from different spiritual practices.

6.3. Religious Interaction

In General, religions play a significant role in interacting with societies and alive; Durkheim argues religion is about community. It binds people together (Social Cohesion), promotes behavioral consistency (Social Control), and looks at religion as a social stability source. Interaction and intermingling of other faiths in the multi-religious setting are inevitable. That influence and interaction motivate pluralism. Obeyesekere (1970) introduced the notion of protestant Buddhism to describe the impact of Christianity on Buddhism during the colonial encounter. In this view, this captured the ambivalent nature of the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity, Buddhism adopting some organizational forms of Christianity and, at the same time, contesting Christianity regarding the validity of its religious doctrine.

In Sri Lanka, different religious sites, the interface is a complex spiritual field where Buddhist, Hindus, Christian, and Islam devotees meet to worship, perform common religious rites interact with each other. That refers to interfaith interface and syncretism (Silva 2016). Examples; Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, Kadirgama, Sri Pada, Polonnaruwa, a sacred site, Sigiriya, unite the people beyond their religious faith and practices. And absorption of other spiritual practice will take place and it promotes the cordial relationship and prevent the conflict.

Tuder Silve and His Team studied that the three religious' sites Devenagala, Galabandara Shrine, Kahatapitiya Mosque, are very much famous for the inter-religious interaction. Images, the cult of Hindu gods in the Buddhist sacred place precipitated since the 12 and 14th centuries. Recognizing Vishnu as a previous Buddha was quite common in Sri Lanka. Mathieu (2018).

6.4. Religious festivals

Religious festivals unite the different communities. In Sri Lanka, festivals such as Vesak Christmas, celebrating Thai Pongal, Deepavali, and Tamil Sinhala new year, are joining the people in a goodwill manner

since ancient times. Some of the festivals are celebrated by different communities in the same pattern base on the same spirit and ideology, for Example, Tamil Sinhala New Year. That provides opportunities to interface and engage in the same religious practices and observation.

6.5. Role of religious leaders and religious organization

There is a criticism lejageharan40@gmail.comjageharan40@gmail.comjageharan40@gmail.comave against some religious leaders for instigating unrest among the communities. Simultaneously, some religious leaders are working to bring the tension cooled off and settle as a mediator. Example: Mahanayaga of the main Buddhist chapter and catholic Bishop conference also appeals to president Premadasa to stop the violence in 1989. Religious leaders use religiously meaningful ideas such as nonviolence, negotiation, divine justice, spiritual advancement (Wickramasinghe, 2015)

Hence religious leaders play an essential role as peace agents during the conflict time and after the internal ethnic conflict over religious leaders directly involved in the reconciliation process in Sri Lanka. Local civil society members and others also contribute to ethnic cohesion. Some organizations are working for inter-ethnic harmony. Due to the ethnic conflict, the cohesive relationship was broken among the communities and developed short of mistrust. The people have been psychologically affected and traumatized. Some of the organizations in the local level district and national level are working for the reconciliation purpose since the ethnic conflict ended. For example, Sarvodaya Movement, based on the Gandhian ideology Ahimsa, always committed to peace campaigns. Besides the National peace council, interreligious dialogue forums at local and national levels working for religious harmony.

6.6. Demolishing Religious symbol

Religious symbols are the external appearance of religions. They are very sensible and communicate the spiritual message to the public. Therefore, Geertz says that religious symbols are potent on intellectual and emotional. (Keith A Robert 95). Symbols convey religious ideas through a symbolic form to the public. They are establishing religious symbols everywhere in Sri Lanka. Under the multi-cultural setting, differences can divide the society, and symbols lead to prejudice toward other communities, which caused religious agitation and hurting. For example, during the ethnic conflict, before the competition and after, there were incidents in the country to demolish the religious symbols that are very sensitives. Several Hindu temples were destroyed in the 1983 riots, the same way in the recent past, lord Buddha statues were damaged, and some of the Mosque came under attack on the Island. These incidents are religiously mooring, and they motivate people to hate each other. Touching the religiously sentimental symbols pays the way to the community mistrust, and disharmony eventually leads to community fragmentation.

6.7. Religious Extremism

Religious fundamentalism or religious extremism in the name of religions' purification is a big challenge to religious pluralism and religious harmony. Example practice of Islam often manifested through symbolic Islamisation in the form of Arabis. Gehan Gunatilleke refers to Islamic scholar Ash-Sheik Muneer Mulafer. Since the late 1970s, militant strands of Islam have reached Sri Lanka through increased scholarly interaction between local Muslim groups and Saudi Arabian thinkers. For example, extremist groups such as *Tawheed Jamaat* has strong Saudi Arabian Wahabi influences. Some of the victims said media, religious organizations such as B.B.S., J.H.U., were working for incitement to violence in the country in the recent past. The Incident's evidence could understand through the statement of affected people.

7. Conclusion

In the preview of religious pluralism and ethnic diversity, there are many similar practices observed in the country. There are possibilities for achieving peaceful coexistence among the multi-ethnic communities through religious pluralism. If the religious leaders and religious organizations work on purely spiritual and ethical doctrines, they function independently without depending on politics and racism. But in Sri Lanka, Religion, Ethnicity and Politics are constantly turning and influencing each other with a very close tie. Overcoming this challenge is a significant curtail to peaceful coexistence.

Suppose we carefully study the history of Sri Lanka, it explicatively expressed that several religious-based incidents occurred since the independence due to the religious plurality in Sri Lanka. Simultaneously, Multi-ethnic religiosity has been a potential for peaceful coexistence by exchanging religious values and other customs. Sri Lanka is a religiously pluralistic country that can viably change its pluralistic religious structure into a secular context like Singapore and Malaysia. Then it will lead the country to prosperous and sustainable coexistence among the multi-ethnic communities. Policy level changes for recognizing pluralism are an integral part. Even the constitution acknowledges the religious plurality. It is not in practice due to a lack of law enforcement. A common goal and national interest are fundamental. There is a libel legal framework for punishing the people who violate the country's basic rights, but at the same time, there is laziness in punishing the culprit. Implementing the rule of law is very much essential for preventing the conflict from repeating.

A legal framework for establishing ethnic cohesion among multi-ethnic communities like Singapore is a timely need for Sri Lanka. Singapore established an act for social harmony in 1990 to promote and ensure social peace among the multi-ethnic communities. Such a setup is essential for coexistence. And Sri Lanka has a lengthy historical Background for religious pluralism. The interface of spiritual practice and religious syncretism provides a platform for religious pluralism to promote coexistence in Sri Lanka. But the religious extremism is also distributing the coexistence then and there. Therefore, the Religious Pluralism is an opportunity to encourage coexistence in the Sri Lankan context, but some other catalysts such as politics, extremism threat religious pluralism and coexistence. Hans Kung (1988) pointed out that world peace depends on religious peace no world peace without peace among the religions.

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