

# **The Impact of Secularization on Religious Faith, Family, and Cultural Value Structures in Sri Lanka**

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## **1. Introduction**

The impact of secularization on religious faith of the family and the cultural value structure is an increasingly relevant issue in Sri Lanka, a multi-religious society where Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity co-exist alongside modern, secular influences. This paper investigates how secularization has affected religious faith within family structures and cultural value systems in Sri Lanka, focusing on generational shifts in religious practices, the influence of globalization, and the growing tensions between traditional religious values and contemporary secular ideas. The study emphasizes the unique dynamics within Sri Lanka, where secularization does not necessarily entail a complete detachment from religious values but rather a transformation in how they are expressed.

Secularization refers to the process by which religious influence in public life declines, leading to the differentiation of religious and secular spheres. In Sri Lanka, a society deeply rooted in religious traditions, this process presents a complex picture. Sri Lanka's religious landscape is primarily composed of Buddhists (70%), Hindus (13%), Muslims (10%), and Christians (7%) (Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka, 2022). However, despite the prominence of religious practices, the country is not immune to the global forces of secularization that challenge these traditional structures.

Sri Lanka presents a unique case study where the influence of secularization intertwines with postcolonial identities, modernization, and economic development. This article aims to explore how secularization affects religious faith within family units and the broader cultural value structures that shape Sri Lankan society.

## **2. Secularization and Religious Faith in Sri Lankan Families**

### **2.1 Traditional Religious Practices in Family Life**

In Sri Lanka, religion plays a central role in family life, with rituals, festivals, and prayers deeply embedded in the daily routines of many families. These religious practices reinforce communal identity and intergenerational bonds (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988).

Buddhism, practiced by around 70% of Sri Lankans, is central to the cultural and social fabric of the country. The family unit in Buddhist households often revolves around religious rituals and values that emphasize morality, mindfulness, and respect for elders. Many Buddhist families have a home altar or shrine dedicated to the Buddha. Daily offerings of flowers, incense, and food are made as acts of reverence and gratitude. This practice serves as a daily reminder of Buddhist teachings and fosters a sense of spirituality within the home (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988).

Poya days, which occur during the full moon each month, are important for Buddhist families. On these days, families often visit temples together to participate in communal worship, engage in meditation, and listen to sermons. Poya days are also occasions for family gatherings and communal charity (*dāna*), reinforcing the value of generosity and compassion. Significant life events, such as births, marriages, and funerals, are marked by religious ceremonies. For example, the Pirith chanting ceremony is often conducted at important family events to invoke blessings and protect the household from negative influences.

Hinduism, practiced by about 13% of the population, is especially prominent in the Northern and Eastern provinces. Family life in Hindu households is deeply tied to religious rituals and the observance of festivals and deities. Similar to Buddhist families, Hindu households typically have a family shrine dedicated to one or more deities, such as Lord Shiva, Vishnu, or Ganesha. Family members, especially women, perform daily *pūjā* at the shrine, offering flowers, food, and prayers. This practice maintains the spiritual atmosphere within the home and reinforces religious devotion (Ragavan, 2008).

Hindu families frequently visit temples, especially during major festivals such as Thai Pongal, Deepavali, and Maha Shivaratri. These festivals are marked by family reunions, shared meals, and communal prayer, reinforcing both religious and familial bonds. Hindu life-cycle rituals, or samskaras, are key religious events in family life. These include ceremonies for birth (Jatakarma), the first feeding of solid food (Annaprashana), marriage (Vivaha), and death rites (Antyesti). These rituals mark significant transitions in an individual's life and are seen as important for spiritual progression, thus strengthening family ties through religious observance.

Christianity, practiced by around 7% of the Sri Lankan population, primarily among Roman Catholics and Protestant denominations, also shapes family life through various religious practices. Many Christian families in Sri Lanka observe daily or weekly family prayers, often combined with Bible readings. This practice serves to strengthen faith and promote a sense of unity among family members (Pieris, 1997).

Regular participation in Sunday Mass or services is an important religious obligation for Christian families. Families attend church together, and participation in religious activities, such as Sunday school for children, reinforces religious values across generations. Major Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter are occasions for family gatherings, communal worship, and charity. These celebrations often extend beyond religious rituals to include social and cultural traditions, strengthening both religious devotion and family relationships.

Islam is practiced by about 10% of Sri Lankans, predominantly among the Moor and Malay communities. Islamic religious practices are integral to family life, with a strong emphasis on prayer, charity, and social cohesion. Islamic families observe the five daily prayers, which are an essential part of Muslim life. In many Muslim households, family members gather to pray together, especially during the early morning (Fajr) and evening (Maghrib) prayers. The month of Ramadan is a time of fasting, prayer, and reflection for Muslim families. Family members break the fast together each evening, strengthening family bonds and religious commitment. Eid al-Fitr, which marks the end of Ramadan, and Eid al-Adha are major festivals that bring families together for communal prayers, feasts, and acts of charity. (Ali, 2011).

In Islamic teachings, family life is highly valued, and children are taught to respect and care for their elders. The concept of zakat (charitable giving) is central to Islam and is often practiced within families, where wealth is shared with the less fortunate, reflecting the communal and charitable spirit that underpins Islamic family values.

## **2.2 Impact of Secularization on Family Religious Practices**

Secularization has begun to shift how religion is practiced within families, particularly in urbanized and middle-class families, where the pressures of modern life—such as education, work, and exposure to global media—are creating spaces where traditional religious observances are less strictly followed. This change is more pronounced among younger generations, who often question the necessity of rigid religious practices in their daily lives (Uyangoda, 2015).

Research indicates a growing divergence between older and younger generations regarding religious adherence. While parents and grandparents might uphold religious rituals and values as integral to family identity, younger individuals may view these practices as symbolic rather than obligatory, reflecting broader secular values (Deegalle, 2006).

One of the most notable impacts of secularization is the decline in formal religious affiliation. Studies indicate that younger generations are increasingly identifying as "nondenominational" or "spiritual but not religious" (Pew Research Center, 2019). This shift often leads to decreased participation in organized religious activities, which historically provided structure to family life (Voas & Crockett, 2005).

With the decline of formal religious affiliation, families are modifying their rituals. Traditional practices, such as weekly worship or holiday celebrations, may be replaced by secular alternatives or personal interpretations (Baker & Longstaff, 2016). For example, many families now celebrate holidays like Christmas with a focus on cultural rather than religious aspects, reflecting a broader trend toward secularization (Hout & Fisher, 2015).

Secularization has also contributed to increased religious diversity within families. Interfaith marriages and blended families are becoming more common, leading to the integration of different religious traditions (Weller, 2015). This diversity often results in

hybrid practices that combine elements from various faiths, reflecting a personalized approach to spirituality.

As families become less anchored in traditional religious practices, individualism often takes precedence. Members of a family may pursue their own spiritual paths, leading to varied practices within the same household (Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). This trend highlights a shift toward personal belief systems, with family members engaging in spirituality on their own terms rather than through collective religious identity.

The decline in participation in religious institutions often leads to a weakening of community ties. Religious organizations traditionally provide social support and a sense of belonging, which may be lost as families become more secular (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). The erosion of these communal bonds can have implications for social cohesion and family support networks.

In response to secularization, some families gravitate toward alternative spiritual practices. This can include new age philosophies, mindfulness practices, or nature-based spirituality, reflecting a search for meaning outside traditional religious structures (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). Such alternative spiritualities can offer families a sense of connection and purpose in a secular context.

### **3. Cultural Value Structure and Secularization**

#### **3.1 Cultural Values Rooted in Religion**

In Sri Lanka, religious traditions profoundly shape cultural values, including concepts of morality, community cohesion, and social hierarchy. Sri Lanka, a multi-religious and multi-ethnic nation, has a rich cultural tapestry that is deeply intertwined with religion. The island's religious landscape includes Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, with Buddhism holding the predominant position as the religion of the majority Sinhalese population. Religious beliefs have significantly influenced Sri Lankan cultural values, shaping not only individual behaviour but also societal norms, governance, and the arts. Buddhist principles such as 'mettā' (loving-kindness) and 'dāna' (generosity) are central to moral conduct, while Hindu values emphasize 'dharma' (duty) and 'karma' (moral action and consequence). Similarly, Islamic and

Christian values reinforce principles of charity, family solidarity, and moral discipline (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988).

### **3.2 Secularization and Erosion of Cultural Values**

One of the key areas where secularization has led to the erosion of traditional cultural values is the family unit. In pre-secularized Sri Lanka, family structures were strongly influenced by religious teachings, whether Buddhist, Hindu, or Islamic. Extended family systems, respect for elders, and strict moral codes regarding marriage and family life were core values (Pfaffenberger, 1982). However, the influence of modern secular values—such as individual autonomy, gender equality, and personal fulfilment—has led to shifts in these norms.

For example, traditional expectations around marriage have been challenged by rising divorce rates and the increased acceptability of cohabitation and delayed marriage, particularly in urban areas. These shifts are often viewed as evidence of cultural erosion, as younger generations prioritize career success and personal freedom over familial and religious obligations (Jayasuriya, 2000).

Another major sign of secularization is the decline in religious observance, particularly among the younger population. While public religious festivals such as Vesak and Thai Pongal continue to be celebrated, participation in day-to-day religious practices, such as temple visits or offering alms, has declined (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988). This decline is more pronounced in urban centers, where secular education and professional life have increasingly replaced traditional religious lifestyles (Spencer, 1990).

Many younger Sri Lankans are exposed to secular, globalized culture through social media, education, and the workplace, which often leads to a weakening of religious identity and practices. This trend is worrying for religious leaders who see the decline in observance as a threat to the country's moral and cultural fabric.

As secularization progresses, traditional religious values face challenges from modern, secular ideologies that prioritize individualism, material success, and scientific rationalism. For example, the influence of global media and Western educational paradigms has introduced values centered on personal autonomy and human rights,

which occasionally conflict with collective religious teachings on duty and social roles (Wickramasinghe, 2014).

Despite these pressures, religious values continue to provide an important framework for ethical conduct in Sri Lanka. Many Sri Lankans, even those exposed to secular ideas, continue to draw on religious teachings for guidance in personal and family decision-making. However, the application of these values often becomes more flexible, with religion adapting to modern contexts rather than being rejected outright (Uyangoda, 2015).

The rise of consumerism, driven by globalization and economic liberalization, has been another factor in the erosion of traditional values. In Buddhist teachings, the rejection of material desire is a core principle, as material attachment is seen as a cause of suffering. Similarly, Hindu, Islamic, and Christian teachings in Sri Lanka have emphasized modesty, charity, and the importance of spiritual over material wealth (Hewamanne, 2009). However, as Sri Lanka integrated into the global economy, consumer culture began to take root, particularly in the urban middle class.

The increasing pursuit of material success, wealth, and status has often been cited as evidence of cultural erosion, as it stands in contrast to traditional religious values of simplicity, generosity, and non-attachment (Obeyesekere, 1992).

#### **4. An Overview of the Church Documents**

The Catholic Church has long been concerned with the moral, social, and cultural consequences of secularization, particularly its impact on the family. Across several key encyclicals, popes have addressed how the growing separation of religious values from public and private life influences family structures and dynamics. This article examines four significant encyclicals: *Familiaris Consortio* (1981) by Pope John Paul II, *Humanae Vitae* (1968) by Pope Paul VI, *Amoris Laetitia* (2016) by Pope Francis, and *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) by Pope Benedict XVI. Each of these documents provides insights into how secularization challenges the sanctity and function of the family, offering guidance on how Catholic families can navigate these challenges.

#### **4.1 Secularization and the Family in *Familiaris Consortio* (1981)**

In *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope John Paul II emphasizes the central role of the family as the fundamental unit of society and a “domestic church.” He expresses deep concern about the effects of secularization, which he argues undermines the sacredness of marriage and family life by promoting individualism, relativism, and materialism (John Paul II, 1981, para. 6). The encyclical identifies secularization as a driving force behind the weakening of traditional family structures, leading to increasing rates of divorce, cohabitation outside of marriage, and the disconnection between sexuality and its procreative purpose.

John Paul II critiques the growing acceptance of contraception and abortion as emblematic of a secularized view of the human body and sexuality, which reduces these sacred aspects of life to matters of personal choice and pleasure rather than gifts from God (John Paul II, 1981, para. 30). He calls for a re-evangelization of families, urging Catholic families to resist the secular tide by living out their faith authentically through prayer, mutual love, and openness to life. In this way, the family becomes a witness to divine love in a secularized world.

#### **4.2 *Humanae Vitae* (1968) and the Secularization of Sexuality and Family**

Pope Paul VI’s *Humanae Vitae* addresses the challenges posed by modern views on sexuality and reproductive ethics. The encyclical was written in response to the advent of modern contraceptive technologies and the widespread acceptance of artificial birth control within secular societies. Paul VI identifies contraception as a central issue in the secularization of family life because it fundamentally alters the nature of the marital relationship by severing the intrinsic link between the unitive and procreative dimensions of marriage (Paul VI, 1968, para. 12).

The encyclical asserts that the secular worldview, which emphasizes personal autonomy and the pursuit of individual pleasure, undermines the Catholic understanding of marriage as a vocation of self-giving love that is open to life. Paul VI predicts several consequences of this secularization, including a general decline in moral standards, a rise in infidelity, and a lack of respect for women, who may be viewed as objects of pleasure rather than as equal partners in the mutual self-giving of marriage (Paul VI, 1968, para. 17).

By upholding the Church's teaching on contraception, *Humanae Vitae* advocates for a rejection of secular attitudes toward human sexuality and a return to a Christ-centered view of marriage and family life, where sexuality is seen as a gift oriented toward both love and life.

#### **4.3 *Amoris Laetitia* (2016) and the Family in a Secular Age**

Pope Francis's *Amoris Laetitia* engages with the complexities of family life in the contemporary world, including the effects of secularization on marriage and family dynamics. While affirming the teachings of his predecessors, Pope Francis offers a pastoral approach to the challenges posed by secularization, emphasizing the need for the Church to accompany families as they navigate modern realities (Francis, 2016, para. 37).

Francis acknowledges that secularization has led to profound changes in the way marriage and family are understood, particularly in terms of the increasing acceptance of cohabitation, divorce, and same-sex unions. He recognizes that these trends reflect broader shifts in cultural attitudes, where individual freedom and personal fulfillment are prioritized over traditional values of lifelong commitment and openness to life (Francis, 2016, para. 34). However, rather than condemning families who struggle with these realities, *Amoris Laetitia* calls for a compassionate and inclusive approach, offering support and guidance to those affected by the secularization of family life.

The encyclical highlights the need for pastoral care that respects the dignity of each person, while also reaffirming the Church's teachings on the sanctity of marriage and the family. In doing so, Francis urges Catholic families to be a source of renewal in a secularized world by living out the Gospel values of love, forgiveness, and mutual care (Francis, 2016, para. 67).

#### **4.4 *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) and the Impact of Secularization on Family and Social Values**

In *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI examines the broader social and economic consequences of secularization, including its impact on the family. While the encyclical primarily focuses on social justice, economic ethics, and the development of human dignity, it also addresses how secularization has contributed to the erosion of traditional

family values. Benedict XVI argues that the secular separation of faith from reason has led to a distorted understanding of human freedom and dignity, where individual rights are prioritized over the common good (Benedict XVI, 2009, para. 53).

This secular emphasis on personal autonomy, according to Benedict, has weakened the family's role as the primary institution for the transmission of moral and spiritual values. The family, he asserts, is central to the promotion of a culture of life, where human dignity is respected from conception to natural death (Benedict XVI, 2009, para. 15). However, secular ideologies that promote relativism and materialism undermine the family's ability to fulfill this role, leading to social fragmentation and the erosion of community bonds.

In response, *Caritas in Veritate* calls for a renewed commitment to the family as a place of love, education, and moral formation, grounded in the principles of truth and charity. Benedict XVI emphasizes that true human development is impossible without recognizing the centrality of the family in fostering a culture of life and love.

## **5. Globalization and the Tension Between Tradition and Modernity**

### **5.1 Influence of Globalization on Secularization**

Globalization, particularly in the form of increased access to education, media, and technology, has accelerated secularization trends in Sri Lanka. Exposure to global cultures and lifestyles has led to a questioning of traditional religious and cultural practices, particularly among younger generations. This is evident in the growing prevalence of English-medium education, secular career aspirations, and the embrace of technological and scientific advancement (Hettige, 2000).

### **5.2 Negotiating Secularism and Religious Identity**

Although secularization brings new perspectives, Sri Lankan society continues to negotiate between secular modernity and traditional religious identities. Unlike Western models of secularization, which often predict the outright decline of religion, secularization in Sri Lanka leads to a transformation in the way religion is expressed and integrated into cultural identity. Religious festivals, symbols, and moral teachings remain vital in shaping public discourse, even as secular values gain prominence (Wickramasinghe, 2014).

Sri Lankan families often reflect this dynamic, with many families maintaining religious observances while also adapting to modern lifestyles and secular education. This coexistence of tradition and modernity results in a hybrid cultural identity where secular and religious values intersect.

## **6. The Future of Religious Faith and Cultural Values in Secularizing Sri Lanka**

The future of religious faith and cultural values in Sri Lanka depends on the complex interplay between secular and religious forces. While secularization influences cultural and family structures, religion continues to serve as a source of moral guidance, social cohesion, and identity. Future research must explore how these dual forces will shape Sri Lanka's social fabric as the country continues to engage with global modernity.

The ongoing balance between tradition and modernity is likely to define how Sri Lankans navigate religious faith within a secularizing society. The ability of religious institutions and cultural values to adapt to changing social conditions will be key in determining the role of religion in future generations.

## **Conclusion**

Secularization in Sri Lanka has introduced shifts in religious faith, family structures, and cultural values, particularly among younger generations exposed to global influences. While secular ideas increasingly influence personal and social life, religious traditions and values continue to play an important role in shaping moral conduct and cultural identity. Sri Lanka's experience with secularization differs from the Western model, as religion remains an enduring force that evolves rather than disappears. This nuanced interaction between secular and religious values will likely continue to characterize the country's socio-cultural landscape in the years to come.

Therefore, the findings of this study support the hypothesis that secularization has a significant impact on religious faith, family structures, and cultural values in Sri Lanka. The evidence suggests a noticeable shift in societal norms, where the influence of religion on daily life, family dynamics, and traditional cultural practices has diminished over time. This highlights the transformative role of secularization in shaping modern Sri Lankan society."

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