

Peace Talk as Mission: Protestant Mission and Ethnic Insurgencies in Ethnocratic Buddhist Myanmar Today

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Abstract

One of the longest civil war has been still fighting between minority ethnic insurgents and the Defense Services of the Union of Myanmar today. The present study finds it as a religious conflict between Buddhism and Protestantism. What, then, will be suitable solution to solve this Buddhist-Protestant conflict in Myanmar?

Protestant missionaries christianized the hill dwellers during the colonial period of the nineteenth century. Burmo-centric nationalism and anti-colonialism implies anti-Christianity throughout the independence movement. As a result, Buddhization and Burmanization could be seen accompanied in the social and administrative life in Burmese ethnocracy.

A Buddhist-Christian summit peace talk ought to be there today in the purpose of making a demilitarized state. The peace talk in Myanmar in demand would be called “mission” indeed for peace and justice.

I. Introduction

The purpose of the present study is to analyze the *status quo* of the ethnic conflict in the Union of Myanmar today and its initial relationship with the history of Christian mission in Southeastern Asia. It will further study the socio-religio-political relationship between Protestant minorities and the Burmo-Buddhist-centric *de facto* incumbent Government of

Myanmar. It is also searching for suitable mission possibilities in the Union of Myanmar under the serious militant conflicts. If we are to figure out one of the longest civil wars around the globe today, then it is safe to say that the confrontation between the troops of *Tatmadaw*, the royal army of the 'Burmo-centric' Defense Services of Myanmar, and the minority ethnic armed forces is to be pointed out. It is a never-ending six-decade-long civil war of multiethnic peoples in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar which generally speaking has broken out from the conflict between the armed forces of various ethnic hill peoples who have professed Protestant Christianity and the Burmo-Buddhist *Tatmadaw*, the Defense Services of the Union.¹ Therefore, it is both a socio-political crisis of the Union and can also be regarded as a religious conflict between Buddhism and Protestantism. What, then, will be the most suitable and possible solution for this long existing socio-religio-political crisis the Union of Myanmar today? Who will be able to restore peace and justice in the militarized Republic of the Union of Myanmar today? The SPDC, the military juntas, had failed to do so in the name of State Peace and Development Council throughout their neo-militarization era. Today, the Thein Sein government of Myanmar, the military-backed civilian government, under the title of USDP [Union Solidarity and Development Party] as the ruling party, seems not to be able to restore actual peace and justice. The current series of peace talks imply just an armistice ending with a limited agreement of ceasefire.

Presently, throughout 2011-12, the Myanmar situation is getting worse. The military-backed *Thein Sein* civilian government and the Burmo-centric *Tamataw* troops have been trying to eliminate the ethnic Protestant armed forces, particularly the KIA [Kachin Independence Army]. Their stated reason for trying to eliminate the KIA is that it does not

¹ The term *Tatmadaw* means the Burmese Troops, namely the Defense Services of the Central Government, according to the newly drafted Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (2008). The hill peoples and the dominant Burmans agreed to build "the Union" together in the independent Burma at the famous Panglong Conference in 1947.

represent the whole people of the Kachin ethnic tribes. The present arm-to-arm-fight between the *Tatmataw* and the KIA troops started again recently, after a ceasefire lasting some seventeen years. When the neo-militarization started in September 1988 with the legal title of SLORC [State Law and Order Restoration Council], its first chairperson Gen. Saw Maung proudly proclaimed, “I saved the country!”² after he estimated that more than one million of people have died relating with the ongoing civil war since independence.³ Nevertheless, he was subtly removed in 1992 and succeeded by Gen. Than Shwe, the vice chair at the time. Than Shwe’s first step of strategically dealing with the ethnic armed forces was making a series of ceasefire agreements. The second step he took was changing the name of the military junta from SLORC to SPDC in 1997, seemingly a better purpose for the restoration of peace and justice in the Union. However, his efforts have been futile. With regard to the neo-militarization of Myanmar today, Martin Smith describes:

Burma’s [Myanmar’s] second era of post-colonial government was over, and it had also ended in a military takeover. During a turbulent passage in world history that witnessed both the ending of the Cold War and the dramatic events of China’s Tiananmen Square, Burma’s long-suffering peoples watched expectantly to see what would happen next.⁴

The present paper will attempt to investigate the impacts of the early Protestant mission in Burmo-ethnic nationalism from the colonial period up to today’s socio-religio-political crisis in the ethnocratic Union of Myanmar. By doing so, we would like to argue that only a Union level inter-religious summit peace talk between the Protestant leaders and the Buddhist leaders in Myanmar would make a proper solution for this long and endless ethnic issue. We claim that a peace talk between both religious sides would be the first step for the Christian mission for peace and justice in the Union of Myanmar.

² Martin Smith, *State of Strife: The Dynamics of Ethnic Conflict in Burma*, (Washington: East-West Center Washington, 2007), 38.

³ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

II. The Rise of Protestantism in the Colonial Period and its Impact on Burmo-Centric Nationalism

In order to trace the beginning of the conflict between the ethnic “hill dwellers” and the “low plain dwellers” of Myanmar,⁵ we have to start from its colonial period. The British colonized the land of Myanmar after three Anglo-Burmese Wars (1824-1885) followed by several annexations. The British troops gradually annexed and occupied the hill regions during the late 1880s and early 1890s. They found two kinds of people in the land of Myanmar: hill dwellers and plain dwellers. Then, they established their governance in the well-known ‘divide and rule’ diarchic system, by ruling the plain land directly and the so-called ‘backward’ and ‘least developed’ hilly regions indirectly. The plain land, the more developed region, in which the dominant Burman (ethnically) and Buddhists (religiously) dwell, had been ruled directly by a colonial governor who made Yangon the capital of the state in the name of ‘Ministerial Burma’ a.k.a. ‘Burma Proper’. The British colonialists “replaced the Buddhist *sangha* authority system with their own bureaucratic administration.”⁶ By capturing and removing the Burmese king, the British colonial system immediately “removed the Burman ruling elite from positions of power and influence”.⁷ It was the first impression that stimulated the Burman nationalism against the British colonial rule and their religion, Christianity. In the perspectives of the Burman intellectuals, the British colonialists were eliminating their identity and Buddhist faith. John F. Cady rightly asserts, “The elimination of the royal Court meant for Burmans the sacrifice of their identity as a people

⁵ By hill dwellers, the present study means different minority ethnic peoples of Myanmar, such as Chin, Kachin, Wa, Laho, Karen, Kaya, etc., who dwell in the hilly regions—the highlanders-the hill people; and by low plain dwellers, it means those who dwell in the low plain regions such as the Burman, Arakanese, Mon, etc.—the lowlanders-the plain people.

⁶ David Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in South-East Asia*, (New York & London: Routledge, First Published 1994), 41.

⁷ *Ibid*

and the elimination of any governmental support of customary law and the Buddhist faith.”⁸ The British used the Karen Police Troops to suppress the Burman rebellion. They had recruited the Karen hill tribes who had already been converted to Christianity as their police troops. John Cady correctly comments, “British use of irregular Karen police, Christian-led, in opposition to *pongyi* [Buddhist monk]-led Burman rebels stimulated Karen national consciousness and sowed the seeds of later strife.”⁹

The hill dwellers, unlike the plain dwellers, had been ruled indirectly through their former minor chiefs in the ‘Frontier Areas’ of the British colonial administration.¹⁰ The Protestant missionaries from the West found safe and easy accesses to reach the regions of ‘backward’ hill dwellers through the colonialists’ restoration of pacification, especially in the Chin Hills.¹¹ The Protestant missionaries found the hill peoples, who were non-Buddhists and non-Burman¹², much easier to convert to Christianity. The Western missionaries converted the hill dwellers such as the Karen, Chin, Kachin, Wa, Lahu, Pa-O, Lisu, Akha, and the like who belonged to the ‘Frontier Areas’ of the British colonial administration. The Protestant missionaries were, to be said, successful in their transliteration of the Christian God into the vernacular languages of the hill dwellers in their traditional religious framework of animism. Mission historian Stephen Neill properly describes concerning the response of the different indigenous to the Christian mission in colonial Burma:

Very different was the situation in *Burma*. Here the coming together of a great missionary and an unexpectedly open door produced results far beyond anything that

⁸ John F. Cady, *Thailand, Burma, Laos, & Cambodia*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), 102.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Martin Smith, *State of Strife: The Dynamics of Ethnic Conflict in Burma*, (Washington: East-West Center Washington, 2007), 9.

¹¹ For detailed story of Protestant Christian Mission in colonial time Myanmar, see Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of The Expansion of Christianity Vol. VI: The Great Century North Africa and Asia A.D. 1800-A.D. 1914* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, Third printing, 1973), 225-35. Also, see Maung Shwe Wa, *Burma Baptist Chronicle* (Rangoon: Board of Publications, Burma Baptist Convention, 1963), *passim*.

¹² The term ‘Burman’ is used herewith for description of the dominant ethnic tribe in contrast with other minority ethnic nationalities.

was to be seen elsewhere in this discouraging part of the world. Burma is in the main a Buddhist country, with its own vigorous Buddhist tradition. But it is a land of mountains and valleys, of impenetrable jungles and scattered peoples. At least 6 million – Kachins, Chins, Karens – belong to non-Buddhist peoples, each with its own language and its own animistic tradition. There were more ready than the Buddhists to hear to new tidings from the West.¹³

Why was the Western missionaries' religious message warmly accommodated by those so-called 'backward' and 'wild' hill peoples of Myanmar? What were the socio-political differences between the colonial 'Frontier Areas' and the 'Ministerial Burma' in accepting Christian mission? What was the main reason that the missionaries were more easily and enthusiastically accommodated in the 'Frontier Areas' than the low plain-land 'Ministerial Burma'?

It could be said that the hill people of the 'Frontier Areas' appreciated the systematic and fair administration of the British colonialists. This is partially because the hill dwellers had felt comfortable in a better socio-political pacification under the British rule. After the 'Chin Hills Regulation' had been decreed in the Chin Hills since 1896, for instance, the hill Chin people lived enjoying their life submitting to the lordship of the British government throughout the late nineteenth century under the colonial system. They would love to call the British officials and the Western missionaries as well 'to [tou]' or 'bawi or lal' and the like, meaning "lord" or "master." The British appointed the missionaries as schoolmasters in the colonial education system through this era. The educational opportunity that was given for the first time for the hill dwellers helped create the positive image of Western missionaries as was also seen in the early history of the Protestant Christian mission in Korea.¹⁴

The American Baptist missionaries, soon after introducing the Christian God and

¹³ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., revised for the 2nd edition by Owen Chadwick, reprinted in 1990), 248.

¹⁴ For instance, for the whole Chin Hills, Rev. J. Herbert Cope was appointed as the Honorary Inspector of Schools; thus, and thereby he had been called so far as Cope *topa* meaning master Cope. For detailed story, see Robert G. Johnson, *History of the American Baptist Chin Mission vol. 1* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Self-published, 1988), 455-464.

Protestant faith to the hill peoples in the colonial period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, saw the Karens transliterate their animistic Supreme One 'Y'wa', the Kachins their 'Karai-kasang' and the Chins their 'Pathian' to be their Christian God.¹⁵ As a result of these smooth religious transmissions, the Christianized hill dwellers found themselves in observance of the missionaries' dos and don'ts in the newly introduced religious framework, which were similar to their animistic beliefs. For example, the Chin peoples called the missionaries in the Chin Hills 'topa' or 'bawipa/lalpa' meaning masculine lord or master whose commands or demands in their social and religious life should be obeyed. In the Karen Hill region, the Western missionaries took advantages through the traditional myth of 'Y'wa', the Supreme Father who had been in the celestial places and the 'white younger brother' who will be coming back and bringing them two sacred books: a golden sacred book and a silver literature book. Thus, the Karens cordially received the Christian scripture as the golden sacred book, and the Karen literature as the silver book of the mythical 'white brother'. As a result, the former illiterate Karens discovered a new religion with a new Karen script elaborated by the Western missionaries. The missionaries were regarded as the mythical 'white brothers' with their sacred books. Moreover, they were educated via Western-style schooling supported by the Protestant missions. Thus, the Karens no longer needed to be aware of Burman writing system, as Freston narrates: "The Karen saw education as the means to strengthen their position vis-à-vis the Burmans..."¹⁶ Another mission historian Kenneth Scott Latourette remarks: "Christianity was transforming them [the Karens] and giving them a more prominent place as a people."¹⁷ Moreover, Latourette

¹⁵ For *Pathian* as the transliteration of the Christian God, see Sangkeun, Kim & Cope Suan Pau, *For the Divine Name of the Christian God among the Chin Peoples: Pathian and the Pau Cin Hau Movement in Myanmar* in the Korean Journal of Christian Studies Vol. 63 (Seoul: Korea Association of Christian Studies, 2009), 229-242.

¹⁶ Paul Freston, *Evangelicals and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, First paperback edition, 2004), 97-98.

¹⁷ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of The Expansion of Christianity Vol. VI, The Great Century North*

further asserts “To the Karen the white man meant relief from the oppression of the Burm[an] and he was therefore inclined to adopt the white man’s faith”.¹⁸

Thus, missionary Christianity had already found its home profoundly among the hill tribes of Myanmar during the rise of Burmo-centric nationalism during the 1930s and throughout the independence movement period of the mid-1940s. So then, could one say that it was the Christian mission accompanied with colonialism that made division among the Burmese speaking brethren? “The British policy of recruiting hill peoples into the colonial army and the conversion of many to Christianity” as Martin Smith analyzes, it “only fuelled interethnic suspicions.”¹⁹ It was the colonial policy “to exclude Burmans” from the military services because arming and training Burmans might be dangerous to the British who were concerned with the gradually boiling anticolonial sentiment of nationalist movement. That was why the Burmans were banned from joining the armed forces throughout over sixty years of the colonial period. In 1931, the national census showed that the ethnic majority Burmans were rarely recruited, while hill tribe minority Protestants—the Karen, Kachin, and Chin—represented some 83% of the indigenous portion of the armed forces.²⁰

Meanwhile, while the Protestant hill tribes would regard the American Protestant missionaries as their masters or lords, the white missionaries were just regarded as spies of the British colonialists by Burmo-ethnic the nationalists. Thus, Burmo-centric nationalism

Africa and Asia A.D. 1800-A.D. 1914 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, Third printing, 1973), 231. He refers to Edward Norman Harris’ book *A Star in the East: An Account of American Baptist Missions in the Karens in Burma* (New York, Fleming H. Revell Co., 1920), 223, *passim*.

¹⁸ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of The Expansion of Christianity Vol. VI, The Great Century North Africa and Asia A.D. 1800-A.D. 1914* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, Third printing, 1973), 231. He refers to Randolph L. Howard’s book *Baptists in Burma*, (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 2nd printing 1931), 56, 57.

¹⁹ Martin Smith, *State of Strife: The Dynamics of Ethnic Conflict in Burma* (Washington: East-West Center Washington, 2007), 83.

²⁰ Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma*, (New York: Cornell Univ. Press, First published 2003), 35. For the census table, see p. 36 & see for original table of J .S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India*, (New York Univ. Press: New York: 1956), 184.

and anti-colonialism against the West implied anti-Christian sentiment directly throughout the independence movement. For example, the formation of the YMBA [Young Men Buddhist Association] against the Christian YMCA²¹ was an obvious confrontational tool against Western Christianity through the national movement called ‘Wunthanu-rekhita -ဝံသာနရက္ခိတာ’ meaning “anti-colonial nationalism.” Therefore, the spirit of the independence movement in Burmo-centric nationalism involved the elimination of missionary Christianity. David Brown rightly observes that the rapid growth of Burmo-ethnic nationalism together with the revival of Buddhism:

Buddhism became increasingly the ‘most important element of Burman identity’ and the cultural basis for an emergent Burman ethno-nationalism. Moreover, Buddhism offered a ‘safe’ channel through which the Burman discontent and emergent nationalism could be developed. After 1917, the younger and more radical elements in the YMBA formed the General Council of the Burmese Associations (GCBA) to campaign for greater Burmese representation in the legislative council. At the same time, the GCBA supported the student demonstrations...demanding an expansion of educational opportunities... teaching of the Burman language, culture, and history.²²

As a result, Buddhization and Burmanization could be seen together in the social and administrative life of the Burmo-centric nationalism as Buddhism become the “most important element of Burmese identity”. For instance, Aung San, formerly the secretary of Burma Communist Party, married a Karen Baptist nurse, who was nursing him while hospitalized once during the independence movement, whom he converted in Buddhism. Thus, Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Aung San, the world-famous independence leaders and the Nobel Peace Prize Winner of 1991, proclaims her pro-democracy movement as a non-violence movement based on the *dharma* of Buddhism. U Nu, the first Prime Minister of the independent Union of Burma, proposed Buddhism to be the official state religion and

²¹ David Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in South-East Asia*, (New York & London: Routledge, First Published 1994), 30.

²² *Ibid.*

proudly hosted the Sixth World Buddhist Council Conference during 1954-56. Gen. Ne Win, the former dictator, who was a young Baptist with his Christian name Simeon, got involved in the independence movement from the Christian background initially. He later lived his life in political authority as a so-called devout Buddhist and led the nationalization of the Christian Mission Schools in the name of RC [Revolutionary Council], and thereby expelled the Western missionaries and all the Westerners as well in 1966. Henceforth, English, the Western language, became a despised language belonging to the colonial era, and it was forbidden for official use. All the textbooks and learning systems in schools and universities were totally transformed into the vernacular Burmese. The publishing and importation of Christian scriptures and related religious literature was strictly prohibited as well. Therefore, generally speaking, intellectual nationalists' response to the Christian mission was obviously intersecting with anti-colonial sentiment.

Nevertheless, in spite of socio-religious conflicts during the independence movement period, the famous Panglong Agreement (February, 1947) saw the hill peoples of the 'Frontier Areas' agreed to set up an independent union with the Burman Buddhists, which were the dominant ethnic group of the 'Ministerial Burma'. Why did the minority hill tribes, particularly Chin and Kachin, who had been professing Protestant Christianity, make an agreement to set up an independent union with the majority and dominant Burmo-centric lowlanders, who were mainly Theravada Buddhists? It was due to Aung San, himself a Chin-Burman, born of a Burmanized Chin father, who assured the Chins and the Kachins: "If Burma[n] receive one *Kyat* [the currency], you will also get one *Kyat*."²³ He made a lucrative offer the hill people could not refuse. Furthermore, the rise of nationalism compelled the hill dwellers to set up an independent union together with their neighbors against the colonialists

²³ Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, (London & New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd, 1991), 78.

in the direct purpose of decolonization as Andrew Walls rightly asserts regarding African nations: “The principal motor of the idea of nationality had been opposition to colonialism. In the quest for self-determination, in which people from various ethnic groups combined, nationality provided a platform on which all could unite...”²⁴ We are watching the same uniting power of nationalism in Asia.

When the Chin and Kachin tribes converted to Protestantism in the course of the twentieth century, they discovered their Burman cousins had already championed Buddhism in Theravada form since the eleventh century when they first established Bagan dynasty.²⁵ The Burman had already Burmanized all the text of the Buddhist canon, the Pali Tipitaka. The vernacular language of the Christian hill people, however, had been Romanized by the American Protestant missionaries. Thus, the wider Tibeto-Burmese speaking peoples of Myanmar became different from one another in religious and cultural factors. Buddhism and Christianity eventually divided the country.

We can now see the true picture of the Burmo-centric nationalism, which obviously involved the promotion of Buddhism accompanied with anti-Christian mission sentiment during the time of independence. In spite of this complicated situation, the Chin leaders, led by Vum Ko Hau,²⁶ son of a Protestant pastor and educator who was one of the first converts in the Chin Hills, agreed to set up a union with their traditional cousin the Theravadin Burmans. This brought oppression to their socio-religio-political destiny under the dominant Burmo-

²⁴ Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (New York: Orbis Books, Third printing, May 2005), 105.

²⁵ For the detailed story of Bagan dynasty and the initiation of Buddhism in Theravada form, see Cope Suan Pau Master's thesis, *Christians' Role and the Gospel Message for the Peoples of Myanmar: An Historical and Critical Study on Missionary Enterprises and Christianity in Myanmar*, (Seoul: Yonsei Univ., 2008), 5-10. Also see Luce, *Old Burma-Early Pagan* (Locust Valley, NY: J.J. Augustine Publisher, Vol.1. Text, 1969), 4-23; Also see Harvey, *History of Burma: From the Earliest Times to 10 March 1824 The Beginning of the English Conquest* (London: Frank Cass and Company Ltd., New impression, 1967), 23-29.

²⁶ For the detailed story, see Yawwun, *The Founding Fathers of the Union of Burma* in Vum Ko Hau, *Profile of A Burma Frontier Man*, (Bandung, Indonesia: Self-published 1963), 106-112.

centric Buddhists' rule in the Burmese ethnocracy.²⁷

The *Thakhin* Movement, meaning the movement of lord or master, was the most powerful Burmo-centric nationalistic movement against colonial lordship and mastership. *Thakhin* Aung San was one of the founders of the AFPFL [Anti-Fascist the Peoples' Freedom League] the political party in which he served as president. The *Thakhin* movement offered an effective leadership as the Burmese nationalist movement from its founding in 1944 onwards. It inclusively embraced all kinds of ethnic groups at the beginning. But the mutual distrust among the different ethnic groups made it eventually an exclusive Burman political party. David Brown systematically analyzes the *Thakhin* movement and its religious consequences:

[T]he organization's unifying impact was inhibited, from the outset, by mutual distrust endangered by the Japanese preference for recruiting Burman and the British preference for recruiting hill peoples....This united front soon split, but the AFPFL continued for some time to include affiliated groups representing the ethnic minorities. Accordingly, it adopted a federated structure with branches in most minority areas. Nevertheless, in terms of its decision-making structure, the AFPFL remained a highly centralized body dominated by Burman and by 1948 it had lost most of its non-Burman support.²⁸

These kinds of reasons were obviously the main causes of the ethno-conflicts between the dominant Burman ethnic group and the hill dwellers. This became a religious war as time went by.

III. Ethnic Protestant Insurgencies in Post-colonial Myanmar

Why and how have the Protestant ethnic tribes been insurgent and involved in the civil wars against the central government of the Union of Myanmar? Sheryl Henderson's opinion seems to be the shortest and clearest answer for this question: "Ethnicity, religion,

²⁷ By using the term 'Burmese' herewith, we refer to the whole state, not the ethnic group.

²⁸ David Brown, *The State And Ethnic Politics In Southeast Asia* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 31.

and politics combine to fuel a civil war between the government and minority ethnic groups. Myanmar's military rulers wield Buddhism as a political weapon against predominantly Christian minority ethnic groups, such as the Karen, Chin, and Kachin.”²⁹

We could see obviously the major ethnic insurgents as Protestants, if we take a closer look back to their formation. For example, the KIO [Kachin Independence Organization], the strongest one among the major ethnic insurgents, founded in 1961, was led by three young Zau brothers—Zau Seng, Zau Tu and Zau Dan, who were sons of a Baptist pastor.³⁰ The late Bo Mya, the well-known leader of KNU, founded in 1948, was a Seventh Day Adventist. The United Wa Army, founded in 1989, partially belongs to the Baptist. The hillside of the Union of Myanmar could be seen today as a Baptist kingdom with its more than 4,000 local churches around the area. The American Baptist missionaries, as mentioned earlier, successfully converted the hill tribes of the “Frontier Areas” of British colonial Burma to Protestantism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Thus, the Protestantism was already profoundly rooted among the hill tribes when they agreed to set up an independent union together with the Buddhists lowlanders of Ministerial Burma.

Ethnic insurgencies started soon after the setting up of the independent Union of Burma. Ne Win initiated the militarization that took power and later a military *coup*, and thereby nationalized the Union. Scholars and analysts like David Brown would regard today's ethnic confrontation of the Union of Myanmar “not as negotiable political issue, but rather as clashes between absolutists and irreconcilable ideologies: the imperative state nationalism confronting the imperative of ethnic nationalism”. Brown continues to assert: “Explanation of the rebellions must be sought, therefore, in examination of the processes have which

²⁹ Sheryl Henderson Blunt, *Destroy the Christian Religion: Campaign Against Christians Presses Problems with Refugee Resettlement* (Christianity Today, April, 2007), Vol. 51, No.4.

³⁰ Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London & New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd, 1991), 191.

generated such antithetical perceptions of state and ethnic nationalisms.”³¹

Our argument herewith is that since the status quo has been a non-negotiable political issue, the only way that will reconcile the conflict between different ethnic groups which rises out of bitter grievance is by initiating an interreligious peace talk on the Union level. The socio-political status quo in the Union has so far been in crisis amongst the religious ethnic groups. Therefore, we do believe that a series of peace talks between the Protestant minorities and the Buddhists majority will be effective in relieving the age-long grievance between the ethnic insurgents and the Burmese ethnocracy. There ought to be a proper Buddhist-Christian peace talk today for the purpose not only of making a demilitarized Union of Myanmar but of also offering the necessary and urgent possibility of Christian mission.

Currently, President Thein Sein, with his ruling party, is trying to make an eternal peace, called *htawarah nyeing-gyan-yae* (တဘဝရ ငြိမ်းချမ်းရေး), by organizing series of peace talks with the ethnic insurgents. However, it has led only to an armistice, a temporary ceasefire between the divided armed forces. Since religion was a real factor of the conflict from the beginning, any real peace talks require genuine religious consideration. The Burmese troops have been in offensive stance against the Kachin troops up to the present day. The UN’s call to an end of fighting seems to be a powerless message which just says “[T]o cease offensives and to find a peaceful resolution to the ongoing conflict there”³². How long will the so-called eternal peace talks continue as a mere armistice?

As time goes without any considerable solution for the ethnic conflicts caused by religious division, the suffering of the religious minorities of Myanmar is increasing. The Chin and Karen Diaspora, particularly is a popular tribal movement today seeking asylum

³¹ David Brown, *The State And Ethnic Politics In Southeast Asia* (New York: Routledge: First published 1994), 34.

³² Reuters, Friday, May 18, 2012. *UN chief calls for end the fighting in Myanmar*
<<http://ph.news.yahoo.com/un-chief-calls-end-fighting-myanmar-200733286.html>>

around the world together with other ethnic minorities. Due to the constant ‘ethnocratic agenda’ of the Burmo-centric governments of the Union of Myanmar since independence, ethnic religious minorities have been feeling marginalized and “excluded from power and their languages, religions and cultures subordinated in the portrayal of the nation” in Paul Freston’s words.³³ Freston correctly explains the socio-religio-political crisis of Myanmar:

One of the pillars of the regime is Buddhism. Although officially the state religion only briefly in the early 1960s, it has always been promoted by the state and its importance has increased since the late 1980s when assimilationist policies switched emphasis from ethnicity to religion. State-promoted revivals of Buddhism especially target ethnic minorities, including violent inducements to Burmese Nagas to renounce Christianity.³⁴

The ‘assimilationist policies’ involves promoting “Burman language, Buddhist religion, and administrative centralism” in the militarized Union of Myanmar ever since independence pursued ethnocratic and Buddhist policies.³⁵ Christina Fink’s proper analysis a decade ago is so far still correct for the situation of today’s ethnocratic Buddhist Myanmar:

Burma today is a country divided ethnically, religiously, and politically. While the military regime has insisted that it is working to unify the country, its promotion of the majority Burman population and Buddhism at the expense of other ethnic groups and religions has in many ways exacerbated pre-existing divisions. The regime has sought to bring all the ethnic areas, which make up half the country, under centralized control and to limit the use of ethnic minority languages. Resentment towards these policies, coupled with brutal military campaigns in the area where ethnic nationalist armies operate, drove members of the ethnic minorities to join nationalist armies bent on maintaining territories under their own control”³⁶

These kind of socio-religio-political crises increase the numbers of ethnic refugees outside the territory of Myanmar. *Refugees International* estimates some three million people of Myanmar “have been forced to flee to neighboring countries”.³⁷

³³ Paul Freston, *Evangelicals and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America*, (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), 93.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 94.

³⁵ *Ibid*.

³⁶ Christina Fink, *Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule* (New York: Zed Books, 2001), 13.

³⁷ R. I., *Burma*, published on Refugee International at <<http://www.refintl.org/where-we-work/asia/burma>>

IV. Conclusion

The military-backed new civilian government of Myanmar seems to be so far reluctant to offer a real freedom of religion and equal rights to the minority ethnic groups. Today the minority ethnic groups have been keeping their own ethnic identities as anti-Burmanization. Nowadays, despite this, one sees that the *Thein Sein* government has been trying to achieve peace talks with the insurgents. The present study strongly asserts that only interreligious peace talks between the Protestant ethnic insurgents and the Buddhist Burmese ethnocratic civilian government will properly lead the state to being a peaceful country. To do so, the *Thein Sein* government should call interreligious peace talks at a Union level rather than as an armed forces summit. The Christian mission history of Myanmar urgently shows the necessity of these interreligious peace talks. As the minority ethnic insurgents have demanded, a new twenty-first century Panglong Conference ought to be summoned as soon as possible so that there will be a proper solution for the ongoing ethnic conflict.

To do so, the Christian leaders both in Myanmar and worldwide could set up a summit committee for the purpose of ethnic reconciliation on the national basis first and then ask of the *Thein Sein* Government to organize a Buddhist-Christian peace talks between the Christian community and the State Buddhist Council—the council of *Maha Sangha Nayaka*. In addition, the historical awareness of the Myanmar Christian mission history and the religious causes of the conflict should be known among the members of the Christian world, who should always remember the holy obligation of the Christian mission for peace and justice.

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