Evaluating Existing Literature on Interreligious Dialogue and Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka: Buddhist-Muslim Relationships

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Abstract: This study evaluates selected literature on interreligious dialogue and peacebuilding in Sri Lanka emphasising Buddhist-Muslim relationships. A comprehensive review of critical findings of existing scholarship about the current state of interreligious dialogue, its role in peacebuilding, and the challenges it faces in the Sri Lankan context is provided. This evaluation aims to identify the need for more empirical research on interreligious dialogue's efficacy in lowering religious tensions and creating societal peace in Sri Lanka. While such dialogue has the potential to foster unity and peace, it faces significant obstacles such as religious fanatism, negative stereotypes, and misunderstanding. The lack of empirical studies and theoretical frameworks implies that future studies are needed to properly understand interreligious dialogue in Sri Lanka and its role in peacebuilding. This study uses historical, descriptive, and analytical methods. This study uses two significant strategies to pick appropriate materials for this evaluation: first, widely accepted experts' most celebrated chapter works, and second, some important selected papers published in reputed journals. The focus of discussion is on (1) Historical interactions between Buddhists and Muslims and lessons for dialogue; (2) Post-war dynamics and the need for dialogue; (3) The role of interreligious dialogue in peacebuilding; (4) Challenges to interreligious dialogue in Sri Lanka; and (5) Analytical Remarks. The study concludes that interreligious dialogue has great potential to enhance peacebuilding efforts in Sri Lanka's multi-religious community, especially in strengthening Buddhist-Muslim relationships.

Keywords: Interreligious dialogue, peacebuilding, reconciliation, Sri Lanka, understanding

Introduction

Sri Lanka, a country of immense religious diversity, has long been home to diverse religious traditions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, all of which have coexisted for millennia. Despite this rich heritage, Sri Lanka has experienced significant periods of ethnic and religious tensions, particularly in the aftermath of its decades-long civil war. The war, primarily rooted in ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority, created deep-seated divisions that spilled over into religious conflict in the post-war era. Political, social, and economic factors and religious nationalism, particularly among Buddhists, have intensified these conflicts (Orjuela, 2018). In this context, Interreligious Dialogue has become essential for promoting peace, understanding, and bridge-budling across religious communities. Despite the importance of interreligious dialogue in Sri Lanka, the academic focus on this area has been limited. While there are numerous studies on ethnic conflict and political reconciliation in Sri Lanka, few have systematically explored the role of religious

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dialogue in fostering peace and harmony. This gap in scholarly attention is surprising, given the prominence of religious identities in Sri Lankan society and the potential for religion to either exacerbate tensions or contribute to conflict resolution. This study fills this vacuum by reviewing the literature on interreligious dialogue's role in promoting peaceful coexistence in Sri Lanka, focusing on the post-war period and the challenges and opportunities that have emerged in recent years.

The importance of interreligious interaction and dialogue in post-conflict Sri Lanka cannot be understated because of the country's complex religious and ethnic composition. Even though different religious groups in Sri Lanka have lived side by side peacefully throughout the country's history, tensions have escalated, especially along religious lines, in the aftermath of the conflict. In light of this change, it is more important than ever to conduct conversations amongst religions to heal the wounds that have opened up and to work toward lasting reconciliation. Several researchers have examined how dialogue may help bring people together and promote harmony, drawing attention to the difficulties of turning conflict into peace.

Interreligious dialogue is the process through which individuals or groups from different religious traditions engage in conversations to promote mutual understanding and cooperation. It is not limited to theological discussions but also encompasses efforts to address social, political, and economic issues that affect religious communities. In Sri Lanka, interreligious dialogue has been employed by various religious leaders, civil society organisations, and international actors to bridge the divides between Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, and Christian communities. These initiatives aim to create a more harmonious society where religious differences are acknowledged, respected, and transcended to pursue common goals such as peace, justice, and development.

The literature on interreligious interaction in Sri Lanka emphasises its potential to promote peace and its limitations. Religious leaders and civic societies have promoted conversation, but more must be done to make it durable and inclusive. The lack of empirical studies and theoretical frameworks implies that future studies are needed to properly understand interreligious dialogue in Sri Lanka and its role in peacebuilding. Therefore, this paper thoroughly attempts to review a few selected existing works dealing with Buddhist-Muslim relationships in Sri Lanka and identify the research gaps. In the following sections, this paper examines the critical contributions to studying interreligious dialogue in Sri Lanka, explores the challenges and opportunities facing interreligious dialogue initiatives, and assesses the potential for interreligious dialogue to contribute to long-term peacebuilding in the country.

Two significant strategies have been applied to pick appropriate materials for this evaluation: first, widely accepted experts' most celebrated chapter works, and second, some important selected papers published in reputed journals. Most of these papers are collected from online sources. Furthermore, this review follows the thematic content analysis method in analysing data, which includes: (1) Historical interactions between Buddhists and Muslims and lessons for dialogue; (2) Post-war dynamics and the need for dialogue; (3) The role of interreligious dialogue in peacebuilding; (4) Challenges to interreligious dialogue in Sri Lanka; and (5) Analytical Remarks.

Historical Interactions Between Buddhists and Muslims and Lessons for Dialogue

The historical and socio-political dynamics between the Sinhalese and Muslim communities in Sri Lanka offer a complex narrative shaped by cooperation and conflict, particularly in recent years. Early interactions between Sinhalese and Muslim communities were characterised by

trade and mutual support, with Muslim traders integrating into the Sinhala kingdoms and receiving royal patronage. Scholars such as Lorna Dewaraja (1994) and Mohamed Shukri (1986) emphasise that these early relationships fostered a degree of structural assimilation without eroding the cultural distinctiveness of either group, creating a foundation for religious coexistence. However, colonial policies, particularly the British "divide and rule" strategy, introduced communal divisions that became significant under modern ethno-nationalist pressures. The 1915 anti-Muslim riots marked one of the earliest fractures, primarily fuelled by economic competition and heightened by political unrest. This incident set a precedent for evolving communal tension, especially in the post-war context (Dewaraja, 1994).

The centuries-old Buddhist-Muslim relationship in Sri Lanka traces back to pre-Islamic Arab trade relations, which laid a foundation for peaceful coexistence that expanded with the advent of Islam as Muslims established deep trade and cultural ties, a strong relationship developed between them and the Sinhalese majority, encompassing economic, diplomatic, and defensive alliances. For centuries, Islamic values interwove with Buddhist ethics, creating mutual respect between communities and resisting imperial pressures. Despite attempts by British colonial powers to use religious differences to divide these groups, their bond remained resilient. Post-independence, however, some political leaders wielded Buddhism for personal gain, eroding the traditional Buddhist values of compassion and unity that had previously characterised Sri Lankan governance. This politicisation of religion has strained the Buddhist-Muslim relationship, as certain political factions have manipulated Buddhist sentiments against the Muslim minority, portraying them as a threat (Riza Yehiya, 2013). This sentiment is a foreign influence to destabilise Sri Lanka's internal harmony. He argues that true Buddhist and Islamic values unite against the threats of materialism and exploitation and that both communities should reinforce their historic bond. For Sri Lanka to resist external pressures and maintain peace, Yehiya suggests an urgent need for collective social awareness, legal accountability, and renewed Buddhist-Muslim solidarity.

The study, "Relationship between the Sinhalese and the Muslims in Sri Lanka," by Razick et al. provides a comprehensive bibliographic survey of Sinhalese-Muslim relations, tracing the peaceful coexistence and strong interethnic bonds that historically characterised the two communities. It highlights those Arab Muslim traders who established themselves in Sri Lanka centuries ago, contributing to the economy and integrating within Sinhalese society, often receiving protection and support from Sinhalese rulers. This amicable relationship persisted through colonial disruptions until the early 20th century, when economic and political factors, including British divide-and-rule policies, strained these bonds. The study reviews key works that underscore how Muslims maintained strong alliances with Sinhalese, supporting national unity even in post-independence Sri Lanka. However, recent tensions have emerged, with Buddhist nationalist movements questioning the cultural and religious rights of Muslims, which has led to incidents of anti-Muslim sentiment and restrictions on religious practices. They contend that while Sinhalese-Muslim relations remain resilient overall, the effects of nationalism and socioeconomic divides pose challenges to interreligious harmony, necessitating renewed efforts for peaceful coexistence and mutual respect between the two communities. Despite the long-standing peaceful coexistence, recent nationalist groups have framed Muslims as a cultural and economic threat, rallying segments of the Sinhalese population around ideas of Sinhala-Buddhist purity. Post-war anti-Muslim campaigns, spurred by extremist Buddhist groups, have further strained relations, leading to violent incidents and social alienation for Muslims, often justified by nationalistic rhetoric advocating a "pure Buddhist state" (Razick et al., 2015).

Interreligious interaction between Islam and Buddhism in Sri Lanka is rooted in a profound history of exchanges and common principles between the two religions. Understanding these historical relationships can provide significant insights for structuring modern interreligious dialogue to promote social harmony and peace. Religious doctrines

prioritising compassion, forgiveness, and moderation offer a foundation for positive community interaction. The historical interactions between these two communities, such as during the Abbasid dynasty and along the Silk Road, show the longstanding potential for constructive engagement. In post-conflict Sri Lanka, ongoing religious conflicts impede peacebuilding attempts; hence, examining past experiences may enhance contemporary reconciliation and coexisting activities. Modern interreligious discourse can aid in bridging the divide between the Muslim and Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka, where religious tensions have occasionally risen, by concentrating on these common principles. Given that the interaction between these two cultures has been impacted by the larger sociopolitical landscape in Sri Lanka, the significance of these shared values is much greater there. Interreligious dialogue can resist the dividing narratives that frequently lead to religious and ethnic conflict by underlying shared ethical principles, such as the value of compassion for all living beings (Nafeel, 2017). Nafeel's analysis suggests that interreligious dialogue grounded in shared ethical values can be instrumental in addressing contemporary communal tensions. However, further exploring practical applications and contemporary challenges would enhance its relevance. This work contributes to the literature on religious pluralism in post-conflict societies by advocating for dialogue as a pathway to national unity and stability.

In "Buddhist-Muslim Religious Co-Existence in Sri Lanka: A Historical Analysis," Fathima Afra and Thameem Ushama explore the longstanding history of peaceful Buddhist-Muslim relations in Sri Lanka, tracing back to the initial settlement of Muslim traders who were well-integrated into Sinhala-Buddhist society and maintained positive relationships with local rulers. However, this harmony faced challenges during colonial rule, particularly under Portuguese, Dutch, and British administrations, which applied restrictive trade policies and "divide and rule" tactics, intensifying religious and ethnic divisions. Post-independence, Sinhalese nationalist policies further marginalised Muslim communities. In contrast, the civil war and the rise of Buddhist nationalist groups, such as Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Strength Force) (BBS), exacerbated anti-Muslim sentiments. Violent incidents, including the Aluthgama and Digana riots, targeted Muslim businesses and practices, with tensions reaching a peak after the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, which fuelled widespread backlash against Muslims. Despite these historical and contemporary challenges, the authors emphasise that resilient grassroots interfaith efforts remain critical in maintaining coexistence. They conclude that sustainable harmony requires addressing political inequalities, legal protection, and active interreligious dialogue to bridge divides and reinforce peaceful cohabitation between these communities (Afra & Ushama, 2022).

Academic literature highlights how this re-emergence of ethno-religious nationalism disrupts the historical bond, creating an asymmetry in which Muslims are viewed as outsiders despite centuries of integration. In response, some scholars call for renewed interreligious dialogue and constitutional protections, emphasising that without systemic changes and intentional peacebuilding efforts, the enduring legacy of Sinhala-Muslim solidarity may be jeopardised.

Post-War Dynamics and the Need for Dialogue

The complex landscape of reconciliation in Sri Lanka is deeply intertwined with ethnonationalism, institutional biases, and grassroots initiatives aiming to bridge divides in a post-conflict society. Although the civil conflict formally ended in 2009, longstanding issues of ethnic and religious tension persist, influenced by constitutional structures that privilege Buddhism and often marginalise minority religions and ethnic groups. Nationalist ideologies, supported by groups like the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), have exacerbated these tensions, creating an environment where institutional reforms alone are insufficient (Peiris, 2017). The Office for

National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR), in collaboration with the Centre for Peace Building and Reconciliation (CPBR), launched the Dialogue Initiative as a pilot project to address these challenges at the community level by fostering mutual understanding and tolerance through dialogue. The Dialogue Initiative strategically selected regions to facilitate dialogues: the predominantly mono-ethnic Anuradhapura and Jaffna districts and the multi-ethnic Ratnapura district. By developing a cadre of trained facilitators from government and community leadership roles, the initiative aimed to promote reconciliation through echo pieces of training and grassroots dialogues that focused on coexistence, peacebuilding, and dismantling stereotypes.

These sessions encouraged open discussion of ethnic equality, cultural diversity, and historical grievances to reduce prejudiced attitudes and foster empathy across ethnic lines. While the project succeeded in forming a dedicated group of facilitators trained in conflict resolution, several obstacles emerged. Bureaucratic red tape, political biases, and an unclear conceptual framework for reconciliation goals hindered the initiative's effectiveness. Furthermore, some Sinhala-majority areas exhibited resistance to the concept of reconciliation, with participants questioning the relevance of such initiatives in regions they perceived as being unaffected by conflict, reflecting a common assumption that reconciliation efforts should target Tamil-majority areas alone. In Jaffna, however, Tamil participants expressed a contrasting perspective, viewing reconciliation as an avenue for justice, reparation, and restoring dignity rather than simply restoring the pre-war status quo. Evaluation data from ONUR and CPBR revealed that participants in the initiative demonstrated modest shifts in attitude, such as greater openness to interethnic friendships and a decrease in support for ethnonationalism sentiments compared to non-participants. However, core issues related to structural inequities and ethnically based entitlements - such as minority protections and respect for cultural diversity - saw little change, highlighting the limitations of individual-focused dialogue without broader systemic reforms (Peiris, 2017). Based on these findings, the assessment recommends incorporating a conceptual framework that draws on conflict resolution theory to address personal biases and structural aspects of reconciliation. Moreover, the report underscores the importance of sustained interethnic interactions, particularly in mixed-group settings, to promote more profound, lasting shifts in perception. The report also calls for a reformed national policy that includes interreligious and intercultural education, positing that such measures will reinforce grassroots dialogue and bridge the gap between communities on a larger scale. Ultimately, while the Dialogue Initiative has demonstrated the value of dialogue-based approaches in fostering mutual understanding, the evaluation emphasises that a dual strategy is essential for meaningful reconciliation to take root in Sri Lanka. This strategy should combine grassroots dialogue initiatives with policy reforms that uphold the rights and inclusion of all ethnic groups, creating a supportive framework for a genuinely pluralistic society in which reconciliation and peaceful coexistence can thrive sustainably.

The research conducted by Chas Morrison focuses on the interreligious dynamics in Sri Lanka following the 2019 Easter Sunday Bombings. These attacks, which targeted Christian churches and luxury hotels, highlighted religious tensions, particularly against the nation's Muslim minority. Morrison draws attention to these difficulties and the shortcomings of current interreligious dialogue initiatives in fostering social harmony and peace. The emergence of religious extremism and the lingering tensions from the nation's protracted civil war provide severe obstacles to peacebuilding efforts, even though religious leaders have actively participated in them. Though it has advanced mutual understanding across communities, interreligious dialogue has not been wholly included in more comprehensive peacebuilding plans. For interreligious dialogue to be more successful, Morrison contends that it has to be integrated into national reconciliation initiatives that address the underlying social, political, and economic problems that fuel conflict in addition to religious differences (Morrison, 2020). The study also highlights the need for a more inclusive conversation strategy in which political actors, civil society, and religious leaders collaborate to develop long-term

peace plans. Incorporating interreligious dialogue into broader peacebuilding frameworks, according to Morrison, can help Sri Lanka create a more cohesive society in which various religious groups can live in harmony with one another despite their differences instead of being a reactionary reaction to crisis dialogue may become a continuous process by focusing on shared values like understanding and forgiveness.

The Role of Interreligious Dialogue in Peacebuilding

In "Inter-religious Dialogue in Sri Lanka," Valence Mendis examines the country's religious diversity and the role of interreligious dialogue in fostering social cohesion. Sri Lanka's multi-religious society, encompassing Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, has historically maintained peaceful coexistence. However, socio-political issues, such as economic inequalities and ethnic tensions, have occasionally strained relations. Mendis employs a fourfold model of dialogue: life, deeds, experience, and intellectual exchange to illustrate how Sri Lankans engage in interreligious interactions. The "dialogue of life" is seen in daily communal living, where mutual respect prevails, particularly in rural villages. The "dialogue of deeds" emerges through collaborative efforts on social and environmental issues as religious communities unite to address shared concerns. Mendis also highlights the "dialogue of experience" through shared spiritual gatherings. However, he notes that the "dialogue of specialists" or theological exchange remains limited due to local suspicions, with some viewing dialogue as a pretence for conversion (Mendis, 2020). He underscores the importance of structured, transparent dialogue to dispel misunderstandings and promote a culture of interreligious understanding, ultimately advocating for policies that support peaceful coexistence while respecting cultural identities. Mendis's work contributes to the discourse on interreligious harmony, proposing a model for peacebuilding in multi-religious societies.

The literature surrounding religious freedom and pluralism in Sri Lanka reflects challenges and opportunities for fostering interreligious coexistence. Historically, the nation's multi-ethnic and multi-religious fabric, supported by religious syncretism and shared worship sites, allowed communities of differing religions to practice harmoniously. However, post-independence, constitutional changes, and nationalist ideologies accorded Buddhism a privileged position in the country's legal framework, leading to an implicit hierarchy of religious rights. The 1972 and 1978 constitutions, despite provisions for religious freedom under Articles 10 and 14, reinforced Sinhala-Buddhist dominance. In post-war Sri Lanka, this hierarchical structure has been compounded by heightened ethnonationalist narratives, which have intensified bias against religious minorities, especially Muslims and Christians (Peiris, 2021). Organisations like Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) and Sinhala Ravaya leveraged these sentiments to instigate hate campaigns and violent incidents, often with tacit political endorsement, fostering an atmosphere of discrimination that affected access to resources and protection for religious minorities. Meanwhile, the role of social media as both a tool for hate propagation and a platform for peacebuilding has been significant. While extremist groups utilise social media to spread disinformation and incite violence, civil society groups, journalists, and religious leaders also use it to promote narratives of coexistence, although effective regulation remains challenging.

In response, numerous civil society initiatives have mobilised religious leaders to act as agents of peace through dialogue and reconciliation efforts. Promoting interreligious dialogue and peacebuilding requires the cooperation of religious leaders and civil society groups. Sulochana Peiris thoroughly examines the contribution of interreligious dialogue to peacebuilding efforts in Sri Lanka since the end of the civil war. Her research focuses on well-known organisations that have employed religious leaders to resolve disputes and promote peace, such as Sarvodaya Shanthisena, the Center for Peace Building Reconciliation, and the

National Peace Council of Sri Lanka. These organisations have used religious leaders' moral authority to spread harmony, nonviolence, and peace themes. She contends that acknowledging the spiritual truths that all religions share is crucial to the success of interreligious dialogue projects. Civil society groups may establish a forum for significant discussion beyond religious divides by concentrating on these shared values. This strategy can assist in dismantling the boundaries that have historically separated communities in Sri Lanka, where religion and ethnic identity frequently cross. These groups ensure that the words of reconciliation reach the grassroots level, where they may have the most significant influence, by enlisting religious leaders in the peacebuilding process (Peiris, 2021).

Similarly, Jayathilaka and Ansari's study explores the role of religious leaders in Sri Lanka's national reconciliation process. Religious leaders in Sri Lanka have been pivotal in the post-war reconciliation process, leveraging their influential roles within their communities to bridge divides among Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, and Muslims. Following nearly three decades of civil conflict, Sri Lanka's society has been deeply affected by ethnic and religious tensions, making interreligious cooperation critical for peacebuilding. The Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom project, a notable initiative by the National Peace Council, established Local Inter-Religious Committees (LIRCs) in eight districts, creating platforms for religious leaders, civil society members, and government officers to collaborate on reconciliation initiatives. Research indicates that many religious leaders, particularly those from Christian and Islamic backgrounds, prioritise individual reconciliation through sermons and community teachings. In contrast, Buddhist leaders emphasise cultivating inner peace as a foundation for broader societal harmony. Despite varying approaches, there is a consensus on the need for collective action. The LIRCs have engaged in interfaith dialogues, social empowerment projects, and cultural exchange programs to foster mutual understanding across ethnic lines. However, the research highlights challenges, such as a lack of awareness among some leaders about their roles in reconciliation and criticisms regarding the alignment of some Buddhist leaders with political factions, which some believe undermines their impartiality and contributes to societal discord. To strengthen interfaith peacebuilding, the study recommends formalising national policies incorporating religious leaders into reconciliation efforts, establishing a National Center for Interfaith Peacebuilding, and promoting interreligious peace journalism to counter divisive narratives. The proposed strategies include legal measures against entities that incite religious conflict, education programs in Sinhala and Tamil to bridge language barriers, and district-level religious unity groups to address potential tensions preemptively. These initiatives underscore the potential of religious leaders to influence society positively and the need for systemic support to ensure their roles are effectively integrated into Sri Lanka's reconciliation framework (Jayathilaka & Ansari, 2020).

Orjuela's study, "Building peace in Sri Lanka: A role for civil society," explores the contributions of civil society to peacebuilding in Sri Lanka amidst entrenched ethnic divisions and conflict. The author discusses how civil society actors attempt to bridge divides through educational programs, awareness-raising, and cross-ethnic dialogue despite being hampered by a politically divided society and ongoing war. Orjuela emphasises that civil society can help foster a "peace constituency," which involves mobilising public support for peace and promoting tolerance across ethnic lines. However, she highlights structural weaknesses, noting that civil society in Sri Lanka is deeply fragmented along ethnic lines, with a strong historical legacy of politicisation. Furthermore, many peace efforts by civil society organisations tend to be project-based and externally funded, which can limit their effectiveness in generating widespread, grassroots support. For instance, peace rallies and workshops often face challenges reaching rural communities, where political patronage and economic dependencies foster a passive "receiving mentality" rather than active civic engagement. Orjuela also underscores the need for more robust frameworks to evaluate the long-term impact of small-scale civil society activities on the more significant conflict. She argues that while civil society has significant potential to advocate for peace, it is not enough on its own; an inclusive and democratic

approach, coupled with greater autonomy from political influences, is essential for sustained peacebuilding. This perspective adds to the literature on civil society's role in post-conflict societies by emphasising the importance of local engagement and the challenges of fostering authentic civic participation in politically charged contexts (Orjuela, 2003).

Challenges to Interreligious Dialogue in Sri Lanka

Paul Rohan's study, "Challenges and opportunities for coexistence: A Sri Lankan Christian perspective," explores the complex religious plurality of Sri Lanka and the potential for interreligious dialogue as a means to foster harmony in a multi-religious society. Rohan begins by contextualising Sri Lanka's diverse religious landscape, noting the presence of four major religious traditions, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, coexist within the nation. He observes that while religious plurality presents opportunities for mutual understanding, it also brings challenges, primarily when divisive attitudes and ethno-religious identities create social tension. According to Rohan, this is evident in the legacy of colonial influences and post-independence policies, which have sometimes prioritised specific religious and ethnic identities over others, leading to a sense of exclusion among minority groups. Rohan emphasises that interreligious dialogue should not be theoretical but must engage communities at the grassroots level, fostering a "culture of peace" within everyday interactions. He draws on the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences' model of "triple dialogue," which encourages encounters with diverse cultures, religious traditions, and marginalised communities. Rohan argues that this model is essential for building resilience against religious extremism and promoting mutual respect, especially in a post-war Sri Lankan society. Despite his strong advocacy for interreligious dialogue, Rohan also notes the practical difficulties, such as entrenched biases and political affiliations, that can hinder genuine cooperation between groups. Nevertheless, he remains optimistic that if religious leaders and communities embrace a spirit of tolerance and openness, religious plurality could become a source of national unity rather than division. His perspective is essential to the broader literature on pluralism in Sri Lanka, as it underscores the need for proactive and inclusive dialogue models that accommodate religious diversity as a pathway to peaceful coexistence (Rohan, 2021).

S. Rifa Mahroof examines the socio-religious tensions between Sinhalese Buddhists and Muslims in Sri Lanka, focusing on how misconceptions and the "self vs. other" dichotomy foster intergroup distrust. She contends that the propagation of fallacies regarding the Muslim community has led to fear, mistrust, and animosity among Buddhists, culminating in violence and discrimination against Muslims. Post-2009 and particularly after the 2019 Easter attacks, Muslims have been collectively blamed for the actions of a few, leading to increased discrimination and alienation, often exacerbated by social media. The shift in Muslim identity, seen in practices like the adoption of the abaya, has been misinterpreted as radicalisation. However, it reflects an ethno-religious identity similar to other cultural adaptations, such as the sari. Addressing these issues requires dismantling stereotypes through interreligious dialogue and inclusive education that highlights shared values of peace and tolerance within both Islam and Buddhism. Therefore, Buddhism and Islam encourage interaction with the "other" based on peace, tolerance, and non-violence, regardless of differences. Integrating interreligious education into the curriculum is proposed to foster mutual respect from an early age, aiming to reshape societal narratives and promote harmony by recognising all Sri Lankans' diversity and shared identity (Mahroof, 2021).

Pinnavala Sangasumana investigates the effects of forced religious conversions on social harmony within Sri Lanka, highlighting how these practices disrupt interreligious relationships. Focusing on Buddhist-Christian tensions, he notes that conversions often occur under socioeconomic pressures, where fundamentalist NGOs allegedly exploit vulnerable

groups, offering financial incentives in exchange for religious affiliation shifts. Sangasumana traces this issue's roots to colonial times when Buddhism faced threats from missionary activities, contributing to the development of what Bartholomeusz terms "Buddhist secularism," a model in which Buddhism holds the "foremost place" under the Sri Lankan Constitution while safeguarding other religious practices. This legal precedent informs contemporary anti-conversion sentiments, including proposed legislative efforts such as the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion Bill, which seeks to criminalise coercive religious conversions. Sangasumana's review of past and present anti-conversion movements illustrates the consistent involvement of Buddhist leaders in protecting Buddhism from perceived threats, particularly from Christian evangelicals. Reports like the 2002 Presidential Commission on Buddha Sasana and the 2009 All Ceylon Buddhist Congress Commission reveal widespread public concern regarding unethical conversions by NGOs. Through these cases, Sangasumana argues that religious conversion in Sri Lanka frequently heightens interreligious discord, especially when perceived as undermining Buddhist culture and identity. This contention is bolstered by the reactions of other religious communities, including Hindu and Catholic leaders, who share apprehensions about forced conversions and express solidarity in resisting external missionary pressures. Sangasumana concludes that fostering peaceful coexistence in Sri Lanka requires more robust interreligious dialogue and legal safeguards against coercive conversion practices, reinforcing the significance of religious harmony as essential to social stability. This study adds depth to the broader discourse on religious plurality by highlighting conversion's social and legal dimensions as critical issues in sustaining interreligious harmony in Sri Lanka (Sangasumana, 2015).

The recent scholarship on Buddhist-Muslim conflicts in Sri Lanka indicates a shift in ethnic tensions and intergroup relations in the post-war era, highlighting the role of Buddhist nationalism in targeting Muslims as a new "other." Historically, Sinhala Buddhists and Muslims coexisted with limited tension, even cooperating in trade and cultural exchanges. However, the resurgence of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, intensified by nationalist organisations like Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) and Sinhala Ravaya, has fuelled a narrative that portrays Muslims as threats to the Sinhala-Buddhist identity, leading to Islamophobic sentiment and periodic violence. This shift mirrors patterns of earlier anti-Tamil rhetoric and violence during the civil conflict, repurposing the nationalist discourse to identify Muslims as undermining Buddhist culture and values. Central to these conflicts is the notion that Islam poses a demographic and ideological threat. This idea has gained traction via social media, where groups such as Safe Buddhism actively disseminate anti-Muslim messages. These groups have utilised social platforms effectively, creating alarmist content that emphasises the alleged encroachment of Islamic practices, like halal certification, into Sri Lankan society. Claims that Muslims are attempting to "take over" Sinhala Buddhist spaces are reminiscent of rhetoric used during the Tamil conflict and have incited protests, boycotts, and attacks on Muslim-owned businesses. Research shows that economic motivations also play a part in fostering these tensions, as illustrated by the targeting of Muslim-dominated trade sectors. Scholars note that some of this nationalist sentiment is rooted in historical grievances, such as those arising from colonial policies that favoured specific communities, thus ingraining economic competition into ethnic relations. The Dialogue Initiative and other reconciliation efforts highlight the need for cross-ethnic engagement, yet grassroots-level programs struggle to counteract the institutional privileges afforded to Sinhala-Buddhists. While dialogue has shown moderate success in fostering tolerance, structural changes, such as constitutional protections for religious and ethnic minorities, are necessary for substantial and lasting reconciliation. Without such systemic shifts, the scholarly consensus suggests that nationalist rhetoric will continue fueling divisive, ethnocentric ideologies and hinder efforts toward a pluralistic and peaceful Sri Lankan society (Stewart, 2014).

Analytical Remarks

This review explores the dynamics of interreligious dialogue and peacebuilding in Sri Lanka by examining the complexities and challenges within this field, focusing on Buddhist-Muslim relations and the roles of civil society and religious leaders. It underscores the potential of interreligious dialogue to bridge divides and foster peace while recognising several persistent issues that limit its effectiveness. Following the significant arguments presented on interreligious dialogue, Buddhist-Muslim communal relations, and the challenges of using dialogue as a peacebuilding tool, this section offers vital analytical insights on the subject under investigation. In evaluating interreligious dialogue's role in peacebuilding within Sri Lanka, it becomes clear that substantial challenges persist while these efforts hold significant promise for fostering mutual understanding and reducing tensions:

Firstly, the available works of literature give us the historical foundation of interreligious engagement between Buddhists and Muslims, which offers valuable lessons for modern initiatives. Historically, these groups often coexisted harmoniously through shared economic and social spaces, particularly in pre-colonial eras. However, colonialism and post-independence political dynamics introduced sectarian divisions that intensified communal tensions, exemplified by events such as the 1915 anti-Muslim riots and more recent nationalist movements. Understanding these past interactions is essential for shaping a dialogue framework to sustain peace and coexistence.

Secondly, the existing scholarly narratives elaborate that despite a rich tradition of coexistence, Sri Lanka's religious and ethnic tensions have been exacerbated by several factors, including economic competition, politicised religion, and ethnonationalism. The 2019 Easter Sunday attacks underscored the fragility of these interreligious relationships, revealing gaps in the country's existing peacebuilding strategies. Civil society efforts, often supported by organisations like the National Peace Council, Sarvodaya Shanthisena, and the Center for Peace Building and Reconciliation, have promoted interreligious dialogue as a tool for healing and reconciliation. However, these initiatives frequently face obstacles such as a lack of political support, societal prejudice, and structural inequalities.

Thirdly, a key consideration at this stage is that it is for interreligious to become an effective tool in Sri Lanka's peacebuilding efforts, it must transcend superficial engagements and address underlying socio-political issues; current initiatives illustrate the need for dialogue frameworks that integrate conflict resolution theories focus on structural injustices and promote cross-ethnic interactions. Effective interreligious engagement in Sri Lanka requires not only conversations at the grassroots level but also systematic reforms to dismantle biases ingrained in the constitution and societal structures that privilege specific religious identities. Furthermore, religious leaders play a promising role in reconciliation, mainly when utilising shared values to foster unity—Buddhist-Muslim relations. Historically rooted in mutual respect, it shows that dialogue based on everyday ethics can help bridge religious differences, calling religious leaders to advocate for peace and pluralistic society beyond sectarian interests.

Fourthly, discussions reveal that challenges to interreligious dialogue and harmony, such as ethnoreligious nationalism, forced religious conversions, and socio-economic inequalities, continue to complicate dialogue efforts. Misconceptions and xenophobic rhetoric often amplify through social media, deepen divides, and fuel distrust between communities; legal protections and educational reforms are essential to foster a more tolerant society and mitigate the effects of such divisive narratives, encouraging interreligious education and incorporating principles of peace and tolerance from an early age help reshape societal attitudes and reinforce a national identity that respects diversity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, successful interreligious dialogue and peacebuilding in Sri Lanka require a multifaced approach that combines grassroots interreligious initiatives with comprehensive policy forms. Recent scholarship emphasises that dialogue alone is insufficient; it must be paired with efforts to address structural inequities and support for religious minorities. Sustained interreligious engagement, underpinned by a legal framework ensuring equal rights and promoting cultural understanding, is vital for creating a peaceful and inclusive society. However, several gaps impede the effectiveness of interreligious dialogue in Sri Lanka's peacebuilding. A notable lack of empirical research on the impact of these dialogues limits insights into their role in fostering reconciliation. Most existing studies focus on historical and theoretical perspectives, with few examining practical applications or evaluating real-world dialogue initiatives.

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