

Myth of Secularism and Foremost Place of Buddhism

One of the issues which were discussed and were met with special consideration of the civil community, in the past constitutional process is that the foremost place is given to Buddhism in the constitution of Sri Lanka. Since this concern can come into the debate in the current constitutional process also, it will be helpful to those who concerned about this, if pointed out few important facts regarding this issue though the possibility of amending this clause in a way multicultural equality is accepted is unlikely in this majoritarian atmosphere.

Most of the civil community and religious minorities have perceived this clause as a threat to the equal rights of religions since it gives prominence to a certain religion. So they do see removing the clause which says “it should be government’s duty to protect Buddha Sasana since the government of Sri Lanka gives foremost place to Buddhism,” as the only way towards a state in which all the religions are equal. Especially most activists see not only the above provision but also many national symbols which reflects the Sinhalese or Buddhist identity as promoting the notion of Sri Lanka as a country with an inviolable state as being a Sinhalese-Buddhist country. And some have argued that this impression given by these symbols are a [cause for religious and ethnic riots](#) even.

Since these symbols are linked to the same ideology, thus there's the argument that removal or alteration of these symbols will change this majoritarian mindset and thus will ensure a more tolerant environment. The assumption which lies behind this argument is that these political expressions which equate the country’s national identity with the Buddhist identity and Sinhalese identity are a result of these constitutional clauses and acceptance of these symbols by the government. But the notion of “Sinhala-Buddhist” country is not something created by state acceptance of these symbols or constitutional clauses, on the contrary, that acceptance too was due to the social acceptance of that ideology. In the history, historiography and in mythology, and in the Sinhala community’s public perception of the national identity, we can see the attempt of equating the country's identity with Sinhalese or Buddhist identity. In other words, this comes from a long historical tradition that dates back to ancient times. But I’m not going to tell anyway that since it is so historical it must be left to continue.

What I’m emphasizing is that, if our expected result is, a widespread change of ingrained notions of national identity among many Sinhala Buddhists, then it won’t be achieved by constitutional reforms or redesign of the National Flag and such efforts. In other words, a secular constitution does not necessarily guarantee us a secular society. One can take the example of India, its constitution is secular, but the influence of the majoritarian Hindhuthva concept can be seen everywhere including in politics. So I see the abolishment of the state relationship with Buddhism is as something that should come after a change of Sinhala-Buddhist

notion of the country's national identity instead of seeing as a harbinger of secular-multi cultural Sri Lanka.

To change the established notions of the national identity, to convert the image of Sri Lanka to a multicultural one from an exclusively Sinhala Buddhist one, we need to engage in educational efforts aimed at younger generations using the school history textbooks, religious education, citizenship education, and such subjects. Discussing the nature and contents of such education is beyond the scope of this article. My intention is to refer to a more suitable and constructive way for creating multi-cultural equality without amending the constitutional clause which gives the foremost place to Buddhism. But first we have to uncover the myth of the "secular country."

Most of the Sri Lankan civil community is confined in a view that any kind of link with religion is opposed to secularism and hence detrimental to religious harmony, freedom, and equality and hence is believing that it's necessary to change or remove the constitutional clause which says Buddhism shall be given foremost place and thus it should be protected by the government, to meet the claim that Sri Lankan government treats all religions equally.

But according to [Jacques Berlinerblau](#) of the Program for Jewish Civilization at the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, the separation of church and state is only one possible strategy using by secular governments. As he has shown every secular state has a concern about the relationship between church and state and each secular state may use their own strategies to deal with that concern. So the concept of secularism is not something clearly defined, but something which have many forms making it's difficult to determine which characteristics will constitute a true secular state.

Furthermore we can say that the distinction between a secular and non-secular state is an illusive one. In a paper entitled [Multiculturalism and Moderate Secularism](#), it's author Tariq Modood writes that;

"In nearly all of Western Europe, there are points of symbolic, institutional, policy, and fiscal linkages between the state and aspects of Christianity."

Our demarcating criteria between secular and non-secular countries is now challenged by this fact. If even the western European countries, which are seen as ideals of secular state concept, have the links with religions, it means that the so-called secular state is a mere fiction that has no practical example. Or it means that a certain kind of relationship between state and religion is permissible even in a so-called secular state. If the demarcating characteristic between a secular state and a non-secular state is having ties with religion, there's no country in which follows this principle in that way. On the other hand this fact will make the demand for Sri

Lanka to become secular country/to remove constitutional clause on Buddhism, a nonsense, for even western secular countries too are maintaining such linkages. And further it may liberate most of us from the belief that state-religion links are a primitive character which hinders the progress of a country by prompting the government to fulfill religious ambitions. And it gives the impression and hope that it must be possible to treat all religions equally and to avoid possible negative outcomes from state linking with a certain religious institution without abolishing such relationships.

Following extract from [*Moderate Secularism, Religion as Identity, and Respect for Religion*](#) by Tariq Modood proves that it's possible. (first sentence may read as a slight slap on the face to civil activists of Sri Lanka too)

“Faced with an emergent multi-faith situation or where there is a political will to incorporate previously marginalised faiths and sects and challenge the privileged status of some religions, the context-sensitive and conservationist response may be to pluralise the state–religion link rather than sever it. This indeed is what is happening across many countries in Western Europe, despite critics on the both the left and right, especially among the radical secularists and the Islamophobic populists.

In relation to the British case one can see this pluralising or multiculturalising in a number of incremental, adhoc and experimental steps. For example, some years ago Prince Charles, the heir to the throne and to the office of Supreme Governor of the Church of England, let it be known he would as a monarch prefer the title ‘Defender of Faith’ to the historic title ‘Defender of the Faith’. More recently, in 2004, the Queen used her Christmas television and radio broadcast (an important national occasion, especially for the older generation, on the most important Christian day of the year) to affirm the religious diversity of Britain. Her message was, in the words of Grace Davie: ‘Religious diversity is some-thing which enriches society; it should be seen as a strength, not a threat; the broadcast moreover was accompanied by shots of the Queen visiting a Sikh temple and a Muslim center. It is important to put these remarks in context. The affirmation of diversity as such is not a new idea in British society; what is new is the gradual recognition that religious differences should be foregrounded in such affirmations.’ If such examples are regarded as merely symbolic then one should note how British governments have felt the need to create multi-faith consultative bodies.

It suggests that ‘weak establishment’ can be the basis for moving towards ‘multicultural equality’ without constitutional disestablishment.”

By reading this it occurred to me that the approach which is identifying by Modood as a “weak establishment” is still going in practice in Sri Lanka. We can see President or Prime minister issuing public announcements expressing their good wishes regarding non-Buddhist religious days, and sometimes participating or patronizing such events. We can see the government giving public and government holidays for auspicious days of every religion which is a right most European nations are not ensuring for minorities. We can see the government is supporting schools linked with other religions also and providing textbooks, appointing teachers to teach those religions in schools. And above all, there’s a ministry regarding affairs of every religion. So it’s not only Buddhism, the government of Sri Lanka is patronizing but it maintains links with other religious institutions also. So despite what the constitution says in the chapter of ‘Buddhism’ and what the most non-Buddhists and civil activists are believing, Sri Lanka, is a state in which treat its all religions equally in the practice. So what is to be done is to improve this situation.

So if such steps can create religious equality without removing the constitutional establishments, as Modood observes, we have already created the religious equality, or if we haven’t done it yet, at least we are going on that path. There’s no need for removing or amending the constitutional clause which gives prominence and state protection to Buddhism to make the state more inclusive and protective towards religious minorities.

- Sachintha Madushan