

## An Analytical Study on the Social Role of Religion

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### Abstract

### Original Research Article

This is a critical discourse that dwells on the social roles of religion in modern society, and specifically the Sri Lankan Buddhist customs. Religion is a diverse institutional system that has essential social functions such as judicial and regulatory functions on par with legal systems, family and community level conflict resolution, social services, educational and healthcare provision, and it also provides individuals with a life purpose, meaning, psychological resilience to endure the unavoidable human patterns of suffering, pain, hardship and death. The research problem addresses how effectively traditional social functions of religion operate within contemporary social systems. Using a primary source methodology that incorporates both quantitative and qualitative data analysis, supported by comparative discussions of secondary sources, including commentaries (*Atthakathā*), Sinhala and English literature, encyclopedias, dictionaries, and journals, this study aims to critically analyze the social functions of religion and determine their effectiveness and relevance in modern society. The investigation reveals that religion functions as a comprehensive institution performing educational, healthcare, social welfare, cultural, and moral guidance roles, particularly in the Sri Lankan context where *Theravāda* Buddhism has continuously promoted social integration and cooperation while preserving national culture, arts, linguistic traditions, and historical heritage since its introduction in the 3rd century BCE. The contemporary challenges, however, such as globalization, secularization, technologies, and shift of generational values have posed constraints in the flexibility of the religious bodies and institutions, which then lead to decline in the impact of the religious values, the expansion of the intergenerational gaps in terms of religious knowledge, the limited availability of resources against social services, and the difficulty of encouraging interfaith collaboration. The research finds that religious education needs to be revitalized by the use of both traditional and modern educational methods, improved use of technology to communicate about and deliver religious services, further encouragement of interfaith discussion and collaboration, invention of religiously related responses to modern challenges like environmental concerns and social injustice, and the establishment of youth-related religious activities are necessary to ensure religious social relevance in the 21st century.

**Keywords:** Religion, Social Functions, Buddhism, Sri Lankan Society, Contemporary Challenges

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## Introduction

Religion plays a pivotal role in maintaining social stability and continuity by performing judicial and regulatory functions parallel to legal frameworks [Durkheim, 1912]. It significantly contributes to the overall well-being of society, particularly through conflict resolution at the family and community levels, and the provision of social, educational, and healthcare services [Gombrich, 1988]. Furthermore, religion provides individuals with a sense of purpose and meaning, serving as a vital mechanism for psychological resilience when facing inevitable human experiences such as suffering, distress, and death [Parsons, 1951]. Since the dawn of civilization, it has been an essential force in social organization, cultural identification, and moral guidance, fostering social integration especially during times of crisis [Weber, 1922].

Within the Sri Lankan context, Theravāda Buddhism was brought in the 3rd century BCE by Arahanth Mahinda and later made the major religion of the Sinhalese majority, which penetrated all spheres of the public life [Rahula, 1993]. The tradition has developed to be part of the Sri Lankan social fabric, which has united the kingdoms and influenced the governance structures, the education systems, the literature, art and the ways of life that characterize the Sri Lankan civilization [Gombrich, 1988]. In rural areas especially, the social network which is centered around the temple, the traditional crafts and the seasonal festivals have been the foundation of social cohesion and have formed up the holistic identity of the Sri Lankan Buddhist culture [Gunaratne, 2015].

Nonetheless, the modern social changes in the world like globalization, urbanization, advancement in technologies and secularization have presented new challenges to the social roles of religion in the traditional past [Amaratunga, 2023]. As a result, the role of religious institutions in major industries such as legal system, education and social welfare is currently being further challenged [Karunaratne, 2020]. The idea of religious freedom, freedom of choice, and the need for interfaith dialogue has largely been transformed by modernity forcing traditional religious organizations to redefine their

social nature in an evolving environment [Jayawardena, 2021].

Therefore, it has become an academic necessity to study the social functions of religion within a modern context and to practically assess their contemporary relevance and utility. This study aims to analyze the institutional social roles of religion through mainstream sociological theories while investigating their practical manifestations within the specific context of Sri Lanka.

## Research Problem

The primary research problem of this study is: "To what extent do the traditional social roles of religion function effectively within the contemporary social system?".

## Research Objectives

### Main Objective

To conduct an analytical study on the social roles of religion and determine their effectiveness and relevance in contemporary society.

### Specific Objectives

- To identify the traditional social roles of religion and analyze their nature and scope.
- To investigate the contemporary forms and effectiveness of the cultural and traditional roles of religion.
- To identify the unique characteristics of the social roles within the Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition.

## Research Methodology

This research is characterized as a library-based study (primary source study). Accordingly, both quantitative and qualitative data are collected and analyzed. Furthermore, in reaching conclusions through this analysis, a comparative discussion is conducted using data gathered from various sources, including the *Aṭṭhakathā* and *Tīkā* (commentaries), secondary source books in both Sinhala and English, encyclopedias, dictionaries, and academic journals.



## Literature Review

The primary source providing the foundational basis for this research is the chronicle "Mahāvamsa" (2001), believed to have been compiled during the 5th–6th centuries CE. The Mahāvamsa is not merely a royal genealogy; it serves as the only detailed historical evidence of how the Sri Lankan social structure, educational system, and cultural identity were constructed upon a religious foundation. Specifically, it analyzes the introduction of Buddhism by Arahan Mahinda under the patronage of King Devānampiyatissa as the first instance where religion contributed to political stability and social integration. Data provided by the Mahāvamsa regarding the propagation of arts and sciences through monasteries, religious leadership in agricultural management (such as water management), and the mobilization of the public during national crises based on religious identity provides the necessary ontological basis for contemporary analysis of the traditional social roles of religion.

The book "History of Buddhism in Ceylon" was published by Ven. Walpola Rāhula in 1993 (reprint) is a pioneering study on how the Buddhist institutional structure was socially established in this country. Through this work, Rāhula argues that since the Anurādhapura era, the temple has not just a place of worship, but a center that regulated all social milestones of a rural inhabitant's life from birth to death. The multifaceted role performed by the clergy as teachers, advisors, and occasionally physicians is thoroughly analyzed in this text. Rāhula's analysis of the self-regulatory system established by the religious institution to maintain social morality, which functioned parallel to the modern legal system adds fundamental value to the discussion of religion's regulatory role in this research.

Dharmasena Hettiarachchi's 1991 work, "The Buddhist Economic Philosophy as Revealed from Early Buddhism," deeply analyzes the relationship between religion and economic welfare. Hettiarachchi demonstrates that religion is not a system that merely distances individuals from worldliness, but a philosophy that guides the creation of a developed socio-economic order based on Right Livelihood (Sammā Ājīva) and frugality. Specifically, using

sutta discourses like the Sigālovāda Sutta, the analysis of economic management within the family unit and the responsibilities of the wealthy toward the poor helps in understanding the process of social justice facilitated by religion. These theoretical points are essential for investigating the relevance and practicality of Buddhist economic values within modern capitalist and consumerist social frameworks [Hettiarachchi, 1991].

Preethi Amaratunga's 2023 publication, "Buddhism in the Future," explores the challenging conditions imposed on religious structures by contemporary globalization and digital technology. Amaratunga emphasizes how traditional religious institutions must secure their existence in the face of secularization. Although there is a common perception that technological advancement distances humans from spiritual values, this work shows how modern media can be used for religious communication to build closer ties with the younger generation. This analysis of modern trends is instrumental in reaching a conclusion regarding the "effectiveness of religious roles in contemporary society," which is identified as a research problem [Amaratunga, 2023].

Sujith Karunaratne's "Capitalism and Buddhist Values" (2020) critically examines Max Weber's religious and economic theories within a Buddhist context. Karunaratne discusses the contribution of religious values to the mental and social stability of individuals within the modern capitalist production system. His arguments regarding the use of Buddhist psychology and ethics to alleviate the dissatisfaction and stress humans face while pursuing worldly success are relevant to the psychological relief function of religion. Furthermore, the commentary on the risk of religion being limited to mere ritual in modern society and the loss of its true social role provides support for achieving the research objectives [Karunaratne, 2020].

Ratnamalee Silva's edited volume, "Buddhist Cultural Studies" (2015), is a collection of academic articles representing various aspects of Buddhist civilization. Articles within this work, such as Ven. Wimalakirthi's "Historical Development of Sri Lankan Buddhist Education," provide a deep analysis of the success of the Pirivena educational



system and its modern transformations. This work confirms that religious education encompasses not just religious subjects but is a holistic process including social skills, vocational training, and character development. Specifically, the ideas presented regarding how the temple-centered educational role should coexist with the modern state education system are crucial for the discussion of religion's social role [Silva, 2015].

The book *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History of Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo* (1988) by Richard Gombrich allows us to see the global level of the development of Buddhism as a social institution. Gombrich identifies the way in which the reciprocal interaction between the political power and religious leadership influenced social stability. His discussion of the Sri Lankan Buddhism modernization in the times and after the British colonial rule (Protestant form of Buddhism) and the ensuing social and cultural resurgence, in particular, assists in pinpointing religion as a social influence. The socio-historical analysis presented in this writing offers a background point of integration role of religion described in the study [Gombrich, 1988].

Stanley Tambiah The Buddhism Betrayed? In Sri Lanka, the relationship between Buddhism and national identity is very complicated, which is critically examined in the article titled "Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka" (1992). It is noted by Tambiah that even though religion serves as one of the factors that ensure social harmony, it can at times be employed to generate conflict of identities amongst the ethnic groups. This is a critical approach that gives a new significant dimension to the issue of interfaith coexistence and national identity. The analysis by Tambiah is critical in determining the role and the constraint of religious institutions in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society, thus giving the value needed to compare and criticize the research [Tambiah, 1992].

This literature review brings clarity to the fact that even though religion is founded on eternal principles it is a dynamic institution that is always in interaction with the prevailing social, economic and political environment.

## Discussion

### Theoretical Foundation of the Social Role of Religion

Embedded in the heart of human civilization, religion functions as a perennial quest for truth combined with profound human experiences, acting as a transformative force for the collective [Durkheim, 1912]. It provides moral guidance and social integration, serving as a primary factor that shapes the philosophies, thoughts, and actions of society throughout the ages [Weber, 1922]. Sociologists have proposed various theories regarding the multifaceted roles of religion; according to Émile Durkheim, religion performs four fundamental functions within society:

- Discipline
- Cohesion
- Legitimation
- Meaning-making (Vitalizing) [Durkheim, 1912].

These functions act as essential components for maintaining harmony, collectivity, and stability, serving as indispensable elements in both traditional and modern societies to create social cooperation and solidarity [Giddens, 2006]. Sociologists such as Max Weber and Talcott Parsons emphasize the role of religion in social adaptation and meaning-making, highlighting how it assists individuals in finding the meaningfulness of life, understanding their place within social structures, and facilitating the process of creating personal and social interpretations [Weber, 1922; Parsons, 1951].

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### Social Roles of Sri Lankan Buddhism

When Buddhism arrived in Sri Lanka as a new cultural stream, its followers assimilated it in harmony with their social and cultural needs, creating a unique Sri Lankan Buddhist culture by integrating Buddhist philosophy and practical activities with local traditions [Gombrich, 1988]. As



a social institution, Buddhism in Sri Lanka has performed complex and multi-layered roles: in the sphere of state affairs, the king's blessing and the support of the Sangha were envisioned as essential for peaceful and continuous governance, leading to the establishment of righteous state administration based on Buddhist philosophy [Rahula, 1993]. Furthermore, temples and monastic life served as the center of society, where the monk functioned as a teacher and social leader in matters of education, ethics, and social services [Deegalle, 2006]. In the field of education, the system established based on the Tipiṭaka facilitated intellectual development and the preservation of lineage, transmitting literacy, literature, arts, and scientific knowledge through the Pirivena and Gurukula systems [Silva, 2015]. On the same note, in economic as well as social welfare activities, the idea of Dāna (charity) and compassion-based cooperation was used to develop the idea of social safety nets to help those in need and the poor as well as the vulnerable, and the idea of Abhayadāna (giving of fearlessness) in Pali literature was put in practice to provide social justice and life security [Hettiarchchi, 1991].

### Modern Problems and Change of Sri Lankan Buddhism

With the forces of globalization, Buddhism in Sri Lanka is now reorganizing its traditional functions into new situations, offering uniform answers to the social problems of today [Amaratunga, 2023]. Regarding urban complexity, national identity, and the role of democratic social structures, Buddhism performs new roles, transitioning from the simple organization of traditional society to the complex social reformation of contemporary multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies [Jayawardena, 2021]. Contemporary Buddhist institutions and organizations engage with universal human issues such as human rights, environmental conservation, and global peace, promoting the moral progress and social equality of global human civilization [Wijeratne, 2019]. Additionally, with technological progress, Buddhist propagation, education, and meditation methods are being disseminated through digital media and social networks, allowing Sri Lankan Buddhism to function as an international

cultural connector that transcends national boundaries [De Silva, 2022].

### Social Integration

Religion assists members of society in becoming virtuous individuals by teaching ethical behaviors [Durkheim, 1912]. How religion fosters integration within society can be identified as follows:

- Establishment of Consensual Values: Religion defines some universal values and standards that are accepted by every member of the society, including the Five Precepts (Pañcasīla) and the Noble Eightfold Path (Ariya Atṭhangika Magga) in the Sri Lankan Buddhist society [Rahula, 1993].
- Collective Identity: The religious beliefs and practices enhance the sense of identity among social groups by engaging in group activities such as Poya festivals and Pirith ceremonies [Gunaratne, 2015].
- Social connectivity: Religious organizations encourage relations and cooperation among various people in society [Giddens, 2006].

### Moral Guidance

Cultural expectations are reinforced through religious learning, creating a greater degree of social conformity [Durkheim, 1912]. Religion has a moral guiding role which is reflected as follows:

- Underlying Philosophy: Social ethics is anchored on religious scriptures and teachings. In Buddhism, there is a Law of Kamma and the Five Precepts governing the social conduct [Rahula, 1993].
- Personal Ethics: Religion offers personal ethics and moral growth, which makes individuals virtuous and responsible citizens [Silva, 2015].
- Communal Morality: Religion sets the moral norms and practices that are shared in the community and propagates virtues like Dāna (generosity), discipline and compassion among the community members [Hettiarchchi, 1991].



## Social Stability and Harmony

Religion is important in the stability of the social and conflict resolution [Parsons, 1951]. This includes:

- Conflict Resolution: Clergy and other religious organizations come in to reduce social conflicts. The Buddhist ethics, such as Mettā (loving-kindness) and Karuṇā (compassion), help to solve the problem peacefully [Tambiah, 1992].
- Social Peace: Religion promotes collaboration between the various social classes. The group cohesiveness is also enhanced through religious practices and rituals when social events are taking place on a large scale [Gombrich, 1988].
- Social Control: Religion is a controller, both formally and informally, that regulates the behavior of the members by acting as a controller in the moral norms [Weber, 1922].

## Religion in Sri Lanka: Social roles in the Modern context

To study the issue of religion in contemporary Sri Lanka, one has to consider the impact of globalization, urbanization, and secularization on the old constructions [Amaratunga, 2023]. The adaptation of the 2,300-year-old Buddhist tradition should be perceived as having a triple role: social functions, cultural aspects, and cultural roles [Rahula, 1993].

## Educational Functions

Although the system of knowledge transmission is based on religion, urbanization in regions such as Colombo and Gampaha has undermined the function of the temple, posing problems to social harmony [Gombrich, 1988]. Even though the urban male engagement in temple activities reduced to about 68 percent relative to 89 percent in the countryside, the religious entities have managed to shift to social development services [Ratnayake, 2021]. Buddhist leaders have become the prominent participants of national discussions, poverty reduction, and assistance to the state apparatus in the form of educational and health benefits [Jayawardena, 2021].

## Technological Influence

Technology has a dual impact. The internet and social media have streamlined the propagation of Dhamma; as an illustration the online sermons and meditation programs increased the scope of religious practices during the COVID-19 pandemic [De Silva, 2022]. On the other hand, digital entertainment is a rival to the traditional activities particularly among the young people [Fernando, 2021]. Religions are responding to this trend by now embracing technology in mobile applications and online classes in order to remain relevant.

## Healthcare Services

Religions play important roles in the health sector. Meditation and spiritual practices demonstrate a high relationship with enhanced mental health and stress resilience [Wijeratne, 2019]. In addition, the Buddhist Ayurvedic tradition still offers physical health care and herbal medicine, and there are institutions that take care of the elderly and the disabled.

## Social Welfare Activities

Religion also plays an important role in reducing poverty and disasters. Combining some of the modern welfare techniques with the classical ideas of Dāna, the institutions offer the most necessary assistance in times of crisis, such as the 2004 Tsunami and infamous COVID-19. Even the religious leaders participate in social justice by encouraging interfaith peace and fighting against inequality [Tambiah, 1992].

## Cultural Elements

### Traditional Crafts and Arts

In terms of the cultural factor, one of the major tendencies of modern society would be the elevation of secular values over religious ones. As Max Weber (1905/1922) noted in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, a value system compatible with the capitalist economic order is promoted in society, posing a risk of replacing traditional religious values such as Dāna (generosity), morality, and a contented life [Weber, 1922; Karunaratne, 2020]. Despite this, religion plays a vital role in preserving and



developing cultural crafts, artworks, and traditions. This includes the preservation of temple murals and cave paintings (such as the Dambulū cave paintings) and the tradition of religious themes in visual arts [Berkwitz, 2008]. It also sustains the continuous traditions of sculpture (Buddha statues and symbolic deities), literature (Dhamma literature, poetry, and storytelling), and music (devotional songs, Pirith, and Gāthās) alongside traditional dance forms performed at religious festivals and weddings [Gombrich, 1988]. While the focus on wealth and physical success among the urban middle class challenges core Buddhist values like compassion and equanimity, religious institutions remain a successful strategy for safeguarding cultural identity and linguistic heritage while adapting to modern needs such as mental health support and environmental conservation [file:12; Jayawardena, 2021].

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### Linguistic and Literary Traditions

Religion's role is significant in preserving the knowledge of the Pāli language through the Tipiṭaka and its Commentaries (Atṭhakathā), as well as maintaining Siṁhala Buddhist literature and poetic traditions [Rahula, 1993]. The Pirivena educational system continues to function as a traditional mechanism for civilizational transmission [Silva, 2015]. However, regarding generational changes, a noticeable decline in religious beliefs and practices among the youth is observed. Ratnayake (2021) indicated in a survey that 72% of the 18-35 age group prioritizes professional and economic goals over spiritual matters, with participation in traditional religious festivals and Dāna ceremonies decreasing by 45% compared to their parents' generation [Ratnayake, 2021]. This situation, caused by the secularization of education and rapid lifestyle changes, has compelled religious institutions to show flexibility by protecting traditional principles while adapting to modern contexts through mindfulness courses, stress-relief programs, and community mental health services [file:12; Wijeratne, 2019].

### Cultural Roles

#### Transmission of Values

In terms of cultural roles, religious institutions have succeeded in facing new challenges by integrating traditional religious education with contemporary pedagogical methods. By including English, Computer Science, Business Management, and contemporary issues (politics, economy, environment) into Pirivena education, religious leaders are empowered to effectively address modern social problems [Dharmasena, 2020]. The digitization of ancient libraries and the use of mobile apps for daily Dhamma messages and virtual meditation programs allow thousands of youths to engage with religious activities, thereby preserving cultural identity in a global context [De Silva, 2022]. Regarding the transmission of values, significant progress has been made in the process of passing down knowledge and traditions from generation to generation, establishing the moral foundation and ethics of society, and facilitating social identification through national identity [Gombrich, 1988; Berkwitz, 2008].

### Festivals and Tradition

Regarding festivals and tradition, religious institutions have demonstrated significant flexibility in maintaining a balance between traditional commemorations and modern technological shifts. Major religious events such as the Vesak festival, Poya days, and Kathina robe-offering ceremonies have incorporated modern media transmission methods due to the influence of globalization [Deegalle, 2006]. Similarly, the institutions have adapted social rituals associated with life's milestones—such as birthdays, marriages, and funerals—alongside traditional practices like Dāna, Sīla, and meditation. This adaptability was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the implementation of virtual Poya day celebrations, online sermons, and digital Dhamma dissemination showcased the ability to harmonize traditional observances with a modern technological environment [De Silva, 2022; Fernando, 2021].



## Cultural Security

In terms of cultural security, religious institutions have achieved substantial success in the preservation of religious texts, histories, and traditions through documentation and publication processes from ancient times to the present [Rahula, 1993]. This extends to the safeguarding of physical heritage, including murals, sculptures, and architectural designs, as well as the protection of traditional handicrafts such as weaving and wood carving [Berkwitz, 2008]. Considering the specifics of the Sri Lankan context, the special status granted to Buddhism by Article 9 of the Constitution has supported religious institutions in facing contemporary challenges [Jayawardena, 2021]. However, the recognition of Sinhala-Buddhist identity as a primary component of national identity has a dual impact: while it contributes to national unity and cultural continuity, it also risks creating barriers to fostering relationships with minority ethnic and religious groups [Tambiah, 1992]. While community leadership provided by senior monks (the Mahānāyaka Theros) contributes to conflict resolution and social peace, there is an emerging need for a critical discussion on the limitations of this leadership to maintain a balance between social duties and cultural roles [Gombrich, 1988].

In conclusion, the historical continuity of the religious tradition in Sri Lanka—spanning over 2,300 years—provides a strong foundation for contemporary religious institutions while simultaneously raising questions about their capacity for modernization and flexibility [Rahula, 1993]. The future role of religion in Sri Lankan society will be determined by the ability of these institutions to adapt to contemporary needs while preserving traditional values [Amaratunga, 2023]. The successful fulfillment of religion's role in modern Sri Lanka depends on the synergistic operation of three dimensions: social functions (comprising education, healthcare, and welfare), cultural elements (traditional arts, language, and literature), and cultural roles (value transmission and tradition). The dynamic interplay between these three fields allows for effective solutions to the multifaceted and complex problems of contemporary Sri Lankan society [Gombrich, 1988; Silva, 2015].

## Conclusion

In summarizing the primary findings of this analytical study on the social roles of religion, it is clearly revealed that religion is a multifaceted institution performing educational, health, social welfare, cultural, and moral guidance roles within society [Durkheim, 1912]. Within the Sri Lankan context, religion plays a continuous role in promoting social integration and cooperation, while also being vital in preserving and transmitting national culture, arts, linguistic traditions, and historical heritage [Rāhula, 1993]. However, the study finds that the flexibility and adaptability of religious institutions face limitations when confronting modern social challenges [Gombrich, 1988]. The influence of religious values has diminished due to the impact of secularization and modern lifestyles, while a widening gap has emerged between younger and older generations regarding religious understanding and practice [Ratnayake, 2021]. Furthermore, constraints in the economic resources of religious institutions have limited social service activities, and challenges persist in promoting interfaith cooperation and mutual understanding within a multi-religious society [Tambiah, 1992].

Consequently, the findings highlight the essential need to integrate traditional religious education with modern pedagogical methods, increase the utilization of modern technology for religious communication and service delivery, and promote dialogue and cooperation among diverse religious groups [Amaratunga, 2023; De Silva, 2022]. It is imperative to develop religious responses to contemporary issues such as environmental problems, social inequality, and mental health challenges, while creating religious activities and programs tailored to the needs and aspirations of the youth [Wijeratne, 2019; Dharmasena, 2020].

In the final analysis, it is confirmed that religion functions as an indispensable component of society, performing eternal roles while adapting those roles to contemporary challenges [Parsons, 1951]. Although Buddhism in Sri Lanka maintains a continuous role in social integration, cultural security, moral guidance, and social services, the emergence of globalization, technological



advancement, and social changes has necessitated an enhanced capacity for adaptation, technological integration, and the identification of modern social needs [Jayawardena, 2021]. For religion to fulfill its future social role, it is crucial to adopt modern methodologies based on traditional values, promote cooperation within a multi-religious society, and advocate for equality and justice across all sectors of society [Giddens, 2006; Silva, 2015].

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