INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
IJRF.ORG

Religious minorities in Sri Lanka

Institutional safeguards, and challenges beyond

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Abstract

This study critically examines the marginalization of Christians in Sri Lanka. Although the Constitution nominally guarantees freedom of religion, the preferential status accorded to Buddhism creates an uneven landscape wherein Christians encounter significant challenges in worship practices, church construction, and registering religious places. The post-Civil War era has witnessed a resurgence of ethno-religious nationalism, militarization, and a regression of constitutional safeguards, which have intensified the marginalization of minority communities. By situating the experiences of Christians within the broader discourse on minority rights and religious freedom, this research offers powerful insights into the structural and socio-political mechanisms that perpetuate religious marginalization.

Keywords

Religious freedom, Christian minority, marginalization, Sri Lanka, minority rights.

1. Introduction

Sri Lanka is a small South Asian Island with a predominantly Buddhist population. Sri Lanka's minority communities include Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. The Sri Lankan Constitution grants religious freedom to all minority communities; however, Buddhism is given prominence because most of the population practices the Buddhist religion (Rifai 2020). According to the latest national census (2012), the Sri Lankan population is 70.2 percent Buddhist, 12.6 percent Hindu, 9.7 percent Muslim, and 7.4 percent Christian (U.S. Department of State, 2022). A Pew Research

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Center report (2023) titled *Buddhism, Islam and religious pluralism in South and Southeast Asia* highlights that in Sri Lanka, Buddhism is frequently regarded as more than just a religion; it is a cultural and family tradition that must be followed. The report has revealed that 95 percent of Buddhists consider adherence to Buddhism essential to authentic Sri Lankan identity (Kuruwita, 2023). Sri Lanka's socio-political history reflects a complex relationship between religion and politics. During colonial rule, Buddhism, once dominant, lost its privileged status, leading to a resurgence of Buddhist nationalism among the Sinhalese majority. The growing presence of evangelical Christian movements sparked allegations of forced or unethical conversions, fueling resentment and anti-Christian hostility (Devota 2009). Buddhist monks (bhikkus) emerged as powerful political actors, openly opposing secularism and aligning themselves with Sinhalese political leaders. This politicization of Buddhism further marginalized religious minorities, placing Christians under increased scrutiny and pressure (Devota 2016).

According to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's *2025 annual report*, religious freedom in Sri Lanka continued a concerning trajectory, marked by the systematic targeting of religious minorities. Government authorities, often in collaboration with the Ministry of Buddhasasana, Religious, and Cultural Affairs (BRCA), the Army, and Buddhist monks, continued to target religious minorities, particularly Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, through discriminatory laws, harassment, and land appropriation. Religious minorities also faced significant bureaucratic hurdles in registering and operating places of worship. The BRCA minister mandated that all religious institutions, regardless of their faith, must now register. Authorities threatened to raid "unregistered" places of worship, alleging they were involved in religious conversions (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom 2025).

In 2012, the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), a Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist organization, was established. It rapidly gained prominence and attracted significant media attention. The group asserted that its primary objective was to safeguard the Sinhalese community and the Buddhist faith. It raised concerns about perceived threats to Sinhalese identity in the context of globalization, warning that the Sinhalese could become a "global minority" if such other religions were given full freedom. Buddhist political leaders have been known to exploit religious identities and sentiments for political gain. By appealing to nationalist and religious ideologies, they mobilize support while simultaneously marginalizing minority groups, thereby deepening societal divides and weakening the credibility of constitutional protections (Rifai 2020). Christian groups in Sri Lanka have reported instances of harassment by police and local authorities, primarily through burdensome and inconsistently enforced registration requirements for places of worship. Although

these actions typically do not rise to the level of persecution, government officials often side with the majority Buddhist community in cases of religious disputes.

According to Verité Research's report titled *Trend analysis of violence against Christians in Sri Lanka: November 2022 - October 2023*, 63 incidents of violence or discrimination against Christians were recorded between November 2022 and October 2023, with nearly half involving state actors (Verité Research 2024). Most cases involved threats, intimidation, or discriminatory actions. Beyond state actors, non-state actors, including identifiable individuals, residents, and Buddhist clergy, target Christians. The report also revealed that of the 63 reported instances of violence against Christians from November 2022 to October 2023, 14 (22 percent) involved identifiable individuals and 11 (17 percent) involved Buddhist clergy as perpetrators (Verité Research 2024). Typical attacks against Christians involve physical and verbal threats against pastors, disruption of services, and demands for church closures. Christians in rural areas are particularly susceptible to intimidation, discrimination, and violence. Evangelical Christians are denied public burials and school admissions (or forced to study Buddhism). Building permits for churches are frequently denied or blocked by local monks, and Christians are refused land sales or property rentals. They also encounter biased legal opinions and economic embargoes preventing laborers from working for them (Yogarajah 2008). A significant driver of this intolerance is the fear of Christian expansion through proselytization, with evangelical Christian groups, known for their active proselytizing, often attracting attention and causing friction. The rise of online hate speech, including calls for violence against churches and pastors, and the spread of disinformation further exacerbate the social environment for Christians (DFAT 2024). The state's failure to protect Christian communities from threats, surveillance, and coercive measures further draws attention to the challenges they face in exercising their religious freedom in Sri Lanka (Human Rights Watch 2024).

2. Constitutional contradictions and legal exclusion

In post-colonial Sri Lanka, although state institutions initially functioned within a parliamentary democratic framework, the system gradually evolved into an ethnic majoritarian democracy. This transformation paralleled the rise of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism, which prioritized the interests of the Sinhalese majority. The movement aimed to utilize State mechanisms to promote the Sinhala language, Buddhism, and Sinhalese-Buddhist cultural values. This ideology was institutionalized through the Republican Constitutions of 1972 and 1978, which established Sinhala as the official language, granted Buddhism a privileged position, and obligated the State to actively support the religion (Centre for Policy Alternatives 2013).

Sri Lanka's legal framework regarding religious freedom presents a complex and, at times, contradictory landscape. While Article 10 of the Constitution unequivocally guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, and religion as an inalienable right, and Article 12 ensures equality without discrimination on grounds including religion, the practical application of these rights is significantly impacted by Article 9. This article accords Buddhism "foremost place" and mandates the state to protect the '*Buddha Sasana*' (Minority Rights Group International, 2024). The term *"Sasana"* extends beyond the teachings of the Buddha and is often interpreted as encompassing the broader concept of the Buddhist nation, which includes religious institutions and the monastic clergy (Obeyesekere 2003).

In the case of *Provincial of the Teaching Sisters of the Holy Cross of the Third Order of Saint Francis in Menzingen of Sri Lanka (Incorporation) Bill (2003),* the Supreme Court examined the constitutionality of a private member's bill aimed at incorporating a Catholic institution dedicated to promoting the Catholic faith and providing care for orphans, children, and the elderly. The Court found the bill inconsistent with Article 9 of the Sri Lankan Constitution, which accords Buddhism the "foremost place." It ruled that the propagation of Christianity through the provision of material benefits to non-Christians was impermissible, as it could undermine the existence of Buddhism or the '*Buddha Sasana.*' The judgment reinforced the interpretation that Article 9 restricts the activities of religious minorities in ways that could be perceived as challenging the primacy of Buddhism (Gunatilleke 2023).

Another example of this judicial interpretation is the *2004 Menzingen Sisters* case. In this instance, the Supreme Court ruled that the Constitution does not guarantee the right to propagate religion, specifically stating that "the propagation and spreading of Christianity would not be permissible as it would impair the very existence of Buddhism." This ruling highlights a clear tension between the broad guarantees of religious freedom and the specific protection accorded to Buddhism, suggesting that the rights of the majority religious community may receive greater protection and freedom of manifestation than those of minority religious communities (Wickremesinghe 2009). Further complicating the legal framework are provisions within the Penal Code addressing religious offenses and hate speech, as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Act (ICCPR Act) and the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). The expansion of the draconian and abusive PTA in March 2021 is highlighted as a new tool to target religious and racial minorities, allowing two-year detention without trial for causing religious, racial, or communal disharmony (Swincer 2023). The Online Safety Bill, passed in January 2024, criminalized speech deemed to "outrage religious feelings," a vague standard susceptible to misuse against minority voices.

Table 1: Special clauses related to hate speech in the Penal Code of Sri Lanka

Section	Description
Section 290	Injuring or defiling a place of worship with the intent to insult the religion of any class.
Section 290A	Acts about places of worship with the intent to insult the religion of any class.
Section 291	Disturbing a religious assembly.
Section 291A	Uttering words with deliberate intent to wound religious feelings.
Section 291B	Deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or spiritual beliefs.

Source: MRGI, 2024

The promotion of national, racial or religious hatred that provokes prejudice, animosity or violence is forbidden by section 3(1) of the ICCPR Act. Similarly, any act that incites violence, discord, animosity, or ill will between various religious groups is illegal under section 2(1)(h) of the PTA (Minority Rights Group International 2024). Despite having laws in the Penal Code and the ICCPR Act to address religious offenses and hate speech, the Sri Lankan government has largely failed to effectively protect religious minorities, making it difficult for them to freely practice their faith (Refer to Table 1).

Fundamental liberties like the freedom of expression and the right to practice one's religion are officially protected by Sri Lanka's constitution. However, in practice, majoritarian Sinhala-Buddhist interests frequently curtail these rights. Minorities, although legally entitled to these freedoms, often experience them as conditional or symbolic rather than claimable rights. Courts regularly uphold limitations imposed on religious attire, propagation, worship, and artistic expression if these are perceived to offend Buddhist sensibilities or challenge majoritarian norms. As such, these rights are enjoyed only at the discretion of the majority, reflecting a system of paternalistic toleration rather than true legal entitlement (Gunatilleke 2023).

3. History of Christianity in Sri Lanka

Christianity in Sri Lanka is linked to colonial rule, with Catholicism introduced by the Portuguese in 1505, followed by Protestant denominations brought by the Dutch and British. Despite this history, Christians comprise less than 9 percent of the population (De Visser 2019). Catholics have largely avoided accusations of proselytism by supporting nationalist discourse and opposing evangelical missionary activities (Brown 2021). This colonial introduction often involved suppression of indigenous religions, mainly Buddhism, and preferential treatment for converts, leading to a complex legacy where Christianity became associated

with foreign influence and, for some, a challenge to traditional Sinhala Buddhist identity. Post-independence, the rise of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism has sometimes positioned Christianity as an "other," leading to periods of tension and even violence against Christian communities, despite constitutional provisions for religious freedom. However, Christian communities, comprising both Sinhalese and Tamil adherents, have also played roles in social welfare, education, and, at times, in advocating for human rights and inter-religious dialogue within the diverse fabric of Sri Lankan society (Minority Rights Group International 2018; Religion Media Centre 2019; Rubavathanan 2021).

One of the bloodiest eras in the nation's history was the civil war that raged between the Tamil separatist group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and the largely Sinhalese government until it ended in 2009. However, the post-war period failed to deliver lasting peace or reconciliation (Ganguly 2018). Instead, it gave rise to heightened religious nationalism, particularly among Sinhalese-Buddhist hardliners, who began targeting minority religious communities, including Christians (Gunatilleke 2018). As Buddhist nationalism gained momentum, it created societal divisions and led to communal violence and the increasing marginalization of religious minorities. Among those affected, Christians have faced widespread violations of their rights, including restrictions on religious freedom (DeVotta 2018). These violations take various forms, ranging from threats and intimidation, destruction of churches, and physical assaults, to discrimination, hate propaganda, and harassment by government authorities.

The threat is not uniform, with certain sections of the Christian population appearing "considerably more vulnerable than others." The non-Catholic portion of Christians, representing about 1 percent of the population, is highlighted as "especially vulnerable" (Swincer 2023). Likewise, Bauman and Ponniah (2017) highlight that Christians and other religious minorities experience discrimination, social harassment, and occasionally violence. Again, State laws aimed at preventing "unethical conversions" are seen as potential instruments of oppression against religious minorities (Pearl 2006).

In 2002, the monthly tabloid, the Buddhist Times, was launched as an anti-Christian newspaper. This publication featured distorted and inflammatory articles alongside vivid pictures, aiming to portray Christianity as an enemy of Buddhist culture and religion (Dhammika 2004). Various reports, including those by the U.S. Department of State and Minority Rights Group International, consistently document instances where state actors, particularly police and local government officials, are complicit in harassment, intimidation, and discrimination against Christian minorities. They often side with the majority religious communities, impede the registration and construction of churches, and fail to

adequately investigate and prosecute attacks against Christians. The government led by Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005-2015) is described as turning a blind eye to these attacks (U.S. Department of State 2023; Minority Rights Group International 2024). This culture of impunity for perpetrators of religious violence is a recurring concern (De Silva 2025). The situation highlights the need for politicians to protect minority religious rights in Sri Lanka.

4. Research methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating both primary and secondary data to explore the marginalization of Christians in Sri Lanka. It employs a qualitative research approach, with primary data collected through field observations and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).

A total of 12 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted across the Western and Southern Provinces of Sri Lanka, where Christian communities have a significant presence. The Southern Province comprises the coastal districts of Galle, Hambantota, Matara, and Tangalle. The Western Province includes the maritime districts of Colombo, Negombo, Dehiwala- Mount Lavinia, and Moratuwa.

FGDs' discussions aimed to capture lived experiences, perceptions, and community narratives related to the marginalization of Christians. Participants were selected using convenience sampling and included both men and women from diverse denominational, professional, and educational backgrounds, ensuring a broad representation of perspectives. Each focus group consisted of 8 to 10 participants. It was facilitated by a trained moderator proficient in Sinhala, Tamil, and English, allowing for inclusive and strong discussion across linguistic and cultural contexts. These discussions provided rich qualitative insights into the lived experiences of religious discrimination, social exclusion, and institutional bias.

In addition to FGDs, observational field notes were maintained to record contextual and non-verbal cues, including community interactions, spatial arrangements of worship places, and visible forms of state presence or restriction. The study also utilizes secondary data, systematically gathered from a wide range of credible sources. Official documents from government and non-governmental bodies, and news media articles reporting on incidents of religious persecution have also been analyzed for this study.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1. Patterns of marginalization and discrimination

Christians in Sri Lanka, particularly evangelical communities, have endured systemic marginalization and repeated acts of violence, often perpetrated by lo-

cal groups led by Buddhist monks and religious leaders. These acts range from physical assaults and destruction of church property to the murder of clergy (Minority Rights Group International 2016). Their freedom to practice their religion has been restricted. In 2003, 91 churches were attacked, demolished, or set on fire (Verité Research and NCEASL 2018). In 2009, churches such as the Vineyard Community Church in Kurunegala were desecrated and robbed, while the Assemblies of God Church in Puttalam was set ablaze. Despite its legal status, state authorities destroyed the Calvary Christian Church in Rajagiriya the following year, demonstrating the public's and government's animosity towards Christian organizations (NCEASL 2019; NCEASL 2020).

Violence continued into the next decade. In 2011, the Prayer Tower Church in Marawila was desecrated using human excrement, and in 2012, mob-led disruptions, including Buddhist monks, damaged church properties and interrupted services in Puttalam. In the early 2010s, religious icons were destroyed, and worshippers were threatened at the St. Thomas Church in Kandy and the Good Shepherd Church in Badulla. A group of about 200 people, including monks, stormed the Apostolic Church in Nikaweratiya in January 2013, threatening the clergy and causing significant damage. In May, the Good Shepherd Church in Badulla was again vandalized by a group of around 50, including Buddhist monks (CPA 2013).

The trend persisted in subsequent years. The Hope Church in Panadura was attacked in 2014 by 60 individuals led by monks, while the Calvary Christian Church in Anuradhapura was vandalized by unidentified assailants. In 2015, attacks were reported on St. Anthony's Church in Jaffna and St. Thomas Church in Kandy. In June 2016, the Evangelical Church in Matara was targeted by around 50 people, including monks, who disrupted the service and assaulted members. Thirty individuals looted and desecrated the Galle Seventh-day Adventist Church in 2017. The Bethel Church in Colombo was severely damaged in July 2018 by a mob of around 70. The Vineyard Community Church in Kurunegala, previously attacked in 2009, was again targeted in January 2019 (NCEASL 2019; Kaur and Oberoi 2025). A 2016 report highlighted that 60 percent of violations were perpetrated by state actors, including police and administrative authorities, through misapplication of laws and failure to protect victims. Additionally, religious nationalist groups and mobs have contributed significantly to this hostility (Minority Rights Group International 2016).

Over the years, incidents of violence against Christians have escalated, peaking in 2019 with the tragic Easter Sunday bombings that killed over 250 people. More recent incidents include the 2020 vandalism of the Holy Cross Church in Batticaloa, the 2021 mob assault on the Grace Church in Vavuniya, and the 2022 attack on the Life Church in Colombo by a group of around 50 individuals, resulting in property destruction and physical assaults. These incidents reflect enduring

communal tensions and systemic violence against Christian minorities (NCEASL and Verité Research 2022; Oberoi and Kaur 2025). Forty-three incidents of anti-Christian violence and intimidation, including threats, disruptions of services, and physical attacks, were documented in 2023 alone (NCEASL 2024; Persecution.org 2024).

Open Doors International's report of 2025, *Sri Lanka: Persecution Dynamics – WWL 2025 reporting period 1 October 2023 - 30 September 2024,* highlighted some major incidents of violence against the religious freedom of the Christian community, more specifically. According to the report, a group of 25 Buddhist monks surrounded a pastor's home in a southern village on Sunday, 31 December 2023, threatening to beat him and drive him out if he persisted in holding church services. In response, the pastor courageously adapted by dividing his congregation into smaller groups to continue worship discreetly (Open Doors International 2025).

In 2024, Christians in Sri Lanka continued to face serious persecution and intimidation from both local communities and religious leaders. In March 2024, anonymous letters containing false accusations against a local church were distributed to households in a village. Soon after, local Buddhist monks and villagers submitted a petition to authorities demanding the cessation of the church's activities. Another incident occurred in July 2024; violence escalated when a pastor was stabbed and seriously injured. The attacker was reportedly influenced by residents who claimed the pastor was receiving foreign funds to build a church, highlighting the dangerous misinformation and hostility faced by the Christian community throughout the year (Open Doors International 2025:7).

5.2. Content analysis from focus group discussions

Several key themes emerged from the discussions. Christians live with fear of attacks and conceal their Christian identities. They face institutional bias. As a result, they have developed strategies of resistance and resilience.

5.2.1. Fear of attacks and religious expression

A dominant concern raised across all FGDs was the pervasive fear among Christians of facing backlash for expressing their faith. Participants reported a heightened sense of vulnerability, citing incidents of both verbal and physical aggression targeted at individuals and Christian institutions. These included episodes of vandalism of churches, hostile remarks, threats, and public ostracization.

A female participant from Western Province said, "They call us outsiders in our own land. I have lived here for 45 years, but during festivals, we are not even acknowledged." Such fears are not abstract but grounded in real experiences. Participants shared accounts of discrimination in employment, education, and social inter-

actions. The threat of being identified as Christian was compounded by the potential for violent retaliation. Several participants also alluded to the 2019 Easter Sunday church bombings as a turning point, after which churches became heavily guarded, while Christian community organizations became harder to locate or openly operate. The researcher corroborated these claims during field visits, noting that while churches were visibly guarded, offices of Christian organizations were discreet or difficult to find. The securitization of Christian spaces reflects the community's ongoing anxiety and reinforces the perception of being targeted and unsafe.

5.2.2. Concealment of religious identity in public and professional spaces

A common pattern observed was the deliberate hiding of one's religious affiliation as a method of dealing with challenges. Many Christians mentioned they would refrain from outwardly displaying their beliefs, for instance, by not wearing religious symbols or engaging in religious conversations in open spaces. This form of self-censorship was particularly prevalent in professional environments, where participants feared discrimination or reprimand. A participant working in a Colombo hotel said, "We are told by our employer not to disclose our religious identity if anyone asks." This was mostly a problem in places like hotels, stores, and factories, where Christian workers were told or felt like they had to hide their faith. People also avoided using religious phrases or symbols in public places like parks, malls, or on public transportation to avoid causing tension or conflict.

The concealment of religious identity was not merely a reaction to immediate threats but also a manifestation of cumulative experiences of marginalization. Participants indicated having observed or endured mockery, stereotyping, and social exclusion in both personal and professional contexts. The internalization of fear and the resulting behavioral modifications illustrate the serious extent of religious marginalization in everyday life.

5.2.3. The case of Pastor Jerome Fernando: Legal and cultural ramifications

A recurring reference in multiple discussions was the 2023 prosecution of Pastor Jerome Fernando, a prominent Christian leader charged with blasphemy[3] for allegedly making remarks deemed offensive to Buddhism. This case was frequently cited as emblematic of the contested nature of religious freedom in Sri Lanka, highlighting the differential treatment of religious communities by the state. Par-

3 Sri Lanka's blasphemy laws are defined in Articles 291A and 291B of the Penal Code, which prohibit utterances that are meant to hurt or offend religious sensitivities. Violations may result in imprisonment for up to two years, a fine, or both. These laws are criticized for potentially violating free speech and being used to target minorities and government critics.

ticipants highlighted the incident as an example of a larger institutional bias in which minority religious figures, particularly those from the Christian community, face immediate legal consequences. In contrast, members of the majority religious group are rarely held accountable for similar derogatory statements about minority faiths. A male participant from Western Province said, "We are afraid to even talk about our religion now. One wrong word, and we could be arrested like Pastor Jerome."

Participants believed that blasphemy laws and cultural standards were implemented unfairly, further marginalizing Christians and limiting open discussion about religious problems. The case of Jerome Fernando sparked broader debates about institutional bias, state surveillance, and the dwindling space for minority religious perspectives.

5.2.4. Institutional bias and legal vulnerabilities

The FGD participants exposed institutional bias against Christians in Sri Lanka. There was a strong conviction that laws governing land use, public assembly, and religious registration were either deliberately delayed or selectively enforced against Christian groups. Due to this legal vulnerability, Christians face challenges in building churches and hosting public events. Due to this systemic discrimination, the community has been forced to adopt alternative strategies, such as operating under the guise of house churches or trusts.

The FGD participants used words like "religious," "fear," "discrimination," and "beliefs" to express worries about safety and social acceptance, showing the intolerance regularly faced by Christians in Sri Lanka. Many people hide their beliefs to avoid bad consequences.

5.2.5. Resistance and resilience of the Christian community in Sri Lanka

The conversation with the FGDs also revealed how the Christian community in Sri Lanka has become more resilient. For example, to provide social services preventing the impression of proselytization, Christian organizations increasingly collaborate with Buddhist clergy and government agencies.

In order to combat discrimination and address unjust state actions, the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) and Religious Liberty Commission (RLC) have been very active in legal advocacy. The RLC advocates for religious freedom before national and international organizations, provides legal assistance, and informs Christians of their constitutional rights. It also works closely with Muslim leaders to monitor religious violence against all minorities and has spearheaded movements for institutional reform, including the creation of a Ministry of Christian Affairs. These joint and legal initiatives demonstrate the

Christian community's vibrant civic engagement in support of democratic rights and pluralism.

Many Christians have adopted regional religious and cultural customs to counteract the pervasive belief that Christianity is a vehicle promoting foreign influence. Celebrations such as the Sinhala-Buddhist New Year, Buddhist almsgiving traditions, and participation in ecumenical religious holidays (e.g., Poya and Vesak) demonstrate intentional efforts to assimilate into mainstream Sri Lankan society. Methodists, Catholics, and other religions support interfaith activities, encourage cultural awareness among converts, and prohibit public displays or disturbance during sacred Buddhist observances. These approaches reflect a deliberate shift towards contextual theology and community-based ministry fitted to Sri Lanka's distinct religious landscape.

Furthermore, respondents claimed that a lack of institutional support and increased religious antagonism pushed Christian communities to migrate to nations with more inclusive cultures. Christian leaders in Sri Lanka and overseas have aided these migrant movements by offering leadership and developing support networks. These travel patterns not only reflect sociopolitical marginalization but also demonstrate the global reach of the Christian community's coping strategies.

5.2.6. Synthesis

Across all themes, the focus group findings show that Christians in Sri Lanka face multi-layered marginalization that includes fear of propagating religion, facing legal vulnerability, and social isolation. A wider crisis of religious freedom and pluralism in the nation is reflected in selective legal enforcement. These results support the study's main argument that state policies, social pressures, majoritarian politics, and internalized coping mechanisms all contribute to the structural and experiential marginalization of Christians in Sri Lanka.

6. Reclaiming religious freedom: normative recommendations

Promoting inclusive governance and social cohesion requires the enactment of policies that foster tolerance, diversity, respect for human rights, and equitable governance for all communities. All acts of violence, discrimination, intimidation, and hate speech based on religious affiliation should be investigated and prosecuted promptly and impartially, irrespective of the identity of the perpetrators. In this regard, judicial sensitivity must be strengthened to ensure the fair and impartial handling of cases involving religious violence and discrimination against Christians, with those responsible being held accountable under the law. Legislative reforms are equally important to safeguard Christian religious freedoms and minority rights by strengthening existing legal frameworks, introduc-

ing effective protective measures, and ensuring equal treatment for all religious communities. Furthermore, a fundamental shift in attitudes is needed among government institutions, law enforcement agencies, and civil society to foster a culture of inclusivity and actively protect the rights of religious minorities. Finally, international engagement should be strengthened through collaboration with international human rights organizations and foreign missions to draw global attention to issues concerning religious freedom and minority rights in Sri Lanka and to encourage meaningful measures to address these challenges.

7. Conclusion

The analysis of religious freedom and minority rights in Sri Lanka discloses a worst-case scenario of marginalization of the Christian population. Although there are constitutional articles that guarantee freedom of thought, conscience, and religion and the prohibition of discrimination, Christians regularly experience fear, verbal and/or physical assault, and systematic discrimination in fields of employment, education, and social life. This atmosphere is so pervasive that it often causes people to cover up their religious identity even in the workplace and other social settings, revealing a significant gap between legal frameworks and lived reality.

In response to this persecution, the Christian population has adopted primarily nonviolent strategies, mindful of its minority position within a predominantly Buddhist country and the limited commitment to democratic values. However, regardless of the changing governments in Sri Lanka, violence and discrimination remain consistent. Legal reforms, like modifying the Buddhism clause (because it gives preference to the Buddhist faith), or removing old legislation, are unquestionably necessary. At the same time, constitutional protections and amendments to laws are ineffective without a broader political revolution that dismantles entrenched majoritarianism and promotes a truly inclusive political culture (Gunatilleke 2023). At the grassroots level, religious leaders, civil society actors, and interfaith-based organizations such as the National Peace Council and Caritas Sri Lanka have worked together to encourage interreligious cooperation in Sri Lanka. In a situation where top-down political solutions have frequently failed to address long-standing grievances and mistrust among religious communities, such bottom-up peacebuilding initiatives are essential, as stated by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2019).

Oberoi and Kaur (2025) also argued that religious plurality is necessary in Sri Lanka's multi-religious society, where Buddhism is the majority religion but Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity are also practiced. Encouraging mutual respect, tolerance, and understanding among different religious groups promotes peace-

ful coexistence. Pluralism reduces community conflicts and promotes a sense of belonging and inclusivity. As a result, this study supports the idea of establishing a pluralistic society in which an existing multi-religious society can allow all citizens to peacefully practice their faith.

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