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On the outset let us declare that we do not have convictions regarding any of these topics that we cannot let go of. We do not have an agenda to impose any set-menus on the society. These are our own thoughts and they are negotiable. Trying not to cling hard on to anything (ideologies in particular) is perhaps a value that we borrowed from Buddhism. We do understand that people who are more educated and knowledgeable than us hold different opinions to that of ours regarding these topics. If those more enlightened people read our rants and if they care, they are bound to respond, convince us, and free us of our wrong opinions. Even during the short period between starting the essay and publishing it, the authors have changed some of their long held opinions. However, as long as we are convinced, we are ready to passionately argue these opinions. The moment we are convinced otherwise, we will gladly change our positions.

Secondly, let us declare that we are utterly unqualified to handle this subject matter. We are no more than a few IT people having access to the internet and vast amount of knowledge it presents. We have picked up a term here and a concept there and not doing anything more than repeating them in a coherent manner. Then again, who is qualified anyway? What else does an expert do apart from picking up concepts and repeating them in a coherent manner, perhaps adding little bit of his/her own thoughts?

The main theme in this essay is "separation of religion and governance". Advocating "Separation" does not mean that we are advocating discarding religion from society altogether. However, in order to convince the readers that morality, law and order aspects of governance needn't derive its tenets from religion, we need to downplay the notion that religion is the sole authority on morality. When we try to argue that rationality and scientific inquiry is sufficient for that purpose, we inevitably downplay religion. Although our intention in this article is not to CONVERT a religious person to an atheist, it is difficult to avoid appearing so.

As argued in the last paragraph of this essay, we strongly believe that religion will not go away from the society by removing state patronage. Therefore 100% secular society is not something either achievable or even desired. The function of religion in the society is important, and we have no issue with it. We even do not have an issue with organized religions per se. The problem only starts when YOUR organized religion starts dictating terms on OUR lifestyle choices by way of manipulating governance. ( "YOUR" and "OUR" are metaphorical)

The target audience of our essay is the policy makers and the layer of the society that can influence policy making.

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## **Synopsis**

The focus of this essay is twofold. (A) To build a case for separation of governance from religious influence in Sri Lanka (B) Argue that religion is taking too much of a share in people's lives (more than it ought to be) and it is given undue importance and undue immunity from criticism.

The first point in question can be discussed and argued without creating lot of controversy. The second point however can hurt lot of religious feelings and create enemies. It can be argued that I am not helping the first cause by mixing it with the second. It could well be that I am approaching the topic in a wrong angle. However, this is the angle that I believe will have the most impact, in order to do a course correction. The reason that I believe so is because the two topics are strongly interlinked and they feed off each other.

Implementation of these concepts in Sri Lankan society cannot (and should not) happen as sweeping changes. It is a gradual process, and it has to take its time. The religion cannot be taken off from the society without a sound alternative. Some of the responsibilities of today's religion have to be transferred to law of the land and/or social ethics. All we can do is to take small steps in the correct direction in that path. The purpose of this essay is to increase awareness and arm those people who like to take the cause forward with weapons of knowledge. I am keeping in mind the layer of the society that has a say in policy making process as the target audience. If I can influence several such people in a way that they will be able to leave their religion aside when dealing with policy making process, and adopt a scientific approach, that involves critical inquiry and use of empirical evidence, I am satisfied that I have succeeded. People often resort to science when their questions are not answered by their religion. The challenge for them is to take a scientific stance even when they have been taught by religion what their stance should be regarding a particular issue.

One might ask why separate? Why not try reforming the religious institutions in a favorable way if we see institutions as the problem. Well, that is the point argued in this essay. The reason to take both (A) and (B) together in this essay is to argue that refining the religious institution is not a viable solution. The point being that religious institutions are built upon a "wrong" foundation. Most religions do not identify that 'change is the nature'. Conservative religious leaders will not agree that everything including the doctrines should be subjected to discussion, and should be open for change. Even a religion like Buddhism, that talks a lot about 'change' at the core of its philosophy, have not bred lot of followers open for change. Even a religion like Buddhism that advises critical inquiry of the tradition (*refer 'Kalama Sutta'*) has managed to create establishments that advice unquestioning adherence.

The key issue is religious scripture based doctrine not being subjected to scientific inquiry. Religious doctrines are not continuously challenged and refined based on new knowledge. In that sense, a religious scripture is highly unscientific. For that matter, any concept that is accepted as an unchallengeable and unquestionable truth can never be a scientific concept. Science is all about continuous learning and continuous improvement to theories and models that we create about the universe. And science boldly discards models that have been held as 'truth' for generations when those models fail to explain new phenomena and new knowledge about how the world works.

It is also important that the champions of this cause to keep an open mind. It is easier said than done to keep an open mind, take opposing arguments with respect, and leave room for change. Sometimes we tend to forget that all of these arguments that we make are extremely relative in nature. Religious people may believe in absolutes, but a secular person should always be aware that everything including concepts like "separation of governance and religion" are very much relative. There are taken-for-granted reference points in these arguments that we can easily forget. By arguing that religion and governance should be separated, we are also arguing for a particular knowledge system as well. The Appendix at the end of this essay titled "worldview

differences" is my attempt to acknowledge the existence of different knowledge systems and rival arguments within them that should be treated with due respect.

## Why bother?

I thought I should give a brief answer to one more question raised by a few. Why bother to write this essay?

Am I getting in to politics? Is this a pastime? Do I not have anything better to do? The answer to first two questions is a No and last question does not need an answer since it is what we call a rhetorical question.

I wrote this since I am very passionate about keeping such dialog alive. Although I am not certain whether claims that I make and ideas that I propose are 100% accurate, I still like to put them forward for discussion. It is these types of continuous dialogs that helped humankind to make course corrections and keep on progressing. The social, economical and political structures around us dictate the terms of our lives. It is our civic responsibility to continuously poke at those structures to see if they are sound. They might need repair or even rebuilding.

I don't believe that we can be certain about anything. Certainly is a word in my vocabulary that I use sparingly.

*"Nature is a network of happenings that do not unroll like a red carpet into time, but are intertwined with every part of the universe, and we are among those parts. In this nexus, we cannot reach certainty because it is not there to be reached; it goes with the wrong model and 'certain' answers ironically are the wrong answers!"*

*Certainty is a demand that is made by philosophers who contemplate the world from outside; and scientific knowledge is the knowledge for action, not contemplation."*  
- J. Bronowski

## Religion and Governance in Sri Lanka

According to a recent survey conducted by Gallup Consultants, (an international consulting body <http://www.gallup.com>) Sri Lanka is one of the top religious countries in the world. This survey was based on a few simple questions such as "is religion an important part of your daily life?" asked from a sample of around 1000 individuals from each country. The analysis is published on <http://www.gallup.com/poll/114211/Alabamians-Iranians-Common.aspx>. According to this survey, Sri Lanka is at 2<sup>nd</sup> place where 99% of the participants acknowledging that religion is an important part of their daily lives, just behind Egypt where the percentage was 100%. It is also interesting to note that according to this survey, United States of America has unusually high religiosity among the developed countries of the world. However when you take the world as a whole, the median religiosity is around 82% and USA is well below this mid point being at 65%. Almost all the topmost religious countries belong to "developing/underdeveloped" category of nations in the world.

A survey when conducted by neutral professional body, usually derives accurate representation of the reality. Although we can argue about the accuracy of this data, I do trust this organization to have used sound survey techniques; and figures in general seem to be solid. Also the terms "developing/underdeveloped" usually draw scorn from those who like to argue against the parameters used to determine such. I am also going to leave that debate outside the scope of this memo. Also we should not read too much in to the implications of the question "is religion an important part of your daily life?" What matters here is the answer people give to the question

rather than whether they are giving a genuine answers or not. I can think of two reasons for getting a “Yes” answer (a) They are genuinely religious (b) They think that “Yes” is the most appropriate answer in order to look good. Either way “Yes” is indicative of the religiosity in the air. Speaking of the state of being genuinely religious, there can be different interpretations too. What do we really mean when we say an individual is genuinely ‘religious’? Having a good understanding of core tenets of a religion, and deriving the personal value system based on religious values is probably the ideal state of being religious. However, in a casual sense, being “religious” does not mean more than the desire of an individual to be identified with a religion. Such a religious person seeks comfort, a sense of belonging and an identity by getting attached to religion.

What do above poll results tell us? It seems to tell us that when the socio-economic status of a country improves, the religiosity drops! Does this mean religion is a phenomenon associated with something that goes away when the socio-economic status improves? In support of that theory, aggressive evangelical religions such as Jehovah's Witnesses seem to flourish mostly on socio-economically “challenged” layers of the society. Their biggest follower base seems to be consisted of individuals from “troubled” social classes even in their home base in USA. Even in a rich country like USA, unusually high religiosity may have a bearing in the inequality in wealth distribution creating the perceived poverty. We can contrast that with countries such as Sweden, Denmark, and Norway where the socio-economic conditions are favorable for the majority, with less inequality in wealth distribution. These countries have the lowest religiosity among developed nations.

I hope the readers won't misinterpret the simple analysis that “when the socio-economic conditions improve, religiosity drops” as a claim for “when religiosity drops socio-economic conditions improve”. That indeed is a logical fallacy. A implies B is not an argument for B implies A.

Although the correlation between religion and socio-economical status is an interesting topic, I am more interested to find out what religious people think how their religion should affect others; Especially “others” that do not follow their religion. The above survey does not tell us much in that regards. I would have been more interested in the results of a survey, where a poll questions were as follows:

1. Is religion an important part of your daily life?
2. Should your government amend existing civil law based on the religious views of your denomination?
3. Do you agree that active measures should be taken and new laws should be passed to stop followers of your faith considering adopting other faiths, or letting go of all faiths?
4. Should religion be a mandatory subject in primary and secondary school education?
5. Do you think someone not following any religion can be a moral person?

My fear is that from what I hear in the religious discourse of present day Sri Lanka, there can be a significant percentage of people answering ...

1. Yes
2. Yes
3. Yes
4. Yes
5. No

... to above questions respectively. Now, such an outcome would indicate that the country is sliding down the slippery slope of religious extremism. Eventual outcome of such slippage is a country where personal freedoms are curtailed in the name of religion. We have seen several Islamic nations going down this path and ending up in utter chaos in the recent past. History has seen many such instances of oppression by Christianity although the numbers are less in the

recent period of time. In my opinion, Sri Lanka is the only country in the world, where the same can happen based on Buddhism. Likelihood of such is much less due to the inherent tolerant nature of the Buddhism, where onus is mostly on personal choice rather than divine mandate. However, over the course of its history, we have seen Sri Lankan Buddhism adopting stereotypical artifacts and props of other major world religions, in order to compete and retain the follower base. I cannot rule out Sri Lanka ending up being a Buddhist-government in the same sense Afghanistan was an Islamic-government under Taliban regime.

## ***Secularism in Sri Lankan context***

One of the first things I realized when I wrote the first cut of this article and gave it out for review, is that there are significant number of Sri Lankans who are proficient in English language yet have not heard the term “secular”. As for me, despite Sinhala being my mother tongue, I am not aware of a proper Sinhala word that conveys the same meaning. This is indicative of lack of a public discourse around those concepts in any language. Looking up a dictionary for this term will not help much since it has so many meanings with subtle differences. Let me start by stating the meaning as applicable to this article

**Secular (adjective)** – not favoring any particular religion and/or not taking religious views in to account.

**Secularism (noun)** – Keeping an equal distance from all religions

We are in a culture where there are no clear distinctions between religious activities and non-religious activities. Buddhism being primary religious tradition, we don't have clear definition for what it means to be an 'atheist' as well. Buddhism not having a central deity in its core, and hence theoretically all Buddhist are atheists to begin with. The widely accepted virtue of good citizenship is the religiousness. **Morality** and **Religiousness** are taken as synonyms. We do not have many role models who are leading a secular lifestyle yet being well respected in the society. The famous personality Arthur C. Clarke who lived and died in the island is known for many good things within Sri Lanka, but not for his atheism. Many Sri Lankans might have thought he is Christian or something like that since he is white skinned person that came from Britain.

In such a setting, “separation of religion and governance” is a difficult topic! The traditional wisdom dictates that for good governance, the state and religion should go hand in hand.

## **Understanding the change of value systems**

The starting point of the new wisdom should be the realization we are not governed by a monarch anymore. We should stop living in the past and look forward for positive changes fitting to the new governance model of parliamentary democracy. Even after living more than half a century in a parliamentary democracy with universal suffrage, most of our self-proclaimed moral leaders and self-styled guardians of the heritage seem to think that we are still ruled by a king and are fond of doling out governance advices fitting only to a medieval kingdom.

However, if you are one of those individuals who believe that moving from current democratic setup to 13<sup>th</sup> century Sri Lankan Monarchy is actually an upgrade, then of course I will be surprised you got this far in to the this essay. There are many pundits and politicians in Sri Lanka that promote this ideology. Some of them have named this ideology as “*Maha sammatha Wadaya*”. This however is commonly known as “Feudal System” (“*Weda wasam kramaya*”)

One of the key issues that I see in Sri Lankan Buddhist institutions is that the traditions around those institutions are still aligned with a non-existent feudal system. The head of state is still assumed to be a “King” by the clergy who were trained within these institutions. The advices of the clergy to the lay followers are mostly based on a 13<sup>th</sup> century value system designed to

keep the peasantry in their place. We often hear clergy and other conservative scholars bringing examples from the time of ancient kings to draw parallels between contemporary situations. Their basic assumption is that something 'good' from that era is unquestionably good and fitting in current times as well. This is very wrong! The value systems changed drastically. The value system the majority of Sri Lankans subscribe today is very different from value systems prevailed at the times of Devanampiyatissa or Dutugemunu or Prarakramabahu. For example, if we are to go by those ancient value systems, we will not see anything wrong with nepotism or use of government property for image building purposes of the ruler. However, these days those acts are viewed as crimes.

Buddhist clergy often refers to '*Dhasaraja Dharma*' as a set of timeless advices for governance. The '*Dhasaraja Dharma*' could well be timeless due to the abstract nature of it. Those abstract concepts should be mapped to concrete concepts using contemporary value system to make any use of it. The problem with the clergy is that they go by some book written hundreds of years ago which actually documents the interpretation of '*Dhasaraja Dharma*' as applicable to a kingdom that existed thousands of years ago.

To better understand abstract nature of Buddhist values and the need to map them to contemporary value system is aptly demonstrated in the third precept "*Kāmesu micchācāra veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi*" (I undertake the training rule to abstain from sexual misconduct.). The term "sexual misconduct" is such an abstract concept, any interpretation could be given, starting from one of the basic sexual ethics "Do not make sexual advances unless you are given the mating signal" (*Satanism*) to "I refrain from having any other forms of sex other than sex in missionary position with my legally wedded wife/husband" (*Conservative Catholic*).

## **Ethno-religious nationalism**

Political forces all over the world successfully employ the Ethno-religious nationalism as means of energizing their vote bases. In Sri Lanka, this phenomena has many faces and I choose only one example "*Mahasammatha Wadaya*". I am treading carefully here not to provide examples of main political parties that make use of the same ideology. I am being extra careful of an unwanted backlash and too much politicalization of this essay. I hope the educated reader can read between the lines and extrapolate on these examples.

Ethno-religious nationalism often uses hate-speech as part of their propaganda. *Mahasammatha* ideologists usually avoid direct public hate speech against Tamils, Muslims and other minorities. Instead they carefully isolate racist elements in those minorities to direct their criticism at. However, as far as criticizing western nations are concerned they are not that careful. Usually they attack the west indiscriminately.

When one greedy political force energizes the majority using ethno-religious nationalism; other greedy political forces go after alienated minorities for the votes, this vicious cycle has been continuing in Sri Lanka for a while now, and it will continue for a while.

## **Mahasammata Wadaya**

Something more need to be said about the attempt to popularize an ancient value system and bring back ancient governance model as the way forward for Sri Lanka. I earlier dismissed this concept as a mere re-dressing of Feudal System (*Weda Wasm Wadaya*) and nothing more. However judging by strength of the fan-base for this concept, it is obvious that they have seen something attractive in it. Therefore I thought that concept should be given little bit more respect than outright dismissal.

It is not an uncommon trend for communities in former colonies to feel that they have "lost" something good in their past, that their former colonial masters took away or destroyed. It is also

not uncommon to associate anything that came from outside after the subjugation to the colonial powers as something thrust upon them. In that sense, I can understand the mindset of *Mahasammatha* fans where they see that parliamentary democracy and modern values associated with it as “alien western concepts”. They feel that whatever was there in the past should have been better since what we have now is less than perfect. A cult formed around this type of nostalgia can be quite harmless. Unfortunately due to strong appeal the Buddhist institution has for this ideology, (for the reasons mentioned above) this is far more than a mere cult. It is almost a political force.

These type of ideologies are harmful in the same sense the Eelam (Eezham) ideology was harmful to the North Eastern Tamil community. The entire community was taken for a very expensive ride by the LTTE who themselves must have been convinced that Eelam was achievable. If we take step back and have an honest look at Eelam concept in its ideal implementation. It does sound quite appealing not only to North Eastern Tamils but also to Sinhalese in the south. Provided that fair division of land and water resources is possible, what we will have are two nations with strong inner coherence (relatively free from internal conflicts) and have strong feeling about the land they live. Tamils with newly achieved land and Sinhalese with newly lost territory both eager to make the best out of the circumstances. I am sure we all agree that this utopian state is not achievable and Tamils are only harming themselves and entire Sri Lanka by pursuing this dream.

I am not even interested in going deep in to *Mahasammatha* concept and see what it offers. Even if someone manage to convince me that is it the best thing that can happen to Sri Lanka, it is a tough ask to rally people around a concept of this nature. This concept has very strong Sinhala Buddhist perspective to it. This immediately alienates more than one-third of the population. At best it can only help in taking the whole of Sri Lanka on a very expensive ride similar to the Eelam ride north eastern Tamils were taken.

As we have overcome a difficult war of our own making, it is time to seek ideologies that promote reconciliation; not further division. We should not leave any room for another war.

## **European Age of Enlightenment**

To be fair by the religions, it should be noted that medieval kingdoms with a feudal setup must have been benefited a great deal by having a close association between religion and governance. In most civilizations, synergy between the religious leaders and the civil rulers has helped the advancement of literature, arts, architecture and civilization in general. This situation is not something unique to Sri Lanka or to the local Buddhist civilization. Imagine Christianity in the pre-enlightenment era in Europe. Everything was so closely knitted around Christianity that a separation was almost unimaginable.

However, the progressive movements in the history of Western world that transformed those civilizations to center around humanitarian ideals are all characterized by the break free from religious hegemony; most significant of such events being the Age of Enlightenment in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century AD.

*“Enlightenment was a desire for human affairs to be guided by rationality rather than by faith, superstition, or revelation; a belief in the power of human reason to change society and liberate the individual from the restraints of custom or arbitrary authority; all backed up by a worldview increasingly validated by science rather than by religion or tradition”*  
- Dorinda Outram, commenting on 18<sup>th</sup> Century Age of Enlightenment

*“It’s man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage”, tutelage being “man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another”*  
- Immanuel Kant, commenting on Age of Enlightenment

Of course religion did not ever go away from influencing governance. It clawed back in but this time only after transforming itself to be aligned with the humanitarian ideals of the Enlightenment era.

## ***Philosophical base of religion vs. Practical implementation***

It is interesting to note that the core philosophy of almost all major world religions survived humankind's relentless pursuit of determinism by way of scientific enquiry. Defenders of these religions always found ways to stay above science or, at least, to be even with the propositions of the scientific modeling of the universe. The origin of the modern scientific approach is found in cultures with a Judeo-Christian background. In those cultures, most scientists treated their efforts as a pursuit of finding the ultimate equation of God. The theories, like the Big Bang beginning of the universe, in fact, were supportive of the argument of the creation of the universe by a personal God. The laws of nature seem to break down at the Big Bang singularity and scientists agreed that only God knows what happened there. On the other hand, with the Copenhagen interpretation of Quantum theory, and modern concepts of subatomic physics, the wisdom traditions of the East found their way into the minds of the scientific community. The concepts, like 'observer-created-reality' in quantum theory go hand-in-hand with Buddhist philosophy. Also the modern notion of 'an undivided universe' where the observer and the observed are treated as a single system, and every observed phenomenon is treated as manifestations of 'an underlying wholeness', goes well with the Hindu philosophy of undivided wholeness of the *Brahman Paramaathma*.

The links between scientific theories and religious views of the universe however can be just superficial, poetic or metaphorical. For example, Albert Einstein often used the word 'God' in his literature. However, Einstein use of the word 'God' is purely metaphorical. The 'God' can easily be replaced with 'Nature' and Einstein's statements still retain its meaning. (*As in his famous quote 'God does not play dice' which refers to his concern towards randomness in events in quantum mechanics*). There still are many theists today who take Einstein's statements out of context to "prove" that he believed in God. It is true that Einstein has never been a vocal critic of creator God concept like Richard Dawkins, nor did he subtly ridicule 'God' in his writings as Stephan Hawking did; However, Einstein's can be anything but a theist. He could be an atheist, agnostic, deist or apathiest but not a theist. In another instance, Murray Gell-Mann, a Nobel price winning quantum physicist named one of the mechanisms in quantum theory the "Eightfold way" (with obvious reference to the Eightfold Path in Buddhism.) This is only indicative of Gell-Mann's interest in eastern eclectics, and not an argument for a relationship between quantum mechanics and Buddhism.

Enlightened religious scholars are wise enough to state that science and religion belongs to different knowledge systems, and to downplay the relationships.

The philosophical base which serves as the seed for the intellectual discourse within and among religions has often little or no bearing to the way the religion is practiced in the field. The people rally not around the philosophy, but around the institution. The leaders who run the institution hold the key to the emotion-buttons that they can press to mobilize the followers in a direction that they please. A dangerous mob can be easily and quickly organized using power of custom or arbitrary authority. This is the danger of endowing religious institutions with more and more resources and authority.

In most of the religious implementations, relationship between the underlying philosophy and the practice of the intuition is similar to the relationship between the Koran to Taliban OR the Communist Manifesto to Stalin's regime OR Eugenics to Nazi Germany. It is true that it is unfair to judge The Koran, The Communist Manifesto or Eugenics by Taliban, Stalin's regime or Nazi

Germany respectively. We all can hopefully agree that the seeds (Koran, Communist Manifesto or Eugenics) were not evil by themselves, but these three institutions were.

## ***Separation of Religion and Governance***

I see evil in all forms of organized and institutionalized religion that meddle with affairs concerning governance. I like to support the worldwide movement to separate governance and religion. In the western world, this concept is called "separation of church and state". This does not necessarily suggest that I am an opponent of religion per se. What I am opposing is the use of institutionalized 'dogma' to determine matters of governance. The 'dogma' can be religious or non-religious in nature. The former Soviet Union was governed by institutionalized communist ideology, which is non-religious yet highly dogmatic in nature. It is interesting to note that they also crushed the traditional religious expression with an iron fist of the communist governance. However, effects were the same as if another 'church' took over, as was in medieval Europe. As illustrated in above Soviet example, in summary, what I am against is any forms of organized dogma playing a hand in governance. Now that communist ideology is rapidly being un-institutionalized around the world; as of today, Religion is the biggest culprit in this regards.

Most governments in the world today do not recognize a de jure state religion. Even when there is a de facto state religion, most governments offer 'religious freedom' at least on paper. For example in Sri Lanka, the citizens have a constitutional right to practice any religion of their liking or not practice any religion. We are also free to change or let go of our religious convictions. It is true that there are a lot of cultural and social barriers to practice these freedoms. However, Sri Lanka by far has very good track record for maintaining religious freedoms comparing to other countries in the world having similar socio-economic circumstances. In fact, even though we do not have a *secular* mandate in our constitution, we are doing better in this regards than our neighbor India where secularism is a tenet in its constitution. It is however worrisome that there are also ongoing attempts by the Buddhist lobby to curb some of these freedoms, and bring about Afghan style Talibanism in to our governance. These lobbyists have significant political power and they are quite persistent. They pose a constant threat to the secular freedoms of our country. It is interesting note that there is a clause somewhere in our constitution that gives Buddhism the 'foremost place' (whatever that means) which can also be exploited by these extremist lobbyists.

These lobbyists are very good in twisting the facts in their favor. Once I confronted one of them and asked "what happens to religious freedoms granted in our constitution, if we are to bring in new laws to *protect* Buddhism". This person then pointed to religious headscarf ban in French public schools and tried to portray it as Catholic move to stop Muslims from wearing religious symbols. Idea was to justify Sri Lankan Buddhist motives by pointing out that it happens elsewhere in the *developed* countries too. May be this person was genuinely misguided by wrong propaganda. The French move in question was not to protect any particular religion, but to keep public schools free of religion as per the secular mandate in the constitution. This over-the-top ban of *conspicuous religious symbols* by French authorities is questionable. (*Although I personally think that it makes sense*) That is a separate debate. However, it is definitely not a move by one religious lobby to "protect" their religion. Catholic symbols (wearing pendants with crosses etc) are most definitely banned in public schools in France.

I have observed that many Sri Lankans believe that 'Religion' just like 'race', is something that one is born in to, and therefore there is no choice but to maintain an allegiance with. Anyone who is not loyal to the religion and race are branded as a traitor, agent of an external force, conspirer, henchman of an invisible hand, etc, etc. Another interesting thing that I have heard in conversations is that some people actually believe the birth certificate issued by the government carry a field that mentions one's religion. Not sure if these people actually checked their birth certificates before making such comments. It is true that the format of the birth certificate got changed over the time and fields got added and removed. However, I have never seen a single

birth certificate that carries a field called 'religion' and it would be rather ridiculous to have such a field since one's religion should be a conviction rather than something one is born with, like race.

### ***Personal belief vs. Institutionalized belief***

By the way, I need to underscore the difference between personal belief vs. institutionalized belief. A harmless (or even useful) religious belief or a religious practice can become a dreadful dogma when used in governance. For example 'five precepts' in Buddhism is a rather simplistic but useful personal value guide. However, if we adopt five precepts in to the civil law, and punish people for breaking five precepts; it will be an extremely hostile form of governance. Buddhist scholars might argue that there is no such danger since five precepts in Buddhism is viewed as a voluntary personal undertaking rather than a divine mandate. In fact, in theory, there is nothing god-given in Buddhism, and every rule is a suggestion for a voluntary personal undertaking, and in that sense, it may not even qualify as a religion. However, we know that Buddhism in its practical form is very much a religion having all the bells and whistles of a regular world religion. What are these bells and whistles that I was referring to; well, to name a few: Hierarchical structure for clergy, highly opinionated body of clergy and lay people providing guidance to the followers, rituals, chanting, idol worshipping, promise of 'divine protection' and 'good luck' for those who serve the interests of the clergy, superstition, claims of miracles etc.

Above and beyond all of other factors, the telltale sign of a 'religion' is the claims of miracles. Nature of these Miracles are surprisingly common across all monotheistic, polytheistic, and even the non-theistic religions such as Buddhism. The large number of Buddhists who saw "*Budu Res*" on the famous "*Day of Budu Res*" is a testimony of gullibility created by religious faith. Also in the aftermath of the 2004 Tsunami, a lot of religious idols from various faiths claimed to have been miraculously saved, Buddha statues topping the list. (Nobody of course talked about non-religious structures like lighthouses that were unscathed due to their peculiar structural qualities)

This whole package makes a "Buddhist Church" of Sri Lanka so to speak. In my opinion, without much argument, we can place all other major world religions and Buddhism in the same bucket. Some Buddhist scholars try to make Buddhism apart by pointing to the fact that it is not a theistic religion at the core. However, this hypothetical non-theistic (atheistic?) Buddhism only exists among a few educated elites. More advanced Buddhist scholars may point out that all these "separation" concepts are alien foreign ideas that flourished within the intellectual elites of Judeo-Christian cultures. That argument demands more respect than the former, but I like to point out that our governance model is already based on the alien concept of "democracy" and unless we totally get rid of that, we may not be able to marry those indigenous concepts of non-separation with those of alien "democracy".

### ***Fight against Abrahamic religious hegemony***

Religious scholars looking for examples in the developed world where religion plays a major role in the society points to America. Like I said in the early part of this essay, USA is not a country I would turn to as an example to model our governance against. Actually USA is a country founded upon a secular constitution, but notoriously religious in its implementation. Its pledge of allegiance to the national flag and the its currency carries the word God ("*nation under God*" and "*in God we trust*" respectively). Those are the most prominent religious symptoms visible to outside world. Within America, the public schools are used to indoctrinate the children in the concept of God in most states. However, religiosity varies from state to state and in certain parts of USA, atheist lobby is strong enough make an impact (whereas in Sri Lanka, the atheist/secular lobby is virtually non-existent)

Loads of literature has already been written and there are very active and enthusiastic people like Richard Dawkins, Bill Maher, Salman Rushdie, etc fighting the Judeo-Christian (Abrahamic) religious lobby (i.e. many denominations of Judaism, Christianity and Islam). So I will not go in to any detail here about the need to separate theistic religions and state. "God Delusion" by Prof. Dawkins is a very good read for that purpose.

I am eternally glad that I was born in Sri Lanka where religious tolerance is almost in par with any other country in the world that can boast about its religious freedoms, despite us being a very religious country as per the Gallup poll. I am glad that Sri Lanka's hegemony being Buddhist rather than any of the Abrahamic religions. I wouldn't be brave enough to write this article if I had the similar circumstances as Salman Rushdie or Taslima Nasreen. I am 100% certain that Ven. Mahanayaka theros won't issue a Fatwa against me for speaking against the Buddhist establishment. And I have the assurance that I do not have to flee the country and be in hiding and then issue a statement contradicting my earlier stance just to save my life, like Rushdie had to.

### ***Well-meaning religious people***

No doubt that a well-meaning religious person who guides his/her life according to his/her own religion will very honestly see no harm in adopting religious values in to the governance. So while acknowledging the good intentions of these well-meaning people, we need to show them the danger of doing so. First of all, interpretation of religion-based-value-system is extremely subjective, and is at the mercy of the interpretation by the so called religious leaders. Most religions do not identify that 'change is the nature'. Conservative religious leaders will not agree that everything including the value systems should be subjected to discussion, and should be open for change. Even a religion like Buddhism, that talks a lot about 'change' at the core of its philosophy, have not bred lot of followers open for change.

In a multicultural setting, (like in Sri Lanka) giving 'foremost places' or state sponsorship to a particular religion will only alienate people of other faiths from the governance model. They will not be able find a sense of belonging to a country giving special treatment to a religion which they find no allegiance with. Those people become susceptible to anti-state forces and will likely have their own agendas that they like push, rather than contributing to a common goal. We have already seen 30 years of bloody and devastating war where a community that could not find a sense of belongs with the state went on their own tangent. There is no guarantee that it will not happen again unless we do the right thing.

We need to question the advocates that campaign for a marriage of governance with religion, the purpose of doing so. In their opinion, if the basis for 'good' human conduct is associated with any particular religion, then we immediately have a problem with accommodating multi religiosity. So such opinions are not in the interest of harmony between communities. If that is not the case, and if they agree that we can find common moral values amongst all religions, then all we need to do is recognize that morality has an existence outside of religion. If I may quote Sir Arthur C. Clarke here;

*"one of the greatest tragedies in human history was the hijacking of morality by religion."*

I would like to add to that great quote and further point out that morality came first and religion came later. In that sense, religion comes from morality rather than morality comes from religion. If we are to accept Darwinian evolutionary history of ours; modern humans have been around for at least 200,000 years and modern religions came in the picture at most 5000 years ago. The human traits such as honesty, love, compassion, altruism, and non-violence provided an evolutionary advantage for the collective survival of humankind. These traits can then be argued as innate values coded in to our genes. When Clarke said that religion hijacked morality, he must

have been referring to the fact that now we do not see an independent existence of morality without getting it associated with whatever religion that prevails around us.

The “state of flux” has been the state of affairs with respect to morals and ethics throughout human history. The morals are always relative to the environment even in a Darwinian evolutionary point of view. Although there can be significant commonality, morals helpful for survival for people living in larger groups in open plains, that seldom come in to contact with other groups, could be slightly different from morals for small groups living in thick forests, who frequently cross boundaries of other groups.

When the socio-economic conditions changes around us, the morals and ethics has to change as well. Even those who loudly argue that morals come from religion will agree that even within religious communities, the “value systems” associated with the religious communities changed over the course of the history.

At the end, religion is only capable of creating memes that is helpful for wider population to easily adhere to. In that sense, religion provides easily digestible moral code. I actually won't argue against the usefulness of religion in that regards. The problem is with the attitude of religious scholars, where they actively hinder the process of the evolution of moral frameworks outside of religion – a true “hijacking” or morality.

If we are to consult religious leaders for their opinion, all we need from them is to distill out the “values” and then suggest accommodating them in to governance without any religious label attached to those values. It should not matter whether it is “*Thou shall not kill*” or whether it is “*Panathipatha Veramani...*”. Giving any particular religious version of that moral code the limelight will only help to get a few cheers from religious hardliners, but alienate lot of people from the governance model.

## ***Buddhist influence on Governance of Sri Lanka***

Overflowing religiosity of the country has always influenced the shape of politics and governance of Sri Lanka. This is demonstrated by how any presidential candidate with significant chances of winning the election conducts his/her campaign. Receiving the ‘blessings’ of *Maha Sanga* and other religious prelates is a must. They also spend a lot of time participating in the religious ceremonies of various faiths and then those sessions are given a wide publicity in media. Even after winning, constant appeasement of prelates of every religion with clear favoritism to Buddhists is the norm. Much of the broadcast time in government run media is spent on showing the president offering flowers, participating in *pirith* chanting ceremonies, *Bodhi Puja* etc. This has been the case ever since presidential system was introduced to Sri Lanka in 1979. Pledge to *protect* Buddhism from unnamed enemies is a usual election promise. Lip service to other religions is also made in the sides. All this appears pretty normal to us in Sri Lanka who has not seen anything different for the last 30 years or so. All this presidential antics is quite ridiculous in my opinion where less attention is given to candidates’ stance on important issues related to economy, foreign policy, law and order.

Somewhere in the 90s, a ministry of “Buddha Sasana” (Buddhist Church/Affairs) was introduced in to the cabinet. And there were ministries for other religions too. I always wondered how tax payers of other faiths felt about having to maintain these ministries out of their tax money. Intentionally or not, President Mahinda Rajapaska made a good move by consolidating Ministry of Buddha Sasana with ministry of Religious affairs in 2006 cabinet reshuffle. A better move would have been to abolish ministry of religious affairs altogether.

Again during the 90s, the Buddhist pressure groups successfully campaigned against and managed to dismantle a government initiative to support inland fisheries industry. Their claim was

that livelihood of raising animals for food is against Buddhist principles. This is an example of religion seeking help from government to instill religious moral code on to the followers and affecting the country's economy and much needed protein intake for rural under privileged. Fortunately, flying kites, producing movies and playing cricket were not against Buddhist principles or we would have seen an outcry to withdraw of government sponsorship for those as well. Taliban in fact banned all those during their regime.

To draw another parallel with Talibanism where change of Islamic faith was punishable by death; sometime ago the Buddhist pressure groups campaigned for a new law that prevents "conversion of faiths". Although this campaign is low key at the moment, it is just in the backburner and at a suitable time it will be brought in to the front again. This so called anti-conversion law is the Buddhist lobby's solution for preventing aggressive evangelical religions (e.g. Jehovah's Witnesses) from eating in to Buddhist follower base. The nature of the proposed law is not quite clear and is subjected to many interpretations. However at the surface, it sounds really a bad idea. First of all, such a law can be abused not only to control evangelical groups but also any secular group campaigning for free thought. It can create an environment where anyone that goes against the wishes of the Buddhist leaders can be prosecuted. For example, under such a law, writing this kind of an article might become illegal. This article forces the Buddhists that read it to rethink their thoughts. Since what I am trying to do here is to change them to more sensible people, which might count as a "conversion"

## ***Unethical conversions***

Constitution of a country should serve the wellbeing of its citizens. The law of a country is not a tool for one religious camp to retain or increase their numbers. The big fuss about unethical conversion in my opinion a non-issue that lot of people have been spending lot of time and energy arguing and counter arguing. Well organized evangelical groups with money have a worldwide network to increase their headcount. They come to every country that offers a degree of religious freedom conducive enough for them to operate. It is true that they are a nuisance. However, using legal means what can we do to stop them that does not involve curtailing of freedoms that we enjoy today? I have heard of this argument that what Buddhist activists suggest is not a ban of 'conversion' per se (which will be outrageously unconstitutional) but a legal barrier for evangelical groups to engage in 'unethical conversions'. I have seen lot of people trying to define what 'unethical conversion' means. I have never seen anyone successfully showing how something 'unethical' can be made 'illegal' without ridiculous sounding clauses of law, breach of which that cannot be proven conclusively in a court of law. Preventing conversion attempts that involve threats, harassment, intrusion into rights of privacy, deception etc are already covered in the existing law. I like somebody to show me how conversion attempts that involve material inducements (which is said to be the ploy of the culprits in question) can be prevented by law without harming the ability of a well-meaning religious organization (Buddhist, Christian, Secular or otherwise) to engage in charity work with no ulterior motive.

I wish success to those who attempt to draft such laws since I too like the evangelical invasion stopped. What I don't like to see happening is that we are ending up "*OK, that is difficult, this clause does not seem to work. Why don't we just say that it is illegal for someone to get converted to another religion? That will do just fine. Saudi Arabia has such a law and they are not such a bad country, are they?*"

What I feel about the whole drama of unethical conversion is that a few religious leaders who have lost a few followers are blowing the whole thing out of proportions and taking the whole country for a ride. What I would like to say to those religious leaders is that "*please go back to your bases, start engaging with your followers, try to cater to their needs in whatever way you can. You will win some, you will lose some. Try to understand that an individual may adopt a new faith based on whatever criteria they deem fitting. It is not within our rights to stop that*" In

fact trying to stop a poor family in need from receiving material inducement from whatever organization that dole out such inducements is a very unethical act of **anti-conversion**.

### ***License to “Do anything”***

The leniency of the law enforcement towards religion of any kind is another big issue in Sri Lanka. Religious organizations or groups operating with a religious backing are often given a license to do whatever they please. The religious activities demand outrageous level of immunity from criticism. For example, until very recently, religious institutions had a “license” to use blaring loudspeakers at any time of the day for any duration of time. It was a timely and commendable move by the ministry of environment to give police the mandate to enforce the law. As a person constantly victimized by blaring loudspeakers from nearby temples, mosques and *Thoranas* during festival seasons, I have had firsthand experience regarding how these issues used to be handled by police. The cases were handled based on the personal tastes of the police officer in charge. The compliant of such nature is first greeted with the forceful query “*Mahaththaya mona agameda?*” (Translates to “Sir, what is your religion?” read “what the hell is wrong with you? Don’t you know that these are important religious rituals?”)

Now that there is a clear-cut law against abuse of loudspeakers, the police officers are lot more courteous in receiving such a complaint. Unless there are clear-cut laws that removes these ‘immunities’, it is difficult to expect things to be improved in some other areas as well. Just like all other freedoms, religious freedoms should also have their limits. As the proverbial saying goes “Your freedoms end where my nose begins”

Buddha statues and other religious statues in every corner and every junction of public roads: It seems corresponding municipals have no control over this. I have seen many new statues that are ‘strategically’ placed in such a manner that no further improvement to the road is possible. Whatever public real-estate that could have been used for future improvement of infrastructure is hijacked by whatever the majority religion in that area. Once established, no one dares to remove these statues, and in that sense, it is far more dangerous than any other structure. All religions are given immunity to commit those atrocities. It is one thing to protect historical structures/trees no matter how awkwardly they are located; it is another thing to allow new constructions to be awkwardly located.

I have seen Buddha statues and places of worship that have been constructed within government institutions such as municipal counsel premises. I hope that those were built using private donations, and not out of the tax money. However the land they occupy is not the property of the local businessman that fancied his name inscribed in the structure, but the property of the public. Such a wasteful use of public property is outrageous. It should also be noted that these structures does not serve any useful purpose other than satisfying the ego of religious camps. More often than not, a new statue is built 25m away from a one that is already around the corner.

Blocking of public roads: In every country, certain degree of tolerance is there with respect to festivals obstructing the public roads. However, in Sri Lanka, religious institutions seem to have runaway freedom to block any road at any time they please.

It should also be noted that although the loudspeaker law is in effect and despite the fact few clergy has been charged and found guilty under this law, violation of the law continues in many parts of the country. Religious places ignore this law if they are confident that no one is going to file a complaint. When the blaring loudspeaker is located in a place where majority of the people living in the neighborhood are OK with it, then there is less likelihood of a compliant. The handful of individuals who find this noise annoying has to silently suffer due to the fear of communal backlash if they try to do something about it. The religious institutions thus reserve the right to pick and choose which laws they like to adhere to.

## ***Religion in public schools***

Regarding growing lack of discipline and prevalence of irresponsible behavior in our society, which is also manifested in schoolchildren of all age groups, the common solution we hear is that "we should teach them more religion". For generations, we have been pouring more and more religion on them haven't we? Should we just continue to pour religion on our children in a mechanistic manner, and see if things improve magically by themselves, or should we take a step back and see what we should really do to improve the situation?

If am to give an analogy here; I think most people will agree without argument that a 7 year old is too small to have an political opinion (communist/capitalist, conservative/liberal etc) and a child need not be taught their parent's political opinion, and for that matter, public schools should not teach politics to little children. However, I know that most people will find it offensive that I even tried equating religious beliefs with political beliefs. Although I respect the opinion of those parents who believe that their children should be introduced to, and indoctrinated in a religion of parent's choice; I do not necessarily agree that the regular school hours is an appropriate time or place to do so. I would argue that there are religious schools as an alternative for those parents, and also Sunday schools are available for most mainstream religions. I could argue that parents should be advised that religion should be taught outside of regular school hours.

Most parents will bring forth the argument that they want their children to be 'disciplined' and good values be instilled in them by making them religious. They might even ask "*How do you teach your child what is good and what is bad without religion?*" Above is a very popular rhetorical question asked by the proponents of institutionalized religion all over the world. It just shows our reluctance to recognize that morality has an existence outside of religion. If I may quote Sir Arthur C. Clarke again here; for the second time in this essay "one of the greatest tragedies in human history was the hijacking of morality by religion."

For the starters, I do not believe that morality and good values can not be instilled without institutionalized religion. When we have children from multicultural and multi-religious backgrounds, the best way to instill good values in them is to have a common classroom subject to teach them morality and social values, rather than segregating and dispatching them to different religion classes to learn different and sometimes conflicting 'versions' of morality. I feel very strongly about the need of having a common classroom subject on ethics, morality, and good citizenship. For example how much we can teach children by the simple concept of a "queue"? Here are some examples of social values that can be developed around a proper queue (1) Leadership – form a queue when there is none (2) Corporation – join the queue when there is one (3) Respect – leave enough space for others and make them comfortable. Do not peek over the shoulder (4) Patience – wait for your turn (5) Compassion – give that pregnant lady the priority (6) Courtesy - Be nice to others in the queue and person serving behind the counter, Create a pleasant atmosphere. Smile and Nod (7) ... and many more

I am not sure where we are on this issue currently. In the mid 90s there was a dialog about making attending Sunday religious schools mandatory for all schoolchildren up to age 15. This was partially implemented at that time by banning private tuition classes on Sundays. I think that initiative had a natural death after several years. I hope this scheme will not be brought forward for discussion again. Whether to send the child for religious indoctrination or not should be a decision of the parents, rather than the government. Under such law where would children of atheist parents go on Sundays? I guess they have to go to a religious school of government's choice, and parents would have to go to jail?

## ***Laws based on religion vs. scientific reasoning***

Blanket opposition to birth control and abortion and indirect support or indifference towards capital punishment is a surprisingly common stance among conservative religious institutions of any kind all over the world. In Sri Lanka, the religious institutions are no different. However, there is no organized outcry as yet by the Buddhist lobby to withdraw government support for birth control or to totally ban abortion. The views related to birth control and abortion seems to be personal opinions of individual clergy. However, there are many other aspects in Sri Lankan society that the Buddhist clergy feels government should directly intervene and control using new laws.

It should be made clear that I am not against introducing new laws to ban things that have been liberally practiced by the society for a long time. I am not advocating anarchy! On the contrary, I am in favor of new laws that ban harmful practices in the society. The issue with 'religious-scripture-motivated' laws is that scripture is not something subjected to scientific inquiry. Religious scripture is not something continuously challenged and changed based on new knowledge. In that sense, a religious scripture is highly unscientific. For that matter, any concept that is accepted as an unchallengeable and unquestionable truth can never be a scientific concept. Science is all about continuous learning and continuous improvement to theories and models that we create about the universe. And science boldly discards models that have been held as 'truth' for generations when those models fail to explain new phenomena and new knowledge about how the universe works. That said, I am sure Buddhist scholars would now point me to "*Kalaama Sutta*" and assert that Lord Buddha himself advised that his teaching should not be accepted without inquiry, and promoted healthy skepticism as a virtue. (*Probably the only religious leader to praise intelligence, promote skepticism, and advice inquiry*). However, my point is slightly different. It is true that Lord Buddha promoted skepticism and inquiry. However that does not mean Buddhist church in Sri Lanka today is willing to accept any other interpretation of Buddhist scripture, other than what is accepted and institutionalized already.

For example, if we are to analyze the current drive to ban Alcohol, which is said to inspired by the fifth of the five precepts "*Surā-meraya-majja-pamādaṭṭhānā*", it is evident that other than going by the popular interpretation of the fifth precept, there is no other scientific inquiry into the pros and cons of such a ban on liquor. There is no public discourse on the outcome of such bans tried by other countries of the world. How many of us even know that several countries in the world, including Canada, Iceland, Norway, Finland, Soviet Union, and USA tried banning alcohol in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with disastrous outcomes that prompted lifting of such bans? When society is not ready for such a substance ban, what happens is that rather than substance going away from use, it goes underground and gets associated with criminal culture. This situation is aptly summarized by following comment from a then-supporter of the alcohol prohibition in USA. A quote from a letter, written in 1932 by wealthy industrialist John D. Rockefeller, Jr., states:

*"When Prohibition was introduced, I hoped that it would be widely supported by public opinion and the day would soon come when the evil effects of alcohol would be recognized. I have slowly and reluctantly come to believe that this has not been the result. Instead, drinking has generally increased; the speakeasy has replaced the saloon; a vast army of lawbreakers has appeared; many of our best citizens have openly ignored Prohibition; respect for the law has been greatly lessened; and crime has increased to a level never seen before."*

## **Mathata Thitha (translates to 'Full Stop to Liquor')**

If the "*mathata thitha*" prohibition drive on alcohol is not motivated by religious scripture, but by the economical and social evils associated with it; then it occurs to me that may be the food containing loads of saturated fat and sugar do equal (if not more) harm to the health and wellbeing of the populace. Should we also start a campaign to ban such foods as well? (*Kottu Roti could be banned!?*). I am a person with very high cholesterol levels in my blood stream

owing to the bad food habits during my young adult years. This definitely has reduced my life expectancy; and I am not joking here but dead serious and feel very strongly about this. But wait a minute... should we rather work on educating the masses on good food habits, and give the individuals the onus of choice of food, rather than try baby-sitting grownups who can decide for themselves? Besides, different people have different tolerant levels to saturated fat, sugar and alcohol. What is bad for me is not bad for everyone and I certainly do not want to take the freedom of gorging on a tasty *Kottu Roti* away from Sri Lankans just because I had a bad experience of it. I would rather become an activist and educate younger generation, than campaigning for a government imposed ban.

That said; I do understand the peculiar issues related intoxicating substances. Throughout the western world, strict laws prevail around alcohol and those laws often stricter than what we have in Sri Lanka today. Moreover, they are enforced effectively. (E.g. in USA, legal age of consuming alcohol is 21 (not 18!). Sale of alcohol to someone below this legal age is strictly prohibited, public consumption of alcohol not allowed, drink and drive laws are severe. Let alone drink and drive; in most states it is illegal to have an open (unsealed) bottle of liquor in a vehicle. Those laws are not inspired by religious scripture, but by scientific reasoning. It is evident that Sri Lanka legal system is lagging behind in this regards, and new laws are needed to prevent harmful effects of alcohol. The proponents of such new laws will be benefited by aligning themselves with scientific reasoning, rather than religious scripture. Wider public support from all corners can be obtained for this cause if government can disassociate themselves from religion in this regards.

Another sin the committed by the champions of this cause is to bring their personal values to the table rather focusing on the real issues. If you are personally against alcohol, you need to understand that it is your personal taste. If your thoughts are tainted too much by your personal opinion, you will not see the difference between **strict control** and a **blanket ban**. By "controlling" you are not taking away the right for someone to consume alcohol in a responsible way. In USA, liquor lovers are not affected by any of the above laws, yet liquor is not a social problem in USA as the consumers are forced by the law to be responsible both regarding society, and as well as regarding themselves. (*Side note: one of the two authors of this article does not consume alcohol*)

If you are a vegetarian, will you be campaigning for a blanket ban of meat? If you are still not clear about the difference between **strict control** and a **blanket ban**; do you agree that people should not masturbate in public, but they can do so in private?

If the "*Mathata Thitha*" drive is not about a total ban but about control, then whether the inspiration came from religion or not does not matter; but how you position the initiative matters. In the political world, perception is the truth. No matter how pure your intentions are, if the Catholic/Christian crowd perceives this as another attempt by the Buddhist hegemony to curtail their freedoms, there will be an unwanted backlash. Also there are many liquor loves from all faiths in the country who silently protest this, mainly because they don't know what "*mathata thitha*" comprise of. If the government highlights the actual need, and actual plan of implementation, rather than paying lip service to the "fifth precept", they will be able to get wider support. It should also be noted that most Buddhist activists does not know what they want to implement, other than the fact that it is inspired by the "fifth precept"

## **Conclusion**

Having already said that 'secular' clause in Indian constitution does not seem to have done any good for religious tolerance in that country, I still like to contrast and draw attention to the governance model of our neighboring nation; the preamble to the Constitution of India proclaimed India a "sovereign socialist *secular* democratic republic". The word "secular" was inserted into the Preamble by the Forty-second Amendment Act of 1976. It mandates equal treatment and

tolerance of all religions. India does not have an official state religion; it enshrines the right to practice, preach, and propagate any religion. No religious instruction is imparted in government-supported schools. In *S. R. Bommai vs. Union of India*, the Supreme Court of India held that secularism was an integral tenet of the Constitution.

All those examples from Sri Lanka and India are from a multicultural and multi-religious setting. So does that mean it is fine to adopt religion in to governance in a single culture setting? Well, I don't think in a globalized environment there is a place where we can claim to have a single culture. Even with same religious and cultural background, each individual will have different tastes and personal values. A single minded governance model will inadvertently suppress personal freedoms and personal expression. Such governance, although will seem to succeed in the short-run, will crumble due to various forces both internal and external, acting on it. Also the close minded nature of such governance will hinder the progress of the community as 'change' will not be a virtue encouraged by religion. Failure of such religious states throughout the world history and failure of former Soviet Union that followed "communist religion" is a testimony of that. In another example; I am sure that members of Taliban movement in Afghanistan, when they rose to power might have felt the same way that some of the Buddhist leaders in Sri Lanka feel today. They must have thought that they are doing a good thing for their country by establishing good governance, guided by a religion that is close to their hearts. Within less than 6 years, they were thrown out of power making Afghanistan one of the messiest places on earth. Yes, lot of external factors outside of Afghanistan played a hand in that mess. However, that is exactly the point! No country is isolated and self-contained to do whatever they please. We need to be smart and understand how the world works, or accept dire consequences.

If it is not obvious from what I wrote, I do have a Buddhist background and a Buddhist upbringing. Whatever personal beliefs that I may or may not have should not matter in the topic of separation of governance and religion. In my opinion, one's own religion should only be discussed among likeminded. It should not be a public affair. In Sri Lanka, and all over the world, there are billions of people who believe in astrology. It is a nice example for a personal belief system that survived without any official patronage from any government. We do not see many people openly discussing their beliefs in astrology. We certainly do not see any group demanding state patronage. We do not have 'astrology' as a mandatory or optional subject in primary or secondary education. In fact, even suggesting that would be met with ridicule by even those who believe in astrology. There are healthy debates between believers and non-believers but (hopefully) no one ever got killed due to those differences in opinion. However we all know that belief in astrology will be passed down many more generations to come, and there will be believers and practitioners despite astrology often being an easy target for ridicule. If astrology can survive and thrive despite being low profile in public discourse, and despite lack of state patronage; so can the religion.

## ***Appendix – worldview differences***

In the chapter "Philosophical base of religion vs. Practical implementation" I argued that philosophical base of religions has little to do with how religious institutions function, and how the people who rally around those institutions behave. There is a remarkable similarity between the attitudes of different religious institutions towards matters of governance. For example almost all religious institutions oppose abortion, but either support or silent about capital punishment. If we try to trace these attitudes towards the core philosophy of different religions, we'll figure out that these are not really based on religious beliefs, but they are typical to "conservative institutions" of any kind.

In private, (in public, now that I stated it here) I dismiss any philosophical tangents along the core-philosophy of religion, as "intellectual chewing gum" that feel good to chew on but has no other useful outcome. However, in a scholarly forum, I cannot use my chewing gum argument and bail

out. I thought it is necessary to acknowledge the existence of counter arguments based on worldviews different from mine.

I do understand that my arguments are not absolute but relative to the knowledge system and the worldview within which I operate. The concept of "separation" is often attributed to the worldview of classical physics (pre-quantum), where the methodology of study is to reduce complex systems to the interactions of its constituents. This is perhaps the only methodology available to the science until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With the advent of quantum theory -and specifically the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics- the scientific worldview changed. The quantum theory dictates that we cannot separate the observer and the observed and treat them as separate systems. They are part of the same system, and every observed phenomenon is influenced by the act of observation. At the sub-atomic level, this concept has remarkable and non-intuitive implications as demonstrated by the famous "double-slit" experiment. In the double-slit experiment, the behavior of a subatomic particle (like an electron) tends to vary in a remarkable manner when not being observed vs. when being observed. The results of this experiment shook the very base of classical notions such as "particles", "waves", "location", and "movement from one place to another".

Despite the implication of quantum theory, when science is taught in classroom, students are forced to think within the classical framework and use the classical methodology of reducing complex systems to the interactions of its constituents. In Sri Lanka, the likes of Professor Nalin De Silva, has been very vocal critiques of the "Sri Lankan intellectuals" who were taught within Cartesian spatio-temporal worldview and who does not seem to be aware of any other worldviews outside of it.

While acknowledging and commending the good old professor De Silva for his contributions to the Sri Lankan intellectual discourse; I have my concerns about the tendency of the professor and his disciples to label things "eastern" / "western" or "Judeo-Christian" / "Buddhist" and oversimplify the complex issues (*or overcomplicate simple issue, depending on how you look at it*); and by doing so contradicting their own stances based on their own teaching.

I am not going in to details as to why I think the concept of "separation" as discussed in this article cannot be dismissed as a rhetoric base on outdated Newtonian classical mechanics. I just like to acknowledge the existence of different worldviews, and the fact that my arguments are relative to the worldview that I entertain, and the knowledge system that I care for, and then move on.

The methodology of separation and methodology of wholeness has to complement each other. The extreme adherence to any one of these is not going to help us. The intuition driven wholeness approach and rationality driven separation are two methodologies we unconsciously use in our daily lives. When a newborn baby cries, mother takes quick intuitive decisions rather than analyzing the situation, which is the most appropriate methodology in that situation. The day-to-day moral decisions that we make are mostly based on intuition, rather than analysis. The practitioners of traditional medicine use a mix of analysis and intuition. Practitioners of scientific (western?) medicine are supposed to use analysis mostly, but they also tend resort to intuition based on the scenario (which is perfectly acceptable). However, I have seen examples of MBBS medical doctors who overuse intuition (due to their cultural upbringing) when they should actually use analyses. For example the environment factors that influence a patient can be temperature, humidity and air quality. Western medicine suggests that we isolate and understand the influences of these elements separately. However, in our culture, elders often boil down all these three factors to just one vague "Air" element. An MBBS doctor who heavily influenced by the culture is at a disadvantage here being unable to isolate an incident of 'pollen allergy' affecting a patient.

## **Appendix - Is Buddhism a religion?**

When it comes to separation of religion and governance, most Buddhist scholars wholeheartedly agree with the movement by western secular groups to separate the Abrahamic religions and the state. However, they argue that Buddhism is not a religion and hence the same approach is not valid for Sri Lanka.

I have touched upon this topic in several places in the above essay. However, seeing that this is a recurring theme, I thought of dedicating an appendix to summarize my views on this topic in point form.

- 1) Personal belief vs. institutionalized belief: As far as scope of “separation of governance and religion” is concerned, I have no issues with personal belief systems. As long as Buddhism or any other religion remains a personal belief/value system and a way of life, it does not concern governance. It is the institutionalized form of the belief that is concerning.
- 2) In theory, there is nothing god-given in Buddhism, and every rule is a suggestion for a voluntary personal undertaking. However, Buddhism in its practical form is very much a “religion” having all the bells and whistles of a regular world religion. What are these bells and whistles that I was referring to; well, to name a few: Hierarchical structure for clergy, highly opinionated body of clergy and lay people providing guidance to the followers, rituals, chanting, choir, idol worshipping, sacred footprints, sacred relics, promise of ‘divine protection’ and ‘good luck’ for those who serve the interests of the clergy, superstition, claims of miracles etc.
- 3) Above and beyond all of other factors, the telltale sign of a ‘religion’ is the claims of miracles. Nature of these Miracles are surprisingly common across all monotheistic, polytheistic, and even the non-theistic religions such as Buddhism. The large number of Buddhists who saw “*Budu Res*” on the famous “*Day of Budu Res*” is a testimony of gullibility created by religious faith. Also in the aftermath of the 2004 Tsunami, a lot of religious idols from various faiths claimed to have been miraculously saved, Buddha statues topping the list. (Nobody of course talked about non-religious structures like lighthouses that were unscathed due to their peculiar structural qualities)

The Buddhism in Sri Lanka as we know it today is a result of couple of millennia worth of assimilation of tradition from various cultures and religions. Just to give one example of assimilation of tradition, the worship of sacred footprints of religious nature is surprisingly common across all religions as shown this following wiki article

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petrosomatoglyph#Religious\\_leaders.2C\\_patriarchs\\_and\\_saints](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petrosomatoglyph#Religious_leaders.2C_patriarchs_and_saints).

For us in Thaprobane, if we get exposed to something for a century or so, we tend to think it is a part of our culture and tradition. For instance, Dutch were here and they made Kokis, we still make Kokis for new year and think it's one of our traditional delicacies; then, the British left us in 1948; but today, we refuse to allow a lady to enter temple of tooth in Kandy if she's wearing a sleeveless garment, because we believe so much that it is an indecency according to our cultural values, but like in the case of Kokis, we fail to recognize that measuring modesty based on the amount of exposed skin came from Victorian value system of the British; and also like in the case of Kokis, nothing even comparable in that sort, existed in our value system before the British. Parliamentary democracy understandably is still not assimilated in to our culture to the extent that Victorian morality (or Kokis for that matter) is assimilated, maybe that's why we still seems be struggling to come to the terms of this concept of good governance under democracy.

## **Appendix - Asphalt rule of criticism**

(A.k.a. Asphalt rule of the road)

Asphalt (**noun**) - A sticky, black and highly viscous liquid or semi-solid

Pronunciation – Rhymes with “Ass fault”

We invented this tongue-in-cheek rule on 24th Feb 2010

We tend to speak of things that we may not have full knowledge of. We tend to disagree and express that we do not find certain ideologies, methodologies, theories, worldviews useful, if they contradict with what we currently subscribe to and believe to be useful. This disagreement could be without comprehensive knowledge of the ideology, methodology, theory, worldview that we are claiming that we do not find useful. Unless we do that, philosophical discussion is going to be either very boring or non-existent; as we are not supposed to reject anything unless we have learnt the topic exhaustively. This will not possible in most practical circumstances. The burden of proof thus lies with the proponents of such and not with us. If you are someone who subscribe to something that we have criticized, feel free to disagree and enlighten us with information, if you care to. As stated in the disclaimer, we do not have convictions regarding any of these topics that we cannot let go of. Once proven wrong, we will gladly stand corrected.

Following two convictions are still negotiable, but will be relative harder to convince us otherwise.

(1) We do not hold that religious doctrines should be immune from criticism. We tend to be careful not to hurt religious feelings too much, but there is no such guarantee.

(2) We do not believe that we need to know something inside out before criticizing it. Please do not blame us for criticizing something without knowing it fully. Knowing it fully is relative position anyway. Rather than blaming us for the action of criticizing, please feel free to criticize our point of view regarding the matter and educate us.

Rationale of the asphalt rule: 9 out of 10 times (ok, we made that statistic up, but you get the point) over-the-top religious/philosophical mumbo jumbo is actually worthless if not harmful. Challenging or outright rejection of such is good for keeping the ideological landscape relatively clean. There is a risk that you may be subsequently proven wrong; given the odds, it is a valid risk to take.

Refer *Kalama Sutta* ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalama\\_Sutta](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalama_Sutta)) for complementing rule of skeptical inquiry.

*If a group of educated elites suddenly started saying that they have been contacted by very advance alien civilization, and they are the first few people to receive the gift of new knowledge from the aliens, and started preaching the new path to salvation, great many people would reject their claim and label them “nut jobs” immediately. We might do the same. Perhaps we will be careful not to label them nut jobs, but skepticism and rejection will be our first reaction, until we are convinced that they are indeed making a lot of sense and advance alien civilizations do exist after all.*