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### Paper: “The Encounter of Missionary Christianity with Resurgent Buddhism in Post-colonial Myanmar”

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#### The Problem: Myanmar as a Unique Context

Myanmar is a unique country in Southeast Asia – unique not in terms of modern techno-economic development but in terms of what Kosuke Koyama once called, the “Burmese way to loneliness.”<sup>1</sup> Added to this uniqueness is the pluralistic structure of the Burmese society which is uniquely known in history as a *perfect ethnological museum*,<sup>2</sup> or a *melting pot*.<sup>3</sup> The present government has officially declared that there are 135 ethnic groups living in the country, of which the eight major ethnic groups are Burman, Kayin, Kachin, Chin, Kayah, Mon, Rakhine and Shan. The population of the country at present is estimated to be about 50 million, though there was no general census since 1983. Buddhism is believed to be practiced by 89.3 percent of the population whereas 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 respectively.<sup>4</sup> The amalgamated existence of such multi-religio-cultural diversities demonstrates the interwoven nature of a community life that is also common among people in other Asian and African countries. The net result of such amalgamated cultural living is on the one hand a blessing for the people of the country as it makes the country more colorful and even unique but on the other hand it is a sort of problem as it makes solidarity of the people more difficult, if not impossible. There are therefore more or less both problems and challenges as these ways of multi-religio-cultural living are put together into a practical reality.

To look at such a religiously pluralistic society as Myanmar with a Christian theologian’s eyes, one can easily recognize it as a unique place where world’s major religions come together for a union of different ethnic groups and cultures. For Christians, it is a unique inter-religious locus where two great world faiths (Christianity and Buddhism) and two great world cultures (East and West) meet and interact. Historically speaking, Buddhism in Myanmar, especially after the post-colonial period, can be called a *resurgent Buddhism* because of its closer and stronger connections with the transitory socio-political powers. Why was and is this Buddhism resurgent? The answer is because of its compartmentalized socio-political roles and power, since the colonial period up to the present, in a chain of Burmese nationalist, socialist and militarist (SLORC & SPRC) political movements. The present government repeatedly makes the claim that there is freedom of worship and no discrimination on religious grounds.<sup>5</sup> But Buddhism, which before was a state favored religion, is now not only reaffirmed by the present government, but enjoys a *special distinctiveness or status*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas J. Elwood, ed., *What Asian Christians are Thinking* (Quezon city: New Day Publishers, 1976), 29. Here Kosuke Koyama indirectly referred to the ‘Burmese way to Socialism’ which was the country’s one party ideology.

<sup>2</sup>Taw Sein Ko, *Burmese Sketches*, vol. II, (Rangoon: British Burma Press, 1920), pp. 332-325

<sup>3</sup>H.N.C.Stevenson, *The Hill People of Burma*, Pamphlet. No. 6, (New York: Longmans Green and Co., 1944), 5.

<sup>4</sup>Ministry of Information, Union of Myanmar, *Myanmar: Facts and Figures 2002* (March, 2002), p. 4-5.

<sup>5</sup>*The New Light of Myanmar* (English), (January 5, 2003), 9.

<sup>6</sup>*Mirror (Kye-mun)* Burmese Newspaper (August 20, 21, 22, 2002).

over other religions, and has the state's backup in all its activities. What this special status of Buddhism means is the continuity of the socio-political power of Buddhism, pointedly sanctioned against the freedom and movements of other religions in the country. This 'favored religion' concept claims to embrace all religions in the country so that they flourish together peacefully and harmoniously, while minimizing the freedom of other 'un-favored religions.' This means no real encounter between the 'favored-religion' (Buddhism) and 'un-favored religions' such as Christianity can happen as long as the special attention on one major religion is continued. The net result here is that the concept of 'favored religion' implicitly condones the idea of 'favored adherents' against other adherents of un-favored religions so that this concept brings about discrimination between religious people, at least at the individual or ethnic level. Here lies the basic ground where the minority ethnic Christians (un-favored adherents) and the majority Burman Buddhists (favored adherents) confronted each other in a conflict leading to a breach of communication between them. This conflict resulted in turn in the identity problem of a Burman Buddhist becoming Christian. For a Burman Christian, who was converted originally from the real Burman Buddhist background, to become a Christian is to get rid of his or her socio-cultural identity. The reason for this is the fact that a Myanmar identity as Christian is mistakenly conceived by the nationalist-minded Burman Buddhists as disloyal to the Buddhist society and to the nation as well. What has happened then to the tribal people who are Buddhists or *nat* (spirit) worshipers? The answer to this question is that religious identity as a Buddhist or animist has nothing to do with one's social identity. In addition, the Burman Buddhists embrace primal religions like *nat* (spirit) worship as part of popular Buddhism and no offense is being made to its adherents at all. Maung Htin Aung clearly painted this image when he said, "*Nat* worship is part of the Buddhist faith and the Burmese (Burman) want to worship *nats* without ceasing to be good Buddhists."<sup>7</sup>

In any case, the Myanmar Buddhists, being proud of themselves as professors and possessors of one of the world's great faiths and cultures, Buddhism, tend to look at Christianity and its adherents, Christians, with nationalist eyes, as indicated above, and as alien elements connected with western cultural imperialism. Myanmar was invaded by the British in 1825, 1852, and 1885. And the whole country became the province of India in 1885 until 1937. She regained independence on January 4, 1948, at 4:20am<sup>8</sup> under the leadership of General Aung San and joined the United Nations the same year and became a member of ASEAN in 1997. The nationalistic Buddhists in Myanmar cannot overlook the imperialist image of missionary Christianity when they come to think of Christianity as an imported western religion being associated with the colonial schemes and movements in the past which took the whole nation about a century to gain a full independence. In that context, colonization made Christianity in Myanmar an element culturally alien and socio-politically undesirable to the Myanmar Buddhist nationalists who consider "Buddhist faith the very *raison d'être* of their state."<sup>9</sup> Hence this alienation and undesirability of Christianity become intensified when the post-

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<sup>7</sup>Maung Htin Aung, *Folk Elements in Burmese Buddhism* (Rangoon: Buddha Sasana Council Press, 1959), 73-75.

<sup>8</sup>U Tun Aung Chain, "The Christian-Buddhist Encounter in Myanmar," an unpublished lecture given at the opening ceremony and public lecture of the Judson Research Center of the Myanmar Institute of Theology on July 13, 2003. The choice of date and time (January 4, 4:20am) was an astrological calculation indicating a traditionalist orientation in the post-colonial order – the link between Buddhism and political authority, which had been disrupted during the colonial period, was restored

<sup>9</sup>G.E. Harvey, *British Rule in Burma, 1824-1942* (London, 1946), 25-26.

independence custodians and protectors of Buddhism, the monks and the rulers,<sup>10</sup> enviously saw the rapid growth of the Christian churches and the mushrooming of Christian denominations, institutes and organizations both in the rural and urban areas of Myanmar in the midst of various political restrictions and religious discriminations against them in recent years. In such a restricted and a suspicion-filled situation, Christian openness to their non-Christian neighbors and access to their own religious freedom has often been limited or even ignored because of fears of ethnic Christian (un-favored adherents) conflicts with the major Buddhist group (favored adherents) and their possible political consequences. The inter-faith activities are therefore carried out only in a very limited measure and sensitive way in the form of ‘person to person’ or group to group relationships.

### **The Challenges: The Church Situation**

The church life in Myanmar is predominantly western-oriented, especially in its ways of God-talk (theology), its form of worship, its structure of church organization (ecclesiology) and in its strategy of mission outreach (missiology). This western orientation of church life came to Myanmar Christians not only through their missionaries’ teachings but also through their colonial rulers, administrators, and civil educators. The problem is that the church took shape in the image of those who established it and administered its people. Professor Erick Sharpe, former missionary to India, was right when he described the Burma situation several years ago as “Christianity in Burma is tarred with a colonialist brush.”<sup>11</sup> This ‘colonialist tar,’ which may represent the influence of western ideals and ways of life upon the churches, remains suspicious to the present government, and is what needs to be first of all removed from the life of the church in Myanmar. A reason for the need to do this is because the church in Myanmar has been and still is undergoing various political pressures and suspicion, causing the unnecessary delays and disruptions of many church activities. As the net result, the church growth in Myanmar continues to be looked at enviously with suspicion and sensitivity as part of western cultural interference in the country’s internal affairs and as being associated with the foreign missionary agencies or churches serving as sponsoring bodies. In response to the challenges of those political suspicions and fears and to the negative impact of both the British colonial rule and later Burmese socialism, the Baptist churches in Myanmar have adopted the three self-dependent principles: self-support, self-propagation and self-governance.

To do away with western ideals and accessories, the churches in Myanmar may need to deconstruct all its western-modeled thought-forms, western-styled forms of worship, and western-patterned structures of Christian life and then reconstruct them in the Myanmar way with Myanmar resources. This process, already initiated under the leadership of the so-called Myanmar Theologians Fellowship, can be called the *Myanmar-ization* of Christianity because of its deconstruction and reconstruction works that have to do with the imported missionary Christianity in a way relevant to the religio-cultural pluralistic Myanmar context. Hence, this deconstruction and reconstruction of missionary Christianity is a challenging theological task which the Myanmar churches need to undertake promptly.

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<sup>10</sup>John Cady, “Religion an Politics in Burma,” in *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, vol. xii (February, 1953, No.2), 150. During the colonial period, John Cady, one of the civil administrators, pointed out, “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>11</sup>Erick J. Sharpe, *Faith Meets Faiths* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 104.

The most undesirable among many missionaries' indoctrinated traditions is the divided and discriminative trends of 'mission fields and mission administration' which is part and parcel of the 'divide and rule' colonial policy of the British Indian Empire at that time. These include different mission fields and missionaries of the same sending body as well as all other mission fields and missionaries of the different denominational mission societies and agencies in the periods between the seventeenth century and the middle of the twentieth century. This tradition of 'divided mission fields' and 'discriminative mission administration' resulted in 'undesirable schism'<sup>12</sup> and 'unjustifiable favoritism'.<sup>13</sup> For instance, the missionaries concentrated only on developing the local dialects of their missionary centers or fields into written forms and lacked visions for the future of their evangelized people as people with identity and unity, and have contributed to shameful and divisive competition and schism among the regional Christian churches of different mission fields. Also fearing that they would have no influence in society, if Christianity were represented overwhelmingly by the poorest and the most ignorant elements (though this really happened today), the missionaries and mission administrators were not very enthusiastic about the growth of Christianity among the hill-tribe people in Myanmar.<sup>14</sup> In his recent lecture at the Myanmar Institute of Theology, Simon Pau Khan En, a professor of Ecumenics at the said Institute, explained how those diverse mission traditions of the western churches have divided their adherents and churches in Myanmar when he said, "Diverse church traditions thus become divisive factors for the churches in Myanmar."<sup>15</sup> The situation shown to us by Simon Pau Khan En here is a 'divided trend' that originated in the west and that flows down from the west to us through different channels of mission agencies. The divided churches irrespective of denominations, including para-churches, have therefore proved the fact that unity or solidarity means little or nothing to these churches because they are already divided among themselves, following the divided streams of western mission traditions. The ecumenical call for unity is hence a demanding challenge for all the churches and denominations of Myanmar today. Without solidarity among the churches and denominations themselves, the witness of the church to the Buddhist neighbors will not be effective and successful. Hence, to strive for solidarity between churches and denominations of different mission traditions has become one of the great ecumenical challenges for doing theology in Myanmar.

### **Theological Challenges**

There is no doubt that the life and works of missionaries, particularly of Adoniram Judson, the first American Baptist missionary to Myanmar, dominated whatever theological thinking there was among the ethnic Christians and early Burman converts of the nineteenth century. For instance, the works of Adoniram Judson such as

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<sup>12</sup> David Lai Sum, "Naming God in Burma Today," (D.Min. Thesis: Divinity School of the University of Chicago, 1994), 31. Here Sum indicates that missionaries to the Chin Hills rejected use of a Chin dialect (Falam) as a medium of instruction in all primary schools in the Chin Hills, though the British administrators decided to do it.

<sup>13</sup> Cung Lian Hup, "Innocent Pioneers and Their Triumphs in A Foreign Land: A Critical Look at the American Baptist Mission in the Chin Hills (1899-1966) in Burma from a Missiological Perspective," (Th.D. dissertation, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1993). Hup shows how the Chin Christians were neglected and ignored by the missionaries in comparison to the Burmese and the Karens.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. Charles W. Normn, ed. Christianity in the Non-Western World (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. Prentice Hall, Inc, 1967), 52-53.

<sup>15</sup> Simon Paul Khan En, "Solidarity Amidst Diversity," an unpublished lecture given on MIT Prayer Day (July 4, 2003).

‘A Burman Liturgy’ (1829) which contains formulas of worship, a creed in twelve articles and formulas for practical ministry and other writings<sup>16</sup> such as ‘Golden Balance,’ and ‘The Threefold Cord’ remain the basic theological position of both early and present Myanmar Christians of the older school of thought, particularly of the Baptists in Myanmar. According Kyaw Than,<sup>17</sup> these missionary works (particularly the 1829 liturgy and 1819 confession of the first convert, U Naw) have constituted the very basis of Protestant theological development in Myanmar.

Theologically speaking, many Myanmar Christians are not yet mature in theological thinking so that they follow centuries-old missionary teachings verbatim without critical questioning and re-evaluating their contents. Being spoon-fed as such by missionary teachings, many Christians still hold a view or thought-form that is quite exclusive in their faith-claim especially in relation to people of other faiths.<sup>18</sup> The problem here is that spoon-fed spirituality produces ‘missionary compound’ mentality and an exclusive Christian attitude - a mentality that looks only to the west for a model of life and an attitude that makes Christians feel better than others, a *holier-than-thou* attitude.<sup>19</sup> This *holier-than-thou* attitude led Christians then to look at the non-Christians and their religions with complete disdain as a bunch of hell bound people and no worthy friends of Christians. The narrow-minded group of this type of missionary trained Christians always point to what their missionaries told them in the past to follow as Christians and use proof texts in the Bible which justify their exclusive theological stand, such as a text of the Bible about not befriending unbelievers. I believe that this is the problem not only in Myanmar but also in many parts of the world. Hence, in that aforementioned context, the Christians are against whatever is Buddhist and do not take sufficient notice of Buddhists as persons. Buddhists are normally viewed as objects of the Christian mission as Pe Maung Tin, a much respected Christian former professor of Pali in Yangon University, once pointed out, “They (missionaries) evidently came to teach, not to learn, not to make Buddhists the object of their missionary love and concern. Rather, the Buddhists are seen only as the object of their missionary preaching.”<sup>20</sup>

Further, another theological challenge has to do with the Christian witness. Many Christians in Myanmar today are not well convinced that Christian witness is not simply a matter of imparting knowledge about the Christian faith and tradition but that it is above all a matter of developing one’s ability to reflect theologically and critically about what is relevant to the challenges of the context. Hence, very little attention is paid to the questions and challenges posed by the Christian encounter with the Buddhists and Buddhist traditions they adhere to. Again, many Christians are not well aware of the need to relate the Christian faith and practice to the present issues of socio-politico-economic realities, though these realities are closely linked with the Myanmar religious community life as a whole. Other theological issues that have to be addressed doctrinally include the Christian understanding of God in personified form, the idea of Christ’s atonement, the doctrine of salvation by faith through grace, and the works of the Holy Spirit. These issues need to be, of course, reconceived and reinterpreted in terms, ideas and expression understandable to the Burmese Buddhist thought-forms. In addition, feminist and gender issues are also entering the context for further discussion.

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<sup>16</sup>Francis Wayland, *A Memoir of the Life and Labors of the Rev. Adoniram Judson*, vol. II (Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Company, 1853), 448-466

<sup>17</sup>Kyaw Than, “Theologizing for Selfhood and Service,” in *Asian Voices in Christian Theology*, ed. G. H. Anderson, p. 56.

<sup>18</sup>Samuel Ngun Ling, “In the Midst of Golden Stupas: Revitalizing the Christian Presence in Myanmar,” in *RAYS, MIT Journal of Theology*, vol.3 (February, 2002), 110-111.

<sup>19</sup>U Kyaw Than, “Christianity, Burmese People and Burmese Culture,” (in Burmese) a paper presented to the Third Inter-Seminary Assembly held from October 14-17, 1999 at Pyin-Oo-Lwin, p. 8

<sup>20</sup>*Southeast Asia Journal of Theology*, vol.3, No.2 (October, 1961), 28.

### Missiological Imperative

Turning to the issue of mission, one has to reconsider seriously what has preconditioned the Christian mission in the past and what possible problems can continue to persist in the future so that he or she may develop a new mission paradigm shift that best fits today's situation. With the aforementioned historical, socio-political and religious conditions in mind, this new shift of mission focus demands a rethinking of the whole mission concept – its content, its strategy and its approach. An important question here is whether it is appropriate for the Church in Myanmar to employ the dogmatic and missionary forms of Christian witness and mission to the Buddhists. The answers to this question are twofold: one is because the approach used by the past missionaries was along the narrow and exclusive line so that when the Christian mission is carried out in that way, a direct encounter with the Buddhist mission known as the *Buddha Taungtan Tatana* (Buddhist Mission to the Hill Tribes) often happens both at local and national levels.

The second is because the works of missionaries clearly show the nature of conquest of the people. This kind of conquest-mission, a sort of proselytized mission, is mainly concerned about conversion, statistics and the quantitative result of mission rather than the quality of Christian life. But the primary aim of the Christian mission is not conquest of others but service to others. It is not to gain statistics but to serve. "For the Son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45, RSV). Such a 'but to serve' type of mission cares for people regardless of race, religion and culture. This type of mission respects all faiths whether they are favored or un-favored by the government. We need today a mission that does not look down on our non-Christian neighbors and that is not bent on condemning *good non-Christians* to hell. The church in Myanmar does not need such a proselytized mission that calls for the arrogant statistical conversions but it needs service mission that is carried out with genuine Christian love and humility.

The Christians should always search for points of contact where dialogue between religions can take place peacefully and interactively. Together with Hans Kung who claimed, "No world peace without peace among religions, no peace among religions without dialogue between religions, and no dialogue between the religions without accurate knowledge of one another."<sup>21</sup> In Myanmar history, neither severe confrontation nor close relationship has ever existed between the Buddhist and Christian churches since the time of the Burmese monarchs up to this present day. The two churches therefore coexist so distantly without interfering or cooperating in each other's affairs. "Worship your own god, go your own religious way" is a philosophy of the country's leaders. Religious interaction or dialogue is often seen as a suspicious tool of the Christian religious conquest. Hence, the Myanmar Buddhists never felt that they needed dialogue with Christians or mutual learning in order to enrich their Buddhist faith. In such a context, the hope of Christian mission in Myanmar must not be what others can do for the church but what the church can do for them. Such a new shift of mission paradigm may require both listening and acting more than telling and teaching. Mission must be a matter of being there and caring, instead of going there and unloading. In fact, if the church in Myanmar really wants to be understood, it must seek first to understand others. Only such a type of mission would be able to make the gospel comprehensive and intelligible to people of other faiths, especially to the Buddhists in Myanmar, and better bring them to the knowledge of Christ.

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<sup>21</sup>Hans Kung, "Christianity and World Religions: Dialogue with Islam," in Toward a Universal Theology of Religion, ed. Leonard Swidler (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1988), p.194.

## Conclusion

Myanmar, known as a hermit nation, is a country where the two wheels of *Dhamma* and Logos (Christ) have rolled together but peacefully at a certain distance. Due to this reality of peaceful coexistence and lack of real encounter, the churches, organizations and theological institutions in Myanmar have been silent theologically for almost two centuries from early 19<sup>th</sup> century to this present day. A reason for this theological silence, as already pointed out in the aforementioned sections, is significantly and primarily concerned with the preconditioned spiritual inputs of the exclusive Christian missionary teachings in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The other reason may have to do with the local Christian communities who continued to struggle for their own survival after 1966 when the surprised expulsion of all foreign Christian missionaries was made without any prior reason. It was only after 1966 that the Christian thinkers in Myanmar began to liberate their theological thinking, though slow in pace, from the captivity of their missionary teachings to pursue the advance of a new theological journey on their own soil and context.

In fact, any assessment of the patterns and paradigm shifts of the Christian mission, church life and Christian theology in Myanmar will have to begin with the analysis of those inherited missionaries' exclusive theologies, thought-forms and lifestyles, which still dominate and determine the manners of the church life in present Myanmar. A question which all Myanmar Christians need to ask themselves here is: (i) Are Myanmar Christian churches still captive to their inherited past? To say yes to this question will mean to prove that the long theological silence of the church in Myanmar is due to their inherited past - *an ideological captivity*. Nevertheless, whatever it was in the past, any Christian theology doing in Myanmar ought to be a theology that theologizes, interprets, reflects and understands critically ( on the basis of Critical Asian Principle) and concretely in the situation of the present. It implies that any doing theology in Myanmar ought to be a dialogical theology, a theology that is informed and shaped by inter-religious experiences or a theology which is self-consciously dialogical in content and orientation. It is imperative therefore that Myanmar Christians develop a theology in dialogue with other faiths in order to help articulate a genuine contextual theology out of the interfaith encounter.

Finally, the followings need to be considered seriously for doing theology in Myanmar: (i) doing theology in Myanmar must be a theology that is critically reconstructed in form and terms comprehensive to the Myanmar people. (ii) the imported western ways of theological articulations that have been detached from the real life situation of the Myanmar people need to be modified or reshaped in form and thought applicable to the Myanmar situation. (iii) A theology developed in Myanmar must take seriously into consideration Myanmar religio-cultural and socio-political resources to make it sense to Myanmar people. (iv) doing theology in Myanmar cannot be authentic unless it takes seriously into account the importance of interfaith dialogue with peoples of different faiths especially with the adherents of Buddhist faith in Myanmar. (v) Any doing theology in Myanmar must be redemptive or liberating than oppressive of the people involved. The central focus should be to set at liberty the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized to heal the broken society and to be in solidarity with the powerless in their struggle for justice, peace and freedom. (vi) Any doing theology in Myanmar must enable Myanmar people to rediscover their lost identity, human right and dignity.