

Title:

**Toward an Ecumenical Theology of Interreligious Relationship:  
Exploring Legal and Theological Issues and Avenues of Quality Buddhist-Christian  
Relations in Myanmar**

By Van Hmung (MF)

**Thesis Summary**

The historical interreligious relationship between Buddhism and Christianity in Myanmar has been an up-and-down quality situation for centuries. However, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the constant attempts of Western Protestant missionaries to expand Christianity in the Buddhist land, their relationships started being conflictive; interreligious tensions became ever increasingly intensified, and the ideological wall of the interreligious boundary from both sides was built. At worst, their moral attitudes, ideological views, and spiritual/religious perceptions toward the other became seriously exclusivism. From this context, two fundamental questions are raised: what could be the root causes of making them religiously exclusivist and what kinds of theory could be applied?

This thesis attempts to answer these questions about the need for quality interreligious relationships 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. As the study suggested that fresh *spiritual*, *ethical* and *practical* approaches be applied to build a new, prosperous, peaceful, and graceful interreligious relationship, the thesis concludes that the Ecumenical Theology of Interreligious Relationships (ETIR), therefore, must be spiritual, ethical, and practical.

As a *Three-in-One* model, they are indivisible, and are golden rules to be respected and followed by the churches in Myanmar. This model has fundamental values. Relationships with religious others plus all these values are called “quality interreligious relationships”, or without them, “quality interreligious relationships” would be impossible to build (*see 7.3*).