

Title:

Toward an Ecumenical Theology of Interreligious Relationship:

Exploring Legal and Theological Issues and Avenues of Quality Buddhist-Christian Relations in Myanmar

ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to answer the question of the need for quality interreligious relationships between Buddhists and Christians in Myanmar by exploring current legal and theological issues as the root causes and relevant avenues toward a contextually ecumenical theology of interreligious relations. The study shows that three critical issues hampered the improvement of the quality of interreligious relations: first, both religions' spirits of religious exclusivism; second, unethical practices of religious conversion through forced conversion and proselytism; and third, the Religious Conversion Law (*Upadi*) which limits religious freedom of belief and conversion. It will claim that while the Buddhist nationalistic attempt for legal protection of religion is the leading cause and purpose of the controversial *Upadi*, certain ecclesial practices of conversion may also have impacted interreligious relations to a certain extent.

In order to see the real situation on the ground of how the law and conversion were understood, interpreted and responded to by Christian leaders, I conducted field research in the Rakhine and Yangon regions in 2019 and 2020, analysed data and discussed findings by utilizing a qualitative empirical research method (QER). The empirical findings demonstrate that mission-minded Evangelical church leaders were more likely to have accepted and practised such proselytised conversions which the *Upadi* prohibits by asserting that it is biblical and found in the Great Commission of Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:18-20), which they interpreted as a *conversion mission*. I shall argue that exclusivist theology, in both missiological and soteriological sense, is a critical challenge to ecumenical interreligious theology as such exclusivist understanding, teaching, and unethical practices of conversions would aggravate the situation of interreligious tension and conflicts instead of building better interreligious relationships between Buddhism and Christianity. Therefore, this thesis proposes pragmatically relevant avenues toward a contextualized Christian

ecumenical theology of interreligious practice, which may ultimately create better-quality interreligious relationships in the pluralistic society of Myanmar. The thesis concludes that the Ecumenical Theology of Interreligious Relationships (ETIR) must be spiritual, ethical, and practical.

The aim of the thesis is to explore how Protestant and Evangelical church leaders experienced and interpreted the impacts of legal regulation of religious conversion through the RCL and the practices of religious conversion on interreligious relationships between Buddhism and Christianity in Myanmar and identify and reflect on the challenges this poses to ecumenical theology.

The research questions (RQs) are:

- (i) How do Christian leaders from Protestant and Evangelical churches in Myanmar understand, interpret, experience, and respond to the RCL and understand and practice the mission of religious conversion and interreligious relationships?
- (ii) To what extent and in what way do the conversion law and conversion practices affect the church's life and the interreligious relationships with Buddhists?
- (iii) What are critical challenges emerging from the empirical findings and applicable approaches/relevant avenues toward an ecumenical theology of interreligious relations for the churches in Myanmar?