

FROM THE PAGODAS TO THE SAVIOR:  
CONTEXTUAL COMMUNICATION OF THE GOSPEL IN THE  
BURMESE BUDDHIST CONTEXT IN YANGON CITY

*Peter Thein Nyunt*

**Abstract**

Mission is at the very heart of the gospel and the life of the Church. The actions of missionary God are manifested and take place in a specific context in which people live. As communication, on the other hand, always happens contextually and of course, mission cannot be understood without it as an indispensable part of God's mission. Hence, if the church is on the move and its mission is to be effective, contextual communication is essential. If God is within the reach of all people, the Omnipresent; when sincerely searching for him, they will definitely find him even in Shwedagon Pagoda.

---

Christian communication is still alien to Burmese Buddhists even though Protestant Christianity has endeavored to preach the gospel to them for over 200 years. Examining Christian communication approaches among these people shows that thousands of missionaries, millions of dollars, and countless translations of texts have been utilized. However, Christianity among these Burmese Buddhists is still regarded as a "potted plant" as it has been successfully transplanted onto the Burmese soil. In addressing the problems confronting Christian communication of the gospel to the Burmese Buddhists in particular, there may be many possible reasons. But one remarkable factor is that the message Christians in Myanmar communicate does not meet the needs of the spiritual quest of Burmese Buddhists. In fact, the spiritual realities of these Burmese Buddhists are persisted tenaciously with the belief in all spiritual beings in the most inclusive form.<sup>1</sup> With the spirit of

---

**Peter Thein Nyunt** (PhD in Missiology, Southeast Asia Institute of Christian Studies, Bangalore, India) was involving at MEGST as the Dean of the Students, Director of Post-graduate Studies and Head of Mission Studies and the Vice-Principal from 2003 to 2016. He is also the founder and director of Rakhine Missions Band for Christ and Community Empowerment Education. He has also been working as the Country Director of Grace Works Myanmar since 2016.

fear, they seek liberation from other dependable beings and practices of folk Buddhism while Buddhism teaches each person's liberation (liberation from cycle of rebirth) depends on their self-own efforts. Conn states, "If we are to reach the world of the twenty-first century, we must reach its cities."<sup>2</sup> In this paper, in brief I will discuss how true liberation can be found only in Christ through contextualizing the gospel to the Burmese folk Buddhists in Yangon city.

Cities are like huge magnets attracting people from villages. "The 21<sup>st</sup> Century opened with at least 460 major cities scattered across the globe, each with more than one million inhabitants."<sup>3</sup> Many of them are in Asia, and Yangon city in Myanmar, the Land of Pagodas, the largest population in the country, is one of them, which constitutes over 14% of the country's population. Compared with the population in 1986, according to the report of Department of Population based on the 2014 census, the growth of population now in Yangon is almost double.<sup>4</sup> Its population is diverse as ethnic groups from different parts of the country migrated. They have created their own communities for networking. Yangon is an urbanized dwelling place with different cultures, languages, and ethnic people groups but the majority are the Burmese Buddhists. And of course, Yangon is regarded as "a Buddhist city and a city of pagoda because of the *Shwedagon* Pagoda, the oldest pagoda in the world located with its height 326 feet on *Singuttara* Hill in Yangon."<sup>5</sup> It is also the symbol of the power of Buddhism; it is the cultural landmark of Yangon and of the whole country.

## Burmese Spiritual Realities

Some say religion in cities carries less weight than in past years. However, others say the pressure of urbanization increases dependence on religion. Insecure city

---

<sup>1</sup> Khin Maung Nyunt, *Myanmar Traditional Monthly Festival* (Yangon: Inwa Publishing House, 2005), 111. See also Simon Pau Khan En, *Nat Worship: A Paradigm for Doing Contextual Theology in Myanmar* (Yangon: Judson Research Center of the Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2012), 65-66.

<sup>2</sup> Harvie M. Conn, "Urban Mission" in *Toward the Twenty-first Century in Christian Mission: Essays on Honor of Gerald H. Anderson*, edited by James M. Phillips and Robert T. Coote (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 333.

<sup>3</sup> Alex G. Smith, "Some Historical Views on Asian Urban Extension: Complexities of Urban and Rural Relationship," edited by Paul. De Neui, *Communicating Christ in Asian Cities: Urban Issues in Buddhist Context* (PA: William Carey Library, 2009), 1.

<sup>4</sup> The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, *The 2014 Myanmar and Housing Census* (Yangon: Department of Population, 2016), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Thanegi, Ma, *Shwedagon Mystique* (Yangon: Asia Publishing House, 2007), 1-9.

people may find security in traditional religion.<sup>6</sup> For the Burmese Buddhists in Yangon city as their typical philosophy “to be Burmese is to be Buddhists”, and they devote themselves to Buddhism. But in their daily life religious practices are different from the teaching of Buddhism. According to its’ teaching, all Buddhists must rely entirely on their self-own efforts, not on any external god, savior, or even Buddha. According to this view, it is ascertained that Buddha’s instruction to his followers to save themselves through their own efforts without failure. Whoever fails is doomed to an aimless existence in Samsara. However, even in its simplicity, humans with their frailty find this a difficult path to follow and they turn to believing in visible and powerful beings.<sup>7</sup> This is known as “*Nat*” worship in Myanmar or folk faith and being practiced directly alongside Buddhism. Moe. M. Nyunt states

Burmese traditional beliefs and experiences were handed down from generation to generation and belief in nats was passed down throughout Myanmar history.... These traditional beliefs were able to survive hindrances and suppression by kings, heads of the government and their supported religions. All the believers’ experiences through history cannot be extricated from their hearts. Long term belief in the existence of spiritual beings is not easily rooted out from the Burmese mind (2010, 38).<sup>8</sup>

Due to amalgamation of animistic practices and authentic teachings of Buddha, idols of the Buddha and other deities flourish; the adherents go behind various gods which are in the forms of idols. The idols are kept, not only in the temples, but also in other places, as well as gods and guardians of the people and places. People not only venerate them, they also worship them. In many instances folk faith is practiced directly alongside Buddhism. Thus, Buddhism in Myanmar is like “a thin veneer of

---

<sup>6</sup> Atul Y. Aghamkar, *Insights Into Openess: Encouraging Urban Mission* (Bangalore, India: SAIACS Press, 2000), 27.

<sup>7</sup> Thanegi, Ma, *Shwedagon Mystique*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Moe Moe Nyunt, *A Pheumatological Response to the Burmese Nat-Worship* (Yagnon: Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2010), 38. Nat is a derivative form a Pali word “Natha” which means a resplendent being worthy of veneration. Generally, the term ‘nat’ refers to any of host of animistic spirits, including the spirits of the ancestors, national heros, and those who died of tragic or violent deaths: former royal figures; spirits in fields, trees and rivers: and regional, territorial overlords. “Nat Worship in Myanmar is the belief in all spiritual beings in the most inclusive form. It also involves finding the way to deal with those spiritual beings.”

philosophy laid over the main structure of animistic belief.”<sup>9</sup> and Burmese Buddhists practice it in their daily life while they worship at the pagoda only once a week. Thus, Simon Pau Enn rightly says that “many Nat images are found on the premises of famous pagodas like *Shwedagon*, *Sule*, and *Shwemawdaw*, with inscriptions on the images which are worshipped by the adherents side-by-side with the images of Buddha.”<sup>10</sup>

### *Spiritual Quests of Burmese Buddhists*

According to Burmese Buddhists, their spiritual realities totally depend on self-reliance in seeking betterment of life after death. Theravada Buddhism claims that “faith is taken without a sense of fear, or a hope for a reward, or status.”<sup>11</sup> But many Burmese Buddhists practice the opposite of this teaching. Fear is one of the primary motivations of such worship. Thus, the Burmese spiritual quest is connected to the belief in all spiritual beings in the most inclusive form. Of course, they seek more than the welfare of intra-mundane life (daily life issues) while their spiritual realities totally depend on self-reliance in seeking betterment of life after death (supra-mundane). In addition, due to their socio-economic situation, for Burmese folk Buddhists meeting the immediate needs in daily lives seems more important than life after death. They need a lord who can solve the problems they are facing in their daily lives. This practice becomes their *mi-yo-pa-la* or *yo-ya* (indigenous religion).<sup>12</sup> Moe. M. Nyunt states

Animistic ideas and belief in the existence of the supernatural power has influenced every phase, every story, every festival, every artistic performance, and the everyday life of the Burmese until now. Every newly constructed building is necessarily preceded by giving homage to nats with an offertory tray. Every dramatic troupe opens each

---

<sup>9</sup> R. C. Temple, *Thirty-Seven Nats: A Phase of Spirit-Worship Prevailing in Burma* (London: W. Griggs, Chromo-Lithographer To the King, 1906), 1. See also Saya Myint, *Nat-Paung-Sone* (Yangon: San Taw Win, n.d), 22-23.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Pau Khan En, *Nat Worship*, 60.

<sup>11</sup> Han Htay and Chit Tin, *How to Live as a Good Buddhist Vol. 1* (Yangon: Department of the Promotion and Propagation of the Sasana, 2002), 17

<sup>12</sup> Saya Myint, *Nat-Paung-Sone* (Yangon: San Taw Win, n.d), 22.

performance with a nat-dance. Most Burmese consult with nats or fortune tellers before they start their business (2010, 38-39).<sup>13</sup>

As noted earlier, fear is dominant in Burmese spirituality. Thus, the Burmese spiritual quest is concerned with daily and personal difficulties where they seek to encounter the power that helps solve their day-to-day problems.<sup>14</sup> Critically speaking, their actual quest is poles apart from their spiritual faith. We now consider how current Burmese popular superstitious beliefs and practices take place, through consulting with *Badin-saya* and performing *Yadayar* in *Shwedagon* pagoda.

### *Badin-Saya and Yadayar*

The term *Badin* in Burmese is used for astrology. For the Burmese, astrology means “not only the methods of tracing the courses of the planets and their influence on morals, but also the ritual by which the planets are appeased and made to withdraw their baneful influence.”<sup>15</sup> The one who predicts the fortune of people through *Badin* is called as a *Badin-saya* (astrologer). Accordingly, he or she advises the people to solve their problems through *Yadayar*. The term *Yadayar* means “a kind of art that applies to the present life”<sup>16</sup> whereas Aung Zaw interprets it as “the Burmese form of voodoo.”<sup>17</sup> Actually, it is the power of prevention of a misfortune and the power which brings good luck prescribed by a *Badin-saya*. It is a belief that *Yadayar* can shield one from misfortunes. Although the practice of *Yadayar* cannot be found in the Buddha’s teaching, most Burmese in Myanmar including country leaders apply it and most performance of *Yadayar* can be found in the *Shwedagon* Pagoda. Many monks and nuns who follow Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar engage in the practice of *Yadayar*. These superstitious practices are still very strong

---

<sup>13</sup> Moe Moe Nyunt, *A Pneumatological Response to the Burmese Nat-Worship* (Yagon: Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2010), 38.

<sup>14</sup> Melford E. Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism* (Philadelphia: A Publication of the Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1978), 94.

<sup>15</sup> Maung Htin Aung, *Folk Elements in Burmese Buddhism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Christian Fink, *Living Silence: Burma under Military Rule* (Bangkok: White House, 2001), 227.

<sup>17</sup> Aung Zaw, “Than Shwe, Voodoo, and Number 11,” in *The Arrawaddy: Covering Burma and Southeast Asia* (Accessed January 1, 2015).

in Myanmar and all these popular spiritual beliefs and practices are directly or indirectly linked with the Burmese folk religion (Nat Worship).

### *Summary*

Common spiritual practices are concerned with their daily and personal difficulties so that they seek to encounter the powerful beings and powers that can protect them from danger and bring blessings to them. They look for a power that can respond to their practical needs. They follow animistic practices in order to have liberation from daily problems while still holding the teaching of the Buddhist scripture. But they realize that following these spiritual quests with their own efforts does not provide a solution. They still need someone who can give ultimate answers to their intra-mundane and supra-mundane lives and set them free from fear.

### **Contextual Approach to the Burmese Buddhists**

In this section, I will be adapting Paul's approaches in the New Testament. For example, the Book of Acts, which depicts some of the early Christian attempts and approaches to reach non-Christians with the good news of Jesus Christ, still serves as a guiding light to evangelize the globe. Even though some of the activities of the early Christians were conditioned by the first century Jewish as well as Greco-Roman cultures, they contain significant principles and practical advices that would be applied in reaching the people of other faiths in any age and place. In Acts 17:22-34 Paul's approach is appropriate to this particular subject. He connected brilliantly with the people from a different culture, showing he understood both Greek society and human needs. He conveyed the message of Jesus Christ to idolaters.

During Paul's time, it is easier to find a god there than a man. According to reasonable estimates there were 30,000 idols in Athens at that time,<sup>18</sup> while the population of the city was less than 10,000.<sup>19</sup> As a servant of Jesus Christ, Paul was emotionally perturbed. However, he did not express his anger towards the idols or those who venerated and worshipped them. On the contrary, as points of contact he

---

<sup>18</sup> A. D. Clarke and B. W. Winter. *One God One Lord in a World of Religious Pluralism* (Cambridge: Tyndale House, 1991), 138.

<sup>19</sup> William J. Larkin, *Acts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 251.

found “the common interests, needs and problems and religious ideas” of Athenians to convey the message of Jesus Christ.<sup>20</sup> He also acknowledged and used Athenian concepts as part of his process of communication when they did not contradict the scriptures.

**God is the Most Powerful:** As mentioned, the Burmese Buddhists are full of fear even though they confess that they are Buddhists. Even their typical philosophy states, “To be Burmese is to be Buddhist.” In this section, there will be an attempt for the Burmese folk Buddhists to understand how the beliefs in the spirits help towards an understanding of the existence, nature, and the work of the Spirit. I would select two functions of the Holy Spirit to respond to the Burmese Buddhists. The works of the *Nats* can be analogous to the works of the Holy Spirit, making the work of the Holy Spirit more intelligible to the Christians in Myanmar. By careful investigation of the works of the Holy Spirit in the scripture it is seen in the New Testament that the Spirit enters into the lives of all believers. One function of the Holy Spirit, then, is the indwelling or possession of the believers’ lives.<sup>21</sup> One of Paul’s metaphors to express the believers’ relationship with the Holy Spirit is that he dwells in the person, as he said: “But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you” (Rom. 8:9). It can be claimed that the Holy Spirit possesses the believers. This concept is very helpful to grasp for the people of Myanmar who have already had the experience in Nat worship. The nature of the function, however, is different. The function of the indwelling Holy Spirit in humans is always transformative and constructive (Gal. 5:22-23) whereas the work of the Nat in possessing humans is sometimes destructive and becomes a cause of misery.

The second function is prophecy. One of the remarkable signs for the inauguration of the Holy Spirit is prophecy, as foretold by the prophet Joel (Acts 2:18). In the Bible, prophecy is fore-telling as well as forth-telling. But it is hard to divide these two functions explicitly. Green spells out the difficulty of division

---

<sup>20</sup> John T. Seamands, *Tell It Well: Communicating the Gospel Across Cultures* (Chennai, India: Mission Educational Books, 2000), 81-85.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Green, *Acts for Today, First Century Christianity for Twentieth Century Christians* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993), 203-220.

It is not easy to be clear precisely what early Christian prophecy was. It could vary from the predictions of a man like Agabus, the mysteries of the Book of Revelation (a remarkable example of early prophecy, see Revelation 1:3), to the induction of a Christian for a particular office (1 Timothy 4:14), testimony to Jesus (Revelation 19:10, and use in evangelism, edification, consolation or teaching (1975, 169-170).<sup>22</sup>

The existence of spirits has been real in the experiences of the Myanmar people for many ages past and thus has become part of their culture. When Christianity came and taught about the Holy Spirit, the people juxtaposed these two beliefs side by side. There are times when the Nats disguise themselves as the Holy Spirit, and John's warning to the churches, to have the wisdom of discernment, is vitally significant (1John 4:1). In the same manner, these two beliefs should not be seen as dualistic but interconnected. The Burmese Buddhists can comprehend the Holy Spirit only with reference to the powerful being, which is deeply grounded in the experience of the people and expressed in terms of indigenous religio-culture.

**God is the Sustainer:** In Acts 17:25 Paul says that God "is not served by human hands, as if He needed anything, because He himself gives all men life and breath and everything else." Epicureans stressed God's self-sufficiency. Paul agreed with them, saying that God is not dependent on the services of human beings.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, he "cannot be manipulated by human cult."<sup>24</sup> Buddhism, whether it is Mahayana or Theravada, has absorbed the local cults, rituals and ceremonies of the countries when it spread and grew throughout the centuries, which served the varied religious needs of the people.<sup>25</sup> As pointed out, the Buddhism in Myanmar is the Theravadic form. In reality it is composed of canonical Buddhism, deity worship, and magical animism. Thus, astrology and worship of Nats are common features of Buddhism in Myanmar. In rituals connected with these aspects of Buddhism, people try to manipulate various gods, demons, and even the Buddha. People supply the needs of the gods by offering flowers, food, fruits, vegetables, and various other

---

<sup>22</sup> Michael Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975), 169-70

<sup>23</sup> W. Neil, *Acts: New Century Bible* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1973), 191.

<sup>24</sup> John B. Polhill, *Acts: The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1992), 373.

<sup>25</sup> H.B.M. Ilangasinha, *Buddhism in Medieval Sri Lanka* (Sri Lanka: South Asia Books, 1992), 183.



things to the idols in Shwedagon pagoda. Such activities are unnecessary for God because He is not dependent on anything that people can offer to him.

God continues to sustain the life that he has created and given to his human creatures. It is absurd, therefore, to suppose that he who sustains life should himself need to be sustained, that he who supplies our need should himself need our supply. Any attempt to tame or domesticate God, to reduce him to the level of a household pet dependent on us for food and shelter, is a ridiculous reversal of roles. We depend on God; he does not depend on us.<sup>26</sup>

Buddhists need to be confronted with the truth that God is not dependent on people but “humanity is wholly dependent on God for everything, from life and breath itself to everything else.”<sup>27</sup> Hence, they should depend on God instead of vainly depending on themselves in their spiritual pursuit.

**God is Liberator:** In a Burmese Buddhist context, it is very important to portray Jesus Christ as Liberator. Christ can be presented as the Liberator from the endless circle of rebirths (samsara) which is caused by the deeds of human beings in their past existence (kamma in Pali). Because life or existence is suffering (dukkha) caused by the ignorance (avijja) and rebellion (moha), human beings are pursuing liberation from existence. It is the stage of liberations is called *Nibbana*, meaning cessation from all existence. To present Jesus Christ as liberator at this level, the Christians in Myanmar have to engage in dialogue with the Buddhists and make an attempt to articulate how Jesus ends those series of existence (samsara) by carrying vicariously all the suffering (dukkha) caused by deeds (kamma) in the series of existence (samsara). Nyunt observes

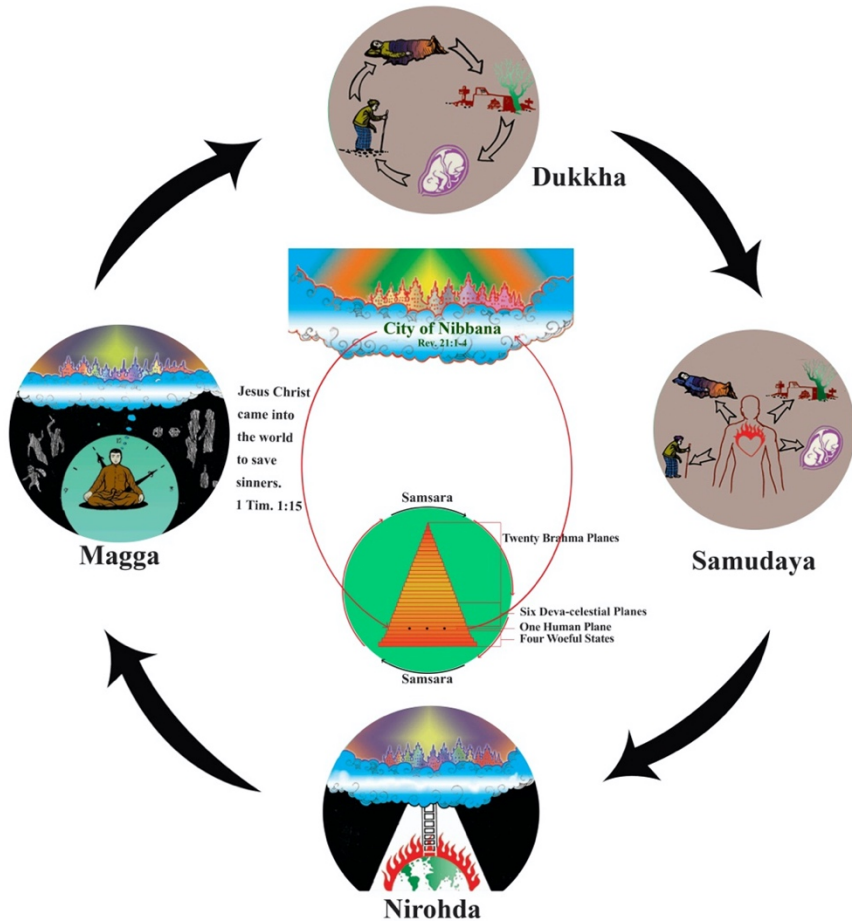
Buddhists are pursuing liberation through self-effort. He or she remains bound to samsara (thirty-one planes of existence: four woeful states, one human plane, six planes of deva and twenty planes of Brahma. It clearly shows that salvation is impossible through human efforts but only through the One who comes from outside of samsara. And those who

---

<sup>26</sup> John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 285.

<sup>27</sup> J.D.G. Dunn, *Acts: Epworth Commentaries* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 1996), 235.

take refuge in Him will definitely have the “nibbana”, the liberation of samsara.<sup>28</sup>



### *Jesus as Liberator from Samsara*

Such an approach can open new ways of introducing Jesus Christ to Burmese Buddhists in which Buddhists can find their liberation and express their faith in Christ. As pointed out, Burmese folk Buddhists are constantly fearful and under

<sup>28</sup> Peter Thein Nyunt, *Missions Amidst Pagodas: Contextual Communication of the Gospel in the Burmese Buddhist Context* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Monographs, 2014), 106.

menace because they are threatened by the *Nats* who haunt every object and every place. Since life in its totality is subject to constant fear and insecurity due to the beliefs in *Nats*, there is no hope in life even though they are propitiating to the *Nat* images in the Shwedagon Pagoda. When Christ is accepted as the Liberator, first of all He liberated people from the power of spiritual beings and He imparted hope to the people in their hopeless lives. When Christ becomes the Liberator of the people, fear and despair will subside at personal level and life will be filled with hope. What Vincent J. Donovan stated as the purpose of his missionary work with the Masai people is true of the situation in Myanmar.

I believe this is what lies at the heart of the urgency and necessity of missionary and evangelization. This is what I and others like me, are trying to do out there. Not to bring salvation and goodness and holiness and grace and God, which were there before we got there. But to bring these people the only thing they did not have before we came: **hope**; a hope imbedded in the meaning of the life and death and resurrection of Christ. It is cleansing and humbling thought to see your whole life and work reduced to being simply a channel of hope, and yourself merely a herald of hope, for those who do not have it.<sup>29</sup>

When Christ becomes the Liberator of the people, fear and despair will subside at a personal and individual level, and life will be filled with hope. When folk Buddhists accept Christ as their Liberator, they will start to study their culture from the perspective of the gospel and transform those cultural evils that dehumanized people. In this sense, Christ becomes the Liberator as cultural evils were challenged and transformed in the light of the gospel.

## Missiological Reflections

God is within the reach of all people; when they sincerely search for him, they will definitely find Him even in Shwedagon Pagoda. God has created human beings with a capacity to search for him. Through general revelation, via created world and human conscience God has left enough evidence about himself for people to search for him (Acts 14: 15-17). What Paul says in Acts 17:27 confirms the fact that the general revelation was given “so that people would seek and perhaps reach out for

---

<sup>29</sup> Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (London: SCMP Press, 1982), 193.

him and find him.”<sup>30</sup> Among Paul’s audience there were people who were depicted as “devout” as well (Acts 17:17). This description is important because “it shows that some were seeking God. In Acts, Luke applies this term to several groups (Acts 13:43, 13:50, 16:14, 17:4, 18:7, 18:13, 19:27), recognizing that just because people were not Christians or Jews did not mean they were uninterested in God.”<sup>31</sup> In fact people were created to seek God. They have an inferred knowledge of God derived from nature (Rom. 1:19-20), and intuitional knowledge of God’s moral law (Rom. 2:14-15). Therefore, they all have a capacity to seek God.

Looking at the pilgrims to Shwedagon Pagoda, they are really seeking someone to help them. Some offer flowers, candles, fruits, vegetables to have good fortune. On the other hand, some are chanting and paying homage to the Pagoda and even some through meditation. Whenever I go to Shwedagon Pagoda, not for practicing idolatry but bringing my students and some foreigners to see the Buddhist spiritual quests in reality, I am motivated how we need to develop an approach to reach these people instead of judging them. It reminds me how Paul approached the Athenians. When he made a formal address to them, he did not scold them as “you foolish idolaters.” If Paul were a Burmese evangelical preacher, it is sure he would speak to them with a negative attitude. But for Paul even though he was emotionally frustrated seeing their religion was filled with idols, he commended their religiosity. For Paul was of course, not endorsing or sanctioning idolatry. On the contrary, he approached them with a positive attitude. Therefore, without condemning their idolatry, he appreciated their religiosity. In this approach, he has a respectful recognition of religious endeavors for it is a cultural compliment to the distinguished audience.<sup>32</sup> In fact, such positive attitude and broadmindedness are vital when encountering Buddhists with the message of Christ so that the Burmese folk Buddhists will have a chance to hear the gospel in their specific context.

---

<sup>30</sup> C.F.H. Henry, “Is it Fair?” in *Through No Fault of Their Own*, (eds) William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 284.

<sup>31</sup> D. Bock. “Athenians Who have Never Heard” in *Through No Fault of Their Own*, (eds) William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 118

<sup>32</sup> Ashin Thittila, *Essential Themes of Buddhist Lectures Given by Ashin Thittila* (Yangon, Myanmar: Department of Religious Affairs, 2000), 213

## Conclusion

Many Christians in Myanmar have introduced the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Burmese Buddhists at an ideological level since they have been influenced by the traditional Western theology for a long time. But in reality these folk Buddhists do not believe in the supernatural at the level of practice. They perceive Burmese spirituality as the high level of spirituality. The most important channel of spiritual connection fits with Burmese spirituality in practicing prayers. Folk religious Burmese usually pray to Buddha statues for their felt-needs and real needs and for their spiritual fulfillment. They also go to *Badin-saya* from whom they receive some kind of aid. Additionally, the present reality of Myanmar forces grassroots Burmese to turn to prayer and prayer becomes a vital practice for them. Due to economic crisis, to the Burmese prayer is like a daily hope for freedom from poverty, hardships and illness. Although missionaries and Christian churches introduce the Burmese to hope for life hereafter, their hope and prayer are very practical and for this real life. Having interviewed some Buddhist converts and *Badin-sayas*, the results show that most of them experienced directly God's presence while they seek wholeheartedly the One who will help them. According to them, they experienced protection given by the Holy Spirit and the liberation in Christ that cannot be compared with any powerful beings from their former beliefs in spiritual beings.

The premise of the Shwedagon Pagoda is surrounded by the *Nat* images and Burmese folk Buddhists pay homage. Their belief in the existence of a spirit world has different levels and kinds of supernatural powers and spirit beings. In fact, belief in the existence of spiritual beings, their powers and traditional experiences are points of contact that Jesus Christ is only the Omnipotent, Sustainer and Liberator, and of course, the true liberation or salvation can be found only in Him. This requires the contextualization of the gospel message within their religio-cultural context of the audience. To have this effective communication of the gospel, in chapter seventeen Paul began with affirmation of the religiosity of Athenians (v. 22), bridged his subject with their familiarity (v. 23), enlarged their vision (vv. 24, 25), used inclusive language (v. 26), gave them encouragement and hope (v. 27), identified with some of their own poets (v. 28), and gave them specific action steps (vv.29-31). If the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1: 14) and through

the contextualization of the gospel Burmese Buddhists living in Yangon can meet Jesus Christ as the Liberator even in Shwedagon Pagoda.