

A REPORT ON RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN MYANMAR

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Abstract

This essay examines the character of religious pluralism in Myanmar and how religious conflict can be solved through inter-religious dialogue, particularly as understood by the Belgian missionary and theologian, Jacques Dupuis', and his "inductive method".

INTRODUCTION

Myanmar is famously known as "a perfect ethnological museum or a melting pot" (Ling, 2005, p.11). The government officially acknowledges that there are eight major groups among the 135 ethnicities with more than two hundred dialects in the country.¹ It is, in terms of ethnicity, one of the richest countries in the world. Due to its diverse tribes and cultures, it is a big challenge to unite this diversity under an umbrella of one nation. This is the main reason why the central government has encountered intermittent uprisings of discontented ethnic groups. Each ethnic group wants to be independent because they want to keep their ethnic identity. After gaining independence from the British rule, the Burmans (the largest tribe in the country, approximately two-thirds of the total population) have been in control of the country and have occupied the majority of seats in the ruling military government. On account of this position, the minority groups (Kayin, Kachin, Mon, Kayah, Shan, Rakhine, and Chin) have not been satisfied with the military government. These ethnic groups accused the government of trying to 'implement a Burmanization policy' in the country. (Topich & Leitich, 2013, p.3). That is why, for many decades they have been fighting for independence in their own territories. In fact, some of these ethnic groups (for example

Kayah) were even “granted autonomy via the 1947 constitution with the right of succession following a 10-year period” after the agreement (Topich & Leitich, 2013, pp.2-6).

With regard to the aspect of religion, Theravada Buddhism is the main belief of the people in Myanmar. Eighty-nine percent of the population embraces this religion in which most of them belong to the Burman tribe. This major ethnic group cannot easily convert to other religions because they see Buddhism as linked with their social and cultural background. They think that Buddhism is the only religion of their tribe and if one of them happens to convert to Christianity, that person is considered not only to have committed “an act of disloyalty to Buddhist society and to the nation” but the person is also seen to have abandoned his or her ‘socio-cultural identity’ (Ling, 2005, p.13). With this deep-rooted mentality of the people, a well-known statement from the Burman Buddhists emerged “to be a Burmese (Burman) is to be a Buddhist”.² Indeed, this major ethnic group never separates religion from nationality. For them, “religion cannot be forsaken without giving up nationality; in other words, the fact of embracing the religion of another people is equivalent to becoming a member of the same social or political body” (Bigandet, 1996, p.4). And for many, “being Buddhist is an important part of being Burmese, and monks, the most venerable members of society, are beyond reproach”.³

According to Samuel Ngun Ling, even though, in 2005, the military government declared that “there is freedom of worship and no discrimination on religious grounds”, Buddhism is still the ‘favored religion’ in the eyes of the government from the very beginning of its arrival. (Ling, 2005, pp.12-13). Apart from the British colonial period, the Burmese government has long seen Buddhism as their national religion. Their policy is “one dominant ethnic group (Burman), one united country (Myanmar), and one religion (Buddhism)” (Berlie, 2008, p.1). As the researcher belongs to an ‘un-favored religion’ (Christianity) and a minor ethnic group (Kayah), he has been one of the victims under the military government. He has personally witnessed the confiscation of lands and schools that belonged to Christianity. The Burmese military has constantly fought against ethnic minorities and destroyed schools, hospitals, places of worship, houses, and “the primary targets of these abuses” have been the

Christian populations (Chin, Kachin, Shan, Karen, and Karenni or Kayah) and the Islamic community (Rakhine). Only in 2009, State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) ordered “100 churches and religious meeting places in Rangoon to stop holding services and forcing Protestant leaders to sign pledges to that effect” (Leo, n.d., p.35). The researcher has also heard so many times from his fellow Christians that being a Christian in Myanmar means being an unlucky person. Christians are discriminated against in several ways: they seldom hold any high position; they cannot freely build churches as Buddhists build temples; and they do not have the same privilege as Buddhists. Some Christians have to abandon their faith in order to get a job. “Thousands of young Christians are unemployed because of their faith and are pressured to convert to Buddhism. Several Christians churches and homes were burned down during 2003” (Claydon, 2005, p.177). Many Muslims (Rohingyans) are not given citizenship. In such circumstances, is it possible to embrace religious pluralism? To answer this question, one needs to look at the problem in a new way.

In this paper, the researcher as a Catholic Christian attempts to apply his practical experience. By doing so, he is using the inductive method⁴ of doing the study of religious pluralism (Myanmar). His personal background is that even though he was born and raised up in a Catholic family and surroundings, he has encountered many people of different faiths. While the majority of his relatives on his mother’s side embraces Buddhism, his father used to practice local rituals connected to animism. As far as the researcher notices, his parents, on the one hand, are committed to Christianity; yet, on the other hand, they never entirely abandon their animistic beliefs. According to Western theologians, these practices are against the faith of Christianity.⁵ To confront the local practices (animism) and Eastern cultures (Buddhism) has been one of the difficulties that Christianity (Western cultures) has encountered from the very beginning of its arrival. Buddhism, however, has been more lenient in dealing with the local practices (such as Nat worship, *Naga* worship and fortunetellers).⁶ In fact, animism is the religion of the land. The other religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc) are foreign religions.

In general, people from Myanmar are believers. Most follow a religious belief: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Animism, etc.

Religious belief is familiar to them. But religions in Myanmar are not ‘pure’, they are somewhat intermixed. Even the main religion (Buddhism) still contains elements of folk belief and indigenous spirit cult (Animism). According to James Roger Black who wrote the review of Maung Htin Aung’s book, *Folk Elements in Burmese Buddhism*:

Burmese Buddhism is not purely the outgrowth of the Dharma taught by Buddha, but contains many indigenous or pre-Buddhist concepts that still have powerful attraction for the people of Burma, and have dramatically changed the religious practices of the original Theravada Buddhists of Burma (Black, 1973, p.10).

In this sense, it is hard to find a ‘pure’ religion in Myanmar. The plurality of religions has been present in this land back to the arrival of the four major religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. Religious diversity therefore is not new to the people but to embrace religious pluralism is another story. The researcher, in this paper, tries to address all existing religions; how they are facing religious pluralism and how they approach or respond to this issue.

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND BUDDHISM

Buddhism is known as “the most tolerant religion on earth” (Humphreys, 2012, p.50) and a human-based religion. It usually adapts to different cultures easily and emphasizes the liberation of man from worldly sufferings. Indeed, it was peace and happiness that Gautama Buddha searched in his lifetime. In doing so, he tried to avoid all kinds of violence and sought to enter Nirvana without depending on others; he rather put his own selfless and strenuous effort into practicing meditation until he attained enlightenment. He identified the contemporary world with sufferings and his mission would be fulfilled only when sufferings ceased. His practical and down-to-earth teachings motivate men and women to be able to see the *self* as humanity and to have compassion for others. This is the authentic teaching of Buddha widely known as Buddhism.

Like many Southeast Asian nations, Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion in Myanmar. Many legends described how Buddhism reached this beautiful land. A story even said that Gautama Buddha had been there and left his eight hairs (Bischoff, 1995, pp.18-19). The most famous two accounts, however, are: King Asoka sending missionaries to the Burmese kingdom to establish orthodox Buddhism (Buddhism, in this period, was influenced by Aris monks, ‘Mahayanists’ who adopted the local practices of astrology, alchemy, and spirit-mediumship); another account is of King Anawrahta who tried to unify Myanmar into one nation and imposed Theravada Buddhism as an official religion of the country. King Anawrahta, however, could not convince Burmese (Burman) people to stop their traditional practices (*Nat* worship, *Naga* worship, etc).⁷ Not much has been changed even in these modern times; “the Burman Buddhists embrace primal religions like *Nat* (spirit) worship as part of popular Buddhism” (Ling, 2005, p.13). According to Maung Htin Aung, “*Nat* worship is part of the Buddhist faith and the Burmese (Burmans) want to worship *Nat* without ceasing to be good Buddhists” (Aung, 1959, p.73-75). Melford E. Spiro, the author of *Burmese Supernaturalism*, tries to interpret the relationship between animism and Buddhism in his beautiful work on *Nat* worship as follows:

For most Burmese, animism is a concession to human frailty; Buddhism is a striving for human nobility. Animism represents man’s natural fears and desires; Buddhism symbolizes his highest ideals and aspirations. Animism presents man as he is; Buddhism indicates what he *ought* to be (and can become). One worships the Buddha because He is holy; one propitiates the nats because it is expedient (“out of fear we must”) (Spiro, 2011, p.273).

Animism has been subsumed into Buddhism; even comparable aspect of Hinduism could also be identified such as worshiping different gods. However, Burmese Buddhists do not seem to involve themselves with Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Islam, not to mention Judaism). They are not so willing, most probably because the general sentiment of the majority of the people is disinterest in “foreign” religions. It is thus

difficult to have mutual understanding, which is the second step to religious pluralism after dialogue. Without interreligious dialogue, it is almost impossible to reach any mutual understanding, dimming the hope for religious pluralism. Even though “to most Buddhists the experience of ‘religious pluralism’ has not been the serious shock as it has been to most Christians”, Buddhists in Myanmar are not interested in promoting religious pluralism (Abe, 1995, p.18). Instead, they are proud of committing to Buddhism. They have more privilege in the eyes of the military government. They consider themselves as belonging to the religion of the nation and so regard other faiths as foreign. However, they are, in principle, tolerant towards the other religions if they themselves do not become manipulated by politics. The real cause of conflict between Buddhists and Muslims is of political nature rather than religious one. Of course, the rise of nationalism and ethnicity is the main cause of the conflict. Buddhism has taken many times “a leading role in the nationalist movements” and it eventually led into ‘violence’. Many non-Buddhists feel that Buddhism is integral to ‘their national identity’ and so the minorities have no comfortable position. The role of the Buddhist monks in Myanmar is very honorable.

Monks wielded their moral authority to challenge the military junta and argue for democracy in the Saffron Revolution of 2007. Peaceful protest was the main weapon of choice this time, and monks paid with their lives.

Now some monks are using their moral authority to serve a quite different end. They may be a minority, but the 500,000-strong monkhood, which includes many deposited in monasteries as children to escape poverty or as orphans, certainly has its fair share of angry young men (Strathern, 2013).⁸

Buddhism in Myanmar must strive still towards an appreciation of religious pluralism. It cannot just follow its old way since “Buddhism has moved from the old pluralistic situation to a new pluralist one” (Abe, 1995, p.19). In Myanmar, Buddhism can play a big role in order to reach mutual understanding among the different religions which helps to pro-

mote religious pluralism.

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND CHRISTIANITY

For many centuries, doctrinal teaching has been the main emphasis of missionary work. Due to this doctrinal highlighting, different religions attempt to separate from one another. Instead of trying to learn from each other, people try to indoctrinate others and at the same time strictly entrench their own creed. While this has been common to many religions it is especially characteristic of Christianity in the past. While the traditional axiom of the Roman Catholic Church taught, “no salvation outside the Church” (*Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*), the Protestants said, “there is no salvation outside Christianity”. In short, both statements condemned non-Christians. It was only in the 20th century that a new way of seeing the world emerged in the Christian theology. Protestant churches, in 1910, started gathering together to discuss the possibility of overcoming the sectarian antagonism in the propagation of Christianity. The consequence of this meeting gave birth to the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948. The Roman Catholic Church, on the other hand, held the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) in order to modernize its teachings. The Catholic Church has undergone a fundamental change; the Catholic attitude towards other religions has taken a positive turn. The researcher therefore may say that, only around this period or in the 20th century, Christian theologians began to open up their theological thought. They tried to appreciate the values of other religious traditions and underwent their own Copernican shift. This is how the idea of religious pluralism was born within Christianity even though religious pluralism has been present for quite some time.

Of all the world religions, Christianity, as mentioned above, appears to be one of the worst in terms of its dealings with other religions. For centuries it has looked disdainfully at other religions. For example, when Christian missionaries came to Southeast Asia, they brought this biased mentality with them. Their main mission was to convert the Asian people into Christianity. They looked down on Asian civilizations and the local religious practices. Asian people were therefore partly justified to

associate Christianity with Western colonization. In fact, many Christians in Asia are the fruit of the imposition of Western imperialism. Myanmar (formerly Burma) is just one of them.

Christianity reached Myanmar quite late compared with Buddhism. Some Christians might have passed by this land in the early periods through the commerce and trade. Some legends stated that a number of merchants came to this region in the early 17th century but no evidence has been documented. If it is true, the first Christians in Myanmar would not be natives but foreigners who came from different parts of the world (Netherlands, England, Portugal, India, etc.). This is the reason why local people in those days used to view Christianity as foreign religion. According to the official record, the Holy See, in 1720, sent Barnabite Missionaries to China with the purpose of spreading Christianity and some of them eventually ended up in Myanmar in 1721 (Bigandet, 1996, pp.1-28). Christianity in Myanmar was under the care of the Catholic Church until the arrival of Adoniram Judson, the first American Baptist missionary and his wife, Ann Judson in 1813.

According to Samuel Ngun Ling, Christianity in Myanmar can be divided into three periods: Christianity till the British colonial rule (1947), Christianity after independence in 1948, and Christianity post-independence under the military rule (1962-). Christians in the first period enjoyed freedom under the protection of the British rulers but Burmese Buddhists feared of losing their ‘centuries-old ways of life’ to the alien rule. In the second period, Christians were under suspicion of being ‘pro-Westerners’ by nationalist movements who strongly opposed British colonial rule. When the third period began, Christians were indirectly persecuted; “Christian missionary schools, hospitals and properties were nationalized under General Ne Win” (Hre & Ling, 2012, pp.78-81).

Christians in Myanmar (mainly ethnic groups) do not perceive religious pluralism in the way Western Christians do. Since they (Christians in Myanmar) are very small in number (4% to 5%) in comparison with the total population of the country, they do not enjoy the same freedom as Buddhists. They are still, at the present, in some way in the ‘third period’. They are still followers of un-favored religion in the eyes of the military government. With regard to economic aspect, the majority of the people are still very poor. Because of closed-country policy of the mili-

tary government, there are no foreign investments. Hence, there are no jobs for the younger generations. Hundreds of thousands of them have to sneak out of the country to find work in neighboring countries. Most of them could find only menial jobs. Back home a large number of people have to struggle hard and most of them live hand to mouth. With this situation, how can Christians in Myanmar talk about the Ultimate Truth or God when most of the time they have to worry about their stomach and to feed their children. Burmese people (I think also many Asian people as well) are not interested in ideology. They would prefer practical or realistic approach rather than idealistic or theoretical one. They want to try something first and then make it as a theory if it succeeds. They prefer practicing first and then write down what they have done. Westerners, on the other hand, do the opposite. They would, at first, formulate a theory, and record it in order to have a guideline for practice. If the researcher applies this different approach to religious pluralism, Christians in Myanmar would rather have interreligious dialogue concerning day-to-day matters (poverty, culture, social life, education, etc.) than discussing about God or Ultimate Truth.

Jacques Dupuis⁹ inductive method to religious pluralism can be applied in this situation. On the academic level, there are more intra-religious dialogue than interreligious one. It seems that Christians in Myanmar have more problems among themselves (Catholics with Protestants of different denominations) than with other faiths. Catholic Bishops, priests, and sisters get along well with Buddhist monks and nuns. If the government does not intervene, any interaction among the religious leaders is smooth and friendly. On the grassroots level, Christians in Myanmar usually meet people of other faiths at work, at school, and at the market without having any problem. They sometimes even invite neighbors of other faiths to help them if there is an emergency, or they participate in animistic festivals. The researcher used to go to his uncle's village when the villagers celebrated Nat worship (the people of this village are Christians but still conduct the practice of animism). This festival is celebrated once a year. He also used to go to his mother's relatives on this special event (It is very interesting that this village, on the other hand, embraces Buddhism but still keep on practicing Nat worship). All in all, Christians in Myanmar are quite familiar with religious pluralism even

though “Christianity itself has moved from a relatively non-pluralistic situation to one radically pluralistic” (Abe, 1995, p.19).

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND ISLAM

Islam was introduced to Myanmar as early as the 8th century. The first Muslims who settled in this land were believed to have been Arab mariners and traders who landed on the Rakhine coast. According to J. A. Berlie in 2008, even though Muslims make up 7 to 10 % of the total population, like other minority religions, Islam is still seen as an un-favored religion. There are various groups of Muslims in Myanmar. The most famous four are: Arakan Muslims (Rohingyas), Muslims of Indian ‘origin’, Panthays and Zerbadees. Most of the Muslims in Myanmar are Sunni with a small numbers of Shi’ite sects. Rohingya are believed to have been the Muslims with the longest history in Myanmar. These Muslims used to serve in the palaces of both Buddhist and Muslim Kings. “Many Rohingyas consider themselves to be the natives of the region” and claimed that they are the same like other ethnic groups (Berlie, 2008, p.10). For Buddhists, who make up the majority of the country, state that they came with the British in the 19th and 20th centuries. Rohingyas are the most marginalized ethnic group in Myanmar; they are considered stateless.

Under the British rule, Myanmar shared the same province with India. Many traders from India came and brought their cultures and religions. Many Indian Muslims were recognized as “the most important minority community under the 1935 Government of Burma Act” (Berlie, 2008, p.8). Hindus and Muslims of Indian origin were involved in many kinds of business. Myanmar separated from India in 1937 and many Indians went back to India in 1964. Muslims from Yunnan are known as Panthays. These Chinese Muslims, however, prefer to be called Burmese Muslims. Some of these Muslims are believed to be the descendants of soldiers who invaded Pagan in 1211-79. Zerbadees, the mixed-blood Muslims, are the nearest culture-wise to Burmans. Some do not want to be called ‘Zerbadee’ but ‘Burmese Muslims’. Zerbadees believe that there is no difference between them and the Burman Buddhists. They accept

some Buddhist practices such as fortune-telling and astrology. In general, Burmans usually call Muslims in Burmese Language *kala*, a very derogatory term, but they would, however, prefer to be called ‘Burmese Muslims’ (Berlie, 2008, pp.6-16).

Like Christians, Muslims are not only persecuted by the military government, they are also seen as a threat to the Buddhist Nationalists. Many Buddhists are afraid of the future possibility of Islamic dominance in the country. They are therefore trying to impose the national law, that is, the law of nationalism. According to this law, “Burmese Buddhist girl should not marry non-Buddhists, if they do, the man must convert to Buddhism. If a Burmese Buddhist woman does not obey this law, she will be put to prison at least five years”. This is a law that the leaders of the nationalistic movement such as U Warathu and U Pinyawara are trying to pass through the parliament.¹⁰ If the parliament passes this law, every Burmese Buddhist girl has to follow it or else she would be put to jail.

The reason why recently Muslims in Myanmar have been continuously in conflict with the Burmese Buddhists is due to the oppression from the military government. Not recognizing them (mainly Rohingyas) as one of the ethnic groups and not giving them citizenship is one of the reasons. It has manifested itself as religious clash between Buddhists and Muslims because Buddhists support the government’s position and there are “radical monks who are at the forefront of a bloody campaign against Muslims”.¹¹ The researcher, however, believes that not all Buddhists hate Muslims and also not all Muslims dislike Buddhists. The fight began only with a very small group of people. This means that there are some anti-Muslims who are ‘nationalists or fascist’ and there are some Muslim extremists who do not like Buddhists. The problem of ethnicity is also one of the reasons why these two groups are fighting. To make the matter worse, the government leaders do not know how to handle this problematic issue. They are facing the dilemma of making a definite decision. This controversial case is one of the most challenging the government leaders have to face as they are also trying to open the country and to journey down a democratic road.

Islam, like other un-favored religions in the country, is also struggling to encounter the favored religion, Buddhism. Like many Christian theologians, in the researcher’s viewpoint, Islamic scholars would prefer

to discuss about the day-to-day problems (basic needs, education, poverty, refugees, etc.) rather than talking about the supernatural things when coming to the dialogue table. The way Muslims in Myanmar approach religious pluralism might not be the same as the Indonesian Muslims who make up the majority of the population. Historically, just like Christians, they have to watch out their daily life in order not to disturb the military government. According to the country's constitution, "the Muslims' right to worship in Myanmar is guaranteed; however, the lack of citizenship of the majority of Arakan Muslims attests to their strong, albeit unspoken, resistance to state policies in the Rakhine State" (Berlie, 2008, p.108).

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND HINDUISM

Hinduism, the world's oldest religious tradition and the world's largest pluralistic tradition, is considered as "a non-institutionalized religion". It therefore does not face "the problem of defining itself *vis-a-vis* 'the other'" (Chatterjee, 1994, p.1). Since Hinduism is not based on dogma (system of religious laws) but emphasizes One Supreme God with different forms or various small gods, its followers believe in the multiplicity of spiritual paths and ways. Hinduism, unlike the other world religions, is not based on the teachings of a single master or a single book; rather it follows the teachings of the different sages. Hindus therefore can encounter the existence of God everywhere, in everything, and in every being (Goel, 2002, pp.1-3). Due to their internal pluralism, Hinduism is "tolerant of other religions and is capable of subsuming them within its own mythic structures" (Knitter, 2005, p.148).

It is said that Hinduism is the only major religion that does not seek to actively expand and convert others. Since it recognizes that "there are many paths to the Divine and that each must find the way which suits them best", Hindus are more interested in searching for the truth rather than trying to convert people to their religion (Chatterjee, 1994, p.3). The positive aspect of having no creed is that they have not drawn any borders to exclude non-Hindus. That is the reason Jeffery Long said "everybody is a Hindu".¹² Furthermore, Mahatma Gandhi who was known as the model of "the adjustment to pluralism under the general umbrella

of nationalism” in India had believed “in the light of his common-sense realization that people belonging to different communities do not encounter each other in theologically charged contexts but in day-to-day living” (Chatterjee, 1994, pp.1&8). Here is what Gandhi had proposed for all religious people how to pray, “our inmost prayer should be that a Hindu should be a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim and a Christian a better Christian” (Gandhi, 1959, p.461).

Hinduism reached Myanmar as early as Buddhism. Some traders immigrated from India and brought their own culture and religion. According to a Mon legend, these Hindu merchants fought with the Mon who also adopted their beliefs into their own culture. There is no doubt to say that Hinduism has greatly influenced Buddhism in Myanmar. Even Theravada Buddhism was introduced in the 11th century; Hinduism still plays a big role in the daily life of the Burmese Buddhists. Hindu god or goddesses have been adopted into the form of Nat worship in which Burmese Buddhists highly venerate. The king of the Nats called Thagyamin is identified with Indra, the king of Hindu gods. All three religions are intermingled. As the religion (Hinduism) appreciates other religious traditions, Hinduism in Myanmar, as the researcher observes, seems to get along well with other faiths.

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM WITH ANIMISTIC BELIEF AND OTHER RELIGIONS

Animism, the first stage in the development of religion according to Edward Burnett Tylor, believes that the spirit exists in the natural entities both living and non-living; plants, mountains, animals, etc. Animists believe that “the spirits that exist in nature have the power to help or harm; therefore Animists offer some form of worship to these spirits” (Hopfe & (Jr.), 1993, p.36). These people see the spirit or the soul in every being. The practice of Animism is everywhere: in Africa, in Australia, in America, and in Asia. Myanmar has also been one of the Southeast Asian countries that greatly embraced this religion in its history. In fact, animism is the religion of the land before the arrival of other world religions. Therefore, people in Myanmar are very familiar with Animistic

practices.

Animism has influenced all other religions in Myanmar. It is the religion rooted in the heart of the people there. People might officially convert to the newly-arrived religions but their daily life would not change. They would still believe in the supernatural of the spirit. To give an example of this, the parents of the researcher are officially Catholics. They put their effort, at least his mother, to go to Church on every Sunday. But when there is a problem in the family or when one of the family members gets sick, they will offer something to the spirit so that the person will recover and get well again. It is a kind of superstition. The researcher finds it hard to believe but it is sometimes difficult to deny as well. This practice is very common to the Burmese believers either Buddhists or Christians.

Buddhism is more flexible adopting the Animistic practices into its rituals than Christianity. This is the reason why many Christian missionaries in the past have failed. They brought Western cultures with them and tried to force the local people to practice exactly as they did. Many times they could not succeed. They did not realize how strongly indigenous practices have influenced the Burmese people. Buddhism and Hinduism, on the other hand, could easily adapt their teaching to the native cultures. The researcher has to admit that he does not have much knowledge about Islam on this issue. Animism, however, to a certain extent has a strong impact on all religions coming into Southeast Asia. Buddhism, the religion that officially acknowledges the 37 Nats under the reign of King Anawrahta, has been influenced the strongest by these Animistic practices in Myanmar.

Since Chinese immigrants used to come in the past, there might still be some Chinese traditional religions in the country but no official record has been given. It is said that before the Second World War, there was a Jewish community which made up around 2,500 members in Rangoon. The document even mentioned that Myanmar was “the first Asian country to recognize Israel in 1949” (Planet, Allen, Smith, & Smith, 2012). Less than one hundred Jews may still be found in the country today.

CONCLUSION

The religious character of Myanmar, like many Southeast Asian Nations, operates along ethnic lines. Just as many Asians assume that Malays are Muslims, Thais are Buddhists, Filipinos are Catholics, and Chinese are Taoists/Confucians. Likewise Burmese people (Burmans 'the majority' ethnicity') should not assume ethnic identity along religious lines. But as many see the religious identity in line with culture and ethnicity, the great need is to first solve the problem of cultural pluralism or ethnic pluralism in order to embrace the religious pluralism.

Endnotes

¹Eight major ethnicities are Burman, Kayin, Kachin, Kayah, Chin, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan.

²The statement is quoted by K. T. Tun Gottingen, "Authority and Freedom of Action in the (Burmese) Buddhist Tradition", on p.223 of the book, *Tradition and modernity in Myanmar: Culture, social life and languages* and by Samuel Ngun Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar*, p.57. This statement is supposed to apply to the tribe of Burman, not all people in Myanmar. A Burmese in this sense is attributed to the tribe, not to the citizen.

³"Punk rockers break Myanmar's silence on religious attacks", in *Bangkok Post*: Retrieved from <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/asia/363116/punk-rockers-break-myanmar-silence-on-religious-attacks>.

⁴This approach normally starts "from the experience of lived reality and the questions that the context raises, thereafter to search for answers in the light of the revealed message and tradition" Jacques Dupuis, "My Pilgrimage in Mission" International Bulletin of Missionary Research, Vol. 27, No. 4, October, 2003.

⁵Just a few years ago, after so many years of prohibiting Christians to practice their former cult practices, the local priests realize that by imposing them to do so, the culture of the people gradually disappear and so they are now trying to acculturate with the Christian faith. It is still noticeable that animistic practices always accompany cultural events.

⁶When King Anawrahta came to power in 11th century, he tried to make Theravada Buddhism a national religion. At first he tried to ban 'nat worship' and destroyed 'nat shrines' but he later on realized that his people could not abandon the aged old practices, and worse still, forcing them to do so would take away from Buddhism. From then onwards, Burmese Buddhists can still practice 'nat worship' while embracing Buddhism.

⁷The word Nat in Burmese seems to derive from the Pali-Sanskrit term *natha* (Lord or guardian). *Nat* (also spirit) is “very much alive in the lives of the people in Myanmar. The power nat of Myanmar has evolved into spirit that may hold dominion over a place, person, or field of experience” (Reid & Grosberg, 2005, p.59)

⁸Alan Strathern, “Why are Buddhist Monks Attacking Muslims?” Retrieved from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-22356306>. on 11. 08. 2013.

⁹Jacques Dupuis was a Belgian Jesuit priest who worked as a missionary in India for 36 years. From there he began to develop his inductive approach to religious pluralism. The inductive approach normally starts “from the experience of lived reality and the questions that the context raises, thereafter to search for answers in the light of the revealed message and tradition” (Dupuis, 2003, p.170).

¹⁰The deadline for the collection of the votes from the citizens was on July 17, 2013 and according to the information that the researcher referred which was on July 18, 2013, Two millions people have singed this potential law. Retrieved from thithtoolwin.com July 18, 2013.

¹¹“Punk rockers break Myanmar’s silence on religious attacks”, in *Bangkok Post*: Retrieved from <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/asia/363116/punk-rockers-break-myanmar-silence-on-religious-attacks>.

¹²This statement is mentioned in his article “Anekanta Vedanta: Towards a *Deep Hindu Religious Pluralism*”. In *Deep Religious Pluralism*, ed. David Ray Griffin. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005 (130-157).

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