

Christianity in the Public Square of Sri Lanka: A Pluri and Inter-Religious Approach

Introduction

In the contemporary era of advanced modernity, the presence of religions in the public sphere has undergone significant transformation. One of the pioneering voices in this discourse, José Casanova, highlighted the shifting role of religion in public life in his seminal work, *Public Religion in the Modern World* (1994). He challenged the traditional secularization thesis by illustrating how religion still continues to influence public domains such as education, civil society, and politics. Nearly two decades later, in *Rethinking Religion and World Affairs* (2012), Casanova affirmed his earlier observations and expanded his analysis, noting the emergence of public religion as a global phenomenon, including in regions like South Asia.

Sri Lanka, with its deep-rooted religious traditions, exemplifies this global trend of public religion where multiple religious traditions, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, interact within a public sphere shaped by historical realities of colonialism, nationalism, and secular constitutionalism. Sri Lanka with its multifaceted pluralistic context offers a unique landscape to explore how religions in the public sphere lead to dialogue, collaboration, and coexistence. Despite the secularization theories predicting the inevitable decline of religion in the face of modernization, the resurgence of religion as a vibrant force in public life is undeniable. This observation is particularly relevant to the Sri Lankan context, where religion remains interconnected with national identity and governance. As the country navigates its complex pluri-religious landscape, Christianity stands as one of the key players, negotiating its role within a constitutional democracy that upholds both secular and religious freedoms.

This article examines how Christianity in Sri Lanka, particularly within a pluri-religious framework, navigates the public sphere of a rapidly changing society. As a minority faith, Christianity in Sri Lanka faces unique challenges, at the same time opportunities, as it seeks to contribute to the public good while maintaining its core mission of bearing witness to the gospel values. As Sri Lanka continues to grapple with issues of economic crises, minority rights, and national cohesion, the role of Christianity in the public sphere becomes increasingly significant. As a result, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of these dynamics, drawing on theoretical frameworks and empirical examples to illustrate how Christianity can thrive as an open, inclusive and vibrant minority faith in the post-modern, pluri-religious society of Sri Lanka.

The Notion of Religion as ‘Public’

The understanding of religion has evolved considerably from the primeval ancient epochs to the post-modern era. In ancient societies, religion was primarily a public institution, functioning as a binding force that unified the believers and influenced all aspects of the community life. Religion permeated politics, law, education, medical practices and social customs, operating as a public bond that connected believers and structured societal norms. However, during the medieval period, a shift occurred. Religion began to be seen as something more personal and mysterious, focused on individual faith and inner spiritual experiences. It was clearly visible in Western Christianity.

With the advent of modernity, the view of religion further evolved. Secularism, rationality, and scientific progress gave rise to the belief that religion would become irrelevant in public affairs and it has to be confined to the private sphere. Yet, contrary to these expectations,

contemporary post-modernity reveals that religion is not merely a private belief system but remains deeply rooted in public life. Religion has re-emerged as a public force, asserting its presence in societal institutions, politics, and culture, and this transformation has been widely accepted by scholars across the globe.

Scholars like Peter Berger, Charles Taylor, and Jürgen Habermas emphasized strongly that religion will not disappear from public life even in the face of the advancement of modernity. Instead, they acknowledged the continued presence of religions in the public sphere. Peter Berger, in his influential work *The Desecularization of the World*, made a groundbreaking assertion: “The assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today, with some exceptions, is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever” (Berger, 1999, p.2). Berger’s observation highlights how religion is reasserting itself in various societal realms, including education, the judiciary, and civil society. His work serves as a vital reference for understanding the re-emergence of religions in the public sphere even in the regions like South Asia, where religions continue to play a fundamental role in shaping the entire public affairs.

Similarly, Charles Taylor, in his seminal work *A Secular Age*, complicates the secularization thesis by suggesting that our era is not devoid of religion, but rather one that embraces a plurality of perspectives. Taylor argues that the modern secular age allows both faith and reason, and religious and secular to coexist as legitimate ways of engaging with the world (Taylor, 2007, p.7). In the context of Sri Lanka, where religious identity is deeply integrated in the cultural fabric, this pluralism allows religious traditions to maintain a significant public presence.

The German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas also recognized the ongoing relevance of religion in public discourse. In his essay *Between Naturalism and Religion*, Habermas suggests that religious traditions can contribute positively to public life, provided their beliefs are expressed in ways that are universally intelligible. This reflects Habermas's notion of the 'post-secular society', where religious and secular worldviews interact constructively (Habermas, 2008, pp.114-116). Similarly, John Rawls, in his work *Political Liberalism*, argues that religious ideas can influence public debate if they are articulated in a language that is accessible to all citizens, regardless of their faith or lack thereof (Rawls, 1996, p.223). These insights are particularly relevant to Sri Lanka, where Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity have all historically played key roles in shaping the spheres of public life.

Like other faith traditions, Christianity in Sri Lanka, exemplifies how a religion could function as a vital element in public life, asserting its relevance through social engagement, advocacy for justice and peace, and involvement in public education and healthcare. The re-emergence of religion in the public sphere in post-modernity challenges the earlier assumptions about the impending danger of secularism. As Taylor noted the so-called secular age is paradoxically one of religious and spiritual openness (Taylor, 2007, p.21). This shift opens up new avenues for re-examining the role of religion as a public institution within post-modern societies.

The Notion of Public Religion and the Emergence of Public Theology

The conceptualization of religion as a public domain, as opposed to a purely private matter, has led to the emergence of Public Theology. This approach emphasizes that religion is not an isolated, personal experience but is deeply rooted in the social, economic,

and political lives of individuals and communities. Public theology asserts that religion has the capacity and the responsibility to address the needs of the society, bridging the gap between faith and the everyday experiences of the people. It views religious principles as vital resources for engaging with issues such as inequality, poverty, unemployment, oppression, and other pressing social concerns.

Public theology seeks to apply the ethical and moral teachings of religion to real-world problems, requiring a deep reflection on the brutal realities of the modern world. Theology is a critical reflection of the 'faith in action' in the light of the Word of God. This assertion underscores the idea that theology should not be a mere intellectual exercise but must engage actively with the struggles and challenges the people encounter in their day to day life (Gutiérrez, 1973, p.9). This approach resonates in Sri Lanka, where theological reflections need to address a wide range of social issues, including ethnic tensions, economic crises, and religious conflicts.

The essence of public theology lies in its relevance to life context of the ordinary people. It moves beyond ritualistic or doctrinal formalism to address the lived experiences of individuals and communities. This theological approach requires Christian communities to engage with questions of justice, compassion, and social transformation, prompting them to reflect on how deeply humanity has internalized the core tenets of their faith.

A critical question for Christianity in Sri Lanka is how it can maintain a living and active faith while simultaneously engaging in the public sphere. Public theology provides an avenue for addressing this challenge by encouraging Christian communities to apply their faith to public realities. Christianity cannot confine itself to private worship or ecclesiastical rituals but must engage with the wider public, responding to their pain, suffering, and expectations.

In Sri Lanka, where Christianity exists as a minority faith within a multi-religious landscape, the concerns of public theology become even more crucial. Christianity must actively participate in addressing the pressing social and political issues of the country, whether through direct involvement in social justice movements, advocacy for marginalized communities, or fostering inter-religious dialogue. The public sphere in Sri Lanka, much like elsewhere, is loaded with complex realities. Theologians and religious leaders who disregard the suffering of the people with whom they live, whether in Europe or Asia, risk reducing their theological discourse to empty rhetoric. As Paul Tillich noted, theology must be relevant to the questions of the day...or it ceases to be theology (Tillich, 1951, p.15).

Public theology, in this sense, serves as a corrective to the abstract or ritualistic forms of religious expression. It calls for an active engagement with the public realm, where theology becomes a force for social and moral transformation. In Sri Lanka, this means confronting the persistent issues of religious and ethnic conflict, poverty and economic crises, and political instability. Without addressing these human tragedies, theology risks becoming a mere paperwork rather than a dynamic force for change. Christianity in Sri Lanka, like other global religious traditions, must rise to the challenge of engaging meaningfully in the public sphere. It must do so not only through religious services and doctrinal teachings but by embodying the principles of justice, peace, and reconciliation in everyday life.

The Reality of Public Religion in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has long been characterized as a land of rich religious diversity, where Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity

coexist and profoundly influence the spheres of the public life. Religions have historically been coupled with the social fabric, and this continues into the present. In Sri Lanka's past, public religion was not merely a private or personal belief system but one that merged with the collective will of the people, directly influencing governance, law, and cultural practices.

Historically, *Cuius regio, eius religio* (whose reign, his religion) aptly described the relationship between rulers and religion in pre-colonial Sri Lanka. Kings often patronized the religious traditions they personally followed, elevating them to the status of state religions. For example, Tamil kings in the North of the island were patrons of Hinduism, while Sinhala kings in the rest of the island strongly supported Buddhism. This patronage often went beyond mere endorsement, sometimes leading to the subjugation of other religious traditions. As scholars such as John Holt note, the close relationship between Sinhala kingship and Buddhism can be traced back to the notion of kings as 'protectors of the Dharma' (John Holt, 1996, p.57).

This pattern of connection between religion and state was transformed with the advent of colonization. Under Portuguese, Dutch, and later British rule, Christianity, particularly Roman Catholicism, and later Protestantism, was favoured in various ways, depending on the colonial power in charge. The colonial authorities sought to impose their own religious traditions, often marginalizing local religions. The arrival of Western colonial powers introduced new complexities into Sri Lanka's religious landscape, as Christianity became a public force both through missionary efforts and institutional support from the colonial state.

The historical interaction between religion and political power, particularly the patronage of religious institutions, has deeply

influenced Sri Lanka's public sphere. However, the British colonial period was notable for its attempts to secularize governance to some degree while still recognizing the importance of religion in public life. Under British rule, Sri Lanka saw a marked shift towards religious pluralism and legal frameworks that provided space for multiple religious traditions to coexist. The introduction of Western education, largely spearheaded by Christian missionaries, also contributed to Christianity's role in shaping public institutions, particularly in education and healthcare (K.M.De Silva, 1981, p.433).

The shift from a monarchy, where religion was aligned with the king, to a modern democratic state with a constitution assuring religious freedom marks a key moment in the history of Sri Lanka. The country's 1978 constitution guarantees freedom of religion, including the right to 'profess, practice, and propagate' one's faith (Sri Lanka Constitution, 1978, Article 10 and Article 14). This legal framework both protects religious diversity and presents challenges to the dynamics of majority or minority, where Buddhism is given 'foremost place' (Article 9) while other religions, including Christianity, navigate the complexities of both religious pluralism and increasing secularism.

This constitutional framework, while providing religious freedom, also highlights tensions between religious majority and minority groups. Scholars like S.J. Tambiah have emphasized how religion and nationalism have become intermingled in post-independence Sri Lanka, particularly with the rise of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism (Tambiah, 1992, p.64). The prioritization of Buddhism in the public sphere creates challenges for other religions like Christianity in Sri Lanka, to redefine their public engagement within this context. Christianity, as a minority religion in Sri Lanka, has historically

faced this challenge by focusing on its contributions to education, healthcare, and social welfare. During the colonial period, Christian missionaries commenced a critical role to play in establishing schools and hospitals, which allowed the faith to exert influence in the public sphere despite its minority status. However, as Sri Lanka is fast moving further into post-modernity, with increasing secular influences and ongoing religious tensions, Christianity faces new challenges in maintaining its public presence.

In Sri Lanka, the current background of religions in the public sphere marked by a constitutional democracy. The pluri-religious context and the continued influence of Buddhism with its majority complex and chauvinistic mentality are posing severe challenges for Christianity. However it faces such challenges courageously with the conviction of faith, that minority is not a weakness. Like salt and light of the world, Christianity with the strength given by its minority position, thrives to pose itself as a powerful witness for the human and moral values in the public sphere of the country. At the same time, the legal framework guarantees Christian communities the right to practice and propagate their religion freely. Thus the continued dominance of Buddhism in the public square and the rise of secularism require Christianity to carefully navigate its public engagement, particularly in matters of inter-religious dialogue and social justice. The presence of secular influences also calls for a rethinking of how Christianity, as a minority religion, can contribute positively to the public sphere without aggravating religious tension.

The notion of religion as a public concern in Sri Lanka today is thus shaped by both its historical hegemonies and its current constitutional framework. As scholars like José Casanova have argued, the resurgence of religion in the public sphere is a global phenomenon, and Sri Lanka provides a microcosmic example

of how different religious traditions coexist and compete in the public arena (Casanova, 1994, p.23). This reality forces Christian communities to continually redefine their role in a rapidly changing, religiously plural society.

Constitutional Democracy and Freedom of Religion in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's constitutional framework presents a complex relationship between religion and the state, particularly in its dual approach to religion. While the Constitution grants Buddhism the 'foremost place' (Article 9), it simultaneously guarantees the rights of all citizens to freely practice, profess, and propagate their religion. This framework creates a delicate balance where religion, including Christianity, continues to influence public life, although within a system designed with certain restrictions. This model contrasts with Western secularism, which often involves a strict separation of religion from the public sphere, relegating religious beliefs to the private domain.

In Sri Lanka, religion remains a visible and integral part of national life, as evidenced by public holidays assigned for religions, wider use of religious symbols, and state-sponsored religious activities. This approach allows for the coexistence of multiple religions within the public sphere while ensuring that religious minorities, including Christians, enjoy constitutional protections. However, this model also faces significant challenges, particularly in light of nationalist movements and fundamentalist groups with chauvinist mentality that aim to impose religious monopoly. The rise of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism in the South and the Tamil-Saiva partisanship in the North, especially in the aftermath of the civil war, have raised questions about whether these constitutional protections are applied equitably to all religious communities.

However, the practical application of the ‘equal status for all religions’ sponsored by the constitution of the country has been filled with tension, particularly as the majority complex seeks to assert the dominance of Buddhism in the public sphere of the South and Saivism in the North. As political analyst Asanga Welikala observes ‘The tension between the constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and the political reality of majoritarian dominance remains a central challenge for Sri Lanka’s democracy’ (Welikala, 2012, p.65). This rise in religious nationalism has led to an increasingly polarized public sphere, where Christians of both Sinhala and Tamil ethnicities are sometimes caught between the scepticism of the secular left, which questions the role of religion in modern governance, and the dominance of the cultural nationalist right, which seeks to assert a syncretic-homogenous religious identity cantered on Buddhism or Saivism. In this context, the equitable application of constitutional protections for religious minorities becomes a central concern for maintaining social harmony.

The challenges that Christianity faces in Sri Lanka are emblematic of broader global issues, where religious fanaticism and nationalism often intersect, using religion as a tool for division and control. Sri Lanka has experienced repeated episodes of religious violence, notably the Easter Sunday attacks in 2019, which claimed over 270 lives and shocked the nation. These attacks and other forms of religious violence have not only caused the loss of life but also the destruction of property, including churches, temples, and mosques. Such tragedies underscore the fragility of Sri Lanka’s religious coexistence and highlight the need for a strong commitment to religious pluralism and inter-religious dialogue.

Religious zealotry, when messed up with political agendas, has contributed to too many tragedies Sri Lanka has faced. As Christianity

navigates this complex terrain, its role is not merely reactive; it has a bounden duty which is levied upon by the very nature of its call to be the salt and light of the world to actively engage in public discourse, advocating for truth, justice, and social cohesion. The future of Christianity in Sri Lanka depends on its ability to place itself meaningfully in the public square rather than being sheltered in its religious institutions. It must do so not only as a religious minority but also as a partner in promoting peace, reconciliation, and justice in a pluralistic society. Christianity, as a minority faith, must navigate a delicate path between isolationism and overt political activism. Historically, Sri Lankan Christianity has adopted a middle course, balancing its public engagement with a commitment to openness, inclusivity, and inter-religious collaboration. This approach has allowed the Christian community to remain a positive force within the country's social and political landscape without contributing to the polarization of religious identities.

Christianity's Role in the Public Sphere of Contemporary Sri Lanka

Christianity's involvement in the public sphere in Sri Lanka is not a recent development but part of a long process of creative engagement. Historically, Christian missions played a crucial role in shaping education, healthcare, and social reform, particularly during the colonial period. Rather than retreating into a position of victimhood in response to their minority status or asserting themselves through political activism, Sri Lankan Christianity adopted a strategy of constructive engagement. This approach aligns with the concept of public theology, which emphasizes a faith that is not only spiritual but also engaged with the challenges of public life. In this context, Sri Lankan Christianity has functioned as a *kerygmatic* community and as a faith community that actively proclaims its message while also engaging with societal needs.

Sri Lankan Christianity's focus on social upliftment and empowerment has been an enduring theme in its public engagement. The constructive role of Christianity in the public sphere is also evident in its advocacy for marginalized and oppressed communities. Christian organizations in Sri Lanka have consistently advocated for the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, workers, and women, aligning themselves with global movements for social justice. This reflects a broader trend within global Christianity, where religious institutions have increasingly become advocates for human rights and social reform. In this sense, Sri Lankan Christianity's engagement with the public sphere can be understood as part of a larger global trend of religions playing a constructive role in advocating for the rights of the oppressed and promoting social welfare.

Moreover, this proactive engagement in the public sphere is not limited to formal institutions or established NGOs. Grassroots Christian movements have also emerged to address local needs, particularly in the aftermath of the civil war and during periods of economic hardship. These movements have often worked in partnership with other religious communities, demonstrating the potential for inter-religious collaboration in addressing common societal challenges. This aligns with the principles of inter-religious dialogue, which emphasizes the importance of cooperation and mutual understanding between different faith communities in building a peaceful and just society.

Pluri-religious and Inter-religious Engagement

In post-modern Sri Lanka, the concept of inter-religious dialogue has gained significant prominence as a tool for fostering social cohesion in a pluri-religious society. Sri Lanka's multi-religious landscape, consisting of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, provides

a unique context for religious engagement and cooperation. The pluralistic context of modernity demands that religions engage with one another, not in competition, but in cooperation for the common good (Tracy, 1987, p.55). This underscores the importance of collaborative efforts between faith communities to address social, political, and ethical issues in society.

The future of Sri Lankan Christianity is closely tied to its ability to foster peace among religions through mutual respect, dialogue, and the shared pursuit of truth. In this context, the development of public theology can help engage constructively with other faiths, recognizing that peace and social harmony depend on the ability of religious communities to coexist and collaborate. This is especially important in a post-modern society where secularization has challenged traditional religious identities, necessitating new ways of thinking about inter-religious engagement.

Christianity in Sri Lanka, through various ecumenical and inter-religious initiatives, has sought to build bridges between different faith communities. With its rich religious traditions, Sri Lanka has the potential to design a global model of inter-religious harmony. The island's history of religious diversity provides fertile ground for inter-religious engagement. A notable example of this engagement is the role of some of the Christian leaders have played in post-conflict reconciliation efforts, particularly following the end of Sri Lanka's civil war and in the aftermath of the devastating Easter Sunday attacks in 2019. Christian representatives, in dialogue with Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim leaders, have advocated for peace and healing, emphasizing the shared values of compassion, justice, and forgiveness central to all major religions. These inter-religious efforts have not only helped to mitigate religious tensions but have also promoted national unity in the face of ethnic and religious divisions.

However, inter-religious dialogue in Sri Lanka is not without challenges. The rise of religious majoritarianism, particularly among Sinhala-Buddhist groups in the South and the Tamil-Saiva groups in the North, has at times intensified tensions between religious communities. The future of religion in the public sphere depends on the ability of faith traditions to engage with one another respectfully, without seeking domination or conversion. This reflects the need for a respectful dialogue that recognizes religious plurality without resorting to coercion or proselytism.

In Sri Lanka the standpoint of Christianity on social justice and inter-religious dialogue illustrates its commitment to the common good. The future of Christianity in the public sphere in post-modern Sri Lanka will depend on its ability to maintain these commitments while navigating the complexities of religious nationalism and secularization. By continuing to promote peace, justice, and dialogue, Sri Lankan Christianity can serve as a symbol of hope for inter-religious cooperation in a diverse and pluralistic society.

Challenges and Opportunities for the Future

As Sri Lanka continues to navigate the complexities of post-modernity, the role of Christianity in the public sphere faces both significant challenges and unique opportunities. One of the most pressing challenges is the rise of religious majoritarianism, which seeks to assert dominant religious identities and marginalize minority religions, including Christianity. This rise in majoritarianism threatens to undermine the pluralistic ideals enshrined in Sri Lanka's constitution. However, Christianity must respond to this challenge by continuing to assert its presence in the public sphere. In the Sri Lankan context, Christian leaders and organizations should continue to engage with their Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim counterparts in

fostering a society built on mutual respect, cooperation, and the pursuit of the common good. Christian advocacy for justice, equality, and reconciliation must be at the forefront of such engagements.

Another challenge for Christianity in Sri Lanka lies in the realm of education. Historically, Christian schools and institutions have played a critical role in shaping Sri Lanka's educational landscape, many of them established during the colonial period. Christian missions were instrumental in founding schools that promoted literacy, higher education, and moral development. However, in the post-modern era, these institutions face increasing pressure to conform to secular standards of education, which may dilute their religious identity and mission. Christian schools must now navigate the tension between upholding their religious values and meeting the secular expectations of modern democratic society.

This challenge also presents an opportunity for Christianity to redefine its educational mission. As secularism increasingly shapes public education, Christian schools have the potential to offer an alternative model of education that integrates academic excellence with moral and ethical instruction. Christian institutions can continue to provide moral guidance by promoting core values such as integrity, compassion, and social responsibility, thereby contributing to public morality. Christian morality is not a set of abstract principles but a way of life, grounded in the practices of the Christian community (Hauerwas, 1983, p.99). In a society where secular values increasingly dominate public discourse, Christianity must find new ways to articulate and embody its ethical teachings.

The challenges that Sri Lankan Christianity faces, ranging from religious nationalism to secular pressures on education, also present opportunities for renewal and transformation. By remaining

committed to inter-religious dialogue, reimagining its role in education, and contributing to public morality through service and advocacy, Christianity can continue to play a vital role in the public sphere.

Conclusion

As Sri Lanka continues to navigate the complexities of post-modernity, the role of Christianity in the public sphere will inevitably evolve. The country faces significant challenges, including the rise of religious majoritarianism, the pressures of secularization, and the ever-present tensions between religious communities. Christian leaders and institutions will need to develop creative and thoughtful responses to these issues, particularly if they wish to maintain their relevance in a rapidly changing society. The contributions of Christianity to Sri Lankan society will likely continue to focus on social justice and human rights, building on its long tradition of service to marginalized and oppressed communities. This perspective aligns with the broader global movement towards a theology of social engagement, wherein religious communities actively participate in addressing the social, political, and economic challenges of their time.

In the pluralistic and multi-religious context of Sri Lanka, as an ‘open minority’, Christianity has to engage itself in the public sphere that encourages dialogue, collaboration, and an outward-facing approach to public life. This perspective emphasizes the need for Christianity to engage both creatively and openly with the broader social and political landscape of the country.

By embracing its mission with creativity and openness, Christianity can continue to be a transformative force in the public sphere,

advocating for truth, peace, and human dignity in a pluralistic society. The true test of any religion is its ability to engage with the world in a way that fosters hope and promotes justice. As a minority religion in a pluri-religious society, Sri Lankan Christianity has embraced a path of creative involvement, advocating for social justice, fostering inter-religious dialogue, and contributing to the nation's development. As the country continues to face both the challenges and opportunities of post-modernity, Sri Lankan Christianity can play a vital role in shaping the ethical and moral landscape of the nation. By promoting peace, justice, and human dignity for all, Christianity will continue to offer a valuable contribution to Sri Lanka's ongoing journey toward a more just and harmonious society.

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