

Glimpses of Authentic Witness Testimonies from Asia

by Peter Joseph, Myanmar

The theme under which we are meeting today “Integrity of Mission in the Light of the Gospel: Bearing the witness of the Spirit” has come at a time no better than now. It is surely the working of the Spirit.

Let me begin by quoting an actual incident while working in the Council of Churches in the early 90 + ies. “After this present Military government took office in 1988, there followed programs of upgrading of the cities, towns by building bridges and roads as is the custom of the old. This scheme came into direct conflict with the church, which was situated in best places and best land. The renovation of the roads required church land. The authorities requested for the necessary land and the church was adamant and denied the government their request. We, at the national office were torn and frustrated at the situation. Almost 200 years ago when Christian missionaries arrived in Myanmar, Buddhism was already flourishing as a religion. When Christ was preached they were polite, listened but did not convert as they felt Buddhism was meeting their spiritual needs. Then they did not drive out Christianity. When Christian missions started acquiring land they were generous and did not deny. Today, Christian missions hold the best land and in best places worth much money. We did not bleed for the sake of the country. When the nation needed from the church, the church was reluctant. When the church needed land, the Buddhist generously gave. Here it seems that the Buddhist were a better Christians witnessing LOVE.

Context

Myanmar as it is known now is a multi-ethnic, multi-racial country. It is predominantly a Buddhist country with 89% Buddhist and 6% Christians, 4% Islam, 0.5 % Hindus etc., Buddhism took root in Myanmar soil so much so that “Myanmar is Buddhist, Buddhist is Myanmar”.

Mission History

There were early Barnabite missions in the 15 & 16 centuries ministering to the Christian communities in Myanmar. The Protestant missionaries who arrived later came to “evangelize and make new converts”. Prof. Pe Mg Tin writes ‘they came to teach, not to learn’.

Adoniram Judson stands prominent in the history of missionary service in Myanmar. Judson was a fine Burmese scholar, who gave to Myanmar -the Myanmar Bible, Myanmar Dictionary & their grammar. Judson’s Burmese Bible approached nearer the style of Burmese Buddhist writings so that it was found to be more readable by the Buddhist monks unacquainted with English. The successors did not follow up the Burmese scholarship that Judson had made.

Also during the colonial period, Christians stood by the colonials and not by the nationals. The only bridge developed between Christians and Buddhist since its arrival in Myanmar was during the colonial period writes Prof. Tun Aung Chain, was education. Later with the Political changes the gulf between the Buddhist and Christians widened. Today the resurgence of Buddhism has left the church as a minority church thrown on the defensive. The exclusivist stand of the church has also been a barrier for the Churches participation in the nation building.

Today

Today, the church is taking steps to understand Buddhism. Buddhism is now taught in theological institutions. Theological education is now geared towards narrowing the gap between Buddhism and Christianity. The Myanmar Council of Churches is leading the way in the area of Dialogue and learning of Buddhism. Prof. Samuel Ngun Ling writes “looking at the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ in relation to other religions, we see that He made no criticism over Greeks or Roman religion of His own time nor did He reject the formal structures of traditional Jewish practice as such. His teachings focused on a new life style ‘ (Mk.2:21-22. He goes on to remark that ‘Christ & Buddha are closely related as a part of a larger pattern of the whole religion reference and meaning. It means that neither Jesus nor Buddha is destroyer

of other religions rather both are completers of the other. Jesus words in Mt.5:17 'think not that I have come to abolish the law & the prophets. I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them' can also be applied with comparable significance to fulfillment in some measure in the teachings of the Buddha and vice versa.

Hence, the church is now in the process of contextualizing the gospel. There are many attempt among which I would like to quote one. In the Christendom, the church bell rings to bring the faithful to church. But in Myanmar some are ringing the bell when the blessing is pronounced as is the practice of a Buddhist who rings the gong as a symbol of sharing his merits at the end of his prayers.

Conclusion

The church in Myanmar is now emerging out of the dreams into the real world. It is now on its way to finding selfhood. The church is rediscovering the integrity of mission and to witnessing with integrity. To this we covet your solidarity and your prayers.

Peter Joseph