



BUDDHISTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ISLAM AND  
MUSLIMS IN SRI LANKA:  
AN EMPIRICAL STUDY IN THE CONTEXT OF  
DA'WAH

BY

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study discusses Buddhists' perceptions of Islam and Muslims in Sri Lanka, a multiracial, multi-religious and multilingual country in which Buddhists are the majority. Muslims are the second largest minority, following the Hindus. Muslims and Buddhists lived for more than thousand years in peaceful coexistence and ethnic harmony, but a few decades back this situation seems to have changed. Ethnic conflict began to simmer; some books and articles were published against Islam and Muslims. Some Buddhist individuals and groups work to propagate extreme thoughts against Muslims. But the question has been to what extent this anti-Islam and anti-Muslim attitude have affected the whole Buddhist society. Does represent commonly held views or are they restricted to a few individuals? To find out proper answers to those questions, an empirical study has been much needed in order to know what actions to take to preserve peaceful coexistence. A peaceful environment and ethnic harmony are essential in order for any society to survive or develop. Field research on this topic was done from January to June, 2007. 1200 questionnaires were distributed among Sri Lankan Buddhists in seven provinces. Of that amount, fifty percent were returned back. 25 individuals were interviewed. Some anti-Muslim literature was also collected. Analysis and result of this field study shows that the majority of the Buddhist community still has a favorable opinion of Islam and Muslims. It is mostly an elite group of intellectuals which has negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims. Muslims' un-Islamic behaviour, their opportunistic politics, their isolation from the mainstream, the misrepresentation and misunderstanding of Islam, and Muslims' failure to convey the true Islamic message are some key factors shaping the Buddhists' perceptions of Islam and Muslims.

## ملخص البحث

هذه الرسالة نتيجة بحث ميداني أُجري بين البوذيين السريلانكيين لتقييم فهمهم وانطباعاتهم حول الإسلام والمسلمين. تُعد سريلانكا بلداً ذا أديان مختلفة ، وأجناس متنوعة ، ولغات متباينة . ويشكل البوذيون أغلبية السكان، أما المسلمون فهم الأقلية الثانية بعد الهندوس. لقد عاش المسلمون مع البوذيين في جو من الأمن والسلام والسماحة، وقد استمر ذلك أكثر من ألف سنة. ولكن هذا الوضع بدأ بالتغير منذ بداية القرن العشرين، فظهرت العداوة تجاه الإسلام والمسلمين من بعض البوذيين، كما أثرت الفتن والمشاكل بين الطرفين من حين لآخر، وفضلاً عن ذلك تم تأليف ونشر العديد من الكتب والمقالات المعادية للإسلام والمسلمين. إزاء هذه المشكلة بدت الحاجة إلى دراسة ميدانية لتقييم الوضع ، وتحليل الظاهرة والوقوف على أبعادها وعواملها الفاعلة ومآلاتها الممكنة . أى أن الدراسة تهدف للإجابة على حزمة من الأسئلة منها : هل ظاهرة العداوة الملموسة في الآونة الأخيرة تجاه الإسلام والمسلمين طاغية على سلوك وطبيعة البوذيين؟ وهل هي ظاهرة تعم جميع البوذيين؟ وما انطباعهم الحقيقي حول الإسلام والمسلمين؟ وما هي الأسباب والعوامل التي ولدت ظاهرة العداوة تجاه الإسلام والمسلمين؟ ومن هنا قام الباحث بتوزيع ألف ومائتي استبياناً بين البوذيين في سبع محافظات سريلانكية، كما أجرى الباحث مقابلات شخصية مع خمسة وعشرين بوذياً، وتم استقراء بعض المنشورات والمؤلفات الصادرة عنهم ليتمكن الباحث من الوصول إلى حقيقة الوضع. ونتيجة هذا البحث توصل الباحث إلى أن أغلبية البوذيين لا يزال يحملون في أذهانهم صورة غير مشوهة للإسلام والمسلمين، وانطباعهم حول الإسلام والمسلمين ما زال إيجابياً ، وليس هذا فحسب بل إن أكثر من سبعين في المائة منهم يرغبون في معرفة المزيد عن الإسلام، كما توصل الباحث إلى أن عدداً من الفئات البوذية المثقفة هي التي تحمل الكراهية والعداوة للإسلام والمسلمين، ونسبتهم بالمقارنة مع الآخرين قليلة جداً ومن العوامل التي أدت إلى إيجاد هذه الفرق المعادية أخلاق بعض المسلمين السيئة ومعاملتهم غير الإسلامية، ومفاهيمهم الخاطئة عن الإسلام، وعدم بذلهم الجهود الكافية لتبليغ رسالة الإسلام، والقدوة السيئة. والحل الوحيد هو نشر الإسلام بمفهومه الصحيح وتطبيقه السليم في الحياة كلها.

## **APPROVAL PAGE**

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at International Islamic University, Malaysia or other institutions.

Hameed Lebbe Mohamed Haris

Signature.....

Date.....

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AN EMPIRICAL STUDY**

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Sri Lanka is a small island located in the Indian Ocean. It is a multi-racial society. Its population consists of followers of the major world religions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. The majority of the population, seventy-six percent, is Buddhists.

The Muslims are the second largest minority in the country, followed by the Hindus who constitute eight percent of the island's population, numbering over one million people. The statistics of the most recent census show the Muslims to be spread throughout the twenty-four districts of the island. Their beginnings go back to distant centuries; as one Sri Lankan political leader stated, "Ceylon Moors have been in Ceylon as long as we, the Sinhalese, have been here."<sup>1</sup>

#### **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The Muslims of Sri Lanka were living with the Buddhist people for more than one thousand years in a peaceful and harmonious relationship. They practiced their religion with absolute freedom. The Buddhist people extended their fullest cooperation to the Muslim community to make their lives comfortable and easy. At times the Buddhist monks even helped Muslims to build their sacred religious places by providing them land which belonged to the Buddhist temples. However, the trend of cooperation and support started to change due to a number of reasons, both internal and external. The reasons for this change in Buddhists' perceptions should be studied

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<sup>1</sup>Lorna Dewaraja, *The Muslims of Sri Lanka; One thousand years of ethnic harmony 900-1915* (Colombo, Sri Lanka: The Lanka Islamic Foundation, 1994) 1.

by conducting field research. This may help to restore the previous situation by rebuilding a good and harmonious relationship between Buddhists and Muslims.

Moreover, every Muslim has a moral obligation to strive to convey Islam's message to non-Muslims. This requires communication, and in order to communicate effectively the inviter must understand something about the person he/she is communicating with. In Sri Lanka every Muslim family has a Buddhist or Hindu neighbor. Before they start their mission of preaching Islam, they need to conduct a proper study to understand the attitudes, perceptions and the understanding of non-Muslims in general and the Buddhists in particular.

There are many misconceptions and misunderstandings about Islam and Muslims in the minds of the Buddhist people in Sri Lanka. They do not have proper means to gain knowledge about the true message of Islam. Their impressions have been shaped by the Western mass media as well as observations of the Muslims' wrong practices based on false teachings of Islam. Neither the mass media nor the Muslims' manifestations of Islam portray to the people the authentic Islam.

There are a number of organizations and institutions which are working to convey the true Islamic message to the Buddhist people by eliminating those misunderstandings and wrong conceptions which they have in their minds. However, the question arises whether their endeavors are effective or not. It is vitally important for Muslims to develop an effective methodology for presenting Islam to Buddhists so that the accumulated misconceptions can be eradicated. It is equally important to educate Muslims how to build bridges with their Buddhist neighbors. This problem has to be approached academically. The researcher believes that the development of an effective methodology depends upon a proper study of the nature of the targeted people, their culture, their thinking style, and their views of Islam and Muslims. In

other words, it requires a proper understanding of their minds. If Muslims want to be successful in their Islamic mission, they have to make concentrated efforts to study the Buddhist conception of Islam comprehensively, and this has not been properly undertaken as yet. If this is not done, the Muslim community of Sri Lanka will face many challenges and problems. They may lose the struggle for survival, religious and cultural identity, political rights and maintenance of harmonious relationships with other communities, especially with the Buddhists. It is hoped that this humble effort will contribute, to a certain extent, to achieving the intended goal. It is a first step for researchers who want to contribute to this field.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The following are the research questions:

1. What are the Sri Lankan Buddhists' perceptions of Islam?
2. What are the Sri Lankan Buddhists' perceptions of Muslims in general?
3. What is their understanding of the Islamic Sharī'ah law?
4. What is their opinion about Muslims' religious identity?
5. What are their views about the Muslims living in Sri Lanka?
6. What are their suggestions and ideas to maintain the peaceful and harmonious relationship between Buddhists and Muslims in Sri Lanka?
7. What is their understanding of jihad?
8. What is their opinion about the Islamic books available in Sri Lanka?
9. What is their understanding of the way Islam is propagated in Sri Lanka?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In recent decades it has become palpably obvious that Sri Lankan Buddhists' attitude towards Islam and Muslims has changed. Many problematic issues have been raised between the two communities. This led some Muslims to begin accusing Buddhists of being communal and fanatic. There are a few books and publications by Buddhists that would seem to support this contention. However, this phenomenon has not been substantiated by any empirical study or academic research.

If Buddhists have developed a fanatical and communal mindset, it can be expected to lead to ethnic conflicts, as we have noticed in the history of a number of other societies. Therefore, this problem should be studied in light of the theories that have been developed about the nature of ethnic conflict. The following are some key propositions of those theories:

- “Individuals and groups (social classes) within society have differing amounts of material and non-material resources (the wealthy vs. poor), and...the more powerful groups use their power in order to exploit groups with less power.”<sup>2</sup>
- “The society or organization functions so that each individual participant and its groups struggle to maximize their benefits, which inevitably contributes to social change such as changes in politics and revolutions.”<sup>3</sup>
- There is conflict in society. People are always in conflict with other people because they want what the others have, and/or because they need to consume their basic needs which may not **be defined by other society**. There is also conflict with the power elite which states that those

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www-personal.umich.edu/~aczop/conflict\\_theory\\_explained.htm](http://www-personal.umich.edu/~aczop/conflict_theory_explained.htm)

<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social-conflict\\_theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social-conflict_theory)

in power want to remain in power; therefore they will do whatever it takes to remain in power.”

- “Social inequality creates the need for people to commit some crimes, such as burglary and larceny, as a means of social and economic survival and to commit others, such as assault, homicide, and drug use, as a means of expressing rage, frustration, and anger.”<sup>4</sup>
- “Most racially prejudiced people learn negative stereotypes about another racial group from their families, friends, and others in their immediate surroundings. If they lack sufficient intimate social contact with members of the group or intense information that contradicts those stereotypes, they remain prejudiced”<sup>5</sup>

These theories enable us to tentatively identify several factors responsible for conflict between ethnic groups in heterogeneous societies in general and Sri Lanka in particular. They include ethnicity, struggles over scarce resources, perceptions of unfair distributions of power and wealth, the unbalanced portrayal of the Other by local mass media, and cynical opportunism by some politicians. We might also add the un-Islamic conduct of some Muslims as a further aggravating factor.

The widespread existence of anti-Islamic attitudes and of prejudices against Muslims throughout the world is an easily observable phenomenon. Most non-Muslims’ perceptions of Islam and Muslims in the world are shaped by media coverage; Sri Lanka may not be exceptional in this matter. The electronic media has failed to cover ordinary Muslims and Islamic culture; it prefers to show gunmen, attacks and anti-Western demonstrations. In addition, local Sri Lankan newspapers,

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<sup>4</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conflict\\_theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conflict_theory).

<sup>5</sup> Neuman, Lawrence, *Social research methods: qualitative and quantitative approaches*, (Sydney, Boston New York: San Francisco, 2003), 41.

magazines and books, as well as religiously tinged political speeches, have played a big role in shaping the Buddhists' perceptions of Islam and Muslims in Sri Lanka.

Based on those theories, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- Lack of interaction between Buddhists and Muslims leads to enormous misunderstandings.
- Buddhists who are deprived of interaction with good Muslims will have more unfavorable opinions of Islam and Muslims than those who have a chance to interact with good Muslim friends.
- The Buddhists who depend on mass media for their knowledge will have more unfavorable opinions of Muslims than those who do not depend on it.
- Buddhists with sound knowledge of the current political situation will have an unfavorable opinion of Muslims.
- Level of education can influence the shaping of the Buddhists' perceptions of Islam and Muslims.
- The nature of the area can be a factor in shaping communal and fanatic attitudes and anti-Islamic feelings. In some areas both communities have more chances to interact one with another.
- One who is deprived of ways of getting authentic knowledge about Islam and Muslims will have a more unfavorable opinion.
- Opportunistic politics is a factor in shaping a community's opinions of others.
- Young people have a more unfavorable opinion of Muslims than senior citizens.
- Ongoing ethnic conflict in the northeast is an important factor in changing perceptions.

#### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:**

1. to better understand the perceptions of the Buddhists about Islam and Muslims in Sri Lanka;

2. to identify the key drivers of and influences on those perceptions, and how they are shaped;
3. to identify means of improving perceptions and intellectual understanding between Muslims and Buddhists;
4. to examine ways of promoting the culture of dialogue between the different religions and cultures;
5. to bring to light the harmonious historical relationship between Buddhists and Muslims in Sri Lanka;
6. to investigate the obstacles and challenges which the Muslims of Sri Lanka are facing today;
7. to explore new strategies and methodologies for *da'wah*.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

Islam is the most misunderstood religion in the world today. Despite the fact that 1.5 billion people follow Islam and it is the fastest growing religion in the world, there are many misconceptions and misunderstandings among non-Muslims about Islam and Muslims. It is the duty of every Muslim to help remove some of the misconceptions that non-Muslims have about Islam. Engagement in *da'wah* work among non-Muslims will help to lessen the level of anti-Islam and anti-Muslim feelings in their hearts. Their misconceptions prevent non-Muslims from seeing the beauty of Islam. In this matter, Sri Lanka is not exceptional. Efforts should be made to clear the many misconceptions of the Sri Lankan community, especially among the Buddhist people.

Some of the misconceptions of the Sri Lankan Buddhists about Islam may be similar to those which are prevalent among the international community. There may also be totally different issues which may be unique to Sri Lanka, because the Sri

Lankan community suffers geographical isolation from the centers of international affairs and issues. The unique Sri Lankan issues may change from time to time according to the internal state of affairs. What we will list in Chapter Five are issues that non-Muslims of today bring up. Ten years ago, these were not the issues; there were other issues. Similarly, ten years from now, different issues may come up. The question now is how to handle these issues, how to overcome the negatives of this situation, and how to start the process of reconstruction.

It is very important for Muslims to thoroughly study the situation currently prevailing in the environment which they want to change. In particular, they have to understand the mind-set of the people living in this situation. Otherwise, their efforts for change will be very ineffective.

There are many organizations and institutions which are working to convey the true Islamic message to the Buddhist people in Sri Lanka. They are using different methods and techniques in this mission. Some of their methods of conveying the message of Islam are effective while others are not. The best way to do *da'wah* is to ask the non-Muslims about their conceptions and ideas regarding Islam and Muslims. This opening makes them feel comfortable about talking. Also, it gives Muslims a good chance to know what they have in their minds and hearts.

If they understand the minds of the targeted people, they can work easily to remove most of the misconceptions from their hearts and minds. Doing so will help to remove the animosity they have against Islam. Also, through these studies and the strategies that grow out of them Muslims can help protect the growing generations from misconceptions. That is undoubtedly the way to maintain the justice of Islam and to preserve it against exaggeration and negligence.

The necessity of preserving the ideological security of the Muslim Ummah demands the cooperation of all academic, research, media and educational sectors and individuals. The researcher trusts that this humble effort will contribute towards achieving that goal.

### **SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

This study will cover only the Buddhist people of Sri Lanka, not other countries with Buddhist populations, like Japan, Korea, China, and Nepal. Its focus will be understanding the minds of Sinhalese Buddhists of Sri Lanka and looking for ways to build up a harmonious relationship between the two communities. There are Sinhalese Christians in Sri Lanka, but they are not included in this study.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The research is both quantitative and qualitative in nature. It involves a thorough scrutiny of primary and secondary sources on the subject. The methodology will consist of both library research and field research, but the field research will be the main source of data. This will include:

- Interviews with Buddhist monks, scholars, and ordinary people to understand their views about Islam and Muslims before approaching them to convey our Islamic message.
- Distributing questionnaires among the Buddhists. The research will be conducted in four main areas of the Island. Area A is known for the presence of fanatic tendencies; area B is more moderate; area C is a place of historical significance to Buddhists; and area D is the capital of the country. 125 people will be selected in every area. Mostly this sample will

be obtained randomly from Buddhist monks, intellectuals and common people of the Buddhist community.

- Visits to some historical places like Anuradhapura and Katharagama<sup>6</sup> to collect data.

The library research will depend on books, magazines, newspapers, booklets and other materials related to the topic.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A number of research works have been conducted in the Muslim world as well as in the Western world in order to understand the perceptions of non-Muslims regarding Islam and Muslims. In 1997 the Islamic Research Institute, the International Islamic University Islamabad, and the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown University, Washington D.C, held a three-day conference in Islamabad on Western perceptions of Muslims and Muslim perceptions of the West. They brought together scholars, thinkers, and opinion-makers to share their thoughts and ideas. That seminar was organized to achieve four main objectives, which are similar to the objectives of our research work:

- to survey the mutual perceptions of Islam and the West between Muslims and Westerners in the past as well as in the present;
- to examine the accuracy or otherwise of these mutual perceptions, and to identify the major factors that contribute to the shaping of these perceptions;
- to study the major issues in the relations between Muslims and Westerners;

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<sup>6</sup>These are two places of historical significant to Buddhism in Sri Lanka; visits to them yield knowledge about the history, culture and belief system of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

- to explore the possibility and work out the modalities of developing a better mutual understanding as an essential requisite for a truly peaceful, mutually tolerant and pluralist world society.

Another, similar effort was undertaken in 2005 by the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, International Islamic University, Malaysia. It was a one-day seminar on Western perceptions of Islam. Its main objective was to present the viewpoints of the East and West on how Islam is seen by the West and to find formulas for developing a better understanding between Islam and the West through proper dialogue. The programme was viewed as significant in providing a platform for intellectual discourse and exposure to academics as well as the public.

*Western perception of Islam and Muslims: a study of public opinion and the role of media in the United States and Western Europe.* This is a valuable study done by Communiqué Partners, a leading San Francisco-based market intelligence consultancy. It was commissioned by the Kuwait Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Affairs, with the guidance of New Future/4M Advertising, a leading Kuwaiti media and communications firm. The research was done between January-September 2005. This study included the following components:

- a public opinion poll (on line) of 1010 American adults and 1410 Western European adults. This used random sampling from a multi-million person database, balanced for general population representation.
- interviews with Islamic and media experts in government, academia, industry, public affairs and media;
- a quantitative analysis of online and offline media articles having a topical association with Islam;