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NAMING GOD IN BURMA TODAY

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## INTRODUCTION

The first Christian theological naming of God in Burma took place when Ann and Adoniram Judson, the first American Baptist missionaries who arrived in the country in 1813 AD, used a Burmese word *Tavara Hpaya* in explaining the Christian concept of God.<sup>1</sup> By using this name, Judson explained the conceptual as well as practical aspects of Christianity to the Burmese Buddhists as answers to their worldly and ultimate religious concerns: "the improving of lives in this world and a happy life in heaven."<sup>2</sup> His creative articulation of Christian faith and missiological approach which the *Burma Baptist Chronicle* records as "Judson's message and method," is held by Christians in Burma as the "Burmese Christian tradition."<sup>3</sup>

However, as Christian mission work expanded rapidly among other ethnic groups in Burma, whose social, religious, cultural and linguistic forms were different from that of the Burmese proper, missionaries in each local context took up the task of naming God. The divine names they coined or used are meant as answers to the local

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<sup>1</sup>There are some historical evidences for the presence of Christians in Burma since Western traders entered the country in the fifteenth century. De Brito, a Portuguese commander of Syriam [now part of Rangoon], was said to have built a church and appointed two Jesuits to convert the local people. Natshinnaung, the king of Taungoo made an alliance with De Brito against the king of Ava, who soon seized Syriam 1610 AD and executed both men. History recorded that the king of Taungoo became a Christian just before his execution. King Alaungpaya also appointed two white priests for his White gun-men in 1756. Felix Carey (son of William Carey) who arrived two years earlier than the Judsons also did some Bible translations into Burmese. Unfortunately, what kind of name they had used for God all these years, whether Judson himself coined the Burmese word for God *Tavara Hpaya*, or copied it from others is unknown. But Judson is the one who disputes the name theologically among the Burmese, even before the King in 1819 AD.

<sup>2</sup>Maung Shwe Wa, *Burma Baptist Chronicle* (Rangoon, Burma: The University of Rangoon Press, 1963), 40.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 39-40.

people's existential and ultimate religious quests.

For instance, the Karens, the largest Christian group in Burma understand the arrival of the missionaries as the recovery of their long-lost civilization and reestablishment of their culture and religion that would result in their freedom from political as well as spiritual bondage.<sup>4</sup> The Chins, the second largest group after the Karens, also understand the arrival of the gospel as the dawn of their tribal history, that is, the liberation from fear of *rai* spirits in their traditional religion and from tribal wars which negatively effected their social and economic life.<sup>5</sup> It will not be wrong to generalize that all Christian groups in Burma share this common experience of "liberation" or "hope of liberation." In short, they understand this event and its symbolic embodiments as the historical as well as theological foundation of their local churches.

However, when the task of doing theology has become a local church responsibility, some Christians in Burma began to be aware of the limits of their theological traditions, and saw the urgent need of reinterpreting Christian faith and practice in a new way if the church was to survive and address problems engendered by the contemporary world. Being inspired largely by other Asian theologians, theologians from the ecumenical circle in Burma have tried different forms of "indigenous" or "contextual" theology, and have raised questions which are facing the church today. Unfortunately, these attempts have not been fruitful so far because of their tendency to

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<sup>4</sup>San C. Po, The Burma and The Karens (London: Elliot Stock, 1928), 2. He candidly states that the freedom is from the Burmans who oppressed and enslaved them for centuries.

<sup>5</sup>Sing Khaw Khai, "The Theological Concept of Zo in the Chin tradition and Culture" (B.R.E. thesis, Burma Institute of Theology, 1984), ii.

generalize and reject all sorts of church or missionary traditions as "theological misnaming," and "missiological failure."<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, the Evangelical Christian groups have proposed a revival [born-again] movement as means of revitalizing the church and reclaiming its true tradition.<sup>7</sup> Although it helped revive the church, such a theology could not move the church beyond a mere renewal of an exclusive understanding of herself as the only agent-institution of God for "soul-saving" and "blessing."

The church in Burma is in trouble on account of such theological confusions, which David Tracy would describe as a "simplistic rejection of church traditions and mere repetition of traditional symbols."<sup>8</sup> Thus, a theological method that will reaffirm church traditions and creatively reinterpret them as answers to questions posed by the contemporary world has become an urgent theological concern. The "theological method" in a Burmese context, may not apply in a strict sense, as aforementioned church traditions are not available in the form of theological statements.<sup>9</sup> Still, there is no doubt that the final answer of all the "whys" and "hows" of the missionary naming

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<sup>6</sup>San Si Htay, "The Gospel and Social Change," (Research Paper, The Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, 1985), 7. See also Kosuke Koyama, No Handle on The Cross (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976), 38-39; C.S.Song, Tell Us Our Names, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), 92.

<sup>7</sup>Khuang Nawni, "The History and Growth of The Churches in Chin State, Myanmar(Burma)" (Th.M. thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1990),65-83.

<sup>8</sup>David Tracy, The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1984), 104. Tracy points out that the church cannot survive simply by dismissing its own tradition, or by mere repetition of its traditional symbols without a critical reinterpretation.

<sup>9</sup>For example, in his Two-Volume, 1320-page record of "History of the American Baptist Chin Mission," Dr. Robert G. Johnson makes no mention of doctrinal statements the missionaries accepted and advocated. See Robert G. Johnson, History of American Baptist Chin Mission, vol. 1 & 2 (Valley Forge, Pa.: By the author, 1988). Dr. Judson hardly wrote theology except in his tracts and personal diary.

and social enterprises is "God."<sup>10</sup> If every divine name, as asserted by Samuel Rayan, "arises out of an encounter between reality and people, and expresses a human group's *response to reality's self-disclosure in a given place and time*,"<sup>11</sup> the divine names among Christian groups in Burma will be nothing less than concrete faith statements if properly and systematically analyzed. We therefore will propose "naming God" as a theological method for the analysis of the divine names: their origin, meaning, theological content or embodiment, practical applications, and the possibility of reinterpreting or changing them when necessary without devaluing their theological value in a given time and place.

As divine names among Christian groups in Burma originated in particular social and cultural contexts, the first chapter of this dissertation will deal briefly with the idea of naming: i.e., meaning and function as well as its changing patterns, by taking the Burmese and Chin ethnic naming traditions as examples. According to these two traditions, a name is the "embodiment of actual experience and orientation of life," and "misnaming" occurs whenever there is ignorance about the naming tradition itself or a wrong understanding of meaning and value of the named.

We will also try to show the negative and positive effects of naming on the people when missionaries applied local naming traditions in naming God. As illustrations, we will discuss Judson's naming of God *Tavara Hpaya*, in Burmese, and the Chin-missionaries' naming of God *Pathian*, in Chin, and argue that if the idea of naming is rightly understood, naming God anew in the case of misnaming is not only a possibility but a necessity.

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<sup>10</sup>John Macquarrie, New Directions in Theology Today, vol. III, God and Secularity (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, ?), 15-16. Macquarrie asserts that our understanding of God underlies how we develop and do theology.

<sup>11</sup>Samuel Rayan, "Naming the Unnamable" in Naming God, ed. Robert P. Scharlemann (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1985), 4.

As alternatives to missionary theological understanding and method in Burma have emerged largely due to the influence of doing theology in other parts of Asia, Chapter 2 of this dissertation will deal with different forms of modern Asian theology. As these new theological methods were originated as part of the national struggle against colonialism and the resistance to and adaptation of modern technological culture, they raise important questions about colonialism, cultural and theological imperialism, national identity, modern technology and Asian spirituality.

In spite of their invaluable contribution in raising these serious questions and in trying theologically to reaffirm Asian values, these alternatives have emphasized so-called Asian values so much so that they have overlooked the ambiguity of human culture and history and necessarily lack an aspect of doing theology that the late Shoki Coe calls the "gospelization of the cultural context itself."<sup>12</sup> Evangelical theologians, on the other hand, stress the other-worldly so much so that they refuse to deal with human reality: e.g., social injustice, political oppression, and everyday human tragedy which are part of life itself in Asia. Therefore, none of these theological methods meets the "criterion of theological authenticity" in an Asian context, that is, "taking Asian reality seriously."<sup>13</sup>

In Chapter 3, We will analyze some significant forms of indigenized, contextual, and evangelical theology in Burma today, and argue that they are unable to take or address the Asian reality as a whole because they reduce God only to the answer to their particular interest or concern. This reductionistic way of understanding God makes the word "God" mere rhetoric or a label which can be controlled or even

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<sup>12</sup>Kosuke Koyama, "Christ's Homelessness," The Christian Century (July 14-21, 1993), 702-703.

<sup>13</sup>C.S.Song, Theology From The Womb of Asia (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986), 58-59. See also Kosuke Koyama, Waterbuffalo Theology, 6th ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989), 23.

manipulated. Thus, we will propose a radically monotheistic understanding of God, that is, God as "the ground, meaning, and direction for all the abovementioned particularities," and also as a solution to the problems of reductionism and missionary misnaming.

In Chapter 4, we will try to name God anew in the Chin-Burmese context by replacing the present name of God *Pathian* with *Khuazing* according to the Chin naming tradition as a means of constructing a theology based on a radically monotheistic understanding of God which will reaffirm, reinterpret, and redirect church traditions and help solve the problems caused by theological confusion and conflicts in that particular context. It may be hoped that this example will engender further naming of God adequately among other Burmese Christian groups in their own ways.