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**THE CHALLENGES OF BEING A CHRISTIAN AMONG THE
BUDDHISTS IN MYANMAR**

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THE CHALLENGES OF BEING A CHRISTIAN AMONG THE BUDDHISTS IN MYANMAR

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ABBREVIATION

ARDA	Association of Religion Data Archives
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CBCM	Catholic Bishops' Conference of Myanmar
<i>EA</i>	<i>Ecclesia in Asia</i>
<i>EG</i>	<i>Evangelii Gaudium</i>
<i>ES</i>	<i>Ecclesiam Sum</i>
EU	The European Union
FABC	Federation of Asia Bishops' Conference
HRDU	Human Right Documentation Unit
KIA	Kachin Independence Army
<i>NA</i>	<i>Nostra Aetate</i>
NLD	National League for Democracy
<i>RM</i>	<i>Redemptoris Missio</i>
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council

INTRODUCTION

Learning the techniques and methods of research papers is like learning a new language. Challenges always make the researcher awake day and night. It is not a big deal for him because he used to live with such challenges throughout his life, particularly in the place where he was born. Myanmar is a country where the researcher comes from. Through many centuries, Myanmar is described as a land of astounding beauty and charm. Unfortunately, after the Burmese military took power over the country in 1962, the land of astounding beauty and charm is now turned into a land of greed, hatred and bloodshed. A human community loses its human face when women, men and children are discriminated against on account of gender, race, and religions. These harmful things regularly happen in Myanmar up to this present age. In particular, there is still lack of religious freedom in the country. There is a Burmese saying, which goes, “Thousands of happiness cannot remove one pain in the heart but one pain can remove thousands of happiness in the heart.” What does this saying has to do with this subject? I would say it is the foundation of this topic.

When the time for writing the dissertation came as a requirement for Practicum, the researcher took the opportunity to write on this important issue. The purpose of writing this dissertation entitled, “The Challenges of being a Christian among the Buddhists in Myanmar,” is to reflect on the challenges a Christian encounters living in a country dominated by Buddhists. Moreover, by writing this thesis the researcher also wants to send a message across the country that Buddhists and Christians, and people from other religions can live together peacefully, if we see each other as brothers and sisters, and not as enemies. The researcher honestly believes that

reflecting on this topic will help his future ministry. As the old Latin dictum says: Non scholae sed vitae discimus (“Not from school, but from life we learn”).

Myanmar refers only to “the Burmese ethnic groups” and Burma refers to “all the Burmese ethnic groups.”¹ In 1989 the present junta (SPDC) promoted the name “Myanmar” instead of “Burma” as the official name for the whole country. The change was recognized by the ASEAN, UN, and Japan, but not by the United States of America and the United Kingdom. The European Union uses Myanmar/Burma. For Burmese minorities, Myanmar is an illegitimate name created by an illegitimate military government. However, the two words mean the same thing and one is derived from the other. Due to a number of other reasons, the researcher uses “Burma” and “Myanmar” interchangeably and inclusively in this research, while not excluding either the former or the latter.

The researcher divides the paper into three chapters: The first chapter shall present a brief history of the country and of the early presence and activities of Christian missionaries in Myanmar as well. In the second chapter, he will present the difficulties and problems faced by Christians under the socialist military government in Myanmar; while heads of government have indeed changed from time to time, the governing policies are always the same and have even become more oppressive. In the third chapter, the researcher will try to prove that in order to have a peaceful life in Myanmar, dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism and with other religions is imperative. Myanmar will be a peaceful country only if there is justice, freedom, and love. Last of all, the researcher wishes to thank his Dominican community in Macau for appointing him as Mayor of the students.

¹ Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy* (Tokyo: ILCAA, 1999), 377.

Moreover, the researcher wants to deeply thank his colleagues and fellow students, and in particular all the teaching staff of the Faculty of Christian Studies for their criticisms, suggestions, and insights in the process of writing his thesis. Above all, from the bottom of his heart he declares deep gratitude to his thesis supervisor Fr. Fausto Gomez O.P, for his unfailing generosity, encouragement, and support during the time of writing. Finally, to all those who have shown their love and prayers all these years, “Kye Zu Tin Ba-deh.”

CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL SITUATION OF MYANMAR: PAST AND PRESENT

A. Myanmar as a Unique Country

Myanmar is really a unique country in Southeast Asia. It is common to say that China, India, and the other Spice Islands were relatively well known at least in Western writings from the time of the Greeks.¹ There were long periods of communication between Europe and those parts of Asia, which have found their way into historical records. Historically speaking, Burma remained virtually unknown in Western archives. According to Helen G. Trager, “It was through the trip of Marco Polo in the thirteenth century to China who had heard about the fall of the first major Burmese dynasty though he never saw it. This reference to Burma marks the beginning of Burmese history as told by Western writers.”²

Looking on a flat map, one realizes that Burma is larger than any country in Western Europe and approximately the size of Texas U.S.A. If one pays more attention to the map, we will see that “Burma is shaped like a kite with its top lying in the eastern end of the great Himalayan Ranges and the tip of its tail extending down the Malay Peninsula.”³ Moreover, the borders of the mountains are extending from northwest to northeast. On the other hand, the Indian Ocean on the west and south has tended to preserve the relative isolation of Burma in times past. Myanmar

¹ Helen G. Trager, *Burma through Alien Eyes: Missionary Views of the Burmese in the Nineteenth Century* (Westport, CT: Praeger, first edition, 1966), 1.

² *Ibid.*

³ Robert E. Huke, *Geography and Population in Burma*, ed. Frank N. Trager (New Haven, CT: Human Relations Area Files, 1956), 65.

is also surrounded by Thailand and Laos in the east, India and Bangladesh in the west, China in the north and north-east and the Andaman Sea in the south. It is the largest of the mainland Southeast Asia countries and with the most richly endowed states as well. Politically, the country is divided into seven states and seven divisions namely, divisions of Irrawaddy, Magwe, Mandalay, Pagu, Sagaing, Tenasserim and Rangoon, and states of Arakan, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah, Mon, and Shan. Rangoon is the capital of the country since British days. Officially, there are 135 ethnic groups living in the country. In each of the states one or more of the ethnic minorities of Burma predominates.

Yet the country remains both economically and politically underdeveloped. It encompasses a land area of 676, 577 sq. kms. Among the ethnic groups, the Burmese are the most numerous and dominant with approximately 68 % of the population of the country, and they are mainly Buddhists.⁴ Chinese and Indians are also numerous, and are mostly concentrated in the big cities. Burmese is the official language of the country and also the medium of instruction in schools and colleges. Besides, there are several languages and dialects spoken in different regions and states of the country. In the religious sector, over 89.2% of the populations are Buddhist in Myanmar. Beside Buddhism, there are Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism and Animism that are also practiced. An unofficial estimate is as follows: Buddhists 89%, Christians 4% (Baptist 3%, Roman Catholic 1%), Muslims 4%, animists 1%, and others 2%.⁵ According to ARDA statistics, in 2010, 74.69 % of the populations of the country are believed to be adherents of Buddhism and

⁴ Kallie Szczepanski, *Myanmar (Burma) Facts and History*
<http://asianhistory.about.com/od/burmamyanmar/p/ProfileBurma.htm> - (accessed on January 14, 2014).

⁵ Robert Reid & Michael Grosberg, *Myanmar (Burma)*. 9th e.d. (Footscray, Victoria: Lonely Planet, 2005), 61.

only 4.6% of the population practice Christianity.⁶ Christians in Myanmar are a minority and Christianity is still considered culturally foreign by the majority of the Buddhists. Christians are mainly composed of ethnic minorities, such as Kachin, Chin, Karen, Kayah, Lishus and Lahus with only a limited number of Burmese.

From the beginning of the sixteenth century the Portuguese established trading posts in Burma. In the seventeenth century, both the Dutch and English East India Companies had representatives in Burma. It was in the latter part of the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century that Western influence began to grow, until eventually the country became absorbed within the British Empire.⁷ Like many other Asian nations Burma also has bitter experience with the British rule and Japanese invasion. It achieved her independence from Britain by General Aung San on 4th January 1948. In April 1947 General Aung San (the father of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi) became prime minister of Burma. But in July 1947 a political rival organized the assassination of Aung San and most of his ministers as they sat at a cabinet meeting in Rangoon. Aung San, was succeeded by U Nu, who won the elections, usually with massive majorities, until 1962.⁸

In 1958 political and ethnic conflicts persuaded U Nu to hand power temporarily to a ‘caretaker government’ handed by the commander of the army, General Ne Win. Ne Win handed power back to the civilians in 1960, after U Nu had won another election with a huge majority.

⁶ The Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), *Burma (Myanmar)*
http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_37_1.asp - (accessed on January 15, 2014).

⁷ Pascal Khoo Thwe, *From the Land of Green Ghosts: a Burmese Odyssey* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 13.

⁸ *Ibid.*

In 1978, Ne Win closed Burma to the outside world, and for many years foreigners were refused permission to visit the country as tourists. At the same time General Ne Win's policy was to combine socialism with nationalism and Buddhism. The ideal was to end the exploitation of man by man.⁹

B. Myanmar as a Buddhist Country

Buddhism is one of the worlds' major religions. "It originated in India and has a history going back 2,500 years. It has adapted to many different social and cultural contexts."¹⁰ It was founded by Siddharta Gautama Buddha (563-483 B.C.E), who came to be known as 'the Enlightened One'. He was born around (563 B.C.E) in what is now Nepal, near the Indian border. The Sanskrit root *budh* denotes both "to wake up" and "to know."¹¹ Its long history, large number of followers and global distribution mark Buddhism as one of the major religions of the world. Buddhism can be found in many Asia countries particularly in Burma, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Japan, Korea and China, and elsewhere. Buddhism exists in two forms: Mahayana Buddhism (Sanskrit "little vehicle") and Theravada (Pali "old doctrine").

Therefore Burma, where the researcher comes from is also a Buddhist country. Burma is known to the world as the place of pagodas because of the influence of Theravada Buddhism. Burma is a land full of pagodas and monasteries, and it is also known as the Golden Land. It is not because the country is full of gold, but because of its richness in natural resources. "Virtually

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Edgar G. Javier, *Dialogue: Our Mission Today* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2008), 85.

¹¹ Huston Smith & Philip Novak, *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2004), 4.

almost nothing is known of Burma's prehistoric inhabitants, though archaeological evidence suggests the area has been inhabited since at least 25,000 B.C.E.”¹² Although Buddhism originated in India in the sixth century B.C.E, there is no clear evidence for its presence in Burma. According to oral tradition and legend, Buddhism arrived in Burma in the lifetime of the Buddha. “It is believed that the Buddha himself and his disciples arrived and preached the *Dharma* (it is an exposition of the Natural Law applied to the problem of human suffering) to the people in the land of Burma, who later were to become Buddhists after hearing the preaching of the Buddha.”¹³ The king and the people were inspired by the *Dhamma* so much so that they requested him to leave something of his for them to worship. Then Buddha left his foot prints for them at *Minbu* Hill which are still visible today and were worshiped by the Mon and Pyu and the kings in Burma.

As the origins of Christianity came from Jewish background, Buddhism is from Hinduism background. As history tells us, the Mon were the first people to settle down in the land of Burma and were the first practicing Theravada Buddhism.¹⁴ Among the ethnic Burmese, early Buddhism was Mahayanist until eleventh century. Theravada Buddhism, however, became the official religion at the ancient capital of *Bagan* and from then on it struck wide and deep roots in Burma. Both Theravada and Mahayana are not centered on a god or gods, but rather a psycho-philosophical system. The Theravada school holds that “to achieve *nibbana* (nirvana), which is the eventual aim of every Buddhist, you must work out your own salvation with diligence. The Mahayana school holds that individuals should forego the experience of *nibbana* until all

¹² Robert Reid & Michael G. *Myanmar (Burma)*, 35.

¹³ Myanmar's net. *History of Buddhism* [http://www.myanmars.net/myanmar-culture/buddhism history.htm](http://www.myanmars.net/myanmar-culture/buddhism%20history.htm) - (accessed on 9 April 2014).

¹⁴ Robert Reid& Michael G. *Myanmar (Burma)*, 57.

humankind is ready for salvation. The goal is to become a Bodhisattva (Buddha), rather than a fully enlightened Buddha.”¹⁵ The Mahayana school does not reject the other school, but claims it has spread more. The Theravadins, on the other hand, see Mahayana as a misinterpretation of the Buddha’s original teachings. Of the two, the Theravada is more ascetic and hard to practice. “In Burma, Buddhism has great influence on the life of the Burmese ethnic groups such as Shans, Rakhines and Mons. About 87% of the people of Myanmar are Buddhist. There are as many as 500,000 monks in Myanmar. Gotama Buddha, however, taught the monks to cultivate love (*matta*), or to act out of sympathy.”¹⁶

In fact, in Myanmar there are two different kinds of Buddhists namely, traditional Buddhists and true Buddhists. “Traditional Buddhists are Buddhists just on account of their parents or ancestors being Buddhists by tradition; they are Buddhists only in name, knowing little about the Buddha’s teachings and the path of practice and consequently failing to practice them. True Buddhists are those who have a deep sense of reverence for great attributes of the three Gems (*un-satisfactoriness, impermanence, insubstantiality*), who appreciate the debt of gratitude to their parents and teachers.”¹⁷ Actually there is no wrong in those who know little about the Buddha’s teachings. People these days are so much preoccupied with their family and social responsibilities that they have little time for other activities. Moreover there is the fact that the teachings of the Buddha are all in Pali which only a few of them know. In spite of the difficulties, the most common Myanmar Buddhists approach is to hope for a better future life by feeding the monks, giving donations to temples and performing regular worship at the local

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Harvey B. Aronson, *Love and Sympathy in Theravada Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999), 1.

¹⁷ Han Htay & Chit Tin, *How To Live As A Good Buddhist*. Vol.1. (Yangon: Myanmar, 2002), iv.

monasteries. As Buddha taught to his followers when he was with them, our happiest moments in this life are only temporary, empty and unsatisfactory. After presenting Buddhism in Burma, let us approach Christianity in Burma.

C. The Introduction of Christianity in Myanmar

The presence of Christianity in Myanmar is thought to have been as early as the 13th century in Pagan, an ancient Burmese kingdom. Portuguese, French and Italian Catholic missionaries entered Burma first long before the Protestants, in 1554.¹⁸ On the walls of the Cave of Kyansittha in Pagan, a fresco is found showing eight crosses with four Latin and four Greek words, spreading on the eight petals of a lotus around a cross in the centre.¹⁹ These crosses are believed to have been painted by the soldiers of the Tartar-Chinese army who under the leadership Kublai Khan invaded Myanmar in 1287. In those days, many Tartar-Chinese armies were Christians albeit they were Nestorians from Turkestan and further west. Historians assert that there might have been other monuments in the kingdom of Pagan during the occupation of the Tartar-Chinese armies and those might have been destroyed or covered up.

According to Samuel N. Lynn, “the Christian presence in the 14th and 15th centuries was represented by the Europeans especially the Portuguese merchants who came to look for opportunities of merchandise in the different parts of Burma.”²⁰ Prior to the coming of the Portuguese, there were reports and evidences that confirmed the presence of Christianity in

¹⁸ Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*. Vol.2. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 330.

¹⁹ Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Myanmar (CBCM), *Official Catholic Directory* (CBCM Secretariat: Yangon, 2009), 7.

²⁰ Samuel N. Lynn, Challenges, Problems, and Prospects of Theological Education in Myanmar. “*CTC Bulletin of the Christian Conference of Asia*”, 22, No. 1(April 2006), 1-28, esp. 1.

southern Myanmar in mid-15th century. On his visit to the country, Hieronimo di Santo Stephano, the Genoese traveler was said to have buried his comrade who died there “in a ruined church frequented by none” in Southern Myanmar. Fr. McCarthy assumes that that church could have been built by Armenian or Syrian traders and their chaplains were most likely French Dominicans who claimed that they had missions in pre-Portuguese time in India and Siam (Thailand).²¹ After they discovered the sea-route to India by Vasco da Gama in 1498, the Portuguese missionaries set out for the Far East as chaplains to Portuguese soldiers, sailors and settlers.

In 1510 Goa was founded as the capital of Portuguese India. Their trade soon extended to Mergui, Martaban, Pegu, Syriam and Bassein. In 1514, Pope Leo X had made an agreement with the King of Portugal whereby the King was granted the privilege of appointing Bishops in all the new territories of Portugal in the East, the King in return guarantee that he will keep his dominions supplied with missionaries and will provide endowments for their churches and institutions.²² In 1519, a peace and trade agreement between the King of Pegu (*Burmese King*) and the King of Portugal was signed by their viceroys.²³ As a result of this agreement, the port towns of Martaban (Mottama), Mergui (Myeik), Pegu (Bago), Syriam (Thalyn) and Bassein (Patheingyi) became centers of foreign trade and presumably the foreigners began to settle in those ports around this time and the Portuguese mercenaries and sailors started to flock in. In 1548 Francis Xavier requested for missionaries to be sent into Burma and suggested that the four

²¹ E. J. MacCarthy, *The History of the Catholic Church in Burma* (Navan, Ireland: Columba Press, 1995), 32.

²² *Ibid.*, 34.

²³ Vivian Ba, *The Early Catholic Missionaries in Burma: A Study of their Manuscripts and the First Casting and Printing of Burmese Alphabets, Outline Grammar, and Catechism in 1776, from Latin, Italian, Portuguese and French Sources* (August, *The Guardian*, 1962), 2.

students from Pegu at the College of St. Paul in Goa would make excellent candidates for such work. However, the first missionary to enter the small Burmese kingdoms was the Franciscan Peter Bonfer, who planted a short-lived mission in 1554.²⁴ Along with these new settlers came the chaplains who were mostly Dominicans, Franciscans, Jesuits and a few Augustinians.

In the reigns of Burmese King named Tabinshwehit (1531-50) and King Bayinnaung (1551-81), the Portuguese mercenaries and sailors were said to have been between seven hundred and one thousand serving the kings in the Kingdom of Pegu.²⁵ Several of these soldiers and merchants were said to have intermarried with the local women. It is said that most of the Roman Catholics in that part of Burma today are descendants of those Portuguese captives. Later on, Friar Peter Bonfer, a French Franciscan was said to have ministered the Catholics in the Kingdom of Pegu between 1554 and 1557.²⁶ There were both good and bad times for Burmese Kings particularly when they reigned the Pegu nations. Both King Min Razagyi and King of Arakan conquered Pegu in 1559 and burnt it to the ground assisted by the Portuguese mercenaries under the leadership of Philip de Britto.²⁷

After conquering the seaport Syriam, the King of Arakan placed Philip de Britto in command of the port to oversee the Custom House there and manage the Portuguese living there. But soon after, Philip de Britto established himself as an independent king by making the port a fortress, strengthening his armies, breaking loyalty with his master, the King of Arakan, fending

²⁴ Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Vol.2. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 42.

²⁵ G. E. Harvey, *Outline of Burmese History* (Bombay: Orient Longmas, 1926), 99-106.

²⁶ Vivian Ba, *The Early Catholic Missionaries in Burma*, 2.

²⁷ Harvey, *Outline of Burmese History*, 112-113.

off the armies of the king, travelling to Goa to obtain recognition from the Viceroy as official governor of the port and returning with reinforcements and six ships.²⁸ He also angered the chiefs of the other petty states by diverting all the coastal ships to pass through his port and thus monopolizing the supply of overseas imports to the interior. He was also said to have plundered the pagodas, removed precious stones from the images, melted down gold and beat into leaf and sold it, melted bronze bells of the pagodas and made them into cannons and more importantly, he forced mass conversion into Christianity (assisted by his Jesuit chaplains).²⁹

He became so rich and powerful that the chiefs of the neighboring region submitted to his authority. What proved to be his downfall was his attack on *Taungoo*, one of the important places and took its petty king, Nat Shin Naung as a prisoner and had him baptized. This act of de Britto infuriated King Anaukpetlun, the King of Ava who was a close relative of Nat Shin Naung, more than ever that he marched down to Syriam with his 120,000 strong army in 1613 and laid siege on the port for one month.³⁰ At the fall of Syriam, Philip de Britto was captured, tied up and impaled to death for his sacrilegious acts while five thousands Christians and a hundred and sixty Portuguese were taken away as captives to Ava and resettled there and continued to serve the successive kings as royal guards, artilleries and interpreters in dealing with European powers till nineteenth century.³¹ Of the priests in the fortress of Sryiam, Father

²⁸ E.J. McCarthy, *The History of the Catholic Church in Burma*. Patrick Usher, ed. (Navan, Ireland: Columba Press, 1995), 37-38.

²⁹ Harvey, *Outline of Burmese History*, 114. See also Lian H. Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity: A Study in Religion, Politics and Ethnic Identity in Burma* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2003), 107.

³⁰ Arthur Phayre, *History of Burma: From the Earliest Time to the End of the First War with British India* (London: Routledge, 1883), 124- 130.

³¹ E.J. McCarthy, *The History of the Catholic Church in Burma*, 41.

Ferreira, O.P, was killed by a spear thrust at the time of the capitulation while living with the surviving Christians, Fr. da Fonseca, S. J and Father Diego Nunes S.J were carried off as prisoners to Ava but the latter Father Diego Nunes died on the way due to the long and rough journey. The number of prisoners was 166 Portuguese and other 5,000 Christians. The surviving Christians, mostly Indians, Portuguese, Dutch, French, half-castes, possibly a few of Nat Shin Naung's subjects and Peguans, were allotted village lands around the palace and the foreigners were given marriage to local women and Fr. da Fonseca was the only shepherd who ministered these Catholics till the arrival of Father Denis Antunes, S.J in 1640 upon his request.³²

In 1639 Fr. Da Fonseca wrote to his Superior asking him to send another priest in his place, so that he himself might retire to India to die among his comrades. He went to Goa to retire and died there after Father Simon Rodriguez S.J came to replace him. In 1648 Fr. Antunes left the country for unknown reasons. Fr. Rodriguez was unheard after the year of 1655. As a result, the Catholics in the Kingdom of Ava were left without a shepherd for many years. Meanwhile, Augustinians extended their missionary activities in the West and South of Myanmar particularly in Martaban. About this time, it was reported that an old Franciscan, stationed in Pegu, opposed any missionary activity in Lower Myanmar, and he therefore sent back Dominicans, Augustinians and some from the Theatine Order who sought to do missions in Lower Myanmar.³³ The Catholics in those days were mainly European descendants and half-castes.

³² McCathy, *The History of the Catholic Church in Burma*, 40-42.

³³ *Ibid.*

D. Early Christian Missions

Even though Pope Leo the X entrusted the spiritual affairs of far Eastern people including those in Myanmar to the care of the Portuguese colonizers, it did not work out as planned before. The power of Portugal became weak in the East after they had lost the port of Malacca to the Dutch in 1641. Therefore, the Church had to find other ways of evangelizing the non-Christians. After founding the Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith in 1622, the Church then set up a College known as Propaganda Fide College for the training of missionary priests. The first purely missionary organization, the Paris Foreign Mission Society was approved by the Pope in 1659. From then onwards, the face of evangelization changed.

The Mission in Myanmar started with the arrival of the Barnabite Fathers. In 1719, Pope Clement the XI sent a delegation to the Emperor of China led by his Legate Mgr Carlambrogio Mezzabarba and the members of the mission were the best among Barnabite Society known for their learning and piety.³⁴ On their arrival in China, the Papal Legate became aware of trouble lurking for the missionaries, and he therefore destined his subjects to other countries. Father Sigismondo Maria Calchi of the Barnabite Order was chosen for the Kingdoms of Pegu and Ava and Father Vittoni, a secular priest was appointed to assist him. These two priests were the first formal missionaries sent from Rome to evangelize in Myanmar. In arriving at Syriam, they were looked upon with scorn by the Portuguese priests living there, and were accused of being spies sent by China since they came from there. They were brought to the court of Ava.³⁵ At the court, they were introduced and praised by influential Armenian Christians and important army officers

³⁴ Vivian Ba, *The Early Catholic Missionaries in Burma*, 3.

³⁵ Paul Ambroise Bigandet, *An Outline of the History of Catholic Burmese Mission: From the year 1720 to 1887* (Rangoon: Hanthawaddy Press, 1887), 13.

who were descendants of the Ava captives. The King was impressed by the two priests and issued an edict throughout his provinces that “Nobody should molest the missionaries in any way, and that they had the right to teach, preach, convert and build churches freely.”³⁶ The King even sought their help to obtain friendship and trade with European powers and Christian Princes. He sent Father Vittoni to Rome to bear greetings and presents his presents to the Pope. The King found Fr. Calchi useful and wanted more missionaries. So Fr. Calchi wrote to his Superior requesting him to send more missionaries who were well-trained in sciences and arts and to bring as many kinds of books as they could.³⁷ Due to his tireless work combined with tough weather in Ava, Fr. Calchi fell ill and Father Rosetti arrived just in time to minister him the Last Sacraments.

Father Calchi was the first missionary in Myanmar from his Order. After him, a host of his fellow Barnabites followed his steps and gave their lives for the missions in the country. There were many notable Barnabite Fathers who zealously toiled to keep the faith of the long-neglected Catholics and produced marvelous works such as the compilation of dictionaries and the tradition of the Sacred Scriptures. Though some of them were highly favored, respected and employed in the palaces by the kings, a number of them were caught between the sides of either the Kings of Ava and Pegu or the local and foreign powers, and were killed on the ground of suspicions of siding.³⁸ As the members of the Barnabite Order were known for their higher education, the ones sent to Myanmar also excelled in learning the languages and in doing translations. Father Sigismondo Calchi was the pioneer in this matter. Among the Barnabite

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Paul Ambroise Bigandet, *An Outline of the History of Catholic Burmese Mission*, 15-18.

Fathers who came to toil in the mission of Myanmar, there were some who were more prominent than others. Fr. Sigismondo Calchi, Bishop Pio Gallizia, Fr. Paolo Antonio Nerini, Fr. Giovanni Del Conte, Fr. D'Amato, Fr. Carpani, Bishop Percoto, Bishop Mantegazza and Fr. Vincent Sangermano all have done great honor to their Order in Myanmar. The greatest Barnabite missionary in Myanmar would probably be Bishop Percoto who excelled in many fields.

Being a Burmese and Pali scholar, he translated some books of the Bible into Burmese, wrote a catechism and most important of all, he composed the Burmese grammar, created models of Burmese alphabets and had cast and printed in Rome in 1776 under the title of *Alphabetum Barmanum*, with the help of Fr. Carpani.³⁹ In the history of Burmese printing, his *Alphabetum Barmanum* and *Catechismus pro Barmanis* were the first. Since his works contained a few errors, Bishop Mantegazza, with the help of an ex-monk amended them and issued a second amended and enlarged edition of the printed Alphabets, Outline Grammar, and Catechism.⁴⁰ Besides improving the works of Bishop Percoto, he was known for his (*Abregé D'Histoire Barmanae*) (*Brief History of Burma*, 1784) in which he wrote about the general history of Myanmar, the situation of the mission, the people, their language, culture and religion.⁴¹ Another great Barnabite worthy of mentioning is Fr. Vincentius Sangermano who was also a scholar of Burmese and Buddhism and a great historian, and wrote a book on "*History of the Burmese Empire*."⁴² This book reveals his knowledge of the people of Myanmar, its history and its religions. Fr. Sangermano labored hard in the mission of Myanmar going up and down the country, besides taking care of his foreign mixed-flock in Yangon while keeping himself very

³⁹ Vivian Ba, *The Early Catholic Missionaries in Burma*, 9.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² E.J. McCarthy, *The History of the Catholic Church in Burma*, 71.

busy. He also pleaded for more missionaries to the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide because the arrival of English and Protestant missionaries worried him.

It was known that Richard Mardon and James Chater of the English Baptists from the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) were the first missionaries who came to Burma from Bengal in 1807. Their purpose was to investigate the possibility of a mission work but did not prove successful, and the mission was later inherited by Adoniram Judson of the American Baptist Mission in 1813.⁴³ Before Judson came to Burma, Roman Catholic missionaries were working already since 1599. Baptists and Roman Catholics are the two main Christian groups in Myanmar. Adoniram and Ann Judson are known as the first missionaries representing American Baptist who reached the Burmese soil on July 13, 1813. Meanwhile, other Protestant missions such as Anglican (1854), Methodist (1879, 1887) and Presbyterian (1956), with their educational enterprises, reached Myanmar in the middle and late periods of 19th century.⁴⁴ Judson found out that people in Burma were very good in social life, but on religious matters it was difficult to open their spiritual eyes because Buddhism has been rooted in their lives for many centuries. In those times, kings were the most powerful authority in the society. Nobody could raise his or her voice. The people were paying high taxes to the king from their businesses. Judson started his life in Burma with many difficulties and frustrations.⁴⁵ He committed his life to break the stronghold of Buddhism in Burma. He also found that the People of Kachin, Chins, Karen belong

⁴³ Simon Pau Khan En, *Nat Worship: A Paradigm For Doing Contextual Theology in Myanmar* (Yangon: Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2012), 2.

⁴⁴ N. Lynn, "Challenges, Problems, and Prospects of Theological Education in Myanmar." *CTC Bulletin* 22/ 1 (April 2006), 4.

⁴⁵ HtoiGinTawng, "The Kachin: History Background" <http://htoigintawng.over-blog.com/article-the-growth-of-christianity-in-the-kachin-people-50861776.html> - (accessed on February 28, 2014).

to non-Buddhist religion, each with its own language and its own animistic tradition. These were more ready than the Buddhist to hear the new tidings from the west.

The religion of Burma was Buddhism and it was well organized. When Judson comes to Burma, he found out the stubbornness of Burmese people and he said, “Converting a Burmese is like drawing a tooth from the mouth of an alive tiger.”⁴⁶ As usual, there was often friction between the Catholic missions and those of the American Baptists. There were some places where some Protestants had been for years before the Catholics, so they resented the competition. They spread malicious rumors about the Italian missionaries and threatened the Catholics and their catechists. They even accused the priests of having the nuns as their wives. The difference was that the Baptists had wives openly and the Italians had them secretly.⁴⁷ However, there were no nuns in the Catholic missionaries yet. Thus, Mgr. Biffi could not let these calumnies go unanswered; he went to court and won the case. The hostility towards the Catholics on the part of the Baptists remained always a great difficulty and a scandal among the pagans. Even the Burmese told the Baptists to go and settle their differences with the Catholics before coming to preach to them.

In spite of all difficulties and hardship Judson still contributed many things to the Burmese people. When the country was governed by General Ne Win, Burma was isolated from the world and pursued the Buddhist path to socialism, which made life difficult for all citizens, many of whom finally rebelled on large-scale demonstrations in 1988, during which thousands of civilians, including monks and students were killed. As usual, the government has ruled Myanmar with an iron fist for many centuries.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Eddy Evans, *The Foreign Missions of Milan 1868-1991* (Belluno: Italy, Sanvitese Press, 2012), 17.

CHAPTER II

CHRISTIAN-BUDDHIST RELATIONS IN MYANMAR

A. The Problem of Accepting Christianity as a Religion

After talking briefly on the historical background of the country and activities of Christian missionaries in Myanmar, we now turn to talk about the difficulties and hardships of Christians' daily life in a Buddhism country. As I mentioned earlier Buddhism is the religion of the predominant ethnic and cultural group of the Burmese who form the 89.2% of the whole population. It was Theravada Buddhism which entered Burma in the first century of the Christian era. Both civil and military governments have supported Buddhism practices since 1948 when Myanmar gained its independence from Great Britain.

In 1961, Myanmar was under the General U Nu government, and a law was passed that established Buddhism as the state religion; other religions were not threatened, as their existence was guaranteed in the 1947 constitution. The constitution said that, "The State recognizes the special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union of Burma."¹ The State also recognizes Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Animism as some of the religions existing in the Union at the time when the Constitution came into effect. Hence the relationship between the state and the religions has been strongly influenced by the political development of the country. In Myanmar Christians are mainly composed of ethnic minorities, such as Kachin, Chin, Karen, Kayah, Lishus and Lahus with only a limited number of Burmese. A saying frequently repeated in Modern times is the following: "To be a Burma is to

¹ Gutter P, *Law and Religion in Burma* (Yangon: Myanmar, 2001), 7.

be a Buddhist.” In 1962-1988, when the Burmese armed forces took direct and exclusive control of the government, the 1947 constitution was abolished. It was the General Ne Win who did not support the recognition of Buddhism as the state religion, because this was perceived as a threat to the union’s very existence. He believed that the Revolutionary Council ought not to favor any particular religion. This proved difficult because of the traditional closeness of state and Sangha. Because the vast majority of Burmese people are Buddhists, the generals saw Buddhism as a useful state ideology in order to build up Burmese nationalism.² Paradoxically, the Sangha was immediately seen as a threat to military rule, not only because the Sangha was so powerful and well-established, but also because it represents the Buddhist religion which in no circumstances allows the taking of life thus making the whole idea of an army repugnant.

We know that until the early 13th century, Christianity was not known to the people in the land of Burma. There are many reasons that make Christianity unwelcome and undesired in Myanmar for Buddhism. As far as I know, there are two main reasons on the Burma Buddhists’ attitude towards Christianity. The first reason is that Christianity arrived in Myanmar with its Western and Greco-Roman accessories and doctrinal teachings that are incomprehensible to the local people;³ in particular, the Church’s teachings on revelation, incarnation, crucifixion, atonement, resurrection, and Western ways of worshipping or the liturgies, combined with the Western images of Jesus that make the Christian message of salvation incomprehensible to Burma Buddhists. The Burmese people usually did not embrace Christianity because the Gospel message of Jesus was not presented to them in a relevant and intelligible way. Christianity in Myanmar is still pictured, by postcolonial regime, mostly as a religion of ethnic minority groups

² *Ibid.*

³ Arnold Toynbee, *Christianity Among the World Religions* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1957), 92.

that symbolize Western political and religious-cultural ideas. Being a Christian is identified with being a Westerner.

The second important issue that made the Christian message not acceptable was its association with colonization. As Dr. Samuel Ngun Ling, affirms, “Colonization made Christianity in Myanmar a culturally alien and socio-politically undesirable element for the Burmese Buddhist nationalists. It is an undeniable fact that the majority of the Burma Buddhists cannot overlook the imperialist image of missionary Christianity during the colonial period. Consequently, “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 to gain full independence.”⁴

Certainly, the missionaries’ purpose was to evangelize the faithful in Myanmar but not to colonize the country. When the British attacked Burma, this caused trouble for the Catholic missionaries because they were misunderstood as collaborators of the British. They not only attacked Burma but even brought some (Protestant pastors) missionaries to the country. Their intention was to create a harmful relationship between Buddhism and Christianity in Burma. That is why the Burmese started considering Christianity as a foreign or alien religion. Actually, the main problem of Christianity for Burmese Buddhists is not necessarily the Christ of Christianity but the Western images of Christianity. Most of non-Christian people in Asia including Mahatama Gandhi of India used to deny only Christians but not Christ.⁵ On the other hand, a good number of well-educated non-Christians tolerate religious pluralism though they

⁴ Samuel Ngun Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar*, 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*

acknowledge that Christianity was largely introduced to the Burmese soil through the merchants, missionaries and the military. They accept Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and native religions while realizing their respective positive and negative points. Among the Buddhists there is a tendency to look upon the Christian church only as a church in Myanmar but not as a church of Myanmar.⁶

In 1948 the Ministry of Religious Affairs, created an office in the government for continuing to patronize Buddhism in Burma. Although making Buddhism the state religion may have appealed to the Buddhists in Burma, the majority of the population was upset, and the ethnic minorities who were practicing Christianity, rebelled against the government patronage.⁷ The military's slogan of "one nation (Myanmar), one language (Burmese), and one religion (Buddhism)" is strongly against other religions' dignity and values. Hopefully, the government of Myanmar will see clearly and understand other religions' values one day. Instead of refusing other beliefs, they should accept warmly other religions in the country and let them see how good the Buddhists are. In the following pages, we shall see more how the Myanmar military government treat others different religions, especially Christianity.

B. The State's Attitude towards Other Religions Particularly Christianity

A Christian community has existed in Myanmar since the early sixteenth century. Over the years since then, the churches have endured hardships of many kinds under diverse political systems, including monarchy, colonial rule, parliamentary democracy, a socialist government,

⁶ San No Thuan, *Overcoming Oppression of Ethnic Minority Christians* <http://cca.org.hk/home/ctc/ctc04-12/ctc04-12t.htm> - (accessed on January 16, 2014).

⁷ David I. Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar* (Washington D.C: Georgetown Press, 2001), 44.

and now military rule. In history, particularly during the period of the Burmese monarchy, there was religious freedom and consequently there were good relationships between kings and missionaries. An interesting article, “The Early Catholic Missionaries in Burma” written by Vivian Ba, states that the Christian missionaries were permitted by the Burmese kings to propagate the gospel freely and build churches and schools.

During the first Anglo-Burmese war in (1824-25), the Italian priest, Fr. D’ Amato, who was imprisoned by a Burmese official, but was immediately released by the order of the Burmese king, who said: “This holy man is like a god, why should we harm him. Furthermore, the kings of Burma always asked for help from the Catholic missionaries in important discussions with the British, in settling disputes, and in developing relations with the outside world.”⁸ Furthermore, when Christian missionaries came to Burma, they came not just to preach the Gospel but also to help the people through social and educational works; the latter educational work in particular attracted Buddhist social elites, including King Mindon, who let his nine sons and his ministers study with the missionaries.⁹ The environment has changed completely today, although the present military government repeatedly makes the claim that there is freedom of worship and no discrimination on religious grounds. Nevertheless Buddhism, which was the religion singly favored by the state is now not only reaffirmed by the present government, but also enjoys special distinctiveness or status over other religions.¹⁰ This is not to deny however that there were also some good things which were done by the government of Burma toward Christianity

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Pa Yaw, *Christianity in Myanmar: Church-State Relationship* (Unpublished M.Div. Thesis at Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2004), 37.

¹⁰ Samuel Ngun Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar*, 12.

and other religions. To cite an example, the Constitution of the Socialist Government from 1962 to 1988, allowed certain freedom of religion, in many respects, although religious activities were limited and controlled. Currently, freedom of worship is allowed but there is no freedom of publications of religious books. Activities allowed by the government are limited to merely pastoral activity. No Catholic schools, universities, hospitals, communication facilities can be built.

On the other hand, there were many negative things caused by those who held the political power of the country throughout history. “In 1964, the native Bishops of Burma and the foreign Bishops were refused permission to go to Rome for the Vatican Council II.”¹¹ In the following year 1965, Christian institutions like, schools, hospitals, training colleges were taken over by the state. “From the perspective of the military junta, the private schools especially those run by Christians constitute a system apart from the government-run schools that undermine the Burmese culture because they fear that these Christian institutions do not promote nationalism. Together with this nationalization, the foreign missionaries were asked to leave the country.”¹² On March 23, 1966 the Bishops were given a long list of the missionaries who would be expelled from Burma. All the foreign missionaries were expelled from the country during that period only seventy-seven native Catholic priests had to take care of the Catholic faithful.

The country then became a closed society for years. Even though the Church had to face unsurmountable difficulties, it grew quickly among the ethnic minority groups. Several people thought that the Christians in Burma would disintegrate with the strict rules implemented by the

¹¹ Eddy Evans, *The Foreign Missions of Milan 1868-91* (Belluno, Italy: Sanvitese Press, 2012), 100.

¹² Khup Za Go, *A Brief History of Christianity in Burma* <http://sialki.wordpress.com/the-stories-of-zomi/a-brief-history-of-christianity-in-burma> - (accessed on February 12, 2014).

military regime. But soon they were surprised to discover that the Church not only survived from erratic persecution but flourished by leaps and bounds. The Christians who were 2% have now become 5%. The hand of Divine Providence can be clearly seen as the Burmese Christians grew in number even with the absence of the foreign missionaries. This incident has greatly changed the notion of Christianity in Burma. Both politically and economically, the Myanmar government failed to care for its own people.

In early 2008, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) announced that there would be a constitutional referendum in May and that most citizens and ethnic minorities would be qualified to vote in the referendum, with the exception of those belonging to Christian religious orders and political prisoners. The draft constitution, which was released in March 2008, explicitly recognized the special position of Buddhism as the faith practiced by the great majority of citizens, but merely mentioned Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Animism as existing within Burma. The Constitution also claims to prohibit religious discrimination and to promote the freedom of religious practices while being subject to public order, morality, health, and other provisions of the Constitution. The Constitution is for religious freedom; however “Despite these promises of religious freedom in the 2008 Constitution members of all religions were still abused by the (SPDC) to varying degrees.”¹³ “Sometimes those who hold political power and take up government roles are automatically seen as messiahs by the people. There could be some suffering servants in government roles like Nelson Mandela, Aung Sun Suu Kyi. But it is difficult to say that all power holders are suffering servants.”¹⁴

¹³ HRDU, *Burma Human Rights Yearbook 2008* <http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs08/HRYB2008.pdf> - (accessed on Jun 25, 2014).

¹⁴ Umnai Kui, “Significance of a Suffering Messiah Figure for the Myanmar People,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 27/2 (20013):208-221, esp. 215.

Yet, not long ago the government of Myanmar warmly created a healthy relationship with the ethnic minority groups in Burma. Thein Sein, 67 years old, took office in March 2011, after the country's first election in 20 years was held in November 2010. After a few months had passed Myanmar's president Thein Sein in 2011 pardoned fifty-six political prisoners in a move considered to be linked to looming peace talks with ethnic armies, although critics say many still remain behind bars. The majority of those released from prisons across the country are members of Shan and Kachin rebel groups who were charged under the Unlawful Association Act. "Thein Sein himself has vowed that no political prisoners will remain incarcerated beyond the turn of the year 2013."¹⁵

Moreover, he has also begun speaking to international media. In his first interview in January, he told the Washington Post that his goals were, to have peace and stability and economic development in Burma. During his visit to New York in 2011, Thein Sein accepted an interview with the BBC where he was asked whether he was afraid to be swept away by the winds of change. He answered, "we are not making reforms because I want to. We are merely responding to the people's desire for reform. Therefore my future depends on the people and their wishes"¹⁶. In a move that surprised many, he said he was willing to accept Ms Suu Kyi (the daughter of General Aung San) as president if she was elected and if members of parliament were willing to change the Constitution so she could run. But he was clear that the military would always have a key role in politics. "He also made no apology for his military's past

¹⁵ John Zaw, *Myanmar frees rebels as peace talks begin* <http://www.ucanews.com/news/myanmar-frees-rebels-as-peace-talks-begin/69426> - (accessed on March 14, 2014).

¹⁶ BBC News Asia, *Profile: Burma President Thein Sein* <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-12358204> - (accessed on March 16, 2014).

actions, such as imprisoning dissidents and activists. They were acting on their beliefs and we were acting on our beliefs, he said. Everyone was working for the country in their own way."¹⁷

Originally, the Burmese Army was founded to defend the country, to protect religion, to fight for freedom and for its people. But there are still minor problems in society between the state and religions. Even though Myanmar is called a democratic country which is led by President Thein Sein, he apparently does not have full control over the Burmese military. Sometimes his ceasefire orders are being ignored by the generals. For example, in the case of June 2012: there was a clash between the majority Buddhists mobs and the minority Muslims in Myanmar, which left nearly 80 lives, lost, and displaced many people.

Five Muslims were killed in an attack on October 6 in Thandwe Township, just hours before President Thein Sein touched down for a scheduled visit.¹⁸ Although police promised the Muslim villagers protection and disarmed them and ordered them back into their home, the Buddhist mob, however, returned in even greater numbers. These clashes spread to other religions. Even though the government insists that the incident was not a religious problem, peoples around the world considered it as religions' motivated. Still thousands of people feel insecure about their lives and continue to live in fear. According to Khon Ja, a co-coordinator for the Yangon based Kachin Peace Network, "Not only the government but the president himself cannot control the army."¹⁹ Christian communities in remote areas, especially where armed anti-government forces operate, have faced much harsher pressure. Particularly, Christians in the researcher's place which is known as 'kayah state'. The eastern border and the western border in Chin State and

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Reuters, "South China Morning Post", News paper, Monday, October 7, 2013. A8.

¹⁹ Reuters, "South China Morning Post", News paper, Sunday, October 13, 2013. A10.

Sagaing division have seen their churches burned down, their pastors arrested and soldiers disrupting services, taking the villagers as porters.²⁰ Furthermore, there are cases of military people offering rice and money to any poor hill people who converted to Buddhism. Many families converted to Buddhism as a result.

As a Catholic priest from Yangon has reported, while "people are freer" under the government that was elected in November 2010, Christians continue to experience discrimination in their everyday lives. "Officials always find some invented excuse to ensure one does not get a job."²¹ The government also continued to prohibit the importing of Bibles and other religious books. Job placement in the public sector and advancement in the military was largely dependent on whether one was a practicing Buddhist or not. The country is left in the hands of high-ranking officials who are all Buddhists. This is unfair and pitiable for some places non-Buddhists have no right of entry to education. Buddhist temples are continually being accepted with no complication, while the churches are not permitted to be built.

They need special permission from government. For liturgical celebrations, the Bishop and other church authorities have no power to do what they like to. Especially, during Christmas time the government usually announces that the night Mass cannot be celebrated; sometimes though, they are allowed with a special permission. Of course, the churches are so thankful for it. Nonetheless, all religions are still controlled by the government in Myanmar. Up to now, Burma is not mainly under the rule of law but under the rule of those in authority.

²⁰ San No Thuan, *Overcoming Oppression of Ethnic Minority Christians* <http://cca.org.hk/home/ctc/ctc04-12/ctc04-12t.htm>- (accessed on January 16, 2014)

²¹ Aid to the Church in Need, *Burma (Myanmar) Country profile* http://www.acnuk.org/countries.php/8/burma_myanmar/490 - (accessed on March 19, 2014).

In our age, most of the Burmese people have been trying to interpret the suffering of the people in many ways. According to *Karma* (fatalism) concept of Buddhism, military leaders could be assumed to govern the country because of their good deeds in their past lives. The Sanskrit term *Karma* originally meant, Deed, action, and doing that have a cause and an effect. Every action causes an effect and every effect is caused by an action. A bad action causes a bad effect and a good action causes a good effect. Most people, especially Buddhists believe that suffering is the fate of the Myanmar people. Similarly, some Myanmar Christians believe that because of the will of God, the military government can continuously control the country.²² But if all religions in Myanmar are really willing to create a peaceful country and have a good relationship with the government then there is always a way. In order to remove from the eyes of Buddhists seeing Christianity as an alien religion, Christians should find out a way in which the Buddhists can understand Christians and accept them as equals.

C. The Role of Christianity in Myanmar

It appears that the world today is interested in two things about Myanmar. First thing is the restoration of democracy in the country, and second, the resolution of the political rights of all ethnic nationalities. In addition, the roles of religions in relation to the government constitute also a significant thing today. Many Christians and non-Christians from other corners of the world also want to know about other minor churches and religious movements which have existed in Burma for centuries. Concerning Christianity these questions are often asked: What does it mean to be a Christian in a Buddhism country, and how much can a Christians contribute with other religions towards the development of societies.

²² Umnai Kui, "Significance of a Suffering Messiah Figure for the Myanmar People," *Asia Journal of Theology* 27/2 (20013), 208-220. esp. 215.

I still remember what Saint John Paul II once said in a homily: What the world needs today is not so much teachers or philosophers but witnesses. Pope Paul VI put it well in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”²³ In the Christian sense, the Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that to witness means to transmit the faith “in words and deeds.”²⁴ Thus for the Church in Burma to be a Christian means to be a witness of life and to be the voice for the voiceless poor in protesting against injustice, repression, violence and servitude. By respecting other cultures, Christians are witnessing who they are in Myanmar in the midst of Buddhist neighbors. Hence, to be a Christian means to search for the meaning of life that is Christ himself. FABC says: “We Asians are searching not simply for the meaning of life but for life itself. We are striving and struggling for life because it is a task and a challenge.”²⁵

Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, a Dominican friar living in Oxford is the winner of the 2007 Michael Ramsey award for theological writing for his book *What is the Point of Being a Christian?* Fr. Radcliffe writes: “As Christians, we hope for eternity. But eternity is not what happens at the end of time, when we are dead. It begins now, whenever we share God’s life. It breaks in whenever we overcome hatred with love.”²⁶ Christians in Myanmar today try hard to find ways to live and share our Christian hope for which the world is thirsting.

²³ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 41; cf. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* 42, and *Ecclesia in Asia* 42

²⁴ *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Quezon City: Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2005), no. 522.

²⁵ Franz-Josef, Eilers, ed. *For All the People of Asia: FABC Documents from 1992-1996*. Vol.2. (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997), 5.

²⁶ Timothy Radcliffe, *What is the Point of Being a Christian?* (New York: Bums & Oates, 2005), 22.

The Church in Myanmar is a young Church young in the sense that it is awakening. “It is a Church with great potential for currently in the fact there are many vocations and the people are deeply pious.”²⁷ Despite the terrible presence of injustice, economic tragedies, religious oppressions, and sufferings, “all Christians wish to find even in this situation of hopelessness a glimmer of hope to make their dim future bright.”²⁸ The purpose of Christian missionary work in Myanmar is not primarily the conversion of others, but rather the personal conversion of the missionaries to the all embracing love and compassion of God. Fr. Anthony Grugni, a PIME priest from Italy and the Director of Sarva Prema Welfare Society for the medical and socio-economic rehabilitation of leprosy says that “Conversion does not mean, first and foremost, to make amends for one’s transgressions or to turn away from what is wrong, but rather to turn towards God.”²⁹

But as I mentioned at the beginning, Christianity is still viewed as a foreign face by Buddhists in Myanmar. This is due in fact not to the foreign origin of the first missionaries. In this context Felix Wilfred writes: “This is not because Christianity is introduced from outside but because the local Church stays away from the mainstream of life of the people, their history, struggles and dreams and they have failed to identify themselves with the people.”³⁰ There is no doubt that the Church appears alien to the people of other beliefs by reason of their perceived failure to be in solidarity with them. To remove this apparent obstacle, Christians in Myanmar

²⁷ Eikhlein, *The Challenges of Catholic Church in Myanmar*
<http://eikhlein.blogspot.com/2007/12/challenges-of-catholic-church-in.html> - (accessed on March 13, 2014).

²⁸ Samuel, Ngun Ling, *Our hope and their hope: Reading Amos’ Justice in Myanmar Context*
http://cca.org.hk/home/ctc/ctc07-02/08_ngun_ling65.pdf - (accessed on March 12, 2014).

²⁹ Anthony Grugni, *The Gospel of the Rose: Evangelization in Asia* (Mumbai, St Paul, 2007), 11.

³⁰ Felix Wilfred, “The FABC Orientations, Challenges and Impact” in *For All the People of Asia 1*, Gaudencio Rosales and C.G. Arevalo, eds. (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992), xxiv.

need to look back at their history and strengthen their spirituality to meet the real needs of the people. As Fr. Guillermo Tejon O.P, claims that “to be effective, the preaching of the Gospel has to take into account the various cultures, languages, traditions and ways of life of such people, so as to make it understandable and meaningful to them.”³¹ In Myanmar still some churches are over-emphasizing prayer, fasting, and personal salvation in the next life. This self-centered approach to Christian life and spirituality has served to explain in part the church’s isolation and irrelevance in its Buddhist context. Fr. Timothy Radcliffe remarks: “No wonder Christianity is sometimes seen as a grim religion.”³² The Church should not forget that the Christians presence in Myanmar is meaningful only inasmuch as it meets the real needs of the people and their longing for meaning - for God. As a friend in need is a friend indeed, the Church is a church indeed only when it exists for others.

Christians are called to be involved in the realization of the reign of justice and peace in Myanmar. Christians in Myanmar should cooperate with the Burmese Buddhist people and government to be patriotic citizens as well. Fr. Anthony Grugni put it in this way: “The problem with us today is that we have too much of religion but little of spirituality.”³³ Religion without spirituality, especially in its social dimension, tends to be a system of oppression and exploitation. In all types of social service it is important to help people see that the Christian’s genuine concern for people is the source of his/her inspiration and drive. The Church in Myanmar should not forget that participation in the work of social transformation is the call of Christ. Buddhists and Christians in dialogue ought to be committed to the defense of human dignity and rights, social justice, peace and the protection of the environment.

³¹ Guillermo Tejon, “The New Evangelization,” *Life today*, (February, 2014), 26.

³² Timothy Radcliffe, *Why go to Church? The Drama of the Eucharist* (London: continuum, 2008), 17.

³³ Anthony Grugni, *The Gospel of the Rose: Evangelization in Asia*, 12.

There are up to 2.5 million Burmese people in other foreign countries, especially in Thailand where more people are entering the country every day, including refugees who have fled armed conflict. Refugees are not allowed to leave the camps along the border, so Burmese priests have to visit the camps instead. The foreign countries allow Myanmar refugees to make a living as laborers. Cheap labor for other countries, mismanagement of nature resources and political instability are the root cause of poverty in Myanmar. The churches in Myanmar however should not aim primarily at doctrinal proclamations but at building communities of love and service where people can lead their lives according to the Gospel, the ‘signs of the time’ and the voice of the Spirit. Christians today in Myanmar might be small in number, but they possess the power of the spirit to transform society.

The Church in Burma is still a mission Church but it is looking forward and preparing to become a missionary Church, one able to evangelize its own people and other people, thus crossing over cultural barriers and prohibitions. In the past, the missionaries were preachers, bringers of the Gospel. They taught the people who Jesus is. Today, the missionaries especially Christians in Myanmar must be the bringers of the joy of the Gospel which means to help people experience Jesus and his unconditional love. As Pope Francis declared in his first apostolic exhortation: “We have to bring the Gospel to the people we meet, whether they are our neighbors or complete strangers. Being a disciple means being constantly ready to bring the love of Jesus to others and this can happen unexpectedly and in any places.”³⁴

The most appropriate and sensitive way of cooperating in the task of humanization of society for Christians Burmese and Buddhists is through religious dialogue. People from both religions traditions need to forego past bitterness and suspicion and love each other in order to

³⁴ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Vatican Press, 2013), n.127-29.

have a healthy and meaningful dialogue. Christians dialogue with Buddhists, not just about religious matters but also on the social and political demission of national reconstruction for which common partnership is essential.

CHAPTER III

DIALOGUE AS A WAY TO A PEACEFUL LIFE

Myanmar is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society where there are also some religious conflicts. The purpose of this chapter is to seek stability and peace by proposing a path to a peaceful life among people of different religions in the country. The researcher of this thesis strongly believes that “dialogue”¹ plays a vital role as a way to peaceful life in Myanmar where we find many religions and multi-ethnicities. Even before and after Vatican II (1962-65), the Church repeatedly encouraged her faithful to dialogue with other Christians, other religions, and with the world.

Through his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (The joy of the Gospel), our present Pope Francis invites the Church and its ministers to enter into dialogue with all. He declares that in order to promote full human development and to pursue the common good then the Church needs to be present in three areas of dialogue: “dialogue with states, dialogue with society-including with cultures and the sciences and dialogue with other believers who are not part of the Catholic Church.”² In this Apostolic Exhortation, Pope Francis wants the Church to dialogue not only with other religious but also with different cultures and the sciences.

A. The Context of Dialogue in Myanmar

The nation has been experiencing conflicts and sectarian violence in the name of religion or religiously motivated in some parts of the country. According to, UN report on 25 January,

¹ Cf: Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, *Dialogue* <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dialogue> - (accessed on May 4, 2014).

² Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Vatican Press, 2013), n. 238.

2014, “At least 48 Muslims appear to have been killed when Buddhist mobs attacked a village in an isolated corner of western Myanmar, violence that has been vehemently denied by the government.”³ In reality, Myanmar has been suffering instability and lack of essential peace since a military government took power in 1962. Likewise, it has fallen into extreme poverty and long isolation from the international community. In this context, Christianity has suffered the most among the other religions. Civil war, notoriously known as “world’s longest civil wars”⁴ is the obvious evidence. These wars are generally understood as the fights between ethnic minorities, wrongly presented as freedom fighters Christians and government groups who represent predominantly the Buddhists.

In some States where Christianity is the majority - Kachin, Kayah, Karean, Chin -, heavy attacks have been carried out by the government troops. Due to the lack of peace and instability, millions of civilians mostly Christians fled from their homes to avoid the suppression, atrocity, and the abuses which are being committed by both sides: insurgents and government groups. Some civilians sought refuge in the refugee camps whereas some sought it in other countries where they have become often slaves to some local people just to be able to live day after day. Indeed, this conflictive and violent reality in Myanmar needs an injection of peace that can be offered by respectful dialogue between Buddhists and the other religious, in particular with Christians. Dialogue is a possible tool to initiate a process of peace and stability for all. Some initial steps have already being implemented by some religious leaders. However, this initial steps need to be effectively continued and improved. All levels of leaders should support and

³ UN, *Myanmar Buddhists killed more than 40 Muslims* <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/568687/un-myanmar-buddhists-killed-more-than-40-muslims> - (accessed on May 4, 2014).

⁴ Patrick, Winn , *Myanmar: Ending the world’s longest – running civil war* <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/asia-pacific/120504/myanmar-karen-rebels-may-oo-mutraw> - (accessed on May 4, 2014).

participate in the process of dialogue in order to produce a trustworthy result and guarantee true religious freedom which is a basic right for humanity and every community.

As Swidler explains, “Dialogue refers basically to every form of meeting and communication to achieve better human relations in a spirit of sincerity, respect for persons and mutual trust. On the individual level, it is a conversation between two persons with differing views, to learn from each other, so that both can change and grow.”⁵ The definition Swidler gives to us is really applicable to the present situation in Myanmar. It is still quite hard for the Myanmar government and ethnic rebels groups to respect each other and to have mutual trust. They occasionally sign a ceasefire which is repeatedly broken by either side due to lack of mutual respect and trust.

For example, not long ago the members of the Kachin community expressed skepticism about a seven-point agreement signed between ethnic (KIA) Kachin rebels and Myanmar’s government and hailed by both sides as a breakthrough. The two sides failed to agree on a ceasefire over three days of talks that ended in the Kachin state. Nawdin Lahpai, editor-in-chief of the Thailand based Kachin News Group states “Kachin people want political dialogue, but the government wants to eliminate the armed groups and have a ceasefire, but it isn’t willing to have political dialogue. They just ignore it.”⁶ Myanmar will never be truly free and at peace until all the peoples of Myanmar can live in freedom and peace. Democratic reforms in the cities will not, by themselves, end decades of conflict. It is often said that genuine peace will only be achieved through a peace process, not simply ceasefires, and that such a peace process must involve a political dialogue leading to a political settlement for Myanmar's ethnic nationalities.

⁵ Quoted by Edgar G. Javier, *Dialogue: Our Mission Today* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2008), 115.

⁶ Clatchy Tribune, “Kachin Wary of Pact with Leaders”. South China Morning Post, News paper, Sunday, October 13, 2013. A10.

That is true of course. Real, true peace however can only be achieved through a revolution in our hearts, a renewal of our minds and a rediscovery of the values of fraternity. Peace, Pope Paul VI, says is not the absence of war. If you want peace, work for Justice. Without justice there will not be peace. As Pope Francis says in his New Year's Message for World Day of Peace: "In the heart of every man and woman is the desire for a full life, including that irrepressible longing for fraternity which draws us to fellowship with others and enables us to see them not as enemies or rivals, but as brothers and sisters to be accepted and embraced."⁷ It is time for all the ethnic peoples and Myanmar's government to work together for the common good of all nationals and for the progress of mankind. "It will take some time because fifty years of pain, suffering, misunderstanding, anger and bitterness are not easy to forget and forgive. But if there is a will there is always a way."⁸

Meanwhile, as Saint John Paul II declares in his encyclical letter on mission, "Dialogue does not originate from tactical concerns or self-interest, but is an activity with its own guiding principles, requirements and dignity."⁹ In Myanmar the political crisis between ethnic groups and government is not the only problem to be solved. There are also conflicts multi-ethnic and among the many religious groups that need to be addressed. Within the country there are hundreds of traditional religions are practiced: Animism, Nat worship, Supernaturalism and Paganism and so on.¹⁰ These are the primal religions of the racial groups existing before the

⁷ Pope Francis, *For the Celebration of the World Day of Peace* <http://hamiltondiocese.com/message-for-world-peace.php> - (accessed on May 4, 2014).

⁸ Noan Oo sao, *Time to Face the Truth*, Mae Hong Song, 30 March 2006.

⁹ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 1990, n.56.

¹⁰ Simon Pau Khan En, *Nat Worship: A Paradigm For Doing Contextual Theology in Myanmar*, 50.

other imported religions such as Buddhism and Christianity. The researcher wishes to talk about specific traditional religions in Myanmar.

Animism: Before the coming of Buddhism and Christianity into Myanmar, the people already had their own religion. “Among the non-Buddhist people of Myanmar, 1% is animist. Ethnic groups that traditionally practiced animism were more receptive to conversion, especially the Kayin, Kachin and Chin.”¹¹ According to Halverson, the term ‘animism’ comes from the Latin word *anima*, which means “soul or breath.”¹²

Nat worship: The word ‘Nat’ is originally Burmese, which means soul, ghost or spirit. It is usually understood as a ghost who returns from a dead body, because they need something from the people, normally from their family members. Most important of the *nats* are a group collectively called the thirty-seven, made up of spirits of human beings who have died violent deaths. They are capable of protecting the believers. The ghost would inflict no harm; “He would even give his protection to those who recognize him and such recognition could be expressed by an offering of rice or fruit, a few words of supplication or a gesture of homage.”¹³

Supernaturalism: Another possible alternative for the terminology of the Burmese primal religion is Supernaturalism. Melford E. Spiro applies this term “*Burmese Supernaturalism*, to refer to the worship of Nats in Myanmar.”¹⁴ Most of the adherents to

¹¹ Robert Reid & Michael G. *Myanmar (Burma)*, 61.

¹² Dean C. Halverson, *Animism* http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/15_2_PDFs/01_Halverson_05.pdf - (accessed on March 27, 2014).

¹³ Simon Pau Khan En, *Nat Worship*, 58.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

supernaturalism believe in ghosts, demons, witches. It is the belief in anything beyond the natural world.

Paganism: The word (pagan) comes from Latin *paganus*, “used by Christians from the fourth century to indicate the country people who had not accepted the new faith like town dwellers.”¹⁵ This term, paganism is therefore too vague and too broad to describe the primal religion of the people of Myanmar.

Although different religious have different values, most of the people of the ethnic minorities in the country however do not know how to celebrate and value their diversity or differences. Rather, they stick to their own ethnic identities and religions so much to that point that each tribe is interested only in its own affairs. Thus if all the religions in Myanmar are willing to promote a peaceful life for the sake of the country then they should practice a certain respect for others, and accept more pluralism and openness to the different others. Dialogue is only possible and effective if all accept each other and cooperate together for justice and peace. Each religion possesses a gift that can contribute towards building up community.

B. Theological Teaching on Dialogue

Under this title theological teaching on dialogue, the researcher will discuss more about how important religious dialogue is for the local Church in Myanmar. Pum Za Mang, a Burmese historian writer, rightly says that “Peace is not only the absence of war; peace needs to be in each action of our daily life.”¹⁶ Therefore, I believe that dialogue is an integral part of the process of

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Pum, Za Maung, “Is Buddhism a Religion of Social Engagement?” *Our Theological Journey*. Vol.4 (Yangon: Myanmar, 2012), 97-117. esp.97.

building up on authentic local Church in Myanmar whether interreligious or ecumenical dialogue or dialogue with the world. Indeed dialogue is an essential element of evangelization according to the teachings of the Church and of the local churches. Thus the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) says.

Dialogue is a primary means and way for enculturation. We discover the seeds of the word in other religions and we become open to and ready for a process of change. It makes us listen to others so that we can understand how they see us as Christians within the context of the Church's message and her structures. Then the foreignness of the Church becomes less evident in the eyes of persons of other faiths.¹⁷

The researcher wishes to present the more significant teachings on dialogue, in particular according to the following documents: *Ecclesiam Suam*, *Nostra Aetate*, *Redemptoris Missio*, *Ecclesia in Asia* and *Evangelii Gaudium*.

Ecclesiam Suam

“Dialogue” appeared in an official Church document for the first time in Pope Paul VI's *Ecclesiam Suam* on August 6, 1964. In this Encyclical, Pope Paul VI encourages the Church and its ministers to enter into dialogue in general and interreligious dialogue with other religions in the world. He asserts: “The Church must enter into dialogue with the world in which it lives. It has something to say, a message to give, a communication to make. This relationship, dialogue, which God the Father initiated and established with us through Christ in the Holy Spirit, is a very real one; we must examine it closely if we want to understand the relationship which we, the Church, should establish and foster with the human race.”¹⁸ This statement can also be applied to

¹⁷ Gaudencio Rosales & C.G. Arevalo, ed. *For All the people of Asia: FABC Documents from 1970-1991*. Vol.1. (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992), 142.

¹⁸ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 1964, n. 65.

the Church in Myanmar. The researcher believes that the Church originates as a little flock among other differences religions, especially Buddhism. Moreover, the Church faces more challenges than others because of low education, poverty and political interferences. Myanmar is still a closed society and many things remain unexplored. As a result, the mission of the local Church does not effectively respond to the challenges and realities of the society. Pope Paul VI re-affirmed powerfully his teaching on dialogue in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (December 8, 1975) where he speaks originally of “the seeds of the word” present also in non-Christian religions (EN, 53).

Nostra Aetate

This document is the Declaration of the Second Vatican Council on the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions. It was promulgated on October 28, 1965 by Pope Paul VI. In relation to our topic, it says: “One is the community of all people, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth. Religions, however, that are bound up with an advanced culture have struggled to answer the same questions by means of more refined concepts and more developed language.”¹⁹ In this statement, Vatican II points out that all peoples have a common origin and end. The whole human race dwell in the same planet, and above all peoples have equal dignity because all come from God. As the Bible says (Gen 1:26) “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.”²⁰

This Declaration is relevant for our discussion on Christian-Buddhist dialogue because it underlines what humans have in common and promotes relationship with non-Christian

¹⁹ Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, 1965, n. 1-2.

²⁰ New Revised Standard Version, the Catholic prayer Bible (New York City: Paulist Press, 2008).

religious. The Catholic Church accepts and respects “What is true and holy in other religions.”²¹ It rejects, moreover, any discrimination of men or women based on race, color, condition of life or religion. More in on Buddhism *Nostra Aetate* affirms: “Buddhism, in its various forms, realizes the radical insufficiency of this changeable world; it teaches a way by which men, in a devout and confident spirit, may be able either to acquire the state of perfect liberation, or attain, by their own efforts or through higher help, supreme illumination.”²²

Redemptoris Missio

In the same order, this Encyclical letter was issued by Pope John Paul II on December 7, 1990. In the Encyclical Letter on the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II asserts that interreligious dialogue is part of the Church’s evangelizing mission. It is to be understood as a “method” and “means”. He believes that, “Dialogue is part of the Church’s evangelizing mission. Understood as a method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment, dialogue is not in opposition to the mission; indeed, it has special links with that mission and is one of its expressions.”²³

In 2013, on unprecedented event was held on the outskirts of Yangon Myanmar. It was attended by all the leaders from the Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist communities. It was the first time leaders from different religions had gathered together for a multi-religious tour. The event, organized by the All Religions Unity Organization, was designed to foster peace amid rising sectarian tensions in Myanmar. U Than Aung, a Buddhist and the group’s spokesperson addressed the audience with these words: “We want to send a message across the country that

²¹ Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, n.2.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 55-57.

Buddhists and Muslims, Buddhists and Christians and other religions can live together peacefully.”²⁴ He repeated movingly that, if every town in our country holds a meeting like this, there will be no more conflict. During the meeting, all the leaders spoke on dialogue in Myanmar and on how they see it from their own perspective. The aim of the event and other similar activities is to foster a better understanding of each other. As the Pope had encouraged, all Christian leaders must persevere in their faith and love, even in places where their efforts are not well accepted. He believes that true dialogue will certainly bear fruit.

Ecclesia in Asia

This Apostolic Exhortation was issued on November 6, 1999 by Pope John Paul II. In this Apostolic Exhortation, John Paul II urgently encourages the Church and its ministers to enter into dialogue with other religions. He points out that “The advent of a new millennium offers a great opportunity for interreligious dialogue and for meetings with the leaders of the great world religions. Meanwhile, dialogue and cooperation with the followers of other religions is a task for the whole Church as a duty and a challenge. The Pope also wished that the churches in Asia provide suitable models of interreligious dialogue, evangelization in dialogue and dialogue for evangelization. He affirms that inter-religious relations are best developed in a context of openness to other believers, a willingness to listen and the desire to respect and understand others in their differences.”²⁵ The Pope strongly believes that interreligious dialogue is more than a way

²⁴ Banyol Kong & Lamin Chan, *Burmese Religious Leaders Gather for Conflict Resolution* http://www.portalkbr.com/asiacalling/english/southeastasia/2865672_5000.html - (accessed on April 30, 2014).

²⁵ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, n .31.

of fostering mutual knowledge and enrichment; it is rather a part of the Church's evangelizing mission.

The Church in Myanmar has been implementing the teachings of Pope John Paul II's in Ecclesia in Asia. In the political context of Myanmar, I have to say that political issues and religious matters are inter-connected as can be seen behind the clashes between the ethnic groups and government troops. As a matter of fact, on August 26, 2013 the Yangon Archbishop Charles Maung Bo called for a dialogue between ethnic and religious groups. Archbishop Bo wanted to end the conflicts that have besieged the nation, especially in Kachin and Rakhine states. He argued that "Dialogue is essential; knowing each other and discovering what we have in common allows us to build a nation based on shared dreams, on mutual respect and unity in diversity."²⁶ The goal is protecting basic human rights of every individual, regardless of race, religion or sex. It is a great duty of the Church to work with other religions in harmony and freely.

Evangelii Gaudium

It is an Apostolic Exhortation by Pope Francis on (2013) the Church's mission of evangelization in the modern world. It has been described as a remarkable and radical document. It touches on many important concerns of Pope Francis, including obligations that Christians have to the poor, and the duty to establish and maintain just economic, political, and cultural social structures. Like his predecessor, Pope Francis underlines the need of dialogue with different religions. The Pope says: "We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that

²⁶ Maung Bo, Charles, *Yangon Archbishop calls for dialogue between ethnic & religious groups* <http://directory.ucanews.com/news/yangon-archbishop-calls-for-dialogue-between-ethnic-religious-groups/436> - (accessed on April 28, 2014).

closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word which shows that we are more than simply bystanders. Only through such respectful and compassionate listening can we enter on the paths of true growth and awaken a yearning for the Christian ideal.”²⁷ In 2014, Archbishop Charles Bo of Yangon the Burma's largest city wrote a New Year's Message encouraging the Burmese to remain united and to strive for peace in their homeland. He then said, “Our task is to rebuild not only the destroyed buildings, but destroyed relationship; our task, individually and in community, is to rebuild our hearts.”²⁸ To rebuild our heart entails to rebuild with dialogue a nation in which every person feels at home, has a stake in the country's future, is treated with equal respect and equal rights, and is accepted and care for by their neighbors.

C. Buddhism and Christianity: Dialogue on Education, Conversion and Spirituality

There are many approaches to promote religious dialogue as a way to peace in Myanmar. In this chapter, the researcher presents three particular aspects: Education for dialogue, conversion of mindsets and Spirituality.

Education

Education is absolutely required to make the initiative of dialogue fruitful. Through education, people become aware of human dignity and rights, social values, including dialogue and peace. Only through interaction and education can misunderstandings be overcome. Hence, inter-faith dialogue is needed in Myanmar now more than ever, and at every level. In Myanmar,

²⁷ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 171.

²⁸ Antonio Anup Gonsalves, *Burmese bishop sees 'new dawn' of hope for his nation* <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/burmese-bishop-sees-new-dawn-of-hope-for-his-nation> - (Accessed on Jun 14, 2014).

where the researcher comes from, the system of education is really bad. The system which both teachers and students have to follow is dominated by the abusive power of the government whose orders have to be followed by all. As a result, many people are not aware of what is good or evil, right or wrong anymore. In this repressive context, it is almost impossible to speak about dialogue, peace, justice and other social issues in the country. In this situation of forced silence, how many we work together in dialogue for peace? Nevertheless, we have to try always. In the late 1940s and 1950s, Myanmar boasted of having one of the highest literacy rates in Asia and an expanding educational system. After the military took the power in 1962, the country was completely changed at once. From then on, schools do not have enough textbooks, poor families cannot afford to send their children to study, while the children of government leaders are sent abroad to study.²⁹ Certainly, in order to build a peaceful nation all religions and the state must be aware that it is their grave responsibility to educate all people whether they are Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, and Hindu, animist or those who have no religion.

Benedict XVI in his message to the 22nd World Youth Day, 2007 says: “Today, in classrooms throughout the country, young Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and indeed children of all religions sit side-by-side, learning with one another and from one another. This diversity gives rise to challenges and sparks deeper reflection on the need to educate young people to respect and understand the religious beliefs and practices of others, to grow in knowledge of their own.”³⁰ He believes, moreover, that true education can support openness to

²⁹ San No Thuan, *Overcoming Oppression of Ethnic Minority Christians* <http://cca.org.hk/home/ctc/ctc04-12/ctc04-12t.htm> (accessed on May 10, 2014).

³⁰ Andrew, Vissanu, “The 4th Buddhist-Christian Symposium” *Pro Dialogo* (2010): 130-133.

the transcendent as well as to those around us. Indeed, where there is education there is an opportunity for dialogue.

Conversion of Mindsets

To be able to participate truly in religious dialogue mutual respect is necessary. In this context, the Christians have to persuade the Buddhists that they are also true Burmese who love their country. For their part the Buddhists have to respect the Christians and their identity. It is said that “For a Burman Christian who has been originally converted from the real Burman Buddhist background, to become a Christian is to abandon his or her socio-cultural identity.”³¹ For the nationalist-minded Burma Buddhist, to become a Christian is mistakenly conceived as an act of disloyalty to the Buddhist society and to the nation as well. Thus, the Myanmar Buddhists, being proud of themselves as professors and possessors of one of the world’s great religions and cultures, tend to look at Christianity and its adherents with nationalist eyes. As we know, Myanmar was invaded by the British in 1825, 1852 and 1885 and regained independence on 4 January 1948. The nationalistic Buddhists in Myanmar cannot overlook the image of Christianity as a Western religion being associated with colonial methods and oppressive movements of the past.

In that context, colonization made Christianity in Myanmar a culturally alien and socio-political undesirable element for the Myanmar Buddhist nationalists. How many Christians help in changing those wrong mindsets from the Buddhists who consider Christianity as an alien and Western religion? It is not an easy task but it is possible and worth trying. I believe that in order to change those mindsets, one of the possibilities for Christians is this: “To express their faith

³¹ Samuel Ngun Ling, *Communication Christ in Myanmar*, 13.

and way of living in the Burman thought-forms.”³² The best possibility towards changing negative attitudes against Christians in Myanmar and elsewhere is a good Christian life, Christian witnessing, kindness, compassion, justice, non- violence and prayer. Prayer is necessary and the grace of the Holy Spirit as well. Both sides must have a hopeful attitude towards religious dialogue. It is necessary to demand mutual trust, honesty and reconciliation among religions.

Spirituality for Dialogue

Spirituality for dialogue between Christianity and other religions particularly with Buddhism is imperative in their common search for meaning and values, liberation and happiness in life. Spirituality for dialogue does not merely mean an exchange of doctrines or intellectual opinions but it means “to continue from the depths of my religious attitude to these same depths in my partner.”³³ In fact, there are more similarities than differences among Christianity, Buddhism and other different religions. For instant, every religion requires its members to work together to defend human life, the environment, and to have mutual respect.

In Buddhism, the principles of metta (*loving kindness*) and karuna (*compassion*) apply to all living beings. In Christianity, the same principles exist: love your neighbor as yourself, and love your enemy (Mt 5:43-44). We are faced with a world of suffering and uncertainty that are becoming more and more apparent around the globe. In the light of such, Buddhism has always advocated a path of asceticism to free man from suffering. Buddhists are constantly engaged in promoting the values of goodwill, peace, humility and non-violence. Christians too believe these

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Javier, *Dialogue*, 127.

ideals which are necessary for the formation of the human conscience and for the well-being of the human society. Wilhelm Dupre, writes powerfully in his book “Christian Faith in Dialogue with Buddhism”:

One can pray together, subsequently one can also meditate together; neither excludes personal prayer or meditation. Communion has something to do with communicability; it does not mean that everything has to be rationally intelligible, explicable, and resolvable. And thus the relationship is designed here in a way that common prayer and meditation leads to personal prayer and meditation, and this again affects the former hence as a process of communication which is not limited to conveying beautiful thoughts and words, but which is meant to be understood as a spiritual participation in life as a whole.³⁴

In the same level, Javier describes spirituality for dialogue in this way: “A spirituality of dialogue is a transformative spirituality for it entails a journey, a walking together with our brothers and sisters in faith and hope.”³⁵ True dialogue cannot be done without spiritual help and without God’s help through prayer and contemplation. Any Spirituality is walking according to the Spirit. We Christians believe that without the help of the Holy Spirit, the work of peace will not succeed. The best way for any of us to share our beliefs is through the way we live our lives and dialogue. Through talking, getting to know each other and discovering that what we have in common is bigger than what divides us, we can build a peaceful nation in Myanmar based on shared dreams, mutual respect and unity in diversity. In so doing, we can put decades of strife and conflict behind.

³⁴ Wilhelm Dupre, *Christian Faith in the Encounter with Buddhism*, vol. 2, *Christian Faith in Dialogue with Buddhism: Lectures, Questions, Interviews* (Moedling: St. Gabriel Publications, 2010), 163.

³⁵ Javier, *Dialogue*, 160.

CONCLUSION

Everything that the researcher has pointed out from beginning to end is focused on this: How peace and stability can be accomplished through religious dialogue in Myanmar. As mentioned above, Myanmar is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. As an inevitable result, religious conflicts among its different groups pop up from time to time. Achieving peace, harmony, solidarity has become a fundamental task for all governments and religious leaders.

Myanmar faces so many challenges today. The most important of which is equality and justice for all regardless of ethnicity, religious affiliation, economic and political status. The Christians in Myanmar, being a minority group, are experiencing different forms of inequality and discrimination, which should be seriously addressed. Inter-religious and inter-faith dialogues are seen as effective ways to achieve mutual understanding and respect. Living in a highly pluralistic society makes dialogue imperative. Biases, prejudices, and stereotyping are often the results of misunderstanding and ignorance of each other. We need to reach out, appreciate, and respect the uniqueness of each other. This is the only way to overcome inter-religious conflicts.

To sum up, the people and all leaders in Myanmar must believe without doubt that having a spirit of universality and commonality is the seal of the journey for them. They must engage seriously in interreligious dialogue for peace. Finally, working together to defend human life and respect one another should be as a way to peace as well. It is time for people in Myanmar to try harder to understand each other's feelings and treat each other as equals. Each ethnic group has its own traditions, language and literature but with tolerance and love all can still live peacefully side by side for love of family and community. Each group may ask the others to change.

However, the change that happens begins with our-selves our family and our religion. Regardless of what others do, Christians in Myanmar are asked by their humanity and faith to love all and to pray for all, including their enemies. Writing this modest thesis has helped the researcher to know Myanmar and its religious landscape better. It is his modest way to contribute a little to personal and social peace. He hopes that others who might read his humble work may also be helped and, perhaps, inspired to go deeper into the issues involved. Thus, we come now to the conclusion of the study.

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