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BURMESE NATIONALISM AND CHRISTIANITY IN MYANMAR:  
CHRISTIAN IDENTITY AND WITNESS IN MYANMAR TODAY

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A Dissertation  
Presented to the Faculty of  
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
Department of Systematic Theology  
in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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December 2015

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Dedicated to:

My Mother, Vung Khaw Hau, who raised me to love God and His Word after my father's early death in 1971, and my wife, Go Khan Lun, who is a true life-companion for me since 1989 when we were united to be blessed with six precious children, four daughters and two sons.

## CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	vii
CHAPTER ONE.....	1
INTRODUCTION.....	1
THE THESIS.....	2
THE CURRENT STATUS OF THE QUESTION.....	4
THE DISSERTATION IN THE CONTEXT OF CURRENT SCHOLARSHIP.....	6
THE METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURE TO BE EMPLOYED.....	9
THE OUTCOMES ANTICIPATED.....	13
CHAPTER OUTLINES AND PROGRESSION.....	15
CHAPTER TWO.....	18
BURMA/MYANMAR AND BURMESE NATIONALISM.....	18
MYANMAR AND ITS PEOPLE.....	20
The Burmese People’s View of Themselves and Other Peoples.....	22
Ethnic Diversity and Its Impact on Christianity in Myanmar.....	32
RELIGIONS IN MYANMAR.....	45
BUDDHISM AND BURMESE NATIONALISM.....	53
CHAPTER THREE.....	62
CHRISTIAN MISSION WORK IN THE SETTING OF BURMESE NATIONALISM IN BURMA/MYANMAR.....	62
SOME INDICATIONS OF CHRISTIANITY’S EARLY PRESENCE IN BURMA.....	62
THE ROMAN CATHOLIC MISSION IN BURMA/MYANMAR.....	65
PROTESTANT CHRISTIAN MISSION IN BURMA/MYANMAR.....	70
American Baptist Mission in Burma.....	71

Some Missions Other Than Baptist .....	78
BURMESE NATIONALISM AND CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY WORK IN BURMA/MYANMAR .....	79
Buddhist Burmese Perception of Christianity in Myanmar.....	89
“Burmanization” and Christianity in Myanmar.....	93
A Strange Case of Christianity in Korea in Comparison with That in Myanmar....	100
CHAPTER FOUR.....	104
A SEARCH FOR AN AUTHENTIC MYANMAR CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY.....	104
A DIVIDED BURMESE SOCIETY AND A SEARCH FOR RELEVANT THEOLOGICAL PARADIGMS.....	105
A Divided Society and Christian Minorities in Myanmar.....	106
Religious Conflicts and the Search for a Relevant Theological Paradigm.....	109
RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AS A WAY OF ENGAGEMENT .....	117
CONTEXTUALIZATION AS A WAY OF ENGAGEMENT.....	124
Local Theologies Constructed with Home-Grown Resources .....	127
CHAPTER FIVE .....	138
LUTHER’S TEACHING ON GOD’S TWO KINGDOMS AS A THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR MYANMAR .....	138
MARTIN LUTHER’S TEACHING ON THE TWO KINGDOMS OF GOD.....	139
A “Doctrine” or “Teaching” on the Two Kingdoms? .....	142
“Two Kingdoms” As the “Two Strategies” of God.....	145
What Does Luther Actually Teach? .....	147
Luther’s Teaching on the Two Kingdoms in the Lutheran Confessions.....	152
The Distinction between the Two Kingdoms or Realms.....	155
Luther’s Teaching on the Two Kingdoms As a Break from the Medieval Concept of Society .....	159

Criticism, Misunderstanding and Misuse of Luther’s Teaching on the Two Kingdoms .....	163
LUTHER’S TEACHING ON THE TWO KINGDOMS IN THE CONTEXT OF MYANMAR .....	170
CHAPTER SIX.....	176
CHRISTIAN IDENTITY AND WITNESS IN MYANMAR.....	176
CHRISTIAN PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN MYANMAR.....	177
PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AS PUBLIC THEOLOGY .....	186
THE SETTING OF MYANMAR AS A CULTURE WITHOUT CHRIST .....	189
THE TWO KINGDOMS AS THE FRAMEWORK FOR CHRISTIAN LIVING .....	193
LUTHER’S TEACHING ON THE TWO KINGDOMS OF GOD AND CHRISTIAN VOCATION.....	198
Right Understanding of Christian Vocation and the Burmese Misconception About Society .....	203
Christians As Salt And Light: The Teaching on the Two Kingdoms as A Corrective to Christian Pessimism .....	204
Christian Involvement in Nation Building Activities in Myanmar .....	208
BURMESE NATIONALISM AND CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN MYANMAR .....	209
Christian Participation in Civic Affairs in the Myanmar Context.....	212
The Practice of Responsible Christian Living.....	214
Some Practical Things That Christians Can Do .....	218
Intercessory Prayer .....	218
Being Subject to the Authority .....	220
The Virtue of Endurance and Patience .....	225
CONCLUSION.....	229
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	235

Online Internet Sources .....251



## **ABSTRACT**

The dissertation first considers the historical and cultural settings of a rising Burmese nationalism that embraces Buddhism as an essential component and seeks to enforce a cultural homogenization known as “Burmanization” on all citizens of Myanmar. For the minority Christian church in Myanmar, this ardent and pervasive nationalism presents a serious challenge, for which the church has yet to present an adequate response. After evaluating the few efforts made by Christians to address the problems confronting the church in the context of a culture of aggressive Buddhist nationalism, the study offers a way forward. Drawing on the resources of Reformation theology, especially the biblical teaching of the two kingdoms or realms as articulated by Martin Luther, the dissertation proposes thinking in terms of God’s two distinct spheres as an effective theological framework for Christians in Myanmar who must interact with the world around them. The two realms paradigm which includes the distinction between the two kinds of righteousness is explained, evaluated, and then applied to the practical context of the church in Myanmar. Particular attention is focused on the potential usefulness of the teaching for ordinary Burmese Christians who will be equipped to engage their immediate culture with a winsome Gospel witness, active service through vocations, submission to authority, and patience in the face of persecution.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, is in Southeast Asia with a population of about 52 million people. It is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world as it is situated between the borders of modern-day Bangladesh, India, China, Laos and Thailand. The Catholic missionaries first introduced Christianity to Burma in the sixteenth century; they were followed by other Protestant missionaries in the early nineteenth century. Adoniram and Ann Judson arrived in Rangoon (the present-day Yangon) from the United States in 1813 and Dr. Judson was able to baptize his first Burmese convert, Maung Nau, in 1819, after six years of tireless labor. The Christian church in Burma has grown from one person to over five percent of the country's population of over 52 million, today.

Many issues and challenges confront the church in Burma/Myanmar, but among them Burmese nationalism that militates against whatever is “Western” and “Christian” stands out prominently. It is important to consider the historical, religious, political and social milieus in which these sentiments have developed over the years, because such study may shed light on the current situation in Myanmar. The Burmese national pride as a people of history, culture, and religion manifests itself in the form of a superiority complex that has been a hindrance to Christian mission work down through the centuries. The Burmese understand themselves historically as a people of high culture with their own sovereign king, a unifying religion with their own Buddhist monks, all living together in a rather peaceful state—until the foreigners came and disrupted that peaceful order and destroyed every established tradition. The result is evident in Burma: strong prejudices against Christianity that result in a conspicuous lack of

response by the Buddhist Burmese to the Gospel. Why does the Gospel remain so alien to the people after almost two centuries of its presence in this land? What are the issues and challenges, and what solutions to them may be proposed? What new methods might one adopt in reaching out to the people, which will enable them to respond to the Gospel while maintaining the essential nature of the Gospel? How can Christians best affirm their identity and presence among their neighbors of other faith traditions? How can they engage people of other faiths in this multi-cultural and multi-religious pluralistic nation? What is the best and biblically sound theological paradigm for Christians in Myanmar in their engagement with people from other faith and belief systems? These questions have great implications for the church and her mission in Myanmar; and they are questions with theological roots and implications.

If good citizenship is equated with being Buddhist, how should Christians in Myanmar today assert their identity among their neighbors? How best could Christians in Myanmar live and witness in this predominantly Buddhist nation as Christians: children of God and citizens of His Kingdom, and citizens of Myanmar at the same time? These are two important questions every Christian should ask in the face of the ever-strong Burmese nationalism.

### **The Thesis**

The thesis of this dissertation is that Martin Luther's teaching on the two-dimensional relationship of the Christian to God and his neighbor, commonly known as the teaching on the two kingdoms is a fitting and relevant theological framework for Christians in this Buddhist country as they engage their neighbors and the wider public in the face of strong Burmese nationalism—a societal consciousness supported by Buddhism as the religion of the majority.

While Christians in Burma/Myanmar cannot change the course of history they have inherited from the past, they can now do certain things as responsible Christian citizens to transform the image of Christianity and the Christian church in this predominantly Buddhist

country. Some of the first Burmese Christians who lived under a favorable foreign rule failed to demonstrate that they were part of the larger Burmese community when they sided with the ruler rather than the ruled in the latter's nationalist struggle for independence. In the years following independence in 1948 Christians lost the privilege and power to impact society from a favored position because they were sidelined in politics and other spheres of public life. To bring about changes in the current situation certain concerned Christian leaders in Myanmar have offered some proposals most of which, unfortunately, come in the form of a compromising contextualization of the Christian faith and simple syncretism.

The church as the eschatological community of Christ and Christians as members thereof must live out their calling in the community they find themselves in as responsible citizens by engaging their neighbors in public life, which in reality is their responsibility and obligation as citizens of both the kingdom of heaven and of this world over both of which God reigns. This study will attempt to establish a basis for Christians in Myanmar to engage the public as good citizens of their motherland which can be understood as 'the kingdom of God's left hand' (*Reich Gottes zur Linken*), while they are always mindful of their citizenship in heaven which can be understood as 'the kingdom of God's right hand' (*Reich Gottes zur Rechten*). Martin Luther's teaching commonly known as "the two kingdoms" teaching, also called by some "the two realms of God's rule" will be explored as a relevant theological framework for Christians in this Buddhist country as they seek to engage the public in the face of strong Burmese nationalism founded on Buddhism.

The church in Myanmar needs to engage with the wider public. The church is called to be a prophetic voice to the public. The church is also called to do priestly service to the public—a task that can be accomplished when Christians live out their vocations in their various callings. The church's service must not be limited to her own members alone within the church

community. Rather, the church must engage the wider public as she tries to address the needs around her.

The history of Christianity in Myanmar and the current situation of the country now demand that Christians in Myanmar demonstrate their true identity as faithful citizens of their country as good Christian citizens. It may not always be easy, as history has testified over and over again. How Christians should relate to their neighbors and engage the public has been an enduring question throughout the church's existence for the last two thousand years. The thought of Luther as he engaged his world in the sixteenth century continues to provide a compelling and faithful answer to this question, and situates this question within the whole of theology. "Luther's distinction between the two kingdoms and two reigns of God helps Christians to understand how they can live by Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and at the same time be responsible citizens in this world until he comes again. For when he returns there will be no longer two kingdoms but only the one kingdom—the kingdom of glory and grace, which for now is hidden in Christ and known only to faith."<sup>1</sup>

### **The Current Status of the Question**

There is a paucity of resources addressing the specific issues of the Burmese context which is the scope of this dissertation. Books on Burma/Myanmar in general and scholarly research on this topic of Christian engagement in Myanmar in particular are remarkably few. Literature on the country itself since 1962 is modest whether at the journalistic or scholarly end of the spectrum. David I Steinberg says: "Burma or Myanmar is a country in which access is limited, field work generally prohibited, information hoarded, statistics often whimsical, visitors

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<sup>1</sup> "The Biblical Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms," Lutheran Church of Australia: Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions, The Two 'Kingdoms.'" accessed October 10, 2013, <http://www.letterofmarque.us/2012/11/the-biblical-doctrine-of-the-two-kingdoms.html>.

discouraged until recently, and data often interpreted and released through myopic and controlled political lenses.”<sup>2</sup> The reasons are simple: the government in power in recent times has set out to make study as difficult as possible, to isolate the country intellectually and economically. It has worked hard to stop the truth getting out—and for that matter, and maybe more successfully worked hard to stop the truth from getting in and around.<sup>3</sup>

Of the few books and research works available on Burmese nationalism, most are published outside of the country and are political in nature. Htin Aung’s work in the history and religion of Burma is invaluable as it is done by a Burmese scholar on Burmese history, culture and religion from a Burmese perspective.<sup>4</sup> Even though there are works by scholars on Burmese nationalism and Buddhism as the uniting factor in nationalistic movements, no specific work has been found that deals with the topic of interest in this paper. While Samuel Ngun Ling makes some insightful passing remarks on the current topic in his work on the encounter between Christianity and Buddhism in Burma/Myanmar, his focus is not on Burmese nationalism per se.<sup>5</sup> Tint Lwin’s study on Burmese culture and Burmese Buddhism may be cited as something that comes closest to the current topic of study.<sup>6</sup> His focus again, however, is not on Burmese nationalism as an existing challenge to Christianity and its missions in Burma.

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<sup>2</sup> David I Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2001), xxv.

<sup>3</sup> What I mean here is best expressed in the following news item that appeared in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* of October 3, 1985: “For the first time since Ne Win came to power in Burma in 1962, a consignment of 900 foreign books (mostly on medicine and computer science) recently arrived in Rangoon—and more are on the way. Donated by a private US foundation, the books are said to fill a vital academic need. In all of Burma’s libraries, there is a pitifully small collection of 30,000 English books, most are pre-1962 and therefore obsolete.”

<sup>4</sup> Maung Htin Aung, *A History of Burma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967); *Burmese Monk’s Tales* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1966); *Folk Elements in Burmese Buddhism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

<sup>5</sup> Samuel, Ngun Ling, “The Meeting of Christianity and Buddhism in Burma: Its Past, Present and Future Perspective” (Ph.D. diss., Tokyo International Christian University, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Tint Lwin, “Contextualization of the Gospel: An Effective Strategy for the Evangelization of the Theravada Buddhists in Myanmar” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1979).

However scant and insufficient it might seem, there has been some discussion of the unfortunate history of Burmese Christianity and its largely ineffective missionary efforts among the Buddhist Burmese. Some of these discussions contain proposals for a present-day mission strategy in terms of contextualizing Christian theology to be more in line with Asian and Burmese situations and aspirations. The interest of the current study, however, has not actually been considered by any of them, and has certainly not been put into writing in the form of a proposal. That Christians in Myanmar today need to make more effort to become part of Burmese society while still being faithful to their faith and calling as God's children and ambassadors for Christ—the salt and light of the world in their context of the Burmese community—needs to be explored.

### **The Dissertation in the Context of Current Scholarship**

Some Myanmar theologians have begun to address the need for engaging their Buddhist neighbors and the Buddhist society and culture in ways that might be more acceptable to the Buddhists. But whenever reaching out to the Buddhist Burmese in mission and evangelistic efforts and engaging the Buddhist society is under discussion, the focus is always on mutual dialogue and contextualization. No study has ever been done on the relevance of the teaching of Martin Luther and the other Reformers on the life of the Christian in the two kingdoms of God in the context of Myanmar Christianity. It is my conviction that this effort to propose a theological framework for the Christians in Myanmar for public engagement in the light of Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms will be a significant contribution to Christianity in Myanmar. It will provide a theological paradigm for Christians in Myanmar that will guide them to understand how Christians can live and witness best among their Buddhist neighbors as faithful followers of Christ, who are at the same time responsible citizens of their country. The teaching on how one who is a faithful citizen in God's spiritual kingdom can live simultaneously as a good citizen in

the community in which he finds himself is exactly what believers in Myanmar need to learn and understand and live out.

As noted above, some contemporary theologians in Myanmar are attempting to address the same problem this dissertation seeks to address, namely, how Christians in Myanmar should engage the wider public in which they live. Ngun Ling offers some useful hints in his discourse concerning dialogue in everyday life situations, which could be labeled ‘theology for engagement with public life.’ But he stops short of giving any valuable insights or direction on how this dialogue in one’s everyday-life could serve as a theological model that might have a significant and continuing impact on both those who are witnessing for their Christian faith and their Buddhist neighbors.

Christians in Myanmar live in a Buddhist culture. Like most of their brothers in other Asian nations, they live in a predominantly non-Christian culture. They also have to live as a small minority. The surrounding culture is clearly not favorable to the Christian faith. It would be wise, then for Christians in Burma to take into consideration what the non-Christians around them may think of them. H. Richard Niebuhr’s landmark work, *Christ and Culture*,<sup>7</sup> seeks to clarify the way that Christians interact with their surrounding world. His work has proved useful in western contexts as it explores different ways that Christians look at the culture around them with his five-fold typology. Helpful as the work may be, it does not offer much for the situation confronting Burmese believers. Niebuhr’s primary interest and focus is not on how the surrounding cultures look at Christians, but rather the Christian’s attitude toward culture and his relationship with it. In the spirit of Niebuhr’s types, the present study is an attempt to see how a “culture without Christ,” which is a fair representation of the situation in Myanmar, perceives of Christianity and how Christians should respond to that attitude and perception. It is my



conviction that Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms, if understood and applied correctly has much to offer to Christians in Myanmar in their situation as a minority religious group.

This dissertation will attempt to fill a void that has never been attempted before as a field of research. Burmese nationalism and Christianity amidst and under the pressure of this nationalism is a subject that has not been treated as a specific research topic. This dissertation will try to fill that vacuum, which will be a great contribution to the nation of Myanmar as a whole and the Christian church in particular in a distinct way. It will also help to remedy the paucity of literature on this topic in the history of Myanmar. Since there is not a single research work done on this topic to date, it is hoped that this study will be of useful service to everyone interested in this subject. An assessment of the historical sources and forces that created the current situation for Christianity and Christian theology in Myanmar will help Christians in general and Christian theologians in particular see a wider picture. After first considering and presenting several options from differing theological traditions for the way forward, a comprehensive vision for doing Christian theology and mission in Myanmar presented in the form of a proposal will help Christians appropriate for themselves the most suitable system, which is faithful to the historic Christian faith of the Bible.

Martin Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms will surely help Christians in the context of Myanmar understand how they should live as responsible citizens of their country. Christians do not need to renounce the world and live in monasteries as do the Buddhist monks, for the world is good despite that fact that it is fallen and sinful. It will also guide the church in her relations with the world, especially government and the surrounding culture, so that she understands her mission in the world. Her primary mission is to preach the gospel and to pray for all people in authority. Her responsibility also includes speaking out against the wider public including

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<sup>7</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

government whenever necessary. Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms does not call for a radical separation of church and state in a sense that people operating with a "Christ against culture" outlook may understand. Right understanding and application of this teaching calls for a proper distinction between them.

### **The Methodological Procedure to Be Employed**

This study seeks to explore the history of Burma/Myanmar as a foundation to the study of Burmese nationalism and Christianity under different government systems. It will explore the huge impact Buddhist religion has had on the Burmese in their long history since the first Burmese dynasty, known in history as the Pagan Dynasty under King Anawrahta and his successors. Study of the religious history of Burma is deemed crucial in this study because an understanding of the religious environment within which the politics of Burma/Myanmar as a nation operated and still operates is essential to a good comprehension of the role nationalism has been playing in the Burmese resistance to the Gospel down through the centuries. It will also examine Christianity and Christian mission work among the Burmese in Burma/Myanmar and the reaction of the Burmese people to Christian mission work among them. In doing this, this study attempts to discover and evaluate the success and failure of the Christian church in engaging the culture of the nationalistic Burmese. The focus is theological because the Christian faith encounters and challenges a culture that is imbedded in a religion—Buddhism. The purpose of this study is neither to write a research paper on comparative religions nor to trace the history of religions in Myanmar. Rather, it is to discover an authentic and effective way to relate the Christian faith to a unique religious culture that is not Christian by discovering the true nature of that culture's resistance to the gospel, and then to articulate a theology as a framework for the Christians' engagement with the wider public.

This dissertation will examine all available material on the history of Burma/Myanmar

from its past to present to explore how Burmese nationalism has been an integral part of the nation.<sup>8</sup> It will also look at how Burmese nationalism became politicized as a movement for independence from the colonial rule of the British, and how that movement and the strong sentiment of that nationalism had rendered the Christian church seemingly powerless to overcome religious and cultural prejudices. This dissertation will analyze the history of Burma/Myanmar in different periods to discover the link between Burmese nationalism and its reaction to Christianity, which has constantly been regarded as a western invasion into the Burmese fabric of life. The study will, therefore, contain more extensive historical material than what one might expect because it is not only an attempt to discern and suggest the usefulness of Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms for the Myanmar Christian context, but it is also an effort to see it work over against Burmese nationalism.

This dissertation will also interact with some current popular thoughts of a few prominent Christian leaders in Myanmar<sup>9</sup> who have offered interesting proposals in search of an “authentic”<sup>10</sup> Myanmar Christian theology that engages Burmese nationalism, today. It is apparent from a cursory reading of their works that these theologians are doing their theology from a progressive standpoint and it is necessary, therefore, to recognize their theological

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<sup>8</sup> Any researcher or writer feels handicapped when it comes to the historical study of Burma both for its ancient and modern times—in ancient times for lack of well documented historical records and in modern times for the government's attempt to keep the nation isolated from the rest of the world by all means among which are restrictions in the area of printing and publishing. Shelby Tucker notes: “Burma had no Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Livy or Tacitus. Until Arthur Purves Phayer published his history in 1873, the meagre records of its past consisted of court chronicles, stone inscriptions and *saga*. Moreover, no one person can be expected to master all of this long, complex story, most of which remains to be explored. Nor is the student's task helped by the military's policy since 1962 of allowing access to Burma's archives exclusively to sycophants.” See Shelby Tucker, *Burma: The Curse of Independence* (London: Pluto, 2001), xii.

<sup>9</sup> Prof. Khin Maung Din, Drs. Simon Pau Khan En, Samuel Ngun Ling and Cung Lian Hup are recognized representative modern Burmese Christian theologians, especially in the progressive Protestant liberal camp. This study will interact with some of these theologians whenever their positions on the current topic of interest are in view.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Simon Pau Khan En, “The Quest for Authentic Myanmar Contextual Theology” *RAYS: MIT Journal of Theology* 2 (2001): 31–48. His inclination to opt for syncretism in doing contextual theology is best expressed in his article on doing contextual theology in Myanmar. See Simon Pau Khan En, “Syncretism: Key to

moorings in order to have a better understanding of them. This study will also evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the work done by these leaders and finally suggest an alternative proposal for a biblically sound, legitimate, and theologically faithful approach to the current problems at hand.

In seeking to understand how one can relate the Christian faith to the broader context of a nationalistic Buddhist culture in Myanmar in which the Christian community is called to live and witness, Luther's teaching on vocation will be explored in the framework of his teaching on the two kingdoms (two realms) as a useful model for Christians in Myanmar. It is believed that a better understanding and appreciation of the Reformer's insight into how the Christian faith should be lived will better equip believers today to be faithful witnesses for Christ and His works of salvation in the context of life in which they find themselves. This study will attempt to find a basis for Christians in Myanmar to engage in nation-building activities as good citizens of their motherland, or 'the kingdom of God's left hand' (*Reich Gottes zur Linken*), while they remain mindful of their citizenship in heaven, 'the kingdom of God's right hand' (*Reich Gottes zur Rechten*).

Martin's Luther's own writings on this subject will be studied in their historical and theological contexts.<sup>11</sup> The works of Luther scholars such as Robert Kolb,<sup>12</sup> Martin Marty,<sup>13</sup>

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Doing Relevant Contextual Theology in Myanmar," *Myanmar Theological Seminary Bulletin* 3 (1997): 100–106.

<sup>11</sup> Especially, Martin Luther, "Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed, 1523," trans. by J. J. Schindel, and rev. Walther I. Brandt, *Luther's Works* 45, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehman (Philadelphia and Saint Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1962), 75–130 and Luther's other writings.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); "Niebuhr's 'Christ and Culture in Paradox' Revisited," *Lutheran Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (August, 1996): 259–79; "God Calling, 'Take Care of My People': Luther's concept of Vocation in the Augsburg Confession and Its Apology," *Concordia Journal* 8, no. 1 (January 1982): 4–11; "Christian Civic Responsibility in an Age of Judgment," *Concordia Journal* 19, no. 1 (January 1993): 10–34; "Luther on the Two Kinds of Righteousness; Reflections on His Two-Dimensional Definition of Humanity at the Heart of His Theology," *Lutheran Quarterly* 13 (1999): 449–66.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Marty, "Luther on Ethics: Man Free and Slave," *Accents in Luther's Theology*, Edited by Heino O. Kadai (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1967), 199–229.

Martin H. Scharlemann,<sup>14</sup> Robert Benne,<sup>15</sup> Richard John Neuhaus,<sup>16</sup> Charles Arand<sup>17</sup> and others will also serve as secondary sources for the right interpretation of the Reformer.

This study will attempt to introduce to Myanmar something quite new in its ecclesiological and theological context. While Christians in Myanmar can be assumed more or less to be familiar to a certain extent with the Calvinistic and Anabaptist positions on how believers should live in the world as citizens of heaven and of the world, Luther's teachings on the believers' position as that of a 'dual citizenship' is more or less neglected or unheard of in this predominantly Baptist church context. This teaching on the "two kingdoms" or "the two realms of God's kingdom," however, will be shown to be altogether relevant and helpful in Myanmar context just as it is everywhere. It will help believers in Myanmar to be able to avoid the trap of rejecting the culture or subordinating the Christian faith to the values of the popular culture. Professor Robert Kolb's insight into and perception of this theme is very precise and worthy of a quote here: "To use H. Richard Niebuhr's categories, Lutherans neither reject the culture with an anabaptistic 'Christ against Culture' stance, nor do they subordinate the Christian faith to the society's values in a 'Christ of Culture' stance like that of the Nazi German Christians or of Albrecht Ritschl's optimistic embrace of nineteenth-century Liberal values."<sup>18</sup>

The Christian is called neither to withdraw from the world nor to submit to the world. The

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<sup>14</sup> Martin H. Scharlemann, "Scriptural Concepts of the Church and the State," *Church and State under God*, Edited by Albert G. Huegli (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1964), 13–58.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Benne, *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); *Reasonable Ethics: A Christian Approach to Social, Economic, and Political Concerns* (Saint Louis: Concordia), 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Richard John Neuhaus, "Christ without Culture," *J. I. Packer and the Evangelical Future: The Importance of His Life and Thought*, Edited by George Timothy (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 143–54; Richard John Neuhaus and Michael Cromartie, eds. *Piety & Politics: Evangelicals and Fundamentalists Confront the World* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1987).

<sup>17</sup> Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> Robert Kolb, "Christian Civic Responsibility in an Age of Judgment," *Concordia Journal* 19, no. 1 (January 1993): 12.

believer is called to be the salt and light of the world for the sake of his neighbor. He is called to be a voice, calling people to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. This, obviously, is because the church's main duty is to proclaim the message of the forgiveness of sin for Christ's sake and the future restoration of God's creation in eternity with the acknowledgment that one can please God now by faithfully fulfilling his earthly tasks in faith. This, I believe, will be the most effective way for Christians to live and witness for God in this land of Buddhism.

### **The Outcomes Anticipated**

This dissertation will make a significant contribution to the study of Christianity in Myanmar in relation to Burmese nationalism. It will be a useful contribution to provide a better understanding of persistent questions in the study of the Christian church and its theology in Myanmar. It will also give Christians in Myanmar today a better understanding of their history and help them appreciate their heritage and tradition. Finally, this study will help people who are engaged in Christian mission among the Buddhists to have a more complete awareness of the prevailing Buddhist Burmese attitude toward Christianity, which in turn will help them be better prepared for evangelism among the Buddhist Burmese. This is a theological study of the history and religion of the Burmese with a focus on their reaction to Christianity under the label of nationalism. It has strong missiological and ethical implications.

A careful study of the history of Christianity and its mission endeavors over against the ever-present and super-strong Burmese nationalism will help Christians in Myanmar see their need for an efficient model for their own Christian living and effort to reach out to their neighbors. Christian involvement and engagement in society as a faithful service to God and a loving service to their neighbors sums up the whole law of Christ: to love your God with all your heart and mind and strength and to love your neighbor as well.

Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms will be studied and applied to the Myanmar

situation in relation to his teaching about the “two kinds of righteousness,” that is, “the active righteousness” and “passive righteousness” or in other words, what makes human sinners righteous or right before God and what makes the same person righteous or right before men. Active righteousness is of this world and is directed towards one’s neighbor, and can be understood as an aspect of God’s left-hand kingdom, as part of God’s creation. Christians pursue active righteousness since they live in the left-hand reality of the world. The concept of active righteousness, it should be noted, is wider in scope than only the Christian’s life in the left-hand rule of God’s kingdom in the sense that active righteousness is not limited only to believers but applies to all of God’s creation. All creatures are expected to live righteously according to God’s will for his creation. Passive righteousness, on the other hand, is not about human deeds and good works. It is God imputing His righteousness to believing sinners on the basis of Christ’s finished work by forgiving their sins and declaring them righteous. The relation between the two kinds of righteousness and the two kingdoms is close and intricate.

Connected with Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms is his teaching on “Christian vocation.” The Christian’s life in the left-hand kingdom is understood as consisting of several specific callings or vocations accomplished for the sake of his neighbor. The word “vocation” literally means calling. Martin Luther is credited with the recovery of the word “vocation” for general Christian use. The doctrine of vocation is a subset of the teaching on the two kingdoms, and will prove invaluable for the situation facing Burmese believers. Myanmar society is very much like the social structure of the days of the great Reformers. Only the dominant religion is not Roman Catholicism but Theravada Buddhism. Today in Myanmar, the monks and nuns in monasteries are considered as doing religious works while the lay people are working only for their own daily survival and sustenance. As in medieval Europe, so in Myanmar today, vocation is understood and used to refer to special callings to religious works, which is considered a

higher calling than “ordinary” life in the family and society. This teaching of Luther on Christian vocation in connection with his teaching that believers are living in the “two kingdoms” of God will be immensely liberating and empowering for all Christians in the context of Myanmar.

### **Chapter Outlines and Progression**

This study is divided into six chapters. The first chapter is an introduction to the whole study. The second chapter will attempt to trace the background of the origin and development of Burmese nationalism throughout the history of Burma under different government systems and try to see how religion has played an important role in the process of this development. In this section, the general background of Burma/Myanmar, its history, civilization, religion, etc. will be studied with a view to discovering the general background for Burmese nationalism, past and present. It will also explore how the Burmese conceive of themselves and how their attitude toward other races has affected their worldview. It will also attempt to see how this nationalism evolved into an anti-western reaction to the rule of the British and then evolved into a resistance to the Christian missionary movement and the Gospel itself.

This section will also examine how Buddhism has always functioned as the rallying point for Burmese nationalism in its historical context. It will also attempt to see how the British colonialists treated the conquered peoples’ religion and what consequences those behaviors and manners have had on Christianity. This section will examine what is meant by the popular saying: “To be a Burmese is to be a Buddhist.”<sup>19</sup> This saying sums up the challenge that Burmese

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<sup>19</sup> A parallel axiom can be readily seen in Indian and Chinese contexts as well. Judith M Brown says: “There were strands in Indian nationalism that implied that to be Indian one had to be Hindu.” See Brian Stanley, *Missions, Nationalism, and the End of Empire* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 111; Paul G. Hiebert also has this to say about a similar Chinese sentiment toward Christianity in China: “As the Chinese used to say, ‘One more Christian, one less Chinese.’” See Paul G. Hiebert, “The Gospel in Human Contexts: Changing Perceptions of Contextualization,” eds. David J. Hesselgrave and Ed Stetzer, *Missionshift: Global Mission Issues in the Third Millennium*. (Nashville: B & H, 2010), 88.



Buddhism and nationalism have posed to the Christian church's legitimate existence.<sup>20</sup> This study will also try to discover why conversion to Christianity is assumed as disloyalty to one's tradition and national heritage. For the Burmese who cannot think of nationality apart from religion, national identity and religion cannot be separated on the practical level because it is believed that Buddhism welded the Burmese together and the idea of nationhood to a large extent owes its inception to Buddhism.

Chapter Three will examine the history of Christian mission in Myanmar in the setting of Burmese nationalism. It will study the Roman Catholic mission work in Burma, which was more or less restricted to the Catholic priests' work among their own compatriots such as Portuguese and other European merchants and traders in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It will also analyze the missionary endeavors of the Baptists and other traditions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries under different political systems in Burma. This section will also examine the Burmese attitude in general and that of the Burmese rulers in particular toward Western Christian missionaries, who "had come uninvited," to use Dr. Htin Aung's words.<sup>21</sup>

Chapter Four will focus on the quest for the so-called "authentic Myanmar theology"<sup>22</sup> by some modern Myanmar theologians whose proposal for contextualization and religious dialogue fill the religious air in Myanmar. It will also try to see how inadequate they are found to be as effective ways of engaging with the wider public. This will be done by looking into some of the most prominent theologians in Myanmar today over against the perspective of some other Asian

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<sup>20</sup> Donald Eugene Smith, a prominent scholar on Burma, says: "A saying frequently repeated in modern Burma is: 'To be a Burmese is to be a Buddhist.' This is an expression of the Burmese national identity as understood by the Burmese themselves, and draws upon traditional nationalist attitudes rooted in nine centuries of history." See Donald Eugene Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), 83.

<sup>21</sup> Maung Htin Aung, "Foreword" to Helen G. Trager, *Burma through Alien Eyes: Missionary Views of the Burmese in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Praeger, 1966), ix.

<sup>22</sup> For example, see Simon Pau Khan En, "The Quest for Authentic Myanmar Contextual Theology," *MIT Ray Journal of Theology*, 2 (2001): 31–48.

evangelical theologians. The criteria for evaluating and appraising any theology will be its faithfulness to Biblical teaching.

Chapter Five will study Luther's teaching on the "two kingdoms" or the "two realms of God's kingdom" in its historical and theological settings. It will also see how it is connected with Luther's teaching on the believer's "two kinds of righteousness" and the doctrine of Christian vocation. It will consider how Luther's teaching on these vital areas of the Christian faith has been misunderstood and misused by different people in different ways. The purpose of studying these themes as taught by Luther is to discover how appropriate and relevant they can be in the context of Myanmar today.

Chapter Six of this study will be presented as a sort of proposal for the application of Luther's teaching on the "two kingdoms" to the Myanmar context today in various areas. The aim is to apply Luther's teaching on the "two kingdoms" along with his teaching on the believer's two kinds of righteousness and Christian vocation as a theological framework within which Christians in Myanmar can engage the wider public. Luther's teaching will be applied to the contemporary context in Myanmar in light of the historical and religious contours of Burmese nationalism. It will help Christians find ways to relate the Christian faith to the broader context of a nationalistic Buddhist culture in Myanmar in which the Christian community is called to live and witness.

## CHAPTER TWO

### BURMA/MYANMAR AND BURMESE NATIONALISM

The historical, cultural and religious heritage of the Burmese people play a significant role in the buildup and growth of Burmese nationalism down through the centuries and the resultant nationalist movements therefrom. How the Burmese people perceive of themselves and their attitude toward other peoples have affected the worldview of the Burmese so much so that it is literally impossible to have a proper understanding of the Burmese people without a correct comprehension of their history, culture, and religion. The Burmese people's opinion of the religions of other peoples has also played an enormously significant role in their reaction to other religions from the stance of Burmese nationalism. A brief introductory study of the historical, cultural and religious background of Myanmar and Burmese nationalism in the history of Myanmar is thus necessary in any attempt to understand the situation in which the church finds herself in Myanmar today in the setting of the ever-strong Burmese nationalism. A scholar on Southeast Asian countries Fred R. von der Mehden recognizes the fact that understanding the religious environment in Southeast Asian countries is essential to understanding the true nature of nationalism in those nations. He says:

An understanding of the religious environment within which the politics of Asian states operate is essential to comprehension of the role of nationalism in these politics.... Events in Indonesia and Burma appear to support the contention that, at least politically, it matters little how good a Moslem or Buddhist an individual is as long as he considers himself to be a member of the faith. In the nationalist ideology of hostility to foreign control the alliance of Moslems or Buddhists against the Christian ruler does not necessarily depend upon the depth of their knowledge of the faith or the purity of their practice.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fred R. von der Mehden, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia: Burma, Indonesia, the Philippines*

For a Burmese, religion is an essential part of his life. It is not just a part of his life; it is his identity. That is true for the Burmese not only as an individual Buddhist Burmese but also for the Burmese society as a whole. G. G. Grentham's statement in connection with the 1921 Census of India gives us an intimation of the Burmese person's view of his identity in terms of his religion: "Actually the Burmese thinks and speaks as a rule of his whole national culture as Buddhism."<sup>2</sup> The Burmese people cannot think of nationality apart from their religion. Donald Eugene Smith, a scholar on Burma and Burmese culture and religion, quotes a keen and discerning observer as saying: "The Burmese people cannot think of nationality apart from the religion that they hold, for it is Buddhism which has welded the Burmese together and the idea of nationhood owes its inception to Buddhism."<sup>3</sup> Buddhism has been the unifying bond for the Burmese society ever since the reign of the first king of the first unified Burmese Kingdom, known in history as the Pagan Dynasty in the eleventh century A.D. Smith describes Buddhism as the positive component in traditional Burmese nationalism that literally gives the Burmese their "Burmese national identity" as understood by themselves:

It has been suggested that the Burmese profession of Buddhism was merely a negative factor in this development, that it allowed nationalism to evolve unhindered. But the evidence is overwhelming that in many different ways Buddhism became a powerful positive component in traditional Burmese nationalism. The founding of the first Burmese dynasty in the eleventh century coincided with the establishment of Buddhism as the state religion. The king was revered as the chief promoter of the faith and indeed as a future Buddha. Burmese architecture found its chief expression in the building of pagodas, especially in the glorious wonder of Pagan, the first capital. The Burmese language was strongly influenced by Pali, the language of the Buddhist scriptures, and many of the best writers in Burmese were monks. The monks were teachers of the youth in virtually every Burmese village and, consciously or unconsciously, an agency of social control inculcating an attitude of reverence for the king and customary law. Buddhism was undoubtedly the most important integrative influence in Burmese society and culture. A saying frequently repeated in

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(Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), 3–4.

<sup>2</sup> Mehden, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia*, 5 quoting *India Census 1921*, Vol. 10: *Burma*, 104.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, 83 quoting *Burma Observer*, July 24, 1922.

modern Burma is: “To be a Burman is to be a Buddhist.” This is an expression of the Burmese national identity as understood by the Burmese themselves, and draws upon traditional nationalist attitudes rooted in nine centuries of history.<sup>4</sup>

In the following paragraphs I will try to describe how the Burmese people perceive of themselves and how their religion, Buddhism, has shaped their worldview regarding other peoples and the religions of other peoples, which in turn has impacted their view of the Christians’ identity and their witness in this predominant Buddhist society in the context of the ever-strong Burmese nationalism.

### **Myanmar and Its People**

Myanmar (officially The Republic of the Union of Myanmar—*Pyidaungzu Thanmăda Myănma Nainngandaw*), formerly known as Burma,<sup>5</sup> is the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia with a land area of 676,578 square kilometers (261,227 square miles) and a population of about 53 million.<sup>6</sup> It is an ethnically diverse country that accounts for its

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<sup>4</sup> Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, 83.

<sup>5</sup> In July 1989, the military junta changed the name of the state from the Union of Burma to the Union of Myanmar, causing much confusion, as the Burma-Myanmar split has become the representative signal of political outlook and stance. Its official name now is the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (*Pyidaungsu Thamada Myanmar Naingandaw*). While the military government has used *Myanmar* for all periods of the nation’s history and does not use *Burma*, *Burmese*, or *Burman*, for the purpose of inclusivity and linguistic objectivity, this study will use the paired form *Burma/Myanmar* for the country in most instances, except in historical contexts where the terms ‘Burma’ and ‘Myanmar’ alone will be used respectively—*Burma* for the previous periods before 1989 and *Myanmar* since that time onwards. *Burman* is used for members of the majority ethnic group whereas *Burmese/Myanmar* is used as a designation for all citizens of Burma/Myanmar. David I Steinberg, an American specialist on Burma/Myanmar also follows some of these distinctions in one of his most recent books on Burma/Myanmar. See David I. Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), xx–xxi.

<sup>6</sup> No official census has been taken under successive military dictatorship rules since 1983 when the last official census was taken nationwide. According to David I. Steinberg, the estimated population of Myanmar was 53 million in 2008. He says: “Other figures range from 47 to 58 million. In preparation for the referendum on the constitution in 2008, the official figure was 57,504,368. But this is likely to be spurious specificity.” See David I. Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), xxiv.

An official census taken under the current government while this dissertation is being written is the latest and the most up-to-date one, which gives the current population of Myanmar as 51,419, 420. “The Provisional Results of the 2014 Myanmar Census show that the total population of Myanmar is 51,419,420 persons counted during the census and an estimated 1,206,353 persons in parts of Northern Rakhine, Kachin, and Kayin States, who are not counted.” See Ministry of Population and Immigration, *Republic of the Union of Myanmar, The Population and Housing Census of Myanmar, 2014: Summary of the Provisional Results*, 2.

geographical location. It is bordered by Bangladesh in the west, India in the west and northwest, China and Laos in the northeast and east, and Thailand in the southeast. Martin Smith, a well-informed observer of Burma/Myanmar and developments in Burmese politics in Myanmar today perceives:

Burma is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world. This reflects its strategic position between the borders of modern-day Bangladesh, India, Tibet, China, Laos and Thailand. Throughout history settlers from many different ethnic backgrounds have migrated across the great horseshoe of mountains which surround the central Irrawaddy river-plain. Today ethnic minority groups are estimated to make up at least one third of Burma's population of 45 million and to inhabit half the land area.<sup>7</sup>

In Myanmar the proportion of minority ethnic groups is larger in terms of population than any other nation in the region. N. Ganesan studies and writes about the impact of the tensions between "majority" and "minority" groups in Myanmar and their impact on the development of state-society relations as follows:

Much of the story of state-building in Myanmar seems to have been excerpted from the experiences of the other countries in the region. But where ethnic difference, and in particular, tensions between "majority" and "minority" groups have exerted a comparatively minor or intermittent impact on the development of state-society relations as a whole in other mainland Southeast Asian countries, this impact has been greatly amplified in the case of Myanmar where the proportion of "minority" members in the population is larger than that of any country in the region other than Laos.<sup>8</sup>

It should be noted that ethnic diversity and certain ensuing tensions between people of different ethnic backgrounds in Myanmar has played a significant role in their religious belonging in Myanmar. It could be generally said that in most cases one's religious belonging in Myanmar is related to that person's ethnic origin and belonging.

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Smith, *Ethnic Groups in Burma: Development, Democracy and Human Rights* (London: Anti-Slavery International, 1994), 17.

<sup>8</sup> N. Ganesan and Kyaw Yin Hlaing, *Myanmar: State, Society and Ethnicity* (Singapore: Institutes of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), 51.

## The Burmese People's View of Themselves and Other Peoples

Burmese people take a great pride in being Burmese. Henry Cochrane, an early twentieth-century American Baptist missionary to Burma, observes: "The Burman is the proudest mortal on earth. Indeed, he is not of earth, according to his belief, but has descended from fallen angels.... The Burma recognizes no superior."<sup>9</sup> W. C. B. Purser, an early Christian mission historian reflected on the Burmese people's pride in their culture and religion: "The Burman is proud of his race, his literature, and his religion."<sup>10</sup> This Burmese national pride as a people of history, culture, and religion results in their feeling of superiority over other peoples. The Burmese people's feeling of superiority over other peoples and any religion other than Theravada Buddhism as practiced by them in Myanmar has been a constant challenge to Christian mission work over the years. Tint Lwin, a Burmese theologian, sees this Burmese pride and feeling of superiority as a challenge to the Gospel. In his doctoral dissertation, he pinpoints two challenges that confront the church in Myanmar today:

The Christian church in Myanmar has been trying to evangelize the Theravada Buddhists in Myanmar since 1813. The church has not been very successful in its evangelistic efforts through all the years. The lack of success is due to the many challenges that confront the church in Myanmar, two of which I wish to consider in my dissertation. The first challenge is the Burmese people themselves and the second challenge is Theravada Buddhism.<sup>11</sup>

This Burmese attitude of superiority over all other peoples has been a constant challenge to Christians in Myanmar as they endeavor to live out their true identity as followers of Jesus Christ among people who feel they are the best people who have the best religion over against anyone else in the world. This same attitude of the Burmese has also always been a hindrance to the

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<sup>9</sup> Henry Park Cochrane, *Among the Burmans* (Philadelphia: The Judson, 1904), 37.

<sup>10</sup> W. C. B. Purser, *Christian Missions in Burma* (Westminster: Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, 1911), 39.

<sup>11</sup> Tint Lwin, "Contextualization of the Gospel: An Effective Strategy for the Evangelization of the Theravada Buddhists in Myanmar" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997), 1.

Burmese Christians' efforts to witness to their Buddhist neighbors.

The Burmese see themselves as a people of history and culture with their own sovereign king who owned Buddhism as their religion with Buddhist monks in virtually every village and town in a rather peaceful state until the foreigners came and disrupted that peaceful order and destroyed every established tradition. Counting the first Burmese kingdom which is known in history as Bagan or Pagan in the eleventh century A.D., there have been three great Burmese kingdoms in the history of Burma—Pagan, Taungoo, and Konbaung. Konbaung was the last Burmese kingdom, which the British conquered and annexed into the then British Indian Empire following the Third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885. King Thibaw, the then reigning king of the Burmese was removed from his throne and sent into exile in British India. A Burmese historian recalls the incident with much grief even till today: “The king and his small entourage were swiftly put on one of the ships and sent down the river and then across the ocean to exile on the Bombay coast of India, where the king was to die on [*sic*] 1916.”<sup>12</sup> The nationalistically proud Burmese people felt utterly humiliated when their king was banished from his own land and the country was forced under the rule of foreigners.

The Burmese still feel the pains of such a mortifying ordeal even today. They would still reminisce and talk about the deportation of their deposed and humiliated king on that historic date when “many women threw themselves into the dust, lamented, and wailed, the men left the city carrying with them all the arms they could find.”<sup>13</sup> Donald Mackenzie Smeaton of the Bengal Civil Service, writing at the time, noted: “The second Burmese War, in 1852-53, was a war of annexation. The third Burmese war, in 1885-86, is a war of annexation and extinction—

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<sup>12</sup> Maung Htin Aung, *A History of Burma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 264.

<sup>13</sup> Maung Htin Aung, *A History of Burma*, 264.



extinction in the people's eyes both of nationality and religion.<sup>14</sup>

Burmese people also feel that they are a people of culture who do not need anyone else to teach them any new thing. Being situated between two of the world's oldest civilizations—China and India—Burma is in a position where religions and cultures from those two ancient civilizations have an enormous influence on the Burmese people. Tint Lwin describes those influences in terms of “saturation” when he says:

The Burmese people are a challenge to Christian mission because they are already saturated with two great religions and two great cultures of the world. The Burmese have Theravada Buddhism and spirit worship as their religions. They also inherited some elements of the Indian and Chinese civilizations and cultures. In their saturated state, the Burmese people do not see any need to assimilate more religions or cultures. They do not think Westerners and Christianity have anything more to offer them than what they already have.<sup>15</sup>

The history of Burma's past glories is also a reason why the Burmese are proud to be a ruling race who had conquered and subdued different ethnic groups in the surrounding regions and ruled them for centuries. The Burmese people's pride in their past glories is one reason why they look down on other peoples and their religions, which has made them feel they do not need to listen to the Christian missionaries from the west to learn new things from them. This feeling of superiority in culture and religion has resulted in disinterest by the Burmese in Christian teachings. Disinterest and disregard of Christianity and Christian teachings by the Burmese people have been a challenge to Christian mission work in Myanmar. Fred von der Mehden has made a perceptive remark as to how the Burmese take pride in themselves as a people of history, culture and religion and feel no need for any other religious teaching, let alone a rule by foreigners by force. His statement quoted here well expresses the ever-present intense Burmese apathy toward other religions: “With the coming of the British to Burma the barriers to

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<sup>14</sup> Donald Mackenzie Smeaton, *The Loyal Karen of Burma* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1920), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Tint Lwin, “Contextualization of the Gospel,” 7–8.

missionary expansion were not so much official as they were an expression of disinterest by a people infused with the history and culture of Buddhism.”<sup>16</sup>

Tint Lwin describes the national pride of the Burmese people in their past glories and the resultant feeling of superiority of their own religion in these words:

The three great Burmese dynasties showed us that the Burmese people were the ruling race. They subdued the tribes and nations that were within the boundaries of Myanmar and ruled them for centuries. They were also a regional power. The Burmese kings attacked and conquered neighboring countries such as Manipur and Thailand. During Tabinshwehti’s reign, Burma had the largest army in South East Asia. King Sinbyushin, another Burmese king, was victorious over the invading Chinese army. Their noteworthy historical past gives the Burmese a distinctive national pride. This naturally made the Burmese feel superior to other races, including the White Westerners. The Burmese therefore see no reason why they should listen to the White Westerners preach about their religion. Thus the historical heritage of the Burmese is a challenge to the Christian Gospel.<sup>17</sup>

This national pride of the Burmese people has been a constant hindrance to any missionary efforts since the earliest times when Roman Catholic priests attempted to start to spread their faith to native Burmese. The Portuguese Catholic priests came to Burma first as chaplains to their own people who had come to Burma as merchants and mercenaries. Later on, some Catholic priests also came to Burma as Christian missionaries to evangelize native Burmese. D. G. E. Hall recounts the attempts of those first missionaries to evangelize native Burmese and their withdrawal from Burma without any success of winning a single native Burmese to the Christian faith due to the unfavorable reception that they had received among their own countrymen:

The Portuguese, however, came to the East not only to seek their fortunes, but also to spread the Catholic religion and crusade against Islam. In 1554, the first Catholic priests arrived in Burma. They were two Dominican friars, Caspar de Cruz and Bomferrus, who came as chaplains to the seaport Portuguese. Bomferrus is said to have studied the Mon language. But they were not well received by the feringhi, as

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<sup>16</sup> Mehden, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia*, 174.

<sup>17</sup> Mehden, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia* 11–12.

the Portuguese freebooters were called in the East, and in 1557 they left, declaring that they would rather preach to pigs like St. Anthony.<sup>18</sup>

The unfavorable reception extended to them by their own compatriots was not the only reason for the abandonment of mission work by those two missionaries. The Burmese pride of not wanting to hear anything from the foreigners was another reason for those Catholic priests to leave the mission field. Henry Yule gives us the account of these two missionaries, especially that of Bomferrus as follows:

In 1557 Bomferrus, a Dominican missionary returned from Pegu [the Burmese Kingdom]. He had spent three years in learning their language and mysteries that he might preach among them, but was soon forced to give over and return to India: for they could not endure to hear any better knowledge than they had. This missionary appears to have given a tolerable account of Buddhism as it exists in these countries.<sup>19</sup>

Yule gives the reason for Bomferrus's retreat from Burma, quoting a certain Sir Thomas Herbert not so much as the cold reception by the Portuguese in Burma, but more so as the response to his labor by the Burmese themselves: "This friar, according to Sir. Thomas Herbert, 'came home professing that he had rather with St. Anthony preach among pigs than among such a swinish generation.'"<sup>20</sup> Tint Lwin expresses the true feeling of the Burmese toward Western Christian missionaries when he says:

When the White missionaries preached Christianity to the Burmese they felt insulted. The Burmese believed that the White man arrived on this earth later than they did. Thus the Burmese assumed that they knew more about life and religion than the White man. The self concept of the Burmese is a challenge to the church.<sup>21</sup>

In reaction to the British rule and their attitude of superiority over the people they ruled some nationalist young people, mostly from the educated younger generation, founded the

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<sup>18</sup> Daniel George Edward Hall, *Burma* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1950), 50.

<sup>19</sup> Henry Yule, *Narrative of the Mission Sent by the Governor-General of India to the Court of Ava in 1855* (London: Smith Elder, 1858), 210.

<sup>20</sup> Yule, *Narrative of the Mission Sent by the Governor-General of India to the Court of Ava in 1855*, 210.

<sup>21</sup> Tint Lwin, "Contextualization of the Gospel," 14.

*Dobama Asiayone*,<sup>22</sup> (We the Burmans Association) and started addressing themselves as “Thakin,” meaning, “Master.”<sup>23</sup> Donald Seekins articulates what the rationale behind the adoption and use of this radical and revolutionary title by the young Burmese political leaders was: “*Thakin* in Burmese means ‘master,’ and Burmese were expected to use it when addressing the British (like *Sahib* in India). That the young Burmese used the terms to refer to themselves had subversive meanings for the colonial regime.”<sup>24</sup> The 1991 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, herself being a Burmese, points out that the term “race” became associated with “thakin” in the Burmese nationalist movement. This term “thakin” literally means “lord,” or “master,” and when used of the Burmese as a race it connotes them as “a race of the masters.”<sup>25</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi says: “Thakin, which means ‘master,’ was the term by which the British rulers expected to be, and for the most part were, addressed by their Burmese subjects. By appropriating the title for themselves, they young Thakins proclaimed the birthright of the Burmese to be their own masters and gave their names a touch of pugnacious nationalism.”<sup>26</sup>

This movement should be understood in the context of the British behavior in acting like the “masters” over the native Burmese in their discriminatory treatment of the people they ruled. Burmese people have not forgotten how they had been treated as slaves in their own land in

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<sup>22</sup> Read as “Do-Ba-Mar-Ah-See-Ah-Yone.”

<sup>23</sup> University students such as Thakin Aung San who later became known as the “Father of Independence,” and Thakin Nu, who signed the Nu-Atlee Agreement in London in 1947 for Burma’s independence a year later following the tragic assassination of Aung San on July 19, 1947 and became the first Prime Minister of the independent Burma in 1948 and a host of other prominent politicians such as Thakin Ko Daw Hmaing, Thakin Than Tun, Thakin Soe, Thakin Thein Pe Myint, etc. adopted the title *Thakin* before their names. All the thirty young men who secretly sneaked out of the country in the wake of World War II and studied in Japan before founding the Burma Independence Army in Bangkok in 1942 all adopted the same *Thakin* title before their names. One can readily see and understand how young people who emerged from these nationalist movements against the colonial rule of the British later became leaders of an independent Burma, and how this trend of opposing whatever is “western” as a remnant element of colonialism among which Christianity is no exception is an on-going phenomenon in Burmese politics even today.

<sup>24</sup> Donald M. Seekins, *Burma and Japan Since 1940: From “Co-prosperity” to “Quiet Dialogue”* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2008), 34n10.

<sup>25</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom from Fear and Other Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 120–33.

various ways. The people of the land were excluded from the social life of the country while the “intruders” enjoyed certain privileges accorded to themselves by themselves. One example would be quite sufficient to demonstrate how the British excluded the Burmese people from the social life of the nation—the Pegu Club. Writing about the club recently in *The Myanmar Times*, Wade Guyitt describes it as a “space of exclusion,” quoting the words of Thant Myint-U, Chairman of the Yangon Heritage Trust who is also author of several books on the history of Burma, including *Where China Meets India: Burma and the Crossroads of Asia*<sup>27</sup> and *The Making of Modern Burma*<sup>28</sup>:

Membership was open to “all gentlemen interested in general society,” the club’s rules stated, but in practice that meant whites only. “Rank, wealth, and birth had no relevance,” wrote Wai Wai Myaing in *A Journey in Time*, a family memoir. “The color of the skin was the only feature that mattered.” By 1910 the Pegu Club boasted 350 members, 25 of whom lived on-site.

In 1922, the same year the Prince of Wales came to dine, George Orwell arrived in-country. In *Burmese Days* he reveals the garrison mentality of such clubs: “[N]atives are getting into all the Clubs nowadays. Even the Pegu Club, I’m told. Way this country’s going, you know. We’re about the last Club in Burma to hold out against ‘em.” Orwell’s novel neatly skewers “those Englishmen—common, unfortunately—who should never be allowed to set foot in the East”.

“Like Robben Island in South Africa, the Pegu Club may symbolise to many Myanmar all that was wrong in the not-too-distant past,” he [Thant Myint-U] says. “But it’s an important part of our history and a unique architectural legacy. To destroy it would be an act of vandalism.”

“What was once a space that excluded Myanmar people,” he says, “should not become again a preserve of foreigners.”<sup>29</sup>

Maung Htin Aung, a Burmese scholar who once occupied an exceptionally prominent position in the educational enterprise in Burma as rector of the University of Rangoon and then

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<sup>26</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom from Fear and Other Writings*, 15.

<sup>27</sup> Thant Myint-U, *Where China Meets India: Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> Wade Guyitt, “A Toast to the Past,” in *The Myanmar Times* (Monday, 08 July, 2013), accessed July 2

later as Chairman of the Burma Historical Commission, makes a sober comment as to how the Burmese were indifferent to the Christian missionaries and the propagation of their “foreign” faith in these words:

Dr. Judson and his missionaries also felt frustrated because they found among the Burmese no religious vacuum, which their religion could fill. Since the beginning of their history, the Burmese had professed Buddhism, one of the noblest faiths mankind has ever known; and the Burmese way of life itself had always been under the all-pervading influence of Buddhism. Dr. Judson made his first Burmese convert only after six years of valiant effort, and when war broke out in 1824, some eleven years after his arrival, the number of Burmese converts was only eighteen. As years passed and their endeavors among the Burmese continued to meet with failure, the missionaries were forced to seek converts in the remoter areas where Buddhism had not penetrated and where the pre-Buddhist religion of animism still prevailed.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to this Burmese pride in their history of past glories as a people of culture and religion, their inimical attitude toward other peoples, especially the White man who came to conquer and take their land and sovereignty away, can be seen as another challenge to the Gospel. This is particularly true when Christian missionaries happened to come along with, or at least at the same time as, the British imperialists and when the native Buddhist Burmese readily associated Christianity with the imperialists. This attitude of opposition to foreigners and their religion as an expression of the vibrant Burmese nationalism is most evident in the proclamation issued by King Thibaw just before the outbreak of the Third Anglo-Burmese War in 1885 that resulted in the final and complete annexation of the last Burmese kingdom into their empire by the British. King Thibaw, the last Burmese monarch, denounced the invaders with the following words:

Those heretics, the English barbarians, having most harshly made demands likely to impair and destroy our religion, violate our national customs and degrade our race are making a display and preparation as if about to wage war against our state...if these heretic barbarians should come and attempt to molest or disturb the state in any way,

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2015, <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/special-features/168-food-and-beverage/7423-a-toast-to-the-past.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Maung Htin Aung, “Foreword” to Helen G. Trager, *Burma through Alien Eyes: Missionary Views of the Burmese in the Nineteenth*, xi.

His majesty the King, watchful that the interests of religion and the state shall not suffer but will himself march forth and with the might of his army will efface these heretic barbarians and conquer and annex their country.<sup>31</sup>

This nationalism of the Burmese people later developed as an anti-western sentiment and movement that opposed anything that was British and Western as inherently imperialistic in nature. The British conquest of Burma and the annexation of it into the British Empire made some enormous changes on the political and religious scenes in Burma. Melford E. Spiro made this significant observation when he says: “The British conquest of upper Burma in 1886 converted many erstwhile politically docile monks into political monks from this period.”<sup>32</sup> This involvement of the Burmese Buddhist monks in politics against the British colonial rule became a bolstering influence in the employment of religion as the rallying point for nationalist movements in Burma. Early on, a former governor of Burma thus recorded his reflection on the religious monks’ involvement in Burmese politics: “Wherever there was an appearance of organized resistance, Buddhist monks were among the chiefs. No political movement of importance has been without a monk as a leading spirit.”<sup>33</sup>

Involvement of the Buddhist monks in national movements in the history of Myanmar can be attributed to the fact that religion is so an integral part of the Burmese social life and that religious leaders wielded so great an influence on the people that Buddhism is readily accepted by the people as the uniting force against any invading powers from outside. Traditionally the *Thathanarbaing*, the head of the monks (literally ‘owner of the religion’), was the advisor to the Burmese monarchs, for although a monk “theoretically had nothing to do with politics or things

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<sup>31</sup> Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, 94.

<sup>32</sup> Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 383.

<sup>33</sup> Sir Herbert Thirkell White, *A Civil Servant in Burma* (London: Arnold, 1913), 161.

of this world, (he) was really a political power, the only permanent power.”<sup>34</sup> Melford Spiro, who had lived in Burma for quite some time to do field research on Buddhism and the Buddhist society (in his case, Buddhist Burmese society), quite remarkably documented distinctions among political monks as follows:

Actually there are two types of political monks, each offering a different rationale for monastic political action. One type, represented by the Young Monks’ Association, believes that monks should attempt to influence political process only when Buddhism itself is at stake. Hence they oppose Communism, work for the establishment of Buddhism as the state religion, and so on. The other type, represented by the Younger Monks’ Association, believes that they should attempt to influence the political process in all matters dealing with human welfare.<sup>35</sup>

The change of the country’s name from “Burma” to “Myanmar” and the former capital “Rangoon” to “Yangon” and the like reveals the ever-present anti-western feeling among the Burmese people. It also reveals the government’s attempt to get rid of all that is a reminder of the British colonial rule in the recent past. This change of names has led to much confusion and complication, but its main purpose as an attempt to get rid of the memories of the past is clear. Donald Seekins explains the complicated issues that lie behind the use of these names in connection with politics in today’s Myanmar:

Although for most languages the choice of formal transliteration is a relatively scholarly decision, perhaps also influenced by habit and preference, in the case of Burma—or Myanmar—it is much more complex. In 1989, the Adaptation of Expressions Law promulgated by the State Law and Order Restoration Council provided a new romanization for geographical and ethnic group names. However, many writers, myself included, have chosen to use the old romanization, which dates from the British colonial era. Whether to refer to the country as “Burma” or “Myanmar” or its major city as “Rangoon” or “Yangon,” etc., has become a politically charged issue. Those who prefer the old names, including Burmese dissidents living abroad, often use them to express their belief that the post-1988 martial law government is illegitimate. My reason for using them is different: There is no international consensus on which set of names should be used. The governments of the United States and the United Kingdom continue to use the old terminology, while the United Nations and most Asian countries, including Japan, have switched to

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<sup>34</sup> J. S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice* (New York: New York University Press, 1946), 200.

<sup>35</sup> Spiro, *Buddhism and Society*, 394.



the new one. Perhaps in the future there will be agreement on this matter that will satisfy all parties involved.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, the Burmese people's view of themselves and other peoples has always been a challenge to the Gospel. The Burmese people's failure to distinguish between the imperialists of the past centuries and Christian mission by people of the same skin color from the same Western countries has made the existence of Christians in this predominantly Buddhist country an existential challenge.

### Ethnic Diversity and Its Impact on Christianity in Myanmar

Myanmar is an ethnically diverse nation with 135 distinct ethnic groups officially recognized by the government, which are grouped into eight major national ethnic races.<sup>37</sup> They are (1) Chin, (2) Kachin, (3) Kayin (Karen), (4) Kayah (Karenni), (5) Bamar (Myanmar), (6) Mon, (7) Rakhine, and (8) Shan. These are grouped primarily according to the regions where they are found to live together and along the lines of a somewhat arbitrary linguistic affiliation. For example, the Shan ethnic group has thirty-three ethnic groups who speak in languages and dialects in at least four different language families while there are over sixty different languages or dialects spoken within the Chin ethnic group. There are other unrecognized ethnic groups living among those eight major groups, such as the Burmese Chinese and Panthays, the Burmese Indians, Rohingya, the Gurkha, and the Anglo-Burmese.<sup>38</sup>

Alfred Cort Haddon (1844-1940), an influential English anthropologist and ethnologist in

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<sup>36</sup> Donald M. Seekins, *Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar)* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow, 2006), xi.

<sup>37</sup> The classification of Myanmar's ethnic groups into 135 sub-groups has never been without problems and protest. Gamani disputes against the Myanmar government's official count of ethnic groups as being 135 with disapproval: "Though the Burmese junta is claiming that they are trail-blazers totally different from and exceedingly superior to former ruling parties of Burma.... they still employ Saw Maung's official count of "135 races of Burma." Now let's see if there are really 135 groups in our country... In summary, 135 ethnic groups put up by the SPDC have 76 ethnic groups that are repeatedly counted or fabricated and only 59 ethnic groups actually exist." See Gamini, "135: Counting Races in Burma" *Shan Herald*, September 25, 2012.

<sup>38</sup> "List of Ethnic Groups in Burma," accessed April 28, 2015.

the first part of the twentieth century gives a comprehensive description of the origin of the different races or ethnic people groups of Myanmar as follows:

The original population may be represented by the Selung, the nomadic fishers of the Mergui Archipelago, who have no fixed villages and do not cultivate the soil. The men are below average size, vary from light to dark brown, and have long, lank back hair. They are regarded as being of *Indonesian* race, but there seems to be a *Proto-Malay* mixture.

All the other peoples belong to the *Indo-Chinese* populations and are grouped into *Mon-Khmer*, *Tibeto-Burman*, and *Siamese-Chinese* sub-families. Probably 2000-3000 years ago the coast was occupied by Indonesians and the interior by tribes speaking Mon-Khmer languages. From the North came the ancestors of the Tibeto-Burman and Tai peoples, who within the last fifteen centuries have flooded Indochina with successive swarms of conquerors and have received through Mon and Khmer channels a varnish of Indian civilization.<sup>39</sup>

W. C. B. Purser also gives an interesting sketch of the people groups of Myanmar and how they migrated into the country:

It has been said that apart from the immigrant Indians and Chinese, Burma is inhabited by about fifty-seven indigenous races and tribes. Which of these peoples were the aborigines of the country it is impossible to say with certainty, but the Selung, or Mawken as they call themselves, the sea gypsies of the Malay Archipelago, have the best claim, as they are the only indigenous people who do not belong to the Indo-Chinese family. All the other races have earlier or later invaded the country from the north. They are classified under the following heads:(1) Tibeto-Burman, including Burmese, Chins, and Kachins, etc.(2) Siamese-Chinese, including the Tai or Shans, Karens, etc.(3) Mon-Khmer, including Talaings (Mon) Khmer (Cambodians), Wa, etc.<sup>40</sup>

Thant Myint-U, a Burmese sociologist and historian, gives a brief yet complete historical background of how cleavages in Burmese society that was based on ethnicity came into existence during the British rule of Burma.

In general, however, the primary cleavage in the new Burma was not to be one of class but of ethnicity, between those seen as 'foreign' and those seen as 'native', and between the 'native races' themselves. The colonial census and legal codes divided

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_ethnic\\_groups\\_in\\_Burma](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ethnic_groups_in_Burma).

<sup>39</sup> Alfred Cort Haddon, *The Races of Man and Their Distribution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909 & 2012), 68.

<sup>40</sup> Purser, *Christian Missions in Burma*, 7-8.

people by religion, language and known caste categories. Thus, the vast majority of people in the Irrawaddy valley were returned as 'Burmese Buddhists'. Others were seen as 'Indian' Hindus or Muslims or as a member of a 'native' minority community. These minority communities in turn were defined in part by the existing classification schema of the Court of Ava and in part through the new science of linguistics. Old court notions of 'Kachins', 'Shans', 'Karens' and others largely remained, and were reinforced or somewhat changed by emergent European theories of language, race and migration. The 'native' races, grouped by their linguistic families, were seen as immigrating in waves from the north, while the 'Indians' from across the sub-continent were the perpetual foreigners of the valley. In local thinking, the inclusion of the English as another *kala* seemed to end around this time. The English were now commonly referred to as *bo*, formerly a military title, and no longer confused with their Bengali, Tamil or Pathan subjects. The peculiar twentieth century divide between 'Europeans', 'Indians', the 'Burmese' and the 'minorities' was firmly set.<sup>41</sup>

Burma /Myanmar is known in history as a "perfect ethnological museum"<sup>42</sup> or a "melting pot"<sup>43</sup> of an ethnically diverse society. Ethnic diversity in Myanmar deserves a careful study because there is some concrete correlation between ethnicity and religious belonging. Ethnic diversity and religious belonging that is associated with it is a dominant cause of other problems in Myanmar that proceeds from it, such as ethnic, religious and communal conflicts as experienced by the country in recent years and months. Someone has well made this statement about the connection between ethnic diversity and communal conflict of which religion is a key factor in recent incidents of violence in Myanmar: "Myanmar needs to be seen as a stable state, but it is always going to have to contend with the fact that it is one of Asia's most ethnically diverse countries and people are watching to see how the government handles tensions between its many communities."<sup>44</sup> Those "many communities" are communities which are diverse in terms of ethnicity and religious belonging.

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<sup>41</sup> Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 243–44.

<sup>42</sup> Taw Sein Ko, *Burmese Sketches* (Rangoon: British Burma Press, 1920), 2: 322.

<sup>43</sup> H. N. C. Stevenson, *The Hill Peoples of Burma* (London: Longmans Green, 1944), 5. The Karen ethnic minority group are in view here as an element in that melting pot of ethnically diverse society.

<sup>44</sup> "Why Is There Communal Violence in Myanmar," accessed June 12 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-18395788>.

Even in a country such as the United States of America there is a close relation between one's ethnicity and his/her religion. Religious historian Martin Marty once described race and ethnicity as "the skeleton of religion in America because it provides 'the supporting framework,' 'the bare outlines or main features' of American religion"<sup>45</sup> because most of America's religions have deep ethnic roots. It is found to be much more so in such a country as Myanmar with so much ethnic diversity. David Steinberg of Georgetown University documented a felt lack of unity in Myanmar among its ethnic groups in his chapter on Burma/Myanmar in a recently published book:

Burma-Myanmar is a state yet not a nation. The military, echoing the writing of General Aung San who brought independence to Burma, continuously invokes the unity of the diverse peoples of society who have been together in "weal and woe." Yet the British separation of Ministerial Burma (essentially, the Burman ethnic areas) from the peripheral frontier areas (of the minority peoples), which were governed separately on the Indian model (and until 1937 Burma was a province of India and governed first from Calcutta and then from Delhi), further split a society fomenting a lack of ethnic understanding, with suspicions and animosities that remain. Some two dozen ethnically based rebellions were prevalent in the peripheral areas when the SLORC took power in 1988.... The numerous attempts by both civilian and military governments to create an overarching national ethos that could unite these diverse peoples have yet to succeed. With at least one-third of society composed of non-Burmans of various levels of political sophistication, population, religion, and potential economic influence, the appeals of Buddhism as the unifying force (although highly important among Burmans) were nationally unsuccessful, even divisive among significant Christian or Muslim populations.<sup>46</sup>

The British separation of the ethnic groups along tribal lines, locating them in the hills away from the majority Burman in the plains was for the sake of convenience in their rule, which ignored the delicate ethnic balance of the country and would lead to ethnic problems after independence. Lord Dufferin, viceroy of India, explained the British division of the country along the lines of ethnicity during the 1886 pacification of the country:

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<sup>45</sup> Martin Marty, "Ethnicity: The Skeleton of Religion in America," *Church History* 41, no. 1 (1972): 9.

<sup>46</sup> David I. Steinberg, "Burma-Myanmar: The U.S.-Burmese Relationship and Its Vicissitudes, in *Short of the Goal: U. S. Policy and Poorly Performing States*, eds. Nancy Birdsall, Milan Vaishnav, and Robert L. Ayres (Washington, DC, Center for Global Development, 2006): 219–20.

The Shans, Kachins and other mountain tribes live under the rule of hereditary Chiefs whose authority is generally sufficient to preserve order amongst the, Here, then, we have to deal not with disintegrated masses as in Burma Proper, but with large well organised units, each under the moral and administrative control of an individual ruler.<sup>47</sup>

Religion under the British rule even since the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1824 became a cause of Buddhist resentment toward the British and some ethnic groups who worked with them.

Martin Smith explains that situation in these words:

Religion was also to be a major cause of conflict. After the first Anglo-Burmese war, British and American missionaries were able to convert a large proportion of the hill tribes to Christianity and these, especially the Karen, were then used in suppressing the Buddhist rebellion that occurred after the third war. With the expulsion of the Burman king, the British has also removed the head of the Buddhist religion. This caused widespread resentment not only towards the British but also to those who worked with them.<sup>48</sup>

San Oo Aung, however, sees this separation otherwise and describes it as what he calls the British policy of “divide and rule” in Burma. He also see this division as the root of all ethnic divisiveness in Myanmar today:

In British Burma, the same policy was introduced with the help of ‘pseudo-anthropological’ tools such as the colonial census and population reports. After three successive wars against the Burmese kingdom in 1824-26, 1852-53 and 1884-85, the British attempted to break the Burman hold on Burmese politics and society by deliberately employing the ethnic minorities and hill tribes in specific sectors of the plural colonial economy. Groups like the Karens were singled out for missionary conversion and recruitment into the colonial police force (such as the Karen Rifles brigade), thereby immediately setting the different ethnic groupings against each other.

Other migrant races were brought in to man the colonial economy as well as the colonial police force. Sikh troops from India were used to curtail indigenous revolts, as in the case of British Malaya. As in the case of Malaya, the British also introduced a policy of ‘protecting’ the rights of the indigenous Burmans when it became obvious that they had been marginalised in the colonial economy that was set up. This involved the employment of Burmans into the civil service apparatus, but it effectively kept them out of other areas such as the economy.

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<sup>47</sup> Martin Smith, *Burma—Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 41.

<sup>48</sup> Paul Keenan, *Discrimination, Conflict, and Corruption: The Ethnic States of Burma* (Chang Mai: Ethnic Nationalities Council—Union of Burma, 2011), 13.

The result was a deepening of ethnic and racial differences and the creation of even more resentment between the communities, which the British used to their advantage. As a consequence of this, Burma experienced a series of ethnic conflicts which intensified during the process of nationalist struggle. The postcolonial regime has also tried to deal with the enduring problem of racial and ethnic animosity for several decades, but most of their policies have failed due to their own Burman-centric approach.<sup>49</sup>

The problem seems to be much deeper and more complicated than what Burma has inherited from the British policy of preferential treatment of certain ethnic groups over the others. Ethnic diversity and issues that have stemmed from historical and cultural heritage from the colonial past did not get resolved with the coming of independence from the British in 1948; they intensified as the successive governments of post-independence Myanmar adopted and practiced totalitarian rule that completely ignored the rights and aspirations of the minority groups. David I. Steinberg's remark is clarifying in this regard:

The Burmese have continuously accused the British of pitting one ethnic against another—the “divide and rule policy.” To a degree this was true, but the British did not need to divide to rule; they had sufficient power. It was rather convenience that prompted them to separate “the hills” from the Burman-dominated river valleys. The periphery, the horseshoe arc of hills and mountains on the west, north, and east where many of the minority peoples resided, was governed separately from Burma Proper, or Ministerial Burma, the homeland of the Burman ethnic group (but including the Arakanese and Mon).<sup>50</sup>

In one of his papers presented to an Asia Regional Consultation on Social Cohesion and Conflict Prevention in Manila, the Philippines, entitled, “The Problems of Myanmar and Myanmar's Problem,” David I. Steinberg states:

Myanmar is an ‘imagined community’—a state that is not yet a cohesive nation, an entity created sequentially through three 19<sup>th</sup> century wars evolving out of colonial economic and geo-political interests. The internal bonds that seemed to cement that country before independence in 1948 were based on the exercise of colonial power, serving both to force an artificial internal cohesion while simultaneously creating detached and separate ethnic groups, some of which were governed under a different

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<sup>49</sup> San Oo Aung, “The British Policy of Divide and Rule in Burma, Malaya, and India,” accessed July 2 2015, <https://sanooaung.wordpress.com/2010/01/28/the-british-policy-of-divide-and-rule-in-burma-malaya-and-india/>.

<sup>50</sup> Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar*, 183.

British administration. Governments since independence in 1948 have, sometimes unintentionally, exacerbated existing cleavages and created new ones, thus reducing national cohesiveness even as it was tutelary strengthened under a unitary state and creating divisive forces that will be difficult to re-meld. The rhetoric of national cohesion must be analytically examined in the light of the reality of its attempted enforcement.<sup>51</sup>

Steinberg also points out that there have been some cleavages in Myanmar among different ethnic groups and classes of people. He identifies at least seven dynamics as being damaging in the current Myanmar situation among which religion always looms large:

A variety of cleavages have led to tensions and confrontations within this state that affect its capacity to create national unity and the equitable sharing of the fruits of development, should that opportunity arise.... The cleavages and tensions within contemporary Myanmar may be conceptualized as follows; Those 1. Between Burman nationalism and a relatively new and diverse ethnic nationalism, which is a component of center-periphery issues and relates to the issue of national unity; 2. Between civil and military sectors of the society; 3. Between globalization and nationalism; 4. Between centralism and pluralism; 5. Between orthodoxy and competing views of the role of state and society; 6. Among religious groups; and 7. New geo-political, international rivalries that affect the internal attitudes of those in authority.<sup>52</sup>

Lian H. Sakhong, a political expert on ethnic issues in Myanmar who has hailed from the Chin ethnic group, recounts how Burma/Myanmar came into existence as a modern state and how ethnicity, language and religion play a huge rule in the present-day situation of Myanmar. He writes:

A modern “nation-state” of the Union of Burma is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-cultural country where many different ethnic groups who practice different cultures, adhere to different religious teaching, and speak different languages are “coming together” to form a new “nation-state” of the Union of Burma. Thus, the boundaries of the “state,” which is the “nation-state” of the Union of Burma, and the

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<sup>51</sup> David I. Steinberg, “The Problems of Myanmar and Myanmar’s Problem,” in a paper presented at an Asia Regional Consultation on Social Cohesion and Conflict Prevention , Asian Development Bank—World Bank in Manila, March 16–17, 2000, accessed June 3 2015, [http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs/Steinberg-Myanmar%27s\\_problems.htm](http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs/Steinberg-Myanmar%27s_problems.htm).

<sup>52</sup> David I. Steinberg, “The Problems of Myanmar and Myanmar’s Problem,” in a paper presented at an Asia Regional Consultation on Social Cohesion and Conflict Prevention , Asian Development Bank—World Bank in Manila, March 16–17, 2000, accessed June 3 2015, [http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs/Steinberg-Myanmar%27s\\_problems.htm](http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs/Steinberg-Myanmar%27s_problems.htm).

boundaries of the “nations,” which is the “homelands” of ethnic nationalities or “ethnic national states,” do not coincide and the population of the Union of Burma cannot share a single ethnic culture, or a single language, or a single religious faith....

Since independence, the successive governments of the Union of Burma implemented “nation-building,” not purely as “state-building,” for the entire Union of Burma. Nation-building, for U Nu, Ne Win, Saw Maung and Than Shwe, was simply based on the notion of “one ethnicity, one language and one religion”—that is to say, the ethnicity of *Myanmar-lumyo*, the language of *Myanmar-batha-ska* and the state religion of Buddhism. Thus, what they wanted to achieve through the “nation-building” process was to create a homogeneous nation of *Myanmar Naing-ngan*, by drawing its political values from the cultural and religious values of *Mynamar-lumyo*, *Maynmar-batha-ska* and *Myanmar-thatana* of Buddhism. While U Nu (1948-1962) opted for cultural and religious assimilation as a means of a nation-building process by promulgating Buddhism as a state religion, General Ne Win (1962-1988) imposed the national language policy of *Myanmar-batha-ska* as a means of creating a homogeneous unitary state. Supplementing U Nu’s policy of state religion and Ne Win’s national language policy, the current military regime is opting for Ethnicity as a means of national integration, by imposing ethnic assimilation into *Myanmar-lumyo*. They, thus, changed the country name from Burma to *Myanmar* in 1989.

Since all these ethnic nationalities in Burma could not find any other means of solving the political crisis, they have resorted to armed-struggle. Growing conflicts and over sixty years of civil war have crystallized a sense of ethnic identity in what was before often only a linguistic or ethno-religious category and still divided by religion and ethnic origin; it is this conflict with the state in which the Arakan, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon, Shan and other ethnic nationalities are involved that have given the members of each ethnic group a wider self-awareness and a sense of their common history and destiny which strengthens their aspirations for a separate ethno-national identity in Burma.<sup>53</sup>

Religion or religious belonging, obviously, is an essential and dominant part of the “ethno-national identity” as Sakhong points out in the above quote. Ethnic diversity and suspicion among different ethnic groups, especially between the majority Burmans<sup>54</sup> and the so-called national races who are the ethnic minorities (or more specifically the ethnic minorities’ distrust of the majority Burmans) contribute to the challenge of Christians’ struggle in affirming their

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<sup>53</sup> Lian H. Sakhong, “The Dynamics of Sixty Years of Ethnic Armed Conflict in Burma,” *Burma Center for Ethnic Studies, Analysis Paper No. 1* (January 2012): 4.

<sup>54</sup> The terms “Burmese” and “Burman” were once used interchangeably, but, as Josef Silverstein has noted, it is more proper to keep the distinction between these two: “Most scholars after World War II used them as follows: Burman is an ethnic term identifying a particular group in Burma. Burmese is a political term including all the inhabitants of the country—Burmans, Mon, Karens, Shans, Kachins, Chins, and so on.” See Josef Silverstein,



Christian identity and witness in Myanmar today. When the nationalism of the majority Burmans got exploited to be used as a means of what Robert A. Holmes calls “Burmanization,”<sup>55</sup> the cleavage between majority Buddhist Burmese and minority Christians and people of other faith traditions got wider and wider.

Ethnic diversity in Myanmar has some concrete bearing on how different ethnic groups of people accept or reject Christianity in the backdrop of the ever-strong Burmese nationalism. The distribution of Christian population among the various ethnic groups of Myanmar is linked to their ethnic belongings. Fred R. von der Mehden makes a remarkable comment on this particular issue of the correlation between ethnicity and religion in Burma: “In Burma, statistics show the Christian missionaries were most successful among the Karens of southeastern Burma and the Chins and Kachins of the western and northern regions of the country. This meant that there were comparatively few Christians living in the centers of burgeoning nationalism and national history and culture.”<sup>56</sup>

It is also interesting to note that whereas the Buddhist Burmese feel the entry of the Christian religion into their country as an undesirable intrusion into their lives and view it even as an invasion into their religious and cultural lives, the Karens, for instance, feel otherwise about it. They regard the entry of Christianity into the Karen community as the beginning of a new national identity and freedom from both political and spiritual bondage. Mikael Gravers has made an interesting observation regarding differing attitudes by different ethnic groups, particularly those of the Burmese Buddhist and Karen Christians toward Christian conversion in the following words:

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*Burma: Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 4.

<sup>55</sup> Robert A. Holmes, “Burmese Domestic Policy: The Politics of Burmanization,” *Asian Survey* 7, no. 3 (March 1967): 188–97.

<sup>56</sup> Mehden, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia*, 171.

Seen from a Buddhist Burman perspective, Christianity was, and still is, intolerant, arrogant and absolutist. Christian conversion thus generated fear of estrangement from what defined Burman identity as well as the foundation of the kingdom and its subjects among other ethnic groups (Shan, Mon, Karen and others). If large sections of these minorities now became like the foreigners, the Europeans could easily assume power. This is exactly what happened in the three colonial wars of conquest in 1824, 1852 and 1885. Even though the king forbade missionaries from handing out books and missions from operating in the areas of the country he controlled after 1826, this could not prevent the conversion of those Karen who were not well versed in Buddhism. These Sgaw Karen from the delta of the Irrawaddy River in the south of Burma held the lowest position in the dynastic hierarchy. Apparently they had no direct protectors amongst state officials and as such they saw not only deliverance but also advancement through the ranks of power in their alliance with the Baptists.<sup>57</sup>

Lai Sum, another Christian scholar from the Chin ethnic group, asserts that the Karens who are “the largest Christian group in Burma understand the arrival of the missionaries as the recovery of their long-lost civilization and reestablishment of their culture and religion that would result in their freedom from political as well as spiritual bondage.”<sup>58</sup> San C. Po, a Karen Christian leader, can be taken as one example who demonstrated this attitude when he said:

The Karens are not ashamed or afraid to proclaim to the world publicly or in private that they owe what progress and advancement they have made to the missionaries whom they affectionately call their ‘Mother’ under the protection of the British Government whom they rightly call their ‘Father.’ The latter, as is usually the case with a father, never really knows, or if he does know often forgets, the special or peculiar needs of his individual child at home.

Every Karen must be ever grateful to the missionaries and the people that send them, of whatever nationality, for the sacrifice of time, talent, money, and men on their behalf. There is no need to speak of the past, the self sacrifice and the great persecutions which the missionaries have undergone, for they have been recorded in history as well as in the Great Book which never leaves out a single act of man.<sup>59</sup>

It is true that some Karen Christians got involved in an uprising against the government of the newly independent Burma in 1949. But the accusation that the Karen uprising was due to their

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<sup>57</sup> Mikael Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma: An Essay on the Historical Practice of Power* (Richmond Surrey, UK: The Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 1993), 24.

<sup>58</sup> David Lai Sum, “Naming God in Burma Today” (D.Min. diss., Chicago University, 1994), 2 citing San C. Po, *Burma and the Karens*, (London: Elliot Stock, 1928), 2. Dr. Lai Sum cites San C. Po who candidly states that that freedom is from the Burmans who oppressed and enslaved the Karens for centuries.

<sup>59</sup> San C. Po, *Burma and the Karens* (London: Elliot Stock, 1928), 58.

Christian faith, however, is simply not true, as a careful study of history clearly reveals. Fred R. von der Mehden says:

This fact needs to be particularly emphasized in regard to the Karens of Burma who have been mistakenly characterized as overwhelmingly Christian, thus leading some to overemphasize the place of foreigners and missionaries in the 1949 Karen rebellion. Actually, the Karen Christian community probably comprises less than 30 per cent of the total Karen community.<sup>60</sup>

The truth of the matter is that both Buddhist and Christians took part in this rebellion and it had nothing to do with one's religion, whether it was Christianity or Buddhism.

“The Chins,” Lai Sum says, “the second largest group after the Karens, understand the arrival of the gospel as the dawn of their total history, that is, liberation from fear of rai spirits in their traditional religion and from tribal wars which negatively affected their social and economic life.”<sup>61</sup> Lai Sum further makes the assertion that “it will not be wrong to generalize that all Christian groups in Burma share this common experience of ‘liberation’ or ‘hope of liberation.’ In short, they understand this event and its symbolic embodiments as the historical as well as theological foundation of their local churches.”<sup>62</sup> What San C. Po attributed to Christianity and its uplifting teaching to the progress that the Karen tribe or ethnic group has made in the following quote can be taken as representing what is true for all other ethnic groups:

Religions has played a prominent part in the general progress of the Karens, and Christianity has satisfied a great national religious need, and in doing so has developed a national civilisation. Three processes have ever since been simultaneously in operation: Christianity, Education and Civilisation. The Karens

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<sup>60</sup> Mehden, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia*, 171.

<sup>61</sup> Sum, “Naming God in Burma Today,” 2. Lai Sum is here citing Sing Khaw Khai as his source. See Sing Khaw Khai, “The Theological Concept of Zo in the Chin Tradition and Culture” (BRE thesis, Burma Institute of Theology, 1984), ii. Sing Khaw Khai, who used to be a captain in the Army in Burma became a prominent politician in the Burmese Socialist Programme Party as a member of its Central Committee. He then served as a pastor for quite some time until his death in 1996. He is a rare blend among the Zomi people in Myanmar of being a government official and Christian pastor in a good combination with insights into some delicate and elusive issues in relation to religion and politics in Burma/Myanmar.

<sup>62</sup> Sum, “Naming God in Burma Today,” 2.

regard these three as indivisible parts of the message which for ages their ancestors had firmly believed God would at some time or other send to them.<sup>63</sup>

W. C. B. Purser also records the same attitude of the ethnic groups toward Christianity and Western Christian missionaries in his work on Christian mission work in Burma in the early twentieth century:

While the Burman often looks on the missionary as a barbarian or heretic, the hill folk look on him as a saviour and deliverer. They are degraded, and they are conscious of their degradation, and far from being proud of their race and their customs, are ready to repudiate both if they can improve their condition. Many of the Karens and Chins have become Burmanized; they have given up the national dress, language, and religion, and have for all intents and purposes become Burmese. Generally speaking, when they become Burmanized they also profess the Buddhist religion, for Burman and Buddhist are to their minds convertible term.

The recent success of the Baptists amongst the Laos shows how great the possibilities are amongst the hill tribes: within the last five years 9000 have been baptized from this tribe alone. Work amongst the Chins, Kachins and Toungthus would produce similar results were it taken up with zeal.<sup>64</sup>

Mr. Purser also described how Christian mission work was fruitful among the ethnic minorities in terms of gaining converts and expressed his delight in the character of those converts won among the hill people:

Among such backward peoples as these hill and mountain dwellers of Burma, Christian Missions have won their most notable victories. By the outsider this success is measured by the number of converts, but to the missionary it is measured by the character of their lives. In the simple piety of their lives these hill Christians demonstrate the power which Christ has over them.

If each race and nation as it enters the Church will contribute something towards the fullness of its religious experience, we may believe that the contribution which these hill people will make will be the spirit of reverence and simplicity. They will remind us of the words of our Lord: "Unless ye become as a little child ye cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven."<sup>65</sup>

The issue of ethnic diversity was compounded when the colonial British government

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<sup>63</sup> Po, *Burma and the Karens*, 60.

<sup>64</sup> Purser, *Christian Missions in Burma*, 39–40.

<sup>65</sup> Purser, *Christian Missions in Burma*, 40–41.

practiced two different systems of rule for the people of Burma under their rule. The ethnically and linguistically diverse border regions of Myanmar were indirectly ruled by the British through local chiefs whereas the central and southern parts of the country were directly ruled by the British until the time of independence in 1948. This was further complicated by the special provisions made in British law for ethnic representation in the directly ruled areas. The British colonial government's exercise of preferential treatment among different ethnic groups under their colonial rule has spawned divisions, distrust and suspicion among different people groups. It turns out to be worse when the Christian population was concentrated among the minority ethnic groups whom the colonial government treated as their allies over against the majority Buddhist Burmese.

The British policy of the recruitment of the ethnic minorities such as Chin, Kachin, and Karen in the colonial armed forces while refusing to accept the majority ethnic Buddhist Burmans best illustrates how the British rulers' treatment of different ethnic national groups has created misgivings, prejudice and suspicion among people groups in Burma. To quote Donald Seekins:

The colonial armed forces were small, just a few thousand soldiers after World War I, but the great majority of them were border area people, especially Chins and Kachins, as well as Karens. Given their history of insurrection, Burmans were not considered trustworthy as soldiers. Karen–Burman relations, characterized by mutual suspicion if not hostility, posed special problems for national integration. Large numbers of them lived in the Irrawaddy Delta and Rangoon as well as in the remoter Burma–Thailand border region, and a vigorous ethnic consciousness emerged, with British encouragement, especially after the establishment of the Karen National Association by Christian leaders in 1881 (though only a minority of Karens were, and are, Christians; the others are Buddhists and animists). Of all the minority peoples, the Karens developed the strongest sense of their separate nationhood under British rule, as expressed in Sir San Crombie Po's classic *Burma and the Karens* (1928); they also had the greatest apprehensions about what their future would be in a postcolonial, Burman-dominated state.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Seekins, *Historical Dictionary of Burma* (Myanmar), 19.

Looking back at the past history of Burma under British rule, Violet Cho is able to affirm today that “Christian converts in ethnic minority groups, such as Karen and Kachin, were given preferential treatment by the British in the armed forces and bureaucracy, causing ethnic tension with the Burman majority. Through early contact with British and American missionaries, a minority Karen converted to Christianity and were able to gain higher education than their Buddhist and animist brothers and sisters.”<sup>67</sup> With the Christian population being concentrated in those ethnic areas as the religion of minorities, Christianity is in a prejudicial position not only as one of the minority religions of Myanmar, but also as the religion of minority ethnic groups. This creates an existential struggle for the Christians as they attempt to affirm their identity as faithful followers of Jesus Christ among their majority Buddhist neighbors.

### **Religions in Myanmar**

Myanmar is home to some of the most conservative Buddhists who claim to practice one of the most authentic branches of Buddhism in the world today.<sup>68</sup> In recent times, Myanmar has been a leading center for the contemporary revival of Buddhism in Asia as the home of the two-year Buddhist Council (1954–1956)<sup>69</sup> and a center for the resurgent Buddhist missionary

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<sup>67</sup> Violet Cho, “Rearranging Bead on a Necklace: Reflections on Burmese Karen Media on Exile,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 12, no. 3 (2011): 465–66.

<sup>68</sup> Buddhists, the predominant majority religious group, make up 89 percent of the population of Myanmar while the minority Christian population is estimated to be barely over 5 percent. Samuel Ngun Ling, quoting the Myanmar Ministry of Information’s *Myanmar: Facts and Figures 2002* (March, 2002), 4–5, however, gives a slightly larger number of Christians against practitioners of other religions: “Buddhism is believed to be practiced by 89.3 percent of the population while Christianity is practiced by 5.6 percent, Islam by 3.8 percent, Hinduism by 0.5 percent and primal religions (animism) by 0.2 percent of the population.” See Samuel Ngun Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions, and Perspectives* (Yangon: Association for Theological Education in Myanmar, 2005), 11.

Contrary to this claim that the Buddhism practiced in Burma/Myanmar is the purest and most authentic branch of the religion, it is a blend of some elements of the pre-Buddhist folk religions and Theravada Buddhism especially since the days of the first unified Burmese kingdom, known in history as Pagan (Bagan) Kingdom.

<sup>69</sup> The first Buddhist Council (Synod) was held at Rajagaha, shortly after Buddha claimed to have attained Nirvana, where all of Buddha’s teachings were recited and classified. The second was held in Vesala in 443 BC and marked the beginning of the two separate schools of thought. The third was at Pataliputta about 308 BC; it was

outreach.

Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion among the majority Burman ethnic group and the Shan, Arakanese (Rakhine), and Mon ethnic minorities. Christianity is the dominant religion among the Chin and the Kachin ethnic groups of the Western and northern regions of Myanmar and has some adherents among Naga ethnic groups. There are large numbers of Christians among the Karen and Karenni (Kayah) ethnic groups although many Karen and Karenni are Buddhist. In addition, some ethnic Indians are Christian. Hinduism is practiced chiefly by Burmese of Indian origin while Islam is practiced in the dominantly Buddhist Rakhine State in western Myanmar where it is the dominant religion of the Rohingya minority. Chinese ethnic minorities generally practice traditional Chinese religions. Traditional indigenous beliefs are practiced widely among smaller ethnic groups in the highland regions. Practices drawn from those indigenous beliefs persist widely in popular Buddhist rituals, especially in rural areas.<sup>70</sup>

Donald Eugene Smith, a scholar on religion and politics in Burma, states that “the socio-political role of Theravada Buddhism under Burmese kings, from the eleventh century onward, was of fundamental importance in shaping the history of the country.”<sup>71</sup> Smith identifies the eleventh century as the beginning of Buddhism in Myanmar because it was in 1044 that the first king of the first unified Burmese kingdom in Pagan in central Burma, King Anawrahta, began to adopt Buddhism as the religion of the kingdom.<sup>72</sup> Anawrahta (1044–1077) was, as D. G. E. Hall

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followed by an intense and extensive missionary activity. The fourth was held in Sri Lanka in 13 BC for the purpose of committing Buddha’s teachings to writing. The fifth was in Burma in AD 1871 under the patronage of the Burmese monarch King Mindon, where the Pali scriptures were transcribed from palm leaves to 729 marble slabs. See Kanbawza Win, “A Christian in Southeast Asia Peninsular (A Burmese Perspective),” *Asia Journal of Theology* 1, no. 1 (1987): 277.

<sup>70</sup> “Freedom of Religion in Burma,” accessed May 11, 2015, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom\\_of\\_religion\\_in\\_Burma#mw.navigation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_of_religion_in_Burma#mw.navigation).

<sup>71</sup> Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, 3,

<sup>72</sup> There were, of course, earlier kingdoms that arose in the history of ancient Burma earlier than that of Pagan. Ancient kingdoms such as Tagaung, Shri Kshetra and Halingyi city-states of the Pyu people and Thaton and Hanthawaddy kingdoms of the Mon people were prosperous kingdoms and city-states before Pagan Kingdom came

says, “the first king of Burma and with him Burmese history proper begins.”<sup>73</sup> G.E. Harvey, describes the best aspects of the Kingdom of Pagan by comparing them with aspects of British history when he writes:

If they [the kings of Pagan] produced no nation-builder like Simon de Montfort, no lawgiver like Edward I, they united Burma for more than two centuries, and that in itself was an achievement. But their role was aesthetic and religious rather than political. To them the world owes in great measure the preservation of Theravada Buddhism, one of the purest faiths mankind has ever known...Those who doubt the reality of the populous city given up to the spiritual, should read the numberless inscriptions of the period, richly human and intensively devout; contemplate the sixteen square miles at Pagan, all dedicated to religion; contrast each separate brick from the depths of a great pile with the rubble of the Norman pillars; reflect that each temple was built not in generations but in months; remember how short was the period when Pagan was inhabited; think of the literary activities of the Kyaukky Onhmin; add to all of this our natural preconception of the conditions necessary to the production of the great religious art; and then say whether those campaigns for a tooth, those heart searchings over the loss of a white elephant, at which we smile, are not rather possessed of a significance as deep to men of the age as the quest of the Holy Grail had for Arthurian knights.<sup>74</sup>

Albert Fytch, who was for many years chief administrator of the then British Burma, however, is of the opinion that it was the Talaings in ancient Burma who first received the Buddhist faith before the Burmans whose migration into Burma took place much later in the eighth century AD than that of the Talaing people. He says:

From Buddhist writings preserved at Ceylon and elsewhere there can be no doubt that the Talaings first obtained their knowledge of the Buddhist religion through the two missionaries as above described; and owing to their being on the sea-board, received it at a much earlier period than the Burmese. But as to when, by what means, the Burmese first obtained their knowledge of it, no authentic record exists. Sir Arthur Phayre is of the opinion that they were converted by Buddhist missionaries from Gangetic India, who reached Upper Burma through Bengal and Manipur. Others, amongst whom is Rhys Davids supposed that Buddhism was introduced from China. It is not unlikely, however, that the Burmese obtained both their religion and their alphabet through the Talaings. The Burmese alphabet is almost the same as the

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into existence. Those, however, were not able to unify the whole country of Burma.

<sup>73</sup> Hall, *Burma*, 14.

<sup>74</sup> G. E. Harvey, *History of Burma: From the Earliest Times to March, 1824 The Beginnings of the English Conquest* (London: Frank Cass, 1925 & 1967), 70.



Talaing's, and the circular form of both strongly indicates the influence of the Singalese, or Tamulic type of letter.<sup>75</sup>

Taw Sein Ko, an able historian who had served for many years in the Indian Civil Service in British Burma in the early days of the British colonial rule there, also gives some information about how the Talaings first obtained the Buddhist faith early in the fourth century A.D.:

The history of the Buddhist Church in Ramanna or the country of the Talaings begins with the third Buddhist Council convened by Asoka in 309 B.C. At the conclusion of this Council, missionaries were sent forth to various countries to propagate the Religion. Mahinda was despatched (*sic*) to Ceylon, and Sona and Uttara were sent to Suvannabhumi, which land both Talaing and Burmese writers agree in identifying with Thaton, the Talaing kingdom (*sic*) conquered by Anawrata in 1057 A.D. An account of the despatch (*sic*) of these missionaries, and of the miraculous conversion of the countries visited by them is given in Chapter XII of the Mahavamsa, a history compiled in Ceylon by Mahanama, a Buddhist Monk, in the fifth century A.D. Doubts have been expressed by European scholars as to the authenticity of this account, and there is an inclination to treat the whole tale as a monkish legend. In the inscriptions of Asoka, Ceylon is referred to only twice, and no mention is made either of Suvanabhumi, or of the mission of Asoka's son Mahinda, or of his daughter Sanghamita. Nor have any inscriptions in the Asoka character been found at Thaton or Pagan, whither it is supposed the Burmese conquerors removed their spoils of war.<sup>76</sup>

Taw Sein Ko also elucidates how the Burmese writers have tried to evade their indebtedness to the Talaings for the Buddhist faith through whom they had received the Buddhist religion:

At the same time, Burmese writers are not willing to acknowledge their indebtedness to the Talaings, whom they had conquered, for their knowledge of Buddhism. They say that Sunaparanta, the classic name of their country, should be identified with Aparantaka; that the Buddha himself visited Sunaparanta during his life-time, and there established his Religion; and that, at the end of the Third Council, missionaries were sent to Aparantaka to propagate the Faith. They add that, as early as 443 B.C., Buddhism was established at Prome as attested by the ancient Pagodas still in existence, and that, if they are at all beholden to the Talaings, the revival of the faith is certainly due to the Buddhist scriptures brought from Thaton to Pagan in the 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The establishment of Buddhism at Prome in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., cannot as yet be proved or disproved, because the ruins of that ancient capital have not been

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<sup>75</sup> Albert Flytch, *Burma, Past and Present* (London: C. K. Paul, 1878), 171.

<sup>76</sup> Taw Sein Ko, *Burmese Sketches*, 179.

systematically explored; nor can Burma's claim to be identified with Aparantaka be admitted.<sup>77</sup>

Donald Eugene Smith once made an insightful observation about the religious landscape of Burma before Anawrahta introduced and established Buddhism in Burma. He said: "An indigenous animism, the worship of "nat" spirits, coexisted and coalesced with various religions of Indian origin, including several Hindu sects and both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism."<sup>78</sup> These Burmese indigenous religions before Anawrahta were made up of religious folk elements of the day. D. G. E. Hall tries to identify these elements when he says that "Burmese animism is made up of the worship of a host of spirits called nats: local nature gods, the spirits of earth and sky, rain and wind, whirlpool and whirlwind, of mountains, rivers, and trees, of jungles, and even of villages and houses."<sup>79</sup> W. C. B. Purser agrees with the above statements about the pre-Pagan religion of Burma when he says: "One of Anawrahta's claims to greatness is that he early recognized the civilizing power of Buddhism. The traditional religion of his own people was the same as that of the Chins with whom they are akin i. e. Animism, the worship of spirits."<sup>80</sup>

The Burmese were united under the kingdom of Pagan, which G. E. Harvey, an official in the administrative service in British Burma for many years described as "the Dynasty of Temple Builders."<sup>81</sup> The scene of the dedication of the great Ananda Pagod by King Kyansittha and his subjects well demonstrated the greatness of the Kingdom of Pagan and the unity of the people as they were unified by their religion. In describing the dedication by King Kyansittha, the successor king to Anawrahta, of the great Ananda Pagoda, Harvey writes:

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<sup>77</sup> Taw Sein Ko, *Burmese Sketches*, 181.

<sup>78</sup> Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, 12.

<sup>79</sup> Hall, *Burma*, 13.

<sup>80</sup> Purser, *Christian Missions in Burma*, 47.

<sup>81</sup> Harvey, *History of Burma*, 21.

Kyanzitha, riding a white horse at the head of a great procession of monks and people, dedicated the temple in 1090. With its tender beauty, its wealth of sculpture, its mingling of races and languages, the Ananda shows forth the kingship's undivided sway over the upper reaches of the Irrawaddy and the Talaings of the Delta, in the days when Pagan was a religious centre far and wide, and men came even from India to worship at her shrines.<sup>82</sup>

Even though the Burmese Buddhists believe and claim their religion to be the purest form of Theravada Buddhism, it is found to be quite the contrary. In his well-documented work, Dr. Htin Aung traces folk elements in Burmese Buddhism. He points out the syncretic nature of Burmese Buddhism.<sup>83</sup> Sir James George Scott, a Scottish journalist who had also served as a colonial administrator in Burma who was recognized as the greatest authority on Burma, has to say this about the religion of the Burmese:

The vast body of the people are Animists pure and simple... It is not uncommon to find spirit shrines almost in the monastic compound, and altars to the viewless spirits of the air are often actually in the shadow of the pagoda. It is the heritage of an immemorial past, it is the core of the popular faith. Buddhism is merely a sounding brass, a tinkling cymbal, an electro plating, a bloom, a varnish, enamel, lacquer, a veneer, sometimes only a partering which flakes off, and shows the structure below.<sup>84</sup>

Mixed and hybrid in nature that it may be, Buddhism has become the religion of the people of Burma since the Pagan period in the eleventh century A.D. and has wielded such a strong sway on the people that the Burmese people cannot think of nationality apart from their religion. Purser would readily concur with this assessment that Buddhism has been the main power in the

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<sup>82</sup> Harvey, *History of Burma* 41.

<sup>83</sup> Maung Htin Aung, *Folk Elements in Burmese Buddhism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962). The thesis of Dr. Htin Aung is that pre-Buddhist culture and institutions have survived in Buddhist Burma by giving themselves a veneer of Buddhist theology while retaining the flavors and practices of their heathen and animistic origins and that the people have largely forgotten the heathen origins and significance of these practices. To support this thesis he outlines the religious institutions of pre-Buddhist Burma, and depicts (from historical sources) the Buddhist response to them when Buddhism became the dominant religion of Burma. He then describes the resulting synthesis of Buddhism and heathen institutions, drawing his material from both history and personal observation. See also R. C. Temple, *The Thirty-seven Nats: A Phase of Spirit-Worship Prevailing in Burma* (London: Kiscadle, 1906); and Simon Pau Khan En, *Nat Worship: A Paradigm for Doing Contextual Theology in Myanmar* (Yangon: Judson Research Center of Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2012). This is originally Dr. Simon Pau Khan En's PhD dissertation at the University of Birmingham, UK in 1995.

<sup>84</sup> Sir James George Scott, *Burma: A Handbook of Practical Information* (London: The De La More, 1911), 381.

building of Burmese society. He says:

And yet, despite all this [i.e., the mixed and hybrid nature of Buddhism as practiced by Burmese in Burma], Buddhism has done great things for Burma in the past; and that it is still a power in the land, and perhaps a growing power, will be shown later on. Burma owes its literature and civilization to Buddhism and a study of the religion is essential to the adequate understanding of its people.<sup>85</sup>

In addition to Buddhism as the dominant religion of Burma/Myanmar, there are other major religions of the world being practiced by a good number of people. Some of them are Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism. The 1995 figures show 89.28 percent Buddhist, 5.06 percent Christian, 3.78 percent Muslim, 0.51 percent Hindu and 1.37 percent others. It cannot be assumed that these data are correct, however, as many areas in Myanmar were left out of any census, i.e., where armed ethnic groups were operating.<sup>86</sup> A 2014 Religious Freedom in the World report gives a much higher percentage of the Christian population in Myanmar; it places the adherents of Christianity as 7.8 percent of the whole population against Buddhists (80.1%), Hindu (1.7 percent), Muslim (4 percent), Traditional Religions (5.8 percent), Unaffiliated (5 percent ) and other religions (0.2 percent).<sup>87</sup>

David I Steinberg articulates the state of religions and the religious landscape of Myanmar and the so-called “religious toleration” and “religious freedom” in Myanmar as follows:

There is apparent religious toleration in Myanmar. Any visitor to the capital will note the numbers of churches, mosques, and Hindu temples that abound. This is indeed the case. But in fact, the identification of legitimacy, nationalism, and power with the Burman Buddhist population has meant that under the military there are subtle pressures on other religions. These pressures are related to the issue of ethnicity, for although the Burman population is essentially Buddhist, many of the minorities, such as the Karen, Kachin, and Chin have substantial percentages of their populations who are Christian. These groups, especially the Karen, have been charged as being pro-British, and thus unpatriotic in the past. A significant segment of that population is

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<sup>85</sup> Purser, *Christian Missions in Burma*, 56.

<sup>86</sup> Khin Maung Win, “Religious Freedom in Burma: A Divisive and Suppressive Practice by the Military Regime,” *Legal Issues in Burma Journal* 4, (October 1999): 26n3.

<sup>87</sup> *Myanmar—Religious Freedom of the World Report—2014*, accessed May 27 2015, [http://religion-freedom-report.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/country-reports/burma\\_myanmar.pdf](http://religion-freedom-report.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/country-reports/burma_myanmar.pdf).

still in rebellion. As the regional military commanders have virtual complete autonomy of power over their respective regions, some have been accused of forcibly discriminating against Christian communities, forcing them to build Buddhist pagodas. This is reported to be evident in the Chin State, and has so been reported in the U.S. Department of State report on religious freedom.<sup>88</sup>

Donald Seekins' brief description of the landscape of religion in Myanmar is helpful in assessing the situation of religious freedom or no-freedom in Myanmar today:

Religious minorities are marginalized. This is especially true of Muslims, most of whom are descendants of South Asian immigrants who arrived in the country during the British period. There are tight restrictions on Muslim religious activities, especially in Arakan State, and post-1962 governments have apparently been involved in, or have encouraged, their persecution; for example, twice in 1978 and 1991-1992, 200,000 to 300,000 Muslim Rohingyas fled to neighboring Bangladesh to escape army persecution in Arakan. Conditions for Burmese Christians, such as the large community of Karen Baptists who live in Rangoon, are generally better; for example, they are allowed to maintain some links to Christian churches outside the country. In many ethnic minority areas, especially where Karens, Kachins, and Chins live, the church, brought by missionaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century remains the core of educational, social and spiritual life. But Christian activities are also limited by the state, which despite the lack of a constitutional provision making Buddhism the official religion has tended to act on the old notion "to be Burmese is to be Buddhist." In other words, non-Buddhists are a "Them" juxtaposed to a Buddhist "Us."<sup>89</sup>

Buddhism, after all, has been the dominant force in the making of Burmese history and culture as has been for many other Asian nations as Donald Smith has pointed out that "the message of Buddhism has profoundly influenced the cultural development of most of Asia, and continues to mold the social values of many millions of Asians."<sup>90</sup> Buddhist religion has so impacted Burmese politics, especially in the use and abuse of it by Burmese politicians in the buildup and growth of Burmese nationalism that it has shaped the cultural, social and religious settings in Myanmar today. It is my modest attempt to lay out these complex religious and social

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<sup>88</sup> David I. Steinberg, "The Problems of Myanmar and Myanmar's Problem," in a paper presented at an Asia Regional Consultation on Social Cohesion and Conflict Prevention, Asian Development Bank—World Bank in Manila, March 16–17, 2000, accessed June 3 2015, [http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs/Steinberg-Myanmar%27s\\_problems.htm](http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs/Steinberg-Myanmar%27s_problems.htm).

<sup>89</sup> Seekins, *Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar)*, 11.

<sup>90</sup> Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, vii.

developments in Myanmar and see how the church could best live out her true identity faithfully as God's people in this dominant Buddhist society. I will venture to describe in the following pages how Buddhism and Burmese nationalism mutually support and strengthen each other and how believers in Myanmar today should understand those complex situations and wisely live out the Christ-life accordingly so that they may be effective witnesses of Jesus Christ in this land of pagodas.

### **Buddhism and Burmese Nationalism**

Nationalism<sup>91</sup> is not something particularly “Burmese” per se. It can be seen as something fairly common everywhere around the world. Burmese nationalism, however, is distinct in nature as it is closely “linked with the Buddhist religion.”<sup>92</sup> Kanbawza Win, A Burmese Christian lay leader avers that “nationalism in Burma is as old as the country's history itself.”<sup>93</sup> He further elaborates:

It can be said that traditional Burmese nationalism started with king Anuruddha [Anawrahta], the founder of Pagan dynasty where the Burmese consolidated their military and political supremacy. It was here that the Burmese acquired a national pride, which enabled [them] to look with contempt upon other ethnic groups, like Mon, Shan, Kachin, Karen, Indian and Chinese.

A common religion, a distinct language, a common ethnic identity, a degree of political centralization, a shared history, the proximity of different and frequently hostile people all have contributed to the development of traditional Burmese nationalism.<sup>94</sup>

Buddhism as the common religion has been the unifying bond for the Burmese society since the reign of the first king of the first Burmese dynasty, known in history as the Pagan Dynasty. To

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<sup>91</sup> Nationalism may be defined as a person's loyalty to a larger group—country, nation or ethnicity—that shares a common identity, origin, history, religion, language and culture, etc. Nationalism is conceived and used in this study as societal consciousness and social force rather than a neatly formulated ideology.

<sup>92</sup> Tint Lwin, “Contextualization of the Gospel,” 25.

<sup>93</sup> Kanbawza Win, “Colonialism, Nationalism and Christianity in Burma (A Burmese Perspective)” *Asian Journal of Theology* 2, no. 2 (October 1988): 270.

have a proper understanding of Burmese nationalism and Buddhism as its supporting dynamic, it is necessary to understand how Buddhism had shaped the Burmese society before Burma ended up being put under the colonial rule of the British in 1885 and even after it emerged out of it in 1948. Donald Smith correctly observes:

The socio-political role of Theravada Buddhism under the Burmese kings, from the eleventh century onward, was of fundamental importance in shaping the history of the country. The traditional pattern of relationships between state and religion came to an end in 1886 when the British deposed King Thibaw. After the unpleasant interlude of sixty years of foreign rule, Burmese Buddhists have set out to restore Buddhism to its “rightful place” in Burma’s national life. As this “rightful place” is necessarily defined in terms of the past, it is of considerable importance that we examine in some detail the role of Buddhism in the pre-colonial period.<sup>95</sup>

It is true, as Mr. Smith has observed in the above quote, that one needs to know how Buddhism had shaped the social life of the Burmese people before the colonial days ever since the rule of Anawrahta, their first king. Ever since the Pagan Kingdom in the eleventh century A.D., Buddhism has been the religion of the majority. Buddhism has enjoyed the official sponsorship of the Burmese kings as promoters and guardians of the religion. With the founding of the Pagan Kingdom, King Anawrahta brought in Buddhism as the religion of the kingdom through Shin Arahan, a monk from the Mon ethnic group in Thaton in Lower Burma.<sup>96</sup> Dr. Htin Aung explains how King Anawrahta with the help of Shin Arahan, the Buddhist monk, was able to make Buddhism the religion of his kingdom:

He [King Anawrahta] was dissatisfied with the prevailing religion of the people, which was a mixture of Mahayana Buddhism with native animistic beliefs. He resented the enormous authority and prestige of the Ari monks, whom he considered depraved. At this juncture a Mon monk, Shin Arahan by name, arrived at Pagan. He

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<sup>94</sup> Kanbawza Win, “Colonialism, Nationalism and Christianity in Burma (A Burmese Perspective),” 271.

<sup>95</sup> Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, 3.

<sup>96</sup> For more detailed accounts of the introduction and establishment of Theravada Buddhism in the ancient Burmese Kingdom of Pagan, see: Sir Charles Eliot, *Hinduism and Buddhism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), 3: 53–56; Niharranjan Ray, *Theravada Buddhism in Burma* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1946), 98–101; G. E. Harvey, *History of Burma* (London: Longmans, Green, 1925), 26–33; Than Tun, “Religion in Burma, A. D. 1000–1300,” *Journal of Burma Research Society*, 42, part (1959): 47–69.

was one those few who disapproved of the acceptance of Hindu ideas at Thaton and, preferring exile to being a party to what he considered the corruption of Buddhism, he had come all the way to the Burmese capital. It was a bold and desperate move on his part, for he was alone without a single follower and he was entering, as it were, the camp of enemy barbarians. His ascetic and saintly personality stood in contrast to the heavy-eating and arrogant Ari monks, and within a short period of time he was able to convert Anawrahta to Theravada Buddhism.<sup>97</sup>

It is clear that the monk from Thaton, Shin Arahan, played an important role in King Anawrahta's introduction and establishment of Theravada Buddhism in Burma. Htin Aung says: "In making Buddhism the official and national religion of the people, Anawrahta was acting under the advice of Shin Arahan, whom he appointed as the primate of his empire."<sup>98</sup> And this appointment of a monk as the primate of his kingdom by King Anawrahta marked the beginning of the role of the highest monk as the *Thathanarpaing* (literally, the owner of the religion) of the Burmese kingdoms in successive eras in the history of Burma. And also, the role of the king as the promoter and guardian of the faith (religion) had been formally and firmly established in Burma. Donald Smith says: "By the end of Anawrahta's reign one important characteristic of traditional Burmese Buddhism was already clear, namely, the extraordinary degree to which the promotion of the faith was regarded as the function of the king."<sup>99</sup>

Donald Smith further explains the role of Buddhist religion in the buildup of traditional nationalism in Burma:

Buddhism was another component, and one of the utmost importance, in this traditional nationalism. The point has been well made that, of the three major religions of South and Southeast Asia, both Hinduism and Islam had certain characteristics which militated against their fostering a spirit of nationalism. Hinduism emphasized the institution of caste and thus promoted loyalty to a group that was much smaller than the potential nation, while the universalist Islam with the caliphate promoted loyalty to a religio-political institution which far transcended the limits of the potential nation. Hinduism and Islam became vital focal points of nationalist sentiments only in the modern period, in the struggle against the

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<sup>97</sup> Maung Htin Aung, *A History of Burma*, 32.

<sup>98</sup> Maung Htin Aung, *A History of Burma*, 36.

<sup>99</sup> Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, 14.



imperialism of Christian European powers. Theravada Buddhism, on the other hand, emphasized neither class nor supranational loyalties, and readily lent itself to the development of traditional nationalism, especially in Burma and Ceylon.<sup>100</sup>

Fred von der Mehden made an insightful observation about how religion became the unifying factor among the conquered in their opposition to the conquerors the religion they brought with them:

Within this background of intensified religious emphasis in lands already suffused by their respective faiths, a major influence on the nationalist movement was the unifying force of religion. The presence of a single faith as a catalytic agent was particularly significant in areas where there were no other coalescing factors such as language, culture, history, or past common territory. When the occupying power was of another faith the conquered grouped together to protect their religion and halt encroachments by foreign missionaries and colonial clerical policies. Religion was the one unifying factor among the conquered; it divided the ruler from the ruled and in doing so provided an emotional basis for nationalism and a tool for ambitious political leaders.<sup>101</sup>

Even after Burma's independence from the British colonial rule since 1948 the successive governments—democratic or military—have been promoting Buddhism as the religion of the majority. Prime Minister U Nu even took measures to have Buddhism proclaimed as the state religion of Burma in 1961 to the opposition, to be sure, of all the minority religions.<sup>102</sup> Successive military governments one after another manipulated Buddhist religion in one way or another for the legitimacy of their rule by exploiting the *Sangha Maha Nayaka* (the highest ruling body of the association of the monks) in various ways.

It is evident that Christian missionaries who have worked among Theravada Buddhists have the same experience of difficulties in their work, obviously, that those in both Thailand and Myanmar report the same problems they encounter in their missionary endeavors. Paul H. Deneui's description of Buddhist religion and Christian mission work among Buddhists in

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<sup>100</sup> Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, 82–83.

<sup>101</sup> Mehden, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia*, 10.

<sup>102</sup> Mehden, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia*, 230–80.

Thailand is very much true of Myanmar as well:

In many Buddhist countries national identity is closely linked with religious identity; good citizenship is equated with being a Buddhist. This religious patriotism seems problematic for the cause of the gospel of Christ. As a result, cross-cultural missionaries have viewed Buddhism as the enemy of the evangelism and have sought ways to counter it with Christianity. This approach has not only served to alienate people socially, but has also reinforced the misunderstanding that Jesus is a foreigner, the leader of a foreign religion.<sup>103</sup>

In this setting of religious and cultural Burmese nationalism with Buddhism as its bolstering reinforcement, practically Christianity has no rightful place in Burmese society; it has been viewed as a Western political, religious and cultural infiltration and invasion. Even today, Christianity and the presence of the Christian church itself have been considered a reminder and the most sinister one of westernization that was imposed upon the Burmese during the heyday of colonialism.<sup>104</sup> What Hendrik Kramer once said about colonialism and Christian mission work among those colonized is remarkably true in the context of the Burmese experience of both: “Christian missions were looked upon as part of the Western invasion of their cultural and spiritual realm.”<sup>105</sup> What he continues to say about Christian missions and the response and reaction of the natives to it is very true in the case of Myanmar too:

To the economic and political “invasion” they had to submit, but in the cultural and spiritual sphere they could resist, but were deeply wounded by the pretension of racial and cultural superiority made by the white domination. Christian missions were also looked upon as part of this western “invasion” of their cultural and spiritual realm, and there were many reasons of this being so.”<sup>106</sup>

Nationalism in Burma/Myanmar, which has developed under various governments in its

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<sup>103</sup> Paul H. Deneui, “A Typology of Approaches to Thai Folk Buddhists,” ed. Charles H. Kraft, *Appropriate Christianity* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2005), 415.

<sup>104</sup> Paul Clasper, “The Buddhist-Christian Encounter in Burma,” *Review and Expositor* 58, no. 1 (January 1961): 43.

<sup>105</sup> Hendrik Kramer, *Religion and the Christian Faith* (London: Lutterworth, 1956), 26.

<sup>106</sup> Kramer, *Religion and the Christian Faith*, 26.

history has grown into what can be called a “nationalistic paranoia”<sup>107</sup> that has Buddhism, the religion of the majority, as its uniting force. It stands opposed to whatever is foreign, especially Western, equating it with colonialism and imperialism.<sup>108</sup> Defending one’s nation, religion, and culture is a constant theme in all the national movements in Asia in general and Burma in particular, which poses a great problem for Christians in Myanmar today as they struggle to affirm their Christian identity and presence among their suspicious, if not hostile Buddhist neighbors. Donald Eugene Smith perceptively says concerning Burmese nationalism that practically excludes anyone from the Burmese society who is not a Buddhist:

Communal conflict tended to define Burmese nationalism more clearly in that it emphasized the positive content of the national identity. Nationalism was not simply anti-British sentiment and a movement for freedom from foreign rule. Many Indians in Burma were equally anti-British. Traditional Burmese nationalism was based, among other things, on a common race, language, and religion. In terms of these significant characteristics which identify and distinguish peoples, the Indians were as different from the Burmese as the British were. ‘Burma for the Burmans,’ a typical nationalist slogan, struck at both the British and the Indians.<sup>109</sup>

Burmese nationalism is different in nature from nationalism in other countries including its Indian counterpart in terms of its origin and development. Lian H. Sakhong in his introduction to Paul Keenan’s work on ethnic armed conflicts in Myanmar demonstrates his keen insight on this issue when he says:

The ‘nation-building’ process with the notion of ‘one ethnicity, one language, one religion’ indeed reflected the core values of Burman/ Myanmar ‘nationalism’, which originated in the anti-colonialists’ motto of ‘*Amyo, Batha, Thatana*’, that is so say, the *Myanmar lumyo* or Myanmar ethnicity, *Myanmar batha-ska* or Myanmar

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<sup>107</sup> Mikael Gravers, *Nationalism as a National Paranoia in Burma: An Essay on the Practice of Political Power*, Reprint (Richmond Surrey, UK: Curzon, 1999), 2.

<sup>108</sup> During the peak days of Burmese nationalist movements, slogans such as the following were readily put forward and made popular trendy catchwords: “Burma is our country. Burmese is our literature and language. Love our country, cherish our literature, and uphold our language.” See Daw Khin Yi, *Dobama Movement in Burma (1930–1938)* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 5, 63. “Thakin Myo Hey, Do Bamar—Master race we are, we Burmans” is the watchword of the movement. The history of *Dobama Asiayone* (We Burmans Association) Movement is described and documented in detail in U Maung Maung, *From Sangha to Laity: Nationalist Movements of Burma 1920–1940* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1980) and Yi, *Dobama Movement in Burma*.

<sup>109</sup> Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, 112.

language, and the *Myanma thatana* of *Buddha-bata* or Buddhism, and it has become after independence the unwritten policies of ‘Myanmarization’ or ‘Buddhistization,’ and a perceived legitimate practices of ethnic and religious ‘forced-assimilation’ into ‘Budda-bata Myanmar-lumyo’ (that is, to say, ‘to be a Myanmar is to be a Buddhist), in a multi-ethnic, multireligious plural society of the Union of Burma.<sup>110</sup>

Aung San Suu Kyi, the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner, also makes some comments on Burmese nationalism in these words: “While Indian nationalism was essentially a product of British rule, there has always existed a traditional Burmese nationalism arising from Burma’s cultural homogeneity.”<sup>111</sup> Mikael Gravers aptly identifies part of this homogeneity as Buddhism both in the past and present,<sup>112</sup> because “To be a Burmese is to be a Buddhist,” a saying repeated by Aung San Suu Kyi herself.<sup>113</sup>

Christianity and Christian mission work in Myanmar were and still are looked upon with suspicion and mistrust by Buddhist Burmese as Western colonial and neo-colonial components. On the surface, the colonial rule of the British appeared to be advantageous to Christian mission work in Burma. It provided the missionaries more security and freedom of movement for their missionary activities and evangelistic efforts. Mission theologian David Bosch once said: “Colonialism and mission, as a matter of course, were interdependent; the right to have colonies carried with it the duty to Christianize the colonized.”<sup>114</sup> Colonial rule, however, distanced the missionaries from the Burmese people who saw the missionaries as partners with the colonialists. The hatred, hostility, and animosity the Burmese felt towards the British rulers were directed towards Christian missionaries who had also come from the West, be it America or other parts of

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<sup>110</sup> Lian H. Sakhong, “Introduction,” in Paul Keenan, *By Force of Arms: Armed Ethnic Groups in Burma* (New Delhi: Burma Center for Ethnic Studies, 2013), 5.

<sup>111</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom from Fear and Other Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 103.

<sup>112</sup> Mikael Gravers, *Nationalism as Paranoia in Burma: An Essay on the Historical Practice of Power* (Richmond, Surrey, UK: Curzon, 1999), 135.

<sup>113</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom from Fear*, 83.

<sup>114</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 227.

the West. The Burmese were never able to distinguish American Christian missionaries from British imperialists nor did they ever try to do so. This might have been for two apparent reasons—both groups were white and spoke the same language, and they were all Christians, at least in the eyes of the Burmese. A missionary in Indonesia, a former Dutch colony, related the same kind of difficulty in his work to the surging of nationalism in that country under the Dutch rule as the native Indonesian tried “all the more to barricade himself against the influence of Christianity, because that religion is associated with the worship of the alien and ruling race.”<sup>115</sup>

James H. Thrall hits the nail on the head when he writes:

Historically, Burma's ethnic groups also have embraced Christianity far more enthusiastically than has the country's majority. Since most of the country's ethnic groups have engaged in armed rebellions against the government at one time or another, “Christian” and “rebel” may be seen as synonymous. “To be Burmese is to be Buddhist” is a mantra of national identification, observed Smith Ngulh Za Thawng.” So who are we? We are aliens in our own country. We are seen as traitors.”<sup>116</sup>

When good citizenship is equated with being Buddhist in Myanmar, Christians in Myanmar today are in a challenging position as they struggle to affirm their identity as followers of Jesus Christ among their Buddhist neighbors. Myanmar certainly has a remarkably rich history of culture and religion. It is also an ethnically diverse country where one’s religious belonging is very much related to his or her ethnicity. Christian mission work was more successful among the ethnic minorities such as the Chins, Kachins, and Karens whereas the majority Burmese Buddhists among the Burmans, Rakhines, Mon and Shans ethnic groups are still practically unaffected by the Gospel. It has also inherited from the past British colonial rule certain unpleasant experiences that have tended to exclude the Burmese from some privileges

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<sup>115</sup> Mehden, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia*, 13 quoting *Insulinde*, World Dominion Survey Series (London: World Dominion, n.d.), 6.

<sup>116</sup> James H. Thrall, “Burmese Christians Struggle to Cope under Military Rule,” accessed June 2 2015, <http://archive.wfn.org/2001/10/msg00255.html>.

that the colonizers have accorded to themselves, which in turn made the Burmese antagonistic to whatever is Western and Christian as Christianity is seen the religion of the imperialists.

As the church in Myanmar is called to live and witness for the Lord in these complex historical, cultural and religious settings, how best can she live and witness in this predominantly Buddhist nation? How can Christians in Myanmar best love the Lord and their Buddhist neighbors who are always suspicious of their mere presence as a reminder and remnant of colonialism in recent past? How best can they manifest the love of God across the boundaries of religious and cultural differences? There is, obviously, an urgent need for a theological framework for Christians in Myanmar today as they strive to affirm their identity as the children of God who are citizens of His Kingdom and citizens of Myanmar at the same time. It is a burning issue especially in the face of the ever-strong Burmese nationalism. A solution to this apparent tension of being children of God and citizens of a Buddhist country, however, will not be found by just tracing the historical developments in the past, but by facing up to long-standing issues and challenges with an open mind and with a view to discovering relevant and applicable responses to them in the form of theological proposals. It is my modest desire to attempt to offer some proposals in the form of a theological framework in the next chapters.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **CHRISTIAN MISSION WORK IN THE SETTING OF BURMESE NATIONALISM IN BURMA/MYANMAR**

Christianity in Burma, like Christianity in other Southeast Asian countries, is a thing of recent establishment in comparison with other parts of the world on the one hand and other religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam in the same region on the other hand. Robbie B. H. Goh describes the late founding of Christianity in Asia as “a recent phenomenon” when he writes:

Christianity in Southeast Asia is in many ways relatively a recent phenomenon, with the most significant event taking place from the late nineteenth century onwards. Certainly compared with other religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, Christianity in the context of Southeast Asia as a whole must be considered a minority religion and one that had recently begun to make cultural impact.<sup>1</sup>

It must be acknowledged that Christianity came to Burma later than Buddhism, the religion of the majority population of the country. It must also be admitted that Christianity as a minority religion has not been able to make cultural impact as profound and substantial as Buddhism has in the social life of Myanmar. There are, however, some evidences that point to the possibility that Christianity could have made some contact with the people in Burma long before Western Christian missionaries actually set foot on the soil of Burma in the sixteenth century AD.

#### **Some Indications of Christianity’s Early Presence in Burma**

While the entry of Christianity into Burma and Southeast Asia seems to be late in comparison with its coming to other parts of the world, there are some indications that suggest

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<sup>1</sup> Robbie B. H. Goh, *Christianity in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), 1.

the possibility that Christianity might have made its entry into Burma earlier than those who came there as Christian missionaries in the sixteenth century and the centuries that follow. Two paintings in the ancient city of Pagan, the capital of the first Burmese kingdom can be taken as examples that some Christians might have come there as early as the eleventh century or a bit later. One of the paintings is a fresco of the cross in the cave temple of King Kyansittha who reigned from AD 1084 to AD 1113. The other painting is found in the Ko-Byauk-Gyi Pagoda in the same spot of ancient pagodas and religious edifices. The painting is, or at least it resembles, a depiction of “the Last Supper.” It is thought that some Christians must have set foot in the city of Pagan early enough to leave traces of their presence in these works of art. These Christians are conjectured to be Indian Christian artists who had previously settled in Thaton of the Mon ethnic group, who were taken captive later on by King Anawrahta when he conquered and ransacked the Mon city in AD 1057.<sup>2</sup> Another version of the originator of these paintings is that they were the Nestorian Christians who had accompanied the Tar Tar Chinese soldiers of Emperor Kubla Khan on his military campaign against the Burmese during the Pagan Kingdom era in Burma. <sup>3</sup>

It is difficult to build a case for the early presence of Christians in Burma based on these works of art alone. Moreover, it is still more difficult to affirm the identity of those Christians as Nestorians from China. What is more puzzling still is the fact that these paintings are no longer extant today for any practical purposes of studying and verifying their origin and nature.

John C. England gives another interesting reference to the probable presence of Christians in Burma before the Catholic missionaries came there in the sixteenth century, followed by their Protestant counterparts later on. He writes:

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<sup>2</sup> John C. England, *The Hidden History of Christianity in Asia: The Churches of the East before the Year 1500* (New Delhi and Hong Kong: ISPCK & CCA, 1998), 95.

<sup>3</sup> Ba Khin (Hanthawaddy), *Foreign Mission Organizations in Burma* (“Naing-Ngan-Chya-Tha-Ta-Na-Pyu-A-Pway-Mya” in Burmese) (Rangoon: Hantawaddy, 1963), 11.



Other references include that of Yule and Cordier quoting the record of a Genoese merchant, Hieronimo de Santos Stephano, who in 1496 buried his late companion in Pegu [Lower Burma], in what he took to be a ruined church “frequented by none.” This was at least fifty years before the first Roman Catholic missionaries—two Franciscans—arrived in Burma.

A century later, the first recorded European visitor to Annam discovered a cross on the coast in 1596. The discoverer was Diego Aduarte, a Spanish Dominican from the Philippines. The cross, not being a crucifix again, suggests an origin in the Churches of the East for whom the cross never included the torso of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

The above mentioned account of a ruined Christian church in Pegu has generated different reactions as to the possibility of the presence of Christians in Burma at that time. Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit believe that the report about a ruined Christian church building in Pegu in Lower Burma has some credibility. They write:

Some ambiguity surrounds the report of a ruined Christian chapel in Pegu in Burma. There, in AD 1496 the Italian Hieronimo de Santo Stefano buried a travelling companion, and reported also contact there with Armenian Christians. The ambiguity arises only from the possibility that the ruined chapel may have been a Buddhist edifice. This is countered somewhat by the report of Varthema some 14 years later that the Burmese king numbered among his soldiers more than 1000 Christians from Thailand.<sup>5</sup>

Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit consider the report about Christian presence in Burma and other Southeast Asian countries before AD 1500. as likely based on the fact that Christians were found also in other the other neighboring countries of Burma:

So it is clear that a group of Christian merchants like those with whom Varthema travelled had trading contacts from India to Burma, Thailand, Malaya, Sumatra and the Moluccas, and that the Persians and Armenians were to be found in many places from Canton to Hainan to Java and Burma. What remains somewhat problematical is the determination of how many settled Christian communities, Nestorian or Jacobite, there were or had been in the region before 1500. That there were such in Pegu [Lower Burma] Ayutthayah, Malaca, and Majapahit kingdom seems certain, with that at Barus in Sumatra being probable.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> England, *The Hidden History of Christianity in Asia*, 96.

<sup>5</sup> Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), 312.

<sup>6</sup> Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, 313.

Certainly there are some evidences that point to an early Christian presence in Burma. They are believed, however, to be Europeans who had come to the East to look for opportunities in trade and commerce rather than the native Burmese converts to the Christian faith.<sup>7</sup> Real Christian mission work in Burma began with the coming of the Roman Catholic missionaries in the sixteenth century onwards, followed by the English and American Protestant missionaries in the early nineteenth century.

### **The Roman Catholic Mission in Burma/Myanmar**

In November, 2014 the Catholic Church in Myanmar celebrated five hundred years of the presence of the Roman Catholic Church in Burma/Myanmar. Although the Nestorian mission is believed to have come to Burma in the tenth or eleventh century the actual existence of the first Christian communities in Burma is thought to be as early as 13th century only when some expatriate Christians from Europe came along with the European traders for a better life and settled down in different parts of the country.<sup>8</sup> After the discovery of the route to India by Vasco da Gama in 1497, Portuguese missionaries set out for the Far East as chaplains to Portuguese soldiers, sailors and settlers. The rich land of Burma attracted these Portuguese traders and by 1510, after having founded Goa in India as the seaport to the East, they came to Burma.<sup>9</sup>

Roman Catholic priests from Portugal and Italy were the first Christian missionaries who had ever come and labored in Burma before Adoniram Judson and other American Baptist

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<sup>7</sup> J. S. Furnivall, "Europeans in Burma of the Fifteenth Century," in *Journal of Burma Research Society* 29 (1939): 236–37. See also G. E. Harvey, *History of Burma* (London: Longman, 1925), 98; Maung Htin Aung, *A History of Burma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 128–42; Dorothy Woodman, *The Making of Burma* (London: The Cresset, 1962), 11–23; D. G. E. Hall, "The Earliest English Contact with Burma," in *Journal of Burma Research Society* 18 (1927).

<sup>8</sup> Pau Khan En, "The Ecumenical Perspective of Christianity by the Churches in Myanmar," in *Rays: MIT Journal of Theology* 10 (January 2009): 6.

<sup>9</sup> "Brief History of the Catholic Church in Myanmar," accessed May 25, 2015, <http://www.catholicmyanmar.org/About/history>.

missionaries following him who came to Burma in the early nineteenth century. According to Ngun Ling, a Burmese theologian, “the Christian presence in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was represented by the Europeans especially the Portuguese merchants who came to look for opportunities of merchandise in the different parts of Burma.”<sup>10</sup> Samuel Moffett places the year of the arrival of Catholic Christian mission in Burma as early as 1554. He writes:

Catholic missionaries first entered Burma long before the Protestants, in 1554. Not until 1613, however, was there a permanent mission presence, with churches in Ava, Sirian, and three hundred Roman Catholic believers in Rangoon. But growth was so disrupted by wars between Burma and Siam in the next two centuries that as they entered the nineteenth century, a total membership of five thousand in 1800 had fallen to about three thousand in 1832. So great was the discouragement about the unhappy situation that two apostolic vicars who were sent out in 1830 gave up in despair and returned to Europe.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to preaching and teaching God’s Word, they also did different kinds of humanitarian mercy work—building schools, hospitals, dispensaries, leper colonies, publications, so and so forth. Most of those mission schools and hospitals were taken away from the church under the label of nationalization by the Burmese Socialist Programme government in the 1960s. The Christian Leprosy Hospital in Moulmein (Mawlamyaing), the Mary Chapman Deaf and Dumb School in Rangoon (Yangon), established by Anglican missionaries and the Christian Blind School by the Karen Baptist Church can be cited as a few examples of Christian mission institutions, which are allowed by the government to operate today.<sup>12</sup> The Catholic missionaries who introduced Christianity to Burma in the sixteenth century had to toil hard as they had to learn to cope with difficult situations in a foreign land. Some of them even gave their lives for their mission. However, their mission ended without winning many native Burmese

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<sup>10</sup> Samuel Ngun Ling, “Challenges, Problems, and Prospects of Theological Education in Myanmar,” *CTC Buleletin of the Christian Conference of Asia* 22, no. 1 (April, 2004): 1.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Volume II: 1500–1900* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 330.

<sup>12</sup> Cung Lian Hup, *World Mission Today: Important Contextual Issues in Myanmar* (Insein, Myanmar:

converts because their main purpose was to minister to their Portuguese expansionist merchants, rather than evangelizing and converting the native Burmese to the Christian faith. Those following them in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did the same, again without any tangible success in their efforts of evangelism among the native Burmese.<sup>13</sup>

In 1644 there was a letter that was circulated in the form of an annual report of their work by the Jesuits in India that contains some valuable information about the fate of the Catholic Church in Burma at that time. This famous letter which is known as the “Annual Letter” lists eight localities in Upper Burma with the number of Catholic believers in each village. The total count was 2900 in all the eight villages altogether.<sup>14</sup> One might wonder about the credibility of this information as it would suggest some Burmese conversions to the Christian faith from their traditional Buddhist religion. Who were those 2900 in the Catholic faith? Yan Pai, a present-day Burmese writer gives an account of his findings about the identity of those early adherents to the Catholic faith in Burma in an interesting article, “Forgotten, but Not Gone” in *The Irrawaddy*, a daily newspaper published in Thailand:

The Portuguese first started arriving on Myanmar’s shores some 500 years ago, but it was not until 1599, when the mercenary Filipe de Brito e Nicote wrested control of Thanlyin (Syriam) away from the powerful Taungoo dynasty, that they gained a foothold in the country. De Brito (known in Myanmar as Nga Zinga) was

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Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2010), 17, 18.

<sup>13</sup> The case of Nat Shin Naung (1579–1613), the Burmese King of Taungoo in Lower Burma who was also an accomplished poet and musician, may be cited as an exception here. Philip de Brito, a Portuguese merchant turned political and religious expansionist won Nat Shin Naung to convert to Christianity. Philip de Brito’s priest baptized him in 1612. de Brito built Syriam across from the present-day Yangon (Rangoon) as his base and made himself a ruler by fortifying the city. He also built what can be spoken of as the first Christian church building in Burma in Syriam between 1600 and 1613. King Anaukpetlunmin, the Burmese king of Ava in upper Burma seized de Brito and Nat Shin Naung when he conquered and destroyed the city in 1613. He also took captive their followers, about four hundred who were mostly Eurasians, to Ava and deported the remaining Portuguese soldiers and their families to a remote region in upper Burma between Chindwin River and Mu River. For the details of this historical incident, see Maung Htin Aung, *A History of Burma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967); G.E. Harvey, *History of Burma* (London: Longmans, Green, 1925); Samuel Nung Ling, “The Meeting of Christianity and Buddhism in Burma: Its Past, Present and Future Perspectives,” (Ph.D. diss. Tokyo International Christian University, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> “History of Myanmar Catholics,” accessed June 2, 2015, <http://catholicmissionmm.blogspot.com/2007/06/history-of-myanmar-catholic-church.html>.

subsequently named governor of this strategically important port on the Bago River opposite Yangon (then called Dagon) by the Rakhine king Min Razagyi, in whose service he had captured it. But his true loyalties soon revealed themselves when, in 1603, he claimed Thanlyin for Portugal.

Once in power, de Brito quickly earned a permanent place in Myanmar's annals of infamy by plundering Buddhist temples for their bells, which he had recast as cannons. His reign was short-lived, however: In 1613, King Anaukpetlun reclaimed Thanlyin for the Taungoo dynasty, and had de Brito impaled for desecrating Buddhist holy sites.<sup>15</sup>

Yan Pai gives additional interesting information about what happened to the followers of de Brito after his demise:

For most in Myanmar, that is where the story ends. What few realize, however, is that in a remote corner of Sagaing Region some 93 miles (150 km) northwest of Mandalay, the legacy of de Brito's brief foray onto the stage of Myanmar history lives on to this day.

After de Brito was executed, most of the 5,000 Portuguese soldiers who had served under him were transported to Innwa (Ava), then the Taungoo capital, as prisoners of war. Some were recruited to serve as military advisers, but the bulk, it was decided, were best resettled somewhere else, at a safe distance from the seat of power. That is how the Bayingyi, as these former Portuguese mercenaries and their descendants are known, came to inhabit a handful of villages in the dry, inhospitable region between the Mu and Chindwin rivers.<sup>16</sup>

The quote above is one of the finest records of the account of the early European Christians' fate under the Burmese kings. It is clear from the account given by Yan Pai in the above quote, therefore, that those early Christians were the Portuguese settlers in Thanlyin (Syriam) who got deported and resettled in Upper Burma. It is evident also then that there was little or no success in the missionary work of the Catholics in Burma in terms of native conversion. G. E. Harvey also gives some information about those Portuguese settlers in Syriam who got deported to Upper Burma: "Anaukpetlun spent a month at Syriam setting affairs. He sent the Portuguese

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<sup>15</sup> "Forgotten, But Not Gone," accessed June 2, 2015, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/magazine/forgotten-gone.html>.

<sup>16</sup> "Forgotten, But Not Gone," accessed June 2, 2015, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/magazine/forgotten-gone.html>.

captives into the interior (pp.208, 349) together with the crews, mostly Mohamedan, of a few ships, which were affiliated to De Brito and had returned to port thinking he was still there.”<sup>17</sup>

Following the de Brito incident at Syriam in 1612, the Roman Catholic mission in Burma discontinued for quite sometime before it was taken up by some dedicated priests who had to pay much to reach the people of Burma. Some of them had to face execution by the Burmese kings.

W. C. B. Purser gives an account of these missionaries as follows:

For about three-quarter of a century after this date hardly any missionary work was attempted; but in 1692 the first missionary priests of the Society of Foreign Missions at Paris arrived in Pegu. The next year they were arrested by order of the king, exposed naked to the bites of mosquitos, and finally sewn up in sacks and thrown into the Pegu River.

In the year 1719 Pope Clement XI sent a solemn embassy to China consisting of the Patriarch of Alexandria, Monsignor Mezzabarba, and several zealous ecclesiastics. They had a gracious audience of the emperor at Peking on the last day of the following year; but their affairs having subsequently taken a less favorable turn, the Patriarch returned to Europe, after having distributed his clergy in different countries. Two were appointed to the kingdom of Ava, Pegu and Martaban—the Rev. Joseph Vittoni, a secular priest, and Father Calchi, a member of the Barnabite congregation and a man of very superior parts and attachments.... After much opposition from several quarters, which they vanquished by a personal conference with the sovereign, they were authorized to erect churches and to preach the Christian religion.<sup>18</sup>

Father Calchi died in 1728 at the age of 42 and was succeeded by other missionaries among whom Father Gallizia became the first bishop. But their success was short-lived as the city where they were living was captured and plundered and they had to flee from it. They lost their lives while travelling. Mr. Purser records this sad incident: “But in 1745, after Syriam had been captured and plundered, the Bishop and two missionaries were murdered when travelling under a safe conduct granted by the Emperor.”<sup>19</sup>

Even though there was freedom of worship for all foreigners in Burma granted by the

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<sup>17</sup> Harvey, 189.

<sup>18</sup> Purser, *Christian Missions in Burma*, 88.

<sup>19</sup> Purser, *Christian Missions in Burma*, 88.

king, no native Burmese was allowed to convert to other religions. It was under such condition that the Catholic missionary priests had to labor. Purser again records:

Under the old Burmese monarchy, although there was liberty for all foreigners in Burma to worship according to their own customs, it was generally understood that no Burman would be allowed to change his religion, or to be anything else than a Buddhist. When Judson paid a special visit to the palace to ask for protection for his Burmese converts, the Emperor definitely stated that he could not alter the law, but that its application in any particular case was at the option of the local magistrate. This permissive proscription of Burmese Christians prevented the Roman Catholic from carrying on more vigorous missionary work. .<sup>20</sup>

Mr. Purser further states that the Roman Catholic missionaries virtually ceased all their attempts to win new convert among Buddhist Burmese:

The Roman Catholics have now virtually abandoned direct evangelistic work among the Burmese; the great bulk of their adherents in Burma being Tamils, Pwo-Karens, and Eurasians. Of late their work amongst the Chinese has met with considerable success.<sup>21</sup>

William D. Hackett, once an American missionary to Myanmar, alleged that there were no recorded native conversion in Burma before the American Protestant missionary started work in 1813.<sup>22</sup> Real missionary work among the Burmese began with the arrival of Adoniram and Ann Judson in Rangoon (the present-day Yangon) in 1813.

### **Protestant Christian Mission in Burma/Myanmar**

Protestant Christianity came to Burma much later than did Catholicism. It was in 1807 that two English Baptist missionaries, James Chater and Richard Mardon, came to Rangoon (now Yangon) as the first Protestant missionaries to Burma/Myanmar. Francis Wayland's brief record of their mission best describes the nature of mission work in Burma in those days and what it must have required:

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<sup>20</sup> Purser, *Christian Missions in Burma*, 91.

<sup>21</sup> Purser, *Christian Missions in Burma*, 93.

<sup>22</sup> William D. Hackett, "Burma," in *The Church in Asia* (Chicago: Moody, 1975), 123.

It is true that the English Baptists had established a mission in Rangoon as early as 1807, under the care of Messrs. Chater and Mardon. Mr. Mardon, after a few months, left the station, and Mr. Chater was joined by Mr. Felix Carey, the eldest son of Dr. Carey, of Serampore. Soon after, Messrs. Pritchett and Brain, of the London Missionary Society, arrived; but Mr. Brain soon died. Mr. Pritchett, after a year's residence, removed to Vizagapatnam. Mr. Chater remained four years, and made considerable progress in the language. He translated the Gospel by Matthew, which was revised by Mr. Carey, and published at Serampore. At length Mr. Chater relinquished the mission, and removed to Ceylon. Mr. Carey remained, and was joined by a young man from Calcutta, who soon quitted the station. When Mr. Judson arrived, Mr. Carey had gone to Ava, by order of the King.<sup>23</sup>

Mr. Felix Carey accepted a position offered to him by the Burmese government as its ambassador to the government of Bengal in India, and that was the end of his Christian missionary work in Burma.<sup>24</sup> James Knowles concludes: "When Mr. Judson arrived, Mr. Carey had gone to Ava, by order of the King. Thus had every attempt of the English Missionaries failed, and this fact seems to show still more conclusively, that God reserved for the American Baptist Churches the duty of establishing and sustaining the Burman Mission."<sup>25</sup>

#### American Baptist Mission in Burma

Mr. Adoniram Judson and his wife, Ann Judson, came to Burma and landed in Rangoon on July 13, 1813. Rangoon was the principal seaport of Burma with a considerable number of foreigners residing in it. "The number of inhabitants, in 1813, was stated by Mr. Judson, to be 40,000. Some of the inhabitants were of Portuguese extraction, and had two or three churches and priests. The Armenians also had a church."<sup>26</sup> He was able to baptize his first Burmese convert, Maung Nau, in 1819, after six years of vigorous labor. The Christian church in Burma

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<sup>23</sup> Francis Wayland, *The Memoir of the Life and Labours of the Reverend Adoniram Judson*, vol. 1 (Boston: Philips & Sampson, 1853), 158.

<sup>24</sup> B. R. Pearn, "Felix Carey and the English Baptist Missions in Burma," in *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 26 (1938): 16–23.

<sup>25</sup> James D. Knowles, *Memoirs of Mrs. Ann Judson, Late Missionary to Burmah Including a History of American Baptist Mission in the Burman Empire* (Boston: Gould, Kendall, and Lincoln, 1844), 124.

<sup>26</sup> Knowles, *Memoirs of Mrs. Ann Judson*, 123.



has grown from one person to over five percent of the country's population of just over fifty-two million today. Mission historian Samuel Moffett narrates how Adoniram Judson tried to reach the Burmese with the Gospel and how he was able to baptize his first convert:

Four years passed before Judson dared even to hold semipublic services. At first he had tried adapting to Burmese customs by wearing a yellow rope to mark himself as a teacher of religion but soon changed to white to show he was not a Buddhist. Then he gave up the whole attempt as artificial and accepted the fact that no matter how much he changed his clothes, no Burmese would identify him as anything but a foreigner. But he was aware of the importance of some accommodations to Burmese customs and built a *zayat*, the customary bamboo and thatch reception shelter, on the street near his home as a reception room and meeting place for Burmese men. Fifteen men came to his first public meeting in April 1819. He was encouraged but observed that he suspected that they had probably come more out of curiosity than anything else. Their attention wandered, and they soon seemed uninterested. Two months later, by a lotus pond and under the unseeing eyes of a large image of Buddha, he baptized his first Burmese convert, Maung Naw (or Nau), a thirty-five-year-old timber worker.<sup>27</sup>

This is how Christian mission work in Burma began with a gentle yet determined man of God in such a discouraging situation. The baptism of Maung Naw by Judson has been called “the beginning of the Protestant Church in Burma.”<sup>28</sup> Francis Wayland records that auspicious occasion in these simple words by quoting Judson's journal, addressed to the corresponding secretary verbatim:

June 27, Lord's day. There were several strangers present at worship. After the usual course, I called Mounng Nau before me, read and commented on an appropriate portion of Scripture, asked him several questions concerning his faith, hope, and love, and made the baptism prayer, having concluded to have all the preparatory exercises done in the *zayat*. We then proceeded to a large pond in the vicinity, the bank of which is graced with an enormous image of Gautama, and there administered baptism to the first Burman convert. O, may it prove the beginning of a series of baptism in the Burman empire which shall continue in uninterrupted succession to the end of time!<sup>29</sup>

The Judsons began their missionary work by learning the language and compiling

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<sup>27</sup> Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Volume II: 1500–1900*, 323–24.

<sup>28</sup> Edward Judson, *The Life of Adoniram Judson* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1883), 132. Edward Judson, quoting his father's journal, gives the date of Maung Naw's Baptism as June 27, 1819.

<sup>29</sup> Wayland, *A Memoir of the Life and Labors of the Rev. Adoniram Judson, D.D.*, 1: 216–24.

dictionaries to be used later by themselves and others following them. Judson then translated portions of the New Testament and wrote some gospel tracts in Burmese. Purser records the progress of Judson's work as follows:

Judson at once set about learning the language. He compiled a grammar and dictionary—both of which are still in use, though the latter has been greatly enlarged—and began the translation of St. Matthew's gospel. He secured a press and a fount of Burmese type from Serampore, and began printing tracts and other missionary literature. His wife was equally eager to learn the language and became more fluent even than her husband in Burmese conversation. By 1820 there were ten Burmese baptized converts.<sup>30</sup>

The Burmese monarchs allowed Judson and other missionaries to live and work in Burma, but they did not allow the conversion of native Burmese to their foreign religion. One of the biggest hindrances to Judson's efforts to convert Burmese to the Christian faith was the fear of persecution for the native Burmese converts. As Purser would later relate, "Judson found that his efforts to convert the people were hindered by the anxiety which they felt at their fate should the knowledge of their embracing Christianity come to the ears of the Burmese Government. He, therefore, determined to visit the Emperor at Ava, the capital, and petition him to allow freedom of religion to all the people of Burma."<sup>31</sup>

The meeting between King Bagyidaw, the then ruling Burmese king, and Mr. Judson best illustrates the Burmese king's attitude toward Christian missionaries and their work among the Burmese. Judson was given an audience by the King three times where he tried to make petition for religious tolerance for both the foreign missionaries and native Burmese converts. In his third meeting with the King, the king asked Judson four specific questions: "Are Judson's Christians real Burmans?" "Do they dress like other Burmans?" "How does Judson preach?" "What does

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<sup>30</sup> Purser, *Christian Missions in Burma*, 96–97.

<sup>31</sup> Purser, *Christian Missions in Burma*, 96–97.

Judson have to say of Gaudama Buddha?”<sup>32</sup>

It is evident that the questions King Bagyidaw asked were concerned with the social, cultural and religious nature of the missionary’s preaching and mission work among the native Burmans. Judson tried to assure the king that his Burmese converts remain true Burmans and in his response to the second question, Judson said: “Yes, they dress like other Burmans; they wore *longyis* [long skirts or sarong-like garment worn around the waist both by men and women, though in a slightly different way] and *eingyis* [shirts] just like their countrymen.”<sup>33</sup> To the third question, Judson replied: “I began with a form of worship, which first ascribes glory to God, and then describes the commands of the law of the Gospel, after which I stopped.”<sup>34</sup> The fourth question was a subtle one and Judson took great care not to ruin his opportunity to evangelize the native Burmans by offending the king, yet he gave a clear answer to the king’s question as he himself recorded in his journal: “I replied that we all know he was the son of King *Thog-dau-dah-nah*, that we regarded him as a wise man and a great teacher, but did not call him God.”<sup>35</sup>

Judson recalled the incident: “When the emperor and others in the government said that all might believe and worship as they please, the tolerance was extended merely to foreigners resident in the empire, and by no means to native Burmans, who, being slaves of the emperor, would not be allowed, with impunity, to renounce the religion of their master.”<sup>36</sup> Ann Judson in one of her letters to a friend also related how the Burmese were feeling that their religion was

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<sup>32</sup> Ling, “The Meeting of Christianity and Buddhism in Burma: Its Past, Present and Future Perspectives,” 110. See also Samuel Ngun Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar*, 110.

<sup>33</sup> Maung Shwe Wa, *Burma Baptist Chronicles*, Vol. 1 (Rangoon: Burma Baptist Convention Board of Publications, 1963), 42.

<sup>34</sup> “Dr. Judson’s Journal,” (Rangoon, 21 August, 1822) as quoted in *The American Baptist Magazine and Missionary Intelligencer* 3, no. 6 (November 1823): 216.

<sup>35</sup> “Dr. Judson’s Journal,” (Rangoon, 21 August, 1822) as quoted in *The American Baptist Magazine and Missionary Intelligencer* 3, no. 6 (November 1823): 216.

<sup>36</sup> This is taken from one of Dr. Judson’s journal entries dated June 14, 1821 as recorded and reproduced in *The American Baptist Magazine & Missionary Intelligencer* 3, no. 11 (September 1822): 420.

good enough for them without the need for any other:

We often converse with our teachers and servants on the subject of our coming to this country, and tell them if they die in their present state they will surely be lost. But they say, “Our religion is good for us, yours for you.” But we are far from being discouraged. We are sensible that the hearts of the heathen, as well as those of Christians, are in the hands of God, and in his own time he will turn them unto him.<sup>37</sup>

When King Mindon came to the throne in 1853,<sup>38</sup> he showed more tolerance toward western Christian missionaries and their work with the hope for a more favorable relationship with the British to ensue from such favors granted to the missionaries. He even ensured Dr. J. E. Marks, an Anglican bishop, his patronage and gave him some uncommon privileges: “Do not think me an enemy to your religion. If I had been, I should not have called you to my royal city. If, when you have taught people, they enter into your belief, they have my full permission,” and then, speaking very earnestly, “if my own sons, under your instruction, wish to become Christians, I will let them do so. I will not be angry with them.”<sup>39</sup>

King Mindon even gave Dr. Marks permission and support to build a Christian school in the King’s capital and promised to send his sons there to study under Christian missionaries. After some time, however, King Mindon terminated his patronage to Dr. Marks when he realized that he had achieved no political advantage from the British through Dr. Marks. Mr. Purser states: “When the Bishop [i. e., Bishop Jonathan Holt Titcomb, formerly the honorary canon of Winchester, who was consecrated as the first bishop of the recently created diocese of Rangoon in 1877] returns to Rangoon, his

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<sup>37</sup> Knowles, *Memoir of Ann H. Judson, Missionary to Burma*, 137.

<sup>38</sup> As the penultimate king of the last Burmese kingdom in upper Burma, King Mindon reigned in Mandalay from 1853 to 1878. He moved the capital city from Amarapura and built a new palace in Mandalay in central Burma. He called for the fifth International Buddhist Conference in 1871 where the Pali scriptures were transcribed from palm leaves to 729 marble slabs.

<sup>39</sup> Purser, *Christian Missions in Burma*, 117.

attention was immediately called to the condition of things in Mandalay. King Mindon had ceased to give Mr. Marks his patronage when he found that he obtained no political advantage from it, and had sent Mr. Marks notice, ‘that it would not be safe for him to stay longer in Mandalay.’”<sup>40</sup> Dr. Marks left Mandalay, the Burmese capital, in January, 1875, and King Mindon died in 1878 and was succeeded by his son King Thibaw who was the last king of Burma before the Burmese kingdom was annexed by the British and was made part of British India in 1885.

Burmese historians such as Maung Htin Aung are quick to pick incidents like Dr. Marks’s experience with the Burmese king’s favorable treatment in pointing out that it was not the Burmese kings who were not unsympathetic and unreceptive to the Christian missionaries, but the missionaries who were hostile to Buddhism and therefore it is the missionaries who are to blame. Maung Htin Aung said: “Although the Christian missions were openly hostile to Buddhism, Mindon had no prejudice against them.”<sup>41</sup>

It is doubtful, however, that the relatively rare favorable treatment Dr. Marks received from King Mindon who had secretly hoped to receive something back from the British Indian government can be taken as the norm for the Burmese kings’ dealings with Christian missionaries during the last Burmese dynasty. A more objective observation of the situation will be candidly to say that suspicion and distrust on the part of the Burmese and their kings started building up since that time when the British kept seeking ways to annex the Burmese Kingdom into their (British Indian) Empire.

It is also rather difficult to understand why Maung Htin Aung could claim that the

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<sup>40</sup> Purser, *Christian Missions in Burma*, 124.

Christian missionaries were openly hostile to Buddhism. Of course, it is true that the nature of Christian missions the world over that confronts religions and seeks to transform societies looks hostile and aggressive in nature to the eyes of many. The then prevalent attitude of missionaries that all non-Christians were “uncivilized,” “pagan,” “heathen,” and even “savage” may also account for this misunderstanding on Maung Htin Aung’s part. Nevertheless, statements asserting hostility of Christianity towards Buddhism, such as the one by a prominent Burmese like Maung Htin Aung demand serious attention and consideration because they often represent the sentiments of the masses or at least instill the same in people’s minds, which in turn becomes popular opinion.

The overall assessment of the Burmese and their kings’ attitude toward Christian missionaries and their work among them can be considered as non-tolerance. Purser made his assessment of the Burmese authorities’ attitude toward Christian missionary work when he writes:

It has frequently been asserted that Buddhism, as contrasted with Christianity, has never been a persecuting religion. This assertion is quite untrue with regard to Burma. It has already been shown how Mindon Min stamped out the Paramat heresy. No one can read the accounts of the missionary pioneers in Burma without realizing that one of their greatest anxieties was about the treatment which their converts would receive at the hand of the Government.<sup>42</sup>

This may be the reason why Judson thought the best way to evangelize and, in his mind, to humanize the Buddhist Burmese was to make Burma a colony of the British whereby he and other missionaries would feel more secure with more freedom of movement. This perspective on the part of Christian missionaries has been thought of as collaborating with the colonial expansionists, which turns out to be a real hindrance to the ministry of the Gospel in subsequent generations. When Judson addressed the atrocities of Burmese prison life, it was held against

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<sup>41</sup> Maung Htin Aung, *A History of Burma*, 241.

him as yet another example of his failure to practice love and forgiveness as a Christian missionary. Maung Htin Aung even blames Dr. Judson for being unforgiving as a Christian missionary for the barbaric treatments Judson had suffered in the Burmese prison for an extended period of time:

American missionaries in their writings presented a monstrous picture of the people to whose country they had come uninvited. The American missionaries were denied permission by the East India Company to settle and work in India itself, yet in Burma the American mission and the English Company found themselves in an alliance that was far from holy, for both desired the same end, namely the speedy conquest of the Burmese Kingdom by the British.... That Dr. Judson suffered terribly in prison cannot be denied, and admittedly his imprisonment was a sad episode in Burmese history. But he was never singled out for any special punishment, and he was treated in the same way as all English and Burmese prisoners were treated. Again, admittedly conditions in the Burmese prison of that time were barbaric, and as Dr. Judson's own fellow prisoner, the Englishman Henry Gouger, observed, such barbaric conditions had disappeared in England and Europe only a few years before. Dr. Judson and his co-missionaries, although men of God, were not saints. And being human, they did not always practice the Christian virtue of forgiveness. They never forgot nor forgave the twenty-two months of imprisonment that Dr. Judson suffered in Burmese hands.<sup>43</sup>

This Burmese attitude toward Christianity and Christian missionaries since the early days of Christian missionary movement in Burma as collaborators with the European colonialists persists till today. It remains as a huge challenge to Christianity's legitimate existence and its mission endeavors.

#### Some Missions Other Than Baptist

Baptists were not the only people working in mission in Burma. There were other mission agencies and church organizations who have had a part in the growth of the church in Burma and the progress of mission work among different ethnic groups there over the years.

Purser reports that "in Lower Burma the Methodist Episcopal Church of America has been

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<sup>42</sup> Purser, *Christian Missions in Burma*, 98.

<sup>43</sup> Maung Htin Aung, "Forward" to Helen G. Tager, *Burma Through Alien Eyes: Missionary Views of the Burmese in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Praeger, 1966), 9, 11.

at work since 1878, but for many years its efforts were restricted to the Europeans of Rangoon. Of late there has been some development, especially in the educational work of the Mission, and large schools have been opened at Rangoon and Syriam.”<sup>44</sup> He also relates that “in Upper Burma the English Wesleyan Methodists have been at work since the last Burmese war in 1885. After the annexation of Upper Burma, Wesleyan missionaries were sent over from Ceylon to survey the field and it was added to open a new mission in Burma.”<sup>45</sup>

The first Anglican clergymen came to Burma as the Government chaplains with Sir Archibald Campbell’s army in the year 1825, but they “were not missionaries at all.”<sup>46</sup> For the Anglicans the interest to start mission work among Burmese came only after the second Anglo-Burmese war in 1852. Purser again documented: “The second Burmese war ended in January, 1853, with the annexation of Lower Burma. Just at this time interest in missionary work had been stimulated in England by the travels of Livingstone, and in Burma the general interest was further inspired by the success of the Baptists amongst the Karens.”<sup>47</sup> In addition to their evangelistic work, Anglicans did exceptional in providing education for both boys and girls in several schools under their care including St. John’s College in Rangoon.

### **Burmese Nationalism and Christian Missionary Work in Burma/Myanmar**

On the occasion of his installment as a professor at Union Seminary in New York, Dr. Hla Bu, a prominent Christian gentleman from Burma, made a salient remark on the situation in which the Christian church in Asia was called to struggle for her rightful existence and missionary endeavors. His remarkable observation still sounds true and relevant today even

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<sup>44</sup> Purser, *Christian Missions in Burma*, 105.

<sup>45</sup> Purser, *Christian Missions in Burma*, 105.

<sup>46</sup> Purser, *Christian Missions in Burma*, 105.

<sup>47</sup> Purser, *Christian Missions in Burma*, 108.



though it was made about half a century ago. He articulated the difficult and challenging circumstances of escalating nationalism in Asia in which the Christian church is called to live and witness:

Aggressive nationalism is the most striking phenomenon in the Asian scene today. It undergirds and provides the dynamic for the revived faiths and new ideologies. This nationalism has made the position of the Asian Church extremely difficult. In some countries, the Church is “cribbed, cabined and confined” and is just tolerated. In some, it leads to the persecution of the Church, curtailment of its activities and relegation of Christians to the positions of less privileged citizens. In many Asian countries, it is responsible for the suspicion of and consequent restrictions imposed upon foreign missionary activity. At the same time it must be conceded that the situation is in some measure due to the Church’s sins of omission and commission. The Church has not always kept itself unspotted from the world, confusing too often the realm of Caesar with the domain of God. In some countries it has shown its political sympathies with the country with which it is bound by denominational ties rather than to its native land. In some countries the Christians are even involved in armed insurrection against constitutional government. All this has cast a shadow over the Church in Asia with the embarrassing result that the Church is suspected of denationalization and tends to be regarded as an alien community. It has therefore become imperative for the Asian Church to be itself, to domesticate its work and worship, to witness in indigenous ways and endeavour to be really ‘the salt of the earth’ and ‘the light of the world.’<sup>48</sup>

The church in Myanmar has passed through different political systems under which it has been growing slowly. Even though the growth rate of the church in Burma/Myanmar has been considerably slower and lower in comparison with some other countries in Asia such as the Philippines, South Korea and Taiwan, it would seem so only to those who are not familiar with missionary work in the context of Theravada Buddhism. This is true particularly when religion is combined with strong sentiments of nationalism as can be seen in many Asian and African nations. To illustrate, one can compare the early missionaries’ work in Burma with the work of missionaries in Thailand, one of Myanmar’s neighbor, which is also a Theravada Buddhist country. John Davis quotes Dr. Saad Chaiwan of McGilvary Theological Seminary in Thailand as saying: “Twenty-two American Board missionaries who had labored for eighteen years,

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<sup>48</sup> Hla Bu, “Luncheon Address” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 15, no. 2 (January 1960): 120.

1831–1849, could not make a single Thai convert. In thirty years, the American Baptists made only forty-five converts, chiefly among the Chinese.”<sup>49</sup>

The Church in Burma/Myanmar has undergone many hardships under varied political systems including Burmese monarchy, British colonial rule, post-independence parliamentary democracy, a socialist government, a military dictatorship, and now a quasi-civilian government. Despite the adverse circumstances under which the church has been called to endure and witness, it can be said that the church has been growing over the years. According to a Burmese missiologist, Kawl Thang Vuta who documented the growth of the church over the years, the population of Christians grew from 70,396 in 1910 to 258,000 out of the country’s whole population of 13,490,000 in 1921 (1.8 percent) to 1,750,000 out of 35,000,000 in 1982 (5.0 percent).<sup>50</sup>

Among the five percent Christians, however, most have come from ethnic minorities<sup>51</sup> such as the Karens (the traditional rivals of the Burmans), the Chins, the Kachins, the Lahus, and the Akhas, etc. It is evident then that the church has not been very successful in its missionary and evangelistic efforts among the majority ethnic and religious groups of the people, the Buddhist Burmese such as the Burmans, the Rakhines, the Mons, and the Shans. This lack of success is due to many issues and challenges that confront the church in Burma/Myanmar ever since Christianity made its entry into Burma. Of the many issues and challenges, Burmese nationalism

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<sup>49</sup> John Davis, *Poles Apart? Contextualizing the Gospel in Asia* (Bangkok: Overseas Missionary Fellowship, 1993), 15. According to the latest statistics, Christians in Thailand, who are mainly Roman Catholics, represent 0.75 percent of the population, accessed May 21, 2012, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/th.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Kawl Thang Vuta, “A Brief History of the Planting and Growth of the Church in Burma” (D.Miss. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1983), 311.

<sup>51</sup> 1974 constitution demarcated seven ethnic minority states—the Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah (formerly Karenni), Mon, Rakhine, and Shan—and seven divisions, which are largely inhabited by the majority Burman population. Such a map according to Martin Smith, however, is “a political simplification” because “over 100 different dialects and languages have been identified in Burma, and many unique ethnic cultures have survived late into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.” See Martin Smith, *Ethnic Groups in Burma: Development, Democracy and Human Rights*

that militates against whatever is “Western” and “Christian” stands out prominently. Moe Moe Nyunt, a Burmese woman theologian who teaches at the Myanmar Institute of Theology in Insein, Yangon, Myanmar, observes that Burmese nationalism along with the Christian imperialistic approach to missions is the major issue in the Burmese people’s resistance to Christianity.<sup>52</sup> She notes what she perceives to be the main reasons why Burmese are still resistant to the Gospel in the following words:

Different theologians, missionaries and evangelists are trying to find the answer as to why the Burmese do not open their hearts to Christianity. Different answers are proposed: the need of contextualization in missions; the unbalanced social and evangelical approach; some theological problems; the need for scholarship in Buddhism to do better missions; the need of better strategies in missions, the authoritative political pressure; the peer Buddhist Burmese pressure; and so on. Their common assumption is that long centuries of Buddhist teachings have led the Burmese to ignore the Eternal God and the Christian message. As a matter of fact, the primitive accounts of the Burmese and Christianity will reveal that: (1) *Burmese nationalism*; and (2) *the Christian imperialistic approach to missions* is the major issue in Burmese resistance to Christianity.<sup>53</sup>

It is interesting to see what Moe Moe Nyunt has listed in the above quote as some proposed failures on the part of Christians in Myanmar for their lack of success in making impact on their Buddhist neighbors. It is a good observation for Moe Moe Nyunt to be able to name some hindrances to the success of Christian mission work in Myanmar. Her contention that Burmese nationalism and the Christian missionaries’ imperialistic mindset in the early days of Christian missionary movement in Burma under a colonial rule as the main reasons for the Christians’ lack of success in their evangelistic and missionary efforts and failure to make an impact on their Buddhist neighbors reflects the real situation in Myanmar today. Burmese nationalism and the Christian missionaries’ imperialistic mindset seem to be the main reasons why Buddhist

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(London: Anti-Slavery International, 1994), 17.

<sup>52</sup> Moe Moe Nyunt, “Burmese Reactions to Christianity,” *RAYS: MIT Journal of Theology* 9 (January 2008): 104.

<sup>53</sup> Moe Moe Nyunt, “Burmese Reactions to Christianity,” 104.

Burmese are still persistently resistant to the saving Gospel of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

Fred R. von der Mehden's comment as someone who has done research work on Southeast Asia and someone who is certainly familiar with what is going on there is insightful in this regard: "In Burma, statistics show the Christian missionaries were most successful among the Karens of southeastern Burma and the Chins and Kachins of the western and northern sectors of the country. This meant that there were comparatively few Christians living in the centers of burgeoning nationalism and national history and culture."<sup>54</sup> Even though he fails to recognize the mission work of Dr. Joseph Herbert Cope and Rev. F. O. Nelson among the Zomis in the Chin Hills area in Myanmar between 1910 and 1953, Benedict Rogers offers a good summary of the progress of Christian mission work among the ethnic groups in Myanmar:

In 1850, Judson died, leaving 63 churches and 7,000 Christian converts. He was followed by other missionaries, who made significant contributions not only to the growth of the Church but to the education and literacy of the general population. In 1853, for example, Dr Francis Mason completed a translation of the Bible in Sgaw Karen language, and Dr Jonathan Wade published dictionaries and a grammar of both Sgaw and Pwo Karen. The Reverend D.L. Brayton translated the Bible in Pwo Karen, and the Reverend J.G. Binney established a Karen Theological Seminary in Moulmein in 1845. A Baptist college in Rangoon, known as Judson College, opened in 1875.

In 1877, Ola Hansen was the first missionary to reach the Kachin people. In 1899, an American Baptist, the Reverend Arthur Carson and his wife, founded a mission station in Hakha and began to work among the Chin. He developed the Chin alphabet, a Romanised script, in 1907. They were followed by medical missionary Dr East and his wife, and then by the Reverend and Mrs Chester Strait, who established a Bible school and translated the New Testament into Lai-Haka language. The last American Baptist missionaries to the Chin were the Reverend and Mrs Robert Johnson, who arrived in 1946. They were forced to leave in 1966 by the military regime. Today, some Chin Christian leaders claim that as many as 90 per cent of Chins in Chin State are Christian (although the proportion of Christians among the Chins in other parts of Burma is believed to be lower). A similar proportion of Kachins are also Christian.<sup>55</sup>

Samuel Ngun Ling, a Burmese theologian from the Chin ethnic group, observes that "the

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<sup>54</sup> Mehden, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia*, 171.

<sup>55</sup> Benedict Rogers, *Carrying the Cross* (New Malden, Surrey, UK: Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 2006), 14.

nationalistic Buddhists in Myanmar cannot overlook the imperialistic image of missionary Christianity and they think of Christianity as an imported Western religion being associated with the colonial schemes and movements of the past from which it took the whole nation about a century ago to gain full independence.”<sup>56</sup> This outlook naturally results in the mistaken opinion of the Buddhist Burmese that converting to Christianity is an act of disloyalty to one’s national heritage as a Burmese Buddhist. It is mainly because Buddhism has become a way of life for the majority Burmese and has shaped the Burmese worldview for centuries. Conversion from Buddhism to Christianity is equated with abandoning one’s “socio-cultural identity.”<sup>57</sup>

Fred R. von der Mehden says that Western Christian missionaries in Burma were not persecuted as they might have been had they gone to some other countries, but there were not many conversions and the growth of the church was slow. In his description of mission work among the Burmese, he says that the Protestant missionaries who came to Burma following their Catholic counterparts “were not usually persecuted in the then independent Burma, but conversions were few and those who did become Christians had to face many obstacles.”<sup>58</sup> A Catholic missionary is quoted as saying: “They do not understand how one can embrace a foreign creed without losing one’s nationality. Such a one has become a foreigner (‘Kala’) which means that he has become a Christian.”<sup>59</sup> It should be noted that the word “Kala” no longer means today what it used to mean before and during the colonial days; it was first used for any foreigner, but it is used today only for those who have come from countries in South Asia.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions, and Perspectives*, 14.

<sup>57</sup> Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions, and Perspectives*, 15.

<sup>58</sup> Mehden, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia*, 173–74.

<sup>59</sup> Maung Kaung, “The Beginnings of Christian Missionary Education in Burma, 1600–1824,” *Journal of Burma Research Society* 20, no. 2 (1930): 73.

<sup>60</sup> Michael Gravers notes: “A Burmese friend, Brenda Pe Maung Tin (Daw Tin Tin Myaing), has kindly drawn my attention to the term *kala* (‘South Asian,’ ‘Indian’) which I have used to mean ‘foreigner’ or ‘Westerner.’ In the beginning of the colonial period the term was used for everyone who came from India, including the British.

G. G. Grentham makes a very fascinating remark in connection with the 1921 *Census of India* how Burmese perceived of themselves in terms of their religious belonging: “Actually the Burman thinks and speaks as a rule of his whole national culture as Buddhism.”<sup>61</sup> Ian Morrison recorded another incident where a man, commenting on the same problem one usually encountered in census taking in Burma, complains that when a Burman peasant was asked of his race, he often replied, “I’m a Buddhist.”<sup>62</sup> It is interesting to note that this way of the Burmese understanding of oneself is still quite prevalent among the Burmese, especially among the ethnic Burmans. Very recently in St. Louis, MO, I encountered the same problem myself; I met an ethnic Burman in a House Church gathering in South City Area in St. Louis and I asked him what his ethnic nationality is. To my utter surprise, he said, “I am a Buddhist” instead of saying that he is an ethnic Burman. The problem encountered almost a hundred years ago in the Indian census-taking remains the same as today’s problem—the Burmese still identify themselves as Buddhists and vice versa. This outlook, obviously, was common also among the Muslims in Indonesia in Southeast Asia, another Southeast Asian country under the colonial rule of the Dutch. For example, one missionary once complained: “When a missionary asks a man from the Sunda [a province in West Java in Indonesia], ‘Why do you not become a Christian?’ the answer is, ‘Because I am a Sundanese.’”<sup>63</sup>

For a Burmese the question of choosing a religion other than Buddhism is not just a religious question; it is a national and cultural question. To be Buddhist is to be a Burmese and

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This usage is found in English literature written during and immediately after the colonial period and has a highly problematic connotation in the modern context. Today *kala* refers to a person of South Asian ethnic origin.” See Michael Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma: An Essay on the Historical Practice of Power* (Richmond Surrey, UK: Curzon, 1999), ix. This is the revised and expanded edition of the same book, which was originally published by the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, Copenhagen, Denmark in 1991.

<sup>61</sup> Grentham, *Census of India*, 1921, Vol. 10: *Burma*, 104.

<sup>62</sup> Ian Morrison, *Grandfather Longlegs: The Life and Gallant Death of Major H. P. Seagrim* (London: Faber & Faber, 1947), 14.

not to be a Buddhist is not to be a Burmese.<sup>64</sup> It is also a question of social identity or a question of belonging to one's society. To discard Buddhist religion is to abandon the Buddhist society or the Burmese society, or even practically rather to be rejected and excluded by the Burmese society. As can be seen in Tint Lwin's statement, society for the Burmese people is far more important than it is for other people in other parts of the world: "Society is a very important factor in Burmese life and one can barely exist without being in the society. So the stronger the Burmese nationalism is, the harder it is for a Burmese to become a Christian."<sup>65</sup>

In this setting of religiously motivated Burmese nationalism with Buddhism as its principle, Christianity has been viewed as a Western political, religious and cultural infiltration and invasion. Even today, Christianity and the presence of the Christian church itself are considered a reminder, and the most sinister one of westernization that was imposed upon the Burmese during the heyday of colonialism. What Hendrik Kramer once said about colonialism and Christian mission work among those colonized is remarkably true in the context of the Burmese experience of both: "Christian missions were looked upon as part of the Western invasion of their cultural and spiritual realm."<sup>66</sup> Christianity and Christian mission work in Myanmar were and still are looked upon with suspicion and mistrust by Buddhist Burmese as Western colonial and neo-colonial components.

Even though missionaries cannot be blamed for the timing of their coming to Burma that coincided with the heyday of western colonial expansionism, the prevalent attitude of those Christian missionaries during that era has certainly caused some misunderstanding and confusion

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<sup>63</sup> W. Freytag, *Spiritual Revolution in the East* (London: Lutterworth, 1940), 65.

<sup>64</sup> Foreign observers too have made statements similar to this. R. Grant Brown can be quoted as one example: "A person who is not a Buddhist is not regarded as a Burman." See R. Grant Brown, *Burma As I Saw It, 1889-1917* (London: Methuen, 1926), 102.

<sup>65</sup> Tint Lwin, "Contextualization," 26.

<sup>66</sup> Hendrik Kramer, *Religion and the Christian Faith* (London: Lutterworth, 1956), 26.

on the part of the native Burmese people. While those misperceptions can be understood in their historical settings, the attitudes and behaviors of some of them, however, have certainly caused suspicion and resistance on the part of native Buddhist Burmese. That Christian mission and colonialism are interdependent in many instances in many parts of the world cannot be denied and Burma is no exception. Mission theologian David Bosch states unequivocally that, “from the sixteenth century, mission manifested supremely within the context of European colonialism of the non-western world” and that “Colonialism and mission, as a matter of course, were interdependent; the right to have colonies carried with it the duty to Christianize the colonized.”<sup>67</sup> Adoniram Judson himself seemed to have felt that the only means to evangelize and also perhaps to humanize the Burmese—the dominant Christian missionary attitude and common terminology used in those days—was to annex the country into the British Empire. This is evident in a certain Colonel Benson’s letter to the Governor-General of the British India, quoted by Dorothy Woodman: “This gentleman (Dr. Judson) avows himself predisposed for war, as the best, if not the only means of eventually introducing the humanizing influences of the Christian religion.”<sup>68</sup> Later Burmese historians see Christian missionaries as one of those “3Ms” in the process of the British colonization of their country. Tint Lwin articulates what “3Ms” means as it is used by historians:

From their observations they formulated the “3M” theory of colonialism in Myanmar. The first Europeans to reach Myanmar were the merchants. They were the first “M.” Then missionaries arrived as chaplains to care for the souls of the merchants. They were the second “M.” Last, the military came to protect the merchants and the missionaries. They were the third “M.” The “3M” together later took over Myanmar and made it a colony of Britain.<sup>69</sup>

Dr. Htin Aung accuses the Christian missionaries of not loving Buddhist Burmese in

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<sup>67</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 227.

<sup>68</sup> Dorothy Woodman, *The Making of Burma* (London: The Cresset, 1962), 115.



Burma and of supporting the British policy of “divide and rule,” which gave preferential treatment to the hill peoples. He also accuses Christian missionaries as inventing and preaching false accounts of Buddhism to the hill peoples so that they would misunderstand the Burmese and thus create a “psychological barrier” between them. He writes:

Since 1885 the British had carefully followed a policy of divide and rule; they deliberately separated the hill peoples from the Burmese. This policy had the full support of the Christian missionaries, who had looked upon the Burmese as their opponents since 1826, and who regarded the British victories as their own. Finding it almost impossible to convert the Burmese Buddhists to Christianity, they turned their attention to the hill peoples, with whom they had some success since those people were still primitive animists. Only a minority of those peoples accepted Christianity, however, and those who accepted retained much of their primitive beliefs. The missionaries, in preaching Christianity, attempted also to build up a psychological barrier against the Burmese by giving false accounts of Buddhism and inventing stories detrimental to the Burmese.<sup>70</sup>

On the surface, the colonial rule of the British appeared to be advantageous to Christian mission work in Burma. It provided the missionaries more security and freedom of movement for their missionary activities and evangelistic efforts. Colonial rule has, however, distanced the missionaries from the Burmese people who saw the missionaries as partners with the colonialists. The hatred, hostility, and animosity the Burmese felt towards the British rulers were directed towards Christian missionaries who had also come from the West, be it America or other parts of the West. The Burmese were never really able to distinguish American Christian missionaries from British imperialists nor did they ever try to do so. This might have been for two apparent reasons—both groups were white and spoke the same language, and they were all Christians, at least in the eyes of the Burmese. A missionary in Indonesia, a former Dutch colony, related the same kind of difficulty in his work to the upsurge of nationalism in that country under Dutch rule as the native Indonesian tried “all the more to barricade himself against the influence of

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<sup>69</sup> Tint Lwin, “Contextualization of the Gospel,” 24.

<sup>70</sup> Maung Htin Aung, *A History of Burma*, 280.

Christianity, because that religion is associated with the worship of the alien and ruling race.”<sup>71</sup>

### Buddhist Burmese Perception of Christianity in Myanmar

We have looked at how Burmese people perceive of themselves and other people in Chapter One. We have also observed how the Burmese Buddhists think of other religions as being inferior to theirs. Those perceptions of the Burmese people about themselves and their religion over against other peoples and the religions of other peoples have proven a continual challenge to Christian mission in Myanmar down through the centuries. It will be an appropriate, then, to consider how the Buddhist Burmese perceive of Christianity in Myanmar both in the past and now as well.

Samuel Ngun Ling, a Burmese theologian from the Chin ethnic group, is able to see several factors that have influenced the Burmese perception of Christianity in Myanmar. He writes:

The Burman Buddhist perception of Christianity is historically conditioned by a number of factors. The first factor is their perception of religion and nationality as a single phenomenon. The root of this perception goes back to the Pagan civilization. For it was from the Pagan period that the reunited Burmans (under King Anawrahta) began to see Theravada Buddhism as the main source of their political unity, social coherence, and cultural existence. From this standpoint, the Burmans cannot easily think of nationality apart from Buddhism. For they see the substantial meaning of their existence as Burmas in no other but in Buddhism. To a Burman embracing a foreign faith therefore almost means ceasing to be a Burman. It is at this point that Theravada Buddhism has for the Burmans not only the spiritual significance but also the social and political significance of uniting the people. To be a Buddhist and to be a Burman is therefore the same in its cultural sense.<sup>72</sup>

This is, obviously, the reason why a Burmese peasant would answer, “I am a Buddhist,” when he was asked about his nationality or racial belonging when a census was taken nationwide in

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<sup>71</sup> Mehden, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia*, 13 quoting *Insulinde*, World Dominion Survey Series (London: World Dominion, n.d.), 6.

<sup>72</sup> Ling, “The Meeting of Christianity and Buddhism in Burma: Its Past, Present and Future Perspectives,” 134.

1921.<sup>73</sup> To a Burman, “to cease to be a Buddhist would be to cease to be a Burman”<sup>74</sup> because “a person who is not a Buddhist is not regarded as a Burman.”<sup>75</sup> Being well aware that for a Burmese religion and nationality are so integrated as to make them a single component, John F. Cady says: “The Burmans considers the Buddhist faith the very *raison de’tre* of their state. The wearers of the yellow robe were proverbially the conscience of the people, the custodians of literature and learning, the educators of youth, the champions of the moral order.”<sup>76</sup>

The Burmese also see Christianity as a fearful religion, according to Samuel Ngun Ling.<sup>77</sup> We need to understand, however, that Christianity is fearful not in the sense that it is fearful in its teachings, but in the sense that the Burmese were afraid of their king who was never tolerant of his subjects embracing other religions. Ngun Ling elaborates what he means when he says that the Burmese think Christianity to be a fearful religion:

This perception [Christianity as a fearful religion] prevailed among the Burmans especially in the period of the kings. Since the Roman Catholic period [by this he seems to mean the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the first Catholic priests came to Burma as missionaries], this was the main obstacle to the free investigation of the Christian religion by the natives.... The religious situation at this time was twofold: first, it was the time when Buddhism was strongly protected by the king and when the Burman people were fearful of their king on any religious matter; second, although the king sympathized with foreign Christians, like the Bayinyies, who lived in Upper Burma by this time, he did not tolerate the natives who embraced the foreign religion or who became Christian.... Since this is the case particularly in the period of foreign mission in Burma, only a handful of Burman Buddhists made a response to the Christian Gospel and showed their interest in Christianity.<sup>78</sup>

With the British annexation of Burma into the British Indian Empire, the Burmese people’s

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<sup>73</sup> Morrision, *Grandfather Longlegs*, 14.

<sup>74</sup> B. R. Pearn, *Judson of Burma* (London: Edinburgh House, 1962), 20.

<sup>75</sup> R. Grant Brown, *Burma As I Saw It, 1889–1917* (London: Methuen, 1926), 102.

<sup>76</sup> John F. Cady, “Religion and Politics in Modern Burma,” in *The Far-Eastern Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (February 1953): 150.

<sup>77</sup> Ling, “The Meeting of Christianity and Buddhism in Burma: Its Past, Present and Future Perspectives,” 139.

<sup>78</sup> Ling, “The Meeting of Christianity and Buddhism in Burma: Its Past, Present and Future Perspectives,” 139–40.

fear of their king in matters of changing one's religion turned into another way of seeing Christianity as an ally of Western imperialism. Ngun Ling has this to say about the radical change of perspective on the part of the Burmese people:

However, the American Baptist mission was interrupted by a series of Anglo-Burmese wars, the first in 1824, the second in 1855 [actually it was in 1852 that the second Anglo-Burmese war broke out and Lower Burma was annexed by the British], and the third time in 1885, finally by the British rule over the whole country, the Burman perception of Christianity radically changed. They began to see Christianity as part of the scheme of the British military conquest.<sup>79</sup>

The Burmese view of Christianity as the religion of Western imperialism still persists today as one of the biggest challenges with which Christians in Myanmar have to wrestle. The Burmese people perceive Christianity as the religion of colonialism about which they still harbor bitter feelings. Ngun Ling again lists three things as the reasons why the Burmese could see Christianity as an imperial religion:

It was from the year 1886 when the whole of Burma was subject to the British that Christianity was fully perceived as the British colonial religion for the following reasons: (1) the disestablishment of Buddhism as the State Religion (from 1886); (2) the replacement of Buddhist monastery education with the British secular and the American missionary educational systems; and (3) a special protection or patronage given to Christianity while not given to Buddhism. During the Anglo-Burmese wars, the British protected the missionaries and their new converts, for example, by allowing them to move their mission station from Rangoon to Moulmein in their territory and there the Christian mission continued to operate under British protection. As a result, the Burman Buddhists came to interpret all this (*sic*) things as an act of conspiracy between the British and the missionaries and therefore looked at the later missionary activities as destructive elements of the British colonial forces.<sup>80</sup>

Dr. Htin Aung, a prominent Burmese historian and educator, provides a picture of the religious landscape following the British conquest of Lower Burma in 1852 and accuses Christian missionaries, especially of those in the Church of England, as collaborators and

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<sup>79</sup> Ling, "The Meeting of Christianity and Buddhism in Burma: Its Past, Present and Future Perspectives," 142.

<sup>80</sup> Ling, "The Meeting of Christianity and Buddhism in Burma: Its Past, Present and Future Perspectives," 145.

remnants of British colonialism. He also questions the British policy of not granting patronage to Buddhism in the land conquered and ruled by the British. He writes:

The First Anglo-Burmese War did not affect Burmese Buddhism very much, and the monks living in the maritime provinces of Arakan and Tenasserim, which had been ceded to the British after the defeat of 1826, were not disheartened as they continued to receive instructions from the primate at the king's capital. In contrast, the Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852), resulting in the conquest of the whole region of Lower Burma by the British, had disastrous consequences for the religion. The monks were distressed at the thought of living under an alien government, and the laity feared that the national religion would be suppressed and persecuted. Mass migrations of monks, both Burmese and Mon, to Upper Burma and rebellions against the new government by both Burmese and Mon resulted. Many towns and villages in Lower Burma came to be without any resident monk, and monasteries fell to neglect and decay. The few monks who remained felt abandoned and lost, and some of them became lax and corrupt. In despair the laity in Lower Burma petitioned the British governor to extend patronage to Buddhism, and appoint a primate so as to enforce discipline and order among the ranks of the clergy remaining in Lower Burma, but he refused to do so. Queen Victoria in her famous proclamation as the empress of India had promised religious toleration to her conquered subjects; following the letter rather than the spirit of the proclamation, the British government in Lower Burma kept itself aloof from the religious affairs of the Burmese people who were under its rule. But conditions in Burma were entirely different from those prevailing in India. In India since the eleventh century, which had ushered in the Muslim conquest of the subcontinent, there had been a continual struggle and conflict between the two religions, Hinduism and Islam. In contrast, since the same century, Buddhism had been the official, national, and popular religion of the Burmese.

In the circumstances, the refusal of the British government to extend patronage to Buddhism was not only misunderstood but also resented. The position was made even worse by the following facts. First, the Christian missionaries at Rangoon even before the Second Anglo-Burmese war openly showed contempt for Burmese national and religious institutions, and sided with the British when that war broke out. After Rangoon had fallen and British rule was extended to cover all Lower Burma, these missionaries identified themselves with the conquerors and gleefully shared their triumph. Second, when the Church of England was established in Lower Burma for the benefit of the English soldiers and officials, its clergymen were naturally paid officials of the government. The Burmese could not understand why the British government should grant patronage to its own Christian religion and not to the Buddhist religion of the Burmese also.<sup>81</sup>

The Burmese also see Christianity to be inferior to their Buddhist faith. Samuel Ling explains how the Buddhist Burmese view Christianity as an inferior religion to their Buddhist

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<sup>81</sup> Maung Htin Aung, *Burmese Monk's Tales* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1966), 15.

religion:

The second factor to be considered here is the Burman's perception of Christianity as an inferior religion. No matter how widely Christianity is considered a universal religion, it is, to the Burmans, whose great civilization owes its inception to Theravada Buddhism, inferior to Buddhism. There is no historical basis by which the Burmans can regard Christianity in Burma as superior to Theravada Buddhism, for it is Theravada Buddhism which came to them before Christianity came and which gives them, as we have mentioned in Chapter I, literature, culture, arts, social values, morality, and civilization. In fact, the Burmans always pride themselves to be possessors of the world's great faith, and never feel themselves inferior to any people of other faiths nor intend to subordinate their Buddhist faith to any foreign faith. This religious-based superiority mentality, as we will explain in the following, manifests itself as a dominant feature in the various aspects of the Burman social, cultural, and political life.<sup>82</sup>

There is nothing wrong about the Burmese' feeling that their religion is the best in the world in comparison with all others; it could be argued that anyone in any religion should feel that his religion is superior to all others. But, the Burmese mentality of religious and cultural pride is at the expense of other religions in the country, which manifests itself in a policy known as "Burmanization."

#### "Burmanization" and Christianity in Myanmar

Added to the identification of the Buddhist religion with nationality that sees Christianity as a foreign religion, the practice of what is known as the policy of "Burmanization" by the successive governments of Myanmar is seen as a real challenge to the Christians' peaceful co-existence with their Buddhist neighbors in Myanmar today. "Burmanization" can be understood both as the Burmese governments' domestic policy of neutralism and the attempt to implement by the same governments what is called "Burmanization" of the minority ethnic and religious groups. The first type of "Burmanization" that we are discussing here is what Robert A. Holmes calls "the Burmese government's domestic policy as it directly relates to its foreign policy of

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<sup>82</sup> Ling, "The Meeting of Christianity and Buddhism in Burma: Its Past, Present and Future Perspectives," 137.

neutralism.”<sup>83</sup> Holmes explains what he perceives as the Burmese government’s policy and practice of “Burmanization” thus:

Burma had deliberately sought to follow a domestic policy that would antagonize neither East nor West, and could not be misinterpreted abroad. Western influence was dominant in Burma until 1962, but since then the government has followed a policy designed to reduced Western influence and presence to a point where it comes into an approximate balance with Burma’s cultural and economic ties with the Communist world. The government apparently regards such a balance as essential to its efforts to avoid irritating Peking. Two other factors, however, were also instrumental in the formulation of this policy: (1) the xenophobia among the highly nationalistic members of the Burmese Revolutionary Council government who want to eliminate the vestiges of the old dominant foreign cultural and economic influences and to begin a process of Burmanization; and (2) a lingering antagonism toward the United States related to the suspicion that the US supported the Koumington (KMT) troops in Burma.<sup>84</sup>

After seizing power for the second time<sup>85</sup> in March, 1962, the military set up the Revolutionary Council and started to take “steps to eliminate all existing and potential rivals. It then issued an economic treatise entitled ‘The Burmese Way to Socialism,’ a blueprint for economic development and national independence. The Revolutionary Council also began to inaugurate policies which were clearly designed to reduce all foreign influences in Burma ”<sup>86</sup> “The Burmese Way to Socialism”<sup>87</sup> is the Burmese way to Burmanization. “One of the first acts of the new government was to terminate the “services of two American philanthropic organizations—the Ford and Asia foundations” and restrictions were imposed so that it was “more difficult for Burmese to obtain visas to travel and study in the West, and travel by

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<sup>83</sup> Robert A. Holmes, “Burmese Domestic Policy: Politics of Burmanization,” in *Asian Survey* 7, no. 3 (March 1967): 188–97.

<sup>84</sup> Holmes, “Burmese Domestic Policy: Politics of Burmanization,” 188.

<sup>85</sup> The first time was in 1958 when the military under General Ne Win seized power from the democratically elected government in the form of a “Care-Taker Government.”

<sup>86</sup> Holmes, “Burmese Domestic Policy: Politics of Burmanization,” 188.

<sup>87</sup> For a complete text and treatise see William C. Johnstone, *Burma’s Foreign Policy: A Study in Neutralism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 312–17.

Burmese government-sponsored scholars to Western countries has been slowed to a trickle.<sup>88</sup>

A report paper by Renaud Egreteau and Larry Jagan traces Burma's policy and practice of isolationism as part of its policy of "Burmanization" under the military regime. This report explains what is known as the Burmese government's policy of "Burmanization":

The Revolutionary Council that Ne Win formed in 1962 to govern the country and instill this new socialist and autarchic ideology enacted several laws clearly aimed at reducing any foreign influence over Burma's economy and society. The first targets were the foreign minorities that had remained in Burma after the independence despite the first waves of "Burmanization" of the country during the Japanese invasion in 1942 and then independence in 1948. The nationalisation programme launched in February 1963 by the military government directly affected the Indian, Chinese, Anglo-Burmese and Western agricultural, trade and banking communities, most of them were forced to flee the country. The English language was even prohibited in educational programs in 1966.<sup>89</sup>

Robert A. Holmes maintains that "one would have expected these measures to have coincided with an active 'anti-imperialist' (i.e., anti-western) foreign policy a'la Cambodia, but this has not been the case. These were merely part of the Burmese effort to balance Western and Communist influence in Burma."<sup>90</sup> I believe, however, that the governments of Myanmar under various political systems have been exploiting the Burmese notion of nationalism to the extent of remaining a pariah nation in isolation from the rest of the world. As a report paper on Myanmar by the International Crisis Group points out:

It seems probable that 'suspicions of foreigners' are exaggerated for strategic purposes to rally the people around a nationalistic leadership and justify continued military control. However, military fears of the world have regularly manifested themselves in observable behaviour. During the 1988 uprising, the arrival of a U.S. naval vessel in Myanmar waters reportedly caused panic in the War Office.<sup>91</sup>

The same report reveals that "the modern state of Myanmar was forged under colonialism and

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<sup>88</sup> Holmes, "Burmese Domestic Policy: Politics of Burmanization," 189.

<sup>89</sup> Renaud Egreteau and Larry Jagan, *Back to the Old Habits: Isolationism the Self-Preservation of Burma's Military Regime* (Bangkok: Research Institute on Contemporary Southeast Asia, 2008), 15–16.

<sup>90</sup> Egreteau and Jagan, *Back to the Old Habits*, 16.

<sup>91</sup> "Myanmar: The Military Regime's View of the World," *ICG Asia Report No. 28* (7 December, 2001): 5.



born in the aftermath of World War II. Since independence in 1947 [actually it was in 1948], continued domestic conflict and the failure of successive governments to forge a stable and prosperous nation have sustained fears of foreign intervention and reinforced a mindset that foreigners are to blame for the country's many problems."<sup>92</sup> Their recent colonial past and the deep-seated and widespread obsessive nationalistic thinking of the Burmese people and their leaders (especially the military) reflect and feed into suspicion toward the world in general and the West in particular. This, I believe, is the root cause of political "Burmanization" as has been practiced by successive governments of Myanmar over the years.

Another aspect of "Burmanization" can be seen in the Burmese government's biased treatment of the minority ethnic and religious groups who are denied many of their basic rights as citizens of the country while the majority Buddhist Burmese enjoy rights and privileges of which the minority ethnic and religious groups are deprived. In this policy of Burmanization, "becoming a Christian is seen as becoming a disloyal citizen, or more precisely as becoming like a foreigner."<sup>93</sup>

"Burmanization" can be understood as an assimilation policy implemented by successive Burmese governments to assimilate non-Burman ethnic groups into Burman ethnic groups. This policy has been implemented since 1948. It was accelerated during Ne Win and SPDC regimes [the former military government, State Peace and Development Council since 1992 which replaced the State Law and Order Restoration Council that came into power after brutally crushing the popular uprising against the then Burma Socialist Programme Party government in 1988]. To achieve their ambition of assimilating ethnic minorities into one nation and one religion, the regimes banned teaching non-Burman ethnic group languages in schools and banned

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<sup>92</sup> "Myanmar: The Military Regime's View of the World," 1.

<sup>93</sup> Ling, "The Meeting of Christianity and Buddhism in Burma: Its Past, Present and Future Perspectives,"

or restricted practicing non-Burman cultures. The regimes also restricted all activities that promoted non-Burman ethnic identities such as celebrating ethnic national days—which would result in the loss of their cultures and ethnic national identities. It also involved openly promoting Buddhism while at the same time persecuting non-Buddhist religions. Paul Marshall says:

The SPDC has conducted a campaign of “Burmanization” against the opposition and ethnic minority groups, both politically and militarily. The first aspect of Burmanization is that ethnic Burman citizens are clearly favored at the expense of ethnic minorities, often also religious minorities, who are denied many basic cultural and political rights and suffer widespread human rights abuses.

A second aspect of Burmanization is the promotion of Buddhism to forge “national solidarity,” as illustrated in the placement of the Religious Affairs Ministry in the grounds of the World Peace Pagoda (Kaba Aye) in Rangoon, the residence of the most senior committee of Buddhist monks. In Chin State, unmarried SPDC soldiers were encouraged, with the offers of higher rank and privileges, to marry and convert Christian Chin women. Tension between Buddhist and Christian Karens has been deliberately exacerbated by the regime, and now the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army is allied to the SPDC against its former ally the Karen National Union (KNU). Christian sites and graveyards are actively demolished by the SPDC, who replace them with pagodas, often using forced labors.<sup>94</sup>

Ethnic groups in Myanmar themselves have many bitter experiences of discriminatory treatments that they have been undergoing. Kachins, the majority of whom are Christian, succinctly could testify that:

“Burmanization” is a word that all the Kachin and all the ethnic groups in Burma know well. Burmanization refers to a carefully crafted set of government policies whose goals are a future Union of Myanmar where one of the most diverse countries on the planet will become a completely homogenized one. Minority language, religion, culture and history are all under heavy assault in Burma today.

In 1961 the central government declared Buddhism the state religion despite the fact that the Kachin are over 90% Christian and many other ethnic minorities in Burma are Christian, Muslim or Animists. Still today the Junta and the state sanctioned Buddhists build countless Buddhist Pagodas and shrines in Kachin State while actively

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<sup>94</sup> Paul A. Marshall, ed., *Religious Freedom in the World* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers in cooperation with Center for Religious Freedom at the Hudson Institute, 3008), 110.

prohibiting the Kachin from building or even repairing their own churches. Many of the new Buddhist pagodas even have false inscriptions on them saying that they are hundreds of years old, despite the local people's testimony that they were recently built. This is one of the many manifestations of Burmanization rampant in Burma today.<sup>95</sup>

*The Chinland Guardian*, the official voice of the Chin ethnic group readily recognizes the unveiling of a new flag of the Union of Myanmar in 2010 without proper legislative process as a symbol of "Burmanization."

Two weeks before its planned election of November 7, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) unveiled a new national flag for Burma on 22nd October, 2010. The new national flag consists of a large single white star set against three horizontal background stripes of red, green and yellow.

According to the military, "the green color of the flag represents peace, yellow solidarity, and red, valour." While the SPDC is hell-bent on materializing its own version of a discipline-induced democracy, once again it finds itself caught in a self-induced contradiction: the SPDC's unilateral unveiling of the flag runs counter to the due legislative process of a democracy.

As the key national symbol of any nation, it is imperative that a due process is followed in the legislative branch. Without formally allowing the future legislative chamber to deliberate over the design and meaning of a new national flag, the SPDC hijacked the ratification process, officially (and symbolically) setting the stage for a one-sided election which disregards the wishes of the many while advancing the will of the ruling few.

The attempt to build a strong centralized Union without acknowledging the existence of ethno-cultural diversity has long been regarded by ethnic national minorities as a policy of Burmanization – the policy of assimilating all ethnic national minorities into the dominant ethnic Burman group.<sup>96</sup>

World Without Genocide reports what is going on in Karen areas in Myanmar in connection with the military government's "Burmanization" policy:

Since 1970s, the government increased civilian attacks in minority areas, resettling residents in sites guarded by the military. The militarized government developed plans to eliminate those who do not fit "Burmese" ideals, and they target the Karen, a primarily Christian ethnic group in southern Burma. Many Karen accuse the Burmese

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<sup>95</sup> "Burmanization," accessed July 2, 2011, <http://www.freekachin.org/about/burmanization/>.

<sup>96</sup> "New Flag for Burma: A Symbol of Burmanization," accessed July 3, 2015. <http://www.chinlandguardian.com/index.php/commentary-opinion/item/312-new-flag-for-burma-a-symbol-of-burmanization>.

government of ethnic cleansing due to mass atrocities against the Karen people such as summary execution, severe torture and rape, forced labor, extortion and displacement. As recent as 2010, reports states that the government continues to burn Karen villages, indiscriminately bomb villages, and engages in forced labor in attempts to terrorize civilians.<sup>97</sup>

William J. Topich and Keith A. Leitich highlight the feeling of ethnic minorities about the attempt of the majority Burmans to implement a “Burmanization” policy:

The Burman constitute approximately two-thirds of the total population of Myanmar. Many Burman (including several leaders of the country) are from mixed ancestry. It is thus difficult to speak of ethnic homogeneity in Myanmar. Since independence, the Burman have controlled the government and military structure in Myanmar. Minority populations have accused the Burman of attempting to implement a “Burmanization” policy throughout the country. Minority groups claim that they are marginalized in areas such as economics, politics, language, and education. The Burman are overwhelmingly Theravada Buddhist, and this is the main cultural characteristic that defines the group. Educationally, the Bamar language is used in the schools throughout Myanmar.<sup>98</sup>

Paul A. Marshall traces some key aspects of ethnic and religious minorities’ loss of citizenship rights and their discrimination by the Burmese government as part of its policy of “Burmanization.” By means of granting different categories or classes of citizenship to ethnic and religious minorities, indicated by color-coded citizenship identification cards, the Burmese government has been implementing its policy of “Burmanization.”

The discrimination against ethnic minorities is demonstrated by key aspects of government legislation, including the citizenship law of 1982, under which full citizenship is granted only to those who can trace the families of both parents back to pre-1824 Burma. Identity cards are color coded according to citizenship categories, and most carry information on religion. These have to be shown on many transactions, facilitating ethnic and religious discrimination.<sup>99</sup>

Harvard University Divinity School’s Religious Literacy Project also records:

Christian ethnic minorities have faced significant discrimination in Myanmar. Christians have reported campaigns of forcible conversion to Buddhism, restrictions

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<sup>97</sup> “Burma, 1962-Present,” accessed July 19 2015, <http://worldwithoutgenocide.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Conflict-in-Burma-World-Without-Genocide.pdf>.

<sup>98</sup> William J. Topich and Keith A. Leitich, *The History of Myanmar* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2013), 3.

<sup>99</sup> Marshall, ed., *Religious Freedom in the World*, 111.

on church-building and religious organizing, forced labor conscription, and killings, torture, rape, abductions, and other acts of violence against Christians by the Burmese military.<sup>100</sup>

The church in Myanmar is caught, so to speak, between the majority Buddhist Burmese people's passion of nationalism that opposes whatever is Western and Christian along with the successive government's attempts to implement the policy of "Burmanization" of ethnic and religious minorities and the same ethnic and religious minorities' vigorous efforts to resist that attempt and process. The challenge for Christians in Myanmar today is to find a theological framework in which they can best try to be faithful followers of their Lord, Jesus Christ and at the same time good citizens of their beloved nation for the sake of their neighbors.

#### A Strange Case of Christianity in Korea in Comparison with That in Myanmar

It is amazing to observe how differently things developed in the Korean peninsula in terms of the Korean people's attitude toward Christianity and Christian mission work there. Contrary to the situation in Myanmar and elsewhere in Asia and most probably in Africa as well, Christianity received the respect and esteem of the Koreans, something totally different than what one sees in Myanmar. Christians in Korea have earned a good name and reputation as truly patriotic people who really love their nation and people. They have earned the good name as people who are ready even to lay down their lives for their nation and people. It was because Korean Christianity was originated and continued to grow under a totally different setting than almost all the other countries in Asia. Jung Young Lee records:

In 1910, Japan annexed Korea as a colony. At first missionaries, following the American policy took a pro-Japanese attitude and encouraged Korean Christians to support the Japanese government. However, after the Conspiracy Case of 1912, when 105 Koreans were arrested and imprisoned for plotting to assassinate the governor-general, Terauch, Korean Christian activism evolved into Korean nationalism. Despite a Japanese attempt to suppress and intimidate Christian activities, it was

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<sup>100</sup> "Christianity in Myanmar," accessed July 3 2015, <http://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/faq/christianity-myanmar>.

impossible to stop the new spirit of Korean nationalism. The 1 March 1919 Independence Movement was a pivotal event for Koreans. Out of thirty-three signatories of the document, fifteen were Christians. After the 1 March movement the church suffered greatly, as another wave of Christian persecution arrived under the guise of mobilization of a national spirit.<sup>101</sup>

Of course, it is relevant that for the Korean people the conquerors and oppressors were not the Westerners whose religion was Christianity. Westerners, especially Americans, were seen not as the colonizing oppressors, but rather as liberators from the hands of the Japanese oppressors. The fact that Christianity has never been identified with imperialism in Korea is believed to be one important contributing factor to the explosion of church growth experienced by the Korean Christians in the 1960s and 1970s. Alister E. McGrath narrates how Christianity has had a totally different reception among the Koreans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in these words:

Christianity was perceived as an ally, rather than an enemy, by Koreans in the twentieth century. Korea was annexed by Japan in 1910 and remained under Japanese rule until the end of Second World War. Unusually, Christianity was seen as allied with Korean nationalism, especially in the face of Japanese oppression. Elsewhere in Asia, Christianity was depicted by its critic as the lackey of western imperialism. In Korea, however, the enemy was not the west, but Japan.<sup>102</sup>

It is evident even from a cursory study of the history of Myanmar that Christians in this country are not as fortunate as their brothers and sisters in Korea. There are, to be sure, some factors that hold back the church from living out her full life in the public—some negative elements the church has inherited from her past. Paul Clasper, a missionary in Burma before all foreign missionaries were forced out of the country in 1966, once remarked: “The Christian movement [in Myanmar] is viewed as a remnant of the colonial era and national Christians, while often appreciated as individuals, are looked upon as those who have given allegiance to a foreign faith

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<sup>101</sup> Jung Young Lee, “Korean Christian Thought,” Ed. Alister E. McGrath, *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993), 309.

<sup>102</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *The Future of Christianity* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2002), 30.

and, therefore, are not really assimilated to the Burman Buddhist culture.”<sup>103</sup> Christians in Myanmar today, however, must learn to overcome those dynamics that are not favorable to their current identity and witness as the followers of Jesus Christ. Karen Bloomquist observes some factors that she sees are holding back the church from living out her call to really engage the wider public:

Yet there are factors that hold churches back from living this out:

Many churches have been organized according to ethnic or tribal identities, which then become the non-negotiables to be preserved or defended.

Privatized understandings of faith are focused primarily on the individual’s relationship with Jesus and immediate family and friends—those most familiar, whose interests are common to “mine.” This is in contrast to the “public,” where we engage with those who are different from ourselves—the strangers—and where “my” interests cannot be assumed to be synonymous with those of the others.

Living under repressive or totalitarian governments, whose policies and practices may be blatantly wrong, corrupt or unjust and call for protest by churches and others but where prayerful, wise and discerning judgment is needed as to when the risks of speaking out and acting are to be taken.

Churches who are in an extreme minority amid an interfaith or secular majority, such that they feel their public witness would be discounted or even they would be persecuted for such.<sup>104</sup>

The above account by Bloomquist reflects some concrete realities in the current situation of Christians in Myanmar. Obviously, there are certain things which have held back Christians from being the salt of the earth and the light of the world in this spiritually dark land of Myanmar. Christians are not in a favorable position inherited from the past to really challenge and change those conditions. The challenge for them, however, is that they are called to be Christ’s witnesses in those same situations. The question is not how advantageous the situations are, but rather how do Christians go about do in fulfilling their mission in every situation?

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<sup>103</sup> Paul Clasper, “The Buddhist—Christian Encounter in Burma,” *Review and Expositor* 58, no. 1 (January 1961): 44.

<sup>104</sup> Bloomquist, “Toward a More Public Witness of Churches,” 125–26.

We understand from the clear teaching of the Bible that the church of Jesus Christ is placed in this world that certainly is not always friendly but rather hostile to her, for the task of witnessing to the world of the glorious Gospel of God's saving grace. In the religious and social situation in Myanmar that has been described in the above few paragraphs, different Christians have attempted to find the best way to address the situation and have come up with various schemes for the Church that would guide the Church in her identity and witness as God's people. In the next chapter, we will try to look at some of the most prominent models that have been proposed by certain Burmese theologians in Myanmar in recent years as the best and most effective methods to evangelize their Buddhist Burmese neighbors. We will also evaluate their strengths and weaknesses and their potential usefulness or danger in the face of the ever-present and ever strong reality of Burmese nationalism in Myanmar today. This effort in turn clear the way for us to discover and explore alternative models that can serve as more viable options understanding and appropriately asserting the Christians' identity and witness in the overwhelmingly Buddhist country of Myanmar.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### A SEARCH FOR AN AUTHENTIC MYANMAR CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Against the backdrop of the reality of the ever-strong Burmese nationalism that always looks on Christianity with annoyance and suspicion and frowns on the presence of the Christian church as an enduring element of the colonial past in Myanmar, some Myanmar Christian leaders have begun to look for ways to make Christian identity more acceptable and their witness more effective. Trailing their counterparts in the West and other parts of the world, they began to speak about the so-called “search for an authentic Myanmar Christian theology.”<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Simon Pau Khan En<sup>2</sup> wants to see an authentic Myanmar theology, which as he always claims, must be a comprehensive and coherent “Myanmar” theology. He emphatically states his plea for an authentic Myanmar theology:

Time is now overdue for the Christians in Myanmar to produce a systematized and relevant contextual theology after its history of two and a half century years [sic]. Throughout the various socio-political systems, which the churches have gone through such as, Monarchical Period (1720-1885), Colonial Period (1885-1948), Parliamentary Democracy (1948-1962), Socialist Regime (1962-1988), and the present Military Regime (1988). Christians have encountered them with different theological styles and thus have been surviving and growing, but without fashioning their verbal theologies in a systematic and written form. In the years past, Christians in Myanmar have only what a noted Swiss theologian Professor Walter Hollenweger has called, ‘Oral Christianity’ or ‘Oral Theology’ which are sparsely found among

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Pau Khan En, “The Quest for Authentic Myanmar Contextual Theology,” *RAYS: MIT Journal of Theology* 2 (2001): 31–48.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Enno—that is how most people in Myanmar know him—used to be the principal of Zomi Theological College in Falam, Chin State in Myanmar. He has also served as General Secretary of both Zomi Baptist Convention and Myanmar Baptist Convention. When he wrote this call for an “authentic Myanmar contextual theology,” he was principal of Myanmar Institute of Theology in Insein, Yangon, Myanmar—an advantageous position that accorded him a position to be read and heard.

the churches. Theological challenge today is to formulate those theologies in a systematic form to make a comprehensive and coherent Myanmar theology.<sup>3</sup>

He further elaborates: “In other words, the gospel has already attempted to *Christianize* the people of Myanmar within the past two and a half centuries with little success, and the challenging mission of the Christians in Myanmar today is to *Myanmarize* Christianity so that the gospel may be seen as authentic and relevant for the people.”<sup>4</sup>

### **A Divided Burmese Society and A Search for Relevant Theological Paradigms**

Myanmar is a divided nation along ethnic and religious lines. As Tom Cramer has pointed out “the country’s most obvious ethnic divide, meanwhile, is between the Burman majority and other ethnic nationalities.”<sup>5</sup> The divisiveness is compounded even more when the majority Burmese are Buddhist and some of the minority ethnic groups are Christian. Generally speaking, the Burmans, the Mons, the Rakhines, and the Shans are Buddhist while some minority ethnic groups such as the Chins, the Kachins, and the Karens are mostly Christian in terms of religious belonging. David I. Steinberg contends that the ethnic factor remains the most explosive issue in Myanmar today:

The ethnic factor remains potentially the single most explosive element in contemporary Myanmar. Although academicians have argued about the importance of ethnicity in Burmese history, the rise of internal ethnic nationalism has been apparent in Myanmar in many other societies. The actual and potential sources of national power, the military and the NLD [National League for Democracy], are Burman-based. Ethnic parties did win seats in the 1990 election; there were nineteen different ethnic parties, and some of those were aligned with the NLD. It is still evident today that to achieve power one must play by Burman rules redefined as “Myanmafication.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> En, “The Quest for Authentic Myanmar Contextual Theology,” 31.

<sup>4</sup> En, “The Quest for Authentic Myanmar Contextual Theology,” 40.

<sup>5</sup> Tom Cramer, “Ethnic Conflict and Lands Rights in Myanmar,” in *Social Research* 82, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 358.

<sup>6</sup> David I. Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar*, 46.

“Myanmafication” is a term coined by Gustaaf Houtman,<sup>7</sup> which non-Burman leaders regard as another act of Burmanization, the latest stage in the majority Burmans’ attempts to deflect and destroy minority cultures, while establishing a single identity for the country.

As the result of the divide between the majority Burmans and the minority ethnic groups there are grievances, especially on the part of ethnic minorities. Cramer points out:

The main grievances of ethnic minority groups in Myanmar are lack of influence over the political decision-making processes; the absence of economic and social development in their areas; and what they see as the military government’s Burmanization policy, which translates into repression of their cultural rights and religious freedoms. Ethnic minorities in Myanmar feel marginalized and discriminated against, and in effect, the armed rebellions in Myanmar are their response.<sup>8</sup>

#### A Divided Society and Christian Minorities in Myanmar

Today’s Myanmar is a creation partly by the British under their colonial rule and partly by the Burmese people themselves of different ethnic groups with the emergence of the independent Burma in 1948. It was at a conference known in history as “the Panglong Conference” where the Burmese leader General Aung San was able to persuade the Chins, the Kachins and the Shans to join the Union of Burma which was to be formed up with different ethnic groups once the country was free from British rule. The Ethnic Nationalities Council (Union of Burma), which represents 22 million people in the Arakan, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon and Shan States, issued a statement in commemoration of the “Panglong Agreement” and recalled the history of the first “Panglong Conference” and demanded a continued “Panglong spirit” among the different ethnic groups in Myanmar in 2007:

After the Second World War, in March 1946, the leaders of the Federated Shan States—Shan, Da-nu, Pa-O, Palaung and Wa—met together with representatives of the Chin, Kachin, and Karen peoples in Panglong to discuss the future. To enable the

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<sup>7</sup> Gustaaf Houtman, *Human Origins, Myanmafication, and “disciplined” Burmese Democracy* (London: Pekhon University Press, 2000), 37–56.

<sup>8</sup> Houtman, *Human Origins, Myanmafication, and “disciplined” Burmese Democracy*, 359.

different peoples to cooperate more closely, the Supreme Council of the United Hill Peoples (SCOUHP) was founded in November 1946. This was a unique development whereby, rather than fighting each other, the different ethnic nationalities were able for the first time ever to work together as equals in order to achieve the same common goals.

When the ethnic nationalities leaders met again for the second time in Panglong in February 1947, Bogyoke Aung San came to join them. He had been to London to negotiate with Prime Minister Atlee for Burma's independence, which was conditional on the unification of the Frontier Areas with Burma. Based on Aung San's promises of democracy, equality and self rule, the ethnic nationalities agreed to work together with Aung San's interim government to form the Union of Burma.<sup>9</sup>

Shelby Tucker argues, however, that the "Panglong Agreement" does not signify a union to be formed with ethnic nationalities. He states: "Burma now celebrates 12 February, the Anniversary of the signing of this document, as Union Day, when the people of the Frontier Areas agrees to join a Greater Burma, but this document signifies no such thing."<sup>10</sup> Many ethnic minorities do not actually feel any real close tie to the majority Burmese as those minority ethnic groups had never been part of the unified Burma before the colonial era. Mang Hre succinctly states:

Whenever we talk about Myanmar before the colonial period (1886-1948), we were excluding other ethnic groups such as Chin, Kachin, Kayin, Shan, and others since they never had been part of the Burman kingdom but each had their own territory. Only after the British invaded and began to rule over the country in 1886 was it easy for them to unite all other ethnic groups under the administration of Rangoon (now Yangon). And from that time, the ethnic minority groups became part of Myanmar. Some of the ethnic groups were separated into two countries or more than one territory. For example, the North-Western part of the Chin state became part of India, in Mizoram State, Manipur State, Assam State, and Nagaland State and some Chins known as Bawm are also living in Bangladesh. Some of the Chin people are also living in Chin State of Myanmar, Magwe division, and Sagaing division. After independence was gained from the British colonials, these ethnic groups have

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<sup>9</sup> "60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Panglong Agreement 12 February 2007 'Unity in diversity'" accessed September 3 2015, <http://www.burmahilfe.org/text/Statement%20of%20the%2060th%20Panglong%20Agreement%20Day%20%28PDF%294.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Shelby Tucker, *Burma: The Curse of Independence* (London: Pluto, 2001), 121.

launched armed struggle against the army demanding self-determination, democracy, and they have even tried to regain their previous territories.<sup>11</sup>

The issue of ethnic diversity was made complicated by successive Burmese governments by ignoring the aspirations of minority groups. They not only ignored the desires of the minorities but also practiced what can be termed “human rights violations” in ethnic minority territories. Mang Hre further states that both the majority Burmans and minority ethnic groups had different interests in their fight for independence. “Many of the Burman people joined the Japanese forces during WWII while many minority ethnic groups remained loyal to Britain. This reflected a genuine desire for independence on the part of both groups: Burmans were struggling to be free of the British colonialism and the ethnic minorities were wishing to escape Burman domination (Veen 2005, p. 7)”<sup>12</sup>

Christians in Myanmar find themselves driven between two poles—endeavoring to engage their majority Buddhist Burmese neighbors while struggling to resist the same majority Buddhist Burmese’ attempts at implementing the policy of assimilation, which in reality is the policy of “Burmanization” as has been pointed out and discussed in Chapter Two. As David Steinberg points out Myanmar is a country, but not a unified nation: “Force held the Union together, not a sense of national unity or ethnic equality. The attempts to instill a national ideology that would be cohesive proved impossible. As Burmese nationalism rose, so did ethnic nationalism.”<sup>13</sup>

The history of Christianity in Myanmar and the current situation of the country today demand that Christians in Myanmar “be as wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16, English Standard Version). It may not always be easy, as history has testified over and over again. Fred von der Mehden’s assessment of the situation of Christians in Myanmar offers

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<sup>11</sup> Mang Hre, “Religion: A Tool of Dictators to Cleanse Ethnic Minority in Myanmar?” in *Journal of Ethics, Religion & Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 2013): 22.

<sup>12</sup> Hre, “Religion: A Tool of Dictators to Cleanse Ethnic Minority in Myanmar?,” 22.

an objective observation of the matter:

Finally, some mention should be made of the relationship between the native Christian community and the nationalist movement. Conservatism, indifference, and at times hostility toward nationalism characterized the majority of the Christians in Burma and the Indies. Only a minority was active in national political life and, except in a few radical parties, the political leadership of their organizations was drawn from business and government service.... However, more religious Moslems and Buddhists regarded the Christians as non-nationalist, precolonial, and lost to their nation and freedom. As we shall see in the next chapter on the Christian community, some of these allegations had a ring of truth.

Christians were not entirely isolated from nationalist activities, however. In Burma, party organization was not important, but there were individuals who sought to unite more closely the Christians and Buddhist communities. Thus, from time to time there were newspaper reports of Christian associations supporting various nationalist causes and during the mid-thirties Bishop West of the Anglican church led a drive to take the Christians out of their political isolation. Yet, the presence of a Christian in the hierarchy of the various nationalist organizations was rare and politicians such as Ba Maw who were accused of being Christians found such accusations embarrassing.<sup>14</sup>

In short, the situation in which Christians in Myanmar find themselves in a divided society that is divided along ethnic and religious lines. When Christianity is identified as the religion of the minorities while Buddhism is considered the religion of the ethnic majority Burmans, Rakhines, Mons and Shans who do not look on Christianity with favor for its association with colonialism in the history of Myanmar, it is always a challenge for Christians really to engage their Buddhist neighbors. This very challenge seems to be that which has motivated some Burmese Christian leaders to find ways to engage the wider public by means of formulating theological paradigms.

#### Religious Conflicts and the Search for a Relevant Theological Paradigm

The struggle of Burmese Christians to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ and good citizens of their country becomes more and more an intricate issue these days as Myanmar is

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<sup>13</sup> Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar*, 187.

<sup>14</sup> Mehden, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia*, 182–83.

witnessing increasing communal and sectarian conflicts in the form of religious violence in some parts of the country. For example, a radical wing of Buddhism in Mandalay, the second biggest city of Myanmar, under the leadership of Shin Wirathu, a Buddhist monk and the spiritual leader of the 969 Buddhist nationalist movement,<sup>15</sup> is believed to be behind those conflicts. It made world news when TIME magazine featured the Buddhist monk and his activities as the cover story of July 1, 2013 issue of TIME Magazine.<sup>16</sup> This particular issue of TIME Magazine was banned in Myanmar by the government immediately following some furious demonstrations against it. Hannah Beech describes this man and his movement in the opening paragraphs of her article:

His face as still and serene as a statue's, the Buddhist monk who has taken the title "the Burmese bin Laden" begins his sermon. Hundreds of worshippers sit before him, palms pressed together, sweat trickling down their sticky backs. On cue, the crowd chants with the man in burgundy robes, the mantras drifting through the sultry air of a temple in Mandalay, Burma's second biggest city after Rangoon. It seems a peaceful scene, but Wirathu's message crackles with hate. "Now is not the time for calm," the monk intones, as he spends 90 minutes describing the many ways in which he detests the minority Muslims in this Buddhist-majority land. "Now is the time to rise up, to make your blood boil."

Buddhist blood is boiling in Burma, also known as Myanmar—and plenty of Muslim blood is being spilled. Over the past year, Buddhist mobs have targeted members of the minority faith, and incendiary rhetoric from Wirathu—he goes by one name—and other hard-line monks is fanning the flames of religious chauvinism. Scores of Muslims have been killed, according to government statistics, although international human-rights workers put the number in the hundreds. Much of the violence is directed at the Rohingya, a largely stateless Muslim group in Burma's far west that the U.N. calls one of the world's most persecuted people. The communal bloodshed has spread to central Burma, where Wirathu, 46, lives and preaches his virulent sermons. The radical monk sees Muslims, who make up at least 5% of Burma's estimated 60 million people, as a threat to the country and its culture. "[Muslims] are

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<sup>15</sup> "969" refers to numbers associated with the Buddha, his teachings and monkhood. A news article explains what is meant by the numbers "969": "The three numbers refer to various attributes of the Buddha, his teachings and monkhood. But it has become to represent a radical form of anti-Islamic nationalism which urges Buddhists to boycott Muslim-run shops and services." See "Attacks Approach Myanmar's Biggest Cities" *Gulf News*, March 10, 2013, accessed October 1 2013, <http://gulfnews.com/news/world/other-world/attacks-approach-myanmar-s-biggest-cities-1.1164608>.

<sup>16</sup> Hannah Beech, "The Face of Buddhist Terror," *TIME Magazine* (July 1, 2013), accessed October 1, 2013, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2146000,00.html>.

breeding so fast, and they are stealing our women, raping them,” he tells me. “They would like to occupy our country, but I won’t let them. We must keep Myanmar Buddhist.”<sup>17</sup>

This movement, according to the assessment of an observer in *Reuters*, has evolved into a radical form that is attempting to turn Myanmar into an apartheid-like state. Jason Szep writes:

The three numbers refer to various attributes of the Buddha, his teachings and the monkhood. In practice, the numbers have become the brand of a radical form of anti-Islamic nationalism that seeks to transform Myanmar into an apartheid-like state.

“We have a slogan: When you eat, eat 969; when you go, go 969; when you buy, buy 969,” Wirathu said in an interview at his monastery in Mandalay. Translation: If you're eating, traveling or buying anything, do it with a Buddhist. Relishing his extremist reputation, Wirathu describes himself as the “Burmese bin Laden.”<sup>18</sup>

An Asia-Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect report (AP R2P Brief) analyzes what it calls ethnic violence that “erupted in Myanmar on 20 March between Buddhist and Muslim communities—which forced the government to declare a state of emergency.”<sup>19</sup> The report says:

Movement 969 is an anti-Islamic mass-based campaign led by a monk named Wirathu, which was created early this year. The number stands for the Buddhist tradition of Three Jewels or Tiratana, composed of 24 attributes (9 Buddha, 6 Dhamma, 9 Sangha). It is reported that the Movement’s number is an attempt to counter the Muslim “786” used in South Asian Muslim tradition, which represents the phrase in Quran, “In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Ever Merciful.” In a country where numerology holds power, Buddhist extremists interpreted “786” as a Muslim conspiracy to take over the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (the three numbers add up to 21).

Although the movement claims that it aims to “protect race and religion” by “peaceful means,” in practice, its supporters organize meetings and religious sermons to build and spread (through CDs, books and leaflets) anti-Muslim sentiments in Myanmar. It also targets Muslim traders by asking Burmese and other ethnic groups

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<sup>17</sup> “The Face of Buddhist Terror,” *Colombo Telegraph*, June 28, 2013, accessed October 1, 2013, <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/the-face-of-buddhist-terror-sri-lanka-to-ban-time-magazine/time-2/>.

<sup>18</sup> Jason Szep, “Special Report: Buddhist Monks Incite Muslim Killings in Myanmar,” *Reuters*, April 8, 2013, accessed October 1, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/08/us-myanmar-violence-specialreport-idUSBRE9370AP20130408>.

<sup>19</sup> “Growing Ethnic Tensions in Myanmar and Indonesia—R2P and Promotion of Dialogue,” *AP R2P Brief* 3, no. 1 (2013): 1.



in the country not to buy from stores owned by Muslims. Specifically, the group recommends Buddhists buy and sell only in stores with 969 signs or stickers, with some unconfirmed reports that some of its supporters and monks even beating up civilians who continue to patronize Muslim stores, teashops, restaurants, food stalls, and street vendors. Anti-Muslim paraphernalia like stickers, audio and video CDs, and booklets are widely and openly sold in urban centres, including in Yangon (the former capital) where CDs are played in the streets and grocery stores. It is likely that anti-Muslim sentiments will grow further as the movement's supporters and monks travel across the country. The use of social media, such as Facebook, has also contributed to the spread of prejudice against Muslim communities in Myanmar.<sup>20</sup>

An unspoken and suppressed fear among the Christians in Myanmar is that they could well be the next target of these radical Buddhist nationalist movements. In light of all these developments, there is urgency in asking the question, how could Christians in Myanmar best assert their rightful existence and identity as legitimate citizens of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar while remaining faithful to their Lord and Master, Jesus Christ?

It must be admitted that to some extent the church has also failed to raise her voice when the military government committed human rights violations and systematically persecuted the minorities who are mostly Christians and Muslims. The church has failed to take a stand and speak up for those minority Islamic religious and communal groups when they were systematically persecuted in Rakhine State<sup>21</sup> and central Myanmar in cities such as Meikhtila<sup>22</sup> and Nyaung-Don, and Lashao in Shan State in recent months.<sup>23</sup> Pum Za Mang makes a strong case against this failure and calls for more action on the part of the Christians. He sees this failure on the part of the Christians to be due to the misunderstanding of the so-called separation

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<sup>20</sup> "Growing Ethnic Tensions in Myanmar and Indonesia—R2P and Promotion of Dialogue," *AP R2p Brief* 3, no. 1 (2013): 4.

<sup>21</sup> "The Roots of Religious Conflicts in Myanmar," accessed August 20 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/08/the-roots-of-religious-conflict-in-myanmar/>.

<sup>22</sup> "Myanmar-Inter-Communal Conflicts," accessed August 20 2015, <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Myanmar%20Inter%20communal%20conflict%20Information%20Bulletin.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> "Intercommunal Violence in Myanmar," accessed August 20 2015, [http://www.themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Report\\_Intercommunal\\_Violence\\_Adapt-MercyCorps\\_Apr2014.pdf](http://www.themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Report_Intercommunal_Violence_Adapt-MercyCorps_Apr2014.pdf).

of church and state:

The military regime in Myanmar (Burma) has systematically committed a crime against humanity—political oppression, religious persecution, massive human rights violations, and ethnic cleansing—in the name of national security ever since 1962, and the church in Myanmar (Burma) has been silent in the face of those human evils primarily because of two basic theological grounds, namely the principle of separation between church and state and the subjugation of church to the political authority.... Consequently, the presence of Christianity, Christian seminaries, Christian churches, Christian pastors, and Christians in Burma surely guarantees nothing for the liberation of the Burmese from their social, political, and economic sufferings.<sup>24</sup>

It could well be that the church simply does not have the courage to stand up for what is right in the current environment of the ever-strong and sometimes radical nature of Burmese nationalism.

Another factor may have played a rather significant role in keeping Myanmar Christians from engaging the public. The majority of the Christian missionaries who came to Burma in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had come from the Evangelical Revival Christian tradition in America and Europe. Paul Clasper, a missionary to Burma before missionaries were forced out of the country in 1966, sees the Christians' lack of involvement in and engagement with the public as the result of geographical and cultural alienation from the wider public. He also sees the simple, pietistic theology prevailing among Christians in Myanmar as another reason. He made this interesting comment on the atmosphere in which Christians are found in this Buddhist country of Myanmar:

With its congeries of tribal groups, cultures and languages, its various stages of civilization and variety of religions, Burma would be a happy hunting-ground for anthropologists. It could also be one of fruitful sources of missionary study, especially after a hundred and fifty years of missionary endeavour. What lessons in missionary strategy are to be gleaned from so many experiments in missionary work with peoples of Buddhist and animistic backgrounds? What factors in the relationship of Christ and culture, treasure and vessel, become clear when the Christian community is found largely among the minority peoples, usually living at a considerable distance, geographically and culturally, from the Burma Buddhist

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<sup>24</sup> Pum Za Mang, "Separation of Church and State: A Case Study of Myanmar (Burma)," *The Asia Journal of Theology* 25, no. 1 (April 2011): 42, 44.

majority? What happens to a church involved in all the tensions of the meeting between East and West, in a land of revolutionary socialist governments, when its chief nourishment has been a simple, pietistic theology and the gospel songs of Moody and Sankey?<sup>25</sup>

It must be admitted that Christians in this land had failed to some extent to engage the public as they should have. They have failed to show that they were as nationalistic and patriotic as their compatriot Buddhist Burmese were when they, or the majority of them at least, shied away from being part of the nationalist movement for independence from the British rule. The Burmese Christians' failure to have taken part in Burmese nationalist movement was by and large conditioned by the attitudes of the missionaries towards the nationalist movements. Most missionaries were against national politics and urged the Burmese Christians not to participate in nationalist movements. This situation is somewhat similar to that of Indian Christians' plight where many missionaries and Church leaders were against participation in Indian nationalist movement. Some, however, could see what could ensue in the future from that failure and encouraged Christians to take part in nationalist movement as long as it was not against Christian principles. It was C. F. Andrews, a missionary to India more than a century ago, who wrote: "It is my own conviction, which grows stronger everyday, that Indian Christians will lose a great and noble opportunity if they hold aloof at the present time from the National Movement in India."<sup>26</sup> He further said that Indian Christians should not lead people of other faiths to take Christians as opposed to nationalist movement for being kept aloof, but, rather should show plainly and clearly that their Christianity had made them more patriotic.<sup>27</sup> It turns out that what C.F. Andrews had warned against the prevailing attitudes of missionaries and native Indian

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Clasper, "Burma Baptist Chronicle," *International Review of Mission* 53, no. 212 (October 1964): 502.

<sup>26</sup> C.F. Anderson, "Indian Christians and the National Movement," *The Young Men of India* 19, no.19 (1908): 147.

<sup>27</sup> Anderson, "Indian Christians and the National Movement," 151.

Christians then is precisely the exact situation in which Christians find themselves in Myanmar today.

Why did missionaries keep Christians from participating in Burmese nationalist movements? What was the motivating attitude on the missionaries' part? Why missionaries in Burma under colonialism had discouraged Christians from taking part in national politics can be understood by considering their historical setting. It was primarily because the missionaries were mainly interested in saving souls and maintaining their hard-won converts. It was the missionaries' fear that Christians would backslide by participating in those nationalist movements. Kanbawza Win, a native church leader in Myanmar under the Socialist government, uses the term "mission compound attitude" to express the position that the missionaries had taken regarding the Christians' participation or non-participation in nationalist movements.

Kanbawza Win describes this outlook on the missionaries' part and the result of it as follows:

Another factor, which placed the Christians at the disadvantage, particularly in the case of Burma, is the mission compound attitude, i.e., isolation within the limits of missionary field. The missionaries discouraged the faithful from walking, standing, and sitting with the non-Christians. The missionaries' attitude was due to over-zealousness and a desire to prevent backsliding among the new converts. But these practices eventually led to communalism and paternalism with the adverse result of the Christians becoming an isolated and a distinct community. Thus in the upsurge nationalistic spirit, especially in the 30's, most of the Christians stay aloof with the result that it led the mass to look upon the Christians as unpatriotic, and when the Second World War broke out there were several cases where Christians were massacred. Although the hard lessons have been learnt, the sorrowful plight of the Christians is that the leaders of the Burmese Christian community, who are on the wrong side of the 50's, still adhere to the old concept.<sup>28</sup>

The "old concept" that Kanbawza Win refers to in the above quote is the Christians' failure to engage the public. Those active in the nationalist movement took this attitude and lack of action on the Christians' part as lack of nationalist spirit and patriotism. Their failure to be part of the nationalist movement has caused Christians in Myanmar to earn a bad name as those

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<sup>28</sup> Kanbawza Win, "A Christian in Southeast Asian Peninsular (A Burmese Perspective)," 75.

whose loyalty is somewhere else than to their country. They have failed to have impact on the society in which they are called to live. They have failed to be salt and light in this Buddhist land. Defeat rather than success has been their plight in their witness for their Lord because they have failed really to engage the wider culture in which they are called to live. This attitude and practice have made the Christians in Myanmar isolated from the rest of the people as if they do not belong to the wider community.

How do Christians in Myanmar best go about fulfilling their Lord's command: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30) and "Love your neighbor as yourself"? How could they best fulfill their Lord's "Great Commission" to them and make Him known in this land of Buddhist pagodas? How do they best engage their neighbors of other faiths who may not be happy about the Christians' existence in their midst? How do they best reach out to people of other faiths in order to win them to Christ? How do they best engage the wider public where they are called to live and witness?

Kanbawza Win encouraged minority Christians not to be disheartened for the fact that they were a minority group. He encouraged Christians in Myanmar to engage the public instead by reaching out to their neighbors and thus have more opportunities to impact them for Christ.

Speaking to Christians in Southeast Asia including those in Myanmar he said:

Since the Christians of these peninsular countries are a minority, in most cases the position is accentuated by the smallness of the minority and the aggressive nature of the majority. But from my humble view, the Christians should not let its minority status unduly worry them because this is how the church appeared in both the Bible and in histories of the world. The Christian Churches of this Peninsular should not let its minority figure be a hindrance and should not be only inward looking and concerned only for self preservation.

Instead the Christians should be a creative minority, fearless yet humble, outward looking yet caring for its members as depicted in the Book of Acts. The minority status of the Christian Churches in Southeast Asian Peninsular should be an encouragement to it, to test the resources that belong to its strength, for the Christians

are an organized minority which meets regularly for worship, fellowship and the formulation of a common programme. A minority Christian must identify himself with the work of other larger organizations especially those set up by the government groups where their policy on social and national issues is acceptable to the Christians. In fact, the creative activities of the minority church are numerous.<sup>29</sup>

Current Myanmar Christian leaders have proposed interreligious dialogues and contextualization of the gospel as the best ways to engage people of other faiths in Myanmar; these two proposals will be studied and evaluated in the following pages.

### **Religious Dialogue As A Way of Engagement**

Spearheaded by Dr. Simon Pau Khan En, other contemporary theologians following his lead, responded to his call to find an authentic and useful Myanmar Christian theological paradigm to actually engage the people of Myanmar. Two of these scholars, Samuel Ngun Ling and Ciin Sian Khai, whose particular area of interest and research is in Buddhist–Christian dialogue as a way toward peaceful co-existence in Myanmar,<sup>30</sup> have advocated interreligious dialogue as one of the most useful approaches or paradigms to guide Christians interested in better engagement with their culture. Samuel Ngun Ling, for example, proposes religious dialogue as the best way to engage the majority Buddhists: “Therefore, it is a vital theological need and contextual demand for the minority Christians in Myanmar to begin dynamic approach to their Buddhist neighbors who are majority and in power to constructively engage themselves in dialogue with them theologically, socio-culturally and even politically in a mutually-related and inter-effective manner.”<sup>31</sup> He further states:

The world we live in today is by nature religiously pluralistic. On the contemporary theological scene, it seems that no Christian theology can be done meaningfully and

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<sup>29</sup> Kanbawza Win, “A Christian in Southeast Asian Peninsular (A Burmese Perspective),” 75.

<sup>30</sup> Ciin Sian Khai, *Buddhist–Christian Dialogue: A Way Toward Peaceful Co-Existence in Myanmar* (Hamburg: Missionshilfe Verlag, 2015). This is Khai’s PhD dissertation at Hamburg University’s Missionsakademie in 2015, which was published later as a book.

<sup>31</sup> Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives*, 3.

relevantly without paying a careful attention to the fact of the existence of other religious traditions and its inter-related theological implications for world peace and justice. Together with Han Küng, “There is no world peace without peace among religions; no peace among religions without dialogue between religions.” The inter-religious dialogue is, therefore, urgent and imperative for world peace, justice and love. The prioritized responsibility of the Christians should be to initiate Christian engagement in the inter-religious dialogue as Christianity is a religion of self-giving love and peacemaking.<sup>32</sup>

Ngun Ling defines what he means by inter-religious dialogue with the goal of mutual growth in the process and as a result of religious dialogue of a Christian as he or she participates in a religious dialogue with his or her dialogue partner:

Dialogue is not merely an exchange of information, neither is it merely a quest for mutual understanding (though it surely involves both of these). Theologically speaking, dialogue is a sharing of convictions as growing together into a new life of mutual transformation. To make dialogue persuasive, the witness must be coherent, relate to the present realities of life, and pave ways for the future. Any dialogue whose goal is less than this—to make and to heed a persuasive witness—is not a genuine dialogue. What then is the expected result of dialogue? To answer this question, the result should be beyond dialogue itself to mutual transformation. By mutual transformation, we mean the dialogue partners growing together in a new direction of community life. Mutual challenge and learning may take place in this process, if the dialogue partners are openly and actively engaged.<sup>33</sup>

Ngun Ling contends that the need for interreligious dialogue stems from the fact that the God of the Bible is God of dialogue and that the Christian Bible is, in a way, dialogue between God and humankind. He says:

The Christian gospel is the gospel of love, peace, justice and freedom through which God makes dialogue with humankind. God of the Bible is God of dialogue with humankind through the history of the Israelite people and the event of Jesus Christ. The Christian Bible is, in a way, dialogue between God and humankind. Both in the Old and New Testaments, God was and is continued [*sic*] to manifest Himself in dialogue with humankind, even beyond the world of the Bible that is continuously in the imparting works of the Holy Spirit through the activities of the churches and the lives of individuals. Jesus Christ made Himself dialogue between God and humankind. As the Incarnated Word of God, He became God’s making dialogue with humankind. As the four books of the Gospels recorded, Jesus was indeed a man of dialogue with anyone, even those who were discriminated against by the Jews. Jesus

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<sup>32</sup> Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives*, 189.

<sup>33</sup> Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives*, 190.

Christ's dialogue with Samaritan woman is one good example among many others. When Peter preached the gospel on the day of Pentecost, people from different races, languages and regions understood the message of Christ in their own languages, thereby laying a dialogical foundation between people of different races and languages. Hence, in the New Testament, the gospel of Christ itself becomes the point of dialogue where people of different races, languages and nations can meet and dialogue. At this point, the gospel is dialogical. For, through Christ God has provided a new status in which a free dialogue with God and humankind can be made. This is what Paul means the "new nature in Christ, saying, "...and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in the knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all. Gospel is therefore not only dialogical but it is also trans-dialogical as John Cobb's "beyond dialogue" toward a mutual transformation.<sup>34</sup>

Ngun Ling further attempts to visualize what interreligious or interfaith dialogue between a Christians and Buddhists in the context of Myanmar would look like. He tries to answer a question he poses to himself:

"What should then mean [*sic*] dialogue between the Christians and Buddhists in the multi-religious context of Myanmar?" To answer this question, it is important to understand the nature of the context and the thought-patterns of the people. Speaking particularly for the Burman Buddhists in the context of Buddhist culture, understanding Buddhism would essentially mean understanding their authentic social and cultural existence.... In fact, the Burmese Christians' commitment to the dual love imperative: love of God and love of neighbors, must include thinking critically of the socio-cultural implications of the Buddhist existential reality. The Burman Buddhist existential and soteriological reality is apparently atheistic in its understanding of ultimate concern and a-personal in its understanding of life's existence, while the other non-Buddhist religions share basically with Christianity the theistic understanding of life's existence.<sup>35</sup>

Ngun Ling finds fault with Burmese Christians' lack of openness to other religions and accommodation to them. He makes a comparison between the Buddhist missionaries who were sent out by King Asoka of India and Burmese Christians when it comes to being open to other religions and blames Burmese Christians for not practicing accommodation to other religion, especially Buddhist in the context of Myanmar. He contends that "For the Christian missionaries

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<sup>34</sup> Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives*, 193-94.

<sup>35</sup> Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives*, 196-97.



especially the early Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the principle of accommodation was practiced but the later missionaries turned to see this principle as the betrayal of the gospel as a syncretistic faith.”<sup>36</sup> He blames those who do not want to practice the principle of accommodation by seeing it as syncretistic in nature in Myanmar as being too exclusive and condemns their attitude as being obstructive to Christian dialogue with people of other faiths. He says:

Those Christians who saw the principle of accommodation as syncretism firmly maintained exclusive Christian moral attitudes and aggressively labeled the people outside the Church as non-Christian, pagan, heathen, backward, uncivilized, uncultured, inferior, and hell-bound, etc. Such missionaries’ exclusive attitudes remained highly offensive and obstructive to the Christian dialogue with people of other faiths in many parts of Asia and particularly in Myanmar today.<sup>37</sup>

While Ling’s concern is obviously theological, Khai’s primary concern for Buddhist–Christian dialogue in Myanmar at the moment, on the other hand, is not doctrinal but social issues. He writes:

The primary concern for Buddhist-Christian dialogue in Myanmar at the moment is not doctrinal issues but social concerns and common interests for the benefit of all, regardless of race and religion. In this regard, religious cooperation or joint action of all religions in the country is urgently needed in searching for the liberation of human beings and their environment from sufferings. Thus, in approaching dialogue between Buddhists and Christians in Myanmar, I will use the “interpersonal approach, contextual approach and cooperative approach.”<sup>38</sup>

One needs to be careful, however, in proposing interreligious dialogue as an effective way to engage people of other faith traditions. As Wayne Johnson has pointed out, religious dialogue is mostly advocated by those sympathetic for a postmodern spirit and supportive of religious pluralism. Johnson argues that submission to Jesus Christ and God’s revelation in Scripture alone will lead one to true worship:

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<sup>36</sup> Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives*, 203.

<sup>37</sup> Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives*, 230.

<sup>38</sup> Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives*, 151.

The postmodern spirit and religious pluralism have been leading advocates of religious dialogue. They presume the basic equality of all religious expressions and seek to grow in knowledge of God through mutual dialogue and cooperation. A biblical understanding of general revelation, Scripture, Christ, and salvation cannot approach other religions in this way. True worship and knowledge of God come only through submission to Christ and the revelation provided in Scripture.

The doctrine of general revelation does allow for the possibility of interreligious dialogue in areas of mutual concern (moral, social, ecological, etc.). Further, dialogue is a legitimate way to gain mutual understanding and respect and may even cause the Christian opportunity to reflect differently on his or her faith in such a way as to gain new understanding. But Scripture is the sole authoritative and reliable source of knowledge of God. Truths gained through reflection upon general revelation are at best partial and must always be judged by Scripture.<sup>39</sup>

No doubt, Johnson is right: religious dialogue could be useful in creating rapport between religious communities. It can certainly decrease and correct misunderstandings and misconceptions about other people's religious beliefs and practices and increase correct understandings of the religious convictions of others. It can certainly defuse tension amidst communal and religious conflicts and enhance mutual respect between people of different religions. The current situation in Myanmar needs and even demands leaders of different religions to come together and build mutual understanding, respect and trust. But, it would be wrong for anybody involved in religious dialogue to work on the premise that all religions are the same. All religions are not the same; they have their own convictions and claims of truth and what John V. Taylor calls their own "jealousies."<sup>40</sup> Taylor explains what he means by religious jealousies:

For there is something else which is in fact common to us all and that is what I would call the "jealousies" of the different faiths. I mean those points in every religion concerning which the believers are inwardly compelled to claim a universal significance and finality. I have referred to some of them—the Muslim conviction that the Holy Quran is not just another revelation but is God's last word; the Jewish

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<sup>39</sup> Wayne Johnson, "General Revelation," in gen. ed. A. Scott Moreau *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 274.

<sup>40</sup> John V. Taylor, "The Theological Basis of Interfaith Dialogue," in *International Review of Mission* 68, no. 272 (October 1979): 380.

conviction that Israel's covenant and her attachment to the Holy Land has a central significance in the determinate purpose of God; the Christian conviction that in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus God acted decisively for all mankind. The great faiths of Southern Asia may be inclined to argue that such absolute claims are typical of the semitic religions only, yet after many conversations I begin to wonder whether Hindu relativism is not itself another of those absolutes of a particular faith which cannot be surrendered without destroying the essential identity of that faith. All such convictions are strictly irreducible. I call them the "jealousies" of the different faith, deliberately using that ambiguous word, because, seen from outside a particular household of faith, such claims are bound to seem narrowly possessive; but within the household they reflect an experience which cannot be gainsaid.<sup>41</sup>

As long as the object of dialogue is for mutual understanding and appreciation between the participants by respecting one another's traditions it would surely lead to reconciliation at the community level in society. In light of the current religious and communal conflicts in Myanmar, interreligious dialogue could enhance peace and tranquility among different ethnic and religious groups. It could bring reconciliation among those who were formerly not at peace, and therefore, it could be beneficial to both parties. As long as the purpose of interreligious or interfaith dialogue is for meeting people from other religions and getting to know their religious traditions for more mutual understanding especially in the face of religious and communal conflicts in Myanmar today, it should be encouraged. It is evident too that dialogues for purposes such as these have taken place with good results in the context of religious and communal conflicts in Myanmar in recent years. Religious leaders met from time to time that have eased tensions and restored peace in recent years and months in Myanmar. They agreed: "Although diverse in their faiths, these leaders agreed that religion is so sensitive in Myanmar that the best way to stop conflicts and hatred will be to avoid extremists' provocative measures and to promote love and kindness within society."<sup>42</sup>

One other reason why religious dialogue should be encouraged is that it can be used as a

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<sup>41</sup> Taylor, "The Theological Basis of Interfaith Dialogue," 380.

<sup>42</sup> "Interfaith Leaders Tackle Religious Extremism in Myanmar:" accessed October 2 2015,

means of helping others find truth. Michael S. Jones supports religious dialogue as a means of sharing our faith:

Evangelicals are not only concerned about discovering truth for themselves: they are also concerned—even obligated—to help others find truth. Dialogue is useful in this effort on several levels. It is necessary in order for persons with other ideologies accurately to understand evangelicals' beliefs and their claims to truth. Evangelicals have often employed nondialogical methods of sharing their faith. However, these methods do not enable persons with other ideologies to understand evangelical beliefs accurately, because they do not encourage the other to express his or her doubts, reservations, and uncertainties about Christianity, thus not directly addressing such areas of question. Nondialogical methods also fail, because they do not help Evangelicals to understand the people they are communicating with; hence, Evangelicals often do as poor job of expressing their beliefs in ways that will be clear to the other and gain a sympathetic audience.<sup>43</sup>

Harold Netland argues for the benefit of dialogue: “properly defined, dialogue is not incompatible with a commitment to evangelism.”<sup>44</sup> In fact for Netland it is essential to evangelism. “Informed dialogue,” he writes, “is essential if the proclamation of the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ is to be carried out effectively.”<sup>45</sup> But, here is a word of caution by an evangelical leader: “To be Christian, dialogue must avoid relativism, a dialectic search for truth, a nonpropositional search for truth, and an antimissions bias, and dialogue must model Jesus' example of encounter/proclamation, respect other human beings, be reconcilable with evangelistic efforts, and be marked by humility, sensitivity and courtesy.”<sup>46</sup>

As the incarnation of the eternal God in Jesus Christ itself can be understood as a supreme example of dialogue—God in dialogue with humankind by sharing human nature with them—we can use dialogue to build mutual understanding and respect between Christians and

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<http://www.religionnews.com/2015/01/15/interfaith-leaders-tackle-religious-extremism-myanmar/>.

<sup>43</sup> Michael S. Jones, “Evangelical Christianity and the Philosophy of Interreligious Dialogue,” 384–85.

<sup>44</sup> Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 301.

<sup>45</sup> Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth*, 296.

<sup>46</sup> Terry C. Muck, “Evangelicals and Interreligious Dialogue,” in *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 36, no. 4 (December 1993): 527

their neighbors of other religions in Myanmar. Dialogue, “while having the potential to be a source of dilution of evangelical doctrine, if properly done is a powerful tool to aid in the discovery of truth.”<sup>47</sup> Bruce Nicholls, however, rejects dialogue as a method of seeking truth, but sees it as a way of life for the proclamation of the gospel. “Dialogue is a way of life, an attitude of mind as well as a verbal defense of the Gospel.”<sup>48</sup> Nicholls sees a missionary dimension in religious dialogues: “Everything the church is and does must have a missionary dimension but not everything has a missionary intention.”<sup>49</sup> Dialogue, if done properly, can enhance the witnessing mission of Christians by giving them “a more sympathetic hearing for their understanding of truth and to accomplish evangelical goals of religious liberty and world peace.”<sup>50</sup> Dialogue can build mutual understanding and trust between people of different religious belonging and views.

### **Contextualization As A Way of Engagement**

“Contextualization” is another theme that some Burmese Christian leaders have adopted as they are searching for a relevant theological model for Myanmar. The basic concern and focus of these theologians can be seen in what Simon Pau Khan En says about the Bible and theology: “Bible itself is the outcome of the process of contextualization as it was first of all formulated to meet the need of the people in *that* period one particular historical reality.”<sup>51</sup> For him, therefore, “it is necessary that both the Bible and theologies must be an ongoing process as context is not

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<sup>47</sup> Jones, “Evangelical Christianity and the Philosophy of Interreligious Dialogue,” 396.

<sup>48</sup> Bruce Nicholls, “The Witnessing Church in Dialogue,” in *Evangelical Review of Theology* (January 1992): 62.

<sup>49</sup> Nicholls, “The Witnessing Church in Dialogue,” 54.

<sup>50</sup> Jones, “Evangelical Christianity and the Philosophy of Interreligious Dialogue,” 396.

<sup>51</sup> Simon Pau Khan En, “Contextual Teaching Methodologies: How to Do Contextualization in Theological Education,” *Engagement* 1 (December 2003): 16.

static but dynamic and rapidly changing.”<sup>52</sup>

Simon Pau Khan En, in his search for “an authentic Myanmar theology” calls for an innovative Myanmar Christian theology. He writes:

To put the cart before the ox, I would like to make a definition of “Theology” for Myanmar. Truly speaking, we all are fed up with the western and classical definition(s) of theology. If the Christians in Myanmar need a relevant contextual theology for their lives and mission then they need to do fresh definition of what ‘theology’ is all about. It is a fact that the churches in Myanmar do not need a ‘*renovation*’ of imported theologies but are desperately in need of ‘*innovation*’ of Christian theology to empower them and guide them in their struggle of practical realities. With the classical definitions in mind, I would like to make an attempt for contextual theology.<sup>53</sup>

As theologians and church leaders are striving to find new ways to engage the wider public they began to think about the kind of theology that theologians in Myanmar should formulate and provide the Burmese with. Simon Pau Khan En gives what he thinks a definition of theology should look like. If one would observe the definition that Simon En is offering us below he can readily see how the context of the immediate human situation takes precedence over the eternal Word of God. He writes: “Theology is making a critical analysis of our practical realities, doing assessment in the light of the Word of God and committing ourselves to the outcome of the assessment made.”<sup>54</sup> He further elaborates:

Four factors are involved in this proposal for definition, namely: (a) Making critical analysis—requires our minds, reasons, intellects; (b) Our practical realities—an analysis of our socio-political and religio-cultures; (c) The Word of God—a new prophetic version of ‘*Thus saith the Lord*’ to the Myanmar situation; (d) Action in response to the analysis and the word of God spoken to our situation (*praxis*).

To me, this definition has adequately synthesized both theory and practice, intellect and action and comprehensively embraces head, heart, and hand of a person. It is a

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<sup>52</sup> En, “Contextual Teaching Methodologies: How to Do Contextualization in Theological Education,” 16.

<sup>53</sup> Simon Pau Khan En, “The Quest for Authentic Myanmar Contextual Theology,” *RAYS: MIT Journal of Theology* 2 (2001): 47.

<sup>54</sup> En, “The Quest for Authentic Myanmar Contextual Theology,” 47.

combination of theology and practice (theopraxis) to assist the churches in Myanmar to *think* and to *work*, to *live*.<sup>55</sup>

His conclusive appeal to churches in Myanmar in general and those in leadership position in particular is to be innovative in formulating theologies, which will speak to the current needs of the people in their existential circumstances. He writes:

The whole theological concept in Myanmar needs to be reviewed and innovated. Christians in Myanmar have to stop as theological consumers but start to be producers of our homeland theology. We should not domesticate the globalized western theology any longer, but produce a viable and constructive Myanmar theology. To this end—let us unite!<sup>56</sup>

Ngun Ling, in a similar vein, calls for a contextual Myanmar Christian theology that is developed in Myanmar that will be able to address issues facing the church today.

A contextual theology that is developed in Myanmar must be able to address the diverse issues of the context relevantly, interactively and meaningfully. In other words, any doing theology in Myanmar must take seriously into account the above two main contexts [the minority non-Buddhist context and the majority Buddhist context] as interactive resources for theological construction in Myanmar. In past decades, the seminaries and theological schools in Myanmar have given theological education only for the church ministry. The church ministers were able to make only a few contributions on Christian literatures so that Myanmar has kept theological silence for a long time as some other Asian nations.<sup>57</sup>

Ngun Ling is concerned with the emergence of what he calls “a living Myanmar Christian theology” that comes out of “the Myanmar context” by using Myanmar resources.<sup>58</sup> He blames churches in Myanmar for being content with what had been imparted to them by Western missionaries and for not trying to appropriate the rich resources Myanmar has accorded them to do theology the Burmese way.

The problem here is that the churches in Myanmar generally seem to be content with re-doing the same theological truism which they have learned from their missionaries,

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<sup>55</sup> En, “The Quest for Authentic Myanmar Contextual Theology,” 47–48.

<sup>56</sup> En, “The Quest for Authentic Myanmar Contextual Theology,” 48.

<sup>57</sup> Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives*, 243.

<sup>58</sup> Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives*, 244.

church founders and benefactors. In fact, the Protestant Christian theology in Myanmar has been and still is largely traditional patterned, conservative, reproductive, and uncritical. Thus many of theological themes and existing resources remain largely hidden from view, waiting for Burmese theologians to investigate and voice them in a more reflective and systematic manner. Our main concern here is to make strenuous efforts to foster the formation and development of a living Myanmar Christian theology coming out of the Myanmar context with usage of Myanmar resources.<sup>59</sup>

He even argues that any in-depth encounter between Christianity and Buddhism has not taken place in Myanmar due to lack of any attempt to do contextualization of the Christian faith on the part of Christians. He declares: “The coming of protestant Christianity has already took [sic] almost two hundred years and yet the real presentation of the Gospel and the depth [sic] encounter of Christian faith with the Theravada Buddhist spirituality and culture had not happened among the Burman Buddhists until today.”<sup>60</sup> This contention by Samuel Ngun Ling echoes a statement that U Kyaw Than, Administrative Secretary in Southeast Asia for the World Council of Churches and the International Missionary Council, once made in a gathering of Christian leaders that should have shocked those gathered together there. He said” “Among this majority of the Burmans the real presentation of the Gospel had not happened as far as one can see.”<sup>61</sup> Kyaw Than made the above statement over half a century ago in 1958, but his statement seems to reflect the reality of the situation of the churches’ failure to really impact their majority Buddhist neighbors today.

#### Local Theologies Constructed with Home-Grown Resources

The core argument of these Burmese theologians is that Burmese theologians in the past have neglected to draw from home-grown resources in doing theology. The result, according to

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<sup>59</sup> Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives*, 243–44.

<sup>60</sup> Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives*, 131.

<sup>61</sup> Kyaw Than, “The Christian Mission in Asia Today,” in *International Review of Missions* 47 (April 1958): 156.



these theologians, is that theologies that have been adopted from the West fail to speak to the real needs of the people in Myanmar. Ngun Ling urges Christian leaders in Myanmar to work for the emergence of a “living contextual theology,” which would draw from Myanmar indigenous resources:

In doing theology in Myanmar, it is important for the Christian leaders neither to overlook nor to minimize the rich Myanmar indigenous resources. Appropriately enough, doing theology in Asia in the past has almost totally ignored the indigenous resources, and hence the application of imported western theology in Asian soils did not fit Asian situation. Myanmar has [*sic*] no exception. As discussed in chapter one, the past missionaries’ theologies have not taken seriously into account the Myanmar situation and her religio-cultural resources. It is therefore time for Myanmar Christians to use the wealth and diverse features of Myanmar resources to bring about the formation and development of a living contextual theology in Myanmar.

He makes a list of resources that Myanmar Christian theologian could use in doing a contextual theology for Myanmar which includes (1) Theological resources; (2) Biblical resources; (3) Ethnic/Tribal resources; (4) Buddhist Resources; (5) Historical and Socio-Political resources; and (6) Ecological and Spiritual resources.<sup>62</sup> According to Ngun Ling, “relevant and innovative theological education must set its focus on deconstruction and reconstruction of western-modeled thought-forms, doctrines, concepts, ideologies, spirituality, and faith-praxis. Classical and traditional ways of western thinking, theologizing and theo-praxis must be replaced with indigenous and contextual ways of thinking and doing theological education, using Myanmar resources.”<sup>63</sup> The same passion for indigenous and contextualized theology have driven many Asian Christian leaders to do theology in Asian ways.<sup>64</sup> Gerald H. Anderson points

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<sup>62</sup> Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives*, 243–55.

<sup>63</sup> Samuel Ngun Ling, “Revisiting and Retargeting Theological Education in Myanmar,” *RAYS: MIT Journal of Theology* 9 (January 2008): 8.

<sup>64</sup> For example: C. S. Song, *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology From An Asian Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984) and *Theology From the Womb of Asia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986); Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God* (Louisville: John Knox, 1965); Kosuke Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1974); *Pilgrims or Tourist* (Singapore: Christian Conference of Asia, 1974); *Theology in Contact* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1975); *Three Miles An Hour God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1980); and *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985); M. M. Thomas, *The Christian Response to Asian*

out that “Asian theologians are proposing today what they call the “critical Asian principle’ as a method of doing theology in their situations. They are not yet very clear about it, but as they struggle to discover its range and depth they see it operating at various methodological levels.”<sup>65</sup>

Samuel Ngun Ling contends that Asian theologies came out as a result of Asian nationalism and anti-western attitude.

Asian theology is actually the product of Asian struggle for self-determination. It was born out of Asian revolution, Asian nationalism, and anti-westernization, which began after the 1950s when most of the Southeast Asian countries became independent from the colonial rules of the West. It is true that Southeast Asian nations except Thailand had been suffering for decades under the iron Western colonial rule and had been exploited socio-culturally, economically, and religio-politically by Western rulers. Western colonization, therefore, left no little impact on the people of these countries, although the impact has had both negative and positive effects. In fact, the history of Asia cannot be completed without talking about the Western impact on Asia in the past.<sup>66</sup>

Ngun Ling’s account about Western impact on Asian society resonates with what M. M. Thomas said about the same matter half a century ago. “The Asian revolution cannot be understood apart from the impact of the West on Asia. Therefore interpreting the Asian revolution means interpreting also the Western impact on Asia.”<sup>67</sup> David M. Thompson concurs with the above statements by Ngun Ling and M. M. Thomas;

The distinctive context of Asia has been that Christianity has always existed alongside other major world faiths and religious traditions. Nevertheless the legacy of

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*Revolution* (London: SCM, 1966); *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (London: SCM, 1968); *Man and the Universe of Faiths* (Bangalore: CISRS & Madras: CLS, 1975); *Some Theological Dialogues* (Madras: CLS, 1977) and many others; Emerito P. Nacpil, *The Human and the Holy: Asian Perspectives in Christian Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978); *Mission and Change* (Manila: East Asia Christian Conference, 1968); Sung A. Park, “Minjung Theology: A Korean Contextual Theology,” in *The Indian Journal of Theology* 33 (October-December 1984): 1–11; Yong Bok Kim, *Minjung Theology* (Singapore: The Christian Conference of Asia, 1980), etc. Works by Burmese Christian leaders such as Kyaw Than, Kanbawza Win and Khin Maung Din can be cited as good examples, too.

<sup>65</sup> Gerald H. Anderson, *Asian Voices in Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976), 3–4.

<sup>66</sup> Ling, “The Meeting of Christianity and Buddhism in Burma,” 270.

<sup>67</sup> M. M. Thomas, *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution* (London: SCM, 1966), 9.

western imperialism and its relationship to the missionary activities of European and North American churches has also been significant in shaping the current situation.<sup>68</sup>

Ngun Ling, at the same time, criticizes Western missionaries for not being prepared theologically to really engage the prevalent culture of the people they endeavored to evangelize.

One of the problems in the missionary period was that the missionaries themselves were not ready to discern signs of their time and context. They were almost completely ignorant about the context of the people and culture, especially the interwoven nature of religion, culture and identity of the ethnic or indigenous people whom they served. Buddhism, Buddhist culture, and being Burmese are, for instance, inextricably identical specially for the Burman Buddhists in Myanmar context. In dealing with such perplexed [*sic*] issues, it is observed that the missionaries were theologically unprepared to address the challenges that have confronted them in their time and context. Not only that, but they neither taught ethnic people how to maintain as faithful Christians their ethnic culture and religious identities nor instructed them how to deal with neighbors of other faiths like Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus in Myanmar.<sup>69</sup>

He then faults the Christian missionaries for destroying the indigenous cultures of the people whom they had endeavored to convert to the Christian faith and for not being able to deal with tribal religions and cultures efficiently:

Hence, no concrete answers were given to questions such as how would Jesus Christ deal with tribal religions and cultures? How would He relate Himself to the Buddhist people in Myanmar? Such theologically exclusive and irrelevant teachings of the missionaries have been [*sic*] resulted in the emergence of what a Burmese theologian called “two versions of Christianity in Myanmar.” To the ethnic people, conversion to Christianity means not only “accepting a better religion which would transform their old cultures as fulfillment of their cultural values, but also abandoning or pruning some of their old cultural elements as part of the works of evil spirits as these elements tends to dehumanize the ethnic society and have hence become a hindrance for [*sic*] the growth of the people concerned.<sup>70</sup>

As can be seen in the above quote, Ngun Ling wants to contend that the teachings of Western Christian missionaries are not sufficient for Christian converts in Myanmar most of whom have come from ethnic minority groups. He sees the approach that the Christian

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<sup>68</sup> David M. Thmpson, “Introduction: Mapping Asian Christianity in the Context of World Christianity,” in ed. Sebastian C. H. Kim, *Christian Theology in Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>69</sup> Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives*, 64.

missionaries had adopted in their evangelistic efforts to win Christian converts from ethnic minority groups and the theology they taught those same people later on as too other-worldly and exclusive. He says:

In a nutshell, an approach which the Christian missionaries used was so other-worldly and exclusive that it failed to make Christian message fit into certain given contexts. Hence, the exclusive and other-worldly theological approach pre-dominated the thought-patterns of the minorities' Christian thinking, thereby minimizing the holistic aspect of Christ's salvation. The exclusive approach lacks of [*sic*] a focus on theological necessity of having a healthy or harmonious relationship with the ethnic primal and Buddhist communities, and hence it comes to ignore the enriching values of other religions and cultures in doing Christian theology.<sup>71</sup>

Even though it is not entirely clear what Samuel Ngun Ling means when he says that the theology and theological approach adopted and used by the Western Christian missionaries are exclusive and other-worldly, it seems he wants to see a theological model that will take the life situations of the people more seriously, which would be able to address the current needs of Christians in Myanmar in engaging with people of other faiths and cultures. He seems to see the need for Christians to have a theology that would equip them to resist the majority Buddhist Burmese's attempt of a cultural assimilation of the minority ethnic and religious groups into one whole nationality (Myanmar), language (Myanmar language) and religion (Buddhism) (*amyo, batha, thatana* in Burmese). D. Brown calls this attempt "assimilation into the dominant ethnic culture."<sup>72</sup>

Ciin Sian Khai also sees the need for Myanmar Christian theology to be contextualized by having it based on Myanmar culture and tradition according to the context of the country in answering theological questions according to the context of the country to make the gospel relevant for Myanmar people. He writes:

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<sup>70</sup> Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives*, 65.

<sup>71</sup> Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives*, 65.

<sup>72</sup> D. Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, 1994), 36–37.

Myanmar Christian theology should be contextualized since the picture of a “colonial Christ” is no longer adequate and acceptable in the country. Thus, the task of Christians in Myanmar is to disassociate western images of Christianity while embracing and creating a Myanmar image of Christianity based on Myanmar culture and tradition, answering theological questions according to the context of the country. In other words, Christianity should be Myanmar Christianity, in and through the teaching of Jesus Christ which means Christ needs to become a Myanmar Christ interpreted according to the context. The challenge here is to initiate a process of contextual interpretation to make the gospel relevant for the Myanmar people.<sup>73</sup>

Khai believes that to prove the identity of Christians in Myanmar as faithful and good citizens one is demanded to do contextual reinterpretation of the religious tenets. He contends that what he calls, “acculturated dialogue,” will help Christians in Myanmar in their effort to prove that they are good citizens of their nation:

Moreover, proving Myanmar Christians as faithful and good citizens of the country demands contextual reinterpretation of the religious tenets. Being an authentic and faithful citizen can be proved by being there with the people and the country in time of need. Standing with the people not only in good times but also in the worst situations will build up trust, so that Christians in Myanmar can be regarded as *bona fide* citizens of the country. Then the negative perception of Christianity can be eradicated from the mindset of the Buddhist majority. Therefore it is crucial for Christians in Myanmar to be acculturated in interfaith dialogue, as acculturated dialogue can make their dialogue partners more open, so that they feel welcome and at ease. Through making Myanmar Christianity visible, Christians in Myanmar can overcome the conviction that “to be an authentic Bamar is to be a Buddhist.”<sup>74</sup>

Professor Khin Maung Din, once professor of philosophy at Rangoon University, proposed long ago that “any construction of a Burmese Christian theology for today must take into account the following three factors: (1) the Christian understanding and experience of the gospel, (2) the religious experience and concepts of Buddhism and other Oriental religions, and (3) the socio-political human realities of our times.”<sup>75</sup> He not only argues for a “contextualized methodology” in presenting the Gospel to people of other faiths, but also insists that the “content” or

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<sup>73</sup> Khai, *Buddist—Christian Dialogue*, 233.

<sup>74</sup> Khai, *Buddist—Christian Dialogue*, 233.

<sup>75</sup> Khin Maung Din, “Some Problems and Possibilities for Burmese Christian Theology” ed. Douglas J. Elwood, *What Asian Christians Are Thinking: A theological Source Book* (Quezon City, the Philippines: New Day,

“component” of the Gospel must include Buddhist understanding of man, nature, and God, whom he chooses to call “Ultimate Reality.” He writes:

There had been attempts in the past to construct an indigenous Burmese Christian theology under the general name: “The Indigenization of Christianity in Burma.” But most of these attempts were concerned more with the form, rather than with the content of the gospel. Presentation of biblical stories in the cultural style of Burmese drama, dressing up of the Nativity Scene in Burmese costumes, use of indigenous musical instruments and melodies for religious hymns and songs, etc., were merely attempts to put the gospel wine into Burmese cultural bottles. I accept the necessity of employing such cultural forms for effective communication. But to me, the basic theological problem for Burmese Christian theology is not that which is concerned with “the bottle, but that which concerns the “wine” itself. The gospel must not only be understood in a Burmese way, but the Burmese and Buddhist understanding of Man, Nature, and Ultimate Reality must also become inclusive as a vital component in the overall content of the gospel.<sup>76</sup>

Khin Maung Din also argues for the possibility of being Buddhist and Christian at the same time, which sounds very much like what we can see in Karl Rahner who proposes a broader concept of being related to the Church by affirming different degrees of relation to it, which would include the so-called “anonymous Christians” as well as the explicitly professed Christians.<sup>77</sup> Khin Maung Din says:

We can think of more positive ways of becoming Buddhist-Christians as well as Christian-Buddhists. Perhaps the question how a Christian can become a Christian-Buddhist may give a lead. A Christian who has become a Christian-Buddhist will keep believing in Christ and at the same time will be expanding that faith to include his faith in the Buddha also. Questions like who is the better teacher, whose teaching is more logical, more scientific, etc. will no longer be primary for him. His faith in both religions is likely to be more phenomenological, and his religion more existential.<sup>78</sup>

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1976), 89.

<sup>76</sup> Din, “Some Problems and Possibilities for Burmese Christian Theology,” 88–89,

<sup>77</sup> Karl Rahner, “Anonymous Christians,” *Theological Investigations*, trans. David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976), 14: 283. Rahner says: “... the theory arose from two facts: first, the possibility of supernatural salvation and of a corresponding faith, which must be granted to non-Christians, even if they never became Christians; and secondly, that salvation cannot be gained without reference to God and Christ, since it must in origin, history and fulfillment be a theistic and Christian salvation.” See Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* trans. David Morland (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976), 16: 218.

<sup>78</sup> Khin Maung Din, *Collected Papers of Professor Khin Maung Din* (Yangon: Myanmar Christian Council, 2002), 183.

Simon Pau Khan En agrees with this proposal by Kyaw Than when he proposes that doing syncretic and contextual theology is liberating Christ and His Gospel from “alienation” among the people of Myanmar:

The time is ripe for the Christians in Myanmar to construct their own theology. In failure of doing Myanmar theology for the past two centuries, Jesus remains a stranger, the gospel remains an embodied word, and the Churches in Myanmar never the Churches of Myanmar. To liberate Christ and the gospel from alienation a creative and responsible syncretism of the gospel with the indigenous religio-cultural ethos is highly urgency [*sic*]. We need to sacrifice our current concepts and create a new form of Christianity with a new gospel content, for the sake of Christ and His gospel.<sup>79</sup>

He also proposes “Nat” (spirit) worship as a viable theological paradigm for a relevant contextual theology in Myanmar because it was a main primal religion for both Burman Buddhists and ethnic groups such as Kachin, Chin, Karen and others in Myanmar.<sup>80</sup> He says:

The primal worldview of Nat worship is fundamental to the right understanding of the Christian concept of salvation, but unfortunately both Buddhism and the Graeco-western oriented soteriological concepts have distorted it and perplexed the Christians in Myanmar. Buddhism has distorted the primal worldview of Nat worship with its concept of the separation between cosmic (*lokka*) and meta-cosmic (*lokkutra*), while the Graeco-western concept distorted it with its division of life with “here-and-now” and “hereafter” or time and eternity. Time, in the concept of the primal worldview of Nat worship, was equated with eternity which is very close to the Biblical concept.<sup>81</sup>

While contextualization as a methodology of doing missions can be a valuable asset to the ministry of the Gospel in Myanmar (the bottle in which the wine is put), applying the concept of contextualization to the content of the Gospel itself (to change or mix or substitute the wine with something else) always results in syncretism that must be rejected as Biblically and theologically not viable. Recognition of and submission to the authority of the Bible is the foundation of

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<sup>79</sup> Simon Pau Khan En, “Syncretism: A Key to Doing Relevant Contextual Theology for Myanmar,” in *Myanmar Theological College Bulletin* 3: 106.

<sup>80</sup> Simon Pau Khan En, “Nat Worship: A Paradigm for Doing Contextual Theology for Myanmar,” (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, UK, 1995).

<sup>81</sup> Simon Pau Khan En, “Nat Worship: A Theological Locus,” in *Our Theological Journey: Writings in Honor of Dr. Anna May Say Pa* (Yangon: MIT, 2006), 24.

authentic Christianity and therefore of correct theology. We must recognize the Bible for what it claims to be: the revelation of God written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, clear and complete in its teaching for the salvation of sinners and the life of the church.

We can see how Christians leaders desperately seek to engage the wider public and how they have proposed the best and most viable theological paradigms that they think would be most useful and effective for that purpose. Perhaps, if properly done and applied, the two proposed theological theories examined in this chapter, namely, interreligious dialogue and contextualization of the gospel, could help Christians in Myanmar to a certain degree in their engagement with their Buddhist neighbors. The price of doing this in the way it has been proposed and put forward by Myanmar theologians as we have observed above, however, would be too high. If existential context takes precedence over the eternal and authoritative Word of God in matters of faith and practice, or in other words, if the primary concern is the changing situations rather than the unchanging Word that speaks to any and every changing situations something is not simply not what it should be. This is true especially when the “content” of the gospel, not simply the “method” of presenting it to people of other faiths, is what needs to be adjusted and changed as people think necessary. When the content is changed, the true Gospel has been forsaken. This process which is promoted most notably by Khin Mang Din who specifically advocates contextualizing the gospel by changing not only the “bottle” of wine but also the “wine itself” in the bottle<sup>82</sup> and by Pau Khan En who sees the “need to sacrifice our current concepts and create a *new form of Christianity with a new gospel content, for the sake of Christ and His gospel*”<sup>83</sup> must be labeled for what it is: syncretism. It is such “syncretism that

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<sup>82</sup> Khin Maung Din, “Some Problems and Possibilities for Burmese Christian Theology” ed. Douglas J. Elwood, *What Asian Christians Are Thinking: A theological Source Book* (Quezon City, the Philippines: New Day, 1976), 88–89.

<sup>83</sup> Simon Pau Khan En, “Syncretism: A Key to Doing Relevant Contextual Theology for Myanmar,” in *Myanmar Theological College Bulletin* 3: 106. Emphasis added.



threatens the heart of the gospel.”<sup>84</sup> We cannot risk the truth of the gospel by compromising basic tenets of the Christian faith in the hope that what remains of the gospel will be heard and understood by people of other faiths. Such an approach accomplishes nothing. The gospel being heard and understood in any other way than what it really is would no longer be the true and pure gospel. It is necessary, we acknowledge, to preach the gospel in ways that are accessible and thus understood by the people to whom we want to communicate the gospel, but we cannot risk or forsake the gospel and the church’s call as a prophetic voice that proclaims the same unchanging gospel.

In affirming their identity as faithful followers of Jesus Christ in this dominantly Buddhist nation, Christians are in urgent need of a theological paradigm that will guide them in living out their lives as God’s children and in their witnessing as God’s ambassadors. A paradigm faithful to Biblical confession would also guard them against erroneous concepts through a whole range of topics in theology. Such a theological paradigm that is faithful to the Bible would be one within which the Christian’s identity as an identity in Christ is affirmed with certainty apart from any dependence on one’s performance, yet—and this is important in the context of Myanmar—certainly not without any performance of the faith that the Christian professes. The theories that we have examined in this chapter as possible theological paradigms are proposed by theologians in Myanmar as the best ways to engage the wider public. In most cases, they are put forward out of desperation stemming from the reality that Burmese Christians seem not quite able to engage their neighbors. To really understand the nature of Christian identity and presence in the public square among their majority Buddhist neighbors, Christians in Myanmar should know both who they are in Christ as God’s children and also how they should live accordingly in their society as

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<sup>84</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 178.

good citizens of Myanmar. Christ should be the identity marker for Christians in Myanmar as they affirm and witness their Christian identity as a minority religious community in the context of Myanmar Buddhist society. The identity of Christians in Myanmar, just like all other Christians all over the world, is Jesus Christ. This is the reason that Martin Luther can state that the Christian “is righteous and holy by an alien or foreign righteousness.”<sup>85</sup> Christian identity is grounded in the righteousness of Christ. What the Indonesian theologian, Bambang Subandrijo has said about Christian identity in Indonesia is also true for Christians in Myanmar: “What is important is that we should know the essence of Christian identity, which is always expressed in accordance with its ages. Times always change, and likewise the situations we are facing. In this regard, what is important to change is not the essence of Christian identity, but the forms of its expressions, which are always transformed relevant to the ages.”<sup>86</sup> The theological paradigms which are offered by some current theologians in Myanmar sacrifice this unique Christian identity. Thus they are deficient. They do not affirm the Christians’ identity nor do they provide faithful guidance for Christians really to engage the wider public. In contrast to these unsatisfactory proposals, in the next chapter I will offer Martin Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms, that is, God’s two spheres or realms of rule as a more viable theological framework for Christians in Myanmar in their attempt to affirm their identity and to witness to their neighbors and fellow countrymen.

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<sup>85</sup> *LW* 12: 328.

<sup>86</sup> Bambang Subandrijo, “Affirming Christian Identity within Indonesian Society,” in ed. Eduardus van der Borgh, *Christian Identity* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2008), 362.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **LUTHER'S TEACHING ON GOD'S TWO KINGDOMS AS A THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR MYANMAR**

In this chapter I will attempt to introduce Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms of God to the Burmese context in Myanmar as a viable theological framework for Christians as they seek to affirm their identity as children of God's kingdom and good citizens of their country. While it is true that every Christian church tradition and theological system is indebted to Martin Luther for their theological interpretations and articulations one way or another, Christians in Myanmar are not, as a whole, familiar with Luther's theology, especially his teaching on the two kingdoms of God. As far as his teaching on the two kingdoms of God is concerned, Luther is more like a "stranger" among Christians in Myanmar. I believe that Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms of God that explains how a believer lives in the kingdom of God on the one hand and the kingdom of this world on the other hand at the same time should be relevant in the context of Myanmar Christianity. Yet no one in Myanmar has tried to articulate what this teaching of Luther on the two kingdoms really is and how it could be a suitable theological framework for the Myanmar setting. I will attempt to introduce the basic teaching of Luther on the two kingdoms to the Burmese Christians in the context of Myanmar in this chapter with a modest attempt to see how this teaching can be applied to the context of Myanmar at the practical level in the next chapter. The writings of Luther and those of Luther scholars will be the source of our study in this chapter. To introduce Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms to the Myanmar context, which is not familiar with Luther in general and his teaching on the two kingdoms in particular, I will need to use some long quotes from appropriate sources where they are deemed

helpful to illuminate some important themes and arguments.

### **Martin Luther's Teaching on the Two Kingdoms of God**

Already in 1525, Martin Luther was convinced that he had sufficiently and clearly articulated what he meant by the existence of two kingdoms. In fact, he was startled that there was still some confusion on the topic: "There are two kingdoms, one the kingdom of God, the other the kingdom of the world. I have written this so often that I am surprised that there is anyone who does not know it or remember it."<sup>1</sup> However, five centuries later, even "the Lutherans continue to struggle to understand the significance of Luther's two kingdoms teaching in relationship to Christian responsibility for the sake of the world."<sup>2</sup> Jonathan David Beeke says: "Almost five hundred years later, understanding Luther's exact meaning of the two kingdoms and two governments (*Zwei Reiche und Regimente*) remains a somewhat enigmatic and therefore hotly contested question."<sup>3</sup> Karl H. Hartz contends that the teaching became a major theological theme in Luther studies only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>4</sup>

It should be remembered, however, that Luther never developed the so-called two kingdoms teaching as a doctrine; it is rather a motif that appears in his writings on a wide range of topics. Robert Kolb, one of the most competent interpreters of Luther among contemporary Luther scholars, is right to speak of it as a 'metaphor':

Modern scholars have formulated a "doctrine of the two kingdoms" from Luther's use of certain terms to describe the structure of creation. Not really a formal doctrinal article in and of itself, the scheme of God's "kingdom of the right hand" (or

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<sup>1</sup> LW 46: 69.

<sup>2</sup> Craig L. Nesson, "Lutheran Social Ministry: Reclaiming Luther's Two Kingdom," in *Missio Apostolica* 11, no. 2 (November 2003): 91.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan David Beeke, "Martin Luther's Two Kingdoms, Law and Gospel, and the Created Order: Was There A Time When the Two Kingdoms Were Not," in *Westminster Theological Journal* 73 (2011): 191.

<sup>4</sup> Karl H. Hartz, ed., *Two Kingdoms and One World: A Sourcebook in Christian Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), 70–75.

“heavenly” kingdom) and His “kingdom of the left hand” (the “earthly” kingdom) rather provided Luther with a working metaphor. The terminology may be confusing when Luther uses the term “kingdom” for the competing powers of God and Satan at the same time. Klaus Schwarzwäller suggests using the term “kingdom” in the latter sense and the term “government” for God's two modes of rule or of exercising power in behalf of His human creatures. Luther did use the term “regiment,” as well as “*Reich*,” as he distinguished God's relating to us for our eternal welfare in His Word of the Gospel from His relating to us for our temporal welfare in His will and pattern for human life, His commands for daily living.<sup>5</sup>

Interpreting and understanding Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms can be a difficult task for those of us who are living in the twenty-first century. Some understand it in its narrow sense of Luther's political ethics while others see it in a broader sense to encompass man's relation *coram deo* and man's relation *coram hominibus*. Brent W. Sockness says:

The task of interpreting and evaluating Luther's two kingdoms doctrine in the twentieth century is notoriously difficult and controversial.... Some interpret two kingdoms in a broad sense and thereby encompass the fundamental distinction in Luther between the human's relation *coram deo* and the human's relation *coram hominibus*. Others restrict the notion of the two kingdoms to Luther's political ethics, i.e., his understanding of the relationship of the Christian vis-à-vis the state.<sup>6</sup>

It is helpful for this study to view and appreciate Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms in the broader sense that encompasses the whole existence of human beings in relation to both God and other creatures on earth because the kingdom of the world in Luther's teaching is based on creation and the order of creation that is more than just temporal authority and human government. Paul G. Sonnack's explanation that secular authority in Luther's *Temporal Authority* is not limited to civil governments alone but that it could also refer to the authority of parents, teachers, employers, etc. as they are also ordained of God is helpful in one's attempt to understand what Luther had in mind when he wrote his seminal treatise on temporal authority:

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Kolb, “God Calling, ‘Take Care of My People’: Luther's Concept of Vocation in the Augsburg Confession and Its Apology,” in *Concordia Journal* 8, no. 1 (January 1982): 5.

<sup>6</sup> Brent W. Sockness, “Luther's Two Kingdoms Revisited: A Response to Reinhold Niebuhr's Criticism of Luther,” in *Journal of Religious Ethics* 20, no. 1 (September 1992): 93.

For Luther, secular authority referred primarily, though not exclusively, to the authority and power exercised by the state. In his medieval setting, this meant princes, kings, and emperors—as well as judges and other governmental officials. It was authority which rested primarily on the power of the sword. When Luther contrasted this authority and power with what he called the authority of the gospel, it was this use of the sword to enforce the will of the ruler upon subjects that became the clearest mark of the distinction between the two kingdoms. It was presupposed by Luther that secular authority was ordained by God, and that in a real sense the rulers exercised their power in subjection to God. It was also presupposed that government exists in order to provide justice and order in society. God has ordained government as part of his providential work to preserve and protect a world which because of sin, would otherwise fall into chaos. While secular authority was primarily identified with the state, it was related to the authority exercised by parents, teachers, employers, and others, including the church. For our purposes, it might be possible to broaden the picture even more. In our society there are other power structures which order and shape our lives. It might well be that what Luther had in mind when he spoke of secular authority is as much in evidence on Wall Street, on Madison Avenue, and in other socio-economic institutions as it is in the Pentagon. Despite all the injustice and distortion which persons have carried into these fundamental structures of the common life, they are God-given and necessary for human life. And for this reason, the Christian, according to Luther, has a necessary commitment to the secular world, a commitment that supports and makes proper use of these power structures.<sup>7</sup>

Since “temporal authority” is not limited to the secular government alone, but also any other societal and power structure in the world, of which families and economic structures are some of the most basic, it should be clear that the usefulness of this teaching is not limited to church/state questions, nor hindered by the type of government that happens to be in power.<sup>8</sup> The distinction should not be understood only in terms of political or human government.

Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms was incorporated into the Augsburg Confession and its Apology where Melancthon recognizes the fact that the Christians’ daily living begins with the presupposition of the distinction between the vertical and the horizontal relationships of

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<sup>7</sup> Paul G. Sonnack, “Church and State in Light of the Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms,” in *Word & World* 4, no.3 (Summer 1984): 275–76.

<sup>8</sup> What I have in mind as I am talking about the usefulness of Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms in the context of any type of government is the great difference between sixteenth-century Germany and twenty-first-century Myanmar and the types of governments those countries may have in power. I have in mind the difference in the government systems between the successive authoritarian military governments of Myanmar from 1962 to 2015 and the democratically elected government that is going to come into power as the result of the recent November 8 2015 nationwide election where the National League for Democracy Party, led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, won a

human beings. The Apology says:

Christ's kingdom is spiritual; it is the knowledge of God in the heart, the fear of God and faith, the beginning of eternal righteousness and eternal life. At the same time [this distinction] lets us make outward use of the legitimate political ordinances of the nation in which we live, just as it lets us make use of medicine or architecture, food or drink or air. The gospel does not introduce any new laws about the civil estate but commands us to obey existing laws, whether they were formulated by heathen or by others, and in this obedience to practice love (Ap, XVI, 2-3).<sup>9</sup>

The Apology enjoins obedience to civil governments as part of the order of creation as the civil or earthly realm is established squarely upon the doctrine of creation, for the Gospel “not only approves governments but subjects us to them, just as we are necessarily subjected to the laws of the seasons and to the change of winter and summer as ordinances of God” (Ap, XVI, 6).<sup>10</sup>

#### A “Doctrine” or “Teaching” on the Two Kingdoms?

Scholars have been struggling to rightly grasp Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms of God down through the centuries. There are different opinions as to what the best terminology is in describing and explaining Luther’s teaching. John Stephenson, observing the discord among Luther scholars in their understanding and teaching of Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms, notes that even for the names and terminologies used for the teaching there is a variety of preferences among Luther scholars. Stephenson explains how Luther is concerned with both the antithesis of the city of man and the city of God and how God exercises his sovereignty over His creation in both the spiritual and the earthly or the secular:

The perplexity which bedevils scholarly discussions of the doctrine of the two kingdoms is reflected in the fact that the most eminent Luther scholars are unable to

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landslide victory.

<sup>9</sup> *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 222–23.

<sup>10</sup> *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 222–23.

agree among themselves about its very name. There is good reason for this discord among the learned, for under the rubric “two kingdoms” there lurks not one doctrine but two. On the one hand, Luther was concerned with the antithesis, expressed most sharply by the New Testament and St. Augustine, between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the devil. His first forays into theology as an Erfurt friar had caused him to become acquainted with the ceaseless combat between those who follow Cain in adhering to the *civitas terrena* and living in bondage to the finite goods of this transient life and those who follow Abel in cleaving to the imperishable Good which will be enjoyed in the everlasting Sabbath prepared for the members of the *civitas Dei*. On the other hand, however, Luther was also concerned with correctly apprehending God’s present sovereignty over Christendom, the *Corpus Christianum*. In this case the model of the journey of the pilgrim people of God through a hostile world which is at root a *civitas diabolic* was no longer adequate. Hence, in addition to thinking in terms of the implacable enmity which obtains between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the devil, Luther could also explain how God exercised his sovereignty over all men through two “governments” represented by spiritual and secular authority respectively. His so-called doctrine of the two kingdoms is in fact a pragmatic combination of these two conceptual pairs, the first of contrasts and the second of correlatives. These two schemes are reflected in the preferred terminology of the opposing factions of Luther scholars. Should the accent be placed on the dualism of the kingdoms of God and the devil, then favour [*sic*] will be shown to the formulation ‘doctrine of the two kingdoms (*Zwei-Reiche-Lehre*). Alternatively, should chief emphasis be given to the inter-relation of God’s two complementary modes of rule, then one will speak, as do the majority of Luther scholars, of the “doctrine of the two governments’ (*Zwei-Regimente-Lehre*)<sup>11</sup>

Richard V. Pierard argues that any definition or exposition of Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms is an exercise of interpretation.

The concept of an eschatological tension between the two kingdoms or realms is found in the NT and Augustine, and some ideas about the two kingdoms (*Reiche*) and two forms of governance (*Regimente*) were expressed by Luther, but this did not constitute a central part of his theology. Since he never made a systematic exposition of the doctrine, interpreters have constructed it from a brief treatise of 1523, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent We Owe It Obedience*, and passing comments he made over a thirty-year period. Because the material that can be drawn from the Wittenberg Reformer’s works is vague, confusing, and at times contradictory, any definition or exposition of the two-kingdoms doctrine is simultaneously an exercise in interpretation. The description that follows is taken largely from post-World War II writers like Heinrich Bornkamm, Ulrich Duchrow and Helmut Thielicke, who have sought to go behind the early twentieth-century accretions and get at Luther’s essential understanding of it.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> John R. Stephenson, “The Two Governments and the Two Kingdoms in Luther’s Thought,” in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34, no. 4 (1981): 322.

<sup>12</sup> Richard V. Pierard, “The Lutheran Two-Kingdoms Doctrine and Subsistence to the State in Modern



James Arne Nestingen argues that Luther did not develop any “doctrine of the two kingdoms,” but that his occasional writings as interpreted by later Luther scholars form what today is called “the doctrine of the two kingdoms:”

There is no locus in Luther’s works called “the doctrine of the two kingdoms,” nor even a treatise by that title. Instead there are some occasional writings from the 1520s, like *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved* and *Temporal Authority: To What Extent They Should Be Obeyed*, in which Luther makes the distinctions in relation to specific problems. And littered through various commentaries (for example on Psalm 118), or sermons, there are similar discussions. What is generally called “the doctrine of the two kingdoms” has thus been constructed from these sources by later scholars for their particular purpose.<sup>13</sup>

Even though Luther never wrote a treatise by the topic of “the two kingdoms,” he certainly worked with the distinction he thought necessary in talking about Christian existence in the world. Nestingen is right when he said that Luther never really tried to develop any definitively formulated ‘doctrine’ or ‘dogma’ of the two kingdoms but he only “thought dialectically, working out of distinctions that he found to be demanded for the relationship between biblical message and the particular situation in which he was implicated.”<sup>14</sup> Also, it should be remembered too that Luther developed his teaching on the two kingdoms in his own historical context. Paul T. McCain says:

Historical circumstances certainly shaped Luther’s reflections. In the 1520s he was concerned more to reject papal claims over the worldly kingdom and was quite put off by the evil he saw in the worldly rulers of his time and the political processes. With the advent of the peasant’s revolt in 1525 and the rise of the Anabaptists, who scorned all worldly authority, Luther recognized that the kingdom of the world was not merely a sharp contrast to the kingdom of God, but instead was God’s way of governing and ruling in the world for the good of the church and society. This was a

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Germany,” in *Journal of the Evangelical Society of Theology* 29, no. 2 (June 1986): 193–94. See also H. Borkamm, *Luther’s Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 5–18; Ulrich Duchrow, *Two Kingdoms—The Use and Misuse of A Lutheran Theological Concept* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1977), 3–9; Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics, Vol. 1: Foundations* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 359–82.

<sup>13</sup> James Arne Nestingen, “The Two Kingdoms Distinction: An Analysis with Suggestion,” *Word & World* 19, no. 3 (summer 1999): 269.

<sup>14</sup> Nestingen, “The Two Kingdoms Distinction: An Analysis with Suggestion,” 269. Also see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Obedient Rebels: Catholic Substance and Protestant Principles in Luther’s Reformation* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1964), 11ff.

great blessing, not only, or not merely, some thing to be tolerated or suffered, but to be encouraged, strengthened, and supported by Christians. Quite possibly, the antinomian struggle that was beginning already in the early 1530s helped Luther see that Christians are never the high-minded individuals he described so enthusiastically in the 1520s in *Temporal Authority*. He emphasized that Christians have the opportunity to carry out their calling in their various stations in life with the Ten Commandments as their guide.<sup>15</sup>

### “Two Kingdoms” As the “Two Strategies” of God

It is relevant here in this study to see that there are Luther scholars who propose terminology like “one kingdom, two strategies” for Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms. For example, Craig L. Nesson prefers to understand Luther’s approach to the two kingdoms of God in terms of “one kingdom, two strategies.” He proposes this way of understanding Luther’s teaching to retain the importance and value of the distinction while avoiding problems that may hinder productive practice of the teaching:

Given the host of problems obstructing a constructive interpretation, how might we retrieve the significance of Luther's two kingdoms as an ethical framework supporting the political responsibility of the church at the start of the twenty-first century? It is crucial that we begin with the clear assertion that *finally there is only one kingdom of God*. In his teachings, Jesus spoke extensively about the dawning of God's kingdom. In doing so, Jesus appealed to this venerable Jewish metaphor deeply grounded in the Old Testament, as is evidenced in the Psalms. The kingdom of God broke into the world in Jesus' sayings, parables, miracles of healing, and casting out demons. The kingdom became present when Jesus forgave sins. The kingdom was present in Jesus' eating with tax collectors and sinners. At his last supper, Jesus instituted a meal of the kingdom for his disciples to share as often as they ate the bread and drank from the cup (Lk. 22:14-20). With this meal Jesus anticipated the eschatological fulfillment of God's kingdom. According to Paul, the kingdom is the destiny of the whole creation (1 Cor. 15:24-25).<sup>16</sup>

Even though Nesson stresses the conceptualization of Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms as “one kingdom, two strategies,” he also takes every effort to distinguish this way of understanding from that of the Reformed tradition by maintaining that the emphasis should be on

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<sup>15</sup> Paul T. McCain, “Receiving the Gifts of God in His Two Kingdoms,” in *Logia* 8, no. 3 (Holy Trinity 1999): 36–37.

<sup>16</sup> Craig L. Nesson, “Lutheran Social Ministry: Reclaiming Luther’s Two Kingdoms,” in *Missio Apostolica* 11, no. 2 (November 2003): 92.

the two kingdoms being the “two strategies” of God:

The claim that there is finally only one kingdom of God is to be distinguished from the Reformed tradition insofar as the Lutheran view entertains a complexity about the interaction of church and state that is muted in Reformed theology. Whereas Reformed theology seeks conformity to the one kingdom of God as its end in both political and ecclesial matters without making clear the peculiar means of engagement appropriate to these distinct arenas, the Lutheran approach is more subtle and realistic about the types of argumentation that are useful when one is operating within the church in contrast to when one is engaging those outside the church in the realm of politics. While it would be constructive for Lutheran theology to recognize the confusion caused by speaking of “two” kingdoms and appropriate the wisdom of the Reformed tradition in talking about a single kingdom of God, it would be constructive for the Reformed tradition to consider how to incorporate the complexity of the Lutheran construct by appropriating the essence of what here will be described as two “strategies.”<sup>17</sup>

Nessan believes that some theologians have tried to make subtle distinctions between two “kingdoms” and two “regiments” or “realms,” but such attempts, he believes, have not shed more light the discussion. Nessan explains why he prefers to use the term “strategy” instead of “kingdom” to avoid confusion and misunderstanding:

Given the fundamental contest between God’s kingdom and Satan’s kingdom in Luther’s conceptuality, trying to distinguish between church and state as two additional “kingdoms” adds a layer of complexity that generally leads to confusion and misunderstanding. For this reason some theologians have tried to make subtle distinctions between two “kingdoms” and two “regiments” or “realms,” but such attempts have not sufficiently clarified the discussion. Moreover, in the case of Luther’s two kingdoms teaching, the spatial metaphor of kingdom does not adequately convey the substance of Luther’s thought. Luther’s two kingdoms teaching is not about two separate and unrelated realms, but rather about two different types of divine activity. The one God—who is the bringer of the one kingdom—engages in two types of activity to oppose the kingdom of Satan. For this reason, when interpreting Luther’s two kingdoms teaching I found it extremely valuable to refer not to two kingdoms but to two strategies. In God’s contest with the kingdom of Satan, God employs two distinct strategies to thwart Satan’s influence and bring forth the kingdom of God.<sup>18</sup>

It is helpful to observe how Nessan also compares the two strategies of God with two hands that God uses in the battle against Satan.

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<sup>17</sup> Craig L. Nessan, “Reappropriating Luther’s Two Kingdoms,” in *Lutheran Quarterly* 19 (2005): 304–305.

God uses two hands in the battle against Satan: 1) a right hand strategy that involves the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the administration of the Holy Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper and 2) a left hand strategy that involves the establishment of just order in society through the institutions of the state, economy, law, education, family, and church, etc. Always these two strategies complement one another. Never are they in competition with each other. God is ambidextrous and very coordinated in the use of both hands to save and preserve the world. Both strategies serve God's purpose in establishing the one kingdom of God in the world. God is not divided against Godself [*sic*], pitting one divine kingdom against another. Rather, God employs two strategies in order to defeat the cause of Satan and usher in the kingdom when God will be all in all.<sup>19</sup>

Ulrich Duchrow's summary statement on the two kingdoms also puts some emphasis on "strategy" as God's activities in both kingdoms: "Summarized briefly: Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms and two-fold governances describes the two-fold strategy employed by God in his struggle in history against the powers of evil. As well as the receiving and active cooperation of human beings in their institutions in healing the world with justice."<sup>20</sup>

Since so many ideas for terminology abound, one must choose what terminology articulates Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms best. For my purposes, I believe that "Luther's teaching" is a good choice. The term serves well because of its simplicity as well as its clarity. It avoids the connotation of a fixed position like the term 'doctrine' might, and it avoids the obscurity that a term like 'strategy' brings to the discussion. The term "Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms," then, is meant to include all the concerns and emphases discussed above regarding Luther's fundamental distinction with which he explained the reality in which every Christian is called to live.

### What Does Luther Actually Teach?

What does Luther actually teach with his distinction of the two kingdoms? In his essay,

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<sup>18</sup> Nessian, "Lutheran Social Ministry: Reclaiming Luther's Two Kingdoms," 93.

<sup>19</sup> Nessian, "Lutheran Social Ministry: Reclaiming Luther's Two Kingdoms," 93.

<sup>20</sup> Ulrich Duchrow, *Lutheran Churches—Salt or Mirror? Case Studies on the Theory and Practice of the Two*

Luther's treatise from 1523, "*Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed*" is one of his most important essays on his teaching on the two kingdoms. I consider the essay seminal because it is the first expansive teaching on the subject from Luther, and presents a way of thinking about God's work in the world in a way that was markedly different than any contemporary thought. Luther himself explains what he means by the two kingdoms or governments: "God has ordained two governments [*Regimente*], the spiritual, by which the Holy Spirit produces Christians and righteous people under Christ, and the temporal, which restrains the un-Christian and wicked so that—no thanks to them—they are obliged to keep still and to maintain an outward peace."<sup>21</sup> God has ordained two kingdoms, which can be understood as two different realms or spheres in which the Christian is destined to live at the same time. The earthly kingdom or the secular realm is the realm of creation, of natural and civic life. The heavenly kingdom or spiritual realm is the realm of redemption, of spiritual and eternal life. While these two kingdoms are independent of each other, they interact and depend upon each other in various ways, one of which is through the faithful fulfillment of one's Christian vocations in the earthly kingdom. The earthly kingdom is distorted by the fall of humanity into sin and is governed by the Law. The heavenly kingdom is renewed by the grace of God manifested in Christ and governed by the Gospel. A Christian is a citizen of both kingdoms at the same time. "As a heavenly citizen, the Christian remains free in his or her conscience, called to live fully by the light of the Word of God. But as an earthly citizen, the Christian is bound by law, and called to obey the natural orders and offices that God has ordained and maintained for the governance of

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*Kingdoms Doctrine* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, Department of Studies, 1977), 318.

<sup>21</sup> LW 45: 91. Although this treatise is not Martin Luther's only and final word concerning his teaching on the two kingdoms of God, it is arguably his most careful, systematic and articulate explanation of how Christians should live in a responsible way in the world.

this earthly kingdom.”<sup>22</sup>

Along with *Temporal Authority: To What Extent They Should Be Obeyed*,<sup>23</sup> two other essays by Martin Luther, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate*<sup>24</sup> and *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved*<sup>25</sup> can be taken as the primary sources on his teaching on the two kingdoms. Of course, as mentioned earlier, there are numerous other places in his many writings where he also addresses topics relevant to the concept of the two kingdoms of God. For the sake of clarity and to limit the field of study somewhat, this dissertation will focus primarily on the essay, *Temporal Authority*. It must be noted that Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms always arises within the context of the great Reformer’s responses to different situations and disputes. Luther’s teaching on the distinction between the temporal and spiritual realms developed vis-à-vis the polemical contexts of Rome on the one hand and the Radicals on the other hand. Luther’s teaching on the distinction between the temporal and spiritual realms developed vis-à-vis the polemical contexts of Rome on the one hand and the Radicals on the other hand.

The medieval papal church had confused the two kingdoms or realms to the extent that they were often indistinguishable where the spiritual realm ruled over the temporal realm. The radicals, on the other hand, were divorcing the kingdoms and making the temporal realm equivalent to Satan’s kingdom, thus Luther was fighting a two-front war. Luther thinks of the two kingdoms in terms of two governments (*Regimente*), which are established by God in order to rule the human race. The right and left hands of God or the right-hand and left-hand kingdoms

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<sup>22</sup> John Witte, Jr., *Law and Protestantism: The Legal Teachings of the Lutheran Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004), 5–6.

<sup>23</sup> LW 45: 75–129.

<sup>24</sup> LW 44: 123–217.

<sup>25</sup> LW 46: 93–137.

are God's scheme of two governments or kingdoms. In the temporal realm or the secular kingdom of the world God rules through secular authority while in the spiritual realm or spiritual kingdom God rules through the Gospel.

*Weltliches Regiment* is spoken of as Gottes Reich for God wills it to remain and wishes us to be obedient within it. It is the kingdom of God's left hand where God rules through father, mother, Kaiser, king, judge, and even hangman; but His proper kingdom, the kingdom of His right hand, it where God rules Himself, where He is immediately present and His Gospel is preached.<sup>26</sup>

To have a better understanding of what Luther taught by his teaching on the two kingdoms, it should be noted that Luther divided all mankind into two groups: the Christians who belong to the kingdom of God, and the non-Christians who belong to the kingdom of the world.:

We must divide all the children of Adam into two classes; the first belong to the kingdom of God, the second to the kingdom of the world. Those belonging to the kingdom of God are all true believers in Christ and are subject to Christ .... He [Christ] also calls the Gospel a Gospel of the kingdom of God, because it teaches, governs, and upholds God's Kingdom.<sup>27</sup>

Each group of people, true believers and non-believers, in each realm or kingdom has its own government, with its own means of government:

All who are not Christians belong to the kingdom of the world and are under the law. There are few true believers, and still fewer who live a Christian life, who do not resist evil and indeed themselves do no evil. For this reason God has provided for them a different government outside the Christian estate and God's kingdom. He has subjected them to the sword so that, even though they would like to, they cannot practice their wickedness, and if they do practice it they cannot do so without fear or with success and impunity.<sup>28</sup>

Each kingdom has its own purpose of government, which are radically different in nature while neither by itself is adequate in the world without the other but complements the other:

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<sup>26</sup> Martin Luther, "Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent," on Matthew 11:2–10, *Predigten*, edition by Kreutzer, p. 26f. Cf. WA 36, p. 385; 20, p. 530, and 52, p. 26 as quoted in F. T. Torrance, *Kingdom and Church: A Study in the Theology of the Reformation* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1956), 24.

<sup>27</sup> LW 45: 88.

<sup>28</sup> LW 45: 90.

For this reason these two governments must be sharply distinguished, and both be permitted to remain; the one to produce piety, the other to bring about external peace and prevent evil deeds. Neither one is sufficient in the world without the other. No one can become righteous in the sight of God by means of the temporal government, without Christ's spiritual government. Christ's government does not extend over all men; rather, Christians are always a minority in the midst of non-Christians.<sup>29</sup>

Luther clearly distinguished the two kingdoms distinctly with their own purposes through their own ways of government in the clearest terms possible. Even though he made the distinction between the spiritual and secular kingdoms or realms so that they are not confused, Luther also always made sure that God himself rules in both kingdoms. In *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved*, a treatise that he wrote in 1526 Luther said:

God has established two kinds of government among men. The one is spiritual; it has no sword, but it has the Word, by means of which men are to become good and righteous, so that with this righteousness they may attain everlasting life. He administers this righteousness through the Word, which He has committed to the preachers. The other kind is worldly government, which works through the sword so that those who do not want to be good and righteous to eternal life may be forced to become good and righteous in the eyes of the world. He administers this righteousness through the sword. And although God will not reward this kind of righteousness with eternal life, nonetheless, he still wishes peace to be maintained among men and rewards them with temporal blessing.<sup>30</sup>

Luther recognized that there were two kinds of human righteousness. Christian, or spiritual, righteousness was through faith in the promise of God as it was created by the Holy Spirit. Civil righteousness, on the other hand, was rooted in a morality of which all are capable, including non-Christians. Thus, humans are righteous in relation to God only by faith, while they may be righteous in relation to one another through that which is called civil righteousness by law-abiding civil justice. We can understand the two kinds of righteousness in the framework of the two kingdoms as on the one hand, Christian righteousness grounded in the Gospel through which the Holy Spirit works to create faith, while on the other hand, civil righteousness based on the

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<sup>29</sup> LW 45: 92.

<sup>30</sup> Martin Luther, "Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved (1526)", LW 46: 99–100.



law that always accuses evildoers and rewards those who serve the needs of the neighbor and community. Luther said:

In this way the two propositions are brought into harmony with one another: at one and the same time you satisfy God's kingdom inwardly and the kingdom of the world outwardly. You suffer evil and injustice and yet at the same time you punish evil and injustice; you do not resist evil, and yet at the same time, you do resist it. In the one case, you consider yourself and what is yours; in the other, you consider your neighbor and what is his. In what concerns you and yours, you govern yourself by the gospel and suffer injustice toward yourself as a true Christian; in what concerns the person or property of others, you govern yourself according to love and tolerate no injustice toward your neighbor. The gospel does not forbid this; in fact, in other places it actually commands it.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, according to Luther, God has established two *Regimente* and *Reiche*: the temporal for *iustitia civilis* through the law by the sword, and the spiritual for *iustitia christiana* through the Gospel. "Thus God Himself is the founder, lord, master, protector, and rewarder of both kinds of righteousness."<sup>32</sup> Luther recognized that temporal authority with its coercive powers is not meant for the preservation and protection of the Gospel: "This is also why Christ did not wield the sword, or give it a place in his kingdom. For he is a king over Christians and rules by his Spirit alone, without law. Although he sanctions the sword, he did not make use of it, for it serves no purpose in his kingdom, in which there are none but the upright.... all for this reason, that Christ, without constraint and force, without law and sword, was to have a people who would serve him willingly."<sup>33</sup>

### **Luther's Teaching on the Two Kingdoms in the Lutheran Confessions**

To fully understand Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms and introduce and rightly apply it to a context such as that of Myanmar in the twenty-first century, it is good to see how Luther's

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<sup>31</sup> LW 45: 96.

<sup>32</sup> LW 46: 100.

<sup>33</sup> LW 45: 93.

teaching has been incorporated within the Augsburg Confession. Article XVI, titled, “Civil Government,” states:

Concerning public order and secular government it is taught that all political authority, orderly government, laws, and good order in the world are created and instituted by God and that Christians may without sin exercise political authority; be princes and judges; pass sentences and administer justice according to imperial and other existing laws; punish evildoers with the sword; wage just wars; serve as soldiers; buy and sell; take required oaths; possess property; be married; etc.

Condemned here are the Anabaptists who teach that none of the things indicated above is Christian.

Also condemned are those who teach that Christian perfection means physically leaving house and home, spouse and child, and refraining from the above-mentioned activities. In fact, the only true perfection is true fear of God and true faith in God. For the gospel teaches an internal, eternal reality and righteousness of the heart, not an external, temporal one. The gospel does not overthrow secular government, public order, and marriage but instead intends that a person keep all this as a true order of God and demonstrate in these walks of life Christian love and true good works according to each person’s calling. Christians, therefore, are obliged to be subject to political authority and to obey its commands and laws in all that may be done without sin. But if a command of the political authority cannot be followed without sin, one must obey God rather than any human beings (Acts 5[:29]). (AC XVI).<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, Article XXVIII of the Augsburg Confession, entitled, “The Power of the Bishops,” succinctly teaches that while the power of the church or of bishops bestows eternal gifts it does not interfere at all with government or temporal authority:

Now inasmuch as the power of the church or of bishops bestows eternal benefits and is used and exercised only through the office of preaching, it does not interfere at all with public order or secular authority. For secular authority deals with matters altogether different from the gospel. Secular power does not protect the soul but, using the sword and physical penalties it protects the body and goods against external violence.

That is why one should not mix or confuse the two authorities, the spiritual and the secular. For spiritual power has its command to preach the gospel and to administer the sacraments. It should not invade an alien office. It should not set up and depose kings. It should not annul or disrupt secular law and obedience to political authority. It should not make or prescribe laws for the secular power concerning secular affairs....

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<sup>34</sup> Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 49–50.

In this way our people distinguish the offices of the two authorities and powers, and direct that both be honored as the highest gifts of God on earth (AC XXVIII, 10-13, 18).<sup>35</sup>

To teach that loving God does not exclude loving one's parents and neighbors Luther taught in the Fourth and Fifth Commandment in his Small Catechism that to love God is not to despise our parents and superiors and not to endanger our neighbor's life:

THE FOURTH [Commandment]

You are to honor your father and your mother.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love God, so that we neither despise nor anger our parents and others in authority, but instead honor, serve, obey, love, and respect them.

THE FIFTH [Commandment]

You are not to kill.

What is this? Answer:

We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in of life's needs.<sup>36</sup>

It is also always helpful to hear from modern interpreters of Luther. Robert Kolb is a good place to begin. Kolb, one of the best known and respected Luther scholars among contemporary theologians, elaborates how the two kingdoms are related with regard to the question of motivation in the Christian's horizontal relationships in the Lutheran confessions.

The two realms are distinct but connected at the point of motivation. Faith provides the basis of all truly God-pleasing works, according to Melanchthon. "True perfection consists alone of proper fear of God and real faith in God, for the gospel does not teach an outward and temporal but an inward and eternal mode of existence and righteousness of the heart." (AC, XVI, 4). This is the chief point which Melanchthon sought to make in Article XX on "faith and good works" (see esp. AC, XX, 27–29, 36). One of the occasional significant differences between the German and Latin versions of the Augustana occurs in the midst of this discussion in Article XX. With the theologians Melanchthon apparently wanted to stress God's sole responsibility for

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<sup>35</sup> Kolb and Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord*, 92.

<sup>36</sup> Kolb and Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord*, 352.

the entire Christian life, for in the Latin he emphasized the necessity of faith for performance of the first two commandments (AC, XX, 36–38). In the German, however, he focused on faith’s impact on daily living, listing the “good works which human nature cannot perform apart from Christ,” including prayer, patience, love, obedience, avoidance of evil lusts, and engaging “diligently in designated responsibilities” (AC, XX, 36–37). Although he does not focus specifically or solely on the offices or responsibilities which God commits to His people, Melancthon does certainly mention them in a key position following the general Christian standard of love for the neighbor as his description of the pious Christian moves from the vertical to the horizontal relationships.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Distinction between the Two Kingdoms or Realms**

The distinction between the two kingdoms should always be kept with vigilance as any confusion of the two will lead to unwanted results in both spheres. Luther contends that attempting to rule the world by the gospel and abolishing the law in the earthly realm will result in total chaos:

If anyone attempted to rule the world by the gospel and to abolish all temporal law and sword on the plea that all are baptized and Christians, and that, according to the gospel, there shall be among them no law or sword—or need for either—pray tell me, friend, what would he be doing? He would be loosing the ropes and chains of the savage wild beasts and letting them bite and mangle everyone, meanwhile insisting that they were harmless, tame, and gentle creatures; but I would have the proof in my wounds. Just so would the wicked under the name of Christian abuse evangelical freedom, carry on their rascality, and insist that they were Christians subject neither to law nor sword, as some are already raving and ranting.<sup>38</sup>

For the reason he has given in the preceding quote, Luther insists on properly distinguishing the two kingdoms or realms. He writes:

For this reason one must carefully distinguish between these two governments. Both must be permitted to remain; the one to produce righteousness, the other to bring about external peace and prevent evil deeds. Neither one is sufficient in the world without the other. No one can become righteous in the sight of God by means of the temporal government, without Christ’s spiritual government. Christ’s government does not extend over all men; rather, Christians are always a minority in the midst of non-Christians. Now where temporal government or law alone prevails, there sheer hypocrisy is inevitable, even though the commandments be God’s very own. For without the Holy Spirit in the heart no one becomes truly righteous, no matter how

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<sup>37</sup> Kolb, “God Calling, ‘Take Care of My People,’” 8.

<sup>38</sup> LW 45: 91.

fine the works he does. On the other hand, where the spiritual government alone prevails over land and people, there wickedness is given free rein and the door is open for all manner of rascality, for the world as a whole cannot receive or comprehend it.<sup>39</sup>

Historian of theology Bengt Hagglund explains that the distinction must not be confused with the modern concept of church and state, which has become for many the basis for the separation of church and state. He also points out that God rules in both realms. He writes:

The distinction must not be confused with modern ideas concerning church and state, in which the state is thought to stand outside the religious sphere, while the church represents the spiritual domain. According to Luther, God rules in both, in the spiritual as well as the secular. The latter is an expression of the ongoing creation, of God's providential care. In some respects both realms are included in God's Word, inasmuch as the secular authority is also constituted by God's word and command. At the same time Luther drew a sharp line of demarcation between the two realms. The spiritual realm is without external power. Its power is exercised by God Himself through the Word and the preaching office. The secular realm is subject to human reason, and its authority is exercised by men who have the power to enforce laws, etc. It is God Himself who is active in both realms, and thus they are united. In the spiritual sphere God works through the Gospel to save men, and in the secular He works through the Law and impels men to live in a certain way, to do the good and avoid the evil, so that their neighbors can be ministered to and general chaos prevented.

Hence we can see that the spiritual realm does not represent a special sphere of power at the side of the secular. Neither is the latter a purely profane area, completely sundered from God. The secular authorities represent God's own power, as it confronts man in visible form in our earthly relationships. Even a completely pagan authority can be used by God to work what is good, to uphold public order and promote human society.<sup>40</sup>

The Swedish theologian, Anders Nygren explains, "Luther insists that it is of primary importance not to confuse the two kingdoms. Each must be true to its Divine mission. Through the Gospel God rules His spiritual kingdom, forgives sins, justifies and sanctifies. But he does not thereby supersede or abolish the earthly kingdom: in its domain it is to rule with power and

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<sup>39</sup> LW 45: 92.

<sup>40</sup> Bengt Hagglund, *History of Theology*, trans. Gene J. Lund (St. Louis: Concordia, 1968), 236.

the sword.”<sup>41</sup> Nygren further states: “It would be wrong to try to rule Christians by the Law, persuading them that through their own deeds and the workings of the Law they could win justification before God. For that end God has ordained the Gospel and the forgiveness of sins. And it would be equally false to try to rule the world with the Gospel, for to do that God has ordained law, rulers, power and the sword.”<sup>42</sup>

Further, the distinction between the temporal and spiritual realms should not be allowed to create a competition and an antagonism between the two realms. The temporal realm should be seen as God’s gracious provision for the good of human beings in His creation. Luther said:

But you say: if Christians then do not need the temporal sword or law, why does Paul say to all Christians in Romans 13 [:1], “Let all souls be subject to the governing authority,” and St. Peter, “Be subject to every human ordinance” [I Peter 2:13], etc., as quoted above? Answer: I have just said that Christians, among themselves and by and for themselves, need no law or sword, since it is neither necessary nor useful for them. Since a true Christian lives and labors on earth not for himself alone but for his neighbor, he does by the very nature of his spirit even what he himself has no need of, but is needful and useful to his neighbor. Because the sword is most beneficial and necessary for the whole world in order to preserve peace, punish sin, and restrain the wicked, the Christian submits most willingly to the rule of the sword, pays his taxes, honors those in authority, serves, helps, and does all he can to assist the governing authority, that it may continue to function and be held in honor and fear. Although he has no need of these things for himself—to him they are not essential—nevertheless, he concerns himself about what is serviceable and of benefit to others, as Paul teaches in Ephesians 5 [:21–6:9].<sup>43</sup>

Luther also stresses that the saints have wielded the sword from the beginning of the world for the good of their neighbors: Abraham in rescuing Lot in Genesis 14:8–16, the prophet Samuel in slaying King Agag in I Samuel 15:33, and Elijah in killing the prophets of Baal in I Kings 18:40. Luther also reminds his readers that Moses, Joshua, the children of Israel, Samson, David, and all the kings and princes in the Old Testament and Daniel and his friends in Babylon

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<sup>41</sup> Anders Nygren, “Luther’s Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms,” in *Ecumenical Review* 1, no. 3 (April 1949): 305.

<sup>42</sup> Nygren, “Luther’s Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms,” 305.

<sup>43</sup> *LW* 45: 93–94.

and Joseph in Egypt, all held the sword for the good of their neighbors and not for the purpose of avenging themselves.<sup>44</sup> Paul Sonnack further explains the purpose of the two kingdoms distinction in this regard:

It has to be kept in mind that these two kingdoms are in no sense to be regarded as being in opposition to each other. Ultimately both kingdoms rest in the sovereignty of God. In a real sense they supplement each other in the world, one providing for an external justice, the other for an inward justification. The gospel cannot rule the world; but neither can the rule of force make persons truly pious. The two kingdoms, then, are two ways in which God encounters and expresses his gracious concern for this sinful world. Luther's understanding is that before God the Christian is totally justified; but insofar as the Christian is in the world he or she remains sinful. No one is by nature Christian or pious, but everyone is sinful and evil. For this reason, God has placed law and government as a restraint upon all. There is a sense, therefore, in which Luther would allow us to say that the Christian is subject to both kingdoms.<sup>45</sup>

This submission, however, is not something done to insure one's own good standing in the temporal realm, or to cultivate personal political or social benefit; the submission of the Christian to the secular authority is for the sake of his neighbor. The Christian's neighbor always comes before anything else. It is not for his own sake, but for the sake of his neighbor that the Christian is called to submit even to the secular authority. Luther said:

I have just said that Christians, among themselves and by and for themselves, need no law or sword, since it is neither necessary nor useful for them. Since a true Christian lives and labors on earth not for himself alone but for his neighbor, he does by the very nature of his spirit even what he himself has no need of, but is needful and useful to his neighbor. Since a true Christian lives and labors on earth not for himself alone but for his neighbor, he does by the very nature of his spirit even what he himself has no need of, but is needful and useful to his neighbor. Because the sword is most beneficial and necessary for the whole world in order to preserve peace, punish sin, and restrain the wicked, the Christian submits most willingly to the rule of the sword, pays his taxes, honors those in authority, serves, helps, and does all he can to assist the governing authority, that it may continue to function and be held in honor and fear.<sup>46</sup>

Sonnack offers a helpful elaboration on Luther's teaching that the Christian's submission to

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<sup>44</sup> LW 45: 96.

<sup>45</sup> Sonnack, "Church and State in Light of the Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms," 276.

<sup>46</sup> LW 45: 94.

the temporal authority is for the sake of his neighbor:

The crucial thing is that we understand that the Christian is subject to secular authority for the sake of the neighbor, not for his or her own sake. The fundamental presupposition for all ethical decisions lies in a proper distinction between what I need and what my neighbor needs. Luther insisted that in what concerns one's self, one is governed by the gospel and suffers injustice for one's self as a Christian; but in what concerns the neighbor and belongs to him or her, the Christian will be governed according to love and allow no injustice to the neighbor. Insofar as government and the structures of society are a blessing and a necessity for others, the Christian must do whatever he or she can to make its authority effective, and this involves willing obedience, payment of taxes, holding office, etc. True, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commanded his followers not to make use of civil authority by going to a court of law to decide disputes among themselves. They should not defend themselves with the sword. They do not need to have the enemy punished, for they are to endure evil willingly. But, and this is the point, the neighbor does have need of justice. For this reason, the Christian is bound to take up the sword, to serve in any manner whatever (whether that be as judge, lord, prince, or soldier). This understanding of need rests in the realization that the Christian already possess all things in Christ: the Christian can gain nothing more for himself or herself through involvement in the world other than that already granted in Christ. Thus Christians have the freedom to commit themselves without reservation to the neighbor. Insofar as the Christian lives in Christ, life in the world can be turned towards the neighbor and the neighbor's need. The Christian loses nothing by this. The Christian's service to the state, then, to the public order, is understood by Luther to be in the service of love. Love, expressed directly in personal relationships or, more directly in the quest for justice, comprehends both kingdoms and both spheres of the Christian's life. Love does what reason and natural law demand.<sup>47</sup>

#### Luther's Teaching on the Two Kingdoms As a Break from the Medieval Concept of Society

In trying to explain and use the teaching of the two kingdoms in Myanmar, it is essential that we acknowledge the *difference* in cultural contexts. In the case of Luther himself, it was in one sense opposite of the situation in Myanmar. For Luther, the teaching on the two kingdoms reflected a break from the institutionalization of the church over the world as understood by the medieval Church. For Christians in Myanmar, the teaching on the two kingdoms may help them to affirm a unique identity of the Church in an institutionalized *non-Christian* situation. His teaching on the two kingdoms of God helped Luther to break from the institutionalization of the

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<sup>47</sup> LW 45: 276–77.



church over the world as the medievalists usually taught; now for Luther the church was within the world. It had moved from an institutional power to a redemptive presence. In his *Babylonian Captivity*, Luther says:

The Romanists have very cleverly built three walls around themselves. Hitherto they have protected themselves by these walls in such a way that no one has ever been able to reform them. As a result, the whole of Christendom has fallen abominably.

In the first place, when pressed by the temporal power they have made decrees and declared that the temporal power had no jurisdiction over them, but that, on the contrary, the spiritual power is above the temporal. In the second place, when the attempt is made to reprove them with the Scriptures, they raise the objection that only the pope may interpret the Scriptures. In the third place, if threatened with a council, their story is that no one may summon a council but the pope.<sup>48</sup>

In his *Temporal Authority* (1523), Luther stressed the importance of the independence of the temporal realm in reaction to the medieval conception of the church's authority over the state. He reproved the sophists (the Roman Catholic scholastic theologians as Luther often termed them) for confusing the two realms and granting the estate of the sword and temporal authority to the bishops and the pope:

The sophists in the universities have also been perplexed by these texts [Matthew 5: 25, 39, 40 and Romans 12:19], because they could not reconcile the two things. In order not to make heathen of the princes, they taught that Christ did not command these things but merely offered them as advice or counsel to those who would be perfect. So Christ has to become a liar and be in error in order that the princes might come off with honor, for they could not exalt the princes without degrading Christ—wretched, blind sophists that they are. And their poisonous error has spread thus through the whole world until everyone regards these teachings of Christ not as precepts binding on all Christians alike but as mere counsels for the perfect. It has gone so far that they have granted the imperfect estate of the sword and of temporal authority not only to the perfect state of the bishops, but even to the pope, that perfect state of all; in fact, they have ascribed it to no one on earth so completely as to him! So thoroughly has the devil taken possession of the sophists and the universities that they themselves do not know what and how they speak or teach.<sup>49</sup>

Luther is indebted to Augustine, as Bornkamm notes, for helping him untangle himself

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<sup>48</sup> LW 44: 126.

<sup>49</sup> LW 45: 82.

from the medieval conception of the church's authority over the state.

This Augustinian heritage helped Luther to uncover the distortion of the gospel which had occurred in the medieval confusion of the powers, and which went as far as direct dependence of the secular on the spiritual authority. Even the extreme papalists felt themselves in agreement with Augustine at this point, and were convinced that the doctrine that the church possessed eminent domain over all worldly goods was only an interpretation of Augustine's statement, "True justice has no existence save in that republic whose founder and ruler is Christ." But in this passage Augustine is simply citing the city of God as an example of true community life.<sup>50</sup>

Another positive contribution of Luther's theology is his eschatological sense of history in which God's people are prepared for the imminent return of the Lord that can take place at any time. He had no hope for a transformed, "Christianized" world, but for the coming of a new world order Luther wrote:

Certainly it is true that Christians, so far as they themselves are concerned, are subject neither to law nor sword, and have need of neither. But take heed and first fill the world with real Christians before you attempt to rule it in a Christian and evangelical manner. This you will never accomplish; for the world and the masses are and always will be un-Christian, even if they are all baptized and Christian in name. Christians are few and far between (as the saying is). Therefore, it is out of the question that there should be a common Christian government over the whole world, or indeed over a single country or any considerable body of people, for the wicked always outnumber the good. Hence, a man who would venture to govern an entire country or the world with the gospel would be like a shepherd who should put together in one fold wolves, lions, eagles, and sheep, and let them mingle freely with one another, saying, "Help yourselves, and be good and peaceful toward one another. The fold is open, there is plenty of food. You need have no fear of dogs and clubs." The sheep would doubtless keep the peace and allow themselves to be fed and governed peacefully, but they would not live long, nor would one beast survive another.<sup>51</sup>

Another prominent feature of Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms is its close link to his doctrine of creation as he places the secular realm in the natural world order. Hagglund helpfully highlights this link between Luther's doctrine of creation and his teaching on the two kingdoms of God:

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<sup>50</sup> Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms*, trans. Karl H. Hertz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 25–26.

<sup>51</sup> *LW* 45: 91–92.

Another consequence of Luther's concept of creation is to be found in his doctrine of the *two realms*, the spiritual and the secular. God exercises His dominion over the human race in different ways: in part through the Word and the sacraments, in part through the authorities and the secular order. The gifts which are needed for man's salvation are imparted in the spiritual realm, while the external order which is necessary for human society (and also for the existence of the church) is upheld through the secular realm.<sup>52</sup>

One final feature of Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms of God worthy of note is that some considered it as closely related to the distinction between law and gospel. James Arne Nestingen sees it as "an extension" of the distinction between law and gospel. He sees the two kingdoms teaching as two relations correlated to the distinction between law and gospel:

Proceeding in this way, the two kingdoms distinction, as opposed to doctrine, is an extension of the distinction between law and gospel. By the very assertion of its promise—Christ's gifts of the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation—the gospel puts the law in another perspective. The shift can be summarized in a question: If Christ justifies the godless, what is the law for? Clearly, given Christ's death and resurrection, the law cannot do the gospel's work. It must, then, of necessity, have some other purpose or purposes. And what might those be? Working analytically and descriptively, Luther answers by speaking of what the law actually does in everyday life, its uses: the law restrains evil and in a more qualified way protects the good, and it has a genius for threatening, accusing, or exposing....

Thus, to the everlasting frustration of those who want to create a new age—politically, ecclesiastically, or otherwise—the two kingdoms are not two institutions or organizations but two different relations correlated to law and gospel. "God's kingdom comes when by his grace, he gives us his Holy Spirit so that we might believe his holy word and live godly lives on earth now and in heaven forever," as Luther says in his explanation of the second petition of the Lord's prayer. The new age, the kingdom of Christ Jesus, is present now, hidden with faith amidst all the contention brought about by the attempts of institutions and their leaders to transcend themselves. In the meantime, visibly, through earthly powers like the state, the church, schools, and social customs, the law continues to exercise its force until such a time as the gospel ends it by taking the heart in its grip.<sup>53</sup>

Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms of God is a theological framework in which all other doctrines can be placed in their right places. "For Luther, God's two kingdoms were a

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<sup>52</sup> LW 45: 235–36.

<sup>53</sup> James Erne Nestingen, "The Two Kingdoms Distinction: An Analysis with Suggestion," in *Word & World* 19, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 269–70.

fundamental premise based upon the diligent study of the Scriptures. They were the reality in which the Christian lived during his or her lifetime. As a basic assumption, Luther presented all of his teachings within the context of these two kingdoms.”<sup>54</sup>

#### Criticism, Misunderstanding and Misuse of Luther’s Teaching on the Two Kingdoms

While the right understanding and application of Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms of God can be a great asset to the cause of Christ and Christianity in Myanmar, we should also be aware that it has been the subject of theological discussions as it has gone through criticism, misunderstanding, and misuse down through the centuries. Paul T. McCain briefly recounts how Luther has suffered unjust criticism and blame for his teaching on the two kingdoms of God:

Luther’s doctrine of the two kingdoms has attracted much interest in the scholarly community in the twentieth century. Many have unjustly assumed that Luther merely accepted decisions of the secular government without question. Others believe Luther is to blame for the authoritarian governments that have characterized much of Germany’s history since the Reformation, some even holding Luther personally responsible for the rise of Adolf Hitler and National Socialism and consequently the Holocaust. Karl Barth captured the imagination of many people trying to find a root cause for Hitler when, in 1939, he wrote, “The German people suffer . . . from the mistake of Martin Luther regarding the relation of law and gospel, of temporal and spiritual order and power.” On the other hand, the Marxists claimed Luther as one of their own and used Luther to bolster their regimes in Eastern and Central Europe.<sup>55</sup>

Notger Slenczka could say that “few aspects of Luther’s theology have caused as much sharp dissension as the teaching on the two realms or two governments. The main features of the teaching are well known and its problems have been widely discussed and debated, especially in the time of the German *Kirchenkampf* during the Third Reich and after the Second World War.”<sup>56</sup> Slenczka further describes what people have seen in the teaching of Luther to be

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<sup>54</sup> William John Wright, *Luther’s Understanding of God’s Two Kingdoms: A Response to the Challenge of Skepticism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 11.

<sup>55</sup> McCain, “Receiving the Gifts of God in His Two Kingdoms,” 29.

<sup>56</sup> Notger Slenczka, “God and Evil: Martin Luther’s Teaching on Temporal Authority and the Two Realms,” in *Lutheran Quarterly* 26, no. 1(Spring 2012): 1.

problematic:

The problems allegedly stemming from Luther's teaching have the following in common: it is said that the distinction between the realm of Christ and realm of the world leads us to conclude that the gospel does not offer any social and ethical implications within the worldly realm, since the distinction seems to encourage the idea that Christians ought to remain completely uncritical of the social structure in which they live and with the government that is currently in power. In addition, Luther's teaching seems to claim that Christians have no way of determining whether or not a government is corrupt enough to be dismantled; therefore, they have no ability to establish the right and duty for opposing a corrupt government. Critics consider the weakness of many Lutheran theologians and churches during the Third Reich to be an evitable consequence of the teaching on the two realms.<sup>57</sup>

John R. Stephenson recounts the disfavor that Luther had been accorded in Great Britain:

The facet of this thought commonly referred to as the doctrine of the two kingdoms has provoked some of the most intractable confusion and bitter controversy in post-war continental Luther scholarship, and the ripples of this debate which reached these shores have all too often amounted to a litany of sweeping statements which have done nothing to enhance the Reformer's reputation in England. Yet even before Hitler's war Luther had endured a century of disfavour [*sic*] among the leading academic and ecclesiastical circles on this side of the Channel. So marked was British—more particularly, English—distaste for Luther in the opening years of this century that the American church historian Preserved Smith devoted an article to the subject in 1917, listing Anglo-Catholicism, rationalism, socialism and—since 1914—visceral hostility to all things German as four factors which had conspired to tarnish the Reformer's image in the minds of the English of that time.<sup>58</sup>

One of the fiercest criticisms of Luther for his teaching on the two kingdoms that has become almost classical is the criticism of Karl Barth who claimed that “Luther's distinction between the two kingdoms did not limit Teutonic paganism, but gave it its own sacred sphere.”<sup>59</sup> Karl Barth accused Luther as the source of Hitler's tyranny for his teaching on the political authority of the secular governments. He even says that the atrocities of the Third Reich were the

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<sup>57</sup> Slenczka, “God and Evil: Martin Luther's Teaching on Temporal Authority and the Two Realms,” 1.

<sup>58</sup> Stephenson, “The Two Governments and the Two Kingdoms in Luther's Thought,” 321.

<sup>59</sup> Karl Barth, *Eine Schwetzer Stimme; 1938–1945* (Zollikon-Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1945), 43, 122, quoted in Hans Schwarz, “Luther's doctrine of the Two Kingdoms—Help or Hindrance for Social Change,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (Feb 1975): 59.

result of “the bad dream of the German pagan who has been Christianized in Lutheran fashion.”<sup>60</sup>

Reinhold Niebuhr is another severe critic of Luther. Reinhold Niebuhr accuses “the Lutheran Reformation” as “defeatism”:

In confronting the problems of realizing justice in the collective life of man, the Lutheran Reformation was even more explicitly defeatist. Human society represents an infinite variety of structures and systems in which men seek to organize their common life in terms of some kind of justice. The possibilities of realizing a higher justice are indeterminate. There is no point in historical social achievement where one may rest with an easy conscience....

Here we have the complete severance between the final experience of grace and all the proximate possibilities of liberty and justice, which must be achieved in history. This principle of separation leads to a denial that liberty can have any other meaning for the Christian than liberty from “God’s everlasting wrath. For Christ hath made us free not civilly nor carnally but divinely; that is to say our conscience is now made free and quiet, not fearing the wrath of God to come.” Social antinomianism is guarded against by the injunction, “Let every man therefore endeavour to do his duty diligently in his calling and help his neighbor to the utmost of his power. But evidently no obligation rests upon the Christian to change social structures so that they might conform more perfectly to the requirements of brotherhood.”<sup>61</sup>

Niebuhr regarded Luther’s doctrine as offering a “curiously perverse morality,” centered in a “perfectionistic private ethic in juxtaposition to realistic, not to say cynical, official ethic,” a distinction which encourages tyranny.<sup>62</sup> He says:

By thus transposing an “inner” ethic into a private one, and making the “outer” or “earthly” ethic authoritative for government, Luther achieves a curiously perverse social morality. He places a perfectionist private ethic in juxtaposition to a realistic, not to say cynical, official ethic. He demands that the state maintain order without too scrupulous a regard for justice; yet he asks suffering and nonresistant love of the individual without allowing him to participate in the claims and counter-claims which constitute the stuff of social justice. The evitable consequence of such an ethic is to encourage tyranny; for resistance to government is as important a principle of justice as maintenance of government.<sup>63</sup>

Niebuhr avers that even without a Hitler, “the Lutheran political ethic would have led to

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<sup>60</sup> Barth, *Eine Schwetzer Stimme; 1938–1945*, 113. Karl Barth wrote this in a letter to a French pastor in 1939.

<sup>61</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation, Volume Two—Human Destiny*, Reprint (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 192.

<sup>62</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 194.

defeatism in the field of social politics. Its absolute distinction between the ‘heavenly’ or ‘spiritual’ kingdom and the ‘earthly’ one, destroys the tension between final demands of God upon the conscience, and all the relative possibilities of realizing the good in history.”<sup>64</sup>

We would do well, however, if we remember that Luther did not live in our days and that he was not a political theologian. He has been claimed legitimately or illegitimately by all sorts of people to their benefit. Caution should be taken that Luther did not even develop a full doctrine or teaching on the so-called “separation” of church and state. Paul McCain’s remark on this issue is worth a quote here:

To demand from Luther the precision that our day and age may wish is neither possible nor appropriate. Finally, Luther really did not have a political philosophy or even a formal, well-systematized and organized dogma of the two kingdoms. Though a doctrine of the two kingdoms may easily, and perhaps even appropriately, be drawn from Luther, he was not interested in creating a system by which every last detail of the relationship between church and state might be classified, quantified or otherwise structured and set down in stone for all ages. It is possible to receive wholesome instruction and guidance from Luther for the purpose of our contemporary debates over the separation of church and state, but Luther will not provide decisive answers for each of our present concerns, for example, our contemporary questions about the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. For that matter, neither Republicans nor Democrats may claim Luther as their own. It is rather absurd to attempt to garner Luther’s support for political situations of which he was totally unaware.<sup>65</sup>

Another critic of Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms of God is Helmut Thielicke, a German Lutheran. His major typical critique is that “the Lutheran doctrine... leads to the church’s being aloof and disinterested in the political sphere.”<sup>66</sup> Thielicke admits, at the same time, that it is only the twisted neo-Lutheranism that is guilty of his critique, including how it is related to Hitler’s coming to power, and affirms that the classical Lutheran two-kingdoms ethic

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<sup>63</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 194–95.

<sup>64</sup> Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 195.

<sup>65</sup> McCain, “Receiving the Gifts of God in His Two Kingdoms,” s38.

<sup>66</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, ed. William H. Lazareth, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 2: 568.

“does not issue in a separation of church from world.”<sup>67</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg also criticizes Luther by using Karl Barth when he contends that “Luther’s theology and Lutheranism share the responsibility for making National Socialism possible” because Luther embraced the idea of the independent “authority of the state,” that had breathed room open for “German paganism” to flourish, which “separated the created world and law from the gospel.”<sup>68</sup>

Criticism of Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms has come also from Liberation theologians. Juan Luis Segundo<sup>69</sup> “has attributed one critical failure of contemporary European and North American political theology to its basis in Luther’s two kingdoms doctrine.”<sup>70</sup> Segundo, “drawing on the work of James Preus,<sup>71</sup> charges that Luther’s doctrine of the two kingdoms tends to depoliticize the doctrine of justification. By means of the two kingdoms doctrine Luther divided society into a religious realm to which the doctrine of justification properly pertained and a secular realm to which it did not.”<sup>72</sup>

Walter Altman<sup>73</sup> from Brazil “differs markedly from Segundo both in his interpretation of Luther’s two kingdoms doctrine and in his assessment of its potential contribution to a contemporary political theology.”<sup>74</sup> While Altmann “would agree that Luther’s doctrine of the two kingdoms has been used to legitimize a number of diverse modern political ideologies (separation of church and state in the United States, the fascism of Nazi Germany, the

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<sup>67</sup> Thielicke, *Theological Ethic*, 2: 568.

<sup>68</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Luther’s Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms,” in *Ethics*, trans. Keith Crim (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), 112.

<sup>69</sup> Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976), 142–49.

<sup>70</sup> Craig L. Nesson, “Liberation Theology’s Critique of Luther’s Two Kingdoms Doctrine,” in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 16, no. 4 (August 1989): 257.

<sup>71</sup> James S. Preus, “The Political Function of Luther’s Doctrine,” in *Concordia Theological Monthly* 43 (October 1972): 591–99.

<sup>72</sup> Nesson, “Liberation Theology’s Critique,” 257–58.

<sup>73</sup> Walter Altmann, “Interpreting the Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms: God’s Kingship in the Church and Politics,” *Word & World* 7 (Winter 1987): 43–58.



dictatorship of Pinochet in Chile), he argues that this use is a misappropriation of Luther's thought."<sup>75</sup> Altmann avers that Luther never advocated the separation of church and state as autonomous identities:

I wish to state very clearly, beforehand, that the dichotomic dualism between church and state cannot be legitimately ascribed to Luther. It is true that he drew a distinction of competences between one and the other, but he has never separated them as autonomous identities. The distinction seemed to be an indispensable task for him. His purpose was very clear: to stand against the corruption of the church which had become a temporal and political power.<sup>76</sup>

In such a time as Luther's when the church had usurped massive political power, Luther's corrective teaching on the two kingdoms of God was the remedy that the church critically needed for some misconceptions about the nature of the authority of the medieval church. This teaching did not radically separate the church and the state, but attempted to return to the state its proper competence of carrying out its secular duties. Luther "turns himself very radically against the political power of popes and bishops (who were often political authorities), against the system of feudal ecclesiastical properties, against the civil jurisprudence of the church, against its complicated and diversified fiscal system, etc."<sup>77</sup> Whereas Segundo sees in Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms the basis for a strict separation of church and state, Altmann sees a dialectical relationship between them. He writes:

Thus the so-called "two kingdoms" can be distinguished regarding their duties and means, but they overlap each other in terms of space. Besides, they are together based on one foundation—God is the Lord of both—and they have a common goal—the good all humanity. Church and state are therefore instrumentalized, limiting and binding themselves reciprocally. The state limits and regulates the church as a social institution (for example, in matters of property). The church proclaims God's will to

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<sup>74</sup> Nesson, "Liberation Theology's Critique," 259.

<sup>75</sup> Nesson, "Liberation Theology's Critique," 259.

<sup>76</sup> Altmann, "Interpreting the Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms: God's Kingship in the Church and Politics," 47.

<sup>77</sup> Altmann, "Interpreting the Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms: God's Kingship in the Church and Politics," 47.

the state (for example criticizing its arbitrariness or calling it to work for social, political and economic transformations).<sup>78</sup>

That Luther has been misused with regard to his teaching on the two kingdoms is an obvious yet complex topic; especially sensitive is the doctrine's use among churchmen during the tragic years of the Third Reich in Germany. The manner in which the Reformer's teaching purportedly prepared German Protestants for the "new order" of fascism was well summarized in a statement made in 1939 by the Nazi Minister of Church Affairs, Hanns Kerrl:

The Protestant Church has learned from Martin Luther to differentiate sharply between the sphere of reason and faith, of politics and of religion, of the state and the church. The National Socialist world view is the national-political doctrine which shapes and determines [the German]man. As such it is also binding upon the Christian German. The Protestant Church honors in the state an order decreed by God and demands of all its members faithful service within this order.<sup>79</sup>

H. Tiefel narrates how Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms was misinterpreted and misused by the National Socialists during the Third Reich:

This viewpoint or variations of it were repeated throughout the Church. Among the most important statements of such a perversion of the two-kingdoms doctrine were the Rengsdorf Theses. Drawn up at a conference in October 1933 convened by the Protestant bishop of Cologne-Aachen in the town of Rengsdorf and distributed to all pastors in the Rhineland, they affirmed that there is no universal Christianity as such. It is rooted in the respective nations, and for the German there can only be a Christianity that has its roots in the German nation. Moreover there is no contradiction between an unconditional allegiance to the gospel and a similar commitment to the German nationality. After praising the German Reformation, the National Socialist revolution, and the values of the national community, the statement declared that state and Church are both divinely ordained orders and that "the church is obliged to obey the state in every earthly matter."<sup>80</sup>

The misuse of Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms did not go unchallenged. But, the damage was done, and the confusion about what Luther actually taught continues to this day. As

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<sup>78</sup> Altmann, "Interpreting the Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms: God's Kingship in the Church and Politics," 260.

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in H. Tiefel, "Use and Misuse of Luther During the German Church Struggle," *Lutheran Quarterly* 25 (November 1973): 402.

<sup>80</sup> Richard V. Pierard, "The Lutheran Two-Kingdoms Doctrine and Subservience to the State in Modern Germany," *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 29, no. 2 (June 1986): 200–201.

a result, there are many critics of Luther, but I believe they mostly get Luther wrong—a position supported, I think, by what Luther actually said and the way that careful interpreters understand what Luther said—all of which was presented earlier in this chapter. As has been examined briefly in the preceding paragraphs, Luther has been accused, but arguably not fairly, of teaching a dualistic concept of human existence in the form of the two kingdoms of God. The greatest misunderstanding of Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms seems to result from viewing the distinction primarily as a political theory rather than a theological truth. Luther has been misunderstood and misused in his teaching on the two kingdoms for the most part, it seems, because his critics did not take into consideration the historical setting of Luther in which he worked to bring about change in the political and social life of the people through his reformation in the church in the religious arena of the sixteenth century.

### **Luther’s Teaching on the Two Kingdoms in the Context of Myanmar**

One way to probe the usefulness of Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms of God in the context of Myanmar is to see how it might enable a Christian to respond theologically to the problem of how one can remain a faithful follower of Jesus Christ while also being a good citizen of a predominantly Buddhist country such as Myanmar. One of the Burmese Christians’ principal problems in this regard is to find a way to engage the wider public as they affirm their identity as Christians in the setting of an ever-strong Burmese nationalism that always promotes the plan that the whole nation should become one people who speak one language and practice one religion, which is Buddhism in the Burmese tradition. Indeed, given such a context, someone may ask, “What does Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms of God have to do with the situation of Myanmar in general and that of Christians in particular?” John R. Stumme once tried to answer a question similar to this in the context of Liberation Theology and democracy in Argentina.

Luther lived in another historical moment and his ideas on politics were conditioned by his situation. He accepted the system of his day with its princes and emperor as the will of God to maintain order and justice. He did not face modern issues concerning the nation-state, the participation of the people in government, and the options among military dictatorship, revolution, and democracy. His response to the question “Who should govern?” was in the essence “Those who already rule.” And this response does not help us now. The idea that the Christian should simply accept the existing authority as the will of God and obey it is a dangerous concept for us. Because of their historical distance, Luther’s political ideas have little direct validity for us.<sup>81</sup>

Is Stumme correct? Does his conclusion apply to the situation in Myanmar, today? Do Luther’s political ideas or theology for public engagement have any direct validity for Christians in Myanmar? At first glance, the only possible answer seems to be “not much” because of the historical distance and religious and cultural differences between the sixteenth-century Germany of Luther’s time and those of Myanmar in the twenty-first century. But, one can learn from the way that Lambert Shuurman attempts to see how Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms could be appropriated in the context of Latin America and then perhaps see the teaching’s relevance for the context of Myanmar. After reviewing the historical and social situation of the church there, Shuurman comes to the conclusion that Luther’s teaching could provide the needed theological paradigm for the Latin American churches:

I think that Luther's distinction between the two realms could help radical theology to an important degree. It gives the material to demythologize the revolution and make it exclusively man’s business in his response to the proclamation of the kingship of God in Christ. It contributes considerably to speaking in a worldly manner about the significance of much-needed transformation, and it invites the avoidance of a religious language, which is foreign to the nature of Jahweh and also to the content of this transformation.

I think that an adequate use of Luther’s theory can help to find a golden median between the two extreme positions of conservatism and progressivism. This theory sees the good elements in both of them. Conservatism, with reason, sees in this world much of the creation of God and rightfully insists on the distinction between this world and God’s new world. Progressivism is right in pointing out that the renovating forces of the kingdom of God not only have a future nature, but want to exercise their

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<sup>81</sup> John R. Stumme, “Luther’s Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms in the Context of Liberation Theology,” in *Word & World* 3, no. 4 (Fall 1983): 427.

function here and now. Luther's theory also makes clear that there should be human activity in keeping this world away from chaos. At the same time, it does not allow us to fall in a scheme of anticipation, which gives human activity absolute value.<sup>82</sup>

Shuurman further sees the eschatological tension in Luther's teaching as giving us the right perspective when it comes to our participation in society:

In other words, it is the eschatological tension in Luther's theology which, on the one hand urges us to activity, and, on the other hand, gives a motive to the expectation of the great deeds of God. I think that this tension is inevitable. It is the key to come to grips with the problem.

I would be quite willing to consider Luther's position as outdated, if a good alternative would be offered to me. I have not found it yet. Sooner or later one has to use the concept of the two realms in order to do justice to the one kingdom. Otherwise, absolute standstill or a theocracy are the only alternatives, and I don't like to have to choose between the two parts of this unacceptable dilemma.<sup>83</sup>

What we have just observed in a few paragraphs in the above quote reflects the same struggles Christians in Myanmar are wrestling with as they try to understand their true identity and endeavor to fulfill their social responsibility under different oppressive totalitarian regimes of military dictatorship.

Mark Noll, an evangelical American church historian, sees some benefits for American Christians, and especially conservative Protestants, in their political thought and activity from Luther's insights in terms of getting involved in politics in a responsible Christian way. One can apply to the Burmese context what Mark Noll has pointed out as the Lutheran strength and see whether this could be appropriated as a potential asset in the context of Myanmar. Mark Noll says:

As a way of moving forward toward a more responsible Christian politics, the theology of Martin Luther would seem to offer a better way. I say "seems" because it is not clear to me that Lutheran practice has ever fulfilled the promise of Lutheran

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<sup>82</sup> Lambert Shuurman, "Some Observations on the Relevance of Luther's Theory of the Two Realms for the Theological Tasks in Latin America," in *Lutheran Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (February 1970): 91.

<sup>83</sup> Shuurman, "Some Observations on the Relevance of Luther's Theory of the Two Realms for the Theological Tasks in Latin America," 91.

theology. But remaining for the moment with theology, we have with Luther a set of emphases that can provide healthy *motive* for being active politically (that is, guidance for why and how believers should be involved in politics). We have theology that offers healthy *priorities* in thinking about politics (that is, guidance for balancing legitimate political aspirations with needs in other areas of life). We have theology that could equip believers with healthy *attitudes* when acting politically (that is, guidance for how to regard the engagement with political problems, struggles, and outcomes). And we have theology that in its biblical wisdom can help to ascertain healthy *political goals* (that is, guidance for determining what should be sought through political means). In a word, the history of Christian engagement in American politics shows the need for healthier motives, priorities, attitudes, and goals; Lutheran theology seems poised to meet that need.<sup>84</sup>

Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms seems to be especially relevant in the context of Myanmar in two particular areas in relation to its historical, cultural and religious contexts which we have described in Chapter One and Chapter Two. We will briefly consider those two areas here while in the next chapter we will further explore how the application of Luther's teaching in the Myanmar context might look like at the practical level.

When we study the historical setting in which Luther wrote his *Temporal Authority*, several identical things can be observed in the situation in Myanmar. Christians in Myanmar have long been under the totalitarian rule of military dictatorship that used Burmese nationalism as a means to implement what is known as "Burmanization" that does not leave alone religion and the freedom to practice one's faith.

One can reflect on the political and religious landscape in Myanmar in the light of the gloomy situation in which Luther found himself when his books were banned and his subjects ordered to surrender them to the authorities. How should Christians respond to civil governments when civil governments interfere in the spiritual realm of the Christians? To what extent should Christians obey the government? It is here that Luther's insights and teaching could be used as guide as Christians in Myanmar navigate their ways through the maze of cultural and religious

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<sup>84</sup> Mark Noll, "What Lutherans Have to Offer Public Theology," in *Lutheran Quarterly* 22 (2008): 127.

encroachment by the majority Burmese Buddhists and the Burmese government.

Luther's teaching can also be quite helpful to Burmese Christians as it speaks to and corrects some of their common misconceptions about the society that surrounds them in the Myanmar context. The right understanding of the true nature of the structure of society through Luther's teaching will empower Christians in Myanmar as they live out their identity as God's children and witness to their neighbors in the life-situations where God has placed them in the left-hand kingdom of God. It will give them confidence and assurance when they recognize, as Luther teaches, that they are actually serving God in their respective vocations regardless of the nature of their jobs. In Luther's treatise, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, Luther tried to prove the dignity and independence of the temporal authority over against the medieval inclination to unite the two under the authority of the papacy. Luther firmly believed and taught that both the temporal and spiritual authority had their place within the church. He believed that members of both realms in the church are—whether working as clergy or farmers—priests before God in their own right:

So it follows that laypeople, priests, princes, bishops, and as they term it, the spiritual and temporal, should not be distinguished fundamentally on the basis of office or function or because of a person's status, for they are all spiritual positions and truly offices of priests, bishops, and popes. Yet they do not all have the same task, just as priests and monks do not have the same tasks. As I have said before, we are all part of one body, whose head is Jesus Christ, and everyone else are the members. The same goes for those who are considered "spiritual," that is, the priests, the bishop or the papacy. These persons are not to be any more distinguished from or found worthier than other Christians; their work is to carry out the administration of the sacrament and to preach God's Word. That is their task and office. Likewise, the temporal authorities have the sword and rod in hand in order to punish evil and protect the righteous and good.<sup>85</sup>

We cannot copy something from a context such as Germany of the sixteenth century or the United States of the twenty-first century and force it to be relevant to a totally different context

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<sup>85</sup> LW 44: 129–30.

such as that of Myanmar. But we can at least look at what is suitable in one context and probe into its applicability to another context. The focus of Mark Noll, as we have seen in the above quote, is on the Christian's involvement in politics in the setting of the United States of America. In this dissertation we are dealing not just with some political issues for which we are searching for relevant answers from Luther's teachings. We are dealing with a believer's whole life as it is lived in the context of a situation that is not so favorable to him or her to see whether Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms of God might be a useful and relevant theological paradigm for Christians in that situation.



## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **CHRISTIAN IDENTITY AND WITNESS IN MYANMAR**

In the final chapter of this dissertation, I would like to raise the question of whether Christian churches can play a significant role in the Burmese society as they seek to affirm their identity and endeavor to witness to and engage their neighbors in this Buddhist country of Myanmar. I believe Christians stand at a significant crossroads in the history of Myanmar as the country has just had its November 2015 parliamentary election, which may prove to decide the future of the country for democracy and human rights—things that the people of Myanmar have long been deprived of and what the same people have been dreaming of for decades. Christians might have failed to be a major cultural force in Myanmar in the past, but that need not be the case now. They might not have lived up to their name as the salt of the earth and the light of the world in this country of Myanmar in the past, but now is the time, I believe, that they should start rising up to the situation in Myanmar in the aftermath of so many years of oppressive and repressive totalitarian rule of successive military regimes. It is time for Christians to begin to think about taking action to really engage their neighbors.

This chapter will deal primarily with the Christian's life in the left-hand kingdom of God, which is his life in this world as a child of God. But to understand this life fully, it will be necessary to speak first about the nature of the Christian in light of the teaching on the two kingdoms. While focusing on the Christian's life in the kingdom of the world as a child of God, there is no intent to neglect or dismiss his life in the right-hand kingdom of God. The Christian's real identity as a child of God cannot be separated from his responsibility to live as such in the world. This leads us to discuss the "two kinds of righteousness." His life in the public flows, so

to speak, from his life in God—his active righteousness is a product of his passive righteousness that he has already enjoyed in God. The Christian’s position as one who has been justified by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ propels him into the world to live as such. One who has received his alien or passive righteousness from God has the freedom to live for his neighbor without the need to earn God’s favor by offering God some good things that he might be considered worthy of God’s grace and mercy.

### **Christian Public Engagement in Myanmar**

We cannot really affirm our Christian identity and enhance our witness in Myanmar without engaging the wider Buddhist public with the gospel for the Lord. But this means asking basic questions such as “What is the real identity of Christians in Myanmar?” “What are the true identity markers for them?” “How are they actually shaped as a distinct people of God in a culture where the concept of a living God seems strange and elusive?” “How do they really engage the wider public with the gospel and provide a voice of conscience in this country that has been under successive authoritarian governments?” Martin Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms of God, which was introduced in the preceding chapter, will provide the theological framework for us through which we can understand who we really are and what we can do to live out our true identity.

Luther’s distinction of two kingdoms takes us to the distinction of two kinds of righteousness. As all Christians believe, Luther taught that righteousness is basic to Christian identity. One is a Christian when one is righteous. Pelagians believe this just as much as Augustinians; Lutherans as much as Baptists. But Luther stressed the importance of acknowledging two kinds of righteousness. There is our righteousness with God, and there is our righteousness with others. The two are related, but are always to be distinguished. In the relationship with God (*coram Deo*) faith in Christ alone is all that matters. In our relationship

with others (*coram hominibus*), however, we are evaluated on the basis of actions and results. Luther expresses this succinctly in “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” written in 1520, when he says, “We... cannot deal with God otherwise than through the faith in the Word of his promise. He does not desire works, nor has he need of them; rather we deal with men and with ourselves on the basis of works.”<sup>1</sup> He explained it more fully in his “Sermon on the Two Kinds of Righteousness (1519)”:

There are two kinds of Christian righteousness, just as man's sin is of two kinds.

The first is alien righteousness, that is the righteousness of another, instilled [*infusa*] from without. This is the righteousness of Christ by which he justifies through faith.... This righteousness, then, is given to men in Baptism and whenever they are truly repentant....

Through faith in Christ, therefore, Christ's righteousness has become our righteousness and all that he has becomes ours; rather, he himself becomes ours.... This is an infinite righteousness, and one that swallows up all sins in a moment, for it is impossible that sin should exist in Christ. On the contrary, he who trusts Christ exists in Christ; he is one with Christ, having the same righteousness as he. It is therefore impossible that sin should remain in him....

The second kind of righteousness is our proper righteousness, not because we alone work it, but because we work with that first and alien righteousness. This is the manner of life spent profitably in good works, in the first place, in slaying the flesh and crucifying the desires with respect to the self.... In the second place, this righteousness consists in love to one's neighbor, and in the third place, in meekness and fear toward God.<sup>2</sup>

Luther called this distinction between two kinds of righteousness “our theology” in his preface to his commentary on Galatians in 1535: “This is our theology, by which we teach a precise distinction between these two kinds of righteousness, the active and the passive, so that morality and faith, works and grace, secular society and religion may not be confused. Both are necessary, but both must be kept within their limits.”<sup>3</sup> This teaching of the Bible on the

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<sup>1</sup> LW 36: 42.

<sup>2</sup> LW 31: 297–99.

<sup>3</sup> LW 26: 7.

believer's two kinds of righteousness calls for the believer to live out the active righteousness as the fulfillment of the two greatest laws demanded of him, and all people, by Jesus—to love God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-40; Mark 12:29-31; Luke 10:27).

Robert Kolb describes its significance thus:

In developing this contrast between passive and active righteousness—which expresses itself in faith—and active righteousness—which expresses itself in performing the deeds of God's plan for human life—Luther was bringing to light a fundamental distinction that has escaped articulation by most theologians since the time of the apostles. This distinction recognizes and rests upon Christ's observation that human life consists of two kinds of relationships, one with the author and creator of life, the other with all other creatures (Matt. 22:37-39).<sup>4</sup>

In a similar way, William W. Schumacher sees the two kinds of righteousness as two simultaneous dimensions of the genuine identity of the Christian. He emphasizes that they serve two different purposes.

These two different kinds of righteousness are not alternatives between which we must choose, but rather two simultaneous dimensions of genuine human identity. They serve different purposes and must, therefore, be kept distinct. Luther's recovery of a right understanding of justification involved the insight that our own activity and works have no place in deciding our standing before God. Similarly, the preaching of the Gospel does not govern nations, feed children, build houses, punish criminals, etc. Both kinds of righteousness are God's will, and both kinds are necessary for us to live in the world as fully human creatures restored in Christ.<sup>5</sup>

This distinction relates to our topic in this way: The believer is called to fulfill this command as he lives in God's left-hand kingdom while living in the two realms of God's rule—the right-hand realm and the left-hand realm—at the same time. Klaus Detlev Shulz sees correlations between Luther's teaching on the two kinds of righteousness, the kingdoms of God and other Christian doctrines:

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Kolb, "Luther on Two Kinds of Righteousness: Reflection on His Two-Dimensional Definition of Humanity at the Heart of His Theology," *Lutheran Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 452.

<sup>5</sup> William W. Schumacher, "Civic Participation by Churches and Pastors: An Essay on Two Kinds of Righteousness," *Concordia Journal* 30, no. 3 (July 2004):166.

What makes the two kinds of righteousness theologically challenging is that it draws in other Christian doctrines such as law and gospel, justification and sanctification, and the two kingdoms. Moreover, as Luther stated, the two kinds of righteousness help to clarify the difference between faith, morality, vocation,<sup>4</sup> natural theology, and philosophy. Thus, the second righteousness, the active one, carried out before humans and the world (*coram hominibus* or *mundo*), invites a review of social ethics and theological anthropology in connection to natural theology and moral philosophy. For natural theology and moral philosophy immediately surface as one contemplates the Christian's role in public life as he or she debates together with non-Christians the *res publicae*, the public concerns, as the ancient Romans called it. Isolationism, as proposed by Roman monasticism or the Anabaptists, was no option for Luther or Melancthon. When Christians engage in matters of the *res publicae*, however, they must anticipate that others contribute toward society's welfare with the use of their free will (*liberum arbitrium*) dictated by natural reason (*ratio*).<sup>6</sup>

Charles Arand and Joel Biermann, professors of systematic theology at Concordia

Seminary, St. Louis, also point out the close connection between our twofold righteousness and the two realms or kingdoms in Luther's teaching:

The two kinds of righteousness touch on countless facets of human living including everything from marriage, parenting, and vocation, to civil rights, higher education, and just war theory. The distinction, though, bears an especially close relationship to another important framework, namely, God's two forms of governance, or, as more popularly known, as the two kingdoms. A more detailed consideration of this particular application serves as a helpful illustration of the practical usefulness of the two kinds of righteousness.<sup>7</sup>

They further explain how God works through the two kinds of righteousness in the two kingdoms or realms to maintain peace and justice in the world for the sake of preserving human life and furthering His creational intention:

In the left-hand realm God rules through the Law; whereas, in the right-hand realm He rules through the Gospel. Here we hear echoes of the distinction between Law and Gospel. But whereas the distinction between Law and Gospel was made for the sake of repentance (contrition and faith), the distinction of the two realms has in view something different. It stresses God's work through the Law primarily in its first use (as a curb) rather than in its theological use (as a mirror), that is, God uses the Law to maintain peace and justice in the world for the sake of preserving human life and

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<sup>6</sup> Klaus Detlev Shulz, "Two Kinds of Righteousness and Moral Philosophy: Confessio Augustana XVIII, Philip Melancthon, and Martin Luther," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (January 2009): 17–18.

<sup>7</sup> Charles P. Arand and Joel Biermann, "Why the Two Kinds of Righteousness?" in *Concordia Journal* 33, no. 2 (April 2007): 128–29.

furthering His creational intention. Following World War II, Lutheran interpretations of the two forms of God's governance have been criticized for rendering German Christians acquiescent to governing authorities and incapable of opposing governmental injustice. The two kinds of righteousness provide ways to reappropriate the teaching on God's twofold governance within a democratic and post-Christian context.<sup>8</sup>

Understood in the context of the two kinds of righteousness, Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms will help us see ourselves as living in both kingdoms at the same time with the responsibility of living out our active righteousness for the sake of our neighbors. To quote Arand and Biermann again:

Considered within the two kinds of righteousness, the two realms cannot be seen as alternative forms of existence (with one being inferior to the other) in which we either live as citizens of this world or we live as citizens of heaven. As long as conscientious Lutheran Christians mistakenly identify the 'public square' (or civic life) exclusively with the arena of state and government, they concede the Enlightenment claim that faith has nothing to say in the public realm and allow Christianity to be confined to a private religious ghetto with nothing to say on important public questions. The Lutheran stress on active righteousness widens our vision regarding the left-hand realm and seeks to identify the common ground for moral reflection between Christians and non-Christians. Historically, when Christians were in league with the dominant culture they affirmed it even as they critiqued it. Such an approach is still needed; voluntary exile is not an option. Neither, however, is conquest. The conquest approach also confuses the two kinds of righteousness.... Here we urge distinction. Church *qua* institution lives in the left-hand realm—which is still God's realm—and is concerned for the extension of law and justice within that realm. A Lutheran appreciation of the two kinds of righteousness can help us reclaim what Robert Benne has called the 'paradoxical vision' of public theology in and for the secular society in which we live.<sup>9</sup>

Arand and Biermann think a renewed appreciation of the two kinds of righteousness can revitalize our thinking on the teaching of the two kingdoms of God. An understanding of their place in the two kingdoms with the two kinds of righteousness—the alien/passive and the active—will encourage and enable Christians to fulfill God's purpose in their lives by more actively participating in the civil realm. The passive righteousness defines who they are in Christ

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<sup>8</sup> Arand and Joel Biermann, "Why the Two Kinds of Righteousness?," 129.

<sup>9</sup> Arand and Joel Biermann, "Why the Two Kinds of Righteousness?," 132.

while the active righteousness gives them the opportunity to live out their true identity as the righteous children of God. The passive righteousness “makes” them what they are while the active righteousness creates space for them where they live out their true identity.

The two kinds of righteousness can revitalize our thinking on God's twofold rule so as to encourage Lutherans to be more active participants in the civil realm. We seek both kinds of righteousness as distinct but interrelated spheres of human existence! The distinction maintains that we do not simply relegate or relinquish the left-hand rule of God to impious non-Christians or to police forces. Christians do not seek and desire only the passive righteousness of Christ before God. They also seek active righteousness for the good of the human community. Indeed, since the passive righteousness of God frees Christians from needing to create or maintain a relationship with God, the believer's life may be completely devoted to the tasks of serving the rest of creation. Thus Christians find themselves within a variety of human communities in which they are called by God to cooperate and participate in His left-hand rule of the creation. In both realms, God works to accomplish His will for creation: the passive righteousness of faith as well as the active righteousness of human creatures by which He preserves the world. In other words, the distinction between the two realms reveals the distinct works of God within human life: God's providential/sustaining work through the Law and God's redemptive/restorative work through the Gospel. The first emphasizes God's care for the fallen world with His left hand through the rule of Law while the other emphasizes God's preservation of the church and consequent restoration of the whole creation (Rom. 8:18-23) with His right hand through the proclamation of the Gospel.<sup>10</sup>

The distinction of two kinds of righteousness has two basic implications for public engagement, including engagement in Myanmar. The first pertains to righteousness before God. It calls on the Church to be clear that we are God's justified children by the alien/passive righteousness that God has provided in Christ alone. If Christians are going to observe a distinction of two kingdoms, then they must also observe a distinction of two kinds of righteousness.

In the first case, this means seeing our standing before God as solely a matter of his grace in Christ, and in any way not a matter of our own efforts, merits, or intentions. Passive righteousness is not about human deeds and good works. It is God imputing his righteousness to

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<sup>10</sup> Arand and Joel Biermann, “Why the Two Kinds of Righteousness?,” 133–34.

the believing sinner on the basis of Christ's finished work by forgiving their sins and declaring them righteous. Joel Biermann again offers this insight into the nature and significance of passive righteousness:

Passive righteousness names what is, at least for most contemporary Lutherans, the more familiar jurisdiction of the word righteousness. Passive righteousness is not concerned with a person's relationships with and responsibilities toward other creatures. It is interested in the relation between the person and his Creator. Passive righteousness addresses the individual's standing before God. And as any confirmed Lutheran knows, when it comes to being righteous before God a person does nothing. He simply receives what God has to give. He is indeed, passive before God, coming into God's presence carrying not a splendid sack of good works with which to impress his Lord, but a sack of wretchedness and filth—the many sins of his failed living. God's gift of righteousness is not earned or claimed. It is bestowed by the declaration of God, by grace for the sake of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. That's justification. That's righteousness before God—passive righteousness.<sup>11</sup>

This is not meant simply as a position Christians should adopt as another belief, but primarily as a guide to the ministry of the Church. Put in terms of Christian engagement, there will be no full and faithful Christian engagement with the society in Myanmar or any other society unless there is first the ministry of the Church by which God makes people Christians by grace alone. The reason is not simply theoretical—it is not in accord with a certain doctrine or theory—but practical. Without this distinction being part of the life and ministry of the Church, there will be always a temptation to make one's own work about making justifying ourselves before God, rather than their being for the good of the neighbors. In other words, the distinction bears directly on our responsibility as God children to live out our righteousness in an active and practical way.

The two kinds of righteousness, then, implies a call on all Christian churches to review and reform their ministries. A correct evaluation of the Christian's life in the secular realm is a corollary of Luther's insight about two kinds of righteousness. The passive righteousness

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<sup>11</sup> Joel Biermann, "Two Kinds of Righteousness," *Tower* (Spring 2005): 3.



establishes and determines our real identity in Christ before God which gives the Christian a freedom to fulfill his vocation and serve his neighbor in the world. These two dimensions of genuine human identity serve two distinct purposes and are necessary for us to live in the world as restored and renewed human beings in Christ. The right understanding of the distinction between the two kinds of righteousness gives us a true freedom to live a full and fruitful life for the good of our neighbors. Since we no longer have to earn God's favor and salvation by our works we can now put them to good use to serve our neighbors.

Having reviewed the two kinds of righteousness, we should ask how the concept of active righteousness bears on the situation in Myanmar. As regards what is known as the "active righteousness," Joel Biermann puts it this way:

Active righteousness refers to the things of this world and to the obligations and responsibilities that every creature bears simply by virtue of her role as a participant in God's created realm. Active righteousness means being where you are supposed to be, doing what you are supposed to do, the way that you are supposed to be doing it.<sup>12</sup>

This dimension of active righteousness in which all human beings are called to live corresponds to the left-hand kingdom/rule of God where Christians are called to live for their neighbors. This dimension of righteousness can be understood as a person's horizontal relationship with the whole creation in contrast to the vertical relationship of the believer, which is the relationship that a person enjoys between God and himself. Kolb further states:

The horizontal relationship has bound us to the rest of creation as people who are held accountable for exercising God-given responsibilities in an adult manner toward other creatures, human but also animal, mineral, and vegetable. They are right—really human—in their horizontal relationship with God's other creatures when they live a life which is active in reflecting this love through the deeds that deliver his care and concern.<sup>13</sup>

It is here for this reason that the teaching on two kinds of righteousness in connection with

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<sup>12</sup> Biermann, "Two Kinds of Righteousness," 3.

<sup>13</sup> Kolb, "Luther on Two Kinds of Righteousness," 453.

the two kingdoms as articulated by Luther can help Christians in Myanmar to find the most Biblically authentic paradigm for their very rightful existence as a believing community in the midst of nationalistic Buddhist Burmese. What I mean by a Biblically authentic paradigm is a theological paradigm that is faithful to the teaching of the Bible as it is based upon faithful exegesis of the Bible. Luther constructs his teaching on the two kingdoms, as well as the distinction between law and gospel, upon an exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7, as well as Romans 12:19; 13:1–7 and I Peter 2: 13 ff. and many other pertinent passages throughout the Bible. Even though Christians in Myanmar have been the object of discrimination along ethnic and religious lines, they can and should still show the love of God to their neighbors for that is what is called the service of love. Even though the Christian lives under both rules in both kingdoms, Luther does not “mean to separate them as though believers live only under the authority of Christ, nor does he bring the two together in such a way as to make the believer appear schizophrenic. He is viewing two aspects of the same existence.”<sup>14</sup> This is what Robert Benne calls “a paradoxical vision,”<sup>15</sup> which he acclaims to be the Lutheran way of understanding Christian life under the rule of God in two distinct aspects. This understanding can be a useful model for believers who live as a minority religious group in Myanmar struggling to affirm their very existence and their expand their engagement with the wider unbelieving community as they learn to live in both temporal and spiritual realities at the same time. This practical aspect of our lives can be studied under the heading of what scholars call “public theology.”

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<sup>14</sup> Robert E. Webber, *The Church in the World: Oppositions, Tensions, or Transformation?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 108–109.

<sup>15</sup> This idea of Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms of God as a “paradoxical vision” is a theme developed and maintained throughout the book by Robert Benne. In his book, Benne lays out the paradoxical nature of the Christian’s public life as its running theme: the paradox of the qualitative distinction between God’s salvation and all human efforts; the paradox of human nature; the paradox of God’s twofold rule; the paradox of history, etc. See Robert Benne, *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

## Public Engagement As Public Theology

The Christian's engagement with the wider public can be described as "public theology." By public theology I mean the Christian's engagement with the surrounding creation and culture. In the case of Christians in Myanmar, the public is an unbelieving Buddhist society. This is the setting for the Christian's life in the left-hand kingdom of God for his neighbors. This life involves everything that a believer in Christ is concerned with in this world.

Robert Benne also sees the Christian's engagement with the wider public as "public theology" and defines public theology as referring to "the *engagement* of a living religious tradition with its public environment—the economic, political, and cultural spheres of our common life."<sup>16</sup> He further articulates what he means by the Christian's public engagement, called public theology:

Thus the public environment is *engaged* by most religious traditions. It is engaged by individual adherents of a tradition who have been formed by that tradition, as well as by the formal religious organizations themselves. When a religious tradition becomes practically engaged with its public environment, either intentionally or unintentionally, religion becomes publically relevant. I will call this practical engagement "public theology" from here on, although in many ways I am referring to publically engaged religion.<sup>17</sup>

Charles T. Mathewes understands the way Christians "should participate in public life" as a "theology of public life."<sup>18</sup> Mathewes further explains what he means by one's "public life," that is, in his case, an American public life:

"Public life" includes everything concerned with the "public good"—everything from patently political actions such as voting, campaigning for a candidate, or running for office, to less directly political activities such as serving on a school board or planning commission, volunteering in a soup kitchen, and speaking in a

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Benne, *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 4.

<sup>17</sup> Benne, *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Charles T. Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

civic forum, and to arguably non-political behaviors, such as simply talking to one's family, friends, co-workers, or strangers about public matters of common concern.<sup>19</sup>

Thiemann, speaking from the setting of the American context, bids us to contemplate the challenges in developing a public theology that is Christian faith while also relevant to matters of public interest:

Our challenge is to develop a public theology that remains based in the particulars of the Christian faith while genuinely addressing issues of public significance. Too often, theologies that seek to address a broad secular culture lose touch with the distinctive beliefs and practices of the Christian tradition. In their zeal to engage a public realm in which theological discourse is either unknown or viewed with suspicion, theologians tend to adopt concepts and forms of analysis foreign to the Christian faith. In the process, the distinctive substance and prophetic "bite" of the Christian witness are undermined. On the other hand, theologies that seek to preserve the characteristic language and patterns of Christian narrative and practice too often fail to engage the public realm in an effective and responsible fashion. Either they eschew public discourse altogether in order to preserve what they see as the uniqueness of Christian life, or they enter the public fray with single-minded ferocity, heedless of the pluralistic traditions of our democratic policy. If Christians are to find an authentic public voice in today's culture, we must find a middle way between these two equally unhappy alternatives.<sup>20</sup>

As we will see later in the following pages in this chapter, Luther's teaching on the Christian's life in the two kingdoms, which as a theological model is understood as a "paradox" rather than "a middle way" that Thiemann had advocated in the above quote is the best model for Myanmar. Thiemann understands public theology not to be a "specialized discipline or technical subspecies with a unique method of inquiry. Like all Christian theology, it is guided by the Anselmian credo: 'I believe in order that I may understand.'"<sup>21</sup> He conceives of public theology as "faith seeking to understand the relation between Christian conviction and the broader social and cultural context within which the Christian community lives. In order for that relation to be properly understood, the theologian must offer a careful and detailed 'thick description' of the

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<sup>19</sup> Matthewes, *A Theology of Public Life*, 1.

<sup>20</sup> Ronald F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 19.

entities being compared.”<sup>22</sup> “The goal,” Thiemann says, “is not to provide an overarching theory that explains how ‘church and world’ or ‘fundamental question and answer’ are related to one another. Rather,” he insists, “the goal is to identify the particular places where Christian convictions intersect with the practices that characterize contemporary public life.”<sup>23</sup> Whether Thiemann is correct about the need or value of an “overarching theory” may be debated, but he certainly is right about the need to identify places of intersection between Christian conviction and public life.

One of the most basic motivations for the Christians’ engagement with a public that is wider than the church is their call to live and witness in the world. It is true that Christians may have their own distinct ethos, life style and practices but this does not mean that they should retreat from society. The Christians make up the church of Christ on earth and the same church exists in different countries and in different situations as part of assorted larger societies exist under governments of various political systems. The church and state always exist in juxtaposition, as Christians are part of the larger society or culture. Martin Scharlemann’s description about the believers’ twofold belonging is a good description of the situation in which Christians find themselves:

Christians are at one and the same time members of the church and citizens of a particular nation. Luther would say that they are subjects of both the kingdom on God’s left hand and that on His right. They live in both the old and the new aeons, and they would be unfaithful to their trust were they to ignore or attempt to escape a situation described by our Lord in His high-priestly prayer when He said: “I do not pray that Thou shouldst take them out of the world but that Thou shouldst keep them from the evil one.” (John 17:15).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture*, 21.

<sup>22</sup> Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture*, 21.

<sup>23</sup> Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture*, 21–22.

<sup>24</sup> Martin H. Scharlemann, “Scriptural Concepts of the Church and the State,” *Church and State Under God* Edited by Albert G. Huegli (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1964), 27, 28.

The existence of these two entities in juxtaposition—the church and the state—at the same time in the same place, that is, in the world, is not without some problems and tensions. In other words, the tension under which the Christian is called to live and witness has been the subject of theological discussions that have generated differing views on what the best paradigm is for a Christian to address this tension. Christians are expected neither to withdraw from the world nor to conform to it, let alone being part of it.

Christians cannot help but engage the surrounding culture as they find themselves in a society that is larger than the Christian church. Yet, even though they are in the world they are not of the world. They are not supposed to retreat from the world but rather to engage it with the Gospel. The Christian's life in the two kingdoms is intended for engagement with, not withdrawal from the world.

### **The Setting of Myanmar as a Culture without Christ**

Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms is not just about the church/state relationship nor is it about the Christian's responsibility to civil government alone. It concerns the Christian's whole life identity as a child of God in both God's right-hand kingdom and His left-hand kingdom at the same time. But how are we to conceive of the relationship between Christians and the Church on the one hand and the society including its government on the other hand? In North America it has been common to think of this as a question of "Christ and culture." The expression comes from Richard Niebuhr in his book, *Christ and Culture*.<sup>25</sup> The book has influenced or at least informed the discussion of the Christian's relationship with what Niebuhr calls "culture" since its first publication in 1951. It must be admitted that this classic by Niebuhr is not without flaws in its categorization and classification of different denominations and people

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<sup>25</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

into a five-fold typology.<sup>26</sup> It must be acknowledged at the same time, however, that the book is very useful in any discussion of the same topic.

H. Richard Niebuhr provided five interpretive models by which one might gain a better understanding of the history and interrelationship of the Christian church and civil government. For Niebuhr, these five models are the answers that Christians have given to the enduring problem of Christ and culture: “Christ against Culture,” “The Christ of Culture,” “Christ above Culture,” “Christ and Culture in Paradox,” and “Christ the Transformer of Culture.”

Niebuhr’s first model, “Christ against Culture,” is an inflexible defense of the authority of Christ for the believer. This model has been in existence since the early days of the church. It urges Christians to avoid participating in things political and worldly. According to Niebuhr, Tertullian was a fervent advocate of this model, famously saying: “As those in whom all ardor in the pursuit of honor and glory is dead, we have no pressing inducement to take part in your public meetings; nor is there aught more entirely foreign to us than affairs of state.”<sup>27</sup>

Niebuhr’s second model, “The Christ of Culture,” sees Christ as the fulfillment of the hopes and aspirations of society. There is no tension between Christ and culture as Christianized civilization is in progress. This model was popular in the early church as many Christians interpreted Christ in terms of the prevalent Graeco-Roman culture.

The third model, “Christ above Culture,” attempts to synthesize Christ and culture so that

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<sup>26</sup> John Howard Yoder’s classic criticism can be taken as an example of a complaint against Niebuhr’s five-fold typology where Yoder raises several objections to the way Mennonites are treated in *Christ and Culture*. Yoder critiques that Niebuhr misrepresents the intention and practice of most Mennonite groups by taking the Old Order Amish or the Bruderhof as representative of all the denominations derived from the Radical Reformation. Niebuhr criticizes the Mennonites (and others) for being inconsistent, that is, for renouncing all participation in politics and military service, but maintaining their own regulations for moderating involvement in cultural areas such as economics and education. Yoder refutes these accusations in his essay. See John Howard Yoder, “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of Christ and Culture,” ed. Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 31–89.

<sup>27</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, xxxviii as quoted in H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 54.

while Christ “neither arises out of culture nor contributes directly to it.” He is “the fulfillment of cultural aspirations and the restorer of the institutions of true society.”<sup>28</sup>

The fourth model, “Christ and Culture in Paradox,” is the model that Niebuhr attributed to Luther as representing the Lutheran understanding of the paradoxical nature of the relationship between “Christ and culture.” The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) evaluates: “This model acknowledges that humans do not encounter in God a simple unity, that the God of grace and mercy is also a God of judgment and wrath (Is. 45:7). This seemingly paradoxical binding of wrath and mercy is a major theme in the letters of Paul and in the writings of Martin Luther.”<sup>29</sup>

The fifth model, “Christ Transforming Culture,” sees a more hopeful potential for human culture to serve the cause of Christ as it works to counteract the consequences of the fall.

The context in which *Christ and Culture* was written and the cultural setting Niebuhr has tried to address was no doubt that of North America and Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is more or less written in the context or at least on the presupposition of the existence of the so-called Christendom. Craig Carter notes: “*Christ and Culture* is based on a very large, general background assumption: the theory of Christendom, which is taken for granted by both author and readers. Niebuhr’s five types presuppose the existence of Christendom, and the debate between them is carried out within a Christendom paradigm. The book could just as well have been titled *Christ and Culture in the Context of Christendom*.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 42.

<sup>29</sup> The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR), *Render Unto Caesar... and Unto God: A Lutheran View of Church and State* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1995), 33.

<sup>30</sup> Craig A. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 14. Carter defines Christendom as: “Christendom is the concept of Western civilization as having a religious arm (the church) and a secular arm (civil government), both of which are united in their adherence to Christian faith, which is seen as the so-called soul of Europe or the West.”



Myanmar's religious and cultural contexts, especially those of the Christians in Myanmar, are very different from those in America and Europe. The culture Christians have to engage in the Myanmar context is a culture *without* Christ! I use this terminology "culture without Christ" for the setting of the predominantly Buddhist country of Myanmar that is different from what Richard John Neuhaus calls "Christ without Culture."<sup>31</sup> Neuhaus has suggested this term for the "American culture," or "the American way of living,"<sup>32</sup> which is a very "capacious and hospitable culture with a marked respect for pluralism."<sup>33</sup>

In the spite of appending Niebuhr's models, it could be argued that the church in the predominantly Buddhist country of Myanmar has been called to live and witness in a "culture without Christ" where the followers of Christ are in an urgent need of a theological framework within which they can affirm and live out their identity and for which I have proposed Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms as the best model for the context of Myanmar. It is also important to note that the word "culture" is used here not only for the state, but for the broader society or the broader public in which the church exists and functions as a living witness for the new life she has been graciously granted in Christ. It is helpful to see the nuances of the word *culture* as used by Niebuhr in comparison with Neuhaus's understanding of what the same word means:

Speaking of Christ and culture will, for many, immediately bring to mind H. Richard Niebuhr's classic book of that title. Readers of that book will recall his typology of the ways in which the relationship between Christian and culture, meaning Christianity and culture, has been understood over the course of Christian history. Niebuhr suggests that there are essentially five ways to frame this relationship: Christ against culture. The Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ transforming culture. While Niebuhr's typology is suggestive and, therefore useful, it is also seriously misleading on several scores....

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<sup>31</sup> Richard John Neuhaus, "Christ without Culture," ed. George Timothy, *J. I. Packer and the Evangelical Future: The Importance of His Life and Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

<sup>32</sup> Neuhaus, "Christ without Culture," 145.

<sup>33</sup> Neuhaus, "Christ without Culture," 145.

Nevertheless, Niebuhr is certainly right that the questions of Christ and culture have been a constant in Christian history from the apostolic era to the present, and will be until our Lord's promised return in glory. Barrels of ink have been spilled trying to define what is meant by *culture*, and I do not presume to have the final word on the subject. By *culture* I mean the historical ambiance, the social context of ideas and habits, within which the church proclaims and lives the gospel of Christ. This included the dominant moral assumptions, the widely held assumptions, and the beliefs and behaviors that characterize economic, political, religious, and educational life, along with the institutions that reflect and supports those habits, beliefs, and behaviors. One might go so far as to say that culture is to us what water is to fish; it is more assumed than analyzed.<sup>34</sup>

So, given the culture without Christ model that one encounters in Myanmar, is it reasonable to employ a model supposedly limited only to Christendom? That is, can Christians in a culture without Christ, which is a predominantly Buddhist culture in contradiction to Niebuhr's five models find value in and direction from the theological framework of Christ and culture in paradox as Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms has been interpreted and understood? We will see how Christians in a predominantly Buddhist country of Myanmar could best engage their public as they comprehend and appreciate their position in the two kingdoms of God.

### **The Two Kingdoms as the Framework for Christian Living**

It must be clearly stated again with emphasis that Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms should not be confused with the relationship or separation of church and state. Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms does not represent his political theory. This teaching can be taken as Luther's "understanding of Christian reality,"<sup>35</sup> as William J. Wright observes. He further explains: "For Martin Luther, God's two kingdoms were a fundamental premise based upon the diligent study of the Scriptures. They were the reality in which the Christian lived during his or her lifetime. As a basic assumption, Luther presented all of his teachings within the context of

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<sup>34</sup> Neuhaus, "Christ without Culture," 144.

<sup>35</sup> Wright, *Martin Luther's Understanding of God's Two Kingdoms*, 38.

these two kingdoms.”<sup>36</sup> By calling attention to the two kinds of God’s righteousness in a believer, Robert Kolb and Charles Arand, in their book, *The Genius of Luther’s Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church*, elucidate that Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms should be understood as the whole of Christian reality. They say: “To use Luther’s language, Christians live in two worlds, one heavenly and the other earthly. Into these we place the two kinds of righteousness, which are distinct and separate from each other.”<sup>37</sup> The Swedish theologian, Gustaf Wingren, in his book, *The Christian’s Calling: Luther on Vocation*, placed Christian vocation in the context of the two kingdoms. Wingren clearly showed the centrality of the concept of the two kingdoms in all of Luther’s thought. In explaining the two kingdoms, Wingren emphasized that “faith’s realm is a future kingdom, a kingdom after death; but vocation’s realm is the present and will come to an end.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, Luther’s teaching can actually work even in a culture in the present world that bears no resemblance to Christendom.

Stated in the most basic terms, Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms can be understood as providing the framework for Christian living. The reason is that the life that a Christian is called to live is a life lived in the spiritual kingdom or realm and earthly kingdom or realm of God at the same time. The Christian’s life in the earthly kingdom is understood as a life of different estates or situations. It is a life that is rooted in the doctrine of God’s good creation. Luther sees these estates as being ordained by God from the beginning, which are called “orders of creation”—household (and by extension economic life), government, and the church. In one of his lectures on Genesis, Luther wrote: “This life is profitably divided into three orders: (1) life in the home; (2) life in the state; (3) life in the church. To whatever order you belong—whether

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<sup>36</sup> Wright, *Martin Luther’s Understanding of God’s Two Kingdoms*, 11.

<sup>37</sup> Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther’s Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 128.

<sup>38</sup> Kolb and Arand, *The Genius of Luther’s Theology*, 12–13, 19–20, 23.

you are a husband, an officer of the state, or a teacher of the church—look about you, and see whether you have done full justice to your calling.”<sup>39</sup> These estates can be understood as “walks of life” for Christians, which are the contexts in which Christians glorify God through service to their neighbors. Luther also taught that no estate or walk of life is better than any other. Luther wrote: “All estates and works of God are to be praised as highly as they can be and none despised in favor of another.”<sup>40</sup> Luther further taught that faithfulness in one’s estate in life is that which really counts, not the highness or lowness of the nature of his or her estate. Luther said: “Hence when a maid milks the cows or a hired man hoes the field—provided that they are believers, namely that they conclude that this kind of life is pleasing to God and was instituted by God—they serve God more than all the monks and nuns.”<sup>41</sup> Robert Kolb explains what Luther taught about different estates (situations) in which Christians are placed in the earthly kingdom of our horizontal relationship:

In accordance with a rather general perception of his day, Luther taught that within the structures of horizontal relationships God’s people stand in three specific kinds of situations. Since the industrial revolution divided one of these into two areas of modern life, we might better understand Luther’s framework for Christian living if we talked of the four “estates” (*Stand, Stände*) or “situations” of the “earthly kingdom,” of our horizontal relationships. The fundamental relationship which God created for human life is the situation of the family. In Luther’s day family members worked together in their homes or went out of them together as a unit to work in the fields, so we should best divide this first of Luther’s situations into home and economic activity. Out of the family unit, Luther believed, grew two others. His second estate was that of the community or state, in which families are united for the common good. Luther’s third estate was that of the church, the congregation of those who join in faith for public worship and praise, for mutual edification and support.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, there are various offices or responsibilities within each estate or situation.

Kolb explains what Luther teaches about different offices in each estate:

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<sup>39</sup> LW 3: 217.

<sup>40</sup> LW 46: 246.

<sup>41</sup> LW 3: 321.

<sup>42</sup> Kolb, “God Calling,” 5–6.

Within each of these estates or situations Luther taught that God assigns His people “offices” (*Amt, Ämter*) or responsibilities. Within the home God designates people to perform the responsibilities of spouse, parent, child, and other responsibilities of the extended family. In the situation of economic activity or job God meets general human needs through farmers, millers, packinghouse workers, grocery store clerks; through those who bring the harvest of wool, cotton, or synthetics to those who spin, weave, sew, and sell clothing; through physicians and teachers, plumbers and carpenters, journalists and entertainers. Within the larger communities of families God appointed some to the responsibilities of governing and others to serving the governors, either as officers of their government or as subjects. The disappearance of subjects and appearance of citizens in modern states have greatly altered the obligations or responsibilities in the political community for most people. Nonetheless, the principle that God assigns responsibilities and that human creatures are obligated to serve one another still stands. People ought also worship God together that they may encourage one another in their vertical relationship, their relationship with their Creator; and in this sphere God assigns some to the office of preaching and administration of the Sacraments, while He assigns others to other specific responsibilities in the church, and charges all with the responsibilities of witnessing and mutual care.<sup>43</sup>

Christians are expected to live responsibly in their various offices and stations. Luther writes: “But at least outwardly, according to his body and property, he [persons in offices and stations] is related by subjection and obligation to the emperor, inasmuch as he occupies some office or station in life or has a house and home, a wife and children; for all these are matters that pertain to the emperor. Here he must necessarily do what he is told and what this outward life requires.”<sup>44</sup> Wright explains what Luther means by this outward obedience:

Luther went on to point out in considerable detail what the outward life required. In one’s station and offices, one must assume his or her responsibilities under the law of the land or country in which he or she lived. If one was a husband or father, he could not shirk his responsibilities to his wife or children. Likewise, a mother should not fail to protect her children. Speaking in the context of would-be Christians who, under the guise of following the gospel, wanted to avoid their outward responsibilities (love of their neighbors), Luther asked: “What kind of a crazy mother would refuse to defend and save her children from a dog or wolf and who would say, ‘A Christian must not defend himself?’” He continued, “Are you a mother? Then do your duty.” It is extremely important to note in these comments the implication of a kind of law that bound all people. Duties came with the offices and stations of life, such as those of fathers and mothers, for example, who were responsible to defend

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<sup>43</sup> Kolb, “God Calling,” 6.

<sup>44</sup> *LW* 21: 109

and protect their children. Luther assumes that the positive laws incorporated these rules. It will not do to pretend that Luther was saying that one should simply follow orders (“do what one was told by superiors”), because Luther was talking here, at length, about social responsibilities which were common to and known to all people.<sup>45</sup>

Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms not only teaches that the Christian is endowed with offices or responsibilities in each estates, but also brings a corrective to the medieval traditional hierarchical structure of authority. Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms was his rejection of the medieval error that confused the two powers—temporal and spiritual. John Witte points out that Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms was a radical disavowal of the traditional hierarchical structure that ordered medieval society. The impact of the discovery of the nature of the believer’s position in society, which in reality is his life in God’s left-hand kingdom is extremely significant. He writes:

Luther’s two-kingdoms theory was a rejection of traditional hierarchical theories of being, society, and authority. For centuries, the Christian West had taught that God’s creation was hierarchical in structure—a vast chain of being emanating from God and descending through various levels and layers of reality. In this great chain of being, each creature found its place and its purpose, and each human society found its natural order and hierarchy. It was thus simply the nature of things that some persons and institutions were higher on this chain of being, some lower. It was the nature of things that some were closer and had more ready access to God, and some were further away and in need of greater mediation in their relationship with God. This was one basis for traditional Catholic arguments of the superiority of the pope to the emperor, of the clergy to the laity, of the spiritual sword to the temporal sword, of the canon law to the civil law, of the Church to the state.<sup>46</sup>

Witte also understands these estates and offices as the different dimensions of God’s presence in the world. He points out that Luther understood these three estates with different responsibilities to be equal before God. :

Luther’s two-kingdoms theory also turned the traditional hierarchical theory of authority onto its side. Luther rejected the medieval two-swords theory that regarded

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<sup>45</sup> Wright, *Martin Luther’s Understanding of God’s Two Kingdoms*, 141. The Luther quotes are from LW 21, 110.

<sup>46</sup> Witte, Jr., *Law and Protestantism*, 6.

the spiritual authority of the cleric and the canon law to be naturally superior to the temporal authority of the magistrate and the civil law. In Luther's view, God has ordained three basic forms and forums of authority for governance of the earthly life: the domestic, ecclesiastical, and political authorities, or, in modern terms, the family, the church, and the state. *Hausvater*, *Gottesvater*, and *Landesvater*; *paterfamilias*, *patertheologicus*, and *paterpoliticus*: these were the three natural offices ordained at creation. All three of these authorities represented different dimensions of God's presence and authority in the earthly kingdom. All three stood equal before God and before each other in discharging their natural callings. All three were needed to resist the power of sin and the Devil in the earthly kingdom. The family was called to rear and nurture children, to teach and discipline them, to cultivate and exemplify love and charity within the home and the broader community. The Church was called to preach the Word, to administer the sacraments, to discipline its wayward members. The state was called to protect peace, to punish crime, to promote the common good, and to support the church, the family, and various other institutions, such as schools and charities, that were derived from them.<sup>47</sup>

The significance of the right understanding Luther's teaching is great. This means that for Luther "Christendom" is not essential for his teaching on the state to be true. If Luther thought all estates were places of God's activity, then also a secular state and even a state founded on a false religion can be used by God to accomplish his purposes, and so can be supported by Christians.

Here the doctrine of Christian vocation enters in as we see ourselves doing God's bidding to be his representatives and ambassadors to our neighbors.

### **Luther's Teaching on the Two Kingdoms of God and Christian Vocation**

Connected with Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms is, understandably, what is known as his teaching on "Christian vocation." The Christian's life in the left-hand kingdom is understood as a calling or vocation for the sake of his neighbor. The word "vocation" literally means calling. Martin Luther is credited with the recovery of the word "vocation" for general Christian use, but more importantly, with reviving its correct teaching. Jürgen Moltmann identifies the teaching of Luther on vocation as the third great insight of the Lutheran

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<sup>47</sup> Witte, Jr., *Law and Protestantism*, 7.

Reformation, after word and sacrament: “Next to Word and Sacrament, the recognition of the divine vocation of every Christian in his or her worldly occupation is the third great insight of the Lutheran Reformation”<sup>48</sup>

Prior to Luther, vocation was understood and used typically to refer to a special calling to religious life such as a priest, monk, or nun. Such a vocation was understood as a higher calling, set over against life in the family and in civil society. Luther’s understanding of the gospel as God’s free gift led him to reject monastic life as an expression of a higher and more meritorious calling. He also rejected the division between sacred and profane spheres on which the medieval church’s understanding of calling was based. In doing this, Luther broadened the concept of vocation from a narrow ecclesiastical concentration to a concept that describes the life and work of all Christians in response to God’s call. Luther insisted that “[e]very occupation has its own honor before God, as well as its own requirements and duties.”<sup>49</sup> “Just as individuals are different,” Luther says, “so their duties are different; and in accordance with the diversity of their callings, God demands diverse works of them.”<sup>50</sup> Twentieth-century Swedish theologian, Gustaf Wingren explains: “With persons as his ‘hands’ or ‘coworkers,’ God gives his gifts through the earthly vocations [food through farmers, fishermen and hunters; external peace through princes, judges, and orderly powers; knowledge and education through teachers and parents, etc.].”<sup>51</sup> Kathryn Kleinhans cautions that vocation should not be understood in individual efforts alone, but also in social and political structures:

It is important to recognize that God works through humans not only through individual efforts but also through their social and political structures. Luther

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<sup>48</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, “Reformation and Revolution,” in *Martin Luther and the Modern Mind*, ed. Manfred Hoffmann, Toronto Studies in Theology, 22 (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1985), 186.

<sup>49</sup> *LW* 46: 246.

<sup>50</sup> *LW* 2: 113.

<sup>51</sup> Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), 27.



frequently describes life in three “orders” or arenas of activity—the household, the state, and the church—each of which he understands as having been established by God for the common good. God’s will for the creation can thus be expressed through socially constructed laws as well as through the laws of nature, and humans are subject to God’s regulating activity in both of these ways. From the point of view of the Lutheran reformers, to withdraw from civil affairs, as did both monks and Anabaptists, was to deny the legitimacy of God’s created orders. Indeed, to withdraw from civic affairs was to abandon the neighbor rather than to serve the neighbor.<sup>52</sup>

Robert Kolb sees the connection of Luther’s teaching on the “two kingdoms” and his teaching on the believer’s two kinds of righteousness, and both in relation to Christian vocation. He writes:

In the horizontal realm human creatures are not only the dependent children of which the kingdom of God consists (Matt. 18:3). There they also are designed and called to act as responsible adults. In this realm, righteousness consists in carrying out the responsibilities prescribed by the Creator for the care of His creation according to His design for human life. In this realm, the Gospel motivates the actions of the believer, but the coercion or blandishment of the Law motivates the actions of unbelievers (and often believers as well)... While the vertical governing of God produces faith, His horizontal governing produces love, expressed in good works.<sup>53</sup>

While Luther’s understanding of the Christian’s callings or vocation in his daily life is based on the life that is lived out in the two kinds of righteousness, unbelievers can also achieve a form of horizontal righteousness. Kolb says: “Thus, unbelievers can practice what Luther called ‘civil righteousness.’ Believers cooperate with unbelievers in the horizontal realm to preserve the human community, the polis or city, not on the basis of the Gospel but on the basis of God’s design for external human interaction, His law.”<sup>54</sup>

Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms of God makes the right room for Christians to fulfill their God-ordained responsibility of caring for their neighbors in the form of their “vocation.” Kathryn Kleinhans explains the connection between Luther’s teaching on the two

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<sup>52</sup> Kathryn Kleinhans, “The Work of a Christian: Vocation in Lutheran Perspective,” *Word & World* 25, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 399.

<sup>53</sup> Robert Kolb, “Christian Civic Responsibility in an Age of Judgment,” *Concordia Journal* 19, no.1 (January 1993): 17.

kingdoms, the two kinds of righteousness and Christian vocation, which the Christian lives out in the left-hand kingdom or the kingdom of the world as active righteousness, which can be understood as the manifestation of his or her true identity as one who has been made righteous in the sight of God.

Luther's so-called "two kingdoms" doctrine is illustrative here. In its mature form, it refers not to two separate, mutually exclusive spheres, but rather to two distinct ways in which God exercises divine authority: God is at work through the gospel, offering forgiveness and new life, and God is at work through the law, bringing order to the world. This twofold understanding of God's activity is the background for the distinct Reformation understanding of vocation as God's call to service in and for the world. The "secular" world is also God's world and is a suitable realm for divine service—not by serving God directly (since God does not need human works) but insofar as one serves the God-given neighbor. Seen through the lens of vocation, all human work becomes a means to participate in God's creating and sustaining activity on earth.

This Lutheran understanding of vocation is distinct not only from the Catholic understanding but also from the Anabaptist understanding. The Schleithem Confession, adopted by the Swiss Brethren in 1527, explicitly rejected the participation of Christians in "civic affairs," since worldly government and punishment are necessary only for those "outside the perfection of Christ." The Augsburg Confession, in turn, just as explicitly rejected the Anabaptist position, defending the legitimate participation of Christians in civil and military matters.<sup>55</sup>

We are eschatological people of God in an alienated and broken world, whether we live in the Christian or post-Christian West or predominant Buddhist countries such as Myanmar. Yet, we are called to live a witnessing life as the people of God in this world. We are placed in the world to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. The question is, "How do we best fulfill our God-given responsibility?" As individual Christians and churches, we respond in different ways to the multiplicity of conditions that confront us in society. We are called not to evade our duty to live for God and the good of our neighbors but to respond willingly to God's call. What we have observed in Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms or realms seems to me to

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<sup>54</sup> Kolb, "Christian Civic Responsibility in an Age of Judgment," 17.

<sup>55</sup> Kleinmans, "The Work of a Christian: Vocation in Lutheran Perspective," 396.

be offering a useful and viable theological framework for Christians in Myanmar as they seek to love and engage their neighbors of other faiths. Their true identity as those who have been declared righteous by God in Christ through their faith in Him gives them the freedom to live for others. As Luther has taught us: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none,” yet “a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”<sup>56</sup> Christians are to demonstrate their identity as the free yet dutiful bond-servants of God through what Luther calls their “active righteousness.”

How do Christians in Myanmar live out their Christ-life in the fullest sense in unfavorable circumstances? I would submit that Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms can speak to the situation in Myanmar. This teaching was forged in an age of struggle, and properly understood, delineated, and applied for our time, it can be a rich resource in providing guidance and revitalizing our theological and ethical thinking and so promote significant Christian action in our contemporary world. Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms, understood in connection with the two kinds of righteousness and our callings or vocations in the world will help us in our life and calling not only in God’s left-hand kingdom of the world, but also in our right-hand kingdom of God—in our life together in the fellowship of God’s people. Let us see what Robert Kolb has said concerning the Christian’s calling:

Bringing salt and light to God’s creation (Mt. 5:13) involves the life-restoring presence of Christ speaking by the power of the Holy Spirit through his word in answer to his call to be the children of God. Bringing salt and light to God’s creatures also involves embodying God’s providential care and concern for his creatures through the exercise of his commands and callings, his virtues and vocations. For evangelistic and ecumenical witness in the twenty-first century, Luther’s understanding of the Christian’s callings is a significant element which speaks directly to this world in which the church continues to carry on its mission.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> LW 31: 333–77.

<sup>57</sup> Robert Kolb, “Called to Milk Cows and Govern Kingdoms: Martin Luther’s Teaching on the Christian’s Vocations,” in *Concordia Journal* 39, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 140.

## Right Understanding of Christian Vocation and the Burmese Misconception About Society

Very much like the western medieval understanding of society, the contemporary Burmese tend to divide life into the sacred and the profane and bifurcate society between the religious order and the laity. This errant notion of dividing all of society between religious people and lay people is a direct influence of the Buddhist understanding and demarcation of society. In Burmese Buddhist culture monks and nuns are recognized as religious people doing sacred work while the rest of the people are considered as laity who are doing the mundane and profane work of the world. Buddhist Burmese people recognize being in fulltime religious work as a special vocation while all other jobs are regarded as just occupational jobs for one's livelihood in the present world. Simon Pau Khan En explains the influence of the Buddhist worldview on Christians in Myanmar regarding the division of society into to the sacred and the mundane:

The classical model of church-society encounter was negative as the Christians have denounced the world outside the church (the mundane world) as sinful. This is mostly the great influence of *Theravada Buddhism* which has neatly demarcated the present world (*lokka*) and the next metaphysical (*lokkutra*). The world outside the church, the secular world, is regarded as so profane and one has to leg behind from this world [*sic*], to be spiritual. This is the classical understanding of spirituality and thus the present Christians have to redefine "spirituality" to encounter the secular world. A new encounter of involvement and participation in the evil world outside the church must be fashioned so that Christian spirituality will be understood as a vital power to combat all evils in society.<sup>58</sup>

But, as we have seen, Luther's understanding of 'estates' gives Christians a theological account that challenges this assumption. The working-out of this challenge comes through a further theological development of Luther's doctrine of vocation. A correct understanding and proper application of Luther's teaching on Christian vocation lived out within the framework of the left-hand kingdom which is not limited only to so-called "religious" deeds will go far in correcting the wrong understanding of what it means to be religious and spiritual among

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<sup>58</sup> Simon Pau Khan En, "The Ecumenical Perspective of Christianity by the Churches in Myanmar," in *RAYS:MIT Journal of Theology* 10 (January 2009): 25.

Christians that is still current among Christians of Myanmar. Christians in Myanmar can certainly learn from the mistakes of the medieval worldview and Luther's great contribution in bringing western society back to a right understanding of Christian vocation. Burmese Christians have much to gain from a better appreciation of Luther's legacy in teaching the Scriptural view of the role of Christians in society. "The great flaw of the medieval monastic system, according to Luther, was that it limited service to God to 'religious' acts—the saying of private mass, the making of pilgrimages, and a withdrawal from the mundane activities of the world. The so-called 'menial' tasks of householders and laborers contributed far more tangibly to the needs of other people."<sup>59</sup> This is precisely the sort of teaching needed in Burmese congregations.

#### Christians As Salt And Light: The Teaching on the Two Kingdoms as A Corrective to Christian Pessimism

The doctrine of vocation applies well to dealing with a persistent problem in Myanmar—Christian pessimism. How are the two, Christian vocation and Christian pessimism, related? Many Christians in Myanmar, following the teaching of their missionaries, subscribe to a theology that portrays the present world as broken and evil beyond improvement or redemption, and believes instead that it will deteriorate until the coming of Christ, who will then establish His millennial kingdom on earth. This understanding, in combination with the view that Christians have nothing to do with this evil world but that total separation from it is mandated in the Bible, argues that there is no point in trying to get involved in social and societal activities. This alienation from social concern discourages Christians from involvement in any social and political activities. This, in turn, has caused Christians to lose their impact on society. John Stott calls this outlook "Christian pessimism."<sup>60</sup> After recounting how Christian influence has had a

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<sup>59</sup> Bennethum, *Listen! God is Calling: Luther Speaks of Vocation, Faith, and Work* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 49.

<sup>60</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Involvement: Being A Responsible Christian in a Non-Christian Society*, Volume One

huge impact on societies across the world, he exhorts the followers of Christ to be more engaged and involved in the public. Stott writes:

So Christian pessimism is historically unfounded. It is also theologically inept. We have seen that the Christian mind holds together the biblical events of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. Christian pessimists concentrate on the fall ('human beings are incorrigible'), and the consummation ('Christ is coming to put things right'), and imagine that these truths justify social despair. But they overlook the creation and the redemption. The divine image in mankind has not been obliterated. Human beings, though evil, can still do good, as Jesus plainly taught (Matthew 7:11). And the evidence of our eyes confirms it. There are non-Christians who have good marriages, non-Christian parents who bring their children up well, non-Christian industrialists who run factories on a just basis, and non-Christian doctors who still take the Hippocratic standards as their guide and are conscientious in the care of their patients. This is partly because the truth of God's law is written on all human hearts, and partly because the values of God's kingdom, when embodied in the Christian community, are often recognised and to some extent imitated by people outside it<sup>61</sup>.

Even though John Stott does not use any terms such as "two kingdoms" or "the two realms of God's kingdom," he holds creation and redemption together in a same sense that Luther did in his teaching on the "two kingdoms." It seems like John Stott is speaking directly to Christians in Myanmar in their current situation. Christians in Myanmar should heed Stott's words and base their theological view on a more complete Biblical vision that encompasses God's creation of the world at the beginning and consummation of the age at the Lord's return in glory at the end. Christians should always be mindful of the fact that they are living in both God's physical created world and spiritual kingdom at the same time, and that they are placed in their life-situations for the sake of their neighbors. Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms, along with his distinctions of the two kinds of righteousness and his doctrine of vocation, is perfectly suited to help Christians to understand and do this.

Christians are expected by their Lord to be the "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world." This metaphor is used by the Lord himself as a reference to the place and influence that

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(Old Tappan, New Jersey: Revell, 1985), 6.

Christians are expected to have as God's representatives in the world. The exhortation primarily refers to the impact that Christians are expected to have on society as the children of God. John Stott discusses what Jesus means by this metaphor and lists four important truths about the identity of Christians in the world, which seem to be very relevant in the context of Myanmar:

First, *Christians are fundamentally different from non-believers*, or ought to be.... This is a major theme of the Bible. God is calling out from the world a people for himself, and the vocation of this people to be 'holy' or 'different.' 'Be holy,' he says to them again and again, 'because I am holy.'

Secondly, *Christians must permeate non-Christian society*. Although Christians are (or should be) morally and spiritually distinct from non-Christians, they are not to be socially segregated. On the contrary, their light is to shine into darkness, and their salt to soak into the decayed meat. The lamp does no good if it is put under a bed or a bowl, and the salt does no good if it stays in the salt cellar. Similarly, Christians are not to remain aloof from society, where they cannot affect it, but become immersed in its life....

Thirdly, *Christians can influence non-Christian society*.... Jesus seems to have meant, Christians can hinder social decay and dispel the darkness of evil....

Fourthly, *Christians must retain their Christian distinctness*. On the one hand we have to permeate non-Christian society, and immerse ourselves in the life of the world. On the other hand while doing so, we have to avoid becoming assimilated to the world. We must retain our Christian convictions, values, standards, and life-style.<sup>62</sup>

Tint Lwin also sees opportunities for Christians to exhibit their good citizenship in their workplaces. He urges Christians to be dedicated and committed people wherever they work so that others can see their way of life and recognize them as good citizens. He writes:

Christians can also exhibit their good citizenship at the place where they work. In former days many Christians worked in mission-related institutions. In 1965 the government ordered all missionaries to leave the country and nationalized all the mission institutions. With the mission institutions abolished, Christians were obliged to work in government departments and other job situations. Today we find Christians working in almost all the government and private institutions. Today Christians have more opportunity to display their loyalty to the nation and they can do it right in the place where they work....

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<sup>61</sup> Stott, *Involvement*, 97–98.

<sup>62</sup> Stott, *Involvement*, 99–101.

Christians who serve in the various government offices could become the most faithful workers. If Christians can excel in their performances right where they work, the non-Christians will come to see it and their attitudes towards the Christians may gradually change<sup>63</sup>

Over against the medieval doctrine of the sacrament of ordination which divided Christians into two levels of being, Luther's teaching on Christian vocation taught us how God views ordinary human jobs as a service to Him. Luther's focus was on the sacrament of baptism as the sign of God's call to all Christians giving them an identity from which Christian living flows out freely for the sake of their neighbors. In a sermon he wrote:

See to it first of all that you believe in Christ and are baptized. Afterward, see to your vocation. I am called to be a preacher. Now when I preach I perform a holy work that is pleasing to God. If you are a father or mother, believe in Jesus Christ and so you will be a holy father and a holy mother. Pay attention to the early years of your children, let them pray, and discipline and spank them. Oversee the running of the household and the preparation of meals. These things are none other than holy works to which you have been called. That means they are your holy life and are a part of God's Word and your vocation.<sup>64</sup>

Luther also articulated his teaching about the vocation of Christians and the dignity of every Christian engagement in the pursuit of his or her job. In his lecture on Genesis 17:9 in which God says to Abraham, "You shall keep my covenant," Luther wrote:

Every person surely has a calling. While attending to it he serves God. A king serves God when he is at pains to look after and govern his people. So too the mother of a household when she tends her baby, the father of a household when he gains a livelihood by working, and a pupil when he applies himself diligently to his studies.... Therefore, it is a great wisdom when a human being does what God commands and earnestly devotes himself to his vocation without taking into consideration what others are doing.<sup>65</sup>

It is the Christian's love for his neighbor and his desire to serve his neighbor that is God-pleasing. The Christian's love for self is redirected away from himself toward Christ and toward

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<sup>63</sup> Tint Lwin, "Contextualizing the Gospel," 193.

<sup>64</sup> Martin Luther, WA 37: 480 (*Luther's Werke, Wiemer Ausgabe*. Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Weimar: Boehlau, 1883 ff).

<sup>65</sup> LW 3: 128.



his neighbor through whom Christ is present among them. Luther wrote:

If you are a manual laborer, you find that the Bible has been put into your workshop, into your hand, into your heart. It teaches and preaches how you should treat your neighbor. Just look at your tools—at your needle or thimble, your beer barrel, your goods, your scales or yardstick or measure—and you will read this statement inscribed on them. Everywhere you look, it stares at you. Nothing that you handle every day is so tiny that it does not continually tell you this, if you will only listen. Indeed, there is no shortage of preaching. You have many preachers as you have transactions, goods, tools, and other equipment in your house and home. All this is continually crying out to you: “Friend, use me in your relations with your neighbor just as you would want your neighbor to use his property in his relations with you.”<sup>66</sup>

The Christian’s ordinary work is “holy because it is anchored in faith in Christ, even though it is performed by sinful women and men. It does not bring a person to God, but flows from the new life God in Christ has given her or him in Christ.”<sup>67</sup> Commenting on Genesis 31:3, Luther wrote: “God’s people please God even in the least and most trifling matters. For he will be working all things through you; He will milk the cow through you and perform the most servile duties through you, and all the greatest and least duties alike will be pleasing to Him.”<sup>68</sup>

#### Christian Involvement in Nation Building Activities in Myanmar

Christians should be supporters of people’s movements as long as they are not against the clear teachings of God’s Word. They should take an active part in nation building activities of the state. Kanbawza Win encourages Christians in Myanmar to be indigenous Christians who are loyal supporters of the people’s movements and the government in its nation-building activities.

He writes:

It is a well known fact that most of the people are indifferent to Christianity and to a certain extent hostile because it is a religion associated with the Western penetration and subjugation of the whole peninsular. Now it is the duty of the faithful to demonstrate that Christianity is a universal religion and has not necessarily to be Western and that that the Christians are very much of the indigenous people of

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<sup>66</sup> LW 21: 237

<sup>67</sup> Bennethum, *Listen! God is Calling*, 50.

<sup>68</sup> LW 6:10.

Southeast Asia. Indigenous Christians must be loyal supporters of the people's movement and the government, and the unique message of the Christian gospel can answer to the ultimate question which others cannot do.<sup>69</sup>

When we consider the social and cultural situations of Myanmar in which Christians are called to live and how they have failed in some areas where they could have had tremendous impact on their society, we are reminded that something has not been quite right in the Christians' approach to life and society. It is clear that they have not been quite able to impact the wider public as the salt of the earth and the light of the world. It is clear that they did not quite know how to best live for God and their neighbors in God's two kingdoms. It is time for Christians in Myanmar to wake up to the theological truth that they are placed in their particular offices or responsibilities within their particular stations or situations for the sake of their neighbors for the glory of God.

### **Burmese Nationalism and Christian Identity in Myanmar**

For reasons we have discussed earlier in Chapter Two, Christians in Myanmar have lived in comparative isolation as a group apart from the rest of the Burmese people. But today the burden of history lies heavily on Christians that they are faced with the question of how best they can retain their Christian identity as the followers of Christ and their sense of national belonging without losing what they have gained in their Christian faith and fellowship. The main concern here is not so much about the foreign origin of their faith; Buddhism and other religions such as Hinduism and Islam are not native-born either. Rather, the problem is that Christian people, by and large, do not seem to be involved in the surging current of new life in post-independence Myanmar. It is an accepted fact that there are radical differences in religious beliefs and practices between the major religions in Myanmar. Certainly, there are things that the Buddhist Burmese

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<sup>69</sup> Kanbawza Win, "A Christian in Southeast Asian Peninsular (A Burmese Perspective)," 76.

find hard to accept about Christianity. Kanbawza Win lists some of those things in speaking about Christianity in Southeast Asia from a Burmese perspective:

But a more discerning Buddhist finds that the Gospel has a queer and unique approach: (1) The surety with which the Christian speaks of a personal God with whom he can have conscious fellowship, leaves them skeptical; (2) Salvation to be realized in this existence is rather hard to understand. For him, Nirvana is quite remote. Nirvana may not be reached in this existence or in the next one. But by accumulating merit through good deeds one can help to improve his lot for the future and move closer to Nirvana; (3) He interpreted Heaven as one of the higher abodes of the thirty two planes of Buddhist cycles of life; (4) The Biblical claim of I am the way, the truth and the life or as the Vancouver Assembly theme of Jesus Christ, the life of the World, will appear to him as aggressive Western dogmatism.<sup>70</sup>

But, what has most estranged Christians from their majority Buddhist neighbors is, in many instances, their way of life, specifically, their introverted social relationships, and their lack of civic concern. Burmese Christians in Myanmar thus find themselves outside the larger whole of the national community. Christians in Myanmar are faced with a glaring need to gain a sense of common identity with their fellow-countrymen and to contextualize their lifestyles into the Burmese culture. Tint Lwin agrees with this priority and recognizes the need for Christians in Myanmar to send a clear message to their Buddhist neighbors that they are part of the Burmese community willing to contextualize their lifestyle. He writes:

The Burmese people think that to be a true Burmese one has to be a Buddhist. For them it is an undisputed fact. The seriousness of this “Buddhist means Burmese” concept is that it naturally connotes “Christian means Westerners.” To make matters worse, the lifestyle of the Christians in Myanmar helps to confirm the wrong assumption that the Burmese Buddhists have. In Myanmar, Burmese who were converted to Christianity do become Americanized or Europeanized. This is the result of the way the Western missionaries nurtured the new converts. The missionaries would seclude the new converts within the walls of a mission compound within the confines of a Christian community. They did this to quarantine the Christians from being contaminated by the evil heathen society outside. Due to this practice the Christian church in Myanmar has been producing Americanized or Europeanized Burmans for decades.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Kanbawza Win, “A Christian in Southeast Asian Peninsular (A Burmese Perspective),” 74.

<sup>71</sup> Tint Lwin, “Contextualizing the Gospel,” 175.

This mentality and practice of staying in isolation away from the larger community is due in large part to a lack of perspective and a failure to understand that Christians are placed in the midst of their fellow human beings to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. As the previous argument has made it clear, Christians should not withdraw from their unbelieving neighbors, but should work to impact the society of which they are a part with their faith in word and action. Christians in Myanmar should examine their lifestyles and abandon any lifestyle that might give the impression that Christians are not fully engaged members of the society. Tint Lwin even says: “If Christians in Myanmar can show with their lifestyle that they are true Burmese it will become easier to convince the Buddhists that Christianity is the religion of the whole world, so the important ask of the Church in Myanmar today is to Burmanize Christians who have been Americanized or Europeanized.”<sup>72</sup>

Kanbawza Win’s observation on this matter needs to be heard by Christians in Myanmar so that they might consider how they can improve themselves in this area. He says:

Another factor which placed the Christians at the disadvantage, particularly in the case of Burma is the mission compound attitude, i.e., isolation within the limits of missionary field. The missionaries discourage the faithful from walking, standing and sitting with the non-Christians. The missionaries’ attitude was due to overzealousness and a desire to prevent backsliding among the new converts. But these practices eventually led to communalism and paternalism with the adverse result of the Christians becoming an isolated and a distinct community. Thus in the upsurge nationalistic spirit, especially in the 30’s, most of the Christians stay aloof with the result that it led the mass to look upon the Christians as unpatriotic, and when the Second World War broke out there were several cases where Christians were massacred. Although the hard lessons have been learnt, the sorrowful plight of the Christians is that the leaders of the Burmese Christian community who are on the wrong side of the 50’s still adhere to the old concept.<sup>73</sup>

Kanbawza Win also laments that Christians in Myanmar have been like salt that has lost

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<sup>72</sup> Tint Lwin, “Contextualizing the Gospel,” 176.

<sup>73</sup> Kanbawza Win, “A Christian in Southeast Asian Peninsular (A Burmese Perspective),” 75. Win is quoting some words in this quote from Paul Clasper, *Eastern Paths and the Christian Way* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1980), 77.

its saltiness while their Lord wants them to be the salt of the earth.

The Lord has taught us to be the salt of the world. But we have become a salt which has lost its flavor. The perennial temptation of the Christian community to retreat from the demanding center of life to safety and security have become just another one of the numerous, odd religious groups that spawn all over the world. It has then lost its uniqueness and distinction and settled for a place as one religion among many others. Instead of being in the midst of the peoples, it becomes walled off like a selective religious club separated by its creeds, customs and social classes—sometimes interesting, often odd, usually exclusive and eventually boring.<sup>74</sup>

An urgent question that Christian in Myanmar need to ask themselves today is: “How can we as Christian people become rooted in the national life of the country?” The question is, to be sure, not how to make Christianity indigenous. It is clear that the faith of the Christian, which is centered in the gospel of Jesus Christ, cannot be made indigenous to any one national culture. What should become part of the environment is not the gospel but the people who are committed to the claims of the gospel and who want to witness to the truth of it in the very environment of which they are a part. Kanbawza Win’s advice for Christians in Myanmar is: “Of course the community of resurrection may have its own ethos, lifestyle and practices but this does not by any means call for a retreat from society. It calls for a special way of being in society. Live in the creative center of life, i.e., to live where the action is. Now it is a ‘MUST’ to identify ourselves with the people and seek to liberate them from the demonic power.”<sup>75</sup>

#### Christian Participation in Civic Affairs in the Myanmar Context

Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms does not exclude Christian participation civic affairs. In fact, it shows that Christians may and should participate in a variety of ways, as we have seen. The importance of this comes through for Myanmar in a particular way. Burmese Christians need to demonstrate that they are true patriots by their way of life in participating in

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<sup>74</sup> Kanbawza Win, “A Christian in Southeast Asian Peninsular (A Burmese Perspective),” 75–76.

<sup>75</sup> Kanbawza Win, “A Christian in Southeast Asian Peninsular (A Burmese Perspective),” 76.

nation building. I agree with what Tint Lwin has said about Christians becoming involved in activities that contribute to the welfare of society as a way for them to demonstrate their love for the nation and their care for people:

Myanmar is a developing nation and so nation building is the pronounced agenda of the country. Christians must therefore participate wholeheartedly in the nation building venture to manifest their love for their country. Christian participation in nation building should be visible at all levels of society. Participation should begin at the basic level of the local community. In Myanmar each local community usually organizes self-help progress to promote the welfare of the neighborhood<sup>76</sup>.

Such participation by Christians in civic activities and direct contributions to the good of society can be a good way to compensate for Christian's lack of involvement in society in the past. The failure of Burmese Christians to be part of the larger society has caused misunderstanding and discredited Christians in Myanmar. Tint Lwin's observation of past failure is very perceptive while his support for Christian involvement in public affairs is very discerning.

At this point of history in Myanmar the Christian church forfeited an immense opportunity to demonstrate that we were true Burmans. If we had participated in the peaceful struggle for freedom, if we had shown support in whatever way we could toward this struggle for freedom, we would be accepted as compatriots by the Burmese Buddhists because of our participation. Christians would no longer be regarded as foreigners anymore. The lamentable fact in history was that the Christians failed to grasp this tremendous opportunity by remaining apathetic. The result of this failure was the continued stigmatization of the Burmese Christians as Westerners and the continued resistance of the Burmese Buddhists to the Christian Gospel.<sup>77</sup>

What is the remedy for the failure of Burmese Christians for their lack of involvement in the national matters? Tint Lwin argues:

How could Christians today remedy the failure of their forefathers in history? One solution would be to prove that Christians love the Burmese nation and the Burmese people. Christians will have to demonstrate their allegiance, loyalty, commitment, dedication, devotion, and faithfulness to the Burmese nation. By becoming good

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<sup>76</sup> Tint Lwin, "Contextualizing the Gospel," 191.

<sup>77</sup> Tint Lwin, "Contextualizing the Gospel," 190–91.

citizens who love the nation the Christians can erase to some extent the unfortunate image of Christianity painted by history.<sup>78</sup>

Why have Christians in Myanmar so failed to impact society? Why have they had so little success in engaging the public with the gospel? Why have they not been effective in their witness to their neighbors of other faiths? Various answers could be given to these questions. The historical setting in which Burmese Christians were called to live and witness might have been one hindrance to their effective witness. The ever-strong Burmese nationalism that looks on Christianity with suspicion is certainly another difficult and perplexing obstacle. The missionary attitude of Christian isolationism toward the surrounding unbelieving culture is very likely another contributing factor for Burmese Christians' lack of engagement with the wider public. I believe, however, that one major, yet often unrecognized reason for Christians' failure to engage the wider public was the lack of a theological paradigm and framework within which Christians would be theologically equipped to affirm their Christian identity and efficiently engage their neighbors with the Gospel. They did not receive enough theological instruction as to how they could be faithful followers of Jesus Christ, their Lord and Savior, and at the same time be good citizens of their nation. They were not taught that by serving their neighbors they were serving God. They lacked this teaching simply because those who should have provided the instruction were not equipped with the necessary answers themselves.

### The Practice of Responsible Christian Living

Luther's teaching on the two kinds of righteousness and on vocation in the context of his teaching on the two kingdoms, particularly life in the left-hand kingdom of God gives us the freedom to serve our neighbors. Regarding the fact that Christians do not need to earn God's favor through requirements and rituals, but instead are free to turn their attention to caring for

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<sup>78</sup> Tint Lwin, "Contextualizing the Gospel," 191.

others through the use of their everyday gifts and in the performance of their everyday activities, Luther once famously said in his treatise, *On the Freedom of the Christian*: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”<sup>79</sup> James Gustafson summarizes what Luther had written in *The Freedom of a Christian*, which has been called one of the “two greatest treatises of Protestant ethics”<sup>80</sup> where the neighbor is of central concern:

We are loved, we are justified by God’s redeeming action; therefore, we can live and we can serve the neighbor in love. God redeems us from the need for self-justification, and frees us to serve the need and the will of the neighbor. We are redeemed to eternal life—to a new life in the Spirit of the Gospel of John and as Paul’s letters expound this. We have the assurance that God gives us new life in the Spirit, eternal life in our existence<sup>81</sup>.

Martin Marty touches on the believer’s freedom to serve his neighbor when he reflects on Luther’s treatise, *On the Freedom of the Christian*:

The main thought of the treatise suggests that a Christian live in Christ through faith and in his neighbor through love. Christ comes with His Gospel. The Spirit comes when one hears the Gospel in faith. The believer, in the Spirit, loves his neighbor and takes on his cares and faces his needs and demands. Man does not discover the Gospel; he through it discovers the need of his neighbor. Christian freedom means that one is free from concern over his salvation, his merit, his good works; it is freedom for finding joy in the act of meeting his neighbor’s need.<sup>82</sup>

The church has the primary responsibility in the right-hand kingdom of God, but that does not mean that it cannot do any good in the world in the left-hand kingdom. Robert Benne, in his discussion of what he calls “the indirect and intentional connections” in the ways theology becomes public, stresses that “the church is the instrument of God’s proper work of the right-

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<sup>79</sup> LW 31: 344.

<sup>80</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *Radical Obedience* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1949), 18.

<sup>81</sup> James Gustafson, “Introduction” to H. Richard Niehuhr, *The Responsible Self* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 39.

<sup>82</sup> Martin Marty, “Luther on Ethics: Man Free and Slave,” in ed. Heino O. Kadai, *Accents in Luther’s Theology: Essays in Commemoration of the 450<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation* (St. Louis and London: Concordia, 1967), 215.



hand kingdom, the gospel. Indirect approaches to the church's role in the world honor that calling."<sup>83</sup> Benne further explains:

Yet the church does not abandon the world. It is called to nurture many callings—the callings of the specialized auxiliary organizations to which it is related and the callings of its millions of individual laypersons. These are the primary links the church has with the world, and the church should not attempt to short-circuit its commission to nurture their callings by approaching the world in a basically direct mode. The two ways that God rules are conjoined in the callings of the laity and of Christian institutions. Fostering such creative interaction is a precious obligation to which the church should vigorously fasten.<sup>84</sup>

Benne considers the lay members of the church to be the most effective ministry that the church can have in society. He writes:

The church's ministry through its laity and institutions has the capacity to reach the deepest level of human society—the hearts and minds of its people. Economics and politics are much less able to affect the more profound guidance systems of the people. If religion is indeed the substance of culture, the church is at the very front lines of the battle for society's soul. Its public role as an institutional actor has far less potential for social impact than does its indirect role as shepherds of souls.<sup>85</sup>

How do Christians in Myanmar vigorously engage their neighbors in the surrounding public vigorously without losing their identity as distinct yet non-discriminating groups of people? How do they really manage to be “in” the world but not “of” the world? Benne believes that “the paradoxical vision will continue to inspire individual Christians of all communities. It is so deeply imbedded in the biblical and Christian tradition that it will repeatedly emerge as spiritual nourishment for the hungry soul. Solitary seekers will perpetually be grasped by its profundity. Public theology will always be shaped in part by those so grasped.”<sup>86</sup> Luther's teaching on how a Christian can serve God by serving his neighbor can surely “affirm us in our

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<sup>83</sup> Benne, *The Paradoxical Vision*, 199.

<sup>84</sup> Benne, *The Paradoxical Vision*, 199.

<sup>85</sup> Benne, *The Paradoxical Vision*, 199.

<sup>86</sup> Benne, *The Paradoxical Vision*, 228.

labors, reminding us that they are God-pleasing because they are neighbor-serving.”<sup>87</sup> It is God’s will for us that we use our gifts and energies to the fullest potential, but these gifts and energies do not establish our values; we as individual persons have value because God values us. “The Christian faith affirms the importance and recognizes the dignity of the normal daily labors of believers as activities that can express their commitment to Christ as well as serve their God.”<sup>88</sup> Martin Luther’s teaching on our lives in the two kingdom and our vocation as a means of serving our neighbors and the common good of society gives us a sense of dignity as persons and a sense of value in our labors.

It is very encouraging to learn from the Bible through Luther’s teaching that our service to God is not limited to what used to be thought of as religious and sacred acts only, but also through any occupation and service we can render to our neighbor’s good. Bennethum tries to encourage his readers “to explore the relationship between those things that occupy their energies while they work and what it means for them to believe that as baptized Christians, they have a vocation, a calling from God not just to ‘go to church,’ but also to *be* the church at all times and in all places, including in and through their daily labors.”<sup>89</sup> The discovery and knowledge of this truth about our lives in God’s two kingdoms will help us to let our faith permeate every aspect of our lives and internalize the same insights as a powerful affirmation of who we are and what we do—our *Christian identity and witness*. Understanding who we are and what we can do truly to serve God by serving our neighbors through our various vocations, in line with a right understanding of the nature of our Christian living within the two kingdoms of God as taught and articulated by Luther will enhance a deeper realization in us that God is

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<sup>87</sup> Bennethum, *Listen! God is Calling*, 57.

<sup>88</sup> Bennethum, *Listen! God is Calling*, 20.

<sup>89</sup> Bennethum, *Listen! God is Calling*, 21.

present and at work in the everyday world, not just in times and activities that seem overtly religious. This realization broadens our perspective and helps us discover new possibilities for finding meaning and purpose in our lives <sup>90</sup>

### Some Practical Things That Christians Can Do

What, then, can we do in the context of today's Myanmar to demonstrate who we are in Christ in a most practical way that would exhibit our true identity as faithful followers of Jesus Christ and good and loyal citizens of Myanmar? How can we best exert some influence for Christ? What does it mean in practice to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world? I will limit myself to just three things that I think are very basic and practical ways of significantly engaging the public and having an impact on society.

#### **Intercessory Prayer**

The first thing that I would like to propose is prayer, especially intercessory prayer—prayer for those in authorities and prayers for all people. John Stott also sees prayer as one of the most effective means of being involved in and engaging society. He actually pairs prayer with “evangelism” as one of the most effective things for Christians to be the world’s “salt and light.”

He writes:

First, there is the power of prayer. I beg you not to dismiss this as a pious platitude, a sop to Christian convention. For it really is not. We cannot read the Bible without being impressed by its constant emphasis on the efficacy of prayer.... We do not claim to understand the rationale of intercession. But somehow it enables us to enter the field of spiritual conflict, and to align ourselves with the good purposes of God, so that his power is released and the principalities of evil are bound.

Prayer is an indispensable part of the individual Christian's life. It is also indispensable to the life of the local church. Paul gave it priority. 'First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable

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<sup>90</sup> Bennethum, *Listen! God is Calling*, 20.

life, godly and respectful in every way. This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (I Timothy 2:1-4 RSV).

Here is prayer for national leaders, that they may fulfill their responsibility to maintain conditions of peace, in which the Church is free both to obey God and to preach the Gospel.... And some churches hardly seem to take it seriously. If in the community (indeed, in the world) there is more violence than peace, more oppression than justice, more secularism than godliness, is it that Christians and churches are not praying as they should?<sup>91</sup>

Indeed, more violence than peace, more oppression than justice! This looks like a description of the situation of Myanmar! Christians urgently need to heed to the call to pray for their nation and especially those in authority. Myanmar is known for one of the longest ongoing civil wars in the world and this fact alone is reason enough for Christians in Myanmar to constantly pray for peace and reconciliation. For the fact that those in the armed insurgency are alleged to be mostly Christian resulting in suspicion and distrust against the Burmese Christians in the wider society, the need to pray for an end to the ongoing civil wars and conflicts is even more urgent. Scharlemann says that “the church and its members on their part have the responsibility of honoring and respecting government for what God intends it to be: a bulwark against anarchy. This is why the church includes governing authorities in its public intercessions.”<sup>92</sup> Scharlemann also links intercessory prayers with the priestly function of the church. He writes:

All this is part of the priestly function of the church, to which the apostle Peter refers when he describes Christians as being “a sacred craft of priests that offers up spiritual sacrifices which are well-pleasing to God through Jesus Christ (I Peter 2:5; our own translation). For this expression the apostle must have had in mind the relationship of the priests at the temple in Jerusalem to God’s people as a whole. Each morning and evening the smoke of incense rose above the walls of the temple as a symbol of the

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<sup>91</sup> Stott, *Involvement*, 102–103.

<sup>92</sup> Scharlemann, “Scriptural Concept of the Church the State,” 50.

intercessory function of the priests. The church as the new Israel has inherited this task, praying through all the centuries also for governing authorities.<sup>93</sup>

Intercessory prayer is one of the most important contributions that a Christian can make to his nation. Nothing else can take the place of a Christian's intercessory prayer for his country and those in authority because of the special relationship that a Christian enjoys between God and himself. Scharlemann understands Luther's inclusion of good government in his interpretation of the Fourth Petition as one of the most important ways that an individual Christian can serve his nation:

One of the most significant contributions that an individual Christian can make to his country is his prayers. These can and should include the welfare of the nation. Luther therefore properly included good government in his interpretation of the Fourth Petition. No Christian ought to say, "Give us this day our daily bread," without thinking of the governing authorities that God has put over him. In a very real sense such praying amounts to political action.<sup>94</sup>

Christians, again as faithful followers of Jesus Christ and good and loyal citizens of their country, have the privilege and responsibility to engage in intercessory prayer in keeping with the apostolic directive in I Timothy 2:1-4. The prayer of the church for the nation should implore God's guidance for those in authority as they work to maintain righteousness for the welfare of all people in God's left-hand kingdom. Not only should Christians pray for the county in their private prayers, but in the public prayers of the gathered congregation the pastor should lead the people in praying for very concrete and specific needs in the county and the world. Pray for leaders by name and pray for situations quite specifically. What the people learn from this elevation of the country to a regular place in public prayer is very important.

### **Being Subject to the Authority**

Secondly, we encounter what is perhaps the Christian's chief task in the left-hand kingdom:

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<sup>93</sup> Scharlemann, "Scriptural Concept of the Church the State," 50-51.

to be subject. This, I believe, is the most significant responsibility of a good Christian toward his nation. Scharlemann articulates what the Christian's subjection to the state means:

This in fact is the keynote of all Scriptural directions on the matter of the Christian's responsibility toward state. It is possible to misunderstand the English word "subjection." There is no real equivalent for the term used by the apostles. As they understood the relationship of the Christian to governing authorities and purposes of God. Hence the verb in the original is in the passive voice; behind the attitude expressed by it lies the prior action of God. Being subject implies the extension of the general principle that Christians are to think more of others than themselves. Subjection is the opposite of that spirit of aggression and exploitation of which man becomes guilty when he goes about "doing what comes naturally." In their attitude of self-effacement Christians live out the strange paradox that man can gain inner freedom only by subjecting himself to that which is above him.<sup>95</sup>

It should be stressed that being subject is not mere passivity. Luther believed strongly that Christians should be politically active to further the government wherever possible. Doing so, they are doing God's work. It is because Luther sees the state and government as an ordination of God for the maintenance of order and peace. Luther wrote:

It [worldly government] is a glorious divine ordinance and an excellent gift of God, who has established and instituted it and wants to have it maintained as something that men can certainly not do without. If there were none, no one could live because of other men: one would devour the other as the brute beasts do one another.... Do you think that if birds and beasts could speak and would see secular government among humans, they would say, "O dear you people, you are not men but gods compared with us. How safe you sit, live, and have everything, while we are never safe from one another for an hour as to life, shelter, or food. Woe to our unthankfulness!"<sup>96</sup>

Lewis Spitz contends that "Luther's social ethics demanded as a matter of conscience the maximum necessary and possible contribution of the individual to the affairs of good government."<sup>97</sup> Luther writes:

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<sup>94</sup> Scharlemann, "Scriptural Concept of the Church the State," 56.

<sup>95</sup> Scharlemann, "Scriptural Concept of the Church the State," 51.

<sup>96</sup> WA 30, II: 554–56.

<sup>97</sup> Lewis W. Spitz, Jr., "Impact of the Reformation on the Church–State Issues," in ed. Albert G. Huegli, *Church and State Under God* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964), 72.

For all our work—in the field, garden, city, house, in war, in governing—what else is it to God but such child’s play through which God wishes to give His gifts in the field, in the home, and everywhere? They are our Lord God’s masks through which He wishes to remain hidden and yet do all.... God bestows all good things, but you must take hold and seize the bull by the horns; that is, you must do the work and thereby give God the opportunity and a disguise.<sup>98</sup>

The Christian is obligated to love his neighbor as himself just as he loves his God, this others-directed love should always be the motivation for the service he might be able to render to his nation and his society. Luther taught that love of neighbor must be the Christian’s motivation for public service:

Here you ask further whether the policemen, hangmen, jurists, counselors, and lesser officials can also be Christians and have a blessed estate. I answer: If the government and its sword are a divine service... then also that must also be divine service which the government needs to wield the sword.... Therefore, when [the authorities] do this, not with the intention of seeking their own ends but only of helping to maintain the law and power with which the wicked are restrained, there is no peril in it for them, and they may follow it like any other pursuit and use it as a means of support.... For... love of neighbor seeks not its own, considers not how great or small but how profitable and how needful for the neighbor or the community the actions are.<sup>99</sup>

Luther even encouraged Christians to participate in civic affairs by seeking public office wherever possible in the government. He wrote:

You are under obligation to serve and further the sword by whatever means you can, with body, soul, honor and goods. For it is nothing that you need, but something quite useful and profitable for the whole world and for your neighbor. Therefore, should you see that there is a lack of hangmen, beaules, judges, lords, or princes, and find that you are qualified, you should offer your services and seek the place.<sup>100</sup>

We should always be careful that the crucial term here in the matter of the believer’s mandate to be submissive to the governing authorities is “a good government.” Luther contends that no Christian should serve against his conscience in an unjust war.<sup>101</sup> Spitz elaborates the

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<sup>98</sup> WA 31, I: 436.

<sup>99</sup> WA 11: 260, 261.

<sup>100</sup> LW 3: 241.

<sup>101</sup> WA 30, II: 115.

stand of Luther on this issue:

The individual owes military service for the defense of the homeland and the just cause, Luther believed, but never in the case of aggressive or even preventive wars, which could never be considered just. He chided the Renaissance popes who not only stirred up hatred for the Turks but also undertook to organize armies and gather fleets which they planned to lead—all in the name of Christ. Luther said the Christian must avoid joining a crusading army as he would the devil. When the Christian cannot decide whether a cause is just or if he lacks information, he should give his own government the benefit of the doubt. In no circumstances, cost what it may, can the Christian serve against conscience in an unjust war. The individual conscience must bear the burden of decision where the divine will is known, for ‘neither the pope nor parents nor the emperor has this title: I AM THE LORD THY GOD.’”<sup>102</sup>

Nevertheless, if the government becomes evil in not protecting but violating the basic human rights of its citizens, Christians are obligated to raise their voice against their evil government. As a test case, Christians in Myanmar have not done very well at being a voice for the voiceless in their service as the conscience of society. Regarding witnessing and even protesting as what Christians can rightly do for the maintenance of good order in a nation, John Stott says: “We have seen that the Gospel is God’s power for salvation. But in fact all truth is powerful. God’s truth is much mightier than the devil’s crooked lies. We should never be afraid of the truth. Nor do we ever need to be afraid for the truth, as if its survival hung in the balance. For God watches over it and will never allow it to be completely suppressed.”<sup>103</sup>

How many times might the church in Myanmar have failed to raise her voice in protest for the government’s evil acts of human rights violations? Pum Za Mang deplors the atrocities that the Burmese government has systematically committed against its citizens:

Unfortunately, a contemporary Burma is a land torn apart by human evil. Burma is ruled by one of the world’s most brutal regimes, which took power by force, ignored election results, continued religious persecution, perpetuated ethnic genocide, violated human rights, and survived by creating a climate of war. The military regime perpetrates crimes against humanity. It takes people for forced labor, uses villagers as

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<sup>102</sup> Spitz, Jr., “Impact of the Reformation on the Church–State Issues,” 73. The Luther quote is from WA 43, 507.

<sup>103</sup> Stott, *Involvement*, 107.



minesweepers, captures children and forces them to become soldiers, systematically rapes ethnic minority women, and burns down villages, churches and crops.<sup>104</sup>

Pum Za Mang laments the fact that in the face of such inhumane evils and atrocities in the country as committed by the government, the church in Myanmar remained silent when they should have raised their voice.

Unfortunately, the church in Burma has been silent in the face of such inhumane socio-political evils, especially the appalling military regime, because of its two theological grounds: the separation between church and state, and subjection of church to the state. In this particular connection, Lap Yan Kung accurately wrote: “One of the characteristic of the Baptist tradition is the separation between politics and religion, and it may become an excuse for the church in Burma to refrain from politics.” Indeed, I know from my personal experiences with the church in Burma that with an overemphasis on the theory of subjugation to the authority and the separation between church and state, Burmese churches are too submissive to the authority and are mostly silent in the face of political oppression, religious persecution, ethnic genocide, and human rights violations brought about by the repressive military regime. Consequently, the presence of Christianity, Christian seminaries, Christian churches, Christian pastors, and Christians in Burma surely guarantee nothing for the liberation of the Burmese from their social, political, and economic sufferings.<sup>105</sup>

Luther clearly taught that if the government overreaches itself and tyrannically interferes in matters of faith, the Christian is conscience-bound to disobey the government. He even said that whoever remains silent makes himself an accomplice: “You should not approve of your adversary’s sin but warn and rebuke him.... For thus you save your conscience.”<sup>106</sup> Ministers are even more responsible as public spokesmen in the Christian assembly: “There are lazy and useless preachers who do not denounce the evils of the princes and lords, some because they do[?] not even notice them.... Some even fear for their skins and worry that they will lose body and goods for it. They no not stand up and be true to Christ.”<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Pum Za Mang, “Separation of Church and State: A Case Study of Myanmar (Burma),” in *Asian Journal of Theology* 25, no. 1 (January, 2011): 43.

<sup>105</sup> Mang, “Separation of Church and State: A Case Study of Myanmar (Burma)”: 44.

<sup>106</sup> WA 28: 286.

<sup>107</sup> WA 31, I: 196.

Christians in Myanmar can learn a lot from Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms that secular governments are ordained of God for the good humans and that Christians should be subject to the authorities. But, at the same time there are times when there must be a limit in that submission, as Luther, following the teaching of the Bible, has taught when one has to decide whom he should obey—God or man. Christians should contribute to the nation as much as they can; they should be the mortar of the society and voice of conscience when the situation demands. The Christian's love for his neighbor should always be the motivation for his contribution to the nation. Understood rightly, as Luther tried to teach it, a Christian's submission to the government does not result in mere passivity or mute compliance. Rather, his submission is active and alert, often vocal in offering support or naming evil, and at times even resistant to unjust and wicked laws or actions.

### **The Virtue of Endurance and Patience**

The third thing that I would like to suggest that Christians in Myanmar learn from Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms is the virtue of patience in the midst of suffering. Christians in Myanmar have gone through discrimination on account of their faith and in many instances persecutions in the clearest sense of the word. As Christians, indeed, because they are Christians, they have to endure restriction to access to political and economic privileges and advances. There have been many instances where Christian have been sidelined because of their faith. For many, when their minority ethnic identity is compounded with their Christian identity, the result is an institutionalized discrimination on the dual basis of their ethnicity and religion as a report from Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) shows:

For decades, the Chins have suffered deep-rooted, institutionalized discrimination on the dual basis of their ethnicity and religion. Since the SLORC/SPDC era [State Law and Order Restoration Council/State Peace and Development Council—both military regime], this has manifested as a pattern of widespread and systematic violations of their fundamental human rights, particularly religious freedom, perpetrated by State

actors. CHRO's documentation shows that over a period of many years, religious freedom violations have often intersected with other serious human rights violations, such as forced labour, torture, and other cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment. For example, worship services and religious gatherings have been disrupted by Burma Army soldiers, who have taken worshippers for portering and subjected them to torture and other ill-treatment.

Ongoing violations of religious freedom include: widespread restrictions on constructing and renovating Christian infrastructure [*sic*; it should rather be Christian structures]; destruction of Christian crosses; violations of freedom of religious assembly; and threats, intimidation, and harassment of pastors and missionaries.<sup>108</sup>

The report further links these systematic violations of human rights and persecution that Christians in Myanmar especially the Chin Christians in the Chin Hills in Myanmar have experienced, with a distorted version of Buddhism. This distorted version of Buddhism always comes with the accompanying policy of forced assimilation which is simply the pervasive Burman nationalism and the majority Burmans' policy of Burmanization:

A distorted version of Buddhism continues to be imposed by the authorities on the predominantly Christian Chin as a tool of oppression, and arguably as part of an unwritten policy of forced assimilation. This has included forced relocation and land confiscation to build Buddhist infrastructure; forced labour exacted from Chin Christians to build pagodas and monasteries; and most recently, extortion to pay for Buddhist religious festivals.<sup>109</sup>

Another example of human rights violation committed by the Burman-dominated government of Myanmar, which minority Christians in minority ethnic areas have had to endure for decades is the government's induced and coerced conversion of ethnic Christians to Buddhism by means of offering education opportunities to children of ethnic Christian minorities. The CHRO report says:

In May 1989 SLORC created the Border Affairs Development Programme, renamed in 1994 as Progress of the Border Areas and National Races Development Programme. A 1993 SLORC decree set out the objectives of the programme, which were ostensibly about development and preserving 'the culture, literature and

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<sup>108</sup> CHRO, *"Threats to Our Existence": Persecution of Ethnic Chin Christians in Burma* (Nepean, ON: Chin Human Rights Organization, 2012), xiii.

<sup>109</sup> CHRO, *"Threats to Our Existence": Persecution of Ethnic Chin Christians in Burma*, xiii.

customs of the national races.” In reality, development projects under the programme have been synonymous with forced labour, and the economic, social, and cultural rights of ethnic and religious minorities living in Burma’s border areas continue to be routinely violated.<sup>110</sup>

How should Christians respond to this kind of unjust and discriminatory treatment from their own government? How do they react to the ethnic and religious majority people’s attempts of induced and coerced conversion? Does Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms have anything to say to this situation in Myanmar at all? Let us consider what Luther’s two kingdoms teaching can instruct us about how we should respond to situations like these and how we go about engaging our Buddhist neighbor in a loving way. It is impossible to read Luther without being impressed that he was such a practical teacher of God’s Word, especially with regard to worldly matters. What I can imagine Luther would say to Christians in Myanmar is: “You will not change the world, ”<sup>111</sup>and then admonish patience coupled with a strong warning about the nature of this secular world. As Wright notes:

Christians required patience in fulfilling their quotidian tasks and responsibilities. That included the task of spreading God’s message. It included the work of the church. The kingdom of the world would never be perfectly good by God’s measures. People in this life would never conform perfectly to God’s commands. Luther’s point was that Christians should not be discouraged by their failure to keep God’s commands or to perfect the world, for it was simply a fact that the world would not be changed prior to the end of the age. At the close of his commentary on Psalm 82, the great Reformer concluded his advice with this prediction: “Worldly government will make no progress.” That is why Christians “pray for another government and kingdom in which things will be better.” That is, Christians prayed for the kingdom of Christ, not another worldly kingdom.<sup>112</sup>

In reality, even the best Christian himself can never achieve perfection in this life but remains at the same time a righteous man and a sinner (*simul iustus et peccator*). We cannot always expect a friendly circumstance while living and battling this left-hand kingdom of God.

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<sup>110</sup> CHRO, “Threats to Our Existence”: *Persecution of Ethnic Chin Christians in Burma*, 11

<sup>111</sup> WA 44: 371, 37. “*Tu non mutabis mundum.*”

<sup>112</sup> Wright, *Martin Luther’s Understanding of God’s Two Kingdoms*, 168–69.

We really need the virtue of patience as we struggle along our pilgrim way. Luther, in his commentary on John, admonished us: “let the world be the world.”<sup>113</sup>

If it can be said that Luther promoted a social ethics, it would certainly have to be understood in the context of vocation, that is the importance of fulfilling one’s responsibilities in one’s offices and stations, and particularly in those offices and stations encountered in the routine of daily life, in other words, within the order of creation. There is much wisdom in Luther’s teaching for Christians in Myanmar. It has taught us that while Christians live in both of God’s two kingdoms at the same time, there are times when they should be active in society and there are other times when they should wait in patience. This truth is linked to the two kinds of righteousness that Christians enjoy as children of God. Luther said: “We set up two worlds, as it were, one heavenly and the other earthly.”<sup>114</sup> We live in these two worlds or kingdoms by the two kinds of righteousness.

“If theology is divine truth put to work amid the practical realities of ordinary life,”<sup>115</sup> Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms of God is real theology which speaks to the realities of ordinary life for the Burmese Christians in Myanmar. Studied in connection with Luther’s teaching on the two kinds of righteousness that the believers enjoy in Christ and Christian vocation that gives the right perspective to the Christian about his callings in the realities of ordinary life, Luther’s teaching on the two kingdoms is a corrective to many misconceptions about the structure of Burmese society and church life; it can also give immeasurable inspiration to Christians in Myanmar as they struggle amid so much suffering along their way to heaven.

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<sup>113</sup> *LW* 24: 156.

<sup>114</sup> *LW* 26: 8.

<sup>115</sup> Oswald C. J. Hoffmann, “Foreword” to ed. Albert G. Huegli, *Church and State under God* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964).

## CONCLUSION

The history of the introduction and growth of Christianity in Myanmar is not exceptionally unique. It is just one among many examples of the planting and growth of the church in Southeast Asia that came about during the heyday of Western colonial expansionism in the early nineteenth century. But, the history and state of Christianity in Myanmar is distinctly challenging in several respects. First, When Christianity was introduced to Burma it encountered a people, which since the eleventh century had been a predominantly Buddhist country complete with a prevalent and popular attitude that for one to be real Burmese he or she has to be a Buddhist. This attitude continues to pose one of the greatest challenges for Christians in Myanmar for their identity as followers of Christ. Second, Burma/Myanmar is a nation of ethnic diversity with 135 government-recognized ethnic groups that make up the population of the nation. Christian faith as it was preached and propagated by Western Christian missionaries was enthusiastically embraced by ethnic minority groups such as the Chin, Kachin, and Karen while the majority Burmese population, which was made up of the majority Burman and smaller ethnic groups such as Shan, Rakhine, Mon, etc. were vehemently opposed to it. The growth of the church and the condition of Christians did not fare well at all when ethnic diversity eventually corresponded to different religious affiliations: the majority Burmese to Buddhism and the minority ethnic groups to Christianity. Not only is Christianity in Myanmar a minority religion but it is also the religion of the minority.

A third problematic aspect of the situation in Burma is that Christian missionaries brought the Christian faith to Burma at the same time in the early nineteenth century as Western imperialists came to Burma to conquer and annex it as part of their expansionist agenda. The Burmese people's perception of Christianity as the religion of Western colonialists from the time that Burma lost her independence to the British in 1885, and even long before that, has remained

strong even in the time since Burma regained her independence in 1948. This attitude of the Burmese people toward Christian mission work and Christianity in Myanmar leads the majority to look on Burmese Christians as people whose loyalty is not to their country, but somewhere else, that is, to the West, especially the United States of America and Great Britain. Moreover, the standard attitude of the Burmese kings toward Christianity and Christian missionaries during the Burmese monarchical era was that of intolerance and, in some cases, hostility and sheer resistance. The reality is that the Burmese people have consistently looked on Christianity as a Western imperialists' invasion into the religious and cultural spheres of their peaceful life. It is hardly surprising, then, that they have vehemently opposed the gospel even when compelled to yield to the political rule of the British colonialists.

There is a fourth factor that puts Christianity in a contrary situation in Myanmar: the Burmese people's nationalism and nationalistic movements that oppose anything that is Western and non-Buddhist. The ensuing practice of that outlook is the "Burmanization" or "Myanmarization" policy of successive Myanmar governments. This policy attempts to encroach on the rights and simple well-being of Christians in ethnic minority areas where the majority population are Christian. This policy provokes minority groups to resist the attempt of the majority ethnic groups and Myanmar's successive governments in promoting the policy of "Burmanization" with a goal of creating one nationality (Burman), one language (Burmese) and one religion (Buddhism). The church, then, seems to get trapped between the aggressive "Burmanization" policy of Burmese nationalism and the resultant minority ethnic and religious groups' understandable reaction to resist that policy. A significant negative consequence of this situation is that it severely hampers and actually typically precludes any real attempts by Burmese Christians to engage their neighbors, countrymen, or government in an effective way.

In addition to these external factors that have put Christianity in a disadvantageous and

arguably unfaithful position in Myanmar, there is another internal force that hinders Christians from fully and energetically participating in civil and cultural aspects of life in Myanmar. A widespread and popular view among Christians in Myanmar, traced to the teaching they received from their missionaries is that this fallen and broken world is perishing beyond repair and that Christians should not get involved in civic affairs that would stain their character. This exceedingly negative and dismissive view of the world as held by Christians in Myanmar has also understandably resulted in Christians tending to retreat from the world instead of engaging it. Of the five models of Niebuhr discussed in Chapter 5, the “Christ against Culture” model seems to be the dominant position of Burmese Christians in Myanmar. As a result, Christians do not have much impact on the surrounding culture and thus fail to fulfill the Lord’s expectation and mandate that they should be the salt of the earth and the light of the world in Myanmar.

Some Christian leaders such as Simon Pau Khan En and Samuel Ngun Ling, rightly recognizing the need for Christians to engage their public context in order to be God’s witnesses in the spiritually dark land of Myanmar, have advocated contextualization of the gospel. The unfortunate result of their proposal, however, is simply syncretism which is not content to employ methods and means that can make the gospel intelligible, but actually encourages making fundamental changes to the content of the gospel itself that it might be more acceptable to the people of Myanmar. These leaders also encourage interreligious dialogue as the best means to communicate the gospel to non-believers in Myanmar. However, their proposed approaches must be rejected since they do not give proper recognition to the Bible as the inspired and inerrant Word of God and Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation for mankind that God has provided whereby repentant sinners may be reconciled to God and saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. By stressing the need for Christians to engage their Buddhist neighbors through interreligious dialogues and contextualization of the Gospel, the theological models that



Burmese theologians have put forward have totally abandoned the Gospel.

How, then, can Christians in Myanmar engage their neighbors in a way that is Biblically and theologically faithful? How can these believers best be the salt of the earth and the light of the world as minority Christians in this predominantly Buddhist country? Do Christians in Myanmar, have an alternative theological paradigm that would enable them really to engage their surrounding culture and reach out to their neighbors with the gospel? Is there a better theological framework that can be used to teach and equip Burmese Christians meaningfully to engage the neighbors and the world around them? Of course, I believe such a paradigm does exist, and have argued that Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms provides precisely the necessary theological framework to enable believers in Burma better to engage and serve their neighbors in this predominantly Buddhist country of Myanmar.

Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms of God clearly shows how Christians should regard themselves as God's children while living in the kingdom of the world. His teaching, reflecting biblical truth, is relevant in different situations of life in different parts of the world—including Myanmar. This teaching also shows Christians how it is possible that they can be subject to the government, no matter what kind of government they may have, because it is God who rules over both the temporal and the spiritual kingdoms, thus human governments are God-ordained. Luther's teaching also clarifies the extent of a Christians obedience to the earthly government—there will be times when Christians should rather obey God than men when human governments act against the expressed will of God as revealed in the Bible. Moreover, Luther's related teaching on the two kinds of righteousness instructs us who live in both kingdoms about our God-given responsibility to live, witness, and serve whole-heartedly in the left-hand kingdom. Furthermore, Luther's teaching on Christian vocation, a critical component of his understanding of the two kingdoms emphasizing that Christians are placed in various estates or situations in the

left-hand kingdom of God for the sake of their neighbors, gives believers the right perspective for their everyday tasks in the world.

Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms also offers a sharp and necessary corrective to common but mistaken notions that Burmese Christians have about society. Some views that Christians have embraced and some terminology that has been used in Myanmar can be linked to the direct influence of a Buddhist tradition that divides society into the sacred and the profane just as the Western medieval worldview had done. One consequence of this idea is that those who are in fulltime Christian ministry are regarded and spoken of as those who are serving God while all the rest of the people in other professions are regarded as not really serving God. Luther's teaching on Christian vocation in the framework of the two kingdoms corrects this false division of society into two classes of people. It also inspires Christians to be faithful servants of God in whatever place they may find themselves in the left-hand kingdom of God.

Luther's teaching on the civil realm also encourages Christians in Myanmar for more active participation in civic affairs. As a concrete example, fulltime Christian ministers in Myanmar normally do not participate in some political activities such as voting, political campaigns and other gatherings for civic affairs for the simple reason that these are political in nature and that Christian ministers should not engage themselves in the things of the world. At other times, such leaders are discouraged and even barred from participation in civic affairs by the lay people for the mistaken notion that such activities will tarnish the reputation of the ministers who are "God's servants." Following Luther's teaching, however, it is the Christian ministers who should take the lead and set an example by joining actively in nation building—that is, in helping to support and guide the work of the God-ordained work of the government—and Christian leaders should encourage other believers to contribute whatever they can to the worthwhile agenda of the government and other public affairs. God's world, and God's provision

for the government and care of the world are good things and Christians need learn to understand and even embrace these things accordingly. Luther provides concrete and accessible guidance in this endeavor.

Is the church in Myanmar ready to accept this teaching and put it into practice as a more viable paradigm than what she had been offered earlier by Burmese theologians? I believe the church in Myanmar is ready. Especially with the prospect of more freedom under a new democratic government resulting from the November 2015 nationwide election, Christians are ready and eager to test the waters for new opportunities where they can demonstrate that they are good citizens of their country and explore new and creative ways to contribute to the good of society as never before. When Christians are gathered in the church and also when they are scattered in the world using their constructive actions day-in and day-out to help and serve their neighbors and fellow countrymen, they are participating in God's work. As they perform their many and varied everyday tasks, the faith they hold and the life they lead are blended in the most beautiful harmony. This is exactly the kind of life that Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms envisions for Christians. And this kind of life and the teaching that will produce this kind of life is what Christians in Myanmar need today. This is the kind of life that will affirm the Christian's identity and enhance his witness in Myanmar today!

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