

THE MIS/APPROPRIATION OF BUDDHIST HIERARCHY IN MYANMAR: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Pau Lian Mang

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ABSTRACT

Since its inception, Buddhism, the major religion in Myanmar, has been appropriated as the unifying principle for national solidarity. The Buddhist hierarchy is therefore influential in the society. This appropriation became manipulative in the postcolonial period, however, with the Buddhist hierarchy used as a political tool to dominate both the Buddhist and the non-Buddhist. The misappropriation has often resulted in undesirable and even tragic incidents including misunderstandings, violence, and murders.

Minority Christians have made efforts to engage in interfaith dialogue in their attempt to end the so-called religious conflicts. The principle for dialogue has been the sameness of the different religions. This article appreciates “sameness,” but does not see “differences,” or even religious hierarchy, as the main problem. The problem lies in the misappropriation of religions. The remedy is therefore the liberation of religions: each religion needs to be emancipated from any form of hegemonic control. With this insight, the article calls for a life-together in religious diversity and a renewed emphasis on practicing “love.”

Introduction

The manipulation of religion is not uncommon in world history. Even today religious beliefs and systems are appropriated, or misappropriated, by different people for various purposes—for building prestige, attaining wealth, legitimizing political power, etc. The same is true in Myanmar. Buddhism, the major religion there, has been used for political ends since its inception in the land. Other minority religions, such as Christianity and Islam, are not excepted from this trend. There were times when the appropriation of Buddhism seemed right and desirable in that it brought about a degree of unity and peace, but for the most part it caused uneasiness and misunderstanding among people of different faiths in the land, even finally rendering Buddhism dreadful to the non-Buddhists. In this paper, the researcher will explore ways in which religions can be liberated from manipulation or misappropriation and will show how Christians can contribute to the process.

With this objective in view, the researcher will first briefly trace the history of Buddhism in Myanmar—how it came to the land and became influential; how it was used at all times by ancient kings down through pre- and post-war politicians to successive military regimes; and how it is now likened to a terror. Next, the researcher will outline the structure of the Buddhist religious hierarchy, its influence on the society, the privileged role of monks in the community, and the martyrdom of those monks who protested against oppressive governments. The researcher will continue by considering Myanmar’s current socio-religio-political scene, which includes the

government's irresponsible actions towards the people and ethnic minorities, and the riots and killings involving some extreme nationalist monks. In the last part of the paper, the researcher will offer a Christian response by making two sincere calls: 1) an existential call in response to the real life situation, that is, a life-together; and 2) a religious call for actualizing love (love in action), a concept which underlies the teachings of different religions.

To this end, the researcher will apply a narrative method for the description of Myanmar's socio-religio-political context. Here narrative simply means an account of connected events or experiences, a method that may or may not include critical comments. To make a call for a life-together in love, the researcher will make use of what can be called a nonfoundational approach. This approach is based on a philosophical view that is defined dialectically by its negation of foundationalism. According to foundationalists, knowledge must be built on a sure foundation—a foundation which consists of a set of incontestable beliefs or first principles that are universal, objective, and discernible to any rational person (Grenz and Franke 2001, 23). In theology the term means that all religions are the same in terms of essence and aims, though they appear to be different in their doctrines. Contrary to this view, nonfoundationalism prioritizes respect for others as others, rather than attempting to relativize them in a doctrinal common ground.

An Interlude

Burma or Myanmar?

Myanmar, formerly called Burma, is made up of several ethnic groups. The dominant majority group has two interchangeable names—*Bamar* and *Myanmar*. For a long time outsiders called the country Burma (the corrupt English pronunciation of *Bamar*), the people Burman or Burmese, and the language Burmese. Until the end of the British colonial period (1948), the Bamar people used the name *Bamar* (alternative English spellings are: Bama, Bamah, Bahma, etc.) more widely than *Myanmar* to name themselves and their country. However, the post-colonial Bamar governments began to use *Bamar* for their own group and *Myanmar* both for all ethnic peoples and the country itself. (*Myanmar* is a more inclusive term which covers all ethnic groups.) From that time on, the people called their country Myanmar, while outsiders continued calling it Burma. In 1989, the military junta attempted to enforce the name Myanmar as the UN-recognized name. This paper follows that name; hence, Bamar for the Bamar people and Myanmar for all groups and the country.

Ethnic Diversity

Modern Myanmar (the Union of Myanmar) began with the Pang Long Treaty signed in 1947, a year before Independence. This was an agreement made between the Bamars and ethnic minorities for the founding of the future Union of Myanmar. The Union government recognizes 135 distinct national races in the country, speaking different languages and dialects. According to the 2014 Census Report, the population totals 51.41 million (The Republic of the Union of Myanmar 2015, 1), but the ethnic distribution of the population is not mentioned in the report. A chart is thus provided to show the percentage share of population, as estimated in 2003 (Than 2007, 197):

Major Groups	Sub-nationalities	Percentage
Bamar	9	67.9
Shan	33	9.4
Kayin	11	6.4
Rakhine	7	4.2
Mon	-	2.7
Chin	53	2.1
Kachin	12	1.4
Kayah	9	0.5
Others*	Non-citizens	5.4

Myanmar has a stratified citizenship system (deriving from the 1982 Citizenship Law), based on how one's forebears obtained citizenship: 1) *Full citizens* are descendants of residents who lived in the country prior to 1823, or were born to parents who were citizens at the time of birth; 2) *Associate citizens* are those who (regardless of origin) acquired citizenship through the 1948 Union Citizenship Law; and 3) *Naturalized citizens* are people who (regardless of origin) lived in British Burma before January 4, 1948 and applied for citizenship after 1982.

The term Others* in the table above therefore refers to people who do not fit in the three categories above and are therefore given Foreign Registration Cards (FRCs). One category among the “Others” is a group of people who prefer to be called “Rohingya” and who wish to be recognized as an ethnic minority group. The government sees these people simply as illegal migrants from Bangladesh.

Buddhism in Myanmar

The Inception

In the mid-eleventh century, Anawrahtar (ruler of Bagan, one of the then city-states), conquered many other city-states and became the king of what can be called the First Bamar Kingdom. Convinced that only a religion of morality could help consolidate his kingdom, Anawrahtar looked for just such a religion. He found it in Theravada Buddhism among the Mons people in the south. When the Mons refused to give the Buddhist canons—the *Pali Tipitaka* or, *Tripitaka* (Three Baskets)—Anawrahtar invaded them and took the canons to Bagan where he became the first Bamar king to make Theravada Buddhism a ruling principle and a unifying factor for national solidarity (En 1995, 397).

The religious beliefs in existence before Anawrahtar’s introduction of Theravada Buddhism are not much known. Many of them might have been a mixture of animism and corrupted forms of Mahayana Buddhism (from the Ari monks). In order to realize his goal of a national religion, Anawrahtar executed the leaders of the Ari monks, while at the same time taking some measures of compromise with indigenous *nat* worship (Aung 1967, 30-7).

In the Bamar language, and as explained by Simon En, *nat* is a generic term for various types of invisible spiritual beings (En 1995, 1). A *nat* is a spirit who has some dominion over a person or a group of people, and over a certain object or objects. There were thirty-six leading *nats* in the land then, and to this list Anawrahtar added one more *nat* called *Tha-gya-min* (Sanskrit: *Sakra*), the guardian god of Buddhism, and claimed this *nat* as the head of the pantheon. Then he set up the images of all these thirty-seven *nats* on the platform of his newly built pagoda named Shwe-si-gon, in order to demonstrate their subservience to the Buddha (Smith 1965, 14). (*Nat* worship is still prevalent among Buddhists in Myanmar today.)

The Growing Influence

Most kings after Anawrahtar took the role of defenders and promoters of Buddhism. They traced their origins back to Buddha’s *Sakya* dynasty. The Buddhist doctrine of *karma* placed the king in the highest position, since one could only become a ruler after the accumulation of the greatest merit in former lives. The King was also believed to be the *Bodhisattva*, the incarnation of future Buddhas. He appointed the head of the *sangha* (the community of monks) and ensured the rule of order through religious hierarchy. At the same time, he ruled with the support of the Buddhist order and its associated prestige.

As such, Bamar society became totally Buddhist. Pali, the language of Buddhist scriptures, strongly influenced the Bamar language. Pagodas were built largely in the design of Bamar architecture. The integrating influence of Buddhism in Bamar society and culture was so great that there emerged a saying frequently repeated, even in modern Myanmar, which goes: “To be a Myanmar is to be a Buddhist” (Smith 1965, 14, 20, 83). Buddhism became Bamar’s national symbol, and as a rule the Bamar people think and speak of the whole national culture as Buddhist. It is said that a Bamar peasant, when asked his race in a census, insistently replied, “I’m a Buddhist” (von der Mehen 1963, 5).

Other Religions

While Buddhism is widely adhered to, minority religions exist as well. Religious affiliations can be seen in the following chart, provided by the Joshua Project (the section identifying “Adherents” was added by the present researcher) (Joshua Project 2015):

Religion	Adherents	Percentage
Buddhism	Almost all Bamars, Mons, and Rakhines; most of Shans; half of Kayins; a few from different groups (including Chinese Myanmars)	75.3%
Christianity	Almost all Chins; half of Kayins; many of Kachins; some from different groups (including Indian and Chinese citizens of Myanmar); and a very small number of Bamars	8.8%
Hinduism	Indian citizens of Myanmar	1.6%
Islam	Indian and Bengali citizens of Myanmar; a few from Bamar group and Chinese citizens of Myanmar	5.6%
Ethnic Religions	Various smaller minority groups	8.1%
Non-religious		0.5%
Others		0.1%

Manipulation

Here manipulation means using or controlling religion and/or making it a hegemonic power for political purposes. In Myanmar, nationalist Buddhism has been strong throughout the country’s history. When facing attacks, Buddhists used to urge each other to be united for the sake of “*a-myou, barthar, tharthanar,*” that is, “(our) race, (our) language, and (our) religion” (Ling 2007, 156). A good instance of this was the founding of the YMBA (Young Men’s Buddhist Association) in 1906, modeled on the YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association). The Association first dealt with religious issues, but later became involved in political activities, such as sending a delegation to the Chelmsford-Montagu hearings in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1917 to ask for Myanmar’s separation from India, and organizing a boycott of elections to the Indian Legislative Assembly and Council of State at Delhi (Smith, 1999, 49).

In the period of “Diarchy” (the British-Myanmar joint government system), rival politicians tried to impress people in their political campaigns by inviting monks to deliver speeches before their political talks. On their campaign trips, they would also make public visits and donations to monasteries in the area. In 1946, Major General Aung San, the national leader fighting for

independence, even had to warn politicians who frequently used Buddhism for political purposes, declaring, “We must draw a clear line between politics and religion, because the two are not one and the same thing” (Smith 1965, 118). However, postcolonial leaders did not follow the policy of Aung San, who was assassinated in 1947, a year before independence (Hackett 1975, 121-22). Political leaders sought political legitimacy in the way that ancient kings did and this meant sponsoring and protecting Buddhism. They even purified the religion by renouncing some orders they considered unqualified, as if they were the chief patrons of the *sangha* (Jordt 2007, 175).

U Nu, the first Prime Minister of the postcolonial Myanmar (1948-1962), looked to Buddhism as a means of unifying the country and in 1961 made an unsuccessful attempt to declare Myanmar a Buddhist state (Smith 1965, 22). General Ne Win, the leader of the *coup d'état* of 1962, took an approach of non-involvement in religious affairs until 1974. However, he later set out to unify and purify the *sangha* according to orthodox practice, operating on the assumption that if he could control the monks, he would thereby control the people (Smith 1965, 176-180).

After Ne Win, according to a professor from Yangon University, the junta tried more than any other post-independence government to legitimize itself through the *sangha* (Smith 1965, 185). It abolished religious associations outside the government's control, and, through the state-controlled media, defamed respected monks who took anti-regime stands. Intelligence agents were sent into the monasteries in the disguised form of monks. At the same time, the junta looked for loyal monks to promote to leadership positions on the state-controlled supreme council of monks. The junta publicized its religious activities to gain political legitimacy. Thus it became a common joke among Buddhist Barmars to say, “There are only two colours on Myanmar TV—green and yellow.” This referred to the news on the state-controlled TV consisting largely of military personnel in their green uniforms, giving donations to monks in their yellow robes (Fink 2001, 217-218).

The Role of Buddhist Monks

Venerated Status

In Buddhist societies, monks are highly respected by everyone and occupy the highest positions in the religious hierarchy. In Myanmar, it is estimated there are around 500,000 monks. The motivations to join the monkhood may vary. Melford Spiro identifies the five main motives for becoming a monk as follows: 1) disgust with the world and its misery; 2) the desire to avoid labour; 3) the wish for an easy life; 4) the desire to achieve the state of *nibbana*; and 5) the desire to acquire merit and good *karma* or to promote and teach Buddhism (Spiro 1984, 137). Whatever motives they may have, the monks certainly enjoy the highest respect from society.

What must be understood here is that the general respect they enjoy is not directed towards the monks as individuals, but to the robes they wear, which are the symbol of the Buddha (Gil 2008, 4). The Buddhist reveres *Yadana Thown-par* (the Three Jewels or the Three Refuges—that is, the Buddha, the *Dharma*, and the *Sangha*). Since the Buddha is no longer physically on earth, the visible expression of reverence goes to the *Sangha*, who teach the truths discovered by the Buddha. Moreover, the Buddhist believes in an uncountable series of lives, among which human life is one that is very difficult to obtain. (It is as difficult as for a needle falling from the sky to meet an upright needle on the ground.) And how much more difficult it is to become a monk. This belief cultivates reverence in the heart of the Buddhist layperson toward monks. Monks might not be ideal, but what counts is that they strive for an ideal.

As such, Buddhist people not only respect monks, but want to support prospective monks. A son is seldom forced to join the monkhood for life, but if he so wishes, nothing can please his parents more. The parents can be honored officially, if not in daily usage, with the titles *Mehdaw* (Royal Mother) and *Khamehdaw* (Royal Father). These terms are used with pride in ceremonies,

and of course, in their obituaries. A mother with a monk for a son can hold her head high in her community, however poor she may be. A woman without a son can fund the expenses of a man who wants to become a monk and be called *Yahan Ama* (Elder Sister of a Monk), or a man who does the same, *Yahan Dagar* (Sponsor of a Monk). Royal parents, Elder Sisters, and Sponsors have the right to have golden umbrellas (although not opened) over their bodies at their funerals.

Mutual Exchange

Monks live in monasteries. Monasteries are supported through the joint efforts of individuals or organizations in the society. The monastery in a village or in a town in the countryside is very influential. It is a center of social life and also a place for the preservation and transmission of the Bamar cultural heritage. The children are taught basic morals and civics, and social rights and duties towards others. Monasteries usually accept all village children who cannot afford to go to state schools. The education in monastic schools is free, often accompanied by free meals and lodging.

For the laity to make religious progress, they need to practice *dana* (donations to the monks and worship of sacred relics). They earn the highest religious merit through the act of donations. The accumulated merit will bring fruit in one of their next lives and will eventually bring them closer to *nibbana*. This is why important events in the life of a layperson cannot be celebrated without the act of donation. Monks are the vessel through which laity can aspire to a better hereafter. The most generous donors deserve also the highest respect and prestige in society. For their part, due to their vows, monks do not earn their living—they rely on the support of the laity. In this way, both sides live in a state of mutual exchange and depend on each other materially and spiritually.

Socio-Political Engagement

The involvement of Myanmar monks in nationalist movements and activities for freedom and justice can be traced back to the colonial period, particularly the early 1920s. Normally monks in Myanmar do not participate in secular affairs, but there are certain monks who do speak out in protest against oppressive rulers, and many have given their lives for this cause. A few, but significant, examples will be given here, in order to highlight these monks' love for country and their courage to stand with the people at the expense of their own lives.

U Ottama (1879-1939)

U Ottama belonged to Rakhine, one of the seven major nationalities of Myanmar. He entered monkhood at a young age, studied in India, and taught Pali and Sanskrit in Japan. He travelled to France, Egypt, Korea, China, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam. He started traveling the country in the 1910s and made anti-colonial speeches, but as an admirer of Mahatma Gandhi he never advocated the use of violence. He was imprisoned in 1921 for his famous "Craddock, Get Out!" speech. (Sir Reginald Craddock was the then Governor of British Burma.) Afterwards he was repeatedly imprisoned, spending more time in prison between 1921 and 1927. During his imprisonment in the late 1930s, he went on hunger strike and died on September 9, 1939.

U Ottama left a significant and admirable legacy. He was the first monk to enter the political arena, the first to be imprisoned as a result of making political speeches, and the first true martyr of Myanmar nationalism. The new generation of monks in his monastery is active in advocating justice and their movements formed a spark for the 2007 Saffron Revolution.

U Wisara (1889-1929)

U Wisara was ordained a monk in 1912, aged twenty-three, and was active in the country's nascent independence movement in 1920s. In 1922, he met U Ottama, who had been imprisoned once for making a political speech. Later, he himself was imprisoned for his "illegal speech"

(1926-1929). In prison, he was forced to take off his monk's robe, but he went on hunger strike and after forty days was allowed to wear it again. Right after his first release, he started to make anti-colonialist speeches and was therefore imprisoned again. He was again forcibly disrobed, and on 6 April 1929, again started a hunger strike. He died on 19 September 1929 after 166 days. The ultimate sacrifice of U Wisara, a previously unknown monk, profoundly "moved many Burmese who had not concerned themselves with politics before" (Fink 2001, 19).

Monks from Pre-/Post- War Period until 2007

In the pre-/post-war period, political parties attempted to make use of monks, and many of them aligned themselves with ambitious politicians. However, there were also monks who continued to keep themselves from party politics and stood with the suffering people. Anti-government protests and demonstrations broke out sporadically in the periods that followed: the parliament democracy period (1948-62); the first phase of the military regime (1962-74); the second phase of the military regime, in the form of a socialist civilian government (1974-88); and the third phase of the military regime (1988-2011). Monks usually took part in these movements, some as supporters or even organizers, and many gave their lives as the army often fired on the protesters. In this connection, an event which is most significant among others, known as Saffron Revolution 2007, will be briefly presented.

The Saffron Revolution

In September 2007, tens of thousands of monks and other anti-government demonstrators, an estimated hundred thousand people, assembled peacefully on the streets of cities in defiance of the junta. It was a spontaneous act, without coordination or permission from the highest levels of the monastic hierarchy. This sudden and courageous act was also something unexpected for the opposition.

The monks tried to use their immunity to urge the authorities to consider the economic situation of Myanmar citizens and to protest against a sudden fuel price hike. After some violent events in one city, which ended with the death of a monk, the protests spread over the whole country. The leading group, *All Burma Monks Alliance*, presented four political demands to the military regime, which were as follows:

- (1) to apologize to the monks until they were satisfied and forgave them
- (2) to immediately reduce all commodity prices, fuel prices, rice and cooking oil prices
- (3) to release all political prisoners including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and all detainees arrested in ongoing demonstrations over the fuel price hike
- (4) to immediately enter a dialogue with democratic forces for national reconciliation, in order to resolve the crises facing the suffering people

As is customary in the history of military regimes, the protest ended with a violent crackdown by the military, with many deaths and arrests. The monasteries were cleared out and most of the monks had to flee to the villages. With this, the military might think that the movement of protest had been completely crushed. However, the monks' united spirit and courageous initiatives had a great impact on the people and the international community. With pressure coming from inside and outside, the junta had to consider holding elections in the near future.

What this section presents is some valid evidence that people are especially impressed and motivated when monks, the highest ranked in the religious hierarchy and the most respected in society, take the initiative in protesting against unjust authorities. In what follows, the way some Buddhist monks have misappropriated this most respected religious position in the hierarchy will be discussed.

Current Socio-Political Situation

Recent Positive Signs of Change

Beginning in 2010, recent years have brought a glimmer of hope to Myanmar, a country that has been in the dark for nearly half a century, ever since the 1962 *coup d'état* (Topich and Leitich 2013, 139ff). A multi-party election was held under the arbitrary supervision of the junta. Aung San Suu Kyi, the opposition leader and democracy idol, was released from house arrest. A multi-party parliament came into existence with elected representatives. Early in 2011, the parliament announced the formation of a new civilian and democratic government. The leading opposition party against military totalitarianism, the NLD, boycotted the election and the parliament was therefore dominated by the USDP (the military's proxy party). Furthermore, the top positions in the government were all taken by generals turned civilians. Nevertheless, the change was historic and encouraging.

The months following the transition saw some of the most significant progress in the history of modern Myanmar. The new president proclaimed in his inaugural address a reform agenda with three key goals: to reinvigorate the economy, reform national politics, and improve human rights. Immediate implementation of initial reforms included legalizing trade unions, establishing a human rights commission, the release of some political prisoners, changes to electoral law, and consultation with longtime critics of the regime (Topich and Leitich 2013, 142-43).

Also, and undreamed-of in the past, media restrictions were eased; there were considerable increases to salaries and pensions; public protests were allowed with official permission; and a series of public distributions of phone SIM cards was made by means of drawing lots. (This caused market prices for the cards to drop from K. 1,500,000 to K. 500,000 initially, later to K. 200,000, then to less than K. 10,000, and finally to K. 1500.) Central control of car import licenses was also eased, resulting in a rapidly growing number of cars; and the many unnecessary investigations into travel, both inland and overseas, were cancelled.

The United Nations and international community showed interest in the reform measures and offered helping hands. The UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon arrived in the country in April 2012 and addressed the parliament as the first foreigner to address the legislature since 1962. Among others, the United States promptly engaged Myanmar's new government to boost and ensure the march to democracy. In December 2011, Hillary Clinton visited Myanmar and was the first US Secretary of State to do so since 1955. Then, in November 2012, Barack Obama became the first United States President to set foot in the land of Myanmar. The United States and the European Union eased the burden of economic sanctions. The ASEAN gave Myanmar a turn to take its 2014 chairmanship, and accordingly, Myanmar had the privilege of hosting the ASEAN Summit in June 2014.

In November 2015, the government held a general election for the second term of parliament. This time, the NLD entered the election and won a landslide victory. On March 31, 2016, the USDP government handed over the ruling power to the new government led by the NLD. Because of the law prescribed by the junta in 2010, Aung San Suu Kyi cannot become president, but she is in the parliament and also in the cabinet, holding four different ministries. With this, the country is filled with hope and enthusiasm for a bright future.

A Confusing and Uncertain Situation

Despite the seemingly positive developments mentioned above, along with many others, there have been incidents threatening political stability and peaceful co-existence. It is true that the new government is trustworthy, since Aung San Suu Kyi and faithful NLD representatives are present within it. But the military element is not yet absent. According to the 2010 Constitution, the military chief still wields great power in the ways indicated below:

- (1) Three candidates are recommended for the presidential election, one by the Upper House, another by the Lower House, and the third by the Commander-in-Chief. The one with the highest vote is appointed President, the second Vice President-1, and the third

- Vice President-2. Now in the new government, the Vice President-1 is a general turned civilian, and was recommended by the Commander-in-Chief.
- (2) The army takes three seats in the cabinet: Defence, Home Affairs, and Border Affairs. These ministers are appointed by the Commander-in-Chief.
 - (3) There is a body named the National Defense and Security Council which holds the highest authority in the nation. The council is comprised of eleven members: President, Vice President-1, Vice President-2, Speaker of the Upper House, Speaker of the Lower House, Commander-in-Chief, Deputy Commander-in-Chief, Defense Minister, Home Affairs Minister, Border Affairs Minister, and Foreign Affairs Minister. Out of the eleven, six—more than half—are from the military.
 - (4) The procedure and the structure mentioned above imply that the Commander-in-Chief can exercise his power to stage a *coup d'état* if necessary.

Top leaders in the previous government were all army generals turned civilians. What was in their minds could be discerned by such indicators as a growing crony capitalism; land/farm confiscations which left poor peasants nothing to live on and cultivate; violent crackdowns of people protesting against projects by enormous industries that would affect the environment of the areas concerned; and the old dictatorial manner of the cabinet which was often manifested in their meetings with people, etc. Considering the power vested in the Commander-in-Chief, it is clear that the military still wants to perpetuate its power. Ways and means of perpetuating power may vary—implementing superficial reforms for a show, or wearing a different mask to change its outward appearance, or, as the worst and last resort, creating chaos to be followed by a *coup d'état*.

In fact, many are suspicious that the riots and the killings in recent years are the government's scheme to "get two in one attempt"; that is, to seek people's support by taking the role of the defender of Buddhist faith, and at the same time, by fanning the tensions and conflicts among people so that the role of the military remains always important. What is confusing and tragic is to see some extremist monks getting involved in the bloody riots. The following are incidents in which extremist monks were involved as supporters, or even as leaders.

Violence and Murders of 2012-13

The violence and murders of 2012-13 occurred during the conflict between ethnic Rakhine (joined by Buddhist Barmars) and the Rohingya people.¹ The spark was lit in Rakhine State with the rape and murder of a Rakhine girl by three young Rohingyas. The reaction came with the broad daylight murder of ten Rohingyas on a pilgrimage trip. Attacks spread to some other parts of the country in 2013. In one year (2012-13), hundreds of people were killed, thousands of houses ruined, and over a hundred thousand people displaced. Many Buddhist monks were actively involved in these violent actions. Owing to the fact that Rakhines are Buddhist and the other side Muslim, extremist monks took it as a religious conflict and incited the Buddhist people to protect their religion. Many times the monks used hate speech in their talks with people.

For the present researcher, the cause of the conflict is first of all not religious; rather it is a racial conflict arising from issues of land occupation and business expansion, thus causing fear, bitterness and hatred. Some have even labeled it as ethnic cleansing (Press TV 2013). The point is: it is only the different religions of the two sides that make the conflict religious—it is violence committed under the name of religion.

¹ The name "Rohingya" has long been controversial in Myanmar. A group of people in Rakhine State claims Rohingya as their name, but the government persistently refuses to recognize the name Rohingya and simply call them migrant Bengalis (though they are more likely to be Bangladeshis). To delve into this controversy will require a depth study of years, and that is beyond the scope and limitation of this paper. The present researcher therefore uses this name for convenience in recounting the conflict.

The “969 Movement”

The 969 Movement was started in 2001 by a Buddhist monk, U Wirathu, and also revived by him in 2010 (Hodal 2013). The number 969 is a derivation of the 9 attributes of Buddha, the 6 attributes of Dharma, and the 9 attributes of the Sangha. The purpose of the movement is to protect Buddhist faith and practice. The movement can therefore easily be considered religious. However, many observe that its motive is political, or more explicitly, Bamar extreme nationalism.

After the riots in March 2013, the Dalai Lama said killing in the name of religion was “unthinkable” and urged Myanmar’s Buddhists to contemplate the face of the Buddha for guidance (Fuller 2013). (NB. Wirathu was mentioned on the cover of *Time* on July 1, 2013, as “The Face of Buddhist Terror” (Beech 2012).)

“Protection of National Race and Religion” Law

Drafted on January 15, 2014 by leading monks of the 969 movement, the Protection of National Race and Religion law includes four bills: 1) Faith Conversion Bill; 2) Marriage Bill; 3) Monogamy Bill; and 4) Population Control Bill (Aung 2014).

The alleged reason behind this law is to encourage peace between different faiths and to protect Buddhist women from being forced to convert to Islam when they marry Muslim men (Ferrie 2014). The proposed law, as drafted, 1) forbids conversion to another faith; 2) imposes an obligation on Buddhist women planning to marry men from other religious groups to obtain permission from both their parents and local authorities; 3) ends polygamy; and 4) limits the number of children a couple can have (The Law Library of Congress 2014).

The law is in effect designed to protect a particular ethnic group and a particular religion—the Bamar people and Buddhism. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom said on June 11, 2014 that this kind of law, aimed at protecting the country’s majority Buddhist identity by regulating religious conversions and marriages between people of different faiths, has no place in the twenty-first century and that it should be withdrawn. The Commission had other serious concerns about the pending legislation and expressed these to Myanmar government (Brunnstrom 2014). While many are opposed to the law, viewing it as a violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the former government showed favor towards it from the beginning. Consequently, the Population Control Bill was passed consecutively by the Upper House of Parliament on February 19, 2015 (Zu Zu 2015) by the Lower House on March 19, 2015 (Zaw 2015a) and by the Union Parliament on April 6, 2015 (Zaw 2015b).

There is a further confusion which affects people’s hope as seriously as the appropriation of religion. This is none other than the silence of Aung San Suu Kyi. People in Myanmar have placed great trust and expectation in the lady, and from the beginning she herself often stated clearly that democratization could not be successful without giving serious consideration to the desire of ethnic nationalities (Hlaing 2010, 144). However, the Nobel Peace Laureate was completely silent about the government’s recent military operations against ethnic armed forces, which caused several thousand ethnic people to leave their villages. She was also silent on the atrocious crimes, committed against Rohingyas living in Rakhine State. Desmond M. Tutu, who came to Myanmar in February 2013 to visit Suu Kyi, was surprised at that, but he refused to criticize his fellow Nobel Prize Laureate and said the lady’s reluctance was linked to her current political situation (McLaughlin 2013).

True, the reason for her silence would surely be the political negotiation/compromise she has made with the government. If this is the case, there is also some reason to predict she will not give sufficient consideration to ethnic issues even when she becomes the President. For, by then there will surely be other pressures preventing her from acting freely on that issue.

A Call for Life-Together

Having described how the Buddhist religious hierarchy was and is misappropriated, not only by politicians and successive governments, but later by certain monks themselves, the present researcher continues by reflecting on the matter from a Christian perspective. The purpose, and of course the concern, is to explore how Christians should respond to the misappropriation of religion.

As a Myanmar, and as a Christian, the present researcher cannot stay aloof and sit back amid the confusing situation and the uncertain future of the nation. He is therefore going to attempt to suggest possible ways through which the nation can come closer to civil society with the Buddhists maintaining their religious hierarchy.

A Focus Shift: Toward Socio-Political Co-struggles

Myanmar is gifted with four major world religions—Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. The need for mutual learning, mutual understanding, and mutual respect is therefore not even a question. While it is important to pay equal attention to each religion in building healthy relationships, a wider perspective and more sensitive interaction is necessary in dealing with Buddhism, mainly because this is the religion adhered to by the Bamar people, the majority and dominant group in the land. This section is thus devoted to dealing with Buddhist-Christian dialogue, in order that this might also serve in some way as an example in finding possibilities for Buddhist-Muslim dialogue.

Focus on Theological Inclusiveness

None of the world religions originated in Myanmar, but Theravada Buddhism is considered indigenous. The ground is clear. It has the longest history as the religion of the majority group, the Bamar people. When it was introduced and made the state religion by King Anawratha in the eleventh century, Bamars were the only local people in the then Kingdom of Burma. Other groups, like Mon, Rakhine, and Shan, were also Buddhists, but they were not yet subject to the Bamars. Today's Christians, such as Kayin, Kachin, Chin, etc. did not have a part in the history of ancient Burmar. Hindus and Muslims were probably in the land even before Buddhism was introduced, but they were not local Bamars and their religions could not be considered indigenous. Also, they did have some religious activities but none of these could be called missionary. Christian mission was a latecomer compared to the others.

The size of a religion depends largely on the size of the diverse racial/ethnic groups, and government restrictions upon other religions. Buddhism enjoys the far largest population because it has been the religion of Bamar people since long before Christian missions started. The latecomer Christianity finds its dwelling place mainly in the remaining smaller groups, such as the Kayin, Kachin, and Chin, and a very small circle of Bamar people.

Observing the small number of Bamar Christians and the insignificant impact the Christian gospel has had on Buddhist society, the leading theologians in Myanmar view the Christian mission as unsuccessful. The reason for this failure, they believe, is the missionaries' exclusive theological views and their triumphalist missional approach, which bred a "missionary-compound mentality" in the next generations of Christians. For these theologians, some Christian doctrines are unintelligible and unacceptable to Buddhists. They therefore propose to reconsider Christian theology and to make it inclusive of the Buddhist understanding of truth/reality, so that it might be relevant to the context.

A pioneering scholar to express this view was Prof. Khin Maung Din (1975), who in 1975 called for a "Burmese Christian Theology," by reconstructing such Christian themes as God, Christ, and Man. Dr. Kyaw Than (1976, 54), a prominent ecumenical scholar, made the same plea. Many of the younger generation are on the same track. Samuel Ngun Ling (2003), for one, brings forth three doctrines that were problematic for the Burmese language teachers of Adoniram Judson, the first protestant missionary to Myanmar. These are: 1) the problem of knowing the eternal being; 2) the problem of the atonement; and 3) the problem of salvation. Seeing these

doctrines are still problematic for many, he insists that “[to] do a contextual theology in the Burmese Buddhist context would mean to take into consideration the Buddhist philosophy, culture, belief, and practice very seriously in its theological reconstruction” (Ling 2012, 26).

To this the present researcher would add the need to take account of two other faiths—Islam and Hinduism—though their adherents are not many. A theology which strives to be relevant to diverse peoples must be inclusive of all. This is essential, especially in Myanmar in such a confusing and tragic time as this. A Myanmar Christian theology which pays attention to the majority only, but does not take account of the suffering minorities, cannot be relevant to the Myanmar context.

Liberation of Religions for Life-together in Diversity

Even though Christian theologians seldom express the need to take into account Islamic and Hindu faith elements when reconstructing theology, they nevertheless took the initiative in organizing interfaith dialogues between the four religions. Dialogical talks were conducted in a scholarly atmosphere, however, and furthermore, until recent years the talks focused mainly on seeking understanding of those religious teachings that looked strange and unintelligible to the other. The presupposition was that the essence and aims of religions are the same, however different their doctrinal expressions seem. To put it simply, the focus was to seek a religious common ground or contact points through which religions could relate to each other and live together in peace.

The underlying principle of these dialogues is related to Hans Küng’s (2001) famous dictum: “There can be no world peace without religious peace; and no religious peace without religious dialogue” (105). World peace is many a time threatened by religious conflicts, and therefore religious dialogues are essential in order both to solve existing conflicts and to avoid possible future problems.

In order for dialogue to be genuine, Catherine Cornille (2008, 4-5) proposes the following four essential conditions:

- (1) doctrinal humility, which entails a certain degree of admission that religious truths, including those of one’s own religion, are finite and imperfect;
- (2) commitment to one’s particular religious tradition;
- (3) interconnection or some meeting point which occurs through shared concerns such as social or political problems or any other challenge directed to religions; and
- (4) understanding of the other religion as other.

The present researcher is also convinced that besides these conditions, different approaches are necessary depending on the nature of the problem and the desired solution for that particular problem. For instance, the sort of dialogue approach needed in Myanmar, in the present researcher’s opinion, is one that seeks life together in a diversity of religious faiths, not an attempt to relativize or universalize the different faiths. Jurgen Moltmann is explicit in this matter:

[W]e do not so much need interfaith dialogues, interesting though they are (italics mine). What we need is a common struggle for life, for loved and loving life, for life that communicates itself and is shared, life that is human and natural—in short, life that is worth living in the fruitful living space of this earth. (2010, 77)

For the present researcher, interfaith dialogue must continue, but the focus must be reconsidered. In Myanmar, interfaith dialogue is needed, not primarily to discuss theological difficulties, but to build unity and cooperation to protect each religion from being used in the wrong way. Given the current socio-religio-political situation, what are problematic are not theological concepts, though they have some defects. In fact, there is no theory or principle that is free from defects. The problem is the manipulation of religions.

What must be done first and foremost, therefore, is to work together for the liberation of religions from manipulation, from being used for other purposes—political, nationalist, or financial. It is time to stop putting doctrinal difficulties to the fore, and making conceptual discrepancies the problem. It is high time to shift to a focus on the suffering of the people and their struggle for justice and rule of law. To relate this to the recent conflicts, acceptance of others on the part of Buddhist monks, and knowledge of the fear of Buddhists on the part of Rohingyas are necessary – these are the primary steps toward a civil society.

Emphasis on Respect Rather Than Sameness

On the same day that a convention was held by the 969 monks, 1500 in number, for the endorsement of the draft law, the United States Ambassador, Derik J. Mitchell, organized an interreligious meeting (Burma Partnership 2014). It took place on June 27, 2013. The leaders expressed concerns about the draft law and affirmed that peace was the only way forward for the country in order to ensure what the new generation in Myanmar expects, namely, education, healthcare and human development. The leaders wanted to revive the principle of “unity in diversity” and “respect” for *different opinions and ways of doing things* (italics mine).

The then Archbishop Charles Bo (now a Cardinal, appointed by Pope Francis on January 4, 2015), who represented the Catholic Church, said to reporters that no religion promotes hatred. It is therefore the task of the leaders of the various faiths to refrain from speech that fosters hatred, targets someone because of their faith, causes damage or injury, or affects specific groups (Khoo Thwe 2014). His words did not imply the need for doctrinal adjustment, but rather that rules of ethics and etiquette be observed by each religion for the sake of peace and harmony.

Another interfaith dialogue, held on January 10, 2014, was also encouraging. Organized by a civil society group, “Religions for Peace,” and Columbia University, the talks brought together an influential Buddhist abbot (the Venerable Dr. *Ashin* Nyanissara, known as Sitagu Sayadaw), a prominent Muslim leader (Al Haj U Aye Lwin, Chief Convener of the Islamic Center), and a leading Christian ecumenical scholar (Professor Dr. Saw Hlaing Bwa from MIT). Among the participants were the British ambassador and a top official from the United States embassy. Another noted participant was the Venerable *Ashin* Wirathu, the leader of the 969 movement. The theme of the talk was “Religious Roots of Social Harmony” (Yu Wai 2014).

The present researcher is very happy and even feels honored to hear of these meetings and especially the themes which concerned them, such as unity in diversity, respect, and the religious roots of social harmony. It is clear that the leaders did not bother about doctrinal differences; rather, their concern was to respect the different faiths and apply them in the right way for social harmony. These are the very concerns that the present researcher expressed in the form of a question some years ago: “Is it impossible to render service with one’s own religious beliefs, so long as mission is understood as service, and dialogue as learning a different set of religious beliefs and being prepared to respect them?” (Mang 2009, 3-4).

At the same time, the researcher is concerned about what is beginning to take place in the country. The target thus far is Muslims, not Christians, but whoever the target, it is a sad thing to see people being deprived of religious freedom and persecuted in the name of religion. Along with the above question, the present researcher also warned of the possible danger in religious dialogue as follows:

[P]roponents of dialogue should be always aware that their dialogue partners are the majority in terms of religion, ethnicity, and political power. They must take account of Bamar nationalistic Buddhism, controlled and used by the junta for legitimizing its power. It is a very uncertain thing whether Buddhists have a desire to do dialogue with Christians, or whether they would even count Christians as equal partners for dialogue. Therefore, before taking the initiatives to do dialogue, Christians should seriously think about the extent to which they could compromise their stance in case the other side

demands more than the common ground. This is crucial because the nationalistic Buddhists would prefer Buddhistization or Burmanization. (Mang 2009, 53)

The point is: religious beliefs and social service are not contradictory. For those who are willing to serve society and work for peace, religions are not problematic. On the contrary, religious beliefs can even be inspirational. What is needed is not dialogue for doctrinal harmony, but dialogue fostering “respect for other religions” as advocated by Kathryn Tanner (1993).

Love: The Sole Remedy for the Religious Hierarchy

Every religion has its own defects, and there have been miserable tragedies resulting from crimes committed in the name of religions, including Christianity. In the history of Christianity, there were times when the hierarchy was powerful to the extent that Christian faith and practice were distorted. The hierarchical element can be seen in every religion, and since it can be so very destructive, especially when misappropriated, each religion has to be alert not to give way to the love of power and dominion. In fact, religions should cooperate, working hand in hand to protect religion from misappropriation.

It is a shocking and sad thing to see Buddhist Myanmar suffering under its military totalitarians who are also Buddhists. Unlike the past colonial age, Myanmar’s rulers are neither foreigners nor Christians—they are Bamar and Buddhist born and brought up in Myanmar’s Buddhist society. Yet the suffering under them seems much worse than that of the colonial age. Saying this is not at all to find fault with Buddhism or Buddhists, but is an attempt at a first step in an exodus from the long nightmare. Finding fault with each other will not bring any good. In this section, the primary focus is not criticism, but a search for possibilities for Christian participation in the socio-political struggle, not as the know-how guru, but as an active complementary partner.

The Teaching to Love, and the Grace of Being Love

With its famous Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Right Path, Buddhism is especially known as an ethical religion. It is also prestigious for the practice of meditation and victory over self. Gautama Buddha imparted every good thing humans should pursue: Nirvana, love, sympathy, compassion, patience, self-respect, inner peace, and detachment—all these areas are covered in his teachings (Kornfield 1996). Taking account of Myanmar’s totalitarianism, the present researcher will venture to argue, however, that the area where Christians, as Christians, can make a contribution to Buddhist society is by actualizing what he terms “the grace of being loved.”

Richard Gromrich, founder of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies, admits that the early Buddhists talked very little about love. Love was discussed mostly in the form of teachings, and the teachings appeared somewhat lacking in warmth. He also explains that the Pali word for “love” is *mettā*, which is a non-erotic love and would be like *agapē* love to Christians, although it has become customary to translate it as “loving kindness” (Gomrich 2009, 78, 85). As a religion that encourages self-reliance, with the belief that there is no supernatural power outside to help humans, Buddhism teaches people to make their own efforts for the attainment of love. A teaching of Buddha mentioned under a topic called “Developing Loving-Kindness,” goes as follows :

Put away all hindrances, let your mind full of love pervade one quarter of the world, and so too the second quarter, and so the third, and so the fourth. And thus the whole wide world, above, below, around and everywhere, altogether continue to pervade with love-filled thought, abounding, sublime, beyond measure, free from hatred and ill-will. (Adapted from the Digha Nikaya, translated by Maurice Walshe). (Kornfield 1996, 7)

Harvey Aronson (1980) elucidates the social, psychological and soteriological import of Theravada teachings on love, sympathy, and the sublime attitudes (2). For Aronson, Gautama Buddha is a sympathetic teacher as is clear from the numerous references to his sympathy in Theravada discourse (3). Buddha teaches and exhorts the monks to cultivate the loving mind, which relates to all sentient beings from a wish for their welfare (26). He also explains love in more detail: the acts of love, which are service with love (39); love as a liberation of the mind—the mind conjoined with love is liberated from becoming possessed by anger (40); the power of love, which protects one from the assaults of both human beings and nonhuman spirits (48-50); and the eight benefits of love, including sleeping well, waking well, being dear to humans and to nonhumans, being protected by deities, and not being affected by fire, poison or weapons (56).

According to the teachings mentioned above, the existence of love is taken for granted and what one needs to do is cultivate it and practice it. Love is not received, but is attained. The insight is deep and the process of the practice is systematic. But since it tends to be somewhat technical, it would be very difficult for ordinary people to attain love in its full essence. Sigmund Freud once said those children who were well-cared for by a mother's love were more likely to become better and more mature than those who were not. This can mean that the child must receive love first before s/he can learn to attain a more mature love.

From a Christian standpoint, Freud's notion can be taken as an analogy for divine love. According to the biblical narrative, love does not seem to be a human possession; rather, it is of God. The Bible says that love is from God (1 John 4:7), and God is Love (v.8). God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son (John 3:16). The reason He sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins is not that we loved Him, but that He loved us (1 John 4:10), and this love enables us to love one another (v.11). The point is: love is received, it is a divine gift granted in grace. Just as a child needs first to receive a mother's love so that s/he may become a mature man/woman, so everyone needs to experience God's love in some way or another so that they may be able to love others. To love is important, but to be loved makes loving possible.

Learning to Love in Order to Offer "Being Loved"

In talking about "being loved," God's love must not be confined to Christian experience. There are many mature people without Christian experience of God's love. A good example among many is Sister Chan Khong, a Buddhist nun from Vietnam and a student of Thich Nhat Hanh. She is well-known for her lifetime commitment to social service and human rights promotion. However, there is no mention of God or the experience of divine love in her autobiography. What then is the source of her maturity and helping spirit?

For the present researcher, Sister Chan Khong was born with love, or in love. Even before she was born, her birthplace was already filled with love. Her paternal grandparents were well-respected in their village community because of their integrity, good hearts, and care for the poor. Her maternal grandparents were rich and spent a lot of their money on the homeless and prisoners. Her parents helped poor farmers in various ways. In their home they looked after twenty-two children, nine of their own and thirteen others. They treated all the children equally, without giving any special privileges to their own (Chan Khong 2009, 12-13). Sister Chan Khong was fortunate enough to descend from a loving family and experience "being loved" from birth.

The present researcher, as a Christian with his hope in God and his commitment to God's world in the present, appreciates anyone who is fortunate or mature enough to become a loving person or a good contributor to the world. But the problem is that not many people are as fortunate as Sister Chan Khong. In the Myanmar context, the main concern therefore is for those who are not fortunate enough to experience love or to feel loved.

It will be an overstatement to say that the root cause of Myanmar's military totalitarianism is the absence of "being loved." Nevertheless, it is also a fact that many people in the land need to feel loved. Many of Nargis' survivors are still suffering from physical and psychological wounds. Thousands of Kachin war victims are in the forest. Many Bengali or Bangladeshi (Rohingya)

people are still landless and homeless. For those who were and will be born into this chaotic situation, to be well-cared for or to feel loved would be a rare opportunity. Therefore, they need to know that they are loved, not only for overcoming their current struggles, but also to prevent them from becoming future loveless terrorists or totalitarians.

In this great task, the present researcher ventures to combine “attaining love by practice” and “the grace of being loved,” so that he can come up with “learning how to love to offer being loved.” To attain love only by practice would be almost impossible for many ordinary and weak people, and also, to rely on being loved alone may make many inactive and unable to share God’s love for others in the most humble but touching and penetrating way. The Christian also needs to learn from the Buddhist how to love.

Myanmar’s Buddhist religious hierarchy, which has been misappropriated by totalitarianism and later by some extremist monks, can be healed only if it is rightly touched by love. Therefore, the present researcher encourages and even challenges his fellow Christians (who are supposed to experience the grace of being loved) to love others in action, to make every good effort to ensure that people in the society feel loved. Only when people feel loved, can they be filled with the courage to be in the present—the courage to love and strive for what is good and the courage to denounce what is evil.

Conclusion

The hierarchical element is a part of religion—every religion has some sort of hierarchical structure. There are ways in which one can say that hierarchy benefits society and, of course, religion. However, the same hierarchy is very vulnerable to manipulation—it is very tempting to ambitious lovers of power. The result is the suffering of religions from manipulation or misappropriation. World history records numerous events of the manipulation of religion by the powers that be. At the same time, it also recounts the misappropriation of religions by religious leaders themselves. Buddhism in Myanmar has suffered both.

To protect religions from misappropriation, religions themselves have to be watchful of the hierarchical element that is present in each of them. To cure the painful results manipulation, they need to work together for the good of all. However, for religions to come to this stage is “easier said than done.” It is not a simple task, not child’s play—it may even demand life itself. Nevertheless, this paper ventures to propose ways through which the desired goal can be achieved. The proposal is a life-together in love.

** Pau Lian Mang (D.Theol.)
Academic Dean, Tedim Christian College, Myanmar*

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