

A Brief History of Christianity in Burma (Myanmar) - by Khup Za Go

I. Introduction of the Land and the People

The Union of Burma, officially known as Pyingdaungsu Myanma Naingandaw, with an area of 676,577 square kilometres, is the largest country in the Southeast Asia. The population of Burma in 1992 is 43,466,000.(1) Burma shares long borders on the east with Thailand, on the northeast with China, and the northwest with India as well as shorter borders with Laos and Bangladesh on the east and the west. Politically the country is divided into seven divisions, namely, Irrawaddy, Magwe, Mandalay, Pagu, Sagaing, Tenasserim and Rangoon, and seven states of Arakan, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah, Mon, and Shan. Rangoon is the capital of the country since British days. Burmese(2) is the official language of the country and also the medium of instruction in schools and colleges. Besides, there are several languages and dialects spoken in different regions and states of the country.

Religiously Burma, famous as the land of Pagodas, is the Buddhist country since the 9th century of Christian era. As such Buddhism exerted great influence on the development of Burmese life and culture. Islam is the religion of the minority Arakanese people who inhabit the southwest near the border with Bangladesh. Among the hill tribes traditional religions and beliefs are still practised.(3) "Religion is inextricably woven into the fabric of Burmese society; religious beliefs and practices are integrated into the life of the family, the community, the tribe and the nation. This is true both of the traditional faiths, Buddhism and animism". (4) Religious affiliations in Burma as recorded in 1983 is as follows: Buddhist 89.4%, Christian 4.9%, Muslim 3.8%, Tribal religions 1.1%, Hindu 0.5% and other 0.3%. (5)

Like many other Asian nations Burma also has bitter experience with the British rule and Japanese invasion, and at last achieved her independence from Britain on 4th January 1948.

With this brief background of the country and the people now we turn to the coming of Christianity in Burma through the foreign missionaries. We shall see the difficulties and hardships missionaries and first converts were facing for the sake of the gospel and also the factors which contributed to the growth and expansion of Christianity in the country.

II. History of Christianity in Burma

A. Beginning and growth of Christianity (1812 -1862)

The first "Christians" as recorded in Burma were Portuguese soldiers and a few traders and adventurers. In 1554 the first Catholic priests came to serve as chaplains. But after three years they left the country for they were not welcomed by the Burmese Buddhists. Therefore there was no record of Christian conversion before the arrival of American Baptist missionaries in 1813. (6)

Rev Adoniram Judson and Ann Judson started their journey by ship from United States of America on February 19, 1812 and arrived on July 13, 1813. Within a few days of their arrival Judson began to study the Burmese language. When he realised that much of the Buddhist religious thought was expressed in Pali terms he started to compile a Pali-Burmese Dictionary of 4000 words as well as a Burmese-English Dictionary. Judson was a rare combination of meticulous scholar and utterly keen evangelist. In his study of Burmese Felix Carey and his wife of Serampore Mission who were already in Burma were very helpful. In January 1816 Judson began the translation of the New Testament in Burmese and also began to translate the gospel tracts. After six years of hard work the first Burmese, U Naw was baptised by Judson in 1819.

The Lanmadaw Baptist Church in Rangoon called later U Naw Baptist Church was built in honour of the first Christian convert in Burma. In 1823 Judson completed the New Testament in Burmese and by 1834 the complete Bible. The first school was opened by Ann Judson in 1821 and in the same year the first medical missionary Dr. Jonathan Price and his wife also arrived from USA. (7)

In 1823 the Burmese king invited the missionaries to settle in Ava, the then capital of Burmese king in Mandalay. Soon after their arrival at Ava the first Anglo-Burmese war broke out and Judson and Price were taken into imprisonment. After 18 months Judson was released to act as interpreter in the Anglo-Burmese peace talks.

Regarding to the methods of evangelism Judson right from the beginning decided to preach the gospel rather than anti-Buddhism. He opened a small roadside zayat (rest houses) where he talked about Jesus with anyone who would like to listen. Later they moved to Moulmein the capital of Karen people, where a strong educational and evangelistic programme was started. They soon realised that Moulmein was differed from Rangoon in its large Mon population. In 1828 thirty-one persons were converted in Moulmein and another 28 more were baptized the next year. Among this group were Burmese, Mon, Arakanese, Indian and Karen. The first Karen convert Ko Tha Byu was included here. Within two years the Moulmein Mon Burmese Church, the 45th Regiment English Church and the Moulmein Indian church were started. In this way the gospel spread to those with languages other than Burmese to the Karens, the Indians, and the British soldiers and the Mons. "Down through the years Burmese-speaking Mon Christians have enriched the growth of Burmese churches. It is even said that U Naw, the first Burman to be baptized, was actually a Mon". (8)

During this period before the end of the Judson era the church was organized among the Burmese, Mon and Karen in the Lower Burma. More details about the evangelistic work and methods employed among these groups would be discussed later.

B. Consolidation of the Church in Lower Burma and Outreach to Minority Groups (1852-1886)

By 1852 the Baptist Mission work in Burma was forty years old. During this period Burma has passed through the three Anglo-Burmese wars. First Anglo-Burmese war from 1824 to 1826 brought Arakan and Tenassarim under the British control. With the second 1852 to 1853 Lower Burma was added to the British section and the remainder of Burma came under the British rule in the third Anglo-Burmese war of 1885. These wars and political changes caused hardships as well as opportunities for the missionary work in Burma. During this period the church was consolidated in many areas. Missionary convention was held and ideas on methods of evangelism were discussed. Medical practice or the establishment of dispensaries was included as a means of evangelism. The use of tracts in evangelistic work was considered to be of great use. They also agreed that preaching should be held at stated times in the chapel, or in the rooms used for the chapel, but that this formal preaching should be supplemented by preaching in the zayat and from house to house in the villages. Another important discussion was that there were then 117 churches connected with the Burmese and Karen Missions, with a membership of some 10,000 converts. Yet there were only 11 ordained pastors. Besides 11 pastors there were more than 120 national workers. So the ordination of more pastors was recommended to serve every church. Also the need of more mission schools was also felt. During this period the new Baptist compound was also secured in Rangoon and the centre office was shifted from Moulmein to Rangoon again. The Burma Baptist Convention comprising all the American Baptist related Christians was organised in 1865 and was resolved to meet annually to transact business and to have fellowship with one another.

The next Protestant group to arrive in Burma were Lutherans and Methodist churches. Salvation Army, Seventh Day Adventist, Assemblies of God, Church of Christ and Presbyterians came in the early part of twentieth century. Regarding the Anglican Church though there were Anglican chaplains in Burma as early as 1825 the founding of the church was dated in 1877 when the first bishop of Rangoon was appointed. The United Society for Propagation of the Gospel began its work first among the Burmese and then extended it to Karens and Chins.

The first Catholic contacts with Burmese were made by the Portuguese in the 16th century. But today 90% of the Catholicism are Karen, Kachin, Chin and Kaw(9). Catholics, like in other countries, were well-known for their charities, social services and education in Burma also. They maintain leprosia, orphanages, homes for the aged and infirm. During this period the non-Burmese ethnic groups like Chin, Kachin, Shan, etc. were reached by the Protestant missionaries.

1. Contact with Asho Chins: In 1863 Maung Coopany an evangelist of the Bassein Pwo Karen association has reduced the Asho Chin language to writing. He compiled and produced a spelling book and a small hymn book which were printed in Rangoon. In 1866 Maung Coopany reported that twenty Chins had been baptized. (10)

2. The Carsons and the Zomi Chins: Ann and Arthur Carsons were the first missionaries appointed by the American Baptist Mission to work among the Chins of Upper Burma who call themselves Zomi. They arrived to Chin Hills (the present Chin State) and started the work in 1899. The missionaries reduced the Chin languages to writing and prepared small hymn books in different languages. Although Arthur met his untimely death of appendicitis on April 1, 1908 Ann Carson continued the work till 1920. Elizabeth and Herbert J. Copes came to Chin Hills in December 1908. Herbert Cope gave 30 years to the Chin Mission and rendered a tremendous service to the Chins. In addition to his evangelization work and tour he translated the New Testament in Tedim Chin and published in 1931(11) and prepared more than 35 small text books in several languages for schools. In recognition of his outstanding service for the Chin people he was awarded the Kaiser-I-Hind medal by the British government in 1927. Today the Zomi (Chin) Baptist Convention, with its baptized membership of 91,170 in 1988 is one of the largest groups in Burma.

3. First contact with the Shans: Mr Moses H. Bixby and his wife who had worked in Moulmein with the Burmese and Mon churches from 1853 to 1856 were re-appointed in 1860 to work among Shans. The first Shan convert was Maung Aung Myat, the son of Swabwa. He was baptized in September 1862 and four months later two Shan women were baptized. Mrs Bixly began a school for children and Mr Bixly a theological class with ten students. They translated tracts into Shan and prepared spelling book and vocabulary.(12) In 1866 Mr and Mrs Josiah Cushing, another missionary couple from USA, Mr and Mrs Bixly in Shan Mission. They made a tour of Shan country and selected Mongnai town as the best location for the Shan Mission centre. Unlike Chins and Karens there was already Buddhist influence among the Shans. Therefore Christian work among them was making slow progress.

4. Beginning of the Mission to the Kachins: We have already mentioned Mr Cushing's involvement among the Shan mission work. Besides that, he was also partly responsible for the pioneering work among the Kachins. He reduced the Kachin language to written form. In February 13, 1878 Mr and Mrs Lyon from USA reached Bhamo to work among the Kachins. Unfortunately within a week of their arrival Mr Lyon died of fever. Hearing the sad news William Henry Roberts, a young pastor in Illinois, volunteered with his wife to take up the missionary work. They arrived on January 12, 1879. The first baptism of Kachin took place in March 19, 1882. The gospel work among the animistic Kachins was successful. They form a strong church group in Burma today.

C. Joint activities of Christians from 1866 to the present:

Under this section we shall see the highlights of the activities of the Christians in Burma with sub-headings as follows:

1. Higher Education: As already mentioned here and there we know the pioneer missionaries were the people who reduced the languages of the minorities into written form and prepared spelling books, textbooks and dictionaries. Therefore when the number of Christians was increasing they felt the need of the church. To meet this long-felt need a junior college was started in 1909. In 1920 the college by the called Judson College after the name of the first missionary in Burma, became a constituent college to the University of Rangoon.

2. Theological Education: As the church was growing so also the need of the indigenous leadership. The first step taken in this regard was that the Karen Theological seminary which was located at Moulmein was shifted to centrally location at Insein in the suburb of Rangoon to serve more students coming from different places in Burma. Also under the initiative of Burma Baptist Convention in co-operation with Methodist and other denominations, a new theological institution called Burma Divinity School was established in Insein. This institution, now called Myanmar Institute of Theology, is affiliated with the Association for theological education in South East Asia, offering courses like B.Th., B.R.E., B.D. Similarly regional Bible institutions such as Kachin Bible School at Kutkai in Kachin State; Asho Chin Bible School at Thayetmyo; Pangwai Bible School and Shan State Bible school in Shan State; Zomi Theological College, Falam; Union Theological School, Matupi; Baptist Theological School, Tedim; in Chin State, were started. All these institutions, to mention a few, become the back-bone of the church for leadership training and advancement of theological education in the country.

3. Healing Ministry: During this period when the missionary work was expanded in various fields, the medical service occupied the vital part of the Christian mission. As a matter of fact, Dr Jonathan Price and Dr J. Dawson were medical missionaries appointed by the American Baptist Mission in the early mission work in Burma. Yet comparing with programmes in some other countries of Asia and Africa medical work was not given enough emphasis in Burma. In 1890s medical programmes were started in Shan State at Hsiphaw, Mongnai, Namkham and Kengtung. Because of his dedicated and outstanding service Dr Gordon Seagrave is still remembered as legendary Burma Surgeon. In the farflung Indo-Burma border of Chin Hills Mr N. East and Dr J.G. Woodin came in 1902 and 1910 respectively. Unfortunately due to health reasons they could not continue the work and left for home. In Rangoon with the initiative of Christian communities of Anglicans, Baptist, and Methodist a Christian hospital was started. In the Sgaw Karen area Sir San C. Po Memorial Hospital was maintained by the Bassein-Myangmya Karen Association at Yedwinyegan.

4. Agricultural School: As a part of the whole gospel missionaries started Agricultural School at Pyimana in 1915. J.E. Case and his wife were responsible for this unique ministry of the church among the rural poor in Burma. Case was very much concerned about the hill peoples of Burma and their sub-marginal existence. Maung Shwe Wa in Burma Baptist Chronicle wrote his moving account on this evangelism through agricultural as follows:

Staff and students were tireless in carrying the gospel of better rural life not only took the graduating class on a launch tour through the delta. They carried with them band instruments, livestock, seeds, medicines, literature, and play costumes. On arrival at a village, the first item on the agenda was an inspection of the nearby fields as a demonstration to the students and as a basis for giving practical advice to the farmers. During the noonday rest period, when the villagers returned from the fields, the brass band would play and lectures on various subjects

were given. Free medical treatment was given to sufferers from itch and other diseases, and small packets of medicines were sold. Charts and demonstrations were prepared during the afternoon. Then more band music at dusk would bring from two to five hundred villagers from the surrounding fields and creeks. Agricultural and health talks, Burmese-style dramas about the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan, and the Christian testimonies filled the evening and sent the villagers home with new ideas and new invention.(13)

5. Ecumenical Co-operation: Among the Baptist Christians back in 1865 the Burma Baptist Missionary Convention was formed with an objective to accelerate the evangelistic work in Burma. Later the name was changed to Burma Baptist Convention to which all the regional and linguistic groups were affiliated. In 1963 when the Sesquicentennial Celebration of the coming of the Judsons in Burma was held in Rangoon the first Christian conversions took place among the tribes and races of Burma were recorded chronologically as follows -- Mon and Burmese in 1813, English, Chinese and Indian in 1827, Sgaw Karen 1828, Pwo Karen 1836, Pa-O 1838, Karen Hill Tribes 1853, Asho Chin 1856, Shan 1860, Kachin & Lisu 1877, Zomi Chin 1899, Lahu & Wa 1904, Akha 1936, Naga 1953. (14) Burma Baptist Convention is a member body of the Asian Baptist Federation and the worldwide Baptist World Alliance.

As regards to the ecumenical movement a regional Christian Council for Burma was formed in 1914 under the National Christian Council of India. When Burma became independent country in 1948 all Protestant groups in Burma formed Burma Christian Council which became affiliated body to the East Asia Christian Council (now Christian Conference of Asia). All the major denominations like Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, etc are affiliated to the Burma Christian Council. Christians form 4.9% of the whole population. (15)

III. Church and State

Buddhism is the religion of the predominant ethnic and cultural group of Burmese who form the 89% of the whole population. It was Theravada Buddhism which entered Burma in the first century of Christian era. "A saying frequently repeated in Modern is: 'To be a Burman is to be a Buddhist'"(16) Therefore the relationship between the state and the religion has been strongly influenced by the political development of the country. From 1950 till military take-over in March 1962 Burma followed a policy of close association between Buddhism and the state. During U Nu's government the Sixth Great Buddhist Council was held in 1954-1956 for promotion of Buddhism. The proposal to make Buddhism the state religion became an important election manifesto in the 1960 election. U Nu's party came into power and the constitutional amendment was passed to declare Buddhism as the state religion of the country. It was done against the wishes of religious and minorities in Burma. When the military regime under the leadership of General Ne Win took the administration of the country the new policy of 'Burmese Way to Socialism' under the Burma Socialist Programme Party which did not recognise the state religion was introduced. Under one-party state all the organizations including Christian organizations were required to register with the government. All the Christian schools and hospitals were nationalized in 1965-66. Government refused to renew the permits of foreign missionaries. As a result 234 Catholic priests and nuns, 56 American Baptist, 29 Anglicans, 18 American Methodists, 15 British Methodists, 8 Salvation Army and 7 A.G. workers were expelled from the country.(17) Christian literatures, journals and magazines could not be printed without being officially censored. Supply of printing papers were controlled by the government, permits was required to buy papers for books and magazines.

Under such a critical situation what was the life and witness of the church? How Christians were living in such hostile environments? These are important issues for Asian Christians who live in a pluralistic society. In connection with this issue I would like to quote the comment and observation Mr Kambawza Win has made on nationalism and Christianity in Burma. Mr Win is

the coordinator of the Institute of Christian Participation in the Development of Shan, Kayah and Karen State Communities. I believe what he has written in 1988 is still relevant even today. I quote:

In 1965 the Christian Institutions like schools, hospitals, training colleges were nationalized. The military junta perspective was that these private schools especially those run by the Christian constitute a system apart from the government run schools undermine the Burmese culture and does not promote nationalism. Together with these nationalization the foreign missionaries were asked to leave the country. Several people thought that by these measures the Christians in Burma would disintegrate and the church would only exist in name as in the Burmese monarchical days. But soon they were surprised to discover that the Church not only survived but flourished by leaps and bounds. The Christian with a little 2% has now become 5%. The hand of Providence can be clearly seen as the Burmese Christians were emancipated from the strangle of the missionaries and could embark on its own programme of propagating and identifying with the people. This incident greatly changed the notion of Christianity in Burma.(18)

Today after forty years of military regime the political situation is still fluid. In 1990 multi-party elections for the first time after 1962 were held and the opposition party the National League for Democracy under the leadership of Mrs Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of General Aung San, won the majority of seats in Parliament, yet the military government under the name of State Law and Order Restoration Committee(SLORC) did not like to hand over power. Recently many of Arakanese (Rakhine) Muslim minorities in Burma fled from their country and took shelter in Bangladesh. Like minority Christians in Pakistan and Bangladesh Christians in Burma also are silently struggling for the fundamental rights of freedom of religion and worship as envisaged by the international laws.

IV. Conclusion

An attempt has been made to trace the history of Christianity from the arrival of Adoniram Judson in 1813. As we have seen response to the gospel was slow from the Burmese Buddhist. Great conversions took place only when the mission centre was started in Moulmein in the area of Karen tribesmen.

As regards to methods of evangelism, in addition to personal evangelism with tract distribution, zayat preaching, house visits, establishment of schools for children, hospitals and dispensaries for the sick, agricultural evangelism among the rural poor, especially among the frontier tribes, proved to be and useful instrument.

During U Nu's government Buddhism, in spite of strong protest from religious minorities, was made state religion in 1962. That was the beginning of the political trouble in Burma. Under the military regime of General Ne Win secular and materialistic philosophy of "Burmese Way to Socialism" was introduced in the country. Since then, Christians and other religious minorities have been facing all sorts of restrictions and hardships. In the midst of political turmoil and vicissitudes the church has been growing steadily both in quantity and in quality. Again this created another problem in the minds of majority Burmese. "Because Christians in the minority groups have received more education and have arisen as new leaders, they have often appeared to be anti-Burma and anti-nationalistic."(19) The question could be asked what is the role and function of the Christian church as prophetic ministry in such a political and religious environment prevailing in the present Burma? I believe this is the relevant issue for discussion not only in Burma but also in other Asian countries we Christians are in confrontation with.

Endnotes:

1. Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1993, p. 676.
2. I have adopted for this paper the term "Burmese" as employed by D.G.E. Hall in A History of Southeast Asia as a dominant linguistic and racial group of Burma as distinct from the non-Burmese peoples - Karens, Shans, Kachins and Chins, etc. See p. 708.
3. Barrett, David B., World Christian Encyclopaedia, p. 202.
4. Hackett, William D., "Burma" in Church in Asia, ed. Donald H. Hoke, Chicago, 1975, p. 119.
5. Encyclopaedia Britannica, p. 676.
6. Hackett, William D., op. cit. p. 123.
7. Ibid., p. 124.
8. Wa, Maung Shwe, Burma Baptist Chronicle, Board of Publication, Burma Baptist Convention, Rangoon, 1963, p. 66.
9. Barrett, David B., op. cit. p. 123.
10. Wa, Maung Shwe, op. cit. p. 199.
11. Johnson, Robert G., History of American Baptist Chin Mission, Vol. II, Valley Forge, 1988, p. 1,302.
12. Wa, Maung Shwe, Op. cit. p. 204.
13. Ibid., p. 247-248.
14. Wa, Maung Shwe, op. cit., p. xiv.
15. Encyclopaedia Britannica, p. 676.
16. Smith, Donald E., Religion and Politics in Burma, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1965, p. 83.
17. Barrett, David B., op. cit., p. 203.
18. Win, Kanbawza, "Colonialism and Christianity in Burma (A Burmese Perspective)" in Asia Journal of Theology, Vol. 2, No. 2, October 1988, Singapore, p. 278-279.
19. Hackett, William D., op. cit., p. 108.

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8. Latourette, Kenneth S., Christianity in a Revolutionary Age, Vol. Pp. 338-343.
9. Hall, D.G.E., A History of South-East Asia, Macmillan and Co. Ltd., London, 1960.

10. Seagrave, Gordon S., Burma Surgeon, London, 1945.
11. Anderson, Courtney, To the Golden Shore: The Life of Adoniram Judson, Boston, 1956.
12. Hall, Gordon L., Golden Boats from Burma, Macrae Smith Company: Philadelphia, 1961.
13. Jessy, F. Tennyson, The Story of Burma, Macmillan and Co., Ltd., London, 1946.
14. Barrett, David B., World Christian Encyclopaedia, Kenya, 1980.
15. Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1993.

Magazines and Journals

1. Asia Journal of Theology
2. International Review of Mission

About the writer

The Reverend Khup Za Go, M.A., M.Th., has a number of books published both in Tedim Chin and English to his credit, namely, *Tedim Lai Siangtho Hong Piankhiatna*, *Tedim Pau leh Lai Khantoh Thu*, *Zo Minam Tawh Kisai Thu*, *Lai Zat Tangzang*, *Khristian Khutzat*, *Leivui Panin*, *Christianity in Chinland*, *A Critical Historical Study of Bible Translations among the Zo People in North East India*, *Zo Chronicles*, etc. This paper was prepared back in 1993 while doing his theological study at the UTC, Bangalore.

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