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Full Paper

Need for Addressing Conflicting religious Teachings Instead of Surface Dialogues for a Long-Lasting Religious Harmony

This paper has two objectives: 1) to point out conflicting teachings in authentic religious texts and 2) to show the need to address them to overcome such ideological conflicts. Teachings found in Buddhist discourses and the Quran, Old and New Testaments are observed. The second part of the paper would suggest some possible mechanisms to work out by religious authorities of different faiths.

Intra-religious and inter-religious conflicts have again emerged as a matter of hot debate at present. Seeking possible alternatives at least to reduce these conflicts is an urgent need. Tense situations of religious conflicts have been evident in Sri Lanka for last couple of years. Being a multi-religious country with different ethnicities, Sri Lanka, however, has been doing comparatively well in its long history on its religious aspects. Though some sociologists and anthropologists like Gananath Obesekara, H.L. Seneviratne, attempted to theorize that dominant power of Sri Lankan Buddhism has caused to create issues among different faiths, it is not still a proved.

Intensity of influence of fundamental teachings of any given religion on its followers depends on many factors. However, it is historically proven fact that certain religions have highly influenced on its followers while some others have less or no influence at all is this true of all dominant religions??. The intensity of religious impact on its followers become very significant factor since this factor plays a pivotal role in any multi-religious society. Weber's analysis on Buddhist impact on politics of a particular era explains certain aspects of Buddhism though it is not true in all aspects.

“Ancient Buddhism represents in almost all, practically decisive points the characteristics polar opposite of Confucianism as well as of Islam¹.“ I think this is sarcastic as you are focusing only on several aspects of human life.

Though Weber focused much on political impact of Buddhism, it finally analyses the degree of impact of different religions on the societies they nourish and prosper. The strength of this impact is directly related with basic teachings of a religion. Teachings related to three religious and social aspects are selected to analyze this matter.

Part- I: Contradictory Teachings Found in Authentic Religious Texts

It is acceptable that the religions emerged in different socio-cultural contexts have different notions and belief about the aspects of human life. It is however evident that some of those notions have conducive for conflicts when they exist in a multi-religious society. I have observed here some of those issues. These are three modern issues in Sri Lanka that have direct connection with religious conflicts.

I. i. Family Planning and Religious Teachings

It is not abnormal that the different faiths have vivid views on certain social phenomena. However, the intensity of one's adherence to the teaching of one's faith is a determinative factor in social changes or governmental policies. Sri Lankan Government's policy of introducing family planning is a good example to explore this matter. While some religions like Buddhism appear to have accepted this policy without much resistant or zero resistant, certain religious groups like Islam did not approve it on religious grounds. Without being concerned with these different religious attitudes the Government went forward with the policy and it is considered as implemented with success result². One of the unexpected repercussions of this move is emergence of a considerable imbalance in different ethnicities³. This trend in which certain ethnicities increased in their racial percentage while the percentage of other group considerably decreased, seems to have caused to create suspicions over other religious groups. There is a growing tendency of Sri Lankans thinking that certain ethnic groups have hidden plans against the majority of the country. Though this is not proven well, the attitude seems growing for several reasons. This suspicion causes to create number of unexpected conflict among different social groups. This new tendency emphasizes the fact that the intensity of a person's adherence to the teachings of his or her religion is a crucial factor even regarding certain government policy implementations. If this sort of policy implementation is carried out without serious concerns, possible result would be that cultures with less influenced by its religious teachings become vulnerable and might face the challenge of its survival while highly-influenced religious cultures seems to get flourished and dominant. An ideological clash between different religious fractions comes into existence as one of the unexpected result of this move. However, it should be noted here that government laws introduced on family planning in China and Vietnam has not contributed this way since those policies are imposed in which everyone has to follow and those who ignore are punished. Though Sri Lanka introduced the policy it did not legalize the number of children a family could have. Finally it was a personal choice whether to follow this or not and religious influence had and opportunity to involve in this practice.

One could argue against this point claiming that religious influence on one's life is considerably low compared to other factors such as economic and political. However, those critics should not forget that religious teachings on sex, marriage, life, and children etc. play a vital role on human life. One of the clear contentions is that while some communities lead monogamous family other

communities could have polyandry. While some religions strictly prohibit certain sexual practices, other religions are neutral on those worldly matters. One such clear example that clash with other three religious teachings in Sri Lanka is Quranic view on getting married on woman.

Likewise hold not the disbelieving woman as wives, ... (Surah: 60:10)

Do not marry idolatresses (Al-Mushrikat) till they believe (worship Allah alone). Indeed a slave woman who believes is better than a free idolatress, even though she pleases you. (Surah 2:221)

Most of the Muslims appear to be strict followers of this teaching and this tendency had led other religious communities to create suspicion over them⁴. Followers of much liberal religious thought also gradually prone to reconsider on their practice when they find greater disparities among believers and how they effect to the society. This clarifies that intensity of one's bond with religious teaching becomes highly influential factor in many aspects in a multi-religious society.

I. ii. Religious Statues

The attitude towards religious statues is another clashing point. While Hinduism and Buddhism advocate worship of statues Christianity and Islam have scriptural prohibition on this. Both new and old versions of the Bible explicitly reject erecting of religious statues on the name of the God. It is the second of Ten Commandments.

"Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water below." (Exodus 20:4)

'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him alone shall you serve.'
(Matthew 4:10, Corinthians 8:4-6)

"Cursed be the man that maketh any graven or molten image."

(Old Testament punishment- Deuteronomy 27: 1 5)

You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, (Exodus 20:5)

Likewise Quran too rejects the construction and paying respect for religious statues. Quranic view on this is explained in details and some scholars have shown that fifteen kinds of idol worship is rejected in Islam⁵.

Recall that Luqmaan said to his son, as he enlightened him, "O my son, do not set up any idols beside GOD; idolatry is a gross injustice." [31:13]

GOD does not forgive idolatry, but He forgives lesser offenses for whomever He wills. Anyone who sets up idols beside GOD, has forged a horrendous offense. [4:48]

Historically Buddhism shares some common features with other Indian religions while it has been successful to maintain its identity, especially on religious symbols. The Buddha's personal visits to some contemporary pagodas in India⁶,

his teaching that emphasised rulers' need of respecting to all religious places in a given state⁷ justify this theoretically. Though the Buddha does not explicitly teach anything about statues of the Buddha, paying respect to relics, and sacred places is generally accepted in Buddhism⁸. It is accepted that the first Buddha image was created around 1st century AD in India. There is no unanimous agreement on the first inventor of religious image in India though all three religious traditions; Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism practice image cult.

Religious symbols play a vital role in recent conflicts among different religions and it is very complicated subject. Though Bible has instructed not to build images for representing God or any other deities in the ten Commandment, the Christian view on idolatry is twofold: Catholics do respect it and Protestants oppose to it. However, It is generally true that there are many different interpretations to justify as well as to oppose this practice. Nonetheless, Qura'nic view on this practice is relatively direct and strong. It does not permit under any circumstance to practice idol worship and it condemns it repeatedly. The Qura'nic word to refer this is *Al-Mushrikât* and its commonly used with the meaning of 'polytheist.' It is countered that the Quran has used the word [Mushrikun/polytheist] more than 150 times and most of the time it is done as a warning for believer to keep away from such dangerous performance. This practice is strictly prohibited and prohibition is justified by the strong commands made over the marriage.

And do not marry *Al-Mushrikât* [idolatresses,] till they believe. And indeed a slave woman who believes is better than a *Mushrikah* [idolatress], even though she pleases you. And give not in marriage to *Al-Mushrikûn* till they believe and verily, a believing slave is better than a *Mushrik* (idolater), even though he pleases you. (2.221)

GOD does not forgive idolatry, but He forgives lesser offenses for whomever He wills. Anyone who sets up idols beside GOD, has forged a horrendous offense. [4:48]⁹

Three religions Buddhism, Christianity and Islam hold different views on paying respect to religious images. The Qura'nic view on this practice is stronger since it considers this practice as punishable offence. Though Bible rejects it, religious statues have become one of their religious symbols for a long time. Though Christianity has cause to destroy some religious images in different cultures in their long history, it seems by now that they have influenced to stop destruction of religious symbols of other religions. However, destroying religious images by certain Muslim groups continues up to date. Without going to long history, Taliban's destructions of Bamian Buddha statues and recent destruction done by ISIS¹⁰ can be taken as recent example for how scriptural teachings influence followers. Though it is true that very few Muslim countries like Indonesia has taken measures to protect Buddhist monuments like Borobudur, the anti-idol ideology of the most of the Muslims seem not changed to a greater level. Therefore, this attitude and the teachings that cause to for such attitudes need to be recognized as a clashing point.

Doctrinally and culturally Buddhism had continued its tolerant attitude towards contemporary religions. It is clear from the very inception of Buddha Sakyamuni as a religious leader, his teachings as well as his missionary activities. Being tolerant on other religions and their practices are one of the inherent features of Buddhist teachings. This tolerance is easily traceable even in the very seal of Buddhist missionaries in which assimilation with existed religious traditions of all the locations Buddhism reached. It had harmoniously intermingled with other religions, cults, beliefs and practices while preserving its core teachings. Diversity of Buddhist cultures of different countries and locations prove this assimilative skill. Assimilation with other cults was never strange phenomena for Buddhists since the Buddha himself gave life example for this co-existence.

I. iii. Missionary Works

Attitudes of religions for missionary activities are another significant area of discussion. As in the case of other aspects, different religions hold different views on this and the way each religion interprets it has its own identity. Biblical and Quranic teachings on this matter is highly discussed. However, isolating some quotations and misinterpret those religions is not aimed here. However, the following quotations are highlighted to depict general points of contentions among religions.

Biblical view on disbelievers is somewhat explicit and early scriptures appear to have encouraged conversion of nonbelievers others using different means and method sometimes without considering whether the means are ethical or not. Moreover, it has further instructed its followers to do their best to propagate the message. Some of controversial statements have been quoted bellow to illustrate the matter.

“And hath gone and served other gods, and worshipped them, either the sun, or moon, or any of the host of heavens, which I have not commanded. Then shalt thou bring forth that man or that woman, which have committed that wicked thing and shall stone them with stones, till they die”. (Old Testament, punishment - Deuteronomy 17:1-5)

“If thy brother, the son of thy mother, or thy son, or thy daughter, or the wife of thy bosom, or thy friend, which is of thine own soul, entice thee secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which thou hast not known, thou, nor thy fathers; Thou shalt not consent unto him, nor hearken unto him; neither shall thine eye pity him, neither shalt thou spare, neither shalt thou conceal him: But thou shalt surely kill him; thine hand shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterwards the hand of all the people. Thou shalt stone him with stones, that he die; because he hath sought to thrust thee away from the Lord thy God.” (Deuteronomy, 13:6-10)

“He that sacrificeth unto any god, save unto the Lord only, he shall be utterly destroyed”. (New Testament punishment - Mark 16:16)

“He that believeth not, shall be damned”. (Exodus 22:20)

However, it should be noted that these quotations are only some of **the** most controversial sayings. They are quoted since pointing out them is necessarily significant and directly related with the objective of this paper. However, both positive and good aspects highlighted in the Bible cannot be ignored. Some of the positive teachings found in Bible on this aspect are shown bellow to make equal justice to it.

” If your enemy is hungry feed him, if he is thirsty give him something to drink.” (Rom 12:20)

” When we are cursed, we bless, when we are persecuted we endure, when we are slandered we answer kindly” (Chor; 4:12-13)

” Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult but with blessings...” (Peter 3:9)

” Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27-28)

Quranic teaching of unbelievers is more explicit than Bible. However, this fact cannot be utilized to justify certain negative teachings we found in Bible. However, the following quotations and many other claims found in Quran justify the fact that Islam teaches a strong monotheism.

Allah is an enemy to unbelievers. -(2:98)

On unbelievers is the curse of Allah. -(2:161)

Those who believe fight in the cause of God, and those who reject faith fight in the cause of evil. -(4:76)

O believers, take not Jews and Christians as friends; they are friends of each other. Those of you who make them his friends is one of them. God does not guide an unjust people. -(5:54)

Make war on them until idolatry is no more and Allah’s religion reigns supreme (8:39)

Muslims are harsh against the unbelievers, merciful to one another. (48:25)

Prophet! Make war on the unbelievers and the hypocrites and deal sternly with them. Hell shall be their home, evil their fate. – 66:9

Prophet! Make war on the unbelievers and the hypocrites and deal sternly with them. Hell shall be their home, evil their fate. (66:9)

But if they turn renegades, seize them and slay them wherever you find them. (4:89)

Those who believe fight in the cause of God, and those who reject faith fight in the cause of evil. (4:76)

Instructs the ummah to kill all unbelievers until they submit to Islam. (8:39)

Requires to you seek out your enemies relentlessly. (4:104)

Instruct the ummah to make war on the unbelievers. (9:73)

It is true that several commentators have provided interpretations for Quranic teaching on Jihad. However, fighting against non-believers physically is clear sign in most of the early teachings. However, Quran rarely mentions certain limitations of fighting for Allah's cause.

"Fight only those who fight you, but do not transgress limits, for Allah does not love transgressors." [Quran 2:190]

You may also fight them to eliminate oppression, and to worship GOD freely. If they refrain, you shall not aggress; aggression is permitted only against the aggressors. [2:193]

"Do not let your hatred of a people incite you to aggression." [5:2]

"You shalt not kill yourselves [or one another]." [4:29]

"Anyone who commits these transgressions, oppression, injustice, maliciously and deliberately, will be condemned to Hell." [4:30]

Let there be no compulsion in religion. [2:256]

Buddhist view on this point is again differs much from all these two religions. Though competition among religions in the 6th Century BC India was evident Buddha's conduct seems not to conflict with others. It is through that being a teacher in a competitive context he was condemned by different people especially due to high competition they had and the victory the Buddha had over other religious traditions. Interestingly the Buddha never advised his disciples no he behaved to hurt other even slightly. One of the very famous instructions of the Buddha explains how much he was liberal and tolerant. His focus was not who accused him but whether the accusation is true or not.

"If, others speak in dispraise of me, or .. of Dhamma, or of the Sangha, you should unravel what is false and point it out as false, saying: 'For such and such a reason this is false, this is untrue, there is no such thing in us, this is not found among us.'

"And if, others speak in praise of me, of the Dhamma, of the Sangha, you should not give way to jubilation, joy, and exultation in your heart. For if

you were to become jubilant, joyful, and exultant in such a situation, you would only be creating an obstacle for yourselves. If others speak in praise of me, or in praise of the Dhamma, or in praise of the Sangha, you should acknowledge what is fact as fact, saying: 'For such and such a reason this is a fact, this is true, there is such a thing in us, this is found among us.'¹¹

Buddha almost all situations encouraged his disciples to propagate his message peacefully. As well as he instructed to pass this great noble message to next generation. All fourfold are instructed to do so. However, harming other faith, their religious places, symbols or any sort of war against non-believers are never mentioned in any of the authentic Buddhist scriptures.

“Ananda, continue this good practice instituted by me and do not be the last man. when there are two men living, he under whom there occurs a breach of this good practice- he is the last among this good practice. Therefore, Ananda, I say to you: continue this good practice instituted by me and do not be the last man¹².

Since the Buddha's aim was to teach means for peace and harmony, his first, middle and last messages were on tranquillity of the mind and peace of the world. In Buddhist sources no world is found where Buddha instructs his disciple to propagate his message hurting others. Without any doubt, Buddha's non-violent method in all missionary instructions can be found. Likewise, Buddha's tolerant attitude towards other religions and their practices is universally admired and nowhere in his life we find any sort of hostility towards other religions and their practices. Close association the Buddha had with different religious leaders, respect and admiration of the Buddha by other religious dignitaries, Buddha's peaceful means of communication and his cooperation with the followers of other traditions, and Buddha's advise for Upali who wished to be a Buddha's follower to reflect his decisions etc depict Buddha's tolerant involvement with other religions, religious practices and their beliefs.

Buddhism does not promote any specific social structure with its own identity on laws, norms, and any other constitutional factors. The very historical inception of Buddhism is radically different from the beginning of most of the monotheistic religions like Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

II

Need of Re-observing of Scriptural Teachings to Overcome Ideological Conflicts

As pointed out in the first part of the article, the degree of a follower's adherence to his religious teachings plays a very significant role in both one's personal life and social structure. The emphasis religions make on varieties of life issues of human beings varies due to different reasons. Though teachings of the authentic religious texts do not impact equally on each and every individual, certain religious texts are stricter while others convey moderate attitude. These differences are not mere scriptural writings since they are related with the life of

followers. Since followers are influenced by those teachings, it is crucially significant to understand how followers read the teachings in the sacred texts at a given time. It is possible to read the same texts differently by different followers. Thus, there is a risk of misreading and misinterpreting certain teachings of religious texts. Fundamentalists could easily abuse some religious teachings to fulfill their personal goals.

Therefore, in addition to cultivation of religious tolerance to other religions, more actions have to be thought and introduced to reduce the conflict among different faiths. Feeling antagonism for other religious groups, their rights and rituals, religious symbols, and communities is not something new. Throughout long history, religious jealousy was like surviving factor in some religions. While some religions follow harsh means and methods in their religious propagation some other were relatively moderate. Some others followed peaceful methods. When all these religions have to exist together, there is an inherent trend to arouse doubt and suspicion over other religions. This initial feeling can be easily provoked and misused by some cruel-minded people. To stop this, many different strategies could be suggested. However, focus of this paper is not on each and every aspect of a religion. Being aware the nature of contents of authentic scriptures, responsible and peace-loving people have to make new approach to their holy texts. Certain methods that could be followed to reduce the above conflicting situations are shown below.

- i. To investigate all teaching of religious texts and to figure out statements which can be easily misinterpreted.
- ii. To find collective solution on those words, sentences or concepts.
- iii. To find appropriate solutions to such teachings. Such conflicting statements could be re-interpreted positively or replaced with new concepts.

These steps may appear like fanatic assumptions since everyone knows that this sort of move is not practical with religious texts which are considered by many as revelation of the God or holy texts which should be never touched. However, peace-lovers of the world hold responsibility to realize present burning situation of the human society due to conflicting aspects of religions. Quranic teaching on converting disbelieving woman into the Islam and discouraging Muslim women marriage with non-Muslims is one such example that causes to create conflict in Sri Lankan context. Non-Muslims would naturally and necessarily get frightened by this sorts of tendencies. Though diversity is appreciated and recognized in most of the cultures, more liberal-minded people also influenced by these trends. However, human civilization has shown that human beings are inclined to separate and isolate further when liberal religions find that certain religions are very exclusive and not open enough to accept others.

The paper had two aims as pointed out at the outset and they were considerably discussed. However, only three social phenomena were analyzed and all other clashing points were deliberately ignored. Need of re-reading authentic religious texts in the light of rational mind and considerably with liberal thought may lead to re-consider and evaluate some of the controversial teachings. If religious authorities could minimize conflicting portions of the texts, the human society can be realistically hopeful on the religious harmony of the world.

¹ Weber, Max, The Religion of India: the Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism, NewDelhi:Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd, 1992, P.206.

² <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/social/DHS%20200607%20FinalReport.pdf>, Accessed date, 08/03/2015.

³ <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/social/DHS%20200607%20FinalReport.pdf>, Accessed date: 08.03/2015.

⁴ <https://www.dvb.no/news/politics-news/monks-and-religious-leaders-back-interfaith-marriage-ban/28988>, accessed date:17/03/2015

⁵ <http://www.submission.info/perspectives/monotheism/idolworship.html>

⁶ The Long Discourses of the Buddha, Walshe, Maurice (trans), Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012. p.246

⁷ The Long Discourses of the Buddha, Walshe, Maurice (trans), Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012. p.232.

⁸ These are the four places that merit being seen by a clansman with conviction, that merit his feelings of urgency & dismay. They will come out of conviction, Ananda — monks, nuns, male lay followers, & female lay followers — to the spots where 'Here the Tathagata was born,' 'Here the Tathagata awakened to the unexcelled right self-awakening,' 'Here the Tathagata set rolling the unexcelled wheel of Dhamma,' 'Here the Tathagata was totally unbound in the remainderless property of Unbinding.' And anyone who dies while making a pilgrimage to these memorials with a bright, confident mind will — on the break-up of the body, after death — reappear in a good destination, the heavenly world."

Mahaparinibbana sutta, DN

⁹ However, term idolatry is not directly mentioned in the Qura'n I referred.

"..... Allah forgives not that partners should be set up with him (in worship), but He forgives except that (anything else) to whom He wills; and whoever sets up partners with Allah in worship, he has indeed invented a tremendous sin." (4:48)

¹⁰ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/06/isis-destroys-ancient-assyrian-site-of-nimrud>

¹¹ The Long Discourses of the Buddha, Walshe, Maurice (trans), Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012. p. 68

¹² The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, Bodhi, Bhikku (trans), Boston: Wisdom Publication Society, 2009. 697