

Impact of Forcible Religious Conversion on Interreligious Harmony: Lessons Learned from Sri Lanka

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INTRODUCTION

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are far-reaching plan to improve human well-being launched by the World's nations at the 2000 United Nations (UN) Millennium Summit. It consists of 8 goals, 21 targets and 60 indicators. The main objective of the MDGs is to use this set of commitments as the framework for integration of sustainable development principles through poverty reduction, universal education, health, gender equality, global partnership and more; all to be achieved by 2015. According to Kofi Annan- Former Secretary General of the United Nations, MDGs are a set of simple but powerful objectives which, together, make up the world's agreed blueprint for building a better world. They have been embraced by donors, developing countries, civil society and major development institutions alike. Enlightened religious leaders and scholars of all faiths also have a key role to play. Their advocacy can influence political leaders and ordinary citizens alike. Their teaching and

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guidance can inspire people to new levels of responsibility, commitment and public service. And by their example, they can promote interfaith dialogue and bridge the chasms of ignorance and misunderstanding.

One of the basic arguments of this paper is that without peace and harmony among the religions of the world, MDGs would be an elusive target forever. Although every religion aspires to peace, it is a fact that in many instances, religious persons, resources, and organizations are implicated in conflict and violence. Keown (2009) states that although religions have always had much to say about peace in their teachings, the contemporary interest in religious peacemaking as a subject of independent study and practice grows out of historical developments. Wars took the form of confrontations between nations or political blocks holding conflicting ideologies, and lasted for years or sometimes decades. Interestingly, however, although religion is often accused of being a cause of war, most large-scale modern conflicts have owed little of their causation to religion. Other, secular, ideologies-such as nationalism, colonialism, fascism and communism-have more commonly been the culprits, and between them have probably notched up more casualties than all the religious wars in history combined. More recently, however, the pattern has changed, and the strife we now see in the world around us has more to do with religion than previously. The nature of warfare has also changed, and we tend not so see all-out wars between nations so much as regional disputes between opposing factions who define themselves by their culture, regional identity, ethnic origins, or religious beliefs. In this explanation it is highlighted that religion is an important factor in the peace building process that provides a kind of roadmap which points the way for religious leaders in the World. This is substantiated by several other researchers in presenting their personal experiences through their writings (Sangasumana (2009 & 2011), Khemananda (2011), Marshall (2012). On the other hand there is a huge vacuum of research interest in the actual peacemaking process with a religious participatory approach. This gap is very much identified by Dion Peoples (2010) in his article on *The Role We Play as Buddhist Educators for Global Recovery* by reviewing the scope of articles published in UNDV conference volumes in the last few years. Hence, the role of religions in global recovery need

to be further researched through empirical evidences instead of more than conceptual and primary source-oriented. In this context, the present paper attempts to find the scale of one of religious-roots of social disharmony being developing among different communities.

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODOLOGY

Since the conflict over religions, faith or ideologies at any scale has become one of the key constraints of achieving MDGs, the dialogue and cooperation between the different religions should be the preeminent tool for a better understanding and peaceful co-existence of the World today. Otherwise, there will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. In global level many efforts have been made to focus world's attention on the significance of religious leaders, interfaith movements and individuals around the world to promote mutual respect and understanding between followers of different faiths and beliefs. In proclaiming this observance, the United Nations General Assembly encourages all States to use the first week of February to spread "the message of interfaith harmony and goodwill in the world's churches, mosques, synagogues, temples and other places of worship based on love of God and love of one's neighbor or on love of the good and love of one's neighbor, each according to their own religious traditions or convictions. Religions in the world are playing a pivotal role in advancing the achievement of the MDGs, through the capacity of their members, the moral authority of their leaders and the vast networks they can activate for advocacy, education and action. But the unseen factor by researchers; religious conversion that leads to the inter-faith conflicts particularly in Asian countries is still not much concerned. The main objective of this paper is to bring this forward to the consideration by exploring three research questions; a) What is forcible religious conversion meant by Sri Lankan context b) Are there any relationship between the role of NGOs and religious conversion movement in Sri Lanka and c) How forcible religious conversion would effect on interreligious harmony?.

Much has been written on Theravada Buddhism and the conflict in Sri Lanka (Bartholomeusz 2002; de Mel 2007; Deegalle 2006a; Gnanarathana

2009; Grant 2009; Ivan 2006; Tambiah 1992). All of these works point out that religious-nationalism and ethnic-nationalism played a key role in the Sri Lankan polity. This paper illustrates that the way in which forcible religious conversion were/are is the mainstay of all episodes of religious revivals in this Buddhist stronghold. It is clear that nationalist elements were quite happy to benefit from various waves of religious revivals that dotted the history of the country. In this paper I document the most recent episode of anti-conversion activism as the background which led to the proposing of a bill to the Parliament.

The methodology for this research primarily consists of an analysis of relevant literature. Many of the sources, particularly the newspaper articles, but also some books and commission reports, came in the local language *Sinhala*. The literature review provided the substance for some open interviews with key informants. Perhaps an important methodological issue that needs to be illustrated here is that in Sri Lanka the distinction between religious conversion and forcible or unethical religious conversion blurs on the field. In addition, there are two different terms 'faith' and 'religion', used rather loosely as alternatives here. Even though there is a lot to say about the difference between the two, which nevertheless are so closely connected, it is quite common for the two terms to be used interchangeably, as they are here.

DISCUSSION

Anti-conversion scenario in contemporary Sri Lanka

The main discussion of this paper is to explore the way in which religious conversion has been widely perceived by the Buddhist society in Sri Lanka and anti-conversion forces impacted by this interreligious harmony. Hence, this section looks at various indicators of the thinking of the contemporary Sri Lankan society regarding conversions.

Conversion is a more general term that applies to all changes that involve a transformation of opinion from one belief to another. Religious conversion applies to those who change their religious belief.

People convert to a different religion for various reasons, including: active conversion by free choice due to a change in beliefs, secondary conversion, deathbed conversion, conversion for convenience and marital conversion, etc. (Falkenberg 2009). This would not be an issue when one who converts from one religion to another according to his or her will. For example, it is common to say that a person converted to another religion after marrying a spouse who is a member of that religion. When it happens by violence or charity against the will then it becomes an issue. Conversion of any person from one religion to another by the use of force or by allurement is widely termed as unethical or forced religious conversion.

Religious conversion provides converts with an opportunity to embrace a community of faith and a philosophy that nurtures and guides; that offers a focus for loyalty and a framework for action. Whether the conversion is from one religious tradition to another, from one denomination to another, from no involvement to participation in a religious community, or is an intensification of commitment within one's faith, the process can be complex and at once compelling and transformative.

Lewis R. Rambo is one of the key scholars who have sought to draw a graph that attempts to capture the entire field of play of the conversion process. In his book 'understanding religious conversion' he has written from within the Christian tradition, his interests embrace major world religions and many of the modern para-church movements as well. He discusses the dynamics of conversion, presenting it as a multifaceted process of change with personal, cultural, social, and religious implications. He considers various modes of conversion, examines the role of cultural and social factors in the conversion process, and describes how different religions and disciplines view conversion (Rambo 1995). Another scholar, Menon (2003) explains that Hindus in India had been converted to Christianity either because they have been tricked by missionaries or seduced by offers of materials and cultural actualization. In Iran, Dani people had responded to invasions to become Christians with large-scale conversions and spontaneous burning movements. Dani people had shown missionaries as ghosts and ancestors (Farhadian 2003). Primarily

conversion has been viewed as a social issue in most of the societies. Through anthropologist's eye conversion is a very complex phenomenon which cannot be put into either negative or positive scenarios. However, Driks (1996) says that the conversion is a sign of the epistemological violence.

In the Sri Lankan context, religious conversion is concerned as the invasion strategy implemented by religious extremists and therefore it has been coming to the fore as a very sensitive social issue throughout the history. Against this background religious conversion almost always is perceived in negative form; as *unethical or forcible religious conversion*. The Bill of Freedom of Religion drafted in 2004 to be presented at Sri Lanka Parliament highlights the purpose and definition of forced religious conversion as follows.

..to protect the freedom of religion enjoyed by the people of Sri Lanka from time immemorial; to encourage mutual cordially between peoples of all religions; to prohibit the conversion of persons espousing one religion or holding or belonging to, one religion belief, religious persuasion or faith, to another religion, religion belief, religious persuasion or faith, by the exercise of force, coercion, allurements, fraud or other unethical means; and to provide for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto.

In addition to the drafted bill, two commission reports that were taken from local print media are used here as documentary evidence of the anti-conversion scenario in Sri Lanka. The two reports were taken from the Presidential Commission on Buddha Sasana 2002, and All Ceylon Buddhist Congress Commission of Unethical Conversion of Buddhists into other Religions 2009. Hereinafter, these will be identified as Presidential Commission (2002) and Buddhist Congress Report (2009) respectively.

The ninth chapter of the Presidential Commission (2002) is about conversion. It outlines the historical background of conversion as a long standing problem in Sri Lanka and then goes on to examine the current situation with regard to the phenomenon. The report outlines that 110

NGOs have registered as companies and engaged in unethical conversions (p.124 and Annex 9.3). The report further asserts that these NGOs have created a space of these conversions while or in the guise of intervening in various humanitarian conditions characterized by abject poverty, unemployment, marginalization, and physical and mental disability. In support of this finding, the report compiled 443 verbal and documentary submissions. Interestingly, the documentary evidence also includes articles, correspondences, advertisements, and leaflets issued/written by Christian evangelical organizations operating in Sri Lanka. The report also documents reported conversion events in various locations in Sri Lanka. Based on these findings the Presidential Commission (2002) proposed 131 recommendations out of which 30 are related to conversions. One of these recommendations is important for this paper: “Unethical and provocative propagation of and conversion of religions should be prohibited by an act of Parliament. These should also be made punishable in the penal code.” (Author translation of recommendation No. 12.83 in p.180).

The commission appointed by the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress on 11/06/2006 was exclusively mandated to report on unethical conversion of Sri Lankan Buddhists into other religions. The resulting Buddhist Congress Report (2009) is pivotal to the discussion here. The report had compiled 348 submissions which had fed twenty chapters of conversion practices of NGOs in Sri Lanka. In fact, the report refers exclusively to practices of Christian fundamentalist organizations. As the report in its totality is concentrating on the conversion issue it had documented even the subtle techniques used by the errant faith-based organizations. When it comes to the recommendations, again this document is more detailed than the previous document. For instance, this more recent document proposes 131 recommendations covering measures to prevent unethical conversions as well as to ameliorate the negative impacts thereof on Buddha *Sasana*.

The anti-conversion sentiment that overflowed following the death of Gangodawila Soma Thera, was the key ingredient in Omalpe Sobhitha Thera's hunger strike (3/1/2004) demanding that the government formulate a Parliamentary act against religious conversion. This triggered

a response from the Ministry of Religious Affairs which appointed a committee of 31 Buddhist monks to look into the matter. A bill (proposed legislation) was thus made available to the minister on 6/2/2004. In addition, the newly elected Jathika Hela Urumaya MPs decided to bring another private member's bill addressing similar issues (Karunanayake 2008). Both these bills captured similar ideas in relations to the issue of unethical conversion.

When published, the bill entitled Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion (Private Member's Bill) in the Gazette, Part II of 28 May 2004—Supplement (Issued on 31 May 2004) had several responses both in favor and against it (The Dhamma Times 2004). When the bill was gazetted, there were 21 petitions challenging the constitutionality of the bill. The Supreme Court rejected all of them, ruling that the bill was constitutional subject to revisions. It is interesting that in their judgment the Supreme Court unambiguously and sternly stated that a key characteristic of the offence of 'persuasion' in this context is the offering of attractive benefits. After the revision of the draft bill it was forwarded to the Parliament on the 6/1/2009. However, the rest of the process leading to tabling, debating and voting of the bill has still not happened.

Impact of religious conversion on social disharmony

Socio-anthropologists claim that religious conversion raises important questions about the social process within which religion is embedded. Conversion is usually an individual process involving the change of worldview and affiliation by a single person but it occurs within a context of institutional procedures and social relationships (Buckser and Glazier 2003). When this conversion happens forcibly it definitely creates the religious unrest at any scale. Consequently, it is disruptive to the interfaith harmony too. Menon (2003) has explained that the way in which religious conversion has become one of leading social problems in India. The Hindu nationalists had protested against conversion and proselyting, arguing that missionaries either trick innocent Hindus into converting to Christianity or that they bribe them by offering material remuneration. In her article one narrative indicates how violence broke out between Hindus and Christians in Gujarat. Farhadian (2003) highlighted that conversion

of Christianity contributed significantly to social tensions among the Dani people in Iran. Therefore it is true that forcible religious conversion fuels to increase different conflicts among religious or faith-based groups particularly in Asian Countries.

Sri Lanka is one of the few countries with a majority Buddhist population in spite of centuries of colonization; first with the arrival of Portuguese in 1505, then the Dutch in 1685, and finally the British in 1798 who completely conquered the country in 1815. This has meant that the modern history of the country is wrought with episodes which posed grave threats to Buddhism at the hands of colonial rulers (De Silva 1965; Malalgoda 1976; Phadnis 1976; Weeraratne 2005). Thus, Sri Lankan freedom struggles had in most instances developed in tandem with Buddhist revivalisms. This paper argues that activism against the conversion of Buddhists was/is a hallmark of these revivals. For example, mass agitations against conversions marked all major Buddhist revivals in the modern history including those spearheaded by Ven. Miggettuwatte Gunnanada (1823-1890), Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907), Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933), etc. In fact this paper argues that the strength of anti-conversion movements was a key indicator of the strength of the Buddhist revivals. This string of Buddhist activism laid the foundation for what Bartholomeusz calls "Buddhist secularism". For instance, the most recent Sri Lankan Constitution grants Buddhism "the foremost place", and at the same time it protects all the religions of the island and guarantees freedom of religion. In this "Buddhist secularism," specifically local concerns, based on religion, are wedded to ideas that link Sri Lanka's present to its colonial past, which has its own secular heritage. (Bartholomeusz 2002: 5)

In reviewing the impact of forcible conversion of Buddhists into Christianity on social disharmony, the salient feature is a sharp and poignant reaction to the conversion movement of the Christian fundamentalist. Most of the NGOs operating in the country have links with the Christian fundamentalist movements. This resulted in the development of Buddhist organizations purposed to counter the

work of culprit NGOs. These organizations use civic activism to focus primarily on anti-conversion work, and with recourse to legal action and establishment of commissions to look primarily into allegations of unethical conversions of the current Buddhist revival importantly outline how it causes and creates unrest among religions. It is important that I look at some of the ideas that circulate among the public on this regard too. This is useful to establish how deeply rooted this issue is in the Sri Lankan society as a whole, not just Buddhists. Pannaseeha (1993), a chief Sanghanayake: *“The practice of unethical conversions of Buddhists must be stopped immediately. For that we need to bring in a parliament act and implement that act immediately.”* Other prominent Buddhist scholars and activists have also made declarations raising the need to protect the Buddha *Sasana* from conversion (Dhammananda 2001; Gnanarathana 2009; Wimalarathana 1990). It is interesting that representatives of other religious communities in Sri Lanka have also raised worries over the increasing trend of unethical religious conversions. Christians, Anglicans, and Catholics have for a long time co-existed in Sri Lanka for a long time. However, internationally funded NGOs are undertaking well-funded conversions of Buddhists, Catholics, and Hindus. This practice is threatening to disrupt inter-religious harmony in the country. Swamipullei (2004) Arch Bishop, Trincomalee and Batticaloa. Commercialized faith movements are threatening the existence of not only the Buddhists but also the Hindus. T Maheshwaran, Minister of Hindu Religious Affairs. Apart from these opinions against conversion emanating from all religious communities in Sri Lanka the topic has caught much currency amid general populations (Jayasinghe 2006; Rajakarunanayake 2007; Waduge 2008; Warnakulasooriya 2006).

The evidence so far—two reports, and the various references to newspaper articles from religious leaders and public figures—established how deep rooted the issue of unethical conversion is in the Sri Lankan society. The evidence is very convincing that the negative image of some religious extremists created by unethical conversions is a quite a complex and a serious social problem.

CONCLUSION

Religion is a major factor in world politics today, with a mixture of much debated positive and negative dimensions. Religious voices enjoin us to work for peace and harmony and a just world order to renounce greed, to protect the environment and to reach the MDGs. Religious involvement into the MDGs has globally recognized practice that has proved to be productive and useful. In the context of building peace and harmony the role of the religion has provided a more amenable platform to reach the beneficiaries in certain context. The present paper discusses the impact of forcible religious conversion on the existing peace and harmony among the religions and consequently how it has become a barrier to achieve MDGs. The situation created because of forcible conversion of Buddhist in Sri Lanka by invaded religious extremists is quite uncomfortable for the traditional minor religions to survive. This is unfortunate because the traditional minor religions of the country indeed have a role to play in reconciliation process. Within already established anti-religious atmosphere if conversions of Hindus were to take place in the North under the guise of humanitarian activities the back lash would most likely be prompt and even violent.

Buddhism is a religion which teaches people to 'live and let live'. In the history of the World, there is no evidence to show that Buddhists have interfered or done any damage to any other religion in any part of the World for the purpose of introducing their religion. Buddhists do not regard the existence of other religions as a hindrance to worldly progress and peace. In this context this paper argued that forcible religious conversion as the most important concern that had soured the way different religious communities in Sri Lanka experience unrest and disharmony. The paper further points out the way in which important Buddhist concepts and practices of religious freedom in the country has been abused by faith-based extremist groups or some newly introduced religions. Citing the recent Buddhist revivals, anti-conversion bill and published reports of two commissions of inquiry this research pointed out that the nature and sequence of religious conversion issue of Sri Lanka and its impact on growing conflicts among religions. It is clear that among the many

internal and external factors that had adversely effected to achieve the MDGs - a far-reaching plan to improve human well-being, conflicts over religions because of forcible religious conversion have become one of the key factors in Sri Lanka. Therefore, strengthening interreligious relations and sustaining interfaith dialogue should be the key concerns of the path to peaceful co-existence today.

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