



Orthodoxy and Order: The Denial of Religious Liberty to Ahmadis in Colonial Ceylon

SHAMARA WETTIMUNY* and GEHAN GUNATILLEKE**¹

ABSTRACT

Conceptions of ‘orthodoxy’ affect how religious liberty is respected in society. Religious groups at the margins of society are often delegitimised as ‘unorthodox’. Dominant religious groups may threaten backlash if the religious conduct of these marginal, ‘unorthodox’ groups is tolerated by the state. A state preoccupied with ‘public order’ may then impose unjust restrictions on the marginal group’s religious liberty to avoid such backlash. The experience of the Ahmadis in colonial Sri Lanka offers an important insight into how ‘orthodoxy’, threats of backlash, and ‘public order’ can interact in this way. This article explores the historical experience of the Ahmadis, and explains how the British colonial state unjustifiably restricted their religious liberty due to their positioning as ‘unorthodox’. It argues that narratives of ‘orthodoxy’, and a mechanical prioritisation of ‘public order’—regardless of the source of the disorder—mediated the extent to which the religious liberty of the Ahmadis was permitted by the colonial state.

Keywords: Ahmadis, public order, British empire, Sri Lanka, religious liberty

Conceptions of ‘orthodoxy’ can shape the way religious liberty is respected in a society. Religious groups at the margins of a society are often delegitimised as ‘unorthodox’, and then exposed to unjust restrictions on their religious liberty. Dominant religious groups may threaten backlash if the religious conduct of marginal, ‘unorthodox’ groups is tolerated by the state. In this context, a state preoccupied with ‘public order’ may impose unjust restrictions on the religious liberty of a marginal group to avoid such backlash. The experience of the Ahmadiyya community in colonial Sri Lanka (known at the time as ‘Ceylon’)

¹ *DPhil Candidate in History, University of Oxford (shamara.wettimuny@gmail.com), ORCID - <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6832-443X>; **Junior Research Fellow, Pembroke College, University of Oxford (gehan.gunatilleke@new.ox.ac.uk), ORCID - <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8670-8602>. We are extremely grateful for the incisive and thoughtful feedback of our reviewers. Any mistakes contained in this article are our own.

offers an important insight into how ‘orthodoxy’, threats of backlash, and ‘public order’ can interact in this way. This article focuses on this historical experience to illustrate the relationship between ‘orthodoxy’, and the restriction of religious liberty on the grounds of ‘public order’.

In 1911, Muslims constituted seven percent of the population in Ceylon (Denham 245). Moors, who are Sunnis, mostly belonging to the Sha’fi sect, comprised the majority of these Muslims (264). For the purposes of this article, the term ‘dominant group’ refers to the majority group within the broader Muslim community—i.e. the Ceylon Moors—as opposed to the numerical majority—the Buddhists. The Ahmadis, who have their earliest origins in Punjab (Usman 36), India, formed a tiny minority among the larger Muslim community in Ceylon. They are a minority within a minority, and were often excluded from conceptions of ‘Muslimness’ in Ceylon; they are totally absent in the key historical and ethnographic literature on Muslim identities of the British colonial period. Even today, Ahmadis do not feature in survey articles exploring ‘the sub-communities’ of the Muslims (Mahroof 1-13), nor in ethnological studies of Muslims in Sri Lanka (Hussein). However, the mobility of Ahmadiyya missionaries in the early twentieth century need not be underestimated when placed in the context of regular crossings and exchange of people, literature, ideas, and goods across the Indian Ocean world (Ricci 23).

The scholarship on the origins of Ahmadis in Ceylon is extremely sparse—a gap that this article seeks to address. Even the available primary sources are not directly from or by the Ahmadis of Ceylon; instead, such Ahmadiyya voices are preserved indirectly in the colonial archive in the form of correspondence between colonial governments, and in *The Review of Religions*—an Ahmadiyya publication produced in Punjab during the period under review (i.e. 1916 to 1923). *The Review of Religions* was a monthly journal published in English and Urdu by the Ahmadiyya community in Qadian that aimed to address ‘important religious question[s]...and [remove] all misconceptions about Islam’ (Review of Religions, May 1916). Further insights into Ceylon’s Ahmadiyya population/community are available in secondary literature discussing Ahmadiyya populations elsewhere in the world.

The research for this article comprised archival research, legal doctrinal analysis, and engagement with the existing secondary literature. Some material on the Ahmadiyya movement in Ceylon was available at the National Archives in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and the National Archives in Kew, United Kingdom, as well as online in global repositories belonging to various Ahmadiyya communities. We have been cautious in our interpretation of colonial sources that claim to reflect the texts of petitions by Ahmadis in Punjab and Colombo. We keep in mind that these are not the original voices of the Ahmadis, and that Ahmadiyya demands

may have been distorted or misinterpreted through a particular colonial logic or lens. However, we do not dismiss these sources as unhelpful. When read alongside Ahmadi mission news in *The Review of Religions*, we are able to analyse a series of exchanges that provide, for the first time, some insight into Ceylonese Ahmadiyya preoccupations and concerns in the early twentieth century.

In contrast to the absence of sources and historiographical debate on Ahmadis in Ceylon, there is a growing body of literature on ‘Muslims’ in general and Moors in particular. Such scholarship on Muslim experience and identity during the colonial period includes seminal research on Muslim revivalism and Moor identity formation from the 1880s onwards (Nuhman, Samaraweera), as well as the origins, and shifting positions of the Malay community (Hussainmiya, Ricci). Meanwhile, global and connected histories have placed Lankan Muslims within transnational frameworks and discourses across Asia, the Indian Ocean (Kooria and Pearson), and even Egypt. These discourses highlight the impact of Pan-Islamic thought and Arab nationalism on local communities (Laffan).

This article explains how a state might be incentivised to unjustifiably restrict the religious liberty of a marginal group that is positioned as ‘unorthodox’ by a dominant group. Unjust restrictions on the otherwise peaceful religious conduct of marginal groups can ensue when the dominant group threatens violent backlash against such conduct, in a situation in which the state is already preoccupied with maintaining ‘public order’. We accordingly argue that, in colonial Ceylon, narratives of ‘orthodoxy’, and a mechanical prioritisation of ‘public order’—regardless of the source of the disorder—mediated the extent to which the religious liberty of the Ahmadis was respected by the colonial state.

This article comprises two sections. The first discusses the de-legitimisation of Ahmadis at the time the religious sect was established in Ceylon. The section begins by discussing the origins of the Ahmadiyya movement in India and in Ceylon, and explores the relationship between Ceylon’s Ahmadis, the majority Muslim community (the Ceylon Moors), and the British colonial state. The section then focuses on how the state can come to perceive the legitimacy of a marginal group through the eyes of the dominant group. In Ceylon, the colonial understanding of the Ahmadiyya community as ‘non-Muslims’, or ‘unorthodox’, was influenced by how certain members of the Ceylon Moor community characterised the Ahmadis.

The second section of the article discusses the concept of ‘public order’, and specifically how this ‘public interest’ was deployed to restrict the religious liberty of Ahmadis. It explores how the threat of backlash by an outraged dominant group can prompt the state to impose unreasonable restrictions on the religious

liberty of a marginal group. In such a context, the concept of ‘public order’ collapses into a form of mob rule.

Ahmadis in Ceylon

The emergence of Ahmadis

Ahmadis believe in the ‘Messiah’, Hazrat Mirza Gulam Ahmad Qadiani. The Ahmadiyya movement was founded in 1889, when ‘the Promised Messiah’, ‘accepted the hands of forty faithful servants in allegiance to the Ten Conditions of Bai’at (initiation)’ in the town of Qadian in Punjab (‘23rd March – The Promised Messiah Day’, alislam.org). One of the key features of Ahmadi belief was that the ‘second coming of the Christ towards the end of times would also mark the arrival of the Mehdi...a messianic figure’ (Qasmi 36). Unlike some other Muslim movements that emerged in the nineteenth century, such as the Mahdist movements in Sudan and Nigeria (Sharkey 265; Robinson 257) Ahmadis renounced *jihad* and called for ‘obedience to the British Empire for having established peace throughout India’ (36). They soon grew in number, and spread across the world along existing networks of trade and migration during a period of expanding empires, and faster travel by rail, road and steamer. John Slight notes that the Ahmadiyya faith spread as far West as the Gold Coast (modern-day Ghana) by 1921 (Slight 216). Given the proximity of Ceylon to India, and centuries of religious exchange between the island and the subcontinent, it was only a matter of time before Ahmadiyya missionaries ventured across the Palk Straits.

John Hanson suggests that the arrival of the first Ahmadiyya missionaries in Ceylon took place in the mid-1910s (Hanson 118). There is evidence that the Ahmadiyya community was present in Ceylon by February 1915. According to an article in *The Review of Religions*, when an early Ahmadiyya missionary left Qadian for Colombo that year, there were already ‘a number of educated gentlemen [who] have already accepted the promised Messiah and joined the Ahmadiyya brotherhood’ (‘A Farewell’, March 1915).

The Moors, by contrast, had a long-established presence on the island. Their earliest origins can be traced back to Arab and Persian traders who engaged in commerce on the island in the pre-Islamic era. Over time, and as trade increased, a number of these Arab (and Persian) Muslims settled along the coast (Shukri 339). It is these Arab Muslims that the Ceylon Moors attempted to connect their ancestry with (Abdul Aziz). Meanwhile, Indian Muslims—who would later come to be described as ‘Indian Moors’ or ‘Coast Moors’—followed some centuries later, although they remained largely itinerant traders (as opposed to settling on

the island) until the nineteenth century. It was during the period of British colonial rule that the position of Moors on the island changed, and largely improved from their status under Portuguese and Dutch rule (McGilvray 446). Governor North's Proclamation to uphold religious freedom in 1799 (discussed below) and the 1806 Mohammedan Code gave Muslims certain privileges in terms of freedom of worship, marriage, and divorce. In 1818, due to the loyalty shown to the British during the Uva-Wellassa Uprising, the Moors were allowed to appoint their own headmen and were no longer answerable to the Sinhalese headmen (Dewaraja 150). In 1832, the Moors were allowed to purchase land and live in the Pettah and Fort, removing a prohibition introduced to prevent their accumulation of land by the Dutch (Colombo Journal, 9 May 1832). The Moors gained a significant degree of 'respectability' or recognition (as far as the colonial state was concerned, at least) when in 1889 they were granted separate representation on the Legislative Council of Ceylon following the creation of a Mohammedan Member in Council. Despite having a representative on the Legislative Council, the Moors were divided by geography (McGilvray 446), occupation, and differences in religious beliefs and observances. As explained later in this article, these divisions need to be factored in identifying and analysing the Muslim voices who claimed to represent the Moors when negotiating/conversing with the colonial state.

Ahmadis in Ceylon were not spread out across the island in the way the Moors were. For instance, at the turn of the century, several Moors had already settled in the East of the island as well as in Colombo, Kandy, and in the rapidly growing towns throughout the island. By contrast, Dennis McGilvray suggests that Ahmadis were only found in Colombo and the Gampola region in the twentieth century, and were therefore concentrated in only one or two centres (McGilvray 434). The actual numbers of Ahmadis in the 1910s was very small. However, they did organise themselves quite quickly; they formed the Ceylon Ahmadiyya Association, which had its headquarters in Slave Island. There are no Ahmadis categorised as such in the Census of 1911, the first census published after the earliest possible arrivals and conversions of Ahmadis in Ceylon. Aside from a single reference to the Sunni and Shia sects, there is no further disaggregation of religious groups by sect (Denham 264). The Census Report records the presence of 983 persons born in Punjab (276). However, 708 of these persons formed part of the 'estate population', and could not have comprised the primarily Colombo-based Ahmadis (494). Accordingly, there were unlikely to have been more than a few dozen Ahmadis in Ceylon at this time.

The Ahmadiyya movement in Punjab formally institutionalised its faith and practices in the Anjuman-i-Taraqqi-Islam (or 'Council for the Propagation of Islam') in 1914. Missionaries were thereafter trained and despatched across British India and beyond (Hanson 118). Hanson observes that it was from 1914

onwards that Ahmadis escalated their missionary efforts. Proselytization became a priority for the Ahmadis. The spread of the Ahmadiyya faith and movement of missionaries from India was not unique to Ceylon or indeed to South Asia. By the mid-1910s, Ahmadiyya missionaries had reached as far West as Lagos, Nigeria, where membership of the Ahmadiyya community was growing (Hanson 1). It was in this context of proselytization that Ceylon Moor antagonism towards Ahmadis began to grow.

Delegitimising the Ahmadis

In 1916, the fledgling Ahmadiyya community sent word to the home of the Ahmadiyya movement in Punjab—the Sadr Anjuman Ahmediyaah of Qadian—about the harassment they faced from the dominant Muslim group in Ceylon. Mohammad B. W. Lye in Ceylon wrote of the ‘sensation...created in Moorish circles’ when the Ahmadis published a Tamil pamphlet containing a letter to ‘the Promised Messiah’ (‘Ceylon’ 351). At this stage, however, he noted that ‘our opponents’ can do ‘[n]othing except showering curses’ (351).

The Sadr Anjuman was the Central Ahmadiyya Council established in 1906 to administer the affairs of Ahmadis worldwide (‘Sadr Anjuman Ahmadiyya’, alisam.org). Such communication with the Sadr Anjuman is significant for two reasons. First, the Council was presumed to have more influence with the colonial state in India than Ceylon’s Ahmadis did with the colonial state in Ceylon. Second, such communication highlights the transnational networks of religious movements, and the ability for groups in Ceylon to request verbal support and protection from abroad.

Upon receiving prayers for support, the Secretary of the Sadr Anjuman of Qadian sent a petition (through the Government of Punjab) to the Governor of Ceylon. Given the selective and exclusionary nature of the colonial archive, it has failed to preserve the original petition. Instead, historians are reliant on communication between the colonial state and its counterparts in Punjab, in which they reproduce the contents of this petition. Thus, it is with some caution that we must treat the source, and the language of the petition. The Secretary is said to have written in his petition that he ‘prays for protection and justice for adherents of Ahmediyya in Ceylon, where... the movement has now taken root, but where the loyal members of the community are being misrepresented in certain quarters’ (‘Ahmediyyah Movement in Ceylon’, no. 2356-2, 10 August 1916). These ‘certain quarters’ were likely to have been elite representatives of the Moors. Elite Moors, Qadri Ismail argues, were typically Southern, male traders who, since the appointment of an ‘elite upper class trader’ as the first Mohammedan Member of the Legislative Council, had increasingly come to dominate the ‘Muslim social formation’ (Ismail 67-68). In addition to the trader class, proprietors of Moor

newspapers used the press and journalism as ‘a tool in identity formation’ (Wahab-Salman 61). These elite voices were at the forefront of advancing a particular narrative that framed Moors as a distinct community (Wahab-Salman 65) and had a legitimate claim to represent Muslims in the island. For the purposes of the rest of this article, we refer specifically to the small group of ‘elite’ Southern, male, and largely self-professed representatives or leaders of the Ceylon Moor community as those ‘Ceylon Moors’ or ‘Moors’ who dealt directly with the colonial state.

The Sadr Anjuman petition also alleged that the Tamil-language journal *Islam Mittiran* ‘has for some time past been indulging in a campaign of calumny and vituperation against the movement, its founder and adherents’. Furthermore, he noted that attempts were being made by this journal to mislead British officials in Ceylon, by giving them ‘wrong information about the teachings of Ahmed, the promised Messiah’ (10 August 1916). *Islam Mittiran* was a bi-weekly journal established in 1893 in Pettah, Colombo. The editor and proprietor was L.M. Othman, a Ceylon Moor. To counter such ‘misleading’ depictions of the Ahmadi faith in *Islam Mittiran*, the Secretary of Sadr Anjuman forwarded copies of a pamphlet entitled *The Review of Religions* to the Governor, ‘for the fuller enlightenment of Ceylon officials on the subject of the movement’ (10 August 1916). The colonial official in India, the Officiating Additional Secretary to the Government of Punjab, added that as far as the government was concerned, it ‘had no reason to complain of the attitude of the [Ahmadiyya] community’, suggesting that the Ceylon government should similarly not entertain fears about the Ahmadis (10 August 1916). These colonial exchanges underscore the extent to which knowledge was shared between regional seats of colonial power.

At this relatively early stage, the British colonial state did not consider Ahmadis a threat to public order. Indeed, on 18 October 1916 at a meeting of the Ahmadi community in Wekanda, Colombo, T.K. Lye (Vice-President of the Ceylon Ahmadiyya Association) read out a letter from the Governor, ‘thanking the Association for [their] presentation of Islamic literature and praising the Ahmadiyya translation of the Holy Quran’ (‘The Ahmadiyya Mission News – Ceylon’ 393).

In this context, the Ahmadis in Ceylon requested from the colonial state permission to receive missionaries from India, who would ‘make a lecturing tour in the Island and will make it known to the people of the land that the Mahdi, the Promised Messiah...had come in the person of Ahmad of Qadian’ (393). The Ahmadiyya missionaries were due to arrive in Ceylon from India at the end of October 1916. However, certain members of the Ceylon Moor clergy protested the intended visit. The clergymen submitted a petition to the colonial state, begging that such Ahmadiyya missionaries be prevented from landing in

Colombo to give public addresses ('Ahmediyyah Movement in Ceylon', no. 17068, 4 October 1916).

'Orthodoxy' was at the heart of Ceylon Moor opposition to Ahmadis. It should be noted that we adopt loose conceptions of 'orthodoxy' and 'unorthodoxy' in this paper, because these terms are often imprecise in their theological connotations. It has been observed that the nomenclature in Islamic discourse around 'orthodoxy' is vague (Wilson), and is often tied to related ideas of 'legitimacy' and 'authenticity'. In this context, the term 'unorthodox' must be understood as an emic term often used by the colonial administration to simply describe the less common religious group. It is unlikely that any robust theological understanding undergirded such usage. Meanwhile, determinations of who might be 'orthodox' and who 'unorthodox' must be understood as discursive projects. Scholars such as Talal Asad have thus conceptualised 'orthodoxy' (also) as a reflection of power, rather than just a body of theological opinion (Asad; Sulaiman). Accordingly, it is the process of *making repeated claims* about one's greater authenticity due to 'original', 'true' or 'correct' (and therefore, 'orthodox') interpretations of religious creeds, that actually makes that group 'orthodox'.

The Ceylon Moors sought to delegitimise Ahmadis by characterising them as 'unorthodox.' This initiative resonated with similar discourses in the region, notably in India, where Ahmadis were being described as 'unorthodox' (Purohit).

Three reasons appear to have motivated the Ceylon Moors who opposed Ahmadis: perceptions of heresy, religious competition, and changed inter-communal relations in the aftermath of the 1915 anti-Moor pogrom. First, Ceylon Moors, being Sunni, were likely to have shared the same theological beliefs as Sunnis elsewhere in South Asia, who increasingly viewed Ahmadis as spreading heretical beliefs. For instance, Muslims in British India found Ahmadiyya beliefs—especially Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's claim of prophethood—blasphemous (Qasmi 39-40). Muhammad Iqbal, the renowned Urdu poet and philosopher from Kashmir, described the Ahmadiyya movement as 'a heresy which caused a serious threat to the collective existence of Muslims as a minority in India by undermining its group identity' (40). Meanwhile, theological disputes between Moors in Ceylon were taking place during the period under review. For example, in 1914, a dispute emerged between the congregants and trustees of a mosque in Puttalam over the issue of a 'breach of Muhammadan law'. One party argued that a 'pagoda procession'—that had long been conducted at the mosque—was a religious innovation and a 'direct violation of the precepts of the Koran' (35 NLR V 18). Thus, in a context of shifting perceptions on what was appropriate as per the Quran, and the rejection of perceived religious innovation, certain Ceylon Moors may have been opposed to Ahmadiyya beliefs.

Accordingly, Ceylon Moor motivation to delegitimise the Ahmadis can be linked to perceptions that Ahmadiyya beliefs were doctrinally inaccurate or impure.

Secondly, Ceylon Moors were motivated to delegitimise Ahmadis because they saw them as competitors within the religious and political spheres. They sought to prevent Ahmadiyya missionaries from entering Ceylon due to competition for religious adherents, and to prevent conversion of Sunni Muslims to Ahmadiyya beliefs. These fears may have stemmed from the overt ambitions of Ahmadis to engage in proselytization; an article published in *The Review of Religions* carrying news from the Ceylon mission claimed that, ‘we pray that God may help our brethren in the island and enable them to make Ceylon an Ahmadi island’ (‘The Ahmadiyya Mission News – Ceylon’, October-November 1919, 365). Since the missionaries from India were invited with the specific objective of sharing their religious ideals, their presence in Ceylon was perceived as a direct threat to the Moors.

There was also a political dynamic to the competition. The Ceylon Moors were the numerically dominant group within the Muslim population of Ceylon. The seat of the Mohammedan Member in Council had, since its establishment in 1889, been occupied solely by Ceylon Moors—a reflection of who the state perceived as representing Muslims in Ceylon. Meanwhile, Ceylon Moors were enumerated as a separate group (distinct from Indian Moors) for the first time in the Census of 1911. Thus Ceylon Moor numbers within the broader Muslim community mattered. In this context, the possible conversion of Sunni Muslims by Ahmadiyya missionaries increased the risk of diluting Ceylon Moorish identity, thereby weakening their claim to be the primary if not sole political representatives of Muslims in Ceylon.

The 1915 anti-Moor pogrom presented a third possible reason for Ceylon Moors to oppose the request for the entry of Ahmadiyya missionaries. This reason is more speculative than the first two reasons, as it surmises that, in 1916, in the context of a recent traumatic event, Ceylon Moors may have been extremely sensitive to any ‘new’ Muslim groups entering the country. Between 29 May and 6 June 1915, Ceylon’s worst episode of religious violence during the British colonial period took place. In what is known as the ‘1915 Riots’ or the ‘1915 Pogrom’ (Ismail 82), at least 25 Moors were killed, seventeen mosques were destroyed and over 4000 shops were looted and attacked (Jayawardena). Four women were also raped although actual statistics are likely to be higher given that many such rapes would have gone unreported—and that any commentary on the experience of women, aside from the statistic ‘four’ is missing in the analysis of the violence (Wettimuny 2019). The pogrom was in fact sparked during a Buddhist procession on 29 May 1915, and Indian Moors were the initial targets of the violence perpetrated by Sinhalese Buddhist participants in the procession.

However, in the hysteria and mayhem of the pogrom, Ceylon Moors also eventually came under attack from/by Sinhalese Buddhist, Christian, and even Tamil participants/instigators of the pogrom (Roberts 114).

In the decade prior to the pogrom, Ceylon Moors had made significant efforts to differentiate themselves from migrant Muslims from India, known locally as 'Indian Moors' or 'Coast Moors'. For example, I.L.M. Abdul Azeez, a Ceylon Moor community leader, claimed that Ceylon Moors were the indigenous Muslim community in Ceylon—of Arab descent—whereas Indian Moors were recent migrants from India, and of Tamil descent (Abdul Azeez). These Indian Moors, a small migrant trader community, were viewed by the Sinhalese and other local communities as 'rapacious' and 'exploitative' traders who were also intolerant of local religious rites, such as Buddhist processions (Ali 2014, 234). In this context, the antipathy of Ceylon Moors to the entrance of Ahmadiyya missionaries—another community of Indian Muslims—in 1916, may have been interlaced with apprehension about further political upheaval and antagonism from other ethno-religious groups in Ceylon, and a concern for the safety and security of Ceylon Moors.

These three reasons prompted Ceylon Moor antagonism towards Ahmadis and the campaign to delegitimise them in the eyes of the British colonial state. The manner in which certain Ceylon Moors succeeded in shaping the colonial state's impression of Ahmadis reveals how colonial institutions and policies were 'actively renegotiated and contested from below by ordinary people in the colonies, whose actions were motivated by local conditions' (Carton 4).

Following the de-legitimation of Ahmadis, the Ceylon Moors advanced an additional discourse that resonated with the British. The Moors warned that a 'breach of the peace' may take place if the British did not accede to their position of denying entry to missionaries. They claimed that 'local' Muslims (thus implicitly contrasted with foreign/alien Muslims) strongly opposed the admittance of Ahmadiyya missionaries and that 'their presence would lead to a breach of the peace' (4 October 1916). In essence, the Ceylon Moors threatened violent backlash if the state acceded to the request of the Ahmadis.

Public Order under British Colonial Rule

The British colonial state was faced with the threat of a 'breach of the peace'—a threat that the state took very seriously. Prior to analysing the state's response to this threat, it may be useful to briefly discuss the concept of 'public order', and how it can shape a state's decision-making when dominant groups threaten backlash in response to the religious conduct of minorities.

Conceptualising public order

‘Public order’ in contemporary legal instruments can be understood as a reference to a wide range of interests. In fact, international law is somewhat mired in controversy as to what the term actually signifies. This controversy stems from a longstanding debate between English common law jurisdictions and jurisdictions influenced by French civil law. The English concept of ‘public order’, found throughout common law countries including Ceylon, ordinarily meant ‘the absence of public disorder’, and this definition was advanced by British drafters of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in the 1940s (Draft International Covenants on Human Rights 139). The French expression ‘*l’ordre public*’, used in civil law countries, is a legal concept that ordinarily concerns the negation of private agreements, the exercise of police powers, or the application of foreign law (139). Modern definitions of ‘public order’ veer towards the broader French idea. For instance, the Siracusa Principles on the Limitation and Derogation Provisions in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights define ‘public order (*ordre public*)’ as ‘the sum of rules which ensure the functioning of society or the set of fundamental principles on which society is founded’ (Siracusa Principles on the Limitation and Derogation Provisions).

In colonial Ceylon, it would have been natural for the state to equate ‘public order’ with the maintenance of peace, and the absence of disorder. This aim was of vital importance to the colonial state, as its central economic enterprise within a colony depended greatly on peace and stability.

Public order and the regulation of religion

‘Public order’ has a long history of being treated as a basis for restricting religious liberty.² The concept of ‘public order’ finds expression in early British colonial legislation in Ceylon, such as the Police Ordinance of 1865. Section 69(1) of the Ordinance, which continues to be in operation today (as section 78), clearly authorises restrictions on religious processions, on the grounds of preventing any breach of peace, and in the interest of maintaining ‘order’.

The regulation of public processions—which were a common religious practice of the time—was statutorily justified on the grounds of ‘public order’. Similarly, it was entirely within the ambit of this provision for the British colonial state to regulate public assemblies convened for the purpose of disseminating missionary

² In present day legal doctrine, the ground of ‘public order’ is explicitly found in article 18(3) of the ICCPR, and in article 15(7) of the Sri Lankan constitution. Both these clauses list the grounds on which the manifestation of religion or belief may be restricted.

teachings. Although during the time under consideration the precise scope of religious liberty had not been crystallised as such, it is reasonable to include religious teaching and preaching within that scope.

Religious liberty, meanwhile, had an even longer and established history in Ceylon, dating back to a British Proclamation in 1799 (as amended). Section 6 of the Proclamation provided that the British hereby allow (Ordinance No. 23 of 1799):

liberty of conscience and the free exercise of religious worship to all persons who inhabit and frequent the said settlements of the Island of Ceylon, provided always that they quietly and peaceably enjoy the same without offence or scandal to Government.

The reference to ‘conscience’ and ‘exercise’ is analogous to modern conceptualisations of religious liberty, which include both the freedom to have and to adopt a religion, and the freedom to manifest a religion (Bielefeldt, Ghana and Wiener). The question remains, however, whether missionary activity entailed proselytization, which is not always accepted as part of the scope of religious liberty.³ In any event, it is clear that ‘public order’ was at the state’s disposal to regulate missionary activities that were claimed to be within the ambit of such freedom.

Buddhist and Christian missionaries in Ceylon, long established presences on the island by 1916—appear not to have been treated with the same suspicion as newer entrants to the island. In fact, foreign Buddhist missionaries were regularly permitted entry into the island. For example, two foreign Theosophists—the American Colonel Henry Steele Olcott and Madam Helena Blavatsky a Russian—publicly converted to Buddhism upon arrival in Ceylon in 1880 (Wickremeratne 124-125). These missionary figures actively participated in the Buddhist revival, notably giving lecture tours, and establishing a Buddhist printing press (*Sarasavi Sandaresa*) and Buddhist schools. Other missionaries, such as the Irish Buddhist U Dhammaloka arrived later, in 1909, and had the freedom to travel and give lectures across the island (Turner 69, Sirisena 135). Moreover, certain Buddhist (and earlier, Christian) campaigns, such as the temperance campaigns in 1904 and 1912, may have been viewed as associated with missionary ideas – although in reality these were movements instigated by ‘Sinhala-educated elites, for whom temperance provided both a symbol of cultural identity and a

³ Even today, the freedom of propagation is not always accepted as part of the freedom of religion or belief. See *Karunvalagaswena Vidanelage Swarna Manjula et al v. Pushpakumara, Officer-in-Charge, Police Station, Kekirawa et al* (2018) SC (F.R) No. 241/14 (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka); *Provincial of the Teaching Sisters of the Holy Cross of the Third Order of Saint Francis in Menzingen of Sri Lanka (Incorporation)*, SC Special Determination No. 19/2003 (Supreme Court of Sri Lanka).

means to assert social dominance' (Rogers 321). The colonial state's treatment of such missionary activities may be contrasted with how it viewed Ahmadiyya missionary activities. One of the governing interests that shaped this difference in treatment appears to have been 'public order'.

The threat of backlash

The Moor clergymen's petition claimed (in the words of the colonial state) that 'local Moslems were strongly opposed to the entrance of preachers of this sect... their [Ahmadiyya missionaries'] presence would lead to a breach of the peace' (4 October 1916). Therefore, these Moors essentially threatened violent backlash if the state permitted entry to the Ahmadis. This threat evoked in the state a sense that public order—one of its major priorities—would be imperilled if it did not acquiesce to the demands of the Ceylon Moor representatives.

The threat resonated with the colonial aims of maintaining 'public order' due to at least two contextual factors. First, religious contestation had played a central role in the unprecedented scale and spread of the 1915 pogrom. Longstanding disputes between Indian Moors and Buddhists over the use of 'noise worship' in Buddhist processions that went past mosques came to a head on 29 May 1915 (Roberts 160). When a Buddhist 'carol party' was forced to silence its instruments in front of the Castle Hill Street Mosque in Kandy, Indian Moors gathered at the mosque are reported to have 'booed' and jeered. This hooting/jeering triggered a violent response from the participants of the carol party—said to be between 2,000 and 4,000 people. The mosque was attacked, as were numerous shops and homes in Kandy, before violence spread to four other provinces in the days that followed (Ali 2015, 1). Fresh after that egregious episode, and the subsequent months under Martial Law, the British would have been wary of any new episodes of violence emanating from religious difference. Although Moors had been the victims of the pogrom between late May and early June 1915, the threat of intra-Muslim conflict just one year after the pogrom would have been more than enough to justify restrictions on the entrance of Ahmadiyya missionaries.

Second, the wider historical moment of 1916 would have had an impact on the state's thinking. The First World War was raging on at the time. Although Ceylon was not a focal point of the war, British colonial troops typically stationed on the island had been despatched overseas to join battalions elsewhere (Ceylon Legislative Council Hansard 1915 395). The colonial state could ill-afford internal violence during a time when it was already stretched for personnel, and would have taken any potential threat to 'public order' seriously. Also in 1916, the Indian National Congress and the All-India Muslim League formed the Lucknow Pact, a crucial development in India's nationalist movement (Datar 65). The significance of the pact, aside from proposing constitutional reforms, included

‘the coming together of the two major political organisations in the country’ that represented Hindus and Muslims (65). Given how closely the colonial state was in communication with the government in Punjab over the issue of Ahmadiyya missionaries, it is possible that the agreement of the anti-colonial Lucknow pact in India may have influenced the state to tread cautiously around the demands of Moorish leaders to preclude any local disturbances.

In the eyes of the British, it did not seem to matter that Ahmadis did not actually present a direct threat to public order. It was not assumed that this community would engage in acts of violence, or themselves breach the peace. In fact, the Governor of Ceylon, John Anderson, inquired from the government of Punjab whether its position on the ‘attitude’ towards the Ahmadiyya community in India had changed since their last communication (‘Ahmediyyah Movement in Ceylon’, no. 17068, 7 October 1916). The response from India was that ‘nothing has occurred in the Punjab to alter the view expressed’ originally in August 1916. Therefore, it was understood that Ahmadis were generally peaceful and posed no threat to public order. Nevertheless, the colonial state in Ceylon prohibited the landing of their missionaries (‘Ahmediyyah Movement in Ceylon’, 9 October 1916).

The Ceylon Ahmadiyya Association was dismayed at the Governor’s decision, and forwarded a petition to the Governor. Once again, the historian is left to interpret the paraphrasing of the original petition through the words of the colonial state. The petition contained a history of the Ahmadiyya movement, and pointed out ‘the very difficult position [the Ceylonese Ahmadis]... have been most unexpectedly placed in consequence of this order’ (‘Ahmediyyah Movement in Ceylon’, no. 17068, 16 November 1916). Clearly, the Ahmadis anticipated that portraying themselves as a legitimate religious group with a history (albeit short) was key to convincing the British administration to revisit its policy. They also framed their request in terms of the longstanding recognition of Muslim religious liberty in Ceylon. They prayed that the Governor reconsider his decision and allow the missionaries to enter Ceylon with ‘the full and free enjoyment of the principles defined in the Proclamation of [September] 23 1799’. The Ahmadis thus responded to their delegitimization in the eyes of the British by emphasising their entitlement to religious liberty under the Proclamation. The petition also highlighted that Muslims as a group were not homogeneous and should not be treated as such. The Ahmadis accordingly requested the Governor to ‘order that the non-Ahmadiyya Muslims, priests and laymen, should not in any way interfere with Ahmadiyya Muslims in the latter’s free and peaceful exercise of their rights’ (16 November 1916).

The colonial state maintained its position, and rejected the petition. Ultimately, in November 1916, the denial of permission to Ahmadiyya missionaries was

justified on the basis of the ongoing war. A handwritten note by the Colonial Secretary, R.E. Stubbs, scrawled in the margins of correspondence intended to go out to the Ceylon Ahmadiyya Association, stated, '[r]epley that you repeat that during the war, you cannot allow the entry into Ceylon of persons whose presence, owing to the strong feeling against them in some countries, is likely to give rise to a disturbance of the public peace' (Stubbs 24 November 1916). Stubbs's advice appears to be intended for the Governor, or his staff member preparing the correspondence. He clearly encouraged the denial of entry to be justified on the basis of antagonism towards Ahmadis in *other* countries as opposed to in Ceylon. He did not refer to the fact that pressure from Muslims *within* Ceylon was the driving force behind the denial of permission. In a further scribbled note *not* intended to be part of the official reply, Stubbs wrote, 'however excellent their motives maybe we should not allow the introduction of a necessarily disturbing element' (24 November 1916). Evident in this claim was the belief that Ahmadiyya missionaries themselves were not likely to cause trouble, particularly if their motives were 'excellent'. Instead, Stubbs appears to interpret their presence on the island as 'necessarily disturbing' those already within Ceylon, most likely those same elements within the Ceylon Moor community that had repeatedly petitioned against Ahmadiyya missionaries from arriving on the island.

Meanwhile in Punjab, the Secretaries of Ahmadiyya Councils in Lyallpur, Pillaur, Bhera district, Bannu district and Amritsar launched a coordinated campaign to appeal to the government of Ceylon. They forwarded copies of the minutes of an extraordinary meeting on 2 December 1916, and begged the Governor to reconsider his order prohibiting missionaries from coming to Ceylon ('Ahmediyyah Movement in Ceylon', 12 December 1916). Yet the government in Ceylon remained steadfast in its decision, and Ahmadis in Ceylon gave up their attempt to host foreign preachers until the war ended.

Even during the post-First World War period, Ceylon Moors advanced the rhetoric that disturbances to the peace would ensue if the state acceded to the requests of the Ahmadis. In this context, the Ceylon Ahmadiyya Association sent reports of deteriorating relations with other Muslims. These reports were published in *The Review of Religions* issue of October and November 1919. It was reported that 'opposition to us has become very bitter again, owing to malicious letters appearing in a local non-Ahmadi paper and the continued preaching by a South Indian...Enemies of truth always do their worst to destroy heavenly movements and so are our opponents in Ceylon doing' ('Ceylon' Oct-Nov 1919).

Also in 1919, the Ceylon Ahmadiyya Association resumed its efforts to receive missionaries, and inquired if restrictions imposed by the previous, late governor (Anderson) were still in force. Given the end of the War in November 1918, and

the change in governorship (Anderson died in office in March 1918), the government sought advice from the Mohammedan Member in the Ceylon Legislative Council. In September 1919, the government met the Mohammedan Member, Noordin Hadjar Mohammed Abdul Cader, and requested his advice. Cader, a Ceylon Moor, was of the opinion that there would be consequences if the missionaries were admitted ('Ahmediyyah Movement in Ceylon', 23 September 1919). He did not attempt to couch the denial of entry in terms of security concerns arising from the First World War, thereby emphasising the domestic or localised nature of the possible disturbances.

The government replied to the Ahmadis that 'the same reasons that governed our decision not to permit these people to enter Ceylon hold good now', and that in the interests of public order they were not prepared to allow their entry (23 September 1919). Therefore, the colonial state's preoccupation with 'public order' did not wane with the end of the War. It appears that the state, then, had by and large deferred to the interests of the majority Muslim community. Even when socio-political circumstances changed, the state refused to shift its position.

In 1921, after an interval of almost two years, the Ceylon Ahmadiyya Association once again requested permission for missionaries from India and England to enter Ceylon. The rationale for inviting missionaries from England as well may have been to suggest that those permitted to enter the metropole should surely be allowed to enter a colony. However, the state denied the request, claiming only that they adhered to the previous decision.

It was in this context of repeated denials by the colonial state that the Ahmadiyya Association announced its intention to appeal directly to the King in Britain, and request to be informed of the reason for this prohibition ('Ahmediyyah Movement in Ceylon', 2 May 1921). The state meanwhile imposed further restrictions on the religious liberty of Ahmadis. In June 1921, the police refused to grant Ahmadis permission to conduct street preaching at the junction of Union Place and Kew Road in Colombo. The Ceylon Ahmadiyya Association appealed to the government for 'liberty in this respect as has been done in the case of Buddhists and Christians' ('Ahmediyyah Movement in Ceylon', 8 June 1921). Buddhists, for example, had a long tradition of public preaching, that was even influenced in the mid-to-late nineteenth century by Christian preaching styles (Deegalle). The Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of Police reported that he had refused permission, as he was convinced that it would have led to a disturbance between the Ahmadis and the 'orthodox' Muslims, and thought it dangerous to grant the request (8 June 1921). The reference to other Muslims as 'orthodox' undoubtedly signalled that the colonial state viewed Ahmadis as 'unorthodox' and, therefore, less established than other Muslims.

'Orthodoxy', backlash, and public order

Scholars have explained the complex relationship between the heterodoxy of Ahmadis, Sunni majoritarian antagonism, and the use of 'public order' laws in contemporary Pakistan, which has witnessed unjust restrictions on Ahmadiyya religious liberty (Nelson 2020; Khan 2003). In contemporary settings, religious liberty is often protected 'subject to public order', and that it is 'via the manipulation of these legal rubrics that heterodox groups like the Ahmadis came to be excluded' (Schonthal et al 1977). It is observed that Ahmadiyya self-identification as Muslims was 'reinterpreted as an insult to other Muslims and, as such, a religious "provocation" threatening public order' (1977). There are some parallels between the experience of Ahmadis in Pakistan, and the manner in which 'orthodoxy', backlash, and 'public order' interacted in colonial Ceylon.

When confronted with Ahmadiyya religious liberty on the one hand, and the contesting threat of backlash by Ceylon Moors on the other, the colonial state's overarching interest was simply to prevent a breach of peace from taking place. Notably, the *source* of the threat was the Moors and not the Ahmadis. In essence, the actual religious activity that was being prohibited was not violent. Missionaries arriving and adherents assembling to hear their teaching were peaceful acts. Yet the ire that these acts inspired in others was presumed to result in a breach of the peace. Therefore, the source of the threat became a secondary consideration. The colonial state calculated that Ahmadis, though peaceful themselves, would attract violent backlash from Moors, and that potential backlash justified a restriction on Ahmadiyya religious liberty. However unreasonable that backlash might be, it appeared to be sufficient reason for the British colonial state to prohibit the otherwise peaceful conduct of the Ahmadis.

Two factors may have influenced the colonial state's calculation in this regard. The first was obviously the likelihood of public disorder. The aftermath of a terrible pogrom may have influenced the state to take the threat of violent backlash very seriously. It was now quite accustomed to just how potent religious fervour might be in motivating people to commit acts of violence. Second, the negligible size of the Ahmadiyya community would have shaped the state's utilitarian calculation. On the one hand, the Ceylon Moors, a relatively prominent, and loyal religious group with a long history, were threatening a breach of the peace if missionaries of a rival group were permitted entry. Particularly in the context of growing anti-colonial sentiments and thrusts for increased self-governance (reflected in the establishment of the Ceylon National Congress in 1919), perceptions of communal loyalty are likely to have weighed on policy-making.

On the other hand, the other group under consideration was ‘new’ and smaller in numbers. Their legitimacy was already in doubt as far as the state was concerned. The equation weighed heavily in favour of the larger, more ‘orthodox’ group. Of course, numbers did not always matter if a group had a critical mass of followers. After all, Indian Moors benefitted from British colonial policies that restricted Buddhist worship and processions despite the fact that Buddhists were much larger in number. For example, the Indian Moors who worshipped at the Ambagamuwa street mosque in Gampola successfully leaned on Police Ordinance No. 16 of 1865 to demand the Wallahagoda Devale’s Esala perahera (procession) of 1912 should silence its instruments when passing the mosque (21489, Kandy: Buddhist Temporalities, Wallahagoda Devale Perahera). The state had already, in 1907, deferred to the Indian Moors at this same mosque on the basis that they were the primary traders in Gampola and should not be antagonised (21489). Therefore, the state’s calculus did not pivot on numbers alone, but on how important the group in contention was for the state’s own aims. The Ahmadis, unlike other religious groups, were of no significance to the British colonial state in Ceylon at the time. Thus, when confronted with a possible violent backlash in response to Ahmadiyya religious practices, the state was unwilling to afford them space to engage in such conduct.

In spite of the restriction on street preaching in June 1921, there is evidence that the colonial state may not have militantly policed its border, and certain Ahmadiyya missionaries may have entered the island in August 1921. Shaikh Abdul Rahman was reported to have ‘gone on a trip to Ceylon during the annual vacation [of the Talim-ul Islam High School in Qadian]’ according to *The Review of Religions* (August 1921). The language of the article, which provides no further details on Rahman’s activities in Ceylon, does not suggest it was a formal missionary delegation, but rather an unofficial ‘trip’ to the island during holidays of the school he was presumably a teacher at.

Finally, in 1923, the Ahmadis received official permission from the colonial state to receive missionaries. Following repeated applications by the Ceylon Ahmadiyya Association, Governor William Manning (after consulting the DIG of Police and the Criminal Investigations Department) decided to permit Ahmadiyya missionaries to enter Ceylon (‘Ahmediyyah Movement in Ceylon’, 28 January 1926). According to Nira Wickramasinghe, Manning is one of the few governors in Ceylon who actively advanced policies that sought to ‘divide and rule’ (Wickramasinghe 81). The ‘Manning Reforms’ of 1920 increased the number of elected representatives in the Legislative Council from four to nineteen, including eleven members elected on a territorial basis for the first time—ostensibly to provide separate representation for territorial minorities such as the Kandyans (82). However, communal representation (the original principle of representation dating back to the Colebrooke-Cameron Reforms of 1833)

remained, and the Council still included one representative for the Muslims. Perhaps, then, the permission to allow Ahmadiyya missionaries into the island was an example of cynical manoeuvring by the state—granting liberty not for liberty’s sake, but to encourage tensions between Muslims on the island, and ‘forge minority political identities’ at a time of growing local demands for greater self-governance and wider communal representation (82). It is difficult to draw any concrete conclusions on Manning’s motivations. Yet it would appear that a separate and broader state interest superseded the state’s concerns with respect to public order, and Ahmadis were eventually permitted to engage in missionary activity.

Conclusion

This article presented an account of the British colonial state’s decision to restrict Ahmadiyya missionary activities in Ceylon between 1916 and 1923. We have argued that narratives around ‘orthodoxy’, and a preoccupation with ‘public order’, drove the state’s policy, and ultimately determined the extent to which the religious liberty of the Ahmadiyya community was permitted.

The treatment of the Ahmadis clearly differed from the treatment of more established religious groups engaging in nearly identical religious activities. In fact, the Ahmadis claimed the identical aspects of religious liberty enjoyed by more established groups, and even referred to the relevant legal instruments that pledged liberty for ‘all persons who inhabit and frequent the said settlements of the Island of Ceylon’. Yet the state refused to heed their requests.

The foregoing discussion suggests that this difference in treatment was driven by two factors. First, the narrative that Ahmadis were ‘unorthodox’—perpetuated by certain clerical and elite elements within the Ceylon Moor community—delegitimised the Ahmadis as unimportant within the British colonial utilitarian calculus. Such de-legitimisation served the purpose of convincing the British that protecting (or recognising) Ahmadiyya religious liberty need not be prioritised. Second, these very elements within the Ceylon Moor community also convinced the colonial state that there was a genuine risk of a breach of peace if the state acceded to the requests of the Ahmadis. The thinly veiled threat of backlash resonated deeply with the British. The colonial state was anxious to maintain stability in the aftermath of the 1915 pogrom, and in the midst of the First World War. This preoccupation with ‘public order’ virtually guaranteed the fact that the colonial state acquiesced to the wishes of the dominant group concerned—the Ceylon Moors. The interests of ‘public order’ were pursued mechanically, as the state only considered the risk of a breach of peace, and not the source of that risk. The state acknowledged the non-violent nature of the Ahmadiyya missionary activities. Yet it sought to restrict those activities in the interest of ‘public order’

because of the threatened reaction to such activities. The threat of violent backlash by the Ceylon Moors, regardless of how unreasonable it was as a reaction to Ahmadiyya missionary activities, was sufficient justification for the British to prohibit such activities on the grounds of 'public order'.

The historical experience of Ahmadis in Ceylon reminds us of the fragility of religious liberty when it is confronted with powerful discourses of orthodoxy and order. We learn that these discourses can indeed shape the extent to which certain aspects of religious liberty are respected in a society.

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