Christian–Buddhist Dialogue in Myanmar: 
A Spirituality of Involvement in Social and Ethical Transformation

by

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

University of Divinity
24 October 2017
Abstract

This thesis examines the possibility of promoting Christian–Buddhist dialogue in Myanmar, where both Buddhists and Christians (especially those of the Protestant churches) have neglected and avoided interfaith dialogue up to the 21st century. In Myanmar, differences in faith and ethnicity tragically lead to religious marginalisation, violence and ethnic conflict. In this unstable situation, politicians exploit an amalgam of hatred, mistrust and fear rooted in ethnic religiosity, which often fuels the anger of defensive religious leaders. In response, this thesis advocates for the promotion of interfaith dialogue based on socially engaged spirituality for Myanmar people at the grassroots level, which may in turn lead to moral and social transformation.

The thesis explores the core messages of the Buddha and Jesus Christ, as enshrined in the Four Noble Truths and the Sermon on the Mount, with a special focus on the Noble Eightfold Path and the Eight Beatitudes. Conceptually, the thesis advances interfaith awareness based on the documents of Vatican II, the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference and the World Council of Churches. The researcher uses the narrative method of theology, integrated with the analytical interpretive method used in missiology. The thesis aims to peacefully address socio-religious evils from the perspective of dialogue, and to uncover relevant and feasible ways to bring peace and social harmony to the broken, fear-ridden hearts of the suffering people of Myanmar.
Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that, to the best of my knowledge, this thesis is my own work and it does not belong to material previously published by any another person. I certify that this thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purpose. I also declare the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and all assistance received in preparing this thesis has been acknowledged. In this thesis, I acknowledged all sources used in writing in accordance with the supervision received in the process of its preparation.

San Lian
16 June 2017
Acknowledgements

This research depended on the generosity of the Commonwealth Government of Australia, for which I am deeply grateful. The Commonwealth Research Training Program funded my research scholarship. I am also indebted to Kingsville Zotung Baptist Church, for its financial assistance, care, prayer, social support, friendship and hospitality, which made me feel at home throughout my studies in Australia.

I am indebted to Professor Samuel Ngun Ling, Professor Anna May Saypa, Professor Simon Pau Khan En, Professor Maung Maung Yin and Professor Saw Hlaing Bwa of the Myanmar Institute of Theology; Professor Hla Myint of the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University; Dr U Ko Ko Naing, scholar and founder of the Dhamma Research Centre in Taunggyi, Shan State; and Professor Paul F. Knitter, Emeritus Paul Tillich Professor of Theology and World Religions, Union Theological Seminary, New York. The motivation of this research was related to their academic influence.

I express heartfelt thanks to Rev. Associate Professor Jacob Kavunkal SVD, Yarra Theological Union, for the insightful guidance, academic suggestions and tireless commitment he contributed to this research project as a caring and patient principal supervisor. At the same time, I acknowledge Dr Oh-Young Kwon of Whitley College, and the kindness he has shown to me as my second supervisor.

I am grateful to Rev. Associate Professor Michael Kelly, Research Coordinator of Yarra Theological Union, for his care, concern, hospitality and readiness to help me throughout my student life in Australia. Similarly, I am thankful to Rev. Professor Mark Lindsay, formerly Research Director of the University of Divinity, and Professor John McDowell, Research Director of the University of Divinity, and other University of Divinity staff who helped me in different ways. My thanks go to Ms Janette Bredenoord, Registrar of Yarra Theological Union. My thanks also to the staff of St Paschal’s Library and Whitley College for their help. I hold a debt of gratitude to Dr Peter Wilkinson for allowing me to use resource materials from his own collection.
I honour and thank my parents, U Za Kua and Daw Ngo Khia, and U Kyaw Ling (my late father-in-law) and Daw Saw Bu (mother-in-law) for their blessings and prayer. I also thank all my siblings, friends and churches for how they have incessantly prayed for the successful completion of my PhD studies.

Last but not least, my thanks go to my dear wife, Talitha Cumi, and beloved sons, Samuel Khan Naw Lian, Zaling Mang Naw Lian and Joseph Han Thawng Lian. Without their love, moral support, encouragement and prayer, this research could not have been accomplished.
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## Abbreviations

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BIRA</td>
<td>Bishop’s Institute for Interreligious Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBCI</td>
<td>Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDNH</td>
<td>Centre for Diversity and National Harmony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIDT</td>
<td>Certificate in Interfaith Dialogue Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>CP</td>
<td>Centering Prayer</td>
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<tr>
<td>ES</td>
<td><em>Ecclesiam Suam</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>FABC</td>
<td>Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences</td>
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<tr>
<td>FIRA</td>
<td>The Formation Institute for Interreligious Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GCSS</td>
<td>The General Council of <em>Sangha Sammeggii</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMC</td>
<td>International Missionary Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>IMC-Yangon</td>
<td>International Meditation Centre-Yangon</td>
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<td>IRD</td>
<td>Interreligious Dialogue</td>
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<tr>
<td>ITBMU</td>
<td>International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IYCA-Myanmar</td>
<td>Interfaith Youth Coalition on Aid in Myanmar</td>
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<tr>
<td>JRC</td>
<td>Judson Research Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>KIA</td>
<td>Kachin Independent Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAID</td>
<td>Master of Arts in Interfaith Dialogue</td>
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<tr>
<td>MCC</td>
<td>Myanmar Council of Churches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIT</td>
<td>Myanmar Institute of Theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MNDAAA</td>
<td>Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MRTV</td>
<td>Myanmar Radio and Television</td>
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<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td><em>Nostra Aetate</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>NESAC</td>
<td>National Economic and Social Advisory Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLD</td>
<td>National League for Democracy</td>
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<tr>
<td>OCHA</td>
<td>Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>PCID</td>
<td>Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RFP</td>
<td>Religions for Peace Myanmar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEDF</td>
<td>Smile Education and Development Foundation</td>
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<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>Socially Engaged Spirituality</td>
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<tr>
<td>SLORC</td>
<td>State Law and Order Restoration Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>SPMV</td>
<td>Society for the Propagation of Mogok Vipassana</td>
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<td>Abbreviation</td>
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<tr>
<td>USDP</td>
<td>Union Solidarity and Development Party</td>
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<td>WCC</td>
<td>World Council of Churches</td>
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<td>WGI</td>
<td>World Giving Index</td>
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Introduction

This thesis examines the possibility of promoting Christian–Buddhist dialogue in order both to raise interfaith awareness among followers of the two dominant religions of Myanmar and to recognise the necessity of nurturing a spirituality of involvement in social and ethical transformation. In the past, Christians (especially those of the Protestant churches) and Buddhists not only neglected but also avoided interreligious dialogue, believing that such engagement posed spiritual dangers. I was raised in such a Christian community, and this research was inspired by my experiences and memories. As one who lived among the suffering minority ethnic groups of Myanmar – namely, the Chin – I witnessed how peaceful religion could be transformed into violent religious movement, and how pandemic social corruption could be born of poverty.

The driving force behind this research is my belief that interreligious dialogue can produce mutual learning, mutual understanding, mutual recognition and acceptance, mutual respect, mutual enrichment, mutual care and mutual progress towards a deeper knowledge of truth, while the majority of Myanmar religious leaders are either afraid of, or sceptical about, the outcomes of interreligious dialogue. My belief that ‘Christian–Buddhist dialogue has a demanding role to play in restoring national reconciliation, social harmony and transforming a corrupted Myanmar society to a healthy democratic social order’ led me to choose the following research topic: ‘Christian–Buddhist Dialogue in Myanmar: A Spirituality of Involvement In Social and Ethical Transformation’.

The main concern of this thesis is not to highlight existing socio-religious evils as a whole, but to seek ways to overcome the existing socio-political problems of Myanmar. It argues that hostilities in the country, resulting in civil war of 70 years and a long series of religious violence on the basis of religion and ethnicity, will cease if interfaith collaboration is widely promoted among Buddhists and Christians, as well as people of other faiths. A lack of interfaith awareness and a fear of interreligious dialogue delays the establishment of peace and religious harmony. If over 94 per cent of Buddhists and Christians are active in promoting interfaith dialogue, the minority
Muslims will no longer become the target of violent mobs of ultranationalist Buddhists, and may be embraced as fellow citizens of Myanmar.

Research Question

The research project considered two main questions: Why have life-destroying socio-religious problems persisted in Myanmar over such a long period of time? And what good things might the existing religions of Myanmar collectively contribute to the changing nation? Out of these a clear research question emerged: How might Christian–Buddhist dialogue in the context of Myanmar lead people to a spirituality of involvement in social and ethical transformation? This core question generates many related questions, which address the existing social problems of Myanmar:

1. Do religious leaders distort their respective peaceful religious teachings?
2. Can religions not bring peace to a society of multi-religious traditions?
3. What is a proper use of religious teachings for peace building, social harmony and national reconciliation?
4. How should people of different faiths be brought together to develop common ground in building a nation of peaceful coexistence in which justice, equality, human rights and economic prosperity can thrive?
5. What practical steps might lead different religious groups to social collaboration to remedy the badly wounded multiethnic society?

Aims and Objectives

The vast majority of Myanmar people are unaware of the positive outcomes that can be gained through interreligious dialogue. For the sake of promoting interfaith awareness, which leads to securing peace and social harmony, this research was conducted with four main objectives in the context of Myanmar:

1. To disseminate the basic concept and the benefits of interreligious dialogue;
2. To promote Christian–Buddhist dialogue for socio-ethical transformation;
3. To seek non-violent interactive techniques for building national reconciliation and peace; and
4. To recommend assistance to (Protestant) churches, to assist them to open their doors to people of other faiths.

Significance

Creating an atmosphere in which a conservative militant Buddhist, a defensive Muslim, and a fundamentalist Christian can come together for religious peace talks is an enormous venture, with many expected and unexpected hurdles, challenges and costs. It is also extremely complex for a proud and hegemonically dominant community to enter into dialogue with a community marginalised because of religious and racial differences. Drawing the attention of the Burmese Buddhist community to the plight of ethnic minorities is difficult. The significance of this research lies in its encouragement for the initiative to be taken by the powerless Christian side to join with the powerful Buddhist-dominated communities, in order to build peace and harmony between the religions and to retrieve national reconciliation via a non-violent, liberation-oriented and dialogical approach. The research’s unique contribution is its informed advocacy for fostering socially engaged spirituality on behalf of the needy and suffering peoples of Myanmar. Also, it fills a lacuna in the existing Myanmar theological literature.

Methodology

Written from a theological perspective, this thesis incorporates narratives and analytical interpretations. The four principal ways in which it is developed are (1) data collection; (2) analytical reflection, with the help of the documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences and the guidelines for interfaith dialogue published by the World Council of Churches; (3) descriptive expression and prescriptive interpretation of the Noble Eightfold Path and the Sermon on the Mount through the eyes of suffering people, in order to discover a new meaning of life in the context of the democratic Myanmar emerging post-junta; and (4) proposition of creative theological insights to aid peaceful coexistence in Myanmar. Data was collected from libraries, a personal collection of monographs published in Myanmar, ebooks, online resources, journals, newspapers, research articles, reports and other published materials, excluding human subject research. Importantly, this research
does not seek to equate Christianity and Buddhism, not to appraise the religions by means of the researcher's theological presuppositions.

**Limitations**

This thesis is based on the researcher’s opinions of and life experiences in Myanmar. It does not attempt to represent the different perspectives of other Christians or of suffering peoples of other ethnic groups. Although the researcher is influenced by the Protestant worldview, it will not represent other Myanmar Protestant churches. While the struggle of the powerless affects nearly all aspects of life, this research is limited to the feelings and attitudes of the dominant power groups towards the powerless. In addition, having been raised in the Protestant tradition, the researcher has insufficient knowledge of the dialogical methods introduced by the Catholic Church after Vatican II, and of understanding people of other religions, especially the extensive Buddhist doctrines. Although this thesis will examine dialogue and socially engaged movements that have been taking place in other parts of the world, its main focus will be in the context of Myanmar.

**Outline**

This research is one of many attempts by Myanmar Christians to promote Christian–Buddhist dialogue, without excluding followers of other faith traditions, especially Myanmar Protestants. In addition, the dialogical approach initiated by the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences will have a noticeable influence on this research.

Chapter 1 presents the background and context of this study. It briefly sets out the politico-religious outlook of Myanmar, and offers a literature review encompassing works of writers committed to promoting interreligious dialogue.

Chapter 2 discusses the importance of understanding interreligious dialogue. This chapter is a concise study of the nature of interreligious dialogue based on the documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences and the World Council of Churches, together with other resources. The pros and cons of interreligious dialogue are outlined.

Chapter 3 focuses on the problems, difficulties and challenges of promoting interfaith dialogue. It outlines the existing problems, some expected and unexpected barriers to dialogue, and the obstacles hindering the progress of interreligious
dialogue in Myanmar. This chapter aims to investigate hurdles that need to be overcome if Christian–Buddhist dialogue is to be promoted.

Chapter 4 describes the moral teachings of the Buddha and Jesus. This chapter is confined to studying the Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path and Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, each of which helps people to radically transform their socio-ethical lives. These two readings aid the researcher in developing a theology of promoting Christian–Buddhist dialogue in the Myanmar context.

Chapter 5 discusses how spirituality is nurtured, and how the process of socio-ethical transformation is developed within the tradition of Buddhism. This chapter explores the necessity and the effectiveness of spiritual practices in cleaning a defiled mind, which causes many forms of suffering. It recommends that, before engaging in social works for the wellbeing of all, establishing inner peace and achieving moral qualities through meditation is essential.

Chapter 6 examines a Christian spiritual practice called ‘centring prayer’, and discusses its impact on daily life. In particular, this chapter attempts to inform those readers who may not be familiar with meditation and its benefits that meditative exercise is not a burden but a medicine that helps practitioners live their lives in happiness and with pure heart. The main purpose of Chapter 6 is to draw the attention of Myanmar Christians, especially those of Protestant churches, to centring prayer or Christian meditative exercises, which can illimitably benefit any person who practises it on a regular basis.

Chapter 7 focuses on the socio-political implications of the Noble Eightfold Path and the Sermon on the Mount in order to seek practical ways of promoting socially engaged spirituality leading to collective interfaith social involvement among Christians and Buddhists in the Myanmar context. All-inclusive interfaith dialogue is necessary now more than ever to bring peace and harmony to the whole country. It means that Christian–Buddhist dialogue needs to be theologically well rooted and socially strong, in order to reconcile the majority Burmese and the Christian ethnic groups. Without trust, understanding and support, all-inclusive interfaith collaboration in Myanmar will never occur. This chapter discusses ways to foster socially engaged spirituality as the foundation of promoting interfaith activity, with the goal of building peace, justice and social harmony in Myanmar. The chapter includes examples of life-affirming contributions in order to show the nature of socially engaged spirituality.
In Chapter 8, and building on the insights gained from the social implications of the core teachings of Jesus Christ and the Buddha, I explore some practical ways to eliminate the existing socio-political problems and ethno-religious violence in Myanmar. This chapter argues that the Kingdom of God, not a proselytised form of Christianity, which is filled with justice, peace, love, social security, freedom, harmony and human dignity, can be peacefully proclaimed and established in Myanmar through interfaith dialogue. From the Buddhist point of view, the Kingdom of God means a reality in which loving-kindness and compassion are concretely manifested.

The central goal of this research is to show that it is possible to establish the Kingdom of God, or the world of Mettā and Karunā, in Myanmar through dialogue that is founded on socially engaged spirituality.
Chapter 1

Background and Context

This project was born out of the concerns of Myanmar Christians in response to existing socio-religious problems in Myanmar, which has a population of 51 million as announced by the Union Minister U Khin Ye in the provisional results of the 2014 Nationwide Census.¹ Myanmar is the largest country by size yet one of the least known countries in mainland South-East Asia. Situated between world superpowers China and India, sadly Myanmar does not have a good reputation, its notoriety derived from dictatorship, corruption, human rights violations and religious violence, and for maintaining the longest ethnic conflict in the world.² Myanmar is the most diverse nation in the region in terms of ethnicity, religion, culture and language. Although its geographic location is naturally blessed, the mismanagement of the natural resources, economy, faith differences and ethno-cultural diversity has seen Myanmar become one of the poorest countries in the world. Due to lack of interfaith awareness, the socio-ethno-religious diversity itself has become a reason to hate, discriminate, oppress, fight and kill. Failure to find proper solutions to eliminate a tangle of ethno-politico-religious problems has resulted in the world’s longest ongoing civil war, coupled with an unquenchable conflict between Rakhine Buddhists and self-identifying Rohingyas. Fighting between the Burmese army and ethnic armed groups has been fuelled by the unwritten policy of Burmanisation.³ Therefore, alongside political efforts to bring national reconciliation, peace building by religious organisations is substantial and religious influences have infiltrated the sociopolitical life of all people. In seeking ways to convey religion-oriented reconciliation to diverse religious and ethnic groups, interfaith dialogue is an effective means of bringing together peoples of different politico-religious backgrounds for peace talk. In practice,

¹ Ye Myint, ‘Female population outnumbers male in Myanmar’s provisional population results, amounting to 1.7 million,’ The New Light of Myanmar, 31 August, 2014.
knowing the diverse socio-religious reality of Myanmar is foundational to promoting Christian–Buddhist dialogue, which leads to peace and social harmony. This chapter introduces the relevant ethnic, religious and socio-political contexts, and provides a brief literature review.

1.1 Ethnic Context

The story of the migration of diverse ethnic groups into Myanmar is long and complex. D.G.E. Hall’s remark that pigmy Negritos, peoples akin to Aborigines and others known today as Indonesians, had settled in South-East Asia as primitive nomads undoubtedly encompassed a bigger geographical landscape of which modern-day Myanmar is a part.4 G.E. Harvey also believed a group of peoples that would later appear to be Indonesians as the first inhabitants in ancient Burma were displaced by Mongolian tribes.5 Ro Sang’s inference that the Negrito people might have wandered along the coastline of Myanmar long before the intrusion of more civilised groups is in accord with Hall’s finding.6 According to Theitpan Soe Yin, the Negrito people – known by a Pali word ‘Rehkha’ (ရႽႽ) or a Burmese word ‘Bilu’ (ဘီလူး), which means ‘ogre’ – were driven away from the Irrawaddy Delta in 200 BCE7 by later comers. Sir Arthur P. Phayre also recorded the early inhabitants of Burma coasts, especially those seen near the mouth of the Salwin River, as savages (the author seemed to avoid using the word ‘Bilu’ here).8

Researchers believe that the Tibeto-Burman group and other Mongoloid stock spreading today in South-East Asia and North-East India migrated in three waves:9 Mon-Khmer, Tibeto-Burman and Tai-Chinese.10 The earliest civilised inhabitants living along the Irrawaddy Valley of Myanmar were the Pyu people. Pyu archaeological sites suggest that the habitation of the Pyu people and their civilisation

9 The Mon-Khmer group includes Talaing, Palaung, En Raing, Pa-o, Khasi and Annamite; Tibeto-Burman is made up of Pyu, Kanzan, Thet, Burman, Chin, Kachin, Naga and Lolo; and Tai-Chinese is comprises Shan, Siamese and Karen.
extended from 200 BCE to 900 CE. However, palaeographers are uncertain whether the Pyu were a distinct ethnic group that entered the central basin or one of a number of groups already present.\textsuperscript{11} Despite a lack of historical evidence in relation to the Pyu' origin, Helen G. Trager noted that the Pyu were probably the earliest group of Tibeto-Burmans who had migrated into Burma from Tibet, Mongolia and western China.\textsuperscript{12} Therefore, it may be deduced that the earliest arrival of Tibeto-Burman groups must have occurred in Myanmar before the 1st century CE.

According to Randy J. LaPolla, a civilised Pyu kingdom, one of Tibeto-Burman groups, controlled central and upper Myanmar (Burma) before the 4th century, while the Mon from the Mon-Khmer group controlled lower Myanmar (Burma) and the migration of the Karen, another group, since before the 8th century, began to threaten the Pyu kingdom.\textsuperscript{13} The Nanzhao (Nan-chao) kingdom in modern western Yunnan Province finally destroyed the Pyu capital, Hanlin, in 832 CE.\textsuperscript{14} Subsequently, the coming of the Burmese group,\textsuperscript{15} who had been in the Nanzhao kingdom, in the middle of the 9th century forced the Karen people to move east of the Irrawaddy River, and conquered the Mon kingdom about 1000, followed by the establishment of the first Burmese kingdom, known as the Pagan dynasty, in 1044.\textsuperscript{16}

The Mon people were one of the civilised Mon-Khmer groups making their home in lower Burma long before the arrival of Burmans in the area. According to Nai Pan Hla, during the ascendancy of the Fun-an Empire in mainland South-East Asia from the 1st to the 6th centuries, both the eastern Monland of Dvaravati in modern Thailand and the western Monland of Rāmaññadesa in lower Burma (which appeared

\textsuperscript{12} Helen G. Trager, \textit{Burma Through Alien Eyes: Missionary Views of the Burmese in the Nineteenth Century} (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1966), 211.
\textsuperscript{15} The Burmese probably arrived in the Kyaukse district in central Burma, which the Pyu had already occupied during the 9th or the 10th centuries. See Peter J. Wilkinson, ‘A Mission to Burmese Buddhists: A Case-History of the Nineteenth Century Apostle of Paul-Amboise Biganet, M.E.P.’ (DMiss. diss., Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, 1970), 46.
\textsuperscript{16} Randy J. LaPolla, ‘The Role of Migration and Language Contact in the Development of the Sino-Tibetan Language Family,’ 11.
as Suvaṇṇabhūmi in ancient Indian literature) were believed to be part of the empire.\textsuperscript{17} As descendants of one of South-East Asia’s most ancient civilisations, the ancient Mons in olden days were highly literate, and introduced both Buddhism and the art of writing to Burmans.\textsuperscript{18}

Before the 9th century, the Chin, another Tibeto-Burman group, migrated to upper Myanmar and established a kingdom in the Chindwin Valley. However, their domination of the region was challenged by the migration of the Shans, a Tai-speaking group. Their migration was pushed by the Mongol invasion of Yunnan in the 13th century.\textsuperscript{19} According to Vum Son, the Chin (Zo) people had settled in the Chindwin valley before Ko-lo-feng (748–779 CE),\textsuperscript{20} the second Nanzhao (Nan-chao) chief, opened trade routes to India and the Pyu kingdom in Myanmar (Burma) in 750 CE.\textsuperscript{21} Therefore, it is believed that the Chins must have entered the Chindwin Valley at the beginning of the 7th century.\textsuperscript{22} According to Gordon H. Luce, the Shan (Tai) people had already established their principalities in northern Myanmar in the early 13th century. Having built the garrison town of Kalay with double walls and moats, only 32 kilometres west of the Chindwin River, they pushed the Chins westward to the present Chin Hills,\textsuperscript{23} while the Mon-Khmer-speaking hill tribes of Lawa, Ponlon and Riang were pushed east of Salween River by their intrusion.\textsuperscript{24}

Historically, there is evidence of interaction between the Shans and the Kachins (Jinghpaw), another Tibeto-Burman group, in the northernmost Myanmar. Randy J. LaPolla wrote that 4th-century Chinese records mentioned the inhabitants who may be identified with the modern Jinghpaw (Kachin) in the far north of Myanmar.\textsuperscript{25} E.R. Leach wrote that a number of early Chinese works published

\textsuperscript{19} Randy J. LaPolla, ‘The Role of Migration and Language Contact in the Development of the Sino-Tibetan Language Family,’ 11.
\textsuperscript{20} Kolofen’s campaigns opened the old road to India across Upper Burma passing through the Pyu capital, Hanlin. See D.G.E. Hall, A History of South-East Asia, 134.
\textsuperscript{21} Vum Son, Zo History (Aizawl, Mizoram, Eastern India: By the Author, 1986), 33.
\textsuperscript{22} Joel Za Hlei Kap, ‘General Background of the Chin,’ Chin Church History (Falam, Chin State: Zomi Theological College, 2007), 7.
\textsuperscript{23} The Shan drove the Chin out of the Chindwin Valley into the western hills after the Mongol victory at Kaungzin in December 1283. See D.G.E. Hall, A History of South-East Asia, 147.
\textsuperscript{25} Randy J. LaPolla, ‘The Role of Migration and Language Contact in the Development of the Sino-Tibetan Language Family,’ 11.
between 350 and 1000 referred ‘the wild and troublesome b’uok tribes’ to inhabitants of the Kachin Hills. In Edmund Leach’s words, the Kachin and the other hill tribes in modern Kachin State practised shifting cultivation and lived a primitive way of life. They happened to be subjects of the Shan chiefs (sawbwa) and were recruited as mercenaries to strengthen the Shan political structures.

The present outlook of Myanmar as ‘one nation with many races’ is firmly grounded in the successive migrations of Tibeto-Burmans and Mongoloid peoples and their settlements in various parts of modern Myanmar over more than a millennium. Today, Myanmar is known as one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world with over 100 different dialects and languages. Based on the distribution of ethnicities, the existing seven national states and seven administrative divisions were affirmed by the promulgation of the Constitution of 1974 during the socialist regime under the leadership of General Ne Win. Out of the eight major national races, a 1982 law made a division of subracial groups into 135 indigenous races. In Article 9(a) of Chapter 1, the 2008 Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar designated the existing seven divisions as seven regions together, and affirmed the same term ‘state’ for the existing seven states. Besides the fourteen territorial units, the 2008 Constitution restructured and demarcated ‘six self administered zones’ for smaller national races such as the Danu, Kokang, Naga, Palaung (Taang), Pa-O and Wa. In sum, according to the Myanmar government’s official definition, ‘indigenous ethnic group’ (Taingyintha in Burmese) means all eight main nationals and other smaller ethnic groups ‘who settled in any territory included within the State as their permanent home prior to 1823’.

26 ‘Modern Chinese refer to the modern Kachins as p’u man – the p’u being written with the same character as b’uok,’ stated E.R. Leach. See E.R. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure* (Norwich: Fletcher and Sons, Ltd, 1964), 238–239.
30 The eight major national races in Myanmar are Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Mon, Burman, Rakhine and Shan.
34 The Rakhine Inquiry Commission was established on 17 August 2012 under the authority of the President’s Executive Order to discover the root causes of communal violence and provide recommendations for the prevention of the recurrence of violence in the future, and the promotion of peaceful coexistence. See Inquiry Commission, Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Final Report of Inquiry Commission on Sectarian Violence in Rakhine State (8 July 2013), 2. ‘Year 1823’ was the last
Although it is impossible to redraw the present geographical map of Myanmar, the dispersal of ethnic groups on both sides of the country’s inland borderlines increases trans-border interaction among the same ethnic groups settling along Myanmar’s frontiers. Thousands of the Chin (also known as Mizo) and Naga are living in India; the Kachin, Wa and Shan in China; the Karen, Mon and Shan in Thailand; and the Rakhine and ‘Rohingya’ (a disputed name) Muslims in Bangladesh. Other smaller racial groups of Lahu, Akha and Lisu are spread across borders of Myanmar, China, Laos and Thailand. According to David Dapice, the unsettled and disputed term ‘Rohingya’ in the late 18th century referred to a group of Muslim residents in Rakhine State who had called themselves ‘Rooinga’. On the contrary, the term did not appear in the British census of 1824. Nevertheless, it can be inferred that interrelations between Rakhines (Arakanese) and Muslims from Bangladesh must have taken place as early as the 14th century.

The ongoing disputed list of subnational races is based on the British census held 1931, while Burma was a constituent part of British India. The categorisation of these indigenous races into 135 subgroups was conducted on the basis of languages recorded in the 1931 census. The ethnic languages were classified into five main indigenous groups: languages of the Burma (Myanmar) group; other Tibeto-Burmese languages – languages of the Lolo-Muhso, Kuki-Chin, Naga, Kachin, Sak (Lui) and Mro groups; languages of the Karen group; languages of the Tai (Shan) group; languages of the Mon-Khmer branch – the Mon (Talaing) and Palaung-Wa groups. In sum, Myanmar is not a land of one dominant national race since ancient times. In early times it was divided into many smaller territorial units among ethnic groups who today appear as citizens of Republic of the Union of Myanmar. Therefore, any part of Myanmar belongs to all ethnicities of the country, regardless of which part they are in.

1.2 Religious Context

The religious plurality of Myanmar is not new.\(^{39}\) Forms of long-standing multi-religious identities embedded among diverse indigenous ethnic groups have been evolving for several centuries. This phenomenon makes Myanmar a place where one need not travel a long distance to encounter faiths other than the dominant religion, Theravāda Buddhism. Because they arrived with meagre and unsystematic cultural structures and animistic religious concepts, the majority of new migrants from the north gradually adopted Indian religions, especially Theravāda Buddhism (at least exteriorly), in the Irrawaddy Valley, the coastal regions of Burma and the Shan Plateau, while other ethnicities continued their animistic way of beliefs.\(^{40}\) While traditional nat\(^ {41}\) worship is persisting in the shadow of Burmese Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam are also spreading across the country. At a popular level, Burmese Buddhism has incorporated elements of folk religions, making room for the thirty-seven Burmese nats in daily religious functions.\(^ {42}\) In many traditional Buddhist homes, a small nat shrine is normally kept as a supplement to a larger and higher Buddha’s shrine.\(^ {43}\) The maintenance of many nat statues at the base of the Shwedagon Pagoda, one of the holiest places, indicates the tolerance of Burmese Buddhism for primal religious beliefs.

The original form and structure of the primitive religion of the Burmese people before they entered the Irrawaddy Valley in the mid 9th century was not well documented. However, they seemed to have a tradition of worshiping the spirits of deceased heroes or respected persons who were later known by the term nats (‘spirits’). Donald Eugene Smith described the religious plurality of ancient Burma, arguing that the Burmese indigenous animism, the worship of nat spirits, coexisted

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\(^{39}\) The official name of the country was changed from the Union of Burma to the Union of Myanmar by the military government in 1989. ‘Burma’ or ‘Myanmar’ will be used interchangeably, according to the given context.


\(^{41}\) Nat in the Burmese conception is an invisible spiritual being who holds dominion over a person, a group of people or natural objects. The suzerainty of each nat is either terrestrial or celestial. According to Maung Htin Aung, the term ‘Nat’ originally means a lord with an idea similar to feudal overlordship. See Maung Htin Aung, Folk Elements in Burmese Buddhism (London: OUP, 1962), 2.

\(^{42}\) Samuel Ngun Ling, Theological Themes for Our Times: Reflections on Selected Themes of the Myanmar Institute of Theology (Yangon: Judson Research Centre, Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2007), 57.

\(^{43}\) Donald M. Seekins, Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar) (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 379.
and coalesced with several Hindu sects and both Theravāda and Mahayana Buddhism. Burmese history proves the survival of belief in nats among Burmans after the suppression of nat worship by King Anawratha in the 11th century. One of the most popular and earliest nat among the thirty-seven nats is Min Mahagiri, who was known by the name Maung Tin De in his human life, whom the king of the Second Tagaung burnt alive, viewing his great bravery and physical strength as a potential threat to royal power. Nowadays, an ancient nat by the name of Min Mahagiri becomes a chief nat at the abode of the traditional nats on the summit of Mount Popa, located in central Myanmar, about 57 kilometres south-east of Pagan (Bagan), the first Burmese ancient capital, which was occupied by the Burmese people after the destruction of the Pyu kingdom in 832 CE.

The nat pantheon of Myanmar may be categorised into three kinds. The first concept of the nat is shared by all ethnic groups, with only slightly different ideas, while the second and the third concepts belong only to Burmans and other Buddhist ethnic groups. The first kind includes nats of nature such as forest nat (tawsaungh nat), tree-guardian nat (thitpinsaungh nat), mountain nat (taungsaungh nat) and paddy-field nat (leisaungh nat). Most of the nats of this kind are malevolent, erratic and vicious, and demand propitiatory sacrifices from people. The second kind are nats of deva, Buddhist-Brahmanic devas, deriving from Buddhist cosmology. The six planes of devaloka in the Buddhist conception are Paranimmitavasavatti, Nimmānarati, Tusita, Yāma, Tāvatīṃsa and Cātummahārājika. Nats of deva are believed to be fundamentally benevolent and close to the Christian concept of angels,

45 Simon Pau Khan En, Nat Worship: A Paradigm for Doing Contextual Theology in Myanmar (Yangon: Judson Research Centre, Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2012), 60.
46 The Tagaung kingdom was a Pyu city-state located in Upper Burma during the 1st millennium CE. Elizabeth Moore placed the Second Tagaung dynasty in the early Han period of expansion (between 200 BCE and 200 CE), which encountered incursions against the Pyu (P’iao or Tircul) people living beyond the frontiers. See Elizabeth Moore, ‘The Early Buddhist Archaeology of Myanmar: Tagaung, Thagara, and Mon-Pyu Dichotomy,’ http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/11826/1/M02MooreMonPyux02.pdf (accessed 27 August 2014).
50 The six planes of devaloka in Buddhist cosmology are celestial abodes existing above the human plane. All devalokas are happy states of sensual pleasure.
because they usually help human beings in times of danger, frailty and hardship.\textsuperscript{52}

The third kind of nats is ‘the spirits of deceased human beings’\textsuperscript{53} who met sudden violent deaths. Among thirty-seven nats, the majority were alive between the 13th and 17th centuries.\textsuperscript{54} These tutelary nats are believed to be able to bring good luck, protection and prosperity to those who faithfully offer sacrifices to them. Similar to nat worship, the legacy of Hinduism, which came to Burma by trade and colonisation, cannot be set apart from the cultural evolution of the animistic Burmese people before the reign of King Anawratha.

Hinduism never became a dominant religion in the history of Myanmar. However, the trajectory of the influence of the Hindu culture in the flow of the Burmese civilisation can be traced back to historical relations between Kalinga (Orissa in India) and Burma. G.E. Gerini stated in his research on Claudius Ptolemy’s Geography that the Kalinga kingdom had colonised Burma before Emperor Asoka invaded Kalinga.\textsuperscript{55} Ancient Indian literature such as the Jatakas, the Arthasastra of Kautilya (c. 4th century BCE) and the Mahaniddesa (c. 3rd century BCE) have references to Burma as Suvarnabhumi (‘the golden land’). The Mahajanaka Jataka (no. 539) mentions that, with the purpose of colonisation, Prince Mahajanaka reached Suvarnabhumi with 350 persons.\textsuperscript{56} Before Ptolemy wrote his Geography in the 2nd century, the rule of the Kalingans centred around at least three places in Burma: Kale (Kalay), the Arakan coast and Pegu\textsuperscript{57} proper around the Gulf of Martaban.\textsuperscript{58} G.E. Harvey believed the art of writing, customary law and other elements of civilisation were probably brought from South India to the Pyu about 300 CE, as part of the great Hindu expansion overseas.\textsuperscript{59} It is believed that, as detected in ancient buildings and sculptures of the Pagan kingdom, Hinayanist Buddhism, Mahayanist and Tantric

\textsuperscript{52} Simon Pau Khan En, Nat Worship: A Paradigm for Doing Contextual Theology in Myanmar, 384.

\textsuperscript{53} Influenced by the ancient custom of burying alive a human sacrifice beneath the foundations of an important building in order to provide it with a guardian spirit, King Anawrahta, after the coming of the Hinayana monk Shin Arahan, accepted the self-sacrifice of one of his queens, the sister of the Shan chief Myodyi, when the king built the Kyaukse irrigation system and she became the tutelary goddess of all the weirs. See D.G.E. Hall, Burma (Tiptree, Essex, Great Britain: The Anchor Press, Ltd, 1956), 17; see also G.E. Harvey, History of Burma, 25.

\textsuperscript{54} Simon Pau Khan En, Nat Worship: A Paradigm for Doing Contextual Theology in Myanmar, 386.


\textsuperscript{56} Ibid..

\textsuperscript{57} Pegu is one of ancient centres of the Mon kingdom. Ussa, the old name for Pegu, is the same word as Orissa. Pegu was colonised from Orissa. See G.E. Harvey, History of Burma, 6.

\textsuperscript{58} Benudhar Patra, ‘Kalinga and Burma: A Study in Ancient Relations,’ Orissa Review, 26.

\textsuperscript{59} G.E. Harvey, History of Burma: From the Earliest Times to 10 March 1824, the Beginning of the English Conquest, 4.
Buddhism and Brahmanism may have been brought to Burma in various forms from Bengal and Orissa by sea since time immemorial. John F. Cady observed that the influence of Hinduism in the kingship of the Burmese kingdoms in three ways: first, directly borrowing from India of the concept of royalty associated with the venerable Code of Manu, which was completed in the 2nd century BCE; secondly, adopting Hindu cosmology, which attributed divine status to the king, meaning the royal palace symbolised the very centre of the universe; and thirdly, viewing the king as the patron and supporter of the Buddhist faith. He remarked: ‘Burma’s kings were allegedly descendants of Manu.’

The Burmese chronicles also recorded heretics known as *Aris*, who imitated some of the ways of Brahmanic and Buddhist institutions in the time of King Anawratha (1015–1078). According to Charles Eliot, the word *Ari* is believed to derive from *aran* representing *aranyakā* – forest priests. The other way round, Maung Htin Aung viewed the term *Ari* to be a derivative of the Pali term *Ariya*, meaning ‘the noble ones’, rather than of the term *Arannika* or *Arannavasi*, meaning ‘dwellers in the forest’, and said, ‘This theory is not acceptable as the *Aris* dwelt in great monasteries and not in the forest.’ *Aris* were seen in black robes with long hair, worshipping serpents and hanging up the heads of the sacrificed animals in their temples. Although they lived in convents, they were not celibate. Although King Anawratha is reportedly said to have eliminated *Aris* and their religious practices, inscriptions dated 1468 evidence that they were not completely extirpated but settled in Myingyan district, about 77 kilometres north-east of Pagan. When Anawratha saw the purity and restrained power of Shin Arahan, a Hinayana monk, in utter contrast with the leering vacuity of the *Aris*, he entreated, ‘My lord, teach me somewhat, yea, though it be a little, of the law preached by the Lord, the Master.’ Under the teaching and the influence of the Mon monk Shin Arahan, King Anawratha sought to purify his realm from Mahayanist practices and break the power of the *Ari* priesthood, who taught magic formulae that released sinners from the operation of the

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62 Ibid., 5.
64 Maung Htin Aung, *Folk Elements in Burmese Buddhism*, 129.
law of karma. The coming of Shin Arahan entailed a struggle with the *Ari* priests of Mahayanist background, who dominated Upper Burma and practised Tantric and other erotic rites. The opposition of the *Ari* monks to the making of Theravāda Buddhism the national religion by King Anawratha led the king to resort to religious persecution. Maung Htin Aung wrote: ‘The *Ari* monks were defrocked and made to serve in the royal armies. All the images of the gods of the planets and the Hindu gods were seized and placed in a Vishnu temple, which was renamed “the Prison of the God”.’ Although the ancient Burmese civilisation was much indebted to Hinduism, the Buddhist teachings outstripped the Hindu elements.

As mentioned, Buddhism was not the only religion adopted by ancient peoples living in the territories of modern Myanmar, but it stands as the most successful. One legend persisting among Burmese Buddhists is that, having met Buddha in *Majjhimaṭṭha* (modern Northern India), two Burmese merchants, Tapussa and Bhallika from Okkalapa (modern-day Yangon), became Buddhists and received the Buddha’s eight hairs, which are said to have been enshrined in the Shwedagon Pagoda, built on the Singuttara Hill during the lifetime of Buddha. Although Burmese Buddhists generally view the existence of the Shwedagon Pagoda as evidence of the arrival of Buddhism since Buddha’s lifetime, Dhammacetṭī Ashin Kosalla, a learned Burmese monk, does not support such a legendary story. He wrote that any legend related to the birth of the Shwedagon Pagoda is unreliable because nothing was clearly known of the Shwedagon before the 14th century.

In the Indian version, the two merchants were not native Burmese but Indians. According to Benudhar Patra, Tapassu (Tapussa) and Bhalluka (Bhallika), the first lay disciples of Buddha, were supposed to be two merchant brothers of Utkal (another name of Orissa). They travelled to the golden land (Burma) by sea with eight hairs of the head of Buddha, given by the Buddha himself, and enshrined under the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon (Yangon). He contended that a steady commercial

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70 Nyunt Wai (*ညြန္႔ေဝ*), *A Significant Complete History of the Shwedagon Pagoda* (*ထူးျခားျပည့္စုံေသာ ေရႊတိဂုံေစတီေတာ္သမုိင္း*) (Yangon: Thazinni ṭīṭa Press, 1989), 35. A favourite Burmese story told how Tapusa and Palikat, two brothers, were given eight hairs of his head by Gautama (see D.G.E. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia*, 132).
71 Dhammacetṭī Ashin Kosalla, *The Arrival of Buddhism into South East Asia* (Yangon: Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2009), 111.
interaction with Burma by the Buddhist merchants of Kalinga later became a missionary undertaking for the propagation of their religion, and afterwards evolved into an assumption of political supremacy in the land. Although the legend of the origin of the Shwedagon Pagoda is popular among lay Buddhists, this finding has shaken the authenticity and reliability of the Burmese tradition, which names the original birthplace of Tapussa and Bhallika as Okkalapa, part of modern Yangon city (the then Mon country).

Another popular story states Buddhism to have arrived in Suvaṇṇabhūmi (modern Thaton, in Mon State) when King Asoka sent Buddhist missionaries in nine different directions to his neighbouring countries in order to propagate the Buddhist Sāsanā after the third Buddhist Council (saṃghāyanā), which was held under his supervision at Āsokarāma Monastery in the city of Pāṭaliputra in 308 BCE. A traditional Burmese notion is that a mission group of five arahats (saint-monks) was sent to Subaṇṇabhūmi, led by the Venerable Soṇa Thera and the Venerable Uttara Thera. However, based on the three suggested periods of Āsokan scholars on the coronation of King Asoka 265–264 BCE or 273–272 BCE or 270–269 BCE, it is reasonable to hypothesise that the third Buddhist Council and the sending of Buddhist missionaries to neighbouring countries must have occurred at least more than half a century later than 308 BCE, because Asoka began to disseminate the Dhamma ten years after his coronation. Professor Than Tun, one of the most influential historians of Burmese history, did not credit the coming of the Soṇa and Uttara mission to Rāmañña country which was also known as Suvaṇṇabhūmi, as recorded in ‘the History of the Buddha’s Religion’ (Sāsanāvāṇa), written by Paṇñāsāmi in

73 Ibid., 26.
74 The year 308 BCE was designated for the third Buddhist Council, according to Burmese tradition.
76 Ibid., 22.
77 Ananda W.P. Guruge, ‘Foreign Mission of Asoka,’ in King Asoka and Buddhism: Historical and Literary Studies, ed. Anuradha Šeneviratna (Mawatha, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1994), 74–75. ‘The Mon chronicles contain a legend which tells how Sona and Uttara, two Buddhist monks, were deputed to the Golden Land by the Third Buddhist Synod at Pataliputra in c. 241 B.C. So far as historical evidence is concerned, however, there is no trace of the penetration of Indian influence earlier than the fragments of the Pali canon found at Hmawza (Srikshetra or Old Prome) dating from c. A.D. 500’ (see D.G.E. Hall, A History of South-East Asia, 132–133).
78 Than Tun was Professor of History in Art and Science University Mandalay and earned a PhD in history from University of London in 1956.
79 The History of the Buddha’s Religion (Sāsanāvāṇa) is the single most influential source of Burmese Buddhist tradition.
1861, as a historical fact.\textsuperscript{80} He notes: ‘Asoka’s Rock Edicts giving the list of countries to which missions were sent do not mention the \textit{Soṇa} and \textit{Uttara} mission to \textit{Suvāṇṇabhūmi}.\textsuperscript{81}

Although Burmese Buddhists view Thaton as a centre from which Buddhism spread upcountry, the religion followed by Burmese people before the Pagan era in the 11th century seemed to be derived from some sort of the Pāli Buddhism practised among the Pyu people.\textsuperscript{82} The archaeological sites of ancient Pyu cities confirm the evidence of a flourishing Buddhism in the region. One of the instances is a major monastery unearthed at Beikthano,\textsuperscript{83} with clues dating back to the 4th century. It was found that the building and its architectural design are identical to the Buddhist monasteries of \textit{Nāgārjunakōṇaḍa}, the great Buddhist centre in Southern India.\textsuperscript{84} According to Roger Bischoff, the Pyu people had a more advanced civilisation than the Mon. He contended: ‘The Pyu sites found in the vicinity of Prome [in Bago Region] are the earliest urban sites in Southeast Asia found to date.'\textsuperscript{85} Based on archaeological evidence, some historians assume that the earliest contacts between the Pyu Kingdom and Asokan religious centre may have occurred in the 2nd century, although the exact date of first contact remains undeterminable.\textsuperscript{86}

It is clear that Burmese people learned Buddhism from the Pyu people before seizing the Mon country. D.G.E. Hall’s statement that ‘religious remains in Old Prome show both forms of Buddhism, Mahayanism and Hinayanism together with Vishnu worship'\textsuperscript{87} renders a message that the Pyu had in their hands more advanced religious legacies to pass down to later intruders of the animistic Burmese. According to Peter J. Wilkinson, Pali-Hinayana and Mahayana influences arrived in Prome by sea in about the 5th and 6th centuries.\textsuperscript{88} The stupas found in the Pyu archaeological site are the prototypes of some of the Pagan temples built long after the fall of the Pyu

\textsuperscript{80} Than Tun, ‘History of Buddhism in Burma A.D. 1000–1300,’ 50.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 53.
\textsuperscript{83} Beikthano, where the earliest highly developed urban settlement was found, is one of fortified Pyu city-states located in the Irrawaddy Valley of central Myanmar. Its city walls and fortifications are believed to have been built between 180 BCE and 610 CE.
\textsuperscript{84} Roger Bischoff, \textit{Buddhism in Myanmar: A Short History} (Mawatha, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1995), 33.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{87} D.G.E. Hall, \textit{Burma}, 8.
Besides the Pyu, there is no doubt that the Burmese people adopted the Mon Buddhist culture and civilisation immediately after the defeat of the Mon Kingdom of Thaton in the 11th century. Having seized Thaton country in 1057 and captured King Manūhā, the Mon king, King Anawratha brought the *Tipitaka* from *Suvannabhūmi*, the Monland, and established the religion in his capital.\(^90\) Holding sacred scriptures which were carried by no less than thirty-two white elephants from the Mon country, Shin Arahan directed the captured Mon monks to propagate Hinayana Buddhism far and wide in the Pagan kingdom. Consequently, Pali became the sacred language of the Burmese, and Burmese became for the first time both a written and spoken language, adopting the Mon alphabet.\(^91\) During his reign, Anawratha collected sacred Buddhist writings from Sri Lanka, which he treasured in a magnificent Buddhist building.\(^92\)

Like Buddhism, the coming of Christianity to Burma also has a long and undocumented history. Simon Pau Khan En,\(^93\) formerly president of the Myanmar Institute of Theology, quotes John England and suggests the Christian community began to land on Myanmar soil as early as the 4th century.\(^94\) On the contrary, ‘Whether Christianity in any form arrived in Burma before the 6th century is still a mystery and the only evidence put forward is both meagre and tenuous,’ according to Peter J. Wilkinson.\(^95\) Plausibly, the Nestorian Christians may have arrived in the Pagan region before the 10th century.\(^96\) Evidence found in the ruins of a pagoda in Pakokku district showing the characteristics of ancient Catholic cathedrals could be

\(^90\) Than Tun, ‘History of Buddhism in Burma A.D. 1000–1300,’ 6. The Mon Kingdom of Thaton was in possession of thirty complete sets of the Tripitaka, the Three Baskets of the Law. On the appeal of Shin Arahan, King Anawratha applied for one copy of them from the Mon Kingdom. When the king’s request was rejected with affronts, Anawratha’s great campaign captured Thaton, deported the king and his court, all the clergy and its entire population of 30,000 souls to the Pagan Kingdom (see D.G.E. Hall, *Burma*, 15–16).
\(^91\) D.G.E. Hall, *Burma*, 16.
\(^93\) Pau Khan En is a well-known respected theologian and one of Myanmar’s Baptist leaders. He graduated with a B.D. degree from Serampore College, India, in 1980, with an S.T.M. degree from Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1991, and with a PhD degree from the University of Birmingham, UK, in 1995.
related to the presence of the Nestorian Christians in ancient central Burma.\textsuperscript{97} Some evidence in Pagan reveals contact between the Christian faith and the Pagan kingdom from the 11th century. One of the drawings inside the tunnel built by King Kyanzittha (1084–1113), son of King Anawratha, portrays a lotus flower with eight petals encircling a ‘cross’ in the middle.\textsuperscript{98} It is believed to be one means of the introduction of Christianity into the Pagan kingdom; King Anawratha may have taken some of Indian Christians who migrated into Thaton as captives.\textsuperscript{99} By the 14th and 15th centuries, some European Christians, mainly Italians and Dutch, came to Burma as explorers and merchants.\textsuperscript{100}

According to Khin Maung Nyunt,\textsuperscript{101} King Tabinshwehti (1531–1550) accepted many Portuguese Christians in his royal services and employed 700 Portuguese mercenary soldiers to capture Moulmein in 1541.\textsuperscript{102} When Pope Leo X (1475–1521) approved the Padroado Real (Royal Patronage) system, both Dominican and Franciscan missionaries came to Burma in the 15th and 16th centuries; the Portuguese traders’ colonisation also expanded.\textsuperscript{103} Similarly, the Catholic mission in Burma was carried out by Jesuit and Barnabite\textsuperscript{104} missionaries in the 17th century. Although many of the missionaries, like Father Jean Joret and Father Jean Genoud,\textsuperscript{105} who may be termed the first Catholic missionaries to the Burmese people and who

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\textsuperscript{98} Maran Khun San (မရန္ခြန္ဆုိင္း), \textit{Buddhist–Christian Encounter in Brief in Myanmar History} (ျမန္မာႏုိင္ငံသမုိင္း၌ဗုဒၶဘာသာႏွင့္ခရစ္ယာန္ဘာသာထိေတြ႔မွဳျဖစ္စဥ္အက်ဥ္း) (Yangon: Judson Research Centre, Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2013), 9.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{100} Samuel Ngun Ling, \textit{Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives} (Yangon: Judson Research Centre, Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2010), 112.
\textsuperscript{101} Khin Maung Nyunt obtained a doctorate in International Relations in 1960 from the London School of Economics. He was appointed Professor of History and International Relations at Mandalay University in 1982 and became Director-General of the Department of Archaeology in 1987.
\textsuperscript{102} Maran Khun San (မရန္ခြန္ဆုိင္း), \textit{Buddhist – Christian Encounter in Brief in Myanmar History} (ျမန္မာႏုိင္ငံသမုိင္း၌ဗုဒၶဘာသာႏွင့္ခရစ္ယာန္ဘာသာထိေတြ႔မွဳျဖစ္စဥ္အက်ဥ္း), 11.
\textsuperscript{104} The earliest Barnabite Fathers arrived in Burma in 1721. See \textit{The Head of the Mission, An Outline of the History of the Catholic Burmese Mission from the Year 1720 to 1887} (Rangoon: The Hanthawaddy Press, 1887), 12.
\textsuperscript{105} Frs. Jean Genoud and Jean Joret, sent by the Society of Foreign Missions at Paris, were arrested by the king’s orders, exposed naked to the bites of mosquitoes, and finally sewn up in bags and thrown into the Pegu River on 12 February 1963. See \textit{An Account of the Catholic Mission of Southern Burma and the New Cathedral at Rangoon}, ed., A Catholic Layman (London: Burns & Oates, 1909), 3.
arrived in Pegu in 1692, were martyred, the native people still remained stubborn.\textsuperscript{106} In 1800 the number of Catholics in Myanmar dropped from 5000 to 3000.\textsuperscript{107}

The first Protestant missionaries who came to Yangon on 19 December 1807 were Felix Carey and James Chater, sons of William Carey, an English Baptist missionary in India. Because of his wife’s health, James Chater returned to Sri Lanka in 1811.\textsuperscript{108} Nine years after his arrival, Felix Carey also left the mission field without harvesting any noticeable number of converts from the native people, except the achievement of preparing a draft of a Burmese–English dictionary.\textsuperscript{109} Although he found evangelising difficult, his medical skills drew the Burmese king’s attention and the king appointed him as a royal doctor with status and a high salary.\textsuperscript{110} Although he did not win any converts, Felix Carey was significant in offering warm hospitality in a strange land to an American Baptist missionary, Adoniram Judson and his wife. A successful Baptist mission had begun to root on Myanmar soil by the time of his arrival in Yangon on 13 July 1813.\textsuperscript{111} His missionary labour led him to baptise of UNaw, the first Burmese Buddhist convert, and Hpu Tha Byu, the first Kayin\textsuperscript{112} convert. Among Judson’s invaluable legacies are the unrivalled translation of the Holy Bible from the original Hebrew and Greek texts into Burmese, and compilations of an English–Burmese dictionary and a Burmese–English dictionary.\textsuperscript{114} Other mainline Protestant missionaries began their missions in Myanmar in the mid 19th century, and established churches together with Catholic and Baptist missionaries side by side.\textsuperscript{115}

Unlike Buddhism’s and Christianity’s proponents, who came to Burma for trade, colonisation and mission, Islam’s colonists and missionaries arrived only via trade or shipwreck. According to Moshe Yegar, Arab merchants often visited Pegu

\begin{footnotes}
\item[107] Ibid., 35.
\item[108] Maran Khun San (မရန္ခြန္ဆုိင္း), \textit{Buddhist – Christian Encounter in Brief in Myanmar History} (ျမန္မာႏုိင္ငံသမုိင္း၌ ဗုဒၶဘာသာႏွင့္ ခရစ္ယာန္ဘာသာထိေတြ႔မွဳျဖစ္စဥ္အက်ဥ္း), 24.
\item[109] Ibid., 25.
\item[112] The Kayin (Karen) people are one of the eight major ethnic groups living in Myanmar.
\item[114] Ibid., 90.
\end{footnotes}
Kingdom (the Mon Kingdom), as a Muslim trade colony had been established there in the 9th century. Some of the Muslim traders came to Burma not by choice but by shipwreck, forcing them to seek refuge and settlement in Burmese coastal regions including Arakan, modern Rakhine State.¹¹⁶ For instance, Shwepyin-gyi and Shwepyin-nge, sons of an Arab merchant¹¹⁷ who were saved from the shipwrecked vessel on the shore of Martaban (modern-day Muttama, in Mon State), came to Pagan in 1055 and became horsemen in the royal service during the reign of King Anawratha. Probably related to their faith, the two brothers refused to help build a pagoda near Mandalay, so they were put to death by the king’s order. The local villagers believe their spirits reside inside the pagoda.¹¹⁸ Similar to the central plain areas of Myanmar, there is evidence of contact between Muslims and the Arakanese people. Four different groups of Muslims in Arakan State, according to Aye Chan:

Chittagonian Bengalis in the Mayu Frontier; the descendants of the Muslim Community of Arakan in the Mrauk-U period (1430-1784) presently living in the Mrauk-U and Kyauktaw townships; the descendants of Muslim mercenaries in Ramree Island known to the Arakanese as Kaman; and the Muslims from the Myedu area of Central Burma, left behind by the Burmese invaders in Sandoway District after the conquest of Arakan in 1784.¹¹⁹

Historically, the Muslim influence in Arakan State began in 1430. The growing power of King Minkhaung I, the Burmese king of Ava, forced Narameikhla Min Saw Mon (1404–1434), King of Arakan, to take refuge in Gaur, capital of the Bengal Sultanate during the reign of Ahmad Shah, and his successor, Nadir Shah. With the help of Nadir Shah, Sultan of Gaur, Narameikhla regained the Arakan kingdom and founded a new capital, named Mrohaung (Mrauk-U). His Muslim soldiers provided by the Bengal Sultanate built the Sandikhan mosque in a village nearby Mrohaung after making settlement in that village.¹²⁰ Undoubtedly, Islam was not a new religion

¹¹⁷ Slightly different from Moshe Yegar, G.E. Harvey wrote his opinion: the Arab merchant, a Mohamedan, who came to Burma by shipwreck, was known by the name of Byatta, the swift runner who gathered fresh saga flowers for the court of King Anawratha. Shwepyin-gyi and Shwepyin-nge were the two warrior sons born of Byatta’s secret love in the forest at Popa Hill. See G.E. Harvey, History of Burma: From the Earliest Times to 10 March 1824, the Beginning of the English Conquest, 24.
¹²⁰ Moshe Yegar, The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group, 18. D.G.E. Hall also recorded that when the exiled king of Arakan returned home and built a new capital called Mrohaung, Arakan regained a long period of independence from Burmese kings. See D.G.E. Hall, A History of South-East Asia, 152.
coming to Myanmar during British rule (1886–1948). Islam must have arrived in the coastal regions of the country via businesspeople in the 9th or 10th century.

1.3 Sociopolitical Context

The sociopolitical context of Myanmar necessitates the dissemination of the concept and the outcome of interreligious dialogue (henceforth IRD). The tragic story of the more than half-a-century-long Myanmar civil war is not the origin of the country’s downfall and economic deficiencies, but the misuse of religious dominance, a dominant cultural hegemony and an exploitative sociopolitical system. There is nothing more heartbreaking than converting the pristine beauty of mutual acceptance, respect and peaceful coexistence among diverse ethnic peoples of rich cultural heritages into incessant ethnic conflicts after independence was gained in 1948. Even after the political transition of 2011, Burmese political leaders could not synthesise the richness of the multi-religious social amalgam, ethnic diversities and colourful cultural backgrounds into the nation’s power and dignity. The misuse of the dominant religious influence, followed by racial discrimination, has produced sociopolitical symptoms such as dissent, hostility, mistrust, xenophobia, oppression, moral corruption, exploitation, confrontation and fighting.

When the junta named ‘SLORC’\textsuperscript{121} took power and changed the country’s name in July 1989 from Burma to Myanmar,\textsuperscript{122} claiming the new name as ethnically more inclusive\textsuperscript{123} with an intention to remove the colonial legacy, it had no impact on the process of national reconciliation but exacerbated a situation in which the minority ethnicities struggled to resist Burmanisation. However, this does not preclude hope to achieve national reconciliation. If IRD is widely accepted, propagated and employed as a way of resolving the country’s pandemic conflicts, Myanmar will become a nation of peaceful coexistence in the near future. Admittedly, IRD is not the only way to solve all the problems of Myanmar, but it is unavoidable if a firm and speedy development of national reconciliation and peace building is to

\textsuperscript{121} SLORC stands for ‘The State Law and Order Restoration Council’, which usurped state power in 1988.
\textsuperscript{122} ‘Myanma is the same word as Mien the Chinese name and Man the Shan name for Burma. The derivation from Brahma is on a level with the deviation of English from angels. The mediaeval scribes with the name Braham before them write not Brahmesa (land of Brahma) but Myammasa (land of Myanmma), and an eleventh century Talaing inscription calls the Burmese Mirma.’ It means Myanma is a historic name for the Burmese. See G.E. Harvey, \textit{History of Burma}, 3.
occur – something for which all Myanmar citizens have been longing for a number of years.

Myanmar is made up of different ethnic groups with diverse religious beliefs, making IRD a challenge. In this context, the Venerable Santikaro’s view on the need to promote interfaith dialogue is noteworthy. He advises that people of different faiths can co-create, by co-evolving, ‘another world’ through dialogue, partnership, cooperation and walking the path together as one humanity in a world marked by conflict, violence, selfishness, sin and the whole ugly list of human ills and suffering.¹²⁴ The Dalai Lama’s talk at the University of Portland insightfully reminds us to view religions with a healthy perception:

There are many different religions, but all share the principles of love, compassion, and forgiveness. Religions can also teach hypocrisy, when we say one thing in church, synagogue or mosque, but we do something else. So religious faith is an individual choice. But if you accept religion, do it seriously.¹²⁵

To reflect the real situation of Myanmar, many innocent Myanmar citizens are easily trapped into deceptive political game of selfish politicians and militant religious nationalists, due to shallow knowledge of each other’s religious teaching. Sadly, politico-religious abusers exploitatively indoctrinate them. Overwhelmed by the dominant religious doctrine of a community, people do not want to see, hear or learn about the beauty of other religions. In reality, all people born on Myanmar soil, regardless of ethnicity and religion, have as their birthright equal citizenship. They are the persons responsible for making Myanmar a better and stronger nation. As Myanmar people lack knowledge of IRD and fail to support it, both religious misunderstanding and racial discrimination continue to grow. However, the pristine beauty of the multi-religious nature of Myanmar can be retrieved if IRD begins to flourish. Interfaith dialogue opens the eyes of politico-religiously blinded citizens and impacts on the process of peace building. An advocate of interfaith dialogue, Hans Kung, stated a general truth which the multi-religious Myanmar societies must heed: ‘No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions

without investigation of the foundations of the religions.\textsuperscript{126} After the military coup in Myanmar in 1989, the call for promoting IRD has become more audible because the conflicts rooted in differing religious affiliations are significantly increasing. Responding to this situation, the sacrificial commitment of a significant number of Buddhist monks and lay Buddhists (who may be called Myanmar-engaged Buddhists) is encouraging, despite the slow development of interfaith cooperation in Myanmar.

Akin in spirit to well-known engaged Buddhist leaders and Christian social activists, the commitment of Aung San Suu Kyi and some sociopolitically engaged Buddhist monks in Myanmar indicate signs of budding engaged Burmese-Buddhist movements and Christian social interest groups, despite the sociopolitical threats, challenges and inescapable hurdles. For example, the Saffron Revolution, led by Buddhist monks on 5 September 2007, broke out in Pakokku, a city of central Burma, when the price of gasoline and energy, controlled by the junta, rose amid economic deprivation. Consequently, while people could no longer donate food to monasteries, some children of the poor were sent to monks as a result of the food shortage their parents had been facing.\textsuperscript{127} The Noble laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the civilian people in the pro-democracy movement, gave her first public political speech on 24 August 1988 at Yangon General Hospital, and her second on 26 August 1988 to half a million people in the precinct of Shwedagon, the most revered Buddhist monument in Myanmar. There she announced her decision to involve herself in the struggle for democracy.\textsuperscript{128}

Hope for a better life still hovers in the dreams of Myanmar peoples. Amid the gloomy sociopolitical situation, this research aims to produce good citizens and to build a nation that embraces all peoples and diverse cultural heritages, based on the principles of equality and respect. When the Buddhist groups and non-Buddhist ethnic groups of Myanmar are together growing towards life-affirming socio-religious consciousness through IRD, they will better value, recognise and accept each other with respect, which then will evolve into an unbreakable foundation for union and solidarity marked by democratic norms, peaceful coexistence and sustainable economic prosperity. With this hope, this research aims to make the Myanmar Christian presence known to the emerging civil society of Myanmar. Alongside the

\textsuperscript{127} David I. Steinberg, Burma/Myanmar What Everyone Needs to Know, 138.
citizens’ efforts to change the notoriously dictatorial Myanmar into a prestigious democratic nation, the promotion of Christian–Buddhist dialogue for socio-ethical transformation is crucially needed, especially as the majority of Myanmar peoples have little knowledge of the benefits of IRD.

### 1.4 Literature Review

This research has been influenced and nourished by some of the existing literature in the field, which has developed common social and spiritual truths based on the Indic and Abrahamic religions. The recognition of the legitimacy of other religions to have salvation or liberation in their own right, and other religions’ writers’ openness and commitment to share their lives with pilgrims of other world living faiths, enhanced the researcher’s understanding of those other religions. Admittedly, some writers’ findings from their engagement in IRD and their responses to their suffering communities have convinced me that many good religious people are missing some important truths which are worth spreading beyond religious boundaries, so that all people, regardless of religion or culture, may join hands to build a better world. Their contributions reflect the socio-religious environment of Myanmar, a country in need of rebuilding in all aspects of life. The two topics in this section briefly deal with Christian–Buddhist dialogue in Asian theological discussion and socially engaged dialogue.

#### 1.4.1 Christian–Buddhist Dialogue in Asian Theological Discussion

‘I left as a Christian, I found myself a Hindu, and I return a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian.’

– Raimondo Panikkar

In his seminal book, The Intra-Religious Dialogue, Raimon Panikkar dealt with his spiritual journey as a figure of dual religious belonging. He viewed dialogue as an essential part of life, based on the concept of ‘loving God above all things and one’s neighbour as oneself’. A prominent thought of Panikkar is that humans live by truth that nourishes life and his sincere admission is very clear here. He experienced that Krishna of faith whom his dialogue partners in India believed in bears truth because

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130 Ibid., 49.
some Hindus that he met proved themselves nourished by their religion. Although practically difficult, entering into the belief systems of others with naked faith, getting clothed with their forms of belief, then blending one’s own beliefs with the newly acquired ones, and finally allowing an interlocutor of the faith whom one has permitted to judge whether the new insight gained is sound or not is the process undertaken by Pannikar in his spiritual journey of developing religious dual belonging.\textsuperscript{131} In this faith dialogue, he advises that a genuine religious spirit is not being loyal only to the past, but it also keeps faith with the present. A religious person is neither a fanatic nor someone who already has all the answers.\textsuperscript{132} Panikkar is firm in saying that a religious dialogue must be an authentic dialogue that is devoid of superiority, preconceptions, hidden motives, or intransigent convictions on either side. He also reminds us that dialogue is not merely a moment for exchanging doctrines or intellectual opinions, but a place for modifying one’s ideas, personal horizons, life framework and mutual correction, with a view to mutual understanding.\textsuperscript{133}

Thomas Merton’s book \textit{Zen and the Birds of Appetite}\textsuperscript{134} describes his opinion that the core teachings of Buddhism and Christianity are compatible. The Buddhist concept of Nirvana, according to him, is ‘a matter of “pure presence” rather than of absence and negation’,\textsuperscript{135} and parallel to the Christian concept of heaven – the eternal presence of God. He also mentioned the agreement of Buddhism and Christianity on the reality of the human condition: the idea that ignorance (avidya), related to original sin in Christianity, is the root of all evil and suffering.\textsuperscript{136} His insight that the self-centred ego is fully eliminated through the experience of love, not of emotional fulfilment but of a complete realisation of love, which is marked by perceiving ‘Absolute Emptiness as Absolute compassion’, is indisputably acceptable to both Buddhists and Christians.\textsuperscript{137} At the same time, his itemisation of two mentalities – affective-personal and dualistic for Christians, and non-affective-non-personal and non-dualistic for Zen Buddhists – specifies the difference between the two religious concepts.\textsuperscript{138}

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 51–52.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 62.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 82.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 81.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 82.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 86.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 133.
Leo D. Lefebure’s discussion on Cosmic Buddha and Cosmic Christ in *The Buddha and the Christ: Explorations in Buddhist and Christian Dialogue* is worth noting. Although the Dharma realm (*Dharmadhātu*) and Dharma manifestation (*Dharmakāya*) are not portrayed in the way Christians express God and Jesus, *Dharmadhātu* (Reality) is the source of all things, and Shakyamuni Buddha is the manifestation of *Dharmadhātu*. Similarly, the status of Jesus is portrayed in the same way by Paul in Col 1:15–18 and 20, and 3:1–4). Comparably, both Jesus and Shakyamuni overcame their particular entrapment of temptation, tests of the highest spiritual achievement, laid by Māra and Satan, before proclaiming the path of liberation to others. Being a practitioner of *vipassana*/insight meditation, Lefebure in ‘The Impact of Buddhist Meditation upon Christian Prayer’ expresses how meditation has rewarded him with direct spiritual experience and brought him back to Christianity, as he gained deeper insight into Jesus’s teachings. He confessed that the practice of meditation learned from Buddhist tradition has broadened, deepened and confirmed his experience of Christian prayer, and he has been rewarded with a greater awareness of God’s presence in all things.

Kosuke Koyama in *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai: A Critique of Idols* describes his view that the destruction of greed in Buddhist teachings and Christian self-denial are moving towards the same goal of conquering self-centredness. In dealing with historical human greed, Buddhism speaks about it calmly, while Christianity does it passionately, by reference to the image of God. In Koyama’s words, Christianity and Mahāyana Buddhism, which is different from Hinayana Buddhism or monastic Buddhism, are placed in the same category as grace religions. The last word of Honen of the Jodo School (1133–1212), who pioneered the concept of Amida Buddha, as quoted by Koyama, in praising the Buddha before his demise reads: ‘His light pervades the worlds in all the ten directions. His grace

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140 Ibid., 53–54.
141 Ibid., 33.
143 Ibid., 173.
144 Ibid., 185.
146 Ibid., 122.
147 Ibid., 128.
148 Ibid., 125.
never forsakes anyone who invokes His Name.\textsuperscript{149} While Koyama mentioned the compatibility of the Mahayāna doctrines and Christian traditions, he did not ignore a problem for Buddhists: that the God of agitated emotions, as seen in the Bible, does not match the Buddha cherished by the people of the nirvana-oriented culture. He quoted a Thai Buddhist monk: ‘Such a god must discipline himself in the Buddhist monastery. Agitation of mind is an anti-nirvanic value.’\textsuperscript{150} Koyama insightfully notes that a ‘Christian superiority complex’ can find no room in the sacramental theology of Jesus Christ, which is associated with the conviction that the name of Jesus Christ is the union of holiness and brokenness.\textsuperscript{151}

Michael G. Fronner’s attempt to present Christology from a Theravāda Buddhist perspective in ‘Toward a Theravadin Christology’, in \textit{Buddhist-Christian Studies}\textsuperscript{152} has contributed an idea about what Christology may mean for Theravāda Buddhists. He views ‘Christology’ in parallel with two of the three Bodies (\textit{Tikāya}) of the Buddha. According to him, ‘Christology includes two natures: “humanity” – particularly Jesus, and “divinity” – the universal-Christ’.\textsuperscript{153} The first Noble Truth of Suffering is related to Jesus’s suffering on the cross, representing pain, deprivation, abandonment and loss.\textsuperscript{154} He also points out two things which Jesus combatted, known to be causal elements in the Buddhist concept of \textit{dukkha}: self-centredness, or a narrow understanding of love, and possessiveness, or God’s law found among the Jewish religious authorities.\textsuperscript{155} Fronner has concerns about some elements of Christology being compatible with Buddhist teaching, and mentions contradictory conceptual frameworks. For example, while Christians embrace personal God language, he says: ‘The Theravadin emphases on self-reliance and the impersonal character of ultimate reality in the soteriological path offer a strong and striking contrast.’\textsuperscript{156}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 162. \\
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 212. \\
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 245. \\
\textsuperscript{152} Michael G. Fronner, ‘Toward a Theravadin Christology,’ \textit{Buddhist-Christian Studies}, Vol. 13 (Hawai‘i: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1993). \\
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 3. \\
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 6. \\
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 6. \\
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 10.
\end{flushleft}
In his article ‘Good News of Salvation to the Buddhists’, in *International Review of Mission*, Lynn A. de Silva describes the ultimate goal of a Buddhist as being to awaken to the liberating knowledge of truth, which breaks *samsāric* existence – characterised by *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering) and *anatta* (soullessness) – and to attain the bliss of *Nibbāna*. Being an expert in Theravāda Buddhism, he takes Psalm 90 as a basis for understanding the three characteristics of the Buddhist conceptual framework in the Bible. However, he has a problem with the doctrine of *anatta*, which affirms the non-existence of self, and at the same time asserts the impossibility of salvation by any outsider except oneself: denying the self and affirming self-sufficiency in the process of salvation is a contradiction. He honestly expresses what he observed, that while Buddhists deny the need of a saviour, in their heart they yearn for a saviour like Jesus Christ. Interestingly, Silva views the concept of *Nibbāna*, as marked by the idea of self-negation, and that of the Kingdom of God with a prevailing concept of fulfilment as compatible. Affirming *Nibbāna* is not the total extinction of the self; he contends that without relinquishing the notion of the exclusive selfish ‘I’ – the basis of *tanhā* (craving) – no one can enter the ‘perfect union’, called ‘communion’, or the Kingdom of God, which is the embodiment of perfect love, fellowship and communion. In the Kingdom of God, both the Buddhist concept of self-negation and that of Christian self-realisation meet in fulfilment, without contradiction.

Aloysius Pieris, in *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism*, discusses two key languages of Buddhism and Christianity – gnosis, the language of liberative knowledge, and agape, the language of redemptive love –

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158 Lynn A. De Silva stated: ‘One of the most important things for us today is to study one another’s religions sympathetically and deeply so that we can intelligently discover where we are at one and where we are at odds.’ See Elisabeth J. Harris, ‘Co-existence, Confrontation and Co-responsibility: Looking at Buddhist Models of Inter-religious Relationships,’ *Swedish Missiological Themes*, vol. 92, no. 3 (2004): 367.
156 Ibid., 449–451.
161 Ibid., 451.
162 In Silva’s mind, a ‘perfect union’ meant the dissolution of self-contained, self-regarding individuality and a perfect integration through a total surrender of the self, a complete losing of oneself in communion.
163 Ibid., 456–458.
which are spoken about in the conceptual meaning of each religion: ‘The gnostic process of realising an “Impersonal I” and the agapeic encounter with a “personal Thou” imply two modes of religious discourse, each having its own logic and its own grammar and syntax.’ According to Pieris, ‘voluntary poverty’, as embodied in Jesus Christ as God’s own kenosis, constitutes a ‘salvific experience’ and is the meeting point between the gnostic and agapeic models of spirituality, because the ‘struggle to be poor’ coincides with the Buddhist ascesis of renunciation followed by the reward of ‘interior liberation’, or liberation from possessions or the greed for possessions. He stresses that self-love or self-centredness is as much a hindrance to Buddhist gnos as a rejection of Christian agape. As the reality that has brought each religion into being is the ‘liberative experience’, Pieris advises Christians to hold two qualifications if they wish to enter into a heart-to-heart dialogue with Buddhism: first, ‘a preliminary empathic apprehension of the real nature of the other religion’s core experience’, and second, ‘an uninhibited willingness to make use of the religious system that the Buddhist offers to the Christian as the only means of access to that core experience’.

Stanley J. Samartha, in ‘The Future of Interreligious Dialogue’, in Between Two Cultures: Ecumenical Ministry in a Pluralist World, mentions two challenges of IRD. The first is the challenge due to the rise of religious fundamentalism, a negative influence for IRD, and a danger to civil society if associated with politico-economic power. The second is secularism, which sees IRD as a hindrance to human progress. The people hope for a life of economic and social justice, a life free from political injustice, with dignity and self-respect, and deliverance from poverty, disease and ignorance. Bearing in mind some difficulties that must be overcome in order to promote interfaith dialogue among Protestant circles, Samartha applauds the Catholic Church, which officially inaugurated a new chapter with the ‘Pontifical Council for

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165 Ibid., 85.
171 Ibid., 167–168.
Interreligious Dialogue’ in 1988, a result of upgrading the Secretariat for the Interreligious Dialogue, founded in 1964. However, he is disappointed with the World Council of Churches, which has been prevented by some evangelical member churches from taking a more open position.\textsuperscript{173} Observing the present reality that intellectuals in society and theologians in the church are marginalised, ignored and sometimes persecuted,\textsuperscript{174} he encourages risk-taking theologians with the following statement:

Alienation is not necessarily negative; it performs positive historic functions as well. The critical function of Christian theologians in India and elsewhere is to speak and write courageously against uncritical conformity to tradition, emphasizing that devotion to Christ and discipleship of Jesus in the face of the striking changes taking place in contemporary history demand changed attitudes on the part of Christians to their neighbours in the country and in the world.\textsuperscript{175}

Samuel Ngun Ling, a leading Myanmar theologian promoting Christian–Buddhist dialogue in Myanmar, is displeased by the superiority complex of many Myanmar Christians, which they inherited from missionaries of the West. In \textit{Ecumenical Resources for Dialogue: Between Christians and Neighbors of Other Faiths in Myanmar},\textsuperscript{176} he urges Myanmar Christians to acknowledge the good work of Buddhist monks by viewing them as founders of the nation’s moral life.\textsuperscript{177} Being an expert in Myanmar Buddhist culture, he emphasises ‘person to person relationship’, which is more important than knowledge of religion. He beautifully states: ‘When there is peace between persons, there is good dialogue. When there is tension between persons, there is only diatribe.’\textsuperscript{178} He sees dialogue as a means to opening oneself to a common path to the common truth, which does not weaken one’s belief but rather strengthens, enriches and deepens faith as dialogue with others thrives.\textsuperscript{179} He stresses the urgency of promoting Christian–Buddhist dialogue:

The Christian virtues of love, forgiveness and acceptance must always precede dialogue. Genuine dialogue promotes the shared social status and increases mutual concords and understandings between people. It enhances intimacy between friends, neighbours and communities, which is most significantly needed to develop especially in Burmese context.\textsuperscript{180}

\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., 176.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., 179.
\textsuperscript{177} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{178} Ibid., 31.
\textsuperscript{179} Ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{180} Ibid., 35.
These writers advocate the importance of dialogue, and develop Christian–Buddhist dialogue in their respective contexts. Inspired by the wisdom and new theological insights acquired from their writings, and with the help of other works in the field, I have developed Christian–Buddhist dialogue relevant to the Myanmar context. The two faces of dialogue – namely, knowledge/head or intellectual dialogue and compassion/heart or action-oriented dialogue – have been equally taken into consideration as the research progressed. Like the advocates of the theoretical disciplines of interfaith dialogue, there are some writers who creatively urge socially engaged dialogue in their theological pursuits.

1.4.2 Socially Engaged Dialogue

Paul F. Knitter’s book, *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian*,\(^\text{181}\) depicts his dual belonging experiences as he has intermingled elements of Christianity with those of Buddhism, making use of a technique of ‘passing over and returning’. Using Buddhist terms, Knitter confidently states that ‘Salvation’ is our own ‘Awakening’, in which our own discovery of our divine nature as ‘children of God’ is realised. According to him, Christian salvation is a matter of waking up to our own unity with God, or our oneness with the spirit. As a result, we feel the very life and energy of God in forms of ‘love’ and ‘compassion’. To be saved is to be in the resurrected Christ,\(^\text{182}\) who is an expression of the universal presence and power of the divine that can be found in all religions.\(^\text{183}\) Knitter encourages Christians to engage in the secular world (while many Christians are oriented to an otherworldly spirituality) by imitating Jesus, who embodied a spirit of driving concern for compassion and justice. Knitter urges: ‘We Christ-Spirit-people are part of the Divine that empties itself into suffering for others, especially for those who don’t count.’\(^\text{184}\) For his personal spiritual nourishment, Knitter follows both Buddhist practices and Christian rituals; he admits:

> I can honestly say that without these Buddhist practices, without this Sacrament of Silence, I don’t think I’d be able to pray as a Christian . . . Personally, I pray differently now. Ritually, I feel the language of liturgy differently.\(^\text{185}\)

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\(^{183}\) Ibid., 129.

\(^{184}\) Ibid., 130.

\(^{185}\) Ibid., 154.
In his book *Being Peace*, Thich Nhat Hanh describes the young Vietnamese Buddhists’ sacrificial service in helping the victims of war to rebuild their villages. Because of mistrust, viewing them as taking the other side, and because of bombs and bullets, many Buddhist social workers, both monks and laypeople, died during their service. He reiterates the importance of ‘being peace’ in the peace movement: ‘Because without being peace, we cannot do anything for peace. If we cannot smile, we cannot help other people to smile. If we are not peaceful, then we cannot contribute to the peace movement.’ He also reminds us of a rule in the process of reconciliation: ‘If we take one side, we can’t fulfil our tasks of reconciliation in order to bring about peace.’ Keeping in mind the danger of being fanatical, he contends: ‘We will respect the right of others to be different and to choose what to believe and how to decide. We will, however, help others renounce fanaticism and narrowness through compassionate dialogue.’ For Nhat Hanh, both Buddha and Jesus are great religious figures possessing tremendous spiritual insight and authority. Out of love, they transformed their respective stagnant and corrupted communities, at the cost of their own lives. Nhat Hanh states: ‘And yet, He [Buddha] was not crucified; the Indians didn’t do such things. But, I’m sure that if the Buddha were born in the society where Jesus was born, He would have been crucified also.’

Choan-Seng Song, in *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, portrays the pain of victims in many Asian countries by reflecting the story of Charito Planas. This involved house raids at midnight, the destruction of homes, personal humiliation and the confiscation of identity by blindfolding and by taking people to places unknown where relatives had no access. Despite terrible oppression, the spirit of freedom never dies but is nurtured in the womb of history, because the yearning for justice is inherent in the human soul, created in God’s image, and because political theology was born with the creation. Song reminds us that any sociopolitical structure that lacks a longing for equality and human community becomes disfigured by the

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187 Ibid., 72.
188 Ibid., 82.
189 Ibid., 75.
190 Ibid., 93.
191 Thich Nhat Hanh and Daniel Berrigan, *The Raft is not the Shore: Conversations toward a Buddhist-Christian Awareness*, 117.
193 Charito Planas was the Filipino lawyer, environmentalist and human rights activist.
struggle for power and gain. An expert in modern Asian stories, he says that both the stories of Christians and those of other faiths come together, penetrate each other and become integrated into the same stories in Asia and elsewhere. For example, in Christians’ struggle for human rights, freedom and democracy, people of other faiths too are involved. Song states his guiding rule for Asian contextual theology:

> What governs us in theology must be first passion and then logic; we should theologize first with the heart and only then with the brain. Passion brings God and human beings together. The heart makes us realize that God and human beings are joined together in loving and suffering. This passion and this heart must be the passion and heart of theology also.

Although Gustavo Gutierrez is an advocate for the poor in a Latin American context, as evidenced in his *The Density of the Present: Selected Writings*, his main concern is for a shared experience of Asian peoples – specifically, ‘poverty’. He says that a new awareness of ‘inhuman misery’ has changed the task of proclaiming the Gospel in the recent life of the Latin American Church. According to Gutierrez, the word ‘liberation’ is closely linked to poverty caused by injustice, and has a social and political meaning derived from biblical and theological tradition. Theologically, it means liberation from selfishness and sin, the ultimate roots of all kinds of injustice. Liberation in the Latin American context, he says, not only means social freedom but also a journey towards full friendship with God and one’s fellow human beings. The ‘preferential option for the poor’ is a ‘theocentric option’, a life centred on God, who rejects unjust and early death. Gutierrez clarifies the depth of the option:

> The preferential option for the poor is much more than a way of showing our concern about poverty and the establishment of justice. Inevitably, at its very heart, it contains a spiritual, mystical element, an experience of gratuitousness that gives it depth and fruitfulness.

Learning from the theological contributions of the promoters of IRD, I have come to realise that both theoretical and practical aspects of dialogue must go hand-in-hand if we desire a successful dialogue. As a study of theoretical or intellectual dialogue leads to accumulating new knowledge, learning to practise dialogue in action also

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195 Ibid., 102.
196 Ibid., 127.
197 Ibid., 116.
199 Ibid., 125.
200 Ibid., 128.
201 Ibid., 143.
202 Ibid., 167.
leads to growing in compassion. While knowledge of dialogue and compassion for others grow, the wisdom derived from dialogue begins to take root in a person. Accordingly, learning from the existing literature in the field of IRD helps one to grow in knowledge and to nurture a compelling compassion for serving one’s fellow human beings, especially the oppressed and neglected, regardless of religion. Although I go beyond the existing literature, the insights and techniques I have acquired for promoting Christian–Buddhist dialogue in Myanmar serve as an academic foundation. To direct this research to its goal, the requisite knowledge and skills for developing Christian–Buddhist dialogue are assembled from the aforementioned works.

As Myanmar is a religiously pluralist society, promoting IRD and multifaith participatory social transformation will not bring disadvantages to citizens, nor will it harm the stability of the union. Simply to promote an action-oriented Christian–Buddhist dialogue, with the aim of building peaceful coexistence filled with social justice and sustainable economic development, is to contribute to nation-building. More simply, studying the context of Myanmar reveals an urgent need to promote interfaith dialogue for reconciliation and peace-building there. The existing literature has extended the theological horizons of this research and given it new theological insight and the strength to penetrate unnecessary doctrinal walls, enabling the researcher to go beyond traditional Christian attitudes and come closer to non-Christians. Kosuke Koyama’s indication of a need to create ‘neighborological language’ and the call to ‘struggle for the poor’ by Aloysius Pieris have compelled this review of Christian negligence in building friendship with our neighbouring Buddhists, and our failure to combat the extensive poverty of Myanmar.

Studying the existing literature has led to a better understanding of Christian–Buddhist dialogue, and shows the need for Christian–Buddhist dialogue that leads to social transformation in order to eliminate the existing socio-religious problems, because the vast majority of Myanmar people are unaware of IRD. In order to restore the beauty of an ethnically diverse and religiously pluralistic Myanmar, disseminating

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203 Kosuke Koyama, *Water Buffalo Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 66–67. Here, Koyama said that our neighbours in Asia are not interested in Christology. Their rejection of Christological language demands our creative use of neighborological language in sharing the message of Christ with them.

204 Aloysius Pieris insisted that following Jesus, who was poor, and serving Christ, who is in the poor now, is struggling for the poor in passion. See Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 21.
the concept of interfaith dialogue is essential. With a view to promoting such interfaith awareness, the next chapter addresses the nature of IRD, based on documents from the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences and the World Council of Churches.
Chapter 2

Understanding Interreligious Dialogue

Traditionally, Christians have understood the main target of mission as winning souls by converting people of other faiths to Christianity. In the past, Christian mission as a whole was marked by proselytisation, without talk of dialogue as a missiological concern. Even today, the word ‘dialogue’ remains unfamiliar to the majority of Christians, not only in Myanmar but also in many other parts of the world, and they continue to adhere to ‘religious conversion’ as the nucleus of the Christian mission.

In reality, this longstanding view changed when the Catholic Church convened the Second Vatican Council. The appearance of Nostra Aetate and Ecclesiam Suam during the early part of the papacy of Pope Paul VI attested to the open and positive attitude of the Catholic Church towards other religions by recognising the moral and spiritual value found in their teachings. In Asia, the historic visit of Pope Paul VI in 1970 led to a more significant ecclesiastical movement, which developed into a continent-wide structure of collaboration called the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC), instituted in 1972.¹

Although dialogue has had a 2500-year-old journey in human civilisation, this thesis will not concentrate on that historical development. However, the focus of this chapter is how dialogue became a Christian concern by the late 20th century, and the fruits of IRD in Christian mission. It will highlight the teachings of the FABC and the documents of the World Council of Churches (WCC). The chapter describes first a brief survey of the promotion of dialogue in the Catholic Church, and then the same project as carried out by the Protestant Churches.

2.1 The Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences

2.1.1 The Meaning of Dialogue

If we go deeper than its literal meaning (a conversation between two or more people), ‘dialogue’ is a means of exchanging story, feelings, ideas and opinions on a particular

¹ ‘History and Background: Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (OEIA),’ http://www.fabc.org/offices/oeia/history.html (accessed on 22 September 2015).
subject. Historically, the concept of dialogue began to take shape in non-Christian cultures. Reflecting the trajectory of Indian civilisation, Michael Amaladoss SJ wrote: ‘Dialogue between religions is not new to India and its origins go back to Ashoka, three centuries before Jesus.’ Tracing the earliest use of the term, David Lochhead contended that ‘dialogue’ is both an old and a new word. In the Western intellectual tradition, he stated, ‘dialogue’ has roots in the Platonic tradition, in which Socrates is portrayed as one who uses a method of question and answer, with a view to arriving at a better understanding of truth (Plato’s *Meno*, written in 380 BCE). In theological discussion, dialogue is quite a new word, appearing in the mid-1960s in the Roman Catholic Church. In the modern world, before Vatican II, Martin Buber’s renowned philosophy of dialogue, published in 1923, also appeared as ‘I-Thou and I-It Relationships’. Assuming human being’s intrinsic nature as ‘*homo dialogus*’, Buber wrote: ‘In the beginning is relation.’ Buber explained that ‘Between’, the meeting point of dialogue, comes into being in the ‘I-Thou’ relation. For Buber, the ‘Between’ is ‘the presence, the immediate, binding and encompassing subject and object’.

2.1.2 Dialogue in the Catholic Church

The fresh initiation of dialogue in modern Christian history started with Vatican II, held from 11 October 1962 to 8 December 1965. One of the pastoral aims of Vatican II was to resume dialogue with ‘separated Brothers and the modern world’. Since then, the Catholic Church has changed its attitude towards the Protestant Church and other religions, and especially towards people of different faiths, who are no longer

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4 Ibid., 46.
6 Buber was preoccupied with the problem of unity in multiplicity. He developed his philosophy of dialogue on the subject of the multiple polarities, namely, spirit and matter, matter and form, being and becoming, reason and will, positivity and negativity. See Robert E. Wood, *Martin Buber’s Ontology: An Analysis of I and Thou* (1969), 117.
8 Ibid., 112.
viewed as rivals alien to Christianity but as the bearers of values pertinent to the
divine mystery.\textsuperscript{10} Out of four constitutions, nine decrees and three declarations issued
by Vatican II, some documents dealt with spiritual values, the status of other religions
and the need for promoting dialogue. One instance is \textit{Dignitatis Humanae}, the
Declaration on Religious Freedom published on 7 December 1965, in which the
council assured religious freedom and declared: ‘The right to religious freedom is
based in the very dignity of the human person as known through the revealed Word of
God and by reason itself.’\textsuperscript{11} In \textit{Ad Gentes}, the decree on the mission activity of the
Church, announced on the same day, Christians were urged to familiarise themselves
with the national and religious traditions of native peoples when they undertake
mission activities, and to uncover the seeds of the Word which lie hidden among them
with gladness and respect.\textsuperscript{12}

\textit{Ecclesiam Suam (ES)}, Pope Paul VI’s first encyclical, of 6 August 1964,
which may be called the encyclical of IRD, is known as the ‘\textit{magna carta}
of dialogue’\textsuperscript{13}. This is the first time the term ‘dialogue’ is used in an encyclical letter. \textit{ES}
proclaimed and promoted the concept of ‘dialogue’ as both the norm and ideal to the
Church.\textsuperscript{14} According to \textit{ES}, dialogue is a way of creating a real relationship between
God and a human being, as initiated by God the Father and established through Christ
in the Holy Spirit, and by which the Church is expected to establish and foster her
relation to all human races.\textsuperscript{15} \textit{ES} confirmed that dialogue is a recognised method of
the apostolate, a way of making spiritual contact, and so is required to have
characteristics such as clarity of speech (for expressing the highest spiritual and
mental powers that a person possesses); meekness (which Jesus showed us in order to
avoid offensive and bitter words and arrogance, by bearing generosity in mind);
confidence (not only in the power of one’s own words, but also in the goodwill of
both parties to the dialogue, in order to promote intimacy and friendship on both sides
by excluding all self-seeking); and the prudence of a teacher (to carefully make
allowances for the psychological and moral circumstances of the hearer).\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{10} ‘Christian Prayer and Interreligious Dialogue: Enrichment of Christian Prayer,’ \textit{FABC Papers No.}
\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Dignitatis Humanae}, no. 2.
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Ad Gentes}, no. 11.
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\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ecclesiam Suam}, no. 71.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ecclesiam Suam}, no. 81.
Begun with the pontificate of Pope John XXIII in 1962, Nostra Aetate (NA), the Second Vatican Council’s seminal Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christians, was finalised and publicised on 28 October 1965. The declaration dealt with several issues: first, the unity and common origin of the human family, and the innate spiritual impulse of all people; second, the Catholic Church’s acceptance of what is true and holy in Hinduism and Buddhism; third, the appreciation of Islam, and the call to promote mutual understanding; fourth, reconciliation with Judaism and condemnation of anti-Semitism; and fifth, the rejection of any form of discrimination. NA affirmed the presence of divine revelation in all human cultures and religions:

From ancient times down to the present, there is found among various peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human history; at times some indeed have come to the recognition of a Supreme Being, or even of a Father. This perception and recognition penetrates their lives with a profound religious sense.

With the appreciation of other religions, Pope Paul VI established ‘the Secretariat for Non-Christians’ on 19 May 1964, with a view to promoting relationships between the Church and other religions. Consequently, he promulgated a Dogmatic Constitution on the Church called Lumen Gentium on 21 November 1964, and declared the status of other religions with new understanding. Dialogue and Mission: The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions, a document promulgated by the Secretariat for Non-Christians on 10 May 1984, clarified: ‘Dialogue means not only discussion, but also includes all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment.’ From another angle, dialogue is a way of showing concern and hospitality towards the other by leaving room for the other person’s identity, modes of expression and values. When the Secretariat for Non-Christians gained a new name as the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) on 28 June 1988, IRD affairs began to be carried out under the name of PCID. Accordingly,

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19 Nostra Aetate, no. 2.
20 Dialogue and Proclamation, no. 2.
21 Dialogue and Mission, no. 3.
22 Dialogue and Mission, no. 29.
Dialogue and Proclamation, jointly produced by PCID and the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples and issued on 20 June 1991, added: ‘Dialogue means reciprocal communication, leading to a common goal or, at a deeper level, to interpersonal communion.’

Aiming at the same goal set by Vatican II, Pope John Paul II’s encyclical Redemptoris Missio, devoted to the subject of the urgency of missionary activity and published on 7 December 1990, affirmed that dialogue is a means through which the Church uncovers the seeds of the Word and rays of that truth, which enlighten all people, as found in individuals and in the religious traditions of humankind. According to the FABC, dialogue is an encounter with others which demands an attitude of humility, acceptance, honesty and respect. The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India’s (CBCI) Commission for Dialogue and Ecumenism, one of the member conferences of the FABC, also put forward an opinion of dialogue: ‘It is both an attitude and an activity of committed followers of various religions who agree to meet and accept one another and work together for common ideals in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust.’ Above all, dialogue demands loyalty to one’s own faith experiences, because dialogue sometimes requires honest explanation of one’s own belief.

2.1.3 The Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences and Dialogue

When Pope Paul VI paid his historic visit to Asia in November 1970, he made a remarkable impact on the 180 Asian bishops at the Asian Bishops’ Meeting in Manila, Philippines. As a result, the collaboration of Asian bishops became a permanent structure of Asian Catholic churches, the FABC, for which Asian Catholic

23 Dialogue and Proclamation, no. 9.
24 Redemptoris Missio, no. 56.
25 The FABC is a transnational episcopal structure that brings together eighteen full-member bishop’s conferences from Asia Continent. James H. Kroeger, M.M., ‘Dialogue: Interpretive Key for the Life of the Church in Asia,’ FABC Papers No. 130 (May 2010): 5. See also ‘A Brief History of the FABC,’ FABC Papers No. 139 (December 2013): 5.
27 The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India was constituted in 1944.
bishops had been prepared by their ministerial experiences in Asia. Pope Paul VI on 16 November 1972 approved the statutes of the FABC. The FABC strongly believes that the Asian Churches have come to a point that makes it urgent to resume dialogue with other world religions, which was broken off when Christianity became the dominant world religion. Since the first Plenary Assembly of the FABC, held in 1974, the FABC has adopted and been developing the concept of ‘triple dialogue’: Asian peoples’ poverty, Asian cultures and Asian religions revolving around the three key poles: local Church, dialogue, and the Asian people and their realities. Dialogue with Asian peoples means dialogue with the poor or deprived people who are struggling to liberate themselves from the oppression of social, economic and political structures which cause social injustice. Amid Asian realities, together with people of Asian religions, the Asian Churches are on a pilgrimage to the Kingdom of God, in which flourishes a harmonious social order endowed with justice, peace and love. The FABC believes that dialogue with the poor, through solidarity with their grappling for human dignity, human rights and harmonious social order, will result in transforming unjust social structures into patterns of prestigious social harmony.

Dialogue with culture, one of the focuses of the FABC, succeeds when the way of living the Gospel by the local Church is internally enriched by the culture of its people, bringing them closer to the prefiguring Kingdom of God. Engaging in dialogue with the Asian religious tradition leads Christians to experience the depth of the mystery of God in His saving action, and helps them to realise the mystery of Christ and the freedom of the Holy Spirit in people of other religions. As one of the early attempts of the FABC on interfaith issues, the Asian Colloquium on Ministries

37 Ibid., 266.
38 Ibid.
in the Church emphasised the importance of integrating IRD with church ministries, and encouraged the Church to uplift mutual understanding and appreciation between the living faiths of the world, and to foster concerns for human being and society without excluding members of other religious traditions.

Seven years after the formation of the FABC, the first Bishops’ Institute for Interreligious Affairs (BIRA I) was held, with the purpose of deepening the understanding of and commitment to dialogue with Buddhists in 1979. In BIRA I, bishops were recommended to practically serve as facilitators of dialogue by encouraging and participating in dialogue, by establishing a national office of IRD, by setting guidelines for dialogue, by promoting cooperation among Christian centres and other similar institutions, both secular and religious, and by encouraging dialogue as a component of parish life.

Similarly, with the intention of supporting dialogue with Muslims, BIRA II took place in Kuala Lumpur in 1979. Statement 18 of BIRA II urged bishops to play a role that fosters genial and open relations with Muslim leaders, and to provide training for church leaders with a view to engendering understanding and respect for Islam. With the same commitment, BIRA III sought ways to dialogue with Hindus in 1982, and asserted that dialogue embraces all dimensions of life – an integral part of the Church’s mission, along with its commitment to building the Kingdom.

2.1.4 The Theological Basis of Dialogue

Theologically, the primary foundation of the Church’s commitment to dialogue is not rooted in anthropological instigation but in Christ, the new Adam, who is working

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39 The Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church, sponsored and led by the Central Committee of the FABC, was held from 27 February to 6 March 1977 in Hong Kong; consequently, the FABC published 136 factors of the Conclusions of the Colloquium.
40 ‘Conclusions of the Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church,’ *FABC Papers No. 3* (May 1977): 16.
42 Ibid., 186-187.
46 ‘Living and Working together with Sisters and Brothers of Other Faiths,’ *FABC Papers No. 49* (1987), 19.
through the Spirit in all human persons to inaugurate interior renewal and a new humanity. Furthermore, the basis of dialogue is God Himself, who made the entire human race, who is the ultimate goal of the human race and the answer of inexpressible human questions, who spoke from ancient times down to the present, and who will continue to speak to all people of great religions in variety of ways. Redemptor Missio proclaimed that dialogue does not originate from tactical concerns or self-interest, but is a practice with its own guiding principles, requirements and dignity, and demands deep respect for everything which has taken place in human beings by the Spirit, who blows where he wills. ES declared the theological foundation of dialogue:

Here, then, Venerable Brethren, is the noble origin of this dialogue: in the mind of God Himself. Religion of its very nature is a certain relationship between God and man. It finds its expression in prayer; and prayer is a dialogue. Revelation, too, that supernatural link which God has established with man, can likewise be looked upon as a dialogue . . . Indeed, the whole history of man's salvation is one long, varied dialogue, which marvellously begins with God and which He prolongs with men in so many different ways.

Dialogue and Proclamation stressed the universal and mysterious presence of the Holy Spirit in the heart of every person, regardless of religion as the source of dialogue, and stated: ‘God, in an age-long dialogue, has offered and continues to offer salvation to humankind.' As the Holy Spirit is at work in the whole creation and all human races of their respective cultures, the Church’s engagement in dialogue is not a new ecclesiastical venture but joins the divine initiative of dialogue for building a healthy relationship with all humanity. The Report on the Assembly of the First Bishop’s Institute for Interreligious Affairs (BIRA IV/1) on the Theology of Dialogue, held from 23 to 30 October 1984 at Sampran, Thailand, reaffirmed and

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48 Nostra Aetate, no. 1.
49 Nostra Aetate, no. 2.
51 Redemptoris Missio, no. 56.
52 Ecclesiam Suam, no. 70.
53 Dialogue and Proclamation, no. 27.
54 Dialogue and Proclamation, no. 38.
56 Bishops’ Institution for Interreligious Dialogue, known as BIRA series, was organised and run by the Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (OEIA) of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC).
acknowledged the work of the Holy Spirit both in the Church and beyond its boundaries. BIRA IV/1 stated:

The Spirit acts in freedom and His action cannot be reduced to persons, traditions, institutions or problems of relationships. The Spirit’s action, His presence and ministry can – and must – be discerned both in other religious and even in secular movements that may be shaped and leading to the Kingdom of God.  

The motivation for dialogue is rooted in ‘God’s commandment to love one’s neighbour’, by which God called Christians to enter into dialogue as a means of growing in knowledge of the Kingdom of God. In order to extend our love to the suffering people, Dialogue and Mission reminded Christians: ‘The great problems with which humanity is struggling call on Christians to work together with other believers by virtue of their respective faiths.’ For example, many forms of inhumanity, injustice and exploitation in Asia as seen in many parts of the world cry for help to secure human rights, dignity and the wellbeing of society. In addition, the world of divisions and conflicts rooted in certain aspects of religion itself makes dialogue urgent for restoring peace and harmony. Today, the growing number of victims of poverty and various forms of suffering caused by war, economic injustice and greed, of political oppression, of religious violence and of racial discrimination are seen across the world. In this fallen human culture, making cries for dialogue means shouting for the coming of the Kingdom of God, in which all people of all nations have an opportunity to enjoy the sanctity of life, which is filled with such qualities as equality, love, peace, justice and the sharing of resources. Heading towards the goal of the suffering peoples, Redemptoris Missio declared: ‘Dialogue is a path toward the Kingdom and will certainly bear fruit, even if the times and seasons are known only to the Father.’

Similarly, the FABC embraces dialogue as a way of ushering in the Kingdom of God on earth. According to the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India, ‘The Kingdom which Jesus proclaimed was not merely a promise for the future, but an

58 Ibid., 141.
59 Dialogue and Mission, no. 32.
ideal we are called to realise here and now’; it reaffirmed: ‘Dialogue itself is a step towards the Kingdom.’ The first Formation Institute for Interreligious Affairs (FIRA I) of the FABC argued that God’s vision for humanity, which Jesus proclaimed, modelled and lived out on earth, is the Kingdom of God wherein all human races have a place marked by peace, justice, honour and respect for each other, and constituted by right relationship with each other and with their God. Thus, for the Church, dialogue is the norm and necessary manner of every form of Christian mission, such as speaking of simple presence and witness, service or direct proclamation. For the very nature of God or the way of God’s communication to creation is dialogical; the foundation of the dialogue that the Church advocates is seated in the very heart of dialogical God. Therefore, rejecting dialogue may imply disregarding the dialogical nature of God and His way of revealing mysterious things.

2.1.5 The Nature of Dialogue

One of the statements of BIRA I talked about the nature or characteristics of dialogue as ‘a process of talking and listening, of giving and receiving, of searching and studying, for the deepening and enriching of one another’s faith and understanding’. This means that IRD is basically understood as a case of ‘human communication’. Moreover, if there is friendly contact regardless of religion and race, dialogue takes place. From another point of view, dialogue is not merely a matter of talking, but of having an open attitude to one’s neighbours, and sharing spiritual values with people

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64 Franz-Josef Eilers, ed., For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences Documents from 1997 to 2001, vol. 3, 120.
65 ‘The Church, being committed to the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, should acknowledge the same Kingdom at work in sociopolitical situations and in cultural and religious traditions and enter into dialogue with them.’ See Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD, ed., For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences Documents from 1992 to 1996, vol. 2 (Quezon City: Claretian, 1997), 202.
66 The Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly defined mission as dialogue: ‘Mission includes being with the people, responding to their needs, with sensitiveness to the presence of God in cultures and other religious traditions, and witnessing to the values of God’s Kingdom through presence, solidarity, sharing and word. Mission will mean a dialogue with Asia’s poor, with its local cultures, and with other religious traditions.’ See Edmund Chia, ed., Dialogue: Resource Manual for Catholics in Asia, 112; see also C.G. Arevalo, ‘The Church in Asia and Mission in the 1990s,’ FABC Papers No. 57b (July 1990): 28–29.
67 Dialogue and Mission, no. 29.
who are seeking answers for crises of life and death as they struggle for justice, peace and human dignity. BIRA IV/4 attested that IRD sprouts from the nature of the Church, a community of pilgrimage journeying towards the Kingdom together with peoples of other faiths.

FIRA I of the FABC clearly stated: ‘The journey of dialogue is a journey from ignorance to enlightenment, from fear and prejudice to openness and acceptance, from darkness to light, from death to life.’ In promoting dialogue, an attitude comprising openness to the divine mystery of saving action in history, of respect for others and of humility is integral. Dialogue requires a respectful manner of listening and a commitment to a common search, as it consists of exchanging knowledge and experiences and probing and sharing with the non-Christian partner. In the same manner, the statement of BIRA III contended that dialogue was a means of promoting mutual understanding and enrichment through common prayer, sharing of experience and reflection. In dialogue, sharing without competition and embracing the values of each side enriches and contributes to mutual growth. Knowing that misunderstanding dialogue can degenerate it into a tactic for proselytisation, one must always keep in mind that true dialogue includes a disinterested manifestation of one’s own religious convictions, and that dialogue partners must not manipulate dialogue in any way for the purpose of religious conversion.

71 ‘Living and Working together with Sisters and Brothers of Other Faiths,’ FABC Papers No. 49, 58.
73 First Formation Institute for Interreligious Affairs (FIRA I) was held from 6 to 16 September 1998 at Ipoh, Malaysia.
79 Ibid., 16.
2.1.6 The Goal of Interreligious Dialogue

The ultimate goal of engaging in IRD with other religions, according to the FABC, is to launch the Kingdom mission, a kingdom of justice, peace and love.\textsuperscript{80} Jesus struggled to reform the dehumanising influences and socio-religious and political structures of his time, which caused suffering to the poor.\textsuperscript{81} Imitating Jesus, the concern which the FABC has always cherished in its ministry is to seek ways to establish the Kingdom of God by dialoguing with the real situations which Asian peoples face.\textsuperscript{82} As Asian bishops were challenged to make proper responses to Asian realities long before the formation of the FABC, the Asian Bishops’ Meeting of 1970 made a point of raising a challenging question about how they would more fully engage themselves to rebuild their nations and societies in response to the people’s aspirations and the demands of the Gospel: ‘societies [are] grounded on truth, guided by justice, motivated by charity, realised in freedom, and flowering in peace’.\textsuperscript{83}

The first plenary assembly of the FABC explained its intention to engage in IRD. The statements of the assembly in relation to dialogue with Asian religions clearly indicated that, through dialogue, the FABC aimed (1) to accept Asian religions, which are undoubtedly rich in profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values, as significant and positive elements in the economy of God’s design of salvation; (2) to recognise and pay respect to the past and present contributions of Asian religions in shaping the histories and cultures of Asian countries; (3) to discover and touch the reality of Asian peoples at the deepest level, by developing friendship and brotherhood in Asian peoples’ quest for God; (4) to help the Church to receive good things from Asian religious traditions, and also help those traditions to be purified, healed and made whole in the light of God’s word; and (5) to offer what the Church alone is believed to have a duty to share with the world, ‘the gospel’.\textsuperscript{84}

Another concern of IRD in the FABC’s mission was to transform people and society by going beyond tolerance and mutual respect to actively engage in correcting evils such as corruption in society, the negative impacts of globalisation, negligence

\textsuperscript{80} Franz-Josef Eilers, ed., \textit{For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences Documents from 2002 to 2006}, vol. 4, 199.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 193.
\textsuperscript{82} Gaudencio B. Rosales et al., eds., \textit{For All the Peoples of Asia: The Church in Asia – Asian Bishops’ Statements on Mission Community and Ministry 1970-1983}, vol. 1, 31.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., vol. 1, 14.
towards the poor and victims of suffering, the interrelated evils of consumerism, secularism and violence and terrorism, the false values of the media, unethical means of population control, environmental degradation, and so on.\textsuperscript{85}

The FABC also seeks to develop a way of being Christian with an Asian flavour and character. FIRA I said: ‘In meditation or contemplation, we encounter a God who is in us and yet mysterious, always ahead of us, who is beyond religions, languages and systems, and whose ways are not our ways.’\textsuperscript{86} By developing meditative forms of traditional Asian spiritual exercise, ‘a culture of words’, embedded in Christian practice, will be augmented by ‘a culture of silence’, which is native to Asian religions. Saying this means that a healthy balance between the prophetic (emphasising conceptual, discursive, doing aspects) and the mystical (emphasising the experiential, meditative, being aspects) dimensions of spirituality will be attained through dialogue and spiritual exercises.\textsuperscript{87} In short, the FABC is committed to promote IRD for the purpose of improving the politically and economically deprived lives of Asian peoples, by immersing the Church in Asian realities. Technically, balanced with the spiritual dimension of dialogue, the FABC is trying to alleviate the suffering and impoverishment of sectors of different Asian societies.

\textit{2.1.7 Forms of Dialogue}

The Catholic Church has developed four forms of dialogue as a main focus of the Kingdom mission. \textit{Dialogue and Proclamation} reaffirmed the four forms of dialogue declared by \textit{Dialogue and Mission}:

1. the dialogue of life, where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations
2. the dialogue of action, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people
3. the dialogue of theological exchange, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each others spiritual values

\textsuperscript{86} Franz-Josef Eilers, ed., \textit{For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences Documents from 1997 to 2001}, vol. 3, 120–121.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 122–123.
4. the dialogue of religious experience, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute\textsuperscript{88}

The dialogue of life embraces the whole environment in which one lives and works. It encompasses all circles of life: the familial, social, educational, artistic, economic, political and so on.\textsuperscript{89} These aspects of dialogue focus on a community of peaceful coexistence, showing respect to neighbours of different faiths while actively living out the highest ideals and values of one’s religious teachings.\textsuperscript{90} A statement of BIRA IV/4 described that, in the dialogue of life, people enrich each other and learn from one another the values of religiosity and spirituality.\textsuperscript{91} The dialogue of work or action comes about when Christians and people of other faiths confront common human problems for the purpose of achieving humanitarian, social, economic or political goals.\textsuperscript{92} The creation of basic human communities that collaborate for the good of all is the goal of the dialogue of action.\textsuperscript{93} The dialogue of theological exchange normally takes place among religious experts of different faith backgrounds, with the intention of deepening their knowledge of other religious heritages, or of seeking ways to solve the problems that threaten social wellbeing.\textsuperscript{94} Although this sort of dialogue may be conducted by a limited number of scholars, the outcomes help followers of various religions to better overcome mistrust, prejudice and misunderstanding.\textsuperscript{95} The dialogue of religious experience is a dialogue of spiritual matters, in which dialogue partners are mutually enriched and grow into the highest spiritual values and ideals.\textsuperscript{96} The goal
of this dialogue is mutual enrichment through sharing of the ineffable spiritual values that may be attainable through subtle spiritual exercises.\textsuperscript{97}

2.1.8 The Fruit of Dialogue

Dialogue is like a mirror. It reveals the unperceived richness of our own faith, and helps us rediscover and identify with the religious legacies which have nurtured a variety of Asian cultures.\textsuperscript{98} Where Christians are successfully involved in dialogue with people of other religions, there is a chance they may find themselves continually evangelising and being evangelised by their dialogue partners at personal level (BIRA II: 11).\textsuperscript{99} The IRD of openness, sincerity, sensitivity, honesty, acceptance and mutuality with a spirit of humility entails an opportunity to grow in deeper knowledge of God’s liberating and transformative activity in all religions, which leads to justice, peace and social harmony.\textsuperscript{100} The colloquium on Dialogue between Faith and Culture in Asia: Towards Integral Human and Social Development, organised by the Office of Education and Student Chaplaincy of the FABC on 14 January 1996, stated the outcome of IRD: ‘By listening to peoples of other faiths and cultures, we deepen our own and discover elements common to both. The deeper we go into dialogue, the closer we come to God, to others and to the whole creation.’\textsuperscript{101}

The same colloquium asserted: ‘Dialogue of heart and soul leads to dialogue of life and action to jointly tackle social evils.’\textsuperscript{102} Together with mutual understanding, mutual enrichment and deepening of our common realisation of the truth, BIRA III claimed that our common commitment to the quest for a fuller life of peace in freedom, fellowship and justice is assured in dialogue.\textsuperscript{103} As BIRA III urged the Church to focus on issues of social justice and options for the poor, oppressed and the marginalised, the outcome of dialogue was related to the alleviation of suffering and the minimisation of oppression, regardless of the race or religion to which victims

\textsuperscript{97} Franz-Josef Eilers, ed., \textit{For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences Documents from 1992 to 1996}, vol. 2, 169.


\textsuperscript{99} Gaudencio B. Rosales et al., eds., \textit{For All the Peoples of Asia: The Church in Asia – Asian Bishops’ Statements on Mission Community and Ministry 1970-1983}, vol. 1, 192.

\textsuperscript{100} Thomas Michel, ‘Interreligious Dialogue in FABC Perspective,’ in \textit{Interreligious Dialogue as Communication}, FABC-OSC Books vol. 6, 40–41.


\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 25.

\textsuperscript{103} Gaudencio B. Rosales et al., eds., \textit{For All the Peoples of Asia: The Church in Asia – Asian Bishops’ Statements on Mission Community and Ministry 1970-1983}, vol. 1, 198.
IRD promotes not only spiritual and sociopolitical dimensions, but also the interrelatedness of family and life, ecology and environment, and helps us to combat the erosion of traditional values caused by the influence of mass media and the negative impacts of globalisation.

Above all, the attitudinal quality of a dialogue partner is a spirit of love, honesty, sincerity, compassion, charity, openness, respect for others, humility and willingness to listen, and this is nurtured, developed and refined to meet the requirements of all forms of genuine dialogue through dialogue itself. For Jesus is at work through the Holy Spirit, and by submissively pursuing the Holy Spirit in dialogue with hope and love, participants are led to inner purification as a fruit of the Spirit. With a purified heart, refined view, firmly rooted spirituality and deeper knowledge of truth accumulated through engagement in IRD, a dialogue promoter can contribute different and good things to rebuilding corrupted sociopolitical structures and liberating suffering peoples. Through dialogue, mistrust, suspicion, hatred and a vengeful mindset diminish to a minimum, and bring reconciliation to opposite parties through a process of peacemaking.

Having examined the FABC’s position on IRD, I now turn to that of the Protestant Churches.

2.2 Dialogue and the World Council of Churches

2.2.1 Historical Context of the Protestant Ecumenical Movement

The root of the modern ecumenical movement of the Protestant Church can be traced back to the meetings of the Missionary Societies in 1888 and 1900, and (decisively) at the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference, which gave birth to three major strands of inter-church cooperation: ‘Life and Work’, ‘Faith and Order’, and

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107 Redemptoris Missio, no. 56.
109 The ‘Life and Work’ movement has helped different churches together make Christian presence more effective and a blessing to society.
‘International Missionary Council’ (IMC). Kenneth R. Ross writes: ‘Edinburgh 1910 has been a symbol of the church’s quest for unity. The deep yearning for greater unity which arose from the missionary experience gave rise to the Ecumenical Movement.’ Moreover, the Encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, promulgated in January 1920, called for the promotion of ‘the cause of Church unity by creating an organism called the League of the Churches of Christ, modelled after the League of Nations’. Similarly, the proposal in April 1919 of Nathan Soderblom, Archbishop of Uppsala, Sweden, called on Christians to play a new role after World War I.

With the intention of bringing Christians to unity in harmony after World War II, the World Council of Churches (WCC) came into existence as the confluence of the three streams of the Protestant movement in two phases. In the first phase, the merger of ‘Life and Work’ and ‘Faith and Order’ was consummated by the covenant of delegates from 147 member churches at the first Assembly of the WCC, held from 22 August to 4 September 1948. Amid a greater need for reconciliation between the older churches and younger churches, which sought equal status as churches in the West in the postcolonial world, the leaders of the IMC were pressured by the timing of international structural change to merge the IMC with the WCC. After strenuously debate, a resolution of the Assembly of the IMC, held from 28 December 1957 to 8

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110 The ‘Faith and Order’ movement is a commitment to explore the differences in basic Christian conviction, which must be reconciled if the unity of the Church as one visible Body of Christ is to be attained.
111 Significant contributions of International Missionary Council are commissioning missiological studies, facilitating the formation of national councils in newly evangelised countries and the West and producing a missiological journal series called, ‘International Review of Mission.’
116 The World Council of Churches was officially founded on the 23 August 1948 in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, when the amalgamation of ‘Life and Work’ and ‘Faith and Order’ was consummated. The WCC is a fellowship of Churches working together in the spirit of tolerance and mutual understanding for the unity and renewal of Christian denominations (www.britannica.com/topic/World-Council-of-Churches, accessed 29 August 2015).
January 1958 in Accra, Ghana, led to the consummation of the second phase by integrating the IMC to the WCC on 19 November 1961 in New Delhi.\(^{119}\)

The purpose of the WCC was to express the unity emerging out of the love of God in Jesus Christ, which binds the constituent churches to God and to one another, and to fulfil the law of Christ in the bond of God’s love.\(^{120}\) To bring peace together in a divided world after World War II through the reconciliation of Christ, the Second Assembly of the WCC, held from 15 to 31 August 1954, restated: ‘The first responsibility of Christians is to live and work for the reconciliation of men to God and, therefore, as individuals and nations, to one another.’\(^{121}\) Although the WCC was not originally designed to advocate for IRD, a greater need for taking the side of the suffering and voiceless peoples pushed the WCC to give more attention to IRD by cooperating with the Catholic Church, which, by Vatican II, had declared the Church’s openness to other religions.

### 2.2.2 Difficulties with Dialogue

Among many, two main problems brought forward in this section are the struggle between two different theological stands of the WCC and worldwide religious fundamentalism. First, when encounters with other religions in their respective missionary fields in Asia and Africa increasingly challenged the Protestant missionaries of the West, the Protestant attitude\(^{122}\) towards other religions became more apparent and aggressive. Consequently, it created a theological discrepancy between the rich West churches, which held on to the evangelical teaching of ‘Fall’ and ‘Revelation’, and the churches of developing countries of both the South and the East, which were nurtured in cultures born out of the existing influential religious traditions.\(^{123}\) Influenced by Karl Barth and Hendrik Kraemer, many Protestant churches viewed religion, even in its best and most elevated form, as a merely human,


\(^{122}\) The then Protestant attitude towards other religions was rooted in two theological orientations, ‘Fall’ and ‘Revelation’.

sinful and vain attempt to reach God. They maintained that God’s self-revelation was the only way to have any knowledge of God. This situation brought little hope to the appreciation of other religions until the mid-20th century in Protestant Christianity. Stanley J. Smartha, who was among those who were keen to support dialogue, pointed out this situation: ‘The presence of Orthodox churches and evangelical Protestants makes it difficult for the WCC to take a clear and unambiguous theological position towards other religions.’ He continued: ‘The presence of evangelicals within its structure thus prevents the WCC from taking a more positive or open attitude to people of other faiths.’

The reality of a theological struggle between missionary-sending churches and younger churches from evangelised countries defied the objections of the West member churches of the WCC on the subject of contextualising the gospel to different cultures and religions. The East Asia Conference of Churches (now the Christian Conference of Asia) founded in 1957 and the All Africa Conference of Churches, founded in 1963, were resolute about living within the cultures of their own people and involving themselves in a profound dialogue between the traditional worldview and the continuing revelation of Jesus. As a result of the struggle and the pressure from younger churches, the Ajaltoun Consultation of the WCC was convened in Lebanon from 16 to 26 March 1970, with representatives from Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Although the consultation made a new beginning by opening the WCC’s attitude up towards people of other faiths, the majority of member churches regarded the consultation as a provocative entry of IRD onto the agenda of the WCC.

Under continuing pressure from younger churches in Asia and Africa, the WCC initiated a program entitled ‘Dialogue with People of Living Faiths’ in 1971. However, at the Nairobi Assembly in 1975, a section report on ‘Seeking Community’, which called for ‘new ways of relating to people of other religious traditions in order to build community across religious barriers’, was opposed, especially by churches

126 Ibid., 171.
128 Stanley J. Smartha, Between Two Cultures: Ecumenical Ministry in a Pluralist World, 49.
from Europe.\textsuperscript{129} Similarly, while gathering to choose the theme for the seventh assembly of the WCC, in 1988, the suggestion that ‘adherents of other faiths be included in the preparatory discussions on the theme’ led several people to strongly resist; they voiced the fear that ‘it would be an approval of syncretism or of accepting revelations outside of Christianity’.\textsuperscript{130} When Chung Hyun-Kyung presented a paper on the theme of the WCC’s seventh assembly, held in Canberra in 1991, ‘Come, Holy Spirit – Renew the Whole Creation’, she related the Holy Spirit to ‘ki’, the life energy in the concept of the North-East Asian peoples, and the self-giving love of Jesus to the compassion of bodhisattva Kwan-In.\textsuperscript{131} This presentation deepened theological dissent among member churches.

One of the most problematic challenges in promoting IRD is religious fundamentalism. Although the term originated within American Protestant Christianity in the 1900s, to oppose the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin and the trends of liberal theology and biblical scholarship, fundamentalism is nowadays widely used to describe any militant religious movement that claims authority and certitude; it suggests narrowness, bigotry, obscurantism and sectarianism, and conjures images of jihad, hostages, protests, militancy, terrorists and so on.\textsuperscript{132} Since religious fundamentalism rejects the concept of IRD as a hindrance to the progress of faith, the need to strengthen the theological and spiritual foundations of IRD becomes a challenging task for the WCC.\textsuperscript{133} The voices of Christians who took a fundamentalist stand was louder than the voices of those who were inclined to promote dialogue when the WCC Sub-Unit on Dialogue reported for the first time the urgency of IRD at the Nairobi Assembly in 1975, because ‘it was feared that dialogue would lead to syncretism, compromise the uniqueness and finality of Christ, and undercut the urgency of mission’.\textsuperscript{134}

Today, not only in the Protestant and Catholic Churches, various forms of religious fundamentalism are seen all over the world as a global crisis. For example,

\textsuperscript{130} Stanley J. Samartha, \textit{Between Two Cultures: Ecumenical Ministry in a Pluralist World}, 188–189.
\textsuperscript{131} S. Wesley Ariarajah, \textit{Gospel and Culture: An Ongoing Discussion within the Ecumenical Movement}, 46–48.
\textsuperscript{132} ‘Youth in Asia: Challenges of Fundamentalism and Relativism,’ \textit{FABC Papers No. 135} (November 2012): 7.
\textsuperscript{133} Stanley J. Samartha, \textit{Between Two Cultures: Ecumenical Ministry in a Pluralist World}, 172.
in response to the emergence of religious fundamentalism as a real threat even in England, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair founded the Tony Blair Foundation, which aims to provide the practical support required to help prevent religious prejudice, conflict and extremism. Similar to fundamentalists born out of Christianity, Hinduism and Islam who distort their respective religious teachings, Buddhist fundamentalist groups have appeared in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand, deforming their religion and making Buddhism no longer peaceful or tolerant. In Myanmar, for instance, the ongoing violence against Rohingya Muslims, which caused killings and internal displacement, accompanied by the flight of many victims to neighbouring countries, has been led by Buddhist fundamentalists, while Muslim fundamentalists also are at the frontlines, defending themselves.

Born from religious fundamentalism, religious extremism associated with suspicion, fear, hostility and revenge deterred the progress of IRD, alongside ignorance of the colossal danger of such religious extremism until its destructive eruption. When religious extremism violently broke out on 11 September 2001 with the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, for example, the world could no longer deny the importance of interreligious cooperation in keeping world peace. Since then, the WCC has intensified its role in initiating Christian–Muslim discussions and talks. Based on his experiences promoting dialogue as one of the prominent WCC leaders, S. Wesley Ariarajah wrote that the rise of militant expressions of religion – under various names, such as fundamentalism, religion-inspired terrorism, religious extremism, militant forms of religion and so on – has raised serious problems for IRD. Michael Amaladoss, an Indian Catholic theologian, addressed two kinds of fear originating in religious fundamentalism – that dialogue might dilute religious conviction and zeal, and that dialogue might be misused as an instrument of

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136 Ibid., 30.
conversion – leading to scepticism about the effort. As religious fundamentalism spreads across the world, a sense of fear and hostility to interfaith cooperation also is felt; the situation calls for the promotion of dialogue even amid such challenges and danger.

2.2.3 World Council of Churches and the Nature of Dialogue

IRD, which has been slowly growing among Christians, is not the priority of the WCC since its formation in 1948. Its roots in Protestant Christianity can be traced back to the early 20th century. Certainly the Protestant missionary conferences started to talk about followers of non-Christian religions at a broader level after Edinburg 1910, with both a perception that ‘a non-Christian World was bereft of the gospel-saving power’, and the adoption of a positive view of other religions. However, dialogue never came onto the agenda of any conference with high demand of action. Akin to the latter view, John R. Mott maintained that the second World Missionary Conference, held in Jerusalem in 1928, ushered in a new attitude towards non-Christian religions, describing ‘systems of thought and faith [that] . . . were dealt with positively and not simply negatively. Chief attention was to bringing out their values . . . to be appreciated, conserved and where necessary supplemented.’

Contrarily, Wesley Ariarajah, as an expert of the WCC, was not satisfied with the precedent missionary conferences:

None of this led to a serious discussion on gospel and culture until after the third world mission conference in 1938 at Tambaram, India, because the missionary movement could not come to an agreement on the relationship of the gospel to religions . . . . A discussion on ‘culture’ as such had to await a changed attitude towards religious traditions.

When the third IMC conference was held – in Tambaram, near Chennai, in 1938 – delegates still chose to defend the ultimate truth of the Christian message vis-à-vis other religions, while missionaries were urged to practise a listening and dialoguing approach. Ahead of the fourth IMC conference, held in Whitby, Canada, in 1947,

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142 Douglas Pratt, The Church and Other Faiths: The World Council of Churches, the Vatican, and Interreligious Dialogue (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2010), 34.
143 S. Wesley Ariarajah, Gospel and Culture: An Ongoing Discussion within the Ecumenical Movement, 5.
the general attitude seemed to be more open, as indicated by the slogan ‘partnership in obedience’, which helped delegates abandon the language of ‘Christian’ and ‘non-Christian’ countries. This attitude opened the way for the development of a new mission theology. However, for two decades the majority church leaders were uncertain whether they would support or avoid IRD, until the unprecedented Kandy Consultation of 1967. Convened in Sri Lanka for a ‘Consultation on Dialogue with Men of Other Faiths’, the Kandy Consultation proved a landmark, with the WCC making a tangible commitment to promoting interfaith dialogue by collaborating with the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians. At Kandy, the Roman Catholic theologians joined the Protestant and Orthodox theologians for discussion on neighbours of other faiths. The Kandy Consultation signposted the WCC’s steps towards dialogue: ‘The fundamental nature of dialogue is genuine readiness to listen to the man with whom we desire to communicate. Our concern should not be to win arguments.’ Kandy defined ‘dialogue’ as a positive effort to attain a deeper understanding of the truth through mutual awareness of one another’s convictions and witness. It expressed the view that dialogue includes an attitudinal readiness to be changed as well as to influence others, and to expect for new things to happen, along with the opening of a new dimension, of which a dialogue partner was previously unaware.

With new insight on the subject of dialogue and support gained from Kandy, the Uppsala Conference, the fourth Assembly of the WCC, held from 4 to 20 July 1968 in Uppsala, Sweden, observed: ‘In dialogue we share our common humanity, its dignity and its fallenness, and express our common concern for that humanity. It opens the possibility of sharing in new forms of community and common service.’ The statement of the Uppsala Report of 1968 validated a Christian’s engagement in

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145 Ibid.
146 The Consultation on Dialogue with Men of Other Faiths was a joint Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic consultation held in Kandy, Ceylon in March 1967, see Drafts for Sections Prepared for the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches: Uppsala, Sweden 1968 (1968), 40.
148 Stanley J. Samartha, Between Two Cultures: Ecumenical Ministry in a Pluralist World, 49.
150 Ibid., 41.
dialogue as right choice: ‘A Christian’s dialogue with another implies neither a denial of the uniqueness of Christ, nor any loss of his own commitment to Christ, but rather that a genuinely Christian approach to others must be human, personal, relevant and humble.’ Section II of the documents prepared for the fourth Assembly of the WCC reaffirmed the statement of the first Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the WCC, held in 1963 in Mexico City, that two aims of dialogue in every circumstance are to participate in ‘the dialogue of God with men’, and to lead dialogue partners to listen to what God in Christ reveals to us and to answer Him.

Tenaciously pursuing the promotion of dialogue amid vehement internal opposition, the WCC Consultation on ‘Dialogue between Men of Living Faiths’ took place with the presence of thirty-eight leaders representing four religions – Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam – at Ajaltoun, Lebanon, from 16 to 25 March 1970. There it was pointed out that dialogue functions as an internal sign of hope, introducing dialogue partners to a new realm of interfaith spirituality. A leading advocate of dialogue among the WCC member churches, Stanley J. Smartha, quoted King Asoka’s view that dialogue is a means of dispelling disputation and promoting better understanding, and of introducing each other and cultivating a sense of unity between all religions, leading to common good. Meanwhile, the meeting of the Central Committee of the WCC, held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1971, affirmed dialogue as the common adventure of the churches, with careful concentration on dialogue with ‘people of living faiths’. As the outcome of Kandy Consultation and the result of persisting advocacy, the WCC formed its Sub-Unit on Dialogue in 1971, to promote dialogue between people of living faiths. The team of the WCC Sub-Unit on dialogue promotes contact between Christians and people of other faiths with the

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aim of building trust, meeting common challenges and addressing conflictive and divisive issues.\textsuperscript{157}

Although small in number, some far-sighted leaders viewed IRD as a critical means of developing common responses to violence, human-rights abuses, political tensions and religious intolerance, as the WCC resolutely began work on promoting IRD from 1971 onwards.\textsuperscript{158} When the fifth assembly, known as the Nairobi Assembly of the WCC, was held from 23 November to 10 December 1975, dialogue was defined as a means of (1) accepting our shared human life and destiny; (2) sensitising people of various backgrounds to each other, which leads to an appreciation of the common concerns of ‘the world community’;\textsuperscript{159} and (3) experiencing a past estrangement, a present responsibility and a sense of sharing a common future, which calls for mutual reflection and mutual witness.\textsuperscript{160} Samartha added that dialogue is not only a matter of shallow friendliness and sentimental love but also a controversial challenge for dealing with urgent, difficult and complex issues that emerge out of different concerns, identities and worldviews.\textsuperscript{161}

With a more concrete and deeper commitment to dialogue in the changing world, where churches in newly independent colonised countries needed to find and express their own real identities, the WCC tried to produce guidelines on dialogue. In the course of making the effort to fill the gap in the changing postcolonial world – between Christian countries of the West and multi-religious nations of the East and the South – ‘Guidelines on Dialogue’, also known as the 1979 Guidelines because it was accepted by the central committee of the WCC in 1979, was born from the Chaingmai Meeting of the WCC in 1977. The Guidelines explained: “Dialogue in community” is not a secret weapon in the armoury of an aggressive Christian militancy. Rather it is a means of living our faith in Christ in service of community

\textsuperscript{157} Edmund Emeka Ezegbobelu, Challenges of Interreligious Dialogue between the Christian and the Muslim Communities in Nigeria (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009), 128.
\textsuperscript{159} ‘The term ‘world community’ is an acknowledgement of our interdependence and mutual need, a willingness to work together as one community encompassing different communities.’ See World Council of Churches, Work Book for the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches (1975), 36.
\textsuperscript{160} World Council of Churches, Work Book for the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1975), 36.
with one’s neighbours.’\textsuperscript{162} In dialogue of mutual trust and respect for the integrity of each participant’s identity, the images of neighbours following different faith traditions are not disfigured.\textsuperscript{163} Moreover, dialogue serves as a welcome means of obeying the commandment of the Decalogue: ‘You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.’\textsuperscript{164} Number 22 of the Guidelines also spelled out the objective of dialogue:

\begin{quote}
The aim of dialogue is not reduction of living faiths and ideologies to a lowest common denominator, not only a comparison and discussion of symbols and concepts, but the enabling of a true encounter between those spiritual insights and experiences which are only found at the deepest levels of human life.\textsuperscript{165}
\end{quote}

With the dawn of the 21st century, the experiences and growing demands for promoting dialogue in every corner of the world led the central committee of the WCC to review and revise the 1979 Guidelines in 2002; they were republished as ‘Ecumenical Considerations for Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions’ in 2004.\textsuperscript{166} With a growing and persistent emphasis on dialogue, the Central Committee of the WCC approved a new ecumenical affirmation on mission and evangelism called ‘Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes’ in Crete, Greece, on 5 September 2012.\textsuperscript{167} Deeper understanding of mission as ‘affirming life in all its fullness’, Jesus’s ultimate concern and mission (John 10:10), led the leaders of the WCC to recognise the presence of the Holy Spirit, the life-giving power, in a great variety of cultures to renew and sustain all of creation.\textsuperscript{168} Today, the WCC stands as one of main advocates of the importance of IRD between Christian institutions. As the WCC has firmly accepted that the original design and initiation of mission has come from God, dialogue today plays an

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\textsuperscript{163} ‘Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies,’ no. 17.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{165} ‘Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies,’ no. 22.
\textsuperscript{168} ‘Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes,’ no. 1.
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important role in its mission. Accordingly, the new mission affirmation concretely stated the WCC’s understanding of dialogue.\textsuperscript{169}

2.2.4 Foundations of Dialogue

The Kandy statement affirmed a theological concept that ‘God alone had made every nation of men’ as the fundamental basis for dialogue that leads all people of nations to common humanity.\textsuperscript{170} Similarly, the statement emphasised the love of God, manifested in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, as the very nature and foundation of dialogue. ‘Love always seeks to communicate,’ the statement read. ‘Our experience of God’s communication with us constrains us to communicate with men of other beliefs.’\textsuperscript{171} Ten years after Kandy Consultation, the WCC’s Guidelines on Dialogue contended that, through dialogue, a fundamental part of Christian service within community, Christians may respond in a lively way to the commandment to ‘love God and your neighbour as yourself’ by expressing the love they experienced in Christ.\textsuperscript{172} In addition, the growing notion of the universal presence of the Holy Spirit, both inside and outside the Church, has become vital in drawing many Christians’ attention to dialogue. The seventh Assembly of the WCC, held in Canberra in 1991, affirmed: ‘The Holy Spirit is at work in ways that pass human understanding: the freedom of the Spirit may challenge and surprise us as we enter into dialogue with people of other faiths.’\textsuperscript{173} In the same way, the tenth Assembly of the WCC, held from 30 October to 8 November 2013, reaffirmed the mysterious mission of the Holy Spirit: ‘We believe that the Spirit of Life brings joy and fullness of life. God’s Spirit, therefore, can be found in all cultures that affirm life. The Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways, and we do not fully understand the workings of the Spirit in other faith traditions.’\textsuperscript{174}

\textsuperscript{169} The WCC’s new mission affirmation states: ‘Dialogue is a way of affirming our common life and goals in terms of the affirmation of life and the integrity of creation. Dialogue at the religious level is possible only if we begin with the expectation of meeting God who has preceded us and has been present with people within their own contexts. God is there before we come (Acts 17) and our task is not to bring God along, but to witness to the God who is already there. Dialogue provides for an honest encounter where each party brings to the table all that they are in an open, patient and respectful manner.’ See ‘Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes,’ no. 94.
\textsuperscript{170} Wesley Ariarajah, Hindus and Christians: A Century of Protestant Ecumenical Thought, 135.
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 136.
\textsuperscript{172} ‘Guidelines on Dialogue with People of LivingFaiths and Ideologies,’ no. 18.
\textsuperscript{173} Stanley J. Samartha, Between Two Cultures: Ecumenical Ministry in a Pluralist World, 172.
In the mysterious mission of the Holy Spirit, today’s multicultural and religiously pluralistic world leads many people to engage in IRD. While established religious communities desire to carefully guard their boundaries and maintain their rigid identities, many people appear to be uncomfortable with static identities and are eager to seek out new hybrid identities; such desires create an opening for dialogue.\textsuperscript{175} On the other hand, while IRD encourages showing respect for religious communities’ right to maintain their identities, multi-religious interactions among people of different faith backgrounds and the growing awareness of truth make it difficult to maintain every static religious identity, and this situation entails mutual enrichment.\textsuperscript{176} Moreover, in this fast-changing world, dialogue is no longer viewed as an Asian concern but is increasingly acknowledged as an ecumenical or global concern, as countries in the West become increasingly pluralistic through migrated minority groups of people of other faiths, from different parts of the world.\textsuperscript{177}

A deeper understanding of the Kingdom mission has become a driving force for IRD. ‘Faith and Order’ in 1971 argued that as the Church is instrumental to the Kingdom of God, the Church has a responsibility to call all people to the Kingdom: ‘The task of the Church is to announce to the world that the Kingdom of God is among us . . . The Church must display the first-fruits of the Kingdom in the way it lives its own life as a community.’\textsuperscript{178} The Kingdom mission to promote human rights, one of the main concerns of the WCC since its formation, is based on ‘the full humanity revealed in Jesus Christ – advancing respect for human beings, human communities, human dignity and human hopes’.\textsuperscript{179} The eighth Assembly of the WCC, held in December 1998, declared the reason for exercising a full range of human rights: ‘We do it so that the world in which we are among God’s stewards will be passed on to future generations resting upon the firm foundations of freedom, justice and peace.’\textsuperscript{180} In order to develop and safeguard the commitment of the WCC to

\textsuperscript{176} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{177} Stanley J. Samartha, Between Two Cultures: Ecumenical Ministry in a Pluralist World, 171.
\textsuperscript{178} World Council of Churches, Faith and Order Louvain 1971: Study Reports and Documents (Lausanne: Imprimerie La Concorde, 1971), 175.
\textsuperscript{179} World Council of Churches, Work Book for the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, 53.
human rights in today’s pluralistic world, IRD that is inviting and inclusive is required. Engagement in human rights does not have geographical, political, racial, religious or cultural boundaries; the WCC’s choice to promote human rights makes it impossible to neglect or avoid IRD.

Although in the past the ecumenical vision of the WCC was limited only to the Christian world, today it undoubtedly embraces all humanity, regardless of religion, culture or race. This vision for building peaceful coexistence in a world of religious plurality will be possible through dialoguing and cooperating with people of other faiths, enabling viable human communities to emerge. The changed attitude of the WCC after 1967 created an opening for it to join hands with the Catholic Church and promote IRD. The ultimate goal of the Catholic and the Protestant Churches in advocating and concretising IRD is to join with honesty and humbleness the life-giving mission of the Holy Spirit in all human cultures. To engage in IRD means following the deeds of God, who revealed Himself in human history as a dialogical God, and participating in the work of the Holy Spirit to fulfil the Kingdom mission, wherein all nations, irrespective of religious, cultural and racial differences, are entitled to enjoy the fullness of life – marked by justice, peace, love, respect for human dignity, the protection of human rights, sociopolitical security, sustainable economic prosperity and the like.

In order to reach this goal, the two great Christian groups, by learning from each other, have conducted many joint programs to promote IRD, especially after Vatican II. Despite bitter memories of struggles and fights between the Catholic and Protestant Churches in the past, their openness and commitment to promoting IRD have brought them together. This means that promoting IRD has itself become a blessing of reconciliation between the Catholic and the Protestant Churches. Similarly, to promote IRD in Myanmar is a very challenging but worthwhile goal, because IRD can effectively serve Myanmar’s people in their struggle for peace, national reconciliation and social harmony. However, there are many barriers and challenges to interfaith awareness in a country such as Myanmar, where a militarised

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181 The commitment of the WCC to human rights encompasses ‘the right to a full human life, the right to enjoy and maintain a political and cultural identity, the right to participate in decision-making within the community, the right to dissent, the right to personal dignity, and the right to freely choose a religion or belief’. See World Council of Churches, *Work Book for the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, 54–56.
sociopolitical structure has long been established. The following chapter therefore discusses the particular challenges of promoting IRD in the context of Myanmar.
Chapter 3

Promoting Interreligious Dialogue:
Problems and Challenges

Myanmar has a unique and tragic social, political and ethnic background. The ethnic conflict history of Myanmar, from the 11th century to the 21st century, although halted for 124 years by British rule, was full of fighting, invasion, uprising, suppression, gradual ethnic absorption and competition for political power between Burmans and ethnic minorities. Although Buddhism has played an important role in nurturing Burmese culture, social values and ideology, the religion has often been misused. The longstanding struggle for ethnic identity and self-determination remained unsolvable until the dawn of the 21st century. Moreover, the rise of religious fundamentalism is spreading among Buddhists, Christians and Muslims. Therefore, the promotion of IRD, which requires honesty, respect and willingness, is halted by the misuse of religion, and the struggle for ethnic survival and religious nationalism. The problems to solve, the difficulties to overcome and the challenges to face in promoting IRD in Myanmar cannot rid themselves of the manipulation of religion, ethnic conflicts and the problem of Burmese superiority and religious fundamentalism. These problems, difficulties and challenges are discussed in the following sections.

3.1 The Manipulation of Religion

The manipulation of a religion is known to many as the politicisation of religion. The politicisation of religion is a well-structured politico-religious system, designed to benefit the majority religious group of a country and its shrewd political leaders, who emerge out of the dominant religion by marginalising religious minorities. This process is generally characterised by denigration, restriction, suppression and even cleansing of a targeted minority religion. Anthony R. Brunello remarked: ‘The politicisation of religion in a democracy is a special danger to civil freedom and public discourse . . . and is certainly a sign that personal and intellectual freedom is
This situation neglects the importance of IRD and bans any movement leading to peaceful social collaborations, irrespective of religion. Consequently a series of problems is created. A statement on the politicisation of religion, approved on 8 November 2013 by the tenth assembly of the WCC, reminds us that the contemporary world is marked by the phenomenon of politicising religion, which causes serious problems to all religious communities, and particularly affects the survival of religious minorities by posing a threat to freedom of religion.\(^2\)

In Myanmar, the politicisation of religion is not new, going back to the monarchical period of old Burma. The adoption in the 11th century of Buddhism as the royal religion by King Anawrahta, which was followed by the appointment of the Mon monk Shin Arahan, who was to convert his subjects to Hinayana Buddhism, is a remarkable example of Buddhism knitting into Burmese culture, Burmese values and Burmese nationality.\(^3\) John F. Cady presumed that King Anawrahta, the first Burmese Buddhist king, borrowed the concept of the royal patronage of Buddhism from the conquered Mon court,\(^4\) while Donald Eugene Smith viewed the relationship between ‘religion and the king’ as a common practice of Burmese kings. He commented: ‘The Buddhist tradition of kingship emphasised the ruler’s function as the defender of the faith, the builder of pagodas, the patron and protector of the Sangha [the monastic community of ordained Buddhist monks].’\(^5\)

3.1.1 Pre-colonial Royal Patronage of Buddhism

Before the ascent of King Anawrahta in 1044, the ‘Ariya School of Mahayana Tradition’\(^6\) was predominant in the changing Pagan region, in the manner of a ‘state

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6 Different in naming from Sao Htun Hmat Win, some writers referred to ‘Ariya School of Mahayana Tradition’ by ‘Ari Buddhism’ (Azigyi-batha/အရွား‌သာ in Burmese) which was a mix of Tantric Buddhism and local traditions. See G.E. Harvey, History of Burma: From the Earliest Times to 10 March 1824, the Beginning of the English Conquest (London: Frank Cass & Co. LTD, 1967), 17.
religion’ under the leadership of heretical monks called Ariś. The devoted King Anawrahta, offering royal patronage to the new religion introduced by Shin Arahan, occupied Mon country in 1056 in order to bring the sacred Theravāda Buddhist literature to his court, with the intention of replacing Ariya Buddhism with Theravāda Buddhism. Ignoring a dialogical approach or peaceful debate to refute the heretical aspects of the existing influential religion of his dominion, the king exerted all his authority and power to dispel the Ari monks’ leadership, without taking religious tolerance into account. Once Theravāda Buddhism was established in every corner of the kingdom, no one in the royal services of the Pagan empire was permitted to decline the king’s command to take part in the building of pagodas, based on a profession of faith. With the king’s support, Theravāda Buddhism became firmly rooted, and has been Myanmar’s unrivalled religion since the Pagan era.

Imitating their ideal king – specifically Anawrahta – six other kings followed who decisively supported Theravāda Buddhism. These were Kyaswa, King of Bagan (1235–1249), Dhammazedi, King of Hanthawaddy (1471–1492), Bayinnaung, King of Toungoo (1550–1581), Min Razagyi, King of Arakan (1593–1612), Badon Min, known as Bodawpaya, King of Amarapura (1782–1819), and Mindon Min, King of Mandalay (1853–1878). Among them, King Mindon Min made a great effort to perpetuate and purify Theravāda Buddhism. The most interesting and significant religious building among many of his works was the complex of the Kuthodaw Pagoda, meaning ‘great work of royal merit’, which was surrounded by 733 smaller stupas housing marble slabs engraved with verses of the Theravāda Pali Canon; together they formed a complete copy of the Tipitaka, the three baskets of the Buddha’s teaching. Overwhelmed by an aspiration to bring sectarian monks to a single unity under the umbrella of Theravāda Buddhism, and to preserve the canonical Buddhist scripture, King Mindon convened the fifth Buddhist Council, attended by

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8 Ibid.
11 D.G.E. Hall, A History of Southeast Asia, 588.
2400 Burmese monks in 1871.\textsuperscript{12} Although the fifth Buddhist Council was a Burmese affair, and so not recognised by the Buddhist world outside Burma, Mindon Min was the sponsor of the event.

The policies of different kings from the beginning of the second millennium ensured the permeation of the Buddha’s teachings in all aspect of Burmese Buddhists’ lives. This made Buddhism the sole religion for defining political legitimacy throughout the millennium-old Burmese monarchical epoch.\textsuperscript{13} Not only from a political aspect, but also from a socio-cultural perspective, Burmese kings held Buddhism as the maker of Burmese culture and social values, and saw ‘being Buddhist’ as a pledge of national allegiance. This situation led Burmese kings to hold an unwelcoming attitude towards Christianity, which came to the land as part of the ‘3-M scheme’\textsuperscript{14} of the Western colonial powers.\textsuperscript{15}

Christianity was seen as a powerful denationalising tool by King Bagyidaw (1819–1837), who asked the first American Baptist missionary, Adoniram Judson, an alarming official question: ‘if the Burmese Christians were real Burmans and whether they dressed like others [Burmese Buddhists]’\textsuperscript{16} In the time of King Thibaw (1878–1885), the last king of the Konbaung dynasty of Burma, the proclamation of the gospel was considered part of the colonialist attempt to control the citizens of Burma, to defame their religion and to inject Burmans with the Western way of thinking, to destroy Burmese cultural identity and to debase Burmese social values.\textsuperscript{17}

3.1.2 Sangha Power Decline and the Colonial Support of Christianity

Historically, the Sangha community immensely influenced Burmese kings, because the Buddhist monastery was the only centre in which to learn basic literacy skills and receive an education. Secondly, because Buddhist principles defined the

\textsuperscript{12} Donald M. Seekins, \textit{Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar)} (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2006), 297.
\textsuperscript{13} David I. Steingberg, \textit{Burma/Myanmar What Everyone Needs to Know} (Oxford: OUP, 2010), 23.
\textsuperscript{14} The ‘3-M’ machinery of the Western colonial powers was comprised of military, merchant and missionary. See La Wu, \textit{Authority of the Messiah and Authenticity of Missions} (Denver, CO: Outskirts Press, Inc., 2007), 147.
\textsuperscript{15} Samuel Ngun Ling, \textit{Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives} (Yangon: Judson Research Centre, 2014), 35.
\textsuperscript{16} Maung Shwe Wa, \textit{Burma Baptist Chronicle} (Rangoon: Board of Publications, Burma Baptist Convention, 1963), 42.
\textsuperscript{17} Samuel Ngun Ling, \textit{Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives}, 35.
characteristics of a just ruler, Buddhist monks helped a king’s power to spread among subjects by admonishing their adherents to obey the law and pay their due taxes, especially in the provinces, where it was more difficult to enforce the law. However, the complete occupation of the British in 1885 imposed a gloomy and strange social order on Buddhist monks. The British protection of Christian missionaries downplayed the powerful role of politicised Burmese Buddhism, and this debased the glorious status of monks. Although Christianity was a de facto state religion as it was the colonialists’ religion, the British rulers both wittingly and unwittingly favoured Christians and the Christian (or animist) ethnic groups. The Karen, Kachin and Chin were recruited into the military police and the army, while Burmans were no longer enlisted into after 1887. The appointment of the Karen national Dr San C. Po, an American-educated physician, to a seat in the Burma legislative council in 1916 indicated the recognition and elevation of educated ethnic Christians by the British rulers. In sum, the protection and support of Christian mission afforded by the British authorities and the loyalty of ethnic Christians, while Burmans were not at heart true to the British government, mutually benefited each other throughout the colonial period.

The removal of the position of the most senior monk (the highest religious authority), the elimination of administratively cohesive ties between kings or rulers and religious authorities, and the introduction of secular education considerably undermined the influence of Buddhism. In the changing colonial rule, the growing number of secular schools, the thriving civil courts and the secular government discredited the prestigious status of the Sangha in all sectors of life. Monks were no longer viewed as the sole source of education, the arbitrators in disputes or the

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18 The Buddha taught: ‘When kings are righteous, the ministers of kings are righteous. When ministers are righteous, brahmans and householders also are righteous. Thus townsfolk and villagers are righteous. This being so, moon and sun go right in their courses. This being so, constellations and stars do likewise; days and nights, months and fortnights, seasons and years go on their courses regularly; winds blow regularly and in due season. Thus the devas are not annoyed and the sky-deva bestows sufficient rain. Rains falling seasonably, the crops ripen in due season. Bhikkhus, when crops ripen in due season, men who live on those crops are long-lived, well-favoured, strong and free from sickness.’ See F.L. Woodward, trans., *The Book of the Gradual Sayings (Anguttara-Nikaya) or More-Numbered Suttas*, vol. II (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2008), 85.
22 Ibid., 141.
recipients of state donations for maintaining religious edifices.\textsuperscript{24} It was for opposing
the British colonial rule that two learned monks, U Ottama and U Wisara, came to
public attention in 1920s.\textsuperscript{25} Under the leadership of U Ottama, who was influenced by
Mahatma Gandhi, the General Council of \textit{Sangha Sammeggi} (GCSS) was formed in
1920, for the purpose of lifting up lay standards of Buddhist practice and giving
political awareness to people to realise the urgency of reclaiming their freedom from
colonial enslavement. The GCSS argued that the wellbeing of religion was dependent
upon the wellbeing of the people who supported it.\textsuperscript{26} As the pro-Christian policies of
the British rule deepened resentment towards Christians, U Ottama bravely
challenged and blamed the lieutenant-governor, Sir Reginald Craddock, in 1922: ‘Out
of taxes paid by Buddhists, missionaries of an alien religion are being paid and fed
and provided for while the monk is being deprived of his natural living.’\textsuperscript{27}

In the pre-colonial period, a culture-bound relationship between kings and
monks was mutually profitable. While a king was responsible for defending and
promoting faith, Buddhism was the crucial bond uniting the Burmese, the Mon, the
Shan and the Arakanese. Although British rule had broken this bond, the traditional
concept of a ruler’s responsibility to protect and support Buddhism was resurrected by
the time of the nation’s independence, in 1948.\textsuperscript{28} U Nu, the first prime minister of
Burma, was a prominent post-colonial figure who attempted to restore the tie between
the ruler and Buddhism. U Nu hosted the Sixth World Buddhist Council of 1954–56
to win the \textit{Sangha} to his cause.\textsuperscript{29} When in 1953 a Christian leader from India
interviewed the Narada Sayadaw of the Brama Vihara in Yangon about the revival of
Buddhism in Burma, it was revealed that the Sayadaw attributed the revival to three
political factors: ‘nationalism, the patronage of the government, and the leadership of
Prime Minister U Nu’.\textsuperscript{30}

Although U Nu’s administration and the two military juntas approximately
restored the status of Burmese Buddhism, the authority and prestige of the most
senior monk throughout the Burmese monarchical periods was never restored, and

\textsuperscript{24} Michael Aung-Thwin and Maitrii Aung-Thwin, \textit{A History of Myanmar Since Ancient Times:
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Donald Eugene Smith, \textit{Religion and Politics in Burma}, 96.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 122.
\textsuperscript{29} Martin Smith, \textit{Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity} (Dhaka, Bangladesh: The University
Press Limited, 1999), 181.
\textsuperscript{30} Donald Eugene Smith, \textit{Religion and Politics in Burma}, 124.
Buddhism was abused in many ways. Accordingly, General Ne Win systematically controlled Buddhist monks throughout his socialist regime, and formed the State Sangha Maha Nayaka – the centralised Supreme Sangha Council of thirty-three member monks – by establishing the hierarchy of monkhood in 1979. Fearing the monks’ history of anti-government activity during the colonial period, the military regime after 1988 tightened its control over the Sangha by taking advantage of conservative senior monks, whom the junta honoured with seats of the highest position in the Supreme Sangha Council.

3.1.3 Post-independence Pagoda-building Administration

Overwhelmed by a tradition of the ruler becoming defender of the faith and a sponsor of constructing pagodas, the first prime minister, U Nu, built the Kaba Aye Pagoda (World Peace Pagoda) in 1952, in preparation for the Sixth Buddhist Council. Consequently, U Nu’s mission, which originated in 1896, benefited Buddhist Sasana by purging extreme factional groups and unifying all Burmese monks under the so-called orthodox Vinaya rules (monastic disciplines). This ensured the support of the majority Buddhists for Nu’s political activities. Similarly, the Maha Wizaya Pagoda, known as the General’s Pagoda, was built for the occasion of the first assembly of the unified orders of Theravāda Buddhism under the political program of General Ne Win in 1980. Neither the Sangha community nor lay Buddhists profited from building the pagoda – only Ne Win’s regime did – as it commemorated the establishment of a state-controlled Supreme Sangha Council.

Moreover, the construction of the Uppatasanti Pagoda, meaning protection against calamity, in Naypyidaw, was completed in 2009 under the guidance of Senior General Than Shwe. The project was likely carried out to ward off ill fortune from

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31 David I. Steingberg, Burma/Myanmar What Everyone Needs to Know, 72.
32 Ibid.
33 Samuel Ngun Ling, Christianity through Our Neighbour’s Eyes: Rethinking the 200 Years Old American Baptist Missions in Myanmar (Yangon: Judson Research Centre, 2014), 119.
35 According to Burmese Buddhism, there are 227 rules, which all members of the Sangha are in demand to obverse. See Donald M. Seekins, Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar), 467.
37 Donald M. Seekins, Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar), 278.
his dictatorship, and to make successful his plan for building a ‘modern nation with flourishing, disciplined democracy’. Despite some claims that the ancient Burmese rulers’ building of pagodas were acts of penance for the wars they conducted, a great number of politically blind Burmese Buddhists are delighted to pay homage to the two new pagodas built under the supervision of two dictators, and credit them too as promoters and protectors of Buddhism. Since the 11th century, the whole country has been filled with ripe-lemon-coloured pagodas as a sign of the Burmese people’s strong faith in Theravāda Buddhism, for which reason Myanmar is renowned as ‘the Golden Land’. Although the politicisation of Buddhism during the pre-colonial periods benefited both rulers and the Sangha community, the same attempt post-independence was exploited by the rulers, while the monks received the virtual homage of top military generals.

3.1.4 Burmese Nationalism’s Identification with Buddhism

Today a popular Burmese nationalistic saying, ‘Buddha-batha Bamar-lumyo/ဗုဒ္ဓိသာသာ ဗမာလူမ်း’, translated as ‘Burmese nationality and Buddhism are unbreakably bound together’, is repeatedly quoted when a Burman proudly makes an outspoken expression of his ethnic nobility: Burmese nationals are more civilised, religious, demure, well-disciplined, well-behaved, dignified, honourable, hospitable and different from others, whom they view to be peoples of less civilised cultures, having emerged out of a religion with lower ethical standards. In reality, a persistent Burmese philosophy – that ‘to be an authentic Burman is to be a Buddhist’ – leads Burmans to blend religion and politics. Such an idea of nationhood marginalises the non-Buddhist citizens of Myanmar, irrespective of their ethnic origins. Especially during the socialist and military regimes, the significant stress of Burmese culture, Burmese history and Buddhism as central to Burmese nationalism led people of other religious backgrounds to feel excluded.

39 Benedict Rogers, Than Shwe: Unmasking Burma’s Tyrant (Chaing Mai: Silkworm Books, 2010), 171.
As the military regime viewed Buddhism alone as the religion which fitted the Burmese style of nation-building, the Ministry of Religious Affairs overtly supported the propagation of Buddhism, especially in hilly regions, where native ethnic Christians predominated. Before quasi-civilian government, which took power in 2011, the Ministry of Religious Affairs did not show respect to the long presence of Christianity and other religions, while every endeavour was made to upgrade, promote and protect Buddhism. Even during the administration of President U Thein Sein (2011–2015), the parliament was prone to follow the voice of Buddhist monks and approve controversial Race and Religion Protection Bills, proposed by nationalist Buddhist monks on 20 August 2015, after accepting the feedback on the proposed draft from the President.

Overall, the history of Myanmar reveals that the longstanding interweaving of Burmese politics, Burmese culture, national identity and Buddhism constitutes one of the most challenging barriers to IRD. Similarly, ethnic armed conflicts and Burmese supremacy cause sporadic outbreaks of violence, and are an enormous barrier to developing genuine dialogue for all social classes in Myanmar.

3.2 Ethnic Conflict and the Problem of Burmese Superiority

As mentioned above, Myanmar is known as the country with the longest on-going civil war in the modern world – a result of disregarding the nation’s composition: eight major ethnicities of 135 sub-racial groups, typifying their respective histories, cultures, languages, social values and religious beliefs, which in turn create the rainbow-like beauty of the country. Until March 2016, the end of the quasi-civilian government led by U Thein Sein, all inclusive political dialogue and non-discriminative religious dialogue, crucial foundations for national reconciliation and peaceful coexistence, have not been established in the Myanmar democratic transition due to unending ethnic armed conflicts and religious discrimination. The ethnic

44 The nationalist Buddhist monks came together and formed ‘Patriotic Association of Myanmar’ (Sāsanaṃsavapaśā, စောင် ဝန်း အစောဆိုင် အသေးစိတ်နှင့် ကြီးမားသော ပညာရေး), known as ‘Ma Ba Tha’ (မဘသ) in June 2013 under the leadership of Ywama Sayadaw Ashin Tilokabhivamsa as chairman. The ultimate goal of Ma Ba Tha is to protect race and Buddhist Sāsana. See Jātiman, Human Rights Shown by the Lord Buddha and Patriotic Articles (Yangon: Shwepyitha Sarpay, 2014), 105. (စောင်ဝန်းပေးပါး မိန်းသားသာကြားနှင့် အမိုးသားေရးဆောင်းပါးမ်ား ရန္ကုန္၊ ဗုဒ္ဓကုမ္ပဏီသာစာေပ၊ ၂၀၁၄)
rivalry of Myanmar is not born of post-colonialism but its roots go back to times even before the Pagan dynasty (1044–1287).

One prominent incident is Anawrahta’s invasion of the Mon kingdom **Ramannadesa** for political and economic reasons in 1056–57, which was depicted by Burmese chronicles of the 18th and 19th centuries as ‘righteous conquest’ (**Dhammavijaya**), a religious activity like the Crusades of 13th-century Europe.\(^{46}\) For 1200 years Burmese-speaking people dominated the making of modern Myanmar. Michael Aung-Thwin has remarked that if the history of Burmese-speaking people was removed from the history of Myanmar, 70 per cent of the country’s actors and nearly all the most important leaders in the making of the country would be excluded.\(^{47}\) The history of Burmese kings as the most powerful rulers in the region spurred a superiority complex (ultranationalism) in Burmans, which pushes other ethnic groups to the periphery of historical importance. For several centuries Burmans’ contemptuous view of ethnic minorities has had an immense impact on the possibility of political and religious dialogues for peacemaking on the basis of equality, respect, honesty and truth-seeking. Burmese ultranationalism is the largest obstruction to building national reconciliation, trust and promoting IRD.

### 3.2.1 Pre-colonial Burmese Supremacy and Ethnic Conflict

Except the Pyu people, who were absorbed into the incoming Burmese groups without armed resistance, several fights, fuelled by disputes over the control of territory, revenue and people, broke out between the dominant Burmese kings and other powerful ethnic groups throughout the pre-colonial eras of old Burma. Consequently, Burmese kings suppressed all their rival ethnic kingdoms as time passed. Like the Mon kingdom, Arakan was the main rival of Burmese kings and finally survived as a tributary state of the suzerainty of Burmese kings since the Pagan dynasty.\(^{48}\) During the Taungoo Dynasty (1531–1752), Bayinnaung (1551–81) was the most significant champion, subduing all ethnic groups and extending the second Burmese Empire to the largest extent. Bayinnaung controlled all territories representing the present geographical area of Myanmar (except the northern part of Arakan), Manipur of India and the Siamese kingdom of Ayutthaya, as they were


\(^{47}\) Ibid., 25.

subordinated to the military power of the Burmese kings during this epoch. In the era of the Konbaung Dynasty (1752–1885), the last Burmese dynasty and the third empire of Burmans, King Bodawpaya (1728–1819) overran the whole kingdom of Arakan in 1784, captured King Thamada and carried away the splendid Arakanese Mahamuni image of the Buddha and 20,000 captives to his capital Amarapura. He controlled all of today’s Myanmar. Overall, the establishment of Burmese supremacy was complete by the end of the 18th century. The aggressive Burmese king’s onerous levying burdens led his ethnic subjects (Arakanese, Mon and Karen) to resist the Burmese court’s exactions; some fled to Siam or Bengal, or hid in the jungles during Burmese forays into Siam in 1794 and 1798. In the pre-colonial period, the Mon and the Arakanese, including the Shan chiefs (sawbwa), were the most powerful rival ethnic groups who revolted against Burmese supremacy.

Despite the third Burmese Empire gaining the whole land of present Myanmar, they failed to integrate all ethnic groups into mainstream Burmese community. Ethnic insurgencies spread across the country. However, armed conflicts between the Burmans and ethnic groups in the pre-colonial period were significantly marked not by ethno-religious discrimination but by territorial expansion and protection of their respective lands. For example, the powerful Burmese king Tabinshwehti (1531–50) granted Smim Payu, a Mon warrior, the position of commandership in his troop, and he became key to the capture of Martarban, the wealthiest city in the Pegu kingdom of the Mon people. Michael A. Aung-Thwin remarked on his finding that the conquest of Thaton by Anawrahta in 1057 and Alaungphaya’s conquest of Pegu in 1757, were not ethnic wars for racial supremacy between Burmans and Mons, but related to acquiring revenues of coastal regions and reasserting dry-zone supremacy over lower Burma’s commercial base. As the main ethnic rivals of Burmans throughout the monarchical period were Buddhists, the persistent conflicts had roots not in racial and religious discrimination but in freedom and territorial control. However, the paradigm shift of political power or supremacy in

49 Ibid., 163168.
51 Ibid., 69.
52 G.E. Harvey, *History of Burma: From the Earliest Times to 10 March 1824, the Beginning of the English Conquest*, 156.
Burma changed with the introduction of British administration in 1826, and the longstanding pride in Burmese supremacy was crushed.⁵⁴ A history of having been the oppressed should teach Burmans to sympathise with the suffering of the discriminated ethnic groups after independence, when the military regimes failed to encourage both political and religious dialogues for conflict resolution and peace building.

3.2.2 The Decline of Burmese Supremacy and the Rise of Neglected Ethnicities

The abolition of the title of monarch during British rule greatly impacted the status of Buddhism, which had been the state religion ever since the reign of Anawrahta. A dramatic change of Buddhism to a religion of subjects exacerbated the agony of Burmans.⁵⁵ During British rule, Burmese political leaders initially opposed Britain’s attempt to permanently attach Burma to the Indian empire. Then they struggled to free Burma from the British government.⁵⁶ As a result, the Government of Burma Act of 1935 was implemented in 1937 by separating Burma from the Province of British India.⁵⁷ However, the administration of Burma did not cover ‘Excluded Areas or Frontier Areas’, representing the Chin, Kachin, Shan and Karenni, as the British governor directly administered them.⁵⁸ Therefore, until today from the Burmese side, the ‘divide and rule’ policy of colonialists has been accused of reifying ethnicity, which led to ethnic nationalism of demanding the state for specialised rights, and mainly recruiting ethnic minorities into the British Burma Army, forming the majority of the troops (Karen, 27.8 per cent; Chin, 22.6 per cent; Kachin, 22.9 per cent; Burmans, 12.3 per cent).⁵⁹ This aggravated the discontent of Burmans about British rule.⁶⁰ The Christian ethnic groups of Burma (the Chin, Kachin, Karen and the Tribal Hills – many smaller hill tribes), which Burmans did not consider a political threat during the monarchical periods, were in a preferential position throughout the era of

⁵⁵ Ibid., 695.
⁵⁶ Ibid., 700.
⁵⁷ Donald Eugene Smith, Religion and Politics in Burma, xxv.
⁵⁹ According to Lian H. Sakhong, the figure of the British Burma Army was different. He wrote: ‘At the close of [World War II] it was 22,000 men strong. Of this number, 3,000 were Chin, 2,000 Kachin, 2,000 Karen and only 1,893 were Burman.’ See Lian H. Sakhong, In Search of Chin Identity: A Study in Religion, Politics and Ethnic Identity in Burma, 194.
⁶⁰ David I. Steingberg, Burma/Myanmar What Everyone Needs to Know, 29.
British rule. This situation scarred Burmans, leading them to view Christianity as a destructive tool of colonial powers.

One year before independence, the leadership of General Aung San, the father of independence, brought together leaders of minority groups (except the Karen who kept hope in the promise of an unofficial British officer an independent state for their support during World War II) to sign the second Panglong Agreement on 12 February 1947, and convinced the British not to separate the minority areas from Burma proper.\(^{61}\) The death of Aung San on 19 July 1947 was a great blow for the minority ethnicities. Other Burmese political leaders and military generals, except Aung San Suu Kyi, were not committed to establish a federal democratic system in compliance with the Panglong Agreement. The Burmese, Mon and Rakhine, in particular, shaped the ethnic rivalry for supremacy\(^ {62}\) during the pre-colonial periods. When the British government declared the independence of Myanmar in 1948, ethnic rivalry re-emerged, with incessant fighting by Burmans: four Christian ethnic groups (the Chin, Kachin, Karen and Karenni), three Buddhist ethnic groups (the Mon, Rakhine and Shan) and other hill ethnic groups (Christians and Animists). In their struggle for ethnic rights and to repel the alleged Burmanisation program, many innocent people were killed, while thousands of ethnic peoples were internally displaced. Although all armed ethnic groups came under attack by the Burmese army, Christian ethnic groups suffered more, alongside the Muslim Rohingya (Bengalis). ‘In an attack on Huay Kaloke refugee camp, on the Thai side of the border, in 1998, the Baptist church was among the first buildings to be torched,’ wrote Benedict Rogers. ‘The Buddhist monastery and the homes around it were left untouched.’\(^ {63}\) Although political struggle between dominant Burmese kings and ethnic groups before British rule was rooted in the claim of territorial and commercial control, in the post-independence period, the conflicts between the military regimes and ethnic armed groups have appeared due to ethno-religious discrimination. This changing situation escalates religion based ethnic nationalism, the most complicated and challenging obstacle to the promotion of IRD in Myanmar.

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\(^{61}\) Ibid., 41.


3.2.3 Burmese Nationalism and Ethnic Group Autonomy Claims

The first post-colonial ethnic insurrection broke out 31 January 1949\textsuperscript{64} under the leadership of the Karen National Union, which was formed on 5 February 1947.\textsuperscript{65} The four slogans of the Karen revolution were independence, equality, national unity and peace.\textsuperscript{66} The death of General Aung San, which was believed to have been masterminded by General Ne Win, not only made the hope of ethnic nationalities bleaker but created a platform for the new prime minister, U Nu,\textsuperscript{67} a devoted Burmese Buddhist nationalist who did not support ethnic nationalism. He presided over the final power transfer from Britain to Burma. He once said: ‘I am a hundred per cent against the creation of Autonomous States for the Karens, Mons and Arakanese.’\textsuperscript{68} The independence constitution of Burma, promulgated in 1947, included the legal right of the existing two states (Shan and Karenni/Kayah) to secede from the Union of Burma after ten years of independence, in 1958. However, the central government did not show any signs of support for the possibility of secession from the union, while political leaders of other five states\textsuperscript{69} demanded either autonomy or independence in their respective regions.\textsuperscript{70}

The unstable and unpromising political climate of U Nu’s leadership led the Karenni to form the second-oldest ethnic armed group, the Karenni National Progressive Party, in 1957 to defend Karenni State, as recognised by the British in 1875.\textsuperscript{71} With the ideology of separatism, the Mon National Liberation Army was born in July 1958.\textsuperscript{72}

The ethnic problems during the period of the short-lived democratic government peaked in 1960. The declaration of Buddhism as the state religion by U Nu, who was said to have ordered 60,000 sand pagodas to be built across Burma,\textsuperscript{64} Christina Fink, \textit{Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule}, 24.\textsuperscript{65} Martin Smith, \textit{Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity}, 89.\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 110.\textsuperscript{67} Although the state was officially secular, U Nu’s establishment of himself as the patron of Buddhism infuriated educated urban politicians and intellectuals, and led him to take a forty-five-day leave of absence from his job to meditate at Mount Popa. See Christina Fink, \textit{Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule}, 26.\textsuperscript{68} Benedict Rogers, \textit{Than Shwe: Unmasking Burma’s Tyrant}, 85–86.\textsuperscript{69} The territories of Burma populated by non-Burman ethnicities gave birth to five new states after independence – Kachin State, Karen State, Mon State, Chin State and Arakan/Rakhine State – without the right of secession from the Union of Burma.\textsuperscript{70} Pascal Khoo Thwe, \textit{From the Land of Green Ghosts: A Burmese Odyssey} (London: Harper Perennial, 2002), 14–15.\textsuperscript{71} Donald M. Seekins, \textit{Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar)}, 245.\textsuperscript{72} ‘New Mon State Party,’ www.mmpeacemonitor.org/component/content/article/57-stakeholders/164-nmsp (accessed 20 January 2016).
accompanied by his regularly offerings to the nats for the purpose of warding off evil and danger, and of provoking the aid of the spirits in his political affairs, pushed Christian minorities to finally choose armed resistance for self-defence and liberation.\(^73\) With the Burmese hegemony over non-Buddhist ethnic groups, Burmese political cunning pressured the Kachin nationalists to start organising armed resistance in February 1961, with the goal of establishing an independent Kachinland, alongside the Karen insurgency led by Karen Christians.\(^74\) The Chin National Organisation, too, went underground with the intention of overthrowing the military junta and restoring democratic government, when General Ne Win dissolved the parliament in 1964.\(^75\)

Political oppression also led to the formation of the Shan State Army in April 1964.\(^76\) When the 1974 Constitution replaced the federalism of the Panglong Agreement with the central controlling system, the hope of the frontier peoples (the Kachin, Karen, Shan, Mon, Karenni, Rakhine and Chin) collapsed, and they intensified their search for political separation from the Union of Burma.\(^77\) The merciless suppression and the launch of the third military coup in 1988 brought about the formation of several new armed groups. Many ethnic minority peoples resented the regime’s goals of bringing all ethnic areas under centralised control and of limiting the use of ethnic minority languages, and were driven to join nationalist ethnic armies and fight to maintain the territories under their control.\(^78\) The Chin’s political patience with the Burmese authoritarian regime ended in March 1988, with the birth of a newly constituted armed revolution under the name of the Chin National Front (CNF).\(^79\) Other armed groups were born in a similar way: the All Burma Students’ Democratic Front (ABSDF) in November 1988;\(^80\) the Myanmar National

\(^{73}\) Donald Eugene Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, 319.
\(^{74}\) Christina Fink, *Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule*, 123.
\(^{77}\) Vum Son, *Zo History: With an Introduction to Zo Culture, Economy, Religion and Their Status as an Ethnic Minority in India, Burma, and Bangladesh* (Aizawl, Mizoram: By the Author, 1986), 220.
\(^{79}\) Donald M. Seekins, *Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar)*, 147.

3.2.4 Burmanisation Schemes Backed by the Military

The concept of Burmese superiority, based on the fact that Burmese were in the majority, has reappeared as a military-backed program of Burmanisation since the onset of the third military coup in 1988. Burmese politicians have long been planning to assimilate all ethnic groups, and thus form one Burmese-dominated community. The basic technique of the Burmanisation scheme is to employ Buddhism in order to assimilate and absorb all ethnic minorities, and fulfil the Burmese dream of one nation, one race and one religion. Having studied the conflicts between Burmans and ethnic minorities, Christina Fink observed: ‘The more the regime tries to assimilate the ethnic nationalities, the more the ethnic nationalities feel they must establish separate political entities in order to maintain their own cultures and identities.’ In order to accomplish the regime’s plan of killing off all ethnic identities, languages and nationalism, the army of 168 battalions in 1988 was expanded to 442 battalions in 1998, with the intention of uprooting all ethnic armed groups who were fighting for freedom, equality, self-determination and identity. In the 1990s, the military authorities imposed the ‘Four Cuts Policy’ (food, funds, information and recruits). This had been an integrated counterinsurgency strategy used in the 1960s by General Ne Win. Subsequently, over 300,000 Shan from 1400 villages left their homes, 40,000 Karens were also displaced, and 20,000 to 30,000

84 Donald M. Seekins, Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar), 400.
86 Vum Son, Zo History: With an Introduction to Zo Culture, Economy, Religion and Their Status as an Ethnic Minority in India, Burma, and Bangladesh, 206.
87 La Wu, Authority of the Messiah and Authenticity of Missions (Denver, CO: Outskirts Press, Inc., 2007), 148.
88 Christina Fink, Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule, 143.
89 Ibid., 28–29. David I. Steinberg maintained, ‘The expansion of the military since 1988 from 168 battalions (198,681 soldiers) is said to be 504 battalions of 826 men each.’ See David I. Steingberg, Burma/Myanmar What Everyone Needs to Know, 102.
90 Donald M. Seekins, Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar), 192.
Karenni were relocated between 1996 and 1999. The junta used cruel methods to kill, destroy, frighten and traumatise ethnic peoples in the military operation zones.

Colonel Van Kulh, commander of the Burmese Army Northwest Command, mentioned the viciousness of the Burmese Army when he warned Chin insurgents in 1964 to ‘better stop’ their anti-government movement, if they did not want to bring hardship and cruelty to their people. He tried to frighten the Chin, saying that many Chin veterans who fought in the Burmese Army against ethnic armed groups still remembered the ruthlessness of the Burmans of the Burmese Army, which burned a Karen congregation alive, ate fried human liver taken from the killed Karen people, and killed many innocent women and children in Kachin State. This may be called a resurgence of the Burmese brutality against the Siamese and Assamese in the 18th century. Burmese troops in many remote areas tore down churches and forced Christians to work on the construction of Buddhist pagodas and monasteries. Moreover, as they pursued ethnic armed soldiers, Burmese troops set alight many Kachin villages.

The former Captain Saw Moe, who fought for the Burmese Army for twenty-five years, uncovered the truth after fleeing to Thailand. Under the system of ‘obey and follow the orders coming from above’, although the order never came in written form, many villages that were believed to support ethnic armed groups in Kachin, Shan and Karen States were burned. He continued: ‘When I was young, I couldn’t say I was Karen at school or in the military because I would be discriminated against . . . It wasn’t that I didn’t have a Karen spirit in Burma, but I couldn’t express my feelings until I got here [Thailand].’ There was a clear need for ethnic minorities, especially Christians, to cover their real identity if they wished to hold higher positions in the Burmese military after 1988.

While armed conflict remains an unsolvable problem between the government and armed ethnic troops, religious fundamentalism ignites the spark of hostility

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91 Christina Fink, Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule, 125126.
92 Vum Son, Zo History: With an Introduction to Zo Culture, Economy, Religion and Their Status as an Ethnic Minority in India, Burma, and Bangladesh, 235.
93 Ibid., 235.
94 Christina Fink, Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule, 144.
95 Maggie Lemere & Zoë West, Nowhere to be Home: Narratives from Survivors of Burma’s Military Regime (San Francisco, CA: McSweeney’s, 2011), 140.
96 Ibid., 179.
97 Ibid., 181.
among civilians of different faith backgrounds. In such a situation, it is extremely difficult to encourage Christian–Buddhist dialogue.

3.3 Religious Fundamentalism

The concept of religious fundamentalism or exclusivism means viewing a particular religion as the only way to salvation, and considering its followers as being responsible for saving the whole world. Specifically, claiming that ‘only Jesus, the only Son of God, saves us from sin’ or that ‘only Muhammad is the final Prophet of God’ or that ‘only the Buddha can show the way toward attaining enlightenment’ is the root cause of religious fundamentalism. According to Karl Keating, the trend of today’s Protestant fundamentalism started when the Social Gospel, Darwinism and the higher criticism of the Bible were adopted into Protestantism, especially in Germany. Historically, the word ‘fundamentalism’ seems to have been derived from a series of booklets called ‘The Fundamentals’, published by the Bible Institute of Los Angeles in 1910–15, to defend fundamental Christian faith and the inerrancy of the Bible from modern critical studies.

In reality, each religion has its own fundamentalist groups that define themselves as defenders of their particular faith, especially in times when they feel their religion is under attack. Fundamentalists are not merely religious conservatives but people willing to fight to defend their views. The culmination of fundamentalism yields a wide range of fighting – from offensive doctrinal or ideological disputes (verbal polemical attack) to waging ‘just wars’ for the strong or ‘guerrilla warfare’ as self-defence for the weak (bloody fighting). Although the word ‘fundamentalism’ began to appear in the early 20th century, the symptoms of modern fundamentalism can be seen in ancient religious communities. Amalodoss pointed out that the scriptures of all religions except Buddhism are full of ‘just war’.

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103 The burst of fundamentalism or exclusivism ends in violence in the name of self-defence, just war, destruction, hatred, social disintegration and the loss of several lives and properties.
even though Buddhist fundamentalists are as violent as the fundamentalists of other religions.¹⁰⁴

3.3.1 The Preconditions of Fundamentalism

The so-called fundamentalist movements, particularly in India, Sri Lanka (Asia) and many parts of the Islamic world, appear as a resistance to Western colonialism, Western influence and secularism, and specifically to Christian missions.¹⁰⁵ There are many ways to explain the emergence of fundamentalism when considering particular locations and cultures, yet almost all forms of fundamentalism have common features. First, fundamentalism is related to misunderstanding signs of the fast-changing world, and failing to cope with the impacts of this change. In our time, Islam is now a major European religion; Buddhism has become an American religion; Christianity is spreading across Asia; and the secularist and consumerist ethos of capitalism has become a global reality.¹⁰⁶ Reflecting on the global stream of change, the sociologist Nancy Ammerman stated: ‘Fundamentalism only exists where there is a conscious opposition to forces of change and conscious opposition can only exist where there are forces of change.’¹⁰⁷

Secondly, fear is one of the main constituents of religious fundamentalism. As fear is normally rooted in a history of ill-treatment, the politico-economic and religious power of the majorities or power-holding groups can pose a threat to the minorities or the weak, based on their past history.¹⁰⁸ Suspicion about the motive of the majority, caused by distrust, mutual injustice and differences, exacerbates the fear of minorities; such a situation becomes a serious obstacle to IRD.¹⁰⁹

Third, and most obviously, a characteristic of the fundamentalist position is complacency and a lack of self-criticism.¹¹⁰ For fundamentalists, an attitude of self-sufficiency becomes a concrete and impenetrable wall. Having a high degree of

¹⁰⁴ Michael Amaladoss, Beyond Dialogue: Pilgrims to the Absolute, 22.
¹¹⁰ James Barr, Fundamentalism, 162.
confidence, they believe that there is a correlation between their opinion and the truth, and feel that they do not need any other viewpoint on scripture or faith.\textsuperscript{111} A fundamentalist’s equation of the biblical ‘Word’ and his or her own interpretation makes absolute his or her view as the only true faith position, which cannot be adjusted to admit other positions.\textsuperscript{112} Fundamentalists heavily emphasise the scripture and its accuracy and infallibility, and with an anti-intellectual mindset vociferously oppose critical scholarship.\textsuperscript{113}

Fourthly, a negligence of learning conditions religious fundamentalism. This entails an arrogant mentality, caused by insufficient knowledge of one’s own religion and of other religions. A person’s deficient knowledge of religions, including his or her own, leads him or her to unwittingly embrace a polemical approach towards other religions. For example, Christian polemicists pick up the Qur’anic representation of Jesus in their attempt to undermine Islam by exposing Muhammad as a fraud who did not receive direct divine revelation, and mention the wrong information about Jesus coming from heretics or Jews hostile to Christianity.\textsuperscript{114} Not knowing that religion and theology are human expressions of the ‘ultimate reality/mystery’ (personal God or impersonal Truth/Dhamma), which is inescapably flawed and full of limitations, expedites the growth of polemical fundamentalist movements.\textsuperscript{115} Fundamentalists adopt an apocalyptic view of the human race, seeing the world as evil and destined to close its existence in a horrible, explosive end; this shatters their belief in the fruit of a wide range of learning, and their otherworldliness blinds them to any recognition of the goodness of God’s creation.\textsuperscript{116}

Fifth, misunderstandings about conversion lead to the worst type of fundamentalism. In a religious sense, the word ‘conversion’ generally denotes two things: ‘changing one’s religious affiliation’\textsuperscript{117} and ‘the change of one’s attitude to

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{112} Thomas F. O’Meara, \textit{Fundamentalism: A Catholic Perspective} (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 12.
  \item \textsuperscript{113} James Barr, \textit{Escaping from Fundamentalism} (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1984), 29.
  \item \textsuperscript{114} Neal Robinson, ‘Christian and Muslim Perspective on Jesus in the Qur’an,’ in \textit{Fundamentalism & Tolerance: An Agenda for Theology and Society}, ed. Andrew Linzey and Peter Wexler (London: Beliewe Publishing, 1991), 93.
  \item \textsuperscript{115} Peggy Morgan, ‘Buddhist Christianity,’ in \textit{Fundamentalism and Tolerance: An Agenda for Theology and Society}, eds., Andrew Linzey and Peter Wexler, 107.
  \item \textsuperscript{116} Thomas F. O’Meara, \textit{Fundamentalism: A Catholic Perspective}, 12.
  \item \textsuperscript{117} ‘Conversion from one religion/sect to another’ is normally caused by the unethical effort and pressure of religious fundamentalists.
\end{itemize}
life’,\textsuperscript{118} based on metanoia, as taught by the New Testament.\textsuperscript{119} Although in the West conversion (ethical) from one religion to another is accepted as a human right and personal choice made because of one’s experiences and spiritual quest,\textsuperscript{120} the Christian fundamentalists’ efforts to, for example, convert Sri Lankans unethically saddens local Buddhists and provokes a furious reaction. In 2003 the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka underwent 107 incidents of violence and threat as consequences of resisting Christian fundamentalism.\textsuperscript{121} Being very limited in one’s knowledge of the subtle nature of conversion or ethical conversion, and failing to acknowledge others’ religious rights and sensibilities, not only distorts one’s religious values but also desecrates freedom of religion, resulting in unhealthy conversion. Therefore, the Inter-Religious Consultation on Conversion\textsuperscript{122} recommended that ‘conversion by unethical means [is] discouraged and rejected by one and all. There should be transparency in the practice of inviting others to one’s faith.’\textsuperscript{123} In reality, conversion means ‘turning away from evil and turning to God’, and it is both spiritual and cognitive, embracing the whole person (the body, heart, mind and soul).\textsuperscript{124} True conversion is a free personal choice, and does not mean abandoning one’s old faith as false.\textsuperscript{125}

Sixth, stereotypical images of other people’s social, moral, attitudinal, religious and racial status aggravates the fundamentalist polemical position. One instance is a stereotypical picture of Christianity, as it compares with Islam. While Islam is seen as a religion of war and violence, the stereotype persists that Christianity

is a religion of peace and love – as if Christians had never used the term ‘holy war’, or killed those who were considered heretics or pagans. In Myanmar, missionaries passed down their stereotypical view of Buddhists to native Christians, regarding non-Christians as heathen, backward, uncivilised, uncultured, inferior and hell-bound. In missionaries’ writings, Burmese Buddhists were accused of dishonesty, falsehood, sensuality, love of pleasure, attachment to worldly objects, rapaciousness, bloodthirstiness, cruelty, vindictiveness, treachery, deceit, and a proneness to robbery ending in blood. By contrast, Christians are stereotyped by Burmese Buddhists as stooges of Western imperialism, who attempt to control Myanmar peoples intellectually, culturally, economically and politically. Silently echoing the Burmese King Thibaw’s proclamation that English were ‘heretic barbarians’ who threatened the Burmese religion, national customs and race, today many Burmese Buddhists still see Christianity as a religion of less-civilised ethnic minority groups. They contemptuously view Christians as second-class citizens, or as disloyal and untrustworthy citizens.

The seventh point is the memory of the agonising past. While fundamentalism in the West emerged as a reaction to liberalising trends in American Protestantism, non-Christian fundamentalism in the East appeared as a movement of resistance to Western influence. In the Islamic world, re-Islamisation or Islamic fundamentalism is a decisive attempt to resist the Western world, which overshadows all Islamic countries technically, politically, militarily and economically, intimidating the Islamic consciousness and worldview. The nostalgic memories of the most glorious Islamic empire of the past, which was superior to all European Christian nations, aggravates the Islamic world, as Western civilisation, now partly secular, has eroded the Islamic

126 Omid Safi, Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism (New York: One World), 266.  
128 Helen G. Trager, Burma through Alien Eyes: Missionary Views of the Burmese in the Nineteenth Century (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1966), 98.  
129 Samuel Ngun Ling, Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives (Yangon: Judson Research Centre, Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2014), 35.  
130 Donald Eugene Smith, Religion and Politics in Burma, 86.  
131 A persisting reality in rural areas is that Karen Buddhists are called well-cultured, civilised, cultivated and courteous Karens, and Karen Christians are called barbarous, wild and uncultured Karens by Karen Buddhist monks.  
133 Elsayed Elshahed, ‘What is the Challenge of Contemporary Islamic Fundamentalism?’ in Fundamentalism as an Ecumenical Challenge, eds., Hans Kung and Jurgen Moltmann, 65.
cultural heritage and its socio-religious values. In Burma proper during the British colonial rule, the abolition of the Burmese monarchy – a national and religious symbol representing the union of Buddhism and kingship – enraged Buddhist monks, who became the first religious nationalists in the anti-colonial struggle. The removal of socio-religious status and power of monks by the British government became the starting point of the Burmese-Buddhist fundamentalism led by monks.

3.3.2 Burmese-Buddhist Fundamentalism before Independence

Most fundamentalist movements are self-defensive, born out of inferiority complexes in many parts of the world. By contrast, apart from the colonial occupation, what one may label as Buddhist fundamentalism of Burma during the monarchical and post-colonial periods stems from a Burmese superiority complex and the ruler–Sangha relationship, similar to the relationship between Western Christianity and Islam in the epoch of the great Islamic empire: endless violent and non-violent campaigns to converting and penetrate the other peoples. As Islamic fundamentalism is rooted in the memory of the Arab-Islamic world empire, which was superior to all others in its heyday, and in an understanding of Islam as the divinely appointed religious and political order for the world, the Burmese Buddhist fundamentalism also is rooted in the pride of three powerful Burmese empires (the Pagan, Taungoo and Konbaung dynasties) and holds Buddhism as the only nation-guarding religion.

Historically, King Anawrahta (of the Pagan dynasty) conquered the Mon kingdom in the name of ‘holy war’ or ‘just war’, and captured the sacred Buddhist scriptures, regarding himself as the most powerful king in the region who alone deserved to preserve the Tipitaka, the Holy Buddhist Scriptures. Similarly, King Bayinnaung (of the Taungoo dynasty) exerted his royal power to convert the animistic Shan to Buddhism by prohibiting the killing of slaves, horses and elephants of a chieftain upon his death; numerous monasteries were built in Shan country, and

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135 Donald Eugene Smith, Religion and Politics in Burma, 84–85.
learned monks sent there to teach the *Dhamma*. As part of efforts to preserve the orthodox Theravāda doctrine and disciplines, King Hsinbyushin and King Bodawpaya (of the Konbaung dynasty) executed heretics in the 18th century.

When the British took total control of Burma in 1886, the nationalistic fundamentalism of the Burmese Buddhist movement started to take a different form. The whole of Upper Burma revolted against the British colonisers immediately after King Thibaw was exiled to India, because the king was the pivot of the mundane and psycho-spiritual worlds of Burmese Buddhists – perhaps similar to the disarray if the Pope were removed from the Catholic world. The marginalisation of the Buddhist faith in society, especially while ethnic Christians were in favour with the colonial rulers, inflamed the Burmese Buddhists’ resistance to Western Christian colonisers.

Comparable to the secular education introduced by the British government, Christian missionary schools quickly became public education centres of immense influence; Judson College became a college of the new University of Rangoon in 1920. Native Christians’ arrogant attitude (inherited from Western missionaries) towards Buddhists – viewing them as followers of a pagan religion or headed for hell – was compounded by the colonial rulers’ appointment of educated Christians to high-ranking government positions. A number of Baptists, for example, became prominent leaders at the national level.

With the view that Christian missionary activity was a Western colonial tool, the leading Buddhist monk U Ottama accused the British government of demeaning the Burmese religion and culture by corrupting the moral lives of the citizens. The number of opium users, thieves, dacoits and drunkards noticeably increased under British rule, compared with the time of the Burmese kings. Meanwhile, the first public controversy between Christians and Buddhists broke out as a religious debate.

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139 Ibid., 24–25.
140 Ibid., 28.
142 Ibid., 216.
144 Samuel Ngun Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives*, 64.
145 Samuel Ngun Ling, *Christianity through Our Neighbour’s Eyes: Rethinking the 200 Years Old American Baptist Missions in Myanmar*, 39.
over which religion (Buddhism or Christianity) is ‘right and better’; on 1 May 1936 the debate occurred in a Chin village in Pyay district, Kyauk Kwin. Of around eighty households, most of the villagers were Christians. While Christians were actively extending their mission under British protection, Buddhists’ antagonism towards British colonial rule was coupled with a growing Christian influence in all sectors of life. Although the debate, led at a national level by prominent religious teachers from each side, was ended peacefully, sixty households of Chin Christians changed their religion on the spot, because they felt Buddhism was ‘right and better’. It was a great achievement for Buddhists, although Buddhist monks were despondent at being subject to British secular law from the time Sangha lost the patronage of the state. Although the Buddhist nationalistic movement had struggled from a defensive position during British rule, the new phase of Buddhist nationalism appeared as ‘Burmanisation’ once the first prime minister, U Nu, assumed power in 1948.

3.3.3 Post-independence Buddhist Fundamentalist Movement and Ethnic Minorities

After independence, Buddhism again became the state religion. There are three remarkable courses of Burmese Buddhism since the Pagan era: (1) the royal patronage and the power of Buddhism, obtained in the monarchical periods, ended in 1886 with the disestablishment of Buddhism as the state religion; (2) the replacement of monastic education with secular and Christian missionary education systems during the colonial rule gave birth to implacable Burmese Buddhist nationalism, and the unalterable Buddhist mentality of viewing Christianity as a destructive colonial religion; and (3) the special protection given to Christians by the British shifted to

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147 One of the prior agreements to twelve points before the debate said that if one household from any side declared to change its religion immediately after the close of the debate, the religion which such a newly changing household had abandoned would be declared ‘defeated’, and a newly accepted religion would be announced as the ‘winner religion’.
Since then, Burmese politicians and military officers strove to accomplish their Burmanisation scheme. Just as the Burmese kings had wiped out the Pyu people and their historical heritages, other native races of the same religion (the Mon, Shan and Arakanese) have been culturally distorted and gradually assimilated.\textsuperscript{154}

For example, the Arakanese monks charged that the U Nu’s government, called the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League, was encouraging the Mujahids, a Muslim insurgent group, in order to weaken the Arakanese \textit{Thawthuyana} Monks Association, which had long been known for demanding a separate Arakanese state.\textsuperscript{155} Being a devoted nationalistic Buddhist leader, U Nu’s tenacity, amid the bitter opposition of Christian ethnic groups, in restoring the state patronage of Buddhism peaked when he declared Buddhism the state religion on 26 August 1961,\textsuperscript{156} under pressure from three \textit{Sangha} organisations,\textsuperscript{157} who threatened to organise mass demonstrations if the government neglected the demand.\textsuperscript{158} With the exception of the Roman Catholic Church and the Burma Hindus, various Muslim organisations\textsuperscript{159} and the Burma Christian Council (representing Protestant churches) publicly opposed the state religion bill.\textsuperscript{160}

Since then, Myanmar Christian fundamentalism – rooted among ethnic Christians in the idea that the saved are responsible for converting the whole country to Christianity – has evolved into a widespread defensive Christian ethnic nationalism.\textsuperscript{161} Christian ethnic groups have become more convinced that they cannot

\begin{itemize}
\item Samuels Ngun Ling, \textit{Christianity through Our Neighbour’s Eyes: Rethinking the 200 Years Old American Baptist Missions in Myanmar}, 56.
\item La Wu, \textit{Authority of the Messiah and Authenticity of Missions}, 149.
\item Donald Eugene Smith, \textit{Religion and Politics in Burma}, 199.
\item Samuel Ngun Ling, \textit{Christianity through Our Neighbour’s Eyes: Rethinking the 200 Years Old American Baptist Missions in Myanmar}, 118.
\item The three \textit{Sangha} organisations which made a demand to U Nu’s administration in May 1956 that ‘Buddhism be declared the state religion of Burma’ were the \textit{Maha Thawthuyana} Association of Rangoon, the \textit{Tahan Nge} (Young Monks) Association of Mandalay and the Arakan \textit{Thawthuyana} Association.
\item Donald Eugene Smith, \textit{Religion and Politics in Burma}, 233.
\item The Muslim organisations that defied the state religion legislation were the Ulama Association, the Muslim Central Fund Trust, the Arakanese Muslim Association, the All Burma Muslim Students’ Union and the Burma Muslim Organisation.
\end{itemize}
maintain their ethnic identities without protecting Christianity, much as Burmans cannot think about nationality apart from Buddhism.\textsuperscript{162}

General Ne Win brought U Nu’s systematic marginalisation of non-Buddhist religions to a climax when, without any reason, he ordered Christian missionaries\textsuperscript{163} to leave the country in 1964.\textsuperscript{164} He also nationalised all Christian mission schools, hospitals, national mass media service and commercial enterprises in 1965.\textsuperscript{165} To conciliate non-Buddhists, especially Christian ethnic groups, the 1974 Constitution nullified U Nu’s establishment of Buddhism as the state religion. However, since then Buddhism has become a religion of unwritten special power, backed by the state; such power, invalid on paper but real in practice, limits religious freedom and makes ethnic Christians peripheral.\textsuperscript{166}

In this situation, ethnic Christians consider Buddhism as a destructive element of Burmanisation, much as Burmans consider Christianity. To control the two most Christianised states, successive military regimes have extended the strength of military power in Chin State from two to fourteen battalions since 1998, and from twenty-four to forty-one battalions in Kachin State since 1994.\textsuperscript{167} Ethnic minorities are unlikely to be allowed again to study their languages in government schools since the junta took power in September 1988,\textsuperscript{168} although U Nu’s administration allowed the languages of ethnic groups for five years in primary schools and for three years by General Ne Win.\textsuperscript{169} Due to the dictatorship’s Burmanisation scheme, the church has become the solitary resource for teaching ethnic languages and maintaining cultural identities. Being seen by sceptical generals and military-appointed officials as having supported British colonial rule, Christians, regardless of race, find it difficult to rise to high-ranking positions in the civil service, and impossible in the army.\textsuperscript{170}

\textsuperscript{162} Samuel Ngun Ling, \textit{Christianity through Our Neighbour’s Eyes: Rethinking the 200 Years Old American Baptist Missions in Myanmar}, 113–114.
\textsuperscript{163} ‘Christian missionaries’ for General Ne Win meant all foreign Christian denominational missionaries, Christian medical doctors, educational teachers and humanitarian social workers.
\textsuperscript{164} Samuel Ngun Ling, \textit{Christianity through Our Neighbour’s Eyes: Rethinking the 200 Years Old American Baptist Missions in Myanmar}, 120.
\textsuperscript{165} Samuel Ngun Ling, \textit{Theological Themes for Our Times: Reflections on Selected Themes of the Myanmar Institute of Theology} (Yangon: Judson Research Center, Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2007), 158.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 121.
\textsuperscript{167} David I. Steingberg, \textit{Burma/Myanmar What Everyone Needs to Know}, 165.
\textsuperscript{168} Christina Fink, \textit{Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule}, 117.
\textsuperscript{169} Samuel Ngun Ling, \textit{Christianity through Our Neighbour’s Eyes: Rethinking the 200 Years Old American Baptist Missions in Myanmar}, 120.
\textsuperscript{170} Christina Fink, \textit{Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule}, 222.
In the mid-1990s, Lieutenant-General Myo Nyunt, the Minister of Religious Affairs, pressured the Myanmar Council of Churches to stop Myanmar Christians’ use of a Pali word, Suttan, for ‘Proverb’, and to cease using caps and gowns in divinity colleges, as they were being used in the graduation ceremonies of secular colleges.\(^\text{171}\) With the idea that the conversion of ethnic Christians to Buddhism would reduce their strong desire for separatism, the military regime built up a common national identity on the basis of Buddhist principles, culture and values, while systematically marginalising ethnic languages, cultures and Christian values. Consequently, Christians can no longer concentrate on extending Christian mission among Burmans, but try to de-Burmanise themselves by protecting their ethnic identities and Christian missionary legacies.\(^\text{172}\)

In order to transform Chin State, which has one of the largest concentrations of Christians in Myanmar, into a Buddhist state,\(^\text{173}\) the military government initiated in 1994 a systematic assimilation program called the Border Areas and National Races Youth Development Training School, locally known as ‘Na Ta La’ after its Burmese acronym.\(^\text{174}\) From 3057 trainees in twenty-nine Na Ta La schools\(^\text{175}\) across Myanmar, one-third were trained in nine Na Ta La schools in Chin State.\(^\text{176}\) Run by the Ministry for Border Affairs, and with the involvement of the Hill Regions Buddhist Missions under the Department for Promotion and Propagation of Sasana (Buddhism), several trainees of Na Ta La schools, irrespective of their religion, were coerced to dress in saffron robes and shave their heads, and were cut off from their parents.\(^\text{177}\) The government-funded free education and vocational training offered in Na Ta La schools unwillingly but irresistibly led many poor Chin families to send

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\(^{171}\) Ibid., 223.

\(^{172}\) Samuel Ngun Ling, *Christianity through Our Neighbour’s Eyes: Rethinking the 200 Years Old American Baptist Missions in Myanmar*, 225.

\(^{173}\) This project is part of the Burmese government’s vision for nation-building, propagandised by a slogan: ‘To be a patriotic Burmese citizen is to be a Buddhist.’


\(^{175}\) The locations of the twenty-nine Na Ta La schools across Myanmar are: Chin State – 9, Shan State – 7, Kachin State – 4, Sagaing Region – 2, Naga Self-administered Zone – 2, Rakhine State – 1, Yangon Region – 1, Magway Region – 1, Karenni State – 1 and Karen State – 1.


\(^{177}\) Ibid., 98.
their children to Na Ta La schools. Consequently, between 1994 and 2012 more than 1000 young Chins were converted to Buddhism.\footnote{Shaikh Azizur Rahman, ‘Burma’s Chin Christians face persecution in Buddhist Na Ta La schools,’ www.thestar.com/news/world/2012/12/27/burmas_chin christians_face_persecution_in_buddhist_na_tala_schools.html# (accessed 29 February 2016).}

In the military-backed Burmanisation scheme, Christian ethnic groups, together with other non-Christian ethnic minorities, can choose nothing but armed resistance for their survival, and for the establishment of a federal democratic nation that guarantees equality, autonomy and self-determination.\footnote{Pum Za Mang, ‘Burman, Burmanisation and Betrayal,’ \textit{Studies in World Christianity}, 173.} In the name of clearing insurgent groups, many targeted churches were set on fire by the junta’s troops. Christians in frontier and remote areas feel affronted and humiliated by the use of church buildings as temporary Burmese soldiers’ camps, by the interruption of their worship services, and by the forcible removal of porters from their worship halls.\footnote{‘Soldiers use houses, church building in Paletwa for temporary camp,’ www.chinlandguardian.com/index.php/chin-news/item/2336-soldiers-use-houses-churches-in-paletwa-for-temporary-camp (accessed 25 February 2016).}

As a means of repressing non-Buddhist religions (especially Islam and Christianity), ethnic languages and cultures, the military government enticed poor ethnic Christians to change their religion by offering them food allowances and exemptions from forced labour. ‘The military came and offered rice and money to those who converted to Buddhism,’ wrote Christina Fink about one incident that occurred in a Christian village of 200 households in Tamu township. ‘Some were also given buffaloes and land for cultivating rice. Fifty houses converted. One man who converted was then appointed by the military as the headman.’\footnote{Christina Fink, \textit{Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule}, 223.} The Burmese-Buddhist-led policy included conversion for financial incentives, food rations, job promotion and security; people were no longer targeted for human rights abuses and local power.\footnote{Chin Human Rights Organisation, \textit{Threats to Our Existence: Persecution of Ethnic Chin Christians in Burma}, 89.} Because of this enticement, many poor and vulnerable ethnic Christians in frontiers had no alternative but to regretfully adopt Buddhism, without being convinced intellectually, spiritually or psychologically.
Chapter 4

Christian–Buddhist Dialogue on the Eight Beatitudes and the Noble Eightfold Path

The principle concern of Chapter 4 is to find theological foundations for promoting Christian–Buddhist dialogue in long-suffering Myanmar, in order to restore genuine national reconciliation and peace based on Jesus’s teaching and the kernel teaching of the Buddha. The key teaching of Christianity is found in the Sermon on the Mount, while Buddhism’s is found in the Middle Way. The nucleus of the Sermon on the Mount is the ‘Kingdom of God’, the centre of Jesus’s message and of the Christian mission, whereas Buddhists term the pith of the Buddha’s teaching as ‘Nibbāna’, the ultimate goal of Buddhism. The road to the attainment of Nibbāna is called the Middle Way, which the Buddha scrupulously taught by categorising eight divisions, ‘the Noble Eightfold Path’. Jesus also portrayed the nature of Kingdom life by ‘the Eight Beatitudes’, through which people gain interiorised knowledge of God.

This chapter will deal with a ‘core-to-core’ dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity. It will explore the fact that the Buddhists and Christians of Myanmar, who represent over 94.1 per cent of the population, have a great deal of ethico-spiritual value, and can contribute to the restoration of justice, peace and harmony in the land. As this chapter is an attempt to enhance Christian–Buddhist dialogue in Myanmar through a dialogical approach, each section is not an exegetical work but a call to seek the foundational moral qualities of the two teachings, so that both Buddhists and Christians can cultivate an attitude of multi-faith, peaceful coexistence and work together for the good of all citizens of Myanmar, regardless of religion or race.

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3 According to the 2014 Census, Buddhists constituted 87.9 per cent of the total population of the Union of Myanmar, Christians 6.2 per cent, Muslims 4.3 per cent, and Hindus 0.5 per cent. See Moe Min, ‘The Population of Buddhists slightly going down, Christians and Muslims growing in number,’ www.7daydaily.com/story/70815 (accessed 22 July 2016).
4.1 Commonalities between the Great Teachers Respective Teaching

The great religious teachers were born in different times and different places, with different settings, concepts and languages used in their teachings, with different forms of social influences and cultures they grew up with, and with different religious backgrounds. A shallow thought may lead people to think that saying there are commonalities between the Beatitudes and the Noble Eightfold Path is nonsense, unprofitable and unsound. However, in-depth study reveals shared commonalities, towards which both Buddhists and Christians are directed.

Emmet Fox is right to remark that the Sermon on the Mount opens with the Eight Beatitudes, constitutes a general summary of Christian teaching which is highly characteristic of the old Oriental approach to religious and philosophical teaching, and recalls the Eightfold Path of Buddhism, the Ten Commandments of Moses and other such groupings of ideas.\(^4\) Similarly, Walpola Rahula explains that the Buddha devoted himself for forty-five years to teach the Noble Eightfold Path by using various ways and different words to make different people his followers, according to the stage of their development and their capacity to understand.\(^5\) Jose Ignacio Cabezon, a Cuban Buddhist professor, confirms the resonation of the Beatitudes (Mark 5:3–10) with Buddhist doctrine.\(^6\) While Jesus summarised his teachings of the earthly Kingdom of God in the Beatitudes, the Buddha compacted all his teachings as well, into the Noble Eightfold Path or the Middle Way.

The commonality of the Beatitudes and the Noble Eightfold Path is identifiable in the characteristics of the Kingdom of God – the real end of all forms of mourning, and, as in the Nibbāna, the total elimination of mental defilements which cause sufferings. In this regard, Burnett Hillman Streeter prudently noted: ‘The moral teaching of the Buddha has a remarkable resemblance to the Sermon on the Mount.’\(^7\) Observing similarities and ‘Essence-connection’ between the Buddha’s teachings and the Four Gospels, many modern scholars, such as Albert J. Edmunds and Dwight Goddard, wrote of the possibility of Jesus being influenced by Buddhist teachings, and gave many examples in their writings. However, Marcus J. Borg is not of the

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same opinion, affirming the impossibility of any historical connection between Jesus’s and Buddha’s teachings. He succinctly expressed his view regarding ‘Essence-connection’ between Buddhism and Christianity: ‘It is spiritual truth, not historical fact, that matters.’

While Jesus taught his followers about the Kingdom of God by utterly depending on the spiritual authority, which is derived from his oneness with God the Father, the Buddha also showed his audience the way to *Nibbāna* as an enlightened one without relying on any external source of power. Although the two teachers and the teaching methods they employed were totally different, the ultimate goal or the essence of each religion is identifiable to one another: real happiness or ultimate liberation from suffering or the power of sin. Marcus J. Borg described the similarities and the major difference of the two great religious teachers, who not only instructed people but also lived what they taught:

Both Jesus and the Buddha opened up the religious life to marginalised people, stressed the interior life, and inaugurated reformist movements. I agree that the major difference is Jesus much greater emphasis on social justice, which leads to a further difference: Jesus was killed, his life cut short because he was a social prophet, whereas the Buddha died from food poisoning. Jesus’ public activity was thus very brief, perhaps as little as a year, compared to the forty or fifty years of the Buddha. To return to similarities, I cite two more, both Jesus and the Buddha had transforming enlightenment experiences of a mystical kind at about age thirty. Both became teachers of a convention-subverting wisdom flowing out of their enlightenment experiences.

Although there are some differences, the following sections will emphasise the commonalities and the ‘Essence-connection’ between the Kingdom of God and *Nibbāna*, together with how Jesus and the Buddha lived their respective teachings. As the Kingdom of God is at the heart of Jesus’s teaching, the main focus of the Beatitudes is to present certain aspects of the Kingdom of God, which characterised by inner peace, joy, hope, good news (Matt 11:4–5), comfort and freedom from the bondage of sin: the end of mourning, righteousness, experience of forgiveness and reconciliation and social reality (inheriting the earth). Similarly, the Eightfold Path

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8 Ibid., 9.
(atthangika-magga) deals with the path leading to the extinction of suffering, called Nibbāna.  

4.1.1 The Kingdom of God

The ultimate goal of Christianity is neither paradise nor heaven, but to bring people to the Kingdom of God, which Jesus has already inaugurated. Jesus did not come to fix the world-escaping mindset of his followers but to help them to shine their light in this world. To change this conventional Christian mindset, Marcus Borg reminded his fellow Christians of wrong conception: ‘The natural assumption was that Jesus was talking about heaven, that is, about an afterlife. But the Kingdom of God is not about heaven; it is for the earth.’ Jesus on no account used heavenly things to draw people’s attention unethically, but focused on genuine change of their sinful hearts and on making their respective lives ‘new creation in Christ’, called ‘conversion’. To make it simple amid the theologically unsound understandings of many, conversion is a mental process of turning away from sin and of beginning a new way of living good life.

Viewing conversion as an ongoing process and a starting point for moving from the orbit of self-centredness and self-created prisons to other centeredness or Christ-centeredness, followed by self-giving love, Laurence Freeman stated: ‘Paul’s conversion continued until he paid the supreme price of his faith, martyrdom in Rome.’ The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue defined the word ‘conversion’ as ‘general movement towards God, the humble and penitent return of the heart to God in the desire to submit one’s life more generously to him.’ Spiritual conversion therefore means being wholly committed to the Reign of God. Genuine conversion is a life-changing seal of meeting with Jesus, the gateway of entering the Kingdom of God both here on earth and for eternity. Herman Hendrickx concisely described the nature of the Kingdom of God:

    The Kingdom of God is both present and future reality, realisation of God’s will – having both individual political dimension, free gift which demands unlimited openness and undivided commitment, the establishment of God’s rule, the

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12 Matthew 5:13–16.
14 Laurence Freeman, *Jesus the Teacher Within* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 158.
15 *Dialogue and Proclamation* (11).
realisation of his saving plan here on earth, and the manifestation of God’s unconditional goodness to human. If God’s rule is accepted, a man can also be his true self.16

Jesus did not give a clear expression of the Kingdom of God in a systematic way. However, his overall teaching lucidly shows that the Kingdom of God is both apocalyptic and historical; that the fulfilment of God’s will is going to be consummated at the end of history; that it is a real source of divine power to overcome evil; and that it is the channel of bringing people to the blessings of God’s Reign, which has already come in the person and the ministry of Jesus.17 The idea of the eternal Kingdom of God which Jesus proclaimed 2000 years ago is not new, but a repetition of what God has promised David as a reward for his faithfulness to God through saintly prophets.18 Sociopolitically speaking, the Kingdom signifies justice for the poor, the widowed and the orphaned, recovery of sight for the blind, recovery of hearing for the blind, and recovery of injured or malfunctioned legs for the lame.19

In his Kingdom mission, Jesus declared his anointment by the Spirit of God for the purpose of proclaiming the good news to the poor, sinners and lowly people, and to fully dedicate himself to the release of prisoners, to the recovery of sight for the blind, to the setting free of broken victims and to the comfort of the suffering people.20 The ultimate aim of the Kingdom of God or God’s Reign is to overthrow the evil kingdom ruled by the powers of evil, to set the whole of creation free from the bondage of decay, to restructure human society by restoring justice, peace and joy, with the help of the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:17), and to restore humans’ true authenticity and dignity.21 In a life which has fully accepted and lived the Kingdom of God, although not yet perfectly, there is no room for exploitation of the poor, the handicapped or the weak, and no yielding to egotism, but instead a firm commitment to stand for love, peace and justice.22 To sink into God’s Reign is to become both an ethico-spiritually and physically free human. Subsequently, to become a liberated

16 See Herman Hendrickx, C.I.C.M., Sermon on the Mount (Manila: East Asia Pastoral Institute, 1979), 2.
22 Bernard Haring, The Beatitudes: Their Personal and Social Implications, 14.
person in the loving care of God is to gain real happiness – the essence of the Kingdom of God.

4.1.2 Jesus as the Embodiment of the Kingdom of God

Historically, the life of Jesus manifested what the Kingdom of God or God’s Reign precisely looks like. As the primary vision of Jesus was declaring the coming of the Kingdom of God,⁴³ his life unsurpassably embodied the pure love and care of God for people.⁴⁴ Jesus’s oneness with God, his personal experience of God as Abba, and his entire dependence upon and trust in a gracious God led him to show unconditional love and compassion for all human beings. Having studied the life and mission of Jesus in depth, John Fuellenbach stated: ‘Jesus experienced God as one coming as unconditional love, entering human history in a way and to a degree not known by the prophets. This experience of God, which Jesus realised and which determined his whole life, is the real core of the Kingdom message.’⁴⁵ Paul F. Knitter also contended that Jesus’s full awareness of the presence of Divine Spirit within him, and the way he responded to this Spirit, helped him to reach a status marked by three points: ‘meeting Jesus in his lifetime was meeting and feeling the living Spirit of God’, ‘being with the Spirit of Jesus now is being with God’ and ‘having real knowledge of Jesus is knowing the real Presence of God’ (cf. John 12: 44–46).⁴⁶

Marcus Borg views Jesus as the decisive manifestation of the sacred for Christians and affirms: ‘We see in him most clearly what God is like and what a life full of God is like. He is the decisive disclosure of both. Affirming that Jesus is for us the decisive revelation of God does not require saying that Christianity is the only true religion.’⁴⁷ Talking about the uniqueness of Jesus, Knitter pronounced: ‘Jesus embodied a Spirit that underwent crucifixion because of a driving concern for compassion and justice. We Christ-Spirit-people are part of the Divine that empties itself into suffering for others, especially for those who don’t count.’⁴⁸ Overall, the reality of the Kingdom of God is fully portrayed and made tangible in the life of

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Jesus, and made realisable any time by following Jesus Christ. As Jesus found true happiness within himself through his oneness with the Spirit of God, true happiness of life may be achieved through establishing a genuine relationship with God.

Immersion into the Reign of God by following Jesus Christ is the way of suppressing and eliminating the power of sin, which causes all forms of evil and suffering. Spiritually, the aim of Jesus’s Kingdom mission includes changing and renewing the perverted hearts of people, bringing them to the Reign of God, and preparing them to join God in establishing the Kingdom of God on an earth which is filled with justice, peace, love and harmony. Capturing the whole picture of Jesus’s social concern, Marcus Borg wrote: ‘Jesus both challenged the existing social order and advocated an alternative. That challenge involved social criticism, an alternative social vision and the embodiment of that vision in the life of a community.’

Politico-socially speaking, therefore, Jesus peacefully committed himself at the cost of death to challenging the existing social evils and sought ways to transform the morally corrupted world into an ethically harmonious social order. He passed down life-giving social principles to which his followers must adhere; one example is keeping one’s eyes on the things happening around and to respond them by any non-violent means.

4.1.3 Nibbāna, the Summum Bonum of Buddhism

From a Buddhist point of view, the absolute solution to the entangled life is Nibbāna; the final goal of the adherents of Buddhism. Having regarded himself as the ‘Perfected One’, the Buddha began to teach about Nibbāna, the sumnum bonum of Buddhism. Despite a universal truth that birth, decay, sickness, death, being conjoined with the unloved one, being separated from the loved one and not getting what is wanted are, in a single word, ‘suffering’, the Buddha explained that there is the good news of ending all forms of suffering, called Nibbāna – the complete

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30 Nibbana should not be misunderstood as ‘paradise’ or ‘heaven’. Although Nibbana literally means ‘blowing out’ or ‘extinguishing’, it is neither an absence of existence nor sheer nothingness, but the absence of craving, detachment and the state of the unborn and unconditioned. See Keith Yandell and Harold Netland, *Buddhism: A Christian Exploration and Appraisal*, 22–23.
32 The Buddha said, ‘all grasping at any of the five aggregates (khandha) is suffering.’ (See Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development*, 43).
elimination of defilements (kilesa) and total liberation from attachment. Nibbāna is the loftiest mental state of exaltation, bliss, insight and altruism. In the Maha-saccaka Sutta, the Buddha declared: ‘When this knowledge, this insight, had arisen within me, my heart was set free from the intoxication of lusts, set free from the intoxication of becomings, set free from the intoxication of ignorance. In me . . . there arose the certainty of that emancipation.’

Donald Lopez simplified and wrote that Nibbāna is the state of utter absence of suffering in the present, the absence of any possible suffering in the future, and the annihilation of all suffering and causes of suffering. The cessation of suffering is also the cessation of desire, and the end of a long chain of painful transmigration. The way by which the Buddha practically suppressed and totally ended all suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path. By faithfully following this, the Buddha taught, one can purify his or her mind and live a life of committing no sin and doing only good things. Such a perfect life, which is totally free from all worldly passion and suffering, is seen in the life of the enlightened Buddha. The Buddha is therefore the embodiment of Nibbāna, ineffable real happiness and the highest spiritual goal.

4.1.4 The Buddha as the Embodiment of Nibbāna

Having been driven by four unpleasant sights of common human fate – old age, a diseased body, a corpse and a wandering ascetic – the young Siddhartha Gautama, unlike Jesus, left his beloved wife and newborn son to become a wandering recluse. Rejecting extreme asceticism, a popular way of his teachers, he embraced the Middle Way. Siddhartha attained Enlightenment (Bodhi), called ‘Buddhahood’ – he became the enlightened or awakened one at the age of thirty-five. The Buddhist concept of Trikaya theologically offers a better understanding of Buddhahood: (1) Physical Body (Nirmanakaya), in which the Buddha appeared among his contemporaries; (2)
Essence Body (*Dharmakaya*), the highest reality – awakening *Nibbāna*, or Emptiness; and (3) Enjoyment Body (*Sambhogakaya*), by which he can still be enjoyed by his followers, and by which he was still truly and effectively present among them.\(^{41}\)

This concept pinpoints the fact that the historical Buddha was the real embodiment of the essence of *Nibbāna*. The implication of this also points to the fact that although Buddhists never talk about ‘resurrection’ and ‘the presence of the enlightened living Buddha’, the Enjoyment Body of the Buddha, which is very much alive in the lives of good Buddhists today, is similar conceptually to the resurrected body of Jesus Christ. Having fully comprehended the Four Noble Truths as the Buddha of *Nirmanakaya*, a wandering ascetic named Upaka questioned the Buddha as to whether he had any teacher who taught him to gain such an unprecedented transfiguration. The Buddha’s senses were extremely clear, like his pure, clean complexion, and he replied:

> All have I overcome, all do I know, from all am I detached, all have I renounced. Wholly absorbed am I in the destruction of craving. Having comprehended all by myself, whom shall I call my teacher? No teacher have I. An equal to me there is not. In the world including gods there is no rival to me. Indeed an arahant am I in this world. An unsurpassed teacher am I; alone am I, the all-enlightened. Cool and appeased am I. To establish the wheel of Dhamma to the city of Kasi go I. In this blind world I shall beat the drum of deathlessness.\(^{42}\)

From this, we understand that the central goal of the enlightened Buddha, who claimed no need of any teacher or helper, is to show people the way to deathlessness or the end of suffering. The death of the Buddha is termed ‘*parinibbāna*’ – the complete, full, final *Nibbāna* – because he will never be reborn, as he fully cut off the chain of rebirth (*Samsara*) in this phenomenal world. The Buddha on his deathbed finally encouraged his cousin Ananda that the truths and the rules of the order, which he set forth for all his followers, would be their teacher. He instructed that his followers should not think of the demise of the Buddha as the complete loss of their teacher: ‘Decay is inherent in all component things! Work out your salvation with diligence.’\(^{43}\) Overall, from a Theravāda Buddhist point of view, the mission of Jesus is unlikely to match the mission of the Buddha: his Enlightenment was not vicarious but solved only his own spiritual problems, and showed people how to work out their own salvation.

\(^{42}\) *Majjhima Nikaya* 1.171.  
Admittedly, Theravāda Buddhists embrace the Buddha of neither saviour nor prophet nor god, nor the one who is required to be accepted personally to attain salvation, but the Buddha who taught people to dispel the darkness of ignorance, which fuels the fire of greed and hatred.44 In Parinibbāna Sutta, the Buddha said: ‘Be ye islands unto yourselves, be ye a refuge unto yourselves, seek not for refuge in others.’45 Christmas Humphreys clearly explained that, in Theravāda Buddhism, faith means following the Way, which the Buddha, as a Guide, has shown as a traveller without doubt, whereas Mahayana Buddhism regards the Buddha as both Guide and the Captain of the ship of salvation.46 The highest goal of Theravāda Buddhists is to become an ‘arahat’,47 which Mahayana Buddhists do not view as the ultimate spiritual freedom, because obtaining Nibanna for oneself still allows for a differentiation between ‘myself’ and ‘others’, and an attachment to ‘I’ and ‘mine’.48 The concept of an all-compassionate Bodhisattva is therefore not only much more favourable than that of self-centred Arahatsip to Mahayanists, but also much more comparable to the nature of Jesus as Saviour.49

4.1.5 Jesus and Bodhisattva

Viewing the life image of Jesus and a typical Bodhisattva – the embodiment of selfless (anataman) compassion – Hee-Sung Keel replied to Jesus’s question, ‘Who do you say that I am?’ in this way: ‘You are for us none other than the one who showed most clearly the ideal image of the Bodhisattva that has captivated Asian people’s hearts.’50 Bodhisattva vows to take the burden of all suffering, to save all beings from the terrors of birth, old age, sickness, death and rebirth, all kinds of moral offence and all states of woe, because his spiritual endeavours are far beyond his own

45 Narada Mahathera, Buddhism in a Nutshell (Mawatha, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1982), 3.
47 The term ‘arahat’ means a saint or the pure one who has fully eradicated all defilements and attained Nibbana. See Ministry of Religious Affairs, A Dictionary of Buddhist Terms (Yangon: Publication Department of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, 1996), 284.
49 Rita M. Gross, ‘Meditating on Jesus,’ in Buddhists Talk about Jesus: Christians Talk about the Buddha, 45.
50 Hee-Sung Keel, Jesus the Bodhisattva: Christology from a Buddhist Perspective,’ in Buddhist-Christian Studies, vol. 16 (1996), 172.
deliverance from the stream of Samsara.\textsuperscript{51} Edward Conze noted: ‘The Bodhisattva would be a man who does not only set himself free, but who is also skilful in devising means for bringing out and maturing the latent seed of enlightenment in others.’\textsuperscript{52} In Mahayana Buddhism, faith means having faith in the power of the Bodhisattva, who has destroyed the power of moral darkness and saved sinners from the consequences of sin and from the conception of ignorance.\textsuperscript{53} Qualities such as realisation of the true self through the denial of the false self, self-affirmation through self-denial, and self-perfection through selfless love constitute the infinite freedom – unconditional love and compassion – of Bodhisattvas and Jesus, by which they liberate human beings from all kinds of oppressive ideas, practices, institutions and ideologies.\textsuperscript{54}

Analysing the two similar concepts, Thich Nhat Hanh quoted Paul Tillich: ‘God is the ground of being.’ Nibbāna is the ground of being and equivalent to God because there is no birth, no death, no coming, no going, no being, no non-being in it.\textsuperscript{55} He stresses the fact that both the Kingdom of God and Nibbāna are not to be sought elsewhere or in the future, and are to be found in the present, in one’s own life, because each of them is the ground of being. Nhat Hanh affirms the availability of the Kingdom of God and of Nibbāna here and now by deeply touching the life and teaching of Jesus and by practising and living the Dhamma. He asserted: ‘When we are in touch with the highest spirit in ourselves, we too are a Buddha, filled with the Holy Spirit, and we become very tolerant, very open, very deep, and very understanding.’\textsuperscript{56} In the same mode, Hee-Sung Kee remarks that spiritual qualities such as compassion, love, freedom for self-sacrifice, commitment and devotion to others, seen in both Bodhisattva and Jesus, by no means belong to the ethics of common sense, but are absolute ethics which emerged out of the realisation of emptiness and divine grace, and from profound awareness of the truth of no-self.\textsuperscript{57}

In short, despite a good number of discrepancies in teaching methods and doctrinal matters, an undeniable compatibility in the spiritual essence and the qualities

\textsuperscript{52} Edward Conze, Buddhism: Its Essence and Development, 128.
\textsuperscript{53} Christmas Humphreys, Buddhism, 161.
\textsuperscript{54} Hee-Sung Keel, ‘Jesus the Bodhisattva: Christology from a Buddhist Perspective,’ in Buddhist-Christian Studies, vol. 16, 175.
\textsuperscript{55} Thich Nhat Hanh, Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers (New York: Riverhead, 2000), 10.
\textsuperscript{57} Hee-Sung Keel, ‘Jesus the Bodhisattva: Christology from a Buddhist Perspective,’ in Buddhist-Christian Studies, vol. 16, 176177.
of the teachers of Buddhism and Christianity can serve as a foundation for Christian–Buddhist dialogue. Based on this compatibility, the following sections address parallels between the Noble Eightfold Path and the Beatitudes. The encapsulation of Jesus’s teachings, the Beatitudes describe how to enter and live in the Kingdom of God, how a person can be rewarded and blessed, both physically and spiritually, and how to become children of God. Similarly, Nibbāna is the highest spiritual reward, achieved after the extinction of greed, hatred and delusion, and is made attainable through faithfully following the Noble Eightfold Path.

4.2 The Eight Beatitudes and the Noble Eightfold Path

It is intriguing, meaningful and renders new insights when individual points of the Beatitudes and the Noble Eightfold Path are paired, based on how each relates to the other in meaning, goal, essence, character and so on. The discussion of each pair will be dealt with not as a personal meditation but as a conceptual dialogue, linking them to the existing sociopolitical context of Myanmar. I follow the order of the Buddhist noble threefold training: (1) the wisdom (Pañña) group – right understanding and right thought; (2) the concentration (Sammaññā) group – right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration; and (3) the morality (Sila) group – right livelihood, right action and right speech.

4.2.1 Eight Beatitudes

A closer reading of the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount allows division of the eight Beatitudes into four parts. According to this understanding, the first set of beatitudes (1 and 6) talk about the mental condition in which the Presence of God is revealed and experienced; the second (2, 4 and 5) relate to the mental quality which makes a person ready to receive God’s loving care; the third (3 and 8) concern the mental states that bring both worldly benefits and eternal rewards; and the last (7)

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58 The Noble Eightfold Path piercingly removes the threefold power of wrong motives, which cause all kinds of evil. When the three powers – desire (Lobha), hatred (Dosa) and delusion (Moha) – are eliminated, the pilgrim lives in the loftiest ethical life, called noble person (Ariya) or arahat. See Christmas Humphreys, *Buddhism*, 109.

59 Although Jesus did not mention how the ‘Kingdom of God’ may be realised practically in the circumstances of the world, he was convinced and taught that, with the help of God, it is realisable. See Schnackenburg, *God’s Rule and Kingdom* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), 109.

discusses the work which proves the quality of being children of God. The eight Beatitudes, extracted from the Sermon on the Mount, are:

1. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
2. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
3. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
4. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
5. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
6. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
7. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
8. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.\(^{61}\)

4.2.2 The Noble Eightfold Path

Some Buddhists say that only knowing and observing the Noble Eightfold Path, in accordance with the Buddha’s instruction, rather than without knowing all the voluminous teachings of the Buddha, is enough for one to attain a noble life. Accordingly, the Noble Eightfold Path can be simplified into the noble threefold training: the training of morality (Sīla), the training of concentration (Sammadhi), and the training of wisdom (Pañña).\(^{62}\) The reward of accomplishing the Noble Eightfold Path is to obtain an ability to turn the three roots of evil mind – greed (Lobha), hatred (Dosa) and delusion (Mohā) – to the three roots of wholesome mind that lead to Nibbāna: non-greed (Alobha), non-hatred (Adosa) and non-delusion (Amohā).\(^{63}\) The nucleus of the excellent teaching of the Buddha, according to Burmese Theravāda Buddhists, is:

1. Right understanding (Samma ditthi)
2. Right thought (Samma sankappa)
3. Right speech (Samma vaca)
4. Right action (Samma kammanta)
5. Right livelihood (Samma ajīva)
6. Right effort (Samma vayama)

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\(^{61}\) Matthew 5:3–10.
\(^{62}\) Mehm Tin Mon, *Samatha: Basic Level* (Yangon: Faculty of Patipatti Department of Samatha, International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University, 2004), 19.
\(^{63}\) Nandamalabhivamsa, *Fundamental Abhidhamma Part I* (Mahasubodhayon Monastery, Sagiang Hills, Myanmar: Centre for Buddhist Studies (CBS), 2006), 70.
4.3 The Beatitudes and Noble Paths in Parallel Pairs

One of the common goals of both the Beatitudes and the Noble Eightfold Path is to calm, correct, cure, nurture and train the evil, dull and hopeless mind or heart which is enslaved by the power of ten *kilesa* (cf. Chapter 5), which Christians call ‘human sinfulness’. Wrong and corrupted mental states are targeted for correction and renovation by the two teachings. By practising the Noble Eightfold Path, the Buddha taught, one can be calm and reduce all mental defilements (*kilesa*); the practice will finally lead him or her to eradicate all mental defilements and attain enlightenment (*bodhi*). Emmet Fox states, from a Christian perspective, that the reason why Jesus’s anti-ritualistic and anti-formalistic teaching focuses intensely on the inner transformation of a person and calls people to regenerate their sinful hearts is his clear heavenly vision: ‘if one’s mental states are right, everything else must be right too whereas, if there are wrong, nothing else can be right’. Inner transformation is key to entering the Kingdom of God, which is invisible but realisable in the innermost reality of a person (Luke 17:20–21), as an illimitable source of spiritual strength to subdue evils of both the inside and the outside world at a social level. Similarly, the best solution for suppressing and eliminating all kinds of defilement (*kilesa*) – the root causes of all sufferings, according to the teaching of the Buddha – is very simple: ‘observe the Noble Eightfold Path’. An analytical study of the Beatitudes and the Middle Way leads to the following pairs.

4.3.1 Poor Spirit and Right Understanding

As ‘right understanding’ is a constituent of ‘wisdom’ (*paññā*) group – the highest spiritual merit of Buddhism and the fruit of attaining *Nibbāna* – ‘being poor in spirit’ also is the melting point of sinful human pride and hardened self-interest which

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65 *‘Kilesa’* is divided into three portions: (1) inflated and aggressive defilement (*vitikkama kilesa*), (2) awaken and active defilement (*pariyutthana kilesa*), and (3) latent or dormant defilement (*anusaya kilesa*). See Mehm Tin Mon, *Samatha: Basic Level*, 64–65.


prevents the coming of Jesus Christ to establish the Kingdom of God in one’s life. Although they are different in wording, the essence conveyed by each is irrefutably consistent. A Burmese Buddhist scholar said: ‘The mind guides the world; the mind leads the world; all beings have to submit to the will of the mind.’\(^{68}\) Considering his words, it becomes clearer that ‘mind’ or ‘consciousness’ is the nucleus of all human beings – meaning that if a person’s mind rightly views and understands the object just seen or the thing just perceived mentally, his or her relative or succeeding deeds will be good, healthy and life-affirming. If the mind is covered by darkness\(^ {69}\) or ignorance (avijja),\(^ {70}\) all related deeds and feats will be perverted and unprofitable.

From a Christian point of view, Matthew’s use of the term ‘poor’ has two dimensions. First, ‘poor’ refers to economic poverty. Regarding material poverty, Warren Carter believes Matthew to have borne in mind ‘physical poverty’ when talking about the poor: ‘They are the literal, physical poor, the destitute, those who live in social and economic hardship, lacking adequate resources, exploited and oppressed by the powerful and despised by the elite.’\(^ {71}\) God’s focus on the poor, not on poverty, is a clear message of Jesus, that the external impact of the Kingdom mission is about restoring economic and social justice, and the internal, transforming a sinful heart.

Second, being ‘poor in spirit’ is the gateway to entering the Kingdom of God or to personally encountering the presence of God. Many today understand ‘poor in spirit’ in a negative sense. To avoid this danger, James Montgomery Boice suggested that ‘being poor in spirit’ is the opposite of being rich in ‘pride’,\(^ {72}\) ‘mana’\(^ {73}\) in Pali. Similarly, George Strecker states that by the word ‘poverty’, Jesus refers not to material possession but to a spiritual and ethical sense or fashion of human being.\(^ {74}\)

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\(^{69}\) Not knowing and following the teachings of what Jesus called the ‘Light of the World or Life’ is called darkness. See John 8:12.

\(^{70}\) ‘Avijja’, translated into English as ‘Ignorance or Delusion’, which causes infatuation, is the primary root of all evil in the world, veiling man’s mental eyes and preventing him from seeing the true nature of things. See Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines*, 24.


\(^{73}\) ‘Mana’ or conceit or pride is divided into three kinds: equality conceit (mana), inferiority conceit (omana) and superiority conceit (atimana). To put suffering to an end, the threefold mana is demanded to be overcome. See Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines*, 88.

genuine fellowship with God, so that their lives are filled with spiritual blessing.\textsuperscript{75} Being poor in spirit is the opposite not only of human arrogance but also of spiritual pride, one of the enormous barriers to IRD. For example, Myanmar Christians still view themselves as better and higher in spiritual status than Buddhists, whom they view as hell-going people.\textsuperscript{76} Knowing the spread of this sort of unsound, offensive, exclusive and wrong self-esteem Christian attitude across Asia, C.S. Lewis warned his fellow Christians:

> Whenever we find that our religious life is making us feel that we are good – above all, that we are better than someone else – I think we may be sure that we are being acted on, not by God, but by the devil. The real test of being in the presence of God is that you either forget about yourself altogether or see yourself as a small, dirty object. It is better to forget about yourself altogether.\textsuperscript{77}

In Buddhist teaching, right understanding is placed in the category of wisdom – the highest spiritual achievement – because it is the loftiest point of realising the Four Noble Truths: true suffering (\textit{dukkha sacca}), true sources of suffering (\textit{samudaya sacca}), true cessations of suffering and its sources (\textit{nirodha sacca}) and true paths for actualising true cessations (\textit{magga sacca}).\textsuperscript{78} Narada Thera excerpted and explained right understanding in this way: ‘To understand rightly means to understand things as they really are and not as they appear to be.’\textsuperscript{79} Right understanding includes the understanding of the ten unwholesome actions (\textit{akusala kamma}),\textsuperscript{80} which give rise to evil consequence, and knowing how to turn them into wholesome actions (\textit{kusala kamma}) in order to bring forth good results.\textsuperscript{81} For Buddhists, only right understanding can achieve the highest wisdom of seeing and attaining the ultimate reality, \textit{Nibbāna}. In order words, through moral, spiritual and intellectual perfection, the ultimate reality is made realisable in this present life, and also makes complete freedom, happiness and peace attainable.\textsuperscript{82} Although Buddhism is thought of as a religion of world-escaping spirituality, the purpose of the Buddha is clearly declared in

\textsuperscript{75} James Montgomery Boice, \textit{The Sermon on the Mount}, 25.
\textsuperscript{76} Samuel Ngun Ling, \textit{Theological Themes for Our Times: Reflections on Selected Themes of the Myanmar Institute of Theology} (Yangon: Judson Research Centre, 2007), 46–47.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{79} Narada Mahathera, \textit{Buddhism in a Nutshell}, 23.
\textsuperscript{80} The ten unwholesome actions are: killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, slandering, harsh speech, vain talk, covetousness, ill will and wrong view.
\textsuperscript{81} Rewata Dhamma, \textit{The First Discourse of the Buddha: Turning the Wheel of Dhamma}, 46.
\textsuperscript{82} Walpola Rahula, \textit{What the Buddha Taught}, 49–50.
Dhammapada 183: ‘Not to do any evil, to cultivate good, to purify one’s own mind...this is the teaching of the Buddhas.’

No one can say, therefore, that Buddhism is a one-sided religion, or otherworldly; rather, it is but multi-directional. As Jesus focuses on both the social and the spiritual aspects of life, the Buddha is a teacher of spiritual matters, but his moral teachings also share the essence of Jesus’s commitment to restoring social justice, peace, love and equality. Overall, spiritual poverty gives rise to a genuine change of heart through meeting God internally, and through a new possibility of living, or at least imitating, the life of Jesus. The establishment of right understanding, on the other hand, brings forth spiritual enlightenment, good moral conduct and foundational moral requirement in progressing healthy social transformation at the community level. An honest study and sincere appreciation of this paired reading will therefore yield profound theological contributions concerning Christian–Buddhist dialogue in Myanmar. Myanmar is in dire need of seeing the country’s multiethnic society and language diversity as its strength, and must accept its multi-religiousness as the spiritual richness of the country.

4.3.2 Pure Heart and Right Thought

It is a universal truth that purity of heart and rightness of thought are inseparable. According to Dale C. Allison, ‘The heart is the real or true self, the human principle of integration, the psyche at its deepest level.’ Warren Carter also affirms the same view: ‘The heart is the core or centre of a person’s willing, thinking, knowing, deciding, and doing, given either to God or to some other (Deut 6:4-19), such as money (Matt 6:21).’ In right thought, the heart is not stained by unhealthy emotions but remains intact in original purity, which bears the image of God, unadulterated and wholesome. As long as right thought persists, the heart cannot be driven by contaminated feelings but by thoughtfulness, wisdom and discernment. With a pure heart, thought becomes healthy, sharper, better, more far-sighted and

83 Sao Htun Hmat Win, Basic Principles and Essentials of Myanmar Buddhism, 69.
86 Gene L. Davenport in a different way, but the same meaning, explained: ‘The word “heart”, in the Bible refers to the desires, motives, will, and intentions which may be either directed toward one goal or fragmented and directed toward competing and conflicting goals.’ See Gene L. Davenport, Into the Darkness: Discipleship in the Sermon on the Mount (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1988), 92.
more penetrating. With a pure heart, any form of evil thought or wickedness is suppressed, and right thought and a good mind become dominant. Purity of heart and rightness of thought produce right intention. Consequently, right intention is manifested in right deeds, which involve humility followed by self-forgetfulness. The righteous\textsuperscript{87} deed arising out of this intention is never done to be seen by others, but for the good of others and the whole community.\textsuperscript{88}

From a Christian point of view, ‘pure heart’ is not a matter of being purified by asceticism, but a simple heart, as Saint Augustine termed it, given over wholly to the will of God, is personal encounter between the individual and God.\textsuperscript{89} A remarkable characteristic of a simple and pure heart is its ability to see God. Single-minded and focused dedication to God’s will creates purity of heart, clean enough to see and experience the presence of God.\textsuperscript{90} Through pure heart, one can experience intimate and face-to-face encounters with God, and consequently grow in imitating the life of Jesus and living a Christ-like life marked by mercy, justice, love and peacemaking.\textsuperscript{91} The pure heart that sees God is ritually dedicated and consistently ethically active.\textsuperscript{92}

From a Buddhist point of view, the two constituents of liberating wisdom,\textsuperscript{93} which make a person qualified to attain the bliss of \textit{Nibbāna}, are ‘right thought’ and ‘right understanding’. Right thought means selfless renunciation, thoughts of love and of non-violence. A lack of right thought or wisdom generates thoughts of selfish desire, ill-will, hatred and violence which destroy all spheres of life, irrespective of the individual, social and political.\textsuperscript{94} Right thought is right attitude of mind, which brings forth ‘right desire’ – the path of altruism and the slaying of self.\textsuperscript{95} The mind

\textsuperscript{87} According to Gustavo Gutierrez, ‘Righteousness implies a relationship with the Lord – namely, holiness; and at the same time a relationship with human beings – namely, recognition of the rights of each person and especially of the despised and the oppressed, or, in other words, social justice.’ See Dale C. Allison, \textit{The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination}, 50.
\textsuperscript{88} Dale C. Allison, \textit{The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination}, 33.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 51.
\textsuperscript{91} Warren Carter, \textit{Matthew and the Margins: Sociopolitical and Religious Reading}, 135.
\textsuperscript{92} David Buttrick, \textit{Speaking Jesus: Homiletic Theology and the Sermon on the Mount}, 72.
\textsuperscript{93} Wisdom or Insight, ‘\textit{Pañña}’ in Pali, leads to the realisation of \textit{Nibbana} by penetrating impermanency (\textit{anicca}), misery (\textit{dukkha}) and impersonality (\textit{anatta}) of all forms of existence. See Nyanatiloka, \textit{Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines}, 115.
\textsuperscript{94} Walpola Rahula, \textit{What the Buddha Taught}, 49.
\textsuperscript{95} Christmas Humphreys, \textit{Buddhism}, 110.
which practises right thought is filled with thoughts of love and compassion.\textsuperscript{96} Originating in right understanding, right thinking eliminates evil thoughts by replacing them with pure thoughts. The threefold functions of right thought are: (1) \textit{Nekkhamma} – renunciation of worldly pleasures, which is opposed to attachment, selfishness and possessiveness; (2) \textit{Avyapada} – loving-kindness, goodwill or benevolence, which is opposed to hatred, ill-will or aversion; and (3) \textit{Avihimsa} – harmlessness or compassion, which is opposed to cruelty and callousness.\textsuperscript{97}

In short, all thoughts of good deeds, from a Buddhist perspective, consist of the practice of generosity, the renunciation of selfish attachments, listening to discourses and practising righteousness.\textsuperscript{98} By all accounts, both the Christian pure heart and the Buddhist right thought are not only indissolubly interrelated but also at the same level of spiritual essence, because while the obtainment of pure heart is the seal of seeing God internally, the attainment of right thought guarantees victory over suffering and the gaining of Nibbanic happiness. Cultivating pure heart and right thought with the help of Christian and Buddhist teachings promises to produce good citizens who are both mentally and spiritually qualified to build a nation of peaceful coexistence. As discussed above, dialogical understanding of pure heart and right thought divulges undeniable theological assets, which are required for Christian–Buddhist dialogue.

\textit{4.3.3 Persecution for Righteousness and Right Effort}

The main characteristic of Jesus’s teaching can be found in the Bible: calling people to follow the ‘Will of God’, which has the same meaning as experiencing the Kingdom of God. In principle, the Will of God, marked by harmony, peace, justice and joy, is made achievable by cultivating moral righteousness with the help of Christ’s spirit.\textsuperscript{99} Practically, to do righteous things or seek the Will of God means to pursue peace and justice, and to serve people. Believing that Jesus’s teaching is parallel to certain Jewish sources, Gerald Friedlander wrote: ‘Hillel, who lived before Jesus, taught “love peace, pursue peace, and love mankind” . . . God creates peace and

\textsuperscript{97} Narada Mahathera, \textit{Buddhism in a Nutshell}, 23–24.
\textsuperscript{98} Rewata Dhamma, \textit{The First Discourse of the Buddha: Turning the Wheel of Dhamma}, 53.
\textsuperscript{99} Emmet Fox, \textit{The Sermon on the Mount: A General Introduction to Scientific Christianity in the Form of a Spiritual Key to Matthew V, VI and VII}, 47.
therefore let man imitate the Heavenly Father, whose name is Peace.’

Friedlander here admits that Jesus’s statement about ‘persecution for righteousness’ is a repetition of the teaching of God’s true prophets, who pointed to the coming of God’s righteous Reign, which Jesus called the Kingdom of God. Therefore, the life of Jesus, the central teaching of Jesus and the mission of Jesus cannot be separated from doing righteous things. To be persecuted for the sake of Jesus and to be tortured for the sake of righteousness are interrelated. By essence, the persecution of the righteous ones who have sacrificed (will be sacrificing) their lives to free people from oppression, abject poverty and bondage, and also for restoring peace, justice and harmony in their respective given communities, regardless of religion, is related to the central theme of Jesus’ mission. In short, ‘righteousness signifies right societal relationships and access to adequate resources for living’.

The fruit of ‘righteousness’ is ‘righteous life’, and a noble life can be achieved by cultivating serenity or peace of the soul, gained through a strong relationship with God. Therefore, speaking from the Christian point of view, no one would doubt, for instance, that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s lived real knowledge of God – sacrificing her life for restoring peace, freedom and right societal relationships in Myanmar – makes her a true daughter of God, as Philo said, because what she has been doing is known according to the Bible as ‘the Will of God’. Interestingly, by his teaching on ‘right effort’, the Buddha aimed to cultivate a righteous life in each of his followers, declaring:

What, O Bhikkhus, is right effort? Here in this teaching, O bhikkhus, a bhikkhu rouses his mind to avoid evil, unwholesome things not yet arisen, to overcome evil, unwholesome things already arisen, to arouse wholesome things not yet arisen, to maintain wholesome things already arisen and not to let them disappear but to bring them to growth, to maturity and to the full perfection of development. And he makes effort, puts forth his energy, exerts his mind and strives. This is called right effort.

Here the Buddha indicates four kinds of effort: (1) preventing any evil that has not yet arisen; (2) dispelling any evil or unwholesome things that have already arisen; (3) bringing about pure or wholesome things which have not yet arisen; and (4) keeping

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102 Emmet Fox, The Sermon on the Mount: A General Introduction to Scientific Christianity in the Form of a Spiritual Key to Matthew V, VI and VII, 47.
103 Philo said, ‘All who have real knowledge of the one Father of all are rightly called Sons [Daughters] of God.’ See Gerald Friedlander, The Jewish Sources of the Sermon on the Mount, 22.
104 Digha Nikaya, 2.312.
the pure or wholesome states that have already arisen.\footnote{Rewata Dhamma, *The First Discourse of the Buddha: Turning the Wheel of Dhamma*, 37–38.} Many people think that to have a defiled mind is human. The Buddha did not affirm this view, but rather taught that a pure state of mind is the real nature of everyone, but the mind is defiled by worldly desires that arise from circumstances – the defiled mind is not the host of a person but an intruder.\footnote{Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai (Society for the Promotion of Buddhism) *The Teaching of Buddha*, 134.} The Buddha instructs us to guard against the intrusion of evil things coming from any of six ‘sense doors’.\footnote{The six sense-doors according to Abhidhamma are eye-door (*cakkhu*varā), ear-door (*sot*advarā), nose-door (*ghanadvarā*), tongue-door (*jivhadvarā*), contact-door (*kayadvarā*), and mind-door (*manodvarā*). See Narada Thera, *A Manual of Abhidhamma: Abhidhammattha-Sangaha* (Cottonpet, Bangalore: The B.B.D. Power Press, 1956), 166–167.} The Buddha said: ‘By self is evil done, by self is one defiled, by self is no evil done, and by self is one purified.’\footnote{Narada Thera, *A Manual of Abhidhamma: Abhidhammattha-Sangaha* (Cottonpet, Bangalore: The B.B.D. Power Press, 1956), 161.}

The Buddha was confirming two possibilities of generating either good or bad, and overcoming external forces by exercising one’s own free will. Announcing his discovery, the Buddha encouraged his followers to avoid generating bad things by making wrong effort, and to make right effort in order to bring about good things for others.

In sum, both Jesus and the Buddha target the same thing: the importance of living a good life. The Buddha emphasises how a person must struggle to live a good life individually, by protecting his or her mind from evil thoughts, which entail evil deeds, by means of right effort. Jesus points to the suffering of the righteous ones, which is not an end of itself, but God’s spiritual reward for their faithfulness is to participate in the completion of God’s purposes and enjoy the fullness of God’s presence, both in the present and in the future.\footnote{Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: Sociopolitical and Religious Reading*, 137.} Jesus’s concern is keeping a firm commitment to stand for justice and righteousness at whatever cost, while the Buddha’s is the way a righteous life may be lived. Consequently, the reward for living a righteous life is to achieve peace, social justice, sustainable development and social harmony.

The person who embodies persecution for righteousness and right effort in modern Myanmar is Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The military government placed her under house arrest for fifteen years over a 21-year period since she began her political
career in 1988. Her success is not based on weapons but on her mental and spiritual quality. She wrote: ‘Some have questioned the appropriateness of talking about such matters as mettā-loving kindness and thissa-truth in the political context. But... love and truth can move people more strongly than any form of coercion.’ Influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and Dr Martin Luther King Jr., Daw Aung San Suu Kyi chose to employ non-violent methods and profound spiritual, political terms to resist the Burmese military oppression.

Spiritually and politically in balance, and living accordingly, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has been making right effort to free Myanmar from the suffering caused by the military dictators. Subsequently, she endured persecution for doing righteous things; even at the cost of sacrificing her husband and children. The balanced life she has lived between meditation and the secular world is key to her peacefully overcoming the power of deathly weapons and the authoritative Burmese military rule. Impressively, the power of the right effort which Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has exerted for two decades against military persecution is far more capable of captivating the Myanmar peoples’ heart, regardless of religion and race, than the established, six-decades-old military power. Her success is a living example of the victory of ‘righteousness’ over ‘persecution’ or ‘cruelty’.

4.3.4 Thirst for Righteousness and Right Mindfulness

Generally, a parallel reading of the great teachers relates to human responsibilities in the process of purifying one’s life. To start with, the Buddha’s teaching about ‘right mindfulness’ is a careful or attentive watch of four mental processes: (1) the activities of the body (kaya); (2) sensations or feelings (vedana); (3) the activities of the mind (citta); and (4) ideas, thoughts, conceptions and things (dhamma). The task of right mindfulness is to get rid of any wrong perceptions of things, which result in perverted passions, by carefully exercising mind control. Here, the Buddha is pointing to the productivity of mind control, by which any unwholesome desires arising out of the stimulation of the six sense-doors can be avoided and, similarly, the roots of all...

worldly passions can be cut off. A mind filled with greed, hatred and evil things can be avoided by a mindful watch of any mind made present by any means of the abovementioned four kinds of mental processes.

The purpose of right mindfulness is to prevent mental defilements from arising, and to help a mindfulness practitioner to avoid covetousness or attachment and grief or hatred which might arise from the object(s) perceived. Right mindfulness is not the final state of saintliness, called ‘enlightenment’, but practising mindfulness is a powerful, microscope-like tool for examining one’s mental state. This short study concludes that the truth the Buddha discovered 2500 years ago benefited the ancient world, is benefiting the present world, and will continue to benefit those who cherish and follow his teachings. Generally, the 87 per cent of Myanmar Buddhists therefore have the best chance to be benefitted from the Buddha’s teachings and to build up their lives according to the Buddha’s moral teachings, which are not incompatible with the moral teachings of Jesus Christ. The moral training of mindfulness is not exclusive to Buddhists, but is pertinent to all who are seeking to live a righteous life, irrespective of religion.

Let us turn to Jesus’s teaching. Focusing on the social aspect of ‘righteousness’, Herman Hendrickx wrote that Jesus uses the word in Matthew to refer to God’s salvation, justice and saving will, by which God defends the rights of the poor and consoles those who mourn. Sociopolitically speaking, ‘those who hunger for righteousness or justice’ are victims of unjust sociopolitical structures and exploitative social relations, and have no access to the resources of this world, no reason to hope and no cause for joy. This Beatitude indicates that their cry for justice and healthy societal relationships will be satisfied by an eschatological turnabout of the Kingdom of God, which has already been at work in this world. In the vision, to hunger for righteousness or justice means thirsting for the Kingdom of God, which is characterised by freedom from oppression, happiness, prosperity,
justice, peace, righteousness and growing in the knowledge of God. To put it succinctly, concern for social justice is at the heart of the Kingdom of God and the word ‘righteousness’. Similar to mindfulness as a mental exercise, thirsting for righteousness is human responsibility, a mental state to cultivate; that is, God will not forcibly fix this mindset in us, but we must learn and train our hearts to know, see and love righteousness. Being mindful of what is happening in the unjust world and hungering for righteousness or justice are spiritual exercises that require human initiative; no outsider can fix such moral qualities in our lives, but we must learn to foster them in our hearts.

From an ethico-spiritual point of view, Jesus’s teaching to hunger for righteousness is a moral demand to avoid doing evil things, because righteousness or justice is a constituent of the Reign of God. Surrendering one’s life to God, with a clear conviction of human spiritual and moral deprivation, precedes having a heart that thirsts for righteousness and social justice. Although God’s Kingdom has a material or sociopolitical realm, it cannot be established by human power, but by accepting in faith and by following Jesus, who has cancelled the distinction or discrimination between bondage and freedom by making all humanity one. In order to establish the Kingdom of God, or God’s righteousness or salvation in earthly life, Jesus commanded his followers to free themselves from anger, to practise a chastity that extends even to the avoidance of an impure look, and to love even their enemies. Jesus’s proclamation about human responsibility must be undertaken according to the Will of God, for ‘Biblical righteousness’ has a much broader field of application than the economic or secular ‘justice’ of distributing goods or possessions. Living righteously according to Jesus’s teaching means doing the Will of God, which extends to all areas of human existence, and to the relationships of people with each other and with God – righteousness thus comprises all the virtues. Therefore, this pair, which Christians call a ‘thirst for righteousness’ and Buddhist term ‘right mindfulness’, enrich each other, producing good people who are morally qualified to promote peaceful social transformation.

120 Gerald Friedlander, The Jewish Sources of the Sermon on the Mount, 138.
121 David Buttrick, Speaking Jesus: Homiletic Theology and the Sermon on the Mount, 69.
122 Gerald Friedlander, The Jewish Sources of the Sermon on the Mount, 146.
4.3.5 Peacemakers and Right Concentration

Relating the pair of peacemakers and right concentration leads to the remark that a peacemaker is the fruit of right concentration. Considering Christian ways of peacemaking and Buddhist ways of preparing one’s mental state, Paul Knitter comments: ‘If Christians insist that “if you want peace, work for justice”, Buddhists would counter insist, “if you want peace, be peace”.”125 Knitter points to the fact that while Christians are better at doing social works, Buddhists are exceptional in mental training; each needs the other. Without clearing mental defilements or sinful thoughts through right concentration or through dedicated concentration on intimate fellowship with God, there can be no real peace of mind. And without peace of mind, it is very unlikely that one can genuinely engage persistently with the process of peace building in the secular world.

For Christians, in order to be peace, one must meet with God, the source of peace. Warren Carter states: ‘Peace is the wellbeing that arises from God’s will for and rule over the earth . . . Peace consists not of exploitation but of all things cosmically in right relation to God.’126 Related to God’s will, a peacemaker is the one who loves his enemies and exhibits unconditional and unlimited redemptive will to all people, as God the Father indiscriminately shares his goodness or creation with both the good and the evil.127 In the Bible, ‘peace’ refers not only to inner peace or peace with God, but also to reconciliation on all levels of human engagement – peace between individuals, races and different social groupings.128 The true nature of peace as a combination of ‘healing, renewal, and restoration’ involves the elimination of enmity and the seeking of freedom, both for oppressors from the bondage of oppressing the weak, and for the oppressed in being liberated from the bondage of oppression and hateful vengeance.129 In any sector of life, a prerequisite for building peace as children of God is gaining inner peace or interior soul peace as a result of profound realisation of the presence of God in one’s life.130 When talking about peace building, people at grassroots level normally think that only the powerful – emperors,

128 David Buttrick, Speaking Jesus: Homiletic Theology and the Sermon on the Mount, 73.
generals and rulers – are responsible for peacemaking. However, Matthew generalises and applies the word ‘peacemakers’ to all sons and daughters of God, with the implication that Christians are morally in control of making peace.131

Coming to the Buddha’s teaching: the word ‘concentration’ (samadhi) represents an intensification of a mental factor present in every state of consciousness or ‘one-pointedness’ of mind (citt’ekaggata).132 In order to avoid misleading understanding, even a killer can reach one-pointedness of mind while he slays his victim, for example; it must be kept in mind that not every form of unwholesome mental one-pointedness is related to what the Buddha called ‘right concentration’.133 Practically, the point of wholesome one-pointedness of mind can be reached only through developing mental training or proper meditation. As a mental discipline, right concentration can lead one to the fourth stage of absorption or trance (jhana), up to the development of pure equanimity and awareness,134 the controlling point of the swinging mind. Specifically, in order to develop successful right concentration, a person must take up meditation by exercising ‘breathing in and out’, the most common among the twenty-five kinds of meditation subjects135 which are observed for the attainment of the first stage of absorption (jhana) – preliminary spiritual development leading to the final state of jhana.136 The aim of right concentration at a very basic level is to temporarily dispel the five hindrances (nivarana): sense desire, hatred, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt. When mature, right concentration is the attainment of the spiritual ability to see any object the mind concentrates on or observes in terms of three characteristics of the ultimate reality: impermanent (anicca), unsatisfactory (dukkha) and devoid of a self or an essence (anatta).137

131 Gene L. Davenport, Into the Darkness: Discipleship in the Sermon on the Mount, 103.
133 Ibid.
134 Walpola Rahula, What the Buddha Taught, 48–49.
135 The twenty-five kinds of meditation subjects for attaining the first jhana are: ten kinds of kasina devices (four colours, four elements, space, light); ten kinds of unattractiveness (decaying corpses); one exercise on the thirty-two parts of the body; one exercise on mindful breathing in and out; three kinds of divine abidings (loving kindness – mettā), compassion (karunā) and joy-with-others (muditā). See Ledi Sayadaw, The Noble Eightfold Path and Its Factors Explained, 29–30.
137 Rewata Dhamma, The First Discourse of the Buddha: Turning the Wheel of Dhamma, 42–43.
A well-versed and respected Buddhist monk, Sayadaw U Silananda, emphasises the importance of concentration. ‘Without concentration clear comprehension can not come,’ he stated,\(^{138}\) giving the example of muddy water:

> At first there is mud in the water and so we can not see through the water. But when the mud settles down and the water becomes clear, we can see through. So, mind needs to be like the water, settled, because there are many mental defilements in our mind.\(^{139}\)

In sum, the Buddha showed a practical way for real peace to be established in a person’s life through developing right concentration. While the Buddha gave specific instructions in the form of several methods of meditation for training one’s mind or spiritual life (see Chapter 5), Jesus gave a general rule, an all-embracing concept that a healthy relationship with God is the sole source of real change, moral transformation and becoming children of God.

Comparing the two, we see that the Buddha emphasised ways of human-centred moral transformation, while Jesus advocated the reality of God-centred inner change. Despite different methods, right concentration (Buddhist technique) and peacemaking (Christian focus) – aiming both at dispelling mental defilement, making effort to remove all evils and to protect social justice by means of non-violence – are undoubtedly bearing the same depth of spiritual essence and outcomes. In Buddhism, both meditation (right concentration) and action are required to make peaceful and effective address to the sufferings of this world.\(^{140}\) Similarly, intimacy with God as children of God (meditative experience) and making peace (action) are inseparable for Christians if they are to fruitfully engage in struggle for social transformation and the restoration of social harmony.\(^{141}\) While Buddhism is eager to talk about concentration (meditation) without undoubtedly neglecting action, Christianity tends to advocate more about action (peacemaking), the fruit of healthy spiritual inspiration.

4.3.6 The Meek and Right Livelihood

Examining this pair leads to the conclusion that ‘right livelihood’ is a visible outcome of spiritual ‘meekness’. Spiritual meekness and right livelihood are correlated. To understand this, it is important to know what Matthew means by the word ‘meek’. This Beatitude declares Jesus’s new law, which actively strives for the high goal of


\(^{139}\) Ibid., 19.


meekness, friendliness, gentleness and deeds that are free from anger, brutality or enmity. The word ‘meek’ refers not to a condition but to an attitude or unstained mind which is totally dependent upon God. Though the meek are pounded by unjust economic practices in their daily lives, they are not cowardly about choosing an alternative – that is, a righteous lifestyle – as they wait for God’s response to their life situation.

According to Theodoret of Cyrrhus, the word ‘meek’ can be construed as ‘simplicity of character, gentleness of behaviour, and modesty of spirit’. By this term, Jesus declared his vision about the coming of a time when the meek of righteous life will rule the world, reversing the present order, in which the powerful or even evil control affairs – those who stand by military power, violence, injustice, unfairness and oppression. Some writers believe that by the word ‘meek’ Jesus was recalling the moral quality of Moses, the exemplar of meekness. Interestingly, the meekness of Moses, an unrivalled and irreplaceable Jewish leader, is pertinent to the simple, humble, non-violent, non-vengeful and wise heart of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi – a voice of the innocent voiceless, who peacefully assumed control of Myanmar in April 2016. Despite the opposition of the military generals, the creation of a new place for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi allowed her to become State Counsellor, the most prestigious and powerful role in the civilian government. The victory of the head of Myanmar’s National League for Democracy may be called the fulfilment of Jesus’ prophecy in Myanmar, and a concrete demonstration of the power of honesty, gentleness, simplicity and prudence.

As mentioned above, the Buddha preferred to focus on defining what right livelihood (samma ajiva) is, rather than stressing the moral root of living rightly. However, the Buddha did not trivialise the importance of cultivating mental qualities in which right living is firmly rooted. The Buddha uttered: ‘What, O bhikkhus, is right livelihood? In this teaching the noble disciple avoids a wrong way of living, gets his

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142 Dale C. Allison, The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination, 47.
143 Robert A. Guelich, The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding, 82.
144 Warren Carter, Matthew and the Margins: Sociopolitical and Religious Reading, 133.
146 Ibid.
147 Numbers 12:3 affirmed and described: ‘Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all men that were on the face of the earth.’
means of living by a right way. This is called right livelihood.\(^{149}\) The four characteristics that constitute right livelihood are: (1) restraint from livelihood based on wrong conduct; (2) restraint from livelihood based on improper means; (3) restraint from livelihood based on deception of others; and (4) restraint from livelihood based on low worldly knowledge (palm-reading, occultism, soothsaying and so on).\(^{150}\) The purpose of right livelihood is to help a person to ensure that he or she earns his or her living in righteous ways. The living must be earned legally, peacefully, honestly without harming or causing suffering to others.\(^{151}\)

By securing right livelihood, the avoidance of killing living creatures is expected, as is avoidance of lying, trickery or deceit, treachery, selling weapons or intoxicants, prostitution, dishonesty, flattery of others to get more gifts or donations, prognostication, and palmistry or astrology.\(^{152}\) When unlawful or unwholesome means and falsehood are employed for the establishment of politico-social influence, for the promotion of business or economic profit, or for the securing of power or position in politics, commerce, law or government, wrong livelihood is constituted.\(^{153}\)

Overall, the Buddha’s teaching of right livelihood is integrated with moral qualities that lead a person to pursue right living, to utter right speech and to perform right action.\(^{154}\) Similarly, the contemplation of Jesus’s saying of dispositional meekness reveals that ‘to be mentally meek’ is to have access to the deepest level of the moral source of doing good things as the children of God.

The two great teachers did not employ the same terms, but they talked about the same concept: the inseparable relationship between moral virtues and wholesome actions which constitute right livelihood.

4.3.7 Mercifulness and Right Action

Intriguingly, all forms of ‘merciful action’ are nothing other than what the Buddha referred to as ‘right actions’. Despite presenting them in different ways, both mercifulness and right action are related to unconditional love and compassion. Logically, merciful heart or thought precedes right action. According to Buddhist

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\(^{154}\) Mehm Tin Mon, *Samatha: Basic Level*, 22.
teaching, abstaining from taking life, from stealing and from sexual misconduct (the most aggressive common evil deeds), as well as abstaining from all kinds of unwholesome deeds, constitutes ‘right action’ (*samma kammanta*). Right action is the avoidance of doing three divisions of evil conduct (three bodily evils, four verbal evils and three mental evils), which together form ‘ten kinds of evil conduct’ (*duccarita*). In fact, no form of physical evil can be committed by a mind that has not been overwhelmed by greed, anger and delusion. The right thing to choose in order to avoid evil deeds and grow in merciful thought is to observe the rising evil mental states objectively until the unwholesome feeling subsides. Consequentially, practising right action accumulates good *kamma* (wholesome or meritorious deeds). Those who have both past and present good *kamma* gain prosperity, happiness and a heart or mind filled with love, kindness, honesty, truth and noble thoughts. It means that while observing ‘right action’ helps one’s heart to grow in mercy, forgiveness and compassion, the ‘merciful heart’ brings forth right actions.

In accordance with the central goal of right action – that is, not harming others – Dalai Lama encouraged his readers thus: ‘Develop a strong desire to refrain from harming others either physically or verbally no matter whether you are embarrassed, insulted, reviled, pushed, or hit.’ Without keeping right action or moral principles in one’s personal life, one descends (either knowingly or unknowingly) to an animal level, lacking moral restraint in thinking, moral control and life-affirming tolerance, and one manifests brutality, selfishness and shamelessness. When the heart or mind is morally well trained, purified and filled with love, compassion and other moral controlling virtues, there can be no room for aggressively committing evil or supporting any means of wrong action or wrong

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156 The ten kinds of evil conduct are: killing, stealing, committing unlawful sex (grouping of three bodily evil conducts); telling lies, malicious talk, harsh and abusive speech, vain talk (grouping of four verbal evil conducts); and covetousness, ill will, wrong view (grouping of three mental evil conducts).


159 The word ‘wholesome’ (*kusala*) means being healthy, positive, wise, generous, loving, compassionate and being free from greed, hatred and delusion. A person of ‘wholesome mind’ is profitable, salutary, blameless and productive of favourable *kamma* results. See Bhikkhu Moneyya, *Teaching and Training: Pa-Auk Forest Monastery* (Kuala Lumpur: WAVE, 2006), 19.


161 Dalai Lama, *How to Practice the Way to a Meaningful Life*, 71.

162 Bhaddanta Pañña Dipa, *Salient Articles on Buddha Desana* (Mayangone, Yangon: World Buddhist Meditation Institute, 1999), 66.
livelihood. As the opposite of affliction or harm is compassion and mercy, the 
Buddha’s teaching of right action, which promotes the practice of non-violence or 
non-harm, is quintessentially related to the ‘mercifulness’ of Jesus’s teaching.

According to R. Kent Hughes, the basic idea of ‘mercifulness’ is ‘to give help 
to the wretched, to relieve the miserable’.

Mercy is neither a feeling nor an empty 
word of sympathy, but active compassion, shown in actions filled with a forgiving 
spirit. ‘Mercifulness’ is a disposition related to one’s spiritual and moral attitude.

‘Mercifulness’ is a mental state of those who have encountered the Reign of God, 
which is transformative and life-giving. According to Saint Gregory, holiness, 
mercy and compassion are inseparable: ‘True holiness is merciful and compassionate, 
but false holiness can do nothing but be angry and rage.’

Realistically, the virtue of 
mercy, demonstrable in manifold forms of action, is an external manifestation of the 
internal wholesome feeling of compassion to the miserable or the unfortunate.

For Strecker, ‘Merciful action requires human initiative without any reservation; it 
realises the demand for unlimited love. Such undivided action is the mark of the 
perfect person.’

Moreover, mercy is a way of showing solidarity with suffering people, as God 
expresses his solidarity by his unconditional and universal compassion.

By mercy, 
the holy God has restored true humanity. In the same manner, mercy of action 
restores genuine humanity amid corrupted human societies, generates sympathy for 
and sensitivity to the plight of the opponent, and understands the opposition of 
others. As the mercy of God is inclusive, embracing both the selfish and the 
unselfish, the just and the unjust, all His children are expected to be merciful – and 
to extend their mercy to enemies, foreigners and the marginalised.

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164 Ibid., 49, 51.
171 Ibid., 90.
In sum, mercy as shown to sinners and law-breakers or wrongdoers who deserve punishment, and right action which rejects any form of harm are not different things but complementary moral elements. Jesus is interested in the need to show inclusive unconditional mercy and compassion even to lawless people or sinners, while the Buddha indicates that mercy and compassion should not be limited to human affairs, but extended to all sentient beings.

4.3.8 Mourning and Right Speech

Careful dialogical study shows that ‘mourning’ and ‘right speech’ can be matched, based on the essence they conceive. Mourning, as an expression of sorrow, grief, lamentation and so on, is not pleasurable, but a pain people do not want to encounter in their lives. However, when material sources of supply dry up and the unbearable suffering of acute poverty visits, fundamentally people begin to learn the lesson that the Divine Power is the true source of human supply, and that experiencing the presence of God is the end of all mourning. By this is meant genuine mourning – that is, lamenting the absence of God and encountering the presence of God brings about both spiritual and mental freedom. When genuine mourning takes place and the heart becomes empty of pride, the heart becomes ready to speak what is true about humans’ sinful nature (confession of truthful words in repentance); consequently, genuine surrender before the loving God occurs. The utterance of genuine mourning is an expression of genuine heart, from which proceeds truthful words or right speech, as termed by the Buddha.

By the word ‘comfort’ Jesus refers to the eschatological consolation (Rev 21:4) and unveils the reality of the present world, where the righteous suffer because of the wicked as the Kingdom of God has not yet fully come. The consolation or comfort of God for the mourned or the suffering is present and future. David Buttrick believes Matthew to have echoed Isaiah 61:1–3, remarking: ‘Matthew is probably thinking of the righteous who mourn their captivity in a world ruled by power, greed and heartless human exploitation. They are grieved because God’s new age has not

176 Gene L. Davenport, Into the Darkness: Discipleship in the Sermon on the Mount, 57.
177 Dale C. Allison, The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination, 47.
yet arrived; the great, glad future has not yet come. Socio-politically speaking, the suffering righteous people were making their voices heard by God, and lamenting the misrule of destructive imperial powers such as Babylon and Rome.

In Matthew’s view, it is very clear that God’s comfort for the mourned or the suffering people is not simply eschatological, but a process already happening in the world. This Beatitude holds that suffering and mourning caused by unjust societal relationships are not themselves the end, but God’s promise of comfort is already working to end the oppression of the devil’s agents by restoring justice and healthy societal relationships. In sum, genuine mourning is a mental state in which one straightforwardly speaks that which is real in one’s heart. In genuine mourning, the cunning mouth has no role and is not dominant, and a truthful heart is dominant. Genuine mourning is spiritual preparation for receiving God’s powerful, life-giving words in order to transform the ‘defiled heart’ (which is full of conceit, cruelty, deception, dishonesty and so on) into a healthy, truthful heart that is naturally inclined to utter right things.

In Buddha’s teaching, the ultimate purpose of the three moral disciplines, called silakkhandha – ‘right speech, right action, right livelihood’ – is both ethical and spiritual. ‘Right speech’ (samma vaca) is also part of the moral foundation for the entire path leading to the attainment of Nibbāna. While talking about either right or wrong speech, it indirectly indicates the innermost mental state. If the mind is pure, so is the speaking; if the mind is impure, wrong speech is the result. Walpola Rahula characterised right speech as: (1) abstention from telling lies; (2) abstention from backbiting or slander, which causes hatred, enmity, disunity and disharmony at both individual and communal levels; (3) abstention from harsh, rude, impolite, malicious or abusive language; and (4) abstention from useless or foolish babble and gossip.

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178 David Buttrick, Speaking Jesus: Homiletic Theology and the Sermon on the Mount, 67.
182 ‘Heart’ is the centre of a person, and the Proverb said: ‘Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life’ (Proverb 4:23).
183 In relation to a deceitful mouth, Matthew states: ‘But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander’ (Matthew 15: 18–19).
185 Walpola Rahula, What the Buddha Taught, 47.
The fruit of engaging in right speech is truthfulness, gentleness, being beneficial to others and promoting social harmony.\textsuperscript{186} Admittedly, right speech, the fourth of the five moral precepts (\textit{pañcasila}),\textsuperscript{187} is an ingredient of the summing-up\textsuperscript{188} of the Buddha’s teaching, and one of the noble ways of achieving happiness and prosperity in this present life.\textsuperscript{189} In sum, genuine mourning is a reality of meeting with God at the innermost level of a person’s life. Consequently, it produces a humble true utterance, the result of a purified heart. The surrender of human pride to God’s saving power is true spiritual freedom and profound success in life. Similarly, Buddhists say that right speaking is a manifestation of pure heart, a symbol of spiritual wellbeing. As genuine mourning serves as a gateway to experiencing the Presence of God, right speech is one of the noble ways leading to the realisation of \textit{Nībbāna}. A parallel reading of the Beatitude of mourning and right speech therefore brings spiritual insight that is relevant for Christian–Buddhist dialogue, and for helping people upgrade their moral life.

It is a universal truth that all human beings want happiness but dislike suffering. Struggling amid this reality, many kings, rulers and merchants, including a good number of ordinary people, commit killing, violence, unlawful deeds and many more crimes against humanity due to their minds being filled with greed, hatred, pride, selfishness and guile. This raises a big question: what is the best solution to end suffering and to restore happiness to all human beings? Despite the fact that different people’s answers may diverge widely, my opinion is that the most effective moral virtue leading to ‘real happiness’, both physical and spiritual, is the cultivation of peace and compassion. Dalai Lama has deep concern on those moral imperatives: ‘Mental peace is a basic need for all humankind. For politicians, engineers, scientists, homemakers, doctors, teachers, lawyers – for all people in every endeavour – a healthy, compassionate motivation is the foundation of spiritual growth.’\textsuperscript{190}

When considering the root causes of suffering in Myanmar, and when seeking ways to end it, citizens of all social levels need encouragement to purify their faulty

\textsuperscript{186} Rewata Dhamma, \textit{The First Discourse of the Buddha: Turning the Wheel of Dhamma}, 34–35.
\textsuperscript{187} The five precepts of the Buddha’s teachings are: (1) abstinence from killing; (2) abstinence from stealing; (3) abstinence from sexual misconduct; (4) abstinence from telling lies, slandering, speaking harsh words and talking vainly; and (5) abstinence from intoxicating drinks and drugs.
\textsuperscript{188} The summary in one statement of the Buddha’s teaching is ‘to avoid all evil, to do good, and to purify the mind’.
\textsuperscript{189} Mehm Tin Mon, \textit{Samatha: Basic Level}, 28–32.
\textsuperscript{190} Dalai Lama, \textit{How to Practice the Way to a Meaningful Life}, 14.
minds and find the real source of inner, mental, spiritual peace by following any spiritual method made available to them. The Eight Beatitudes and the Noble Eightfold Path are theologically the most precious summaries of Christianity’s and Buddhism’s voluminous teachings, which are dedicated to the process of purifying the defiled mind. Without a morally transformed heart, no ethically creditable change can be established in any sector of life and society. Having real knowledge of the profound meanings of both the Beatitudes and the Noble Eightfold Path is to obtain a powerful moral lens through which to see the secret of moral, mental transformation and the key to spiritual growth. Admittedly, a parallel reading or conceptual dialogue of these two teachings yields moral fruits such as mutual appreciation, mutual respect, mutual spiritual enrichment and moral readiness for collaboration. Moreover, a parallel reading encourages both Christians and Buddhists to taste, care for and reap the benefits of Christian–Buddhist dialogue.

Following this foundational and preliminary dialogue between Jesus’s and Buddha’s teachings, the next chapter explores the details of moral training in order to promote ethico-spiritual transformation in Myanmar.
Chapter 5

Nurturing Ethico-spiritual Transformation in the Buddhist Tradition

This chapter investigates the nature and benefits of moral training in nurturing the ethico-spiritual transformation of a person. Moral training is at the centre of both Christianity and Buddhism: Jesus described the coincidence of moral qualities and being true children of God in the Sermon on the Mount, while the Buddha emphasised ways of cleansing mental defilements in the Noble Eightfold Path. The main concern of this chapter is to bring out the parallel spiritual principles in Buddhism and Christianity by which spiritual aspirants are guided to cope with the manifold challenges they face in their daily lives. Although credit is also due to practices such as teaching, learning, awareness training, workshop, liturgy, chanting, worship, preaching, prayer, austere ascetical practices and other ritual activities as facilitators of a person’s gradual ethico-spiritual development, this chapter concentrates on the practicability, workability and effectiveness of meditative practices, because meditation is one of the most effective ways to embed the core teachings of both Jesus Christ and the Buddha.

Although meditation is abstract by nature, undeniable inner change takes place in the process. Meditation tames and transforms the defiled wild mind, the source of all evil action, in order to keep the deepest realm of a person’s being healthy. Therefore, choosing ‘meditation’ as the main content, this chapter argues for importance of establishing a balanced life between individual spirituality and society or wider social relations by imitating the two figures’ perfect lives, nurtured through their respective ways of meditation. Moreover, this chapter presents the nature of meditation, the historical development of meditation, the benefits of meditation, and how meditation leads a meditator to taste and enter the depth of perfect spirituality and balanced life, as seen in the examples of Jesus and the Buddha. It argues that ‘meditation’ should be an integral part and the main content of Christian–Buddhist dialogue, and explores the possibility of dialogue between love-oriented meditation (Christianity) and wisdom-oriented meditation (Buddhism).
5.1 Meditation as the Buddha’s Way of Moral Training

The summary of the Buddha’s teaching is the Four Noble Truths, which he discovered after gaining his enlightenment through the insight meditation (vipassanā): the Noble Truth of Suffering (Dukkha Sacca), the Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering (Samudaya Sacca), the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering (Nirodha Sacca), and the Noble Truth of the Path leading to the Cessation of Suffering (Magga Sacca). The Buddha affirmed:

That both I and you have had to travel and trudge through this long round is owing to our not discovering, not penetrating the four truths. What four? They are: The Noble Truth of Suffering, The Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering, The Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering, and the Noble Truth of the Way Leading to the Cessation of Suffering.

Throughout the forty-five years of his mission, the teaching of the Buddha consisted of the Four Noble Truths and always dealt in one way or another with the Noble Eightfold Path – that is, the Fourth Noble Truth, which is believed to be accomplishable only through the practice of meditation. The Buddha taught his followers to have good moral conduct and win wisdom (paññā) by training and developing the defiled mind through persevering right effort, mindfulness and concentration. The significance of the Buddha’s own spiritual discipline is characterised by the avoidance of the two extremes: indulgence in desirable sense objects (sight, sound, smell, taste and touch) and self-mortification. In order to overcome and eradicate suffering, the Buddha taught not only the five ascetics, his first Dhamma audience, but also all his followers to practise morality (sila), concentration (samadhi), and wisdom (paññā) – the three steps of vipassanā meditation – for meditation is a way of internalising the Buddha’s teaching.

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2 Digha Nikaya Sutta, 16.
4 Ibid., 49.
5 Rewata Dhamma, The First Discourse of the Buddha: Turning the Wheel of Dhamma, 24; Theragatha, v. 637, ii.
6 ‘What now is the Noble Truth of Suffering? Birth is suffering; decay or ageing is suffering; sickness is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering; association with the undesirable and unloved ones is suffering; separation from the desirable and beloved ones is suffering; not to get what one desires is suffering; in short: the Five Groups of Existence are suffering’ (Digha Nikaya, 22).
A successful Buddhist life cannot be established without the observance of meditation. Without practising insight or mindfulness meditation, Siddhartha himself would not have become the Buddha, the Enlightened One. At the culmination of his spiritual quest, Siddhartha made his final attempt to seek enlightenment with inflexible resolution. During his final meditation before attaining Buddhahood under the Bodhi tree on the bank of the River Neranjara, he sat cross-legged and said: ‘Though only my skin, sinews, and bones remain, and my blood and flesh dry up and wither away, yet will I never stir from this seat until I have attained full enlightenment.’ Having been victorious in his Dhamma search, the wandering ascetic Upaka questioned the newly Enlightened Buddha in relation to the Dhamma teacher of Tathagata. Responding to this question, the Buddha spoke about his unmatched spiritual mastery, gained through his peculiar meditation technique of following the Middle Path:

Wholly absorbed am I in the destruction of craving. Having comprehended all by myself, whom shall I call my teacher? No teacher have I. An equal to me there is not. In the world including gods there is no rival to me. Indeed an arahant am I in this world. An unsurpassed teacher am I; alone am I, the all-enlightened. Cool and appeased am I. To establish the wheel of Dhamma to the city of Kasi go I. In this blind world I shall beat the drum of deathlessness.

Of the two kinds of illness, the Buddha said, medicine can cure only physical illness, while the power of healing mental illness comes through spiritual practice. Accordingly, the Buddha’s teaching and his practice of meditation constituted a remedy for mental illness and a spiritual platform for gaining perfect mental health, equilibrium and tranquillity. As an integral part of a good Buddhist life, meditation serves as mental culture, moral training (with a clear focus on inner transformation), mental purification and upgrading moral life.

When the word ‘meditation’ is mentioned, many wrongly think of it as an escape from one’s demanding daily activities, and a means of aiding one’s survival and physical needs (with no concern for the horizontal aspect of life). In fact, meditation is a way of searching for the reality and the meaning of life. As a subtle reflection of personal life, meditation is associated with a mental state called ‘jhana’,

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8 Samyutta Nikaya, 2.28; Anguttara Nikaya, 1.50.
9 The Pali word ‘Tathagata’ means one who has trod the Path of Reality, or reached ultimate reality. See Ministry of Religious Affairs, A Dictionary of Buddhist Terms (Yangon: Ministry of Religious Affairs, 1996), 329.
10 Majjhima Nikaya, 1.171.
which means ‘mental concentration’, contemplation and absorption.\textsuperscript{12} The Buddha clearly indicated that the key function of meditation is to cleanse the impure mind which is obsessed with lustful desires, hatred, ill-will, indolence, worries, restlessness and sceptical doubts, in order to cultivate moral qualities such as concentration, awareness, intelligence, confidence, joy, tranquility and analytical faculty.\textsuperscript{13} To do so, the Buddha declared the Fourth Noble Truth: that the Middle Path should be undertaken. This he discovered without any teacher, as this path was unknown to his former meditation teachers:

\begin{quote}
What is the Noble Truth of the Way Leading to the Cessation of Suffering? It is the Noble Eightfold Path, that is to say: Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. There is this Noble Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering: such was the vision, insight, wisdom, knowing and light that arose in me about things not heard before . . . This Noble Truth must be penetrated to by cultivating the Path . . . This Noble Truth has been penetrated to by cultivating the Path: such was the vision, insight, wisdom, knowing and light that arose in me about things not heard before.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

Based on his own experience, the Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard wrote: ‘The goal of meditation is not to shut down the mind or anesthetise it, but rather to make it free, lucid, and balanced.’\textsuperscript{15} Therefore, the purpose of meditation is personal transformation. The reason the Buddha encouraged his followers to practise spiritual exercise is that, in fruitful meditation, arrogance evaporates, antagonism dries up, the mind becomes still and calm, and life smooths out by reducing tension, fear and worry, through the sharpening of concentration or thinking power.\textsuperscript{16} Therefore, meditation is neither a means of developing a world-escaping spirit nor a way to promote a sense of attachment to worldly things (the vertical) but an effective means of correcting and purifying the contaminated mind in one who perseveres in the meditative practice with sincerity, vigilance and determination. Meditation is a moment of spiritual retreat, with the intention of re-entering our daily activities with finer mental qualities. Meditation brings new and fragrant thought to our daily lives, which permeates our outlook and our approach to the activities and interactions we

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\textsuperscript{13} Walpola Rahula, \textit{What the Buddha Taught}, 68.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Samyutta Nikaya} LVI, 11.
\textsuperscript{16} Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, \textit{Mindfulness in Plain English} (Boston, MA: Wisdom, 2002), 18.
\end{flushright}
share with the people and the nature around us. Meditation and a healthy social life are inseparable (the horizontal).

Because meditation is at the very centre of Buddhism and the life of the Buddha himself, exploring it in more detail will help people of other faiths, especially Christians, to better understand the essence of Buddhism and its spiritual validity.

5.2 Understanding Two Kinds of Buddhist Meditation

It is essential to understand that the two natures of Buddhist meditation show how Buddhists strive to cope with their mental defilement (human sinful nature, for Christians). As it was naturally inclined to borrow meditation techniques from other contemporary sects, Buddhism has a bounty of meditation techniques, which Buddhists categorise into two groups: *samatha bhavana* (calm or tranquillity meditation) and *vipassanā bhavana* (insight or mindfulness meditation). The main focus of this chapter is to examine *vipassanā bhavana* as it compares to centring prayer (see Chapter 6).

The word ‘*samatha*’ can be defined as calm, quietude of heart or settlement of legal questions, while ‘*bhavana*’ refers to a way of concentrating the mind.\(^\text{17}\) The word ‘*vipassanā*’ is derived from the Pali word ‘*vipassati*’, meaning to see clearly or to have.\(^\text{18}\) Although the Buddha himself achieved the highest mystic states by practising tranquillity meditation (*samatha*), which originated in non-Buddhist schools of meditation in India,\(^\text{19}\) he was not satisfied with them and continued his spiritual search until he reached his own discovery of insight meditation (*vipassanā*), leading to the complete liberation of mind and to the realisation of the Ultimate Truth of *Nibbāṇa*.\(^\text{20}\) The Buddha declared that *samatha*, or his formal spiritual teachers’ way of meditation, could not eradicate all mental defilements, even though it did temporarily subdue hindrances (sensuous desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness, worry and doubt).\(^\text{21}\) The Buddha therefore proclaimed *vipassanā* to be the most effective way of attaining *paññā* (wisdom), as it leads to the attainment of

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\(^\text{18}\) Ibid., 239.

\(^\text{19}\) Sayadaw Dhammapiya, *Nibbāṇa in Theravāda Perspective* (Selangor: Selangor Buddhist Vipassanā Meditation Society, 2004), 121.


enlightenment, or *Nibbāna*\(^{22}\) – the complete elimination of all mental defilements.\(^{23}\) The Buddha declared his unprecedented *Dhamma* discovery of ‘The Noble Eightfold Path’:

> Of all the paths the Eightfold Path is the best; of all the truths the Four Noble Truths are the best; of all things passionlessness is the best: of men the Seeing One (the Buddha) is the best.\(^{24}\)

Although the present forms of *samatha* and *vipassanā* were, no doubt, later developed later, Sayadaw Dhammapiya affirmed *vipassanā* meditation as a distinctive Buddhist form of meditation deriving from the original teaching and practice of the Buddha, which he regularly observed during his search for the Ultimate Truth, throughout his missionary journey as the Enlightened One. According to Dhammapiya, the function of *samatha* meditation is to tranquilise or settle down one’s restless mind, while the purpose of *vipassanā* is to see the *dhamma*,\(^{25}\) the truth.\(^{26}\) *Samatha* meditation can temporarily achieve mental peace, but *vipassanā* meditation leads to the end of rebirth by completely uprooting all defiling mental inputs.\(^{27}\) Therefore, while *samatha* and *vipassanā* meditations are similar in many aspects, their decisive difference is revealed by their respective spiritual benefits. Although both are integral to the practice of meditation and can lead to the attainment of enlightenment, Theravāda Buddhists in particular view the practice of *samatha* as ‘following the long and tedious path’, while *vipassanā* is ‘taking a shortcut’ that infallibly leads to *Nibbāna*.\(^{28}\)

In sum, Burmese Buddhists understand all religions to have their own significant forms of *samatha* meditation (the inferior one), but to lack *vipassanā* meditation (the superior form, and a method of analytically observing the intrinsic nature of things), which they believe is found only in Buddhism. The Venerable

\(^{22}\) In *Aunguttara Nikaya* 1.158, the Buddha said, ‘Thus is *nibbana* realizable even during this lifetime, immediate, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise. Now, insofar as the bhikkhu has realised the complete extinction of greed, hatred, and delusion, insofar is *nibbana* realizable, immediate, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise.’ See Rewata Dhamma, *The First Discourse of the Buddha: Turning the Wheel of Dhamma*, 97.


\(^{24}\) *Dhammapada* v., 273.

\(^{25}\) The *dhamma* here refers to seeing all phenomena as they truly are, in diverse ways in relation to impermanence (*anicca*), suffering or unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and non-self or insubstantiality (*anatta*).


Chanmyay Sayadaw explains why Buddhists regard samatha as a preliminary stage of mental training, inferior to vipassanā:

Samatha meditation is practised to attain deep concentration of the mind only, not to realise these three characteristics [the realisation of impermanence, suffering, and non-self]. Vipassanā meditation is practised to attain some degree of concentration and to realise these three characteristics, thereby eradicating all mental defilements and to experience the cessation of suffering, Nibbāna.29

5.3 A Closer Look at Tranquillity Meditation (Samatha)

When discussing Buddhist meditation, we cannot ignore samatha and how it works in the process of moral training. The root word of samatha (sam) can be translated as ‘to lull’ or ‘to subdue’, denoting ‘tranquillity’ or ‘quietude’.30 The Pali word samatha is therefore a mental state in which the mind is focused on only one item, to the exclusion of all other perceptions arising out of the meditator’s consciousness.31 The experienced Burmese lay meditation teacher Mehm Tin Mon affirmed the possibility of achieving a concentrated, unshaken, undefiled and peaceful state of mind by practising samatha meditation. Samatha meditation aims to gain the highest degree of mental concentration and calmness by progressively discarding all the sensory and mental concomitants that normally occupy the mind, with intense focus on one of the chosen meditation subjects.32

Different from the three main states of consciousness in psychology, waking, sleeping and dreaming, the state of absorption (jhana) achieved during meditation is neither waking nor sleep, nor is it dreaming; the mind is operating in a special, distinctive mode.33 Based on one-pointedness of mind gained through the practice of samatha meditation, the practitioner of this meditation is still in demand of proceeding to the practice of vipassanā meditation in order to reach the point where the possibility of attaining the highest spiritual achievement is assured – from temporary mental peace to realisation of the enlightenment, ultimate spiritual liberation.34 Although the art of meditation was not practically available to most

29 Venerable Chanmyay Sayadaw, Talks on Meditation Given in the Blue Mountains (Medlow Bath: Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre, 2010), 31.
31 Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, Mindfulness in Plain English, 3.
33 Ibid., 25.
people in earlier days, the appearance of the great commentator and scholar Buddhaghosa in Sri Lanka bridged the gap by producing extensive commentaries both on Buddhist meditation and on many major texts of the early Buddhist canon. Specifically, the Visuddhimagga made meditation from the time of the Buddha more accessible to later generations.\textsuperscript{35}

5.3.1 Forty Subjects of Tranquillity Meditation and Six Temperaments

In finding ways to provide people with meditational techniques, Bhadantacariya Buddhaghosa entered forty items in the list of \textit{samatha} meditation subjects\textsuperscript{36} in one of his influential books, \textit{The Path of Purification} (\textit{Visuddhimagga}), composed in the 5th century.\textsuperscript{37} These meditation subjects are subdivided into seven types: (1) ten subjects or devices (\textit{kasina});\textsuperscript{38} (2) ten loathsome subjects of the dead body (\textit{asubha});\textsuperscript{39} (3) ten recollection subjects (\textit{anussati});\textsuperscript{40} (4) four subjects of divine abidings (\textit{brahma vihara});\textsuperscript{41} (5) four subjects of immaterial states (\textit{arupa});\textsuperscript{42} (6) one subject of perception of repulsiveness (\textit{aharepatikula-sanna}); and (7) one subject of defining the four elements – earth, cohesion/water, heat/fire and motion/air (\textit{catudhatuvavatthana}).\textsuperscript{43} In \textit{samatha} meditation, it is beneficial to know how each temperament (\textit{carita}) suits one or more meditation subjects, to encourage speedy development of mental concentration. Based on six kinds of \textit{carita},\textsuperscript{44} suitable meditation subjects for each temperament are suggested for the practice of \textit{samatha} meditation. Generally, most people belonging to those personality traits have greedy/lustful-natured and hateful-natured temperaments, while others of the four

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{35} Sarah Shaw, \textit{Buddhist Meditation: An Anthology of Texts from the Pali Canon} (London: Routledge, 2006), 4–5.
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Narada Thera, \textit{A Manual of Abhidhamma}, vol. I (Colombo: Vajirarama, 1956), 45.
  \item \textsuperscript{37} Takeuchi Yoshinori et al., eds., \textit{Buddhist Spirituality: Indian, Southeast Asian, Tibetan, and Early Chinese} (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), 85.
  \item \textsuperscript{38} The word ‘\textit{kasina}’ means ‘whole’ or ‘complete’, and the conceptualised image of any chosen \textit{kasina} is observed in meditation. The ten \textit{kasin}as are: earth \textit{kasina}, water \textit{kasina}, fire \textit{kasina}, air \textit{kasina}, blue \textit{kasina}, yellow \textit{kasina}, red \textit{kasina}, white \textit{kasina}, light \textit{kasina} and space \textit{kasina}. See Mehm Tin Mon, \textit{Samatha: Basic Level}, 71.
  \item \textsuperscript{39} See Narada Thera, \textit{A Manual of Abhidhamma}, vol. II (Colombo: Vajirarama, 1957), 110.
  \item \textsuperscript{40} See Mehm Tin Mon, \textit{Samatha: Basic Level} (Yangon: Faculty of Patipatti Department of Samatha, International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University, 2004), 73.
  \item \textsuperscript{41} The \textit{brahmavihara} is comprised of four sublime state of mind: mettā – loving-kindness, karunā – compassion, muditā – sympathetic and appreciative joy, and upekkha – equanimity. See Takeuchi Yoshinori and others, eds., \textit{Buddhist Spirituality: Indian, Southeast Asian, Tibetan, and Early Chinese}, 17.
  \item \textsuperscript{42} See Narada Thera, \textit{A Manual of Abhidhamma}, vol. II, 130.
  \item \textsuperscript{43} Sarah Shaw, \textit{Buddhist Meditation: An Anthology of Texts from the Pali Canon}, 7.
  \item \textsuperscript{44} The Pali word ‘\textit{carita}’ means ‘nature’ or ‘character’ or ‘temperament’. See Nyanatiloka, \textit{Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines} (Colombo: Frewin & Co. LTD, 1956), 34.
\end{itemize}
temperaments are not common to each individual. Although there are forty kinds of meditation subjects, the meditator needs to choose only those that are believed to suit his or her personality trait. Each individual must make the choice of a suitable meditation subject according to the nature of his or her significant temperament.

For instance, in a person with raga-carita (a lustful person), strong attachment to the five sensual pleasures is predominant; persons of this temperament are generally wily, cunning, proud and greedy. For this person in meditational exercise, one of the ten signs of foulness or corpse will help him or her to more effectively subdue greed, lust and passion. In the same manner, a dosa-dominant person (hateful-natured) naturally shows grudge, revenge, envy, jealousy, slander, pride and stubbornness in his or her behaviour. The most suitable meditation subjects for the hateful-natured are the four brahmaviharas (divine abiding), and one of the four colours of kasina (blue, yellow, red or white). For both the moha-carita person (who is associated with ignorance, delusion, forgetfulness, perplexity and confusion) and the vitakka-carita person (who is obsessed with uncertainty, scepticism, indolence, useless babbles, speculations and imagination), the mindful practice of anapanassati – the in-going breath and the out-going breath is most effective in quickly calming down the swinging mind. While faith-natured (saddha-carita) and intelligent-natured (buddhi-carita) people are suited to the ten recollections (anussati) in samatha meditation, it is also widely accepted that the earth kasina, the water kasina, the fire kasina, the air kasina, the light kasina, the space kasina and the four immaterial states (aruppas) are suitable for all types of temperament. The benefits of observing samatha meditation not only include the temporary suppression of greed, hatred and delusion, but also the promotion of faith, mental concentration and mindfulness.

47 Mehm Tin Mon, Samatha: Basic Level (Yangon: Faculty of Patipatti Department of Samatha, International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University, 2004), 77.
48 Ashin Janakabhivamsa, Abhidhamma in Daily Life, 139.
49 Mehm Tin Mon, Samatha: Basic Level, 77.
50 Ashin Janakabhivamsa, Abhidhamma in Daily Life, 140.
51 Mehm Tin Mon, Samatha: Basic Level, 77.
52 Ibid., 78.
5.4 Vipassanā as a Significant Theravāda Buddhist Discipline

The second and most talked about kind of meditation in Theravāda Buddhist countries – and especially among Burmese Buddhists, who believe their religion is the final stronghold of pure Theravāda Buddhism – is vipassanā. Without at least preliminary knowledge of vipassanā meditation, they claim, one is very unlikely to understand the spiritual norms, goals and practices of Burmese Theravāda Buddhism. Historically, vipassanā was not born in ancient Burma. While the Indus River Valley is recognised as the birthplace of manifold forms of meditative culture, thriving in the periods between 3000 BCE and 2500 BCE, only Gautama the Buddha (c. 563–483 BCE), a contemporary of Pythagoras in the West (see more in the section on centring prayer) was associated with rediscovery of vipassanā, the most ancient Indian meditation technique, long lost to human civilisation. Despite having been rediscovered in India, many Buddhists see modern India as the land that lost the original form of vipassanā, which shifted to the Theravāda countries of South and South-East Asia, especially Sri Lanka and Myanmar. As Burmese Buddhists view any other form of spiritual practice as inferior to vipassanā, it is essential for those interested in promoting Christian–Buddhist dialogue in Myanmar to understand the benefits of vipassanā (see below), and to find a parallel spiritual discipline with its origins in the very roots of Christianity, and which brings forth similar spiritual benefits.

Not an escape from the worries and trials of everyday life, vipassanā helps the meditator to equip himself or herself with techniques to eradicate suffering, to purify the mind, to generate positive contributions to society, and to face the tensions and problems of life in a calm, balanced way. Traditionally, meditators normally practise samatha to develop a higher degree of concentration and tranquillity, whereas vipassanā was practised in order to achieve liberation through insight gained by analysing the true nature of all corporeal and incorporeal phenomena. Unlike samatha, which is characterised by one meditation subject, a one-pointed mind and

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55 Amadeo Sole-Leris, Tranquility and Insight: An Introduction to the Older Form of Buddhist Meditation, 23.
absorption (jhana), vipassanā meditation is an analytical method associated with mindfulness, awareness, vigilance and careful observation.\textsuperscript{56}

As part of his own spiritual practice and Dhamma discoveries, the Buddha explained how things can be analytically watched in order to see the intrinsic nature of each, and to grow in wisdom (pañña) through taking the path of right mindfulness:

What, O bhikkhus, is right mindfulness? Here, in this teaching, a bhikkhu dwells contemplating the body (material qualities) in the body, ardently, clearly comprehending, and mindfully, removing covetousness and grief in the world (of corporeality); he dwells contemplating the feeling in the feelings; he dwells contemplating the consciousness in the consciousness; he dwells contemplating the mental objects in the mental objects, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, removing covetousness and grief in the world (of the five aggregates). This is called right mindfulness.\textsuperscript{57}

Theravāda Buddhists see vipassanā meditation as the most beneficial spiritual practice because it develops intuitive insight, which sheds light on the three characteristics of reality: impermanence (anicca), misery (dukkha) and impersonality (anatta).\textsuperscript{58} As the Pali word ‘vipassanā’ literally means ‘clear vision’ or ‘to see clearly’, vipassanā meditation brings forth insight and wisdom in unambiguously seeing things as they truly are.\textsuperscript{59} The goal of vipassanā meditation is to perfect the noble and wholesome qualities latent in our subconscious mind: purifying the mind, overcoming sorrow and lamentation, overcoming pain and grief, treading the right path leading to attainment of eternal peace, Nibbāna (which cannot be experienced through any of the five sense-doors but only through the mind-door\textsuperscript{60}) and attaining happiness by following the path.\textsuperscript{61} In order to eradicate defilements latent in the mind and transform them into subtle dispositions, the Buddha recommended the persevering right effort and pronounced:

What, O bhikkhus, is right effort? Here in this teaching, O bhikkhus, a bhikkhu rouses his mind to avoid evil, unwholesome things not yet arisen, to overcome evil, unwholesome things already arisen, to arouse wholesome things not yet arisen, to maintain wholesome things already arisen and not to let them disappear but to bring them to growth, to maturity and to the full perfection of development. And he makes effort, puts forth his energy, exerts his mind and strives. This is called right effort.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{56} Walpola Rahula, \textit{What the Buddha Taught}, 69.
\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Digha Nikaya} 2.312.
\textsuperscript{58} Nyanatiloka, \textit{Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines} (Colombo: Frewin &Co. LTD, 1956), 177.
\textsuperscript{59} Amadeo Sole-Leris, \textit{Tranquility and Insight: An Introduction to the Older Form of Buddhist Meditation}, 23.
\textsuperscript{60} Nina van Gorkom, \textit{Abhidhamma in Daily Life}, 259.
\textsuperscript{61} Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, \textit{Mindfulness in Plain English}, 50.
\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Digha Nikaya} 2.312.
According to *Maha Satipatthana Sutta*, there are twenty-one kinds of *vipassanā* meditation or mindfulness practice: mindfulness of breathing; mindfulness of the postures of the body; mindfulness with clear comprehension; reflection on the repulsiveness of the body; reflection on the material elements; nine cemetery contemplations; contemplation of feelings; contemplation of consciousness; the five hindrances; the five aggregates of clinging; the six internal and six external sense-bases; the seven factors of enlightenment; and the Four Noble Truths. In the practice of *vipassanā* meditation, mental concentration is employed as a tool that can chip away the wall of illusion, which blocks the awareness of reality and the attainment of spiritual liberation – the goal of all Buddhist systems of practice.

The Buddha emphasised the benefits of concentration gained through mindfulness breathing, the most widely adopted technique of *vipassanā* meditation today:

O bhikkhus, just as dust particles which have arisen in the last summer month are immediately pacified and calmed down by unseasonal torrential rain, so in the same way a restless mind is immediately calmed down by the practice of *anapanasati*. This concentration through mindfulness of breathing, when developed and practised much, is both peaceful and sublime. Nothing need be added to it. It is an unadulterated blissful abiding, and it banishes at once and stills evil unprofitable thoughts as soon as they arise.

In this practice, the meditator commits to destroying the enslaving, delusory view of ‘selfhood’, the core of the human samsaric predicament, by analysing both body and mind as a continuing series of mental-physical states, an ever-flowing stream of consciousness. The final result of this practice is to enter the four stages of noble life or sainthood through liberating knowledge called: the attainment of the conditions of stream-enterer (*sotapanna*), once-returner (*sakadagami*), non-returner (*anagami*) and released one (*arahat*). The basic function of *vipassanā* is to analyse the three characteristics of all phenomena of existence. The *Khandha Sutta* of the *Samyutta Nikaya* presents the instruction of the Buddha to examine each of the five aggregates (*pancakhandha*) in eleven ways: that is, to examine *pancakhandha* by their respective ‘past, future and present states; internal and external states; gross and subtle states;
inferior and superior states; and far and near’. By explaining the five aggregates’ nature of impermanence, pain and non-self, the Buddha strictly warned his followers to rid themselves of desire (chanda), attachment (raga) and strong attachment (chanda-raga). When the meditator has achieved a certain level of concentration in the practice of analytical vipassanā meditation, he or she will see the experiential benefits – the benefit of having acquired a clear state of mind, the benefit of having a balanced and stable state of mind, the benefit of finding some sicknesses cured, the benefit of attaining higher intelligence, the benefit of obtaining what is always desired (that is, to have closed the door of apaya, or the four woeful states), and the benefit of finding the Noble Dhamma.

On a practical level, vipassanā meditation, an integral part of true faith and practice, is the art of conquering mental enemies. Vipassanā meditation teaches us how to go into the depths inside our hearts, how to see the reality of our minds, and then how to find peace of mind within ourselves. To liberate ourselves from drowning in the daily struggle for physical need, meditation’s unique quality brings us back from the stimulation of the greed-ridden outside world through our interconnectedness with nature, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, in gentle ways. In addition, vipassanā meditation leads us to overcome the storms and distress of day-to-day life, so we can grow in selfless love and compassion, and detoxify our minds with the blessing of becoming more positive, optimistic, understanding, giving and open, while also remaining less defensive, less aggressive, less judgemental and less self-centred.

Vipassanā meditation is not about escaping the demands and responsibilities of the real world, but about preparing ourselves to make peaceful, creative contributions for the betterment of our society. The practice of vipassanā meditation (unlike what is seen in many religious organisations and non-religious institutions) is not about controlling and manipulating other people, but rather conquering our own selfish desire. In short, it is the art of promoting a spiritually self-sufficient life by

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maintaining a habit of purifying one’s mind and heart on a regular basis. While the roots of broader social evils can be traced back to individuals’ unhealthy mentalities or contaminated minds, vipassanā meditation is one of the best ways to purify the defiled mind and return it to a wholesome state, which best suits the mission of building healthy social harmony or restoring the Kingdom of God on earth. Vipassanā is therefore essential to building peaceful social harmony in a world of different views and ideologies.

5.4.1 The Revival of Vipassanā Meditation and Its Inspiration

Burmese Buddhists acclaim themselves as the main proponents of vipassanā meditation in the modern world. Accordingly, it is worth delving deeper into the historical development of the renovation of vipasanā meditation. Although the fundamental principles of the meditation technique are expounded in several Suttas of the Buddha’s teachings, the original version of the practice has seen some modifications as time passed – in some places, it now completely misrepresents what the Buddha taught. Meanwhile, some monks and teachers faithfully maintained pure techniques in accordance with the Buddha’s original teaching. Among the illustrious lineage of Burmese meditation masters are Ledi Sayasaw, Saya Thetgyi, U Ba Khin and S.N. Goenka.71

These masters were deeply rooted in the ancient tradition and inspired by the Buddha, who addressed his teaching not only to yogis, reclusees and monks, but also to laypersons of all social classes: from kings and princes to merchants, farmers and barbers, from millionaires’ wives and ordinary housewives to prostitutes.72 The number of laypeople practising vipassanā meditation in Myanmar grew when U Ba Khin (1899–1971) formed the Vipassanā Association at the office of the Accountant General in 1950 and the International Meditation Centre in 1952, two miles north of the famous Shwedagon Pagoda, in Yangon.73 With the support and commitment of

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71 Pierluigi Confalonieri, comp., ed., *The Clock of Vipassana Has Struck: The Teachings and Writings of Sayagyi U Ba Khin with Commentary by S.N. Goenka*, 68.
72 Amadeo Sole-Leris, *Tranquility and Insight: An Introduction to the Older Form of Buddhist Meditation*, 126.
many meditation masters, both clergy and lay, the ancient system of Buddhist meditation has gained nationwide and worldwide popularity today.

Although the revival of *vipassanā* meditation among Burmese lay Buddhists is very recent, its roots go back to the influence of the most respected prolific Buddhist monk, U Nanadhaja, publicly known as the Ledi Sayadaw (1846–1923). Generally speaking, Burmese Buddhists believe the original practice of *vipassanā* meditation had been latent until the late 19th century among Buddhists around the globe. Meanwhile, they are sincerely content with the most Venerable Ledi Sayadaw, whom they believe to be the most articulate pioneering revivalist of *vipassanā* meditation in the modern Buddhist world. Remarkably, in Myanmar, through his preaching and books (over seventy *Dipanis*/expositions and other writings), Bikkhu Nanadhaja not only influenced his contemporaries but also made a great impact on the faith practice of today’s Buddhists, regardless of status – monk, nun, layperson, male, female and so on.\(^7^4\)

When King Mindon (1808–1878) sponsored the Fifth Buddhist Council in 1871 and built the historic monument, with the authenticated texts of the Buddha’s teachings inscribed on 729 marble slabs, Bikkhu Nanadhaja played an important role in editing and translating the *Abhidhama* texts.\(^7^5\) When the British conquered the whole of Burma (Upper Burma) in 1885, Bikkhu Nanadhaja resolved to move to a forest called Ledi, north of Monywa, setting out in 1886. As many bikkhus came to him to learn the techniques of *vipassanā* meditation, he constructed a monastery to house them, the Ledi-tawya monastery. Later, a new honorific name was ascribed to him. The title ‘Ledi Sayadaw’ is well known today.\(^7^6\) Burmese Buddhists are proud of the Sayadaw’s contributions and his spiritual leadership, and proud of their land, where *vipassanā* meditation re-emerged and thrived.

Another influential Buddhist monk in *vipassanā* revival, who committed himself to finding a good teacher of practical meditation, leading to the attainment of sainthood (*arahatship*), was U Narada Mahathera, publicly known as Mingun Jetawan Sayadaw (1868–1955). A contemporary of Ledi Sayadaw, he was recognised as a source of knowledge about the ancient technique of the four foundations of

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\(^7^5\) Pierluigi Confalonieri, comp., ed., *The Clock of Vipassana Has Struck: The Teachings and Writings of Sayagyi U Ba Khin with Commentary by S.N. Goenka*, 73.

\(^7^6\) Ibid., 74.
meditation, in accordance with the teaching of the Buddha, for the practice of insight meditation in modern times. Coming to the famous meditation caves in the Sagaing Hills in Upper Burma, he was advised to meet the best teacher in the *Maha Satipatthana Sutta*, which contains the original teachings of the Buddha, and to find the clearest and most effective method of mindfulness training (*satipatthana*), in order to realise ultimate liberation. Having understood its salient features through his own experience of the practice, he developed the principles of mindfulness for the pilgrims who followed him. Many believe him to have attained the state of *arahatta*, or total elimination of all defilements, during his lifetime.

Mingun Jetawan Sayadaw was the *vipassanā* meditation teacher of the Venerable Sobhana, the Mahasi Sayadaw (1904–1982), the most respected and famous spiritual leader of the newly independent Burma. Having met the highly competent master at the age of twenty-eight, the Mahasi Sayadaw developed mastery in meditation technique in a short period of time. He began to teach systematic practical courses of *vipassanā* meditation, based on the foundations of mindfulness, at his native village in 1941, and his reputation as a very effective teacher of insight meditation soon spread across the country. In November 1949 Prime Minister U Nu invited the Mahasi Sayadaw to offer intensive meditation training courses at the government-owned *Sasanā Yeiktha* (Meditation Centre), located at the headquarters of the National Buddhist Association, in Yangon. Almost immediately he inaugurated the first group of twenty-five meditators on 4 December 1949. To meet the growing demand, a number of branches were established all over the country, with the appointment of monks trained by the Mahasi as meditation teachers. The 1972 Census reported that the total number of meditators (both in Burma and abroad) trained in the Mahasi meditation technique exceeded 700,000.

The fame and influence of Mahasi Sayadaw stretched to many South-East Asian nations, including India, Sri Lanka and the world’s largest Muslim country,

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77 The four foundations of meditation are: contemplation of the body; contemplation of sensations; contemplation of the mind, mental states; and contemplation of mental objects.
78 Amadeo Sole-Leris, *Tranquility and Insight: An Introduction to the Older Form of Buddhist Meditation*, 128.
79 Ibid., 126–128.
81 Amadeo Sole-Leris, *Tranquility and Insight: An Introduction to the Older Form of Buddhist Meditation*, 128.
Indonesia. For instance, requests by the Minister for Sangha Affairs of Thailand in 1952 and by the Sri Lankan government in 1955 pushed the Mahasi Sayadaw and his monks to extend the mission of renovating *vipassanā* meditation to those foreign lands. Before his demise, he made missionary journeys to America, Britain and Europe between 1979 and 1981.  

The Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw’s outstanding achievements as a scholar and meditation master saw him unanimously appointed as ‘Questioner’ at the Sixth Buddhist Council, held in Yangon from 1954 to 1956, which was celebrated in memory of the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha’s *Sasana* – the proclamation of the *Dhamma*. Receiving his instructions, thousands of people, both lay and clergy, directly benefited from his insights and experience. The influence of Burmese Buddhist monks who committed their lives to the promotion of *vippasanā* meditation peaked in the time of the Mahasi Sayadaw.

Despite his aversion to popular attention, the Venerable Sayadaw U Vimala, the Mogok Sayadaw (1899–1962), was also highly respected across Myanmar as a *vipassanā* meditation master, and was believed to have attained arahatship (the conqueror of *samsara*). After investing his life for over thirty years in promoting *Pariyatti Sasana* (the teaching mission), holding the rank of tutor by lecturing the *Abhidhamma* course to student monks, he left for Mingun to intensively practise *vipassanā* meditation. After the Second World War, he returned to Amarapura and started preaching *vippasanā* sermons. Emphasising the importance of understanding the doctrine of dependent origination (*paticcasamuppada*) in order to eliminate wrong views (*ditthi*) before one begins meditation practice, he introduced and developed a new and more comprehensible method for breaking the hold of the wheel of *paticcasamuppada* and attaining *Nibbāna*. As many Burmese Buddhists were drowned in the whirlpool of *sassata ditthi*, the Venerable Mogok Sayadaw stressed the arising and passing away of the five aggregates in order to quickly realise *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*, the required knowledge for proceeding to attain *Nibbāna*.

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83 Ibid., 18–22.
84 Amadeo Sole-Leris, *Tranquility and Insight: An Introduction to the Older Form of Buddhist Meditation*, 129.
86 ‘Sassata ditthi’ means ‘eternity belief’ – the existence of a persisting ego-entity or personality or soul is independent of physical and mental which constitutes life and continues to exist after death. See Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines*, 48.
Shortly after the death of the Sayadaw, the Society for the Propagation of Mogok Vipassanā (SPMV), Mogok Sayadaw’s way of vipassanā meditation, was formed in 1963 under the leadership of U Than Daing.87 Today, together with other monasteries and meditation centres independent of SPMV, the Mogok way of vipassanā is propagated all over the country, in more than 400 Mogok Meditation Centres and monastery-based yeikthas (centres) that are under the direct supervision of SPMV.88

There have also been some unforgettable lay meditation masters who earned widespread acclaim and high esteem as competent vipassanā meditation teachers in Myanmar. The emergence of esteemed masters shows that the practice of vipassanā meditation has no boundary, age limit or qualification requirement. Any ambitious person, regardless of social class, can take up this method for gaining spiritual benefits.

One of the well recognised lay pioneers of vipassanā meditation is Saya Thetgyi (1873–1945), who started practising meditation at the age of twenty-three with the help of his lay teacher, U Nyunt. As he set out on his spiritual quest, he met the Venerable Ledi Sayadaw and learned vipassanā meditation from him for seven years. Returning to his native village, Pyawbwegyi, eight miles south of Yangon, he started teaching the meditation technique to a group of fifteen people at a rest house in 1914, when he was forty-one. One year later, with his wife, U Thetgyi visited his spiritual benefactor, the Ledi Sayadaw, to pay homage for the insight and the spiritual achievement he had received. During his visit, he was recognised and announced as a great lay meditation master; the Venerable Ledi Sayadaw assigned him to teach twenty-five learned monks from his monastery the technique of vipassanā meditation. Following this, he gained the honorific title ‘Saya’, and people began to address him as Saya Thetgyi (‘saya’ means teacher).89

Saya Thetgyi taught the well-known lay mediation master U Ba Khin, passing the legacy of the renovated vipassanā meditation technique down to new

Sayagyi U Ba Khin (1899–1971), the Accountant General of the independent Burma and the father of six children, is known as a person who lived a balanced professional and household life, and practised *vipassanā* meditation. For him, household life was compatible with a meditative life. He began practising *vipassanā* meditation in 1937, and began teaching some techniques of the practice in 1941. His formation of the Vipassanā Association in 1950 led him to constitute the International Meditation Centre in Yangon (IMC-Yangon) two years later, where he regularly offered intensive ten-day courses.\footnote{Amadeo Sole-Leris, *Tranquility and Insight: An Introduction to the Older Form of Buddhist Meditation*, 136–138.}

A founding member of Burma’s Buddha Sasana Council, Sayagyi planned the celebration of the Sixth Buddhist Council (*Chattha Sanghayana*). Amid his highly demanding government duties, Sayagyi committed himself on a part-time basis to teach the *vipassanā* training course at the IMC-Yangon until his retirement in 1967. Although his international *vipassanā* meditation students were small in number, they were diverse, representing Western Buddhists, academics and members of the diplomatic community in Yangon. At the time Sayagyi was the only meditation master who was fluent in English, having received a Western education at the Methodist Missionary School in Yangon. Some of the Westerners attending the Sixth Buddhist Council were referred to him to receive instruction in *vipassanā* meditation. Following his retirement and until his death in 1971, he lived at the centre and dedicated himself to spreading the technique of *vipassanā* meditation.\footnote{Pierluigi Confalonieri, comp., ed., *The Clock of Vipassana Has Struck: The Teachings and Writings of Sayagyi U Ba Khin with Commentary by S.N. Goenka*, 23–26.}

The fame and influence of Satya Narayan Goenka (1924–2013) as a lay meditation master spread not only across Myanmar but also around the world. Born to a wealthy Hindu Indian family of the merchant class in Mandalay, Myanmar, the then Hindu Goenka was privileged, at the age of thirty-one, to attend an intensive ten-day *vipassanā* course at IMC-Yangon led by Sayagyi U Ba Khin in 1955. The two-sided impact of his first meditation attempt – that is, being healed of his migraines, which he had suffered for twenty-five years, and having a glimpse of insight – drove him to follow U Ba Khin as a faithful meditation student, and later as an assistant, for the
next fourteen years, while maintaining his professional and household responsibilities.93

When the military government headed by General Ne Win nationalised and took over all foreign business and industry between 1964 and 1966, including those belonging to Goenka’s family and relatives, what was a tragic misfortune became a spiritual opportunity. Almost all his time previously spent doing business now became time for spiritual exercise. While remaining the father of family, he spent more time with his meditation teacher at IMC-Yangon. When he returned to India in 1969, his forefathers’ land, as a consequence of General Ne Win’s ultimatum to all foreigners then living in Myanmar to leave the country immediately, he devoted himself to teaching a non-sectarian vipassanā course in India. In 1974 he established the Vipassanā International Academy (Dhamma Giri) in Igatpuri, near Mumbai, where ten-day or longer meditation courses were offered, particularly to laypeople. In 1979 he began an overseas missionary journey, directly teaching tens of thousands of people the vipassanā meditation technique in more than 400 ten-day courses across Asia, Australia, Europe and North America.94

Although Sayagyi Goenka conducted his first vipassanā course for just his mother, relatives and friends, his vipassanā mission in India grew quickly. He extended his meditation centres to Jaipur and Hyderabad in India, also establishing smaller ones in Dharamsala in the Himalayas, Barachakia in Bihar, and in Nepal. As well as forming the Vipassanā Meditation Centre at Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts, USA, in 1982, Sayagyi Goenka also travelled to Japan and New Zealand to spread vipassanā meditation. Whenever he travelled to propagate the practice and give Dhamma talks, his wife always accompanied him.95 An Indian by descent but a Burmese national by birth, Sayagyi Goenka is owed a great debt of gratitude by Burmese Buddhists for his efforts. They believe vipassanā practice and its techniques to have been revitalised and repopularised by him and other Burmese meditation masters – from the time of the Venerable Ledi Sayadaw down to the meditation masters who serve at several thriving meditation centres across Myanmar today.

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93 Amadeo Sole-Leris, Tranquility and Insight: An Introduction to the Older Form of Buddhist Meditation, 142–143.
95 Amadeo Sole-Leris, Tranquility and Insight: An Introduction to the Older Form of Buddhist Meditation, 143–144.
Burmese Buddhists are proud of the growing number of vipassanā meditation centres, which make Myanmar a land of protectors, promoters and revivalists of insight meditation. To name some famous vipassanā meditation centres: Dhamma Joti Vipassanā Centre in Bahan Township, Yangon (U Ba Khin tradition); Chanmyay Yeiktha Meditation Centre, Kaba Aye, Yangon (vipassanā, using the Mahasi Sayadaw method); Hmawbi Chanmyay Yeiktha Meditation Centre, Hmawbi Township, Yangon (vipassanā, using the Mahasi Sayadaw method); Mahasi Sasana Yeiktha Meditation Centre, Buddha Sasana Nuggaha Organisation, Yangon (satipatthana vipassanā meditation tradition); Mahavijayaransi Vijjalaya and Mahatularansi Dhamma Yeiktha, Kya-Swa Chanung (Valley), Sagaing Township, (vipassanā, using the Mahasi Sayadaw method); Mann Ai Khur Tai Temple, Lashio, Northern Shan State, Myanmar (affiliated to both Mogok and Mahasi); Panditarama Meditation Centre, Bahan, Yangon (vipassanā, using the Mahasi Sayadaw method); Pak Auk Forest Monastery, Mawlamyine, Mon State (Pak Auk method); Saddhamma Ransi Meditation Centre, Mayangone Township, Yangon (vipassanā, using the Mahasi Sayadaw method); Shwe Oo Min Dhamma Sukha Yeiktha (The International Centre), Gone Tala Poung Village, Mingaladon township, Yangon (cittanupassana vipassanā meditation method). Although different meditation methods are practised according to each centre’s tradition, all are rooted in the teaching of the Buddha.

The success of these various vipassanā meditation centres in Myanmar poses an indirect challenge for Myanmar Christians: is there any comparable Christian spiritual discipline which bears spiritual fruit of equal quality that might be acceptable to Buddhists? Before exploring Christian spiritual practice, I briefly outline how vipassanā meditation is introduced in a ten-day meditation course.

5.4.2 The Ten-Day Meditation Course

The emergence of meditation centres confirms that meditation is not a practice set apart only for monastic and ascetic life. Many centres offer intensive ten-day or longer courses for both laypersons and monks on a regular basis. Sayagyi Goenka is the main propagator of vipassanā meditation in many parts of the world, in the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin, among many meditation masters native to Myanmar.

96 ‘Meditation Centres in Myanmar (Burma),’ www.buddhanet.net/medburma.htm (accessed 15 November 2016).
This section considers the meditation course conducted by Sayagyi Goenka, along with the contributions of lay vipassanā meditation masters.

In this tradition, those who attend retreats must commit to follow the Five Precepts, until the end of the course. Similarly, in this retreat, all participants are required to observe ‘noble silence’ – silence of body, speech, mind and avoidance of any form of communication, whether by physical gesture, writing or otherwise. Of the same importance in this retreat is unremitting concentration on the practice. The student must suspend any other forms of worship, rites or techniques – for example, prayer, fasting, burning incense, counting beads, reciting mantras, singing and dancing – so that pure vipassanā meditation can be properly undertaken. It is also important to avoid any form of communication with outsiders during the retreat – for example, letters, phone calls, email, listening to music or radio, and visitors, except in times of emergency.

The first two days are dedicated to developing an awareness of breathing, by sitting in a comfortable position, usually although not necessarily cross-legged, and with eyes closed. The sitting position may be changed if it becomes uncomfortable in the first three days. The focus is to feel the air as it goes in and out, with the observation of the whole inside of the nose, the nostrils, the upper lip, tactile sensations of airflow, temperature, intensity and the duration of each breath. With the purpose of strengthening and refining concentration by focusing more powerfully on a restricted area, over three days each student narrows down the area of awareness to the tip of the nose only – the edges of the nostrils, and the part of the upper lip just below the nostrils.

On the fourth day the student is ready to move the attention to a small area on the top of head, to observe all natural physical sensations – pressure, itching, tingling, pain, heat, cold and so on. Gradually, the meditator begins to vigilantly and attentively observe the sensations of the whole body: the head, the neck, the arms, the trunk, the legs and so on. Whatever position is taken up, the meditator should

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98 Amadeo Sole-Leris, *Tranquility and Insight: An Introduction to the Older Form of Buddhist Meditation*, 145.
100 Amadeo Sole-Leris, *Tranquility and Insight: An Introduction to the Older Form of Buddhist Meditation*, 146.
resolve to stay unmoved for the whole two hours, no matter how intense the discomfort that may develop. As the meditation progresses, the meditator directly experiences the fluctuation, change and disappearance of all aches and pains, just like all the other bodily sensations which are observed. The non-clinging observation of whatever sensation arises, whether pleasant or painful, without resisting or avoiding leads the meditator to experience the first glimpse of accepting reality as it is – the essence of vipassanā.¹⁰²

From day five to day eight, the meditator perseveres, improving and refining the perception of phenomena by observing every part of the body. The focal attention may be moved in different ways, depending upon the intensity and the quality of the sensations that arise. The method of scanning the body includes surface scanning, depth scanning and reverse scanning (from toe to head). While maintaining instant awareness of any straying of the mind, the meditator refines and enriches the perception of physical sensations, seeking the fullest awareness, at the finest possible level, of all phenomena of body and mind.¹⁰³ By great effort, the meditator secures direct experiential knowledge of impermanence, and of the unsatisfactory character of all phenomena.

After many days of hard work and learning to control and purify the mind of negative conditioning, on day nine the student is introduced to the practice of loving-kindness meditation (mettā).¹⁰⁴ Having been calmed and cleansed by the vipassanā exercises, the mind is now turned towards all living beings in a spirit of benevolence. This is similar to the way a glowing ember radiates its heat. In this stage, the feeling of peace and goodwill flows from the whole body in all directions, to all other beings, like a blooming flower emits its fragrance to its surroundings in all directions. The student is now instructed to ‘think of all beings – those near and dear to you, those that are indifferent and those that may be unfriendly; those you know and those you don’t know; near and far; human and non-human, great and small; make no distinctions. Your fellow feeling, your loving kindness, goes to them all.’¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Amadeo Sole-Leris, Tranquility and Insight: An Introduction to the Older Form of Buddhist Meditation, 148.
¹⁰³ Ibid., 149.
¹⁰⁴ Amadeo Sole-Leris, Tranquility and Insight: An Introduction to the Older Form of Buddhist Meditation, 152.
¹⁰⁵ Pierluigi Confalonieri, comp., ed., The Clock of Vipassana Has Struck: The Teachings and Writings of Sayagyi U Ba Khin with Commentary by S.N. Goenka, 218.
The tenth day is a day of recapitulation, and of preparing for transitioning back into everyday life. The vow of silence is lifted, and words of guidance and advice are offered to the students. On this day the students are advised to persevere with daily practice of *vipassanā* on their own, in order to preserve and sharpen the skills acquired during the course. Any meditation student who accomplishes the ten-day course is expected to cultivate a regular habit of performing daily *vipassanā* exercises, closed by a short period of loving-kindness meditation at the end of each practice.106

Practising *vipassanā* is the best way, especially for Buddhists, to overcome the disease of greed, hatred and delusion. A successful practice of *vipassanā* naturally generates love, compassion, tolerance, peace, calmness and spiritual wisdom, which together constitute a noble or morally healthy life, the required foundation for building social harmony. Therefore, the practice of *vipassanā* is an integral part of the process of gradual ethico-spiritual transformation, or inner change in which the fundamental idea of healthy social transformation is conceived. *Vipassanā* serves as a spiritual fortress from which to face the enemies of moral life, as we see in the next section.

5.5 The Enemies of Moral Life: The Five Hindrances and the Ten Defilements

Although the Christian concept of ‘sin’ or ‘sinfulness’ is not popular among Buddhists, they have the same notion of human depravity. In the Buddhist worldview, the five hindrances (*nivarana*) and the ten moral defilements (*kilesa*) are regarded as the main enemies of spiritual growth, blocking the possibility of attaining enlightenment or higher levels of spiritual achievement. The Pali term *‘nivarana’*, which blinds mental vision, may be translated into English as ‘prevention’, ‘warding off’ or ‘refusal’.107 The latter is comprised of ten kinds and called mind-defiling passion.108 The Pali word *‘kilesa’* means ‘passion’, ‘lust’, ‘depravity’ or ‘impurity’.109 What Christians call a ‘sinful heart’ or a ‘defiled mind’, therefore, for Buddhists

106 Amadeo Sole-Leris, *Tranquility and Insight: An Introduction to the Older Form of Buddhist Meditation*, 152.
indicates a life that is not free of the shackles of kilesa. Regardless of religion, terminology or ethical teaching, in order to live a moral life as the result of spiritual wellness, which is the foundation of ethically healthy social involvement, one must strive to protect oneself from impure thoughts. Christians label these as both carnal and sense-pleasing temptations, rooted in the three root causes of all evils: greed, hatred and delusion, the main cause of both individual and communal ruin.\textsuperscript{110}

5.5.1 The Five Hindrances (Nivarana)

The first and most important thing a doctor does during medical treatment is identify the diseases that are causing health problems in the sick person. Similarly, the Buddha was committed to discovering the main causes of moral depravity in his spiritual search. According to him, there are five kinds of spiritual obstructions (nivarana): sensual desire (kamacchanda),\textsuperscript{111} ill-will (byapada),\textsuperscript{112} sloth and torpor (thina middha),\textsuperscript{113} restlessness and worry (uddhacca kukkucca),\textsuperscript{114} and doubt (vicikiccha).\textsuperscript{115}

Based on the impact of the hindrances and the entire spectrum of the operation of defiled mental states, Henepola Gunaratana metaphorically explained: ‘They [five hindrances] are compared to a debt, a disease, imprisonment, slavery, and a desert road, and obscure a man’s vision so that he can perceive neither his own good, the good of others, or the good of both.’\textsuperscript{116} Having quoted Buddhist scriptures such as Anguttara Nikaya, Mahavagga Samyutta and Sangarava Sutta, Mehm Tin Mon also explained the nature of the five hindrances by using the similes of the Buddha: ‘sensuality is compared with water mixed with manifold colours, illwill with boiling water, 

\textsuperscript{110} Rewata Dhamma, The First Discourse of the Buddha: Turning the Wheel of Dhamma, 97.
\textsuperscript{111} The hindrance of sensual desire (kamacchanda) signifies desire for the five strands of sense pleasure: visible forms, sounds, smells, tastes and tangibles, which are desirable, lovely, agreeable, pleasing, sensuous, stimulating lust. It takes a form of greed (lobha) in a mode of craving (tanhā), the main cause of suffering. See Henepola Gunaratana, The Path of Serenity and Insight (Columbia, MO: South Asia Books, 1985), 29.
\textsuperscript{112} The hindrance of ill-will (byapāda), rooted in hatred (dosa), indicating the feeling of aversion directed towards any disagreeable persons or things, ranging from mild annoyance to overpowering hatred. See Henepola Gunaratana, The Path of Serenity and Insight, 29.
\textsuperscript{113} The Buddha taught: ‘Sloth, monks, is a hindrance; torpor is a hindrance. Thus the hindrance of sloth and torpor that comes down in the summary by this method becomes twofold.’ See Henepola Gunaratana, The Path of Serenity and Insight, 29.
\textsuperscript{114} Henepola Gunaratana explained: ‘Restlessness (uddhacca) is equated with excitement, agitation, and disquietude, and worry (kukkucca) with the sense of guilt aroused by moral transgressions.’ See Henepola Gunaratana, The Path of Serenity and Insight, 29–30.
\textsuperscript{115} Ministry of Religious Affairs, A Dictionary of Buddhist Terms (Yangon: Department of Publication, Ministry of Religious Affairs, 1996), 120; Walpola Rahula, What the Buddha Taught, 74.
\textsuperscript{116} Henepola Gunaratana, The Path of Serenity and Insight (Columbia, MO: South Asia Books, 1985), 46.
sloth and torpor with water covered with mosses, restlessness and remorse with agitated water whipped by the wind, and sceptical doubt with turbid and muddy water.\textsuperscript{117} Just as one can not perceive one’s own reflection clearly in these five kinds of water, therefore, a person may neither realise his or her own benefit, nor discern what is going on with others, while his or her mind is overwhelmed by any of the five hindrances.

When the five hindrances have been abandoned through the practice of regular meditation, the meditator experiences feelings such as freedom from debt, being rid of disease or being released from prison. Consequently, in a person with the abandonment of the five hindrances, the possibilities for spiritual growth become limitless when associated with a pliant, supple, radiant, lucid and firm mind.\textsuperscript{118} The most direct and effective way to work carefully with hindrances is not to fight to overcome them but to allow their energy to tell us their laws by mindfully transforming them into the subjects of meditation, and so to turn them into the source of energy, investigation and insight. Conversely, opposite states of mind can be taken up and cultivated as counterbalances or remedies for working with hindrances.\textsuperscript{119}

In coping with ‘desire’, the first hindrance, any kind of sense desire (greed, wanting, sensual pleasure and so on), it is advisable to analytically observe what the desire is, how it feels in the body, the parts of the body affected by it, the time of its arising, whether it is happy or agitated and so on. The close observation of sense desire reveals its creation of tension, pain, unsatisfiable longing and incompleteness, as it is bound to the reality of impermanence.\textsuperscript{120} The effective antidote for subduing sense desires, at least from moment to moment, is cultivating a habit of regular mindfulness meditation practice. When a person harbours anger, hatred, grief, sorrow, worry or dissatisfaction, the ill-will (vyapada) is prominent and burns his or her mind.\textsuperscript{121} As with ‘sense desire’, watchful noting and investigation of the feeling of anger and its multifaceted impacts through mindfulness practice will bring about

\textsuperscript{117} Mehm Tin Mon, \textit{Samatha: Basic Level}, 102.
\textsuperscript{118} Henepola Gunaratana, \textit{The Path of Serenity and Insight}, 47.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 37.
\textsuperscript{121} Mehm Tin Mon, \textit{Samatha: Basic Level}, 102.
greater freedom of mind for the meditator. The technique here is not to fear ‘anger’ but to take it as a meditation subject and attentively examine it.\(^\text{122}\)

Whenever the third hindrance, ‘sloth and torpor’, arises, a meditator of defiled mind cannot reach deep concentration due to drowsiness.\(^\text{123}\) In any case of sleepiness as a result of imbalanced concentration and energy during practice, the meditator has to keep mindful watch of the drowsiness until it disappears.\(^\text{124}\) Although the fourth hindrance, ‘restlessness’, is a state of overexcitement or arousal or losing one-pointedness, it is not to be resisted but an object for mindful observation. When ‘restlessness’ is being watched with mindful attention, its transitory and insubstantial nature can be clearly seen.\(^\text{125}\)

Finally, the Pali word ‘vicikiccha’ (doubt) refers to a mind devoid of the remedy of knowledge, or a perplexed and undecided frame of mind.\(^\text{126}\) Having realised ‘doubt’ as one of manifold thought processes, mindfully noting ‘doubting, doubting’ as a mediation subject will reveal the impermanent, ungraspable nature of the mind.\(^\text{127}\) The Buddha 2500 years ago had already discovered the root causes of all social problems, which originate in the human mind when it is ensnared by the five hindrances. When the Buddha explored the five hindrances (nivarana) more extensively, he retitled them as the ten kinds of mental defilement (kilesa). As the Enlightened One, the Buddha’s scrupulous explanations of the nature of kilesas and the instructions he gave for coping with them are applicable to people of all ages in a fast-changing world, and are effective in transforming a person’s moral life.

5.5.2 The Ten Kinds of Defilement (Kilesa)

The Pāli word ‘kilesa’ means passion, lust, depravity, and impurity,\(^\text{128}\) although it is generally known in English as ‘defilement’. There are ten kinds of defilement: ignorance of the realities or delusion (moha); desire, craving, attachment (lobha or tanha); anger, hatred, aversion (dosa); pride or conceit (mana); wrong view (ditthi);

\(^{122}\) Joseph Goldstein & Jack Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation*, 38.


\(^{124}\) Joseph Goldstein & Jack Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation*, 41.

\(^{125}\) Ibid., 42–43.


\(^{127}\) Joseph Goldstein & Jack Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation*, 43.

sceptical doubt (*vicikiccha*); restlessness (*uddacca*); sloth or laziness (*thina*); lack of moral shame (*ahirika*); and lack of moral dread (*anotappa*). The Buddha ascribed these ten defilements to the arising of four cankers or poisons (*asava*).

The enormous trap for a person’s spiritual growth is described by four dangers: (1) craving for sensual pleasures; (2) lusting for the next life in higher planes; (3) a wrong and perverted view; and (4) ignorance of the four Noble Truths (*Ariya Sacca*). The Buddha taught that the ten *kilesas* are the most dangerous spiritual poisons, and propel us into actions that cause suffering for ourselves and others; therefore, we must struggle to free ourselves from the enslavement of the defiled mind.

In order to cope with *kilesas* successfully, it is important to know the three characteristics of each of them: aggressive defilement (*vitikkama kilesa*), active defilement (*pariyutthana kilesa*) and latent or dormant defilement (*anusaya kilesa*). First, *vitikkama kilesa* is similar to the part of a tree that holds branches, leaves, fruit and blossoms. At this stage, *kilesa* violates the rights of other people through physical and verbal actions. Second, the trunk-like *pariyutthana kilesa* represents a state of the agitated and afflicted mind, which is primarily internal activity before its eruption into action. Last, *anusaya kilesa* is comparable to the unseen root of a tree, where the viability of the tree is seated. So the *anusaya kilesa* is the seat of the very sinful nature of human beings. In the process of suppressing and eradicating all defilements, the meditator is in demand to mindfully develop his or her ethico-spiritual qualities by following the three moral principles of *vipassanā* meditation, step by step.

To explain in more detail: the best antidote for *vitikkama kilesa* is the observance of *sila*. As a person unfailingly observes *sila*, he or she will be free from such unwholesome actions as harming living beings, stealing, sexual misconduct and

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129 Mehm Tin Mon, *Samatha: Basic Level*, 64.

130 The four cankers are (1) being intoxicated in the sense-objects – eye, ear, nose, taste, body (*kamasava*); (2) craving a better existence (*bhavasava*); (3) being intoxicated with false views (*ditthasava*); and (4) being intoxicated with ignorance of the Four Noble Truths (*avijjasava*). See Ministry of Religious Affairs, *A Dictionary of Buddhist Terms*, 159.


134 Each group of the threefold moral principles are: (1) morality group (*sila*) – right speech (*sammavaccā*), right action (*samma kammanta*) and right livelihood (*samma acīva*); (2) concentration group (*samma samadhi*) – right effort (*samma vayama*), right mindfulness (*samma sati*) and right concentration (*samma samadhi*); and (3) wisdom group (*pahāhā*) – right understanding (*samma ditthi*) and right thought (*samma sankappa*). See Walpola Sri Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 45.
wrong speech; consequently, the acquired good living and positive actions will become dominant in his or her life\textsuperscript{135} – the foundational morality for nurturing healthy social relations. In this way, the fire of aggressive defilement is extinguished from moment to moment, and the breach of human rights is avoided. The smouldering internally active defilement (\textit{pariyuthana kilesa}) of the mind, which is accompanied by unwholesome thoughts, can be subdued by practising mindful concentration (\textit{samadhi}).\textsuperscript{136} The practice of \textit{samadhi} by following mental disciplines such as right effort, right awareness and right concentration is powerful in preventing the mind from mental obsessions. In this practice, any thought process emerging out of the contacts of sense bases with sense objects is noted: ‘hearing’ or ‘seeing’ or ‘touching’ and so on.\textsuperscript{137} In this way, the rising mental defilement is gently subdued, until it fully subsides and the mind becomes pure. In the last step, the latent or potential defilement is completely eradicated by wisdom (\textit{paññā}), which is constituted by right understanding and right thought, the final outcomes of enlightenment.\textsuperscript{138}

The Buddha explained what he meant by ‘right understanding or view’ and ‘right thought’:

And what, bhikkhus, is Right View? The understanding of \textit{dukkha}; the understanding of the cause of \textit{dukkha}; the understanding of the cessation of \textit{dukkha}; the understanding of the path leading to the cessation of \textit{dukkha}. This, bhikkhus, is called Right View.’ He resumed, ‘And what, bhikkhus, is Right Thought? Thoughts directed to liberation from sensuality; thoughts free from ill-will; and thoughts free from cruelty. This, bhikkhus, is called Right Thought.\textsuperscript{139}

Specifically, the root cause of this dormant defilement is ignorance (\textit{avijja}) or darkness. When wisdom or light arises and becomes strong through the practice of mindfulness, the darkness disappears and the mind becomes free from delusion, as a result of the attainment of enlightenment or liberation.\textsuperscript{140} While the power of hindrances and defilements seem giant as they cause various forms of suffering, \textit{vipassanā} meditation is abundant in producing the more powerful spiritual benefits that will conquer any form of \textit{kilesa}. Therefore, \textit{vipassanā} is the best way to bring the defiled mind back from mental illness to mental wellness, by taming the perverted heart. Although the maturity of the defiled mind gives birth to social evils, chaos,
violence and destruction, the tamed and healthy mind, along with the pure heart, yields peace, love, harmony and social order.

5.6 The Benefits of Meditation

The overall benefit of meditation has two dimensions, vertical and horizontal. While ultimate spiritual liberation or at least future rebirth in a happy realm – a heavenly world – is ascribed to the vertical, a balanced life in this worldly existence (free from hate and ill-will, and from doing evil) and healthy moral conduct gained through meditation belong to horizontal dimension. Although meditation offers two-way spiritual benefits, many people stay aloof from it. In the Anguttara Nikaya, the Buddha himself enumerated the rewarding benefits of cultivating *sila*, *samadhi* and *paññā* through the regular practice of meditation:

Thus, O Kalamas, with a mind freed from greed and ill will, undefiled, and purified, the noble disciple is already during this lifetime assured of a fourfold consolation. ‘If there is another world, and a fruit and result of wholesome and unwholesome actions, then it may be that, at the dissolution of the body, after death, I shall be reborn in a happy realm, a heavenly world.’ Of this first consolation he is assured. ‘And if there is no other world, no fruit and result of wholesome and unwholesome actions, then I live at least here, in this world, an untroubled and happy life, free from hate and ill will.’ Of this second consolation he is assured. ‘And if evil things befall evil-doers, but I do not harbour ill will against anyone, how can I, who am doing no evil, meet with evil things?’ Of this third consolation he is assured. ‘And if no evil things befall the evil-doer, then I know myself in both ways pure.’ Of this fourth consolation he is assured.¹⁴¹

Regardless of one’s religious affiliation, meditational technique or social status (whether monk, priest, nun, ascetic or layperson), mindfulness or insight meditation is relevant to the reality of daily life. There is no necessity to become a Buddhist in practice, but an encouragement to live a life in harmony with oneself and with the world. It helps us to cultivate an attitude of appreciation for each moment we have lived, together with access to the full spectrum of our conscious and unconscious possibilities.¹⁴² The Dalai Lama stated that practising the morality of individual liberation increases patience, which takes place in our hearts and in our minds. When true change occurs within, one’s behaviour reflects an improved mind and heart; practising the teaching of the Buddha is about transforming attitude. The Dalai Lama also said that monastic practices could be successfully incorporated into laypersons’

¹⁴¹ *Anguttara Nikaya* 1.190–192.
lives through a strong, conscious wish to refrain from harming others, physically or verbally, which requires patience that will withstand physical and verbal attack. Goenka said that *vipassanā* cures physical and many psychosomatic diseases as a by-product of mental purification. Moreover, like a mirror, meditation reveals what the mind does, bringing forth the quality of mind that notices what is present, without judgement or interference. Serving many functions, meditation maintains different, wholesome states of mind in balance, working together in harmony. Without mindful awareness of what minds are doing, unknowing confusion often results.

In conclusion, the benefits of meditation are held by the Buddhist spiritual masters to be multidimensional. Engagement in daily social life is more effectively, positively, meaningfully harmonious, and meditation can bring healing to those struggling with neuroses. As a secondary consequence, *vipassanā* meditation heals physical pain and certain diseases, while every successful meditation reaps the fruit of the highest spiritual liberation, its primary goal. Moreover, meditation has a great impact on any work, amid the vicissitudes of this uncertain and ever-changing world. Finally, meditation transforms and transcends self-centredness and defiled minds, helping practitioners avoid being overwhelmed by unhealthy emotional reactions when interacting with nature and other people. As true faith practice results in healthy, life-affirming deeds and moral transformation, living a healthy Buddhist life, even an ordinary Buddhist life, requires the practice of *vipassanā* meditation.

Whenever we talk about Christian–Buddhist dialogue with the intention of promoting social engagement, meditation as a faith practice may not stand apart from the main content of the dialogue. Christians should therefore think about Christian spiritual practices which are similar, conceptually and in practice, to Buddhist meditation. Centring prayer, a Christian spiritual exercise, may well be Christians’ first choice, as we will see in Chapter 6.

Buddhism has a deep well of exercises and techniques that promote an ethico-spiritual life and healthy relations; Christianity has similar depth and richness in how it nurtures morality, spirituality and social harmony. Admittedly, during each individual’s attempts to perfect their spirit, the Buddha, as the author of *vipassanā*

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144 Amadeo Sole-Leris, *Tranquility and Insight: An Introduction to the Older Form of Buddhist Meditation*, 145.
meditation, was silent about the vertical dimension, placing himself at the centre of
the whole spiritual quest; Jesus, in modelling centring prayer, was very dependent on
his vertical loving relationship with God. In spite of this difference, their firm
commitment to save the world, and their shared goal of transforming and freeing
suffering people in the horizontal dimension of life, brings the great spiritual masters
closer. Their respective meditational methods and the benefits they garnered through
spiritual practice are exchangeable and linkable in many aspects.
Chapter 6

Nurturing Ethico-spiritual Transformation in the Christian Tradition

Centring prayer is a Christian spiritual practice. ‘Centring prayer’ (henceforth CP) is a newly adopted name for a deeply rooted tradition of ancient contemplative prayer. By its nature, this method of contemplative faith practice makes itself easily understandable and exchangeable with Buddhist meditational techniques and methods. CP was born out of several centuries-old meditative legacies of the Roman Catholic Church. Thomas Merton, the most articulate pioneer of CP, observed the theologically profound roots of meditation in the Bible. Referring to the meditation of Isaac (Gen 24:63), for example, Merton stated that the meditative life of the patriarchs – Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – nurtured and maintained their closeness to God, and God’s close familiar communication with them in return.¹

Vipassanā meditation has been rediscovered and revitalised since the time of the Venerable Ledi Sayadaw in Myanmar, and CP too was renewed in the 1970s. This brief study of CP will show how the ‘real or unconditional presence’ gained through contemplating the words of God, which neither inner nor outer storms of assailants can remove, is maintained in everyday life (Rom 8:28–29).²

6.1 A Definition of Centring Prayer

The original concept of CP is derived from the Christian monastic practices of spiritual reading, discursive meditation and contemplative prayer, which brought about experiential knowledge of God. CP is the practice of God’s greatest command or the law of ‘Love’, whereon Christianity was established as love-oriented religion: ‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.’³ The results of practising contemplation are: a state of realised oneness with God, experiential resting in God and God resting in us, being at home in

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³ Deuteronomy 6:5.
God, who is also at home in us, and mystical union with the love of God and Christ, which constitute ‘real presence’. Engaged in a life-transforming realisation of oneness with God through entering the mind of Christ, we are liberated from our tendencies to derive security and identity from anything less than God.\(^4\) Merton stated: ‘Strictly speaking, contemplation is an immediate and in some sense passive intuition of the inmost reality or our spiritual self and of God present within us.’\(^5\)

The key concept of contemplative prayer can be traced back to the use of the Hebrew word ‘\(da’ath\)’ (translated as ‘\(gnosis\)’ in the Greek Bible) to refer to a kind of knowledge which involves the whole person and comes through love, not just the intellect (Ps 139:1–6; cf. Eph 3:14–21; Col 1:9). In the course of the development of this concept, the Greek Fathers, such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, borrowed the term ‘\(theoria\)’ from the Neoplatonists, which originally meant the intellectual vision of truth, the supreme activity of the human person. Having translated the word ‘\(theoria\)’ into the Latin term ‘\(contemplatio\)’, the concept was eventually Anglicised as ‘contemplation’. By the end of the 6th century, Saint Gregory the Great adopted this tradition, using the term ‘contemplation’ for ‘the knowledge of God that is impregnated with love’; he called it ‘resting in God’.\(^6\)

The Greek word ‘\(theoria\)’ and the Latin word ‘\(contemplatio\)’ similarly denote a total devotion to revealing, clarifying and making manifest the nature of reality.\(^7\) Father Thomas Keating, a populariser of CP, remarked: ‘The practice of contemplative prayer is not an effort to make the mind a blank, but to move beyond discursive thinking and affective prayer [\(oratio\)] to the level of communing with God [\(contemplatio\)], which is a more intimate kind of exchange.’\(^8\) As intimacy and real exchange of inner reality can happen only in love, CP serves as a fecund platform on which spiritual union and communication between God and the human take place – beyond limits, and in the depth of divine love.

CP is simply a contemporary name for the practice that Jesus refers to in the Sermon on the Mount as ‘prayer in secret’ (Matthew 6:6). To go deeper, CP is a

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movement of ‘Divine Love’, designed to renew the Christian contemplative tradition; it is also known by other names, such as pure prayer, prayer of faith, prayer of the heart and prayer of simplicity, as seen in Psalm 46:10. At the very centre of CP is the heart of the Christian mystery: Christ’s passion, death and resurrection. The passion of Jesus Christ is constituted by the four qualities which define who God is: sheer humility, total selflessness, absolute service and unconditional love. These were made manifest through the incarnation of Jesus. Together with consent to the call of the Holy Spirit, the practice of CP has three requirements: consent to God’s presence and action within; surrender of the will completely to God; and relation to God who dwells in secret, which is the silence of self. In addition, the Word of God, both the Ultimate Mystery and the Ultimate Reality, made incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, is the source of Christian contemplation. The one nature of the Trinitarian God, the interior relationship of total giving and receiving, which has been fully revealed in the life of Jesus Christ, is the foundation of CP. Choosing who we are eternally in the mind of the Creator and what we are called to in meditation, we enter the mind of Christ in order to realise our oneness with Christ, which is the oneness of the Word with the Father.

Today, the term ‘meditative’ has become increasingly popular in Christian circles, referring to what Christianity has historically called ‘contemplation’ or ‘contemplative prayer’. Due to the coincidence of the return of contemplative practice to public attention in the modern Christian world and the arrival of Eastern spiritual paths in North America in the mid-1970s, many think that CP or meditation is not intrinsically Christian, but an attempt to graft an Eastern practice onto Western spirituality. Yet Thomas Merton, Thomas Keating and John Main, all modern icons of Christian meditation or contemplative prayer, belonged to the Benedictine order and had considerable spiritual maturity and contemplative experience. They agreed that meditational practice is not a recent innovation in the Western Christian world;

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14 Ibid., 16.
rather, it is a lost spiritual discipline, which originally was at the very centre of Christian spiritual practice.\textsuperscript{16}

CP has deep historical roots, tracing back to the time of the Desert Fathers in the early 3rd century, as the second wave practising ascetical life (the next section explores this historical development). When the Christian Church ceased being a forbidden cult and became an imperial religion, ecclesiastical stardom became a barrier to the authentic practice of faith. Consequently, those Christians who preferred Jesus’s solitary, intimate practice of prayer were inspired to enter the deserts of Egypt and Syria to practise their religious habits in pure faith; they grew in number from a trickle into a steady stream.\textsuperscript{17}

Father Keating set out his view of CP: ‘Centering prayer is a method of moving our developing relationship with God to the level of pure faith. Pure faith is faith that moves beyond the rational level of discursive meditation and particular acts to the intuitive level of being.’\textsuperscript{18} CP takes one into the presence of God, with the development of the contemplative attitudes of listening and receptivity. This prayer is a spiritual preparation that aims to reduce the obstacles caused by the hyperactivity of our minds and lives.\textsuperscript{19} Jesus taught: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself,’\textsuperscript{20} and CP is practised as the art of giving one’s heart and mind to God and to fellow humans in sincere love. At the centre of CP is the presence of God, and oneness with other people in love, care and concern.

6.2 Theological Foundations

For Christians unfamiliar with the meditative tradition, the spiritual validity of CP is questionable. Therefore, it is important to explore the genuine theological foundation of the practice of CP. In order to respond to accusations that CP falls short of true intimacy with Christ, Father Thomas Keating declared it a Christ-centric practice, based on his personal experience. He said that the practitioner of CP is led to a deeper intimacy with Christ, beyond words, through the work of the Holy Spirit; this very

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{16}{Ibid., 56.}
\footnote{17}{Ibid., 60–61.}
\footnote{18}{Thomas Keating, \textit{Open Mind, Open Heart: 20th Anniversary Edition}, 133.}
\footnote{19}{Thomas Keating, \textit{Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer}, 11.}
\footnote{20}{Luke 10:27.}
\end{footnotes}
experience is expressed both in daily prayer and in action, because centring prayer is Christ-centric, consistent with the Christian mystical interpretation of the Gospel.\textsuperscript{21}

The pivotal model of CP was that which Jesus himself practised. As a contemplative, the purposeful alternation between contemplation and action is one of the fundamental rhythms of Jesus’s personality. In order to listen and unite his whole being to the divine will, Jesus withdrew into solitude. Out of two patterns of listening, namely, \textit{cataphatic} and \textit{apophatic}, Jesus is believed to have chosen the latter: he seemed to regularly enter the prayer of intercommunion of his and his Father’s divine consubstantiality, rather than making requests for discernment (John 10:30; Matt 6:5ff).\textsuperscript{22} CP follows the same model of spiritual practice, whereby Jesus entered the ultimate union with his Father, God, and through which we also may enter the mystical body of Christ.

CP is rooted in God’s life moving within us, whereby we participate in the movement between the Father giving himself totally to the Son and the Son giving himself totally to the Father in the Spirit of Love, which reconstitutes them to keep surrendering forever. Being Trinitarian in source with a Christological focus, this practice re-establishes us in a deep relationship with Christ after we stray, spiritually. When the practitioner is more experienced in this spiritual exercise, the relationship with Christ grows to a new level of intimacy.\textsuperscript{23} In deep CP, the entire human family, especially those in dire need, is included as an invaluable part of the mystical body of Christ, because the primary concern of Jesus Christ is to reach out to needy people. The sacred word chosen in consent to the divine presence and action within, during the CP, effectively facilitates the process of psycho-spiritual development. Whenever we sit in meditation, we relate ourselves to the mystery of Jesus’s passion, death and resurrection, not as something outside us but as something inside us, because our relationship with Christ is an interior one, especially through the Holy Spirit, who dwells in us and pours the love of God into our hearts.\textsuperscript{24} Therefore, CP serves us as a caregiver of the loving heart, creating an ethico-spiritual platform for us to love and forgive even enemies.

\textsuperscript{21} Thomas Keating, ‘Intimacy with Christ,’ \textit{Contemplative Outreach Newsletter}, vol. 32, no. 2 (June 2016), 1.
\textsuperscript{22} Cynthia Bourgeault, \textit{Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening}, 59.
\textsuperscript{23} Thomas Keating, \textit{Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer}, 32.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 33–34.
Another model of CP is found in Luke 10:38–41. When Jesus comes to their house, Martha sets about preparing a meal for him while her sister, Mary, is so intent on listening to Jesus that she sits at his feet, unmoved by what she sees or hears spoken about her. Paying no attention to what Martha is doing, Mary turns to Jesus with all the love of her heart, sitting in perfect stillness with her heart’s secret, joyous love. Even at the time Jesus heard Martha’s complaint about Mary’s negligence, Mary was neither annoyed nor irritated but remained still and untroubled, showing no signs of resentment against Martha for her grumbling. Mary was so utterly absorbed in another work, unknown to Martha, that she did not have time to notice her sister or defend herself.25

This story reveals a truth: that in the depth of CP one can reap spiritual fruit, such as love, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity, which Buddhists call the four brahma viharas (divine abidings), as well as peace, forgiveness, absorption and calmness. Jesus’s words in Matthew 16:25 – ‘Whoever would save his life will lose it and whoever loses his life will find it’ – also form a foundational teaching, modelled in the life of Jesus Christ, which Christians are bound to imitate. As we emulate Jesus, our life is to be a continuous ‘dying to self’ voluntarily – wants, needs, preferences, opinions and agendas, some of which may be authentic expressions of being, but many of which are motivated by fear or self-importance. Dying to self, which leads us to achieve our truer being, means getting God’s will done in a person’s very life by creating a space for God, through which divine direction, guidance and lordship are offered.26 For Christians, CP is one of the most effective ways to tangibly receive divine might to overcome evils, and to purify our defiled thoughts and contaminated hearts.

In complying with Jesus’s teaching, the Apostle Paul developed the concept of self-emptiness, as seen in Philippians 2:9–16. The principle of ‘kenosis’ in Paul’s mind refers to the point that whatever is in the mind of Jesus must also be in yours.27 In Paul’s affirmation of Jesus’s spiritual discipline, self-emptiness is regarded as the touchstone, the foundation and the core reality that guided every moment of Jesus’s human journey. Self-emptiness is the main hub of Jesus’s ministry, which brought him

26 Cynthia Bourgeault, Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, 80.
27 Ibid., 83.
into human form, which led him throughout his human journey, and which returned him to the realm of dominion and glory. 28

In accordance with the Apostle Paul’s instruction, meditation is instrumental in making ourselves gradually become the same as Christ Jesus through a lifelong process of conversion, wherein Christ’s mind and our mind become united – it is one way of seeing and being in the world together with Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is the guide of each individual’s engagement on a path of self-transformation, with the purpose of attaining the mind of Christ by faithfully practising meditation. 29 Through the accomplishment of his ultimate self-emptying on the cross, the ultimate expression of God’s infinite love and the very nature of God, Jesus inaugurated the new era of the New Creation, wherein the Kingdom of Heaven is made manifest. Saint John of the Cross declared how the love of God operates: ‘God, who is infinite love, keeps lifting us up in love, and will continue to do so until we are equal to him in love. God will have no Sabbath rest until our equality with him in love is realised.’ 30 Theologically, the central concept of CP is to conquer our selfish desires and wants, by allowing the love of God to transform us with the guidance of the Holy Spirit in such a way that we gradually grow into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

In accordance with its intrinsic nature, a subtle dimension of relating to Christ developed through reflection and affective prayer, leading to ‘resting in God’. Christ is always the teacher in CP, in the work of transmitting his experience of God as ‘Abba’, loving Father – the core work of contemplative prayer – to people. 31 Firmly rooted in the foundation of Jesus’s lived teaching, Christian meditation brings about an authentic experience of dying to self, in order to enter the higher spiritual state called ‘resting in God’. As a result of learning, self-talk, interior dialogue, fears, wants, needs, preferences, daydreams and fantasies are let go. 32 By changing unhealthy consciousness through contemplative practice, the practitioner may see and participate in the very nature of Christ (Eph 3:18–19). Leading to ever deeper levels of growth in the likeness of Christ, the contemplative prayer yields such spiritual fruit as ‘a pattern of abiding in God’ and ‘the dying to self or emptying to self’, which then

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28 Ibid., 84.
29 James Finley, Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God, 175.
30 Ibid., 164.
31 Thomas Keating, Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer, 105.
32 Cynthia Bourgeault, Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, 81.
make a radical opening to God possible in our lives so that we can love others as God does.

Therefore, the practice of contemplative prayer or CP has nothing to do with ‘a life apart’ or ‘the hermit path’ or being ‘separated from all’, but is ‘united to all’. This reality is seen in the life of Thomas Merton. Having come from monastic practices (lectio divina, the liturgy of the hours, the Eucharist, the silence and separation of the cloister) to maturity in his spiritual quest, Merton no longer viewed secular things such as nature, art, politics, human relations (especially with women) and social justice concerns, and all the manifestations of human life, as spiritual hindrances – they became mirrors of God. In spiritual maturity, therefore, there is no discrimination between the secular and the holy, but every circumstance is accepted and responded to with a benevolent and insightful mind and heart.

Because CP embraces the theologically well-grounded concept of self-emptying or infinite love as its foundational method, the disparity between it and other meditation methods is clear. While the majority of meditation methods, regardless of religion, are built on models such as storing, attaining and concentrating in order to obtain a clear mind, conscious presence, unitive experience and so on, CP does not aim at attaining anything but the kenotic path, wherein only love is in play – to perform the act of giving itself away. As the paragon of the Christian meditative life, the perfect example of CP can be found in the life of Jesus Christ. Observing CP simply means following the sacrificial life of Jesus Christ, who was born to do the Will of God on earth. Jesus showed his total devotion to God and his commitment to the mission of the socio-ethical transformation of sinful people in order to establish the Kingdom of God on earth.

In sum, the foundation of CP is not only Biblical but also traditional, being deeply rooted in early Christian culture. The practice itself is one of the most effective means by which to discern the subtle essence of Christian spirituality and the meditative dimension of the Gospel. Through Christian meditation, we gradually grow in oneness both with Christ and with others. According to James Finley: ‘Jesus taught that he was so one with others that what we do to others, we do him. He taught that, just as he was one with everyone, so, too, we are one with everyone and are to

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33 Ibid., 156.
35 Cynthia Bourgeault, Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, 87–88.
give witness to this oneness by our love for everyone (Matt 25:35-37).\(^{36}\) CP catalyses our love for God, which is accompanied by our love for other people and our desire to be one with them, amid their suffering and their daily struggles for survival.

### 6.3 Historical Development

Just as every event has its own historical roots, so does CP. Digging to its roots corroborates the vitality of contemplative prayer in Christian history, without any influence from the rich meditational techniques of Eastern religions. In secular Western culture, Pythagoras (c. 582–507 BCE), who was influenced by the Orphic religion and mysteries, was a pioneer in the practice of meditation. After moving from the Greek island of Samos to the city of Crotone in southern Italy, Pythagoras formed a religious community of self-reliance. He trained his followers to live a life of balance between body and spirit. According to his teaching, purifying one’s soul required one to maintain high ethical standards, engage in physical exercise, be celibate, observe a vegetarian diet, engage in protracted periods of silence and practise various other kinds of abstinence.\(^{37}\)

However, in the Christian tradition the practice of contemplative prayer began in the period of persecution by the Roman Emperor Decius (c. 201–250). During his reign, many Christians sought refuge in the desert to escape torture and death. These were the first wave of contemplatives, although the majority would return to their villages after the persecution ended.\(^{38}\) But several fervent Christians remained celibate for the Lord, and continued living on the borders of the desert as ascetics. By the end of the 3rd century, many solitary monks were spread along the Nile Valley, making grottos on the slopes of the cliffs above the river or huts nearby their homes. The number of Desert Fathers and Nuns grew significantly after Saint Antony the Great (251–356 CE),\(^{39}\) ‘the Father of Monks’, attracted many people to the ascetic or contemplative life. Saint Antony’s demise at the age of 105 left a legacy that promoted the ideals of monasticism throughout Christian world.\(^{40}\) With such


historical evidence, it is clear that without any contact with Eastern spiritual practices, the Desert Fathers had begun practising Christian meditation, which is deeply rooted in the teaching of Jesus Christ.

The contemplative prayer, originally practised and taught by the Desert Fathers of Egypt, Palestine and Syria, has representatives in each and every age. For instance: Evagrius Ponticus (345–399 CE) and John Cassian (c. 360–435 CE) were among the Desert Fathers; Saint Augustine (354–430 CE), Saint Gregory the Great (540–604 CE) and Pseudo-Dionysius (5th to 6th centuries CE) were prominent during the patristic age; Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), William of Saint Thierry (1085–1148), Saint Mechtilde (1240–1299), Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), the anonymous 14th-century author of The Cloud of Unknowing, Walter Hilton (1340–1396), and Julian of Norwich (1342–1416) in the Middle Ages; the Carmelites, Saint Teresa of Avila (1515–1582), and Saint John of the Cross (1542–1591), were well known after the Reformation; Saint Francis de Sales (1567–1622) and Cardinal Pierre de Berulle (1575–1629) among the French school of spiritual writers; Jean Pierre de Caussade (1675–1751) and Louis Lallemont (1578–1635) among the Jesuits; Dom Augustine Baker (1575–1641) and Dom John Chapman (1865–1933) among the Benedictines; and among modern Cistercians, Dom Vital Lehodey (1857–1948), Thomas Merton (1915–1968), and Thomas Keating (born 1923). This strong lineage of representatives confirms that Christian meditational activities have long existed, and were not directly derived from Eastern religious heritage. Therefore, while Buddhists claim the Buddha was the pioneer of vipassanā meditation, Christians ay claim that CP is a historic legacy of the Desert Fathers, from whom the spiritual path of Jesus Christ was inherited.

However, the practice of contemplative prayer declined shortly after the initiation of the Protestant Reformation by Martin Luther in 1517. The post-Reformation Catholic teaching opposed the early Christian tradition, which had been taught and practised for fifteen centuries; it said that ‘contemplation is the normal evolution of a genuine spiritual life and hence is open to all Christians’. The ‘Spiritual Exercises’ developed by Saint Ignatius of Loyola between 1522 and 1526, which best reflect the state of spirituality in the Roman Catholic Church at the time,

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41 Thomas Keating, Open Mind, Open Heart, 149.
was not fully accepted during the post-Reformation period. The Jesuits seemed to be first to reduce the status of contemplative prayer: in 1574, Everard Mercurian (1514–1580), the Father General of the Jesuits, in a directive to the Spanish province of the society, prohibited the practice of affective prayer and the application of the five senses, which Saint Ignatius recommended for the development of spiritual practice in the third method of prayer. Propelled by the reluctance of the Roman Catholic authorities to support contemplative prayer, Pope Innocent XII announced his official condemnation of ‘Quietism’, a set of spiritual teachings, as a species of false mysticism in 1687. Although the legalistic Roman Catholic Church gave birth to many saints during the 19th century, few of them spoke or wrote about contemplative prayer, while the Eastern Orthodox Church embarked on renewing spirituality.

Despite this blow, contemplative prayer re-emerged as CP in the second half of the 20th century, a method of prayer born out of the Christian tradition, more akin to the method of The Cloud of Unknowing and the work of St John of the Cross. Coinciding with the first wave of renewing religious life after Vatican II, St Joseph’s Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, where Father Thomas Keating served as abbot from 1961 to 1981, represents as a good example of the modern roots of CP. In the attempt to develop CP, Father William Meninger, who was then assigned to teach in the guest house of the Abbey, introduced a new method called ‘Prayer of the Cloud’, based on The Cloud of Unknowing. After he led the first retreat in Connecticut, the participants suggested that Father Basil Pennington, another monk in Spencer, use the term ‘centring prayer’ for the practice, although it was coined by Thomas Merton.

From 1976, Father Pennington began teaching under the name ‘centring prayer’, in its initial phase in the form of introductory workshops at the Spencer guesthouse, first to priests and later to interested laypeople. Meanwhile, Father Keating moved to St Benedict’s Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, with no intention of teaching CP. However, upon a request in May 1982 by the assistant pastor in Aspen, Father Keating offered a presentation on prayer once a week for four

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42 Ibid., 144.
43 Ibid., 145.
44 Ibid., 146.
46 Thomas Keating, Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer, 11.
47 Ibid., 15.
48 Cynthia Bourgeault, Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, 58.
49 Thomas Keating, Intimacy with God: An Introduction to Centering Prayer, 16.
consecutive weeks. Ever since his arrival in Colorado, Father Keating has conducted retreats in Trappist and Benedictine monasteries.50 In summary, the practice of CP is not an adaptation of the spiritual practice of the Eastern insight-based religious traditions, although its nature is similar to that of Eastern spirituality. In fact, CP is the reinstatement of Christian mystical spirituality that had roots in the spiritual practice of early Christianity.

Amid the hustle and bustle of city life, Christians should recognise that contemplative prayer or CP serves as an effective antidote to the secular and individualist spirit of the post-modern world. Moreover, the influence of globalisation and the very nature of the religiously pluralist world, whether we like it or not, also poses challenges to an exclusive worldview. And so, hoping to reinvigorate Christian contemplative spiritual exercise, Father Keating reminded his fellow Christians to spiritually rethink Christians’ self-understanding of high esteem by affirming the advanced spiritual status of people in the East: ‘The spiritual disciplines of the East possess a highly developed psychological wisdom, we Christian leaders and teachers need to know something about them in order to meet people where they are today.’51 To make it simple, Father Keating raised a practical question in relation to spiritual practice: ‘Is there something that we can do to prepare ourselves for the gift of contemplation instead of waiting for God to do everything?’ His answer: ‘There are ways of training the mind in the spiritual disciplines of both East and West that can help to lay the groundwork for contemplative prayer.’52

Much like the long-dormant practice of vipassanā meditation in Buddhist countries, contemplative prayer faded significantly from the 16th century, yet it has been resuscitated in the form of CP by modern Christian spiritual fathers, in order to respond to a spiritually desolate world. Even though CP is firmly rooted in its Christian foundation, it can no doubt adopt some method of spiritual discipline from the East, and also share itself with Eastern spiritual practices. The outcomes of CP are by no means inferior to those of vipassanā meditation. Keeping in mind that both CP and vipassanā serve people of particular spiritual journeys in different ways, dialogue mutually enriches practitioners on both sides; such an experience may encourage them to establish peaceful multicultural harmony.

50 Ibid., 17.
51 Thomas Keating, Open Mind, Open Heart, 150.
52 Ibid., 154.
6.4 Methods

CP is one of the most effective Christian spiritual practices, as Buddhists will understand, given the similarities it shares with *vipassanā* meditation. Methodologies of meditation may be summed up in three groups: concentrative methods, awareness methods and surrender methods. CP belongs in the last grouping. Concentrative methods are the most universal and time-honoured, and are fixed on the principle of attention, with the mind simply giving its attention to a chosen touchstone or subject. This method may involve counting one’s breaths, holding one’s attention on a particular area of the body or reciting a mantra either aloud or silently, depending on the tradition. Prayer with a mantra is also well attested in Christianity: witness the Lord’s Prayer, the Rosary and the ‘*Maranatha*’ of Christian tradition.53

Second, awareness methods are widely used in Buddhist practice, particularly in *vipassanā* or insight meditation. Having aligned oneself with an inner observer, one mindfully watches the processes of thoughts and emotions rising, taking form and dissipating. For example, rather than getting tangled up in angry thoughts, the emerging anger is watched: it is labelled – ‘thinking, thinking’ or ‘angry thinking, angry thinking’ – until it subsides.54

The third grouping is the simpler surrender method: the practitioner is not bound to watch the rising, taking form and dissipating of any thought, but simply to let it go. Father Thomas Keating called this a prayer ‘not of attention, but of intention’.55

The unknown author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the source of CP, stressed the role of heart rather than head in practising contemplative prayer: ‘Lift your heart up to the Lord, with a gentle stirring of love desiring him for his own sake and not for his gifts. Centre all your attention and desire on him and let this be the sole concern of your mind and heart.’56 Whenever drawn by grace to contemplative work, we are determined to perform with a gentle stirring of love. In this practice, we are to think only of God the Creator, who redeemed us and guided us to this work; we are not to

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54 Ibid., 20–21.
55 Ibid., 21.
allow any ideas about God to enter our mind. Even naked intent towards God, the desire for him alone, is enough in this practice.57

In the following sections, some fundamental contents of and instructions for the practice of CP are presented.

6.4.1 Silence as Divine Language

While the benefit of silence is known to only a few people, CP offers an opportunity to learn ‘the art of silence’, which characterises the very nature of God. The 16th-century mystic Saint John of the Cross declared: ‘Silence is God’s first language.’58 The 4th-century Desert Father Anthony discovered the four essential foundational elements of spiritual health which constitute the contemplative lifestyle: solitude, silence, simplicity and a discipline for prayer and action.59 Based on the profound experiential finding of his spiritual journey, Thomas Merton named silence as a conveyor of divine revelation: ‘Contemplation is essentially a listening in silence, an expectancy . . . It is by his silence itself suddenly, inexplicably revealing itself to him as a word of great power, full of the voice of God.’60 Interestingly, Paul F. Knitter also supported this idea: ‘So the regular practice of the Sacrament of Silence can lead us Christians into a deeper experience of what it means to have faith.’61

Like the togetherness of water and the riverbank along a watercourse heading to the sea, contemplative prayer and silence cannot be divorced in order to realise the indwelling of God in a person’s true self, the image of God. Cynthia Bourgeault divided silence into two kinds: outer silence (an external cessation of words and busyness) and interior silence (stopping the much more challenging inner talk). The first kind serves to quiet external pressures in order to touch inter reality by analysing feelings, want and so on. This mental process naturally brings about renewal.62 The second kind makes a deliberate effort to curb the wandering mind. According to Bourgeault: ‘Intentional silence almost always feels like work . . . Since centering

57 Ibid., 56.
58 Cynthia Bourgeault, Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, 7.
60 Ibid., 15–16.
62 Cynthia Bourgeault, Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, 7–8.
prayer is a discipline of intentional silence, dealing with this internal resistance is an inevitable part of developing a practice.  

6.4.2 The Sacred Word and Guidelines

Similar to silence, any chosen ‘sacred word’ plays an important role in Christian meditation as a short and powerful prayer. ‘A short prayer pierces the heavens,’ wrote the author of The Cloud of Unknowing, because it is the prayer of a person’s whole being, the prayer prayed with all the height, depth, length and breadth of the spirit of a person. This short prayer is deep, for all understanding is put together into one little word; it is long, for this feeling could endure for life and the cry would go on forever; it is wide, because what desire for self could be part of a universal concern desired by everyone? For example, the short and most effective prayer during a time of danger is just one word: ‘Help.’ Likewise, in order to make short and effective prayer during contemplative prayer, we need to choose a sacred word. The choice of a sacred word for repeated saying – silently, gently and steadily, as a symbol of one’s willingness to consent to the presence and action of God – is the starting point of CP. Contemplatives rarely pray in words, or their words are few if they do. A word of one syllable is recommended for this spiritual exercise.

The sacred word symbolises the willingness of the practitioner to observe contemplative practice, and serves as a reminder for him or her to let go of whatever thought is being thought, and then to return to ‘naked intent directed to God’. The practitioner’s temperament may draw him or her to a certain word with clear devotional or religious intent, such as ‘Jesus’, ‘Father’, ‘Abba’, ‘Spirit’ or ‘Come, Lord’. Any other words pertaining to the spiritual attitude which leads to basic intention of the spiritual exercise – ‘open’, ‘still’, ‘be here’, ‘listen’, ‘let go’ and so on – can be chosen too. In the choice of a sacred word for the practice of CP, short is better than long, and simple is better than elaborate. The chosen sacred word is not a mantra, nor is it for constant repetition. A sacred word is used only when the

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63 Ibid., 8–9.
65 Ibid.
66 Cynthia Bourgeault, Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, 29.
practitioner notices that he or she is being attracted to a thought.68 As it does not describe the height, depth or breadth of the practitioner’s love for God, the sacred word means nothing special, but is a simple placeholder, like the finger pointing at the moon of intention. More importantly, the sacred word is not a thought suppressor; it does not put down thoughts or replace them with itself. Its simple, grease-like function is to control the skid of the letting-go motion, and enable the releasing of thoughts promptly, without a lot of interior reactivity.69 Like Buddhists, who have many meditation subjects to choose from, the practitioners of CP can choose any word that is accompanied by profound spiritual meaning.

The practice of CP in many aspects is technically akin to the way vipassanā is performed. The instruction of Father Thomas Keating, a prominent advocate of CP, contains sixteen clear steps that together constitute the practice of contemplative prayer.70 While Keating is more concerned with the theological concept and the spiritual goal of CP, Meninger emphasises suitable posture and offers practical guidelines to be used during the practice. Father Meninger, a champion of CP, scrupulously explained and recommended eight rules71 to those who wish to take up regular individual contemplative prayer on a daily basis.

6.5 The Benefits of Centring Prayer

The regular practice of CP results in the realisation of the co-dwelling of God and the true self within the person, the reality beyond the activity, and the effects of the false self system (the ego-self). Consequentially, the healing experience of God’s presence in interior silence brings about true existential security, control and esteem. Having bypassed the false self system and its mechanisms through the practice, one finds true happiness in God through pure receptive consent to the Indwelling Spirit.72 David Frenette wrote about the core benefit of CP: ‘Because regular contemplative practice orients us toward the healing and transforming action of God, beyond any felt

68 Ibid., 25.
69 Ibid., 26.
72 Thomas Keating et al., Spirituality, Contemplation and Transformation: Writing on Centering Prayer, 31–32.
presence, the deeper roots of the false self-system are gradually exposed. The false self’s motivation and activities are no longer being acted out and reinforced.”

One of the most significant effects of CP is that it helps one to live life from one’s very centre. Consequently, we interact with others and nature ever better than before because we are not defending ourselves from other people or circumstances, but living reality as it unfolds. Not merely a method of prayer but a process, CP offers one of the best ways to gently respond to the Gospel and its values with our whole being. To reach the perfect love that casts our fear (1 John 4:18) or to live the gospel by our own effort, as Jesus did, is virtually impossible; contemplative prayer, however, is instrumental in helping us grow towards the authentic self-understanding of Jesus Christ – the epitome of perfect self-giving love. William Johnston beautifully described the spiritual growth of a contemplative, which is marked by unconditional love – because ‘love’ is at the very centre of CP:

The skilled contemplative has no special regard for any person in particular, whether brother or stranger, friend or enemy. In reality, no man is a stranger to him because he looks on each one as a brother. And none is his enemy. All are his friends. Even those who hurt or offend him in everyday life are as dear to him as his best friends and all the good he desires for his best friends he desires for them. Through contemplation he is so growing in practical goodness and love that, when he speaks or prays with his fellow Christians at other times, the warmth of his love reaches out to them all, friend, enemy, stranger, and kin alike. If there is any partiality at all, it is more likely to be toward his enemy than toward his friend.

God invites every human being to the contemplative dimension of the Gospel, where we are privileged to share God’s very nature: love. This dimension grows as a desire to know God and to enter into God’s love through dying to self or emptying to self, where a change of consciousness begins to take place. This dynamic sharing of God’s nature transforms and opens each person to the mind and the very life of Christ, alongside a challenge to become an instrument of God’s love and energy in this corrupted world. Contemplative consciousness bonds each person to God and to all other persons, so each can see God’s presence in all things.

Cynthia Bourgeault contended that CP is not about accessing sublime states of consciousness or having mystical experiences: ‘The fruits of this prayer are seen first in daily life. They express themselves in your ability to be a bit more present in your

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73 Ibid., 32–33.
74 Ibid., 27.
75 Cynthia Bourgeault, Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, 17.
77 Ibid., 156.
life, more flexible and forgiving with those you live and work with, and more honest and comfortable in your own being. These signs occur when the inner depths are actually touched and have begun to set in motion their transformative work. Meninger beautifully described the concrete benefits experienced from contemplative prayer:

When we operate from the heart of God, we proceed from and together with the Son of God, and God’s work of salvation is carried out in the love of the Holy Spirit. We become Christic, we become Christ, we become truly Christians. In God’s mercy and through God’s love, we learn more and more to view the world through the eyes of the risen Christ. We learn to love everyone, even inveterate sinners. We do not see sinners as people to be despised or condemned, but as children of God, called to love and holiness. We deplore the deeds of sin; we hate the sin but we love the sinner.

Resting in the ‘inner room’ of CP, the Living Christ transforms our minds and hearts and makes us ready to embrace union with God, not as ‘identification with’ God but as ‘participation in’ God. Consequently, each one of us experiences the ‘Great I Am’ that dwells in the very centre of our being. As with ‘knowledge of the heart’, where ‘heart’ signifies the totality or wholeness of one’s being, resting in the inner room integrates all human potentialities: body, mind, soul and spirit, centred in Christ. Contemplative prayer teaches us how to embrace the presence and action of God amid the regrets, worries, chaos and messiness of life, and equally with its joys, achievements and triumphs. Contemplative prayer is all about embracing life as it is. For contemplative prayer is the faithful and loving consent to ‘dissolve’ into God’s unconditional loving being (Rom 8:26; 11:33). Contemplative life leads us to awareness of the reality of everyday life, with all its joys and pleasures, as well as its problems and chaos.

Finally, it is worth noting Justin Langille’s expression of the fruit of CP: practitioners become a bit more patient, less judgemental, more forgiving, less stressful, more compassionate, less angry, more at peace and so on, when they gain the capacity to recognise the goodness of others. More importantly, as contemplative prayer brings us more deeply into intimacy with the Living Christ, we

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78 Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, 30.
80 Thomas Keating et al., *Spirituality, Contemplation and Transformation: Writing on Centering Prayer*, 76.
81 Ibid., 77.
82 Ibid., 77–80.
have potential to become divine in terms of love through Christ’s humble taking of humanity – the source of ‘abundant life’ whereto we are all invited, along with the transformation of our being. The contemplative dimension of the Gospel increasingly liberates us to embrace a whole new dimension of intimacy with the loving God. Giving ourselves to the practice of contemplative prayer on a regular basis leads us to gradual growth in the service of love, associated with our willingness to give up our entire false self. Put another way, the death of the false self is followed by the surrender of one’s whole self and the awakening to its fullness.

In sum, ‘contemplative prayer leads us to the fruit of mature faith that is complete self-donation’. Thomas Merton described the reality of the benefit of the contemplative life as a result of the meditative; it may occur at any time, anywhere, with any person:

In Louisville, at the Corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the centre of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and that I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of a pure self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness.

6.6 Exchangeable Concepts of Centring Prayer and Vipassanā Meditation

Overall, while CP serves as a way of entering into union with God in love, and a way of living out the contemplative aspect of the Gospel to the fullest extent in order to become more open to one’s neighbours in advancing the Kingdom of God, vipassanā meditation represents the essential practice for realising the ultimate liberation and the Dhamma from which spiritual insight and wisdom emerged to overcome and eliminate mental defilements, which are rooted in greed, hatred and delusion. To use one word for each practice: ‘love’ represents the fruit of CP, while ‘wisdom’ represents the fruit of vipassanā meditation. At the same time, according to their respective natures, rather than on the basis of their benefits, we can see significant differences between CP and vipassanā meditation.

As we have seen, its intrinsic nature shows that CP is based on divine love and human love for God, with the intention of growing into the likeness of Jesus Christ by participating in God’s love through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. No one can argue

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84 Ibid., 68.
85 Ibid., 71.
against it, except recognising that this spiritual practice emerges out of the mysterious power of love (mettā). The prominent characteristic of vipassanā meditation, on the other hand, is the sharpening of one’s intellectual power for the purpose of attaining the highest spiritual wisdom. Therefore, we can designate vipassanā meditation as a spiritual practice that depends totally on the mysterious way wisdom works. Each practice pierces the inner darkness of the false self, like a two-edged sword, and brings about ethico-spiritual transformation, although in different ways: the respective practices of the mettā-oriented CP and the wisdom-oriented vipassanā meditation lead to significant ethical outcomes, which help any practitioner to respond social evils in peaceful ways for the betterment of human race, at least in those communities where both Buddhists and Christians dwell together.

Meninger affirmed ‘divine love’ as the source of true inner transformation. He explained, for instance, that forgiveness, the most difficult thing to do in life, is impossible from our meagre and limited love, yet possible from the unlimited compassion of God’s love, made attainable by entering into the heart of God in the loving search of contemplative prayer, because ‘to forgive is divine’. Being imbued with the love of Christ and empowered by the grace of the Holy Spirit, Christians will become more loving, forgiving, peaceful, reconcilable and open to others, regardless of faith, race or social status. CP helps Christians to gradually attenuate the activities of the false self, to the point of complete elimination, along with the restoration of true self or the image of God, the seat of unconditional divine love that extends to all human races with no discrimination. Receiving and living the contemplative dimension of the Gospel through meditation, the contemplative finds the innermost part of his or her being, where God and the true self co-dwell.

This spiritual insight becomes critical in regenerating a person’s moral life, which the Apostle Paul called ‘new creation in Jesus Christ’ (2 Cor 5:17). Such a person will continually grow in the mind of Jesus Christ, which is represented as being full of wisdom, unconditional love, peace, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, humbleness and tolerance. In sum, CP or Christian meditation is about nurturing our ‘continual growing in love’ and establishing ourselves in the mind of Jesus Christ in order to shine our light of goodness in society. Meninger writes insightfully of how love powerfully transforms people’s lives from a Christian point of view:

87 William A. Meninger, The Loving Search for God: Contemplative Prayer and the Cloud of Unknowing, 34.
Love transforms idle into industrious, lazy into vigorous, timid into courageous, sinners into saints. The human problem, social or personal, has never existed that could not be solved by love. Love of neighbour will call you to a generous giving of yourself and your material goods in service. Love of self will inspire you to care for your own physical and mental wellbeing in a way that will be neither excessive nor neglectful. You will always find God when and where you need God, because you will always be united to God in love.

Vipassanā meditation method develops bountiful moral qualities (as we saw in Chapter 5), and yields benefits similar to those of CP, and fundamental to ethico-spiritual change in a person, regardless of social status or religion. Amid this world of negative forces, the good news for Buddhists is the attainability of mettā, or true love, as a result of attaining wisdom through the practice of vipassanā meditation.

Jocelyn King once witnessed this reality, and discussed her vipassanā meditation teacher Sayagyi U Ba Khin’s personal experience of mettā within: ‘Sayagyi had been asked to be a member of a certain government committee. The other members were very hostile to him when he first joined the group. Over time he completely turned this situation around’ by showing his mettā in action to the members who hated him.

In the same way, S.N. Goenka specified three examples of how real transformation takes place through vipassanā meditation. He contended that the conversion that occurs in vipassanā meditation has nothing to do with religious change but constituted three dhamma gems: the conversion from misery to happiness, from ignorance to enlightenment, and from bondage to liberation. Goenka wrote:

In past millennia, and in the present day, we are seeing how vipassanā enables one to live a happy, harmonious life. When more individuals achieve inner peace, peace is achieved in homes, in the neighbourhood, in villages, towns, cities and countries. This unifying process of peace and harmony is visible in vipassanā courses worldwide. During a vipassanā course, people from all religions, castes, nationalities, races and social strata sit together to practice this ancient path. Thousands of Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists and Jews have taken vipassanā courses.

Overall, just as spiritual awakening to enlightenment or wisdom through vipassanā meditation is inspired by perfect loving kindness, mettā, the source of loving all living beings, entering into union with the love of God (entering mettā) through CP is also

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88 Ibid., 61.
91 Ibid., 258.
enabled by awakening to the subtle spiritual insight (wisdom). Consequently, we can share and participate in God’s unconditional love for all creation and for all human races, regardless of religion or worldview. On the basis of spiritual benefit, we can infer that dialoguing CP and vipassanā meditation will by no means cause harm, but rather will bring each group into better understanding, mutual respect, mutual recognition and mutual appreciation through learning from each other. The final reward will be peaceful social harmony, which is established according to the norm of unity in diversity.

CP and vipassanā meditation are not familiar to many people, who think them tremendous spiritual exercises that only monks or recluses can achieve in practice. But they are not. For example, as a person uses a cup when thirsty and a plate when hungry in order to provide the physical body with water and food, CP and vipassanā meditation serve mental and spiritual needs. We need to keep our minds and hearts healthy. In this regard, Goenka said that similar to keeping the body healthy and strong by preventing it from becoming weak and diseased through physical exercise and suitable diet, it is even more necessary to keep the mind healthy and strong through meditation, preventing them from losing their balance and becoming miserable, as we live in a confusing and stressful world.92

William Johnston encouraged regular practice of a suitable spiritual exercise, like the mirror a person uses to detect a blemish in his or her appearance.93 In order to live a good life as either a Buddhist or a Christian, therefore, it is crucial to keep one’s ethico-spiritual dimension healthy through the practice of a suitable spiritual exercise. CP or vipassanā meditation is practised in order to establish a balanced life, abundant in spiritual blessings, so that one can peacefully and wisely cope with daily social needs and problems without harming others. When a person is mentally, spiritually and physically healthy, he or she will become an asset to the society in which they live, and any contribution they make to society will be life-affirming.

To discuss the workability of a spiritually and socially balanced life in the secular world, the following chapter examines the impact of healthy spirituality in social engagement – the major theme of this thesis.

92 Ibid., 38.
Chapter 7

Socially Engaged Spirituality

Christians and Buddhists in dialogue can play a crucial role in responding to the current socio-religious issues of Myanmar. This kind of dialogue includes healthy spirituality and social involvement. Accordingly, this chapter deals with a description of socially engaged spirituality (henceforth SES¹) that is embedded in the teachings both of the Buddha and of Jesus Christ. Naturally originated in a person’s faith commitment as the outcome of an intimate relationship with ineffable, subtle reality (God or Dhamma), SES flows into the secular world in the form of life-affirming action. Gregory C. Stanczak wrote: ‘Engaged spirituality allows for creative innovation between private experience and public action or between religious faith and social activism.’² SES proves that religion is not an opiate³ with a world-escaping ideology; religion is for peace, social harmony and service in this world.

7.1 Understanding Buddhist SES

From a Buddhist point of view, humanity is endowed with the highest dignity of all living beings. The Buddha declared the propriety of human being in Itivuttaka 4.1: ‘You are my own true sons, born of dharma, created by dharma, my spiritual heirs, not carnal heirs.’⁴ Interestingly, Vimalakirtinirdesha Sutra 2 confirmed that the Enlightened Buddha is full of the essence of Dhamma: ‘The body of the Buddha is born of love, patience, gentleness, and truth.’⁵ Itivuttaka and Vimalakirtinirdesha Sutra confirmed that the pristine design of human being is full of dignity, beauty, happiness, righteousness, truth, love and so on. At the same time, each individual is not without ethical and spiritual enemies. All human races are suffering because of

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¹ The acronym ‘SES’ refers to the four dimensions of dialogue: dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of theological exchange and dialogue of religious experience (cf. footnote 92 of Chapter 2).
⁵ Ibid., 27.
tahna,⁶ which means greed, voluptuous desire or craving. While tahna blinds people’s moral eyes, many faithful Buddhists break its power and are able to represent SES in daily life. The following are examples of those who advocate SES in word and deed.

SES is clearly seen in the modern world through the teaching and life of Thich Nhat Hanh, who coined the term ‘Engaged Buddhism’, referring to putting ‘wisdom and compassion’ (paññā and mettā) into concrete action to help all sentient beings (principally humans and animals).⁷ Thus, Engaged Buddhism describes Buddhists seeking ways to apply the insight gained through meditation and the social implication of the central teachings of the Buddha in order to address social, political, environmental and economic suffering and injustice. By definition, Engaged Buddhism is an effort to express through practical actions the central Buddhist concept of ‘loving-kindness’ or universal goodwill (mettā) towards all.⁸ By nature, SES is native to the action-oriented dimension of mettā. Therefore, loving-kindness itself is the source of SES. To love means to serve out of free will, without outside compulsion. As Parker J. Palmer said, ‘Action is the visible form of an invisible spirit, an outward manifestation of an inward power,’⁹ while ‘social engagement’ is the visible form of the invisible loving-kindness (mettā).

Since love and compassion are the two mental states on which Engaged Buddhists’ actions are firmly grounded, those who aspire to engage in social works for the wellbeing of others must cultivate mettā and karunā in order to achieve inner peace.¹⁰ Nhat Hanh explained that the art of loving is comprised of loving-kindness, compassion, joy and inclusiveness, and compassion arises when you understand the reality of suffering in yourself and another person.¹¹ Therefore, SES is a way of showing solidarity with suffering people in love and in a spirit of brotherhood, through in-depth knowledge of interconnectedness. As a social activist, Nhat Hanh warned that teaching Buddhist philosophy without practising generosity to ease the

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⁶ ‘Again, monks, this is the Noble Truth as to the origin of sorrow; it is the recurring greed, associated with enjoyment and desire and seeking pleasure everywhere which is the cause of this sorrow. In other words, it is the greed for sense pleasure, greed for individual existence, greed for non-existence’ (Mahavagga of the Vinaya Pitaka, 10, i, 6:20). See Antony Fernando and Leonard Swidler, Buddhism Made Plain: An Introduction for Christians and Jews (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 27.
⁷ Sallie B. King, Socially Engaged Buddhism (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2009), 4.
⁸ Ibid., 3.
¹⁰ Sallie B. King, Socially Engaged Buddhism, 49.
¹¹ Thich Nhat Hanh, ‘Healing Ourselves, Healing the Earth,’ The Mindfulness Bell, a publication of Plum Village, issue no. 67 (autumn 2014): 7.
suffering of others means missing the essence of Buddhism; the practice of generosity in compassion by no means discriminates against even those who cause anger and hatred in society. To become a socially engaged Buddhist, meditation is integral because the inner peace of a liberated heart is achieved through meditation. The liberated heart is flooded with compassion and a great ambition to ease the burden of those imprisoned by false views, hatred, greed and ignorance, and who continue to create suffering for themselves and others.

Akin to Christian social engagement or social liberation movements, which are neither sectarian by nature nor centralised movements of established sects, modern Engaged Buddhism came into existence as individual movements responding to the 20th-century social, economic, political, ecological and military crises in the countries of Buddhist Asia. In the second half of the 20th century, the cultural patterns that had nurtured the Buddhist world for centuries and even millennia seemed subject to the expanding forces of modernisation, Westernisation and globalisation, which are tightly intertwined with materialism. Ajarn Buddhadasa, a highly respected Thai monk and advocate of interfaith dialogue in Thailand, viewed materialism as the common enemy of all religions, because it caused moral corruption, environmental degradation, cultural prostitution, political violence and intellectual rigidity. If Buddhism had nothing to say about the problems of materialism, the religion would likely have become irrelevant in the modern world.

Prominent figures such as Thich Nhat Hanh and Tenzi Gyatso (the fourteenth Dalai Lama) also addressed life-destroying problems and challenges, and soon became known as representatives of Engaged Buddhism. They based their values on the teachings of the Buddha, and were motivated by the welfare of the people to whom they addressed their faith practices. Since figures of Engaged Buddhism such as Aung San Suu Kyi and Thich Nhat Hanh received some Western education, which was influenced by Christian charitable work and Western sociopolitical norms, some have accused Engaged Buddhists of ‘Westernising’ Buddhism. Although Buddhist

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13 Sallie B. King, Socially Engaged Buddhism, 48.
16 Sallie B. King, Socially Engaged Buddhism, 2–3.
engaged spirituality is similar to Christian charity and social movements, in reality the foundations of Engaged Buddhism are the Buddhist virtue of compassion and traditional Buddhist philosophy.\textsuperscript{17} The Four Noble Truths are the central theme of the very first sermon and the teaching of the Buddha. They are also the core of Buddhist philosophy. They are the ideas that life inevitably involves suffering; that suffering is caused by our perverted desires; that a real state in which there is no suffering is possible; and that there is a way leading to the achievement of this state called liberation. The Buddha declared that the way to eliminate suffering was to follow the Noble Eightfold Path: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.\textsuperscript{18}

In Buddhist history, there was a legendary figure named Asoka the Great, who gained a balanced life through his ethico-spiritual transformation into a new truth that he did not know before. While Engaged Buddhism is unfamiliar to many, as if it were a new spiritual discovery in the modern world, in fact the great emperor had already embodied SES in a different way. Asoka the Great was said to have killed ninety-nine half-brothers before his conversion to Buddhism.\textsuperscript{19} However, his faith in and following of the teachings of the Buddha changed his life, and he became an unrivalled icon of religious tolerance and peacemaking, and a faith defender for rulers all over the Buddhist world.\textsuperscript{20} His conversion propelled him to give up the traditional duty of an Indian monarch to engage in military conquest (\textit{digvijaya}), and to take up his own version of \textit{Dharmavijaya}, which refers to the happiness of both conqueror and conquered when the victory was through \textit{Dhamma}.\textsuperscript{21}

According to Thich Nhat Hanh, SES is the fruit of true wisdom gained through meditation, which in turn leads to awareness of the suffering of victims. For him, SES means sharing one’s life with suffering people in sacrificial love, the outcome of a balanced spirituality between two dimensions of reality: one’s history-bound and time-limited life, and one’s time-free illimitable life. Thich Nhat Hanh taught that right understanding (wisdom) is key to earning a balanced life, a great

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{20} Richard F. Gombrich, \textit{Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo}, 97–98.
reward of keeping the two dimensions in harmony. For him, meditation played a significant role in attaining right understanding of all phenomena. For him, to meditate meant deep inspection of things, and analytical observation of what was happening around us. In solidarity with war victims, he said: ‘If you touch suffering deeply in yourself and in the other person, understanding will arise. When understanding arises, love and acceptance will also arise, and they will bring the suffering to an end.’ Remarkably, the Vietnam War of the 1960s compelled Nhat Hanh and other Buddhist monks to move beyond the usual rhythms of monastic life and involve themselves in aiding the victims of the war, and in working towards a peaceful end to the conflict. Creatively developing the ancient path of compassion known as Engaged Buddhism, Nhat Hanh fully committed his life to addressing the suffering of his people, on the principle that ‘the first step in making peace in the world is to be this peace ourselves’. In 1964 Nhat Hanh founded the School of Youth for Social Service in South Vietnam, with the intention of teaching the path of compassion to others, helping victims of the war, and aiding the Vietnamese in rebuilding villages and resettling wartime refugees.

Holding to the Buddhist norm of non-violence, Nhat Hanh, like many similarly minded people, joined the pagodas to avoid Vietnam War conscription; they did so not because of cowardice but because they did not want to commit murder. Several monks were imprisoned, tortured and killed for refusing to take sides with the Communist North or the government of South Vietnam, for showing concern for war victims regardless of political background, and for asking both sides to stop fighting. Among 600 monk prisoners, many had resisted being drafted. Even in such a situation, they preferred jail to the army as they cherished the ideal of non-violence. This pacifism, non-violence, solidarity with suffering people and social service constituted SES.

The peacemaking spiritual leader the Dalai Lama exemplifies SES. Based on life experiences similar to those of Nhat Hanh in exile, the Dalai Lama points to ‘hatred’, which abets the greed-ridden manufacturers’ sale of sophisticated weapons that only fuel violence. He says: ‘As long as hatred dwells in the human mind, real

22 Thich Nhat Hanh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers* (New York: The Berkeley Publishing Group, 1999), 37.
peace is impossible. In order to achieve lasting peace in a secular world preoccupied by competition for arms, inner peace must urgently be established through mutual trust, respect, love and kindness. In transforming a hating heart into a loving heart, the Dalai Lama strongly recommended meditation or other spiritual practices. According to him, one of the major aims and purposes of religious practices is to internally transform an undisciplined, untamed, unfocused state of mind into a disciplined, tamed and balanced mind. When transformation occurs, one finds oneself communicating better with people of other religious traditions and cultural backgrounds, and appreciating the values and the value of other traditions and worldviews.

The Dalai Lama taught: ‘Through [spiritual practice], one can bring about inner transformation, the inner tranquillity that will make that individual spiritually mature and a warm-hearted, whole, and good and kind person.’

As the living figure of Tibetans’ struggle for freedom, the fourteenth Dalai Lama in exile mentioned the importance of non-violence for reclaiming genuine freedom, happiness and prosperity on the fifty-second anniversary of the Tibetan National Uprising Day (10 March 2011): ‘I am a firm believer in non-violence and people-power and these events have shown once again that determined non-violent action can indeed bring about positive change.’ To refrain from harming others, the Dalai Lama made a brief suggestion for daily practice:

Notice your attachments to food, clothes, and shelter, and adapt monastic practices of contentment to a layperson’s life. Be satisfied with adequate food, clothing, and shelter. Use the additional free time for meditation so that you can overcome more problems. Develop a strong desire to refrain from harming others either physically or verbally no matter whether you are embarrassed, insulted, reviled, pushed, or hit.

The power of meditation or spiritual practice in nurturing SES is irrefutable. One of the most prominent examples in this regard is Mahatma Gandhi, who, although not a Buddhist, spent at least two hours a day in meditation. His public campaigns included arguing for justice and freedom, seeking solidarity with the poorest of the poor, and embracing voluntary poverty and celibacy, as well as civil disobedience and

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27 Ibid., 74.
28 Department of Information and International Relations, Central Tibetan Administration, Collected Statements of His Holiness Dalai Lama on Devolution of Power to the Elected Leaders of Central Tibetan Administration (Dharamshala: Narthang Press, 2011), 4.
29 Dalai Lama, How to Practice: The Way to a Meaningful Life, 71.
community life. Sallie B. King affirmed that Gandhi, the great figure of non-violent social engagement for the world, influenced many practitioners of SES.30

Firmly grounded in his inner peace and enlightenment, Gandhi declared: ‘We must become living embodiments of Truth and Love because God is Truth and Love.’31 Reminiscing on his social involvement in the suffering Indian peasants’ campaign for rights, Gandhi admitted: ‘It is no exaggeration, but the literal truth, to say that in this meeting with the peasants I was face to face with God, Ahimsa and Truth.’32 During the peasants’ campaign, Gandhi was able to convince leaders of labourers to follow four conditions of the strike: (1) never to resort to violence; (2) never to molest blacklegs; (3) never to depend upon alms; and (4) to remain firm, no matter how long the strike continued, and to earn bread during the strike by any other honest labour.33 The secret that made Ghandi the unrivalled architect of non-violence and balanced spirituality, and a key sociopolitical figure of the modern world, has nothing to do with his educational qualification or wealth, but because he was a person of meditation, through which he cleansed his mind and removed from his heart evil sources such as ‘greed, hatred, and delusion’.

Similarly, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the icon of hope, freedom and non-violent struggle for socio-political change, is also a person of meditation. Her fortitude and courage, which she exerted to free all Myanmar peoples by non-violent means, was challenged and tested at the cost of life for the first time on 5 April 1989 in Danubyu, Irrawaddy Division. She overcame the test by her serenity, stemming from her balanced life, established through meditative principles. Defying the SLORC’s34 martial law in the Danubyu incident, Suu Kyi delivered a speech to a small gathering at the office of the National League for Democracy (NLD). When she and her entourage made their way on foot to Danubyu’s river port, a group of soldiers, led by Captain Myint Oo, pointed their rifles at her on the jetty and shouted for her to go away and not come back. She replied to the captain that, short of arresting and imprisoning her, there was no way to stop her going where she pleased.35 Returning from the villages she visited, and approaching the jetty in the evening, the same

30 Sallie B. King, Socially Engaged Buddhism, 2.
33 Ibid., 385.
34 ‘SLORC’ stands for ‘State Law and Order Restoration Council’.
caption ordered the motorboats not to land. Facing this second hurdle, Suu Kyi quickly alighted onto the stone steps and ignored a company of soldiers, who had advanced their towards the landing spot and taken up firing positions. Her followers avoided a scuffle in the confusion and the soldiers backed off.\textsuperscript{36}

As they continued on their way, three more soldiers with German Bren guns blocked them, but Suu Kyi, with a smile, gently but firmly pushed the barrels of their weapons down and told them, ‘You must let us pass.’ The soldiers gave up their attempt.\textsuperscript{37} Approaching Danubyu’s market, she encountered a fourth and final test that day. From a distance of 400 yards, they saw deranged riflemen kneeling in firing formation, and heard a blaring loudspeaker commanding that if they did not return to their boat, they would be shot. As Suu Kyi continued, the captain ordered his soldiers to aim and fire on the count of ‘three’; they readied their rifles. After the captain had counted to ‘two’, an unexpected voice rang out, and the soldiers lowered their weapons. An unknown major stepped out from hiding and countermanded the captain’s order.\textsuperscript{38} Although the regime had orchestrated the Danubyu compromise, with the aim of smashing Suu Kyi’s resolution to liberate the people and push her out of Myanmar, she turned the incident into grounds for demonstrating ‘her absolute commitment of no turning back’. Curtiss Paul Deyoung wrote about her peaceful means of unpredictably overcoming the regime’s oppressive schemes, as a living representative of SES, during the twenty-one years of her house arrest:

Suu Kyi’s house arrest was at times very harsh. She initially had no source of income and sold household items just to eat. At one point, she dropped from 106 to 90 pounds due to hunger and illness. Suu Kyi survived the difficulties of house arrest through a rigorous schedule that included exercise, meditation, reading, playing the piano before it was irreparably out of tune, and listening to the radio . . .

Up at four every morning, she would tidy up before sitting at the foot of her bed in a half lotus position to meditate for one hour.\textsuperscript{39}

7.2 Understanding Christian Socially Engaged Spirituality

According to Christian teaching, God created, out of His unconditional love, all human races in ‘His own image’\textsuperscript{40} (Gen 1:26–27), with no discriminatory social strata, but with due prestige and great potential. Jacob Kavunkal reaffirmed the

\textsuperscript{36}Ibid., 312–313.
\textsuperscript{37}Ibid., 313.
\textsuperscript{38}Ibid., 314.
\textsuperscript{40}Cf. Pro 2:6; Jer 10:12, 51:15, 31:3; 1 John 4:7–8; Heb 4:12; 2 Cor 13:11.
Biblical statement in this way: ‘The basic principle is the God-given dignity of the human person created in God’s image, into whom God has breathed God’s spirit and with whom God has entered into a covenantal relationship.’\(^{41}\) The Creator God can by no means allow any human to be exploited or stripped of their dignity. However, the fundamental freedoms of being and dignity are prevented from growing into fully fledged maturity by manmade evils. Although God was pleased with his creation of human beings, the interventions of disobedient hearts caused a chain of suffering to destroy the beauty and the blessings of God’s creation (Gen 3:1–24). SES is therefore crucial for the restoration of the original purpose of God’s creation of humans: to end suffering, to reinstate justice and peace in the morally perverted world, and to bring abundant life to all human communities. Accordingly, this section discusses how the Christian faith has generated the following models that represent SES in action.

The insight that led Constantine the Great to stand as the ultimate liberator of persecuted Christians cannot be underrated. He was criticised, though, for not fully embracing non-violence, due to a situation that pushed him to choose armed conflict to subdue his rivals, who were merciless persecutors of Christians. He became the Roman Emperor who emancipated the oppressed as a result of being influenced by the Christian faith through his mother’s piety, although his remarkable social actions preceded his baptism. After his victory at the Battle of Mulvian Bridge on 28 October 312 CE, Constantine freed all pagan and Christian Roman citizens from the tyranny of the usurper Maxentius, who was notorious for jailing even senators, ravishing matrons, cruelly persecuting Christians, harassing bishops and brutalising his subjects.\(^ {42}\)

One significant contribution of Constantine the Great was the Edict of Milan, issued on 13 June 313 CE, which enabled freedom of conscience and religious belief for people of different faiths all over the empire. The Christian teachings that he received from his mother had an unassailable impact on his administration; the laws of the state became more humane, for example, with executions by leg breaking and forehead branding abolished. Criminals were no longer consigned to the gladiatorial contests but to mines, and overall prisoners were more humanely treated. The exposure of sickly or unwanted infants was banned, provision for unsupported poor


\(^{42}\) Charles Matson Odahl, Constantine and the Christian Empire (London: Routledge, 2004), 94.
children was granted, a program for the emancipation of slaves was enacted and animals sacrifices were prohibited.\textsuperscript{43}

Among modern Christian social activists, Dietrich Bonhoeffer demonstrated his faith in and love for Jesus Christ by responding to a real-life situation of his time – the suffering Jewish people in Germany – at the cost of his own life. He wrote: ‘It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life.’\textsuperscript{44} By this he meant that faith and love are neither ideological nor dogmatic; they are evidenced by practical, dynamic and productive non-violent actions. Although the pacifist Bonhoeffer did not have particular meditation techniques, his spiritual maturity, nurtured in accordance with Jesus’s teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, had surpassed that of his fellow Protestant leaders among the member churches of the Ecumenical Movement. Accordingly, none of them was able to follow him when he challenged the conference delegates in Fano, Denmark, in August 1934 as part of his attempt to stop anti-Semitism and the rise of Nazi Germany under the leadership of Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer said: ‘Peace means to give oneself altogether to the law of God, wanting no security, but in faith and obedience laying the destiny of the nations in the hand of Almighty God, not trying to direct it for selfish purposes. Battles are won, not with weapons, but with God.’\textsuperscript{45}

Bonhoeffer’s desire to see Gandhi revealed that the same depth of SES drove both of them, as they unquestioningly preached solidarity with suffering people. For both men, the religion each professed had nothing to do with siding with the oppressed. However, the spiritual level each reached through their respective religious practices mattered, and proved them to be like-minded socially engaged leaders who sacrificed their lives for voiceless people. Bonhoeffer never realised his dream to visit India, and he was finally killed on the Nazi gallows. His commitment to peace and social harmony compelled Bonhoeffer to seek to spend time with Gandhi so that he could join with the suffering Indian people and observe Gandhi’s non-violent stand against the British colonial rulers. In early 1935 Bonhoeffer received a letter from Gandhi:

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With reference to your desire to share my daily life, I may say that you will be staying with me if I am out of prison and settled in one place when you come. But otherwise, if I am traveling or if I am in prison, you will have to be satisfied with remaining in or near one of the institutions that are being conducted under my supervision. If you can live on the simple vegetarian food that these institutions can supply you will have nothing to pay for boarding and lodging.⁴⁶

From the Christian liberation perspective, SES is about identifying oneself with the social reality of wherever one is. According to Gustavo Gutierrez, the socioeconomic, political and cultural environment of the place where SES occurs affects authentic conversion – a process of entering the Kingdom of God or winning a balanced life. He affirmed that conversion breaks our wrong mental categories in order to stand in profound solidarity with those who suffer misery and injustice.⁴⁷ For Gutierrez, the Kingdom of God is ‘a kingdom of peace, love, and justice’.⁴⁸ Therefore, SES is a force that may lead us to participating in the work of establishing the Kingdom of God, the kernel teaching of the Gospel, in the secular world. SES is necessary if we are to imitate Jesus, who, out of his deepest love for the world, declared:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.⁴⁹

Although we don’t have to use the term ‘Kingdom of God’ in the secular world, we must not ignore the peculiar qualities of the Kingdom if we want to understand and embrace the double-edged teachings of Jesus Christ (vertical and horizontal), and if we feel obliged to carry out what Jesus taught. The best example of the modern Christian world is Nelson Mandela, who made an unfailing commitment, ready even to give up his life. Because of this sacrificial commitment, Mandela was deprived of his peaceful family life and career, and imprisoned for twenty-seven years. Struggling in SES for the liberation of his people, Mandela was finally triumphant, declaring to the world and his country the essence of the Kingdom of God, the central concern of SES, in his inauguration ceremony, held on 10 May 1994. He claimed his victory was a common victory for justice, peace and human dignity:

⁴⁹ Luke 4: 18–19. All Scripture quotes in this chapter were taken from the New Revised Standard Version.
We have, at last, achieved our political emancipation. We pledge ourselves to liberate all our people from the continuing bondage of poverty, deprivation, suffering, gender and other discrimination. Never, never, and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another . . . The sun shall never set on so glorious a human achievement. Let freedom reign. God bless Africa!\

Prominent among Christian social activists is Martin Luther King Jr. His commitment to the civil-rights struggle, the goal of his non-violent fighting for freedom and equality, and the genuine love he had for his fellow American citizens regardless of skin colour were beautifully expressed in a famous speech:

I have a dream – that the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit together at the table of brotherhood . . . I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character.\

As a paragon of peaceful social activism, King, in his Christmas sermon ‘Peace’, focused the fact that any struggle for racial justice must be experimented. He objected philosophically to the idea that the end justifies the means. King’s argument went the other way: in order to have peace in the world, the non-violent affirmation that ‘ends and means must cohere’ has to be embraced. The conclusion is that we cannot reach good ends through evil means, as the means represent the seed and the end the tree. For example, in the name or pursuit of ‘peace’, conquerors such as Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Charlemagne, Napoleon and Hitler (who argued that everything he did in Germany was for peace) killed millions of people by evil means; their attempts failed to bring real peace. For the end pre-exists in the means: destructive means can by no means bring about constructive ends. According to King, ‘peace’ is not a distant goal, but the means by which the goal is reached. Therefore, peacemakers must take up peaceful means to pursue peaceful ends.

Even when social activists choose non-violent means while struggling for social justice, oppressors normally accuse them of creating tension and social unrest. The response of King to these accusations was very clear: social engagement in non-violent direct action does not create tension, but brings the hidden, unseen and alive tension to the surface, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that needs to be exposed before it can be treated, injustice, along with whatever tensions it may create

52 Martin Luther King, The Trumpet of Conscience (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1968), 82–86.
through exposure, must be displayed and brought to light in order for healing to take place through peaceful means.\(^{53}\) Another remarkable aspect of King was his view of pacifism. Praising Gandhi’s method of non-violence in practical actions, King wrote: ‘True pacifism is not non-resistance to evil, but nonviolent resistance to evil . . . True pacifism is not unrealistic submission to evil power . . . It is rather a courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love.’\(^{54}\) In short, the predominant spiritual quality apparent in King as a representative of SES is the power of love.

From the Christian point of view, SES is born out of a subtle interconnection between the ultimate dimension of reality, the loving God the Father and existential life; and the historical dimension of the phenomenal world, where we can show our love for neighbours in concrete actions.\(^{55}\) As Jesus, the perfect embodiment of divine love, shared his inter-being with God the Father in the deepest realm of his being, Nhat Hanh, who has profoundly understood Christian spirituality from a dialogical point of view, claimed that to enter the Kingdom of God is to enter the deepest realm of our hearts, where God co-dwells with us.\(^{56}\) Second to none among Buddhist monks in promoting Buddhist–Christian dialogue, the Vietnamese monk believed that ‘to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind’\(^{57}\) means to make an effort in your daily life to touch the deepest dimension of your being, the ultimate dimension or the dimension of God.\(^{58}\) He also argued that loving Jesus is something we can all experience—something tangible and conceivable.\(^{59}\) Thich Nhat Hanh’s emphasis here is on the interconnectedness of vertical and horizontal dimensions of life and spirituality. As he mentions, it is impossible to get in touch with the vertical dimension of life (God) if we fail to get in touch with the horizontal dimension of humanity (the capacity for loving humankind and other species).\(^{60}\)

Overall, SES cannot be confined to a narrow or limited definition, because it is multifaceted, multidimensional and all-embracing. The fundamental focus of SES is


\(^{55}\) Thich Nhat Hanh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, 156.

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 155.

\(^{57}\) Mathew 22:37.

\(^{58}\) Thich Nhat Hanh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, 156.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 151.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 3.
to promote both the social and the spiritual wellbeing of humanity: peace, love, social justice, religious harmony, human rights, human dignity, equality, sustainable development and the interdependence of all human races. For SES emerges out of religious experiences and profound faith commitment: any person, irrespective of religious affiliation or race, who dedicates his or her life to a faith tradition of high moral standards with honesty has the potential to mature towards SES. It also means that a person of good heart with considerable moral qualities in the secular world can also represent SES. No matter the tradition, the spirituality of social concerns or SES is the same: aiming at the same goal and belonging to no particular religion or culture. As it values healthy social relationships, SES leads people of all social statuses to turn their unresponsive hearts to address social evils and transform the corrupted society. SES is a conveyor from which certain levels of spiritual achievement, gained through either meditation or other religious activities or personal disciplines, are acted out. Life-affirming spiritual norms such as loving-kindness, wisdom (knowing right and wrong things), peace, justice and liberty are predominant in SES, which SES is characterised by compassion-ridden actions carried out in right attitude, with clear goal and caring heart for the wellbeing of the whole of society.

In the next section, I examine how SES is at the core of the teachings of both the Buddha and Jesus Christ.

7.3 Imitating the Buddha and Jesus to Nurture Spiritual Health

Spirituality, or our spiritual life, has a great impact on the way we think, the way we interact with our surroundings and the way we perceive things in our day-to-day lives. When our spiritual life or our inner being is healthy, the way we live our life is more forgiving, peaceful, compassionate, humane, open, considerate, tolerant, flexible and so on. Conversely, an unhealthy spiritual life entails cruelty, violence, oppressiveness, discrimination, wickedness, selfishness, spite, arrogance and hatefulness. Similar to the demand for ensuring personal hygiene, nurturing spiritual health is crucial for making a better multi-faith society in Myanmar. Without upgrading the moral life of all social categories of Myanmar (monks, priests, the ruling powerful people, powerless laypeople and so on), the goal of ending the rampant ethno-racial conflicts, drug issues and restoring social harmony will remain beyond our reach into the future.
The analysis of social problems shows that the root causes of the conflicts between the power-holding Burmese military and ethnic armed groups and the hostility between Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar are greed for power, religio-racial discrimination, manipulative mindsets, dishonesty, mistrust, moral corruption, Islamophobia and chauvinism. The religious leaders of Buddhism and Christianity (and other religions) are responsible for providing their followers with moral guidance and spiritual inspiration so that they gradually become good peacekeeping citizens. In doing so, the imitation of Jesus Christ for Christians and of the Buddha for Buddhists is crucial. As perfect models of healthy spiritual life and the embodiment of loving-kindness and compassion, the life-changing messages of the Buddha and Jesus Christ are presented in this section (with some examples) as the foundation of the spirituality of social involvement.

7.3.1 The Buddha: The Spiritual Mirror of Buddhists

The core of Buddha’s Dhamma discovery is the Four Noble Truths, which was preached in his very first sermon, delivered in Deer Park at Isipatana. Having become enlightened, the Buddha declared: ‘I have no teacher, one like me does not exist in all the world, for I am the Peerless Teacher, the Arahat. I alone am Supremely Enlightened. Quenching all defilements, Nibbāna’s calm have I attained…’ The Buddha attributed his spiritual achievements to human endeavour and practice. As the Buddha liberated himself from the chain of sufferings and attained enlightenment through the practice of the Middle Way, this Dhamma discovery is suitable for all classes of people to attain liberation: kings and peasants, high castes and low castes, bankers and beggars, holy men and robbers, with no distinction between them.

After his enlightenment, the Buddha became a living embodiment of the four divine states of mind (Brahmavihara): loving-kindness (mettā), compassion (karunā), sympathetic joy (muditā) and equanimity (upekkhā). The Buddha’s announcement that Nibbāna – the total elimination of greed (lobha), hatred (dosa) and delusion

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61 To be ‘enlightened’ means to fully understand the Four Noble Truths (Ariya Sacca) and to attain Nibbana through the Middle Way. See Ministry of Religious Affairs, A Dictionary of Buddhist Terms (Yangon: Ministry of Religious Affairs, 1996), 74.
62 Piyadassi Thera, The Buddha: His Life and Teaching, the Wheel Publication no.5 (Mawatha, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2008), 12.
(moha) and freedom from all kinds of mental pain and grief – is realisable here in this life is recorded in Anguttara Nikaya, 1.158: ‘Thus is Nibbāna realisable even during this lifetime, immediate, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise. Now, insofar as the bhikkhu has realised the complete extinction of greed, hatred and delusion, insofar is Nibbāna realisable, immediate, inviting, attractive and comprehensible to the wise.’

The Buddha ordered his followers to contribute their best Dhamma service to liberate those people drowned in tahna, as he served the suffering world out of mettā, the foundation of SES. The Venerable Narada Mahathera said: ‘The Buddha exercised mettā equally towards His own son Rāhula, His adversary Devadatta, His attendant Ānanda, His admirers and His opponents.’ This reflects that the life of a good Buddhist is growing in mettā and being morally qualified to serve people, regardless of race, colour, religion or social status. Although many people wrongly generalise the Buddha’s way of seeking the Ultimate Reality as world-renouncing asceticism, in fact the Buddha established the social implication of his teachings by serving people as the embodiment of mettā.

On one occasion, the Buddha ministered to the ailing monk Putigatta Tissa, who was lying with festering ulcers on his soiled bed. The Buddha gave his tender loving care, prepared hot water and nursed the sick monk with his own hands, and enabled him to attain arahatship before his death by teaching the Dhamma.

The Venerable Narada Mahathera simplified the meaning of mettā: ‘The culmination of this mettā is the identification of oneself with all beings (sabbattatā), making no difference between oneself and others. The so-called “I” is lost in the whole. Separatism evaporates. Oneness is realized.’ Therefore, it is irrefutable that both the Buddha and Jesus Christ represented the perfect example of SES.

Since the life of the Buddha was filled with all noble qualities, the way he interacted with people in the secular world (or his social engagement) was peculiar

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65 Rewata Dhamma, The First Discourse of the Buddha: Turning the Wheel of Dhamma, 97.
66 Piyadassi Thera, The Buddha: His Life and Teaching, the Wheel Publication no.5 A/B (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1982), 40–41.
68 The Buddha said, ‘Whosoever, monks, would follow my admonition (would wait upon me, would honour me), he should wait upon the sick’ (Vinaya I, 302). See Ven. Piyadassi Thera, The Buddha, His Life and Teachings, The Wheel Publication no.5 A/B, 70.
70 Venerable Narada Mahathera, The Buddha and His Teachings, 493.
and life-transforming. The Buddha embraced social outcasts, which directly challenges the existing religious discrimination in Myanmar, as a predominantly Buddhist country. Undoubtedly, in the life of the enlightened Buddha, there is no clue of discrimination as the following two examples show. To the surprise of his audience, the Buddha offered a seat beside him to a leper named Suppabuddha when he preached at the Squirrel’s Sanctuary, Bamboo Grove, Rajagaha (Udana 5:3). Embodying the Dhamma, the Buddha embraced people of all social classes during his time in India: brahman, king, prince, merchant, farmer, servant, low or high outcast, wealthy or poor, man or woman, including lepers. Transcending ordinary people’s discriminatory mentality, the Buddha accepted the meal and the park donated by the prostitute Ambapali (Digha Nikaya 16, ii 96–102).

The Buddha affirmed in a sutta that force or weapon could not bring peace, but only the Dhamma or the Truth. The Buddha declared that only non-violent means proceeded from wisdom and loving-kindness, which, made achievable through following the Noble Eightfold Path, can bring real peace. To the wonder of those who thought it impossible, the Buddha brought the bandit Angulimala as his attendant to Savatthi in Jeta’s Grove, Anathapindika’s Park. The bandit was known for violence, mercilessness, wearing a garland of human fingers, killing people, swiftness faster than a running deer, and the unsurpassable strength to kill even a group of forty people in a single fight (Ingulimala Sutta 86, ii 98–99). King Pasenadi, whom people beseeched to save their lives and put the bandit down, was amazed to hear that the Blessed Buddha had tamed and brought peace to Angulimala. ‘Venerable sir,’ he said, ‘we ourselves could not tame him with force and weapons, yet the Blessed One has tamed him without force or weapons’ (Ingulimala Sutta 86, ii 102–103).

It is also worth noting that the Buddha rejected the idea of judging people by their descent or religion. The only criterion for the Buddha when measuring the quality of life was moral achievement. He taught that the renunciation of violence

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75 Ibid., 713.
towards all living beings (neither killing nor causing death), friendliness amid hostility, peacefulness in violence, freedom from the entanglement of lust, greed, hatred, pride and hypocrisy, endurance in patience, and restraining from resentment marked a person’s moral achievement (*Dhamapada* 399, 405–407).\(^76\)

From the Buddhist point of view, the foundation of SES is ‘love/mettā’ and ‘compassion/karunā’, inseparably associated with wisdom/pañña. The Buddha encouraged his audience to mindfully attend their respective minds in any circumstance. Whether addressed by others appropriately or inappropriately, truthfully or untruthfully, gently or harshly, benevolently or harmfully, with loving-kindness or with inner hate, the Buddha instructed his followers, they should remain unaffected by the words and utter no evil word in response, but stand with their minds imbued with compassion for their welfare, forbearance and loving-kindness without inner hate (*Majjhima Nikaya* 21, i 126–127).\(^77\) The Buddha taught his followers to maintain peace and social harmony, and to protect the world with the power of love. ‘Just as a mother at the risk of life loves and protects her child, her only child,’ he said, ‘so one should cultivate this bondless love to all that live in the whole universe’ (*Sutta Nipata* 149).\(^78\)

In one occasion, his lay follower Jivaka proclaimed in this way that the Buddha is the embodiment of loving-kindness: ‘Yes, venerable sir. I have heard this, venerable sir: “Brahma abides in loving-kindness”. Venerable sir, the Blessed One is my visible witness to that; for the Blessed One abides in loving-kindness’ (*Majjhima Nikaya* 55, i 369).\(^79\) Precisely as he said and taught, the Buddha was not hesitant to engage in reconciliation for the quarrelling tribes over water shortage. Referring to *Jakaka* 536, Perry Schmidt-Leukel wrote about the Buddha’s concern to prevent battle: ‘When a war once threatened to break out over a shortage of water, the Buddha actively intervened and managed to reconcile the hostile tribes thereby preventing the pending carnage.’\(^80\) Based on the above-mentioned Buddhist Scriptures, we can


boldly say that the Buddha is one of the undisputed champions of peace, love, non-violence, reconciliation and non-discrimination.

Despite a number of prolonged internal conflicts that remain unsolved, there is still hope for a bright future: a wish to see a thriving, non-discriminatory, harmonious sociopolitical system, because thousands of monks and millions of Buddhists who are eager to imitate the life of the Buddha by following his teaching represent the larger part of Myanmar’s Buddhist community. For the time being, it is true that the influence of some monks (especially Ma Ba Tha Sayadaws), supported by thousands of their followers, who are discriminating against people of non-Buddhist communities on the basis of religion, are disheartening many and negatively affecting the political transition of Myanmar. However, the unfailing efforts to restore healthy Buddhist spirituality will gradually undermine hate speech and eradicate religious violence and killing. Hopefully, along with mutual respect and appreciation, peace and a working social model of ‘unity in diversity’ will replace the existing hostility and violence, as the involvement of the majority of good Buddhists eliminates unfair and unjust discrimination, motivated by extremist Buddhist nationalism.

Touching the qualities of the Buddha guarantees the transformation of life-destroying negative seeds into life-saving spiritual qualities – greed to altruism or benevolence, hatred or anger to love, ignorance to understanding, intolerance to tolerance, discrimination to acceptance or recognition and so on. The promotion of spiritual health in Buddhist-dominant Myanmar will increase the potential for peace and national reconciliation. To live a meaningful and positive life, the living Buddha of love and compassion must be manifested neither by imagination nor by the structure of religious institutions, but by the way each Buddhist lives his or her life. Buddhists can measure their own spiritual health by assessing whether they actually imitate and follow the teachings of the Buddha, who without discrimination embraced lepers, prostitutes, bandits, violent people and people of all social classes, as the embodiment of mettā, compassion and reconciliation. If Myanmar Sayadaws are able to lead millions of their followers to the peaceful path trodden by the Buddha, and be successful in establishing healthy socially engaged Buddhist spirituality, the fragrance and the beauty of Myanmar as a Buddhist nation will spread across the globe, and many good, qualified and respected world leaders, like the former United Nations

82 Ibid., 57.
Secretary U Thant, an excellent example of good Buddhist life, will be produced again in Myanmar. U Thant said: ‘Wars begin in the minds of men, and in those minds love and compassion would have built the defences of peace.’ In light of this, we can say that all forms of conflicts and fighting in Myanmar are rooted in and emerge from the hearts of those who have been engaging in them. Imitating the Buddha and following his way are therefore essential, especially for Buddhists, to end the world’s longest civil war and the frequent mob violence. A healthy Buddhist spirituality and simple faith commitment to the Buddha are fundamental to the promotion of IRD.

7.3.2 Jesus Christ: The Perfect Model for Christians

Similar to the Buddha for Buddhists, it is true for Christians that Jesus Christ is the perfect example of Kingdom-life, which is the reign of God filled with love, peace, justice and selfless giving. The Kingdom of God is not an institutional, politico-military structure. It primarily refers to a community of equals under God, characterised by love (Matt 5:44; John 15:13–14), moral perfection (Matt 5:48), peacemaking (Matt 5:9), forgiveness (Luke 11:4; Matt 18:22), interdependence (Matt 10:10–11), sacrificial service (Mark 10:45; Matt 10:16–25), solidarity with the marginalised (Luke 4:19) and total submission to God (Matt 22:34–40; Luke 10:25–28). Pope John Paul II declared the very nature of the Kingdom of God:

> The kingdom’s nature, therefore, is one of communion among all human beings with one another and with God. The kingdom is the concern of everyone; individuals, society, and the world. Working for the kingdom means acknowledging and promoting God’s activity, which is present in human history and transforms it. Building the kingdom means working for liberation from evil in all its forms. In a word, the kingdom of God is the manifestation and the realisation of God’s plan of salvation in all its fullness.

Jesus precisely lived what he taught. The life of Jesus is morally perfect and spiritually abundant; he called his disciples with a clear statement: ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’ This statement indicates that if we are true followers of Jesus, we must serve others with unselfish love, abandon our selfish desires and imitate Jesus Christ in

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85 Redemptoris Missio, no. 15.
concrete actions. Following Jesus means moving from a false self of self-centredness to a new reality of other-centeredness, which Jesus portrayed by his life of unconditional love. Since he is imbued with dynamism of God’s love, there is no prejudicial boundary between sinners and the righteous in the mind of Jesus Christ – that is, no discrimination between holy and secular. A short statement about Jesus’s Kingdom ethics, the foundation of Christian social engagement, reads:

It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.  

Jacob Kavunkal remarked on the social commitment of Jesus Christ to save the suffering:

Jesus was not a temple person but declared how God is to be worshipped not in the temple but in the world in spirit and truth (Jn. 4:21). God is to be served in the arena of the world where people are. God is inviting us to serve God in the world by caring for men and women in the world, especially those who are suffering in any form.

Jesus indicated that the forthcoming Kingdom of God is not for a few of the chosen people but for all humanity, embracing all social strata: men and women, Jews and non-Jews, the scribes and the simple, the rich and the poor, people of all skin colours, the insiders and the outsiders of society – tax collectors, prostitutes, drunkards and so on. His vision of life embodies goodness, non-violence, forgiving love and self-giving or sacrificial love for the good of others. As the life of Jesus was imbued with love, understanding, courage and acceptance, he allowed tax collectors and prostitutes to talk with him, in accordance with his mission to heal the corrupted society of his time at any cost. Not only was the passion of God incarnate made manifest in his life, as a social prophet Jesus calmly protested the dominion system and the political injustice of his time, which benefited only the elite while impoverishing the magnitude of ordinary people. The incarnation of Jesus, a divine movement towards humans, originates in God’s unbounded love and the coming of Jesus is to bestow on men and women.

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90 Thich Nhat Hanh, Living Buddha, Living Christ, 35–36.
women, without discrimination, ‘abundant life’ (John 10:10).\(^\text{92}\) Gustavo Gutierrez, a Christian social activist and a modern example of imitating Jesus, wrote about the universal principle of love in action:

> But this charity exists only in concrete actions (feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, etc. [Mt. 25: 35-40]); it occurs of necessity in the fabric of relationships among men. ‘Faith divorced from deeds is barren’ (James 2:20). To know God is to do justice: ‘if you know that he is righteous, you must recognise that every man who does right is his child’ (1Jn. 2:29). ... Charity is God’s love in us and does not exist outside our human capabilities to love and to build a just and brotherly world (cf. 1Jn. 3:17-18; Lk. 7:13; 10:33; 15:20).\(^\text{93}\)

The new exodus of humanity accomplished by Jesus Christ through his sacrificial love is accompanied by true freedom, which eliminates the incubus of false sociopolitical influence (the Law for Jewish people, Gal 3:23–24) and of racial, gender-based and religious discrimination.\(^\text{94}\) A comment on the Christian faith and practice made by Bokin Kim from the Buddhist point of view is worth noting here: ‘Christian faith, that is, faith in Christ as the Saviour, is truly a grace that leads one to go beyond one’s ego-boundary.’\(^\text{95}\) This means that the freedom Jesus has given to all people as a result of their faith in him is directly related to freedom from selfishness. Christian faith is not only about the eternal rewards reserved for life after death; its principal concern is to transform a morally perverted heart to a status of healthy spiritual qualities, in order to shine the light of Godly life in this world (Matt 5:14). Therefore, Christians should not be satisfied with the perfect life of Jesus Christ, as proclaimed in sermons and written about in books, but the church and each individual must manifest the living Christ of love and liberation through each individual’s way of life, which must be filled with loving-kindness, tolerance, reconciliation, understanding and forgiveness.\(^\text{96}\) To know God or to be with Christ is to have the knowledge of divine power that manifests itself as a transforming force in individual and social humanness.\(^\text{97}\)

\(^{92}\) Adrian Thatcher, *Truly a Person, Truly God: A Post-Mythical View of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1990), 139.


\(^{95}\) Bokin Kim, ‘Christ as the Truth, the Light, the Life, but a Way?’ in *Buddhists Talk about Jesus: Christians Talk about the Buddha*, eds. Rita M. Gross and Terry C. Muck (New York: Continuum, 2000), 57.

\(^{96}\) Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 57.

\(^{97}\) Adrian Thatcher, *Truly A Person, Truly God: A Post-Mythical View of Jesus*, 140.
In the context of Myanmar, many Pentecostal or evangelical Christian churches think themselves special before God, and so develop for themselves a spiritual superiority complex. They are normally quick to judge people of non-Christian faiths not on the basis of their moral qualities but on theologically unsound self-understanding coming from unhealthy indoctrination. Although Christian ethnic groups, including Burmese Christians, feel religiously oppressed and politically inferior to the Burmese majority, their spiritual pride mistakenly leads them to consider themselves spiritually superior to Buddhists. Samuel Ngan Ling noted: ‘Due to their superior attitude towards other religions and aggressive proselytising, most Christians have lost friendships with their Buddhist neighbours and are isolated from the society.’

Taking a defensive position, fear-ridden Christians in armed conflict affected areas regard the Burmese army and Buddhists as their hell-going (eternal) enemies, while blindfolding themselves with wrong spiritual self-glorification. A popular joke among ethnic Christians reflects the feeling they have for the predominant Burmese Buddhists, especially the Buddhist oppressors: ‘If I see a Burman in heaven, I will plunge back down to earth.’

Overall, the Myanmar Christian attitude (which is overwhelmed by fear, mistrust, discontent, resentment, antipathy and scepticism) towards Buddhism, towards the Burmese political system and towards the predominant Burmese cultural influence often seems like a clenched fist, and acts as a barrier to the establishment of social harmony. This situation was worsened by the demotion of Christians to ‘second-class citizenship’ during the successive military regimes, not by law but by the reality on the ground. Consequently, the majority of Christians have stayed aloof from the mainstream of the civilian sociopolitical struggle for democratic reform, for the restoration of peace and for reconciliation. Moreover, due to Christian fundamentalism, religious oppression and military hegemony, the spirituality of Myanmar Christians is marked by enmity, defensiveness, irreconcilability, implacability, unforgivingness and an un-Biblical spiritual pride.

This spiritual symptom points to an urgent need to revisit the spiritual health of Christians so that their presence in Myanmar becomes a blessing to the nation, bearing spiritual fruit such as ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity,

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faithfulness, gentleness and self-control’.\textsuperscript{99} To become a good Christian with a healthy spirituality, Christians need to know the spiritual qualities that Jesus lived with, and to persevere in following his examples and teachings.

7.4 Challenges and Opportunities

There are many challenges for the religious leaders of Myanmar, and they can be overcome only through interfaith collaboration, based on the service of compassion. Among many concerns, the intimidating leading role of Buddhist monks in the anti-Muslim movement, as well as the viewing the presence of Christianity as a threat to Buddhism and national unity, have formed a great barrier to social awareness for Buddhist religious leaders. The activities of extreme Buddhist nationalists misrepresent the true nature of Buddhism: peace, non-violence, courtesy, benevolence and moral purity. Similarly, Christian fundamentalists’ aggressive proselytization, and their view of Buddhists (including followers of other non-Christian religions) as hell-going people, distorts the true characteristics of Christianity: pacifism, amicability, forgiveness, reconciliation, friendliness, altruism and a welcoming attitude. In short, while many Buddhist nationalists are militant, Christian fundamentalists in Myanmar are often spiritually arrogant.

Some Myanmar theologians of the mainline Protestant tradition agree that both Buddhism and Christianity are religions that promote peace, compassion, non-violence, liberation and good morality.\textsuperscript{100} A handful of them, as well as a few ethico-intellectually qualified Christians, appreciate the goodness of Buddhism and its adherents. However, the vast majority of Myanmar Christians, including many prominent Christian leaders, do not share the same opinion due to their exclusive theological stance, and because they lag behind in spiritual maturity, religious education and interfaith interaction.

For example, while the outside world openly criticised the Burmese troops who were killing monks and civilians during the Saffron Revolution in 2007 – an event in which thousands of monks came together in demonstration to liberate

\textsuperscript{99} Galatians 5: 22–23.
\textsuperscript{100} Samuel Ngun Ling, ‘Communicating God and Christ in Myanmar,’ in Theology Under the Bo Three: Contextual Theologies in Myanmar, 315.
Myanmar from the military dictatorship\textsuperscript{101} – the silence of Christians disappointed some Christians with social concerns. One was Brother Thomas,\textsuperscript{102} a radical Myanmar Catholic thinker. Although some Buddhist monks (such as U Thumingala, highly respected as one of only five monks in modern Myanmar to have memorised the entire Buddhist Scripture, who was arrested by the military junta for taking side with demonstrators and for not condemning the boycott\textsuperscript{103}) appreciate Christianity as a peaceful religion, many nationalist monks and hardline Buddhists remain unlikely to appreciate the good points of other religions, including Christianity. Buddhist monks are generally assumed to be peacemakers, wherever and in whatever situation they are, and a holy community that teaches people of all social levels (both rulers and subjects, both rich and poor, both bad and good and so on) to become good rulers and good citizens according to the Buddha Dhamma. Conversely, thousands of nationalist monks and extremist Buddhists have supported the oppression of the military regimes and the hardline Burmese political party (USDP). The way they have treated non-Buddhist Myanmar citizens strays from the teaching of the Buddha:

\begin{quote}
When the ruler of a country is just and good, the ministers become just and good; when the ministers are just and good, the higher officials become just and good; when the higher officials are just and good, the rank and file become just and good; when the rank and file become just and good, the people become just and good
\end{quote}

\textit{(Anguttara Nikaya)}\textsuperscript{104}

Despite the nightmare of successive military regimes, the auspicious dawn, although very fragile, has come again with the rise of the civilian government under the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Reversing the policy of the military dictatorship, the present democratic government gives more chances to ordinary citizens to make positive contributions to the process of rebuilding the nation. Religious leaders of Buddhism and Christianity are in a good position to take advantage of this, as at least 94 per cent (87.9 Buddhists and 6.2 Christians) of the

\textsuperscript{101} Mridul Chowdhury, ‘The Role of Internet in Burma’s Saffron Revolution,’ \textit{Internet and Democracy Case Study Series}, the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University (September 2008): 14.

\textsuperscript{102} Brother Thomas remarked: ‘We have two dictatorships in Burma. One, the junta, who hate us. The other, the bishops, who won’t let us stand up. We need more than prayers; we need deeds.’ See NCR Staff, ‘Burma: Power, politics and the church in Burma,’ \textit{National Catholic Reporter}, 24 July 2010, www.ncronline.org/news/global/burma-power-politics-and-church-burma (accessed 10 May 2017).


population follows Buddhism or Christianity.\textsuperscript{105} This means that both Buddhist monks and Christian priests or pastors have millions of followers, who are open to education, nurturing, training and discipline, according to their respective religious teachings. Therefore, all religious leaders, whether Buddhist or Christian, should move beyond doctrinaire attitudes and sectarian boundaries in order to promote the ethical lives of their followers.

Unfortunately, not infrequently some Buddhist monks preach hate. In response to this situation, Thura U Aung Ko, the Union Minister for Religious Affairs and Culture, said: ‘I requested Ma Ha Na’s [the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee] head monks to stop or take action against monks or others who make hate speeches that can incite bad blood between people or conflicts, because it is very important that we have stability and development in the country.’\textsuperscript{106} Similarly, some Christian leaders in Myanmar still use the pulpit to transmit Christian arrogance through their sermons, viewing non-Christians as idolators, due to the influence of foreign missionaries. The prominent Christian theologian Pau Khan En remarked on this: ‘After more than two hundred years of Christian experience, the churches in Myanmar are still applying western models and structures of church organisations, liturgies, and forms of worship. There are no longer appropriate for the present time . . .’\textsuperscript{107}

In order to generate life-giving and liberative sermons, Christian and Buddhist preaching must be free from hate speech and arrogance. It is crucial to transmit the immediate benefits of imitating the Buddha (for Buddhists) and Jesus (for Christians) in order to foster SES. There is no need to find new followers; the only responsible is to feed and nurture the huge crowd of followers; both Buddhist and Christian leaders have to prepare themselves as resources, in light of the teachings of the Buddha and Jesus Christ, who can provide their respective followers with healthy moral teachings for the betterment of the multi-faith society of Myanmar.


Several monks and Christian priests are influenced by donations; Myanmar stands at the top of World Giving Index (WGI). Adam Pickering has noted: ‘A widespread commitment to Sangha Dana – giving to support the monastic lifestyle – in the Theravāda school of Buddhism likely explains this outstanding culture of generosity.’

Professor Dr Aung Tun Thet proudly said: ‘Myanmar has been consistently ranked at the top of WGI ranking in the past recent years. The results demonstrate very sharply how a “poor” country can be a “rich” one through its generosity, by focussing on giving rather than getting.’ In this culture of generosity, many monks (including Christian priests or pastors of rich churches) are content with the material offerings they receive, and their social engagement as spiritual leaders is not noticeable. Admittedly, all sectors of secular society of Myanmar have been distorted by corruption and bribery, religious intolerance, injustice, conflicts, discrimination, abject poverty and so on. Consequently, the vast majority people rarely see the blessing of life in present-day Myanmar.

As a result, Buddhist and Christian spiritual leaders should strive to promote SES, and to create an atmosphere in their respective religious institutions (monasteries, churches, meditation or spiritual retreat centres, religious education centres and so on) so that people may experience love, peace, justice, security and belonging. In order to effectively lead their followers in a proper way, the religious leaders of each side should check their own spiritual qualities or status, and then build up their spirituality in accordance with the quintessence of their religion. The spiritual power to live a good life and to show significant moral examples is derived from the imitation of the Buddha or Jesus, whom each religious leader serves. To imitate Jesus or the Buddha means to live what they taught. In conclusion, the main task of a good religious leader is to teach his followers – not only by words but also by life. They must rid themselves of their false self, as the Buddha taught:

109 Prof. Dr. Aung Tun Thet is Economic Advisor to the President of Myanmar and member of the President’s National Economic and Social Advisory Council.
110 Adam Pickering, ‘2016 World Giving Index shows Myanmar is most generous nation,’ Future World Giving, Charities Aids Foundation (25 October 2016).
Though one may conquer a thousand times a thousand men in battle, yet he indeed is the noblest victor who conquers himself. Self-conquest is far better than the conquest of others. Not even a god, an angel, Mara or Brahma can turn into defeat the victory of a person who is self-subdued and ever restrained in conduct.\textsuperscript{113}

Based on SES and the social implications of the teachings of the Buddha and Jesus Christ, the following chapter examines the social realities of Myanmar, with the intention of seeking practical ways to promote collective social involvement between Christians and Buddhists, in order to build a peaceful society in Myanmar.

\textsuperscript{113} (Dhamapada 103–105); Acharya Buddharakkhita, trans., \textit{The Dhamapada: The Buddha’s Path of Wisdom}, 39.
Chapter 8

The Quest to Promote
Christian–Buddhist Social Engagement

In Chapter 8 of this thesis I describe the sociopolitical climate of Myanmar in the context of the religious violence and socio-ethnic discrimination that is fuelled by self-seeking politicians, and that results in poverty and suffering. The chapter emphasises how the existing sociopolitical problems of Myanmar necessitate the promotion of SES, and the urgency of enhancing interfaith awareness for building and sustaining peace. Significantly, opium-related corruption is addressed as one of the major ethico-spiritual problems that the leaders of all religions in Myanmar never take seriously, although it is a destructive spiritual enemy amid their ministry. The chapter offers some practical suggestions that incorporate SES, along with an appreciation of the emerging interfaith collaborations in line with the concept of SES. The main task of the chapter is to indicate the possibility of establishing peace, harmony and social wellbeing in Myanmar through Christian–Buddhist dialogue, based on SES, which invites and welcomes the participation of people of other faiths.

8.1 Sociopolitical Problems and the Urgency of Engaged Spirituality

In practice, the constituents of the Noble Truth of suffering, such as sickness, pain, grief, sorrow, lamentation, physical weakness, short-lived success or joy, old age, death and so on,\(^1\) are acceptable as an inescapable reality of imperfect life. However, any suffering caused by human greed, hatred, revenge, cruelty, exploitation, oppression, enslavement or injustice, for example, are not admissible in this civilised world. Similarly, from the Christian point of view, many aspects of sufferings – both those born of the natural law and those sometimes caused by imperfect human interferences – are acceptable as the tools that God uses to draw human attention to accomplish His purposes for human communities. Conversely, other forms of suffering – those caused by human wickedness and resulting in social unrest, violence

and the killing of innocent people – are intolerable. As each nation has its own sociopolitical history, Myanmar has a unique context with regard to the main causes of suffering on the ground. While the Buddha identified the causes of suffering (dukkha) from the vantage point of ethico-spirituality, Myanmar ascribes sociopolitical problems to the existing unquenchable sufferings.

Keeping in mind human accountability for creating social evils, the following sections deal with how some people are implicated in causing various kinds of suffering. Issues that address the unhealthy means and the destructive attitude of some self-seeking political leaders will be the focus of this section, in order to indicate the urgency of promoting SES.

8.1.1 Do They Work for Peace? The Army, the Ethnic Armed Groups and the National League for Democracy

‘If you want peace and development, lay down your weaponry and stop fighting’ – this is a byword for the Burmese military’s attitude towards ethnic armed groups, whom the army officers accuse of causing conflicts, killing, threats to national security and the loss of public properties. Conversely, from the perspective of the armed ethnic soldiers, the Burmese army is main orchestrator of prolonged armed conflict in Myanmar. The political stance of the armed ethnic leaders is also clear: ‘If all nationals are to build Myanmar in a fraternal spirit, and to completely eliminate armed fighting, the army must stop its hegemonic military operations in the ethnic armies’ controlled areas and create a genuine platform leading to fruitful political dialogue.’ In fact, the ethnic groups’ struggle to reclaim ‘self-determination and self-reliance’, which ethnic politicians today link to the ‘federal system’, gave birth to one ethnic revolution after another following the formation of independent Burma in 1948.²

While the issues of democracy, human rights and amending the 2008 Constitution are still the main challenges of the current civilian government, finding a new system of governing, one that is acceptable to the highly diverse, multi-ethnic society of Myanmar, is no small task. The two focal points of non-Burmese ethnic groups are: (1) there has never been access to state power; and (2) each ethnic identity has been targeted by the nationwide discriminatory practices of successive military

regimes. In this situation, the coming to power of the NLD has brought hope to the minority ethnicities. However, the ethnic leaders cannot trust the army, which is reluctant to remove the restraints it has on the two houses of parliament and the government itself.

The long-lasting sociopolitical conflict of Myanmar is related to a negative attitude towards ethnic diversity and religious plurality, and to greed for political power. The clash between the assimilation policy of the Burmese government (the military) and the self-defensive stance of ethnic groups has resulted in the longest civil war in the world, marked by armed fighting, retaliation, human-rights abuses, forced relocations, rape and economic underdevelopment, especially in the non-Burman-occupied mountainous regions of the country. As the Burmese saying goes, ‘To be a Burman is to be a Buddhist’ – but the Ministry of Religious Affairs’ discriminatory support of Buddhism after independence, under the scheme of Burmanisation, has fanned the fires of conflict, especially between the Burmese army and Christian ethnic troops, and deepened the mistrust between them. Although local NGOs and churches tried to maintain the locals’ ethnic, linguistic and cultural heritages, and religious norms in some areas, the programs of Burmanisation always undercut such efforts. The unfair treatment of ethnic peoples by successive military regimes for decades posed a complicated question: how can the ruling NLD government, with considerable restraint of power shown by the military, achieve national reconciliation and integration without damaging the cultural identities and values of disparate ethnic peoples?

Unlike the fight against the apartheid system in South Africa, where the minority white people oppressed the majority Africans, the Burmese majority is assumed to have oppressed the minority ethnic peoples since the civilian government was overthrown by General Ne Win’s military coup in 1962. The reasons for fighting the ruling Burmese military are clear. The common goal of ethnic armed groups is to gain democracy, not secession, justice, peace, reconciliation, equality, human rights,
self-determination and economic development. The half-century-long ethnic conflict of Myanmar is a collective fight for the liberation of a multi-ethnic society from the grip of systematically militarised governing structures.

In this new era, ordinary people and the civilian government can criticise and question the violent means used by armed ethnic soldiers in their struggle for decentralised self-autonomy, as well as the merciless way the Burmese army has subdued them in response. Although ethnic peoples are entitled to demand their own rights—on which one may quote Martin Luther King—his choice of armed revolution is not at all the best option; similarly, there are no other words for the overuse of the military power and cruelty used in the ethnic regions of Myanmar, but ‘it must be prevented’. King said: ‘We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.’

Amid the vulnerable uncertain political transition, people are waiting to see whether the NLD government can end the civil war and bring peace and prosperity to Myanmar.

8.1.2 Considering Ethnic Christianity as a Threat to National Solidarity

The ruling Buddhist officers’ attitude towards Christians was clear ever since 1962. Some prominent Christian leaders and influential Christian contributions in the making of Myanmar were strictly controlled as General Ne Win seized state power. Specifically, Catholic bishops could not attend the last session of Vatican II in 1964, Baptist leaders were unable to join the Baptist World Alliance, held in Miami in 1965, no Burmese delegates were seen at the World Congress of Evangelism in Berlin in 1966, and no one was permitted to attend the World Council of Churches in Uppsala in 1968. With diminishing Christian social contributions, some military officers, without prior notification, showed up and announced the nationalisation of outstanding private schools. Several Christian institutions (both Protestant and Catholic), including twenty-four Baptist schools, were taken over in 1965 by the military regime.

Coming to the second generation of the military regime, fighting intensified in Christian-dominated regions, with a understanding that ‘to be a Christian is to be a colonisers’ loyalist’, a dreadful tool of imperialists, and so a threat to national solidarity.\textsuperscript{11} In reality, positive outcomes have never resulted from military operations in the name of national solidarity and the rule of law, or from ethnic armed groups’ fighting against the Burmese army in the name of liberation, equality and self-determination. Exhausted by the fighting, over twenty-five truces were signed between the junta and the armed ethnic groups between 1989 and 1995, after forty years of conflict across the ethnic areas.\textsuperscript{12} However, soon after the 2008 Constitution was adopted, Article 338 – ‘All the armed forces in the Union shall be under the command of the Defence Services’\textsuperscript{13} – rekindled the disquiet and fear of the ethnic leaders of ceasefire groups, and exacerbated the tension and mistrust between the military government and ethnic leaders. One of the most significant examples is the annulment of the seventeen-year ceasefire agreement in June 2011 by the Kachin Independent Army (KIA). In response, the Burmese army relaunched several military operations and intensified the fighting in the KIA’s territory in 2013, while the former President U Thein Sein’s administration was conducting peace talk with the ethnic armies, including the KIA.\textsuperscript{14}

The Kachin are predominantly Christian Baptists and Roman Catholics; armed conflicts broke out in Kachin State, destroying many churches and severely affecting Christian religious practices. Long targeted in part because they are not Buddhist, the Kachin Women’s Association of Thailand (Kachin refugees in Thailand) reported that between 2011 and early 2013, sixty-six church buildings were destroyed in Kachin State by the military troops.\textsuperscript{15} The overall picture of the military presence and the way the Burmese government treats the ethnic Christians leads them to view the military operation in their regions and Burmanisation (supported by military-backed Burmese politicians and extremist Buddhists) as inseparable. Since ‘the politics of fear

\textsuperscript{11} La Wu, Authority of the Messiah and Authenticity of Missions (Denver, CO: Outskirts Press, 2007), 146.
\textsuperscript{12} Asley South, Burma’s Longest War: Anatomy of the Karen Conflict (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute and Burma Center Netherlands, 2011), 13.
overrules wisdom or compassion in Buddhist-majority countries where anger against minorities is rising’. Christians are not exempt from the scourges of heated Buddhist nationalists. The *National Catholic Reporter* confirmed this anti-Christian discrimination: ‘Catholic citizens are routinely denied better-paying administrative jobs and barred from what little social services the government provides. While the junta often subsidizes Buddhist temples, it asks for large bribes for proposed church projects, or just blocks their construction outright.’

Although the shared intrinsic nature of both Buddhism and Christianity provides their adherents with a common platform characterised by peace, love and tolerance, and in favour of the promotion of IRD for peace and harmony, Buddhist extremist nationalism shows no tolerance for non-Buddhist religions in Myanmar, as Barbara Crossette remarked: ‘Buddhism is marked by concern for the welfare of all sentient creatures. But when it is harnessed to ethnic intolerance and extreme nationalism, it can turn violent.’ In reality, Christian teachings pose no threat to national unity and solidarity, or to social stability, as Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount: ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’ (Matt 5:44), the source of Christian pacifism. However, the waging of war against the Burmese state for decades by Christian ethnic minorities, most of them Baptists converted during British colonial rule, leads Christians on the ground to become the first target for the army, and the second for ultranationalist Buddhists, after Muslims. Rachael Fleming wrote that there were even more extreme ultranationalist monks and associations that were not fundamentally part of Ma Ba Tha. Among them, the National Monks’ Union and the Myanmar National Network organised a public protest against the appointment of U Henry Van Thio, a Chin Christian, for the

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20 Barbara Crossette, ‘Buddhism Violence in Burma,’ *The Nations*. 

position of the second Vice-President of the Union of Myanmar in April 2016, motivated by anti-Christian hate rhetoric.\textsuperscript{21}

On the whole, Christian communities in Chin, Kachin, Kayin and Kayah States have faced restrictions on their freedom of religion, forced conversion to Buddhism, forced confiscation of land and forced labour for the construction of monasteries and pagodas. Moreover, arbitrary arrest, detention and torture of religious leaders, missionaries, church workers and other laypeople are parts of Christian ethnic peoples’ story of suffering.\textsuperscript{22}

Since the formation of the Kachin Independence Organisation in 1961, Kachin State has been a fierce battleground. As part of its military operations, the Burmese army committed abusive forced labour, torture, killings, rape, property destruction, land confiscation, burning of churches and villages, and many other abusive activities before and after the ceasefire agreement was signed on 24 February 1994. Tragically, an estimated 60,000 Kachin were internally displaced in Kachin State and northern Shan State, while more than 20,000 people fled to China and approximately 4000 to India by 1994.\textsuperscript{23} Similarly, the breakdown of a seventeen-year ceasefire in 2011 has resulted in the internal displacement of more than 96,000 people, mainly in Kachin State and northern Shan State.\textsuperscript{24}

8.1.3 How Younger Ethnic Armed Groups Encounter the Same Fate

Having signed the ceasefire or ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ with the regime, many other ethnic armed groups lost their territories to the Burmese army in exchange for some measures of economic assistance and opportunities. Taking full advantage of the ceasefire agreement, the Burmese army extended several new battalions into new territories, which had been controlled by ethnic armies before the signing of ceasefire agreements. In this situation, the uncertainty of the peace talks, coupled with the expansion of the military into non-Burman regions pushed ethnic soldiers back to armed fighting. Consequently, the conflict between the armed wing of the Kokang

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people, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), one of the ceasefire ethnic groups and the Burmese outposts broke out for the first time in August 2009, and 37,000 local people fled to refugee camps across the border in Yunnan Province, China. 25 During the second fight, the MNDAA attacked the Burmese outposts for four months as it attempted to recapture lost areas in Laukkai Township, Shan State, in February 2015. 26 Although the Burmese army regained control of the region soon after, clashes broke out again on 6 March 2017 for a third time between the Burmese army and the Kokang ethnic armed troops, backed by the Northern Alliance, which was constituted by the KIA, the Ta’ang National Liberation Army, the MNDAA and the Arakan Army. Due to this armed conflict, more than 20,000 people have reportedly fled to border camps in China, and more than 2000 people to Lashio and Mandalay in early March 2017. 27

Given the nature of fighting between the Burmese military, which blatantly violates human rights, and ethnic armed groups, most of them involved in poppy cultivation, opium production and drug trafficking or other illegal trading, it is clear that the means of both sides have nothing to do with SES, despite both sides at least ideologically aiming to achieve national reconciliation, the enduring peace and economic development and the wellbeing of Myanmar. ‘Ethnic nationalism’, intertwined with federalism, fear, grudges, hatred, inferiority complex, mistrust and defensiveness, and ‘Burmese Buddhist nationalism’ or ‘Burmanisation’, which is comprised of detrimental assimilation policy, superiority complex, religio-racial discrimination, Burmese hegemony, Buddhist cultural homogeneity, chauvinistic attitude and power abuse, are in dire need of ethical refinement, political reformation and spiritual improvement through healthy SES.

8.1.4 Religious Discrimination towards the Anti-Muslim Movement

While violence caused by ethnic conflict victimised only ethnic peoples in the non-Burman mountainous regions, Islamophobia in the name of the ‘anti-Muslim movement’ is spread across the heartland, and some ethnic regions as well. Violence and killings by anti-Muslim movements are often related to discrimination on the

basis of religion. Significantly, the eruption of anti-Indian movement in 1930 started to become anti-Muslim sentiment in 1938. Since then, anti-Indian or anti-Muslim violence intermittently broke out and remained unterminated until now in various parts of Myanmar. The growth of religious violence in the country is related to having no awareness of interfaith dialogue. If Buddhist–Christian dialogue is well-established, church buildings in the ethnic armies’ regions will not be the object of Buddhist-dominated Burmese troops’ destructive power and the targets of bombing.

In turn, Buddhists will no longer be regarded as hell-bound by Christian fundamentalists. Similarly, if Buddhists and Muslims are collaborative in nation-building, the beauty of Buddhism as a religion of peace and harmony will not be stained by terror and violence. The promotion of interfaith awareness and collaboration is a must, otherwise many more people will die amid religious violence.

Some of the prominent instances that caused many casualties and the flight of Muslims to neighbouring countries include: an anti-Muslim riot in Mawlamyine, Mon State, in 1983; violent communal attacks on Muslims in Pyay and Taunggyi in 1988; attacks on Muslims’ shops, homes and mosques in Mandalay in 1997 by a sizeable mob, including hundreds of Buddhists monks; the destruction of six mosques and Muslim shops, and attacks on Muslims occurred in Taungoo, central Myanmar, in May 2001, in retaliation at the Talibans’ demolition of Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan, which also spread to Pyay in September and to Bago in October 2001; and riots broke out in Sittwe and Maungdaw townships in Rakhine State in 2001, which was triggered by an argument between a group of young monks and a Rohingya stallholder; twenty people were killed, several mosques and madrasas were in ruins and a curfew was imposed.

Many people were killed or seriously injured, and several homes and shops were looted or destroyed in anti-Muslim violence: on 30 April 2013 in Okkan, north of Yangon; on 2 May 2013 in Hpakan, Kachin State; on 28 May 2013 in Lashio, Shan State; in June 2013, mob violence inflamed by an alleged rape of a Buddhist woman by a Muslim man in Thandwe, Rakhine State; and anti-Muslim mob violence

in Kanbalu Township, Sagaing Division, on 24 August 2013.\textsuperscript{31} Occasions such as a march of thousands of monks led by U Wirathu (U Vicitta Bhivamsa) on 2 September 2012, part of a wave of growing anti-Muslim movement, presaged violence; it surprised and shocked many political observers to see Buddhism, whose central teaching was non-violence, as a terrifying religion. Matthew J. Walton wrote: ‘The most pressing problem Burmese Buddhism faces today is its inability to coexist peacefully with other religions in times of crisis and uncertainty.’\textsuperscript{32}

Buddhist monks not only play a vital role in Burmese nationalist organisations but also influence ethno-nationalist movements in places where ethnic Buddhists are predominant. For example, nearly all the leaders of Arakan Liberation Party, an ethnic armed group that signed a ceasefire agreement in April 2012, which had been implicated in violence against Muslims in Rakhine State in 2012, were formerly monks.\textsuperscript{33} In sum, the demand of peacemaking in Myanmar has two faces, like a coin: the obverse is to restore peace among diverse ethnic groups, while the reverse is to build peace among religions. Hans Kung recommended ‘dialogue among religions and the investigation of common grounds’ for building peace among nations;\textsuperscript{34} Myanmar needs to appreciate the necessity of interfaith awareness and promote dialogue so that all citizens, irrespective of religion, may live in peace and harmony.

8.1.5 The Murder of U Ko Ni Poses a Challenge to the Rule of Law and the Influence of Ma Ba Tha

The death of U Ko Ni, a key supporter of the interfaith peace movement,\textsuperscript{35} greatly impacted the promotion of interfaith social involvement in Myanmar. This incident was a clear message to extremist Buddhist nationalists that they were not yet ready to embrace the concept of peaceful religious coexistence. The assassination of the prominent Muslim lawyer U Ko Ni, legal adviser to the ruling NLD government, on 29 January 2017 is believed to been inspired by anti-Muslim sentiment. U Ko Ni was an expert on Burma’s controversial 2008 Constitution who worked untiringly with the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{ibid} Ibid., 14–15.
\bibitem{martin} Martin Smith, \textit{Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity} (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1999), 182.
\end{thebibliography}
NLD to amend or replace charters that were widely criticised as undemocratic. He was also a strong opponent of ‘Race and Religion Protection’ laws, the controversial legislation proposed by the nationalist Buddhist Association for the Protection of Race and Religion, known by its Burmese abbreviation Ma Ba Tha, and approved by the previous U Thein Sein’s government. It is also thought that a political motive could have been behind the killing because U Ko Ni was credited with creating the position of State Counsellor for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who had been barred from the presidency under Article 59(f) of the military-drafted 2008 Constitution.

The office of the Burmese President U Htin Kyaw stated that the attack was conducted to undermine the country’s stability, suggesting a political motive. However, the military officers attributed the killing to a personal grudge. Home affairs minister Lieutenant-General Kyaw Swe, the representative of the Burmese army, said at a press conference held in Yangon on 25 February 2017: ‘Based on investigations and suspects’ confessions, it is highly possible that extreme nationalism contributed to the grudge that led to assassination.’ Aung Win Khaing, a former lieutenant-colonel in the Burmese army, paid his elder brother Aung Win Zaw 100 million kyat (US$73,000) to kill U Ko Ni. Aung Win Zaw then allegedly hired a third man, Kyi Lin, in exchange for a car. Gunman Kyi Lin was captured with the help of a mob of taxi drivers in the area of Yangon International Airport on 29 January 2017. When the police arrested Aung Win Zaw in Karen State on the following day, he confessed that his brother Aung Win Khaing, who remains at large, was behind the assassination plot. While the escape of Aung Win Khaing from captivity could temporarily be the best solution for the orchestrators of U Ko Ni’s assassination, it challenges the rule of law.

Reflecting the state-sponsored Depayin massacre on 30 May 2003, an incident in which the victims of the violence were punished rather than the perpetrators, people suspect that the current Burmese Police investigation of U Ko Ni’s killing is

under the supervision of top military officers. Admittedly, they have little hope of bringing the mastermind of the killing to justice. The only thing people can say here is: ‘Wait, time will decide whether an investigation launched into the plot is real or not.’ Concerning the Depayin mob, which attempted to either kill or hurt Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the military junta failed to investigate the incident. Mixing with the nationalist monks, more than 2000 ruffians armed with iron bars, clubs, stakes, bamboo bats and knives attacked Suu Kyi’s motorcade and killed more than 70 people. As the thuggish crowd shattered the rear window and caused cuts on Daw Suu’s neck, her driver shot the car forward at speed. Although immediate shots fired behind them – seemingly by the police – were heard, fortunately they missed their target. Her driver saved Daw Suu’s life. The regime’s soldiers arrested her in Ye Oo Township while U Tin Oo, the present chairman of the NLD, received a severe head injury during the attack.40

The main culprits of the Depayin massacre were, it later transpired, members of the Union Solidarity and Development Association, which later became the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). They commandeered notorious thugs known as ‘Swan Ah Shin’ to accomplish their political plot. Gen Soe Win, the then Secretary-2 of the junta, Gen Ye Myint, Central Regional Military Commander, and U Aung Thaung, a powerful minister, masterminded the incident. Consequently, Senior General Than Shwe promoted General Soe Win to the premiership in October 2004. Taking full advantage of the junta’s favour, U Aung Thaung and his family accrued incredible wealth. He was also believed to be behind the rise of Ma Ba Tha, and was accused of playing a supporting role in the 2012–14 sectarian violence, in which more than 300 people across the country were killed, most of them Muslim. Without being summoned to trial for the alleged crimes, he passed away on 23 July 2015.41 Despite criticism from her critics and activists, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, embodying forgiveness, love, and reconciliation, visited her enemy’s home to convey her condolences on 24 July 2015.42

In Myanmar, sadly, law enforcement has never guaranteed ordinary people justice, equality and security. In an interview, Thura U Shwe Mann, the third-highest-ranking member in the former military regime, and now the head of the Commission for the Assessment of Legal Affairs and Special Issues, appointed by the State Counsellor, spoke out about his frustration at the rule of law. Analysing the current sociopolitical climate with sympathy for powerless people, U Shwe Mann lamented that as long as one person or group of people was above the law, there could be no effective law enforcement, and any attempt made to enforce the law would remain unproductive. Similar to the Depayin massacre, in which the implicated powerful figures were exempted from trial, some political thinkers infer that if the mastermind of the assassination of U Ko Ni is a power figure, he can never be apprehended and sentenced according to the existing law.

Myanmar has been trapped by its own religious discrimination and lawless rule, resulting in the suffering of innocent people. Allegedly led by nationalist monks, the many who support the extremist anti-Muslim view and its follow-up movements take full advantage of the poor law enforcement and torture religious minorities, especially Muslims. Although all Buddhist monks are supposed to promote non-violence and peace, a post by the prominent nationalist monk U Wirathu – that ‘he was grateful to those who murdered U Ko Ni’ – worried and frightened many, and called ‘the legitimacy of his monkhood’ into question. Meanwhile, the lawsuit of U Kyaw Myo Shwe, one of U Wirathu’s followers, against the chief correspondent of Myanmar Now News Agency, Ko Swe Win, under Burma’s telecommunications law of the Article 66(d), with a charge that he defamed U Wirathu, became a widely known test of the rule of law.

In the meantime, unlike U Wirathu’s stand, a Buddhist monk claimed that most Buddhist monks do not support any form of violence and hate speech; this encouraged hope in peace activists. Specifically referring to the senior abbot of a monastery, Sayadaw U Seinnida, ‘expressing gratitude to a murderer was an unforgivable offense in monastic practices’, Ko Swe Win stated: ‘U Wirathu was no longer in the monkhood as he had thanked the assassins.’ He added: ‘I have to

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45 Ko Swe Win was accused of insulting the hardline nationalist monk U Wirathu and filed a complaint at a police station in Mandalay on 7 March 2017.
question the rule of law in a country where people who support an assassination and spread hate speech over the Internet go unpunished while people like me are being sued. In support of Ko Swe Win, Aung Zaw, the founder and editor-in-chief of The Irrawaddy, reminded the ruling NLD government: ‘If the government cannot contain U Wirathu and protect or defend Ko Swe Win, the public will begin to question whether U Wirathu and his group are above the law.’ He added, ‘No doubt, many Burmese will lose faith and hope in the government and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.’

U Thein Sein’s administration failed to take action against U Wirathu, who started the ‘969 movement’ in 2001. Although the nationalist monk had been sentenced by General Than Shwe’s military government to a twenty-five-year jail term in 2003 for inciting religious conflict, he was released during the 2012 amnesty of the quasi-government. While suspicion lingered concerning the government’s response to two legal cases brought against prominent journalist Ko Swe Win by people with links to Ma Ba Tha, the Ministry for Religious Affairs and Culture issued a three-page official letter stating that Ko Swe Win had not contravened either Article 66(d) or Article 295, under which he had been charged. According to this letter, Ko Swe Win was doing his job as a journalist and did not intend to defame U Wirathu. The Ministry saw no grounds for classifying the journalist’s expression as inciting defamation of Buddhism, for his criticism of the nationalist monk was based on fact. The Speaker Journal clearly expressed U Wirathu’s attitude towards U Ko Ni’s assassination, quoting his response in an interview to the question of ‘why he thanked the killers of U Ko Ni’:

The main point was about the clearance of a grove. It means that a rabid dog was troubling people and ravaging the serenity of a ward (place) where people were observing the precept of abstaining from killing (panatipata) and therefore they endured the rabid dog’s intolerable roaming in all directions of their surroundings and the disgusting things it had made. Meanwhile, a certain person emerged and

killed the dog. People took pity on the dead dog while they were abhorrent to the disgusting things it had made. Sacrificing the observance of his moral conduct by breaking the precept for the good of people, the dog killer brought back a peaceful neighbourhood to the ward and eliminated the danger of rabies. So, his gratitude to killers of U Ko Ni was similar in manner to the gratitude shown to the killer of the rabid dog by the residents.51

Because of hate speech that encouraged people to boycott Muslim-run businesses and fanned extreme nationalism, the State Buddhist Sangha Maha Nayaka (Ma Ha Na) banned U Wirathu from preaching for one year, with effect from 10 March 2017.52 Immediately, U Wirathu protested the ban by delivering a silent sermon at Thee Kwin village, Einme Township, in Irrawaddy Division, on 11 March 2017. Before a congregation of hundreds of his followers, U Wirathu covered his mouth with black and red tape and played one of his previous sermons on a CD player. Consequently, the government of Irrawaddy Division planned a lawsuit against the organiser of U Wirathu’s silent protest.53 Within a short period of time, U Wirathu, as one of the leading ultranationalist monks of Ma Ba Tha, delivered three silent sermons and continued spreading hate speech through his previous sermons, which blared through loudspeakers. Two of these took place in Myitkyina, Kachin State, and Kawhmu Township, Yangon Division, in defiance of the Ma Ha Na’s preaching ban.

Therefore, Bhamo Sayasaw Bhaddanta Kumara, Chairman of the State Buddhist Authority, Ma Ha Na, warned U Wirathu and his followers:

He [U Wirathu] has preached things as if they were delivered by the Buddha, which were not . . . if he continues delivering sermons in spite of the ban, it is an act of defiance, and he will be punished for it. There is law. He must obey the order of the Buddha. If he doesn’t, he can be arrested and imprisoned.54

Meanwhile, the ongoing scuffle between the nationalist Buddhists and tolerant Buddhists shows the reality of two different views seen among Myanmar Buddhists. The nationalist Buddhists organised a public demonstration in Naypyidaw on 20 May 2017, calling for the resignation of the Union Minister, Thura U Aung Ko, alleging

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that he treated Muslims preferentially.\textsuperscript{55} The next day, accompanied by their supporters, some member monks of the Golden Sangha Organisation held a campaign for collecting ‘signs’ to push Ma Ha Na to determine ‘whether the preaching of U Wirathu is of dhamma or not’ and to take action against him.

The Venerable U Dhamasara said: ‘For the sermons of U Wirathu sound adhamma, we, the Golden Sanghas can by no means agree with his preaching.’\textsuperscript{56} With the attempt to peacefully handle the growing threat posed by Buddhist nationalists, Ma Ha Na declared a restriction on Ma Ba Tha on 23 May 2017, banning the organisation from operating under its current name and forcing it to take down its signage across the country by July 2017.\textsuperscript{57} In response, the central committee of Ma Ba Tha changed the name of the organisation to the Buddha Dhamma Parahita Foundation on 28 May 2017, with the intention of maintaining its goal and mission.\textsuperscript{58} The Dhamma Wunthanu Rakhta, a Ma Ba Tha sub-chapter formed in April 2017, also announced, on the same day, a plan to form a new political party named 135 United Patriots.\textsuperscript{59} In short, the future politico-religious climate and the rule of law in Myanmar are unpredictable, uncertain and gloomy.

If the rule of law remains in force in Myanmar’s civilian government, the mastermind(s) of U Ko Ni’s assassination must be brought to justice, and no single guilty monk can be exempt from punishment. Sadly, no one knows if the country will be able to declare to the world that there is neither any person nor any political party nor any religious organisation that is above the law. For the time being, Myanmar remains in dire need of being liberated from the abuse of power, the misuse of the law for personal profit, and the misuse of religion for political purposes. To bring the light of faith to this gloomy situation, the establishment of Christian–Buddhist dialogue as

\textsuperscript{58} ‘Ma Ba Tha Changes the Name,’ \textit{Thithtoolwin}, 28 May 2017, www.thithtoolwin.com/2017/05/blog-post_291.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+thithtoolwin+%2FyIwW+%28%E1%80%9E%E1%80%85%E1%80%B9%E1%80%91%E1%80%B0%E1%80%B8%E1%80%9C%E1%80%BC%E1%80%84%E1%80%B9%29 (accessed 29 May 2017).
a foundation for interfaith dialogue, and for peace and social harmony, is desperately needed.

8.2 Promoting Interfaith Awareness Towards Peace Building

Interfaith dialogue brings both challenges and opportunities. Fear, mistrust, onesidedness, exclusivity, defensiveness, resistance to change, reluctance, unfamiliarity, strangeness, disappointment and annoyance constitute the challenges, while the opportunities include the chance to learn new things, to see things from many different angles, to be openminded, flexible and magnanimous, to appreciate reasonable changes, and to be inclusive. The former set is marked by isolationism that is underpinned by pride, self-righteousness, indignation, volatility, revengefulness and militancy, while the latter is characterised by companionship, humbleness, tolerance, geniality, pacification, mutual understanding and mutual recognition. In the Myanmar context, unlike in the West, where some of the majority Christians promote interfaith relations, the majority Buddhists are disinterested in interfaith dialogue. Similarly, the vast majority of other non-Buddhist communities dislike IRD. Therefore, the handful of Western-trained Myanmar theologians’ struggle to disseminate the concept of IRD has had little influence, even among Christians.

Considering it as a new form of proselytisation, Buddhists fear interfaith dialogue, while the majority of Christians accuse dialogue-promoters of doing Satan’s work by advocating syncretism. Preserving their respective religious traditions and remaining in their insular comfort zones, both Buddhists and Christians view Christian–Buddhist dialogue as unnecessary.

Buddhist–Muslim relations in Myanmar became strained after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, as the attack was stirred up by Osama bin Laden’s call for the indiscriminate killing of Americans.\(^6^0\) Admittedly, the majority of non-Muslims in Myanmar rarely heard about Islam until that time. However, the nightmare of 9/11 badly distorted the image of Islam, and incorrect statements about Muslims have since spread across the country among Buddhists and Christians. While Christian suffering is the result of political greed, the struggle for a federal system in the ethnic territories and the stump of anti-colonialism, Myanmar Muslims’ suffering

is fundamentally not racial\textsuperscript{61} but religious. Therefore, to bring lasting peace and social harmony to the ethnic-dominated areas and the central Burman-dominated regions, the promotion of interfaith awareness becomes a national responsibility.

8.2.1 School Curriculum and Interfaith Awareness

Including interfaith awareness in the Myanmar school curriculum is one idea to promote social harmony and reduce suffering. Despite many difficulties and challenges, a few religious learning centres and some local NGOs have taken steps to peacefully promote interfaith awareness. Taking an initiative in support of the government’s scheme of education reform among NGOs, the Centre for Diversity and National Harmony (CDNH)\textsuperscript{62} published seventeen civics textbooks in December 2015 for students from Kindergarten to Grade 10, together with textbooks and guidebooks for teachers to help them enhance schoolchildren’s knowledge of multiple faiths. When the CDNH included Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam in a section called ‘Introduction to Religions’ for Grade 3 and Grade 4, the nationalist monk U Wirathu stated his opinion on Facebook on 4 March 2017: ‘Only one popular faith is urged to be included instead of outlining all [four] religions.’\textsuperscript{63} In the centralised education system, Buddhist culture, Buddhist values and Buddhist philosophy have been inseparable with the government-funded school curriculum ever since independence in 1948.

There is no choice for students in state-run elementary schools but to accept the state-mandated curriculum, which includes only Buddhist doctrines. Because the Buddhist worldview is promoted in the classroom, opting out of instruction in Buddhism does not mean non-Buddhist students are spared from the daily recitation of a Buddhist prayer in the classroom, as no centrally mandated exemption for students of non-Buddhist faith is made.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{61} The anti-Muslim movement of Myanmar is not related to racial discrimination because millions of Myanmar Hindus, who are Indian by descent, have been living in harmony with the predominant Burmese Buddhists.

\textsuperscript{62} The Centre for Diversity and National Harmony (CDNH) is an independent non-governmental organization established with an overall objective to enhance social harmonization, peaceful coexistence and mitigation of violence in Myanmar. See ‘About Us,’ Centre for Diversity and National Harmony, www.cdnh.org/about-us (accessed 28 March 2017).


\textsuperscript{64} Matt Cherry, Freedom of Thought 2013: A Global Report on the Rights, Legal Status, and Discrimination Against Humanists, Atheists, and the Non-religious, ed., Bob Churchill, created by the
I was once able to express my thoughts to top-ranking national advisors to President U Thein Sein. I gave my opinion that religious discrimination insidiously enters the hearts of schoolchildren from the outset of their education journey in primary school. My suggestion at the ‘Interfaith Meeting’ jointly held by the National Economic and Social Advisory Council of the President (NESAC) and the Myanmar Peace Centre (MPC) on 30 March 2013 at the Myanmar Peace Centre in Yangon, was that: ‘Sections to promote basic knowledge of main religions of Myanmar, religious harmony and peaceful coexistence should be included in the curriculum of the state-run schools.’ Admittedly, there is no direct connection between CDNH and me, but the President’s Advisor on Education, Dr Kyaw Yin Hlaing, the founding Director of CDNH, heard my concerns that uprooting religious discrimination and violence must begin in primary school.

Recognising the disagreement of non-Buddhists about how the government preferences Buddhism, and the weak points of the existing government-run school curriculum, Thura U Aung Ko, the Union Minister for Religious Affairs and Culture, admitted that the former military government ‘over-promoted Buddhism’. There is no doubt that CDNH has produced excellent civics textbooks for teachers and students, which can be integrated into the curriculums of the Ministry of Education. Opposing the CDNH’s textbooks, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), the most influential opposition party, issued a statement: ‘Education and religion should not be mixed up. In such a sensitive situation regarding religious tolerance, such a curriculum provision is unacceptable.’ Although many appreciate


On 30 March 2013 I was sent by Myanmar Baptist Convention, as one of the representatives of Myanmar Council of Churches, to the interfaith meeting on the theme of ‘Community Dialogue for Social Harmony and Stability in Myanmar’, jointly organised by NESAC and MPC, both of which were formed in 2012 by President U Thein Sein. State Ovada Cariya Sayadaws, representatives of religious leaders of other non-Buddhist religions, political parties, members of the Myanmar Movie Association, businessmen and civil society groups also attended. The meeting was remarkable for me because I met U Wirathu in person for the first time, and my suggestion in relation to school curriculum was not neglected.


Tin Htet Paing, ‘Nationalists Oppose NGO’s Curriculum for Including Religions,’ The Irrawaddy, 7 March 2017.
the independent and well-designed civics textbooks, prepared by collecting suggestions from civics trainers, specialists and interfaith leaders, the ultranationalists have accused the CDNH of attempting ‘Islamisation’ of the country through the introduction of the fundamental values of the four major faiths in the NGO’s civics curriculum.\(^70\)

Despite the opposition of the hardline nationalist groups, if the ruling NLD government, the public and private schools support the CDNH’s invaluable contribution, Myanmar will add another brick to the democratic reform it is building, bolstering its struggle for national reconciliation, peace and social harmony. If schoolchildren acquire an ethical foundation and basic knowledge for appreciating interfaith harmony and peace, the potential of new generations to become extremists or ultranationalists will be curtailed.

8.2.2 The Media and Interfaith Awareness

Educating schoolchildren, ordinary people and religious leaders is not enough to enhance peace and harmony in religiously sensitive and volatile communities. U Kyaw Soe Aung, Secretary of the Democracy and Human Rights Party, has called for the political leaders of the country, such as the President and the State Counsellor, to support campaigns promoting interfaith awareness and harmony by paying occasional visits to churches, mosques and Hindu temples.\(^71\) Until 2017, just as it was during the successive military regimes, the state-owned broadcast media have transmitted only prominent Buddhist monks’ sermons on television each morning. *Freedom of Thought 2013* stated: ‘State-controlled media frequently depicts government officials and their family members paying homage to Buddhist monks; offering donations at pagodas; officiating at ceremonies at new or restored pagodas…’\(^72\) Non-state-owned broadcast media air not only regular Buddhist sermons but also sectarian sermons, especially those delivered by nationalist monks that target Muslims and Christians. Born in 2014 out of the 969 movement, although the exact size is unknowable, Ma Ba Tha boasts 250 offices nationwide, a bi-monthly magazine with a claimed circulation

\(^{70}\) Ibid.


of 50,000, and regular sermons on Skynet, Myanmar’s largest and most influential non-state-owned broadcaster.73

Even in 2017 the broadcast and print media, both state-owned and independent, exist mainly for the purpose of Burmanisation, for the accrual of profit, for the promotion of Buddhist culture and for the promotion of Buddhism itself. Therefore, only a few programs – on education, health, the weather, entertainment and so on – benefit all citizens, regardless of race and religion. The ethnic peoples and non-Buddhist faith groups find no content for them in the mainstream media of Myanmar. Hence, they doubt or even lose faith in all Burman-dominant media groups. Every day, the stations of MRTV,74 the largest state-owned broadcaster, put to air factually accurate, incomplete and editorially biased news in both Burmese and other major ethnic languages. The absence of ethnic representation in the mainstream media (apart from ethnic media outlets) means the opinions and voices of ethnic groups are publicly inaudible and unrecognised.75 Research conducted on the public opinion of MRTV by the International Program for the Development of Communication revealed that the state-owned broadcast media of Myanmar still censor news, and present a one-sided selection of news in order to show the government in a positive light.76

Now is the time for prominent political figures of the NLD government and parliamentarians to show some sympathy to the non-Buddhist groups who are seeking a secure space in which they can practise their faith free of fear and anxiety. The government could encourage both state-owned and joint-venture broadcast media to air the religious activities of other religions in their daily television programs, or at least once a week. As well as receiving financial support for Buddhist missionary activities from the state, until 2016 the state-controlled media was an official propaganda outlet for spreading Theravāda Buddhist faith across the country.77 As part of efforts to achieve national reconciliation and a lasting peace, both state-owned

73 The International Program for the Development of Communication, Assessment of Media Development in Myanmar: Based on UNESCO’s Media Development Indicators, Assessment Period from May 2014 to April 2016 (Bangkok: Communication and Information Unit, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] and International Media Support [IMS, Copenhagen], 2016), 34.
74 ‘MRTV’ stands for Myanmar Radio and Television.
75 Ibid., xx.
76 Ibid., 74.
media and joint-venture broadcasters must include programs on topics such as interfaith awareness, Christian faith and Burmese culture, Muslim faith and religious harmony, tolerance of Buddhism and other religions in Myanmar, rotating weekly, with the intention of promoting religious harmony and social stability.

Although the rise of U Thein Sein to power ended press censorship in 2011, almost all broadcast and print media are still reluctant to include interfaith awareness in their programming. The reason is clear: there are no influential and convincing interfaith collaborations or interreligious awareness programs organised by qualified religious leaders, which might inspire talented people in media to engage in interfaith awareness for peace building. Therefore, religious leaders, who have deep knowledge of their respective religions’ teachings, are responsible for initiating plans to advocate the benefits of interfaith dialogue in any possible way, starting from people at the grassroots level. As the power of broadcast media, social media, the internet, the print media and so on is irresistibly influential in the 21st century, if religious leaders can learn to take full advantage of it, this will greatly benefit the democratic transition and the building of peace and social harmony in Myanmar. According to Mridul Chowdhury:

The government’s extremely defensive behavior may indicate that the Internet had an influence on the government’s overall response to the Saffron Revolution . . . While any number of deaths is unacceptable, it is also possible that the government actually exercised restraint in the use of force against civilian protesters because of the Internet and international media attention. Comparing the crackdown of the Burmese military government in 1988 uprising with that of 2007, which were both similar with respect to scale and participation, it is worth highlighting the significantly lower number of deaths in 2007. It is plausible that the military felt it was under greater scrutiny because of the Internet, and that it was therefore more restrained in its use of force.

8.2.3 Legislation and the Protection of Religious Harmony

The promotion of SES through interfaith dialogue and collaboration among Buddhist leaders and leaders of other faith groups can influence lawmakers. Even if both the President and the State Counsellor are active in supporting the promotion of interfaith activities, it is not enough to maintain national stability and religious harmony: enacted laws are also necessary. In fact, many lawmakers preference the voice of the

79 Mridul Chowdhury, ‘The Role of Internet in Burma’s Saffron Revolution,’ Internet and Democracy Case Study Series, the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University (September 2008), 14.
majority, without taking rights of minorities into account, due to a lack of SES or Kingdom ethics. For instance, not satisfied with the government’s half-century of support for Buddhism as a de facto state religion, and with the special position given to it by the 2008 Constitution (Article 361), the 969 movement, led by U Wirathu, collected nearly 2.5 million signatures in order to pressure President U Thein Sein’s government to pass a Race and Religion Protection Law in 2013. Although Article 34 of the 2008 Constitution appears to protect the right to freedom of religion and belief as fundamental, in reality it aims at the protection of only Buddhism: restrictions on this article were added to control non-Buddhist religions. Article 34 reads: ‘Every citizen is equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess and practise religion subject to public order, morality or health and to the other provisions of this Constitution.’

To counter the nationalist Buddhists’ effort to legally constrain Muslims, Christians and other non-Buddhists, some interfaith groups drafted a law ensuring interfaith harmony. Archbishop Charles Bo stood with interfaith groups to prevent the passage of the nationalist Buddhists’ proposed laws that attacked women and religious harmony. He declared: ‘Marriage, conversion to a religion or faith other than that of one’s birth and the right to vote, even for religious leaders, be they Buddhist, Christian, Hindu or Muslim, are inviolable human and political rights.’ Meanwhile, as the 969 movement stirred up Buddhist–Muslim conflicts in many major cities, the Meikhtila riot erupted in central Myanmar on 20 March 2013. In this violent incident, a huge, angry Buddhist mob, armed with machetes, swords, iron pipes, chains and stones, killed thirty-two Muslim students trained for religious leadership and four teachers. The mob also destroyed mosques and Muslim businesses, resulting ultimately in the displacement of about 12,000 people.

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Widespread clashes between Buddhists and Muslims across the country, especially the Meikhtila riot, sped up interfaith groups’ desire to propose the draft *Maintenance for Religious Harmony Act*. The draft was submitted in 2013, but the parliament of the quasi-civilian government could not find a space for it on its agenda, despite its urgency for keeping the peace. The late U Ko Ni said, in relation to the draft, ‘There are two main purposes – one is to promote the aspect of living harmoniously among religions, and the second is to take effective action against those who try to disturb the status of harmony.’\(^{85}\) While Buddhist nationalists heaped pressure on the government, a two-day conference of tolerant Buddhist monks was organised by U Dhammapiya and Ashin Saekeinda in Hmawbi Township in June 2013; 227 people attended. It was in response to the controversial 969 nationalist campaign, which prepared a fifteen-page draft law that would require any Buddhist woman seeking to marry a Muslim man to have the permission of her parents and local government officials. The conference made a statement that Buddhist monks were to promote peaceful coexistence with all those in the country. The conference recommended solving conflicts by the Buddhist way, and the promotion of studies that might lead to peace-building and law and order enforcement. The conference declared: ‘We object to any action, false accusation or statement against Buddhism which is detrimental to Buddhism and the dignity of Buddhist monks.’\(^{86}\)

To the frustration of interfaith promoters, President U Thein Sein approved and signed a package of four pieces of legislation intended to protect ‘race’ (Burmese) and ‘religion’ (Buddhism) on 19 May 2015,\(^{87}\) despite criticism by women’s rights activists and non-Buddhist religious organisations. Women’s rights groups, civil society organisations and human rights protectors jointly condemned these laws as discriminatory against religious minorities and women.\(^{88}\) The newly passed laws accelerated criticism of the 2008 Constitution. Equality Myanmar, a local NGO, claimed that the flawed 2008 Constitution could not protect freedom of religion and

belief, as it had been undermined from the very beginning by constitutional provisions that were inconsistent with human rights and democratic norms.89 Despite the Ma Ba Tha activities, which caused tension, dissent, social unrest, conflicts and large-scale carnage, U Thein Sein’s government pandered to the nationalists’ desires and supported their discriminatory laws,90 while staying deaf to those Buddhist monks who criticised U Wirathu’s lobby for passing the draft of four pieces of law which would blatantly restrict Buddhist–Muslim marriage.

Although a draft of a law proposed by interfaith groups that aimed to maintain religious harmony was unsuccessful during the administration of the quasi-civilian government controlled by the USDP, the NLD government is expected to enact a law that can protect freedom of religious belief and social harmony. Top officials of the previous military governments never met interfaith activists with unbiased goodwill, except for the purpose of controlling the leaders of non-Buddhist religions. However, in the civilian government, Thura U Aung Ko, Union Minister for Religious Affairs and Culture, met two interfaith groups for the enhancement of interreligious movement towards social harmony in Myanmar – one in Mandalay on 5 May 2016, and the other in Yangon on 15 May 2016 – to discuss legislation that would guarantee equal rights for all religions.91

Meanwhile, the assassination of the high-profile lawyer U Ko Ni hurt the attempt of interfaith groups who are working hard to resubmit a draft of a law that will protect the rights of followers of all religions. ‘The government has the duty to act in the interest of all religions. They should not pay attention only to Buddhists but also to other religions, as the constitution says everyone has the right to religious freedom,’ U Ko Ni said.92 Similar to the heartland Buddhist-dominated areas, many parts of predominantly Christian regions are still facing violations of the freedom of religion and faith practices. For example, even in Chin State’s capital, Hakha, government employees are routinely ordered to work on Sunday, without compensation. Violations of religious freedom and faith assembly affect Chin, Kachin, Naga and all Christian communities nationwide, due to the absence of the rule of law. Students and teachers in many parts of those territories pay homage to the

90 Ibid., 27.
92 Ibid.
Buddha by reciting the Buddhist Scriptures in state-funded schools, and observe *uposatha* (Buddhist Sabbath); if it falls on a weekday, school is rescheduled for Saturday or Sunday. In addition, Christians are barred from constructing buildings for the purpose of worship; and in some heartland areas, Ma Ba Tha members openly pressure and intimidate Christians not to assemble for worship.93

Due to their commitment to their respective faiths, Buddhist–Christian dialogue can inspire and advocate for laws that protect all citizens without discrimination. The present government has an opportunity to end Myanmar’s notoriety for violating the freedom of religion, torturing Muslims and marginalising Christian minority groups. Handling nationalist Buddhists is complicated, yet the government must sensitively re-examine the Ma Ba Tha’s four pieces of the race and religion protection law, and annul or at least amend them as soon as possible, if the NLD government is to bring equality to all religions. The present government needs to pay full attention to the cries of religious minorities, and take proper action to terminate the current socio-religious threat and systemic social exclusion. The government must protect ‘religious harmony’ by law, and support any peaceful activities that lead to the promotion of interfaith awareness, fellowship and collaboration. People are waiting to see whether the NLD government can fulfil the promises it made to the people (both the majority Buddhists and religious minorities) during the election campaign with the slogan ‘It’s Time for Change – Vote NLD.’94

Eighty per cent of the electorate voted for the NLD, with high expectations that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her party would commit to making changes to the entrenched sociopolitical and economic structures of successive regimes, with a clear aim of liberating the country from political oppression, social discrimination, the violations of human rights and economic poverty.95 As the interfaith movement for promoting peaceful coexistence in Myanmar is still only embryonic, the elected government must protect it from the attacks of nationalist Buddhists, and from other fundamentalist groups within non-Buddhist religions.

Since the time of the missionaries, there has been no will to promote interfaith dialogue. Bishop Paul Ambroise Bigandet (1813–1894), the resident Superior of the

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Burma mission,\(^9\) was able to build a genuine friendship with the Burmese royal palace and the Catholic mission under the administration of the most liberal Burmese Buddhist king, Mindon Min. However, this friendship never led to the establishment of IRD; it served only to bestow the king’s favour on the missionaries’ works. In the same way, with the aim of gaining arms and support from France and Italy in his struggle against the British, the shrewd Buddhist king unquestionably favoured Catholic missionaries. Although he permitted missionaries to evangelise to non-Buddhist peoples, his rigorous order meant that Buddhists could not be preached to or converted.\(^7\)

Just as missionaries sought the Burmese kings’ favour, Christians, including Catholics, avoided confrontation with the military government, and negotiated for their survival by any means. Brother Thomas spoke about this by reference to the Saffron Revolution in 2007, noting that top Myanmar Catholic officials were silent while many Buddhist monks died in their peaceful struggle to liberate suffering people from the military oppression. Based on the disagreement of Brother Thomas and other Christians (both Catholics and Protestants), the *National Catholic Reporter* noted: ‘The absence of any direct criticism of the government crackdown was deafening. And many Catholics viewed the order for the clergy and religious to remain silent as an inexcusable washing of church hands.’\(^8\) From 1962 onwards, both the Catholic and Protestant churches were strictly controlled; this was followed by the loss of Christian social influence throughout the military regimes, and they only tussled over securing their survival. Almost all Christian leaders thought that the best way to prolong their existence in Myanmar was by evading any form of political engagement. As the situation discouraged them from prioritising interfaith dialogue or promoting religious harmony, Christian leaders saw their responsibility only as protecting the Christian presence in Myanmar.

With no legal protection, interfaith groups struggled throughout the tenure of President U Thein Sein. Despite making slow headway in meeting many challenges and difficulties, interfaith activists have been greatly encouraged to hear the Union Minister for Religious Affairs and Culture, Thura U Aung Ko, say that, because of

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\(^7\) Ibid., 221–226.

feedback from the international community, State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the Information Ministry are adding provisions to a draft law to combat and criminalise hate speech and allow the police to act against anyone spreading such speech. In reality, the government’s efforts to establish religious harmony have not been sufficient. Myanmar’s Buddhists and Christians must, as an expression of interfaith dialogue, jointly advocate for the process of law enforcement so that all people may enjoy peace, equality and unity in diversity. Their fundamental duty in joining the government’s push for law enforcement is simply to live in compliance with the existing law as followers of the peaceful Lords: the Buddha and Jesus Christ. If the government is reluctant to legislate to protect freedom of religion and interfaith harmony, they can make their voices heard and push the government without creating violent conflict, through peaceful means such as interfaith prayer gatherings, a public referendum, open letters to the government, using the mass media, lawful demonstrations and so on. Buddhist monasteries and churches should not only be spiritual centres but also places where people are (at least occasionally) encouraged and educated to abide by the law for the wellbeing of multireligious Myanmar society, regardless of their political views.

8.3 Promoting Christian–Buddhist Involvement in Interfaith Activity to Foster Peace and Social Harmony

Interfaith dialogue is needed now more than ever, as Myanmar increasingly connects with the outside world. From the outset, people have been pleased by the liberalisation of the telecommunications industry, attributing it to the economic growth of the country as direct foreign investment worth more than US$2.8 billion came into the sector. However, nationalist Buddhists upset many with their use of social media and the internet to spread hate speech against non-Buddhists, and to stimulate anti-Muslim sentiment. Anti-Muslim and anti-Christian sentiment (although differing in degree) are frequently posted in Burmese on Facebook and Twitter, and

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99 Religious leaders and the Myanmar Interfaith Friendship Group formulated an initial draft of the anti-hate speech law before the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture developed the draft.  
spread through YouTube videos, stirring up and confusing tens of thousands of young people.

The negative outcomes of the misuse of social media were seen within two years of Myanmar’s political liberalisation. Myanmar’s first free access to the internet was met with violent attacks by Buddhist mobs against minority Muslims in Meikhtila, Bago, Oakkan and Lashio, causing at least forty-seven deaths and the destruction of many mosques and Muslim-run businesses. This situation calls for the promotion of Christian–Buddhist dialogue, and for the embracing of interfaith dialogue in which people of all religious backgrounds can come together, without fear, to seek ways to restore peace, justice and harmony. Christians are more influential, recognised, trusted and acceptable to Buddhists than Muslims or other smaller religious groups. Hence, Christian–Buddhist dialogue can serve as a foundation for the promotion of interfaith dialogue, in order to enhance peace and social harmony in Myanmar.

8.3.1 Positive Signs

The No-Hate Speech Project stated: ‘Incendiary rhetoric regarding race and religion has become more common among Burma’s netizens since an influx of the Internet access and a lifting of barriers to free speech.’ Nationalist Buddhists view the incoming waves of global interaction in every sector of life as evil forces that will cause the downfall of Buddhism in the near future, while aiding the growth of Christianity and Islam in Myanmar. In this unstable situation, vulnerable interfaith activists have been encouraged by an informal interfaith meeting, the largest ever, held on 18 March 2017 at the Mandalay City Hall, with the aim of fostering peaceful coexistence by the different faiths. Dr Zaw Myint Maung, Chief Minister of Mandalay Region, by his presence at the meeting honoured the more than 1000 people representing Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hindu, Baha’i, civil society groups and different political groups. At the forum, Chairman Sayadaw of Mandalay Region Sangha Nayaka Committee and the leaders of other religions delivered

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103 Pe Htet Htet Khin, ‘Daw Aung San Suu Kyi Alters Draft of Hate Speech Law,’ *The Irrawaddy*. 

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speeches on the topic of peace, and denounced the use of violence and ‘hateful words’ in the name of religion.\textsuperscript{104}

The beauty of religious pluralism is characterised by interfaith harmony and peace. However, Myanmar currently has two faces: one of interfaith violence and one of social instability. Specifically, the territory of Rakhine State, especially its north-west, is a picture of interfaith violence. Although violence between people of different faiths is not new, violent attacks between Buddhists and Muslims are more frequent than ever, and the spark of each attack quickly spreads to some major cities in the heartland, especially after the democratic transition of 2011. Derek J. Mitchell, the US ambassador to Myanmar, nudged religious leaders by organising an initiative meeting in Yangon in June 2013. At the meeting, the representatives of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam together focused on the need for fostering ‘unity in diversity’ and ‘respect for different opinions and different way of doing things’.\textsuperscript{105}

Similarly, the Institute for Global Engagement, based in Washington DC, and the Sitagu International Buddhist Academy jointly organised an interfaith conference in Yangon on 1–2 October 2013 in response to the fanning of religious animosity by the nationalist Buddhist 969 movement. This conference was the first international interfaith dialogue hosted at a Buddhist Missionary Centre in Myanmar, and was honoured by two encouraging opening messages sent by President U Thein Sein and the people’s leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.\textsuperscript{106} Attended by leaders of Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Jews and ambassadors, the conference was dedicated to peace, harmony and peaceful coexistence. Archbishop Charles Bo (now a cardinal) reminded his fellow citizens: ‘Thanks to monks and political leaders like Aung San Suu Kyi, there opens “a new era” and allowing episodes of hate and violence would be like betraying the sacrifice of thousands of people who have shed blood and tears to bring us where we are today.’\textsuperscript{107} The presence of the Cardinal Bo, a prominent


Christian leader, at an interfaith dialogue, and the collaboration of Sitagu Sayadaw, the most famous Buddhist monk, is a positive sign that a new era of social harmony may be dawning in Myanmar.

8.3.2 Protestant Christian Contribution to Interfaith Activity in Myanmar

As discussed earlier, the traditional Protestant churches were restrained about engaging in IRD until 2010. Coinciding with the intensification of the anti-Muslim movement, the years 2012 to 2014 marked an unprecedented period in which many peaceful interfaith activities promoting peace and social harmony took place in Myanmar, in response to rampant violence by nationalist Buddhists and extremist Muslim defensiveness. When President U Thein Sein eased restrictions on politics, religion, economy and media in 2011, Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC), representing the Protestant churches of Myanmar, also became more active in collaborating with the organisations of other religions to foster religious harmony. As a result, Religions for Peace Myanmar (RFP) was formed on 13 September 2012, with the religious organisations pledging to make efforts to defuse religious tension in conflict-hit communities.

The members of RFP-Myanmar are the Buddhist Sitagu Community, Ratana Mettā Foundation (a Buddhist organisation), the MCC, the Catholic Church, the Islamic Centre of Myanmar, and the Hindu Community in Myanmar. One hundred religious leaders, politicians, diplomats and civil society leaders from around the world, together with Thura U Myint Maung, the Union Minister for Religious Affairs, attended the inauguration ceremony of RFP-Myanmar. However, the emergence of RFP cannot influence ordinary people, who are overwhelmed by sectarian views of their respective religions as taught by influential bigoted religious teachers.

Like other non-Christian interfaith groups, the Judson Research Centre (JRC) is a leading interfaith organisation among Protestant churches; its contribution is briefly presented here. Established on 13 July 2003 by the Myanmar Institute of Theology (MIT), under the supervision of Samuel Ngun Ling, the first director of the centre (he is now President of MIT), with a firm commitment to promoting interfaith studies, dialogue and current issues of all sectors of life, the JRC works actively with

the leaders of other non-Christian religions, scholars, students and young people, irrespective of their religious affiliation, to promote peace and religious harmony.109 Officially owned by the Myanmar Baptist Convention, the largest member church of the MCC, the JRC-MIT represents the MCC in wider interfaith talks. In 2013 the government-run International Theravāda Buddhist Missionary University (ITBMU) and JRC-MIT, the most prestigious Protestant school, launched a historic joint project called the Annual Academic Level Buddhist–Christian Dialogue. This is the first time in post-junta Myanmar that the state-owned Buddhist university and a Protestant-run Christian institution officially began Buddhist–Christian dialogue. The main task of the project is to present academic papers, followed by discussion and clarification, on a chosen theme. Having taken the initiative in this way, the JRC-MIT was pleased when the ITBMU accepted its invitation to jointly organise the annual Buddhist–Christian dialogue on a regular basis; the first gathering was held in 2013, with the theme ‘Towards a Harmonious Society’.110 The third gathering, held on 28 August 2015, attracted 160 participants.111

The good relations between the ITBMU and MIT can be traced back to my study of Buddhism at the ITBMU in 2006–2007, before which there was not yet a close relationship between the institutions. I received a certificate of the diploma of Buddha Dhamma from the state-sponsored ITBMU at the eighth diploma certificate presentation, held on 3 June 2007, which was attended by Brigadier-General Thura Myint Maung, the Minister for Religious Affairs and Culture.112 Having worked very hard to build a good relationship with some professors of the ITBMU, I helped MIT find a Buddhist resource person from the ITBMU for its annual program ‘Doing Theology Under the Bo Tree’, which promotes the contextual theology of Myanmar and is open to local and overseas participants. Later, the two institutions were able to build a firm friendship to promote Christian–Buddhist dialogue. Although this collaboration takes place only among intellectuals at the institutional level, it stands as a good example that interfaith friendship and cooperation at any level is possible

111 Ibid.
between Buddhists and Christians if they have a shared vision to promote harmony in their communities.

The Judson Research Centre has run ‘Campus Dialogue Forum’, a program for students from MIT and nearby Christian institutions, every Friday since 2008, in order to promote interfaith awareness and current social issues. The forum is normally populated by young participants, mostly Christians but also some Buddhists. For almost all, interfaith dialogue was unknown in their home communities. The main functions of this pioneering campus forum are to introduce interfaith awareness and help participants to personally experience dialogue, familiarising them with people of other faiths and extending their exclusive religious view. They become accustomed to seeing things from other points of view, and learn to be more attentive and responsive to the social problems of Myanmar.

Taking another step up from convening interfaith forums, seminars, symposia and workshops on various themes to prepare seminarians and Protestant church leaders for IRD, with the intellectual support of people from non-Christian religions and NGOs, the JRC-MIT launched an academic program called Master of Arts in Interfaith Dialogue (MAID) in 2014, under the umbrella of the Liberal Arts program of MIT, with a view to responding to the needs and challenges of the highly diverse society of Myanmar. All qualified students are accepted for this program, regardless of their faith tradition. Nine Christians, three Buddhists and one Hindu were accepted in the first intake; five Christians and two Buddhists (one of whom is a Buddhist monk) have been enrolled for the second intake. Students are academically trained with an expectation that they will advocate at the grassroots level for interfaith awareness that leads to peace and harmony.

In addition, the JRC-MIT regularly offers a one-week intensive course on dialogue once a year, the Certificate in Interfaith Dialogue Training (CIDT), designed

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114 For more than a decade, the JRC has been conducting a series of interfaith gatherings convened for sharing religious insights on the chosen theme of each year’s program such as: interfaith dialogue, ethnic issues, gender equality, environmental issues and so on. In each event, the resource persons of each religion presented papers and the audience constituted by Christians, Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus enthusiastically discussed, reflected the presentation and finally found out common platforms for building friendship and promoting mutual understanding, mutual trust and mutual collaboration.
116 Khin Hnin Phyu, Coordinator of the Interfaith Engagement Programme of Judson Research Center, provided me with the requested information in relation to the figure of MAID students through Facebook Messenger on 6 April 2017, www.facebook.com/hkinhnin.phyu (accessed 6 April 2017).
to provide trainees with dialogue skills for peace-building. By the fifth CIDT, JRC had made headway in collaborating with Buddhists. Pan Pyo Let Monastery, a peaceful botanical garden located near Kyaut Tan Village in Pegu Region, accepted the JRC’s invitation to hold a dialogue workshop in February 2017; the training was successfully held with the participation of six Buddhists, six Muslims and fifteen Christians, who were interested to advance their skills of interfaith dialogue.\(^{117}\)

JRC-MIT’s contribution to promoting interfaith awareness from an intellectual angle, even with its limited capacity, is significant. However, with the exception of the MIT, other Protestant theological schools, including Catholic seminaries in Myanmar, are still reluctant to promote interfaith activities. Therefore, more effort is required to persuade other theological seminaries to peacefully disseminate the concept of interfaith awareness among Christians, so that they appreciate IRD and interfaith collaboration as a means of promoting peace and religious harmony.

### 8.3.3 Grassroots-level Designs Needed for Interfaith Programs

The escalated tensions and violence caused by religious extremists of both sides (Buddhists and Muslims) in Rakhine State fuelled the expansion of the 969 movement, which later evolved into Ma Ba Tha. Although a very small number of Christian leaders support the promotion of interfaith dialogue and interactions, the Reverend Si Khaw, a representative of Mara Evangelical Church, a member church of the MCC, is not satisfied with the majority Christians’ reluctance to engage in interfaith activities. At a Christian–Buddhist dialogue called ‘Consultation on Anglican-Lutheran-Buddhist Relations’, held in Yangon from 16 to 20 January 2017, he remarked: ‘We Christians have quite excluded ourselves from the main religion [Buddhism] in the country. This kind of consultation will give us a heart to understand them more, it helps to break barriers.’\(^{118}\) More religious leaders and civil society groups were gradually awakened, at least conceptually, by the end of 2011; they have become more active in promoting interfaith dialogue for peace-building in major cities such as Yangon and Mandalay. However, the vast majority of people at

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the grassroots level still remain deaf to the concept of interfaith dialogue that might foster interreligious harmony.

While it is relatively easy for well-educated people with liveable incomes to appreciate the idea that interfaith dialogue can create a better world, it is far harder to introduce the concept to economically and educationally underprivileged people. At present, only a few religious leaders, academics, politicians and social activists can participate in academic interfaith forums or seminars. Therefore, Myanmar interfaith groups must find action-oriented ways to reach the majority people who cannot take part in the existing interfaith awareness programs, which occur mainly among intellectual elites. Therefore, people of advanced interfaith knowledge need to make a collective effort to redesign the existing activities by which they spread the concept of interfaith harmony in Myanmar, with the target of reaching ordinary people.

For example, interfaith groups could organise interfaith awareness programs in which participants clean the precincts of Buddhist monasteries, churches, mosques or Hindu temples; plant trees in the compounds of religious centres or other public areas; donate food, water and clothes to religions, to orphanages run by religious organisations or humanitarian groups, or to the poor or widows in local communities; build friendship through social games or sports, for all age levels; and so on. With government support and the collaboration of religious institutions, interfaith groups could take advantage of the United Nations’ resolution\(^{119}\) for observing World Interfaith Harmony Week for spreading interfaith awareness through simple actions. (Following King Abdullah II of Jordan’s proposal at the UN General Assembly on 23 September 2010, the UN unanimously adopted the first week of February as World Interfaith Harmony Week on 20 October 2010.\(^{120}\))

For example: an interfaith action group in Mandalay comprising Catholics, Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus offered one good meal as a special Christmas gift to the poor children and families of the Irrawaddy riverside on 20 December 2015.\(^{121}\) This interfaith group indeed contributed to interfaith awareness not by word but by deed. Their example shows that if we seek out and open our hearts to the followers of other religions, we might find many simple and suitable platforms for spreading a

message of interfaith harmony. We can manifest our SES and love our neighbours, irrespective of faith, through inexpensive but meaningful interfaith actions. A simple action gives a better meaning of interfaith dialogue, and a clearer picture of interfaith harmony, than a lengthy, unfamiliar if informative academic paper. To grow the fruit of peace, solidarity and social harmony, the majority Buddhists and Christians have to take initiatives and actions that promote interfaith harmony with the support of government.

In conclusion, the majority religious groups have an opportunity to facilitate and speed up the government’s current slow progress with peace talks, national reconciliation and the elimination of religious violence by disseminating interfaith awareness, with a view to securing social harmony. Showing love, tolerance and hospitality, the Buddhists and Christians of Myanmar might welcome Muslims, Hindus and other fellow citizens without racial prejudice or social exclusion, demonstrating by their actions that religion is not for conflict but for peace and harmony. While Christian–Buddhist dialogue and interfaith dialogue at the intellectual level are required for spreading the concept of interfaith harmony, action-oriented interfaith activity is more important in alleviating the suffering of the victims of Myanmar’s internal conflicts and natural disasters. The intellectual dialogue activities of open-minded religious leaders, intellectuals and well-trained civil society groups should not be confined to classrooms, seminars, workshops, symposia and so on. It is time to make interfaith dialogue audible, visible and tangible in action to people at the grassroots level, in all parts of Myanmar.

8.3.4 Interfaith Collaboration and the Need for Social Services

As well as longstanding ethnic conflicts and the unending violence on the basis of religion, Myanmar is prone to natural disasters such as cyclones, floods, landslides, droughts, wildfires, tsunamis, climate disorders and earthquakes. According to the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), on 2 May 2008 Cyclone Nargis killed 140,000 and affected 2.4 million people in Myanmar alone; Cyclone Giri killed forty-five and affected 260,000 on 22 October 2010; and 120,000 were evacuated in Rakhine State when Cyclone Mahasen devastated the region in May 2013. Action-oriented interfaith groups are indispensable in helping the

122 ‘Myanmar: Natural Disaster Risks and Past Events,’ OCHA (31 May 2016),
victims of natural disasters, war and religious violence. When Cyclone Komen hit
many parts of Myanmar, affecting several thousands of people and damaging over
500,000 acres of paddy field in July 2015, the subsequent flood and landslide in Chin
State destroyed many houses, churches, roads and bridges, traumatising thousands of
people, including 5000 in the Chin’s capital, Hakha.\(^{123}\)

Meanwhile, showing a caring hand and a loving heart to Chin Christians who
were depressed by the scene of ruined churches, the Venerable Sitagu Sayadaw, the
most influential socially engaged Buddhist monk, known for his charity work and
community engagement, donated 10 million kyat for repairing ruined churches in
Chin State. However, due to Chin Christians’ sensitive attitudes towards interfaith
dialogue, Buddhism and Burmanisation, no ruined church accepted the donation;
ultimately the relief committee in Hakha transferred it to the common relief and
rehabilitation fund.\(^{124}\) In this case, the open-minded Sayadaw exemplified the
workability of interfaith brotherhood, not by preaching or teaching but through the
service of compassion and love. Despite this, the vast majority of Myanmar Christians
view Buddhists as idol-worshipers, while most Buddhists fear Christianity as a
Western intrusion. Socially engaged interfaith groups must not be discouraged by this,
but persist in their commitment to bring better understanding among religions, and
social harmony on the basis of compassion, tolerance, patience, love and forgiveness.

Amid many barriers and challenges, an interfaith network called Mettā
Setwaing Consortium (literally, ‘Love Circle’) was formed in 2013 by ten socially
engaged interfaith organisations:\(^{125}\) the Kalyana Mitta Foundation, the Student
Christian Movement, the Swe Tha Har Development Organisation, the Interfaith
Youth Cooperative Actions for Peace, the Interfaith Youth Coalition on Aid in
Myanmar (IYCA-Myanmar), the National Catholic Youth Commission, the Myitta

\(^{123}\) Ye Mon and Lun Min Mang, ‘Landslides Could Force Hakha City to Move,’ The Myanmar Times,
11 August, 2015,
(accessed 7 April 2017).

\(^{124}\) Rev. Dr Law Ha Ling, the General Secretary of Chin Baptist Church, responded to my request to
tell me ‘how Sitagu Sayadaw’s donation to the ruined Chin churches in 2015 was managed’ through
Facebook Messenger on 11 April 2017,

\(^{125}\) Kaw Mai, former Co-Director of Judson Research Center who became the Programme Manager of
Danmission in Myanmar since 1 April 2017, sent me the information on 13 April 2017 via Facebook
Messenger,
Resource Foundation, the National Young Men’s Christian Association, the Smile Education and Development Foundation (SEDF) and the Judson Research Centre of the Myanmar Institute of Theology. Each stands for the promotion of interfaith awareness, peace and social harmony. The characteristics and goals of three of them are briefly outlined here.

First, Swe Tha Har was founded in 2004 with the purpose of establishing peaceful relationships among various religious and diverse ethnic groups, and advancing environmental awareness, solidarity and interfaith harmony.

Second, IYCA-Myanmar came into existence in December 2006, formed by seven young people from different religious backgrounds, with a view to subduing HIV/AIDS and building a healthy, peaceful and prosperous interfaith community in Myanmar.

Third, SEDF became a registered NGO in 2013, and is committed to support sustainable peace-building and to combat discrimination based on sex, gender, religion or ethnicity, in order to resolve violence, conflicts and acts of hate. Its goals are: to assist civil society organisations in Myanmar to become more efficient and aid sustainable development; to promote gender equality and empower women in a cultural, political, economic, religious and environmental context; to improve grassroots democracy and human rights, and to provide citizens with the capacity to understand and act upon their rights and responsibilities as citizens of Myanmar; and to empower young people and equip them with the skills to be effective and positive social change makers in their communities.

While socially engaged interfaith groups that promote peace, justice and harmony are needed more than ever before, given Myanmar’s recent emergence as a democratic nation, interfaith promoters have no security as multi-religious communities are prone to experience mob violence and conflict. Nationalist monks and Buddhists, anti-Muslim movements and religious extremists of various faiths can easily target vulnerable interfaith activists. What makes this worse is the unprovable

though irrefutable perception that people backed by the regime or the military regularly fan tensions or even conflicts between religious groups, in order that citizens will continue to demand the military subdue violence and keep the peace. Generally, the minority Muslims become scapegoats in the implementation of a military-backed political aim, which is usually accomplished by exploiting volatile religious sensitivity.\textsuperscript{130} In Myanmar’s current sociopolitical climate, civil society organisations and peace activists should heed Jesus’s instruction: ‘See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.’\textsuperscript{131}

Although they face unpredictable challenges and difficulties, interfaith groups and civilian peace activists are driven to persist with their life-giving social commitment by imitating some prominent socially engaged spiritual leaders, such as Sitagu Sayadaw. While he was attending the Interfaith Academic Conference held on security, peace and coexistence on 1 October 2013, he received news of riots in Thandwe Township, Rakhine State, between the Rakhine people and Muslims. On 7 October 2013, four days after the conference ended, the Venerable Sayadaw, accompanied by U Aye Lwin, the Chief Convener for the Islamic Centre of Myanmar, left for Thandwe to restore peace and stability to the region. The Sayadaw and U Aye Lwin each offered two peace talks to Rakhine Buddhists that same day, and to local Muslims on 8 October 2013. During his visit, the Venerable Sayadaw donated clinics and school buildings to conflict-affected areas: the Sitagu Eye Hospital was built in Thandwe for all patients, regardless of race and religion, in an encouraging sign of the possibility of peaceful coexistence in the region.\textsuperscript{132}

In his talks, the Venerable Sayadaw warned the local Buddhists and town officials of the damaging consequences of believing in rumours. He also told them to be conscious of dangerous people who have hidden agendas, and how inciting violence might help fulfil their plans. During his meeting with Muslim leaders, by referencing the stories of Jataka, the Sayadaw spoke out about the need for mutual respect and the negative consequences of sectarianism, emphasising the importance of moral character and wisdom in establishing peaceful coexistence. He urged the Rakhine Buddhists to live peacefully with the local Muslims, while telling the


\textsuperscript{131} Matthew 10:16.

\textsuperscript{132} ‘A Peace Trip of Sitagu Sayadaw to Thandwe.’
Muslims to guard against those who are likely to use religion as a political tool. In short, this Sayadaw’s efforts to bring Buddhists and Muslims together constitute an excellent example of how SES can contribute to peace and harmony through dialogue. The Sayadaw’s social engagement is characterised by academic-level interfaith dialogue and by the extension of love and compassion in action to those who do not belong to his own religion: peace talks on conflict transformation, preaching on peace and social harmony, and offering humanitarian aid and social services.

Similarly, interfaith groups and peace activists should not limit interfaith dialogue to a circle of intellectuals, open-minded religious leaders and high-ranked government officials as a purely academic exercise. Rather, they should reach out to people at the grassroots level, through simple programs: raising awareness, training and workshops on dialogue, interreligious fellowship programs, social and community services, and charity works. Even if all ethnic armed groups were to agree to sign a nationwide ceasefire agreement and abandon their weapons, real peace will still be far distant while the country fails to achieve social harmony through interfaith dialogue. The present sociopolitical situation in Myanmar is like a coin that has fruitful political dialogue on the obverse and interfaith dialogue on the reverse. Unless and until inclusive political dialogue and interfaith dialogue are highly valued and honestly cherished by the government, by the military and by ordinary people, Myanmar citizens’ common goal of reconciliation, peace, justice and social harmony will remain unachievable.

In conclusion, the emphasis of this chapter has been on turning the conventional understanding of religion around in order to address the social realities of Myanmar, through the lens of the sociopolitical implications of religious teachings. The key finding of this chapter is that a profound knowledge of the social impact of the core teachings of the Buddha and Jesus Christ is the bedrock of SES theological formation, which by nature addresses and responds to real-life situations in the service of compassion. Through faith-based SES, both Buddhists and Christians, as well as people of other faith traditions, can prove that their own religions are not world-escaping tools but facilitators of an inner transformation that prepares individuals to serve needy and suffering people. The underlying theological concept of SES is the importance of imitating and following the teachings of the Buddha (for Buddhists)

and Jesus Christ (for Christians). Marcus Borg wrote: ‘Both Jesus and the Buddha offered a similar diagnosis of the typical human condition: blindness, anxiety, grasping, self-preoccupation. In both cases, the prescription for cure is similar: “seeing”, “letting go”, “dying”.’ Just as Jesus and the Buddha diagnosed the problems of human suffering before showing the way to liberation, the coming together of interfaith groups must prioritise the uncovering of real sociopolitical problems, so that action-oriented interfaith groups may peacefully help to heal the wounds of all sectors of life in Myanmar.

In doing so, socially engaged interfaith groups may become vulnerable to ultranationalists or extremist fundamentalists, much as the sociopolitical passion of Jesus Christ led him to an early death. Amidst danger and uncertainty, some socially engaged interfaith groups have taken significant risks in advancing interfaith awareness following the rise of the quasi-civilian government in 2011. For as long as Myanmar’s key problems persist – an oppressive political structure, ethnic conflicts, religious discrimination and drug issues – interfaith groups will have to brace themselves to withstand divisive forces in peaceful ways.

Until a time comes when nationalist politicians stop using religion for their political goals, when all ethnic armed groups and the Burmese military work together to preserve an enduring peace, and when people of all faiths learn to see the beauty of religious plurality in mutual respectful appreciation, interfaith dialogue based on SES will remain desperately needed in Myanmar. As Jesus said: ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few.’ The number of committed interfaith activists or volunteers in Myanmar is far too low, given the need for IRD. A few volunteers and some NGOs will not be enough; the religions at an institutional level have to make a commitment to lead people of various faith traditions to a new understanding of the sociopolitical implications of their respective religious teachings, the theological foundation of SES.

135 Ibid., xi.
136 Matthew 9:37.
Conclusion

Despite the richness of Myanmar’s natural resources, the beauty of the country, the goodness of its peoples and religions, the nation has experienced military dictatorship, human-rights violations, corruption, uncontrollable opium cultivation and widespread illegal drug trafficking, abject poverty, religious violence and the world’s longest ongoing civil war. This, as well as the incessant conflict between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims, prompted me to investigate Christian–Buddhist dialogue in Myanmar. As an attempt to respond to violence, exclusion, poverty and injustice, this thesis will contribute to the creation of a harmonious nation, and to the process of healing social corruption through dialogue and interfaith collaboration between the followers of the Buddha and Jesus Christ based on SES. The social implications of the core teachings of the Buddha and Jesus Christ are foundational to promoting SES, which is a desperate demand for restoring justice, peace and social harmony.

The thesis began by describing and analysing the ethnic, religious and sociopolitical context of Myanmar. This was followed by a critical survey of the literature relevant to this thesis in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 explained the concept of IRD as taught by Vatican II, the FABC and the WCC. Remarkably, Vatican II shattered doctrinal boundaries and created a new platform for collaboration with the WCC, enabling a journey towards interfaith awareness as equal partners. Chapter 3 discussed some of the barriers to the goal of dialogue, outlining how Christian–Buddhist dialogue is unlikely to happen among people who are inescapably captured by views that derive from sectarian indoctrination and religious rivalry.

Chapter 4 is a theological dialogue between the core of the Sermon on the Mount and the Middle Way, as a foundation for advancing Christian–Buddhist dialogue. Chapters 5 and 6 critically analysed the Buddhist teaching of meditation, as well as one form of Christian meditation, centering prayer, as a moral preparation for dialogue leading to SES. They discussed the urgency, the role, the Biblical rootedness, the benefits and the demand of nurturing meditative life on a daily basis in order to establish and cultivate SES in an individual’s life. Chapter 5 described the Buddhist way of moral training and its benefits, while Chapter 6 introduced CP.
Chapter 7 presented the Buddha and Jesus as perfect models of social engagement. For example, Jesus, the epitome\(^1\) of SES, emphasised the urgency of standing in solidarity with the marginalised, his true followers, people who participate in God’s Kingdom mission to liberate the suffering of others, both physically (in the sociopolitical realm) and spiritually (the subtle reality of one’s inner being).\(^2\)

Borrowing the idea from Albert Einstein’s famous aphorism, ‘Science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind,’\(^3\) we may say, ‘Christian spirituality without social engagement is lame; Christian social involvement without genuine faith commitment in Jesus Christ is blind and dangerous.’ The last chapter explored how SES may be actualised in Myanmar.

The primary task of this thesis was to advocate Christian–Buddhist dialogue as essential groundbreaking work, with the intention of promoting peace, social harmony and national wellbeing in Myanmar though SES. It recommends four rules to be observed while promoting SES: (1) no attempt must be made to equate different religious concepts; (2) faith differences must be respected and recognised; (3) honest matching as a result of analytical understanding of different religious texts can be conducted, with the intention of creating a common platform for dialogue; and (4) the required effort must be exerted to thoroughly understand both one’s own and the other’s religions. Dialogue of knowledge exchange, of life and of action may not survive and be fruitful without a dialogue of religious experience,\(^4\) which is firmly rooted in faith commitment and gradually develops through one’s spiritual practice or spiritual nourishment, as the Dalai Lama said. He emphasised the precedence of choosing a spiritual practice which best suits one’s mental development, disposition and spiritual inclination before engaging in social services.\(^5\)

A popular refrain among the member churches of the WCC was that ‘doctrine divides, service unites’. This has two possibilities, according to Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, the General Secretary of the WCC: it is a way to criticise the deficient outcomes of theological discussion, and it is a way of confirming the enormous potential of common service, common actions and common initiatives to respond to

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the social realities and the needs of the world, despite differences in our respective worldviews. In light of this refrain, this thesis has argued that rigid doctrines in the Christian tradition as a whole will never lead Christians of different denominations to a common meeting point. Similarly, although a doctrine may be meaningful for a particular community, the doctrinal issues of Buddhism and Christianity, like those of other major world religions, will never lead people of different faiths to genuine friendship, trust, acceptance and collaboration, but only to division, argument, fear, hatred and conflict. At the same time, insightful adherence to one’s own religious doctrine may lead some to productive faith-based social services, but undiscerning or blind attachment to one’s own religious doctrine is very likely to end in life-rejecting sectarianism, destructive religious nationalism and faith-based defensiveness.

It is my strong belief that interfaith dialogue based on SES has enough spiritual richness to cope peacefully with differences without jeopardising any group. Dialogue is the best way to express respect, appreciation, openness, recognition and acceptance to those who do not share unique identities, and to those not belonging to any particular faith or ethnic community. Dialogue and service are inseparable. Just as service leads different Christian denominations to unity, different faith communities can come together under the umbrella of social service. Social engagement is a way of making faith commitment real, visible, tangible. It is like a lampstand shining spiritual enlightenment, as Jesus taught.

This research leads to the following conclusions. Buddhists and Christians in dialogue, imbied with Myanmar culture and knowledge of the religious and political divide that afflicts the nation, can bring an awareness of the depth of ethnic diversity and the main causes of ethnic conflict amid the world’s longest on-going civil war. A thorough knowledge of this sector is crucial to the restoration of peace and social harmony through IRD. The Buddhist philosophy of mettā, as well as the Christian idea of love, should prompt all people to be open to the followers of other religions. With the possible exception of the primal religions, all religions of Myanmar have their origin outside the country. Due to a lack of historical awareness, some attribute

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the origins of Buddhism in Myanmar to the Buddha himself – a view that has caused religious marginalisation and violence.

Knowledge of interfaith awareness is required in order to become a person of openmindedness and tolerance who can promote IRD. When the Catholic Church opened its door to other religions following Vatican II, the WCC came forward to work with it to advance interfaith awareness. Similarly, Christians in Myanmar, both Catholics and Protestants, need to go beyond their exclusive positions and extend the horizons of their knowledge of IRD. Joining to form one Christian voice calling for dialogue is more effective and intriguing to the majority Buddhists, and to those of other faith traditions.

Unshaken, insightful and deep-rooted faith commitment and regular spiritual nourishment are essential in nurturing SES, disseminating interfaith awareness and performing faith-based social collaboration. The imitation of Jesus Christ (for Christians) and the Buddha (for Buddhists), along with the in-depth understanding of the social implications of the Gospel and the Buddha Dhamma, are all foundational to promoting SES and action-oriented Christian–Buddhist dialogue. The measuring stick used to examine the credibility of the social engagement of a Christian is the life and the teachings of Jesus Christ; for a Buddhist it is the Dhamma taught by the Buddha. If dialogue partners are firmly grounded in the teachings of their respective religions, they can confidently engage in interfaith social services without worrying about doctrinal disparities or faith confrontation.

A discerning knowledge of the social reality is necessary when diagnosing and identifying the root causes of social evils. As Karl Barth said, ‘We must hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.’ All religious leaders, especially those of Buddhism and Christianity, need to follow the real life situation reported in Myanmar’s digital and print media. They also need the resolution to show their love and compassion for the suffering people in action.

Christian–Buddhist dialogue can advocate the legislation relevant to the protection of vulnerable religious minority groups and defenceless interfaith social workers and volunteers. Taking advantage of poor law enforcement, self-seeking politicians and ultranationalists maliciously exploit the socio-ethno-religious diversity of Myanmar for their own benefit. To stop their manipulation, the attention of the

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ruling government and lawmakers must be drawn through interfaith collaboration between Buddhists and Christians. Christian–Buddhist dialogue is able to wisely and peacefully nudge the government and the military to make sure the rule of law is enforced, and push parliamentarians to enact new laws that protect freedom of religion, religious harmony and interfaith activities, leading to justice, peace and the social wellbeing of all in Myanmar.

The main target of this research was to advocate for Christian–Buddhist dialogue as a foundation for SES that can serve the suffering people of Myanmar regardless of religion and race. There was insufficient space in this thesis to discuss several crucial topics, which are therefore recommended for further study: (1) Buddhism and good administration, which is in dire need of concretisation, especially in a country such as Myanmar, where Buddhists are in the majority; (2) Muslim–Buddhist dialogue for the promotion of peace and interfaith brotherhood; and (3) opium production and moral corruption, which undermines the moral lives of the authorities (religious, civic, police, military and ethnic armed groups), greed-ridden businesspeople and vulnerable youths.
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