

Science and religion: Public and scientific understandings of evolution in pluralistic Sri Lanka

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This study explores the complex relationship between religion and science in pluralistic Sri Lanka, focusing on public and scientific understandings of evolution. Based on 60 semi-structured interviews and 10 focus group discussions across five provinces, alongside a comprehensive literature review, the research reveals how religious identity, early socialisation, and contextual factors such as ethno-religious diversity and education shape perceptions of evolutionary science. Participants included 22 life scientists and 38 members of the public, reflecting the religious and linguistic spectrum of Sri Lankan society comprising Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. The research was conducted in accordance with ethical standards, including the procurement of informed consent and the assurance of participant anonymity. Findings show that while life scientists generally demonstrate a sound understanding of evolution, the general public holds a wide range of interpretations from metaphorical to symbolic, often shaped by religious worldviews. Many participants attempted to reconcile evolution with their beliefs, suggesting a negotiation rather than open conflict. However, a significant number of individuals expressed contradictions between private acceptance and public silence, revealing tensions in directing these domains. The study also highlights key structural barriers: limited resources in schools, linguistic segregation, and lack of exposure to science education especially in rural and marginalised communities. These conditions restrict the public's understanding of evolutionary theory. Importantly, discussions of evolution are notably absent from mainstream media and public discourse in Sri Lanka. The influence of religious authorities such as priests, monks, and imams and the figures of Gods and deities play a critical role in shaping how evolution is framed. For many, belief in God or respect for religious leaders took precedence over scientific explanations, contributing to a "God versus scientist" tension, although not always in antagonistic ways. Yet, Sri Lanka's religiously plural and relatively tolerant society often enables coexistence of diverse beliefs, even in the absence of open debate. This research calls for inclusive, culturally sensitive science education and public engagement that respect religious diversity while promoting scientific literacy. It contributes to global conversations on religion and science by offering insights from a deeply religious, postcolonial society where public narratives on evolution remain largely unexplored.

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