

## Doing Theology in Myanmar's Context

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Myanmar is a multi-racial and multi-religious country and has an estimated population of 50 million people. "The population is comprised of some 135 ethnic groups speaking 106 languages. The eight major ethnic groups and their percentage of the total population are: Bhamar (69), Shan (8.5), Kayin (6.2), Rakhine (4.5), Mon (2.4), Chin (2.2), Kachin (1.4), and Kayah (0.4). The major religions in Myanmar are Buddhism (89.4%), Christianity (5.9%), Islam (3.9%), Hinduism (0.5%), and animism (1.2%). Small numbers practice Confucianism, Judaism, and Laipianism, a local religion."<sup>1</sup> Even though it is a multi religious society, one can generally define the society of Myanmar as a Buddhist society. Religious plurality, however, has existed in Myanmar since her early history.

The nation's political history can be divided into the times of the monarchy (1044-1855), colonialism (1824-1947), parliamentary democracy (1948-62), the socialist regime (1962-88) and the Military regime (1988 to the present time).

The author of this paper would like, first of all to begin with, statement on Myanmar's Theology. According to Dr. Simon Pau Khan En, principal of the Myanmar institute of theology, "Christian theology in Myanmar today, uses two different approaches to the gospel. In a primarily Buddhist culture, the traditional exclusive teaching of Christian churches is no longer found to be constructive. Thus, a new inclusive approach is used when in encountering other religions. God is no longer depicted as a person who has been revealed in one particular religion alone, but as a non -

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<sup>1</sup> A. Scott Moreau (ed), Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 2000), 667

person, a transcendental Reality, who is creator and preserver. Jesus Christ is portrayed not merely as a historical figure, but as the fulfillment of the Truth (Dhamma) discovered in all religions. The second approach emphasizes gospel elements latent in the primal religious - cultures of various ethnic groups to express the Christian gospel in a more intelligible way. The current theological challenge, then, is not to Christianize the people, but rather to “Myanmarnize” the gospel. Political restrictions compel Christians to take a prophetic stance and hold patiently to hope in God and to fulfill their roles of being "Light and leaven" in the society" <sup>2</sup>

Doing theology in Myanmar’s context calls for a life style that is consistent with our claims. For more than a hundred and seventy eight years we have received the good news as witnessed in the Scriptures. Because of our traditional training in evangelism, we used to be quite comfortable with what was then the dominant way of theologizing, namely, how to be logically conceptual in one's attempt to "talk theology" with little reference to the actual, concrete life situations outside the church setting. <sup>3</sup>

However, the situation has been changing. How can we do theology in Myanmar’s context? Here, the author of this paper would like to propose a construct for doing theology in Myanmar’s context. His proposed construct is as follows:

### **Christ, *Dhamma* (the truth) and the Cross, the Greatest *Karma*: A Quest for an Authentic Gospel in Myanmar**

Buddhist people in Myanmar cannot understand the traditional understanding of the Christian Gospel. In other words, up to now it has not been comprehensible or meaningful to them. This is one of the greatest hindrances to mission and evangelism in Myanmar. Mostly, Christianity in Myanmar still uses the traditional interpretation of the gospel. Likewise, Myanmar Buddhist people are still interpreting it according to their traditional doctrines. This can cause unfruitfulness for the Gospel and can create

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<sup>2</sup> Virginia Fabella, M. M. (ed), *Dictionary of Third world Theologies* (Mary knoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 150-151.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Dun, “*Doing theology in Myanmar Context:*” *Journal of Theology for Myanmar*, (Yangon: ATEM, 1995), 45-46.

misunderstanding between Buddhists and Christians. Conversely, a correct understanding of the Christian gospel can bring about peaceful co-existence between Buddhists and Christians in Myanmar. In brief, why Buddhist people in Myanmar cannot understand and accept the traditional Christian Gospel is the main problem. Therefore the author of this paper would like to make the gospel of Christ to be meaningful and comprehensible to Buddhist people in Myanmar, while maintaining a biblical understanding of the gospel. It seems that the doctrine of *Karma* is the most essential doctrine in Theravada Buddhism. According to this doctrine, by the law of *karma* (the law of cause and effect which is ordered by one's past actions) one cannot escape from the wheel of life – which is symbolical of suffering. To be liberated from this, one needs to know or realize the *Dhamma* or Truth and live according to it. No other thing, or more specifically, no external things can help or cause one's liberation. That is to say, one has the sole responsibility for one's own liberation.

To be liberated from this wheel of life or suffering, which is the effect of the law of *Karma*, is the ultimate goal of Buddhism. In other words, liberation from the wheel of life is the real good news for Buddhists. This liberation can only occur by knowing Truth or *Dhamma* (this knowing includes action). In Buddhism, the doctrine of *karma* is the first important doctrine. The second is namely the doctrine of *Dhamma*, the Truth.

If Christian can present Christ as *Dhamma*, who is the way and power to liberate people from the wheel of life – suffering, and if Christians can also explain the Cross of Christ as the greatest Karma, which can nullify or destroy all the effects of all other Karma, it will be the greatest good news for Buddhists.

### Ideas

Christ = *Dhamma* (the truth)

Cross = the greatest *Karma*

Resurrection = the evidence of liberation from the *Samsara* (the wheel of life)

Grace = Christ = *Dhamma* (The truth)

Sin = Bad/Good Karma = *Samsara*

From the perspective of this author (presenting Christianity in Myanmar's context) requires simultaneously maintaining two interpretations of the gospel. The Gospel of the Bible and the Gospel for Myanmar Buddhist people (As Christians can maintain the two

natures of Christ – God and man, it should be possible for them to maintain the, above mentioned, two interpretations of the gospel). The former is for the Christianity in Myanmar to have confidence in the gospel of the Bible, for its faithfulness to mission and evangelism. The latter is for the Myanmar Buddhists, to understand the gospel in the light of the vital doctrines of Buddhism – the doctrine of *Dhamma* and the doctrine of the law of *Karma*, so that Christianity can be meaningful and comprehensible to them.

The author of this paper hopes, that by this synthesis of these two interpretations, Buddhist people in Myanmar will feel and realize the grace and love of God. Furthermore, by presenting this dualistic interpretation of the gospel, Christians will come to realize the real purpose of the gospel and its richness. Likewise, Buddhists will realize the value, the truth and sincerity of the gospel and they will understand why Christians are so concerned about it.

### **To apply Buddhist spirituality to Christian discipline in Myanmar's context**

In Myanmar, the majority of people are Buddhists. So Myanmar Christians are influenced by the Buddhist way of living and customs. Therefore Myanmar people are well rooted in Buddhist culture. In Myanmar today, although Christianity arrived a long time ago, there are still not many Christians. Here, the author of this paper would like to apply Buddhist spirituality to Christian discipline in Myanmar's context.

In the Eight-fold path of Buddhism-Right thought, Right Speech, Right action and Right Livelihood are seen through the rubric of bodily action. Also Right Effort, Right Mind Control and Right Meditation are seen through the rubric of verbal action. Then Right Views or (Knowledge) and Right Thought are mental action. In Buddhism, the Eight-fold Path is a Way which offers liberation from life's sufferings. Also it leads to peace of mind, to the higher wisdom, to awakening, to Nirvana. Because of that, the three actions are very important in Buddhist spirituality.

In Buddhism, **bodily action** is done through imitation. Bodily action includes killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct. Therefore everybody needs to consider their bodily actions again and again before doing them. In Buddhism, every action should be

accompanied with wisdom.<sup>4</sup>In like manner, when we look at Christian morality, every action should be accompanied in the fear of God which is equivalent to wisdom, (Proverb. 1:7). Therefore, when Joseph was tempted by Potiphar's wife, he was able to escape from temptation because of his fear of God. (Gen. 39.9)

**Verbal action** is performed through speech and is known as verbal imitation. Lying, tale bearing, harsh language and frivolous talk are all examples of verbal action. Generally, we can say that man easily falls into mistakes because of his words (verbal action). We can hurt people with our words as well as encourage others with the same mouth. Therefore, it is very important to think carefully before we speak. We should be carefully of the time and situation. Therefore, one needs to consider the situation thoroughly before speaking. Here we should notice that if the words do not give effect to the listener, then it is good to stop the speaking. That is why even good words should not be spoken too long. Jesus said, "Let what you say be a simple "yes" or "no"; anything more than this comes from evil."(Matt. 5:37) So everybody should speak right words to others. St. James writes "If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check."(James. 3:2)

**Mental action** is done through the mind itself without (body or verbal) imitation. Mental action includes covetousness, ill will, and false views. In Buddhism, every action comes from the volition or will.<sup>5</sup> A good will can lead a person to a good action. Therefore the desire of our hearts or our wills is very important. In Buddhism, to be able to have good desires of the heart we need wisdom.<sup>6</sup> Only wisdom can guide our mind and heart to a right thinking and a better condition of life. In Buddhism, a good will or a good heart is very important. According to Paul's teaching, Jesus Christ is the only One who can change our hearts and minds to a right thinking and a better condition of life. (II Cor. 5:17). But from the Buddhist point of view, in order to have a pure heart, we need wisdom to control our hearts and minds.

These three actions are very popular in the lives of Myanmar people. Every monk has to keep and not violate these three actions. Myanmar Christians are familiar with these three actions. Almost every pastor is familiar with these three actions. If the pastors

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<sup>4</sup> Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1971), 44.

<sup>5</sup> Christmas Humphreys, *Buddhism* (Great Britain: Penguin Books Ltd, 1952), 95.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

tell the Burmese people about these three actions they can easily understand, when he then reads the Bible passages for them. Therefore, the pastors need to use the teaching of Buddha, when they preach the good news of Jesus, in order for the Myanmar people to understand. And also the pastors need to watch out for these three actions in order to deal effectively with the congregation.

A Buddhist monk observes the teaching of Buddha and seeks to be morally perfect. In Myanmar, a pastor must be morally perfect and a spiritual leader. This is because the Myanmar people see pastors as holy men who possess the same level of status as their Buddhist monks. Also it is very important for a Christian pastor to lead a good moral life. According to the understanding of the author of this paper, in Myanmar, the pastor is not only a moral leader but also a spiritual leader in the Church. Generally, one has to see a pastor as a preacher, preaching in the Church every Sunday. But the role of a pastor is complex and is more than preaching on Sundays. Some times a pastor may look like a priest who stands before the altar on behalf of the congregation, celebrating Holy Communion and praying for them. Some times he may look like a social worker who takes care of the poor and the needy. Some times he looks like a politician who stands for his people to confront the unjust actions of the government. Some times he may look like a counselor who gives suggestions to the depressed.

In Myanmar, some pastors who work in rural areas are farmers or cultivators, because they have no salary. In some places, Anglican pastors could not draw their salary from the Diocesan office, because they wanted to avoid contact with the Myanmar army. So they had to, and continue to have to, earn their living by farming. In some places, where there are no educated people, no one wants to be the head of the village (especially in insurgent areas), so pastors have to become headmen and manage the affairs of the village. When the villagers need to deal with a person in authority, the pastor is always called upon to speak on their behalf. The rural people are very simple and they are afraid of persons in authority. Also non-believers come to see a pastor to ask for help. So a pastor is highly respected by the villagers. The pastor, however, because of the variety of roles in his life can decline any time.

In Myanmar, the majority of people are Buddhists. They are living on the moral teaching of Buddha. Morality or spirituality plays an important role in dealing with them.

The statement "Actions speak louder than words" is true for Myanmar people. They can learn from your life more quickly than from your speech. Therefore if you want Myanmar people to become Christians, don't preach too much to them, but show your life to them first. They learn from your life rather than from your speech. In doing ministry, to Myanmar people, we need to always keep in mind that pastoral spirituality is more important than pastoral skill.

### **Meditation in Myanmar's Context**

Meditation is also at the heart of the Buddhist way of salvation. Apart from it, morality and doctrinal correctness are dry husks. Also without it the ultimate detachment which leads to Nirvana is impossible. Therefore the devout Buddhists aspire to give themselves increasingly to this discipline of meditation. In the book "A Thousand Lives Away," Winston says," Meditation is thus the essential technique of salvation; and it is also an embodiment of Nirvana, this time in an available spiritual technique of which *Gautama Buddha* is only the latest supreme example."<sup>7</sup> Meditation is very important in Buddhist spirituality.

When we look at the Myanmar method of meditation, we see that they put an object in front of themselves and concentrate on this object, so that their minds should not think of any other things. The object may be a material thing or their own physical body. Myanmar people believe that through meditation you will come to know the true nature of yourself. One of the basic meditations practiced by Myanmar people is to meditate upon the body. This meditation proceeds by reasoning from known to unknown. It is to train oneself to observe attentively the inner workings of the body, and the mind, as well as the external phenomena of the universe. At the same time, as accepting their true natures, they are to free themselves from the lust of the world. Therefore, through meditation there is a longing to be freed from the burdens, and pains of life, and to be released into the impersonality of Nirvana.<sup>8</sup>

Generally, the Eastern form of meditation stresses the need to become detached from the world. But on the other hand Christian meditation goes far beyond this notion of

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<sup>7</sup> Winston L. King, *A Thousand Lives Away* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1964), 70.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 228-229.

detachment. Meditation requires detachment. But for Christians, the detachment from the confusion all around us is to free us, so as to have a richer attachment to God. In Christian meditation, we usually meditate on the words of God. The word becomes the object which we need our minds to concentrate on. A Christian's meditation is different from a Buddhist's. Christians use the Bible as an object in meditation. Therefore, we can say that Buddhist meditation is an attempt to empty the mind; Christian meditation is an attempt to fill the mind.<sup>9</sup> These are the things which a Christian pastor in Myanmar should keep in mind when dealing with his Buddhist friends. Besides, a pastor needs to deeply meditate upon the Scriptures for the task of interpreting and applying them in his personal spirituality.

Buddhist meditation is rich in spirituality. In a time and situation like ours, where life is a struggle, individual Christians need to give time to prayer and fasting. Christians today rarely give time for a quiet moment with God. If we look at the Buddhists, observing their fasting day (*Ubode*), one admires and respects the way they practice their spirituality. They will spend the whole day at the pagoda to fast and meditate. When Christians see this, they should be reminded of Jesus' prayerful life and quiet times with God. The time spent by Buddhists in meditation should be imitated by Christians, in giving themselves a time to be with God, and strengthen their spiritual lives. Prayer life is not only in the Church at Sunday worship. It should be part of our daily lives. As the Buddhist keeps a special room for meditation, we should keep a special room for worship and prayer.

### **The Essential Need of a Method of Dialogue in Myanmar Mission**

Myanmar is a multi-religious society but one can generally define the society of Myanmar as a Buddhist society. In fact religious plurality has existed in Myanmar since her early history. Therefore dialogue is necessary for all the people in Myanmar to know the main essence of both Christianity and Buddhism, and to realize that there is only one God whom we can accept and trust. At the same time values need to be established reciprocally. The objective of doing this dialogue is to understand each other, to respect

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), 24-25.



each other's faith and be in closer solidarity with the world, knowing and sharing its pains and yearnings. Only by responding effectively to each other, can we remove our ignorance and misunderstanding of each other, and be better able to minister.

Today there are misunderstandings between Christians and Buddhists in Myanmar. The Buddhists think that Christianity is a foreign religion, especially the religion of the foreign invaders, and that Christian mission is also part of the western invasion of their cultural and spiritual realm. Besides, some Christians who are exclusivists want to limit the saving grace of God to the members of the Christian church. They say that if someone does not believe in Jesus, he or she will have to go to hell. As Christians we must believe that the gospel is true and it is true for all. Even though this notion seems to be close to that of exclusivism, it invites all to examine it and everyone to share it. In this sense it is inclusivism. Christians, who are living among the pluralist society of Myanmar, need to have this concept, and to hold this stand. Professor Kyaw Than puts it another way, in terms of the unity of the church and the given context.

“As many people in their time and clime have confessed Christ, so every community, in each continent or context must make meaningful confession of their faith. It is to express the essential unity of the church, faithful to the scriptural tradition, and holding hands together, to follow Christ, who came as a slave to serve humanity. The challenge for Christian unity, for service together to humanity, and to express faithfully what Christian faith and life means, will be one of the greatest tasks of Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”<sup>10</sup>

Today salvation is a hot topic among the Christians in Myanmar. Therefore Professor U Khin Maung Din says that “the more important problem for Myanmar Christian theology is the desire for salvation. Generally, Myanmar Christians (apart from very few pluralists) accept that salvation come to all through Jesus Christ. However, the hard line exclusivists insists that ‘all who do not accept Jesus as Lord and savior are

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<sup>10</sup> Kyaw Than, “*Christianity on the Threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*” *RAYS Journal of Theology*. Vol .1. No.1. Feb (Yangon: MIT, 2000), 1-8.

eternally lost’,”<sup>11</sup> Whereas the inclusivists avoid saying this and allow for the saving grace of God in the people of other religions.

In conclusion, the author of this paper would like to quote what professor Samuel Ngun Ling proposed as possible steps to be taken for dialogue between Christians and Neighbors of other faiths in Myanmar. “What should Christians do?

- 1) Repent of past Christian missionaries’ wrongdoings or mistreatments and ask non-Christians for forgiveness.
- 2) Change the Christian attitude of indifference to what other religions think, believe and practice.
- 3) Renounce the absolute claim or supremacy of the Christian faith over other religions including Buddhism.
- 4) Recognize whatever is good, valuable and true claimed by other religions and see neighbors of different faiths as equal seekers after truth.
- 5) Avoid offensive views on non-Christians and their religions, including Buddhists and Buddhism, as demonic, false, inferior, powerless and hell-bound, etc.
- 6) Avoid a ‘holier than thou’ religious mentality and denounce comparison of Christianity with other religions in terms of good and bad.
- 7) Rearticulate the exclusive forms of missionaries’ teachings, in terms and expressions, relevant to other religions.
- 8) Reconstruct commonalities, parallels and differences of Christianity and other religions with a view to help provide a common ground for all religions.
- 9) Relate other religious worldviews, concepts and elements of other faiths to the Christian faith and consider them seriously as vital components in creating a Christian theology in Myanmar.
- 10) Avoid a hermit’s tradition of religious isolationism and try to engage more and more in a closer relation to, or a creative dialogue with, adherents of other faiths and religious traditions.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Stephen Than Myint Oo, “*The gospel and Religious Pluralism: A Study of the theology of Leslie Newbigin and it’s potential contribution to Christianity in Myanmar*” (an unpublished M.Th Thesis, Singapore: Trinity College, 2001), 76.

<sup>12</sup> Samuel Ngun Ling (ed), *Ecumenical Resources for Dialogue: Between Christians and Neighbors of Other Faiths in Myanmar* (Yangon: Judson Research Center, Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2004), 38-39.

If Christians in Myanmar would like to construct a living theology for Myanmar then they have to start it with a sincere dialogue with other religions on equal terms. Therefore, for the preparation of our new mission we must repent and accept people of other faiths as God's children, equal with us, in God's act of salvation. If we repent and accept others as our equals, the Spirit of God will surely work in us, as individuals, as well as in the whole Church, as we work in cooperation with our-Christian neighbors. We have already seen that cooperative work is necessary. Therefore, we should not hesitate in our newfound mission of God.