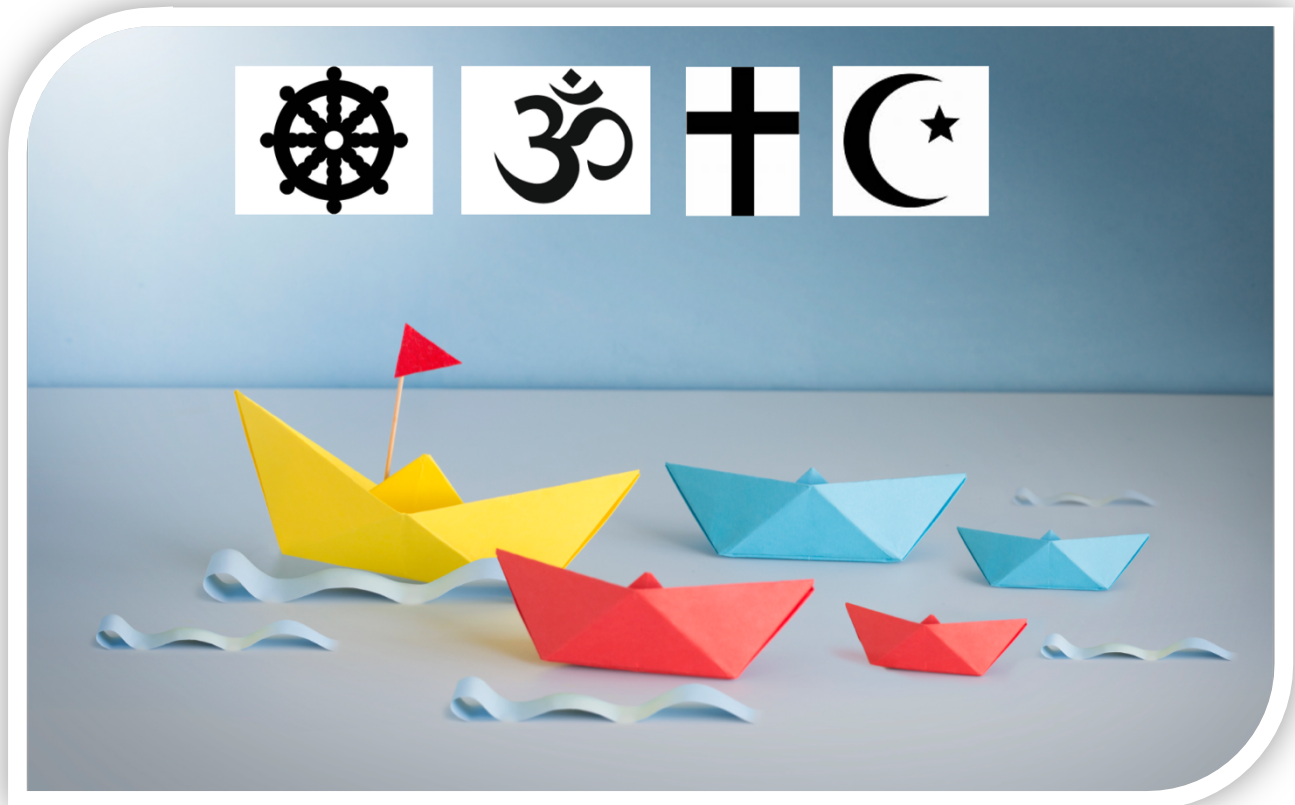


Religious Leaders Can Transform Violent Religious Extremism in Sri Lanka



Sri Lanka is blessed with four major religious traditions along with many other faiths and beliefs. Religion is important for Sri Lankans in their individual, family social, and community life. Sri Lanka has been a sanctuary for different religions and faith traditions to be together, grow and flourish while enriching one another through shared cultural practices.

Violent religious extremism (VRE) refers to advocating, engaging in, preparing, or otherwise supporting violence to further social, economic, and political objectives motivated or justified by religious or faith-based ideologies (USAID, 2020)

Despite the history of religious tolerance and coexistence, violent religious extremism has been a problem that has ravaged the island nation of Sri Lanka in the recent past. Religious leaders, as spiritual, social, and political opinion leaders play a decisive role, both in the generation of extremist ideologies which could escalate into acts of violence, as well as in promoting peace and harmony that go beyond ethnoreligious diversities. Nevertheless, religious leaders are rarely engaged in an in-depth understanding of the arising of violent religious extremism, as well as effective strategies to address it.

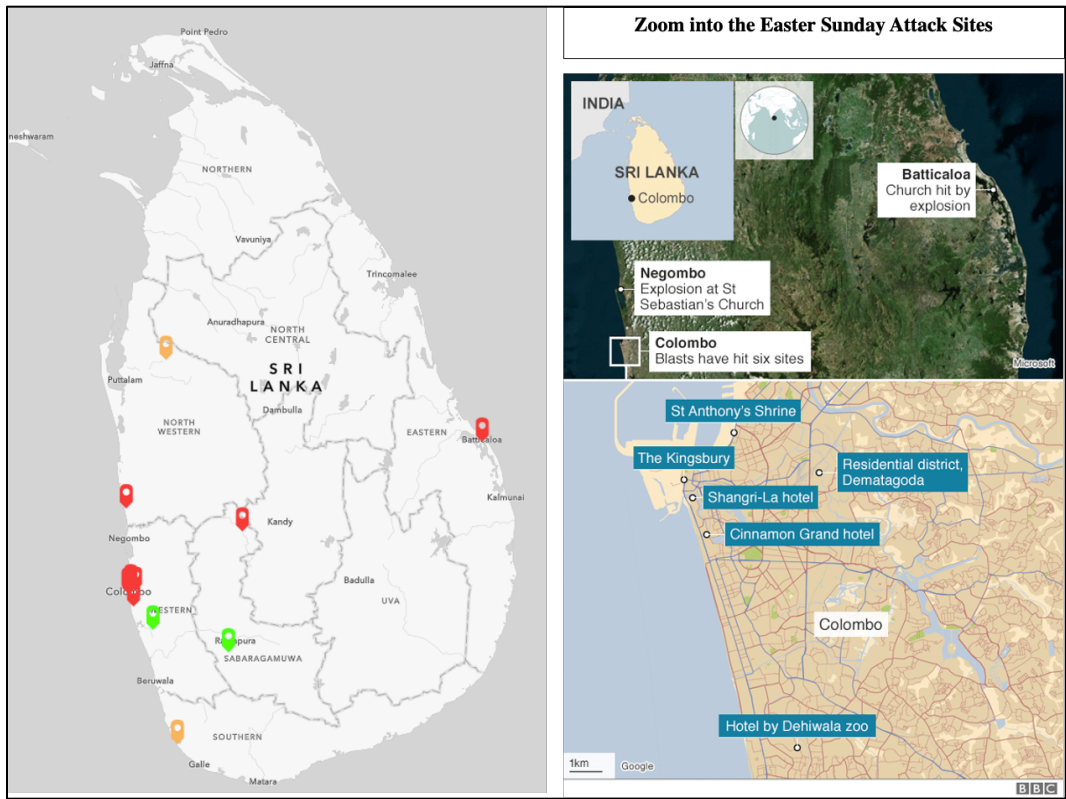
Violent Religious Extremism Needs Urgent Attention.

Religions in Sri Lanka include Buddhism (70.2 %), Hinduism (12.6 %), Islam (9.7 %), Christianity (6.1 %), other Christians (1.3%), and others 0.1%. Religion plays an important role of the lives of Sri Lankans (Wikipedia, 2022). For example, in 2014, Sri Lanka became the third out of 143 with 99% of its people believing religion to be important in their daily lives (Nationmaster.com, 2014).

The Sri Lankan constitution guarantees freedom of opinion, conscience, and religion, as well as the right to change religion. Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity are all recognized religions under the legislation. Buddhism is given the "foremost place" among the country's religious beliefs in the constitution and other legislation, and the government is committed to maintaining it while respecting the rights of religious minorities (Article 10, 12 and 14 Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka 1978., 2020). Despite these safeguards provided by the law of the country, Sri Lanka witnessed several acts of Violent Religious Extremism (VRE) in the recent past including the Easter Sunday Attacks (BBC News, 2019; Firstpost, 2014; Kalaung, 2019; Morningstar News, 2012; *Ominous Rise in Attacks on Sri Lanka's Christians*, 2016; Perera, 2017; Sri Lanka Brief, 2018; Sunil, 2001; Worthynews, 2014) (Figure 1 and 2).

10 May 2001	Personal conflict leads to Sinhala Muslim riots
12 January 2014	Mobs led by radical Buddhist monks attack the Assemblies of God Church and Calvary Free Church.
12 -15 June 2014	<u>Sinhala Muslim Conflict in Aluthgama triggered by an attack by Muslims on a Buddhist monk.</u>
14 January 2017	<u>Buddhists destroy a church in Sri Lanka</u>
05 March 2018	<u>Digana Sinhala Muslim Riots triggered by four muslims beating a Sinhalese person to death for a personal conflict</u>
17 January 2019	Buddha statues damaged in Mawanella
21 April 2019	<u>Easter Sunday Attacks</u>

Figure 1: Timeline of Violent Religious Extremism in Sri Lanka



Red: Islam inspired incidents, Orange: Buddhism Inspired Incidents, Green: Sinhala Muslim Incidents
Figure 2: Map of Selected Acts of Violent Religious Extremism in Sri Lanka

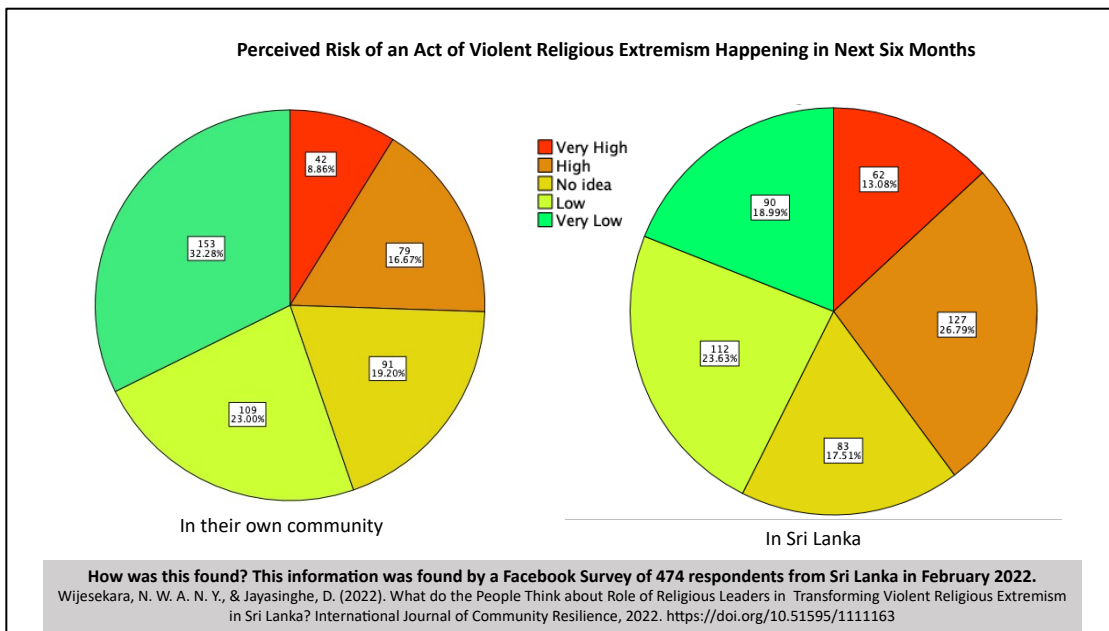


Figure 3: Perceived Risk of Violent Religious Extremism in Sri Lanka by February 2022

Results of a Facebook survey of public opinion on the role of religious leaders in transforming violent religious extremism of 474 respondents from Sri Lanka in February 2022 (VRE Survey 2022) showed the threat that respondents felt both in their community and Sri Lanka as a whole: over a quarter of respondents felt there would be a serious act of VRE could occur in the community within the next six months, with that number increasing to 40% to the entirety of Sri Lanka. In addition, around two out of three respondents thought that the VRE was increasing in Sri Lanka (N. W. A. N. Y. Wijesekara & Jayasinghe, 2022).

Religions, Peace and Violent Extremism has a complex relationship.

With increased risk of VRE, it is important that all stakeholders including religious leaders should clearly understand that the relationship between religion, peace and violent extremism has been complex: All religions are advocating for peace, harmony and non-violence in their scriptures and teachings. However, the lived religion across the world has been a driver of VRE. The OPOS-VRE-22 Survey also showed that people were divided about if religion was contributory or responsible factor for VRE.

A minority of religious leaders can be identified as key drivers of VRE in Sri Lanka. In ongoing investigations into the Easter Sunday attacks, the Government of Sri Lanka identified individuals inspired by extremist religious ideologies as the perpetrators of the attack. On the other hand, the extremist Buddhist religious leadership has been accused of being behind the acts of VRE against Christians or Muslims in Sri Lanka. Over half of respondents of the VRE Survey 2022 strongly agreed or agreed that religious leaders create or aggravate VRE in Sri Lanka.

Despite these identifications and accusations, many religious leaders continue to advocate for peace, harmony, and reconciliation. Four out of five respondents of the VRE Survey 2022 survey said that religious leaders could prevent or minimize VRE: eight out of ten said this could be done within one's own religion while six out of ten agreed that interreligious dialog for the same. through interreligious dialog. Religious leaders being appointed as members of the Presidential Task Force on "One Country, One Law" can be seen as recognition of this decisive role of religious leaders. However, concerns have been raised over some religious leaders in their conflicting role as being perpetrators of VRE.

Religious leaders can transform violent religious extremism.

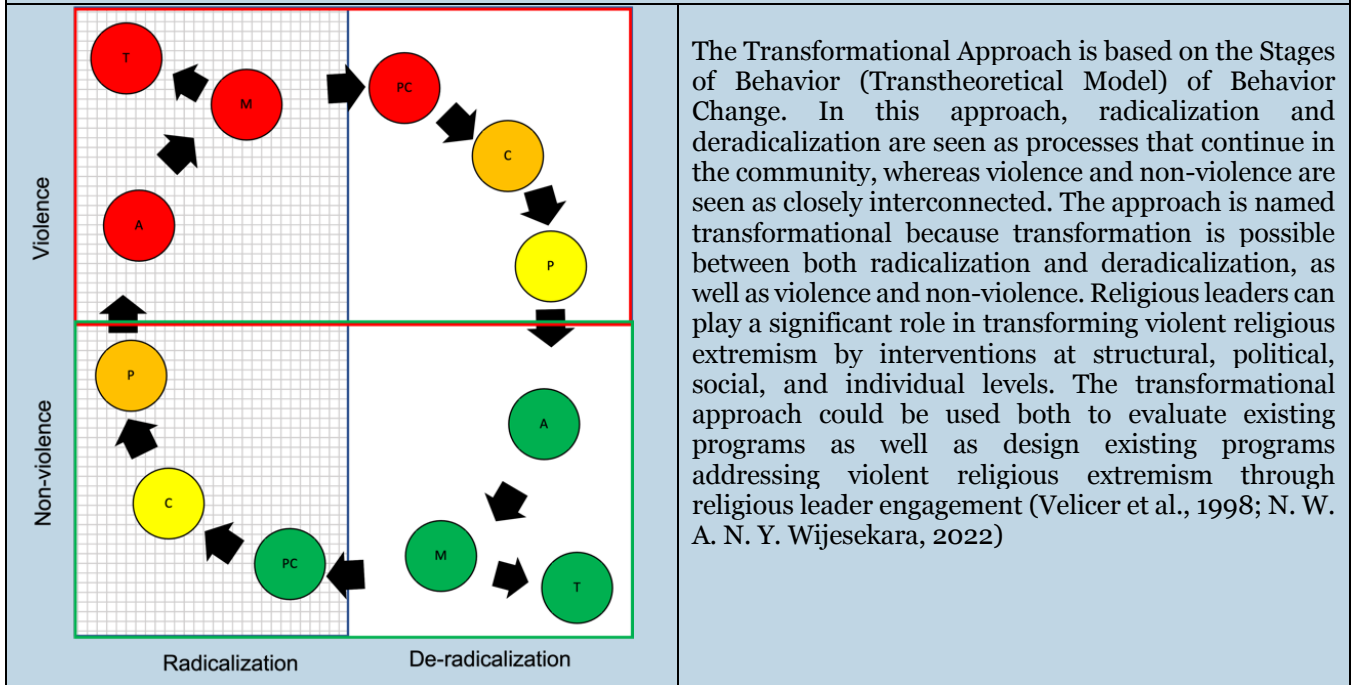
Religious leaders can either create, aggravate, prevent or minimize VRE Nine out of ten respondents in the VRE Survey 2022 survey said that religious leaders should be role models in promoting peace, but eight out of ten also said that they were not doing enough to prevent our counter VRE in Sri Lanka.

How individuals are convinced to adopt acts of violence based on religious beliefs are not clearly understood. People start making up their mind to commit such an act of VRE, much earlier than we see an incident. People do not make up their mind overnight, but in steps. The steps that a person take in becoming a violent religious extremist is called radicalization. A person may move back and forth in these steps before they complete such an act. Some may commit to continue such acts till the end of their life.

On the other hand, people who once did an act of VRE could later decide to give up such decisions. The steps of giving up VRE is called deradicalization. Some individuals may even give up such activities for ever. Falling out from VRE could happen even among those groups who are committing such acts of violent religious extremism.

Without being visible, the processes or radicalization and deradicalization are occurring in our society. Religious leaders can push people in any of these directions. That is why they should understand how these processes well. There are tools which could help religious leaders understand VRE better and design effective solutions (Box 1).

Box 1: Tools such as the Transformative Approach to Violent Religious Extremism could help better understand VRE and design effective solutions



The Transformational Approach is based on the Stages of Behavior (Transtheoretical Model) of Behavior Change. In this approach, radicalization and deradicalization are seen as processes that continue in the community, whereas violence and non-violence are seen as closely interconnected. The approach is named transformational because transformation is possible between both radicalization and deradicalization, as well as violence and non-violence. Religious leaders can play a significant role in transforming violent religious extremism by interventions at structural, political, social, and individual levels. The transformational approach could be used both to evaluate existing programs as well as design existing programs addressing violent religious extremism through religious leader engagement (Velicer et al., 1998; N. W. A. N. Y. Wijesekara, 2022)

What Can Decisionmakers Do to Increase Religious Leader Engagement to Transform Violent Religious Extremism in Sri Lanka?

To engage religious leaders meaningfully to address violent religious extremism in Sri Lanka, decision makers both from the government and civil society should

- Prioritize VRE as a complex and protracted social problem that needs urgent and sustained attention in Sri Lanka.
- Provide complete on how individuals are radicalized and deradicalized within the individual's mindset as well as within the community.
- Encourage each religion to take steps to address VRE occurring within its own congregations.
- Support interreligious networks to design and implement activities to address VRE.
- Increase funding for religious leaders to launch programs to address VRE.

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This Policy Brief was developed by Dr. N.W.A.N.Y Wijesekara for Resilience Research, Training and Consulting, a Sri Lankan Think Tank working to promote community resilience

www.resiliencertc.org

Correspondence: novil.wijesekara@gmail.com

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