Encountering Different Cultures: Concords and Frictions in Pre-colonial, Colonial and Post-colonial Sri Lanka

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Abstract – Today's world is characterized by global and local polarization, rising mistrust and the fear of the «other», and increasingly de-humanizing languages among identity groups. This phenomenon is not unique to this epoch. Following a brief geographical, demographic, and historical overview of Sri Lanka, this paper examines the issue of the multifaceted relations of globalization and cultural (religious and ethnic) conflicts, with particular attention to religious and ethnic factors. The author traces the historical roots of the current situation in Sri Lanka, from the colonial period (Portuguese, Dutch, and British domination) to the post-independence era, highlighting the complex interplay of religion, ethnicity, and politics in the local/global encounter. A special focus is given to the role of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, to the rise of rival Tamil and Muslim funda-mentalisms or ethno-religious nationalism, to the crucial «conversion issue» (linked to some Evangelical/Pentecostal and Islamist groups), and to conspiracy theory concerning activities of NGOs. The author concludes calling upon the necessity to build an inclusive identity supplanting the ethnic politics.

Introduction

Sri Lanka known as Ceylon until 1972 is often referred to as the «Pearl of the Indian Ocean» or as the «teardrop» off the Southeast tip of the Indian subcontinent due to its geographical situation in South Asia. It is an island country with maximum length of 435 km and with minimum breath of 225 km, and a total area of total area of 65610 sq.km. It has a significant population of 21.02 million in 2019 with a per capita income of 2804 (US dollars). The population is highly literate with a literacy rate of 90.7%. Around 42.6% of the population lies in the age bracket of 25-54 years old individuals. Sri Lanka is a country of multiple

ethnicities and religions. The Sinhalese make up around 74.9%, Sri Lanka Tamil 11.2%, Indian Tamil (South Indian immigrants during the British colonial era) 4.2%, Sri Lanka Moors 9.2%, Burghers (the descendants of European settlers) 0.2% and Malay 0.2%. Sri Lanka is also home for Buddhists 70.2%, Hindus 12.6%, Muslims 9.7%, Roman Catholics 6.1%, and other Christians 1.3%[1]. The ethnicity is related to religion thus the majority of the Sinhalese are Buddhists and the majority of Tamils are Hindus. Christianity include individuals of both ethnic groups.

The earliest historical source of the island is found in the Buddhist chronicle, the *Mahavamsa* written by Buddhist monks from the sixth century AD onward. Pre-colonial nationalism was later interpreted specially during the British colonial period, to affirm the Sinhalese as the chosen guardians of Buddhism as well as of the motherland. This ideology – «The king protects and supports the *Sangha* (the order of Buddhist monks); the *Sangha* preserves the teaching of the Buddha and acts as a field of merit for both the king and the people, the people prosper when the king governs righteously and provide protection for the Sangha»[2] – persisted until the pre-colonial period.

1. Accounting for Cultural Conflicts

Peter L. Berger in «Many Globalizations, Cultural Diversity in the Contemporary World» identifies four 'carriers' of cultural globalization: i) international business elite called 'Davos culture'; ii) intellectual elite called 'faculty club culture'[3]; iii) 'McWorld' or popular culture[4]; and iv) 'Evangelical Protestantism' or large scale popular (generally religious) movements[5]. There are three responses to the emerging global culture:

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[1]   Department of Census and Statistics in Sri Lanka, http://www.statistics.gov.lk/PopHouSat/.

[2]   J. Spencer, *Sri Lana: History and the Roots of Conflict*, London - New York, Routledge, 1990, p. 6.

[3]   Cf. P.L. Berger, *Introduction. The Cultural Dynamic of Globalization*, in P.L. Berger - S.P. Huntington (eds.), *Many Globalizations: Cultural Diversity in the Contemporary World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 1-16, here p. 4. The globalization of the Western *intelligentsia* promoting ideas and behaviors invented by Western intellectuals, such as the ideologies of human rights, feminism, environmentalism, and multiculturalism, as well as the politics and lifestyles that embody these ideologies.

[4]   The emerging global culture is the vehicle of popular culture. It is propagated by business enterprises (McDonald's, Disney, MTV, and so on) The popular culture penetrates broad masses.

[5]   Some of the popular movements are linked to faculty club culture; human rights- environmentalist, and feminist movements «Evangelical Protestantism, especially in its Pentecostal version, is the most important popular movement serving as a vehicle of cultural globalization». P.L. Berger - S.P. Huntington (eds.), *Many Globalizations*, p. 8.

acceptance, militant rejection (isolation from the global culture, like in the case of the *Taliban* and in-between acceptance and rejection (governments trying to balance global economic participation with resistance against the global culture). This latter process can be called 'localization' namely «the global culture is accepted but with significant local modifications»[6]. Localization can reflect in diverse ways: i) a local religion borrowing organization forms from the 'evangelical Protestantism'. ii) Revitalization of indigenous cultures. For instance, the Western-based fast food chains led to fast food outlets for traditional foods: iii). Sub-globalization movements within regional outreach: Indian impact or Tamil Nadu on Sri Lanka.

In an era of globalization, cultural and religious diversity play a fundamental role in mitigating or exacerbating conflicts. Most of Asian countries are marred by violent conflicts or cultural conflicts. Some countries are easily prone to conflict due to their physiognomy.

«By cultural conflicts we mean those domestic, inter-state or transnational political conflicts in which the actors involved focus on issues relating to religion, language and/or historicity. The adjective 'cultural' does not refer here to the actors' motives in a conflict, but to the issue of the conflict. When defining a conflict as 'cultural' it is not relevant 'why' there is a dispute, but 'what' is in dispute»[7].

Three groups of actors can be identified in cultural conflicts in Asia: (i) anti-regime wars, inspired by left-wing actors and this type of domestic conflicts are dwindling or are related to other two groups listed below; (ii) ethnic conflicts among communal groups or against the central government to win cultural and political self-determination and the redistribution of economic rights; (iii) religious conflicts often shaped by transnational groups[8]. Closer looks at the prevailing cultural conflicts often reflect the combination of all three groups. Some of the views expressed by Samuel P. Huntington in *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* roughly lay down a theoretical framework to account for the prevailing cultural conflicts in Asia. He argues that «People and countries with similar cultures are coming together. Peoples and countries with different cultures are coming apart»[9]. He further

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[6]   P.L. Berger *Introduction, The Cultural Dynamic of Globalization*, p. 10.

[7]   A. Croissant - C. Trinn, *Culture, Identity and Conflict in Asia and South Asia*, in «ASIEN – The German Journal on Contemporary Asia», 110, 2009, 1, pp. 13-43, here p. 13.

[8]   *Ibid.*, p. 21.

[9]   S.P. Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996, p. 126.

observes that «Political boundaries are increasingly redrawn to coincide with cultural ones: ethnic, religious, and civilizational»[10]. Thus, the cold war question, «which side are you on?» has been supplanted by

«Who are you? The answer emanates from one's cultural identity. Moreover, the globalization with its dislocated, excluded and discontent contribute to stimulate the revitalization of indigenous identities and culture»[11].

This process of affirmation of religious, ethnic, tribal and linguistic identities of one group at the expense of an «other» – a different religious, ethnic, tribal, and linguistic group – will give birth to an «us» from a «them»-based perception» perception. The «us» versus «them» distinction will generate conflicts when one cultural group tries to take control of another's territory, wealth, and resources by imposing its own values, culture, and institutions. Thus, identity-rooted cultural conflicts are a social phenomenon today. The late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries have been characterized by a global resurgence of religions, generating a global process of indigenization and reawakening of non-Western cultures. The tensions between the local and global cultures give birth to clash of civilization or an internalized clash of civilization: secularized elite and religious revitalization movements. Furthermore,

«Here the problems of cultural globalization link up with the problems of economic and social globalization – notably the problem of how to 'manage' the losers of the global system»[12].

It is a phenomenon observed in every age that the discontents of social systems often channel their resentments into cultural resistances. In recent decades, religion, religio-political parties, and religious rhetoric have become dominant features of the political scenes of all of these countries (Afghanistan, Banglagesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka)[13].

Globalization also facilitates the dissemination of religio-political ideology with advanced technologies allowing «the religio-political groups to learn from each other, adopt successful strategies, and avoid failed tactics. A closer look at the prevailing religion-politics nexus reminds us that this

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[10]   *Ibid*.

[11]   *Ibid.*, p. 129.

[12]   P.L. Berger *Introduction, The Cultural Dynamic of Globalization*, p. 16.

[13]   A. Riaz, *Introduction, Three Arguments About the Religious-Politics Nexus*, in A. Riaz (ed.) *Religion and Politics in South Asia*, London - New York, Routledge, 2012, pp. 1-24, here p. 3.

is not completely a new phenomenon in Asia. Throughout this paper, this fact will become evident in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial history of Sri Lanka. According to Ali Riaz the following factors contribute for religion to become a powerful ideology.

1. Although the interplay of religion and politics in South Asia has received heightened attention in academic circles and the media in recent years, it is not an aberration; instead it has long historical antecedents.

2. The abject failure of secular liberal states in South Asia as in many other parts of the world, to deliver developmental goods and services has delegitimized the states and ruling blocks. This engendered an environment within which religion has appeared both as an ideology of the ruling class and a counter-hegemonic project.

3. The appeal of religious ideology is a result of ontological insecurity and existential uncertainty faced by individuals because of the pace and nature of globalization in recent decades[14].

It is evident throughout the history of Sri Lanka, in particular during foreign invasions; Buddhists monks played an important role to safeguard the integrity of the country. Post-colonial Sri Lankan history is not entirely a break from the past. History repeats itself with a continuation of the anti-colonial message into the era of globalization, awakening the collective memory and the historical consciousness of the members of the society. The religion (Buddhism), the nation, and the ethnic majority (Sinhalese) are then merged into one and the same often excluding the minority ethnic and religious groups. This process leads to the demarcation of identities as «us» and «them», marring the coexistence, instigating communal riots, and leading to religious persecution. The polarization of cohabitation manifests itself in claims and counter-claims of the inheritance of the land. Through a particularized interpretation of first and earlier claim to the land, political Buddhism seeks to establish its supremacy over other ethno-religious minority groups and vice versa.

Within this theoretical framework, we will examine the interaction between local and global and its impact on the Sri Lankan society. All the migrants who came, whether they were peaceful or hostile, have left their mark on the religious beliefs, ethnicity, language, and culture of the island.

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[14] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

2. Pre-Colonial Sri Lanka

From the dawn of history Sri Lanka has attracted foreigners to its shores as peaceful immigrants, traders and hostile invaders. Sri Lanka's early historic period begins in the fifth century BC with the colonization of the island by immigrants from North India speaking an Aryan language. The *Mahavamsa* chronicle attests the presence of various tribes in the i sland at the time of the arrival of Prince Vijaya and 700 other Indo-Aryans from Bengal, East India. It further notes that Vijaya and his group arrived in Sri Lanka on the very day Buddha passed away or achieved Nirvana, the perfect annihilation. This foundational myth for Sri Lankan history is an inescapable part of the historical consciousnesses of the Sinhalese because it unites or divides the different ethnic and religious groups.

Gananath Obeysekara, making a distinction between Buddhist history and Buddhist doctrines, argues that it is Buddhist history that is associated with cultural identity, violence, and intolerance of others[15]. It is worth, here, to examine the analysis of the foundational myth provided by Obeysekara. According to the *Mahavamsa*, the Buddha, flying through the air by virtue of his supernatural powers, visited Sri Lanka three times. Thus, the land is consecrated and cleansed of evil spirits by the Buddha for Vijaya, the founder of the Sinhala race. When Vijaya arrived in the island, the Buddha entrusted Sakra (Indra) to protect Vijaya, and Sakra delegated this task to Visnu who blessed Vijaya when he landed by tying a Buddhist protective charm on his person. This foundational myth was later interpreted to mean that the Sinhaladipa, the island of the Sinhalas was consecrated by the Buddha to make Buddhism shine in glory. Thus, the ethnic identity (Sinhala) and religious identity (Buddhism) were fused to give birth to national identity.

It is also worth mentioning here the legendary battle between King Dutugamunu (101–77 BC or 161–137 BC) and Elara (205-161 BC). In 237 BC, Tamils from Southern India invaded Sri Lanka and 10 years later, the Tamil king Elara ascended to power and ruled for 44 years. Dutugamunu liberated the island and this story is also presented to define the nation as Sinhala-Buddhist by the *Mahavamsa* written approximately 700 years after Dutugamunu. Accordingly, Dutugamunu was fighting the Tamils

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[15]   G. Obeysekara, *Buddhism, Nationhood, and Cultural Identity: A Question of Fundamentals*, in M.E. Marty - R. Scott Appleby (eds.), *Fundamentalisms Comprehended* (The Fundamentalism Project, 5), Chicago IL - London, The University of Chicago Press, 1995.

not for the glory of sovereignty but for the glory of the sasana –in its entirely particularistic sense[16].

Dutugamunu is saddened by the large number of Tamils killed in battle, and he can't sleep as a result of his guilty conscience. But the monks console him and tell him that this will be no hindrance to heaven because the enemies he has killed were «not more to be esteemed than beasts «… But as for thee, thou wilt bring glory to the doctrine». Gananath Obeysekara points out that

«This statement is a terribly important development in Buddhist history because it produces a theory, or at least a rationale, for killing one's enemy that contradicts the Buddhist doctrines and the Buddhist faith, and overthrows the primary Buddhist ethical postulates of compassion and nonviolence»[17].

In the course of Sri Lankan history, we can see the Buddhist nationalists turning to this legendary story to boost the ethno-religious consciousness of the Sinhalese.

3. European colonialism

European colonialism in Sri Lanka began with the arrival of the Portuguese (1505-1658), followed by the Dutch (1658-1796) and the British (1796-1948) respectively. It is interesting to note that more or less the three interrelated processes enforced and consolidated colonial rule. They present themselves as follows: i) The subjugation of the conquered peoples to European rule through military and legal mechanisms or «political expansion». ii) The economic exploitation of the conquered peoples or «economic expansion». iii) The cultural and missionary penetration into the colonized lands or 'cultural expansionism'[18].

It is sufficient to mention here that the European history in the island was like a doubled-edged sword; the political, economic and cultural impact produced mixed results. It dismantled existing elites and the feudal system and generated new elites in the capitalist economic system in the course of 450 years. The British «divide and rule» policy, in the long run, produced a situation in which the access to political

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[16] *Ibid.*, p. 239.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 235.

[18] Cfr. H. Grunder, *Colonialism*, in K. Müller et al. (eds.), *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspectives*, New York, Orbis Books, 2006 (1999[1]), pp. 67-71, here p. 69.

power got entangled with ethnic-religious criteria. Thus, any study of the encounter between European and local, as well as the resulting concords and frictions, is incomplete without the analysis of the colonial era.

4. The Portuguese period

When the Portuguese arrived in Sri Lanka in 1505, there were three independent kingdoms: Kotte, Kandyan and Jaffna. The Vijayabã-Kollaya or the assassination of King Vijayabã by his three sons over a succession dispute in 1521 led to the partition of the Kingdom of Kotte. Before long, the Portuguese were able to take control of the coastal regions because of the internal political instability. The Portuguese arrival supplanted the Muslim traders, resident in Kotte and weakened the Tamil expansion in Jaffna. The missionary activities began in 1543 with the arrival of a batch of Franciscan friars at the invitation of the king of Kotte, Bhuvanekabahu[19]. The Portuguese shared the power and leadership with the local nobles yet they had to fulfil the following requirement; i) The family had to have roots somewhere in traditional Sinhalese nobility. ii) The family had to have converted to Catholicism early upon the arrival of the Portuguese. iii) The family, and preferably the individual, had to have demonstrated loyalty to the Portuguese – either through intermarriage or individual acts of loyalty[20]. The transit of the political power badly affected the Buddhist Sangha due to the confiscation of temple properties. Accordingly, the tradition that the king is the guardian of Buddhism came to an end in the maritime regions. Moreover, soon after the conversion, King Dharmapala gifted the temple lands to the Franciscans for the purpose of erecting and maintaining schools and colleges.

«I granted them the revenues of the *pagoda* of the *Dalade*[21], which became the church of the Holy Saviour of the same Fathers, and also all other *pagodas* (temples) of my

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[19]   Yet, the king of Kandy never embraced Christianity. «… You may be quite sure that I will never embrace the Christian religion, or speak in favour of it. If I am forced, I will abdicate my kingship and abandon my native land, rather than be dipped in the water of Baptism», V. Perniola, *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka: The Portuguese Period*, I: *1505-1565*, Dehiwala, Tisara Prakashakayo, 1989, p. 192; see also, pp. 38-46, 66, 97-98, 118, 130, 191, 249. It can be proved that for his political survival the king invited the missionaries to his kingdom.

[20]   M.R. Singer, *The Emerging Elite, A Study of Political Leadership in Ceylon*, Cambridge MA, Institute of Technology Press, 1964, p. 23.

[21]   The Temple of the Tooth Relic of Kotte was the highest place of worship for the Buddhists.

realms and territories, that is, their revenues, lands, gardens, and services, just as my predecessors and I myself had granted all that to the same *pagodes*»[22].

In brief, the royal patronage was now lavished upon the Catholic Church. Due to losing the lands and the revenues, Buddhism in Kotte reached in a state of decay. Worsening the situation of the Sangha, Rajãsimha the king of Sivavakã converted to Hinduism.

«It was the misfortune of Buddhism that two rulers, Dharmapala and Rajãsingha, both withdrew their patronage within about thirty years of each other. This double misfortune had a disastrous effect on Buddhism in the low country, for the *Sangha* (monks) fled to the hill country and Buddhism as mass religion could not survive without them»[23].

Thus, the destruction of Buddhism in the coastal regions sowed the seeds of anti-Christian sentiments. This antagonism which originated during the Portuguese era, has left an indelible scar in Sinhala-Buddhist consciousness[24].

As the Portuguese occupied and wielded their control over the maritime provinces, most of Karava (fisher caste) were attracted to Catholicism. Furthermore, killing animals is sinful according to first precept of Buddhism. Houtart reasons out that, «The Karava who was marginalized in Buddhist society, received a social recognition which they had not previously enjoyed through conversion»[25]. Accordingly,

«in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries large numbers converted to Catholicism ... However, following the overthrow of the Portuguese by the Dutch in the 1650s ... Many Karava reverted to Buddhism»[26].

Simultaneously, the Durava and Salagama castes that were originally from South India were placed low in the caste hierarchy of Ceylon. The change of religion gave them a new social recognition. The converts were distinguished from the non-converts either by adopting complete

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[22]   V. Perniola, *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka: The Portuguese Period*, I, pp. 352-353.

[23]   T. Abeyasinghe, *Portuguese Rule in Ceylon 1594-1612*, Colombo, Lake House Investments, 1966, pp. 206-207.

[24]   *The Betrayal of Buddhism*, in the part of the analysis dedicated to the Portuguese period, states that: «No stately fabric remains as compensating gain for that religious fanaticism to which ample witness is borne by the desecrated ruins of those lovely structures which the piety of generations had strewn broadcast over century» See, *The Betrayal of Buddhism: An Abridged Version of the Report of the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry*, Balangoda, Dharmavijaya Press, 1956, pp. IX-X.

[25]   F. Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, Colombo, Hansa Publisher, 1974, p. 139.

[26]   M. Roberts, *Caste Conflict and Elite Formation: The Rise of a Karava Elite in Sri Lanka, 1500-1931*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 3.

Portuguese attire, by using a special cap or carapace or by growing a beard and also having Christian names[27]. «In brief, these converts came to be regarded and treated as a privileged group»[28]. Conversion to Roman Catholicism also brought about new social concepts such as monogamy and the sanctity of marriage[29].

It is erroneous to conclude that all conversions occurred for material and worldly reasons. It can be argued that if under political pressure or for economic gains people embrace a religion then when that pressure or gain is removed, they would relinquish their new faith. On the contrary, during the Portuguese and Dutch periods many Catholics suffered enormously on account of their faith. It seems that some locals who embraced Christianity were ostracized by their kith and kin[30]. Some endured the persecutions[31] and still others stuck to their new faith in spite of the discrimination and loss of privileges[32]. Moreover, it is inaccurate to say that the missionaries were indifferent to the injustice committed by the Portuguese. There are proofs that whenever possible they not only condemned such acts but also informed their superiors[33].

Did missionary methods during the Portuguese period use «forced conversion». This is a nagging question. Even today, some Buddhists[34] hold the view that the missionaries made their converts at the point of the sword»[35]. T. Abeysinghe notes that the question is «not whether

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[27] Names likes Pedru, Peter, Paulu, Paul, Filex, Pelis and surnames like Dias, Alwis, Fernando, Perera, Peiris, Silva and Soysa.

[28] K.M. de Silva, *History of Sri Lanka*, London, C. Hurst & Company, 1981, p. 181

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 182.

[30] «For those who become Christians, by that very fact, lose their parents and relations, by whom they have been helped before to maintain themselves, while now they are treated and detested as enemies». V. Perniola, *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka: The Portuguese Period*, I, p. 140.

[31] «For those who become Christians, by that very fact, lose their parents and relations, by whom they have been helped before to maintain themselves, while now they are treated and detested as enemies». Fr. Lancilloto says that 25,000 people fell away from the faith. See, *ibid.*, p. 342.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 346.

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 137. Additionally, see S.G. Perera, *A History of Ceylon for Schools, 1505-1911*, Colombo, The Associated Newspapers of Ceylon, 1932, p. 135.

[34] The Report of the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry states: «… their instructions were, to begin by preaching but, that failing, to proceed to the decision of the sword». *The Betrayal of Buddhism*, pp. IX-X.

[35] T. Abeysinghe, *The Portuguese Rule in Ceylon 1594-1612*, Colombo, Lake House Investments, 1966, p. 209.

Catholicism was propagated by force, but whether force was employed against Buddhism and Hinduism. While the answer to the first question is 'no', that to the second is an unhesitating 'yes'»[36]. The Sri Lankan Catholic historian Fr. S.G. Perera categorically denies the accusation that the Portuguese came to Ceylon with the cross on one hand and the sword in the other. He cites the Sinhalese historical literature, namely *Rajavaliya* and *Mahavamsa*, to refute the accusers. According to him, these chronicles do not say a word to support the above allegation. Instead, they give a different explanation. «They say that the conversions were due to Portuguese gold»[37]. Fr. S. Gnana Prakasar affirms the view that there was no forced conversion during the time of the Portuguese.

«... they destroyed temples and banished heathen priests from their territory. But never once did they torture or put to death a heathen for his conscientious adherence to heathenism»[38].

It is true that even in Sri Lanka during the time of Portuguese the mission and colonialism went hand in hand. Nevertheless, it is inaccurate to conclude that the Catholic Church was merely the religious arm of the political power and there was 'forced conversion'.

The Portuguese have left their stamp on Sri Lankan social administration, society, fine arts, language, and religion (Roman Catholicism). Furthermore, cultural impact is visible in music, dance, cusine, clothing, names, etc.

5. The Dutch period (1658-1796)

The Dutch East India Company was tolerant towards the Roman Catholics in most of its colonies, yet showed little mercy for the Catholics in Sri Lanka[39]. In 1658, the Dutch issued a *plakkaat*[40] as follows,

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[36] *Ibid.*

[37] S.G. Perera, *Portuguese Missionary Methods: or the Myth of «Forced Conversion»*, Colombo, Caxton Printing Works, 1936, pp. 10-14.

[38] S. Gnana Prakasar, A *History of the Catholic Church in Ceylon 1505-1602*, Colombo, Messenger Press, 1924, p. 139.

[39] J. Metzler (ed.), *Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide Memoria Rerum 1622-1972*, 3 vols. Rome - Freiburg i.Br. - Wien, Herder, 1971-1976, III/1: *1815-1972*, pp. 436-437.

[40] An edict or proclamation by the Dutch Government.

«we hereby forbid and prohibit them from receiving or concealing any Portuguese priests or their followers. And those who do not furnish information thereof and those who act contrary to this order shall incur the death penalty»[41].

Having banished the missionaries, the Dutch took other measures to destroy Catholicism[42]. Accordingly, the religious conflicts in Europe were imported to colonized countries.

The persecution disheartened many Catholics. Thus, some went back to Buddhism and Hinduism. Some others gave into the pressure and accepted to have their children baptized by the *predicant* (Pastor) lest, they should be considered illegitimate and unable to inherit. Of these Catholics, some embraced the Calvinist religion. The strong Catholics sought political asylum in the Kingdom of Kandy and others practised their faith as an 'underground church'. Now the Catholics were without a single priest from 1658 until 1687. In 1687 Fr. Joseph Vaz, (beatified in 1995) from the Oratory of Goa, disguised as a beggar, secretly entered Ceylon. As a matter of fact, it is no exaggeration to call Blessed Vaz as the 'Apostle of Sri Lanka'. He labored alone for nine years to revive the Catholic faith in the island. The number of missionary tours he had made reveals his zeal for Christ and his Church. Towards the end of the Dutch rule in the island, they are less severe. «Many of the anti-Catholic plakaats, although they remained in the statute books, were seldom if ever observed in practice»[43]. The introduction of the printing press, the availability of religious literature (Catholic and Calvinist) in the vernacular languages, Catholics using the traditional folk drama for the purpose of evangelization, the outstanding contribution of Fr. Jacome Gonçalves, a Konkan Brahman from Goa in Sinhala and Tamil contributed to the growth of Christianity and also of the wider society.

The Sinhala state was organized according to caste-hierarchical order and the Portuguese and the Dutch did not change this social order but rather contributed to weaken it. The Dutch like the Portuguese sought to win the loyalty of the native chiefs and inhabitants through the following methods: i) Conversion of the population to Calvinism;

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[41] V. Perniola, *The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka: The Dutch Period*, I: *1658-1711*, Dehiwala, Tisara Prakashakayo, 1983, pp. 4-5.

[42] Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 21-24. Such measures are: a) Prohibition to hold Catholic services. b) Penalties were imposed on those attending Catholic services. c) Penalties against those who lend their houses for such services. d) Penalties against priests. e) Division of fines. f) Prohibition to have statues or altars in houses. g) Power to arrest those who violate these prohibitions.

[43] K.M. de Silva, *History of Sri Lanka*, p. 258.

ii) Upholding the chiefs in most of their ancient privileges and positions;
iii) Material advancement for chiefs – liberal grant of lands[44].

«Generally, these officials were Sinhalese Christians while in the Jaffna commandment the Tamil Christian families. Native headmen who had served the Portuguese were not displaced provided that their loyalty to the Dutch was beyond doubt and they made the necessary change in religious affiliation from Roman Catholicism to Calvinism …»[45].

Low castes like Karava, Salagama (the cinnamon-peeling caste) Durawa, thanks to the colonial economic and administrative system were able to obtain an upward social mobility in the last decades of Dutch rule. Cinnamon cultivation on a plantation basis starting from 1768 and extending to other crops such as coffee, cotton, and indigo paved the way for the gradual growth of capitalist economy[46]. The Salagamas received a wide range of privileges improving their social and economic status.

«One of the important aspects of the social history of the Western maritime region of Sri Lanka in the early nineteenth century was the growing antagonism between caste groups. The backdrop to this tension was the questioning of the superior ritual status of the *Goyigama* caste by some caste groups that had hitherto been assigned lower ritual status»[47].

The subsidiary crops like coffee, pepper and cardamom paved the way for the monetization of the economy and the familiarization of the Sinhalese with cash transactions and the accumulation of the capital[48]. The Dutch introduced the Roman-Dutch law, which largely prevails today. The Roman-Dutch law contributed to monogamous marriage and thereby to the sanctity of marriage; inheritance of property, the concept of private property.

6. The British period and the post-independence era

The English had a volatile policy towards religions: indifference, favoritism and moderation. The neutrality of the state often did not manifest in neutrality of its officials. The secularization and liberalization in Europe

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[44] Cf. M.R. Singer, *The Emerging Elite*, pp. 25-26.

[45] K.M. de Silva, *History of Sri Lanka*, p. 250.

[46] *Ibid.*, pp. 223-224.

[47] N.R. Dewasiri, *The Adaptable Peasant: Agrarian Society in Western Sri Lanka Under Dutch Rule, 1740-1800*, Leiden, Koninklijke Brill NV, 2008, p. 185.

[48] Cf. K.M. de Silva, *History of Sri Lanka*, p. 226.

influenced the British in their dealings with the colonies. Thus, unlike the previous colonists, they granted religious liberty in Ceylon. They scrapped the penal laws imposed on Catholics by the Dutch[49].

The British conquered the maritime regions from the Dutch in 1796. In 1802 Ceylon was made a crown colony. Like the previous colonial policies, the British too introduced the anglicanization of the Ceylonese elite. In 1815, the British unified the entire island under British rule by capturing the Kandyan Kingdom. The opposition of the majority of the nobles and the alienation of some of the prominent Buddhist monks to the king contributed to the downfall of the last Sinhala Kingdom.

«Thus the political turmoil in the kingdom in 1814-1815 can by no stretch of the imagination be called a rebellion of the people. Nor can it be described as a civil war. It was a conspiracy against a ruler whose government was a threat to their interests as a social group …»[50].

The disillusioned Kandyan chiefs launched an unsuccessful rebellion against the British in 1817-1818. After quelling the insurrection,

«By proclamation of November 1818, civil administration was completely taken from the hands of the Kandyan chiefs and placed in the hands of British government agents»[51].

The Colebrooke-Cameron reforms in 1833 generated radical political, economic and social changes in the island. The old feudal and caste social system was wiped away completely in 1833 with the abolition of the system of *rajakariya* (service obligation). Government support for all Christian missions and education, especially the official adoption of the vernacular education was introduced in 1840s. The following changes – the infrastructure for plantation economy, coffee, indigo, cotton, cinnamon, coconut, immigration of India labor for plantation, introduction of land taxes –, paved the way for the emergence of a capitalist economy. Yet, the negative impact of the emerging commercial economy on the peasants of the Kandyan traditional subsistence economy, compulsory labor on road construction, alienation of the aristocracy and the *sangha* (Buddhist monks) in the Kandyan society due to the dissociation of the British government from Buddhism caused to the resentment and anger of the peasants and aristocrats which exploded as a rebellion in 1848.

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[49] S.G. Perera, *A History of Ceylon for Schools*, p. 48.

[50] K.M. de Silva, *History of Sri Lanka*, p. 299.

[51] M.R. Singer, *The Emerging Elite*, p. 31.

Ceylonese economic and social order underwent radical changes with the plantation of coffee and later rubber and tea. Basing on these export crops, the local economy developed. Catering to this economy, a network of roads and railroads were build connecting the island politically and physically. The economic boom of the plantation industry, demanded more English-speaking employees to work as commercial enterprises, bank, wholesale and retail stores, the government service, professions in legal and medical fields, etc. The emerging commercial economy opened the investment opportunities to local entrepreneurs and English educated Ceylonese. The emerging new elites during the Dutch period, particularly from the low-country, were better off economically and intellectually to assume these new opportunities.

7. Sinhala buddhist revivalism and nationalism

The British «divide and rule» policy introduced in 1833 ethnicized and polarized the Sri Lankan society. In the late nineteenth century in colonized Sri Lanka, otherness was determined by religion. Colonization brought about unity among Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims against Christian proselytizing. The resistance of the indigenous society to the impact of British rule took place in the form of religious revival in the maritime regions, mainly the Western Province Moreover, «under the British, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims shared a similar identity: they were all non-Christians»[52]. Nonetheless, the common struggle against colonialism and Christian conversion later shifted the dualism of colonial/colonizer and native/alien. In the late nineteenth century, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims began to fuse national or ethnic identities with religious identities. In the course of time, the Sinhala-Buddhist perception of the 'Other' expanded. Thus, not only the colonizers but now also the Tamils, Muslims, and Christian Sinhala were moved from the centre to the periphery as aliens. Indigenous revivalism, unfortunately, reaffirmed the traditional Sinhala Buddhist identity of the pre-colonial era, excluding the newly developed identities of the colonial period, namely, Christians, Tamils, Muslims, and Burghers[53]. In the absence of

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[52] T. Bartholomeusz - C.R. de Silva (eds.), *Buddhist Fundamentalism and Minority Identities in Sri Lanka*, New York, State University of New York Press, 1988, p. 18.

[53] Cf. G. Obeyesekare, *The Vicissitudes of the Sinhala-Buddhist Identity through the Time and Change*, in M. Roberts (ed.), *Sri Lanka. Collective Identities Revisited*, vol. 1, Colombo, Marga Institute, pp. 355-384, here p. 381.

a «sacred» text or scripture for Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism, *Maha-vamsa,* a mytho-historical text, is used to draw up fundamentals for a righteous society and world order. The fusion of the past with the present reawakens the Sinhala historical consciousness towards non-Buddhist peoples: Tamils, Muslims, Burghers, Christians. Some groups of Sinhala Buddhists regarded (even today) the above mentioned non-Buddhists as alien and threatening.

8. Western conflicts animate the local struggles

Religious revival and anti-colonial struggle were directly and indirectly influenced by the West as well.

«But it must be noted that the strongest social critics of Christianization were people who were essentially 'Western' in outlook and were themselves influenced by what were termed 'modern,' 'advanced,' and 'rational' views»[54].

Kumari Jayawardena argues that some Western movements – the anti-Christian propaganda of European freethinkers, and Theosophists, nineteenth-century liberalism associated with various British reform movements, and radicalism as expressed in British labor party and socialist organizations[55] – influenced elites. The revival of Buddhism gradually led to the growth of national consciousness and the recovery of national pride against the resistance to colonialism and the spread of Christianity or evangelization.

The education paved the way for the children of the rising affluent to the upward social mobility. The traditional elite were badly placed off due to the limited access to English education. «In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Christians were well ahead of all other groups in literacy»[56]. Public debates on the tenets of Buddhism and Christianity were aimed at demonstrating the superiority of one's own religion. Between 1865 and 1873 there were five such debates between Christians and Buddhists, of which the Panadura debate of 1873 was the most famous. The victory achieved by Buddhists in the Panadura debate really boosted their self-confidence. The news reached

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[54]   V. Kumari Jayawardena, *The Rise of the Labor Movement in Ceylon*, Colombo, Sanjiva Prakashna, 1972, p. XII.

[55]   *Ibid.*, p. XII.

[56]   K.M. de Silva, *History of Sri Lanka*, p. 417.

the United States of America and the founder of the Theosophical Society in 1875, Henry Steel Olcott. He sent Migettuvatte Gunanada a mass of pamphlets and tracts written against Christianity and the latter translated them into Sinhalese, and published them. Henry Steel Olcott arrived in Ceylon in 1880 and he was honored by Sri Lankans as one of the heroes in the struggle of our independence and a pioneer of the present religious, national and cultural revival.

«The presence in Sri Lanka of a group of westerners openly championing Buddhism had a deeply significant psychological effect on the Buddhist revival movement»[57].

Buddhist Catechism (1881) written by Olcott reflected a new interpretation of traditional Buddhist tenets. David McMahan observed,

«[Olcott] allied Buddhism with scientific rationalism in implicit criticism of orthodox Christianity, but went well beyond the tenets of conventional science in extrapolating from the Romantic- and Transcendentalist-influenced 'occult sciences' of the nineteenth century»[58].

The emergence of 'Protestant Buddhism' started in the late nineteenth century under the formative influence of Anagarika Dharmapala. It was strongly influenced by the «modern» values of the British colonialists. George D. Bond argues that

«Protestant Buddhism, both because it mirrored Protestant Christianity and because it attempted to revive Buddhism and make it relevant to a new context, represented a reformed movement»[59].

Buddhism thus underwent in its encounter with modernity.

9. Emerging elite with nationalistic fever

Another important element of the Sinhala Buddhist revival is the establishment of Buddhist schools in competition with the missionary schools which later produced «contemporary elites». Marshall R. Singer divided the history of Ceylon into three periods: traditional, colonial and contemporary[60]. He identified three elite groups in the contemporary

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[57]   *Ibid.*, p. 430.

[58]   D.L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2008. p. 95.

[59]   G.D. Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka, Religious Tradition, Reinterpretation and Response*, Bangalore, Motilal Banarsidass, 1992, p. 45.

[60]   M.R. Singer, *The Emerging Elite*, p. 5.

period: westernized, traditional and emerging elites. The Westernized elites were broadly Ceylonese, largely Christian, mostly high-caste, highly urbanized, highly Western-educated, largely engaged in Western-type occupations, of the highest economic and social class[61]. Governor Sir Henry McCallum, in 1910, notes

«[It] is precisely the acquisition of European ideas and the adoption of European in preference to Ceylonese civilisation that differentiates this class of Ceylonese from their countrymen ... [and separates them] by a wide gulf from the majority of the native inhabitants of the Colony. Their ideas, their aspirations, their interests are distinctively their own, are moulded upon European models, and are no longer those of the majority of their countrymen»[62].

In the beginning of the twentieth century, with the Westernized type of politicians, traditional elites emerged. They are overwhelmingly Sinhalese, heavily Buddhists, somewhat lower-caste, largely rural, generally less educated but more Swabasha-educated (educated in native languages, namely Sinhala and Tamil), engaged in more traditional occupation, and very largely drawn from the middle economic and social classes[63]. Marshall R. Singer also refers to 'emerging elite'. They resemble the third group mentioned by Peter L. Berger: global economic participation with resistance against global culture.

«They are strongly drawn toward transforming Ceylon into a modern industrial nation, very much along Western line, but at the same time they are equally drawn to pre-serving the traditional cultural order, with which they also identify»[64].

In 1956, the resounding victory of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party brought to power the emerging or new elite by uniting them under the banner 'traditional Sinhalese nationalism'. The emerging elite, after replacing the Westernized political elites, extended its power into other areas.

«After 1956, this change in personnel spread beyond the political elite and began to affect the other major elites as well. Once the emerging elite had assumed political power, they were able to dislodge the cosmopolitans (and the Tamils) from the civil service, the armed forces, and the educational institutions – in short, from every activity controlled by government»[65].

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[61]   Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

[62]   K.M. de Silva, *History of Sri Lanka*, p. 413.

[63]   Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

[64]   M.R. Singer, *The Emerging Elite*, p. 50.

[65]   *Ibid.*, p. 147.

The emerging elite sought to modernize the country preserving the traditional values.

10. The Post-independence era and the revitalization of local cultures

The post-1956 era was characterized by the interplay of religion/ethnicity and politics and the Sinhala- Buddhisization emerging as a marker of identity and a tool of political mobilization. This led to various modes of instrumentalization of the religious symbols. When the state favors the dominant cultural/religious/ethnic group, the alienation and exclusion of other groups receive the blessing of the state. When the state institutionalizes such an inequality within its structures, it causes insecurity and alienation among minority groups. When ethnic/religious majorities enter politics and the parliament, they tend to serve their groups and exclude the minorities. In this way, the state loses its neutrality since it favors one group at the expense of the others. The failure of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism to embrace the other minorities sowed the seeds for a bloody ethnic conflict later.

The Betrayal of Buddhism (1956), a report published by the Buddhist Committee of inquiry was set up by the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress in 1954. Its recommendations include: the restoration of Buddhism and the *sangha*, and the lay of the Buddhists to their rightful place, making Sinhala the only official language and the nationalization of schools. Thus, with the implementation of these recommendations, the year 1956 saw the political success of the Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. The process of nationalization and decolonization reflected on the Church both positively and negatively. It contributed to expedite the process of inculturation of the Church proposed by the Vatican Council II. On the other hand, R. L. Stirrat argues that the homogeneous Catholic identity of the colonial era changed due to the decolonization process introduced by the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, the Vatican Council II, the inculturation, and the prolonged ethnic conflict.

«So, while the decline in the salience of a specific Catholic identity was in part a result of the rise of Sinhala nationalism and Buddhist fundamentalism, this was encouraged by the actions of the universal church»[66].

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[66]   R.L. Stirrat, *Catholic Identity and Global Forces in Sinhala Sri Lanka, in Buddhist Fundamentalism and Minority Identities in Sri Lanka*, in T. Bartholomeusz - C.R. de Silva (eds.), *Buddhist Fundamentalism*, pp. 147-166, here p. 156.

The ailing ethnic conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese further fractured the «Catholic identity» in Sri Lanka.

11. The era of globalization and fragmentation of national identity

The fundamentalism of the majority breeds the fundamentalism(s) of the minority and vice versa; it may contribute to the birth of a rival fundamentalism among minorities. This explains the rise of Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism, and its later development to Eelamist Tamil nationalism. Even though, strictly speaking, Tamil nationalism is not monolithic, its various sectors (the northern Jaffna Tamils, the Eastern Batticaloa Tamils, the hill-country Indian Tamils, and the Colombo Tamils) embrace the interest of all Tamils; they emerge as a reaction to the exclusive Sinhala nationalism.

«Sinhala nationalism which seeks to pose as Ceylonese nationalism incorporates nothing of the Tamil tradition and is even seen to be in conflict with it»[67].

Ironically, the ideology of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the powerful group of Tamil fundamentalism, put into practice same exclusivist doctrine which contributed to its birth and growth. Sri Lankan Tamil=Hindu/Christian=nation and LTTE are the sole representatives of Sri Lankan Tamils. The perceptions of the 'other' as those who are «not us», who are **«them»**, create images of the other as aliean and stranger. Such an ideology also draws boundaries of exclusion and expulsion. The Tamils in the northern and eastern provinces, the Sinhalese in border villages, and the Muslims and Sinhalese expelled from the northern provinces are victims of this divisive ideology.

In the Sri Lankan multicultural society, Muslims are another major ethnic community that constitutes 7% of the total population. Muslim identity grew and evolved as a reaction to hegemonic Sinhala and Tamil nationalism. Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil nationalism forced the culturally conscious Muslim community to transform itself into a separate, politically-driven ethnic identity based on Islam. Later, the deep-rooted Muslim insecurity, especially in the North and the East led to the rise of another ethnic political party with the creation of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) in 1981. V. Ameerdeen notes that the

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[67] S. Arasaratnam, *Nationalism in Sri Lanka and the Tamils*, in M. Roberts (ed.), *Sri Lanka*, pp. 295-313, here, p. 311.

«eventual formation of separate Muslim nationalism can be distinguished as a winning factor of the Muslim community, from Sinhala and Tamil nationalism that prevails in Sri Lanka»[68].

The religion-politics nexus grew further in a turbulent ethno-politic context. With the foundation of the JHU (National Sinhala Heritage Party) in 2004, Buddhist monks became professional politicians in the Sri Lankan Parliament. The political manifesto of the Sinhala nationalist Buddhist monks-party «maintains that while seeking political power for the Sinhalese, it also has to rebuild 'the unique Sinhala civilization' in Sri Lanka»[69]. These objectives – namely constructing an idealized notion of the *dharmararajya (*righteous state) and rebuilding 'the unique Sinhala civilization' reminiscent of past glories – represent the reinterpretation of Buddhism and history as an answer to the challenges of the emerging global culture.

12. Evangelical and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) expansion and conspiracy theories

We saw above that during the colonial era the indigenous resistance movement came into being mainly as a reaction to Christian missionary expansion. In the early part of 1990s, the Buddhist-Christian animosity resurfaced again due to the so-called 'unethical conversions'. The conversion debate sparked with the evangelical expansion in the era of globalization. The proselytization-related rumpus reawakened the historical prejudices of the colonial epoch. Buddhists accused all Christians *en masse* as culprits of proselytism, and the Catholic Church and mainline Churches pointed fingers at the new Christian groups. On the contrary, the new Christians groups complained of the persecution and violation of their rights. Conversion debate came to a climax with the anti-conversion bills. The Jathika Hela Urumaya (National Heritage Party) presented a bill to the Parliament entitled «The Prohibition of Forcible Conversion on July 21, 2004. On the 6th of May 2005, the same bill, but with some amendments and a new title «Freedom of religion», was again presented to the Parliament. Even though the bills were not approved in the Parliament, they contributed to intra-Christian and inter-religious tensions and sometimes even conflicts in Sri Lanka.

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[68]   V. Ameerdeen, *Ethnic Politics of Muslims in Sri Lanka*, Sri Lanka, Centre for Minority Studies, 2006, p. 236.

[69]   M. Deegalle, *Politics of the Jathika Hela Urumaya Monks: Buddhism and Ethnicity in Contemporary Sri Lanka*, in «Contemporary Buddhism», 5, 2004, 2, pp. 83-103, here p. 88.

Related to 'conversion issue' was the conspiracy theory concerning the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). NGOs are seen as foreign agents and their activities are considered as detrimental to the national interests and therefore they should be banned or their activities need to be monitored or controlled.

Between 1983 and 2009, Sri Lanka was plagued by a civil war between the Sinhala government and Tamil (mainly Hindu) rebels. The elimination of the LTTE in 2009 has not healed the wounds and ironed out the mistrust and fears among ethnic and religious groups in Sri Lanka. The Lesson Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC)[70] also observes this fact.

«The Commission was also reminded that despite the lapse of two years (now almost four years) since the ending of the conflict, violence, suspicion, and sense of discrimination are still prevalent in social and political life. [The] delay in the implementation of a clearly focused post-conflict peace building agenda may have contributed to this situation» (no. 9.181)[71].

In post-war Sri Lanka, even though the war has ceased, durable peace is not in the foreseeable future. Today, ethno-religious fundamentalism seems to be on the rise.

«Muslim Ministers and Parliamentarians, representing all political parties, expressed dismay over the emergence of recent communal and religious hatred towards Muslims in the country»[72].

«Bodu Bala Sena» (BBS) Buddhist Power Force has been accused of instigating extremist sentiments against Muslims. «It is statically true that the Muslims in Lanka have grown, numerically, economically and to a great extent politically»[73]. The government has set up a special Parliamentary Select Committee (PSC) to look into racial intolerance and religious fundamentalism in the country[74]. The BBS wants the im-

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[70] The Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) was a commission of inquiry appointed by Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa in May 2010 to look into the Sri Lankan Civil War, fought from 1983 to 2009, and to provide recommendations for an era of healing and peace-building. After an 18 months-inquiry and analyzing over 1,000 oral and 5,000 written submissions, the commission presented its 388-page final report to the President on November 15, 2011 and it was subsequently made public on December 16, 2011.

[71] *The Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (hereafter LLRC)*, p. 369.

[72] http://www.ceylontoday.lk/16-22889-news-detail-president-promises-tough-action.html.

[73] http://groundviews.org/2013/01/15/bodu-bala-sena-and-buddhisms-militant-face-in-sri-lanka/#_ftn1.

[74] Editorial, Extremism on the March, The Island (News Paper), 26.01.2013 online edition. January 25, 2013.

plementation of Buddhist predominance in Sri Lanka. It has organized various campaigns against the country's minorities, Muslim and Christian communities, which, according to the organization, pose a threat to Sri Lanka's Sinhalese-Buddhist identity. It also accuses Muslim organisations of funding international terrorism with money from Halal-certified food industries. BBS also has links to Myanmar's extremist 969 Buddhist movement. New clashes between Buddhist extremists and Muslims triggered by hate speech, occurred in two different towns in Sri Lanka, Kandy and Ampara, in early 2018. These riots resulted in the death of one Muslim and the destruction of many buildings.

13. Aftermath of Easter Attack

On 21 April 2019, with the Easter bombings by radicalized Islamists, a decade of relative peace in the island came to an end. This barbaric suicide attacks against innocent Christians and some hotels gave rise to new concerns about the radicalization of Islam. Islamophobia, in turn, contributed to the re-emergence of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist slogan, «Nation and Religion are in Danger» which was invoked during the presidential (2019) and general elections (2020). The Political analyst Victor Ivan argues that

«Gotabaya's (present President) victory at the 2019 election can be considered a new version of the 1956 revolution. The defeat at the 2015 election had baffled the Buddhist forces. They saw this political phenomenon as a tragic moment where minority forces had gotten together and defeated the hero who saved the country and their religion. In this backdrop, temple-centred programs were initiated at the village level to disseminate the idea that the Sinhalese race and Buddhism were in danger and stressed the importance of Sinhalese Buddhists uniting to address the situation, which had resulted in the creation of a society where emotions based on race and religion reigned supreme»[75].

In the 1980s, under the influence of Wahhabism, Islamic identity in Sri Lanka was gradually transformed by the widespread adoption of *Halal*, the wearing of the *burqa*, *hijab*, and *thobe*, the emergence of Islamic banks and Kathi courts, plans for Shariah universities, the increasing use of Arabic terminology and architecture, and a proliferation of mosques and madrasas. The ideology of Wahhabism and its rejection of Sufism, along with all rituals and teachings associated with it, led to violent confrontations within the Muslim community in some parts of Sri Lanka.

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[75] See *'56 Reborn*, in «Daily FT», available at: http://www.ft.lk/columns/-56-reborn/4-690073.

The radicalized National Thowheeth Jama'ath, which is believed to have had ties to the Islamic State, killed more than 250 innocent people on Easter Sunday, 21 April 2019.

14. Buddhist reaction to Islamization

I. Buddhist nationalists perceive that Islamic movements are driven by an agenda to take over the country.

II. Islamophobia has given rise to movements and organizations to protect race and religion.

III. The accusations and fears of the BBS towards the Muslims are expressed as follows:

- the claim that they procreate at a faster rate than the Sinhalese, which means that Muslims will soon outnumber the Sinhalese and that Sinhala-Buddhist culture will be wiped out of the island;

- the boycott of Muslim-owned shops;

- the rejection of food offered by Muslims because of bogus allegations accusing Muslim shopkeepers of distributing sweets containing sterilizing medicaments to Sinhala Buddhist women;

- the claim that Buddhists are forced to convert to Islam, etc.

IV. There are competing claims to historic religious sites.

V. Buddhist nationalists rejoiced over their victory in the recent presidential election as validation of their ideology.

Conclusion

Sri Lanka is blessed with four major religions and their spiritual traditions. These religions have brought about positive and negative changes in the island's political, economic, philosophical, and cultural systems. Sri Lanka is also known for its spirit of religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Since the last decades, the politicized religious revivals with religio-political parties have re-emerged as a social phenomenon in the domestic politics of the island. Thus, today, the religion-politics nexus disturbs the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural fabrics of the island, generating intolerance, violence, and militancy.

This article examined the interaction of religion and politics in Sri Lanka in the following circumstances: i) pre-colonial period; ii) colonialism and birth of religiously inspired nationalist movements; ii) globalization and politicized religious revival; iii) Religious majority nationalism and the responses of the minorities.

The encounters of the national-regional, local-foreign, and global-local have generated different reactions in the course of history: assimilation, collision, and in-between acceptance and rejection. These encounters have left an indelible mark on political, economic, religious and social landscape of the country, namely concords and frictions. In this era of globalization, the international business elite, intellectual elite, popular culture, and large-scale popular (generally religious) movements encounter the local cultures. Often there are «winners» and «losers» in this relationship. The insecurity, fears and resentment of the losers sow the seeds for ethnic and religious tensions. When national identity is fractured, the excluded and the discontents tend to seek a reference group outside the national boundaries. For instance, the local Muslims identify themselves with Arab world, Sri Lankan Tamils with Tamil Nadu, India. Thus, national conflicts become regional and transnational. The popular movements, mainly inspired by Islam and Christianity add fuel to the fire with the issue of proselytism. This further animates a debate on human rights.

Here the views expressed by Asoka Bandarage are useful for us to grasp the phenomenon of the politicized religions as an ideology in Sri Lanka. He demonstrates that the Sri Lankan conflict is neither just a terrorism-related, nor a primordial ethnic confrontation. Rather, it is a complex political-economic conflict perpetuated by the confluence of various factors in an increasingly globalized world. Within this perspective, ethnic groups are not seen as inherently antagonistic to one another merely by reason of the differentiation along the lines. Rather, conflicts are seen to emerge in the context of relevant changes in economic and political structures as well as in the unequal distribution of wealth and power between groups at the local, regional, and international levels[76].

Sri Lankan society carries a massive weight in terms of historical consciousness and the historical roots for the present ethnic politics are found in the colonial era. The daunting challenge the state is confronted

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[76] Cf. A. Bandarage, *The Separatist* Conflict in *Sri Lanka: Terrorism, Ethnicity, Political Economy*, London - New York, Routledge, 2008. pp. 7-8.

with is to manage the discontents of globalization and to construct an inclusive national identity supplanting the ethnic politics. How to overcome the extreme inequalities that threaten to stir discontent and undermine democratic values? Economic trends are political actions that can curb dangerous inequalities.

Today, the growing phenomenon of religious fundamentalism has provoked a heated debate in many societies with regard to the causes of violence and, more specifically, with regard to the role of religion in relation to the perpetration of violence. There are two principal schools of thought: one school argues that religion is inherently violent, while the other refutes that claim, arguing that the essential message of religion is non-violence. The «religion causes violence» school argues that «it is precisely foundational religious teachings that are claimed to sanctify violence by many of its perpetrators»[77]. Therefore, religion and violence are inextricably intertwined. On the contrary, William T. Cavanaugh shows the other side of the coin.

«The idea that religion has a tendency to promote violence is part of the conventional wisdom of Western societies … What I call the «myth of religious violence» is the idea that religion is a transhistorical and transcultural feature of human life, essentially distinct from '«secular' features such as politics and economies, which has a peculiarly dangerous inclination to promote violence. Religion must therefore be tamed by restricting its access to public power. The secular-state appears as natural, corresponding to a universal and timeless truth about the inherent danger of religion … In this book, I challenge this piece of conventional wisdom, not simply by arguing that ideologies and institutions labelled 'secular' can be just as violent as those labelled 'religious', but by examining how the twin categories of religious and secular are constructed in the first place»[78].

Although he does not directly deal with the thesis that «religious violence is not religious», William T. Cavanaugh does point out the ways secular-violence whether socio-economic and political – can provoke so-called religious violence. Since religion is very much related to culture and ethnicity, it can be manipulated for political purposes. Thus, we also need to make a distinction between the core message of a religion and the history of that religion.

While it is no exaggeration to say that the dominant culture has used its media to manipulate and politicize religion, we should not overlook

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[77] M. Juergensmeyer et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 2.

[78] W.T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, Oxford - New York, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 3.

the counter-storytelling that is present in society and that serves to heal, restore, and foster social, political, and cultural harmony. Moreover, there are common misconceptions about Buddhists and Muslims. Accordingly, it is far from the reality to say «Muslims are extremists» and «Buddhists are fundamentalists». Each identity is multifaceted and the reaction to the dominant and exclusive ideology can be manifold, ranging from assimilation to the formation of rival fundamentalism[79]. It must also be mentioned that the ethnic and religious identities are not static but rather are subject to changes depending on the circumstances.

Finally, the dream of a better and more prosperous future for Sri Lanka is still possible. Yet, the challenge of fostering an inclusive and harmonious society depends on the reduction of the global-local or center-periphery injustices and inequalities as well as the respect of human dignity.

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[79]   T.J. Bartholomeusz - C.R. de Silva (eds.), *Buddhist Fundamentalism and Minority Identities in Sri Lanka*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1998.