

“Contributions of Religious Institutions to The Social Development: Case of All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama in Sri Lanka”

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ABSTRACT

This investigation examines the practical and logistical contributions of religious elements to social development through various activities related to societal behaviors. It explores how religion shapes human societies by standardizing religious emotions, beliefs, and practices, as well as by disseminating and sustaining them. Religion serves as a powerful instrument for social control and integration, promoting growth. Unfortunately, this sector is often undervalued in many policy and social development frameworks. Within this context, the study evaluates the role of the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU) in Sri Lanka, a religious institution and the supreme council of Muslim religious scholars. To achieve this, qualitative data was collected and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that the ACJU strives to provide spiritual leadership to the Muslim community while contributing to the welfare of the entire nation. Its efforts include promoting social harmony and coexistence within Sri Lanka's pluralistic society, supporting the export economy, and engaging in social-finance activities.

Keywords: Religion, ACJU, HAC-Halal, coexistence, zakat.

INTRODUCTION

Religions play important roles in the process of social and economic development. In most societies, especially in developing countries, religious beliefs strongly shape or influence the political and economic institutions, and hence either hamper or spur overall development (Basedau, 2015). However, despite their potentially important role in prosperity, religions have been neglected areas in development policy and development cooperation. Middle age history reveals long-lasting conflicts between religious (church) and political (Monarchs) institutions in power in the European and Christian world. As a result, the secular political institutions thrived in overruling such religious elements and paralyzing them within religious entities (Blumenthal, 2016).

The historical separation of church and state in medieval Europe significantly shaped modern development policy. Secularization led aid organizations to view religion as a private or irrelevant issue, but today, many recognize its strong influence on social norms, values, and community economic behavior. The medieval Church's power and conflicts with monarchs contributed to secular states, which influenced early development theories to exclude religion from planning (Barro & McCleary, 2003).

Islam guides mankind religiously and culturally throughout history to live from birth to death, especially the Muslims in a strict manner. Religious credentials are highly respected and often determine leadership in villages and towns in the predominantly Muslim society. Religious scholars are called ulama (scholars). Instructions and judgments of religious scholars are based on the word of Allah the Almighty as cited in the Holy Qur'an or the practices of Muhammad (SAW) the last messenger of Allah. Scholars are often connected to other senior scholars and religious leaders in a vast network throughout the Islamic world. Scholars can be exceedingly powerful and influence entire regions. Their word is generally considered reliable.

This study aims to provide a clear understanding of religion and its role in shaping human life. As well as it also examines the position of the ACJU among Muslims in Sri Lanka, highlighting its influence on social conduct and its ongoing contributions to the nation's progress. Specifically, the study seeks to identify the role of religion in human activities in general, evaluate the contributions of the ACJU to social development in Sri Lanka and assess the efforts made by the ACJU to promote social cohesion among multi ethnic communities.

Theoretical context

Since this study focuses on an institute dedicated to the development and guidance of a specific community, serving the betterment of the nation through spiritual and social platforms, it draws on several relevant theories to provide a meaningful evaluation. Accordingly, the following theories are considered important:

Social Capital Theory: This theory emphasizes the role of social networks, norms, and trust in facilitating cooperation for mutual benefit. Religious institutions like the ACJU build social capital by fostering community bonds, trust, and collective action, which enhance social development.

Functionalist Theory: From a sociological perspective, this theory views religion as serving essential functions in society, such as social cohesion, moral guidance, and support systems. The ACJU's roles in education, welfare, and ethical guidance align with these functions, contributing to societal stability and development.

Liberation Theology: This theory highlights the role of religious institutions in advocating for social justice and the empowerment of marginalized groups. ACJU's efforts to uplift the Muslim community economically and socially can be seen through this lens.

Resource Mobilization Theory: This theory explains how organizations, including religious ones, mobilize resources (financial, human, social) to achieve social change. The ACJU's ability to harness community resources for education and welfare illustrates this concept.

Cultural Transmission Theory: This theory suggests that religious institutions are key in transmitting values, norms, and knowledge across generations, thus shaping social behavior and development. ACJU's educational activities contribute to preserving cultural and religious identity while promoting social values.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

In order to gain a better insight into the institutional structure, progress, and services rendered by the ACJU over decades and its dedication to keeping solidarity within societies, and works for peacekeeping in the motherland, the study relied on qualitative methodology which is most suitable to addresses the how and why research questions and enables a deeper understanding of a context. Qualitative research allows the researcher to ask questions that cannot be easily put into numbers to understand human experience (Cleland, 2017). In addition, Qualitative research can be used to gather in-depth insights into a problem or generate new ideas for research (Bhandari, 2020).

The most commonly used data collection techniques of qualitative methods can be classified into three broad categories: (1) interviews (individual or group), (2) observation methods, and (3) document review (Cleland, 2017). Hence, structured and semi-structured interviews were conducted with a number of office bearers, executive committee members, members of the ACJU, and, a range of documented data and sources such as books, journals, newsletters, souvenirs, electronic collections, etc. employed for this study.

Survey of literature

Role of religion in human life

Human beings are religious by nature. They seek a higher purpose outside themselves. Whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, or any other religion or faith offers a framework by which people find meaning,

belonging, and identity. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has written, religion gives us “a feeling of participating in something vast and consequential (Sacks, 2011).

All societies have some moral basis, whether derived from religion, philosophy, custom, or any number of sources. Religious values should not be dismissed from the public square any more than the vast array of other positive values. Throughout the history of civilizations, religions have played essential roles in many societies. There are many reasons why religions have played such a prominent role in defining the culture of a society, but arguably the most notable of these reasons is that a belief or faith in a spiritual or divine power can add meaning and significance to many people’s worldly lives (Meeker, 2017).

Religion deserves to be upheld and honored in our culture. It has enormous capacity and obligation to lift individuals, strengthen communities, and protect humanity's dignity. As a result, faith and society are inextricably linked. As Christian Pastor Rick Warren has stated, “A truly free society protects all faiths, and true faith protects a free society (Warren, 2013). With mutual respect and civility, we can all live, and even thrive, despite our greatest differences. Religion will remain not only important but also a vital component of what it is to be human as long as people continue to seek meaning, purpose, and community.

Religion carries out a variety of functions from individual and societal points of view: 1. Religion brings mental peacefulness, 2. Religion give details for individual grief, 3. Religion implants social intrinsic worth, 4. Religion encourages social harmony, 5. Religion alters animal qualities to human qualities, 6. Religion promotes prosperity, 7. Religion provides reformation, 8. Religion serves as a source of social solidity, 9. Religion influences the economy, 10. Religion influences the political system, 11. Religion strengthens self-confidence (Davie, 2004).

When people consider the purpose of life, many questions arise: where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? And so on. It is proven that there is wisdom behind the creation of mankind from the standpoint of shari'ah (Islamic law), but it is also proven from the standpoint of reason. The wise man cannot deny that things were created for a reason, and the wise man considers himself above doing things in his own life for no reason, so how about Allaah, the Wisest of the Wise? (Eduburdie, 2022).

The noble Quran says: “Not without purpose did We Create heaven and earth And all between! That Were the thought of Unbelievers. But woe to the Unbelievers Because of the Fire (of Hell)” (Quran, 38:27)

So, mankind is a creature with more distinctions than any other creature on the planet. Because one of the most significant responsibilities they play is global governance. As a result, the creator granted mankind command over all other creatures. The noble Quran says: “And, O Muhammad, when Your Lord said to the angels, "Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority" (Quran 02:30). “And He has subjected to you whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth - all from him. Indeed in that are signs for a people who give thought” (Quran, 45:13). Hence, mankind is able to use space, oceans, wind, wildlife, etc. for his convenience.

Secularism and religious segments

Before the centralization of the church system and the advent of the ecclesiastical primacy the emperor was the head of both the secular and spiritual worlds and the church did not hesitate to show obligations to the secular power. But when the supremacy of the spiritual organization was established beyond doubt, the church fathers proceeded to bring the political world under their full control and then commenced the conflict between the two (Monalesa, 2017). Since the 4th century when Christianity was legaliz’ed in the Roman Empire, churches tried to influence the lives of the Europeans through involvement in people's daily lives, including the government of marriage, abortion, and divorce. Their secular involvement was also reflected in their administration over large tracts of land (Rodney, 1996).

Once more, there was potential for conflict in the area of exercising the authority of the temporal and spiritual authorities. For both of them, a compromised formula was unacceptable. Tensions increased and it seemed that

a confrontation would inevitably arise. The accumulation of wealth in the hands of the church fathers may be regarded as another cause of conflict between the two. There was a gulf of difference between what the churches preached and what it practiced (Monalisa, 2017).

While the church advised the people to adopt plain living and high thinking, it led to a very luxurious and comfortable life and for that purpose; it received monetary donations from the people (Thomas, 1901). The church's fund gradually started to fill up with wealth, and soon it possessed an incredible quantity of money, which encouraged the church fathers to get involved in politics and other secular endeavors.

Prominent thinker on religion and society Jurgen Habermas wrote that among the modern societies of today, “only those that can introduce into the secular domain the essential contents of their religious traditions which point beyond the merely human realm will also be able to rescue the substance of the human (Habermas, 2010).

The situation boosted the clashes between religious institutions and the state authorities until resulted in marginalizing the religion from the secular life, in other words, religion has been constrained within the boundary of churches. This practice gradually extended to other parts of the world and the other faiths as well (Backford, 2012).

However, such practice in the Muslim community is less, in comparison with the other faith-based societies since the congregational tie between religion and society is still alive and continues to a measurable degree in the Muslim community. Even though, it is obvious that the interaction with global societies began influencing the traditions of the Muslim societies. Hence, the survival of this religious relation has been challenged throughout history (Kuran, 2018).

The major religious institution of Sri Lankan Muslims and its role in shaping the society

All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU) is the religious body of Islamic Theologians that provides religious and community leadership to the Sri Lankan Muslim Community. This institution was established in 1924 and incorporated into the Parliament of Sri Lanka in 2000. The ACJU as an institution strives for the Muslim community’s spiritual and temporal advancement and has established 163 divisional branches in all 25 administrative districts of Sri Lanka with more than 10,000 membership of theologians its members, among them whom with higher educational qualifications; like doctoral, master's, bachelors and other special qualifications.

Besides fulfilling its religious obligations to the community, the ACJU has evolved into an organization focused on fostering cooperation and coordination among communities, while emphasizing social service on a national level. To extend its support, several subdivisions have been established to provide comprehensive services to both the Muslim community and the nation. The ACJU is steadily progressing towards becoming a unique institution contributing significantly to nation-building efforts.

The ACJU consists of:

No	Sub Division	Tasks
1	Council for Cooperation and Coordination	To promotes humanitarian values by fostering unity and peaceful coexistence between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, uniting Islamic groups like Da’wah organizations and Tharīqās and collaborating with other faiths, enhancing inter-community relations through dialogue, discussions, conventions, and public guidance, especially via Friday Jumu’ah sermons.
2	Social Service Division	The committee focuses on relief aid, social services, and counseling by training Ulama in disaster management and collaborating with regional social service entities for rehabilitation. It ensures funds raised for specific projects are used appropriately, and any surplus redirected to similar initiatives, assisting both Muslims and non-Muslims on humanitarian grounds.
3	Education	To provide services to schools, universitites and Arabic colleges to ensure beter educational environment

4	Fatwa Division	As a recognized religious body to deliver guidance carries out this unique project with the consensus of opinion among Ulama of different Schools of Thought. • simplifying and presenting religious rules in matters that may cause confusion for the people and to create a lifestyle of peace and harmony. delivering clear and accurate solutions and guidance to issues of a religious nature.
5	Hilal (Crescent) division	This Committee guides to understand the Hijri Months, Salah (prayer) times, and accurate Qiblah directions using a moon-sighting mechanism developed to international standards. Regional Hilaal sub-committees assist in implementation. Public announcements of Hijri months are made via SMS, emails, the ACJU website, and printed calendars. The Committee also uses a sun-based system to ensure precise Qiblah direction guidance.
6	Ulama affairs	The Committee supports Islamic Scholars by standardizing the Madarasa education system, facilitating training for Ulama in spiritual, academic, and skill development, and identifying qualified Ulama to best serve the community. It aids Ulama in pursuing higher Islamic studies, improves their living standards, creates self-employment opportunities with vocational training, and honors the veteran Ulama.
7	Propaganda committee	Assists the community in dispelling misinformation about misguided movements and conducts awareness programs on topics such as Hajj, Ramadhaan, family life, and unity.

The study revealed that most of the above subdivisions are dedicated to reaching the focused visions, with the support of the stakeholders in the community, and make these efforts fruitful in the plural society. Also, there some other sub committees work for the fostering the service of this institutions towards the community and the entire nation.

Contributions of the ACJU to social harmony and sustaining peace in the Country

Socio-cultural factors are the most important elements in identifying a society's development and dignity. Since the Muslim community in Sri Lanka is a minority it has its concerns in managing its inter and intra-community affairs within a plural society, with keeping the religious-cultural obligations and identities.

Muslims in Sri Lanka have a long history of peaceful coexistence with other communities. The ACJU plays a key role in promoting peace and harmony through dialogue. Over the past 30 years, despite challenges from ethnic tensions, the ACJU has effectively managed these issues through media conferences, personal visits, and efforts to encourage tolerance and unity.

The records revealed that the ACJU participated in a large number of relief actions including natural disasters at national and international levels to share other people's grievances in brotherhood and harmoniously. Also, the ACJU has had several moves towards peacekeeping missions at the national level through supporting security measures and the defense sector as well as bringing support from foreign nations to strengthen the land's constancy.

The contribution of the ACJU to the economic development

On the other hand, The ACJU contributes to the economic development of the country in direct and indirect ways for a long period. The subdivisions such; as the economic and finance advisory committee and halal committee in the ACJU dedicated to the economic development within the society and at the national levels.

The Islamic Economics and Finance Division working as; a committee aims to work with the financial and economic aspects of the Muslim community, as well as to streamline the processes of handling matters related to Zakat (wealth tax), Sadaqa (charity), inheritance, and others (ACJU prospectus-1924-2014).

According to the interviews responses, the committee collects information at the masjid level on the economic needs of the people, in order to provide assistance and guidance to those in need. Further, steps are taken to provide vocational training in order to improve the people's livelihoods and to provide assistance for technical studies for those who discontinued school education due to financial inabilities and other reasons. The committee

also will be guiding people in securing job opportunities and starting small industries through microfinance projects (case study for the institutional survey).

Also, the committee is tasking guidance for zakat collection and disbursement activities at masjids and/or federations of masjids levels. Also, the committee undertakes seminars and workshops to educate people on zakat calculation and disbursement. Besides, efforts to establish a baithul mal system based on masjids or masjid-related organizations to provide interest-free loans to SME individuals in order to boost livelihood and financial backgrounds. Most of these efforts are carried out by the ACJU branch network as shown through field observation.

Another milestone the ACJU founded to serve the community and the nation as a whole is The Halal Certification Committee. It is a not-for-profit organization registered under the Companies Act No. 7 of 2007 as a Company Limited by Guarantee. The committee was founded to guarantee clean and healthy food consumption for all with special reference to the Islamic guidance for lawful consumption. And, it has been dedicated to providing accreditation for a number of local products to export to halal consumers around the world, particularly in the Middle East. As well as the projects of the committee helped to encourage tourists from Muslim countries to visit Sri Lanka, regarding the availability of Halal products (Centenary of service, 2023).

The halal certificate which was granted by the ACJU with the great intention of observing the challenges of the modern world and thereby formulating a framework for a healthy lifestyle was widely acknowledged by not only the Muslims but also the non-Muslim masses.

Yet, dated since 2014.01.01 the ACJU had handed over the issuance of the halaal certificate to a private institution namely the Halaal Accreditation Committee (HAC), and the ACJU would direct and guide such an institution only on matters of shariah and has been acting upon such till this day (Prospectus of the ACJU, 1924-2014).

Services offered by the Halal Committee include; setting authentic Halal standards, certifying enterprises who volunteer to incorporate Halal standards within their organizational systems, auditing and supervising certified companies and products to ensure proper adherence to the specifications of the standards and consulting and aiding in the implementation of standards within willing corporate entities to fulfill their goals and objectives.

Then the HAC ensures the highest quality in setting Halal standards for the country, supervision of Halal certified products and companies, and assuring complete and total compliance with the Halal concept including cleanliness, healthiness, and purity of products and processes. An organization of repute, HAC is certified for ISO 9001: 2015 Quality Management System (QMS) certification by the Sri Lanka Standards Institute.

The council is accredited by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Accreditation Centre (UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait) based on standards GSO 2055-2:2015 & ISO/IEC 17065:2012 and is globally recognized by leading authorities which include, JAKIM (Malaysia), MUI (Indonesia), ESMA (UAE), MUIS (Singapore), CICOT (Thailand), to name a few.

In an independent study conducted, it was noted that HAC has facilitated over 65% of Sri Lanka's food and beverage exports, valued at USD 1.6 billion per annum, and has the future potential to further propel exports into the burgeoning Halal consumer market, valued at US\$ 2 Trillion. The HAC organization services a diverse range of clients, of which 80% is owned by Non-Muslims. These clients locally manufacture and export a range of products which predominantly include indigenous cash crops such as tea, coconut-based products, and spices to name a few.

Also, the international recognition of HAC Halal compliance certification is indeed a value addition to HAC clients as it allows them access to the global halal market. HAC is a member of the World Halal Food Council. HAC has established mutual recognition and acceptance with over 75 prominent and prestigious Halal certification bodies in the world amongst which are JAKIM of Malaysia; IFANCA and AFH of USA; MUI of

Indonesia; HFA of UK; SMUI of Singapore; SANHA of South Africa; HC of Germany; CICOT of Thailand, FIANZ of New Zealand; HFCE of Belgium; CDIAL and FAMBRAS of Brazil; GIMDES of Turkey; AFIC and ICCV of Australia...

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

In order to achieve the objective of this research, the study sought to assess the role of religious components via the pertinent theories in the sustainable management of national transitions, particularly in terms of the role of the ACJU, it has been revealed that the majority of the ACJU subdivisions are committed to achieving their targeted objectives, aided by community stakeholders, hence these initiatives are successful in a diverse society.

This institution has also attempted to correct misconceptions among other religious organizations about the Muslim community in this country. To address controversial issues, it engages in healthy and extensive discussions with the relevant parties for as long as necessary. While this study discovered that this institution plays an important function in leading followers toward tolerance and harmonious living while increasing cultural similarity and sustaining the emergence of cultural diversity within communities.

As a religious institution, it has a tremendous impact on propagating and implementing the global idea of sustainable development for the entire community and nation by instilling religious and cultural values in education systems.

Another significant purpose for this institution is to contribute to the restoration and reconciliation of natural catastrophe victims, as well as to the implementation of microfinance initiatives for the underprivileged. The ACJU contributes to the operation of an interest-free financial system, which has been recognized by over 100 countries worldwide, as well as the IMF. In this task the ACJU could carry out socio economic projects in several crises situations such as Tsunami, riots, floods, Covid-19 and so, around 01 billion LKR, over 228,000 beneficiaries through a range of assistance .

However, it necessitates a well-structured, long-term work plan with the assistance and participation of skilled field experts, rather than being limited to a certain set of people in favor of a particular cause. Also, the institution's membership process needs to be altered to encourage all graduates of religious institutes to join the ACJU.

Furthermore, the ACJU must demonstrate its neutrality in religious guidance and non-alignment with any movement, doctrine, or school of thought in activities in order to create an intellectual platform for people of various capacities, as well as a neutral criterion for selecting executive positions or office bearers. Because the existing practice appears to be structured to suit people who adhere to a specific discipline, or are dominated by a particular movement.

CONCLUSION

As long as religions are the most important and most influential sector in human life, it is most beneficial to pay attention to their contributions to keep social moves in order. In this regard, this study has undertaken the ACJU which is the supreme religious institution of Sri Lankan Muslims, to evaluate its institutional structure and activities to serve the Muslim community especially and the nation generally.

In this consensus, the missions being carried out by the ACJU are vital and to be encouraged. By the way, it needs more improvements in membership attainment, and organizational structure from the closed process to open and liberal motions, to include and ensure well-educated and field experts' participation to acquire the righteous place anticipated by the stakeholders.

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