

RELIGIOUS HARMONY IN SRI LANKA

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Religious harmony is a contemporary issue all over the world. Sri Lanka, a multi-religious nation, is with people of strong religious beliefs when compared to other countries. It is a land of freedom and tolerance. It was ranked the 3rd most religious country in the world by a 2008 Gallup poll, with 99% of Sri Lankans saying religion is an important part of their daily life.

The composition of religions is Buddhists - 70.19%; Hindus - 12.61%; Muslims - 9.71% and Christians - 7.45%. In general there had been comparative religious harmony in its long history. Occasionally, sporadic incidents of disharmony appeared.

Buddhism and Hinduism were of Indian origin and had much common ground in religious practice and philosophy. Hindu gods like *Ganapathi*, *Skanda*, *Vishnu (Uppulvan)*, *Pattini (Kannaki)* were worshiped by the Buddhists. New Year, Funeral rites and Astrology are common. Islam was introduced about the 8th century directly by the Arabic speaking traders and also through India where it had imbibed much Indian trends. *IbnBatuta* made a pilgrimage to Adam's Peak; later Muslims found *Kataragama* a congenial place for spiritual practices. Even Siva temples like *Munneswaram* attracted inter-religious worshippers. Kings preferred equal treatment of religious groups for their own uninterrupted rule, as evidenced by inscriptions.

Portuguese expansion introduced European Christianity. Unfortunately they, in their commercial ambitions and territorial conquests displeased the people who became intolerant. Catholic and Protestant sects raised internal conflicts which local religionists hated. The British Colonial Rulers adopted the policy of 'divide and rule'. Although their exterior educational policy was non-sectarian, there was certain bias for Protestants for many decades.

Secular education of the old colonial type failed to prepare the newly-educated middle class to meet the needs of modern employment. The economic struggle took a cover in religion. Instead of creating new educational institutions for the growing youths, the government introduced restrictions to the tertiary educational institutions, which resulted in civil war. That erased completely the picture of religious harmony. Language and Religion combined hands and sufferers saw the struggle in its religious light. However, the religion is not an important factor for the ethnic conflicts of the country.

Although much is spoken of Sinhala - Buddhist domination and erosion of religious tolerance, there is much legal safeguard for other religious groups as well. This will be given emphasis in this paper. A deeper study of the causes of disharmony combined with the correct emphasis on activities of Inter Religious Bodies should go deep into the society.