# ABSTRACT

This study proposes to go beyond academic public theology. It has three purposes. First, it examines how academic Asian public theology has been developed. While academic Asian public theology has some strengths and its tendency is toward engaging people of other religions and academicians, it does not sufficiently engage the grassroots Christian community. Second, it ethnographically studies how the grassroots Christians witness their faith and the gospel of reconciliation in the context of Buddhist nationalism and ethnic conflict. This study claims the thesis that theology is first the lived experiences and practices of the grassroots Christian community before it is articulated by the academic community of theologians. Therefore, this study suggests that we should turn the paradigm shifts in recognizing the grassroots Christian private and public witnesses as the primary sources for doing lived Asian public theology. Asian public theology should be done with the grassroots Christians as conversation partners rather than doing theology on their behalf. Third, I have demonstrated some ways how we should synthesize the grassroots and academic voices for a more relevant Asian public theology. Particular attention is paid to how religions play the spiritual and social roles in ethnic reconciliation. In response to Buddhist nationalism, we should approach religion [Buddhism] paradoxically—a moral side of religion and an amoral side of religion. I have shown how Christians should resist Buddhist nationalism by interacting with moral Buddhists who resist nationalism. I have concluded this by suggesting the imaginative idea that recognizing one's ethnic identity and cultural otherness and making a hospitable space for receiving one another is central for the moral vision of ethnic reconciliation.

# Beyond Academic Public Theology:

## Grassroots Asian Public Theology of Religions and Reconciliation in Southeast Asian Burmese Context of Buddhist Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of

Asbury Theological Seminary

Wilmore, Kentucky, USA

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirement for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Gregg A. Okesson, Mentor

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By

David Thang Moe

March 2022

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Dedication

to

A grassroots church in my village of Khin Phong in Mindat of Chin State
(The Presbyterian Church of Myanmar)
where I grew up as a Sunday School student and as a teacher

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I acknowledge my heartfelt thanks to my parents, my relatives, my rural village Presbyterian Church of Myanmar in Khin Phong, for their prayers for my study. I dedicate this to my village church. I am most grateful to my wife, Prissila Moe ("the prudent wife from the Lord," Proverbs 19:14), for her constant encouragement, sacrificial care, and spiritual patience throughout my study. Without her companionship, I would not have been able to complete my doctoral study at Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, KY, USA.

My uttermost thanks go to my *Doktorvater*, Prof. Gregg Okesson (mentor) and Prof. Stephen Offutt (reader), and Prof. Lalsangkima Pachuau (examiner). A combination of their different expertise as a public theologian, a sociologist, and an Asian missiologist influences the integrated flavor of my dissertation. My *Doktorvater* has been not only a source of wisdom, but also a model of mentorship for guiding and for giving me space to develop my own theological ideas. I am also thankful to the entire Asbury community, especially some friends for their supports.

I thank the anonymous interviewees who agreed to share with me their inspiring stories and faith. Some of them are grassroots pastors, church elders, music leaders, Sunday school teachers, while others are social activists and charity workers in Myanmar's rural villages and towns. Their grassroots voices have been never heard. Their grassroots voices are described in chapter three, and the synthetic nature of interpreting their grassroots voices and academic voices are evident in chapter four and chapter five.

I must express my special indebtedness to the committee of "Equipping the Saints for Burma" at the Presbyterian Church of the Way in Shoreview, MN, USA, for their financial supports. In particular, I thank Dick Stone and Judy Stone, Russ Cummings and Anita Cummings, Chris Martin and Sheila Martin, Joe Patrick and Carol Patrick for their financial and spiritual supports. I also extend my thanks to Dr. Timothy Geoffrion and his Faith, Hope, and Love Global Ministries (Minnesota), Grace Foundation (California), and CMF International (Indianapolis) for their final supports that made my study possible.

I am indebted to Professor James C. Scott, Dr. Brandon Milliate, librarian for Southeast Asian Studies collection at Yale University, Dr. Thomas Hastings, Executive Director of OMSC and his wife Carol Hastings, for their hospitality during my research at Yale. Scott becomes one of my interlocutors for my research. Scott and I have shared panels at Yale University, Columbia University, and Yonsei University on the Burmese politics of nationalism and resistance and I am grateful for his friendship and for his insights on the subaltern politics of the people of Myanmar and their everyday forms of resistance to powers. Richard Lesage, librarian for South and Southeast Asian Studies collection at Harvard University, also deserves my thanks for his help during my research at Harvard.

The triune God has been faithful throughout my study. Without Him, I would not have been able to complete my study. May this work be blessed to the glory of the triune God!

January 27, 2022, On my Birthday

# PREFACE

This work has been the fruit of my conversation with grassroots Christians and academic Christians. My intention in this research is to explore a conversation between the description of the lived grassroots Christian practices and public theology that emerges from their practices. Since my inquiry relates to the description of lived practices on the ground and their relation to the formation of public theology, this research is placed at the intersection between grassroots Christian voices and academic voices. My methodology, therefore, is rooted in a conviction that synthesizes grassroots and academic voices. Having been born and raised in the rural village and participating in the grassroots church as a Sunday school teacher and as a youth director for some years, I see myself both as a grassroots insider (experienced person) and as an academician Christian (researcher).

My conviction is that Asian public theology starts in the lived experiences and practices of the grassroots Christian community. Having established this framework, I have invited the readers to reimagine the paradigm shifts in grassroots Asian public theology in the era of world Christianity. I have provided some reasons and methodologies for approaching grassroots Asian public theology. I also have reviewed some literatures on Buddhist nationalism, ethnic identity, and religion, liberation, and reconciliation.

I have presented some themes of this dissertation at some academic occasions over the past few years and months before and after the rise of the February 1, 2021 coup. I have presented the first chapter of the dissertation at the World Christianity Conference, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ (March 2019). I have presented the Parable of Good Samaritan and its theological implication for ethnic reconciliation, healing, and hospitality at the annual meeting of the AAR/SBL, Denver, CO (November 2018), Myanmar Institute of Theology (November 2021) and at Tahan Theological College, Myanmar (December 2021). I have presented the Lukan Banquet of hospitality and its theological implication for the "public mission of reaching out and receiving in" at the annual meeting of the ASM, Norte Dame, South Bend, IN (June 2019).

After the coup, I have presented some themes at some universities, including Yale University (September 2021 and February 2022), Harvard University (March 2021), Columbia University (February 2022), Brown University (August 2021), Boston College (October 2021), University of Kentucky (September 2021), Eastern Kentucky University (October 2021), University of Oxford (June 2021), Cambridge University (July 2021), University of Toronto

(November 2021), Hamburg University (July 2021), Yonsei University (May 2021 and October 2021), Ewha Womans University (August 2021), Australian National University (February 2022), and University of Sydney (February 2022). I thank each institution for their invitations to deliver some topics on the Burmese politics of nationalism, religion, resistance, reconciliation, federalism, and democracy.

In chapter one, I have discussed some research problem and the need to move beyond academic public theology. I have examined the current state of Asian public theology and provided some reasons and methodologies for reimagining the paradigm shifts in grassroots Asian public theology in the era of world Christianity. I have invited the academic theologians to listen to and to engage with the grassroots Asian Christian communities as conversation partners in doing a more relevant Asian public theology.

In chapter two, I have revisited the origins and foundations of Asian public theology of religions and liberation. I have described some distinctive contributions of some select Asian theologians to Asian public theology of religions and liberation. In chapter three, I have described how the grassroots Christian communities express their faith and witness the gospel of reconciliation. In chapter four, I have attempted to find and fill some gaps between the academic and grassroots Christian views on faith, theology, and public life.

In chapter five, I have explored the role of religions in resistance and reconciliation. Particular attention has been given to the relationship between the vertical and horizontal dimensions of reconciliation with some theoretical and practical suggestions for how the social meaning of reconciliation should be practiced in the context of ethnic conflict. I have shown how some Christians and Buddhists' unexpected reconciliation with one another by crossing their religious and ethnic barriers for the sake of interreligious resistance to the political powers of the coup should be deepened. The central thrust of my argument in this chapter is that a mutual recognition of one's ethnic identity and otherness and making a hospitable space for one another are crucial for achieving ethnic reconciliation.

February 1, 2022
On the One Year Anniversary of the
Myanmar Coup

# CHAPTER ONE

# PARADIGM SHIFTS IN GRASSROOST ASIAN PUBLIC THEOLOGY: METHODLOGICAL REIMAGINATION IN THE ERA OF WORLD CHRISTIANITY

## 1. Introduction: Setting the Research Problem and Thesis

Although the term "public theology" was introduced by American Lutheran historian and theologian Martin Marty in 1974,[1] scholarly discussions on public theology have recently become more popular in the academic circles and it has gained wide support from scholars around the world.[2] This is evident in the wide range of publications on the subject. The establishment of the Global Network for Public Theology (GNPT) in 2007 at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton and its several centers in different institutions in global contexts have advanced the growing interest in public theology. The GNPT brings together research centers in nearly thirty academic institutions around the world.[3] The GNPT uses *International Journal of Public Theology* as an academic venue for sharing some global public issues and for exchanging global theological insights.[4]

While the growing trend in public theology is impressive, one may observe that public theology tends to be done more as an academic enterprise. Public theologians have written academic public theology about the public issues of religious diversity, social injustice, and ethnic marginalization by dialoging with their fellow academicians. They have written about public theology without sufficiently incorporating the voices of the

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[1] Martin E. Marty, "Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience," in *The Journal of Religion*, 54, no. 4, (October 1974): 332-59.

[2] Sebastian Kim, "Public Theology in the History of Christianity," in *A Companion to Public Theology,* ed. Sebastian Kim and Katy Day, 40-66 (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

[3] See "Mission and History," in *The Global Network for Public Theology*, https://gnpublictheology.net/about/#mision&history, accessed on April 4, 2022.

[4] Sebastian Kim, "Editorial," in *International Journal of Public Theology*, 1, issue 3, (2007): 285-289. See also Kim, "Public Theology in the History of Christianity," 40-66.

grassroots Christians into the theological reflections. If public theology is truly for the sake of all people, not just for academicians, then we need to move beyond overtly academic public theology by engaging and recognizing the ecclesial voices and lived experiences of the grassroots Christian communities. It is my thesis that the lived voices, practices, and experiences of the grassroots Christians are the primary sources for creating a more relevant Asian public theology. My thesis is built on the claim of an Asian Pentecostal theologian, Simon Chan that "Theology is first a lived experience of the church before it is a set of ideas formulated by church theologians."[5] The purpose of this study is to engage the grassroots Christian lived voices and to reconcile their voices with the academic voices. I will employ the public issues of Buddhist nationalism and ethnic conflict as the contexts for doing grassroots Asian public theology of religions and reconciliation. These public issues are pointing to the urgency of considering three areas of the research inquiry.

First, this research explores the origins and foundations of Asian theology of religions and liberation. It studies how Asian theologians develop Asian public theology that addresses the Asian issues of religious diversity, political oppression, and ethnic conflict. Second, it studies how some grassroots Christians express their lived faith and witness the gospel of reconciliation in the context of Buddhist nationalism and ethnic conflict. Third, it suggests how grassroots and academic Christians should witness the holistic gospel of reconciliation in the context of Buddhist nationalism and ethnic conflict. It is in this third area of inquiry that I will seek to reconcile the grassroots Christian voices with the academic Christian voices. The aim of this study is to show how the grassroots

[5] See Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 15.

and academic Christians should learn from each other in their witness of the holistic gospel of reconciliation in the context of Buddhist nationalism and ethnic conflict.

In synthesizing two voices, I will also bring my interpretative voice as an ethnic minority person who has the firsthand experience of Buddhist nationalism (insider) at the grassroots levels, and as a researcher (outsider). For the sake of clarity, it might be helpful to provide a brief ethnographic background of my identity as a grassroots Christian at one point, and as a researcher, on the other hand. I was born and raised in the rural village of Khin Phong in Chin State of Myanmar. I was actively involved in the grassroots village church (Presbyterian Church) as a Sunday school student, as a teacher, and as a youth leader for several years. I have spent most of my life with those grassroots Christians who embodied their dynamic faith in many ways as preachers, missionaries, evangelists, persons of prayers, singers, social activists, and charity workers. I have preached and sung the embodied theology of the church along with those grassroots Christians.

Having been born and raised in a Buddhist-dominant nation, I, along with those some ethnic minority Christians, have experienced the political problem of Buddhist nationalism and ethnic Christian discrimination. My inquiry is: what it means to be a faithful minority Christian in the context of political oppression and ethnic persecution? What does it mean to witness the gospel of salvation as reconciliation in the context of ethnic conflict? How should we, a grassroots community of faith and prayer, respond to the problem of Buddhist nationalism? My primary aim is to study and describe some grassroots Christians' original expressions of their faith and the gospel of reconciliation. I will do this in chapter three. In chapter four, I will use my interpretative lenses to reconcile some grassroots Christians' lived voices and practices with the academic Christian voices.

## 1.1 Majority-Minority Conflict: Religion and Reconciliation

Sri Lankan liberation theologian Aloysius Pieris famously sums up the context of Asia into a twofold reality: "multifaceted religiosity" (in which Christianity is a minority) and "mass poverty" (both Christians and other faiths suffer together).[6] While this is right, he seems to neglect the third reality of Asia, that is, majority-minority conflict. In Asia, there are the conflicts between the majority groups and the minority groups. Those conflicts are between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority in Pieris's home country of Sri Lanka and between Buddhist majority and ethnic Christian minority in Myanmar, and other parts of Asia. I will use the majority-minority religious and ethnic conflict as the Southeast Asian context for doing grassroots Asian public theology of religions and reconciliation.

In his celebrated book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*,[7] Samuel Huntington claimed that in the post-Cold War world, "the most pervasive, important, and dangerous conflicts will not be between social classes, rich and poor, or other economically defined groups, but between people belonging to different cultural entities."[8] What is true about Huntington's thesis is that the conflicts in the post-colonial world are not between different countries, but what he calls "local conflicts" between different religions and ethnicities.[9] He names this "local politics of ethnicity."[10] One of the most challenging problems faced in Southeast Asian Burmese context is the public issues of conflict between the ethnic minority Christians and ethnic majority Buddhists.[11]

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[6] Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 69-86.

[7] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

[8] Ibid., 28.

[9] Ibid., 29.

[10] Ibid., 28. While Huntington's thesis can be questionable in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it remains relevant to the local conflict between Buddhist majorities and Christian minorities.

[11] Milton J. Esmen, "Communal Conflict in Southeast Asia," in *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience,* eds. Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, 391-419 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

Myanmar is home to some of the world's longest civil war (war between majority Bamar army and minority Christian armed groups for 70 years in the post-independence era). Conflict is not limited to the political tension, but it compasses among the Bamar majority Buddhists and the minority Christian Chin, Kachin, and Karen.

The majority-minority conflict is pointing to the urgency of imagining grassroots Asian public theology of religions and reconciliation. In order to understand the role of religions in reconciliation, we first explore why and how religions play the public role in conflict. The failure of moral recognition and respect for one's distinctive ethnic and religious identity is the root cause of identity-based conflict.[12] The majority Buddhists' failure to recognize the cultural otherness of the ethnic minority Christians and their attempt to dominate, assimilate, and discriminate against the ethnic minority groups cause the conflict between the majority Buddhists and minority Christians. According to Donald Smith, "majority-minority conflict is the result of Bamar Buddhist nationalism. Buddhist nationalism was not simply anti-British sentiment and a movement for freedom from foreign rule. It was based among other things, on a common race, religion, and language."[13] The Bamar majority and the ethnic minority (Chin, Kachin, and Karen) imagine their respective identities on the basis of religion, language, and ancestral history.

Buddhist nationalism is closely associated with the national identity formation. The nationalist slogan goes like this: "to be a Burman is to be a Buddhist."[14] This nationalist

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Peter C. Phan and Jonathan Y. Tan, "Interreligious Majority-Minority Dynamics," in *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, eds. David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt, and David Tombs, 218-40 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[12] See, for instance, Philip F. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letters* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 40-76. Using the Romans as the context, Esler helpfully provides an overview of identity-based conflict between Jews and Gentiles in the ancient context.

[13] Donald E. Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), 112.

[14] 320.

creates the politics and publics of "Burmanization" (race) and Buddhistization (religion).[15] Burmese-ness is defined by religious identity. This is problematic for the ethnic minorities who embrace Christianity. They face a Buddhist nationalist problem of religious discrimination and ethnic assimilation. What kind of public theology is needed in such a context? This study proposes that we need a grassroots public theology of religions and reconciliation. It empirically and academically studies the roles of religion in conflict and reconciliation. Scholars who focus on the politics of religion, conflict, and reconciliation argue that we need to approach the subject from the paradoxical perspectives of religions—the roles of religion in conflict and reconciliation.[16] My approach builds on this.

The next question is: how do I approach reconciliation? My approach to reconciliation is based on the traditional and contemporary perspectives. Jan Milic Lochman's book *Reconciliation and Liberation* serves as a helpful source for reconciling the gap between a traditional and contemporary understanding of reconciliation.[17] Built on Gustaf Aulen's three classic models of reconciliation ("dramatic model, objective model, and subjective model"),[18] Lochman develops three models of reconciliation under the rubrics of "the classic theory, the Latin theory, and the humanistic theory."[19] The first model sees salvation as the effect of liberation from and victory over the devil through the resurrection of Christ. The second model depicts salvation as an atoning aspect of

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[15] Ibid., 154. Smith is perhaps the first person who coined the term "Burmanization."

[16] See Jerald D. Gort, Henry Jansen, and Hendrik M. Vroom, eds, *Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation: Multifaith Ideals and Realities,* Currents of Encounter, vol.17 (New York: Rodopi, 2002). Philip Broadhead and Damien Keown, eds, *Can Faith Make Peace? Holy Wars And the Resolution of Religious Conflicts,* International Library of War Studies, 9 (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

[17] Jan Milic Lochman, *Reconciliation and Liberation*: *Challenging a One-Dimensional View of Salvation*, trans. David Lewis (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980), 91-106.

[18] Quoted in Cees Van der Kooi, "Three Models of Reconciliation: A Christian Approach," in *Religion, Conflict, and Peace: Multifaith Ideals and Realities,* et al. Jerald D. Gort, 104-16 (New York, NY: Rodopi, 2002).

[19] Lochman, *Reconciliation and Liberation.*, 91-106.

reconciliation between God and sinners through the satisfactory death of Christ. This has to do God's remission of sin and forgiveness of sinners through Jesus's death.[20] The third model treats reconciliation as a social condition for Christians' subjective practice of reconciliation among people of different religious groups.[21] Lochman explained:

> The atonement has implications not just for our inner human world but also for our outer, public world, too. The Christian vision of reconciliation has practical ethical and even political consequences. To see and to champion these consequences is an essential inseparable aspect of salvation as reconciliation.[22]

Lochman suggests that the "three great theories of atonement—the classical, the Latin, and the humanistic—are not mutually exclusive but complementary to one another."[23] As I will show in chapter three, grassroots Christians' witness of the gospel of reconciliation is deeply rooted in the first and second models of reconciliation. In the Burmese context of political oppression and ethnic conflict, I wish to approach salvation as reconciliation and liberation. Within the integrative nature of liberation and reconciliation, I focus on a threefold dimension of transformative, restorative, and relational reconciliation.

First, a transformative nature of reconciliation focuses on a new way of perceiving one another as friends or neighbors across the ethnic and religious barriers. Craig Keener considers this nature of reconciliation to be central to the New Testament patterns of ethnic reconciliation in our contemporary context. Keener uses the Jewish-Gentile relations (Eph. 2:19-22) and Jewish-Samaritan relations (Jn. 4:4-42; Lk. 10:29-37) as some biblical patterns for witnessing ethnic reconciliation in our today's world.[24] Second, a restorative

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[20] Ibid., 98-9.
[21] Ibid., 101.
[22] Ibid., 105.
[23] Ibid., 101.
[24] See Craig S. Keener, "Some New Testament Invitations to Ethnic Reconciliation," in *Evangelical Quarterly*, 75, no. 3. (2003): 195-213.

justice seeks to redress the wrongs of regime and bring justice and peace through the resistance, reparation, and forgiveness. Most liberation and public theologians use this restorative model of reconciliation (liberation model).[25] Third, a relational aspect of reconciliation deals with the identity issue of harmonious interethnic and interreligious coexistence. A Croatian public theologian Miroslav Volf focuses on the relational aspect of justice and ethnic reconciliation in the name of mutual embrace.[26]

This threefold aspect of reconciliation will be evident through our study. I should also note that my approach to reconciliation tends to focus more on religious and ethnic reconciliation among non-state Buddhists and Christians without excluding political reconciliation and personal reconciliation.[27] Reconciliation in all three of these spheres is much-needed in Myanmar. Each domain places distinct requirements into the process of reconciliation. I will use the integrative approach that sees a horizontal and social reconciliation among humans as the indivisible aspect of a vertical reconciliation with God.

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[25] John W. De Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restorative Justice* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 15. Jürgen Moltmann, "Political Theology and the Ethics of Peace," in *Theology, Politics, and Peace*, ed. Theodore Runyon, 31-42 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989). Sebastian Kim, "Reconciliation Possible? The Church's Efforts Toward the Peace and Reunification of North and South Korea," in *Peace and Reconciliation: In Search of Shared Identity,* et al. Sebastian Kim, 161-178 (New York: Routledge, 2008).

[26] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*: *A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, revised and updated (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019), 97-174.

[27] Political reconciliation deals with the situations where the state actors commit injustice by violating the ethnic minority rights; see Daniel Philpott, *Just and Unjust Peace: An Ethic of Political Reconciliation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). For personal reconciliation among people of the same ethnic groups, see Lewis B. Smedes, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve* (New York: Harper One, 1984). Rula Khoury Mansour, *Theology of Reconciliation in the Context of Church Relations: A Palestinian Christian Perspective in Dialogue with Miroslav Volf* (Carlisle: Langham, 2020). Mano Emmanuel, *Interpersonal Reconciliation between Christians in a Shame-Oriented Culture: A Sri Lankan Case Study* (Carlisle: Langham, 2020). Ethnic reconciliation deals with the situations where communities of different ethnic and religious groups are in conflict; see Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*.

## 1.2 Scopes and Outlines of the Research

Although the contemporary issue of the military coup is significant for doing Asian public theology, it will not be the main study of this research. It is because I started writing this research before the rise of the coup. Buddhist-Rohingya Muslim conflict will also be outside of this study. The scope of this study focuses on the public issues of majority Buddhist-minority Christian conflict. In doing so, I will not cover all the ethnic Christian groups, but I will focus on only three: Chin, Kachin, and Karen. I selected them because they represent the nation's highest percent of Christian population and their experience of Buddhist nationalism, and their responses to it are significant. According to the third edition of *World Christian Encyclopedia*, Christians compose 6.2 percent of the entire population, and the vast majority of Christians are found among the Chin, Kachin, and Karen, while 87.9 percent of Theravada Buddhists are found among the Bamar.[28]

I will examine how religion plays a key role in the minority Christian imagination of their ethnic identity. I will also explore how they perceive Buddhist identity and how they relate their faith to the public issues of Buddhist nationalism. In exploring the causes and characteristics of Buddhist nationalism, I will identify three major characteristics of Buddhist nationalism—political domination, ethnic assimilation, and religious discrimination. My focus is on the post-colonial Buddhist nationalism. In my study of Christians' responses to nationalism and coup, I am not analyzing their political armed resistance, for it is a still developing story. Rather, I will explore how the grassroots Christians resist the coup and witness their faith and the gospel of reconciliation.

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[28] Todd Johnson and Gina Zurlo, eds, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020): 555-9.

When I use grassroots Asian public theology, I am not neglecting the importance of academic theology. I am also not saying that we should romanticize the grassroots Christian voices. Rather, I am suggesting that we ought to develop public theology from the ground up by engaging the grassroots lived experiences as the primary means of public witness. The goal is to synthesize the academic and grassroots voices. In my interactions with Asian theologians, I selected a few on the bases of their different Christian traditions and of their diverse contributions. I will focus on the Southeast Asian Buddhist context. In my approach to Buddhism, I am not saying that all Burmese Buddhists are nationalists. My use of Buddhist nationalism refers to the military Buddhists and their followers who are the public mobilizers and preachers of hatred against non-Buddhists. This distinction is helpful for our understanding of two different forms of Buddhism: amoral Buddhism that supports nationalism and privileges and moral Buddhism that opposes religious nationalism and discrimination. I will put Christians in dialogue with moral Buddhists.

Chapter one addresses some methodological reimagination for moving beyond academic public theology and for creating grassroots Asian public theology. It offers some reasons and methodologies for why and how we should interact with grassroots Christians. Chapter two revisits the origins and foundations of Asian public theology of religions and liberation. This chapter argues that the concept of Asian public theology has been developed without terminology before the official rise of public theology in the West. Chapter three describes the grassroots Christians' expressions of their faith and their multiple witnesses of the gospel of reconciliation. Chapter four synthesizes the academic and grassroots voices by combining scholarly literatures and qualitative interviews. Chapter five addresses the role of religions in resistance and reconciliation. It explores how

the academic and grassroots Christians should witness their prophetic, priestly, apostolic, and healing faith and the gospel of reconciliation in the context of Buddhist nationalism.

## 1.3 Research Questions

This study involves three main research questions.

(1) How do the grassroots Christians express their faith and witness the gospel of reconciliation in the context of Buddhist nationalism and ethnic conflict?
(2) How do Asian theologians develop Asian public theology?
(3) How should the grassroots and academic Asian Christians reconcile their voices and witness their public faith and the holistic gospel of reconciliation?

## 1.4 Why Moving Beyond Academic Public Theology: An Invitation

In order to discern some reasons for moving beyond academic public theology, it would be helpful to revisit the current state of Asian theology. Scholars agree that the 1960-1970s were a time when Asian contextual theologies were emerging as "resistance against a Western theology that posed as universal, normal, and axiomatic."[29] In order to resist Western theology, the theologians needed the intellectual knowledge and academic ability. While we celebrate the contextual formation of Asian theology within over 60 years, I would invite us to rethink the current state of Asian theology and its relevance for the Asian context. Aloysius Pieris makes the often-cited point that a serious theological inquiry in

[29] See R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Jesus in Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 200. For an overview of the emergence of third world contextual theologies, see Virginia Fabella, M.M and R.S. Sugirtharajah, eds, *Dictionary of Third World Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000).

Asia should deal with its two twofold reality: religious diversity and mass poverty. The first reality calls for interreligious dialogue and the second reality calls for liberation.[30]

First, academic Asian theology of religions and liberation is the product of an interreligious dialogue. Theologians employ an interreligious dialogue as a controlling tool for doing authentic Asian theology of religions.[31] In order to develop Asian theology of religions, theologians focus on interreligious dialogue rather than on intra-religious dialogue or academic-grassroots dialogue within Christian community. Theologians tend to engage people of other religions as their dialogue partners for doing Asian theology. In Myanmar, academic theologians promote the academic form of interreligious dialogue (Christian-Buddhist dialogue), but neglect the need of academic-grassroots Christian intra-religious dialogue.[32] While the former form of interreligious dialogue is crucially important, we cannot neglect the latter form of intra-religious dialogue in the church.

Second, academic Asian theology of religions and liberation is the product of an inter-academic dialogue. Theologians do Asian theology by engaging with their fellow academicians. The local expressions of the grassroots Christians are absent from their reflections on Asian theology. Consider Asian liberation theology. Liberation is one of the unified themes for doing Asian public theology.[33] Take *Minjung* theology, which Jürgen Moltmann calls "the first liberation theology to come from Asia,"[34] as an example. *Minjung*

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[30] Aloysius Pieris, "Two Encounters in My Theological Journey," in *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Trends*, ed, R.S. Sugirtharajah, 141-146 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994) here 141. Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 36-50.

[31] For a critique of academic interreligious dialogue in Asia/India, see Muthuraj Swamy, *The Problem with Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 145-162.

[32] See Samuel Ngun Ling, ed. *Ecumenical Resources for Dialogue: Between Christians and Neighbors of Other Faiths in Myanmar* (Yangon: Judson Research Center, 2004).

[33] Mary Rosario Battung, "Commonalities: An Asian Perspective," in *Third World Theologies*, ed. K.C. Abraham, 95-99 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000).

[34] Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*: *Ways and Forms of Christian Theology*, translated by Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 250.

theology was developed in the 1970s in South Korea as a contextual political theology in response to the regime.[35] While it gains a wide acceptance from the global theologians, it has been criticized by local Korean Pentecostal theologians as a "theology from above," represented by a group of elites.[36] Pentecostal theologian, Koo Dong Yun argues that some of the Korean Christian *minjung* who had been marginalized by the ruling class in the 1970s later became an upper-middle class or members of the ruling political party in the 1990s. "These people who used to be the oppressed *minjung* were being accused by others of being oppressors as they became organized and acquired socio-political power."[37]

Third, Asian public theology of religions and liberation has been developed on behalf of some grassroots Christians. It has been developed *for* the grassroots Christians rather than *with* them. Some Asian theologians may engage with some grassroots Christians, but they do not incorporate their grassroots voices and lived practices into their reflections on Asian theology. M.M Thomas represents this approach. As we will see in chapter two, Thomas is a lay theologian with highly intellectual thinking. He seemed to engage with the grassroots Christians, but he did not bring their grassroots voices and lived practices of public preaching, prayers, and social charity into his writings. By engaging with some academicians who see a theology of the church's direct engagement in politics

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[35] See, for instance, Kim Yong-Bock, ed. *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983).

[36] While I was working at two different Korean Presbyterian Churches in the U.S (at Korean Central Presbyterian Church in Virginia as children pastor and at Lexington Korean Presbyterian Church in Kentucky as youth pastor), I asked some lay Korean Christians about *minjung* theology. The vast majority of lay Korean Christians did not know about *minjung* theology at all.

[37] Koo D. Yun, "Pentecostalism from Below: *Minjung* Liberation and Asian Pentecostal Theology," in *The Spirit in the World: Emerging Pentecostal Theologies in Global Contexts,* ed. Veli-Matti Karkkainen, 89-114 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009) here 97.

as the only relevant public theology in Asia, Thomas wrote Asian public theology of religions and revolution *for* the grassroots Christian communities rather than *with* them.[38]

Simon Chan argues that Thomas's writing is not about grassroots Asian public theology because he failed to incorporate some grassroots Christians' lived practices. [39] I agree with Chan's assessment. It is my conviction that writing about some Asian public issues of political oppression and suffering on behalf of some grassroots people does not sufficiently meet the needs of the grassroots Christians. Theologians may theologize about the grassroots Christians' experiences of social injustices and political liberation for them, but grassroots Christians, as I will show in chapter three, are interested in a different kind of liberation from spiritual powers. In order to do a more relevant grassroots Asian public theology, we must start theology from the ground up of the grassroots Christian communities by engaging their voices and by incorporating their practices into theological reflections. My understanding of grassroots Asian public theology is methodologically grounded in using the ecclesial practices, experiences, and interests as primary sources. In other words, grassroots Asian public theology methodologically emerges from below.

Some theologians may argue that Asian public theology of religion and liberation tends to be the result of "top-down approach" rather than "bottom-up approach."[40] The problem with a top-down approach, according to Vinoth Ramachandra and Craig Keener is that it becomes another opportunity for the academicians to speak in the name of the grassroots Christians, and sometimes profit in their academic status by so speaking, without

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[38] M.M. Thomas, *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution* (London: SCM Press, 1966).
[39] Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 23-37.
[40] Simon Chan, "Asian Christian Spirituality in Primal Religious Context," in *Walking with God: Christian Spirituality in the Asian Context,* eds. Charles R. Ringma & Karen Hollenbeck-Wuest, 32-52 (Manila: OMF Literature INC, 2014) here 42-3.

relinquishing personal privilege.[41] Robert Schreiter also observes that theologians can be academic oppressors if they do not incorporate the congregational voices. He explains:

> To allow the professional theologian to dominate the development of a local theology seems to introduce a new hegemony into often already oppressed communities. In the development of local theology, the professional theologian serves as an important resource, helping the communities to clarify its own experiences and to relate to the experience of other communities past and present. Thus, the professional theologian has an indispensable but limited role.[42]

In his book *Spirit Hermeneutics*, Craig Keener also observes on the danger of the inter-academic dialogue without engaging with some grassroots Christian voices:

> In many cases academicians listen only to fellow academicians, and often to those of the same basic theological persuasions, whatever their cultures. It is not yet a problem, but is a warning for the future. Indeed, in some scholars' hands, postcolonialism has become another opportunity for an educated elite to speak in the name of an underclass, and sometimes profit in their academic status by so speaking, without relinquishing personal privilege or helping the oppressed.[43]

We may ask: is Asian liberation theology emerging from the academic dialogue relevant for the grassroots Christians? In his *The Genesis of Asian Theology of Liberation*,[44] Aloysius Pieris defends that Asian theology of liberation remains relevant. He said:

> Some think—and would want others to think—that liberation theology is out of fashion if not out of date altogether for the simple reason that it is not mentioned today as frequently as it used to be a few decades ago. This inference is flawed. That liberation theology has lost its novelty does not imply that it has lost its relevance. It is far from being extinct. For its framework can be detected even in certain tracts published by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference (FABC). Some evangelicals in our country are also showing overt interest in it.[45]

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[41] Vinoth Ramachandra, *Subverting Global Myths: Theology and the Public Issues Shaping Our World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 240-2. Craig S. Keener, *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 294. Brian Stanley also observes that majority world theologians "do theology from above," which is not much relevant to their local grassroots communities, see Britain Stanley, "Inculturation: Historical Backgrounds, Theological Foundations and Contemporary Questions," *Transformation* 24, no. 1 (January 2007): 21-27, here 26.

[42] Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 18.

[43] Keener, *Spirit Hermeneutics*, 294-5.

[44] Aloysius Pieris, *The Genesis of Asian Theology of Liberation: An Autobiographical Excursus on the Art of Theologizing in Asia* (Gonawala-Kelaniya: Tulana Research Centre, 2013).

[45] Ibid., 1.

There is no denying the fact that Asian theology of liberation is relevant for the political liberation the oppressed, but its relevance for the grassroots Christians is insufficient. While Asian liberation theology opts for liberation from political powers, some grassroots Christians, as I will show in chapter three, opt for a different kind of liberation from spiritual powers. While Asian liberationists tend to focus on socio-political sin, grassroots Christians tend to focus on personal sin. Asian liberationist' understanding of salvation tends to focus on a horizontal dimension, whereas grassroots Christians tend to focus on a vertical dimension. There is a gap between grassroots Christians and academic liberationists. The purpose of this study is to reconcile that gap. In order to fill the gap, I use a synthetic methodology. The synthetic methodology of qualitative interviews and academic literatures is helpful for creating a more relevant Asian public theology. In the following, I will offer some reasons for engaging and incorporating grassroots voices and lived experiences as the primary sources for creating grassroots Asian public theology.

### 1.5 Reasons for Engaging the Grassroots Christian Communities

First, in order to engage with grassroots Christian communities, we should regard grassroots Christianity as a "lived religion."[46] As a lived religious community, grassroots Christians embody their faith in everyday life. There is embodied theology in the church. In his book *Experiences in Theology*, Jürgen Moltmann regards theology in the church as a shared theology.[47] He said, "In sermons, hymns and prayers, in teaching, and when I talked to people in their homes, I experienced theology as a *shared theology* of believers

[46] See, for instance, Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3-18.

[47] Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 5.

and doubters, the oppressed and the consoled."[48] Moltmann recognizes the need of doing "shared theology" in dialogue with people in the congregation.[49] For Moltmann, theology is not just the product of academicians. Theology is a shared product of cooperation between grassroots and academic Christians. Simon Chan of Singapore and Hwa Yung of Malaysia in particular—have paid serious attention to the importance of doing grassroots Asian theology by engaging with grassroots Christian communities as collaborators.

In his book *Mangoes or Bananas,*[50] Yung has proposed for doing Asian theology that is relevant for the grassroots Asian Christian communities. He has urged:

> A serious effort must be made to bring theology down to the grassroots level of the church. One non-Christian academic, in private conversation, has observed that most of the Asian theologians today are writing for the academic. A change of orientation is needed. This involves consciously writing much of the material discussed above with the needs of the laity in mind.[51]

While Yung has proposed to do what he calls "Asian theology for and from the grassroots," he has not sufficiently developed it. It is only Chan who comprehensively develops the methodological idea of why and how grassroots Asian theology should be done. Chan argues that Asian contextual theology should emerge from the ground up of the grassroot church rather than from the elite top-down. For Chan, "theology is first a lived experienced of the church before it is a set of ideas formulated by church theologians" or academic theologians.[52] Chan confesses in his book *Grassroots Asian Theology* that, although he is

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[48] Ibid., 5. Moltmann reflected on this when was a pastor for five years in the Reformed Congregation of Bremen-Wasserhorst, a little country congregation of about 400 people.

[49] Ibid., 4-5. Some theologians regard theology in the church as "primary theology." See Alexander Schmemann, *Church, World, and Mission* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979), 135. Chan, "Asian Christian Spirituality in Primal Religious Context," 42.

[50] Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology*, 2nd ed (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2014),

[51] Ibid.

[52] Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 15.

a systematic theologian, grassroots Asian theology does not represent a systematic theology, but a contextual theology. Expressed in his own words:

> This is not a systematic theology. My main focus is on how theology ought to be done. This book as much concerned with the process as the contents of theology. Only the content that has a particular bearing on the Asian context is highlighted in each theological focus. My aim is to force a rethink on the way Asian theology is currently undertaken and in so doing show the distinctive contributions of Asian grassroots Christianity to the wider church's theological endeavors.[53]

Chan suggests that a more pertinent methodological question we need to ask in order to develop a relevant theology in Asia is: "what spiritual and intellectual resources of the Christian faith can we bring to bear on the Asian context."[54] Chan invites us to reconsider grassroots ecclesial experiences and lived practices as the primary sources for doing grassroots Asian theology. Amos Yong praises Chan's "methodology as exemplary."[55] While Chan's methodology shapes my own way of thinking, he tends to quickly discredit academic theologians in favor of grassroots voices.[56] I agree with Chan's methodology that calls for doing Asian theology from the ground up, but I have a concern that his conclusion seems to highly praise the grassroots Christian voices. I will show in chapter four that one cannot either discredit academic voices or romanticize grassroots voices. Instead, we should synthesize their diverse voices by analyzing their strengths and limitations.

The second relates to the reality of the flourishing of the grassroots Christian communities amid economic poverty and political suffering. Grassroots Christianity is not only a lived religion, but also a flourishing religion. Philip Jenkins, in his celebrated book

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[53] Ibid., 8.
[54] Ibid., 10.
[55] See Yong's endorsement on the back cover of the book.
[56] Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 18-27. Chan criticizes C.S. Song, M.M. Thomas, and some pioneer *Minjung* theologians and argues that their "theologies are hardly qualified as Asians."

*The Next Christendom*, acknowledges that "global Christianity is flourishing wonderfully among the poor, persecuted, while it atrophies among the rich and secure."[57] Although Jenkins' category of the "next Christendom" could be contestable as to how some grassroots marginal Christians could represent the powerful nature of the next Christendom, his observation on the flourishing of Christianity among the grassroots communities in global contexts is demographically correct. Likewise, Gina Zurlo, an expert young scholar in the demographic profiles of World Christianity, rightly observes that "much of Christian flourishing has been among poor and marginalized people."[58]

The same is true to the flourishing of the ethnic minority Christianity in Myanmar among those who are economically poor, politically powerless, ethically marginalized, and intellectually low. It might be fair to say that the socio-political situation of the ethnic minority Christians and their experiences of oppression and persecution echo some similar situations of the first-century minority apostolic and grassroots Christian communities and their experiences of persecution and oppression.[59] In their co-written book *The New Testament in Its World*, N.T Wright and Michael Bird helpfully said:

> Many early Christians were functionally illiterate, at least, at the time of their conversion. Part of the glory of the gospel, however, is that it is for everyone, that there should not be an elite who get it while everybody else is simply going with the flow. So, the leaders and teachers in the early church taught people to read, so that they could become thinking, reflective, and contributing actors in the drama.[60]

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[57] Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 275.

[58] Gina Zurlo, "A Demographic Profile of Christianity in East and Southeast Asia," in *Christianity in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Kenneth R. Ross, Francis D. Alvarez, and Todd M. Johnson, Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity, vol. 4. 3-14 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019) here 4.

[59] For the stories of the first-century Christian communities, see N.T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 849.

[60] Ibid. 849.

Wright and Bird show the need of recognizing the role of some grassroots Christians in the drama of witnessing the gospel. Despite some difficult political situations, like the first-century apostolic Christians, grassroots ethnic minority Christians in Myanmar remain faithful to witnessing the gospel and the life and work of Jesus by the power of the Spirit. This calls for the need of listening to their lived experiences and their storied theology that tells the dynamic stories about their faithful and spiritual relationship with God.[61]

The third reason is related to the specific subject of my study. My research deals with the empirical inquiry into how grassroots Christians understand their identity, express their faith, and witness the gospel of reconciliation in the context of Buddhist nationalism and ethnic conflict. I am trying to figure out how I should approach to this subject. I am more familiar with the literatures written by some political scientists. These analyses are politically strong, but ecclesiologically weak.[62] They do not sufficiently address how grassroots Christians witness their faith. This requires for the ethnographic interaction with grassroots Christian voices and for recognizing their multiple witnesses of their faith and the gospel in the context of Buddhist nationalism and ethnic conflict. For example, Gregg Okesson's book *A Public Missiology: How Local Churches Witness To A Complex World*, invites theologians to listen to the voices of grassroots congregations and to recognize their lived practices as the primary means of public witness to the complex world.[63]

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[61] For the concept of storied or story theology, see C.S. Song, *In the Beginning Were Stories, Not Texts: Story Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

[62] See Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*; Juliane Schober, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2011); Thant Myint-U*, The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism, and The Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century* (New York: Norton, 2020); Lian Hmung Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity: A Study in Religion, Politics, and Ethnic Identity in Burma* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2003).

[63] Gregg Okesson, *A Public Missiology: How Local Churches Witness To A Complex World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 245-156.

As noted above, academic theologians tend to recognize a theology of the church's political engagement as the only possible Asian public theology. While recognizing the church's political engagement as an important form of witnessing public faith in the context of the political oppression, I wish to suggest a more nuanced approach that goes beyond a mere political engagement and recognizes the grassroots Christian communities' multiple witnesses of their faith in terms of preaching, prayer, charity, evangelism, healing, and hospitality, and others. This way of nuanced approach enables us to reimagine a more relevant Asian public theology. It further enables us to reconsider the ecclesial experiences and lived practices of preaching, prayer, social charity, evangelism, healing, and hospitality as the primary means of public witness in and for the world. It does not consider the church's direct and open engagement with politics as the only type of public theology.

Public theology is not just about the church's engagement in politics, but it is also about the church's engagement in public realms as the prophetic pastors, priestly persons of prayers, apostolic gospel preachers, activists, and academic advocates for holistic mission. Therefore, academicians are not the primary agents of doing public theology.[64] All Christians are the agents of doing public theology. Analogically speaking, doing public theology in a communal manner is like playing a soccer. No one is a referee; only the Holy Spirit is the referee. Everyone plays their important roles in doing public theology. Martin Luther said, "We all are theologians—every Christian. Theology means God's Word; theologian means one who speaks God's words. Each and every Christian should be such

[64] See, for instance, Max L. Stackhouse, "Pastor as Public Theologian," in *The Pastor as Public Theologian*, eds. Earl E. Shelp and Ronald H. Sunderland, 106-29 (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1988); Max L. Stackhouse, *Public Theology and Political Economy: Christian Stewardship in a Modern Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989). See also Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Owen Strachan, ed, *The Pastor as Public Theology: Reclaiming a Lost Voice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015).

a person."[65] Miroslav Volf admits, "public intellectuals are too detached from life as it is lived on the ground; what they say or write may be correct in theory but is of no use in practice."[66] Therefore, academicians, grassroots pastors, activists, charity workers must come together and exchange their voices for creating grassroots public theology. From the perspective of this approach, I suggest that grassroots Asian public theology needs a triple dialogue partners—dialogue with other people of other religions; dialogue with grassroots Christian practitioners; and dialogue with academicians.[67] But grassroots voices and lived experiences must be seen as the primary means of public witness to the public world.

## 1.6 How to Engage the Grassroots Christians: Ecclesiology and Ethnography

Although ethnography takes its roots in the nineteenth-century anthropology, its renewed relationship with ecclesiology has a recent development.[68] It is fair to say that Lesslie Newbigin's idea of "Congregation as Hermeneutic of the Gospel" seems to inspire the development of the relationship between the ethnographic study of congregations and their role in interpreting the gospel.[69] Although Newbigin did not say anything about ethnography, his concept of "Congregation as Hermeneutic of the Gospel" shapes the

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[65] Martin Luther, "Sermon Psalm 5," in *Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Schriften) (Wemar: Bohlau, 1883), 9-11.

[66] Miroslav Volf, "On Being a Christian Public Intellectual," in *Public Intellectuals and the Common Good: Christian Thinking for Human Flourishing,* eds. Todd C, Ream, Jerry Pattengale, and Christopher J. Devers, 3-20. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021) here 8.

[67] The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences first introduced the term a "triple dialogue," that is, "dialogue with Asian cultures (contextualization), dialogue with Asian religions (interreligious dialogue), and dialogue with poor" (liberation." See F.J. Eilers, *For All Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: Documents from 1997 to 2002*, vol. 3. (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2002), 3-4. See also Peter C, Phan, ed, *Asian Christianities* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 256-261. However, I use a triple dialogue in a slightly manner. I use a triple dialogue to refer to a dialogue with "grassroots Asian Christian communities, dialogue with academicians, and dialogue with other people of religions (Buddhism)."

[68] Ward, "Introduction," 6.

[69] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989). 222.

relationship between ecclesiology and ethnography in a sense that ethnographer must recognize the authoritative role of local congregation in interpreting the gospel.

Some significant books on the relationship between ecclesiology and ethnography have recently come from some anthropologists, sociologists, and ecclesiologists. They include Helen Cameron's *Studying Local Churches,*[70] Nancy Ammerman's *Studying Congregations*,[71] Pete Ward's *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*,[72] and Christian Scharen's *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography*.[73] Pete Ward said, "ecclesiology and ethnography demand our attention because it has the potential to make significant and urgently needed contribution to the contemporary discussion of the church."[74] Since 2014, *Ecclesial Practices: Journal of Ecclesiology and Ethnography* has been published as a premier forum for the intersection of ecclesiology and ethnography.

On the other hand, some missiologists, such as Darrell Guder,[75] George Hunsberger,[76] and Gregg Okesson,[77] prioritize the role of the local congregations in doing missional theology of public witness. In particular, Okesson who is one of the active participants in the American Society of Missiology's working group on public missiology employs ethnography for public missiology. His book *A Public Missiology* has advanced

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[70] Cameron, et al, *Studying Local Churches.*

[71] Nancy T. Ammerman, et al, *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998).

[72] Pete Ward, ed, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography,* Studies in Ecclesiology and Ethnography (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012)

[73] Christian B. Scharen, ed, *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography,* Studies in Ecclesiology and Ethnography (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

[74] Pete Ward, "Introduction," in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography,* ed. Pete Ward. 1-12. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), here 4.

[75] Darrell L. Guder, *Called to Witness: Doing Missional Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).

[76] George Hunsberger, "The Missional Voice and Posture of Public Theologizing," *Missiology: An International Review* 34, no. 1 (2006): 15-28. See also George Hunsberger, *The Story That Chooses Us: A Tapestry of Missional Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).

[77] Okesson, *A Public Missiology*.

the conversation on the relationship between ecclesiology and public missiology.[78] Following in the footsteps of Newbigin who regards congregation as the hermeneutic of the gospel, Okesson and others consider the congregations to be central for interpreting a public missiology. They emphasize the lived experiences, doxological practices, and witnesses of local congregations as the resources for formulating public missiology.[79]

Ethnography is understood as a common methodology for doing theology in the context of World Christianity. "Currents, Perspectives, and Ethnographic Methodologies" was taken up by Princeton Theological Seminary as the theme for the second World Christianity conference held on March 15-18, 2019. I attended this conference and presented a paper on "Ethnic Identity and World Christianity: Grassroots Ethnic Theology of Salvation and Sin in Myanmar." In my presentation, I asked three questions: (1) do we scholars listen to the voices of the grassroots Christians? (2) Do grassroots Christians listen to our scholarly discourses? How can we fill the gap between the intellectual and grassroots voices for doing theology in the age of World Christianity? This conference was a way of affirmation for ethnography as a method for doing grassroots Asian public theology. I was not able to conduct the fieldwork due to the outbreak of two cs: COVID and coup, but I conducted the qualitative interview with the grassroots Christian communities.

### 1.7 How Did I Engage the Grassroots Christian Communities?

I have used online video conversation as a qualitative methodology for engagement with the grassroots Christians.[80] The interviews were mainly conducted in July and August

[78] Ibid., xi. 148-50; 245-256.

[79] Ward, "Introduction," 4-5. See Okesson, *A Public Missiology*, 95-116.

[80] There are seven characteristics of the relationship between ethnography and qualitative interviews: (1) participation; (2) immersions; (3) reflections/reflexivity; (4) representation; (5) thick

of 2020. Since it was a crucial time of preparation for the nation's election on November 8, common people, including the interviewees, were excited about sharing the role of their faith in political and public life. The second part of interviews were conducted in March and December of 2021and January of 2022 after the rise of coup on February 1, 2021. But I depend mainly on my interviews before the coup.

As we will see later, the way they understood the role of faith in political and public life is different from one to another. Such diverse voices arose from their different ministerial roles in different locations. Some participants work at the churches in the small hill towns and rural villages as pastors, church elders, and Sunday school teachers, while others work among Bamar Buddhists in the plain area as missionaries and evangelists. Some of them work at the refugee camps in the ethnic hill rural villages as the practitioners and philanthropists for the victims of civil war. What they have in common is that all participants identify themselves as devout Christians. In my conversation with them, I also experienced a challenge. That challenge had to do with theological meaning related to my conversations with them. In our conversations with our fellow academicians, we do not much experience that particular challenge because we are all generally familiar with theological terminologies, concepts, and others.

Yet our conversations with grassroots Christians are different. Since they did not readily understand some technical theological terms, I adjusted my conversations with them in accessible ways. Conversations with them in accessible ways are important for gaining relevant data. I would call this "a symbolic practice of incarnational

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description; (6) empowerment; and (7) understanding. See Julie Scott Jones and Sal Watt, eds, *Ethnography in Social Science Practice* (London: Rutledge, 2010), 6. See also Ward, "Introduction," 6.

conversations." It is rooted in Jesus's incarnational practices of what Andrew Walls calls "translating divinity into humanity"[81] for all humanity to understand in their own cultures. Jesus uses parables as the mediums for His conversation with His audiences. As Bailey, an expert in the study of the first-century cultural setting rightly said:

> Jesus was a metaphorical theologian. That is, His primary method of creating meaning was through metaphor, smile, parable, and dramatic action rather than through logic and reasoning. He created meaning like a dramatist and a poet rather than like a philosopher. In the West tradition serious theology was almost always been constructed from ideas held together by logic. In such a world the more intelligent and the theologian, the more abstract he or she usually becomes, and the more difficult it is for the average person to understand what is being said.[82]

Like Jesus, I used some metaphors, stories, and symbols as the mediums for conversations with the grassroots Christians. Using metaphors, stories, and symbols was helpful for some grassroots Christians' expressions of the meaning of church, salvation, and public life. My conversations with them have proceeded in three helpful steps.

### 1.7.1 Step One: Selecting Congregations and Sampling Interviewees

In order to collect data, I have selected three ecclesial traditions—Presbyterians, Baptists, and Pentecostals—the Chin, Kachin, and Karen backgrounds. I have selected 15 interviewees based on their different roles as pastors, elders, Sunday school teachers, and charity workers. After the coup, I have interviewed 7 Christian activists and advocates.

In relation to sampling, I have employed snowball sampling. I have found snowball sampling helpful because connecting with one another as a small group of Christians is the

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[81] Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 47-51.

[82] Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 279-80.

strength for identifying research problems and collecting the data.[83] Using snowball sampling, I have made initial contacts with a small group of some ethnic Christians who are relevant to my research topic and inquiry. I have asked them to put me in contact with some grassroots Christians who would be willing to be interviewed and to discuss their expressions of faith in the context of Buddhist nationalism with me.[84] In deciding who to interview and who to not interview, my interview has been conducted with a small group of some grassroots Christian leaders. By the grassroots Christian leaders and practitioners, I do not generally mean those who are totally illiterate.

By grassroots Christians, I basically mean those who have basic knowledge of theology, but have not done any advanced degrees. To be more specific, by the grassroots Christians, I do not mean those have basic knowledge of theology and teach at the seminaries as lecturers. By the grassroots Christians, I primarily mean those who are ordinary people and the main body of the local churches. They are working at the local churches in the small towns and rural villages as senior and/or youth pastors, church elders, women leaders, Sunday school teachers, evangelists, missionaries, church planters, social activists, and charity workers for the poor and wounded victims of civil war.

I used Burmese as the key medium for communicating with grassroots Christians. I asked them some open-ended questions. I assembled open-ended questions in three main areas: (1) church, (2) salvation; and (3) salvation-public life relation. Raising open-ended questions allowed them to express their voices in whatever they found most helpful. These open-ended questions included: (1) how do the grassroots Christians understand the

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[83] Alan Bryman, *Social Research Method,* 2nd ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 100.

[84] Ibid.,100-101. A good example of snowball sampling method can also be seen in H.S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Free Press, 1963), 45-6.

church? (2) What is the gospel of salvation? (3) What role can the church play (or not play) in relating salvation to public realities? As we will see in an appendix, I also asked some additional open-ended questions within each of these three categories.

### 1.7.2 Step Two: Interviewing Ecclesial Leaders and Collecting Data

In order to collect relevant data, I have interviewed about fifteen people. As I belong to one of those grassroots ethnic Christian groups with the firsthand experience of Christian persecution, the interviewees saw me their compatriot. In having conversation with them, I treated myself both as an outsider (researcher) and as an insider. Since they saw me as their compatriot or insider, they honestly shared with me about their voices. In order to allow them to express their voices without presuppositions, I treated myself as an outsider or researcher. I was open to being surprised by hearing a variety of their expressions of faith. I tried not to impose my intellectual voices on them. It is difficult to practice a pure subjectivity, but I tried as much as possible to de-center my subjectivity, giving them the liberty to express their own voices and views. A combination of being an outsider and insider created a helpful space for our friendly and honest conversations on a variety of public issues. I audiotaped the interviews and then transcribed them.

### 1.7.3 Step Three: Analyzing and Coding Ethnographic Data

In the third step, I have analyzed the qualitative data. In the process of analyzing data, I have used the method of coding. Some ethnographic researchers acknowledge that data analysis is the most crucial aspect of qualitative research and coding is one of the most

significant processes in organizing raw data into a theoretical narrative.[85] Coding involves managing data, reviewing transcripts, and giving names to component parts of data.[86] I have used "open coding and selective coding"[87] as the methods for comparing and selecting the themes and issues of data. While open coding tends to manage, compare, and categorize unstructured components of data, selective coding tends to select, relate core themes of data to each other, and make sense of them. Using these two methods, my coding procedure has six steps within three main phases.[88]

The first phase is "making the text manageable."[89] In this first phase, I have worked at the level of the raw text or data itself. This is a filtering process, in which I have chosen which parts or what kinds of information will be included in my data analysis and which parts will be discarded. The two steps involved in this first phase are: stating my research concerns (step 1) and selecting the relevant text for my data analysis (step 2). This has required reading through the text data carefully.

The second phase of data analysis is "hearing what was said."[90] I have gained more access to the subjective experiences of the grassroots Christian interviewees. In this phase of data analysis, what I have done is twofold: "organizing the relevant data into the repeating ideas (step 3) and organizing the repeating ideas into general themes" (step 4).[91] By "repeating ideas," I mean the similar ideas with different words expressed by the

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[85] C.F. Auerbach and Silverstein, L.B, *Qualitative Data: An Introduction to Coding and Analysis* (New York: New York University Press, 2003). 31; Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 402; Tehmina N. Basit, "Manual or Electronic? The Role of Coding in Qualitative Data Analysis," *Educational Research* 45, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 143-54, here 143.

[86] Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 402.

[87] Ibid.,

[88] I heavily draw the ideas from Auerbach, *Qualitative Data,* 48-9.

[89] Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 402.

[90] Ibid., 42.

[91] Ibid., 54.

interviewees. The third phase is "developing theory."[92] In this phase, I have organized the themes of data into more abstract grouping by fitting them into a theoretical framework. In order to develop theoretical framework from data analysis, I have taken two steps. For one, I have developed theoretical constructs by categorizing the core themes of data into more abstract concepts consistent with my research questions (step 5). For the second, I have used the theoretical constructs to create a theoretical narrative by retelling the grassroots ethnic interviewees' experiences of the ethnic conflict and Buddhist nationalism (step 6).[93] Chapter three was composed by the qualitative data collection and description. The main purpose of chapter three is to address the research question above.

## 1.8 Survey of Literature

My survey of literature is based on three segments: Buddhist nationalism; the role of grassroots Christians in imagining their identity and witnessing their faith; and the role of religions in reconciliation and liberation. The first segment will help us understand different scholars' approaches to religious nationalism. For the sake of clarity, I will frame three related movements of Buddhist nationalism as: an anti-Westernism, an anti-ethnic minority; and an anti-liberal democracy. The second segment touches on the grassroots Christian communities' imagination of their identity and witnesses. The third segment addresses the role of religions in Asian public theology of religious and reconciliation.

[92] Ibid., 43.
[93] Ibid., 67-76.

### 1.8.1 Buddhist Nationalism: Burmanization and Buddhistization

Benedict Anderson's theory of nationalism in terms of "imagined communities"[94] is helpful for my approach to Buddhist nationalism. In his book *Imagined Communities*, Anderson defines nationalism as "imagined communities" where the dominant groups imagine the nation-construction in Southeast Asia.[95] Fred R. von der Mehden's *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia*,[96] Donald Smith's *Religion and Politics in Burma*,[97] Joseph Liow's *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia*,[98] Mikael Gravers' *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma,*[99] Jeff Kingston's *The Politics of Religion, Nationalism, and Identity in Asia,*[100] J. Christopher Soper and Joel Fetzer's *Religion and Nationalism in Global Perspective,*[101] Thant Myint-U's *The Hidden History of Burma*,[102] Matthew Walton's *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar*,[103] Tharaphi Than's "Nationalism, Religion and Violence,"[104] and Pum Za Mang's "Religion, Nationalism, and Ethnicity in Burma,"[105] are helpful for understanding the politics of Buddhist nationalism.

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[94] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983) xi-xv.

[95] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

[96] Fred R. von der Mehden, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia: Burma, Indonesia, The Philippines* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), 115-169.

[97] Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, 81-124.

[98] Joseph Chinyong Liow, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 1-61.

[99] Mikael Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma: An Essay on The Historical Practice of Power*, 2nd ed. (London: Curzon Press, 1999), 41-121.

[100] Jeff Kingston, *The Politics of Religion, Nationalism, and Identity in Asia* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

[101] J. Christopher Soper and Joel S. Fetzer, *Religion and Nationalism in Global Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1-31.

[102] Thant Myint-U, *The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism, and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century* (New York: Norton, 2020).

[103] Matthew J. Walton, *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[104] Tharaphi Than, "Nationalism, Religion and Violence: Old and New Winthanu Movements in Myanmar," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 13, no. 4 (2015): 12-24.

[105] Pum Za Mang, "Religion, Nationalism, and Ethnicity in Burma," *Journal of Church and State* 59, no. 4 (2017): 626-48.

Theorists of nationalism agree that religion and nationalism serve as the foundation for the political and religious imagination of communal and individual identity. Religion and nationalism are equally imagined communities that can unite or divide people across the world. Such an interplay between religion and nationalism is seen in Myanmar, too.[106]

#### 1.8.1.1 Buddhist Nationalism as an anti-Western Movement

Buddhist nationalism emerged as the politics of anti-Westernism[107] in a colonial period. In his 1965 book *Religion and Politics in Burma,*[108] Donald Smith helpfully explores how religion and Burmese politics intersect with each other and emerge as a nationalist movement against Western influence in the colonial period (1824-1948). This is the first book to address the most comprehensive issue of the relationship between religion [Buddhism] and nationalism.[109] As Smith rightly notes, "nationalist sentiment is based on the group consciousness of what we are and what we are not."[110] Buddhist nationalism was based, among other things, on a common race, language, and religion. The Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) was founded in 1906 as a nationalist movement against the British as an external enemy.[111] "The objectives of the YMBA were

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[106] Soper and Fetzer, *Religion and Nationalism in Global Perspective*, 1-31.

[107] See, for instance, Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order In Pan-Islamic And Pan-Asian Thought* (Chichester, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007).

[108] Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*.

[109] Ibid., 81-116.

[110] Ibid., 81.

[111] Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps*: *A Personal History of* Burma (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 204. Nicholas F. Gier, *The Origins of Religious Violence: An Asian Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 79. U May Oung, "The Modern Burman," *Rangoon Gazette*, 10 August 1908. Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps,* 204. Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, 86. Myanmar's YMBA was inspired by the Sri Lankan nationalist movement of the YMBA founded in 1889.

to strengthen the national spirit or Bamar race (*amyo*), to uphold a national Burmese culture and literature (*batha*), and to advance Buddhism (*thathana*) and education (*pyinnnya*)."[112]

The YMBA movement was succeeded in 1921 by the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA).[113] The GCBA is known as *wunthanu athin*, which means "patriotic association." Patriotism was a driving force for what Anderson calls "anticolonial nationalism."[114] The anticolonial nationalist movement against British influence was later led by some Buddhist monks U Ottama, U Wisara, and Sayar San, who stimulated the *Sangha* (monastic Buddhist community) to call for "home rule."[115] The anticolonial movement was finally joined by some Bamar Buddhist university students, such as Aung San, the father of national independence, U Nu and Dr. Ba Maw in the 1930s.[116] They founded *Dobama Azi-ayone*. *Dobama* means, "We Burmans and *Azi-ayone* means "association;" put together "We Burmans Association."[117]

Aung San and his friends or comrades used a more colloquial ethnonym "Burman or Bama," to emphasize a majority Bamar identity.[118] *Dobama Azi-ayone*'s slogan runs along the lines of race, language, and religion: Burman is our race, Burmese is our language, and Buddhism is our religion.[119] During the nationalist strikes against foreign powers, Buddhist students shouted, "love our race, cherish our language, and uphold our

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[112] Juliane Schober, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2011), 57.

[113] Gier, *The Origins of Religious Violence*, 69.

[114] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 141-4.

[115] E.M. Mendelson and John Ferguson, *Sangha and State in Burma*: *A Study of Monastic Sectarianism and Leadership* (Ithaca, NY: Connell University Press, 1975), 199-205. Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, 106-7. See also Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps*, 204.

[116] Suu Kyi, *Freedom from Fear*, 8-12. Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps,* 198.

[117] Richard Butwell, *U Nu of Burma* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1963), 11; Myint-U, *The Hidden History of Burma*, 29.

[118] Myint-U, *The Hidden History of Burma*, 29.

[119] Ibid.

religion."[120] Their protest song, the basis of today's national anthem, includes the refrain *da-do-mye*, *da-do-pyi*: "this is our land, this is our country." It is not yours.[121] *Dobama Asi-ayone* gave birth to the Burma Independence Army in 1942. If there is one positive impact of the Buddhist nationalist movement in the colonial period, then it could be a pathway to gaining a national independence from the British on January 4, 1948.[122]

1.8.1.2 Buddhist Nationalism as an anti-Ethnic Minority Movement

Buddhist nationalism arose as what I call an "internal colonial form of anti-ethnic minority" in the post-independence period. Although the nation gained a national independence from Britain, Buddhist nationalists maintain what J.S. Furnivall calls a "colonial policy and practice."[123] Theorists, such as Donald Smith,[124] Anthony Smith,[125] Benedict Anderson,[126] and Mikael Gravers[127] believe that nationalism in the post-independence period is a construction caused by the majority groups in their top-down relations to the ethnic minority groups. Political domination, ethnic cultural assimilation, and religious discrimination can be identified as three related characteristics of Buddhist nationalism. Some scholars and ethnic politicians argue that Aung San's political vision of

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[120] Daw Khin Yi, *Dobama Movement in Burma (1930-1938)* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 5, 63.

[121] Myint-U, *The Hidden History of Burma*, 29.

[122] Nationalism is a movement against external colonial power for national freedom; see John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, ed. *Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 4. See also Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, 81. Benedict Anderson, "Western Nationalism and Eastern Nationalism: Is There a Difference That Matters?" in *New Left Review* 9. (May-June 2011): 31-41.

[123] See J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands in India* (New York: New York State University, 1956).

[124] Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, 320-22.

[125] Anthony D. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in Global Era* (Oxford: Polity, 1995).

[126] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 5-7.

[127] Mikael Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma: An Essay on the Historical Practice of Power,* 2nd ed. (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999).

national integration in 1947 and U Nu's nationalization of Buddhism as a state religion in 1961 cause the problem of the ethnic assimilation into the Bamar dominant cultures.[128]

U Nu's vision of ethnic assimilation was driven by a nationalist slogan: *amyo* (only the Bamar race), *batha* (only the Burmese language) and *thathana* (only the Buddhist religion). U Nu defined national identity through a lens of race and religion: "to be a Burman is to be a Buddhist."[129] The politics of anti-ethnic minority is rooted in Buddhist nationalists' failure to recognize and respect for the religious otherness of the ethnic minority identity.[130] Walton's book, *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar* helpfully provides an analytical framework for understanding Buddhist influences on the politics of Bamar domination, ethnic exclusion, and cultural assimilation in Myanmar.

Moreover, James Scott's theory of domination is helpful for understanding the politics of Buddhist domination. In his book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*,[131] Scott provides two patterns of political domination and the role of religion in such a nationalist domination.[132] The first is power. Scott argues that power plays a key role in the first pattern of domination. Powerholders use hegemony and ideology as tools for domination.[133] While hegemony homogenizes differences, ideology articulates systems of

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[128] Lian Hmung Sakhong, *In Defence of Identity*: *The Ethnic Nationalities' Struggle for Democracy, Human Rights, and Federalism* (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2010). Lian Hmung Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*: *A Study in Religion, Politics and Ethnic Identity in Burma* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008), 206-16. Maung Maung, *Aung San of Burma* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff for Yale University Southeast Studies, 1962), 127. Michael A. Charney, *The History of Modern Burma* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 89. Josef Silverstein, *The Political Legacy of Aung San* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 51-8. Pum Za Mang, "Burman, Burmanization, and Betrayal," *Studies in World Christianity,* 8, no. 2. (2012): 169-88.

[129] Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, 83.

[130] Some say Buddhist nationalists view Christians as pro-Westerners due to their embrace of Christianity. See Helen Trager, *Burma Through Alien Eyes* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), ix.

[131] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), ix-16.

[132] Ibid., 12-16.

[133] Ibid., 17-36.

meanings, values, and beliefs for the subordinates within the dominant culture.[134] The hegemonic forms of power-driven domination require the exercise of the control over various modes of political oppressions and economic exploitation.[135] Scott's theory of domination as hegemonic control is quite related to the Bamar Buddhist military practices of political power as what Mikael Gravers appropriately calls "paranoiac nationalism."[136]

According to Scott, the second pattern of domination lies in justifying domination as a legitimacy. This is true to Myanmar where the Bamar groups not only use their dominant identity as a tool for exercising power over the minority ethnic groups, but they also legitimize it.[137] They use religious nationalism as a source of legitimacy for exercising the power of Burmanization and Buddhistization.[138] They exercise domination and discrimination in the minority regions where local religious leaders are controlled by some Bamar Buddhist nationalist monks. A Chin politician Lian Hmung Sakhong said:

> In the name of Hill Regions Buddhist Mission, the junta brought in an army of Buddhist monks who were then dispatched to various towns and villages across Chin State. Protected by the soldiers, these Buddhist monks have considerable powers over the Chin population. In many cases, local people have pointed out that the monks are military intelligence operatives who are more powerful than local army commanders.[139]

The Bamar nationalist practice of domination and discrimination is experienced not only in Chin state, but also in the Kachin and Karen regions.[140] David Steinberg helpfully said:

> The Burmans are prejudiced against the minorities and consider them to be less civilized. The state military have unfairly been dominated by the Burmans. The

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[134] Ibid., 26-27.
[135] Ibid., 26-44.
[136] Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma*. Gravers sees "Buddhist nationalism as the practice of power," 78.
[137] Ibid., 14-16.
[138] For the idea of religious nationalism as a source of legitimacy, see also Liow, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia*, 48-51.
[139] Sakhong, *In Defence of Identity*, 53.
[140] Ja, "Burmanization and Its Effects on the Kachin Ethnic Group in Myanmar," 173-90.

> coercive power of the state is in the hands of the Burman leadership. The traditional autonomy of the minorities has been eliminated, even though the traditional leadership of some of the ethnic minorities was retained during colonial rule. The autonomy promised the minorities under the first constitution of the Panglong Treaty has never been fulfilled. Although minority areas are rich in natural resources, especially Kachin, the profits from their exploitation have not been shared with the minorities, and the minorities have been denied adequate economic development. Minority religions have been placed in jeopardy by the state. The minorities have been denied the right of education in their native language.[141]

Such Buddhist nationalist practice of political domination and ethnic discrimination causes the ethnic Christians' experiences of being alienated in their native lands.[142] Political domination and ethnic discrimination consist of ethnic marginalization, economic exploitation, and physical persecution in terms of committing sexual abuse, restricting on freedom of worship, arresting pastors, and demolishing the Christian crosses and replacing them with Buddhist pagodas. Some ethnic villagers are occasionally arrested by the armies for their porters.[143] In chapter three, I will describe a fuller picture of how some grassroots Christian communities experience religious discrimination.

Where there is the politics of domination, assimilation, and discrimination, there is the politics of the minority groups' resistance in the name of minority-majority conflict.[144] Nick Cheesman's and Nicholas Farrelly's *Conflict in Myanmar*,[145] Ardeth Maung

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[141] David I. Steinberg, *Burma: The State of Myanmar* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2001), 191.

[142] Lap Yan Kung, "Love Your Enemies: A Theology for Aliens in Their Native Land: The Chin in Myanmar," *Studies in World Christianity*, 15, no. 1. (April 2009): 81-99

[143] Salai Za Uk Ling, and Salai Bawi Lian Mang, *Religious Persecution: A Campaign of Genocide Against Chin Christians in Burma* (Ottawa: Chin Human Rights Organization, 2004). Pum Za Mang, "Ethnic Persecution: A Case Study of the Kachin in Burma," *International Journal of Public Theology* 9, no. 2. (2015): 68-93. Sakhong, *In Defence of Identity*, 49-59.

[144] Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World* (New York: Verso, 1998), 318-332.

[145] Nick Chesman and Nicholas Farrelly, *Conflict in Myanmar: War, Politics and Religion* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2016).

Thawnghmung's *The "Other" Karen in Myanmar*,[146] Lian Hmung Sakhong's *In Defence of Identity*,[147] Mandy Sadan's *Being and Becoming Kachin*,[148] and her "Constructing and Contesting the Category of Kachin in the Colonial and Post-colonial Burmese State,"[149] and Perry Schmidt-Leukel's co-edited *Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Myanmar*[150] are helpful resources for understanding the conflict between the majority and minority groups. In their book *Ethnic Conflict*, Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff helpfully show how nationalism and ethnic conflict are closely related to each other in the post-colonial world.[151] Therefore, when I use the term ethnic and religious conflict, I am referring to the "conflict between majority and minority ethnic and religious groups, based on demands for respect, recognition, minority rights, power, and self-autonomy."[152]

1.8.1.3 Buddhist Nationalist Coup as anti-Liberal Democracy Movement

The third movement of Buddhist nationalism in the new face of the coup targets not only ethnic minority groups, but also Bamar Buddhist groups, who confront the military idea of democracy. In his book *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar*,

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[146] Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung, *The "Other" Karen in Myanmar: Ethnic Minorities and the Struggle without Arms* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).

[147] Sakhong, *In Defence of Identity*.

[148] Mandy Sadan, *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories Beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma* (London: British Academy, 2013).

[149] Layang Seng Ja, "Burmanization and Its Effects on the Kachin Ethnic Group in Myanmar," *Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Myanmar: Contested Identities*, Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Hans-Peter Grosshans, and Madlen Kruege, eds*,* 173-190 (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

[150] Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Hans-Peter Grosshans, and Madlen Kruege, ed. *Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Myanmar: Contested Identities* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

[151] Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff, *Ethnic Conflict: Causes - Consequences - Responses* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010), 25.

[152] See Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan, eds, "Introduction," in *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*, ed. Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan, 1-28. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), here 5. See also Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Picador, 2018).

Walton describes the military notion of "disciplined democracy."[153] *Si kan* is a Burmese word for discipline. Disciplined democracy implies the dictatorial idea of action within given boundaries controlled by the military.[154] In contrast to the military notion of disciplined democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi's notion of democracy is "rights-based democracy."[155] The military leaders argued that the disciplined democracy is culturally appropriate for the Burmese context because it would guard against the Western style of human rights-based liberal democracy.[156] Their notion of disciplined democracy implies the fact that there is no freedom of opinion, speech, and action that goes against the military. Disciplined democracy does not understand human rights, dignity, and worth. It is precisely because of this that people of Myanmar strongly resist the nationalist coup and see true democracy as freedom. That freedom is multi-dimensional—freedom from fear, freedom from political oppression, and freedom from economic poverty.[157]

In this regard, the third movement of Buddhist nationalism and military coup tends to focus not only on the majority-minority identity conflict, but also on the ideology conflict (military disciplined democracy ideology vs. rights-based liberal democracy ideology). As I will show in chapter five, the rise of the new coup as anti-democracy movement creates some great challenges of humanitarian crisis, on the one hand, and it creates an opportunity for promoting the interreligious solidarity and interethnic friendship among protesters. Protesters bridge their religious and ethnic divides to counter the coup for federal democracy beyond Buddhist nationalism. I will take up the important issue of

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[153] Walton, *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar*, 167-74.
[154] Ibid., 167-72.
[155] Ibid., 176.
[156] Ibid., 169.
[157] Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom from Fear*, new ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2010).

interreligious and interethnic resistance to the coup develop how such kind of new movement envisions a new Myanmar beyond Buddhist nationalism.

## 1.9 Ethnic and Religious Identity

According to the theorists of ethnicity or ethnic identity, Anthony Smith and John Hutchinson,[158] the term "ethnicity" first appears in the 1950s in the English language. It is first recorded in a dictionary in the Oxford English Dictionary of 1953.[159] The English adjective "ethnic" derives from the ancient Greek term *ethnos*, which is a synonym of gentile, that is non-Christian or non-Jewish pagan.[160] They observe that the dichotomy between a "non-ethnic us and "ethnic others" continued to adopt the concepts in the field of ethnicity and nationalism. For instance, some English and American reserve the term "nation" for themselves and ethnic for immigrants or ethnic minorities.[161] They suggest that we should use the "term "ethnic" or "ethnic identity" for the inclusive community of both majorities and minorities, hosts and immigrants."[162] I will adopt this inclusive approach for referring to the ethnic Bamar majorities and ethnic Christian minorities

Hutchinson and Smith further provide six features of shared ethnic identity: (1) "a common name; (2) a myth of common ancestry; (3) memories of a common past; (4) elements of a common culture; (5) a link with a homeland; and (6) a sense of solidarity."[163]

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[158] John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, ed, *Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[159] John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, "Introduction," in *Ethnicity,* ed, John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, 4-16 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[160] Ibid., 4.

[161] Ibid., 4.

[162] Ibid., 5. For a comprehensive study of ethnicity from biblical and theological perspectives, see David G. Horrell, "Introduction," in *Ethnicity, Race, Religion: Identities and Ideologies in Early Jewish and Christian Texts, and in Modern Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Katherine M. Hockey and David G. Horrell, 1:20 (London: T&T Clark, 2018). Mark G. Brett, ed, *Ethnicity and the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

[163] Hutchinson and Smith, "Introduction," 6-7.

These features are helpful for understanding the identity formation of Chin, Kachin, and Karen. So, when I use "ethnic identity," I am referring to the ethnic community that shares the distinctive nature of common religion, culture, history, and language. I use Smith's theory of ethnic identity as a synonym of national identity.[164] In particular, religion plays a key role in constructing ethnic minority's identity formation. In this respect I find Fredrik Barth's highly acclaimed book *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* helpful for distinguishing between the ethnic minority Christianity and the ethnic majority Buddhism.[165]

Moreover, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan's theory of "conflicts between majority and minority ethnic groups" are helpful for understanding the Bamar Buddhist majority and ethnic Christian minority conflict.[166] Theories of ethnic identity, such as Nathan Glazer, Daniel Moynihan,[167] Anthony Smith, John Hutchinson,[168] Clifford Geertz,[169] Max Weber,[170] and Fredrik Barth,[171] agree that there are two ways of approaching ethnicity or ethnic identity: the primordialist approach (*emic* perspective) and the constructivist approach (*etic* perspective). While *emic* perspective defines one's identity from inside, *etic* defines one's identity from outside.[172] The first approach looks at

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[164] Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 14.

[165] Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Oslo: Universitesforlaget, 1969); Fredrik Barth, "Ethnic Groups and Boundaries," *Ethnicity*, ed, John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, 75-82 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[166] Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, "Introduction" in *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience,* eds, Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, 1-28 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 5.

[167] Ibid., 1-28.

[168] John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, ed, *Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[169] Clifford Geertz, "Primordial Ties," in *Ethnicity,* ed. John Hutchison and Anthony D. Smith, 40-44 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[170] Max Weber, "The Origins of Ethnic Groups," *Ethnicity,* ed. John Hutchison and Anthony D. Smith, 35-39 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[171] Barth, "Ethnic Groups and Boundaries," 75-82.

[172] The term *emic* and *etic* was first coined by American linguist Kenneth L. Pike*, Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*, 2nd ed. (Mouton: The Hague, 1967).

the ethnic groups from their own perspectives rather than from outside. The primordialist approach is represented by Geertz,[173] Smith,[174] and Hutchinson,[175] and others.

In contrast, the second approach believes that ethnic identity is a human construction. It is something which society constructs in order to pursue political and cultural ends. This approach believes that what we understand by ethnic identity is a modern idea originating in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century.[176] Two approaches will be evident in my study. Moreover, Smith helpfully distinguishes between nation and state. For him, nation is inclusively defined in "historical, territorial and cultural terms, while state is exclusively defined by political power." [177] I find this distinction helpful. While most states in the world possess an army, "in Myanmar, the military believe they possess the state."[178] I do not use "nation-state" and "nation" interchangeably, because the former is misused by the army as a political space in which ethnic minorities are integrated by force.[179] I use "state" to refer exclusively to a space controlled by the army, while the "nation" is a shared public sphere where Buddhists and Christians share their lives.

It is highly noted that Perry Schmidt-Leukel's co-edited book *Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Myanmar* serves as a powerful resource for understanding the nation's religious and ethnic diversity and identity complexities. This is a timely book on ethnic and religious diversity, with fresh perspectives essential for better understanding the nation's

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[173] Geertz, "Primordial Ties," 40-44.

[174] Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*; Anthony D. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in Global Era* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1995).

[175] Hutchinson and Smith, ed, *Ethnicity*.

[176] Quoted in Dewi Huges, *Ethnic Identity from the Margins: A Christian Perspective* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2012), 20.

[177] Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nation*, 14.

[178] Mikael Gravers, "Tatmadaw's Coup in 2021: The Return of Totalitarian Rule," *in Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Myanmar: Contested Identities*, ed, Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Hans-Peter Grosshans, and Madlen Krueger, 249-56 (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), here 249.

[179] Sakhong uses the same theory, see Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, xiii-xv.

recent past as well as prospects for the future of multicultural society. What biblical sources can we draw for constructing ethnic identity in the context of Buddhist domination?

Jannette OK's *Constructing Ethnic Identity in 1Peter* serves as a helpful resource. The historical context of 1 Peter and the social alienation and political suffering of the marginal Jewish ethnic identity as a result of their conversion in the Roman Empire share some commonality with the experience of the ethnic minority Christians in Myanmar. Ok argues that Peter characterizes Christian identity as an ethnic identity. In order to help construct a collective understanding of what it means to be an ethnic minority Christian in the context of political domination and social alienation, Ok argues that the author of the epistle invites the readers to hold a powerful sense of internal solidarity in their prophetic resistance to external pressures as a distinctive community of God's people.[180]

Simon Chan's *Spiritual Theology,*[181] *Grassroots Asian Theology*[182] and "Grassroots Asian Ecclesiologies,"[183] are helpful resources for understanding the roles of doxological practices in constructing grassroots Asian theology. Chan said, "a grassroots approach assumes that theology arises as much from how being the church is practiced as how it is understood."[184] Adopting this approach opens up largely unexplored field of the church's lived practices of praise, prayer, preaching, and charity and their distinctive contribution to grassroots Asian theology. While Chan tends to focus on the internal life of

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[180] Jannette H. Ok, *Constructing Ethnic Identity in 1 Peter* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

[181] Simon Chan*, Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998).

[182] Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*.

[183] Simon Chan, "Grassroots Asian Ecclesiologies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology,* ed. Paul Avis, 595-614. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[184] Ibid., 295.

the church, Amos Yong's *In the Days of Caesar*,[185] takes the liturgical role of the church as a starting point for formulating public theology. Yong's main concern is to show how the liturgy should not be isolated from its socio-political and public praxis. The result is to correct the gap between the church's inner life and its public witness to and in the world.

James Scott's *Decoding Subaltern Politics*,[186] *Weapons of the Weak,*[187] and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*[188] are helpful resources for understanding everyday forms of grassroots Christians' witnesses of their lived faith in the context of Buddhist political domination. Especially his theory of "hidden transcripts" enables us to recognize some hidden, symbolic, indirect, and private witnesses of grassroots Christians in Myanmar.[189] His theory allows us to reveal the hidden and implicit theology of the grassroots Christians and to recognize their contributions to Asian public theology.

## 1.10 Religion, Liberation, and Reconciliation

Aloysius Pieris' *An Asian Theology of Liberation*,[190] Christopher Queen's and Sallie King's *Engaged Buddhism*,[191] Sallie King's "Buddhism and Human Rights,"[192] and Amos Yong's *Pneumatology and the Christian-Buddhist Dialogue*,[193] and his *Hospitality*

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[185] Amos Yong, *In the Days of Caesar: Pentecostalism and Political Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 155-65.

[186] James C. Scott, *Decoding Subaltern Politics: Ideology, Disguise, and Resistance in Agrarian Studies* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012).

[187] James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985),

[188] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

[189] Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 37-41. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 4-5.

[190] Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*. This book first appeared in 1986 in German.

[191] Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King, eds, *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996).

[192] Sallie B. King, Buddhism and Human Rights" in *Religion and Human Rights: An Introduction*, eds, 103-118. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[193] Amos Yong, *Pneumatology and the Christian-Buddhist Dialogue: Does the Spirit Blow through the Middle Way?* (Leiden: BRILL, 2012).

*and The Other*,"[194] and Vinoth Ramachandra's *Subverting Global Myth,*[195] Felix Wilfred's *Asian Public Theology*,[196] Peter Friedlander's "Conflict and Peace in Buddhism,"[197] and Elizabeth Harris's The Cost of Peace: Buddhists and Conflict Transformation"[198] serve as powerful resources for understand the roles of religions in political liberation and ethnic reconciliation. Moreover, Alicia Turner's book *Saving Buddhism*[199] enables us to look at the moral teaching of Buddhism and Buddhists' moral practices of their engaged faith as religious sources for forming a Burmese religious community of justice and peace.

In considering the role of the gospel of reconciliation in the Christian ministry, we cannot miss Karl Barth's four volume of *Church Dogmatics*.[200] Barth's study of the doctrine of reconciliation is "unsurpassed in the history of Protestant theology and perhaps in the entire history of the Church universal."[201] Barth brings together five doctrines under his encompassing study of the reconciliation: Christology, soteriology, anthropology, ecclesiology, and Pneumatology. Built on his mentor Barth and other theologians, Jan Lochman, in his book, *Reconciliation and Liberation*,[202] challenges a one-sided dimensional view of salvation and explores the relationship between reconciliation and

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[194] Amos Yong*, Hospitality and The Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Other* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008).

[195] Vinoth Ramachandra*, Subverting Global Myths*: *Theology and The Public Issues Shaping Our World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 81-5.

[196] Felix Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology: Critical Concerns in Challenging Times* (Madras: ISPCK, 2010).

[197] Peter Friedlander, "Conflict and Peace in Buddhism," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Religion and Conflict Resolution,* ed. Lee Marsden, 79-95 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012).

[198] Elizabeth J. Harris, "The Cost of Peace: Buddhists and Conflict Transformation" in *Can Faiths Make Peace? Holy Wars and The Resolution of Religious Conflicts,* eds. Philip Broadhead and Damien Keown, International Library of War Studies, 9, 149-162 (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

[199] Alicia Turner, *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial* Burma (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2014), 75-109.

[200] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, vol. IV.1. trans. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956).

[201] David F. Muller, *Foundations of Karl Barth's Doctrine of Reconciliation: Jesus Christ Crucified and Risen* (Mampeter: Mellen, 1990), 251.

[202] Jan Milic Lochman, *Reconciliation and Liberation* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980).

liberation. Lochman holds together in dialectical tension between the vertical and horizontal dimensions of salvation as reconciliation (reconciliation between God and humanity and reconciliation among humanity) and as liberation (God's freedom of sinners from sin and freedom of the oppressed from political powers).

Corneliu Constantineanu's *The Social Significance of Reconciliation in Paul's Theology*[203] and Craig Keener's article's "Some New Testament Invitations to Ethnic Reconciliation"[204] are helpful resources for a biblical understanding of ethnic reconciliation. While Constantineanu's work focuses exclusively on the social meaning of Pauline theology of reconciliation (Rom. 5-8; 12-15), Keener's work focuses on a broader aspect of the New Testament's theology of ethnic reconciliation, such as Jew-Samaritan and Jew-Gentile ethnic reconciliation across ethnic barriers. Both scholars invite us to see Jesus and Paul not only as the abstract teachers of reconciliation, but also as the public and practical models for building a community of ethnic and religious reconciliation.

Finally, Miroslav Volf's *Exclusion and Embrace*[205] serves as a powerful source for a theological understanding of identity, otherness, and ethnic reconciliation. Built on the narrative of God's embrace of hostile humanity as a model, Volf argues that our embrace of the other, including the evil other, is imperative.[206] He shows how "repentance," "forgiveness," "making a space for the other," and "healing memories of pains" are four essential moments in the movement from exclusion to embrace.[207] Volf believes that a

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[203] Corneliu Constantineanu*, The Social Significance of Reconciliation in Paul's Theology (*Edinburgh: T& Clark, 2010).

[204] Craig S. Keener, "Some New Testament Invitations to Ethnic Reconciliation," in *Evangelical Quarterly*, 75, no. 3. (2003): 195-213; see also Craig S. Keener, "The Gospel & Racial Reconciliation," in *The Gospel in Black & White: Theological Sources for Racial Reconciliation*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm, 117-130 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

[205] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*.

[206] Ibid., 98.

[207] Ibid., 98.

public theology of reconciliation cannot done apart from religions. He, therefore, emphasizes the role of religions in public theology of reconciliation.[208] His two books *A Public Faith*[209] and *Flourishing*,[210] are resourceful for understanding the role of religions in reconciliation.[211] Particular attention will be given to the relationship between political reconciliation and ethnic reconciliation. While political reconciliation focuses on the restorative justice of the ethnic minority, ethnic reconciliation seeks a transformative and relational aspect of recognizing one's ethnic identity by crossing the ethnic barriers.

## 1.11 Grassroots Asian Public Theology as Lived Theology

We have shown how grassroots Christianity should be seen as lived religion. As lived religion, grassroots Christians practice their lived faith in everyday life between the church and public life. We have suggested to recognize their grassroots voices and lived practices as the primary means of public theology. Built on this framework, we will now focus on constructing grassroots Asian public theology as lived theology. In a book *Lived Theology*, Charles Marsh suggests that "lived theology examines practices, objects, and beliefs in order to understand God's presence in human experience."[212] Lived theology is not about doctrine in abstraction, but about engaging real life. He said, "by creating space in language, and by organizing spaces of conversation and exchange in and outside the

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[208] 276-80.

[209] Miroslav Volf*, A Public Faith: How the Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011).

[210] Miroslav Volf, *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).

[211] Ibid., 161-94; see also Volf, *A Public Faith*, 119-38.

[212] Charles Marsh, "Introduction—Lived Theology: Methods, Style, and Pedagogy," in *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy,* eds, Charles Marsh, Peter Slade, and Sarah Azaransky, 1-22 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), here 7.

academy, lived theology welcomes to the table both friend and stranger."[213] As lived theology, grassroots Asian public theology is not just about engaging grassroots voices, but also about recognizing their lived experiences as the primary means of public witness.

Two scholars play the key roles in my own way of imagining grassroots Asian public theology as lived theology. They are Simon Chan and James C. Scott. Chan is an emeritus Professor of Systematic Theology at Trinity Theological College in Singapore. Scott is an emeritus distinguished Sterling Professor of political science at Yale University in Connecticut. While Chan is widely recognized as an Asian theologian and ecclesiologist, Scott is widely recognized as "a true Southeast Asianist of stature" in the words of the late Benedict Anderson.[214] It is my conviction that grassroots Asian public theology should be done through the combination of engaging with the grassroots church and non-church voices. Scott's and Chan's approaches to people's lived experiences from different disciplines shape my own way of imagining grassroots Asian public theology.[215]

First, in his book *Grassroots Asian Theology*,[216] Chan proposes to see the ecclesial lived experiences and practices as the starting points for doing Asian theology.[217] Chan helps me to study and recognize how the ecclesial experiences and practices should be taken as the primary sources for doing grassroots Asian public theology. As noted, grassroots Asian public theology should begin in the lived faith of the church. Grassroots

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[213] Ibid., 17.

[214] See Anderson's endorsement. James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976).

[215] I have shared four panel discussions with James Scott at Yale University, Columbia University, and Yonsei University on the subaltern politics of Buddhist nationalism and everyday forms of subalterns' resistance to political powers of the coup and I am indebted to him for his insights.

[216] Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*.

[217] Ibid., 15.

Christians do not reflect theology academically, but they embody and live it in their own ways. They live their apostolic, prophetic, and priestly faith in private and public life.

While the internal life of the church is crucial for the church's ontological relationship with God, its external life is crucial for the church's public engagement. I relate this to my experiences of participating in Myanmar's democracy movement along with a group of grassroots Burmese Christians and non-Christians in Louisville. Since the rise of the Feb 1 coup of 2021, they led anti-coup movements for Myanmar. They imagine the future of federal democracy from the ground up. Imagining democracy from the ground up is important because it is helpful in filling the gap between political elites and ordinary people.[218] Here Scott's work becomes helpful for my approach to lived theology.

Second, in discerning the voices of the grassroots Christians and non-Christians' resistance to political powers, I employ Scott's theory of "hidden transcripts."[219] Because of his ethnographic interaction the peasants in the Southeast Asian Malay villages and his learning from them, Scott has appeared in the profile of *The New York Times* in 2012, as "Professor who Learns from Peasants."[220] Scott's work is helpful for three reasons.

The first is his categorization of Christians and non-Christians as "non-state people" or "subordinate group." This is helpful in the study of power relations among people in the church, state, and society. Unlike political elites, non-state people are politically

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[218] I spoke on "Myanmar's Democracy Movement from the Ground Up," as the introductory remark at the one-year anniversary of Myanmar Coup at Yale University, February 1, 2022. See Charles Taylor, Patrizia Nanz, and Madeleine Beaubien, *Reconstructing Democracy: How Citizens Are Building from the Ground Up* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 9-28.

[219] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 1-16.

[220] Jennifer Schuessler, "James C. Scott: Professor Who Learns from Peasants," in *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/05/books/james-c-scott-farmer-and-scholar-of-anarchism.html, accessed January 2, 2021.

powerless.[221] The second is his coinage of the terms "the hidden transcripts" and "public transcripts" as the diverse strategies of non-state people's resistance to political powers. He asks a question: "how do we study power relations when the powerless are often obligated to adopt a strategic pose in the presence of the powerful and when the powerful may have an interest in overdramatizing their reputations and mastery?" He answers:

> Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a "hidden transcript" that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant. The powerful, for their part, also develop a hidden transcript representing the practices and claims of their rule that cannot be openly avowed. A comparison of the hidden transcript with the weak with that of the powerful and of both hidden transcripts to the public transcripts of power relations offers a substantially new way of understanding resistance to domination.[222]

For Scott, the strategies of the "public transcripts" and "hidden transcripts" are evident in non-state people's resistance to political powers. But he emphasizes what has been deemphasized, that is, the "hidden transcripts," which are sometimes unnoticed. As subordinate people, their resistance to political powers is not always public, but hidden. In his classic book, *Weapons of the Weak,* a fruit of his fieldwork among grassroots peasants in the Malay village, Scott invites us to discern and recognize subordinate group's "everyday forms of resistance to powers."[223] He emphasizes that such everyday forms of subordinate's resistance are not always the public or direct protests against political powers on the streets, but they are hidden, symbolic, and indirect.[224] He said:

> If subordinate discourse in the presence of the dominant is a *public transcript*, I shall use the term *hidden transcript* to characterize discourse that takes place offstage beyond direct observation by powerholders. The hidden transcript is thus

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[221] See, James C. Scott, *Political Ideology in Malaysia: Reality and the Beliefs of an Elite* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), 214-43.

[222] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, xii

[223] James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).

[224] Ibid., 37-40.

> derivate in this sense that it consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript.[225]

Scott's theory of hidden transcripts is helpful in performing Asian public theology of lived faith in a hidden way. There is the challenge of performing the publicness of public theology in a military country. In this respect I argue that public theology is not merely about the church's public witnesses of faith in public life, but it is also about the church's hidden and symbolic forms of faithful witnesses in private lives. According to Scott, the grassroots people's offstage thoughts and symbolic resistance do not obviously appear to those political and academic elites.[226] Scott's theory enables us to discern and recognize some grassroots people's hidden forms of embodied lived theology in everyday life.

The third reason is that Scott's categorization of inclusive non-state people helps us consider the contextual effectiveness of the grassroot church's public engagement with non-state people of religions in their interreligious form of resistance to political powers. In my approach, grassroots Asian public theology of religions is not just about the church's public and direct resistance to the political powers of the state, but more about the church's dialogical engagement with the non-state people of other faiths and their interreligious forms of stronger resistance to the political powers of state. The latter method is more relevant to Myanmar and many parts of Asia where Christianity represents a marginal status. I will take up Scott's theory and will develop it in the final chapter when I address people of interreligious communities' contemporary resistance to the military coup.

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[225] Ibid., 4-5.

[226] Ibid., 37-47. See also Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 4-16. Scott adopts Irving Goffman's concept of offstage resistance. See Irving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor, 1959).

## 1.12 Summary

This chapter has begun by discerning a methodological paradigm shift in grassroots Asian public theology. I have provided some possible reasons and ways for moving beyond academic public theology by engaging the grassroots communities. I have constructed a conceptual framework of grassroots Asian public theology as lived theology that discerns and recognizes some grassroots voices and their lived experiences. In order to synthesize some grassroots and academic voices, I also have reviewed some select scholarly literatures. My review of scholarly literatures was based on three segments of theoretical frameworks: theory and movement of Buddhist nationalism, formation of ethnic identity, and the role of religion in reconciliation and liberation. In the next chapter, I will revisit some origins and foundations of Asian public theology of religions and liberation.

# CHAPTER TWO

# REVISITING THE ORIGINS AND FOUDNATIONS OF ASIAN PUBLIC THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS AND LIBERATION

## 2 Introduction

As noted in chapter one, Aloysius Pieris sums up the context of Asia into a twofold reality: "multifaceted religiosity" (in which Christianity is a minority) and "mass poverty (both Christians and other faiths suffer together)."[227] Built on Pieris's insights, Korean public theologian Sebastian Kim recently added two more dimensions and now there are four dimensions that shape the context of Christian witness in Asia: "religion and politics, poverty and marginalization, the emergence of civil society, and prosperity and economic growth,"[228] These contextual dimensions, especially religious diversity and ethnic marginalization, call for the twin praxis of Asian public theology: religiosity calls for interreligious dialogue and Asian poverty and/or ethnic marginalization calls for the praxis of political liberation. Asian theologians grapple with religions and public life: how do religions play the public role in socio-political liberation of the poor and oppressed?

It should be noted that liberation is theologically understood as political freedom of the oppressed from oppression. Asian liberationists commonly use the Exodus paradigm (Ex. 3:7-14) and Nazareth public manifesto (Lk. 4:18-19) as the biblical sources for engaging with the liberationist sources of other religions.[229] Asian public theology of

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[227] Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 69-86.

[228] Sebastian Kim, "Social and Political Context," in *Christianity in East and Southeast Asia*, eds, Kenneth R. Ross, Francis D. Alvarez, Todd M. Johnson, Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity, vol. 4, 387-99. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), here 387.

[229] Kim Yong Bock, ed, *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History* (Singapore: CCA, 1981), xii-xv; C.S. Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction*: *An Asian Analysis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977), 143-73; C.S. Song, *Third-Eye Theology: Theology in Formation in Asian Settings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 101-23; Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 8-14, 35-68.

liberation distinguishes itself from other Majority World liberation theologies.[230] While other liberation theologies are seen as a Christian public engagement with Christians, a distinctive characteristic of Asian public theology of liberation lies in its interreligious nature of public engagement with Asian people of other religions.[231]

Asia is religiously diverse and regionally broad enough that one should mention the context-focus of this chapter.[232] While it is impossible to cover every public issue and theological development in Asia in this study, this chapter will focus on the Southeast Asian Buddhist context.[233] I hope to achieve three goals in this chapter. I will organize the chapter into three sections, beginning with a broad overview and concluding with a narrow overview of Asian public theology. I will select some Asian public theologians as my interlocutors on the basis of their distinctive contributions from their different ecclesial backgrounds. My hope is to gain diverse perspectives on Asian public theology.

In the first section, I will revisit the origins and foundations of Asian public theology of religions and liberation. My aim is to show when, why, and how the foundations of Asian public theology have been laid and developed before the official rise of the term "public theology" in the West. I will look at two select Asian public

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Aloysius Pieris, *The Genesis of Asian Theology of Liberation*: *An Autobiographical Excursus on the Art of Theologizing in Asia* (Gonawala-Kelaniya: Tulana Jubilee Publications, 2013), 10-27, 152-167.

[230] For a comprehensive study of Third World Theologies, see K.C. Abraham, ed, *Third World Theologies: Commonalities and Divergences* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986).

[231] Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 69-86; Tissa Balasuriya, "Divergences: An Asian Perspective," in *Third World Theologies: Commonalities and Divergences,* ed. K.C. Abraham, 113-19. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986); Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology*, xvii-xxvi.

[232] See Peter C. Phan, ed, *Asian Christianities* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Scott W. Sunquist, ed, *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001). Kenneth R. Ross, Francis D. Álvarez, and Todd M. Johnson, eds, *Christianity in East and Southeast Asia* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

[233] Perry Schmidt-Leukel, ed, *Buddhist-Christian Relations in Asia* (Munich: EOS, 2017), 97-272.

theologians—Shoki Coe of Taiwan (1914-1988)[234] and M.M. Thomas of India (1916-1996)[235]—as the examples for their pioneering works on Asian public theology.

The second section is dedicated to describing fresh perspectives and methods of Asian public theology. I will proceed through this section into two steps. I will first look at a Catholic public theologian Felix Wilfred of India (1948-).[236] I will then move to a narrower scope of Asian public theology of Christian-Buddhist dialogue and liberation. I will engage with an Asian liberationist Aloysius Pieris of Sri Lanka (1934-)[237] and a Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong of Malaysia-USA (1965-).[238] Third, I will conclude this by looking a Baptist theologian Saw Hlaing Bwa of Myanmar (1955-).[239]

## 2.1. The Origins of Asian Public Theology without the Term

Scholars[240] acknowledge that the term "public theology" first appeared in 1974 in an article by an American Lutheran historian and theologian Martin Marty (1928-) in the *Journal of Religion* entitled "Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American

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[234] C.H Hwang (Shoki Coe), *Joint Action for Mission in Formosa: A Call for Advance into a New Era* (New York: WCC Friendship Press, 1968).

[235] M.M. Thomas, *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution* (London: SCM Press, 1966).

[236] Felix Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology: Critical Concerns in Challenging Times* (Madras: ISPCK, 2010).

[237] Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*. Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism*, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988); Aloysius Pieris, *Fire and Water: Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

[238] Amos Yong, *In the Days of Caesar: Pentecostalism and Political Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

[239] Saw Hlaing Bwa, "Myanmar: Religious Presence in the Public Space and Interreligious Relations," in *Interactive Pluralism in Asia: Religious Life and Public Space,* eds. Simone Sinn and Tong Wing-Sze, 179-95. (Geneva: WCC, 2016).

[240] Sebastian Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere: Public Theology as a Catalyst for Open Debate* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 3-7. See also E. Harold Breitenberg, "Defining Public Theology," in *Public Theology for a Global Society: Essays in Honor of Max L. Stackhouse,* ed. Deirdre King Hainsworth and Scott R. Paeth, 3-20. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010) here 7-10.

Experience."[241] While giving credit to Marty for coining the term "public theology," I will first argue that the concept of Asian public theology without the term had been developed as a prophetic nature of public witness for political liberation in the late 1950s and early 1960s before the official rise of the term in 1974 in the West.[242] This hypothesis is important in developing Asian public theology in the context of World Christianity so that we do not bring Western public theology to the local context as a universal model. Rather, we start public theology in the local context and bring it into dialogue with global public theologies. In his book *Water Buffalo Theology*, Kosuke Koyama rightly said:

> Third World Theology [Asian theology] begins by raising local issues, not by digesting First World theologians, namely Saint Augustine, Karl Barth, and Karl Rahner. This is, in short, an attempt to call your attention to some of the Asian theological raw situations that have been on my mind for some time.[243]

In his *Subverting Global Myths,* a Sri Lankan public theologian Vinoth Ramachandra also emphasizes the need of developing a local form of Asian public theology. He states:

> There is a great need to develop local theology and missionary practices that receive from all that is best in other cultures and contexts, while being relevant to one's own. In the church we now have a hermeneutical community that is global in scope and character, so we can test the local expressions of Christian faith against one another, thus manifesting the true catholicity of the body of Christ. The way we become truly global Christians is by seriously engaging with our local contexts as members of a global community that has redefined our identities and interests.[244]

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[241] Martin E. Marty "Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience," *The Journal of Religion,* 54, no. 4 (October 1974): 332-59. See his subsequent publication, Martin E. Marty, *The Public Church: Mainline—Evangelical—Catholic* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

[242] Christian Conference of Asia statement, "The Confessioning Church in Asia and Its Theological Statement," *International Review of Mission*, LV, no. 218. (April 1966): 199-204; Thomas, *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution*; C.H Hwang (Coe), *Joint Action for Mission in Formosa*; A collection of articles published in the 1960s republished in *What Asian Christians Are Thinking: A Theological Source Book*, Douglas J. Elwood, ed. 267-457. (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1976).

[243] Kosuke Koyama, *Water Buffalo Theology*, 25th ann (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 3.

[244] Vinoth Ramachandra, *Subverting Global Myths: Theology and The Public Issues Shaping Our World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic 2008), 259.

If one agrees with Koyama and Ramachandra, it is right to discern the local expressions of Asian public theology. I see the inaugural meeting of the East Asia Christian Conference (EACC: now Christian Conference of Asia/CCA) held at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on May 14-24, 1959 as the origins of academic Asian public theology.[245] M.M. Thomas who participated at the EACC meeting saw the EACC as a point of departure for the origins of Asian public theology of revolution. He said: "I think the inaugural Assembly of the East Asia Christian Conference which met in Kuala Lumpur in 1959 gave the clearest expression to what may be called a theology of the Asian revolution. [246]

I agree with Thomas, but I would specify that academic Asian public theology was conceptually and contextually made at EACC, although we might argue that grassroots Asian public theology has long engaged public issues. Put simply, first, the concept of academic Asian public theology without the official term "public theology" had been developed by academic Asian theologians before the official rise of the term "public theology" in 1974 in the West. Second, grassroots Asian public theology had been embodied by some grassroots Asian Christians without knowing the academic concept. For example, some grassroots Karen Christians in Myanmar had embodied their faith in public life as public preachers and social workers since the 1830-40s under the leadership of American missionaries. The Karens were among the first ethnic minority groups to have received the gospel from an American Baptist missionary Adoniram Judson.[247] They did not just preach the gospel, but they also got involved in social, educational, and spiritual

[245] U Kyaw Than, ed, *Witnesses Together* (Rangoon: EACC, 1959), 60-80.
[246] Thomas, *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution*, 27.
[247] Maung Shwe Wa, *Burma Baptist Chronicle, Book I* (Rangoon: Burma Baptist Convention, 1963), 67-69. Ko Tha Phyu was the first Karen convert. He was baptized on May 16, 1828 and thereafter he started witnessing the life and work of Christ in public life. Phyu was known as "the first Apostle to the Karens." See Francis Mason, *Memoir of Ko Tha Phyu* (Tavoy: Tavoy Press, 1943), 67.

transformation of public society.[248] In the following chapter, we will look at a fuller overview of how some grassroots Asian Christian communities express and practice their faith in public life. This present chapter will first look at academic Asian public theology.

There are two reasons for recognizing the EACC as a point of departure for the origins of academic Asian public theology. Frist, the EACC was the inaugural meeting where a group of pioneer Asian theologians, including Thomas, came together with the common vision of renewing theology in Asia. They renewed the scope of theology as public by engaging with public life of socio-political revolution and change.[249] It was during this era that Asian theologians began to reexamine Christian mission left to Asia by Western missionaries and formed a new theology that is rooted in what Ramachandra calls "the new Asia" and is relevant for Asian Christian identity and mission.[250]

Second, the EACC meeting chose "witnesses together" as a conference theme.[251] Choosing this conference theme was intentional. The conference theme called on the Asian churches to discern Christ's cosmic presence and dynamic work by engaging with people of other religions for witnessing together the common goal of socio-political revolution.[252] It was in the same year, 1959 that *Southeast Asia Journal of Theology* (now *Asia Journal of Theology*) was founded as an academic journal for sharing the public issues of local theology and for exchanging theological insights. We will now show how two pioneer

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[248] San C. Po, Burma and the Karens (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2001), 58. See also Saw Augurlion, *Christian Existence And Issues Related to Nationalism and Religious Identity in Post-Colonial Myanmar* (Yangon: Judson Research Center, 2017), 45-55.

[249] M. Takenaka, "A New Understanding of the World and the Need of Theological Renewal," in *Witnesses Together*, Kyaw Than, ed. (Rangoon: EACC, 1959).

[250] See Vinoth Ramachandra, *Church and Mission in the New Asia: New Gods, New Identities*, ed. Kimhong Hazra (Singapore: ARMOUR, 2009).

[251] Quoted in Thomas, *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution*, 24-34. For the report of the meeting of EACC (now CCA); Than, ed, *Witnesses Together*, 60-80.

[252] Than, ed, *Witnesses Together*, 60-80.

Asian public theologians, Thomas and Coe, have advanced the social vision of the EACC by developing some foundations and concepts of Asian public theology.

## 2.2. M.M Thomas and Shoki Coe as Pioneer Asian Public Theologians

Because of their pioneering advocacies for the public issues of the post-independent national reconstructing of Asian identity and social justice, Coe's and Thomas's legacies were selectively published in the special series "Prophets from the South" sponsored by the Council for World Mission.[253] In a collection of works by pioneer Asian scholars, *What Asian Christians Are Thinking*, editor Douglas Elwood saw Thomas as "Asia's foremost lay [public] theologian."[254] Hwa Yung also said, "Among Asian Christians of his generation, it can be said that he [Thomas] has been peerless in his advocacy of Christian social engagement and involvement in nation building."[255] Moreover, Hielke Wolters succinctly stated the pioneering life and work of Thomas:

> A pioneer is one who explores unfamiliar terrain or initiates a new enterprise, and thus opens up and prepares the way for others. M.M. Thomas has been a pioneer in the area of post-independence Christian theology in India. From the 1930s up to the present day, he has been engaged the search for a meaningful Christian contribution in a completely new situation. Rooted in deep faith, he has been responding to a vision. That response is the subject of our study, and its importance is by no means limited to the Indian context.[256]

Like Thomas, Coe was a pioneer and prophet in developing the foundations of Asian public theology of liberation. In his tribute for the legacy of Coe, John England said:

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[253] See M.P. Joseph, Po Ho Huang, and Victor Hsu, eds*, Wrestling with God: Revisiting the Theology and Social Vision of Shoki Coe* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019); Jesudas M. Athyal, George Zachariah, and Monica Melanchathon, ed, *The Life, Legacy, and Theology of M.M. Thomas: Only Participants Earn the Right to be Prophets* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

[254] Elwood. ed, *What Asian Christians are Thinking*, xxviii.

[255] Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas*? *The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1997), 157.

[256] Hielke T. Wolters, *Theology of Prophetic Participation: M.M. Thomas's Concept of Salvation and the Collective Struggle for Fuller Humanity in India* (Madras: ISPCK, 1996), ix.

> It is widely known that Coe's work and writing has been of pivotal importance for every level of Asian theology in recent decades, not least for his pioneering explorations in contextualizing Christian faith and understanding. These were, however, deeply rooted in his own, and his people's historical experience. For the Taiwanese, this included the very long history of its aboriginal peoples, the impact of colonization by Spain and the Netherland, China, Japan, and the endurance of martial law for almost half a century.[257]

Moreover, seeing himself as a second-generation Asian theologian, C.S. Song of Taiwan (1929-) who is 13 years younger than Thomas and 15 years younger than Coe regarded his mentor Coe as a respected pioneer in developing the foundations and concepts of Asian public theology. Song said, "Shoki Coe is a respected pioneer in theological education in Asia. Many of us second- and third-generation theologians in Asia are deeply indebted to him for his tirelessly promoting the contextualization of theology."[258]

Put together, Coe and Thomas experienced the contexts of the post-Western missionary and of home-grown nationalism. While Thomas experienced Hindu nationalism in India, Coe experienced Chinese nationalism in Taiwan.[259] Experiencing these contexts, Thomas and Coe had two common concerns of liberation: liberation of theology and theology of liberation. While "liberation of theology" focuses on the erudite liberation from the Western theological captivity,[260] theology of liberation focuses on

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[257] John C. England, "A Watershed Figure in Asian Theologies: The Very Rev. Dr. Hwang Chiong-Hui (Shoki Coe, C.H. Hwang) 1914-1988," in *Wrestling with God: Revisiting the Theology and Social Vision of Shoki Coe,* M.P. Joseph, et al: 327-330 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019) here 329.

[258] C.S. Song, *The Compassionate God: An Exercise in the Theology of Transposition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), xiii.

[259] See Boris Anderson, ed. *Recollections and Reflections*, 2nd ed. (New York: Rev. Dr. Shoki Coe's Memorial Fund, 1993); Jonah Chang, *Shoki Coe: An Ecumenical Life in Context* (Geneva: WCC, 2012); Ray Wheeler, "The Legacy of Shoki Coe," *in International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 26, no. 2. (April 2002): 77-80. For Thomas, see Jesudas M. Athyal, et. al, *The Life, Legacy, and Theology of M.M. Thomas: Only Participants Earn the Right to be Prophets* (New York, NY: Rutledge, 2016), 7-8; M.M. Thomas, "Some Notes on a Christian Interpretation of Nationalism in Asia," *South East Asia Journal of Theology*, 2, no. 2. (October 1960): 16-26; M.M. Thomas, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 13, no. 1 (January 1989): 28-31.

[260] The term "liberation of theology" was coined by Latin American theologian Juan Luis Segundo; see Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, trans. J. Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976), 4-6.

political liberation from local political oppression. Their visions of twofold liberation came out at the height of contextual theologies that resist Western theological captivity and home-grown nationalism in the post-Western mission and post-independence era.

## 2.3. M.M. Thomas' Social Vision of Asian Public Theology

Thomas was born in a Christian family in 1916 and died in 1996. He was nurtured in the "evangelical and sacramental piety" of the Mar Thomas Syrian Church in which his father was a famous evangelist.[261] Upon graduation from college, Thomas worked on a number of different jobs, which involved him into evangelism and social work, interreligious dialogue and politics. He worked as a director of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion in Society, Bangalore, as a moderator of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches (1968-1975), and as a governor of Nagaland (1990-1992), a state with a high population of Christians in Northeast India. He was conferred with the honorary doctorate by the University of Uppsala in Sweden 1978.[262]

Thomas was India's most recognized ecumenical leader and self-educated lay theologian (except a one-year theological training in 1953 at Union Seminary in New York City). As a lay theologian, "Thomas often disclaimed the title theologian."[263] He later came into contact with Gandhianism and Marxism. He aspired to become an ordained minister to become a member of the Communist Party. But he was rejected both by his church for ordination because he was too Marxist and by the Communist Party because he was a

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[261] T.M. Philip, *The Encounter Between Theology and Ideology: An Exploration into the Communicative Theology of M.M. Thomas* (Madras: CLS, 1986), 2.

[262] Charles C. West, "M.M. Thomas," in *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Mission,* ed. Gerald H. Anderson (New York: Macmillan, 1998), 666-67; Thomas, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," 28-31.

[263] Quoted in Felix Wilfred, "Theologies of South Asia" in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918,* David F. Ford and Rachel Muers, eds, 3rd ed. 502-17. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) here 510.

Christian.[264] Thomas said, "I asked for ordination in my church and for membership in the Communist party. Both rejected me, for opposite reasons.[265]

Despite his acceptance of a double rejection, Thomas's passion for integrating faith and social concerns remained. Since the 1930s, Thomas has been involved in the public issues of India's national independence and then in the nation-building after the independence from the British in 1947.[266] Thomas's early work has been widely unnoticed. He became more globally recognized in the 1960s through his book *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution* (1966)[267] and through his work in the WCC (1968-75). Since Thomas has written widely, it is not easy to cover his thoughts.[268] But the themes of his writings are close to each other within the framework of Asian public theology.[269] I will focus on three main points of his contribution to Asian public theology.

The first point is his basic concept of faith as action in public society. For Thomas, faith must always be active in socio-political involvement for nation-building and theology must articulate such an active faith by grappling with the realities of everyday life. This kind of theology is what Thomas called a "living theology."[270] He did not reflect on theology first and then apply it as an action of faith. He acted his faith first and reflected on it theologically. His approach to living theology was conditioned by his praxis of faith

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[264] Paul Rajaskekar, "M.M. Thomas," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed, Ian A. McFarland, 505 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[265] Thomas, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," 30.

[266] Wolters, *Theology of Prophetic Participation,* viii; 11-90.

[267] Thomas, *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution*.

[268] See Wolters, *Theology of Prophetic Participation,* 253-329.

[269] See T. Jacob Thomas, ed, *M.M. Thomas Reader: Selected Texts on Theology, Religion and Society* (Tiruvalla: Christava Sahitya Samithi, 2002).

[270] M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (Madras: CLS, 1969), 306.

in public life as a social worker, as a director of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, and as a governor of the Nagaland state of India.[271]

For Thomas, theology is not just an academic exercise divorcing from the realities of life. It must always be involved in social revolution as a "living theology." His vision of "living theology" was shaped not merely by the Christian faith, but by a Christian engagement with the revolutionary practices of other religions. In his book *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (1969), Thomas stated how Jesus's Sermon on the Mount was practiced by Gandhi for the Indian renaissance and thus a Christian engagement with the Gandhian renaissance was necessary.[272] Thomas uses the cosmic dimension of Christ's public presence in the cultures of other religions as the foundation and as the model for Christian active engagement with the world. He said:

> The church must endeavor to discern how Christ is at work in the revolution of contemporary Asia (it then spells out the various forms of his work), releasing new creative forces, judging idolatry, and false gods, leading people to a decision for or against him, and gathering to himself those who respond in faith to him, in order to send them back into the world to be witnesses in his kingship. The church must not only discern Christ in the changing life, but be there in it, responding to him and making his presence and lordship known.[273]

Using the cosmic Christology as the foundation and model, Thomas argues that the task of the church is to discern Christ's public presence among other faiths and to engage Christ's revolutionary action in dialogue with the revolutionary action of other faiths. In other

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[271] Thomas, *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution*, 6-8; Thomas, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," 28-31.

[272] Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, 306; M.M. Thomas, *The Secular Ideologies of India and the Secular Meaning of Christ* (Madras: CLS, 1976), 10.

[273] Thomas, *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution*, 28.

words, he uses Christ as a meeting point for interreligious people's struggles for sociopolitical revolution in Asia.[274] This leads us to Thomas's idea of salvation.

The second point is his redefinition of salvation as "humanization." In reaction against the Western concept of individualistic salvation, which focuses on a vertical sense of one's personal relationship with God, Thomas redefined salvation as humanization, which reorients a horizontal aspect of human social revolution. He redefined salvation in terms of humanization by which the oppressed people find their liberating humanness of inherent rights and dignity.[275] Being the chairperson of the WCC (1968-1975), Thomas's grand concept of humanization underlined the WCC meeting in Uppsala, Sweden in 1968 and it eventually influenced the ecumenical Christian leaders to replace "salvation with liberation" at the WCC meeting in Bangkok, Thailand (S.E Asia), December 1972.[276]

Third, Thomas's redefinition of salvation as humanization led to his concept of mission. The Uppsala report entitled "Renewal in Mission (1968)" took up Thomas's concept of humanization as the concept of its new approach to mission.[277] Thomas rejected the idea of mission as converting Hindu because it was the colonial legacy of Western mission, which stimulated Hindu nationalism. Thomas believed there was a relationship between the rise of local nationalism and the impact of Western imperial mission.[278] For Thomas, the task of mission in the post-Western mission and post-independence era was

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[274] Ibid., 8-34.

[275] M.M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanization: Some Crucial Issues of the Theology of Mission in Contemporary India* (Madras: CLS, 1971), 40.

[276] Ibid., 40. M.M. Thomas, "The Meaning of Salvation Today: A Personal Statement," in *International Review of Mission*, 62, no. 246. (April 1973): 158-69. This article was his address given in the opening session of the WCC's Conference on Salvation Today held at Bangkok in 1972.

[277] See Norman Goodall, ed, *The Uppsala Report 1968: Official Report on the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Uppsala July 4-20, 1968* (Geneva: WCC, 1968), 21-38.

[278] Thomas, *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution*, 9.

to participate in nation building through "secular fellowship" with Hindus.[279] In light of this, Thomas saw salvation as "new humanism," which struggles for the new cultural identity of the Asians in the post-Western mission era.[280] In his article "The World in Which We Preach Christ" (1963), Thomas described mission as:

> Christianity, renascent religions, and secular faiths, are all involved in the struggle of man for the true meaning of his personal and social existence—each in its own terms but together. It seems to me that the relations between Christian faith and other living religions and secular faiths is passing to a new stage, because they not only co-exist in the same society, but also cooperate to build a common secular society and culture. It is within such coexistence and cooperation that we can best enter into dialogue at the deepest level on the nature and destiny of man and on the nature of ultimate Truth. In this form the judgment and salvation of Christ himself can be proclaimed.[281]

In his later essay "My Pilgrimage in Mission" in *IBMR* (1989), Thomas helpfully said: "My journey has taken me through a critique of missions in the narrow sense to the more inclusive concept of the mission of the church in the modern world."[282] For Thomas, mission means a prophetic participation in the public issue of nation building through the cooperation with Asian world religions.[283] It is in this regard that Paul Rajashekar recently remarked, "Thomas's prophetic witness at crucial points where Christian faith and world's religions, cultures, and ideologies intersect made him a truly public theologian."[284] Thomas

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[279] Ibid.,9-65; Thomas, "Some Notes on a Christian Interpretation of Nationalism in Asia," 16-26. M.M. Thomas, "Indian Nationalism: A Christian Interpretation," in *Religion and Society*, 6. (June 1959): 4-26; M.M. Thomas and Paul D. Devanandan, eds, *Christian Participation in Nation-Building: The Summing Up of a Corporate Study on Rapid Social Change* (Bangalore: NCCI, 1960), 266-67; M.M. Thomas, "The Struggle for Human Dignity as a Preparation for the Gospel," *National Council of Churches Review*, LXXXVI/9 (September 1966): 356-59; M.M. Thomas, *Towards a Theology of Contemporary Ecumenism* (Madras: CLS, 1978), 40.

[280] Thomas, *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution*, 35-92.

[281] M.M. Thomas, "The World in Which We Preach Christ," in *Witness in Six Continents—Records of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism*, ed. Ronald K. Orchard, 11-9 (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1964) here 18.

[282] Thomas, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," 28.

[283] Thomas, *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution*, 93-126. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanization*, 10-18; 40-60.

[284] Rajashekar, "M.M. Thomas," 501.

proved himself to be public theologian by emphasizing the church's dialogue with Hindus and by deemphasizing the church's missionary act.

### 2.3.1. Evaluating Thomas' Approach

First, Thomas is a lay public theologian. But his theology is quite academic that he is frequently cited as an example of an Asian theologian. Although he actively worked among some grassroots Christians, he did not sufficiently incorporate their ethnographic voices and needs in his theological reflections. His approach is hardly qualified to be grassroots Asian public theology. His notion of humanization is limited to a horizontal dimension of social salvation without embracing much of a vertical dimension.[285]

Second, Thomas does not see the church as the starting point for doing Asian public theology. As we will show later, Felix Wilfred adopts Thomas's approach for Asian public theology. This leads us to question Thomas's understanding of ecclesiology. Thomas's understanding of ecclesiology is confined to its interreligious dialogue with other faiths. He does not ask how the church's internal and sacramental life of praise, prayer, and preaching could shape the church's external life of witness in public life. His understanding of the church is strong in socio-political involvement and is weak in pastoral preaching, evangelism, and social charity. Thomas underestimates the church's internal life of prayer, praise, and preaching merely as "pietistic individualism."[286]

Third, Thomas believes that the church's secular fellowship with other religions for nation-building is the most important example of practicing faith in the post-independence Asia. Such fellowship, according to Thomas, is shaped by Christ's secular fellowship with

[285] Thomas, *Salvation and Humanization*.
[286] Ibid., 12-13.

the outcasts. Thomas is not interested in preserving the distinctive identity of the church. He regards the church merely as one of the social communities of socio-justice for the oppressed. As such, he sees the church's direct engagement in socio-political involvement as the only Asian public theology. "Anything else, even if it has had a positive impact on society, is not considered a theology of engagement at all."[287]

Thomas's ecclesiology has been strongly criticized by, among others, Newbigin who worked in India as a missionary teacher and church's bishop. The Thomas-Newbigin debates occurred in India in the 1970s, but the issues of the church they raised remain relevant for the role of the church in society today.[288] Newbigin argues that Thomas's understanding of the church's secular fellowship is "docetic."[289] It is docetic because Thomas emphasizes the church merely as a political community and as a syncretistic community of secular koinonia with Hindus without holding its distinctive identity.[290]

Thomas's contextual idea of the church is understandable in the post-colonial context where Christianity was seen by Hindus nationalists not only as a foreign religion, but also as a tool of colonial mission of proselytizing other faiths. While it is needed for the church to cooperate with other faiths in nation-building, the church does not have to compromise its distinctive nature by breaking religious cultural elements which are "congruent with the Lordship of Jesus Christ."[291] Thomas's understanding of the church is limited to an interreligious nature of socio-political involvement for humanization.[292]

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[287] See Chan, *Grassroots Asian Public Theology*, 35.

[288] M.M. Thomas and Lesslie Newbigin, "Baptism, the Church, and Koinonia," *Religion and Society,* 19, no. 1. (1972): 69-90.

[289] M.M. Thomas, *Some Theological Dialogues* (Madras: CLS, 1977), 122.

[290] Thomas and Newbigin, "Baptism, the Church, and Koinonia, 72.

[291] Ibid., 80. See also Chan, "Grassroots Asian Ecclesiologies," 598-99.

[292] See Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas*? 160-61.

## 2.4. Shoki Coe's Social Vision of Asian Public Theology

Shoki Coe has two more names, Ng Chiong Hui (Taiwanese name) and Chang Hui Hwang (Mandarin name).[293] He was born in 1914 during the Japanese colonial rule (1895-1945). The name he later chose to publish under was Shoki Coe, a Japanese version of Taiwanese name, reflecting the Taiwanese context of his birth during the Japanese rule. He was the son of a Presbyterian pastor.[294] In 1947 he returned to Taiwan with his British wife Winifred Saunders after World War II when Taiwan was liberated from 50 years of Japanese rule, but only to face regime under the Kuomintang from China.[295] In the 2/28 Incident (February 28, 1947), 20,000 Taiwanese elites were either massacred by Chinese nationalists or ended up missing without a trace.[296]

During this political hardship, Coe served as the first Taiwanese Principal of Tainan Theological College (1947-1965). He was also elected twice as the moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan. During his eighteen years in Taiwan, he encountered Chinese nationalism.[297] Coe's significant writings in the period of 1962-1977 during the Chinese nationalist reign became a basis for Asian theological thinking.[298] In his early articles "Rethinking of Theological Training for the Ministry in the Younger Churches" (1962),[299] "God's People in Asia Today" (1963),[300] and "The Life and the Mission of the

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[293] Coe published a book under the name C.H. Hwang, but the rest of his several writings are published under the name Shoki Coe. See Hwang, *Joint Action for Mission in Formosa.*

[294] See Po Ho Huang, "Ng Chiong Hui (Shoki Coe, Hwang Chang Hui)," in *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity,* ed, Scott W. Sunquist (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 601.

[295] Ibid.

[296] Ibid.

[297] Coe, *Recollections and Reflections*, 244.

[298] England, "A Watershed Figure in Asian Theologies," 330.

[299] Shoki Coe, "A Rethinking of Theological Training for the Ministry in the Younger Churches Today," *South East Asia Journal of Theology*, 4, no. 2. (October 1962): 7-34.

[300] Shoki Coe, "God's People in Asia Today," *South East Asia Journal of Theology*, 5, no. 2. (October 1963): 5-17.

Church in the World" (1964),[301] Coe developed Asian theology as public witness against nationalism. In 1965, Coe left Taiwan and lived in England for security reasons.

Thereafter 1965, Coe joined the Theological Education Fund (TEF) of the WCC as assistant and later director during the TEF's Third Mandate (1970-1977). He then coined the term "contextualization" in 1972.[302] Coe's coinage of the term contextualization is what Wilbert Shenk called "A truly paradigm shift" in rethinking theology that is rooted in local context and is relevant for local Christians [sic].[303] It advances contextual theology that addresses the public issues of socio-political and socio-economic liberation.[304] This takes us to the heart of Coe's public theology of liberation.

First, in order to develop Asian public theology of liberation in the Asian context of home-grown political nationalism, Coe argued that Asian Christians must first recognize and resist three affections that have been inherited from Western Christendom: "colonialism, denominationalism, and pietism."[305] Each of these, according to Coe, creates the problems of religious proselytization, church dividedness, and church pietistic isolation from the socio-political involvement in sociopolitical revolution and liberation.

Second, Coe reconstructs the political hermeneutics of salvation as socio-political liberation. Coe does not use the term public theology, but his political hermeneutics of

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[301] Shoki Coe, "The Life and Mission of the Church in the World," *South East Asia Journal of Theology*, 6. no. 2 (October 1964): 11-38.

[302] Virginia Fabella, "Contextualization," in *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, eds, Virginia Fabell and R.S. Sugirtharajah, 58-9. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000); Coe, "In Search of Renewal in Theological Education," 240-243.

[303] Wilbert R. Shenk, "Contextual Theology: The Last Frontier," in *The Changing Face of Christianity*, eds. Lamin Sanneh and Joel A. Carpenter, 191-229. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) here192-193.

[304] Shoki Coe, "In Search of Renewal in Theological Education," in *Theological Education* (Summer 1973): 233-243. Shoki Coe, *Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund (1970-1977)* (Bromley: TEF, 1972), 108-15. Fabella, "Contextualization," 240-243. Shenk, "Contextual Theology," 191-93. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 430-31.

[305] Coe, "The Life and Mission of the Church in the World," 11-36.

salvation rooted in the *mission Dei* has an implication for public theology.[306] Coe emphasizes that a theology of God's *missio Dei* is manifested in Jesus's incarnational and prophetic engagement with the world.[307] As the follower of Christ who engages with the world, the church's prophetic engagement with the world in dialogue with other faiths is imperative. Coe emphasized the church's existence between two poles—the relationship with God and with the world is crucial for Coe's social vision of public theology.[308]

Third, Coe argued that the church must be a communal prophetic agent of social justice. Coe considered the church prophetic voice not as a predicator of other-worldly, but rather as a social advocate for political liberation of the margins in this-worldly life by confronting political powers. For Coe, faith without political action is a lifeless faith.[309] Coe's vision of public theology and his political involvement are driven by his personal confessional faith. In his editorial note on "Theology and Church (1957)," Coe boldly said, "A confessional church has inevitably to humble itself and ask, is my confession right? Is my confession in accordance with God's will or is it only my bias? Theology is derived from this sort of self-evaluation of the church."[310] For Coe, the church's social involvement is rooted in the confession of Jesus Christ. Theology is a sort of a critical reflection on faith and its relevance for public life. He asserted:

> I am politically involved because I am a Taiwanese and I am politically involved because I am a Christian. Taiwanese is the context into which I was born, and in which I was brought up, and which has been and still is very determinative to my whole existence. My political involvements are the outward expression of a twofold inner wrestling for the meaning of being a Taiwanese and a Christian.[311]

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[306] Ibid., 13.
[307] Coe, "A Rethinking of Theological Training for Ministry in Younger Churches Today," 10.
[308] Coe, "The Life and the Mission of the Church," 13. Coe, "God's People in Asia Today," 37.
[309] Joseph, "Context, Discernment, and Contextualization," 6.
[310] Shoki Coe, "Theology and Church: Editorial," in *Theology and Church* 1 (1957): 1-9, here 5-6.
[311] Coe, *Recollections and Reflections*, 234.

On December 30, 1971, Coe and the Taiwanese Presbyterian leaders made the Public Statement on the Nation Fate against Chinese Nationalism.[312] The Statement declared:

> We oppose any powerful nation disregarding the rights and wishes of fifteen million people and making unilateral decisions to their own advantage, because God has ordained and the United Nations Charter has affirmed that every people has the right to determine its own destiny.[313]

The church's public statement called for the Taiwanese freedom from foreign power.[314] Late in January 1972 in New York, Coe and three other Taiwanese Christian exiles, C.S. Song, Ng Bu Tong, and Lim Chong Gi organized the Formosan Christians for Self-Determination. Po Ho Huang said, "Though started outside Taiwan, the Self-Determination movement had a big impact on political developments in Taiwan and was significant to later efforts in constructing contextual theology in Taiwan."[315] One example is the birth of "homeland theology," a term coined by Wang Hsien-Chih.[316] The task of homeland theology is to resist the Chinese regime and to imagine the Taiwanese cultural identity. Exiled for 22 years, Coe returned to Taiwan in 1987 and died in 1988.

### 2.4.1. Evaluating Coe's Approach

Like Thomas, Coe was a pioneer in developing the origins and foundations of Asian public theology before the official rise of public theology terminology in 1974 in the West. First, Coe's methodology of contextualization helps us understand the end of one era (the

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[312] Quoted in Song, *Third-Eye Theology*, 220.
[313] Ibid.
[314] Ibid.
[315] Po, "Ng Chiong Hui," 601.
[316] Wang Hsian-Chih, "Homeland Theology," in *A Testament to Taiwan Homeland Theology: The Essential Writings of Wang Hsien-Chih*, ed. Chen Nan-Jou (Taipei: Yeong Wang, 2011), 49-50.

end of Western mission) and the beginning of another era (the new era of Asian Christianity and its new imagination of Asian Christian identity). Using contextualization as a methodology, he has grappled with a twofold concern: (1) criticizing Western concept of individualistic salvation and privatizing faith and (2) constructing a new political hermeneutic of salvation that is relevant for Asian Christian identity formation and for their public witness of political liberation. While Coe's work advances Asian theological thought at a time when Western theology was dominant,[317] we should also evaluate his limitations for the sake of a more relevant Asian theology.

Second, unlike Thomas, Coe takes the church as the starting point for developing Asian public theology. Coe emphasizes the prophetic role of the church in witnessing social justice. Coe's understanding of the prophetic role of the church is confined to this-worldly issues of protesting against social injustice. He also emphasizes the prophetic role of the church's interreligious engagement for social justice. While Coe regards the church as the starting point for developing Asian public theology, he does not incorporate the ecclesial voices of the grassroots Christians in articulating Asian public theology. It is not clear if Coe recognizes the doxological practices of the grassroots Christians could shape academic Asian public theology. His notion of the church is strong in its external life for social justice and is weak in its pastoral witness of preaching and social charity.

Third, Coe's understanding of salvation is limited to political liberation and his understanding of sin is confined to political oppression. This is understandable in the context where he developed Asian prophetic theology that resists against the Japanese and

[317] Song, *The Compassionate God,* xiii.

Chinese colonial rules. Despite his role as a pastor, as a moderator of the church assembly, and as an educator, Coe fails to do some integrative work for Asian theology.

## 2.5. Describing Asian Public Theology: Contemporary Approaches

If Coe and Thomas have laid the foundations of Asian public theology without using the term "public theology," then public theology is not entirely a new concept. However, some fresh perspectives of "Asian public theology" has recently gained its renewal and wide attention from academic circles through the establishment of the Global Network for Public Theology, founded in 2007.[318] I will look at some contemporary Asian theologians who describe some fresh perspectives of Asian public theology.

## 2.6. Felix Wilfred's Asian Public Theology

I have chosen Felix Wilfred as one of the interlocutors because he is the one who uses the explicit term "Asian public theology."[319] As we will see later, he distinguished his Asian public theology from other Asian public liberationists. Wilfred was born into a Catholic family in 1948. He is Emeritus Professor and the founding director of the Asian Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies at the University of Madras, Chennai. He is the first Indian to have been appointed by the Pope to be a member of the Theological Commission of Vatican. He also serves as an advisor to the Federation of Asian Bishop's Conferences

[318] Kim, "Public Theology in the History of Christianity," 40.

[319] See Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology*. Felix Wilfred, "Towards an Asian Public Theology," in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflections*., 74. 103-116. (2010). Felix Wilfred., ed. *Theology to Go Public* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2013). Felix Wilfred, "Asian Christianity and Public Life," in Felix Wilfred, ed, *Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*. Felix Wilfred., ed. 558- Simone Sin and Tong Wing-Sze, ed. 558-74 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

on matters of Christian doctrine.[320] He is the founding editor of the academic journal *International Journal of Asian Christianity* published by Brill. Wilfred helpfully describes the scope of Asian public theology as consisting of four crucial areas.

> In the first place, Asia stands in need of defense of freedom against state despotism of various kinds and grades. The second area of public concern is the defense of the poor from the tyranny of the market. The third important public concern is the creation of harmonious and non-exclusive communities. The fourth concern is that of protecting the environment.[321]

In order to play its public role in this fourfold scope, Wilfred defines Asian public theology in its broad sense. How does Wilfred define Asian public theology?

First, in order to understand what is meant by Asian public theology is, it is better to begin by discerning Wilfred's conceptualization of what public theology is not. As we have seen in the work of Kim[322] and those of other Asian theologians—Shoki Coe,[323] C.S. Song,[324] Vinoth Ramachandra,[325] Paul Chung,[326] and Hwa Yung,[327] Asian public theology is a discipline that starts in the church life and seeks its public relevance for political liberation. But for Wilfred, doing theology from the church life and seeking its relevance for public life is not truly Asian public theology.[328] According to him, a theology that starts from the church life and seeks its faith-motives for public life is not public theology. It is

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[320] For an overview of his life and work, see Patrick Gnanapragasam and Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, eds, *Negotiating Borders: Theological Explorations in the Global Era: Essays in Honour of Prof. Felix Wilfred* (Madras: ISPCK, 2008).

[321] Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology*, xii-xiv.

[322] Kim, *Public Theology in the Public Sphere*, 14-20.

[323] Coe, *Joint Action for Mission in Formosa.*

[324] Song, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction*, 83-113.,

[325] Ramachandra, *Subverting Global Myths*, 81-5.

[326] Paul S. Chung, *Public Theology in an Age of World Christianity: God's Mission as Word-Event* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1-10.

[327] Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas*? 8-10.

[328] Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology*. xvi-xix. Felix Wilfred, "On the Future of Asian Theology: Public Theologizing," in *Theology to Go Public,* ed. Felix Wilfred, 28-55 (Delhi: ISPCK, 2013).

rather a "theology for public life, which is a Western import."[329] He shows how "theology for public life" and "public theology" is different from each other:

> We need to draw a distinction between theology for public life and public theology. The former speaks about faith-motives and convictions for involving oneself as a believer in the affairs of the world—politics, economy, culture, violence, war, and peace. It is a discourse within the church about the world. On the other hand, in public theology, the concrete life-situation and the questions flowing from it are taken seriously, and an effort is made to respond to them in faith that understands itself in relation to others, and not as a private matter.[330]

He takes public life as the starting point for doing authentic Asian public theology. He said, "Asian public theological reflection needs to be open-ended and should begin from the world."[331] Wilfred criticizes the Second Vatican Council's vision of the church theology that moves from the Christian faith to the community of other faiths.[332] He also criticizes Aloysius Pieris and Michael Amaladoss for adopting a Western form of Asian liberation theology that impels the church to engage in public life.[333] Wilfred said, "In spite of the innovative character of Asian theology, it is a fact that theological reflections have remained mostly internal to the church and its pastoral needs."[334] In his ambitious book *Asian Public Theology,* Wilfred suggests that public life, not the church, should be the starting point for defining Asian public theology.[335] For Wilfred, it is more appropriate to start Asian public theology in public life because non-Christians actually initiate and practice Asian public theology, while Christians busy with their internal affairs.[336] Wilfred portrays Mahatma Gandhi as a good example. Wilfred said:

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[329] Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology*, xvi.
[330] Wilfred, "On the Future of Asian Theology," 35-6.
[331] Ibid., 35.
[332] Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology*, xvii.
[333] Ibid., xvii.
[334] Wilfred, *On the Future of Asian Theology*, 34.
[335] Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology*, xvii-xix. Here Wilfred also quotes Thomas's work, *The Secular Ideologies and the Secular Meaning of Christ*.
[336] Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology*, xix.

> This kind of Asian public theology originating from the non-Christian communities could make the Christian Gospel more relevant and meaningful to the larger public than what hundred years of preaching by Christians and Christian missionaries have succeeded to do.[337]

Second, Wilfred sees the kingdom of God as the foundational source and subalterns or margins as the prime site for doing Asian public theology.[338] Like Kim, Wilfred argues against a Christian's narrow concept of God's reign within the church and urges Asian Christians to see the wider scope of God's reign beyond the church. For Wilfred, the broad vision of God's reign opens up a larger horizon of doing Asian public theology with immense possibility to dialogue and interact with other religions on public issues of socio-political oppression, ethnic marginalization, and economic poverty.[339] He said:

> Public theology is strongly based on God's creation and on God's reign which have no boundaries. Besides, in public theology we try to create a discourse and language that is understandable to others, and therefore can be shared with them. This new language breaks forth when we hold aloft the truth of creation and the great vision of the Kingdom of God.[340]

Third, Wilfred describes a distinctive characteristic of Asian public theology as its interreligious public engagement with people of other religions. He succinctly said:

> Asian public theologies must be developed in the various religious traditions and there be continuing dialogue and exchange among these theologies. Christian theology is challenged to become truly a partner among the various public theologies of the continent sharing the same historical, social, political, and cultural situation and turn into a force of transformation for justice, peace, and harmony with the entire creation.[341]

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[337] Ibid.

[338] Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology*, xxiv. See also Felix Wilfred, *Margins: Site of Asian Theologies* (Madras: ISPCK, 2008).

[339] Wilfred, "On the Future of Asian Theology," 36-55. Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology*, 134.

[340] Wilfred, "On the Future of Asian Theology," 36.

[341] Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology*., 326.

The cosmic idea of God's reign in the public domain provides the meeting point of religions for their interreligious struggle and the goal is for the liberation of the margins.[342] Wilfred emphasizes that Asian public theology of religions is "in service of liberation."[343] In order to achieve liberation, Christians and people of other religions have to struggle together against political powers. Wilfred sees the Philippines and Korea *minjung*'s achievement of political liberation through their struggle as the examples.[344] Public theology and liberation are teleologically related, but the two are methodologically different from each other. Liberation theology starts in the church, and it moves to public life, while public theology starts in public life and it struggles for the common good in society. Wilfred suggests that the two are mutually beneficial for each other.[345]

### 2.6.1. Evaluating Wilfred's Approach

Unlike many Asian public theologians, Wilfred boldly proposes to start Asian public theology in public life. He justifies this approach by seeing the world as a pluralistic reign of God where people of other religions, especially social activists practice public theology, while Christians remain busy with their internal affairs of worship and divorce their private faith from socio-political involvement. For Wilfred, public theology originating from the engagement of non-Christians in the field could, perhaps, make the Christian gospel more relevant and meaningful to the larger public.[346] Wilfred's approach seems to be attractive, but such an approach is problematic.

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[342] Wilfred, "On the Future of Asian Theology," 37.

[343] See Felix Wilfred, "Public Theology in Service of Liberation," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflections*, 83, no. 7 (July 2019): 485-504.

[344] Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology*, 322.

[345] Wilfred, "On the Future of Asian Theology," 37.

[346] Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology*, xix.

First, it is missiologically problematic from the perspective of *Missio Dei*. *Missio Dei* is rooted in God's sending of the Son into the world as a missionary by the power of the Spirit. Mission (*missio* in Latin or *apostellein* in Greek) means sending the church into the world as imitating God's sending of Jesus into the world (Jn. 20:21-22; Acts 1:8).[347] The primary identity of the church is rooted in God's calling of the church out of the world for doxological relationship with God. God then sends the church to the world to witness His life and action. The church's full identity is rooted in this dialectical relationship between calling and sending. Starting public theology in public life weakens the primary identity of the church as a doxological community. Moreover, starting public theology in public life is contextually problematic in the context where the public space is dominated by people of other religions. In such a specific context, it is more appropriate to start in the ecclesial life and empower the marginal faith to engage in public life.

Second, Wilfred's approach is ecclesiologically problematic. Over-appreciating socio-political actions done by other faiths, especially social activists (Gandhi in this case), Wilfred does not recognize the grassroots Christians' ecclesial internal practices of doxology, congregational prayer, pastoral preaching and their external practices of evangelism and social charity. He only recognizes a theology of direct engagement in socio-political life as the only public theology relevant in Asia. In this regard, Wilfred is inspired by Thomas' vision of public theology.[348] Their theology is strong in socio-political involvement, but weak in pastoral engagement. Their understanding of the public praxis of

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[347] See Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 398-402. Bosch observes that the idea of mission as being sent to spread the good news of Jesus's life and message is carried through the New Testament 2,160 times. See also Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Mission of Jesus and the Disciples According to the Fourth Gospel: With Implications for the Fourth Gospel's Purpose and the Mission of the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 27-37.

[348] Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology*, xix.

faith is confined to its socio-political involvement in dialogue with people of other faiths who practice public theology in the non-ecclesial life.[349]

Third, in reaching out to the world, the church must not see people of other faiths as the objects of conversion. This is Wilfred's concern.[350] Wilfred suggests that Asian public theology should take a shift in "understanding mission not in terms of salvation or damnation or not in opposition to other religious traditions, but in terms of relationship with them."[351] It is necessary for Christians to cooperate with other faiths for the liberation of the margins. But this does not mean that the church should limit its mission to dialogue. Dialogue is one of the actions of mission, but not the end goal. Wilfred's understanding of the mission of the church is confined to the church's public practices of interreligious dialogue. He rejects the role of evangelism in mission. For instance, Paul practices interreligious dialogue in Athens and its impacts on the conversion of some dialogue partners (Acts 17:23-34). I will come back to this issue in the following chapter.

Moreover, Wilfred's understanding of salvation is limited to social justice or political liberation. He does not address the significance of the cross of Christ for Asian public theology of reconciliation. For him, social justice or political liberation is the only soteriological need in Asia. While political liberation of the oppressed is urgent in Asia where the minority Christians and other minority religious groups suffer at the hands of corrupted political powers, we cannot limit the broad concept of God's salvation to political liberation. God's salvation encompasses a comprehensive concept of reconciliation,

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[349] Ibid.
[350] Ibid., xviii-xix.
[351] Felix Wilfred, "Theology of South Asia," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*, ed. David F. Ford and Rachel Muers, 3rd ed. 502-17 (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005).

healing, forgiveness, and so on. Our concern is to address how these soteriological terms integrate God's broad drama of salvation in the world.

## 2.7. Aloysius Pieris's Asian Public Theology of Religions and Liberation

I have chosen Aloysius Pieris of Sri Lanka (1934-) as one of the interlocutors because he is one of the most eminent of Asian liberation theologians and his commitment for Christian-Buddhist dialogue is significant.[352] It is said that Pieris first studied at Sacred Heart College in India (1959) and earned a B.A degree in Sanskrit and Pali from the University of London (1961), and an STL degree from the Pontifical Theological Faculty in Naples, France (1966). He taught Asian religions at the Gregorian University in Rome for a year and explored a possibility for a doctorate in Buddhist studies at a Western university. However, his zeal for developing Asian theology in dialogue with Asian Buddhism at an everyday level eventually led him to studying a PhD in Buddhism at the University of Sri Lanka. In 1972, he became the first Asian Christian to gain a Ph.D in Buddhism under the supervision of a Buddhist monk. He is the founding director of the Tulana Dialogue Centre at Gonawala-Kelaniya.[353]

It was Pieris who first proposed the thesis that a serious theological inquiry in Asia should deal with its two twofold reality: religious diversity and mass poverty. In his landmark book *An Asian Theology of Liberation*,[354] Pieris states how the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) shaped his vision for theologizing Asian theology of liberation:

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[352] R.S. Sugirtharajah, ed. *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Trends* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 141.

[353] Robert Crusz, et al, *Encounter with the World: Essays in Honor of Aloysius Pieris S.J* (Colombo: The Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue, 2004), 643-69. Aloysius Pieris, "Two Encounters in My Theological Journey," in *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology,* ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah, 141-46. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994).

[354] Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*.

> The Second Vatican Council was for me a point of departure rather than a point of arrival, as I joined my Asian colleagues over twenty years ago in the challenging task of applying the conciliar teachings to our Asian context and of trying to give concrete Asian form to the spirit of the council.[355]

In theologizing Asian theology of liberation, Pieris takes seriously the twin poles of Asian realities: religious diversity (Christian-Buddhist encounter) and mass poverty. The first pole calls for interreligious dialogue and the second pole calls for liberation. These twin poles are the driving forces for Pieris's distinctive contribution to Asian public theology of Christian-Buddhist interreligious engagement and liberation. Pieris's deliberate dialogue with Buddhism is principally related to his main theological concern to develop a contextual Asian public/political theology of religions and liberation.[356]

First, "liberating Christology of religions,"[357] is the foundation for Pieris's Asian public theology of religions and liberation. His concept of liberating Christology of religions is rooted in two related images: "Christology of liberation" (the liberating person of Christ) and "liberation of Christology" (the liberating action of Christ).[358] While the former image focuses on the Synoptic Gospels conveying historical event of Christ's humanistic identification with the poor for their liberation, the latter focuses on Christ's cosmic solidarity with the interreligious community of the poor, Pieris brings Christ's political act of liberation in dialogue with the Buddha as a liberator.[359] Central to Pieris'

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[355] Ibid., xv.

[356] See Kenneth Fleming, *Asian Christian Theologians in Dialogue with Buddhism* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 201-65. Aloysius Pieris, "Political Theology in Asia," in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology,* ed. Peter M. Scott and William T. Cavanaugh, 256-70 (Hoboken, NY: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004).

[357] Pieris, *The Genesis of Asian Theology of Liberation*, 169.

[358] Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom*, 124. See also David Tombs, "Liberating Christology: Images of Christ in the Work of Aloysius Pieris," in *Images of Christ: Ancient and Modern,* eds. Stanley E. Porter, Michael A. Hayes, and David Tombs, 173-88 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) here 179.

[359] Aloysius Pieris, "The Buddha and the Christ: Mediators of Liberation," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions,* ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, 162-77. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987).

vision is that Christ's and the Buddha's praxis of resistance against social injustices shape the public role of Christians and Buddhists in the liberation movement.

Second, Pieris suggests that there are two ways of witnessing the prophetic role of the liberating Christ in the Asian context of human poverty and suffering. One is a "Christo-struggle to be poor and the other is a Christo-struggle for the poor."[360] Pieris refers to the "struggle to be poor" as a Christian spiritual embodiment of Christ's humiliated solidarity with the poor in terms of renunciation of the world. Pieris calls this "voluntary poverty," which Christians should act through the spiritual renunciation of the comfortable ecclesial life.[361] On the other hand, Pieris refers to the "struggle for the poor" as the Christian social public embodiment of Christ's prophetic struggle against political powers.[362] Pieris calls this "forced poverty."[363] The two are interrelated to each other.

The interrelated idea of Christ's struggle to be poor and Christ's struggle for the poor is rooted in God's cosmic reign of liberating action for all suffering human community.[364] Rejecting a narrow view of Christ's exclusive solidarity with the suffering churches, Pieris emphasizes Christ's cosmic solidarity with all victims of poverty. This opens up for the Christian-Buddhist social involvement in the liberation movement.[365] Vietnamese Buddhist activist Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-2022) inspires Pieris's vision of the public role of Buddhism.[366] Hanh is often cited for his approach to Buddhism as a public

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[360] Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 15.
[361] Ibid., 20-23.,
[362] Ibid., 15.,
[363] Ibid., 20-23.,
[364] Aloysius Pieris, *God's Reign for God's Poor: A Return to the Jesus Formula* (Kelaniya: Tulana Jubilee Publications, 1999), 1-18. See also Pieris, *The Genesis of Asian Theology of Liberation*, 211-16.
[365] Pieris, *The Genesis of Asian Theology of Liberation*, 168-188.
[366] Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 28; 35-68.

religion.[367] Hanh coined the term "engaged Buddhism" in 1963 to show the public role of Buddhism.[368] In *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, co-editor Christopher Queen states how the term "engaged Buddhism" takes a paradigm shift in seeing Buddhism not just as a meditative religion, but as an engaged religion.[369] Given the context that the 1960s were the golden ages of Asian theology of liberation, Hanh's new approach to Buddhism shaped the Christian new images of Buddhism.[370]

Thus, Pieris argues that the Christian praxis of Christo-struggle to be poor through the spiritual renunciation and of Christo-struggle for the poor through the social action is complementary to the Buddhist spiritual struggle to be poor in terms of renunciation of the world and of the struggle for the poor in terms of social resistance against political powers. Pieris takes some engaged Buddhists and activist Christians in Sri Lanka as prime examples due to their spiritual and social struggles against political powers.[371]

Third, Pieris envisions that the interreligious practice of the struggle to be poor and of the struggle against political powers leads to the liberation of the poor from socio-political oppression. Pieris emphasizes that liberation can be achieved only through the interreligious struggle against political powers or societal sin, which deprive the margins. He criticizes the pastoral work of social charity and preaching, which does involve in the struggle against societal sin. The goal of the Christo-praxis to be poor and the praxis for

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[367] Quoted in Christopher S. Queen, "Introduction: The Shapes and Sources of Engaged Buddhism," in Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King, eds, *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996): 1-44.

[368] Ibid., 2.,

[369] Ibid.,2.,

[370] Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 28; 35-68.

[371] Pieris, *The Genesis of Asian Theology of Liberation,* 197-201. Pieris, "The Buddha and the Christ: Mediators of Liberation," 163. Aloysius Pieris, "Religion and Politics in Sri Lanka—The Role of the Sinhala Monk," *Dialogue*, n.s. 3, no. 3. (1976): 113-6.

the poor against political powers is to liberate the oppressed from the oppressors. We will now explore the Spirit-empowered public witness of Pentecostal public theology.

### 2.7.1. Evaluating Pieris's Approach

First, Pieris's Asian public theology of liberation is deeply rooted in Christology. His understanding of Christology is confined to the liberating praxis and cosmic Lordship of Christ. He sees Christ as the cosmic liberator of all humans. He then brings the liberating praxis of the cosmic Christ into dialogue with the Buddha as liberators. He sees Jesus and the Buddha as equal liberators. Pieris does not accept Jesus's divinity.[372] For Pieris, the uniqueness of Christ lies in His liberating praxis for liberation of the poor. Therefore, for Pieris, the cosmic Lord and the historical Jesus who labored among the poor in the Gospels, are the one and the same, sharing identical purpose. Buddhists also have a liberating gnosis of the liberating praxis of the cosmic Lordship.

While I appreciate Pieris's emphases on the cosmic Lordship and liberating praxis of Christ and find them insightful for developing Asian public theology of religions and liberation in the setting of Christian-Buddhist dialogue, I am not satisfied with his limited understanding of Christ merely as a human liberator. In order to meet for the interreligious exchanges of liberating praxis for the poor, Pieris increases the Buddha and decreases Jesus Christ by rejecting Jesus's divinity.[373] It is necessary for the church to discern Christ's cosmic presence and liberating activity in the Asian pluralistic and public contexts, but we cannot limit Jesus as a liberator. Jesus can holistically be seen as a reconciler, redeemer, and healer. Pieris's notion of soteriology is limited to liberation.

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[372] Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 15-23
[373] Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom*, 129.

Second, with his overemphasis on Christ's liberation of the poor, Pieris rejects the possibility of reconciliation. He makes a claim: (1) "the irreconcilable antagonism between God and mammon, and (2) the irrevocable covenant between God and the poor (i.e., a defense pact against their common enemy: mammon)."[374] While Jesus takes a stand with the poor and the oppressed, we should also accept the fact that He resists the oppressive systems and opens the door for reconciliation between the victims and the oppressors. Since Jesus serves as a reconciling victim between God and hostile humanity by the power of the Spirit, He stands in solidarity with the victims and resists their oppressors. The goal of resisting the oppressors is to restore justice and reconciliation between the community of victims and the perpetrators. I will elaborate on this later.

Finally, while Pieris's view of Christ's inclusive solidarity with the poor from different religious groups and his commitment to their socio-economic liberationist hermeneutic is admirable, he does not address the reality of how some majority religious and ethnic groups become another oppressors of the minority ethnic groups. His home country of Sri Lanka is famous for the majority Sinhalese ethnic Buddhist nationalism and violence against the minority Tamil ethnic Christians and Hindus. However, Pieris fails to address what Sugirtharajah calls "a plurality of oppressions."[375] Although masses may be economically poor in most parts of Asia, some religiously dominant groups are oppressors of the minority ethnic and religious groups. Pieris fails to address how the economically poor but religiously and ethnically majority groups could be political oppressors of the minority ethnic groups. Pieris's writings fail to address the roots of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism and he praises Buddhism as a liberating religion.

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[374] Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 120-21.
[375] Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 120.

If the true vision of public theology is not just for one public aspect of socio-economic liberation, but for the larger aspect of the common good, Asian Christians should reconsider the public issues of Buddhist nationalism and ethnic conflict. In the last chapter, I will take up these urgent issues and explore how moral Buddhists and Christians should envision the public goal of ethnic reconciliation and liberation.

## 2.8. Amos Yong's Asian Pentecostal Public Theology

Last, but not the least, we will now turn attention to the youngest and the most prolific Asian Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong (1965-).[376] Yong is not only prolific, but he is also creative and constructive in advancing the new face of Pentecostal scholarship in the era of World Christianity.[377] He was born in Malaysia and immigrated to the USA at the age of ten. Having been born and raised in Southeast Asia, trained, and ministered in the US as an educator, pastor, and author, Yong makes a relationship between Asian theology in Asia and Asian-American theology.[378] Although he lived in Malaysia for ten years only, he does not divorce his writings from the Asian contextual issues. I have chosen Yong as one of my interlocutors because of his distinctive contribution to three main areas of Asian Pentecostal public theology of religions.[379]

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[376] Christopher A. Stephenson, *An Amos Yong Reader* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), xi-xii.

[377] See Wolfgang Vondey and Martin William Mittelstadt, eds. *The Theology of Amos Yong and The New Face of Pentecostal Scholarship* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

[378] Amos Yong, *The Future of Evangelical Theology: Soundings from the Asian American Diaspora* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014); Amos Yong, "Diasporic Discipleship from West Asia through Southeast Asia and Beyond: A Dialogue with 1 Peter," in *Asia Journal of Theology*, 32, no. 2 (October 2018): 3-21.

[379] Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Academic, 2005), 235-266. See especially chapter 6, "Public Theology, the Religions, and the Identity of the Spirit.

First, he contributes to the area of Christian-Buddhist dialogue.[380] Second, he brings the strong role of Pneumatology in formulating Asian public theology of religions and hospitality.[381] Unlike the aforementioned Asian theologians who focus on the role of Christology in developing Asian public theology of religions and liberation, Yong brings the important role of the Spirit in developing Asian public theology.[382] Third, he addresses the Asian contextual issues of both political powers and spiritual powers and adds the role of healing to Asian public theology that is grounded in Christ's threefold office (prophet, priest, and king).[383] Seeing himself both as an evangelical and ecumenical theologian, the tone of Yong's reflections on public theology is evangelically sound and the scope of his critical engagement with other Christian traditions and Buddhism is ecumenically broad.[384]

After obtaining his PhD from Boston University in religion and theology in 1999, Yong first taught at Bethel Seminary in Minnesota. He then taught theology at Regent University in Virginia until 2014. He is currently Dean of the School of Theology and of the School of Intercultural Studies and Professor of Theology and Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary. He is a former President of the Society for Pentecostal Studies (2008-09) and co-edited its journal *Pneuma* (2011-2014). Yong has written widely that it is not easy to systematize his thought. But we will look at the most notable characteristics of his though on Pentecostal public theology of religions, liberation, and healing.

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[380] Amos Yong, *Pneumatology and the Christian-Buddhist Dialogue: Does the Spirit Blow through the Middle Way*? Studies in Systematic Theology, vol. II (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

[381] Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor*, Faith Meets Faith (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 1-14. He discussed the Sinhalese majority Buddhist-Tamil minority Christian conflict and the role of religions in hospitality.

[382] Amos Yong, *In the Days of Caesar: Pentecostalism and Political Theology*, Sacra Doctrina 6. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

[383] Ibid., 95-98. Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirit (s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 276-310.

[384] Yong, *The Future of Evangelical Theology*, 33-249; Yong, "Diasporic Discipleship from West Asia through Southeast Asia and Beyond," 3-21.

First and foremost, the overarching theme in his writings is best described as a "Pneumatological imagination" in his first book *Discerning the Spirit (s)*.[385] As a Pentecostal theologian, Yong is dissatisfied with the Christocentric public theology of religions and liberation without paying sufficient attention to the anointing role of the Spirit in Jesus's public mission (Lk. 4:18-19). He, therefore, proposes to go beyond the Christological impasse by embracing both Christ and the Spirit as the two hands of God's providence of public life.[386] In his landmark book *Spirit-Word-Community* (2002),[387] which lays the hermeneutical foundations of Yong's subsequent writings, he proposes how the Lukan gospel narrative of the anointing presence of the Spirit in Jesus's public mission shapes a Christian imagination of Asian public theology. Yong explained:

> Jesus's ensuing public ministry is no less superintend by the Spirit. Being full of and led by the Spirit (Lk. 4:1), Jesus overcomes the temptation of the devil in the wilderness and returns to Galilee in the power of the Spirit to begin his ministry (4:14). As he himself declares from the prophet Isiah (Isa. 61:1), Jesus clearly understands his mission to be conducted under the anointing of the Spirit of God.[388]

Since Jesus's public ministry of teaching, preaching, healing, exorcising, liberating, delivering works is the result of the Spirit's power,[389] Yong suggests that public theology should begin with the Christian's confession of the Spirit-led public mission of Jesus. In a sense, Yong's approach to public theology is confessional. He suggests that the ecclesial

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[385] Yong, *Discerning the Spirit (s)*, 29. For his subsequent development of the "pneumatological imagination," see in his triology, Amos Yong, *The Dialogical Spirit: Christian Reason and Theological Method in the Third Millennium* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Book, 2014), 1,3-4, 13-14, 114, 117. Amos Yong, *The Missiological Spirit: Christian Mission Theolog in the Third Millennium* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Book, 2014), 2,4,15, 109-111, 222, 229-230. Amos Yong, *The Hermeneutical Spirit: Theological Interpretation and Scriptural Imagination for the 21st Century* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Book, 2017), 16, 35, 72, 76, 83.

[386] Yong, *Discerning the Spirit (s),* 311. See also Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 13-104.

[387] Amos Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2002).

[388] Ibid., 29.

[389] Yong, *In the Days of Casers*, 368-381.

community of faith should be seen as the starting context for imagining Asian public theology.[390] As we will see later, the ecclesial praxis of praise, preaching, and prayer shapes the way we witness the work of Christ by the power of the Spirit in public life.

Second, in his book *In the Days of Caesar: Pentecostalism and Political Theology*,[391] the first academic book of its kind to come from a distinctly Pentecostal perspective on political or public theology, Yong acknowledges that "in some ways, much of global Pentecostalism remains apolitical."[392] By apolitical Pentecostals, Yong means those who divorce their faith from the public issues of political life. As Yong observes, they are influenced by dispensationalism to the extent that they take literally Jesus's saying like "my kingdom is not of this world" (Jn. 18:36). Their belief is driven by the dichotomy between secular and sacred, this-worldly and other-worldly, anticipating the imminent destruction of this-worldly and the rapture of the church.[393] Yong said:

> Within such an apocalyptic scenario, energies directed toward the political are misplaced; instead, they need to be channeled toward ministry to the souls of humankind, for "what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mk. 8:36; cf. Matt. 16:26). Unsurprisingly, Pentecostals who have been shaped by dispensationalist eschatology have emphasized missions and evangelism over political engagement. An apocalyptic mentality suggests that things are going to get worse before they get better, and they will only get better after the return of Jesus Christ, since only he can right the wrongs in the world.[394]

Yong confesses that having been raised in a context of such an apolitical Pentecostalism as a son of a Pentecostal pastor, he himself thought that "being Pentecostal and being political were contradictory." The event of 9/11 was a point of departure for his new interest in

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[390] Ibid., 275-310. In our conversations with Amos Yong at the Myanmar Theology Seminar Webinar, January 8, 2021, he said that "any kind of comparative and public theology should begin in the Christian community and move to public life to engage in dialogue with other religious traditions."

[391] Yong, *In the Days of Caesar*.

[392] Ibid., 4.

[393] Ibid., 4-5.

[394] Ibid., 5.

Pentecostal political or public theolog.[395] He then asked a fresh question from a Pentecostal perspective: can there be any "political Pentecostalism" as an alternative solution?" Yong believes that there is an alternative way. In order to move beyond an apolitical Pentecostalism, Yong attempted to correct stereotypes of Pentecostalism by understanding the broad concept of a "political Pentecostalism" theologically. He said:

> The political is not limited to the formal dimension of politics understood in terms of government or statecraft. But my scope is much broader, taking off from the Greek word *polis*, which refers not only to the ancient city-state but also to the ways in which social and cultural life was organized. The political thus refers to human life in the public square, where the various dimensions of religion, culture, society, economics, and government converge and interact.[396]

It is in this broad and comprehensive sense of the relationship between *polis* and the public sphere that Yong uses the terms "political theology" and "public theology" interchangeably.[397] This leads us to the heart of Yong's Pentecostal public theology.

Third, Yong uses the Lukan narrative of Acts 2 as the foundation for imagining a Pentecostal public theology of the Spirit-empowered apostolic public witness. As we have shown, Yong uses the Lukan gospel narrative of the Nazareth Manifesto (Lk. 4:18-19) as the foundation for imagining the Spirit-anointed public witness of Jesus. Put together, the Lukan narrative of both Luke 4:18-19 and Acts 2 are the methodological foundations for what Yong calls a "Pentecostal public theology of the Spirit."[398] He said:

> Our goal is to understand the implications of Luke's own political perspectives for the task of political or public theology, especially as representative of the early church, so that we can consider how a distinctively Pentecostal reading of Luke-

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[395] Ibid., xvii.

[396] Ibid., xix.

[397] Ibid., 3-4. See also Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, 235-302. I also gained some insights about the relationship between Pentecostal political theology and public theology from Amos Yong's recent webinar presentation on "Pentecostal Christianities and their Public Lives: Many Tongues, Many Social Practices," hosted by the Oxford Centre for Religion and Public Life, January 11, 2021.

[398] Stephenson, ed, *An Amos Yong Reader*, 199-233.

> Acts might generate a creative hermeneutical approach for contemporary Christian beliefs within and practices amid the political.[399]

Yong's Pentecostal public theology is rooted in the intersection between the Spirit-anointed public witness of Christ and the Spirit-empowered public witness of the apostles. In his book *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*,[400] Yong proposes a Pentecostal public theology by claiming: "if the Spirit has been poured upon all flesh, the public of theological reflection as wide as humankind."[401] The public dimension of the Spirit's outpouring on all flesh opens up a vision of Pentecostal public theology. Since the Spirit's outpouring is public, the apostolic Christian public engagement is imperative.[402] Yong's understanding of the role of the Spirit is not confined to the internal life of the church. He takes the public presence of the Spirit as the foundation for the apostolic church's public engagement.

Fourth, Yong takes the Lukan narrative of many tongues (Acts 2:4) as source for the multiple forms and practices of the Spirit-empowered apostolic Christian witness of Christ's prophetic, priestly, kingly, and healing action in public and pluralistic life.[403] This demands an apostolic Christian dialogical and hospitable engagement with Buddhists.[404] Yong's main concern is: how do Christians and Buddhists play a public role in God's public providence of political liberation and physical healing?[405] Yong does not deny the role of evangelism and apologetics in the Christian dialogical witness,[406] but he suggests

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[399] Yong, *In the Day of Caesar*, 99.

[400] Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh.*

[401] 236.

[402] Ibid., 235-302. See also Amos Yong, *The Cosmic Breath: Spirit and Nature in the Christianity-Buddhism-Science Trialogue* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

[403] Yong, *The Missiological Spirit*, 195-210. Yong, *In the Days of Caesar*, 96-98.

[404] Yong, *Pneumatology and the Christian-Buddhist Dialogue*, 131-80. Yong, *Hospitality and the Other*.

[405] Ibid. Amos Yong, "On Doing Theology and Buddhology: A Spectrum of Christian Proposals," *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 31. (2011): 103-18; Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, 235.

[406] Yong, *The Missiological Spirit*, 164-67.

that the Lukan narrative of the Spirit's outpouring on all flesh and of many tongues could also imply the many religious and ethical practices of Christian and Buddhist being involved in God's public providence of life.[407] His Pneumatological approach to public theology of religions enables him to recognize Buddhist ethical participation in God's liberating and healing life of the world. Yong said:

> A Pentecostal-charismatic [public] theology of religions should therefore free the human beings for participation in the interreligious dialogue. The goal of such dialogue is not a mere agreement on similarities that ignore serious differences. Rather the activity of apologetics needs to be included in acknowledging such conversations to be in the service of righteousness, peace and truth that characterize the kingdom of God.[408]

Yong suggests that there are three aspects to the Christian-Buddhist public engagement "the interpersonal, the communal, and the socio-political."[409] The first aspect of interpersonal engagement embodies God's hospitable acceptance of human community. Yong refers to the "Spirit of hospitality" as a model for the practice of Christian-Buddhist interpersonal hospitality. Christians serve not only as welcoming hosts, but also as vulnerable guests in their interactions with Buddhists.[410] The second aspect of interreligious engagement relates to building a community of charity together. The third aspect of engagement directs toward liberating the oppressed from political powers.[411]

Fifth, on the other hand, Yong suggests the need of liberating people from spiritual powers. For Yong, a Pentecostal public theology does not just confront political powers for a vision of political liberation, but it also addresses the public issues of spiritual powers

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[407] Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, 235-302. Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community*, 279-86.
[408] Yong, *Discerning the Spirit (s),* 313.
[409] Yong, *The Missiological Spirit*, 160.
[410] Ibid., 160-61. Yong, *Hospitality and the Other*, 99-160. Amos Yong, "Spirit of Hospitality," in *Missiology: An International Review*, XXXV, no. 1. (January 2007): 55-73.
[411] Yong, *Discerning the Spirit (s),* 313. Yong, *In the Days of Caesar*, 129-135; 354-358. Yong, *The Missiological Spirit*, 151-67.

for a vision of healing. He said, "Pentecostals have experienced Jesus as saving them not only from their sins, but also from their sicknesses and diseases."[412] According to Yong, Pentecostal public theology of soteriology is holistic.[413] Pentecostals understand salvation not only as liberation of the oppressed from political powers, but also as healing of the body, and as deliverance of people from spiritual powers.[414] In the global south, a Pentecostal understanding of salvation as healing of the sick body and deliverance of the people from spiritual powers is popular among grassroots people. To be fair, Yong also criticizes Pentecostals' individualistic understanding of salvation.

Finally, Yong's approach to Pentecostal public theology is rooted in the interrelationship between right beliefs and holistic practices. While orthodoxy or belief in the outpouring of Spirit on all flesh is the key identity for Pentecostals, practicing right beliefs both in the ecclesial internal sphere and in the external sphere is imperative.[415] Pentecostal public theology lies in the relationship between the internal doxological practices of worship, preaching, healing, and dancing with the Spirit and the external dialogical practices of charity and justice for the margins by the power of the Spirit. The interlink between the doxological praxis and dialogical praxis is central for the church's eschatological identity and public vocation between now and not yet. Yong stated:

> The church's liturgical imagination enables its eschatological performance in the public sphere as a people of prayer, praise, worship sacraments, and even exorcism—all of which combine to bear witness to the powers of the way of the cross in anticipation of cosmic restoration and rehabilitation to come.[416]

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[412] Yong, *In the Days of Caesar*, 123.
[413] Ibid., 126-129; Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community*, 279-6.
[414] Yong, *In the Days of Caesar*, 123.
[415] Yong, *Hospitality and the Other*, 38-50.
[416] Yong, *In the Days of Caesar*, 354.

Yong suggests that it is worship that shapes the Christian doxological and priestly identity and their public and dialogical witness to the kingly, prophetic, and priestly work of Christ by the power of the Spirit. In the next chapter, we will take up these themes and develop grassroots Asian public theology. More importantly, Yong, as a Pentecostal, emphasizes that the public dialogical witness of liberation-orthopraxis should be shaped by the Spirit-filled orthopathy (spiritual compassion). Our compassionate heart for the suffering people leads to our practical hands of performing our beliefs in the society.[417]

### 2.8.1. Evaluating Yong's Approach

There is much in Yong's writings that is worthy of admiration and needs to be endorsed as salutary for developing the Spirit-led Asian public theology. The majority of Asian theologians, as noted above, are strong in utilizing Christ as the foundation and model for Asian public theology, ignoring the role of the Spirit. Yong comes up with a strong reemphasis on the role of the Spirit in Christian public witness. Especially, his focus on multiple forms of Christian witness as the various gifts of the Spirit is necessary for recognizing the grassroots Christians' multiple witnesses. However, one could argue that Yong's approach to Asian public theology is stronger in Pneumatology than in Christology. This is not to suggest that Yong separate the Spirit from Christ. As a trinitarian theologian, he holds the two, but he just prioritizes the Spirit over Christ.[418] Grassroots Asian public theology needs a robust trinitarian public theology that holds the equal role of Christ and the Spirit in Christian public witness of the gospel of salvation.

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[417] Ibid., 155-5. Yong, *Hospitality and the Other*, 38-50. Yong, *The Missiological Spirit*, 204-10.
[418] Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community*, 219-76. Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, 235-66.

The second strength of Yong is his utilization of the Christian community as the context and starting point for doing Asian public theology.[419] This is contradictory to Wilfred's approach. I agree with Yong that we should start Christian public theology in the ecclesial life. Starting public theology in the Christian community enables us to recognize the ecclesial praxis of praise, preaching, and preaching as the primary means of Christian public witness. However, it is not clear if Yong incorporates the ethnographic voices and lived experiences of the grassroots Christians in articulating Asian Pentecostal public theology. Although he rightly proposes to start theology in the ecclesial life, he seems to articulate public theology as academic public theology without engaging with the grassroots community. If public theology is a collaborative work, we must engage with the grassroots Christians as co-doers of public theology by recognizing their lived experiences and ecclesial practices of prayer, worship, preaching, and public witnesses.

Third, Yong has a unique contribution to Asian Pentecostal public theology. Unlike some Asian theologians whose approaches are not much different from Western public theologians, who do not seriously consider spiritual powers as Asian contextual issues, Yong addresses spiritual powers (not just political powers) as contextual issues for Asian contexts. While some liberationists tend to focus on the problem of political powers, Yong considers the problematic role of spiritual powers in oppressing grassroots people on the ground. In response to this, Yong helpfully shows how the Spirit plays a role in healing and liberating grassroots people from the oppression of spiritual powers. In his recent essay, "The Spirit, the Common Good, and the Public Sphere," Yong said:

> Public theologians in the present time surely ought to be discursively articulate, but they may and perhaps should be, as led by the Spirit of Pentecost, also practically engaged. Such apostolic insights would then urge that public theological and

[419] Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community*, 275-310.

> intellectual work not only formulate abstract vision for the common good but also seeks to socially, materially, and concretely actualize such in our midst.[420]

While Yong's academic reflections on the role of spiritual powers and of the Spirit's healing in public theology and his vision for public theologians' engagement with public life are admirable, it is not clear whether he had done some ethnographic engagements with grassroots Christians who experience the oppression of spiritual powers. Grassroots Christians' voices and their lived experiences are not seen in his prolific writings. It is fair to say that his main interlocutors for his writings are overtly academic theologians.

### 2.9. Hlaing Bwa's Burmese Public Theology of Religion and Liberation

I have chosen Saw Haling Bwa (1955-) because of his contribution to a Burmese public theology of religions and liberation. Bwa is a Karen Baptist theologian. He was born in Christian family. He first studied at the Myanmar Institute of Theology in Yangon and then at the University of Yangon. He then went to Germany to pursue a PhD at the University of Regensburg and wrote a dissertation on the Theology of T.F Torrance[421] under the supervision of Hans Schwarz.[422] Since the completion of a PhD, he serves as a professor of systematic theology at Myanmar Institute of Theology.

First, Bwa takes religious conflict and socio-political suffering as the key issue for developing a Burmese public theology of religions and liberation. Bwa thinks that religious

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[420] Amos Yong, "The Spirit, the Common Good, and the Public Sphere," in *Public Intellectuals and the Common Good: Christian Thinking for Human Flourishing,* eds. Todd C. Ream, Jerry Pattengale, and Christopher J. Devers, 21-41 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021).

[421] Saw Hlaing Bwa, *Thomas Forsyth Torrance: A Bridge Builder between Theology and Science* (Brno: L. Marek, 2004).

[422] See Saw Hlaing Bwa, "The Problem of Evil: A Theological and Scientific Assessment," in Doing Theology in a Global Context: A Festschrift for Rev. Prof. Dr. Hans Schwarz, ed. Craig L. Nessan and Thomas Kothmann, 169-176. (Bangalore: ATC, 2009).

conflict arises when the Buddhist religion is politicized as a weapon of social and political control in terms of violating the rights of non-Burman minorities.[423] Buddhism plays a controlling role in religious nationalism by dominating and assimilating the ethnic minority Christians to their Bamar cultures. As Bwa states, this is evidenced by the fact that the political power, in collaboration with grassroots Buddhist nationalists, control over the ethnic minorities.[424] This leads us to the second point.

Second, Bwa recognizes the practice of Christian-Buddhist interreligious dialogue as the only solution to religious conflict. He criticizes a traditional monological practice of mission as converting Buddhists and re-considers mission as dialogue. Bwa asserts that the church's practice of interreligious dialogue is not only an embodiment of the dialogical God, but also a solution to religious conflict.[425] Such a concept is demonstrated in his article "Why Interfaith Dialogue is Essential for Myanmar's Future." In this article, Bwa explores the public role of religions in resolving religious conflict. He said:

> Political solutions alone cannot resolve a century of political suppression. This is where religions can enter, playing a vital role for the embodiment of human rights. Religious beliefs are a fundamental way in which people organize their life and their personal and social development. By reducing the role of religion and restricting it, society could miss an essential element of being human.[426]

Bwa's vision of Christian-Buddhist interreligious dialogue for religious peace

is inspired by a Swiss theologian Hans Kung in theory and a Sri Lankan theologian Aloysius Pieris in practice. In his essay "Myanmar: Religious Presence in the Public

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[423] Bwa, "Myanmar: Religious Presence in the Public Space," 181.

[424] Ibid., 181.

[425] Saw Hlaing Bwa, "Mission: Christo-Praxis in Myanmar," *Missio Dei: Journal of Mission and Evangelism*, 2. (February 2008): 1-26, here 4.

[426] Saw Hlaing Bwa, "Why Interfaith Dialogue is Essential for Myanmar's Future," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs,* vol. 13, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 71-78, here at 74.

Space," Bwa quotes Küng's dictum: "there will be no peace in the world without peace among religions."[427] For Bwa, religious peace cannot be promoted against religions, but with them. Since religious peace can be promoted only through dialogue, he believes that the future of a peaceful society in Myanmar depends on Christian-Buddhist dialogue. But Bwa does not explicitly suggest which group of Buddhism should be our dialogue partners. As I will show in chapter five, there are at least two groups of Buddhism in Myanmar: Buddhists who promote nationalism and Buddhists who resist nationalism.

Nevertheless, Bwa's public vision of Christian-Buddhist dialogue leads him to the heart of his social commitment. He has promoted Christian-Buddhist dialogue through the Judson Research Center (JRC) since 2003. The JRC has promoted what Bwa calls the "academic Christian-Buddhist dialogue" in collaboration with some international universities: the International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University and the Program on Peace Building and Rights of Columbia University.[428] The JRC conducted the forums on these themes: "A Critical Appraisal of Reconciliation from the Buddhist and Christians Perspectives" (August 28, 2015); "Loving Kindness" (August 29, 2014); "Interfaith Dialogue: The Religious Roosts of Social Harmony (January 19, 2014); "Towards a Better Harmonious Society through Buddhist-Christian Dialogue" (October 30, 2011). In chapter five, I will unpack these interreligious themes and issues.

Third, Bwa's vision of a Burmese public theology of religions and liberation is inspired by Pieris's Asian theology of Christian-Buddhist interreligious liberation. Like Pieris and other Asian liberationists, Bwa uses Christo-praxis as the basis for a Burmese

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[427] Bwa, "Myanmar: Religious Presence in the Public Space," 191. For Kung's dictum, see Hans Kung, *Global Responsibility: In Search for a New World Order*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Continuum, 1993), 76; 89; 105.

[428] Ibid., 91.

public theology. In his essay, "Mission: Christo-Praxis in Myanmar," Bwa employs Christo-praxis as the model for the Christian praxis of liberating the oppressed.[429] Bwa's understanding of Christo-praxis is rooted in the cosmic idea of Christ's liberating work for the oppressed and the poor in the public sphere beyond the church. He said, "Christo-praxis as God's salvific-liberative work can be discerned throughout the religio-political context in Burma and Christians are called to participate in this public arena."[430]

Bwa suggests that Christians should discern Christ's liberating praxis and cosmic presence in public life by learning from the engaged Buddhists.[431] While praising the Buddhist liberation movement, Bwa criticizes Christians who rely on the Western-financed development projects for the charity of the poor.[432] He also criticizes some Christians who see conflict as the sign of the end time. Bwa asserts that political suffering in Myanmar is rather caused by "moral evils."[433] The task of the church is not about the salvation of the lost souls, but about political liberation. For Bwa, a common journey toward political liberation is possible only through Christian dialogue with Buddhists.[434]

### 2.9. 1. Evaluating Bwa's Approach

While some Christians are not quite willing to be involved in the interreligious dialogue, Bwa's commitment for promoting Christian-Buddhist dialogue in Myanmar is admirable. He believes that socio-political oppression and religious conflict in Myanmar can be overcome by the academic interreligious dialogue. To be sure, Bwa is more

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[429] Bwa, "Mission: Christo-Praxis in Myanmar," 7.
[430] Ibid., 13.
[431] Bwa, "Myanmar," 188.
[432] Bwa, "Mission," 12.
[433] Bwa, "The Problem of Evil," 169-76.
[434] Bwa, "Mission," 21. Saw Hlaing Bwa, "Journey Together: Toward a Community of Peace for All," *RAYS: MIT Journal of Theology*, 8, (January 2007): 1-13.

interested in dialoging with Buddhists than in dialoging with the grassroots Christians. His understanding of sin is confined to the concept of political oppression. His understanding of salvation is limited to socio-political liberation that focuses only on the liberation of the oppressed from political powers. While this is necessary in the context of socio-political oppression, we should also pay attention to the grassroots Christians' struggle for liberation from fatalism or demon-possessed oppression in Myanmar. Moreover, we should also encompass a broader concept of salvation as including reconciliation and healing.

Like other Asian theologians, Bwa's theological concern is about this-worldly issue of politics. He does not show his interest in other-worldly issue. An authentic Burmese Christian public theology must balance between this-worldly and other-worldly issues so that our theology is more relevant for the larger communities of both academic and grassroots Christians. This requires the recognition of some grassroots Christians' ecclesial praxis of worship, preaching, and prayer. Bwa's theology is strong in socio-political engagement, weak in pastoral engagement and social charity in public life.

## 2.10. Summary

This chapter has attempted to accomplish three goals. First, I have revisited the origins and foundations of Asian public theology of religions and liberation. I have shown how the concept of academic Asian public theology had been developed by Asian public theologians without the term "public theology" before the official rise of the term "public theology" in the West in 1974 in the West. In order to show when and how Asian public theologians have developed academic Asian public theology, I have taken the liberty to depict the 1959 EACC as a point of departure for the chronological origins of Asian public

theology. I have selected Thomas and Coe as two examples, who have laid the conceptual foundations of Asian public theology of religions and liberation. I have described their key contributions to the conceptual and contextual development of Asian public theology.

Second, I have explored the current state of Asian public theology. I have looked at how Wilfred has approached to some fresh perspectives and radical methodologies of Asan public theology of religions and liberation. His radical proposal for seeing public life rather than the church as the starting point for Asian public theology has been highlighted. Then I have engaged with Pieris and Yong, who have focused on Asian public theology of Christian-Buddhist dialogue. I have highlighted their distinctive contributions to Asian public theology. For instance, Pieris has considered the role of Christ in Asian public theology of liberation, while Yong has considered the role of both the Spirit and Christ in Asian Pentecostal public theology. While Pieris and other Asian liberation theologians tend to focus on seeing salvation as political liberation, Yong holistically depicts salvation not only as political liberation, but also as redemption and as healing of the bodies.

Finally, I have looked at a local picture of how Bwa has developed a Burmese public theology of Christian-Buddhist encounter and liberation within Asian public theology. Bwa's approach to a Burmese public theology of religions and liberation is influenced by some Pieris and other Asian liberation theologians. He focuses strongly on the Christo-praxis and neglects the role of pneumatology in public theology. In sum, I have described how the prophetic and kingly role of Christ has been employed by Asian public and liberation theologians as the key foundations for developing Asian public theology of religions. But Yong has come up with a strong role of Pneumatology in Asian Pentecostal public theology. Focusing on societal sin as the cause of political suffering and poverty,

Asian public theology of salvation tends to be confined to political liberation. The concept of the church is reduced to its functional role of interreligious dialogue without balancing it with its ontological role. In the next chapter, we will study how some grassroots Christians express their lived faith and witness the gospel of salvation inside and outside the church. We will also study how they express their lived experiences of political powers and spiritual powers in the context of Buddhist nationalism and ethnic conflict.

# CHAPTER THREE

# LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF GRASSROOTS CHRISTIANS: STUDYING THEIR MULTIPLE WITNESSES OF ONE FAITH AND THE GOSPEL OF RECONCILIATION

## 3. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I have explored the academic voices and views of Asian public theologians on the theoretical framework of Asian public theology of religions and liberation. I have shown how they emphasize the cosmic and prophetic role of Christology and Pneumatology in formulating Asian public theology. I then demonstrated how the cosmic Spirit and prophetic Christ shapes the function of the churches in public engagement with Buddhists for the liberation of the oppressed in society. Much of the academic discussions tend to be confined to what academic Asian theologians are saying about the function of the church in interreligious dialogue with Buddhists without taking the voices of grassroots Christians sufficiently. Can we really do a relevant Asian public theology without taking the voices and lived practiced of grassroots Christians seriously?

The aim of this current chapter is to state that we cannot do a relevant Asian public theology without incorporating the voices of grassroots Christians. Because some enquiries in this chapter relate to some methodological considerations in chapter one, I will remind the readers of some overlapping issues when necessary. As I have noted in chapter one, doing Asian public theology without listening to the voices of grassroots Christians is not sufficiently relevant for the real life in the Asia contexts where Christianity is flourishing among the grassroots communities. One grassroots pastor rightly said in personal conversations that “academic theologians in Myanmar are writing and teaching from their academic perspectives without engaging with the grassroots levels of Christian

experiences."[435] Some theologians would also argue that the practical relevance of academic theology without engaging people on the ground is little for the real world.[436]

With this conviction, this present chapter will describe the grassroots voices and views, giving them freedom to express their own imaginations. Such a grassroots approach to Asian theology, according to Simon Chan, "assumes that theology arises as much from how being the church is practiced as how it is understood."[437] Built on Chan's idea, the aim of this chapter is to study how the grassroots Christians understand their ecclesial identity and how they witness their faith. Attempts are made to rethink theology from the ground up. A relevant Asian public theology actually starts in the ecclesial life of the lived worship, preaching, and prayer rather than bringing a theology from academic life or public life.

## 3.1 How I Engaged the Grassroots Christian Voices

As I have noted in chapter one, I have conducted online video conversation as a qualitative methodology for engagement with the grassroots Christians. Interestingly, the way they understood and expressed the role of faith in political and public life is different from one to another. Such diverse voices arose from their different ministerial roles in different locations. Some of the participants work at the churches in the small hill towns and rural villages as pastors and church elders, while others work among the Bamar Buddhists in the plain area of the nation as missionaries and evangelists. Some of them work at the Internally Displaced Persons or refugee camps in the rural villages as the

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[435] Interview with a Presbyterian pastor, August 19, 2020.

[436] Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?* 232. John S. Mbiti, "When the Bull is in a Strange Land, It Does not Bellow," in *God and Globalization: Christ and the Dominions of Globalization,* eds. Max L. Stackhouse and Diane B. Obenchain, 145-70. (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2002). Gregg A. Okesson, *Re-Imaging Modernity: A Contextualized Theological Study of Power and Humanity within Akamba Christianity in Kenya* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 29-30.

[437] Chan, "Asian Ecclesiologies," 595.

practitioners and philanthropists of charity for the victims of civil war. What they have in common is that all participants identified themselves as devout Christians.

In order to understand their expressions of multiple witnesses of faith and the gospel, I assembled open-ended questions in three main areas: (1) church, (2) salvation, and (3) salvation-public life relation. Raising open-ended questions allowed them to express their own voices in whatever way they find most helpful. Open-ended questions go like this: (1) How do grassroots Christians understand the church? (2) What is the gospel of salvation? (3) What role can the church (or cannot) play in relating salvation to public realities? As we will see in an appendix, I also asked additional open-ended questions within each of these three categories. In my conversation with them, I also experienced a challenge. The challenge had to do with theological meaning related to my conversations with them. In our conversations with academicians, we do not experience that challenge because we are generally familiar with theological terms. Our conversations with grassroots Christians are different. Since they did not readily understand some technical terms, I adjusted our conversations in more accessible ways.

## 3.2 Describing the Grassroots Christian Voices and Expressions

Interviewing with a diverse array of people from three different denominations, I gained some similar and different views of the church, salvation, and the church's relation to or separation from public realities. My intention is to describe both similarities and differences found in their expressions of those three areas. I will begin by describing their expressions of the church. In describing their expressions of the church, I will cover both the internal nature and the external nature of the church. For the sake of clarity, I will

describe them separately. I will begin with the internal nature of the church and then I will describe their views of the eternal nature of church when I deal with how the grassroots Christians relate or do not relate their faith to public realities. What are some common components of their understanding of the internal nature of the church?

## 3.3 Grassroots Christian Expressions of the Ecclesiology

### 3.3.1 Worship

The overarching theme that has emerged from my interview with grassroots Christians from three different denominations—Baptist, Presbyterian, and Pentecostal—about the church is worship. Grassroots Christians see themselves as the people of worship. Worship is central to their self-imagination of who they are and why they exist on this earth. To be sure, they do not understand the nature of the church doctrinally; but they understand the church doxologically. In their understanding, the church exists for the doxological purpose of worship. For grassroots Christians, the church would be meaningless without worship. Corporate worship is held at least three times a week on different days. One is held for a youth worship, and another for woman worship. Sunday worship is the main activity for the whole congregation. Grassroots lives and Sunday worship are inseparable. One of the pastors said: "it is hard for us to divorce our lives from Sunday worship during the pandemic. We have been missing Sunday worship."[438]

Although the way they understand the significance of worship for the internal life of the church is similar, the styles of Sunday worship are different from one another depending on their different denominations. For example, Pentecostal churches tend to

[438] A pastor, interviewed by the author, July 19, 2020.

focus more on the revival form of worship, which consists of dancing their bodies and raising their hands during the worship. They strongly believe the role of the Holy Spirit in the revival of the church. They do not understand the Holy Spirit doctrinally, but rather they understand the Spirit experientially. They believe in the experiential work of the Holy Spirit. One of grassroots senior Pentecostal pastors helpfully said:

> We did not know much about the doctrine and understood little of the teachings on key aspects of the faith, such as the Holy Spirit or the Trinity. It was only after I had bought my first New Testament in 1978 that the believers and I began to learn more about the gifts and the works of the Holy Spirit.[439]

Grassroots Pentecostals generally understand the revival worship as the active motion of the congregations, dancing in the Spirit, raising their hands, and singing contemporary songs rather than hymns. The congregations sing some contemporary revival songs, some of which are Burmese songs, and some of which are translated from the Australian Megachurch Hillsong.[440] Three or four older women left their seats and danced in the altar, waving the Bible. The congregations' posture during the worship is standing with their eyes closed, clasping their hands and voicing out halleluiah so often.[441]

Unlike Pentecostal churches, Baptists and Presbyterians tend to focus more on the traditional forms of worship. They normally sing hymns, some of which are Burmese songs, and some of which are translated from the Western songs. In particular, some older generation people prefer the traditional structure of worship, singing hymns without much body dancing. However, some younger generation members of the congregation prefer the revival style of worship, singing some contemporary songs. One of the Presbyterian pastors

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[439] Tam Ki, *From Darkness to Glorious Light: The Amazing True Story of a Myanmese spirit worshipper turned evangelist* (Singapore: Genesis Books, 2011), 95.

[440] A Pentecostal pastor and music leader, interviewed by the author, July 24, and August 1, 2020.

[441] I personally experienced this in our hometown of Mindat, Chin, Myanmar.

told me that "the revival style of worship is generally influenced by the surrounding Pentecostal churches, which he also referred to as Halleluiah churches because of their common expressions of Halleluiah during the worship."[442] The same is true for the structure of Baptist worship. While some older generation prefer the traditional worship, some younger generation prefer the revivalist form of worship.

In the cases of grassroots Presbyterian and Baptist worship, the hybrid styles of worship are pertinent to their practices of Sunday liturgies. They hybridize the traditional and revival styles of Sunday worships, while Pentecostal congregations tend to focus mainly on the revival style of worship. Yet what these three denominations have in common is their understanding of worship as a spiritual encounter with God. Their spiritual encounter with God is demonstrated in terms of clasping their hands and dancing their bodies while singing the worship songs. One of the pastors said, "clasping their hands and dancing their bodies are the key components of worship because these doxological actions echo the Psalmist common expression of praising God."[443]

Most of the congregants I have interviewed expressed their common voices for the purpose of worshiping God. They worship God for his faithfulness, love, and kindness. Sometimes they even sing Psalm 117 as a worship song.[444] God's goodness to their lives in the midst of political suffering serves as a motivating power for their praise of God. Sometimes the worship leaders lead the congregation by making the corporate declarations: "God is good for me, God is good for my family, God is good for my job, and God is good for my country." Sometimes, some congregants come up front to the altar and share

[442] A senior Presbyterian pastor, interviewed by the author, July 19, 2020.
[443] A senior Presbyterian pastor, interviewed by the author, July 19, 2020.
[444] Psalm 117:1-2 is a popular contemporary song among grassroots Christians.

testimonies for how God is good to their lives. Some testimonies are followed by some solo songs. Others only share testimonies by reading Bible verses.[445]

### 3.3.2 Communion

Grassroots congregations consider communion as an essential Christian ceremony. Although they see the value of communion for Christian ceremony, the sequences of their celebration of communion are different depending on different situations. Some congregations celebrate it monthly. But others celebrate it once a year. There are different reasons for celebrating communion once a year. One reason is that some bread and wine are not always readily available in some village churches. In order to buy bread and wine, they need to go to the towns on foot, which generally takes two or three days. The other reason is that communion is conducted only by senior ordained pastors. The village congregations have to suit the senior ordained pastors' availabilities.

However, what is important is that grassroots congregations have a common understanding of the purpose of communion celebration. For them, the key purpose of communion celebration is "to remember the death of Jesus."[446] The sacrificial death of Jesus Christ is meaningful for their purpose of communion celebration. They commonly recount that Jesus has died for our sin and how gracious he was for us. The celebration of communion is a sacred time for grassroots Christians to remember the death of Christ and to confess their sin. The emphasis is not on anticipating the coming of Christ, but rather on

[445] A church elder, interviewed by the author, July 22, 2020.

[446] A Presbyterian pastor, interviewed by the author, July 19, 2020. A Pentecostal pastor, interviewed by the author, July 25, 2020. A Baptist pastor, interviewed by the author, August 1, 2020.

remembering the sacrificial death of Christ. They celebrate communion in an exclusive way. It is not for all worship participants. It is only for born-again Christians.

### 3.3.3 Preaching

Preaching is crucial to the grassroots Christian understanding of the church. Grassroots church worship is incomplete without preaching. The chairpersons of worship normally say something like this before he or she invited the preachers:

> Those who have fallen asleep, wake up. Stay awake, we are now coming to the most important part of worship. This is an important sermon because the preacher will preach the word of God. 'As the Psalmist says, as a deer longs for streams of water, so my soul longs for you, God' (Ps. 42:2). As you need food for your physical health, so you need the word of God for your spiritual food.[447]

Mostly, senior pastors preach. Sometimes church elders preach. They necessarily remove their shoes before standing on the platform. The preachers' removal of shoes mark respect for the platform as a sacred space. This demonstrates the preachers' resonance with the biblical accounts of removing shoes because of holy ground. Moreover, one of the pastors who work among Buddhists as a missionary stated that this could also demonstrate the preachers' attempt to adapt to local Burmese cultural practice of removal of shoes before entering the Buddhist temples.[448] Sermons often take up to 50 minutes or an hour. The sermon formats are mostly topical, testimonial, and exhortative rather than expository and exegetical. Some preachers draw the stories from the Bible as the sources for encouraging the congregations to strengthen their faith amid difficult circumstances.

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[447] A Presbyterian pastor, interviewed by the author, July 22, 2020.
[448] A pastor interviewed by the author, July 31, 2020.

Other preachers use God's faithfulness to his or her life as a testimony for encouraging the congregations. Generally, most of the preachers use God's grace, faithfulness, and promise as the main contents of their sermons. The most recurring theme is the message of God's reward for Christian faithfulness. The reward is mostly related to material blessing as a result of exercising faith in God's promise. But some preachers also deal with the need of Christian unity. The preachers preach about Christian unity especially when conflict occurs to church members.[449] Their preaching does not address any ethnic or religious conflict outside the church. Their preaching on the unity tends to focus on the internal issue of the Christian unity among church members. I will now describe the grassroots Christian understanding of pulpit and politics.

### 3.3.4 Pulpit and Politics

As I will show in detail later, grassroots Christians have different opinions on the external role of the church in political and public life. These different opinions depend not only on different denominations, but also on different locations. Yet they have common opinions on divorcing politics from the pulpit preaching. They have common objections to mentioning politics at the pulpit. Three pastors commonly said:

> Pulpit is the place where only the word of God is to be preached. The word of God means the Biblical accounts of the salvation, death, resurrection of Christ. It also includes the story of God's dealing with a particular group. The pulpit is not the place where politics is to be preached. Preaching politics at the pulpit may cause division among the church members who have different favors of political parties and interests. For this reason, politics is not to be preached at the pulpit.[450]

[449] A pastor interviewed by the author, July 19, 2020.
[450] Pastors interviewed by the author, July 19-27, 2020.

They regard the pulpit as a sacred place. Because of this, the preachers must remove his or her shoes before he or she stands on the sacred pulpit. Grassroots Christians see the church not as a political community where politics is to be preached, but as a spiritual community where only the name of God is to be glorified through worship, testimony, dancing, prayer, and preaching the gospel. Understanding faith as a spiritual relationship with God, some grassroots Christians have serious objection to preaching politics at the pulpit. Pulpit is the sacred place where only the holy word of God is to be preached.[451]

### 3.3.5 Prayer

Prayer is a key component of the internal life of grassroots church. Grassroots Christians strongly believe the power of prayer. They are not just the people of prayer, but they are also the believers of the power of prayer. They understand prayer as a direct communication with God. In addition to mass prayer in the Sunday worships, some pious grassroots Christians conduct weekly and monthly fasting prayers. Some conduct weekly fasting prayers, while others conduct monthly prayers. They do these on Saturdays. Some practice dawn prayer every Sunday morning. Most of congregations conduct fasting prayer communally. But there are some congregations where a particular type of people practices fasting prayer individually. Their different schedules of fasting prayers depend on each congregation. One of the church elders helpfully expressed prayer like this:

> Christian life and prayer are inseparable. Just as our breath and air are inseparable, so Christian life and prayer are inseparable. Prayer is like the air we inhale and exhale. Prayer is also like the key. We cannot open the door without the key. When we pray, we do not only speak to God as our Father, but we also open the door of our Father's heart so that we receive something from him.[452]

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[451] The pastors interviewed by the author, July 19-27, 2020.
[452] A church elder, interviewed by the author, July 22, 2020.

Interestingly, they have commonality in their understanding of the purpose of fasting prayers. Within the common purpose, they come together and pray for multiple issues: praying for the mission works of the local congregations, for the healing of the sick, for the students' education, for the global missionaries, and for the leaders of the government. Although grassroots Christians are not willing to include politics in their pulpit sermons, they are willing to include political issues in their prayers. Later I will elaborate why grassroots Christians intentionally include politics in their prayers.

### 3.3.6 Bible Study

Bible study plays a key role in grassroots Christian understanding of the internal life of the church. They conduct Bible study corporally and individually. In either way, the goal is to equip the disciples of Christ for a deeper knowledge of the Bible and to build up a warmer fellowship. They have a high view of the Bible, placing it at the center of their faith. It is through the Bible study that they become more mature disciples whose faith is rooted in the word of God and is transformed into the likeness of Christ. In some congregations, the Bible study is conducted individually for the purpose of personal devotion. This is common among many grassroots Christians. They read the Bible devotionally. For instance, one of the Presbyterian elders helpfully said:

> I have devotionally read the whole Bible twice. As a lay Christian who has low education, my goal is not necessarily to understand the literal meanings of the Bible. But my primary goal is to read the Bible devotionally in order to nourish my spiritual life. The epistle to the Hebrews is my favorite book in the New Testament because it focuses on the sacrificial role of Jesus Christ as the priest.[453]

[453] A church elder, interviewed by the author, July 22, 2020. The elder passed just two grades.

The church elder emphasizes that the Hebrew portrait of the priestly and sacrificial nature of Jesus plays a role in his understanding of salvation and his priestly function as a church elder. In the following, I will describe grassroots Christian understanding of salvation and elaborate how Jesus's priestly function is related to the grassroots Christian understanding of their pre-Christian cultural practice of ritual rites led by the priests.

### 3.4 The Grassroots Expressions and Experiences of Soteriology

Grassroots Christian understanding of salvation is deeply rooted in the atonement of Christ. When I asked them what salvation is, their common answer is "forgiveness of sin." While the academic Asian liberationist notion of salvation, as noted in the previous chapter, tends to be rooted in Christ's prophetic ministry of liberating the oppressed and the poor from socio-political oppressions and socio-economic poverties, grassroots Christians' understanding of salvation as forgiveness of sin is rooted in the cross of the priestly Christ. The blood language is crucial to their expressions of salvation. For them, the salvation of Christ is incomplete without the cross where Christ offered himself as a sacrificial victim. This relates back to one of the church elder who regards the epistle to the Hebrews as his favorite book due to its focus on the priestly and sacrificial Christ.[454]

Some grassroots Christians expressed that Paul's letter to the Romans is their favorite book due to its focus on the sinful nature of humanity and the atoning work of Christ for the forgiveness of sin.[455] Despite two different books, what grassroots Christians have in common is their perceptions of salvation as forgiveness of sin through the sacrificial death of Christ. It is quite understandable because grassroots Kachins, Chins,

[454] A church elder, interviewed by the author, July 22, 2020.
[455] Church pastors, interviewed by the author, July 19-22, 2020.

and Karens have the pre-Christian indigenous cultural practices of ritual sacrifices, which are analogous to the Old Testament and New Testament concepts of ritual sacrifices. Chin spirit-worshiper turned grassroots Pentecostal pastors Tam Ki said:

> Spirit worship was at the very heart of our Chin [K'Cho] culture. Every kind of life event from birth and marriage to death, as well as the annual seasons of seed planting and harvest, were done under the fearful rules of the spirits. Our superstitions were guided by omens, divination, and dreams resulting in numerous ceremonies and feasts involving animal sacrifices to appease the spirits. *Ghun Kho* (mountain spirit), *Ng'yo* (household spirit), *Pakhui Ng'yo* (generation guardian spirit), *Ei Ng'* yo (crops spirit), *Sei Ng'yo* (mountain ox spirit), and *Sa Ng'yo* (animal spirit) were among the hundred spirits, which my people had to appease. The spirits were believed to inhabit homes, springs, paths, rocks, rivers, and mountains. Every individual household had spirit governing them. Each man was believed to have six guardian spirits, whereas each woman had five.[456]

Since there were hundreds of spirits, people did not know which spirits had to be appeased and so they had to consult with the village priest or astrologer who knew the minds of the spirits. Through egg readings by the priest, the spirits would demand various animal sacrifices, ranging from the offering of a chicken to a mountain ox. Sometimes, people had to offer many sacrifices to the spirits until the misfortune was removed.[457] Out of some ritual sacrifice commonly found among the Chins, Kachins, and Karens, two ritual practices are crucial. One is the communal and the other individual. Although the way they observed the ritual rites may slightly differ from each of the minority ethnic groups, the concepts and goals of such ritual rites are quite similar to one another.

The first communal rite is observed at any time when a village has an unnatural dead. As noted earlier, a community of the village people had to contact the spirits through the priest of the village. The priest led the ritual sacrifices by killing the unblemished animal and offered them to the spirits. A half-burnt extinguished piece of firewood and an

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[456] Ki, *From Darkness to Glorious Light*, 5-6.
[457] Ibid., 6.

old rag are given to the chief priest by each family. Then the chief priest took the sacrificial animals to the center of the village and offered them to the deities, calling them to bless and protect the village. They did this communal rite because they recognized the deities as the benevolent and malevolent spirits. The failure to appease the deities through the animal sacrifices would bring harm to the village and appeasing the deities would bring health, prosperity, and success to the community of the villagers.

The second kind of sacrificial rite has more to do with the benefit for the individuals. This is performed when a person is seriously sick, caused by evil spirits. After consulting with the astrologer or medicine person who knew the minds of the spirits, some animals are offered to appease the spirits. The purpose of performing this ritual rite is to ask the spirits for forgiving and healing the sick.[458] In short, these two ritual sacrifices practiced among the ethnic Chin, Kachin, and Karen pave the way for their grassroots understanding of the sacrificial death of Christ for forgiving sinners.

Central to their understanding of salvation is Jesus's sacrificial and mediatorial role. Just as the unblemished animals were sacrificed for the ritual rites, so was the innocent Jesus sacrificed for salvation. Especially Jesus's mediatorial role for the reconciliation between the Father and sinners is analogous to the way the village priest played a mediatorial role in leading the ritual rites for the reconciliation between the people and the spirits.[459] Using 1 Timothy. 2:5, one grassroots pastor said this:

> Jesus is the mediator between the Father and us (sinners). As he is a mediator, he knows the mind of his Father and the condition of us. There is no way for sinners to please God. Only Jesus knows how to please the Father and restores the right

[458] See Ki, *From Darkness to Glorious Light*, 3-6.

[459] The pastors and elder, interviewed by the author, July 19-22, 2020. See also, Ki, *From Darkness to Glorious Light,* 3-6.,

> relationship between the Father and sinners. It is only through the blood of Jesus' sacrifice that our sin was forgiven and our relationship with God was possible.[460]

Within the blood language of Jesus's death, grassroots Christians also relate salvation to rescue. Rescue implies the idea of God's "saving from something." They see God's delivering the oppressed Israel from the captivity of the Egyptians as an example for Jesus's rescuing the sinners from the power of sin and the hands of Satan. Grassroots Christians understand that Jesus is not just a sacrificial victim, but he is a Victor. Jesus was not defeated at the cross as a victim, but he rather defeated Satan through the resurrection. They emphasized that Jesus's defeat of Satan and rescuing them from Satan was possible by the power of the Spirit. This is good news. For them, the good news was rooted in Jesus's achievement on the cross. One of pastors helpfully gave an analogy:

> Jesus's recusing us from the captivity of Satan is comparable to the expert swimmer's rescuing someone from being drought in the river. A person who was draught would die if the swimmer did not save him or her from the river. That would be sad news! Likewise, Jesus has rescued has us from the power of sin and the hands of Satan. Jesus's rescuing us from the power of sin and from the hands of Satan is crucial to the meaning of the good news of salvation.[461]

The idea of Jesus's rescuing them from the hands of Satan is crucial to their grassroots notion of the gospel of salvation and to their identity imagination as the children of God. For instance, a grassroots Pentecostal pastor and evangelist who was a former spirit-worshiper compares the rule of Christ and the rule of Satan with the analogies of the light and of the darkness. He then expresses sharing the gospel of salvation as his highest call. In his book *From Darkness to Glorious Light*, he told a story of how he experienced God's rescuing of his spirit-worshiping life of darkness to glorious light of Christ.

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[460] A pastor, interviewed by the author, July 19, 2020.
[461] A Presbyterian pastor, interviewed by the author, July 19, 2020.

Born in the village hidden in the jungles of Chin Hills, no foreign missionary had even visited his village. As noted in chapter two, some of the earliest Baptist converts were due to the work of Adoniram Judson. But this is not the case for the Pentecostals. With no access to the Bible and to salvation from the missionaries, Tam Ki received supernatural visions from God in 1973 and became the earliest Christian convert in his village. He related his understanding of salvation to God's rescuing of his life from evil spirits. For him, Christ's recusing his life from the evil spirits means a total conversion from the old cultural practices of spirit worship and a commitment to sharing the gospel.[462] He preaches the gospel of Christ's rescuing of his life as an example to many people trapped in the darkness of Satan. He preaches the "gospel" (*Htu Ni* in Cho Chin dialect and *Tha-Tin Kaung* in Burmese) to thousands of people.[463]

There is a close relationship between the grassroots Christian understanding of salvation as rescue and Christ's victory over the power of Satan. Victory is the effect of Christ's liberating act of rescue. Again, we have seen this example in the life of a pastor who shares his story about how Jesus has rescued him from evil spirits or fatalism. The Christ of the grassroots Christians is more experienced in liberating people from the fear of evil spirits rather than in liberating people from socio-political oppressions. Moreover, grassroots Christians emphasize the powerful role of the Spirit in Christ's liberating act of delivering their lives from the fear of evil spirits. They believe that the Holy Spirit plays a powerful role not only in Christ's act of rescuing them from evil spirits, but also in

[462] Ki, *From Darkness to Glorious Light*, 53-59. This is common among grassroots Christians.
[463] Ibid., xxxiii-2; 105-16; 173-84.

protecting their grassroots lives. A pastor said, "his prayer is that the Holy Spirit would protect the new converts so that "evil spirits will not snatch them away."[464]

Moreover, grassroots Christian expressions and experiences of salvation are not confined to the two aspects of forgiveness of sin and of rescue from Satan; they also relate salvation to healings. While the first two aspects focus on the cross of Christ, their understanding of healings embrace both the atoning work of Christ and the miraculous work of Christ during his social ministry among the poor and sick. Especially within the Pentecostal circles, Jesus's healings and miracles are increasingly recognized as a crucial part of their grassroots ministries. They literally believe in the powerful role of the Spirit in the miraculous act of healing the blind and sick.[465] A Pentecostal pastor who prayed for the healing of the evil spirit-possessed girl and boy said this in his own words:

> We need to be sure of our Salvation and not doubt the power of the Spirit. We could not fight against the enemy in our own strength or with our own understanding. In the unity of Christ, we had to invite the Holy Spirit to fill us with faith and power. Only then, we could be successful in the face of spiritual battles. More than thirty people came forward to pray with me over the girl's lifeless body. After praying for about an hour, breath came back into the girl and she sat up. Everyone gave thanks to the Lord. Suddenly, we heard a loud thud. A man in the prayer team had fallen down and become motionless with his eyes wide open, in exactly the same condition as the girl. His breathing had stopped and there was no pulse. This evil spirit must have gone into the man's body. Now even more people ran off. Only six others were left standing with me. We prayed in tongues for more than two hours until sunset. Suddenly, a black mist swirled out of a man and went upwards. The man began to breathe. Since that accident, the man had become a pastor of Ngamai Mission Church, five miles west of Mindat. The girl surrendered her life to the Lord.[466]

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[464] Ibid., 45.

[465] The Pentecostal pastors, interviewed by the author, July 24-27, 2020. See also Ki, *From Darkness to Glorious Light*, 126-133.

[466] Tam, *From Darkness to Glorious Light*, 128-129.

In the context where demonic possession causes psycho-physical sickness are the daily experiences, grassroots Christians express Jesus as their victor and healer.[467] Their expressions of salvation as healing are anthropocentric. Although they did not reject the cosmological idea of environmental healings, they emphasized the anthropological idea of healing. Their expressions of human healings are anthropologically more individualistic than communal and cosmic (the healing of broken community and nature).

The ministry of physical healings can also be found among other grassroots Christians beyond the Pentecostal community. While the Pentecostal ministry of healings tends to focus on performing the miracles of healing the sick through prayers, non-Pentecostals tend to focus on healing the sick through the medical facilities. This is not to suggest that Pentecostals are interested only in miraculous healings and non-Pentecostal Christians are interested only social charity. I am rather describing their emphases. For instance, some non-Pentecostal pastors and practitioners who work at the refugee camps among the victims of civil war in Kachin and Chin states expressed their ministry focus on social charity of medical facilities, as well as food and school supplies for healing and feeding the victims. Later, I will describe their healing ministries of social charity.[468]

### 3.4.1 The Grassroots Witness of Faith and Salvation in Public Life

Do the grassroots Christians witness their faith and salvation in the public life? If yes, how? If no, why? How do they understand Buddhist nationalism in their own terms? These are some of the key questions I will be discussing in this section. I will begin by

[467] Ibid., 121-140.

[468] The pastors and practitioners who work at the refugee camp in Kachin Hills, interviewed by the author, August 1-2, 2020.

describing their answers to the last question. I have chosen to begin with the last question because I assume that grassroots Christian understanding of what Buddhist nationalism means may naturally create the way of witnessing their faith in public life.

### 3.5 How Do They Understand Buddhist Nationalism?

The academic concept of Buddhist nationalism is not readily familiar to some grassroots Christians. The concept of Buddhist nationalism is more readily familiar to some academic people and ethnic political elites. In Burmese terms, Buddhist nationalism is called *lumyo-gyi wada*, which literally means the "domination of the majority race." Some grassroots Christians have different views of Buddhist nationalism, even within the same congregations. Some think of Buddhist nationalism as a myth, while others see it as a reality. For instance, when I asked one grassroots pastor about his personal experience of Buddhist nationalism, his response was that his experience of *lumyo-gyi wada* is natural, but not really problematic. For him, in any context where the majority race rules, the minority's experience of *lumyo-gyi wada* is natural. He said this in his own words:

> Christian experience of marginality is natural throughout the centuries. The disciples of Jesus experienced marginality and persecution. Many Christians in different parts of the world experience marginality and persecution. But they all remained faithful to God in the midst of marginality and persecution. Likewise, ethnic minority Christians in Myanmar experience marginality and persecution. But what is most important for us is to remain faithful to following Christ.[469]

The pastor felt that some politicians are exaggerating about *lumyo-gyi wada*. For him, some Buddhists are even nicer to him than some of his fellow Christians. He observed that some

[469] A pastor, interviewed by the author, July 24, 2020.

grassroots Buddhists—both his neighborhood friends and those whom he met when he was on the gospel trip for evangelism—were kind and nice to him.[470]

Some grassroots Christians, by contrast, see Buddhist nationalism as a reality and as a system. They expressed the reality of Buddhist nationalism from socio-cultural and religio-political experiences. Its reality is identified with the problem of ethnic Christian discrimination and religious persecution. They noted the Buddhist soldier destruction of Christian crosses as one of the common examples of ethnic Christian discrimination. It is common for the Chin, Kachin, and Karen Christians to erect the crosses at the top of local mountains as their religious symbols.[471] They said that some Bamar Buddhist soldiers demolished some Christian crosses erected in the mountains and replaced them with Buddhist pagodas. In some areas, some church buildings are destroyed and burnt.

Some of them expressed their experiences of Christian discrimination from the perspective of job applications. For instance, some Christians are denied of their job applications for the civic vocations of teaching and medical positions, while some Bamar Buddhist applicants are accepted. One of the Kachin pastors helpfully explained:

> The Kachin Christian experience of ethnic discrimination is real. For instance, when the Kachin Christians and Bamar Buddhists apply for the same positions of teaching and medical affairs in society, Kachins are more likely to be rejected. Thus, a few Kachin Christians leave their religion and adopt Buddhism as their new religion in order for them to be accepted for the positions in society.[472]

Not only a few Kachins, but a few Chins and Karens also leave their Christian religion and adopt Buddhism as a new religion in order for them to be accepted into the positions in

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[470] Ibid.,

[471] The Chin Presbyterian and Pentecostal pastors, interviewed by the author, July 19-27, 2020. The Kachin Baptist pastors, interviewed by the author, July 27-28, 2020. The Karen pastors, interviewed by the author, July 31-August 1, 2020.

[472] A Kachin pastor, interviewed by the author, July 30, 2020.

Buddhist society. Another example of Buddhist nationalism I have learned from grassroots Christians is the Bamar cultural replacement of some ethnic local names with the Burman names. One Kachin pastor gave me an example of naming their local mountain (*machang baw*) a Burmanized term, *machan phu pawh*, which means "it is not cold."[473] One Chin pastor also gave an example of naming their famous local mountain *khawnu tung*, with a Burmanized term, *nat-ma taung*, which means "the mountain of female spirits." The original meaning of *khawnu tung* is "majestic mountain."[474]

While a few Christians do not have a clear understanding of Buddhist nationalism, some ethnic Christians expressed their experiences of the ethnic persecution. They expressed the ethnic persecution in terms of forced labors and the Buddhist soldiers' brutal practices of raping some ethnic women. One pastor who works among the victims in the Kachin region expressed his personal witness of being raped:

> The Bamar Buddhist soldiers often practice ethnic persecution by raping and killing some Kachin ethnic women. The soldiers' brutal practices of Christian persecution and raping the ethnic women are the reality of daily experiences in our Kachin region. Although we witnessed their ethnic persecution and of raping women, they never acknowledge their action. Anyone who speaks truth against their behaviors of raping women would face their persecution.[475]

In the same vein, a Chin pastor, who works in the civil war zone in Paletwa, western part of Myanmar expressed that "the Bamar Buddhist soldiers' practices of ethnic persecution at the grassroots levels are the daily reality—women are raped and some men are forced to labor for the soldiers."[476] On the other hand, some grassroots pastors tried to be fair by saying "not all Bamar Buddhists necessarily commit the ethnic Christian discrimination

[473] A Kachin pastor, interviewed by the author, July 26, 2020.
[474] A Presbyterian pastor, interviewed by the author, July 19, 2020.
[475] A Kachin woman minster, interviewed by the author, July 30, 2020.
[476] A pastor interviewed by the author, August 1, 2020.

and persecution; only a particular group of Bamar Buddhist solders commit such violent actions."[477] After describing some grassroots Christians' diverse expressions and experiences of Buddhist nationalism, I will now explore how they do or do not witness their faith and salvation in the context of the ethnic discrimination and persecution. Based on what I have observed on their expressions of faith within and outside the church, it might be helpful to make a distinction, yet an inseparable relationship between political engagement for grassroots Christian faith and public engagement for grassroots faith.

### 3.6 The Grassroots Christian Faith and Political Engagement

Debates are ranging among grassroots Christians about the role of Christian faith in political life. The majority of grassroots Christian leaders spoke in favor of divorcing faith from politics. However, some of them spoke in favor of relating faith to political life. I will begin with those who vote for divorcing faith from politics. Grassroots Christians, especially those represented by the Pentecostals, expressed that the church or Christian faith must stay out of politics. One Pentecostal pastor affirmatively said:

> The church exists for worshiping God and for preaching the gospel or good news (*tha-tin kaung* in Burmese). The church does not exist for politics nor is the church a political community. The church is a holy community of the believers who know Jesus as Savior and Lord. Politics is a secular community made up of a majority of non-believers who do not know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.[478]

One of the main reasons for the Pentecostal separation of faith from politics is rooted in their understanding of the sacred-secular divide. They see the church as a sacred community of faith and politics as an area of secular community. As a sacred community,

[477] A pastor interviewed by the author, July 26, 2020.
[478] A Pentecostal pastor, interviewed by the author, July 24, 2020.

the church has to preserve its faith from the secular politics. The task of the church is not to engage in politics. For them, the task of the church is to engage with God through worship, prayer, and preaching.[479] When I asked them, what they would do if some political rulers destroyed their church, their responses were that "they would just pray for them." They quoted Jesus's words: "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44). They also objected to the street protests against the political rulers.[480]

However, there are some contrasting voices among the Pentecostals. A few of them noted their views for relating faith to politics. Especially some younger Pentecostals voted for relating the Christian faith to politics when needed. One pastor said:

> There is a reason for relating Christian faith to politics. The reason is rooted in the wide concept of God's kingdom. Since God's kingdom is not confined to the church, but it encompasses political life, faith needs to engage in politics. Moreover, the politics of the life of Israel is a good example for Christian engagement in politics. What is important is how one engages in politics.[481]

Many non-Pentecostal Christians generally agree with this statement. For instance, some Presbyterians and Baptists spoke in favor of relating Christian faith to politics. They said the life of Israel is inseparable from politics. Therefore, Christian faith is to be related to politics. They expressed their willingness to demonstrate on the street if/when the ruling authorities commit some injustices to the church.[482] However, they also expressed their reluctance to engage in politics by street protest against the rulers due to the fear. Their fear has to do with a political arrest as the result of their critique of politics.[483] Therefore, some of them expressed the possibility of discussing politics and of criticizing political

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[479] The Pentecostal pastors and church leaders, interviewed by the author, July 24-28, 2020.
[480] Ibid.
[481] A Pentecostal pastor, interviewed by the author, July 31, 2020.
[482] A pastor, interviewed by the author, July 19, 2020; a Karen Baptist pastor, interviewed by the author, August 1, 2020.
[483] The Presbyterian pastors and elders, interviewed by the author, July 19- August 10, 2020; the Pentecostal pastors and leaders, interviewed by the author, July 24-28, 2020.

corruption at their private social gatherings outside the church. What they have in common is the way they see the powerful role of prayer in political life.

However, some grassroots Kachin Baptist Christians believe that prayer and private critique of corrupt politics are not enough. The Kachin Christians are more active in resisting political oppression than other ethnic Christians. This is understandable because the Kachins are the most persecuted Christian groups in Myanmar. There are now more than 100,000 Internally Displaced Persons or IDPs at some camps in Kachin state. The Kachin Christians believe that to remain silent in the context of the ethnic persecution and discrimination means taking a side with the oppressors. They have a reputation of saying "to be Kachin is to be Christian. To be faithful Christian is to be resistant warrior." They see their struggle against Bamar domination as a "just war," a fight to defend their ethnic identity.[484] The Kachins are some of the most defensive ethnic groups in Myanmar. They defend their ethnic identity by demanding for their minority rights. They justify their political struggle for political freedom by echoing Moses's prophetic involvement in politics for the liberation of the oppressed Israel. A pastor said:

> Many Kachin Christians believe the whole Bible as the word of God. However, they tend to prioritize the Old Testament over New Testament precisely because the former has some more political implications for their political witnesses of faith. Moreover, the Kachin Christian experiences of socio-political oppression under the Bamar oppressors are similar to those of the oppressed Israel.[485]

In relating their identity to the political freedom of Israel, the Kachin Christians have a political concept of liberation, which they call *Awm-Dawm* in the Kachin dialect.[486] The

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[484] See, Bertil Lintner, "Burma: Faith and Resistance in Kachin," https://therevealer.org/burma-faith-and-resistance-in-kachin/ accessed on August 31, 2020.

[485] A pastor, interviewed by the author, July 27, 2020.

[486] Lagai Zau Nan, *Awmdawm Hte Anhte A Makam Laknak* (Yangon: Genesis Family Media, 2013).

Kachin Baptist Christians believe the holistic concept of salvation, but they prioritize *Awm-Dawm* or political liberation over spiritual liberation. One pastor said:

> We the Kachin Christians prioritize *Awm-Dawm* because we consider it to be more visible and urgent in the current context of Christian persecution. *Awm-Dawm* is a political concept of freedom from oppression. On the other hand, some poor Kachin Christians are more interested in prosperity gospel than in *Awm-dawm*. Prosperity gospel will not last long because it is not biblical.[487]

Seeing themselves as the example of the Israel who eventually entered the promised Canaan land of freedom, the Kachins have their local song *Wunpawng Hkanan*, which is the Kachin imagination of the promised land of freedom from Bamar domination.[488] In order to achieve their imagination of *Wunpawng Hkanan*, Kachin Christians boldly resist the Bamar political oppression. Their common goal is to achieve social justice and political freedom from Burman nationalism rather than the ethnic reconciliation between the Kachin Christians and Bamar Buddhists. In light of the former goal, some Kachin Christians even said, "they would not go to heaven if there are Bamar to be there."[489]

While many grassroots Kachin Christians are aggressively political in terms of resisting Bamar political domination and ethnic discrimination, some grassroots Kachin Christians choose to be involved in the public ministry of social charity for the victims of civil war without confronting the ruling authorities.[490] Not only the Kachins, but a majority of grassroots Chin and Karen Christians witness their faith in the public life rather than in the political life as charity workers and evangelists. To this I will turn now.

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[487] Pastors, interviewed by the author, July 27, 2020.
[488] Pastor, interviewed by July 26, 2020.
[489] Ibid.
[490] Pastor, interviewed by the author, July 30, 2020.

## 3.7 The Grassroots Christian Faith and Public Engagement

Although the grassroots Christians tend to divorce their faith from politics, they do not divorce their faith from the public life or society where common people live. I will describe two forms of their faith witnesses in the public life—evangelism and charity.

### 3.7.1 The Grassroots Christian Witness and Evangelism in Public Life

Unlike some academicians who tend to theorize the concept of evangelism, grassroots Christians just practice evangelism as they understand it. They understand their church identity as being the gospel people and they understand evangelism as preaching the gospel to non-Christians, the spirit worshipers and Buddhists. They describe the people who particularly preach the gospel in the public life as "evangelists." Although their descriptions of the gospel people imply the entire congregations and their doxological activities of worship, their uses of evangelists refer specifically to those who are called by themselves or sent by the congregations as missionaries.[491] In this sense, grassroots Christians do not theorize the differences between evangelism and mission, but they understand and practice evangelism and mission as two sides of one coin.

Because of this, some grassroots Christians use the combined word "evangelistic mission."[492] The task of evangelistic mission is to convert non-Christians, especially Buddhists and spirit-worshipers. Although the majority of Christians in Myanmar are among Chins, Kachins, and Karens, there are still some spirit-worshipers in their neighboring towns and villages. The spirit-worshipers and Bamar Buddhists are, therefore,

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[491] The pastors, interviewed by the author, July 19-August 12, 2020. See also Ki, *From Darkness to Glorious Light,* 121-125

[492] Ki, *From Darkness to Glorious Light*, 70-71.

the two target groups of grassroots evangelistic mission. The Chin, Kachin, and Karen Christians focus on evangelizing spirit-worshipers or pre-Christians among their fellow minority ethnic as well as some Buddhists among the Bamar ethnic group.[493]

In reaching out to Buddhists and spirit-worshipers, evangelism is conducted both as the long-term mission activity and as the short-term mission activity. In either way, grassroots evangelists focus on preaching the gospel of salvation. Because of their focus on preaching the gospel of salvation to non-Christians, they call such activities "gospel trips." On their gospel trips, grassroots evangelists take the Bibles, hymn books, guitars, and loudspeakers along with them. One grassroots Pentecostal evangelists described:

> Before I ventured out on any evangelistic trip to the neighboring *pigaw gui* (other religious neighbors), I would pack in my basket enough rice to last me for a week, a change of clothes. My Bible, a hymn book, a notebook, and without fail, my loudspeaker. The loudspeaker—a wet cell battery, an amplifier and a horn—weight a good 22 pounds. I would walk from *pigaw* to *pigaw*, sharing the *Htu Ni* (gospel of Christ) with the loudspeaker until the battery was completely used up.[494]

The loudspeaker was used as a powerful tool for open-air evangelistic rallies to draw the crowds. One evangelist, who preached the gospel in public life said, "Curious onlookers gathered around me just to hear the loudspeakers. The seed of the *Htu Ni* (the gospel) were sown into the hearts of many."[495] In evangelizing Buddhists and spirit-worshipers, grassroots Christians focus on winning lost souls.[496] Winning lost souls arises from their concept of Christ's coming to the world as being for redeeming lost souls. The spiritual aspect of salvation and its futuristic concern is central for grassroots evangelism. They tell non-Christians to confess their sin and to acknowledge Jesus as their Savior. Interpreting

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[493] A Pentecostal who works among the Bamar Buddhists as an evangelist and church planter, interviewed by the author, July 31, 2020.

[494] Ki, *From Darkness to Glorious Light*, 71.

[495] Ibid.

[496] Ibid.,121-40.

John 3:16, one evangelist said: "For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son the Lord Jesus, to be born into this world to redeem lost souls who are precious in his sight. He has given eternal life to those who believe in him."[497]

For grassroots Christians, those who do not believe in Jesus will surely die in the fires of Hell forever.[498] The redemptive idea of salvation as rescue from Satan or other religious practices is central to the grassroots Christian practices of saving lost souls. Evangelists do not just attempt to win lost souls without planting the churches. Winning lost souls and planting churches go hand in hand. They plant churches as the places for the discipleship of the converts. The church internal acts of Bible study, prayers, and preaching are norms of the grassroots acts of discipleship. When the converts become mature in the knowledge of Christ and of the Bible, some dedicate their lives to the evangelistic work of sharing the gospel with the hope of winning lost souls of others.[499]

This is not to say that all the grassroots Christians completely ignore the social significance of salvation. They believe in a holistic concept of salvation, but they do prioritize the spiritual and otherworldly significance of salvation.[500] In the following, I will describe how some grassroots Christians witness their faith in the public life by practicing the social significance of salvation as social charity for the victims and poor.

### 3.7.2 The Grassroots Christian Witness and Social Charity in Public Life

Unlike some academic liberationists who focus exclusively on the prophetic task of the church as a public critique of political authorities, some grassroots Christians opt for

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[497] Ibid., 41.
[498] Ibid., xxxviii; a church elder, interviewed by the author, July 22, 2020.
[499] A pastor, evangelist, and church planter, interviewed by the author, July 31, 2020.
[500] The pastors, interviewed by the author, July 19-August 12, 2020.

the apostolic task of the church as a public commitment to healing the victims, the sick, and the poor. In other words, they opt for witnessing their apostolic faith in the public life by taking a side with the victims and the poor rather than directly confronting the ruling authorities. As noted above, grassroots Christian public witness of evangelism tends to focus exclusively on winning lost souls of non-Christians. But grassroots Christian public witness of social charity tends to focus inclusively on the humanitarian work of healing the interreligious community of both Christian and non-Christians in need. One of the pastors and evangelists who work among the Bamar Buddhists said:

> Evangelism and social charity should go hands in hands in the Buddhist context. In the Buddhist context where the Buddhist practice of social charity is a cultural issue, Christian evangelism without social charity is not effective. The Christian practice of social charity and friendship with Buddhists should prioritize over evangelism. This is an effective mission strategy in the Buddhist context.[501]

Grassroots Christians choose to do the apostolic public witness of charity for two main reasons. First, they believe that the witness of social charity in the public life is rooted in the public practices of Jesus's disciples in the first century. For instance, Acts 2:45 says, "the disciples would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as they had need." Grassroots Christians, therefore, witness their apostolic faith to the public ministry of charity in the concrete context where medical and educational facilities are extremely basic needed and, even where there are available, they are often beyond the reach of the poor. Grassroots churches understand social charity as essential combination with evangelism. They engage in preaching the gospel and practicing charity.

Second, grassroots Christians opt for social charity of healing the poor and victims of the civil war. In the context of civil war, grassroots Christians do not confront the ruling

[501] A pastor, interviewed by the author, July 31, 2020.

authorities due to fear. Instead, they choose to do social charity for the victims of war. This is a practical reason especially for those grassroots Kachin, Karen, and Chin Christians, who in the civil war zones where the conflicts between the Bamar soldiers and the ethnic armed groups occur on the daily basis. Many grassroots ethnic Christians live in fear. One pastor who lives in the intense area of civil war expressed:

> Our faith is often threatened by the Bamar soldiers. Sometimes the internet line is cut off in order not to be able to get in touch with people outside our community. They cut off the internet so that the world would not know what is happening on the ground. Our lives are miserable. We live in fear and in poverty. But what they cannot cut off is our faithful relationship with God who is with us.[502]

Living in such challenging contexts, some grassroots Christians choose not to practice their faith as a public witness of a direct political confrontation against the ruling authorities. Rather, they choose to practice their faith in the alternative ways. They practice their faith as a private affair in terms of secret prayers for political freedom and social justice at churches and homes, on the one hand, and they practice faith as a public affair in terms of providing social charity for the wounded victims of war at the IDP camps, on the other.[503] The ministry of charity includes providing some basic humanitarian needs, such as meal, cloths, shelters, medicines, and educational supplies.

## 3.8 Summary

This chapter has studied the grassroots Christian expressions of their faith by focusing on three areas of theology: church, salvation, and public witnesses of salvation. I have begun by exploring the similar and different expressions of the grassroots church.

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[502] Chin pastor, interviewed by the author, August 10, 2020.

[503] Kachin pastor and practitioner, interviewed by the author, July 30, 2020. Chin minister and humanitarian worker, interviewed by the author, August 10, 2020.

First, their expressions of the church are quite close to each other. Especially their understanding of the internal life of the church is commonly rooted in the practices of worship. Although the styles of worship differ from one denomination to another, the motivation for their practices of worship are similar to each other. For the grassroots Christians, the church exists for the main purpose of worship. Preaching, singing, dancing, prayer, and Bible study are the main elements of grassroots ecclesial worship.

Second, their expressions of salvation are rooted in the cross of Christ. Grassroots Christians are more interested in the cross of Christ than in the social ministry of Christ. But this does not mean that they reject Jesus's ministry of healing and exorcising. Their understanding of salvation is holistic. To be sure, the blood language of Christ's death and the power language of Christ's victory over death and devils are quote central for their common expressions of the meaning of salvation. Their expressions of salvation are more rooted in the priestly role of Christ than in the prophetic role of Christ. This leads to their grassroots witnesses of salvation and faith. They witness salvation as the spiritual rescue of people from sin and from evils rather than from socio-political oppressions.

Third, grassroots Christian expressions of faith-public relation are not the same. While some grassroots Christians tend to object to faith-politic relations, others advocate for faith-politic relations. Some Christians who object to faith-politic relation in a public way still relate their faith to politics in a private way of praying for political issues. They have expressed their witnesses of salvation and faith in two ways. One is their public witnesses of evangelizing non-Christians. The main content of this witness is a spiritual and otherworldly dimension of salvation. The other is their public witness of social charity for the sick, poor, and victims of civil war. In light of the latter, their targets of people

encompass the interreligious community of the poor and oppressed. Their public witnesses of spiritual evangelism and social charity in the public life are deeply shaped by their lived practices of worship in the private sphere. This could serve as the unique sources for developing the grassroots Christians' contribution to Asian public theology.

# CHAPTER FOUR

# SYNTHESIZING ACADEMIC AND GRASSROOTS VOICES FOR A RELEVENT ASIAN PUBLIC THEOLOGY

## 4. Introduction

In chapter two, we have revisited some Asian theologians' approaches to Asian public theology of religions and liberation. In chapter three, we have studied and described some grassroots Christian lived voices and their expressions of faith. In this present chapter, we will discern some gaps between the academic voices and grassroots voices and will synthesize the two voices for creating a more relevant Asian public theology. Since I have done the qualitative descriptive study of the grassroots Christian voices and their expressions of faith in chapter three, I will now focus on the interpretative nature of the grassroots voices by engaging with some academic voices. Synthesizing two voices demands the integrative interpretation of public theology. Using the interpretative lens, I will exegete the grassroots Christian practices and integrate them with the academic voices.

The integrative interpretation would come from a combination of my own firsthand historical and cultural experiences as a participant observer in some local grassroots churches, and of my qualitative interviews with the grassroots Christians on the ground. I will try to interpret the embodied public theology that emerges from the grassroots Christian voices and their lived experiences. I will avoid replacing their grassroots voices with the academic voices. Instead of adopting the replacement model that replaces one voice with the other, I will use a synthesis model that integrates two voices by recognizing each distinctive contribution to a more relevant Asian public theology. For instance, we will not replace personal faith with public faith or the ontology of the church with the

function life of the church or other-worldly concern with this-world concern or personal sin with structural sin or vertical reconciliation with horizontal reconciliation. Instead, we will hold each of those theological themes in tension. In the following I will begin by examining different approaches to Asian public theology.

## 4.1 Evaluating Two Approaches to Asian Public Theology

### 4.1.1 Doing Asian Public Theology from the Public World

As noted in chapter two, there are two ways of approaching Asian public theology. The first approach is what I call "decentralizing the church approach," which sees the public world as the starting point for Asian public theology. Wilfred represents this approach.[504] He objects to starting Asian public theology from the church because it "remains mostly internal to the church and its pastoral needs."[505] He, therefore, suggests that one should move in a new direction for developing Asian public theology that "begins from the world and its public theological reflections are to be open-ended."[506] Wilfred justifies his approach by seeing the world as the place where people of other faiths, such as Gandhi, practice public theology.[507] Recognizing other religious practitioners' political engagement as public theology, Wilfred does not recognize the grassroots ecclesial praxis of worship, prayer, preaching, evangelism, and social charity.

While starting Christian public theology from public life seems attractive, it actually contradicts a missiological meaning and purpose of the church. God calls the church out of the world to be a gathered community for its doxological relationship with

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[504] Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology*; Wilfred, "On the Future of Asian Theology," 28-55.
[505] Wilfred, "On the Future of Asian Theology," 34.
[506] Ibid.
[507] Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology*, xix.

God. God sends the church back to the world as a scattered community for its public and missionary witness of God's salvation. The authentic identity of the church as a doxological and public-dialogical community is rooted in what Gregg Okesson calls "this back-and-forth movement" of gathering and scattering.[508] In light of this, starting public theology in the faith of the church is more missiologically sound, theologically right, and methodologically acceptable. Given the fact that the public realm belongs to fallen humanity, rather than humanity renewed by the Spirit in the church, Chan argues that the public "cultural experience cannot be the primary source of theology."[509] He explains:

> Contextual theologies emerge as the church lives out its given script in new situations. In other words, theology is first a lived experience of the church before it is a set of ideas formulated by church theologians. Ecclesial experience constitutes the primary theology (*theologia prima*) of the church. Ecclesial experience as truth is analogous to Jesus Christ as the Truth.[510]

Although Chan sees the fallenness of cultural experience, he does not mean that the church is sacred, and it should stay away from secular public life. Rather, he proposes the method that sees the ecclesial experience as the starting point for Asian theology. As I will show later, Chan himself puts the church in dialogue with Asian primal religion.[511]

### 4.1.2 Doing Asian Public Theology from the Church for the World

The second approach is to start in the church. Like the first, this approach sees the world as the realm of God's reign and uses it as the rationale for the public relevance of

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[508] Gregg Okesson, *A Public Missiology: How Local Churches Witness To A Complex World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 5.

[509] Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 18.

[510] Ibid., 15.

[511] Ibid., 129-56.

faith.[512] Unlike the first, the second approach sees the church as the starting point for Asian public theology and asks how the church should be involved in God's public reign. This approach is represented by Asian *Minjung* theologians, Shoki Coe, C.S. Song, Aloysius Pieris, Sebastian Kim, Paul Chung, Amos Yong, Vinoth Ramachandra, and others. Although the way they address the role of the church in public life may be different from one another, they see the church as the starting point. Some lesser-known Asian theologians and pastors also emphasize the need of starting public theology from the life of the church and example how the church should play its role in public life.[513]

Although the second approach has many strengths, it has two limitations. One is its tendency toward reflecting the academic Asian public theology without incorporating sufficiently the voices of grassroots Asian Christians. While I call the first approach "decentering the church approach," I would call the second approach "decentering the grassroots voices approach." With the decentering of the grassroots voices, much of discussion about Asian public theology tends to be confined to what academic theologians are saying about the church's public role in dialogue with other religions. As noted, Asian theologians are more willing to engage with people of other religions than to engage with grassroots Christians. They do Asian theology in partnership with people of other faiths, rather than with the grassroots Christians as the ecclesial collaborators.

As I will show later in chapter five, doing Asian public theology in dialogue with people of other religions is necessary, but I am just suggesting that we should not neglect the grassroots Christians as dialogue partners in doing Asian public theology of lived faith.

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[512] See Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere,*15.

[513] See Bonnie Miriam Jacob. ed, *Public Theology: Exploring Expressions of the Christian Faith* (Bangalore: Primalogue, 2020).

Instead of doing public theology *for* the grassroots Christians, we should do grassroots Asian public theology together *with* them by recognizing their lived voices, practices, and experiences of worship, prayer, preaching, healing, and social charity.

The second limitation is the failure to synthesize the dichotomy between academic and grassroots voices on social justice and social charity, mission and evangelism, salvation and liberation, political powers and spiritual powers, as well as personal sin and structural sin. Although some Asian theologians criticize Asians' uncritical adoption of Western dualism, some Asian theologians fall into a dualistic idea of theological construction. Instead of integrating the two for a holistic public mission, they dichotomize social justice and social charity, spiritual salvation and social liberation, personal sin and social sin. Their ideas of sin and salvation are reduced to structural sin and liberation from politics, while some grassroots people tend to focus on personal sin and spiritual liberation from spiritual powers.[514] In order to integrate each of those themes, we will first define grassroots Asian public theology and offer some frameworks.

## 4.2 Public Theology as Church-Oriented and World-Engaged

Using the grassroots ecclesial voices as the primary sources, I define grassroots Asian public theology as a theology that bridges the church's doxological and dialogical witness of God's life and action inside and outside the church by the power of the Spirit. Public theology is not just about witnessing God's life and action in public life, but it is also about doxological witness in the church's life. The church's public witness in public

[514] Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Recovery of Mission: Beyond the Pluralist Paradigm* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1996), 52-60. Simon Chan, "Evangelical Theology in Asian Contexts," in *The Cambridge Campion to Evangelical Theology,* ed, Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier, 225-40. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Tam, *From Darkness to Glorious Light.*

life flows from the inner life of the church. I will treat grassroots Asian public theology as a church-oriented and a world-engaged theology. In this respect grassroots Asian public theology has three characteristics: confession, conversation, and conversion. It is the witness of the church's confession of the triune God and of the church's conversation with people of other faiths in public life for mutual conversion or enrichment.

The task of public theology is to bridge the first identity of the church's confession and its second identity of conversational engagement. The first identity of the church is rooted in God's first calling out of the world as a gathered and doxological community. Its second identity is rooted in God's commissioning of the church to the public world as a scattered and dialogical community. The thick identity of the church is rooted in this twofold movement without separation.[515] Calling and commissioning are crucial for performing the church's authentic identity. There is no second identity of the church without its first identity. The first identity is incomplete without the first identity. The reciprocal idea of the internal and external movements takes its root in the people of Israel's imagination of their identity as the relationship with God and with the world. In his book *Theology of the Old Testament*, Walter Brueggemann helpfully explains:

> The testimony of Israel concerning Yahweh is always of two kinds, one to reorder the internal life of the community in ways faithful to Yahweh, the other to invite the world out beyond this community to reorder its life with reference to Yahweh. Both enterprises are preoccupied with the recognition that the acknowledgement of Yahweh at the center of life (the life of Israel or the life of the world) requires a reordering of everything else.[516]

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[515] 1) *thin* and *thick faith*; 2) *thickness of faith*; 3), Geertz is the one who popularized it in ethnographic contexts, but he got the term from Gilbert Ryle. See also Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973), 3-32. Volf uses thin and thick faith, see Volf, *A Public Faith*, 39-41. Okesson also uses thickness of faith, see Okesson, *A Public Missiology*, 69-80.

[516] Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press, 1997), 747.

We should hold a balanced emphasis on the tensions between the internal life of the church and its external engagement with the world. The task of the internal life of the church is to perform what Kevin Vanhoozer calls "first theology." First theology is rooted in a threefold relation of the Trinity-Bible-church.[517] In terms of its ontological relationship with God, first theology of the church can also be seen as "Liturgical Theology."[518] First theology proceeds to "second theology," which is rooted in a threefold relation of the Trinity-church-world. The church plays a role in first theology by exegeting its first identity as a doxological community of faith, worship, and prayer. On the other hand, the church plays a role in second theology by asking how the church should engage with the world.

In bridging first and second theologies, Karl Barth's distinction between the church and the civil community is helpful for understanding Christ's work in the church and in the world. Barth offers a helpful analogy for understanding the church and the world. The smaller and internal circle is the church and the larger and external circle is civil community. Christ is the center of two circles. Barth emphasizes that the internal circle knows Christ as its center and strives to live for Him through worship, preaching, and other witnesses, and the external community has Christ its center, but it may not know Him.[519] In order to synthesize ecclesial grassroots voices and academic voices, it would also be helpful to look at the role of grassroots public theology in what David Tracy calls "three

[517] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002), 28-31.

[518] Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology, The Church as Worshiping Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 21-40.

[519] Karl Barth, *Community, Church, and State: Three Essays* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 149-89.

communities—church, academy, society."[520] I will now explore the role of public theology in three communities and the role of three communities in public theology.

## 4.3 Public Theology in Three Communities

Tracy suggests that there are three kinds of publicness in public theology. In his famed book *The Analogical Imagination,* Tracy explains about those three this way:

> If one is concerned to show the public status of all theology, it becomes imperative first to study the reference groups, the publics of all the theologian. The fact is that theologians do not only recognize a plurality of publics to whom they intend to speak, but also more and more the theologians are internalizing this plurality in their own discourse. The results are often internal confusion and external chaos. Just whom does the theologian attempt to address in theological discourse?[521]

While I appreciate Tracy's creative proposal for the need of theology's public engagement with three communities, I would specify that the church is a grassroots community. The church in the West where Tracy lives might be a balanced community of lay people and intellectuals. The church in Asia generally is a community of grassroots Christians. Unlike the church, the academy is a community of intellectuals, and society is a community of interreligious people. These different types of communities require consideration of how we engage three communities for performing public theology as everyday theology.

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[520] David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 3-5; David Tracy, "Defending the Public Character of Theology," *Christian Century*, 98 (1981): 350-56. David Tracy, "Three Kinds of Publicness in Public Theology," *International Journal of Public Theology*, 8, no. 1. (2014): 330-34.

[521] Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 3-5.

### 4.3.1 Embodying Public Theology with Heart: Community One

The first nature of public theology is a doxological embodiment or lived performance. If we define theology as a study of God, we tend to think that there is theology only in the academy. But if we define theology as a lived expression of faith, we acknowledge that there is theology in the grassroots church.[522] Theology is not just to be learned, taught, written, and reflected in the academy, but it is also to be sung, preached, and prayed in the grassroots church. There is the priestly nature of embodied theology in the church. Therefore, we should engage with grassroots Christians by recognizing their multiple witnesses of praise, prayer, and preaching as the primary sources for performing liturgical public theology.[523] As noted in chapter three, grassroots Christians do not articulate the doctrine of God, but they embody their faith as expressions of their gratitude for who God is and for what He has done for them.[524] Their embodiment of theology begins with grateful heart. Although they do not know how to articulate the doctrine of God with their head, they express how they love God with their heart. If mission begins with God's heart, then theology should also begin with heart—the heart that shows a doxological expression of joyful faith in the triune God.

Therefore, grassroots public theology is first and foremost to be performed in the church with heart. Yong states that worship should not be understood in isolation from public and political praxis. For Yong, political or public praxis is not merely about the church's public engagement, but also about the church's liturgical performances of prayer, preaching, and praise.[525] A political way of doing public theology focuses on the church's

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[522] Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*, 4-5. "There is theology in the congregation."
[523] Yong, *In the Days of Caesar*, 155-65.
[524] A grassroots Pentecostal pastor, interviewed by the author, July 21, 2020.
[525] Yong, *In the Days of Caesar,* 155.

public engagement for socio-political change. In fact, public theology is first and foremost to be performed in the church. Its goal is to renew our mind (Rom. 12:2) in order to be moral public agents for social transformation. The task of Christians is not just to advocate for social transformation, but also to prepare for inner transformation.[526]

### 4.3.2 Reflecting Public Theology with Head: Community Two

The second nature of public theology done in the academy. The academy is where public theology is *critically* imagined and reflected beyond doxological performance. The nature of public theology in the second community is a reflective imagination. Tracy and Kim suggest that public theology is to be critically reflected.[527] As an academic discipline, public theology is critically reflected in conversation with other academic disciplines.[528] Although Tracy does not incorporate the grassroots voices of the church as the sources for reflecting public theology, he does emphasize the need of relationship between the academy and church. He said, "as a discipline, theology belongs, therefore, to the churches and its seminaries and possibly to church-related institutions of learning."[529] Tracy's aim is to relate academic reflections to the life of the church.

It is my concern that the academy exists for reflecting public theology in conversation not only with the academicians, but also with the church people, listening to their voices and exchanging some insights for doing a relevant public theology. Since grassroots Christians already embody an implicit theology without thinking about it critically and academically. They need academic theologians to think it together. Moltmann

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[526] Ibid., 155-56.
[527] Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere*, 3.
[528] Tracy, "Three Kinds of Publicness in Public Theology," 333.
[529] Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 16.

rightly points out that "There is implicit theology of modern times—a theology always already existent, but not critically thought through—and that this demands an explicit theology."[530] An explicit nature of public theology can be done through the synthetic voices of the academic and grassroots Christians. I will take up this idea later when I analyze the grassroots voices on some theological themes.

### 4.3.3 Performing Public Theology with Hands: Community Three

Tracy's third publicness of public theology is society. This is the context where public theology is enacted practically (i.e., with hands). Kim, Tracy, and Moltmann suggest that the nature of public theology in the third community should be "prophetic in action."[531] Since society is not only larger by scope, but also a more pluralistic community by nature, the performing implication of public theology requires a dialogical nature of prophetic action, joining in hands with people of other faiths for the common good. In chapter six, I will demonstrate how grassroots Christians and people of other religions bridge their religious and ethnic divides to counter the political powers of the coup. It is stressed that the dialogical and prophetic character of public theology is for the sake of God's broad kingdom beyond the church and academy. Moltmann rightly said:

> As kingdom-of-God theology, it is of necessity missionary theology, linking the church with society, and the people of God with the peoples of the earth. It becomes a public theology, which participates in 'the sufferings of this present time,' and formulates its hope for God at the places where contemporaries are and exist. Kingdom-of-God theology intervenes critically and prophetically in the public affairs of a given society, and draws public attention, not to church's interests but to 'God's kingdom, God's commandment and His righteousness.[532]

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[530] Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 1.

[531] Tracy, "Three Kinds of Publicness in Public Theology," 331-34. Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere*, 5. Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society,* 1.

[532] Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*, xx.

As God's kingdom-theology, public theology has to be performed in all dimensions of life from the church through the academy to public society. Since the nature of God's kingdom encompasses all dimensions of private and public life, public theology is situated in the church, academy, and society. More importantly, public theology is not overtly academic business, but rather it should be done in an accessible way that enables many people to participate in. I will now explore how grassroots Asian public theology should be done as everyday theology by synthesizing academic and grassroots voices.

### 4.4 Grassroots Asian Public Theology as Everyday Theology: Reading the Bible and Newspapers

Asian public theology is not only about academic reflection in the academy as a weekday theology and not only about doxological singing, praying, and preaching in the church as a Sunday theology, but it is also about everyday theology of performing prophetic, priestly, apostolic, and healing faith in everyday life. If so, we ought to relate the meanings of Sunday doxological lives to our social everyday lives. In his book *Everyday Theology*,[533] Kevin Vanhoozer helpfully defines everyday theology as follows:

> Everyday theology is faith seeking understanding of everyday life. Nothing should be easier to understand the notion of the everyday for the simple reason that it is so commonplace. What is most familiar to us, however, is often the hardest thing to understand.[534]

[533] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpreting Trends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

[534] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "What Is Everyday Theology?" How and Why Christians Should Read Culture," *Everyday Theology: How To Read Cultural Texts and Interpreting Trends*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 15-60 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007) here 17.

Vanhoozer defines everyday theology by using Anselm's definition of theology as "faith seeking understanding." Everyday theology is faith seeking everyday understanding of God and making sense of that faith for all everyday life by engaging the Bible and everyday cultural trends.[535] Basic to Vanhoozer's notion of everyday theology is that faith reflects everyday trends from the view of the Bible and respond to them ethically.[536] In his book *Faith Speaking Understanding*, Vanhoozer notes that the public dimension of God's reign and gospel demands the church's witness of Christ in every life of all people.[537] He said:

> Public theology is the church's demonstration of life in Christ—to the glory of God and for the sake of the world. There is a public dimension to the gospel. The relatively new discipline of public theology studies ways in which Christian faith should impact public life. The assumption is that the gospel has a significant bearing on all people, not Christians only. Much of what the church says and does takes the form of public witness.[538]

Vanhoozer's aim is to guide how the church should perform the doctrinal confession of God in public life. Basic to Vanhoozer's proposal is the idea of how Christians should participate in the drama of God's public mission. In his book, *The Drama of Doctrine,* Vanhoozer introduces the idea of God's trinitarian public mission as the drama performance in everyday life. He uses the church and public life as an analogy of theater, the gospel or Scripture as the script, the triune God as the director, and Christians as actors.[539] As Christians engage everyday life as participating in the drama of God's public mission, it is necessary to relate the Bible and newspaper. Karl Barth's dictum, "Holding

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[535] Ibid, 16.
[536] Ibid.,
[537] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 7.
[538] Ibid., 7.
[539] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 57-75.

the Bible in one hand, and the newspaper in the other,"[540] as the vocation of Christians is helpful for reflecting and performing public theology as everyday theology. The Bible and newspapers are informative sources, though not equally, for discernments for God's speeches and directions for our act of public theology as everyday theology. When we read newspapers, we learn some everyday public trends and issues as the *kairos* for our prophetic, priestly, and apostolic responses to them from the perspective of the Bible.

Miroslav Volf is another public theologian who treats public theology as everyday theology. Volf proposes to move beyond academic theology. In his co-authored book *For the Life of the World*,[541] Volf expresses his dissatisfaction with academic theology that fails to address everyday human flourishing.[542] He states that the aim of theology is "to discern, articulate, and commend visions of flourishing life."[543] He expresses:

> The theology that has lost its way is above all professional academic theology, which is only subset of Christian theology as a whole. In an important sense, all Christians are theologians. As Christians, we seek to think and speak plausibly about our journeys with Christ into our own and the world's fulness to make the practice of faith coherent. Call this "everyday theology."[544]

Volf criticizes academic theology for its over-emphasis on the abstract idea of God and for its detachment from real life. He observes that there is the gap between "established knowledge and public opinion."[545] What knowledge generators or scholars are too detached from life as it is lived on the ground.[546] In order to articulate public theology as

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[540] Though frequently credited to Barth for this dictum, no authoritative source is found yet for this citation. Probably the clearest statemen on the record from Barth regarding these maters can be seen in *Time Magazine*, published on Friday, May 31, 1963.

[541] Miroslav Volf and Matthew Crossman, *For the Life of the World: Theology That Makes a Difference* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2019).

[542] Ibid., 13.

[543] Ibid., 11.

[544] Ibid.

[545] Volf, "On Being a Christian Public Intellectual," 3-20

[546] Ibid., 8. Volf borrows these insights from Immanuel Kant.

everyday theology, Volf sees this world as "God's home" (Jn. 1:14; 6:15; 10:40).[547] Since this world is God's home, the task of public theology is to discern everyday trends of public issues by reading newspapers, to articulate theology for all people, and to commend vision of human flourishing.[548] As everyday theology, public theology does not just focus on one specific aspect of life, but on all public aspects. It is in this sense that Volf brings theology in dialogue with people of other religions for the common good.[549] Volf writes:

> We need to revive a sustained truth-seeking cultural conversation about the flourishing life. We live in a globalized world where party overlapping and partly contradictory visions of flourishing life coexist in the same public space. People of many diverse perspectives, religious and nonreligious, we all need to participate in that conversation. Christian theology ought to become one such voice. If it does, it may be able to help both religious and educational institutions to make the true life their central concern.[550]

Although Volf and Vanhoozer may popularize the term "everyday theology," their vision shares a commonality with some Asian public theologians. They meet at the common point where they all aim to relate "faith to action" and "theology to everyday life."[551] They are all concerned about the problem of divorcing theology from everyday life and utilize the cosmic Lordship as a solution to overcoming the problem. Given the fact that Christ's Lordship encompasses all aspects of everyday life, they relate public theology to everyday life by using stories of humans.[552] For instance, C. S. Song said:

> Our theology must begin with humanity and all that it means because it is in humanity that God is theologically engaged. Humanity to theology is something

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[547] Volf, *For the Life of the World*, 70.

[548] Ibid. See also Miroslav Volf and Ryan McAnnally-Linz, *The Home of God: A Brief Story of Everything* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022).

[549] Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), xvi, 4-5.

[550] Ibid., 32.

[551] Elwood *What Asian Christians Are Thinking;* Than, ed, *Witnesses Together.*

[552] See C.S. Song, *The Tears of Lady Meng: A Parable of Political Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), 43-8.

> like water to fish. Fish die when taken out of water. Theology dies when divorced from human life and history.[553]

While we appreciate their vision of public theology as everyday theology, they do not take sufficiently the voices of the grassroots Christians in their theological reflections. In the following, I will discern how Asian public theology might look like if we incorporate the grassroots Christian voices and lived practices into theological reflections. I am hoping to fill some gaps between the academic and grassroots Christian voices for the public vision of performing Asian public theology of religions and reconciliation as everyday theology.

## 4.5 Grassroots Voices and Academic Voices in Conversation

In synthesizing academic and grassroots voices, we will pay particular attention to ecclesiology and soteriology and explore their implications for the mission of God. But what does that synthesis look like? Am I using academic voices as one-sided intellectual tools for criticizing grassroots voices? Or am I romanticizing grassroots voices as the only empirical tools for rejecting academic voices? What I am trying to do in the following sections is to bridge some gaps between academic and grassroots voices with some suggestions on how they should complement each other. As noted in chapters two and chapter three, academic and grassroots Christians have their orientations. My hope is to bring academic voices into conversation with grassroots voices for mutual enrichment.

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[553] C.S. Song, *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 10.

### 4.5.1 Asian Public Ecclesiology: Bridging Ecclesial Ontology and Function

While Christology has been a dominant theme in Asian public theology of liberation,[554] it is fair to say that ecclesiology is a relatively neglected theme. Theologians tend to articulate theology for the church as the recipient, but they don't adequately do a theology of the church (ecclesiology) with the grassroots churches as the collaborative participants.[555] As noted earlier in chapter two, some Asian public theologians use the cosmic and prophetic Christology as the foundation and model for the function of the church's political involvement and interreligious dialogue. If the cosmic Christology addresses God's universal reign and public presence in the cultural spaces of other religions, prophetic Christ calls for Christians' prophetic engagement with people of other religions for the common vision of social justice and political liberation.[556]

Although the liberationists' emphasis on the kingly and prophetic Christology is crucial for the church's public praxis of discerning Christ's public reign and prophetic witness against political powers, they neglect the priestly role of Christ. We need to reconsider a balanced emphasis on the kingly, prophetic, priestly, and healing roles of Christ and seek their significance for the priestly, prophetic, and healing action of the church. While the liberationists focus on the church's function in its prophetic participation in interreligious dialogue and social engagement, grassroots Christians focus on the

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[554] For a comprehensive study of Christology in Asia, see R.S. Sugirtharajah, ed, *Asian Faces of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

[555] Simon Chan is arguably one of the strongest Asian proponents of grassroots ecclesiology or a theology of the church. See Chan, *Liturgical Theology*; Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 157-202.

[556] Than, ed, *Witnesses Together,* 60-78. Thomas, *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution*, 27-65; Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology*, xix-xx. For a comprehensive summary of academic Christology, see John R. Levison and Priscilla Pope-Levison, "Toward an Ecumenical Christology for Asia," *Missiology: An International Review*, XXII, no. 1 (January 1994): 3-17. Priscilla Pope-Levison and John R. Levison, *Jesus in Global Contexts* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 55-88.

church's ontology and its priestly and healing participation.[557] It is imperative to bridge the gap between the external function and the internal ontology of the church.

### 4.5.2 Grassroots Trinitarian Ecclesiology: The Internal and External Trinity

Central to an authentic grassroots public theology is the question of how the church is to be rightly understood in relation to the Trinity and the world. As noted in chapter three, grassroots Christians' self-understanding of the church is strongly rooted in its ontological relation with God.[558] But when it comes to the threefold relation of the Trinity-church-world, both theologians and grassroots Christians tend to emphasize the economic Trinity as the mission model for the church's functional engagement with the world. What is often neglected is the significance of the immanent Trinity for the church. If grassroots Asian public theology is to be started in the church, we should reconsider the importance of the internal life of the church. My inquiry is how the internal life of the immanent Trinity serves as the model for the internal life of the church. In particular, I find the Orthodox Christian approach to the Trinity helpful for recognizing grassroots Christians' emphasis on the internal aspect of ontological relationship with the Trinity.

According to Miroslav Volf, Cappadocian Fathers, especially Gregory of Nyssa are the most important early advocates of employing communal images for the Trinity.[559] While Nyssa advocates for a social model, Augustine, father of Western theology, advocates for a "psychological model of the Trinity" (Trinitarian persons are related to the

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[557] Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 157-202; Chan, "Grassroots Asian Ecclesiologies," 595-614.

[558] Church pastors, interviewed by the author, July 19-21, 2020.

[559] Miroslav Volf, "Being as God is Trinity and Generosity," in *God's Life in Trinity*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Michael Welker, 2-13. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006) here 5.

one God and to each other as memory, intellectual, and will are related to the human mind). While Augustine's psychological model is important, Nyssa's social model of the Trinity offers a more significant and practical role for the church's internal and external communion.[560] Holding the inseparable unity between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity, we will also emphasize the significance of their internal and external distinctions for the internal life and the external or public life of the church.[561]

While the immanent Trinity refers to the image of the internal communal relationship among the persons of the triune God, the economic Trinity refers to the image of God's external acts of salvation for the world. My aim is to show how the immanent Trinity and economic Trinity integratively serve as the model for the internal and external life of the church. In the following, I will begin by showing the relationship between the immanent Trinity and the internal life of grassroots Christian community.

### 4.5.3 The Immanent Trinity and the Grassroots Church

In his celebrated book *Being as Communion*, Eastern Orthodox ecclesiologist John Zizioulas develops the significance of the immanent Trinity for the internal and ontological life of the church. Although he does not explicitly depict the immanent Trinity as the model for the church, I find that his approach to the personhood and communion of the Trinity builds the analogous relationships between the Trinity and the church.[562] Central to Zizioulas' idea of trinitarianism is his understanding of the being of the Trinity as

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[560] Ibid., 6.

[561] See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 290-305. For instance, Karl Rahner advocates for the approach that says, "The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity." Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: NY: Herder and Herder, 1970), 22.

[562] John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1985), 15-26.

communion and personhood. For Zizioulas, God's being coincides with God's personhood and communion. He said, "person cannot exist without communion, but every form of communion, which denies the personhood is inadmissible."[563]

Zizioulas' idea of the doctrine of the trinitarian perichoretic personalism without individualism and divine communion without uniformity is helpful not only for overcoming the misunderstanding of monotheism as divine individualism, but also for envisioning what we would call "communitarian Trinity," from the grassroots Asian communal perspective. In his book *Towards a Theology of the Concord of God: A Japanese Perspective on the Trinity*,[564] Japanese theologian Nozomu Miyahira argues against a Western individualistic view of the Trinity (Augustine) and takes the East Asian Japanese communal culture as the context for the communal nature of the Trinity.[565]

It is true that communal life is inherent in grassroots Asian cultures. Their communal cultures shape their ecclesial embodiment of the communal nature of the trinitarian personhood. They do not articulate the doctrine of the Trinity theologically, but they embody the communal nature of the Trinity without having academic knowledge. One grassroots Pentecostal pastor said, "We did not know much about doctrine and understood little of the teaching on key aspects of the faith such as the Holy Spirit or the Trinity."[566] In a sense, the grassroots church is what Miroslav Volf calls the "image of the Trinity."[567] They image the Trinity in two ways of being and action without academic reflections:

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[563] Ibid., 18.

[564] Nozomu Miyahira, *Towards a Theology of the Concord of God: A Japanese Perspective on the Trinity* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000), 48-65.

[565] 48-65, 223-25. Jung Young Lee also argues that Western culture tends to be more individualistic and dualistic, while Asian culture is more communal and non-dualistic. See Jung Young Lee, *The Trinity in Asian Perspective* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 22-4.

[566] Ki, *Darkness from Glorious Light*, 95.

[567] Miroslav Volf, *The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 73-106.

imaging the communal nature of the Trinity through the communal being of the church and imaging the Trinity through the multiple actions of the church. We will show how they embody the Trinity through their communal being and multiple actions.

### 4.6 Doxological Faith: Grassroots Three Images of the Church

When I interviewed some grassroots Christians about their understanding of images of the church, they had common expressions of three images of the church: the people of God, the body of Christ, and the missionary of God.[568] I will look at each of these images and discern how they perform their one faith in multiple forms of Christ-like and Spirit-led witnesses inside and outside the church.[569] In particular, Yong emphasizes the multiple ecclesial forms of witnesses as the gifts of the Spirit.[570] He said:

> From a Pentecostal perspective, we have already seen that there is no one form of political, economic, or social engagement in global Pentecostalism. Rather there is a multiplicity of pentecostalisms in the global south, with distinct orientation toward the political, broadly construed. The preliminary biblical explorations provided in this chapter suggests that the many tongues of Pentecost, precisely because they represent a diversity of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural experiences, also imply the redemption of many political practices.[571]

In the following, I will explore how grassroots Christians' understanding and performance of the ecclesial images of the people of God, the body, and the missionary make some unique contributions to grassroots Asian public theology.

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[568] Grassroots Christians, interviewed by the author, July 19-August 25, 2020.
[569] See Yong, *In the Days of Caesar*, 121-256.
[570] Ibid., 99-111; Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, 235-247.
[571] Yong. *In the Days of Caesar*, 110.

4.6.1 Chosen People of Worship: Grassroots Ecclesial Identity Imagination

First, it is common for grassroots Christians to imagine and express their identity as the chosen people. They use 1Peter 2:9 as a source for justifying their identity as the chosen people. Peter said: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." They emphasize the idea of "chosen from and chosen for." While the term "chosen from" refers to their understanding of Christ's calling the church out of the world as a holy community, the term "chosen for" refers to Christ's calling the church for the purpose of gathering for praise, prayer, and preaching. They imagine that their identity as the chosen people is rooted in their doxological praxis of ontological relationship with God, while seeing others as unsaved and unholy.[572]

It is in this sense that grassroots Christians relate their identity to the people of Israel. One of grassroots pastors said, "We share commonality with Israel in two ways: one is that the church shares its commonality with Israel in terms of God's election and the other is that the church in Myanmar share communality with Israel in terms of political oppression."[573] While their imagination of their identity as the chosen people of God is right, they tend to interpret God's election as an exclusive privilege against people of other faiths (2Cor. 6:14), rather than as an inclusive instrument for witnessing God's salvation. They see themselves as chosen and holy people and see other religions as unholy and unsaved. They draw a sharp discontinuity between Christian faith and other faiths. One of the pastors who was converted to Christianity from a primal religion said:

> One day, there was a spirit worship ceremony near my home. When it came to offering the animal sacrifice, the *pigaw* (village) elders wanted me to perform the

[572] Ki, *From Darkness to Glorious Light*, 40-48.
[573] The church pastor interviewed by the author, July 25, 2020.

> role of *tai gui tung* [priest]. I flatly rejected them. So, they forced Mana Ling Mana, another distant uncle, to undertake the ritual. He took it on grudgingly, afraid of putting his family under thread from the unpredictable spirits. But he held me responsible for his predicament. After the ceremony, it was suggested that this proxy high priest should approach me to some kind of donation to the costs of the ceremony. He angrily marched to my home and sensing that there was going to be a confrontation, the crowd followed. Mana Ling called out, "Tam Ki, come out? We have come to collect a donation." I refused to donate anything, saying I am now a servant of God and I don't belong to the spirits anymore.[574]

While the church's replacement of Israel is a debatable theological issue in the Western academy, the church's replacement of the primal religious cultures is a theological issue for grassroots Christians in Asia. It is noted that grassroots Christians need to be informed that the purpose of God's calling is not for an exclusive privileged identity against other faiths, but for an embracing agent of witnessing God's love and salvation.[575] Using a nuanced approach to primal religious practices from the perspective of cultural appreciation and appropriation that avoids some forms of syncretism, academic and grassroots ethnic Christians should have a more deeper dialogue on how their primal religious practices of rites pave the way for the gospel of atonement and could enrich the communal nature of the grassroots church's holistic spirituality as well as salvation.

In his book *Nat Worship*, Simon Pau Khan Enn, a Chin [Zomi] theologian proposed to employ the ethnic primal religious practices as the local sources and paradigms for developing contextual theology in Myanmar. In this book, Enn suggests that at least six theological themes could be drawn from *Nat-worship* for developing contextual theology. They include: (1) the atoning role of Christ, (2) communal nature of ecclesiology, (3) eco-healing (e.g., the benevolent roles of spirits as the guardians of nature), (4) leadership (the

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[574] Ki, *From Darkness to Glorious Light*, 43-44.

[575] See Christopher J.H Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 191-221.

priestly role of the village leader in performing rites), (5) Pneumatology (believing in the existence of the spirits enriches our better understanding of the Spirit), and (6) spirituality.[576] Similarly, Simon Chan focuses on the significance of primal religion for applying the relationship between the Asian church and spirituality.[577]

Second, grassroots Christians understand their identity as a gathered community of faith. As the gathered community, they understand that their task is to worship God. The purpose of God's calling the church out of the world is to worship him. They emphasize that the church would be meaningless without worship. For them, worship defines what the church is. They are proud to be the people of worship (Phil. 3:3; 1Tim. 2:10; Heb. 12:28).[578] In his book *Liturgical Theology*,[579] Chan whose writings focus on Asian grassroots ecclesiology, states that "the church's most basic identity is to be found in its ontological act of worship."[580] In contrast to some Asian theologians who emphasize a functionalist understanding of the church, Chan emphasizes the ontology of the church, and argues that worship defines and distinguishes the church as the church.[581]

As a community, the church could be like other social community in terms of being the instrumental champion of charity for the poor, which other charity community or NGOs could also do, but the ontological act of and being of worship, according to Chan, distinguishes the church from other social communities.[582] This brings us to the purpose of worship. Why does worship matter? How does it relate to public theology?

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[576] Simon Pau Khan En, *Nat-Worship: A Paradigm for Doing Contextual Theology in Myanmar* (Yangon: Judson Research Center, 2012), 157-218.
[577] See Chan, "Asian Christian Spirituality in Primal Religious Contexts," 41.
[578] Grassroots Christian leaders, interviewed by the author, July 19-August 25, 2020.
[579] Chan, *Liturgical Theology*.
[580] Ibid., 42.
[581] Ibid., 21-61.
[582] Ibid., 42-7.

4.6.1.1 Grassroots Doxological Public Theology: Worship and Witness

First, grassroots Christians perform worship as their ontological expressions of gratitude to God. The most common themes in the worship songs and testimonies are God's characteristics, such as love, grace, mercy, power, holiness, faithfulness, and truth.[583] They prefer experiential rather than theological doctrinal aspects of faith. They worship God for helping them in difficulties. They relate to God through their understanding of God's gracious role in providing for financial needs of the poor and God's powerful role in healing the sick.[584] The congregational declarations, such as "God is good all the time," is common expressions of worshipers. Worship is a time for them to express God's grace and power. They refer to God's power as the consequence of Jesus's victory over devils and as the Holy Spirit's empowering act of miracles in their lives.[585]

They perform worship as a primary way of their ontological relationship with God. In worship, they regard God as the only worthy receiver of praises and honors from the church. God is the receiver of glory from the gathered church. Grassroots Christian doxology embodies what Moltmann call a "trinitarian doxology."[586] He said:

> In the trinitarian doxology, we adore God for himself and glorify him because he is what he is. The trinitarian figure for this is therefore the immanent Trinity. Of course, in human doxology the Trinity becomes an unfathomable mystery which excels all imagings and concepts. For anyone who enters into the wonder, the be-wondered counterpart becomes an inexhaustible source of always wider and every deeper wonderment. How could we ever stop and where could we ever come to an end of the marveling?[587]

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[583] Grassroots Christian leaders, interviewed by the author, July 19-August 25, 2020.

[584] See also Denise Ross, "Hybridity among the Chin of Myanmar," in *Scripting Pentecost: A Study of Pentecostals, Worship and Liturgy*, eds, Mark L. Cartledge and A.J. Swoboda, 167-185. (New York: Routledge, 2016), here 176-177.

[585] See Ki, *From Darkness to Glorious Light*, 44-5.

[586] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 304.

[587] Ibid..

When Jesus came to bring the world salvation by the power of the Spirit, the Father is the receiver of glory from the Son and the Spirit. When Jesus ascended into heaven, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit were and are the receivers of honor from the church.[588]

Second, grassroots Christians perform worship as celebrating the salvation of Christ as reconciliation. While liberationists, as noted in chapter two, tend to see Jesus Christ as a political liberator and His prophetic resistance against political powers is emphasized, grassroots Christians see Jesus Christ as a priestly savior and His sacrificial death and victory over evils are emphasized. For the liberationists, sin is understood more as political oppression that creates unequal relationship between the oppressors and the oppressed. But for the grassroots, sin is seen as the broken relationship between God and sinners. Understanding sin in a vertical sense, grassroots Christians see salvation as the forgiveness of sin and as the reconciliation between God and sinners (Rom. 5:8-10).[589]

They emphasize Jesus's mediatory role in the vertical reconciliation between God and sinners (1Tim. 2:5). One pastor says, "Jesus's mediatorial role is analogous to the pre-Christian ritual rites where the priest serves as a mediator between the spirits and sick persons. The priest plays a mediatorial role in appeasing the evil spirits by offering animal sacrifices for healing the sick."[590] The mediatorial priest and the sacrificial animal are analogous to Jesus as a priest and sacrificial victim. Jesus's mediatorial role is crucial for grassroots Christians understanding of salvation. They believe that forgiveness of sinners is impossible without the blood of Christ (Heb. 9:22). Blood language is common for grassroots Christians' imagination of salvation. The song called "The Power of the Blood

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[588] Ibid., 302-4.

[589] Grassroots Christians leaders, interviewed by the author, July 19-August 20, 2020. See also Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 81-2.

[590] Ibid., 3-7.

of Christ" is one of the most common worship songs. The blood of Christ resonates with their former ritual practices of appeasing the spirits.[591]

Since Jesus's priestly act of salvation is so important for grassroots Christians that they perform worship as celebrating salvation as the forgiveness of sin. They celebrate salvation primarily as a doxological performance of reconciliation with God.[592] While their doxological form of celebrating salvation as a vertical reconciliation is imperative, they need to expand their understanding of salvation both as a vertical reconciliation with God as well as with one another in the church and outside the church.[593] Their performance of reconciliation remains strong in a vertical sense, but weak in a horizontal sense. Likewise, their grassroots understanding of sin is stronger in a vertical sense, but weak in a horizontal sense. In the situation where political suffering is caused by political powers, sin must also be defined in political terms so that we strive for political liberation and social reconciliation.[594] I will take up this subject and develop it in chapter five.

Third, I have noted earlier that grassroots Christians tend to focus on performing worship as a moment of expressing their gratitude to God for His act of salvation. They celebrate Holy Communion as a sacramental movement for confessing their sin, for thanking Jesus, and for asking the Holy to lead in their lives. Some of them said that they celebrate Holy Communion in a more exclusive way. It is celebrated only for those who are born-again and baptized. The pastors and elders who officiate Holy Communion invite only those born-again Christians to partake of bread and wine as the symbols of the broken

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[591] Church praise and worship leaders, interviewed by the author, August 22, 2020.
[592] Chan, *Liturgical Theology*, 147.
[593] Yong, *In the Days of Caesar*, 122-55. See also Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 108.
[594] For example, see Andrew Sung Park, *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 69-85.

body and shed blood of Christ. Not all worshippers are invited to participate in it. Only those who are born-again and baptized are exclusively invited to participate in it.

One could argue that worship should also be performed as a transformative life. Worship is not just about a heartfelt expression and joyful celebration, but also about renewing minds. Grassroots Christians focus more on the need of revival rather than on renewal. They consider revival to be the main work of the Holy Spirit. For them, revival consists of dynamic dances and various kinds of bodily motion in worship. Their practices of revival worship are accompanied by dynamic music and stimulating songs.[595] While revival could be a crucial element of worship, renewal cannot be ignored. This is the area where grassroots Christians need to be equipped. In relation to worship, an apostle Paul said, "be transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Rom. 12:2). What God requires of us, according to Paul, is renewing our minds in relationship with God.

In particular, Walter Brueggemann, Stanley Hauerwas, Simon Chan, and Amos Yong emphasize the relationship between worship and social action. They agree that public theology does not begin in public life, but in the worshiping life of the church.[596] Hauerwas is known for advocating that "theological politics" starts in the worshiping life of the church as a "community of character" shaped by the apostolic tradition of Jesus's teaching.[597] He states the relation between social engagement and the practice of worship:

> Liturgy is social action. Through liturgy we are shaped to live rightly the story of God, to become part of that story, and are thus able to recognize and to respond to the saints in our midst. Once we recognize that the church is a social ethic then we

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[595] Ki*, From Darkness to Glorious Light*, 95-99.

[596] Walter Brueggemann, *Texts that Linger, Words that Explode: Listening to Prophetic Voices* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 75-8. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991). 36-52; 57-71. Chan, "Evangelical Theology in Asian Contexts," 225-40. Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 38-41. Chan*, Liturgical Theology*, 45-6. Yong, *In the Days of Caesar*, 155-65.

[597] Hauerwas, *A Community of Character,* 36-52; 57-71.

> can appreciate how every activity of the church is a means and an opportunity for faithful service to and for the world.[598]

Brueggemann also makes a connection between liturgy and social action by providing two disciplines of resistance. One is a liturgical and the other ethical in an ancient Israel's attempt to live as a distinctive community in a world dominated by empires.[599] For the liturgical resistance, Brueggemann expounds Exodus 1-15 as the reenactment of Israel's foundational story. This liturgy begins with the Israel's public voicing of pain to God. Liturgical life shapes Israel's prophetic resistance against hegemony.[600] Liturgy is a moment to transform one's mind in order to be a light and salt to the world (Matt. 5:13-16). While the light symbolizes a Christian's shining life through which others could see Jesus's true life, the salt symbolizes preserving the integrity of faith in the world.

Likewise, Yong sees worship as a doxological moment of character transformation. He said, "Christian liturgies shape ethical and political agents."[601] This interpretation is helpful for recognizing some grassroots Christians' practices of weekly Bible study as a way of equipping discipleship. Since liturgical practices shape the moral political, and apostolic Christian agents for social transformation, Yong sees "worship as an alternative political praxis."[602] He argues that grassroots Christians, including pentecostals' contribution to public theology begins in the liturgical space where Christians celebrate salvation as Jesus's victory over political and spiritual powers.[603] I will show how grassroots Christian notion of the body of Christ shapes their multiple witnesses of faith.

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[598] Quoted in Christian Scharen, *Public Worship and Public Work: Character and Commitment in Local Congregational Life* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 19.

[599] Walter Brueggemann, *Texts That Linger, Words That Explode: Listening to Prophetic Voices* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 75-78.

[600] Ibid., 76-8.

[601] Ibid., 155-56.

[602] Ibid., 55.

[603] Ibid., 157-65.

4.6.2 Body of Christ: Grassroots Multiple Witnesses of One Faith

Grassroots Christians are familiar with the Pauline image of the church as the body of Christ (1Cor. 12:27). Their understanding of the body of Christ implies two meanings for the church: the first one expresses the nature of one body with different parts and the second states the role of Christ as Head and the Holy Spirit as neck.

First, one pastors says, "If the church is the body of Christ, we need to understand Christ as head and the Holy Spirit as neck so that we have a full imagery of the church."[604] For them, there is no motion of the body without head and neck. With this imagery, the head leads the body, but the neck restricts how far it can lead. This is an imagery I learned from them. The church is moved by the leadership of Jesus and the Spirit. It is the Spirit that links the church to Christ as head. Imagine that the neck links body to head. Without the Spirit, there is no ontological relationship between Christ and church. It is Spirit who guides the church in its right relationship with Christ.[605]

Second, the body of Christ expresses the nature of church as a community of one faith with many members who perform multiple works or witnesses (Eph. 4:4-5). As the body of Christ with different parts, there is no single performance. Grassroots church members differently perform their one faith in various ways as preachers, praise and worship leaders, prayer leaders, and communion stewards. This resonates with Yong's liturgical imagination of multiple performances of the church as embodying the multiple gifts of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, Yong sees the doxological forms of multiple performances of prophetic and apostolic faith as "alternative political praxis."[606]

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[604] Pastors, interviewed by the author, July 19-August 20, 2020.
[605] Ibid.
[606] Yong, *In the Days of Caesar*, 151-165.

Grassroots Christians' priestly prayers should not be underestimated for contribution to grassroots Asian public theology. They are not only the people of worship and of preaching, but they are also the people of prayers. As noted in chapter three, grassroots Christians hold regular prayers. Some do weekly fasting prayers. Their prayers are related to public issues of Christian persecution and politics. They also pray for political leaders (1Tim. 2:1-4). In the situation of the coup and humanitarian crisis, many grassroots Christians across the nation emphasize the power of prayers. They see prayer as a tool for transforming the minds of the military. While some go to the public streets for the anti-coup protests, many Christians pray for the nation at churches and homes.

However, some pastors abuse the priestly role of Christ for their hierarchical relationships with their church members. Pastors are treated as having special status. I learned that their works are not just to preach, but also to officiate wedding, dedications of homes, newborn babies, and to make reconciliation among church members in conflict.[607] They need to be theologically shaped by the egalitarian doctrine of the perichoretic Trinity. For Moltmann, where God reigns in freedom, there is no hierarchical relationship among humans.[608] He argues that since the divine image is not hierarchical, we must replace hierarchicalism with egalitarianism.[609] Chan also said: "When the church is understood as essentially communion in and body of Christ, the primal focus of the ecclesial life is not church hierarchy but *koinonia* characterized by agape."[610]

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[607] The pastors, interviewed by the author, July 19-August 10, 2020.

[608] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 191-222.

[609] Ibid., 198-99.

[610] Chan*, Liturgical Theology*, 29.

Another problem facing among grassroots Christians is the individualistic practices of spirituality. This is a result of their personal confession of Christ as Savior and Lord. Chan suggests that "personal relationship is definite for grassroots spirituality, but if it is to be truly Christian, personal relationship with God cannot be divorced from corporate existence in Christ."[611] Grassroots Christians are strong in their personal and vertical relationship with God, but they seem weaker in their horizontal and social engagement with people of other faiths. It needs to be supplemented by the inter-personal and horizontal relationship with people of other faiths in society. I will address this subject later.

In short, since grassroots Christians center the liturgical relationship with the Trinity, doxology cannot be seen as an end in itself.[612] Orthodox Christians consider doxology as mission and they call it liturgy before liturgy.[613] For them, mission is the church's breathing: "we inhale in worship; we exhale in public witness."[614] We should see doxology itself as mission. Some missiologists suggest that "Mission is not just from inside to outside, but also from outside to inside."[615] By this, we mean to bring the public issues into liturgy and reflect them in preaching and prayer. Of course, the goal is not to politicize the church as a divisive community. The task of the church is not only to gather for doxological dialogue with God, but also to scatter for dialogical engagement with the

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[611] Chan, "Asian Christian Spirituality in Primal Religious Contexts," 41; Chan, *Liturgical Theology*, 29-39.

[612] Roger P. Schroeder, *What is the Mission of the Church? A Guide for Catholics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 115.

[613] Ibid.

[614] Geevarghese Mor Coorilos, "Mission as Liturgy Before Liturgy and as Contestation," in *Orthodox Perspective on Mission,* ed. Patros Valiliadis (Oxford: Regnum, 2013), 175.

[615] Thomas A. Schattauer, *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 1-21.

world. As the immanent and economic Trinity are inseparable, so must the church hold internal vocation of worship and external vocation of public witness of the church.[616]

### 4.6.3 Missionary Church of God: Economic Trinity and Dialogical Church

After discussing the significance of the immanent Trinity for the inner life of the church, we will explore the significance of the economic Trinity for the church's public engagement.[617] As a missionary, the church must go to the world out of its worshiping space. One grassroot pastors said, "Matthew 28:19-20 is clear that Jesus commissions His disciples to be missionaries to the world. Jesus's last commission to His disciples must be the first concern of the church's missionary work outside the church."[618] While Matt. 28:19-20 is more familiar to grassroots Christians as the source for their mission work, some scholars see Jn. 20:21-22 as the touchstone for the relation between God's economic trinitarian mission to the world through the Son by the power of the Spirit and the mission of the church to the world.[619] Craig Keener shows how the Johannine text sees the "function of Christ as a model for the of the Spirit-paraclete who empowers the disciples after His resurrection to continue His mission."[620] When the economic Trinity turns to the world, Jesus becomes the witness of God. It is Jesus who makes God known to us (Jn. 14:9-10;

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[616] Martin Luther argues that all Christians have a twofold vocation—spiritual vocation in the church and external vocation in society. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. T. Persons (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 80.

[617] Miroslav Volf, "The Trinity is Our Social Program: The Doctrine of God in the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement," *Modern Theology*, 14, no. 3. (1998): 1-20. Miroslav Volf, "Faith, Pluralism and Public Engagement," *Political Theology*, 4, issue 6. (2013): 813-34.

[618] Pastor interviewed, by the author, July 25, 2020. Ki, *From Darkness to Glorious Light*, 105-6.

[619] Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2003), 1203-6. See also Craig S. Keener, "Sent Like Jesus: Johannine Missiology (John 20:21-22)," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, 21, no. 1. (2009): 21-45. Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (Chichester, Paternoster Press, 1988).

[620] Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 1203.

Col. 1:15) and fulfills God's economic plan of salvation. Jesus is God's servant and sent missionary into what Karl Barth calls "the far country."[621]

The sending Jesus sent His disciples to the world as missionaries. In Jn, 20:21-23, Jesus said to His disciples, "As the Father has sent me, so I sent you." Jesus added, "receive the Holy Spirit." This shows that Jesus sent His disciples to be the Christ-like and Spirit-led missionaries. When Jesus urged His disciples to turn to the world (Acts 1:8), the church becomes an apostolic and public witness of what Christ has done, is doing in the world. In his classic *Be My Witnesses*, Darrell Guder rightly said that "What God has done for us (reconciliation, justification, ultimately salvation) is ultimately and intimately connected to how God has done it" through the church.[622] Within a broad framework of God's public mission through the church, we will now explore how the grassroots Christians witness their one faith and the gospel in a threefold form.

## 4.7 One Faith and Threefold Form of Public Witness: From Pulpit to Public Life

I will show how grassroots Christians perform their "one faith" (Eph. 4:4-5) in a threefold form of public witness. These three forms are "kerygmatic witness" (public witness to other faiths against spiritual powers), "apostolic witness" (witness with other faiths on social charity), and "prophetic witness" (public witness against political powers with other faiths on justice). While the third form of grassroots Christian public witness

[621] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, trans. G. W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, IV.I (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1963), 157-210.

[622] Darrell L. Guder, *Be My Witnesses: The Church's Mission, Message, and Messenger* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 20.

has more to do with resisting political powers in state, the first two forms of their public witnesses have more to do with what James Scott calls "non-state people"[623] in society.

### 4.7.1 Kerygmatic Public Witness of Evangelism *to* Other Faiths

While academic liberationists tend to focus on this-worldly kingdom concerns of political liberation through interreligious dialogue, grassroots Christians tend to focus on the gospel-centered issue of saving the lost souls of other faiths for other-worldly concerns. For academic liberationists, mission is dialogue. Wilfred argues that mission in Asia is to be understood not "in terms of salvation or damnation," but in terms of interreligious dialogue with other religions.[624] For Wilfred, understanding mission in terms of salvation or damnation stands "in opposition to other religious traditions."[625] But for grassroots Christians, mission means proclaiming the gospel of salvation to other faiths beyond the church. As I have said earlier, they see Matthew 28:19-20 as a biblical source for their mission praxis of kerygmatizing the gospel of salvation to other faiths by converting, discipling, and baptizing them.[626] Their understanding of the gospel of salvation is deeply rooted in the priestly death and resurrection of Christ by the Spirit.[627] One grassroots missionary pastor explains the concept of the gospel this way:

> During the [Easter] gathering, Pa Za Mung, preached using these words, for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus, to be born into this world to redeem lost souls who are precious in his sight. He has indeed given eternal life to those who believe in him (Jn. 3:36). At this Easter, we celebrate the resurrection of Christ. Easter! It was a completely new festival for us. During

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[623] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 1-16.

[624] Felix Wilfred, "Theologues of South Asia," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918,* ed, David F. Ford and Rachel Muers, 502-517. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005) here 508.

[625] Ibid., 508.

[626] Pastors and church leaders, interviewed by the author, July 19-August 25, 2020. Ki, *From Darkness to Glorious Light*, 105-116.

[627] Grassroots Christian leaders, interviewee by the author, July 19-August 25, 2020.

> this first Easter, we learned about the Lord's works of redemption for sinners on Good Friday.[628]

They understand the gospel and good news interchangeably. The gospel, for them, is good news because of what Jesus has done on the cross.[629] Their understanding of the gospel as good news resonates with N.T. Wright's academic definition of the gospel.

Why is the gospel news and what makes the gospel good? In his popular book *Simply Good News*,[630] Wright states the early Christian concept of the gospel as good news:

> The Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the Bible; he was buried; he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Bible; he was seen by Cephas, then by the Twelve; then he was seen by over five hundred brothers and sisters at once, most of whom are still with us, though some fell asleep (1Cor. 15:3-6). Yes, the good news is indeed about Jesus, and about his death and resurrection in particular. Yes, this is good news does indeed open up a vision of an ultimate future beyond death, so that we live in hope and joy meanwhile.[631]

Like Wright and some scholars, grassroots Christians emphasize Jesus's death and resurrection as the center of the gospel (Rom. 4:25; 8:34; 1Cor. 15:3-5; 2Cor. 5:15; 1Thess. 4:14). As Michael Bird notes, "The gospel of Paul and the Four Gospels all climax in Jesus's death and resurrection as the singularly most important events in the redemptive purposes of God."[632] Grassroots Christians' self-understanding of the church as a missionary is shaped by their passion about proclaiming the gospel. Chan observes:

> The primary community that gives Christians their most basic identity is the church. The gospel, so central to the church's proclamation, is also that which gives the church its own distinctive identity. To be the church of Jesus Christ is to be shaped by the gospel story. The gospel of Jesus Christ in all its particularity is the means for the total transformation of the world.[633]

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[628] Ki, *From Darkness to Glorious Light*, 40-41.
[629] Ibid., 53.
[630] N.T. Wright, *Simply Good News: Why the Gospel is News and What Makes It Good* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2015).
[631] Ibid., 5, 23.
[632] Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 34.
[633] Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 39.

According to Chan, Christians should transform the world by their distinctive character as the gospel preachers rather than by merely promoting social programs for the common good, although the latter is not to be ignored since Christians share some common space with people of other religions in Asia. Grassroots Christians see Jesus as the key person of the gospel and Paul as the key missionary for the example of kerygmatizing the gospel to other faiths. They see themselves as the gospelizers (who proclaim the gospel), but the ways they share the gospel differ from each other. Some privately share it, especially in the place where the attempt to convert other faiths is restricted, but others openly share it in the public rallies. One missionary who shared the gospel in the public rallies said:

> As I became more accustomed to venturing into the nearby *pigaw* [villages] to share the *Htu Ni* [Good News], I realized that a loudspeaker was a powerful tool for open-air evangelistic rallies. Too many people living in remote *pigaw gui* [village compatriots] located deep in the mountains of South Chin State, the loudspeaker was a completely foreign invention. I would rent one to take a long with me on my trips. Curious onlookers gathered around me just to hear the loudspeaker. The seeds of the *Htu Ni* were sown into the hearts of many.[634]

The purpose of public witness of evangelism is twofold: to convert people from their religions and to save evil-possessed sick from spiritual powers. First, grassroots pastors see Paul's conversion experience on the Damarcus Road as a motivation (Acts 9:1-9) and his post-conversion kerygmatic ministry of conversion in Athens (Acts 17:22-34) as a motivation for their public witness of evangelism.[635] Paul's conversion experience is not just an example for grassroots conversion, it is, according to a Pauline scholar Seyoon Kim, central to Paul's understanding of his identity as a follower of Christ and of his vocation

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[634] Ki, *From Darkness to Glorious Light*, 70-71.

[635] Ibid., 78-83. Seyoon Kim, *The Origins of Paul's Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 7.

as a missionary to Gentiles.[636] Second, grassroots Christians perform their faith as a public witness for healing the political victims and evil-possessed sick people.

While struggling against political powers is necessary for political freedom, spiritual powers are not to be ignored. Asian Christians must address both powers since they are the contextual issues in Asia. Overemphasizing political powers, some Asian theologians, like their counterpart Western theologians, do not address spiritual powers and their implications for the pastoral miraculous healings of the sick. Yung writes:

> Western theology invariably asks the question: are miracles possible? This of course addresses the Enlightenment problem of a closed universe. In much of Asia that is a non-question because the miraculous is assumed and fairly regularly experienced. The question rather is: Who or what lies behind a particular miracle? After all, healings, exorcisms and the like occur regularly in temples, through the hands of mediums, shammas and the like. In other words, our theology must help the Christians to discern the true from the false (c.f. Mark 13:22; Matt. 7:22f; 2 Thess 2:9), the actions of God from those demonic powers, and genuine healings from those that lead the supposedly healed into deeper spiritual bondage.[637]

We must remember that Jesus's public mission includes exorcising demonic powers and healing the demon-possessed sick (Matt. 10:8; Lk. 4:31-37). Jesus's ministry of healing the sick becomes what Keener calls "the credibility of the New Testament accounts of Miracle."[638] If the purpose of Asian public theology is truly for public life with concerns for holistic healing, academic and grassroots Christians should confront both political powers and spiritual powers by recognizing grassroots kerygmatic witness of salvation as spiritual liberation from evil powers. It is in this specific context that I wish to distinguish public theology from political theology. While academic political theology tends to focus

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[636] See Seyoon Kim, *The Origins of Paul's Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 7.

[637] Yung, *Mangoes and Bananas*? 230.

[638] Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts,* vols. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

mainly on challenging political powers for political liberation, it does not address the need of healing and spiritual liberation from spiritual bondage on the grassroots grounds. While sharing some commonality with political theology, grassroots Asian public theology addresses the public issues of both political powers and spiritual powers.

While recognizing grassroots Christians' contribution to a grassroots public theology of spiritual healing, I also observe that their attitudes to people of other faiths need to be appropriated. Grassroots missionaries tend to criticize the cultures of other faiths.[639] This is something that some grassroots Christians adopt from the colonial legacy of some (not all) Western missionaries. As noted in chapter two, some Western missionaries created and left the legacy of hostility between people of other faiths and their new convert ethnic Christians by showing some kind of favor upon the latter groups.

As a result, some local grassroots Christians sometimes preach good news as what Wright calls "good advice."[640] They preach to other faiths by advising them to do something, that is immediately leaving the cultures of other faiths. Their kerygmatic evangelism tends to be more one-sided: they want to give them the gospel without receiving some cultural insights from other faiths. Of course, not all grassroots missionaries confront other faiths. For example, one Pentecostal missionary who works among Bamar Buddhists says, "I made friendship with Buddhist before he practiced evangelism."[641] It is right that one should reach out to other faiths by making friendship with them before practicing evangelism. There are two reasons for doing this. First, God's cosmic aspect of reconciliation precedes Christians' friendship with people of other faiths (Col. 1:19-20).

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[639] Ibid., 53-55.
[640] Wright, *Simply Good News.*
[641] Pastor, interviewed by the author, July 31, 2020.

Second, if Christians prioritize evangelism without practicing friendship with other faiths, they would probably be kicked out from their local contexts.

### 4.7.2 Apostolic Public Witness *with* Other Faiths on Social Charity

Some academic Asian liberationists limit the scope of Asian public theology to a liberative paradigm of social justice and ignore social charity. For them, the church's political engagement is the only relevant paradigm of Asian public theology. It is observed that "Anything else, even if it has an impact on social transformation in society is not explicitly considered a theology of social engagement."[642] This assumption is common for some political liberationists. In his book *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation,*[643] R.S. Sugirtharajah criticizes a pastoral charity-oriented liberation:

> In its overzealousness to represent the poor, liberation hermeneutics has ended up as a liberation theology of the poor rather a theology of liberation by the poor. The goal now is not social change, but pastoral concern. Political activism is replaced with the church 's traditional concern for good work and charity projects.[644]

As I will show later, social change is necessary in the context of social injustice, but we should not ignore the necessity of extending charity to the victims of injustice. We cannot separate social justice and social charity. While some theologians tend to write a public theology of social justice, grassroots Christians relate their faith to public life by reaching out to the victims with their compassionate hearts and generous hands. The charity works of grassroots Christians have great impacts on healing many victims that the liberationists

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[642] Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 35.
[643] Surgirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*.
[644] Ibid., 115.

should recognize their contributions to Asian public theology.[645] Among some grassroots Christians whom I interviewed are those working at the Internally Displaced People (IDPs) camps. Some of them perform their apostolic and priestly faith by visiting the victims at the camps and prisoners by providing food, drinks, clothes, medicines, and shelters.[646]

The public ethics of social charity is imperative in the current context of humanitarian crisis in Myanmar. Today, many people of Myanmar are living in the IDPs campus as the consequence of civil wars. The first response to this humanitarian crisis is probably not about debating the doctrine of God in abstract ways, but about extending social charity to victims in urgent need. Many grassroots and academic Christians actually extend social charity to those who are the wounded victims of the coup. For example, they donate some money to the individuals and families those who have lost their works in the anti-coup Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). The CDM is the first effective strategy of prophetic resistance to the nationalist coup. Hundreds of thousands of civil servants, such as medics, engineers, nurses, schoolteachers, and general workers in the train stations across the nation join the CDM with the high commitment of refusing to get salaries from the illegitimate military government. The CDM is not only an anti-coup campaign, but also a potential foundation from which to replace the coup-controlled administrations.[647]

Christians practice the public action of social charity by cooperating with people of other faiths. Unlike the first kerygmatic form of public witness that evangelizes other faiths, this second form of apostolic witness allows grassroots Christians to perform the gospel of

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[645] Yong recognizes the church's charity works of what he calls "subsidiary and solidarity" for the well-being of people as contributions to political/public theology, 389-95.

[646] Pastors and practitioners interviewed, by the author, July 19, 2020, March 9, 2021.

[647] Anonymous, "The Centrality of the Civil Disobedience Movement in Myanmar's Post-Coup Era," in *Mandala*, https://www.newmandala.org/the-centrality-of-the-civil-disobedience-movement-in-myanmars-post-coup-era/, accessed December 1, 2021.

social charity by cooperating with people of other religions. Is social charity biblical? Social charity is rooted both in the Old Testament and New Testament. Psalm 10:5-9 states the conditions of people who need social charity. Matthew 25:35-36 is known for Jesus's teaching about social charity. Jesus said: "for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Seeing Himself as the victim, Jesus emphasizes that what we did to the needy people is tantamount to what we did to Him (25:40-41).

This shows the relationship between orthodoxy (personal faith in Jesus) and orthopraxy (public action for Jesus). The practice of social charity is central to the apostolic faith and action of the early Christian community. Acts 2:45 said, "the disciples of Jesus Christ sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need." In his massive commentary on *ACTS*,[648] Keener said, "The sharing of possessions is a central (perhaps because so distinctive) feature of Luke's vision of the early Christian community formed by the Spirit, leading to a wide impact on the society around them."[649] For Keener, a central part of Luke's portrait of the faith of the early church is its sharing of possessions to those in need. As a medical doctor, Luke focuses on the healing aspect of social charity.[650] Above all, the Lukan account of the Good Samaritan's public witness of social charity and of crossing ethnic barriers (10:25-37) clearly indicates the concept that Christian individuals and communities must practice public witness of social charity. In chapter five, I will

[648] Craig S. Keener, *ACTS: An Exegetical Commentary—Introduction 1:1-2:47*, vol. 1. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).
[649]Ibid., 992.
[650] Ibid., 1012.

elaborate on the significance of the parable of the Good Samaritan for a Burmese public theology of ethnic reconciliation, social healing, and hospitality.

### 4.7.3 Prophetic Public Witness *against* Political Powers for Social Justice

When it comes to prophetic witnesses against political powers, there are at least two strategies of grassroots Christians' resistance to political powers. One is a more open resistance, and the other is what James Scott called a more "hidden resistance."[651] These two strategies are true to the current situation in Myanmar before and after the rise of the February 2021 coup. I will first demonstrate how some Christians' prophetic witness of resistance to political powers is public. I will then consider why and how some Christians' prophetic witness of resistance to political powers is hidden and indirect.

First, grassroots and academic Christians see Moses as a prophetic paradigm for their open resistance to political powers. Although some grassroots Christians tend to see prophecy more as foretelling (future), they portray Moses's prophetic resistance to Pharoah as a model for their forthtelling form of prophetic resistance to political powers. It is in the latter form of prophecy that grassroots and academic Christians are convergent in their resistance to the coup. One of the ethnic Christian leaders who led the first large anti-coup protest in Yangon on February 6 said, "As a Christian, resistance to the coup is not about party politics, but about the prophetic role of Christian." [652] Some Christian protesters in Tahan-Kalaymyo used Moses's confronting words against Pharoah "let my people go" (Ex. 5:1) as the model for protesting against political powers. Some Christians said, "in the

[651] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 4-16.

[652] One of the leaders who led the first largest public protest on the frontline interviewed by the author, August 5, 2021.

current situation of social injustice, we prefer the Old Testament to the New Testament because the OT indicates the prophets' public critiques of political powers."[653]

It is true that the Hebrew prophets publicly resist political powers. According to Walter Brueggemann, prophetic Christians are the "silence breakers." In his book *Interrupting Silence*,[654] Brueggemann argues that the Hebrew prophets break silence and speak out against hegemonic power. In the hegemonic context, God's command is to "speak truth to power."[655] Brueggemann shows that the Hebrew Bible is filled with stories where marginalized people break repressive silence and speaking against it. Since maintaining silence allows the power to keep control, Brueggemann motivates prophetic Christians to break silence and to speak out against power. In his classic book *The Prophetic Imagination*, Brueggemann said, "prophetic imagination must come before the implementation. It is the task of prophetic ministry and imagination to bring people to engage their experiences of suffering to death."[656] In the situation of injustice, he sees a twofold ethic of the "prophetic imagination" and "embrace of pathos" as the first step to take. While Brueggemann's position on the prophetic imagination and public resistance is imperative, he fails to imagine an alternative resistance, which is a prophetic hidden resistance. The latter option is necessary in some contexts. I will show how we need it.

Second, in the first and second months of the coup, when the military regime still allowed for public protests on the streets across the nation, millions of people publicly and openly protested against the coup. After the military coup used violent crackdowns on

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[653] The pastors and church leaders, interviewed by the author, July 20-25, 2020.

[654] Walter Brueggemann, *Interrupting Silence: God's Command to Speak Out* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018).

[655] Ibid., 84.

[656] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 40th Anni (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 2018), 40-41.

peaceful protesters, some protesters opted for the hidden strategies of prophetic resistance to political powers. While it might be much easier to go to the public streets to protest against the injustices of authorities in the Western and non-Western democratic nations, it is highly risky to publicly protest against the military regime in non-democratic countries, like Myanmar. The public protest is between life and death. The armies will either arrest the protesters and put them in jail alive or shoot them dead on the spots.[657]

In this concrete situation, we should also choose the hidden strategies of prophetic resistance to political powers. Public theology is not just about the prophetic resistance to political powers in public life, but it is also about the hidden strategies of indirect resistance to political powers in private space. As a companion to a direct resistance, thousands of Burmese Christians use indirect and hidden forms of resistance to political powers—ranging from private and corporate prayers, singing of the gospel songs, such as New Hope for New Days" (sung by Saw Win Lwin), an unofficial anthem among protesters, and banging of pots and pans at 8 o'clock every night as a symbolic meaning of casting evil spirits from the coup. Sometimes people think of a direct protest against political powers as the only way for seeking justice. Scott argues that whenever there is domination in various forms of "material, status, ideological domination," there is also inevitably resistance by the subordinated in various forms of indirect and hidden acts.[658]

According to Scott, subordinated groups' resistance is indirect and symbolic in terms of "evasion, anger, aggression, gossip."[659] They are not silent, but they actually use the hidden transcript as a tool that "represents a critique of powers spoken behind the back

[657] The pastor, interviewed by the author, March 9, 2021.
[658] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 27; 198.
[659] Ibid.,198-201.

of the dominant."[660] The hidden transcript, according to Scott, represents a symbolic and unnoticed resistance.[661] Scott's theory has been taken up by some biblical scholars as the foundation for their fresh approaches to the peasants' indirect resistance to political powers in the first-century milieu.[662] For example, Richard Horsley acknowledges and appreciates that Scott's theory of resistance by the subordinated has a greatest potential for our new understanding of Jesus's and Paul's ancient contexts in which Jesus and Paul do not organize the armed groups to directly rebel against powers.[663] But this does not mean that Jesus and Paul are not engaged in resistance against political powers.

In his book *God in Public: How the Bible Speaks Truth to Power Today*,[664] N. T. Wright shows that Jesus does confront political powers, such as Caesar and Pilate (Jn. 18; 19). As a king and prophet, Jesus is critical of political powers, which combat His kingly Lordship.[665] As the followers of Christ, the first-century apostles also resist political powers, yet their resistance is not as direct as those of the OT prophets' resistance. Scott's theory of domination and the arts of hidden transcript advances our understanding of the grassroots Christians' symbolic and hidden forms of resistance against political powers in the context of the coup.[666] I will develop Scott's theory in chapter five.

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[660] xii.

[661] Ibid., 27-8.

[662] See Richard A. Horsley, "Introduction—Jesus, Paul, and the Arts of Resistance": Leaves from the Notebook of James C. Scott," in *Hidden Transcripts and The Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul,* ed, Richard A. Horsley, Semeia Studies, no. 48, 1-28. (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2004).

[663] Ibid., 7.

[664] N.T. Wright, *God in Public: How the Bible Speaks Truth to Power Today* (London: SPCK, 2016). See also N.T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 83-129.

[665] Ibid., 39-57.

[666] Horsley, "Introduction.," 7.

## 4.8 Summary

This chapter has paid attention to the interpretative nature of grassroots Asian public theology. I have begun by examining some different academic approaches to Asian public theology. Built on the works of some theologians, I have shown how grassroots Asian public theology should take the church as the starting point for developing grassroots Asian public theology. Using the church's lived practices of worship, preaching, and prayer as the primary means of public witnesses, I have shown why and how the academic and grassroots voices should be bridged for performing a relevant public theology as everyday theology that engages three communities—church, academy, and community. I have bridged some themes, such as social justice and social charity, mission and evangelism, spirituality and social engagement, personal sin and structural sin, as well as vertical sense of salvation and horizontal dimension of salvation.

Understanding public theology as everyday theology, I have shown how a confessional faith and public commitment should go hand in hand on a daily basis. Public theology is rooted in the church's confession of God and in the church's public witness of God through conversation with people of other faiths. I have interpreted how the ecclesial practices of praise, prayer, preaching, and Bible study not only embody the communal nature of the Trinity, but also shape grassroots Asian public theology as preforming the kingly, prophetic, priestly, and apostolic action of God in everyday life. Particular attention has been given to a balanced emphasis on the ontological and functional identity of the church as the worshiping people of God, body of Christ, and missionary of God.

# CHAPTER FIVE

# BEYOND BUDDHIST NATIONALISM: GRASSROOTS ASIAN PUBLIC THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS, RESISTANCE, AND RECONCILIATION

## 5. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I have offered a general overview of how one should synthesize academic and grassroots views. This chapter will pay narrower attention to the relationship between religion, resistance, and reconciliation.[667] I will continue synthesizing some academic and grassroots voices. The aim of this last chapter is to accomplish three things. The first is to show how grassroots and academic Christian communities witness their faith as the followers of Christ in a suffering nation. Using the present situation of people's resistance to the publics of the coup and Buddhist nationalism as an example, I will show how grassroots Christian communities' resistance to Buddhist nationalism could make a fresh contribution to grassroots Asian public theology. The second is to discern some theoretical and practical ways how we could move beyond Buddhist nationalism.

The third is to show how the concept of reconciliation relates to the thesis of my study of the grassroots Christians' multiple witnesses of salvation as reconciliation, liberation, healing, and hospitality. Built on the grassroots Christians' key expressions of the gospel of salvation as reconciliation between God and humans, I will explore how a vertical dimension of reconciliation might be related to the horizontal social meaning of reconciliation in the context of religious and ethnic conflict. Particular attention will be paid to how religions play the public role in social and ethnic reconciliation. I will conclude this chapter by suggesting how a reciprocal recognition of the cultural otherness of one's

[667] I have presented this topic at the one-year anniversary of the Myanmar coup at Columbia University, New York City, February 1, 2022.

ethnic and religious identity and making a hospitable space for Christians and Buddhists are crucial for ethnic reconciliation. I will proceed this chapter in three related steps.

The first part will describe the approach. I will employ a fourfold approach: paradoxical, dialogical, defensive, and relational. A paradoxical approach looks at religion (Buddhism)—looking at the moral side of religion and the amoral side of religion. A dialogical approach invites the grassroots Christians to interact with moral Buddhists in their interreligious resistance to the powers of the nationalist coup. While a dialogical approach is one option for the Christians, a defensive approach will also be an alternative approach for defending their minority identity and for demanding their minority rights. Finally, I will use a relational approach as a way for understanding and practicing reconciliation as a relational aspect of the interethnic relationship with one another.

The second part will reflect on the religious dimensions of people's resistance to the coup. Using the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and (Romans 13:1-7) as biblical resources, I will reflect on their interreligious resistance to the publics and politics of Buddhist nationalism and coup. In the final section, I will examine some goals of resistance to Buddhist nationalism. I will examine whether the ethnic minorities and ethnic majorities might or might not share the same vision? I will conclude this by suggesting how recognizing one's religious identity and ethnic otherness and making a hospitable space for one another is central for the social vision of ethnic reconciliation.

## 5.1 Paradoxical Approach to Religion: An Alternative Imagination

In addressing the problem of Buddhist nationalism, we need a nuanced approach. Nuanced approach to Buddhism would be helpful for moving beyond Buddhist

nationalism. Although his country of Sri Lanka is known for promoting the post-colonial majority Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism and the minority Tamil ethnic and religious conflict,[668] Aloysius Pieris, one of the eminent Asian Christian scholars of Buddhism, fails to address the problem of Buddhism. In order to move beyond Buddhist nationalism, I suggest that we need a paradoxical approach to religion (Buddhism). Miroslav Volf is right when he says, "religions are alive today—for good and for ill."[669] In a similar vein, Karl Marx defines religion in a paradoxical manner—religion serves as the problematic opium of people on the one hand, and as a source for resolution, on the hand other.[670]

A paradoxical approach is helpful for two reasons. It is helpful in distinguishing between religion and adherents. Buddhism is not a religion of violent nationalism based on the Buddha's doctrine of compassion and peace, but nationalists justify their ugly acts in the name of religion. A noted Sinhalese Buddhist scholar Rahula Walpola said:

> The Buddha was just as clear on politics, on war, and peace. It is too well known to be repeated here that Buddhism advocates and preaches non-violence and peace as its universal message and does not approve of any kind of violence of destruction of life. According to Buddhism there is nothing that can be called a just war—which is only a false term coined and put into circulation to justify and excuse hatred, cruelty, violence, and massacre.[671]

This means that religion itself does not lead to nationalism, ethnic discrimination, and conflict, but rather nationalists misuse religion to justify their actions. In this context,

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[668] See Peter Lehr, *Militant Buddhism: The Rise of Religious Violence in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 157-77. Mahinda Deegalle, ed *Buddhism, Conflict, Violence in Modern Sri Lanka* (New York: Routledge, 2006). Chelvadurai Manogaran, *Ethnic Conflict and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 41-114.

[669] Miroslav Volf, *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 59.

[670] Jerald D. Gort and Hendrik M. Mroom, "Religion, Conflict, and Peace," in *Religion, Conflict, and Reconciliation: Multifaith Ideals and Realities*, vol. 17, ed, Jerald D. Gort, Henry Jansen, and Hendrik M. Vroom, 3-10 (New York: Rodopi, 2002).

[671] Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught: Revised and Expanded Edition with Texts from Suttas and Dhammapada* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), 84.

Mahinda Palihawadana suggests that one needs to look at the root of conflict and nationalism from a psychological perspective. If we do so, we see how thought leads to action. According to the Buddha, the basic cause of conflict was ideology (*vitaka* in Pali), which led to distorted perception (*papanca*) motivated by greed, hate, and ignorance.[672]

The second helpful reason is that a paradoxical approach to religion enables us to distinguish amoral Buddhists who cause and endorse nationalism and moral Buddhists who confront nationalism. Religious conflict is so complex that it is not easy to draw a clear line between a moral person and an amoral person. This complexity leaves some academic and grassroots Christians in Myanmar with an option for seeing the coup not as Buddhists. The way Christians see the coup differ from one to another. While some grassroots Christians see the coup as a Buddhist nationalist movement,[673] some academic Christians said, "The coup and their followers are not Buddhists because their political actions are completely contradictory to the teachings of the Buddha."[674] Instead of seeing the coup and their followers not as Buddhists, I choose to see them as Buddhists who are amoral. My view of them as amoral Buddhists is based on their self-identification as Buddhists.

In the situations of manifest evil coup, it is appropriate to distinguish between moral Buddhists and amoral Buddhists. The majority of academic and grassroots Buddhist monks and social activists' condemnation of Buddhist coup as *adhamma* serves as a helpful reason for confronting Buddhist coup and their nationalist followers as amoral Buddhists. *Adhamma* in Pali (untruth) is the opposite of *dhamma* (truth). *Dhamma* means the moral

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[672]Mahinda Palihawadana, "The Theravada Analysis of Conflicts," in *Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka*, ed. Mahinda Deegalle: 67-77 (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006). Jonathan Sacks, "Concluding Reflections," in *Confronting Religious Violence: A Counternarrative,* ed, Richard A. Burridge and Jonathan Sacks 219-33 (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018) here 219-20.

[673] Some grassroots Christians, interviewed by the author, March 2, 2021.

[674] Some Christians interviewed, by the author, March 2, 2021.

doctrine of the Buddha, whereas *adharma* states evil.[675] One of the well-known anti-coup Buddhist monks, Myawaddy Sayadaw said, "The destruction of religion is due to tyranny, fascism, and militarism. Fighting these militarists can be called building *dhamma*."[676] Moral Buddhists represent the beautiful side of their religion by speaking truth to political powers, whereas amoral Buddhists represent the ugly side.

Our alternative imagination is not to eliminate religion itself. According to the Pew Research Center, Buddhism is more likely to flourish than to decline in the coming decades.[677] If so, our alternative imagination is to reveal and resist the ugly side of religious nationalism and to recognize its beautiful side of ethics as sources for confronting nationalism.[678] For example, a Burmese Buddhist monk Ledi Sayadaw believes that there is the power of good actions against amoral actions. For him, the moral actions of religious groups had positive effects in the world.[679] He said, "Good deeds are the medicine that can heal the wounds and disease of bad deeds; the medicine that makes bad deeds disappear. And the relevant good deeds can make specific bad deeds disappear."[680] Building on Sayadaw's insights, Alicia Turner, in her book *Saving Buddhism*, rightly argues that the

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[675] See, for the Buddhist moral doctrines, Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught,* 125-135.

[676] Mya Waddy Mingyi Sayadaw, "Resistance Groups as Representatives of *Dhamma*," in *Myanmar Now News*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t83zPdGN9R8, accessed January 12, 2022.

[677] Benjamin Wormald, "Buddhists," in *Pew Research Center*, https://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/buddhists/ accessed April 10, 2021.

[678] Along the same line of this thought, see Richard A. Burridge and Jonathan Sacks, eds, *Confronting Religious Violence: A Counternarrative* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018); Pauline Kollontai et al, *The Role of Religion in Peacebuilding: Crossing the Boundaries of Prejudice and Distrust* (Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publisher, 2018); Vinoth Ramachandra, *Faiths in Conflict? Christian Integrity in a Multicultural World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999); Philip Broadhead and Damien Keown, eds. *Can Faiths Make Peace? Holy Wars and The Resolution of Religious Conflicts,* International Library of War Studies, 9 (New York, NY: IB Touris & Co Ltd, 2007); Lee Marsden, ed., *Religion and Conflict Resolution* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012); Jerald D. Gort, Henry Jansen, and Hendrik M. Vroom, ed, *Religion, Conflict, and Reconciliation: Multifaith Ideals and Realities:* Currents of Encounter, vol. 17 (New York: Rodopi, 2002).

[679] Quoted in Alicia Turner, *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Buddhism in a Colonial Burma* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2014), 106-7.

[680] Ibid., 107.

goal of using Buddhist moral teachings as sources for correcting amoral Buddhists is to save Buddhism from the immoral politician and ordinary Buddhists. She said:

> Working to save Buddhism transformed not only Burmese politics, but Buddhists as well. The need to preserve the *sasana* offered a moral project that motivated Burmese and shaped how they viewed themselves. The need to save the Buddhist teaching was a compelling motivation that endangered a sense of connection with thousands of other unseen, unknown Burmese Buddhists, and a feeling that the potential to meet the challenges posed by the current colonial condition resided in collective, not individual efforts.[681]

I agree with Turner. Our resistance to Buddhist nationalism is not to reject Buddhism, but to save its moral teachings from the amoral actions of some nationalist Buddhists. This requires interreligious interactions, but not just among academics.[682] As I will show, there is power of interreligious interactions among anti-coup protesters at the grassroots levels. Christians alone cannot solve Buddhist nationalism by fighting against Buddhists, but by cooperating with moral Buddhists who resist nationalist coup as *adhamma*. This approach is consistent with my proposal that Asian public theology is not about the church's direct resistance to political powers (state), but about the church's interactions with people in society and their interreligious resistance to powers. This approach is more effective in the context where Christianity is a minority status that needs interreligious solidarity.

## 5.2 The Grassroots Christian Imagination of Religion and Reconciliation

As noted in chapter three, grassroots Christians' imagination of religion and reconciliation differ from one to another. While some of them tend to think of religion as a private affair, opposed to politics, others see it as a public affair in their social relationship with people. Some see religion and faith interchangeably, whereas others see the two

[681] Ibid., 144.
[682] Swamy, *The Problem with Interreligious Dialogue,* 145-60.

differently. For the latter groups, faith is simply a spiritual relationship with God and religion is a humanistic idea of beliefs and practices. In light of this, some of them even see Christianity not simply as a religion, but more as a relationship with God. [683]

In the case of reconciliation, their common understanding of salvation tends to focus more on the vertical dimension of personal reconciliation between God and sinners, with very little having done on the horizontal and social dimension of reconciliation among people of other religious and ethnic groups. Their grassroots imagination of salvation echo Jan Lochman's first and second models of reconciliation (Christ the victor model and Christ the reconciler model). Their expressions and witnesses of the gospel of salvation have more to do with proclaiming the gospel of reconciliation as forgiveness of sinners and as calling other faiths for repentance from sin.[684] A grassroots pastor said, "the struggle for political reconciliation is not the primary work of the church; it is the work of politicians. However, our prayers reach out to the political conflict areas."[685]

This shows that some grassroots Christians do not completely ignore the social significance of reconciliation. While they do focus on the vertical dimension of spiritual reconciliation with God, they imagine and witness the doctrine of reconciliation among persons of intra-ethnic conflict within the church. In their understanding of salvation as reconciliation, Jesus's priestly mediation plays a crucial role (1 Tim. 2:5). The pastor and elder said, "they embody Jesus Christ as a model for their pastoral and priestly practices of reconciliation among some church members."[686] Their pastoral and priestly practices of reconciliation between two persons or communities through a third person is common

[683] Grassroots Christians, interviewed by the author, July 19-21, 2020.
[684] Tam, *From Darkness to Glorious Light*, 23-30.
[685] Pastor, interviewed by the author, July 21, 2020.
[686] Pastor, interviewed by the author, July 19, 2020.

among the ethnic minority Christians. The third person plays a mediatorial role in negotiation for reconciliation between two persons or communities. This is analogous to Jesus's priestly role as a mediator between God and humans. It is fair to say that grassroots Christians focus on the priestly and atoning role of Jesus and its significance for saving the lost souls as well as personal reconciliation among church members, while liberationists focus on the prophetic role of Jesus as a model for witnessing social justice.

In the academic settings, some public theologians tend to focus mainly on the prophetic model of public theology in the name of the church's prophetic engagement with politics.[687] If public theology takes the whole nature and action of the triune God as its foundation and model for the church's participatory engagement in political and public life, then Asian theologians should reconsider the priestly and healing role of Christ in doing and performing grassroots Asian public theology. If we approach to public theology in this holistic way, our task is necessarily to recognize the grassroots Christians' multiple witnesses of the reconciling work of the priestly, kingly, prophetic, and healing Christ.

To be fair, many grassroots Christians differ from one another in their imagination of reconciliation. While some, especially grassroots pastors and church elders, stay away from the political witness of ethnic reconciliation, some younger generations of majority Christians, as I will show later, are involved in the social imagination of interethnic reconciliation and solidarity in the context of the coup. Some younger generations of Christians' imagination of reconciliation shares some commonality with some academic

[687] See Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 5. See also Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere*, 3. Koopman, Nico. "Public Theology as Prophetic Theology: More Than Utopianism and Criticism," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 134. (July 2009): 117-130.

theologians' vision of justice, peace, and reconciliation. According to the younger generations of Christians, the doctrine of reconciliation is not confined to Christian community, but it extends to the political community.[688] They came to understand that Christians are the agents of witnessing the gospel of justice, peace, reconciliation, and freedom. Especially the rise of the political coup transforms the grassroots Christians' new understanding of reconciliation. In the context of political oppression and ethno-religious conflict, they believe that the idea of liberation and reconciliation should be integrative.

Within the integrative nature of liberation and reconciliation, I will show how a threefold dimension of transformative, restorative, and relational reconciliation should be achieved. First, a transformative nature of reconciliation focuses on a new way of seeing one another as friends across the ethnic and religious barriers. Second, a restorative nature of reconciliation redresses the wrongs of regime and bring justice through the resistance, reparation, and forgiveness. Third, a relational aspect of reconciliation deals with the identity issue of otherness and interethnic and interreligious coexistence. This threefold aspect of reconciliation will be evident throughout our study. will discern how religions play the public roles in each of those models of reconciliation. I will begin by showing how religions play the public roles in a transformative nature of ethnic reconciliation, followed by the restorative and relational aspect of reconciliation.

## 5.3 Religion and Resistance: The Rise of Coup and Interreligious Reconciliation

The rise of the February 1 coup creates the tension between challenges and opportunities. While the coup creates many challenges, there is also an opportunity for a

[688] A Christian social activist, interview by the author, August 2, 2021.

transformative nature of interreligious solidarity and interethnic reconciliation among non-state protesters at the grassroots levels. To be sure, Myanmar's democracy movement against the coup does not come from the top-down, but from the ground up. Religion has played a dividing and exclusionary role in the Burmese politics, resulting most tragically in the persecution of the Rohingya. However, the rise of the 2021 coup transcended this religious exclusivity and created a transformative and inclusive form of solidarity, hospitality, and friendship.[689] As noted in chapter one, the new coup and Buddhist nationalism emerged not only as anti-ethnic minority groups, but also as anti-Bamar ethnic Buddhists who support democracy movement. The resistant groups see their shared experience of political suffering as a point of departure for their common journey of interreligious solidarity and interethnic reconciliation at the grassroots levels.

Three days after the coup, anti-coup protesters bridged their religious and ethnic divides to resist the coup in the streets in nonviolent way. They brandished the three-finger salute, a symbol of resistance made famous by the *Hunger Games*. Urban civilians, mostly from ethnic majorities, and ethnic minorities from small towns and the most remote hill villages of Chin and Karenni regions, of whom most of them are grassroots people, have reconciled their religious and ethnic divides to resist the coup for the common goal of democracy.[690] In the beginning, protesters carried the NLD flags and wore logos, but they came to realize that the focus was not on the NLD party politics, but on the national politics.

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[689] I first presented this topic at the panel discussion on "A Shared Vision? Reflections on the Creation of Unity in Opposition in Myanmar's Civil Disobedience Movement Since February 2021," hosted by University of Oxford, Oxford, UK, June 17, 2021.

[690] I shared this topic at the one-year anniversary of the Myanmar coup panel discussion on "One Year After the Myanmar Coup: The Origin and Ongoing Democratic Movement of Interreligious and Interethnic Resistance to the Coup," hosted by Columbia University, New York City, USA, February 1, 2022. I shared a panel discussion with Prof. James Scott, who is expert in subaltern politics of Southeast Asia and people's resistance to political powers and Esther Ze Naw, who co-led the first large anti-coup protest on the frontline, Yangon, Myanmar.

The resistance movement led by young adults of Generation Z distinguishes itself from the previous anti-regime movements in 1988 and 2007.[691] While the previous two movements have been marked by more exclusive Buddhist activists, the present movement has been marked by the inclusivity of religious and ethnic diversity.[692]

One of the protest leaders said, "Young adults are tired of seeing and experiencing Buddhist nationalism and Bamar ethnic privileges and so we want to move beyond those problems."[693] A Bamar Buddhist scholar Mon Mon Myant also observes that "Solidarity among protesters is becoming stronger than Buddhist religious nationalism."[694] Most powerfully, one of the Bamar ethnic protesters from Debeyin of Sagaing repentantly acknowledges on social media that "Now we deeply understand some ethnic minority groups' long suffering under the Bamar regime."[695] How deep is this interreligious solidarity within a short space of time remains questionable from the perspective of ethnic minorities! Later I will reflect on this. But we should not ignore the fact that the rise of the coup creates what I call "the unexpected opportunity" for a twofold ethic of interreligious reconciliation or friendship among the protesters and of the interreligious resistance. I will now reflect on this twofold ethic of reconciliation and resistance.

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[691] Ingrid Jordt, Tharapi Than, and Sue Ye Lin, *How Generation Z Galvanized a Revolutionary Movement Against Myanmar's 2021 Military Coup*, issue. 7 (Singapore: ISEAS, 2021).

[692] Iselin Frydenlund, et al, "Religious Responses to the Military Coup in Myanmar," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs*, 19, no. 2. (Fall 2021): 77-88.

[693] One of the leaders of anti-coup movement, interviewed by the author, August 6, 2021.

[694] Mon Mon Myat, "Buddhist Morality in Myanmar: Religious Nationalism and Solidarity After the Coup," *The Berkley Forum*, https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/buddhist-morality-in-myanmar-religious-nationalism-and-solidarity-after-the-coup, accessed January 7, 2022.

[695] https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1412607485862232, accessed January 8, 2022.

## 5.4 Religion and Reconciliation: Reading the Parable of the Good Samaritan for *Pyithu-Dukkha* Theology of Ethnic Reconciliation, Healing, and Hospitality

In his *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, Kenneth Bailey said, "the parable of the good Samaritan is famous for its ethics."[696] If there is one Bible text, which is most relevant to the current context of Myanmar, it would be the Lukan parable of the good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37). I will look at how the parable serves as a model for people's transformative ethic of ethnic reconciliation, healing, and hospitality.[697] While some Asian interculturalists,[698] see the good Samaritan as the primary actor for embodying Jesus's cross-cultural mission, *Minjung* liberation theologians,[699] see the victim as the primary actor.[700] I observe that the innkeeper's role in hosting and healing the victim (10:34-35) is ignored. In order to understand a fuller meaning of the parable, I will read the parable through the synthetic eyes of three actors. I use a paradigmatic method as a tool for a synthetic reading.[701] I name the first reading "a cross-cultural reading" (the good Samaritan model), the second reading "a liberative reading," (the wounded victim model), and the third reading "a hospitable reading" (the hospitable innkeeper model).[702]

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[696] Bailey, *Jesus through the Eastern Middle Eyes*, 284.

[697] The earlier version of this was presented at the Society of Biblical Literature and American Academy of Religion, November 19, 2018, Denver, CO, USA. See David Thang Moe, "A Cross-Cultural and Liberative Hermeneutics of Luke 10:25-37 in Asian and Asian-American Perspectives: Reading One Text Through Two Lenes," in *The Expository Times*, 130, no. 10 (2019): 439-449.

[698] See Peter C. Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Interculturation and Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 136-52.

[699] Suh Nam Dong, *Exploring Minjung Theology* (Seoul: Hangil, 1983), 107. Ahn Byung-Mu, *Talking about Minjung Theology* (Seoul: Korean Theological Study Institute, 1990), 117-8.

[700] C.S. Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 216-8.

[701] The paradigmatic reading of the Bible is advanced by Christopher Wright (OT) and David Gowler. See Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 64. David B. Gowler, *Host, Guest, Enemy, and Friend: Portraits of Pharisees in Luke and Acts* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 246.

[702] After the coup, I spoke this topic at Myanmar Institute of Theology, November 26, 2021, Yangon and Tahan Theological College, December 29, 2021, Myanmar. See also Moe, "A Cross-Cultural and Liberative Hermeneutics of Luke 10:25-37 in Asian and Asian-American Perspectives," 439-449.

First, according to George Forbes and I. Howard Marshall, the Samaritan was not only marginal, but also a despised indweller in the dominant Jewish context.[703] He represented a grassroots person. His grassroots marginal identity shares an analogy with some ethnic minority Christians in the context of Buddhist domination. Another lesson from the good Samaritan is his ethic of compassion (10:34). While the priest and Levite, who represented the elites in their ancient time, ignored the victim (10:32-33), the good Samaritan helped him with compassion. E.P Sanders and Brendan Byre argue that compassion is central for the Samaritan-victim relationship.[704] Jesus's use of the good Samaritan (religious other) as a healer for the victim is crucial for recognizing religious other's compassionate ethic of healing the victims in our pluralistic world. Compassion is the key doctrine of Buddhism. In his classic *What the Buddha Taught*, Rahula said,

> According to Buddhism for a human to be perfect there are two qualities that he or she develop equally: compassion (*karuna*) on one side, and wisdom (panna) on the other. Here compassion represents love, charity, kindness, tolerance, and such emotional side, or qualities of the heart, while wisdom would stand for the intellectual side or qualities of the mind. If one develops only the emotional neglecting the intellectual, one may become a good-hearted fool; while to develop only the intellectual side neglecting the emotional may turn one into a hand-hearted intellect without feeling for others. Therefore, to be a perfect one has to develop both equally. This is the aim of Buddhist way of life: in it wisdom and compassion are inseparably linked together.[705]

A Tibetan Buddhist activist Dalai Lamai also sees compassion as a key ethic for response to political suffering. He said, "Living in society, we should share the sufferings of our fellow citizens and practice compassion and tolerance not only towards our loved ones but

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[703] George W. Forbes*, The God of Old: The Role of the Lukan Parables in the Purpose of Luke's Gospel* (London: Continuum, 2000), 63-64. See I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 450.

[704] E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 6. Brendan Byre, *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 101.

[705] Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 46.

also towards our enemies."[706] There are many Samaritan-like compassionate people of religions who resist the coup. For instance, some seminaries extended their charity to railroad workers when the regime expelled them from their residences for joining the Civil Disobedience Movement. In Monywa, a Buddhist fruit seller embodies the good Samaritan by distributing her fruits to the protesters who performed sit-up protests. A young Bamar Buddhist in Yangon donated her watermelons to the protesters. In Yangon, Hindu sellers of fritters donated her food to nonviolent protesters. In front of Central Bank of Myanmar, a Hindu well-wisher donated her coconut juice to the protesters.[707]

Second, when we turn to reading the parable through the lens of the victim, we recognize his experience of unjust suffering. The robbers "stripped the victim, beat him, and went away, and leaving him half dead" (10:30). Likewise, the military coup beat peaceful protesters and rob their properties. Reading the parable through the eyes of victim means we see the connection between the victims and Jesus.[708] Moltmann said:

> The sufferings of Christ are not just Jesus' sufferings; they are the sufferings of the poor and the weak, which Jesus shares in his own body and his own soul, in solidarity with them (Heb. 2:16-18;11:26;13:13). Because of this, the sufferings of Christ are open for the sufferers still to come, both the men and women who suffer with Christ (Col. 1:24) and those with whom Christ will suffer—open for the sufferings of the martyrs for his new and kingdom, and for the coming apocalyptic sufferings which will fall upon all vulnerable creatures.[709]

In line with Moltmann, Asian liberation theologians and *Minjung* theologians emphasize the compassionate presence of Christ among the suffering people of other religions beyond Christianity.[710] It is common to claim in Asia that Jesus is present not only among suffering

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[706] Quoted in Kwok Pui-Lan, *Postcolonial Politics and Theology: Unraveling Empire for a Global World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 169.

[707] See Frydenlund, et al. "Religious Responses to the Military Coup in Myanmar," 79.

[708] Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, 216. Suh*, Exploring Minjung Theology*, 107.

[709] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life,* 130-1.

[710] Thomas, *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution*. Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*. Ahn Byung-Mu, "Jesus and the Minjung in the Gospel of Mark," in *Minjung Theology: People*

Christians, but also among suffering masses of other religions and ethnicities or *Pyithu-Dukkha*. *Pyithu-Dukkha* is a combination of two Burmese words—*Pyithu and Dukkha*. *Pyithu* refers to people or masses, while *dukkha* refers to suffering. Put together, we get the idea of suffering masses of people.[711] In his book *Buddhism and Society*,[712] Melford Spiro describes *dukkha* as everyday expressions of people's pain. He said:

> *Dukkha* (*doukkha*) is probably the most frequently used term in the Burmese lexicon; it is on everyone's lips. One hears it scores of times every day—at work, at school, in the house, on a trip. For the Burmese, for the rest of humankind, the notion that life involves suffering is not an article of faith; it is a datum of everyday experience. But it is one thing to agree that life involves suffering, and another to agree that life—every form of life—is suffering.[713]

Within a broad version of Asian liberation hermeneutics, *Pyithu-dukkha* shares its commonality with *Minjung*, but it also has a distinct nature. While *Minjung* refers to the suffering people of religious diversity in a Korean homogeneous context, *Pyithu-dukkha* refers to suffering masses of both religious diversity and ethnic diversity in a Burmese multicultural context.[714] In short, Jesus did not just suffer for the multitudes of sinners, but He is suffering in solidarity with *Pyithu-dukkha* as their liberator and comforter.[715]

The other important fact we learn about the victim is his anonymous identity.[716] No clue about the ethnic identity of the wounded victim is mentioned in the parable. The

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*as The Subjects of History*, ed, Kim Yong-Bock, 136-151. (Singapore: CCA, 1981). C.S. Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996),

[711] See David Thang Moe, "A Critical Reading of C.S. Song's Asian Third-Eye Liberation Theology for a Myanmar Intercontextual Liberation Theology of Pyithu-Dukkha," in *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology*, 2, no. 2. (October 2018): 193-215. Joel Tin Moe is the one who first coined the term "*Pyithu-Doukkha* Theology."

[712] Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1970), 74.

[713] Ibid.

[714] Moe, "A Critical Reading of C.S. Song's Asian Third-Eye Liberation Theology for a Myanmar Intercontextual Liberation Theology of Pyithu-Dukkha," 193-215.

[715] Along the same line of thought, see Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life,* 130-1.

[716] Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, 444-5.

Samaritan did not care about the victim's ethnic identity, his concern is to simply see the victim as a human neighbor in need.[717] When examined in the Burmese context of Christian-Buddhist religious conflict, the term "neighbor" raises a question of exclusivity and inclusivity, one's understanding of God and social responsibility toward the other. For instance, one of the grassroots Karenni Christian activists said, "the challenge for the Karenni Christians is their extending social charity to their fellow Christians rather than to suffering people of other faiths."[718] The victim's anonymous identity challenges the church to universalize the victims as one's neighbors rather than particularize friends.

Third, the good Samaritan's ethnic crossing for reaching out to the victim is paradigmatic for Christians ethnic crossing among protesters. According to Joel Green, the good Samaritan's neighborly love for the victim by crossing ethnic barriers is the main feature of the parable. He said, "neighborly love knows no boundary."[719] Craig Keener also sees the good Samaritan's ethnic crossing as a model for the New Testament invitations to today's ethnic reconciliation.[720] The vast majority of grassroots anti-coup protesters reconcile with one another by crossing religious and ethnic barriers. Protesters are courageous, creative, and compassionate in crossing religious and ethnic barriers.[721]

Fourth, as we read the parable through the lens of the innkeeper, we find his central role of hospitality. Olivia Constable argues that John Chrysostom offers the Greek word *pandocheion* as having two meanings of hospitality. One is that *pandocheion* signifies the act of charity. The innkeeper paid two denarii for healing the victim (10:35). The other is

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[717] Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 429.
[718] A grassroots Karenni activist, interviewed by the author, November 26, 2021.
[719] Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 426.
[720] Keener, "Some New Testament Invitations to Ethnic Reconciliation," 202-207.
[721] I presented this topic at the panel discussion on "Events Since the Coup in Myanmar," at Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA, September 22, 2021.

that *pandocheion* describes our earthly home.[722] Sometimes we think that charity and hospitality are possible only for rich people. But the innkeeper just paid two denarii (10:35) for healing the victim. What is central is the innkeeper's generous, compassionate, and hospitable action of hosting and healing the victim. The Good Samaritan's mission might not have been accomplished without the innkeeper.

There are tens of thousands of Burmese civilians who embody the paradigm of the Lukan innkeeper. How can people living in one of the poorest countries due to the regime in the world be among the most generous and hospitable? The answer is that religious compassion is the key for their cultural practices of generosity and hospitality. In her book *The Culture of Giving in Myanmar*,[723] Hiroko Kawanami, a Japanese scholar who did her ethnographic research in Myanmar for several years rightly described:

> Myanmar has topped a global generosity list for the past few years, despite having at one time been listed by the World Bank as one of the poorest countries in the world in GNP terms, and more than 90 percent of the population is not reported to engage in giving activities, offering donations to charity and to a large extent to the Buddhist monastic community. Generally speaking, the country's people are known to be exceedingly hospitable and generous even towards strangers, and as an indication of this there are earthenware water jars placed at almost every street corner offered to quench the thirst of anyone who passes by. You can never outdo a Myanmar person with generosity. They never stop giving.[724]

Kawanami's observation is about the Buddhist public practices of hospitality and generosity. Such religious practices of generosity and hospitality can also be found among Christian communities. Like the innkeeper, both Buddhists and Christians are generous and hospitable. For instance, a pregnant Buddhist woman in Mandalay opened her house

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[722] Quoted in Olivia R. Constable, *Housing the Stranger in the Mediterranean World: Lodging, Trade, and Travel in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 25-26. See also Bruce W. Longenecker, "The Story of Good Samaritan and the Innkeeper (Luke 10:30-35): A Study in Character Rehabilitation," in *Biblical Interpretation*, 17, no. 4 (2009): 422-447.

[723] See Hiroko Kawanami, *The Culture of Giving in Myanmar: Buddhist Offerings, Reciprocity and Interdependence* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

[724] Ibid., 21.

for peaceful protesters to seek a refuge from the violent coup, an act for which she was shot dead. This shows the cost of hospitality. Christians across the nation open their houses for hosting some protesters. Millions of people raise funds for the purpose of healing victims and supporting the Civil Disobedience Movement participants. The practices of interreligious hospitality by opening their hearts and houses for friends and strangers embody the parable. A Palestinian liberation theologian, Naim Ateek, said:

> The question posed by the young lawyer to Jesus, "who is my neighbor? (10:29) is, as relevant today as it was two thousand years ago. So long as we define the neighbor negatively as a person who is foreign and alien, our humanity is in jeopardy. So long as we divide the world and our own communities into friends and enemies, neighbors and strangers, we feel no moral obligation toward those whom we have already designated as outsiders. This distinction between us and them creates a binary society that shuts the door on viewing the other as a neighbor that deserves to be loved.[725]

While the parable provides the ethic of social charity and ethnic reconciliation, it does not explicitly provide the ethic of resisting the robbers who beat the victim. This does not mean that Luke is not interested in social justice. Luke does provide a liberating paradigm of Jesus' public manifesto of justice and freedom (Lk. 4:18-20). In chapter four, I have suggested that one must integrate social charity and social justice as inseparable elements of grassroots Asian public theology. Keeping this in mind, we will look at everyday forms of people's courageous and creative resistance to the coup that causes political suffering.

[725] Naim Ateek, "Who Is My Neighbor? *Interpretation*, 62, no. 2. (April 2008): 156-65, here 156.

## 5.5 Everyday Forms of Religious Resistance: A Dialogue with James C. Scott

It is necessary to bring Scott back into dialogue with everyday forms of grassroots people resistance to the coup.[726] In his two particular books, *Weapons of the Weak* (1985) and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990) drawn from his fieldworks among the Malay peasants in the context of political domination, Scott has proposed the need of recognizing symbolic and hidden forms of resistance. When he is talking about resistance, he is referring to "everyday forms of resistance by average people."[727] Scott does not reject open resistance on the streets. Rather, he invites us to recognize many forms of indirect and symbolic resistance.[728] He believes that multiple forms of people's resistance to the state are both public and hidden. For Scott, everyday forms of resistance by average people might be prosaic, but constant and everyday forms of resistance are more effective over the long run. Multiple forms of resistance are "offstage comments and conversation, proverbs, folksongs and history, legends, jokes, ritual, and religion."[729]

Scott's theory of resistance resonates with the Burmese people's various everyday and creative forms of resistance to the coup. Grassroots people adopt both public and hidden transcripts. While "public" refers to people's open resistance to the coup, "hidden" refers to people's symbolic and silent resistance to political powers. For example, civilians across the nation joined the silent strikes on December 10, 2021 (Global Day of Human Rights) and February 1, 2022 (One-Year Anniversary of the Coup). Moreover, "Buddhist symbols and rituals are often used in the protests, from the turning-over-of-the-arms-bowl

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[726] James Scott and I shared a panel discussion on the theme "One Year After the Myanmar Coup: The Origin and Ongoing Democratic Movement of Interreligious and Interethnic Resistance to the Coup," at Columbia University, New York City, November 1, 2022. I am grateful for his insights.

[727] Scott, *Weapons of the Weak,* 29; Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 198-201.

[728] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 37-41.

[729] Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 41.

to symbolize the condemnation of the coup to the offerings of kindness chants for the protesters."[730] Another symbolic protest, is banging of pots and pans. Its symbolic meaning is casting evil spirits from the coup. Christians' everyday forms of resistance range from singing gospel songs through prayers to banging of pots and pans. They practice prayers as powerful tools for defeating the coup.[731] I will explore how the hidden and public forms of interreligious and interethnic resistance is evident in Civil Disobedience Movement.

### 5.5.1 Reading Romans 13:1-7 as a Hidden Transcript of Public Theology

Christians are divided over the interpretation and reception of Rom. 13:1-7 in the context of the coup. James Scott's famous theory of the hidden transcripts shapes our fresh understanding of the hidden meaning of Rom. 13:1-7. In recent years, some Bible scholars have used Scott's social scientific theory of the hidden transcripts as a creative and critical approach to Rom. 13, and for explorations of Jesus and Paul as well as for the politics of their interpretations. Richard Horsley admits that "James C. Scott offers a rich range of knowledge and theory that helps biblical studies broaden and deepen approaches to texts in contexts."[732] A Romans expert Neil Elliot praises Scott's work when he said:

> Whether or not this last suggestion regarding Rom. 13:1-7 prevails, it should be evident enough from the preceding that James Scott's work holds out tremendous promise for a new critical approach that will contextualize Paul within the dynamics and ideology of Roman imperialism. Perhaps the effort will also contribute to

[730] Frydenlund, et al. "Religious Responses to the Military Coup in Myanmar," 80.

[731] A Grassroots Christian, interviewed by the author, September 15, 2021.

[732] See Richard A. Horsley, "Introduction—Jesus, Paul, and the Arts of Resistance: Leaves from the Notebook of James Scott," in *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul,* ed. Richard A. Horsley, 1-28 (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2004) here 1. See Gerald West, "Explicating Domination and Resistance: A Dialogue Between James C. Scott and Biblical Scholars," in *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul,* ed. Richard A. Horsley, 173-194 (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2004).

> greater awareness of our own situation vis-à-vis the imperial cultures and ideological pressures that surround us today.[733]

Scott's hidden transcripts of the Southeast Asian rural peasant everyday forms of resistance to political powers is applicable not only to the Palestinian rural peasants among whom Jesus ministers and the congregations of urban poor among whom Paul ministered, but also to the Burmese Christian responses to the coup in the rural villages of the ethnic minorities and the urban cities of the ethnic majorities. Rom. 13:1-7 is not an easy text. When it comes to the responses to the coup, Christians in Myanmar are both united and divided in their perceptions of the relationship between faith and state. In my view, there are three kinds of Christians who witness their one faith (Eph. 4:5).[734]

The first group is represented by *apolitical Christians*. This group is inspired by dispensationalism that teaches a dichotomy between this-worldly and other-worldly, faith and politics. Jesus's word, "my kingdom is not of this world (Jn. 18:36)," serves as the excuse for justifying their faith as divorcing from politics. An anti-coup pastor said, "Some Christians justify their submission to the coup by reading Rom. 13:1-7 as a text for their submission to the coup."[735] Apolitical Christians adopt "State theology."[736] "State theology," according to South African public theologians, is "simply a theological justification of the status quo."[737] Apolitical Christians believe that Paul is presenting us with the legitimacy of the state and the Christians' obedience to the state. It is true that in

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[733] Neil Elliot, "Strategies of Resistance and Hidden Transcripts in the Pauline Communities," in *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul,* ed. Richard A. Horsley, Semeia Studies, vol. 48, 97-122 (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2004) here 122.

[734] I first presented this topic at the panel discussion on "The Religious Dimensions of Myanmar's Protests," hosted by Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, March 10, 2021.

[735] A pastor, interviewed by the author, March 8, 2021.

[736] The Kairos Theologians, *The Kairos Document: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa* (London: The Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1985), 6-10.

[737] Ibid., 6.

13:1-7, Paul is not presenting anything about the just or unjust state. Then what is Paul's hidden purpose? I will discern the answers after describing the second group.

The second group is sharp contrast to the first group. The second groups are represented by *Christian politicians*. As noted in chapter two, these groups do not care much about the inner life of the church and its evangelism. Some of them have been involved in the politics of resistance to Burmanization for seven decades. For them, to be good ethnic minority Christians are to be good political fighters against Burmanization. They see Moses as a political model for them. Moses's political leadership for freedom of his people from oppression is crucial for their public understanding of political activism.[738] Many of them see themselves both as the party politicians and as the national politicians. For them, there is no problem with separation between faith and politics. For them, political resistance to the coup and Buddhist nationalist movement is an imperative.[739]

The third group is represented by *prophetic Christians*. Some of them are academic and most of them are grassroots Christians. In my view, this group chooses the middle ground between the first and second groups. Christians who represent the second groups are a mixture of grassroots and academic Christians. They are not necessarily politicians, but they read the Bible prophetically. Using the Old Testament prophetic critique of social evil and the New Testament prophetic life of Jesus as the models, they see resistance to the coup as a moral responsibility. They embody the "Prophetic theology."[740] Reading against Rom. 13:1-7 as a text that justifies the unjust state, prophetic Christians read the text as what Scott calls a "hidden transcript" of prophetic theology. Scott's theory of hidden

[738] Some Christian politicians, interviewed by the author, July 19, 2021. See also Aaron Wildavsky, *Moses as Political Leade*r (Salem, NY: Salem Press, 2005).

[739] See, for instance, Sakhong, *In Defence of Identity*, 9-64.

[740] The Kairos Theologians, *The Kairos Document*, 18-24.

transcripts enables us to see Paul not as a social conservative, but as a hidden sort of prophetic theologian and political thinker who challenges empire.[741] Paul does not address any issue of the just or unjust state, but prophetic Christians use verse 4 as a key tool to question whether or not the state embodies "God's servant for the public good." If the state fails to live up to God's civil service for the good, God does not ordain them.

Elliot observes that Philo's distinction of 'caution and untimely frankness' resembles Scott's distinction of 'hidden and public transcripts.' He said, "Here we see Philo's explicitly distinguishing two transcripts: the public transcripts of deference to imperial order, and the offstage transcripts of defiance, under the categories of speaking mostly freely or boldness of speech and speaking with untimely frankness."[742] Elliot invites us to see how Philo's categories of caution and untimely frankness and Scott's categories of hidden and public transcripts enable prophetic Christians to re-read Rom. 13:1-7 in the context of socio-political domination. Expressed in Elliot's words:

> When the times are right, when a social space is opened in which the offstage transcript can come onstage, the hidden transcript of defiance become public, then it is good to set ourselves against the violence of our enemies and subdue it; but when the circumstances do not present themselves, the safe course is to stay quiet.[743]

Elliot's reading of Rom. 13 through the lens of Scott's theory and Philo's theory enables us to perform hidden and public resistance to the coup. Being public does not mean to be the only way to resist the state. Prophetic types of evangelical and ecumenical Christians are united in their hidden and public resistances to the coup. Their responses are communal

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[741] Horsley, ed, *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance*, 7. Richard A. Horsley, *Paul and Politics* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2004). See N.T. Wright, "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire," *Reflections,* 2 (1999): 42-65.

[742] Elliot, "Strategies of Resistance and Hidden Transcripts in the Pauline Communities," 117.

[743] Ibid.

and individual. For instance, in a Joint Statement, the Catholic Bishop's Conference of Myanmar, Myanmar Council of Churches, and Myanmar Evangelical Christian Fellowship came together to express their prophetic resistance to the coup and their solidarity with all political detainees.[744] Some Christian organizations, such as Myanmar Baptist Convention,[745] Kachin Baptist Convention,[746] Presbyterian Church of Myanmar,[747] Methodist Church of Upper Myanmar,[748] and some churches made their statements of the prophetic resistance to the coup and of calling for social justice, peace, and freedom.[749] These statements state the church's prophetic responses to the coup.

There are many examples of grassroots individual resistances to the coup. Take a Catholic nun, Sister Ann Rose Nu Tawng from Myitkyina of Kachin state, as an example. Nu Tawng is a grassroots Catholic Nun. She publicly showed her compassion and courage by begging the police not to shoot and torture nonviolent protesters. Because of her compassionate and courageous action in public, she eventually became one of the 100 most inspiring women of 2021 selected by the BBC. Instead of keeping religious peace in her private life, she publicly made peace with the police for the sake of civil protesters.[750] Nu Tawng said, "I have witnessed with a broken heart what happened in Myanmar. If I were able to do something, I would release all people detained in prisons without justification and would make people equal without any discrimination."[751]

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[744] Statement of the Ecumenical and Evangelical Christian Organizations, February 9, 2021.
[745] Statement of Myanmar Baptist Convention, February 7, 2021.
[746] Statement of Kachin Convention, February 3, 2021.
[747] Statement of Presbyterian Church of Myanmar, February 4, 2021.
[748] Statement of Methodist Church (Upper Myanmar), February 5, 2021.
[749] For a fuller account of Myanmar Christians' resistance to the coup, see Frydenlund, et al. "Religious Responses to the Military Coup in Myanmar," 82-4.
[750] "BBC 100 Women 2021: Who is on the List?" In *BBC News,* https://www.bbc.com/news/world-59514598?fbclid=IwAR0bc8KQvU860kTup2BY2BeRLjH_kgbvldfMwOR, accessed January 2, 2021.
[751] Ibid.

It must be noted that religious dimensions of people's resistances to the coup are both hidden and public.[752] The reasons for the hidden resistances are due to fear. In democratic nations, it is easier to openly resist political powers, but it is not the case in Myanmar, where the coup would either shoot you dead in the streets or put you alive in jail. This is a challenge of doing the publicness of public theology. I must emphasize that grassroots Asian public theology is not just about the church's public witness of prophetic faith, but it is also about the hidden, symbolic, and indirect witnesses of apostolic and priestly faith in everyday forms of resistance to the coup through prayers.

## 5.6 Goals of Resistance—Political Reconciliation and Reciprocal Liberation: A Case Study of Political CDM Armies and Grassroots People's Embrace

In the previous sections, I have shown how Christians and Buddhists have reconciled their religious and ethnic divides to resist the coup. Now we ask: what are the goals of their interreligious and interethnic resistance? Do the ethnic minorities and ethnic majorities share the same vision? I will attempt to explore and examine their goals.

### 5.6.1 Liberating the Oppressed—Liberation from Oppression

The first goal is for the political liberation of the oppressed or *Pyithu-dukkha* from the oppression. People want multi-dimensions of freedom—freedom from the fear of the regime, freedom from poverty and suffering caused by the regime. Aung San Suu Kyi's classic book *Freedom from Fear* sums up well about freedom. The following statement is her remarks on freedom 19 days before she was placed under house arrest. She said:

[752] Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 37-41.

> People want freedom. The one thing is that they have become used to being frightened. On June 19, 1989, a foreign photographer was taking pictures of me and he was harassed. Some of the people with me were astonished that he spoke back. I said: "But that is normal for people who have come from a free society." Fear, like so many things, is habit. If you live with fear for a long time, you become fearful. That is why I think when people say I am so brave, perhaps it is just that I am not used to being frightened.[753]

Suu Kyi's understanding of freedom is associated with liberal democracy, which has to do with freedom of expression and of action without fear.[754] Her understanding of democracy is a Westernized form of democracy. James Scott observes that "the theories of liberal democracies are, of course, Western, and any examination of the nature and extent of democratic beliefs must concentrate on the impact of the West in these Southeast Asia areas," such as Malaysia and Myanmar.[755] According to Scott, political elites in those Southeast Asian nations embraced the Westernized form of liberal democratic beliefs. By liberal democracy, Scott means "freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of election for a representative government by popular franchise."[756] In contrast to Suu Kyi's Westernized ideology of the "liberal democracy," the military apply the "disciplined democracy" as a suitable democracy for the context of Myanmar. Discipline is *si kan* in Burmese, which implies proper action within the given boundaries set by the military. They contrast "disciplined democracy" with "Western-style liberal democracy of freedom.[757]

The political vision of freedom from oppression through resistance shares its commonality with liberation theologians. As noted in chapter two, much of what we know about the Asian paradigms of liberation theology have advocated for what one may call

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[753] Suu Kyi, *Freedom from Fear*, 226.
[754] Ibid., 169.,
[755] James C. Scott, *Political Ideology in Malaysia: Reality and the Beliefs of an Elite* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), 153.
[756] Ibid., 154
[757] Walton, *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar*, 167-9.

"an exclusive liberation of the oppressed." In their overzealousness for God's preferential option for the oppressed, liberation theologians struggle for the exclusive liberation of the oppressed only. I am dissatisfied with their failure to integrate liberation of the oppressors. The problem is not liberation itself (God's liberating action), but the way it has been applied (the theologizing of liberation). I will try to show why and how we should rethink an inclusive or reciprocal liberation of the oppressed and the oppressors.[758]

### 5.6.2 Liberating the Oppressors: Liberation from Dehumanization

The second goal of resistance is for the liberation of the oppressors. Jurgen Moltmann defines liberation of the oppressed as "political liberation" and the liberation of the oppressors as "psychological liberation."[759] A psychological liberation is central to a Buddhist doctrine of internal liberation. As noted earlier, external actions of social conflict and injustice come from Buddhist nationalists' internal thoughts and desires for power and superiority. If so, we must struggle for liberating the oppressors from their wrong ideologies. Scott argues that "there are four characteristics of ideology in the post-independent Southeast Asia—ideology as personal, patterned, politicized, and shared."[760] The mobilization of Buddhist nationalism arises from such kinds of political ideology.

Theologically speaking, both kinds of liberation are rooted in God's comprehensive way of doing justice. In the context of human injustices, God takes a side with the oppressed and resists the oppressors. According to Moltmann, the highest form of divine

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[758] See David Thang Moe, "Sin and Suffering: The Hermeneutics of Liberation Theology in Asia," in *Asia Journal of Theology*, 30, no. 2. (October 2016): 208-225, esp. 214-225.

[759] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 40th anni. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 419-94. Moltmann borrows a "psychological liberation" from the words of a psychologist Sigmund Freud.

[760] Scott, *Political Ideology in Malaysia*, 31-5.

justice in the biblical tradition is the "justice of compassion."[761] It is through the justice of compassion that God stands in solidarity with the oppressed and resists the oppressors. The goal is to restore justice for the oppressed and to transform the mind of the oppressors. It is through God's justice of compassion that those deprived of their rights come to receive their rights and the oppressors come to be converted to justice.[762]

Debates are raging among theologians and politicians. Some prioritize peace over justice. In the context where there is a clear line between *dhamma* and *adhamma*, I prioritize justice over peace. The author of Psalms reminds us that "justice and peace kiss each other" (Ps. 85:10b). While holding the inseparation of the two, I prioritize justice over peace. These past few years, Aung San Suu Kyi prioritized peace with the regime. She did not seek justice, but insisted peace and reconciliation. The coup leader also emphasizes peace. In his New Year's message, the coup leader addressed peace, but did not mention justice. The following statement is his New Year's message:

> First and foremost, I extend my greetings for your mental and physical health and well-being with auspiciousness on the accession of the New Year 2022. The year 2021 was an important year for our country. We faced various kinds of challenges within the previous year. I implemented the stands on the peace and stability of the State, unity, and development as much as possible for ensuring the firm path of multiparty democracy we all are walking today.[763]

On the day the coup leader gave a New Year's message on peace, his followers used airstrikes to attack on the civilians in Demoso of Karenni State. The regime's understanding of peace is related to what is called "negative peace." Johan Galtung,

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[761] Moltmann, "Political Theology and the Ethics of Peace," 38.
[762] Ibid., 31-42.
[763] "New Year Message for 2022 from Chairman of SAC," in *The Global New Light of Myanmar*, https://www.gnlm.com.mm/new-year-message-for-2022-from-chairman-of-state-administration-council-prime-minister-senior-general-min-aung-hlaing/, accessed January 3, 2022.

perhaps the most well-known figure in peace studies defines "negative peace" as the absence of conflict and defines "positive peace" as the presence of justice and resisting injustice.[764] The Myanmar regime never sees peace as the presence of justice, restoration of democracy, and respecting human and ethnic rights. Anti-coup people of Myanmar want peace and reconciliation, but they strongly believe that there can be no lasting peace and political reconciliation without restorative justice. John DeGruchy helpfully said:

> Reconciliation is properly understood as a process in which we become engaged at the heart of the struggle for justice and peace in the world… to say that the God who reconciled the world to Himself in Jesus (2Cor. 5:19-20) is another way of saying that God is busy restoring His universal reign of justice and peace.[765]

There is no peace where injustice rules, even when law and order are applied by force. In order to achieve peace and reconciliation, one must first seek justice by speaking truth to political powers. The vast majority of people of Myanmar believe that true democracy and its fruits of justice and peace will prevail only when the military regime step down from political leadership. The military does not exist to lead the nation, but to protect the nation. While people resist political powers of the coup for the political liberation of the oppressed, their resistance also leads to the psychological liberation of some soldiers.

### 5.6.3 Oppressed People's Embrace of the Liberated Oppressors

According to *Myanmar Now*, a local new outlet, over 2,000 armies and 6,000 police officers have been psychologically liberated within one year of the coup. Now they join the Civil Disobedience Movement and fight back against the coup. The beautiful part is the way how some grassroots civilians embrace the CDM armies and police. Some creative

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[764] Johan Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development, and Civilizations* (Oslo: PRIO, 1996), 72.

[765] John W. De Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 21.

and compassionate young civilians founded a community called "*Pyithu's Yin Khwin* in Burmese or "People's Embrace" as a space for embracing liberated and repentant armies.[766] Using *Pyithu's Yin Khwin* as a hospitable space, some civilians and liberated armies practice socio-political reconciliation as new friendship. One of the grassroots leaders of *Pyithu's Yin Khwin* talks about the process of friendship. She said:

> In the beginning, there is a mutual suspicion between liberated armies and resistant civilians or the hosts and guests because we are strange to each other. A mistrust of the armies takes its deep root because they never speak truth to civilians. In order to build a mutual trust and genuine political reconciliation, some hosting civilians use social media to publicly interview armies about their reasons for leaving the community of the coup and for their transformative views on the coup. Some liberated armies and police share their views of the coup as *adhamma* and express their individual repentance. They also expose some internal strategies among the armies. These are helpful for the civilians' deeper understanding of the internal motivations and strategies of the armies.[767]

When Hannah Beech interviewed Capt. Tun Myant Aung, one of the earliest CDM armies, for *The New York Times*, about "Inside Myanmar's Army," he said, "The army see protesters as criminals and the army is the only world for most soldiers."[768] He admitted, "I love the military so much. But the message I want to give my fellow soldiers is: if you are choosing between the country and Tatmadaw, please choose the country."

Aung's liberative view of Tatmadaw is important for assessing how soldiers are brainwashed. Since they see the army as the only world, they are blind to see the suffering they inflict on civilians. The slogan of the Burmese army is, "The Tatmadaw shall never betray national causes." They see themselves as the sons and daughters of the Burma

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[766] Nyein Swe and Min Min, "Over 8,000 Soldiers and Police Officers Have Joined the Civil Disobedience Movement," in *Myanmar Now*, https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/over-8000-soldiers-and-police-officers-have-joined-the-civil-disobedience-movement-says, accessed January 10, 2022.

[767] The grassroots social activist, interviewed by the author, January 15, 2022.

[768] Hannah Beech, "Inside Myanmar's Army: They See Protesters as Criminals," in *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/28/world/asia/myanmar-army-protests.html, accessed January 10, 2022.

Independence Army (BIA), who fought British colonialism for national independence. While recognizing the political work of the BIA as anti-British colonialism, we must resist the Tatmadaw's wrong adoption of the BIA as the internal colonizers of their own citizens in the post-colonial period. They will not voluntarily be liberated from their wrong ideologies. Their psychological and ideological liberation is possible only through the everyday forms of civilian resistance. The goal is to achieve the reciprocal liberation. Moltmann rightly talks about the two sides of oppression:

> Because oppression also has these two sides; the liberation process has to begin on both sides too. The liberation of the oppressed from their suffering must lead to the liberation of the oppressors from the evil they commit; otherwise, there can be no liberation for a new community in justice and freedom. The goal of these reciprocal liberations cannot be anything less than a community of men and women, free of fear, in which there are no longer, any oppressors, and no longer any oppressed. In order to achieve this goal, the oppressed will have to free themselves from the constraints of oppression and cut themselves off from their oppressors, so as to find themselves and their own humanity.[769]

In short, everyday forms of interreligious and interethnic resistance to the coup are crucial for achieving reciprocal liberation and political reconciliation. We will now explore how the minority Christians and the majority Buddhists share their vision.

### 5.6.4 Defending Ethnic Identity and Demanding for Ethnic Rights

While the goal of interreligious resistance to achieve freedom from the coup, the ethnic minorities have an additional vision: the vision of freedom not only from the ruling elite coup, but also from grassroots Burmanization. The minorities have what I call "a double vision" because they face a double crisis: political oppression (along with Bamars under the regime) and religious discrimination or ethnic assimilation under the Bamar

[769] Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology,* 186.

privileges.[770] The nationalist ideology that says, "to be a Burmese is to be a Buddhist" justifies privileges. While the minority Christians have a tendency toward a dialogical interaction with moral Buddhists in their resistance to the coup, they have an alternative option for a defensive reaction against Burmanization. Some grassroots activists said:

> We have been resisting the military state of Burmanization and Buddhistization since the 1947's national integration of the ethnic minority cultures into the majority Bamar cultures. In this present democratic movement, some Bamar ethnic majorities just join us in our long struggles for freedom from the regime and federal democracy. We have the same goal; that is, to defeat the coup, but we need to worker hard for freedom from Burmanization (*lumyogyi watta*).[771]

Not all ethnic Christians opt for a defensive reaction against Burmanization and Buddhistization. Some ethnic Christians opt for conversion to Buddhism so that they would be free from religious discrimination.[772] In my interactions with some grassroots Christians, it is clear that the vast majority of Christians opt for the defensive reaction against Burmanization and Buddhistization that wrongly imagine Myanmar as a monocentric nation of the Bamar Buddhist ethnic majorities.[773] Ramachandra observes:

> When a majority community defines itself as a nation and claims the cultural ownership of the state, it provokes its minorities to define themselves too as nations. Minority ethnic nationalism is often a defensive reaction against majority nationalism. This is the bloody postcolonial history of countries such as Sri Lanka and Indonesia. In many countries (for instance, India, Burma, and Russia) there have been separationist struggles against raging for many years which only flicker intermittently in the global media.[774]

The ethnic minority Christians' defensive reaction against Burmanization and Buddhistization. As shown in chapter one, the problem of national integration in the post-

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[770] I first presented this paper at the event of "The State of Democracy and Activism in Myanmar: Five Months into the Coup," at the University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK, July 17, 2021.

[771] Some activists interviewed by the author, April 20, 2021.

[772] Lehman, *Military Rule in Burma Since 1962*, 5. A pastor, interviewed by the author, July 19, 2020.

[773] Grassroots church leaders and social activists, interviewed by the author, July 19-August 20, 2020 before the rise of the coup and May 20, 2021 after the coup.

[774] Ramachandra, *Subverting Global Myths*, 142.

independence is its tendency toward building the Bamar-ethnocentric nationhood. The Bamar-led government controls the ethnic minority regions by setting up military centers. Even if a few rulers in the minority regions are Christians, they are appointed by the regime who obey their orders from the centrist government. Therefore, the Chin, Kachin, Karen ethnic groups have been struggling for defending their ethnic identity and for demanding their minority rights in the name of self-autonomy. Self-autonomy was their pre-colonial existence. Lian Hmung Sakhong said, "Chins were independent. None of the surrounding powers, such as the Bengali, Indian or Burman, ever conquered the Chinram."[775] Both grassroots and academic ethnic Christians see federalism as a solution to the problem of minority-majority ethnic conflicts in Asia.[776] Again Sakhong said:

> Federalism is the only viable solution to Burma's current political crisis, including seven long decades of civil war. Federalism, therefore, is essential to the ultimate success of the democracy movement, to guarantee political equality for all nationalities, the right of self-determination for all member states of the Union, democratic rights for all citizens of the Union.[777]

In the following, we will explore why and how federal democracy should be emphasized as a potential solution to the politics of minority-majority ethnic and religious conflict.

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[775] Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 85.

[776] See Michael G. Breen, *The Road to Federalism in Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka: Finding the Middle Ground* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 3. Liam D. Anderson, *Federal Solutions to Ethnic Problems: Accommodating Diversity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013). W. Kymlika, "Multi-nation federalism in Asia," in *Federalism in Asia,* B. He, B. Gallingan and T. Inoguchi. ed, 33-56 (Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, 2007). Alan Smith, "Ethnic Conflict and Federalism: The Case of Burma," in *Federalism against Ethnicity? Institutional Legal and Democratic Instruments to Prevent Violent Minority Conflicts,* ed. Gunther Bachler, 236- 67 (Zurich: Verlag Ruegger, 1997).

[777] Sakhong, *In Defence of Identity*, 15.

### 5.6.5 Politics of Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict: Choosing the Middle Ground for Federal Democracy

Although some ethnic minority groups have played the key roles in building an independent nation by resisting British colonialism, they have been excluded from building the post-colonial nation. For example, U Wamcu Maung from the writer's hometown of Mindat is one of the Chin heroes who played a key role in building the independent nation. Sadly, the Bamar ethnocentric coup has recently destroyed some houses, public school buildings, and clinics in his village of Womcu. Yet I would also like to mention that although Mindat has been under martial law since May 13, 2021, as the first ethnic minority town, the regime can only govern a small area within the town. The larger area of over 100 villages outside the town are what James Scott calls "ungovernable" in his highly acclaimed book *The Art of Not Being Governed*.[778] The rural villages are governed by some local resistant groups, who fight for a deeper sense of self-governing community.

In their essay "Myanmar's Transition to a New Inclusive Society," James Scott and Tun Myint argue that the rise of the new coup paves the way for Myanmar's transition to a more inclusive society from a Bamar monocentric nation imagination. They argue that "Neither the military nor Aung San Suu Kyi-led NLD party alone can bring a permanent peace and inclusive society without the inclusive participation of other ethnic and political groups."[779] Such a new vision is not just popular among the public intellectuals and political elites, but it is also popular among grassroots social activists.

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[778] James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

[779] James C. Scott and Tun Myint, "Myanmar's Transition to a New Inclusive Society," *Independent Journal of Burmese Scholarship*, 6, no. 1 (December 2021): 3-11, here 7.

I had conversation with some grassroots activists on their goal of democracy movement. I asked them, what kind of democracy is needed in Myanmar?[780] They said, "Myanmar needs federal democracy so that the Bamar ethnic majority groups and the ethnic minority Christians groups share ethnic equalities, and they build a more harmonious and inclusive nation."[781] In order to adopt "federal democracy" as a new vision for building a more inclusive society, we need to choose the middle ground between the competing powers of Suu Kyi-led NLD and the regime.[782] Suu Kyi has been criticized by some as a Bama-ethnocentrist due to her failure to defend ethnic minority rights.[783] The current democracy movement has a clear option for moving beyond the coup and Suu Kyi. In envisioning federal democracy, I will argue that we should no longer overemphasize the 1947 Panglong Treaty. While remembering the Panglong Treaty's vision of federalism, we should expand a more inclusive vision. The Panglong Treaty is not inclusive enough. For example, Karen and some minority groups did not join the Panglong Treaty. Only Chin, Kachin, Shan, and some Bamar joined the Treaty.

If we truly envision the future of a more inclusive federal society, we should move beyond the vision of the Panglong Treaty by embracing other ethnic groups, such as Karen, Karenni, Rakhine, Mon, and others. In *The Road to Federalism in Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka,* Michael Breen suggests that "federalism is regularly promoted as a potential solution to minority problems."[784] He goes on to argue that there are different models of

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[780] I first presented this "What Kind of Democracy?" at the Acting Out Theology of Democracy in Glocal Contexts Conference, at Yonsei University, Seoul, South Korea, October 1, 2021.

[781] Activists interviewed by the author, June-July 2021.

[782] I first presented this at the panel on "The State of Democracy and Activism in Myanmar: Five Months into the Coup," at University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK, July 17, 2021.

[783] Tamas Well, "Making Sense of Reactions to Communal Violence in Myanmar," in *Conflict in Myanmar: War, Politics, and Myanmar*, ed. Nick Chesman and Nicholas Farrelly, 245-60 (Singapore, ISEAS, 2016).

[784] Breen, *The Road to Federalism in Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka*, 3.

federalism depending on the contexts.[785] Federalism focuses on the democratic idea of establishing balanced powers between shared rule through common institutions and self-rule through segmental institutions within the government.[786] Our intent is to envision a broad idea of federal democracy as a political tendency toward decentralizing Bamar-ethnocentrism and promoting self-rule of the ethnic minorities.[787]

First, in order to implement federal democracy as a framework for decentralizing Burmanization and for building a more inclusive society, one should recognize the reality of multiethnic and multireligious diversity. Myanmar is considered by many as ethically and religiously the second most diverse nation in Southeast Asia after Indonesia.[788] Second, one should recognize some differences between the Bamar majority groups and ethnic minority groups. Some differences between the Bamar groups and minority groups (Chin, Kachin, and Karen) lie in religion, region, custom, and language. Clifford Geertz helpfully provides six factors to define ethnic identity: "assumed blood, race, language, region, religion, and custom."[789] Religion (mostly Christianity), region (minority groups are hill people), custom, and language (diverse dialects) form a basis for ethnic identity. These cultural differences prove strong that the Bamar groups and the ethnic minority groups continue to be self-conscious about their identification with their communities.

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[785] Ibid., 149-195.

[786] Raoul Blindenbacher and Arnold Koller, ed, *Federalism in a Changing World* (Ithaca, NY: Mcgill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 9.

[787] I first presented this at the panel discussion on "The Future of Federalism and Political Decentralization in Myanmar," hosted by Asian Institute, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada, November 12, 2021. I am indebted to the audience for their comments and questions.

[788] Scott and Myint, "Myanmar's Transition to a New Inclusive Society," 3. See also Perry Schmid-Leukel, Hans-Peter Grosshans, and Madlen Krueger, eds, *Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Myanmar: Contested Identities* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 1-6.

[789] Clifford Geertz, "Primordial Ties," in *Ethnicity,* ed. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, 40-45 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) here 43-44.

Third, one should see their cultural differences not as the basis for discrimination against each other, but as the identity markers. Later, I will elaborate on this concept from a theological perspective. Fourth, one should recognize ethnic equality amid ethnic cultural diversity. Ethnic federalism in the context of Myanmar is considered by many as the political struggle for "democracy, equality, and federalism" (DEF).[790] Especially ethnic equality is central for the vision of federal democracy. Ethnic equality is something related to John Rawls' theory of justice as "fairness."[791] Justice as fairness does not privilege some and marginalize others. Rather, justice as fairness balances ethnic equality and privileges. More importantly, justice of fairness is not just about the political sake, but about what religions teach. How does Buddhism teach about fairness? If democracy is a Western idea in the eyes of Buddhist nationalists, how should we use Buddhism as a local source for a moral vision of federal democracy and equality?

### 5.6.6 Religion and Democracy: A Democratic Understanding of Religion

We often think of democracy politically. Can we rethink democracy politically and religiously? If so, we ask a question: Is Buddhism a democratic religion? In order to achieve the politics of democracy, it is necessary to understand the Buddhist moral concept of democracy. Walter argues that "in order to understand the political dynamics of contemporary Myanmar, it is necessary to understand the interpretations of Buddhist concepts that underly much of modern Burmese political thought."[792] The aim is to use Buddhist democratic ethics as sources for correcting Buddhist undemocratic nationalism.

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[790] Sakhong, *In Defence of Identity*, 9-13
[791] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard College Press, 1971), 251-157.
[792] Walton, *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought*, 3.

In 1958, U Chan Htoon, a Bamar Buddhist judge of the Supreme Court and Secretary General of the Buddha Sasana Council, declared that Buddhism is democratic and that its emphasis on self-reliance strongly supports democratic values. Chan Htoon said:

> Buddhism therefore tends to promote an individualistic outlook which is characteristic of Buddhists, both in their personal relationships and their national life. The rejection of all forms of authoritarianism stems from the Buddha's insistence upon freedom of will and choice… It is thus the anthesis of the totalitarian concept in which the individual has only a group-existence subordinate to the needs of the state.[793]

Sri Lankan Buddhist R.S.S. Gunewardene, affirmatively declared in a similar manner:

> Democracy is not something new in Asia and is not western-imposed as many people in the West used to think…Democracy is inherent in the very principles of Buddhism…Tolerance, individual freedom and responsibility, the spirit of understanding, the value of individual and collective service, all these constitute a part of the Buddhist philosophy of life.[794]

Our concern here is not with how we impose Buddhism on federal democracy, but with how we discern the moral role of Buddhism in shaping a public vision of federal democracy and human rights in a Buddhist nation. Democracy is unthinkable without speaking about human rights. In their co-edited book *Religion and Human Rights*, John Witte, Jr and M. Christian Green helpfully provide a comparative study of the relationship between religion and human rights.[795] In this, Sallie King argues that human rights, individual freedom, and self-autonomy are inherent in Buddhism. Those concepts are inherent in the Christian doctrine of humanity, too.[796] Human rights are rooted in the Buddhahood. Since the

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[793] U Chan Htoon, *Address to the Sixteenth Congress of the International Association for Religious Freedom* (Rangoon: Union Buddha Sasana Council Press, 1958), here 9.

[794] Quoted in Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, 137. R.S.S. Gunewardene, "South and Southeast Asia Look at the United States, in *Nationalism and Progress in Free Asia*, ed. Philip W. Thayer (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), 21.

[795] John Witte, Jr and M. Christian Green, eds. *Religion and Human Rights: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[796] Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, "Christianity and Human Rights," in *Religion and Human Rights: An Introduction,* ed. John Witte and M. Christian Green, 42-55. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Buddhahood depends on self-effort, individual duty becomes an essential part of enlightenment.[797] Traditionally, Buddhists spoke of duties rather than rights. Duties and rights became the two related terms in the modern Buddhism. So, individual has freedom of self-determination and freedom to act for his or her destiny.[798]

Buddhists see compassion as calling for a respect for the self-autonomy of each person. Buddhist nationalists fail to embody their doctrine of compassion in their relationship with the minorities. They privilege their own Bamars and discriminate against others. Buddhism has a democratic principle of human rights. For example, U Thant, a Bamar Buddhist and the first non-white Secretary-General of the UN declared that the Universal Declaration is the 'Magna Carta' of all humankinds, because its provisions constitute a common standard of achievement for all peoples and nations. Myanmar is one of the first nations endorsed the human rights declaration of the UN in 1948. Unfortunately, Bamar nationalists violate the UN declaration of human rights.

Some Bamar nationalists misinterpret federalism as a separation *from* the nation. Federalism is not to be understood as separation, but as a democratic vision of the self-autonomy of the ethnic minorities *within* the federal union. If we rightly apply federal democracy, we will see some significant progress in building a more peaceful nation. The ethnic minority would freely elect their own leaders to rule their regions so that the Bamar armies would no longer persecute their bodies and exploit their natural resources. This is the case especially for the Kachin whose land is blessed with bountiful natural resources.

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[797] L.P.N Perera, *Buddhism and Human Rights: A Buddhist Commentary on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,* (Colombo: Karunarane and Sons, 1991), 50. Sallie B. King, "Buddhism and Human Rights," *Religion and Human Rights*, ed. John Witte and M. Christian, 103-18. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) here 103.

[798] Perera, *Buddhism and Human Rights*, 50.

The Bamar regime has been occupying the Kachin land and exploiting their natural resources.[799] In the current situation, the coup has been driving tens of thousands of ethnic Christians out of their ancestral lands and making them refugees in the foreign lands. While thousands of Chin fled to India,[800] Karen and Karenni fled to Thailand due to civil wars.[801] Even for those remaining in their lands, they feel alienated and unsecure.

Unlike the Western worldview which prioritizes human rights over land rights,[802] grassroots ethnic minorities have a holistic worldview of human rights and land rights. Human rights and land rights are inseparable for their ethnic identity imagination. For example, the land concept of *Kawthoolei* ("a land without darkness") has been central for the Karen imagination of their identity.[803] Grassroots ethnic Christians I have interviewed express their ancestral land as the promised land God gave them as a place for their existence. Since it is a promised land given to them by God, they believe that it belongs to them, not to any outsiders.[804] Although some grassroots ethnic Christians do not explicitly relate land rights to the soteriological doctrine of eco-healing, their struggle for the preservation of natural resources from the exploitation of Bamar soldiers implies the idea

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[799] See Layang Seng Ja, "Burmanization and Its Effects on the Kachin Ethnic Group in Myanmar," in *Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Myanmar: Contested Identities,* ed. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Hans-Peter-Grosshans, and Madlen Krueger, 173-190. (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

[800] Sui-Lee Wee, "Thousands Flee Myanmar for India Amid Fears of a Growing Refugee Crisis," in *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/19/world/asia/myanmar-refugees-india.html, accessed January 17, 2022.

[801] Ryan General, "Karen People Flee to Thailand as Myanmar's Junta Carry on with Attacks," in *Next Shark*, https://nextshark.com/myanmar-karen-people-flee-thailand/, accessed January 17, 2022. "Karenni Christian Refugees Hiding in Thailand Need Your Help Today," in *Bananas Fund*, https://barnabasfund.org/latest-needs/karenni-christian-refugees-hiding-in-thailand-need-your-help-today/, accessed January 17, 2022.

[802] See, for example, K.K. Yeo and Gene L. Green, eds. *Theologies of Land: Contested Land, Spatial Justice, and Identity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021).

[803] Giulia Garbagni and Matthew J. Walton, "Imagining Kawhtoolei: Strategies of Petition for Karen Statehood in Burma in the First Half of the 20th Century," *Nation and Nationalism* (2020): 1:16.

[804] Grassroots Christians, interviewed by the author, July and August 2020.

of eco-justice and peace. Salvation should be reconsidered as a holistic dimension of God-human reconciliation and human-nature reconciliation (Rom. 8:19-22; Col. 1:20).

In fact, the ethnic cultural practice of primal religion could contribute to grassroots Asian public theology of eco-healing. As noted in chapter three, the ethnic ritual practice of spirit-worship is an eco-ethical religion in terms of its veneration of creation. Since nature-spirits are powerful in their jurisdiction, they do not tolerate human trespass.[805] Neither shooting animals nor cutting trees is permissible in the vicinity. Hunters and farmers must first give an offering to the spirits, asking permission for their undertakings. The failure to appease the spirits brings misfortunate to those who trespass. Even after asking permission from the nature spirits to use natural resources, no one is allowed to take more than necessary. Their belief in the existence of spirits as the guardians of creation could be helpful for their transformative understanding of the purpose of God's creation of humans as the guardians of creation not as the destroyers. If we approach the primal religion from the perspective of appreciation and appropriation, there is hope for grassroots Asian public theology of eco-healing and reconciliation.[806] Primal religion plays a role in grassroots Asian public theology of eco-reconciliation, whereas Christianity's dialogue with Buddhism plays a role in ethnic reconciliation.

While the ethnic minorities' resistance to Burmanization is necessary to defend their ethnic identity and to preserve their ethnic lands, their reaction may in turn arise as anti-Bamar movement. One grassroots pastor whose son-in-law, a Bamar Buddhist, said:

> It is true that ethnic Christians experience Buddhist nationalism, religious discrimination, and Bamar-ness privileges. Our experiences of religious discrimination are evident when applying for some civil jobs in society, for some church building projects, and for erecting some crosses at the tops of some

[805] Melford E. Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism* (Eaglewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1967), 42.
[806] Enn, *Nat-Worship,* 66-71,

> mountains. Privileges always go to some Buddhists. However, in my view, a few Bamar also face some discrimination in our region. Not all Christians welcome them into their communities as neighbors. Some of them even don't want to speak Burmese language because they hate both Bamar and Bamar militaries.[807]

Having experienced decades of the Bamar ethnic privileges, some grassroots Christians see Bamar as enemies rather than as neighbors. As noted in chapter three, some Kachin Christians expressed, "they would not go to heaven if there are Bamar to be." How should Christians witness the gospel of love and reconciliation? I will now turn to a theological reconstruction of ethnic identity, cultural otherness, and reconciliation.

## 5.7 Beyond the Politics of Federalism: Theological and Moral Imagination of Ethnic Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation

In their federal imagination, the ethnic Christians adopt both the primordialist approach and constructionist approach.[808] The primordialist approach is stronger in their ethnic identity imagination in the context of Buddhist nationalism. They imagine their in-group ethnic identity in terms of their ancestral histories, memories, territories, customs, languages, and religion.[809] The constructionist approach is also vital for rediscovering their pre-Burmanizing independent community and for restoring federalism and minority rights. While I am convinced that ethnic federalism is a political solution to the current problem of Burmanization and Buddhist religious nationalism, I observe that the politics of federalism does not completely solve a theological issue of identity and otherness.

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[807] A pastor, interviewed by the author, July 20, 2021.

[808] See, for the comprehensive study of primordialist and constructionist approaches to ethnicity, John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, eds, *Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 8 Edward Shils, "Primordial, Persona, Sacred and Civil Ties," *British Journal of Sociology,* 8, no. 2. (June 1957): 130-145

[809] Along the same line of thought, see Geertz, "Primordial Ties," 43-44.

While the Bamar majority Buddhist-ethnic minority Christian conflict is a major issue, one cannot ignore the internal conflict among ethnic minority groups. Even after federalism, some dominant ethnic groups would dominate other smaller in-groups. Among the Kachin groups, Jingpaw would dominate Rawang, Zaiwa, Lungwo, Lachit, and Lisu. The same would be true to Chin. Some dominant Chin ethnic groups, such as Hakha, Falam, Zomi would impose their languages on some people in Mindat, Kanpetlet, Paletwa, and Matupi. One church elder in the southern Chin said, "Our brothers and sisters in the northern Chin want us to learn their languages, but they don't learn our languages."[810] The challenge facing among the Chin is that they do not have a common dialect. Kachin and Karen have some advantages of having some common dialects.

There is no easy solution to the problem of internal conflict among minority groups. One potential response to this internal conflict is to recognize each in-group's distinctiveness and to learn one's dialects. At one point, we may achieve an internal ethnic reconciliation through learning one's dialects. On a personal note, I speak most of the Chin dialects and I can cross the linguistic barriers among the Chin. Even after the vision of federalism, Christians and Buddhists would remain in the same nation, sharing public space as pilgrims and citizens. My hope is to imagine how one can coexist in harmony not only with in-group ethnic Christians, but also with out-group ethnic Buddhists.[811] We need to imagine a public theology that addresses a theological question of how interethnic and intra-ethnic coexistence should be theoretically and practically imagined and achieved.

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[810] The grassroots church elder, interviewed by the author, July 22, 2020.

[811] For instance, Eugene Weiner, "Coexistence Work: A New Profession," in *The Handbook of Interethnic Coexistence,* ed. Eugene Weiner, 13-26 (New York: Continuum, 1998). Alexander Horstmann, "Coexistence in Myanmar: Challenges and Prospects," in *Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Myanmar: Contested Identities,* eds, Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Hans-Peter Grosshans and Madlen Krueger*,* 122-138. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022). I am thankful to Prof. Horstmann for his comments on my talk at University of Hamburg in Germany about ethnic conflict and harmonious coexistence, July 5, 2021.

### 5.7.1 Relational Identity and Reconciliation: Seeking Justice and Embracing the Other

Scholars and practitioners who focus on the social vision of reconciliation suggests that establishing shared identity is an important part of any process of justice-seeking, peacebuilding, and reconciliation-dreaming. For instance, Robert Schreiter said:

> Building toward social reconciliation is a long and complex process, requiring attention to many different aspects and issues. One of the most important issues is establishing a shared identity between the two aggrieved or separated parties. This is of course complex undertaking, involving an analysis of current identity—both as they are narrated within a community and to those outside the community—as well as adjudicating the different versions of history maintained by each party. Moreover, the purpose of a shared identity is not just to create a common past, but also to provide a platform for a different future.[812]

Although we are ethically and religiously different from one another, we still share a relational identity grounded in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). Christians and Buddhists bear the same image of God. Christians know that they bear God's image, but Buddhists have God's image without knowing it.[813] In his book *The Social God and the Relational Self*, Stanley Grenz, shows how our relational identity is rooted in the relational identity of God.[814] According to Grenz, God is not an enclosed deity, but a relational deity. God's relational identity is demonstrated through Jesus's incarnational relationship with the world and ultimately through the cross of reconciliation. God is relational by nature and His

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[812] Robert J. Schreiter, "Establishing a Shared Identity: The Role of the Healing of Memories and of Narrative," in *Peace and Reconciliation: In Search of Shared Identity*, co-edited by Sebastian Kim, Pauline Kollontai, and Greg Hoyland, 7-20 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008

[813] Karl Barth is known for saying the smaller/internal Christian community, which knows Christ as its Lord and the larger/external community that has Christ without knowing Him. See Barth, *Community, Church, and State*, 149-189. See also Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 71-75.

[814] Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of Imago Dei* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 162-82.

atoning act of reconciliation is relational. If we embody the relational God and His relational aspect of reconciliation, we should extend our friendship to out-groups.[815]

As noted earlier, the language of human rights is the language of ethnic people demanding something for themselves. The ethnic rights are exclusively for the ethnic in-groups. It has almost nothing to do with out-groups. While this is necessary in the context where the ethnic minority rights are politically deprived, Christians should not forget a theological concept of relational identity. Since their identity is relational, it is important to embrace the other while seeking justice. Volf's work is helpful for this vision. While believing that theology has something to say about "social arrangements" for building a just society, Volf believes that the role of theologian is to ask, "what kind of selves we need to be in order to live in harmony with other."[816] Volf does not think that "Christian faith has no bearing on social arrangements."[817] While the concept of "social arrangements," resonates with a politician vision of social arrangement for federalism, Volf does push a question: "What kind of the selves we need to be in order to live in harmony with other."

Volf argues that the cross of Christ plays a central role in shaping the way Christians relate to the other. He said, "God's reception of hostile humanity into divine community should be a model for how human beings should relate to the other."[818] The cross of Christ is not only its public witness to Christ's solidarity with the victims, but also the fact that He gave up His life for His enemies that they too can be reconciled to God (Rom. 5:8-10; 2 Cor. 5:18-20).[819] Volf's vision of the cross of reconciliation resonates with some

[815] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 201-209. Volf, "The Trinity is Our Social Program," 403-43.
[816] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 9-10.
[817] Ibid., 10.,
[818] Ibid., 98.,
[819] Ibid., 11-15.

grassroots Christians' central understanding of the cross. But there is the distinction between Volf's vision of embrace and grassroots ethnic Christians' vision of the cross. Many grassroots Christians focus mainly on a vertical aspect of reconciliation between God and sinners and see the cross of Christ as the model for their spirituality. Some of them read 1Peter. 2:21 as a prime text for their spiritual embodiment of the suffering Christ as a model for their experiences of suffering and spiritual growth in Christ. They said, "suffering brings our spiritual faith closer to Christ."[820] The relationship between suffering, spirituality, and cross-centered salvation is evident in grassroots Christian faith.

Unlike some grassroots Christians who focus on the spirituality of the cross, Volf seeks to balance a vertical and horizonal or social aspect of reconciliation from the moral perspective of the cross. Using embrace as a metaphor of reconciliation, he argues that embrace has to be initiated by the victims in their moral relation to perpetrators. Volf's approach to embrace is set in the context of the victim-perpetrator relationship. In some contexts, the victims might represent the majority groups. However, my approach to embrace is set in the context of the ethnic minority-majority relationships. Because of that specific context, I approach the spiritual and moral practice of embrace from a slightly different view. Volf insists that Christians should take the initiative of embrace. This might be relevant to the context where Christianity is a majority religion. It is challenging in the context where Christianity is a minority religion. The Bamars have been tightly assimilating the minority cultures to their dominant cultures. Volf calls this a "bear-hug."[821]

In the situation where the "bear-hug" is practiced in the name of cultural assimilation and national integration by the majority group, the minority group's strong

[820] Grassroots Christians, interviewed by the author, July 19-August 20, 2020.
[821] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 46.,

resistance to the dominant group is imperative. Since the root of ethnic conflict emerges from the majority group's failure to embrace the ethnic minority's identity and otherness, I will suggest that embrace should also be initiated by the ethnic majority group. In order for this to happen, Christians must resist the dominant group by opening their marginal hospitable hands and hearts for the other to be embraced.[822] This way of mutual embrace is more feasible in Myanmar. Central to Volf's important thesis is that justice cannot be done without mutual embrace. In light of the cross, restoration of minority rights is not the end goal, but Christians ought to make a space for out-groups to come in. Volf said:

> To agree on justice in conflict situations you must want more than justice; you must want embrace. There can be no justice without the will to embrace. It is, however, equally true that there can be no genuine and lasting embrace without justice.[823]

Volf's concern is relational justice, that is, the justice we seek must be mutually beneficial for two groups so that reconciliation can be achieved. Love is the motivating power of God's demonstration of His relationality within an internal communion of the Trinity and within an external communion with humanity. As the follower of Christ, we should not enclose our ethnic community. Christ-like love does not seek enemies but extends a wide network of social friendship.[824] I will look at how the Christian doctrine of kenosis and a Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* serve as interreligious sources for relational justice and reconciliation. Masao Abe developed interreligious relationship between the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness and the Christian doctrine of kenosis. He confessed, "The Epistle to

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[822] I discussed with Miroslav Volf about this issue in Denver, Colorado, November 17, 2018.

[823] Ibid., 202.,

[824] See Dana L. Robert, *Faithful Friendships: Embracing Diversity in Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), 164-187. Although Robert writes about Christian friendship among Christians, its implications are relevant to Christian friendship with people of other religions beyond the church.

the Philippians (Phil. 2:6-11) is for me one of the most impressive passages in the Bible. There are two reasons for my appreciation of this Pauline passage."[825]

One is the abnegation of Christ, and the other is His self-giving love. Abnegation and self-giving love are interlaced. By self-giving love, God reaches out to sinful humanity. By abnegating, God makes a space in Himself for the other to be reconciled.[826] According to Abe, the Christian doctrine of kenosis does not compete against, but completes a Buddhist doctrine of *anatta*. *Anatta* is an opposite of *atta*. *Atta* means egocentrism, while *anatta* means non-egocentrism. *Anatta* plays a hospitable role in the interethnic relationship between the self and the other. *Anatta* is "boundless openness" for the other.[827] The interreligious ethics of kenosis or *anatta* teach us two things. First, one needs to recognize the cultural otherness of the ethnic other by rejecting the egocentrism of the self. Second, one needs to make an open and hospitable space for the ethnic other to come into our communities. Christians and Buddhists should, therefore, use kenosis and *anatta* as interreligious sources for embodying their relational or shared identity that transcends the exclusive nature of the Bamar Buddhist-Christian conflict.

### 5.7.2 Mutual Recognition and Otherness: Maintaining Identity Boundaries

Ethnic and religious diversity can enrich us or divide us. Therefore, the way how we engage the other, even within in-groups, and recognize their diversity is important. Theologians of religions focus on a one-sided question of how Christians should approach

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[825] Masao Abe, "Kenosis and Emptiness," in *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity,* ed. Roger Corless and Paul F. Knitter, 5-25 (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1990). *Anatta* in Theravada Buddhism is *Sunyata* in Zen Buddhism.

[826] Ibid., 12-15.

[827] Ibid., 20-22. For a doctrine of Trinitarian embrace, see Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 98-99.

religious other.[828] Such an approach is not adequate in Asia where Christians and religious other build mutual misperception of their identity. We should address three questions for reconstructing ethnic and religious identity. Three questions go like this: (1) How do Buddhists perceive Christians? (2) How do Christians perceive Buddhists? (3) How should they rightly reconsider their identity? As noted, Buddhist nationalists see Christians as unauthentic nationals due to their embrace of Christianity. Buddhists see themselves as authentic nationals due to their embrace of Buddhism. Some grassroots Christians distinguish their identity as the holy-chosen people of God and demonize Buddhists.[829]

First, one way to solve their mutual misperception is that one should challenge the idea that Buddhism is not a native religion of Myanmar. Like Christianity, Buddhism has been adopted from a foreign nation. As a "missionary religion," in the word of Stephen Neill, Buddhism,[830] has been adopted in Myanmar from India since the 11st century.[831] As a missionary religion, Christianity is not a divinizing religion either. It has gone through Jewish-Hellenistic cultures, and it must engage with local cultures for localizing the intercultural nature of Christianity.[832] Since majority Buddhism is older than minority Christianity in terms of its chronological arrival in Myanmar and that Buddhism shapes Burmese cultures, Christianity is to be built on Buddhist cultures by engaging with them.[833] I will return to this momentarily when I address reciprocal hospitality. Here I would first like to demonstrate why and how a mutual recognition is necessary.

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[828] Paul F. Knitter, *An Introduction to Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002).
[829] Grassroots Christian communities, interviewed by the author, July 19-August 20, 2020.
[830] Stephen Neil, *A History of Christian Missions* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 14.
[831] Victoria Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Vol. 1, Integration on the Mainland: Southeast Asia in Global Context, 800-1380* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 115-116.
[832] Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christ History.* 16-25.
[833] See, for instance, Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar*.

Second, Christians and Buddhists should recognize their distinctive human identity and missionary religious history rather than demonizing each other (Christian's view of Buddhist) and discriminating against the other (Buddhist's view of Christian). In Buddhism, "the recognition of humanity is expressed in teachings of the preciousness of a human birth and teachings of human enlightenment."[834] According to Buddhism, no one is born to be superior to the other. And there is no outsider savior. Unlike Hinduism, Buddhism teaches that the self's salvation or enlightenment is attainable through the self's effort of the eightfold path, not through the mediation of others. Buddhist's right recognition of human distinctive identity is not based one's status, but based on humanity.[835] In fact, ethnic groups' freedom of embracing Christianity as their religion aligns with Buddhist teaching of individual freedom. Moreover, Buddhist doctrine of compassion is crucial for extending loving-kindness in their relationship with others.

In Christianity, humanity is unique because it bears God's image (Gen. 1:27). This requires for discovering human identity and its cultural diversity through the lens of Genesis narrative (Gen. 1) and Pentecost narrative (Acts 2:1-13).[836] In his book *The Beginning of Difference*,[837] Theodore Hiebert argues that the Genesis narrative enables us to see God as the creator of humanity, while Pentecost narrative describes God's gracious recognition of human diversity as His gift to the world. Hiebert writes:

> Claiming that difference is God's decision for the world and claiming that all its people have God-given spaces in that world is the theological foundation of

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[834] King, "Buddhism and Human Rights," 107.

[835] Ibid.

[836] Amos Yong, "Toward A Trinitarian Theology of Religions: A Pentecostal-Evangelical and Missiological Elaboration," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 40, no. 4. (October 2016): 294-306, here 299-300; see also Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, 203-234.

[837] Theodore Hiebert, *The Beginning of Difference: Discovering Identity in God's World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019), xxiii-xxvi; 109-12.

> difference in the book of Genesis and in the account of Pentecost that draws from it.[838]

If we read the New Testament through the lens of ethnic discourse, we see the importance of recognizing ethnic identity and difference in antiquity and today. Eric Barreto said:

> At core, the author of Luke-Acts views our differences as a gift from God to be treasured, not a difficult to be overcome. Ethnic and racial differences are not the problem. Prejudice and racism inject our differences with the sinful notion that our differences are merely cultural cues for determining who is in and who is out, rather than emblems of God's gift of diversity.[839]

What have Jesus's disciples in antiquity to do with the followers of Christ in Myanmar's religious and ethnic diversity today? What does it mean that the story of God's interaction with God's chosen people of Chin, Karen, and Kachin extends to the rest of out-groups? If diversity is God's gift for the world, then diversity itself is not a problem, but the problem is one's refusal to recognize the cultural otherness of the other. Lalsangkima Pachuau is right when he says, "the recognition of otherness involves accepting and interacting with the other as equal."[840] It is imperative for Buddhists to respect the cultural otherness of the ethnic minority, not as a source for discrimination against them, but as a basis for recognizing their identity marker. A mutual recognition must be held between Buddhists and Christians. If Christians expect Buddhists to recognize their cultures, Christians should also recognize Buddhist cultures. This is one way of embodying Jesus's famous Golden Rule: "in everything, do to others as you would have them do to you" (Matt. 7:12).

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[838] Ibid., 148.

[839] Eric D. Barreto, "Negotiating Difference: Theology and Ethnicity in the Acts of the Apostles,' *Word and World* 31, no. 2. (Spring 2011):129-37, here 131. Eric D. Barreto, *Ethnic Negotiations: The Functions of Race and Ethnicity in Acts 16,* WUNT 294 (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2010),

[840] Lalsangkima Pachuau, *Ethnic Identity and Christianity: A Socio-Historical and Missiological Study of Christianity in Northeast India with Special Reference to Mizoram* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 25.

Third, maintaining ethnic boundaries is another key issue for the ethnic recognition and formation. In his seminal book *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Fredrik Barth challenges the primordial approach, which defines the ethnic group as a possessor of fixed cultural difference in isolation from out-groups. Rather, he reconstructs an ethnic group as a dynamic interaction between in-groups and out-groups. He focuses on the processes involved in the making and maintaining of an ethnic identity.[841] In doing so, Barth emphasizes the need of interaction with the other ethnic groups.[842] He said:

> Ethnic distinctions do not depend on the absence of social interaction and acceptance but are quite to the contrary often the very foundations in which embracing social systems are built. Interaction in such a social systema does not lead to its liquidation through change and acculturation, culture differences can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence.[843]

A reconciling nature of ethnic identity formation occurs when a group comes into social interaction and negotiation with out-groups. One cannot construct an ethnic identity without interaction and negotiation with others who share the same public sphere. Barth makes a famous claim that "it is the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses."[844] Barth's theory is helpful for the ethnic identity formation in Myanmar. A twofold ethic of maintaining ethnic boundaries and of negotiating ethnic differences is necessary. While maintaining ethnic boundaries is a necessary option for preserving one's distinctiveness as identity marker, ethnic Christians should open up for negotiating their ethnic differences with out-group Buddhists. As noted in chapter three, some grassroots ethnic Christians strongly understand their identity as the chosen people.

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[841] Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Oslo: Universitesforlaget, 1969), 9-10.

[842] Ibid., 9-15.

[843] Ibid., 9.

[844] Ibid., 15.

They use 1 Peter 2:9 to justify their self-imagination. What has 1 Peter to do with ethnic minority Christians' theological and moral imagination of their identity?

In her book *Constructing Ethnic Identity in 1 Peter*, Janette Ok observes that Peter's addressee minority Christian communities are like those of some ethnic minority Christians in the dominant cultures today.[845] She said, "while it is impossible to know the precise ethnic-religious makeup of Peter's actual audience, the author gives us some clues to how Peter encouraged his addressee Christians to live as the distinctive followers of Christ."[846] By constructing Christian identity through the use of the elect (1Peter 2:9), Peter helps the persecuted and minority Christians to live distinctively and faithfully in their relationship with God and with people of other faiths who are hostile to them.[847] It is noted that 1 Peter's construction of Christian identity as ethnic identity theologically and morally shapes what minority Christian community in Myanmar looks like and how its ethnic and religious members relate to one another as in-groups and those who are out-group community.

### 5.7.3 Reciprocal Hospitality: Reaching Out and Receiving In

As noted in chapter three, grassroots Christians read Matt. 28:19-20 as a prime text for their practice of mission as a one-sided move to Buddhists. I wish to suggest that we need to rethink of mission as a two-way movement that demands the reciprocal hospitality of reaching out to the other and receiving them in our community.[848] Especially the Gospel of Luke provides the Biblical model for the mission of hospitality. In his book *The*

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[845] Ok, *Constructing Ethnic Identity in 1 Peter*, 10-11.
[846] Ibid.
[847] Ibid.
[848] I first presented this topic at the American Society of Missiology at Saint Mary's College, University of Notre Dame, June 19, 2019. See David Thang Moe, "Reaching Out and Receiving In: Reading the Lukan Banquet (Luke 14:12-24) as a Trinitarian Theological Paradigm of Hospitality in a World of Hostility, in *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 28, no. 1. (March 2019): 46-70.

*Hospitality of God*, Brendan Byre shows how Luke portrays the life and ministry of Jesus as a divine visitation, seeking and offering hospitality.[849] In looking at the reciprocal hospitality as a social practice of ethnic reconciliation in the context of ethnic diversity, we need to see the metaphorical role of Jesus as a guest and as a host.[850]

Luke 10:38 describes the role of Jesus Christ as a guest. Jesus Christ receives hospitality from Martha. When it comes to the comparison between Martha and Mary, Mary seems to be more popular. But we cannot ignore Martha's role in hosting Jesus. Martha's practice of hospitality for Jesus echoes some grassroots ethnic women's social practices of hospitality. Some grassroots women embody Martha's paradigm of hospitality. Women's practices of hospitality are culturally common among the Chin, Kachin, and Karen Christians.[851] Although their leadership roles at church are not widely seen due to male's dominant cultures, we should recognize their generous participations in God's mission of hospitality. As noted in chapter three, grassroots Christians witness their faith in multiple forms—from preaching at the pulpits through hosting people at houses and the IDP camps to preaching the gospel and witnessing social justice in public and political life.

First, in reaching out to Buddhists, ethnic Christians are like the guests. As the guests, our task is to respect the hosting Buddhist cultures. Our task is not merely to give Buddhists the gospel, but also to receive cultural insights from them. A one-way mission is not acceptable. A better option is for a two-way mission of hospitality by exchanging insights. Buddhists are not to be understood as the mere objects for conversion, but they are to be recognized as neighbors to whom a reciprocal hospitality must be given and

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[849] See Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel*, rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 112-22.

[850] See Yong, *Hospitality and the Other*, 129-160.

[851] Grassroots ethnic Christian women, interviewed by the author, July-August 2020.

received. As we reach out to them, Christians must recognize the prevenient presence of the Holy Spirit among them as hidden God (Acts 17:23). At Pentecost, the Spirit speaks to people in their humanly tongues, rather than in heavenly language (2:13). If so, God may speak to Buddhists in their cultures. Acknowledging the Spirit's prevenient presence among Buddhists, Christian should witness the gospel by crossing Buddhist cultures.

Second, in receiving out-groups in our community, Christians are like the hosts. As the hosts, our task is to make a hospitable space for guests. Their role as the hosts seems to be more potential in the ethnic hill regions where some Bamar Buddhists are minority. Some ethnic Christians complaint that we have extended an "excessive hospitality" to Bamar Buddhists in our regions. They asked, "How far should the ethnic Christians practice hospitality for them?"[852] This is understandable in the context where ethnic Christians are marginalized. As the prophetic and apostolic followers of Christ, we should open our hospitable hearts and homes for Buddhists without ceasing to resist Buddhist nationalism. According to Christine Pohl, extending hospitality to the other, including strangers, defines the identity of Christians as the followers of Christ. She said:

> In His life on earth, Jesus, Jesus experienced the vulnerability of the homeless infant, the child refugee, the adult with no place to lay His head, the despised convict. This intermingling of guest and host roles in the person of Jesus is part of what makes the story of hospitality so compelling for Christians. Jesus welcomes and needs welcome; Jesus requires that followers depend on and provides hospitality. The practice of Christian hospitality is always located within the larger picture of Jesus's sacrificial welcome to all who come to Him.[853]

[852] A Christian, interviewed by the author, November 26, 2021.

[853] Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 17.

It is challenging to practice hospitality from the perspectives of marginality. Since hospitality is not only the social metaphor of God's salvation, but also a Christian virtue ethic, then it is imperative for Christians to extend their public hospitality to Buddhists.[854]

Third, what might be the result of reciprocal hospitality? The result of a reciprocal hospitality is mutual transformation and enrichment. Acts 10:10-16 describes the story of a mutual transformation or conversion between Peter and Cornelius through the hospitable interaction with each other. Peter came to know Jesus in a transformative way and Cornelius came to know Jesus in a new way (Acts 10:10-16). The Holy Spirit plays a key role in transforming their lives.[855] If the Holy Spirit is still at work in our pluralistic world, it is possible that the identity of the self could be transformed and enriched through a hospitable interaction with the other. More importantly, conversion is not just an event, but an ongoing process that could happen in our hospitable interaction with the religious and ethnic other. In his book *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, Darrell Guder notes:

> The Holy Spirit began the conversion of the church at Pentecost and has continued that conversion through the pilgrimage of God's people from the first century up to now. The conversion of the church will be the continuing work of God's Spirit until God completes the good work begun in Jesus Christ.[856]

It might be right to define and perform the mission of God as what I call "a hospitable conversation and as an ongoing conversion." By a hospitable conversation, I do not just mean an academic interreligious dialogue, sharing philosophical doctrines, but a hospitable

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[854] For a cross-centered theology of the hospitality, see Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 235-255. See also Letty M. Russell, *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

[855] See, for instance, van Thanh Nguyen, *Peter and Cornelius: The Story of Conversion and Mission* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 1-12. See also Craig S. Keener, *ACTS: An Exegetical Commentary—Introduction 3:1-14:28*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 1762-1774.

[856] Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 206.

way of conversation at the grassroots levels, sharing everyday experiences of God. Such a conversation leads to a mutual conversion and intercultural enrichment. It is noted that interculturalism and multiculturalism are not identical, but inseparable. While multiculturalism tends to focus on recognizing the descriptive nature of cultural diversity, interculturalism focuses on the prescriptive nature of integrating cultural diversity.[857] In looking at multiculturalism as a source for intercultural theology, Mark Cartledge and David Cheetham, in their co-edited book *Intercultural Theology*, explain "the word 'inter,' meaning 'between' or among or 'across,' refers to the awareness of and engagement with different expressions of theology as they exist between different cultures."[858] An intercultural nature of public theology of religions demands a hospitable engagement.[859]

Finally, a reciprocal hospitality plays a key role in co-building a new nation of Myanmar, a nation that must go beyond Buddhist nationalism. Nation-building is not just the duty of politicians, but it is also the public vocation of non-politicians, including prophetic, priestly, and apostolic Christians. Christians are called to "seek the welfare of the city" as responsible benefactors and citizens (Jer. 29:7; 1 Peter 1-2:11ff).[860] In co-building a new nation based on multiculturalism, it is imperative for Christians to engage the ethnic other constructively and compassionately and embrace their ethnic and religious otherness as the strength for the social vision of harmonious coexistence without losing their Christian distinctive identity as the followers of Christ in society.

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[857] Geoffrey Brahm Levey, "Interculturalism vs. Multiculturalism: A Distinction Without Difference? *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 33, no. 2 (April 2012): 217-24, here 217.

[858] Mark J. Cartledge and David Cheetham*, Intercultural Theology: Approaches and Themes* (London: SCM Press, 2011), 2.

[859] See Henning Wrogemann, *Intercultural Hermeneutics*, trans. Karl E. Bohmer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 391-296. Sebastian Kim and Kirsteen Kim, *Christianity as a World Religion: An Introduction,* 2nd ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 267-287.

[860] Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

## 5.8 Summary

In this chapter we have explored the relationship between religion, resistance, and reconciliation. First, we have begun by discerning how a paradoxical approach to religion (Buddhism) might be a potential solution to the problem of Buddhist nationalism. Built on this approach, I have demonstrated how the dialogical, defensive, and relational approaches are helpful for the ethnic Christians' practices of resistance to Buddhist nationalism and ethnic injustice. Second, using the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and (Romans 13:1-7) as biblical resources, I have reflected on the interreligious dimensions of people's diverse forms of public and private resistance to the political powers. I also have shown how the rise of the coup has created an unexpected opportunity for the ethnic and religious reconciliation among the non-state people on the grassroots grounds.

Finally, I have examined some goals of resistance to the political powers. A political freedom from the coup is a common goal for both ethnic majority and minority groups. Yet the ethnic minority groups have understandably an additional goal, that is, freedom from Bamar-ethnocentrism. Federalism serves as a potential source for solving an ethnic conflict. While federalism is a potential source for solving the politics of ethnic conflict, I also have argued that we need to go beyond the political vision of federalism by exploring a theological and moral vision of ethnic identity, otherness, and reconciliation. I have concluded this chapter by suggesting why and how the theological and moral reflections on the concepts of relational identity, mutual recognition of each's cultural otherness, and reciprocal hospitality are important for a harmonious coexistence.

# 6. CONCLUSION

This study is about the invitation for rethinking Asian public theology. With that sentence I first invited us to rethink the current state of Asian theology. While Asian public theology has several strengths and its tendency is toward engaging with people of other religions and academic Christians. I have observed that it does not sufficiently engage with grassroots Christian voices. Asian public theology that emerges from engaging with other religions and academicians does not sufficiently meet the needs of the majority grassroots Christian communities. In order to meet their needs, I have suggested that we should approach Asian public theology from the views of the grassroots Christians who embody their faith in multiple ways. There is an embodied public theology in the life of the church.

My invitation is to do grassroots Asian public theology with the grassroots Christian communities as dialogue partners rather than doing public theology on their behalf. It is important to listen to and to recognize their lived practices as the primary sources for creating grassroots Asian public theology. Doing theology is not a dichotomic work, but a dialogical work between the grassroots Christians and academic Christians by exchanging their diverse voices and experiences. Doing grassroots Asian public theology in this nuanced way enables us to realize that all Christians—both grassroots and academic persons—are participating in God's public mission. The result of the academic-grassroots dialogue is clear that we integrate some dichotomies between a vertical reconciliation and horizontal reconciliation, social justice and social charity, personal sin and structural sin, social ministry of Christ and the cross of Christ, spirituality and social engagement.

Second, I have sought to reveal the grassroots Christians' distinctive contribution to Asian public theology. Asian public theology has been mainly treated as the church's

prophetic and direct engagement in politics for political liberation. This type of theology is popular among more theologically progressive Asian Christian communities. They tend to see the church's direct and prophetic confrontation against politics as the only effective theology in Asia. But if we start public theology from the life and work of the grassroots Christian communities, we will recognize their multiple witnesses in public life more than a prophetic type of witness. As noted in chapter three, grassroots Christians witness their faith not only as the prophetic, but also as the priestly, apostolic, and healing people of God. The significance of such a bottom-up approach is that it focuses on the internal life of the church and then examines how the ecclesial life of worship, prayer, and preaching might shape the church's moral engagement in public life as public preachers, priestly people of spiritual prayers for the nation; apostolic gospelizers of salvation; and charity workers for healing the wounded victims of both political powers and spiritual powers.

Third, although the way we understand public theology may share general commonality, the way we practice that theology might differ one from another depending on the context. We need to consider relevant options. Using the grassroots Christians' multiple witnesses of their faith in the context of political dictatorship as the examples, I have reconsidered the challenge of the publicness of public theology. Public theology is not just about the church's public witness of faith in public life, but it is also about the church's private and hidden witness of faith. This kind of public theology is relevant in the dictatorial context where the public witness of faith is not always possible and noticeable. Faithful witness of Jesus is deeply grounded in both public and hidden forms of witness.

Fourth, I have explored the relationship between a vertical dimension of reconciliation and a horizontal dimension of reconciliation in the context of Buddhist

nationalism and ethnic conflict. In response to Buddhist nationalism, I have suggested the need of an alternative imagination that approaches religion (Buddhism) paradoxically: a moral side of religion and an amoral side of religion. While an amoral side of religion causes conflict and discrimination, a moral side of religion creates conflict transformation and reconciliation. The ethnic minority Christians cannot overcome Buddhist nationalism by themselves. It would be more effective for them to dialogically interact with moral Buddhists who confront Buddhist nationalism. I also have emphasized the idea that a Christian's interaction with non-state Buddhists and their interreligious resistance to the nationalist powers is more effective than the marginal church's confrontation against state.

While the church's direct engagement with politics and the state may be possible in some contexts where Christianity is a majority and powerful religion, in this study, I have argued that such a public engagement is not readily relevant in Myanmar and some Asian contexts where Christianity is a minority religion. A better option is that the church should first engage with non-state people of other religions in the society and then resist political powers. In other words, there is the first need of interreligious solidarity among the non-state people of religions at the grassroots levels before their interreligious resistance to political powers. This kind of interreligious engagement and public witness of the gospel would be more meaningful for the life and work of the church.

Finally, this study finds out that the majority Buddhists' failure to recognize the distinctive otherness of the minority Christians is the root cause of minority-majority conflict. If the healing word of the holistic gospel needs to be heard today in such a context, I have suggested that a public theology must address a threefold aspect of reconciliation: transformative, restorative, and relational reconciliation—all three aspects of reconciliation

are grounded in the life and work of Christ. While a transformative reconciliation tends to focus on a new perception of the religious and ethnic other by crossing their boundaries, restorative reconciliation tends to focus on seeking the restorative justice of the ethnic minorities who are discriminated on the basis of their identity. Restorative justice is not the end goal. There is the need of a relational aspect of reconciliation that demands a mutual embrace and a harmonious coexistence between Buddhists and Christians. A twofold ethic of a mutual recognition of one's ethnic identity and otherness and of making a hospitable space for one another is central for the public vision of ethnic reconciliation in Myanmar.

Yet do we Christians in Myanmar embrace such a theological and moral vision?

## APPENDIX

### Interview questions with the Grassroots Ethnic Christians

**A. Background Questions**

1. Could you introduce yourself, please? (education level, family, and role at church)
2. When and how did you start working as church pastors, elders, music leaders, Sunday school teachers, missionaries, or social charity workers
3. If you are converted from other religious backgrounds, can you tell me about your conversion story and your journey of new faith?

**B. Research Questions**

I. Ecclesiology: What is your understanding of the church?

1. Which of the following are the most defining characteristics of the church?

   (a) The people of God
   (b) The body of Christ
   (c) The followers of Christ
   (d) The temple of the Spirit
   (e) Others (if any)

2. Describe what defines the people of God
3. Describe what defines the body of Christ
4. Describe what defines the body of Christ
5. Describe what defines the temple of the Spirit
6. Describe what makes the church distinctive from other religious communities?
7. What are the main internal tasks of the church?

   (a) How important is worship to you?
   (b) How many times do you hold church worship a week?
   (c) How important is preaching to you?
   (d) What are the main messages of preaching?
   (e) Did anyone ever mention politics at the pulpit? How and why?
   (f) How important is prayer/fasting prayer to your faith?
   (g) How important is holy communion to you?

(h) How important is bible study for the church?

II. Soteriology: What is your understanding of salvation?

(a) The concept of salvation
(b) The scope of salvation
(c) The goal of salvation

1. How important is the death of Christ for salvation?
2. How important is the forgiveness of Christ for sinners?
3. How important is Jesus's ministry of exorcism for salvation?
4. How important is Jesus's solidarity with the oppressed for salvation?
5. How does the gospel of salvation play a role in your faith?

III. What is your understanding of mission?

1. How does your church understand and practice mission?
2. What is the key biblical source for the mission of your church?
3. How is Jesus's last commission important for your church's mission?
4. How do you relate your faith to public life?
5. How does the church preach about the gospel of salvation among other religions?
6. How does the church preach and practice salvation among the poor?
7. How does the church preach the gospel of salvation among ethnic conflicts?
8. Do you experience Buddhist nationalism (*lumyo gyi watha*)?
9. Can you identify some characteristics of Buddhist nationalism?
10. How does your church react to Buddhist nationalism and ethnic conflict?
11. What are some challenges in your reactions to Buddhist nationalism?

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