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**WHY IS RELIGIOUS LITERACY KEY TO
PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN SRI
LANKA?**

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Why is Religious Literacy Key to Preventing Violent Extremism in Sri Lanka?

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Over 250 individuals were killed in coordinated suicide bombings that targeted hotels and churches in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday 2019¹, making it one of the bloodiest attacks in the nation's history with a religious motive. Although Sri Lanka is home to Buddhists (70.2%), Hindus (12.6%), Muslims (9.7%), and Christians (7.4%)², sectarian mistrust and ethno-religious nationalism have left the country's post-war society divided.³ Scholars argue that theological illiteracy exacerbates this divide and leaves individuals vulnerable to extremist manipulation.⁴ Thus, religious literacy is vital for preventing violent extremism in Sri Lanka. While counterterrorism often focuses on surveillance and suppression, long-term prevention requires promoting religious understanding. Religious literacy fosters peaceful coexistence, combats misinformation, and empowers individuals to reject hate-based ideologies.⁵

Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians have coexisted in Sri Lanka for centuries; however, this fragile plurality has often broken down due to ethno-religious politics. Anti-Muslim riots in Aluthgama (2014)⁶ and Digana (2018)⁷, along with the 2019 Easter attacks, show how tensions have shifted from ethnic to religious lines since the end of the separatist war in 2009. These events are not isolated but emerge

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¹Kristine Höglund and Camilla Orjuela, "Sri Lanka's Easter Bombings: Ethno-Religious Violence and the Politics of Fear", *Third World Quarterly* 41:5 (2020), 741–760.

² Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka, *Census of Population and Housing: Population by Religion* (Colombo: Government of Sri Lanka, 2012).

³ Mahinda Deegalle, "Buddhist Leadership and Religious Extremism in Contemporary Sri Lanka". In *Buddhism and the Political Process*, ed. Hiroko Kawanami (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 141–160.

⁴ Mick Moore, "Religion, Education, and Conflict in Sri Lanka", *International Journal of Educational Development* 62 (2018), 92–99.

⁵ Robert Jackson, "Religious Literacy and the Prevention of Extremism: A Framework for Education", *British Journal of Religious Education* 41:3 (2019), 211–225.

⁶ Harini Amarasuriya, Mirak Raheem, and Pradeep Peiris. *Sri Lanka's Muslims: Caught in Political Crossfire* (Colombo: Centre for Policy Alternatives), 2021.

⁷ A. Sarjoon, M. Faslan, and A. I. Azeez. "Anti-Muslim Sentiments and Violence in Post-War Sri Lanka". *Islamic Studies* 55:3 (2016), 229–256.

from widespread religious ignorance, worsened by populist rhetoric, rumour, and fear. Unchecked online misinformation and politically driven Buddhist nationalism have fostered an atmosphere of religious scapegoating. As Spencer and Haniffa argue, religious ignorance is not passive; it is actively filled with mistrust, hate, and violence.⁸

Religious literacy involves understanding the historical, cultural, and social role of religion without promoting any belief system.⁹ It recognises the diversity and evolution of traditions, allowing individuals to critically engage with religious ideas while respecting others. Dinham argues that religious literacy is a civic skill essential for managing diversity, resolving conflict, and combating prejudice in multifaith societies, not religious indoctrination.¹⁰ In Sri Lanka, where religion is often politicised, religious literacy helps citizens confront bias, debunk conspiracies, and build mutual respect.¹¹ Without this literacy, ignorance becomes a dangerous force, enabling social fragmentation and extremism.¹²

Religious ignorance is a core enabler of violent extremism. Extremists root their ideas in historical grievances and distorted religious interpretations.¹³ In Sri Lanka, Buddhist extremists have twisted Theravāda teachings to incite anti-Muslim violence, while Islamist extremists misused Islamic doctrine to justify the Easter bombings.¹⁴ Research shows that youth with limited religious knowledge are particularly vulnerable to such ideologies, primarily through online echo chambers and polarising rhetoric.¹⁵ Religious literacy disrupts this cycle. Jackson notes it helps people distinguish between legitimate belief systems and violent distortions.¹⁶ A literate public can reject

⁸ Jonathan Spencer and Farzana Haniffa, "What Could Be Worse than a Riot? Sectarian Violence and Political Process in Sri Lanka". *Contemporary South Asia* 28:1 (2020), 22–37.

⁹ Diane L. Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 6.

¹⁰ Robert Jackson, "Religious Education and the Prevention of Extremism: A British Perspective", *British Journal of Religious Education* 38:3 (2016), 260–262.

¹¹ Adam Dinham, "Religious Literacy as a Public Good". In *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, ed. Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015), 57–70.

¹² Matthew Wilkinson, *A Fresh Look at Islamic Education: Pedagogy and the Muslim Learner* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 89–91.

¹³ Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Radicalization: Why Some People Choose the Path of Violence* (New York: The New Press, 2017), 45–49.

¹⁴ Amarnath Amarasingam and Shamara Wettimuny, "Explaining the Easter Sunday Bombings in Sri Lanka: Local Politics and Global Terror". *CTC Sentinel* 12:5 (2019), 1–6.

¹⁵ Robert Jackson, "Religious Education and the Prevention of Extremism: A British Perspective", *British Journal of Religious Education* 38:3 (2016), 260–262.

¹⁶ Robert Jackson, "Religious Education and the Prevention of Extremism: A British Perspective," *British Journal of Religious Education* 38:3 (2016), 260–262.

extremist narratives and resist radicalisation through informed, critical thinking about religion.

Fear of religious “others” is not a natural instinct in Sri Lanka, it is politically constructed. False narratives, notably the sterilisation pill hoax aimed at Muslims, were spread on social media to instill fear.¹⁷ Similarly, unverified stories of forced conversions fuel tensions between Christians and Hindus.¹⁸ Such panics thrive where religious understanding is lacking. Höglund and Orjuela highlight how nationalist actors deliberately intensify religious polarisation and feed on perceived threats.¹⁹ Religious literacy, in contrast, cultivates empathy and critical awareness.²⁰ It replaces fear and suspicion with knowledge and shared civic understanding, dismantling the emotional foundations of hate.

Religious illiteracy also empowers authoritarian populism. Groups such as *Bodu Bala Sena (BBS)* have manipulated Buddhist identity to create panic about demographic threats.²¹ Politicians often exploit religious divisions to mobilise support and silence dissent.²² As Hayward emphasises, peacebuilding requires more than ceasefires; it involves changing public attitudes.²³ Religious literacy supports this transformation by helping citizens recognise when their faith is being politically manipulated. It encourages democratic engagement, counters hate-based populism and builds inclusive civic dialogue.²⁴

¹⁷ Shamara Wettimuny, “Digital Hate: Anti-Muslim Propaganda on Facebook in Sri Lanka”. In *Digital Hate: The Global Convergence of Hate Online*, eds. Julie Posetti and Kalina Bontcheva (Paris: UNESCO, 2021), 97–109.

¹⁸ Jude Fernando, “Conversion Controversies and Conflict: Religion and Law in Contemporary Sri Lanka”, *Religion, State & Society* 38:2 (2010), 197–222.

¹⁹ Kristine Höglund and Camilla Orjuela, “Sri Lanka’s Easter Bombings: Ethno-Religious Violence and the Politics of Fear”, *Third World Quarterly* 41:5 (2020), 741–760.

²⁰ John H. Morgan, *Understanding Religious Empathy: The Role of Faith in Bridging Difference* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2016), 34–38.

²¹ Neil DeVotta, “From Civil War to Soft Authoritarianism: Sri Lanka in Comparative Perspective”, *Global Change, Peace & Security* 20:3 (2008), 337–343.

²² Bhavani Fonseka and Uvinie Hettiarachchi, “Religious Violence and Politicisation in Sri Lanka”, *Centre for Policy Alternatives*, April 2019, 5–8.

²³ Susan Hayward, *Religion and Peacebuilding: Reflections on Current Challenges and Future Prospects*, United States Institute of Peace Special Report No. 313 (Washington, DC: USIP, 2012), 1–10.

²⁴ Elizabeth J. Ferris, *Faith and Politics: The Influence of Religion on Conflict and Peacebuilding* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), 23–27.

Some argue that surveillance, policing, and security operations are more effective than education in preventing extremism. However, this view is dangerously short-sighted. Intelligence may stop attacks, but it cannot dismantle ideologies.²⁵ Abu-Nimer argues that radicalisation stems from emotional and identity-based drivers that must be addressed through cultural and religious understanding.²⁶ Religious literacy is not just soft power; it is a strategic form of prevention. Without it, government responses remain reactive and fragile.²⁷ Educating citizens to detect and reject extremist narratives before violence occurs is key to sustainable peace.

In Sri Lanka, religious ignorance is not just a weakness; it is a weapon. It fuels fear, divides communities, and makes it easier for violent ideologies to spread. Religious literacy is our most effective but underutilised tool for prevention. If Sri Lanka is truly committed to peace, it must confront hatred with education as well as law enforcement. Before the next crisis arises, citizens must be equipped with knowledge, not ignorance.

²⁵ Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 127–139

²⁶ Mohammed Abu-Nimer, *Alternative Approaches to Transforming Violent Extremism: The Case of Islamic Peace and Interreligious Peacebuilding* (Berghof Foundation, 2018), 11–17.

²⁷ Douglas Pratt, “Religion and Radicalization: Religious Identity and the Politics of Difference”. In *Religion and Security: The New Nexus in International Relations*, eds. Giorgio Shani, Mark Jurgensmeyer, and Sato Hiroshi (London: Routledge, 2013), 45–56.

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