

BURMA

An Encounter with Faith



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Though in the past, resource-rich Burma had a very modern society and literate population, its military rulers have implemented tight controls and economic restrictions that has made it one of the poorest nations in Southeast Asia.

With regard to the religious setting of Burma, there is a lot to be discussed particularly in understanding how the Burmese people in their traditional Buddhist setting respond to the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

Last year in September, V2M's vision challenge was to pray for and partner in the ministry to the Burmese people.

This year, we are pleased to present a report authored by two young men who visited Burma in October 2011. Binoi Samuel and Godly John are both based in United Arab Emirates and they had the opportunity to travel to Myanmar to visit friends who had graduated from the Asian Christian Academy (ACA - Hosur, India).

During their 6 day stay, they had close fellowship with ACA graduate Br. Henry Lyan and they also visited a few churches, seminaries and homes of fellow believers.

It was an eye opening experience where they witnessed testimonies of God's faithfulness amongst the Burmese people.

Along with Henry, they could also meet with brothers who involve in church planting ministry, orphanage ministry, translation ministry, and even leadership training ministry.

Their report will give you an an insider's perspective of the mission field in Burma.

The following pages details the conversation they had with Bro. Henry Lyan, who is engaged in in full-time ministry in Yangon, Myanmar.



Binoi and Godly with Buddhist monks at the Shwedagon Pagoda, Yangon.

Can you please give us an introduction to the religious setting of Myanmar?

There is no other institution in Burma that is more important than Buddhism of the Theravada (or Hinayana) school. Buddhism is the most central of all the primordial values that define a Burman (and some other communities such as the Shan and Mon).

The Mon community strongly influenced the Burmans and the Burmans adopted much Buddhist influence from them.

Built onto an indigenous animist base, that is still vital and alive, Buddhism permeates both the government and people's lives and values.

Buddhism, during the classical period, denied political legitimacy and every king tried to regulate the sangha (monkhood), purify practices, reform various sects and scripture and build agodas (Buddhist temples).

The classical prestige of the sangha continues into the contemporary period. The monks had a great role as the educated populace and all schools in the pre-colonial period were in the Buddhist monasteries. To be devout was to be literate and to be able to read Buddhist scriptures. The British, to avoid charges of favoring Buddhism, eliminated the position of the most senior monk, thus in essence demoting and denigrating Buddhism by depriving it of its administrative cohesion. The introduction of secular education by British further undercut Buddhist influence. Instead of being destroyed by these actions, however, Buddhism became the surrogate indicator of Burmese nationalism when political activity was banned by the British and monks became martyrs to the nationalist movement and at times often led it.

The Burmese hated the British as they were the colonizers. Christianity became an attractive religion since it came into Myanmar with the Colonial power. Thus, Buddhist sees Christianity as a religion from the west accompanied by its brutality without mercy and grace. The relevance of Buddhism to

beliefs and legitimacy in the postcolonial period is still central and permeates Burman society. In the civilian period (1948-1958, 1960-1962), U Nu, a leading Burmese nationalist employed Buddhism for political purposes, making it the state religion following the elections of 1960. Today, the present military junta is strictly following the same.

The Buddhist strongly believed that religion cannot be changed. They also believed that forsaking Buddhism is insulting the forefathers.

The slogan amongst the fundamental Buddhists and the present Military government is the phrase "**Amyo, Batha, Thathana.**" 'Amyo' means that



Photo of a typical Burmese girl with beautifying paste applied.



Statues of Buddha in Yangon.

the Burmese people should be the only people who remain in Myanmar, 'Batha' means that the religion of Myanmar should only be Buddhism and 'Thathana' means that the missions should only be Buddhist.

Buddhism in Myanmar can be traced back to early 9th century; some even say earlier.

So, dividing the history of Buddhism in Myanmar into three sections, we can summarize that Buddhism was already born in Myanmar in pre-colonial period (as practiced and promoted by people, kings and rulers), grew stronger (as a response to the British as a nationalist) in during Colonial period and now become the strongest religion (since they are now backed up by the military with weapons) in this present age with power and authority.

In a nut shell, Buddhism has crept into the lives of the people of Myanmar and they strongly believe that to be a Burmese is to be a Buddhist.

How do you plan to influence the society that you are in? How has the Lord been leading you all to 'connect' with the religious setting of Myanmar?

Having been in the Lord's vineyard for more than half a decade, we have come to the conclusion that the best way to reach Myanmar with the gospel of Jesus and to equip the next generation leaders or pastors in the most effective and efficient way is:

1. Through Literature (tracts, discipleship materials, commentaries, theological books etc.)
2. Church Planting (evangelism, discipleship, establishing churches)
3. Training (Bible colleges and Seminary education)

To answer the question of 'connecting' with the religious setting of Myanmar, the method we use is that of contextualization.

The M. Div program we offer at the Berean Evangelical School of Theology (BEST) is superior to 'M. Div' program in India or Philippines in that student are taught how to contextualize the gospel without losing its flavor but understandable by the mind of the Buddhists we encounter.

Those who serve in Myanmar among the Buddhist must know the history of the country, more importantly the history of Buddhism and must understand how Buddhist sees, understands and reflects on the things we share with them. Once they can clearly understand, the gospel became something that can be grasped by the mind of a Buddhist.



The Berean Evangelical School of Theology (BEST)



Bro. Henry with faculty of Berean Evangelical School of Theology

What are some of the challenges you face when it comes to missions whether church, evangelism, Bible College and even fellowship among believers in Myanmar?

I will briefly mention 3 points:

1. Buddhism: A rapid growth of Buddhism is threatening the Christian missions and churches in Myanmar. Buddhists have developed a mission organization and they also have missionaries who go to Christian towns and villages doing the same (exactly) that Christians have been doing in the mission field. So the challenge is when we are winning souls to Christ in the front line, the Buddhist people are winning our sheep back into Buddha. Sometimes, I think of the Christian missions as people who are putting souls into a bag that has hole at the bottom.

Buddhism is a very intellectual religion and their philosophy is quite complex and attractive. It is indeed a great challenge for Christians to respond to Buddhism intellectually and scientifically. Contextualization is

another challenge as I mentioned earlier. Many Christians who encounter Buddhists assume that everyone understands the language of Christians such as eternal life, being born-again, penal substitution, atonement, redemption, etc. but the Buddhist would not understand it. So we need to work hard on the methods that will meet the need of the people.



Some of the Christian books that have been translated into Burmese through the Literature ministry of Bro. Henry Lyan

2. Liberalism: A constant influence of liberalism in Myanmar is a reality. Many liberal Seminaries and churches in Myanmar are growing. And their leaders are mostly trained in Princeton, US. There are more than 13 mainline denominations that are connected with Myanmar Council of Churches, being liberal and ecumenical, which is under the World Council of Churches. They see Evangelical Christians in Myanmar as uneducated and narrow minded. This is a charge that the Evangelicals in Myanmar need to respond to.

3. Discipleship: The mission mark of the Church in Myanmar (of course, it is true with many other countries as well). We need to be doing a task of growing people.

Evangelism is where we preach and God transforms the lives of people. Discipleship is what we do with people to bring them to maturity,

About Bro. Henry Lyan



Bro. Henry Lyan with wife Ni Ni and children Paul and Grace.

Bro. Henry Lyan is a Burmese Christian who has been trained in theology in India graduating with an M.Th from ACA, Hosur. Since then he has moved back to Myanmar and has been involved in training and ministering to churches in Myanmar training pastors and believers in Christian theology and leadership. He is also involved in Literature ministry particularly in translating Christian books into the Burmese language as such books are lacking in Burma.

Bro. Henry is also the President of Berean Evangelical School of Theology (BEST) and through BEST his purpose is to equip and train ministers who will be able to teach other also (2Tim 2:2). BEST has a strong commitment for "Equipping a new generation of Pastors and Teachers to strengthen the Ministry and Mission of the Church in Myanmar." BEST offers biblical, theological and ministerial instruction at a graduate level.

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