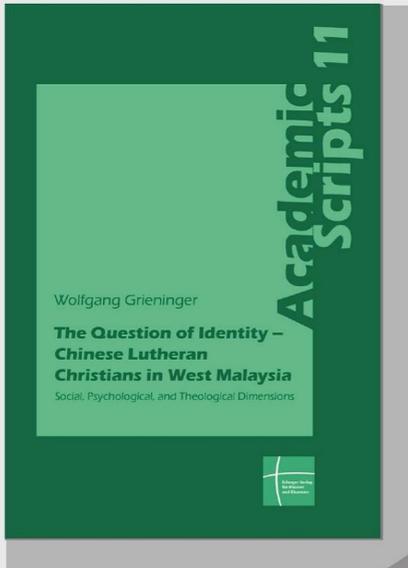


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Peter K. H. Lee

Christian Theology in Myanmar

in a multi-religious, predominantly
Buddhist environment and a society
full of tensions

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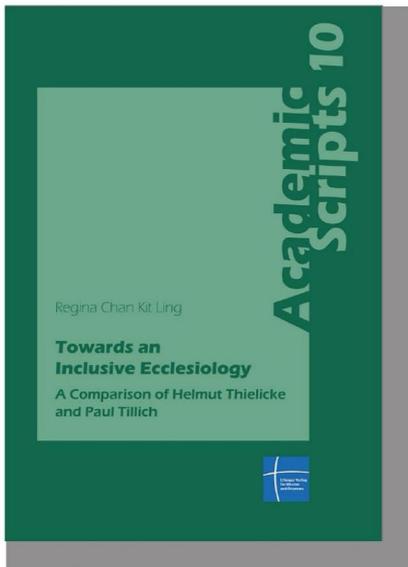
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PROFILES IN ASIAN THEOLOGY
VOL. 2: MYANMAR



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CONTENTS

- iv Preface of the Authors
- v Foreword

1 INTRODUCTION

THE KEY TO CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY IN MYANMAR: U KHIN MAUNG DIN 1

- 10 Person
- 10 Basic concern
- 11 The fundamental issue: God
- 13 The universal Christ and the historical Jesus
- 15 Perspectives for the understanding of man
- 16 A new understanding of mission
- 21 Preliminary reflections

CONCERNS OF CURRENT THEOLOGY IN MYANMAR 23

1) Christians in Myanmar: foreigners in their own country 25

- 27 Historical reasons
- 44 Inadequate missionary theology

2) General principles of Contextualization 55

- 55 Aim of contextualization
- 59 Samuel Ngun Ling: Theology listening to the East and the West

3) Multireligiosity, Ethnic Diversity and Discrimination	64
65 The majority religion: Burmese Buddhism	
80 Ethnic and religious minorities: A fundamental issue for Myanmar and the church there	
86 Discrimination	
4) Theology relating to Myanmar traditional religiosity, Nat Worship	101
101 Simon Pau Khan En	
124 Moe Moe Nyunt: The spirits and the Holy Spirit	
5) Basic approach to Buddhism	134
134 Samuel Ngun Ling: Differences and common ground with Buddhism	
141 Saw Hlaing Bwa: Buddhism better than Christianity?	
6) Theology of Religions, Mission and Dialogue (mainly referring to Buddhism)	143
143 Simon Pau Khan En	
149 Samuel Ngun Ling	
157 Saw Hlaing Bwa	
166 Dialogue at Myanmar Institute of Theology	
169 Pau Lian Mang	
173 Ciin Sian Khai	
177 Zam Khat Kham	
7) Economy – Globalization – Environment	180
180 Economy and the impact of globalization	
191 Environment	
210 Other aspects of globalization	

8) Political situation	212
212 A culture of violence	
212 Aung San Suu Kyi and the recent developments	
217 Theological Response to the Political Situation	
9) Denominationalism and Ecumenism	256
256 The situation	
257 Ecumenical theology	
10) Women's situation and feminist theology	264
264 The origin of feminist theology in Myanmar	
265 The role of women in society and church and in traditional theology	
275 Feminist theology: Anna May Say Pa	
FINAL REFLECTIONS ON THE MAIN FIGURES IN THIS PRESENTATION	298
298 Khin Maung Din	
302 Simon Pau Khan En	
305 Samuel Ngun Ling	
312 Saw Hlaing Bwa	
318 Attempts at a Gospel for Myanmar Buddhists	
CONCLUDING REMARKS	323
325 A challenge from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's thinking	

Note

Note that texts not specifically marked are mainly written by Karl-Hermann Mühlhaus, however, sometimes including material written by Peter K.H. Lee (e. g. on p.1, 3f, 64). The responsibility for errors in those sections is with Karl-Hermann Mühlhaus.

Preface of the Authors

This is the second volume of a project called *Profiles in Asian theology*. The first volume was on India.³ Originally we had not planned to write a whole volume on Myanmar, but to cover East and South East Asia in the second volume. However, we found so rich material that it took more and more space to do justice to it. And Myanmar was, and perhaps now is again, a country where it was not so easy to communicate with the outside world. Due to health reasons, the major part and some editorial work has fallen to Karl-Hermann Mühlhaus.

We have tried to give an idea of the amazing theological work in this suffering but also charming country, with many religions, but shaped by the main religion of Buddhism and with the widely practiced folk religion of Nat Worship. Christian theologians in Myanmar have struggled with the colonial heritage in theology, church and society, facing the situation of many decades mostly under dictatorial governments, the corruption and the poverty, the exploitation of the environment, and the male predominance. They have traced God's working in their country and searched for ways of the Gospel in this situation, not without hope, as not at least shown in Peter K.H. Lee's contributions.

We would like to thank those theologians Karl-Hermann Muehlhaus has met in Myanmar and who have helped generously, especially at Myanmar Institute of Theology, Rev. Dr. Samuel Ngun Ling and Dr. Saw Hlaing Bwa, and the librarian, Mr. Klo Htoo, furthermore Rev. Dr. Lal Tin Hre at the Association for Theological Education in Myanmar. Also very welcoming and helpful with materials and information have been the (Anglican) Holy Cross Theological College in Yangon with its president and the librarian Rev. John Thet Lwin, and the (Methodist) Myanmar Theological College in Mandalay with then Principal Rev. Thang Suan Pau and Rev. Gospel Hrilvelthanga.

We also would like to thank our other former students who have first introduced us to this country and some of its culture and church life, and who have especially helped Karl-Hermann Muehlhaus to make his first visit to Myanmar in 2004 a deep experience.

3 Peter King Hung Lee and Karl-Hermann Mühlhaus, *Profiles in Asian Theology*, Vol.I: India, Hong Kong: Lutheran Theological Seminary, 2015 ISBN 978-9-88163-075

Furthermore, we would like to thank for the sharing with Peter K.H. Lee of the former doctoral students of Chung Chi College, Hong Kong, Dr. Pau Lian Mang and Dr. Khin Maung Yee, thank also Ms. Christa von Zychlin of Lutheran Theological Seminary Hong Kong, who has given access to her materials from Myanmar, and, last not least Mr. Immanuel Lal Siang Awng, who has done a great job in copying material for this study. He, Rev. John Thet Lwin, Mr. Klo Htoo and Rev. Thang Suan Pau also are former students of Lutheran Theological Seminary Hong Kong.

A special thank you goes to Dr. Samuel Ngun Ling for his foreword and some valuable hints.

Peter King Hung Lee
and Karl-Hermann Mühlhaus

Foreword

Focusing on collective Myanmar theological resources, Karl-Hermann Mühlhaus and Peter K. H. Lee have made great efforts to put together Myanmar Christian theologians' views and thoughts, doing their homeland theologies in response to questions and challenges that come out of the Myanmar Buddhist and ethnic Christian contexts.

Christianity in Myanmar had been and still is looked upon as a part of the Western colonialists' so-called three Ms' scheme (Merchant, Mission and Military), and at the same time the national Christians are often suspected of being advocates of Western imperialism whose presence can turn out to be a threat to Buddhist nationalism and even to the solidarity of the nation. "A Burman is synonymous with a Buddhist, and so when a Burman turns to Christian, he or she is looked upon with suspicion as pro-British, pro-American, and a traitor to Burma (sic)," said a prominent Burmese Christian historian and scholar, Prof. Pe Maung Tin.⁴ To remove such an undesirable suspicion, the need to make Christianity a homegrown religion of the country is strongly felt among the Myanmar Christian theologians.

The basic concern of all the Myanmar Christian theologians has been and still is to present the Christian message in a new way by means of contex-

4 Bouquet, A.C., *The Christian Faith and Non-Christian Religions* (1958).

tualization so that the majority Buddhists and minority ethnic religious peoples may be able to understand each other better and stronger in their relationships, thereby promoting inter-religious dialogue and peace among themselves regardless of religion, ethnicity, and culture.

As religion plays a potential role in preserving and promoting national and social identities, ethnic Christian identities in Myanmar often clash with the predominant Buddhist national ideologists. In fact, a key concern that has been reflected throughout the collective research includes: – how can Christianity in its Western flowering take root in the soil of a deeply Buddhist culture? Or how can the fusion of ethnic Christian national identity with the cultural dominance of Buddhism endure for centuries? - With these concerns in mind, most Myanmar theologians insist that Christians must approach Buddhists with humility and respect rather than condemnation if there is to be any authentic dialogue. In this light, a new pedagogy and a new approach to doing Christian theology in Myanmar always needs to be sought as the ethnic Christians have often encountered the challenges and threats of Buddhist nationalism. In this vein, the Christian missionaries in Myanmar should be more like pearl-hunters that seek the treasure of truth in the others rather than pearl-merchants who fail to see the value of the others but only blindly want to sell out their own treasure of truth.

This book is indeed a must-read book for the benefits of blended theological insights of the local Myanmar Christian theologians and scholars. The readers will be thankful to Karl-Hermann Mühlhaus and Peter K. H. Lee who have tremendously contributed widely and richly to the formation and reconstruction of the diverse Myanmar theological resources as a new epoch-making in continuing the articulation of contextual Christian theologies in Myanmar Buddhist context.

Samuel Ngun Ling, PhD., D.D.

Professor of Systematic Theology & Former President
Myanmar Institute of Theology; Seminary Hill,
Insein Yangon, Myanmar.

INTRODUCTION

Myanmar is not really known as a country prominent in Christian theology, rather as a Buddhist country. It is located in Southeast Asia, called 'Burma' for centuries, in the northwestern frontier bound by India; further south by a corner of Bangladesh; on the northeastern side touching China's Yunnan; further down, Laos; southward, reaching Thailand. It is known as a country with a military dictatorship which recently had opened a little towards democratic development and given some space for activity to the "Lady", Aung San Suu Kyi, who won the parliamentary elections in 1990, but was prevented by the military from taking office and from then on was under house arrest much of the time, until she was released in 2010. Her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), could take part again in the election in November, 2015, and won with a majority of around 80 %, which meant that they won the majority of the seats in both houses of parliament, although one fourth of the seats are reserved for the military.

However, the constitution of 2008 does not allow Aung San Suu Kyi to become president by stating that nobody can be president who has children with a foreign citizenship. Aung San Suu Kyi was married to a British, who died of cancer in 1999. Her children hold British passports. Therefore, instead of her a person of her trust, Htin Kyaw, her long-time assistant in the NLD, became president and Aung San Suu Kyi the first female Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of President's Office. Htin Kyaw also created for her the position of State Counsellor (de facto Prime Minister).³ So she was the de facto leader of the government and the leader of the National League for Democracy. However, the military still maintained control of the country.⁴

3 See e. g. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/un-general-assembly-speech-aung-san-suu-kyi-pledges-to-uphold-minority-rights-in-un-speech-but-a7322051.html>, accessed October 27, 2016

4 about details see below, p.212, 225f

Even so this new development was an amazing change. It was the consequence of a cautious opening of the country under the former President Thein Sein, himself originally a general, and gave hope for the future. Yet such hopes were already dampened by Aung San Suu Kyi's silence about the brutal expulsion of ca. one million Muslim Rohingyas to Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia and other countries in the region.⁵

And this opening seems to have come to an end: In national elections on November 8, 2020, Aung San Suu Kyi and her party won with an even greater majority than in 2015, which would have allowed her to form the new government.⁶ International observers considered the elections free and fair.⁷ However, on 1 February 2021, the military declared the election fraudulent and invalid and – pronouncing a national emergency – seized power again, arresting Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint (the successor of Htin Kyaw) and forming a government out of generals under Min Aung Hlaing, the Chairman of the State Administrative Council and Commander-in-Chief of the Myanmar Armed Forces. Many demonstrations have been taking place in the whole country for Aung San Suu Kyi and democracy. The ruling forces have intervened brutally, killed over 800 people and arrested thousands.⁸ Aung San Suu Kyi has been put on trial under a number of accusations and apparently shall be silenced and prevented from involvement in politics for a long time. In December 2021 she was “found guilty of inciting dissent and breaking Covid rules” and sentenced to four years, which was later reduced to two years. She has been charged under a number of other charges and sentenced meanwhile to a total of 33 years’ imprisonment, which means for good, since Aung San Suu Kyi is beyond 78 years old.⁹ Her sentence was reduced to 27 years by a grant of pardon on 1 August 2023, which does not make a great change. She was moved “into a VIP Government residence”, however has been reported to be in prison again since the beginning of September 2023.¹⁰ She has denied all charges, and “they have

5 Below, p.84–86, 214–216

6 396 out of 476 elected seats in parliament (83.2 %. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2021_Myanmar_coup_d%27%C3%A9tat#Background, accessed Feb 4, 2021). 322 members are needed for the election of the president and forming a government. The Union Election Commission rejected accusations of irregularities in the elections as unsubstantiated.

7 https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aung_Suu_Kyi, accessed December 17, 2022

8 according to a press statement of the U. S. State Department, of March 25, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/united-states-and-allies-impose-additional-sanctions-on-the-burmese-military-regime/>, accessed December 17, 2022, more than 1,700 people were killed and over 13,000 people detained.

9 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aung_Suu_Kyi, accessed March 26, 2023

10 *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, Munich, of 5/6 February, 2022, p. 7

been widely condemned as unjust.”¹¹ The United Nations, most European countries, and the United States condemned the arrests, trials, and sentences as politically motivated.¹² Aung San Suu Kyi has been trying to get the corruption charges overturned, so far without success.¹³

The country has been transformed dramatically in the last decades by rapid economic development. However, this development also meets with criticism, as we shall see.

After the coup d'état of 2021, there has been more coordinated armed insurrection, beginning in the North, East and West of the country; in the meantime it has spread over the whole country, and the government is under pressure.¹⁴

Christians are a minority of about 6 % in the country with almost 90 % Buddhists.¹⁵ Most of the Christians are Baptists with an American, Adoniram Judson, doing pioneer work from 1813.¹⁶ Later on, the Methodists, both from Britain and America, entered into Burma as a mission field (British Methodists in lower Burma, American Methodists in upper Burma). The Anglicans also came with the British. Lutherans and many other churches have followed.

But even with this small basis and in spite of many difficulties and restrictions, there is a vibrant theological scene in Myanmar. All the missions established schools, service centers, and preaching stations. Most of the schools emphasized Bible teaching, with some becoming seminaries to train converted Christians to become clergy. There is an amazing number of theological schools, in Yangon alone around 150. There is a planned effort to build up faculty for such schools. In the last 20 years, quite a number of students have been able to study abroad in different countries, among others at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Hong Kong, the Chinese University Hong Kong and Trinity Theological College Singapore. As a consequence, there has been an increasing production of bachelor, master and doctor theses, which not necessarily repeated Western patterns, but speak out of, and into, the Burmese-Myanmar con-

11 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-59544484>, accessed June 10, 2023

12 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aung_Suu_Kyi, accessed December 19, 2022

13 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aung_Suu_Kyi On 12 July 2023, November 1, 2023

14 details below p. 216f

15 About details see below, p. 82

16 see below p. 35 f

texts, as we shall see.¹⁷ Some of the young theologians are now in positions of influence, among them prolific writers. Therefore it is not easy to show anything like a complete picture of the theological scene in Myanmar, and it shall not be attempted in this presentation. However, the authors have come across some of this more recent theological work, among them excellent pieces, and a few are discussed below.¹⁸

While Karl-Hermann Mühlhaus has tried to listen to and understand the Myanmar authors, their concerns and their theological responses, and do some reflections, Peter K.H. Lee has a special interest in the development of liberation theologies based on resources both of Christianity and of local traditions and on dialogue, tracing liberative elements helpful for the situation. The older authors like Samuel Ngun Ling, Simon Pau Khan En and Saw Hlaing Bwa have seen the motives of liberation and dialogue as fundamental for their theology as well. However, Lee has found significant attempts in that direction especially among the younger theologians and presented and encouraged such endeavours. He deals, among others, in a very personal account with three young theologians who have theologically reflected on the political situation including the role of Aung San Suu Kyi, also considering the cultural, especially Buddhist, context, and he includes a portrait of Aung San Suu Kyi.¹⁹

This presentation is limited in other ways too. The authors do not understand Burmese and therefore are limited to material available in English or German (and Chinese, as far as Peter K.H. Lee is concerned). Furthermore, they have not lived in Myanmar, one lives in Germany, one in Hong Kong. However, both have taught for many years at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Hong Kong, where many students from Myanmar have studied. Karl-Hermann Mühlhaus has visited Myanmar twice and has got to know the country a little and met some of the theologians. Even so, the attempt to present and discuss theology in Myanmar is a questionable undertaking, considering the words of a prominent Myanmar theologian, Samuel Ngun Ling: "Dogmatic theological statements

17 Already in bachelor theses, students have reflected, among others, on the mission history in their country, the impact of mission, and ways of contextualizing the Christian message and theology. Some have appreciated the bringing of the Gospel by the missionaries to their regions and also later missionary campaigns of their churches (e. g. the campaign "Chin for Christ in One Century"), but have pointed out deficiencies and negative consequences of these activities, too.

18 E.g. Moe Moe Nyunt, below p.124 ff; Pau Lian Mang, below p.169 ff and 233 ff; Ciin Sian Khai, below p.173 ff; Zam Khat Kham, below p.177 f; Khin Maung Yee, below p.227 ff; L. Fanang Lum, p.241 ff; Lahphai Awng Li, p.244 ff and 320 ff; Pausa Gam Ja, p.249 ff; M. La Rip, p.291 ff. Some others are discussed under the topic to which they refer.

19 below p.223-249

from a church that stand on the sideline as spectator or even as interpreter of what God is doing in Asia can carry no conviction. A living theology is born out of the meeting of a living church and its world."²⁰

However, there are some reasons for giving – even from abroad – an introduction into the theological scene in Myanmar. Initially, one idea of presenting theology in Myanmar was to give a voice to theology in a country, from which it was not easy to communicate with the rest of the world. This changed to a certain extent and seemed to be not so urgent any more because of the opening of the country. It has to be seen how the events of 1 February 2021, which have been called a coup d'état, will affect the situation.

In any case, it may be of some interest to get an idea of the blooming theological work in this charming, fascinating and suffering country, which was closed for a long time, and some reflections on Christian theology there, be it for people, especially students from this country, or be it for other people interested in Myanmar and in the way Asians try to think and live the Christian faith. For it is not so easy to find access to the sources.²¹ Christian theologians can become guides into their cultural and religious worlds for people of other cultures.

This presentation can only be a screenshot in the ongoing process of rapid theological development, but it may still give interesting and challenging perspectives into the theological work in this country. Fundamental issues are at stake and it is hoped that in all its fragility and exposure to questions this presentation could be a contribution to the theology in Myanmar and beyond in this very unequal and rapidly changing world, looking at it from a corner which has been under heavy pressure for many decades.

In Myanmar a need has been felt for a theology more suitable for the country than the one left behind by the missionaries.²² A pioneer for this kind of thinking and the resulting efforts of contextualization has actually been a lay theologian, U Khin Maung Din, who has deeply influenced theological thinking in Myanmar. He has tried to develop a theology in

20 Samuel Ngun Ling, "Christ through Our Neighbors' Eyes: A Burmese Christian Observation", *Rays, MIT Journal of Theology*, Vol. 11, Jan 2010, Myanmar Institute of Theology, Insein 11011, Yangon, Myanmar, p. 5-28 (Ngun Ling, "Christ through Our Neighbors' Eyes"), here p. 22. But he also calls for Westerners to study Asian theology (below, p. 59 ff).

21 as even one of the authors has experienced (see below, fn. 24 and 29)

22 about details see below p. 59 ff

communication with Burmese thinking and reality, and since the vast majority of Burmese are Buddhists, he mainly re-thinks theology from the Buddhist context. Therefore, we begin our presentation of theology in and of Myanmar with him. His ideas are a key to contextual theology in Myanmar.

Prominent in following up Khin Maung Din's ideas and in developing contextual theology has been the Myanmar Institute of Theology in Yangon (MIT), a Baptist foundation, which, however, accepted students and teachers, and from 1955 even board members of other denominations.²³ The institute closely cooperates with the ecumenical institutions in Myanmar, the Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC) and the Association of Theological Education in Myanmar (ATEM). At the MIT, dialogue with representatives of other religions, especially Buddhists, is conducted. A number of periodicals are published by the Myanmar Institute of Theology and the mentioned ecumenical organizations, and several books have been produced.

Therefore, this presentation relies widely on the rich material from these sources. In the many theological schools in the country, too, in their daily effort of training the students to communicate the Gospel to Myanmar people in their own language, and in fact in the daily struggle of pastors and evangelists to interpret the gospel for their people, a permanent process of contextualization is taking place. However, – according to Samuel Ngun Ling – the theology they teach and the materials they use are often produced in the West.

This presentation cannot claim validity for the whole of Myanmar theology.²⁴ But at least some of the younger Myanmar theologians included are quite critical over against the theology mainly represented by the Myanmar Institute of Theology and so allow a broader picture of the theological scene in the country.

23 *Myanmar Institute of Theology Diamond Jubilee 1927-2002*, prepared by the Diamond Jubilee Committee, Yangon: Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2002, p. 24 f, 29, 31.

24 For instance, the author has tried to get information from Myanmar Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (MEGST), but has received no answer. More information and reflection about the predominant evangelical type of Christianity in Myanmar can be found in the study of Winfried Maier-Revoredo, *Christian Faith and the Hope for a Better Life. Three Case Studies from Tanzania, Myanmar and Peru*, Erlangen: Erlanger Verlag für Mission und Ökumene, 2021 (Maier-Revoredo), which is based in its Myanmar part mainly on interviewees from Kalaymyo (for which Maier-Revoredo uses the name "Kalay"), with some interviewees from Yangon (mainly MIT).

As it seems, the style of doing theology is different from that in Western countries, where often theologians strive to establish their own identity, their own theology as distinguished from others. In Myanmar the effort of producing a theology responding to the needs of the country is, at least at the institutions and organizations mentioned, a common one, where theologians do not so much emphasize the differences from the thinking of their colleagues, but rather want to get away from what they see as an insufficient theology inherited from the missionaries. In this way, they already represent a style of doing theology different from the West, communal rather than individualistic. This does not exclude that they place emphasis on different aspects and they may differ in judgment. That is why in this volume we have more of a profile of theology in a country (Myanmar), whereas in the first volume (on India) of these *Profiles in Asian Theology* we had mainly profiles of individual theologians. For this reason too, it does not appear to be so necessary to reach completeness and to cover all the theologians. Rather this presentation mainly relies on some prominent theologians and leaders and a few of the younger theologians:

Simon Pau Khan En has studied intensively the common Nat²⁵ Worship in Myanmar and how Christian theology could constructively relate to it and to the challenges of the present time, especially globalization. Samuel Ngun Ling has been struggling with how to communicate the Christian faith in the Buddhist surroundings, has worked at interfaith dialogue and the challenges of the situation, increasingly also of the environment. Both Simon Pau Khan En and especially Samuel Ngun Ling are prolific writers. Both have been remarkable in analyzing the situation and have covered a wide range of issues in their publications. For the presentation of current theology in Myanmar these two authors are primarily referred to. These are supplemented by articles written by Saw Hlaing Bwa, who was the director of the Judson Research Center at the Myanmar Institute of Theology for many years, a thorough and systematic thinker. He has not written so much, but impresses by his learnedness and has developed a rather consistent position.

For women's issues and feminist theology, Anna May Say Pa has done pioneering work and serves as the main resource for this presentation, although there are now more feminist theologians in Myanmar, and younger female theologians have presented penetrating studies.

25 Nats are spirits which are widely considered to influence everyday life.

Most of these theologians are Baptists, as the majority of Protestant Christians in Myanmar are. From the small Lutheran communities the author has discovered only one doctoral thesis²⁶ and a Master of Theology thesis.²⁷ However, the Lutheran World Federation has initiated a number of mission forums in the Mekong area, and as a result some publications have been produced, from the side of Myanmar mainly with contributions by the same authors from Myanmar Institute of Theology, ATEM and MCC.²⁸

26 By Zam Khat Kham, below p. 117–179

27 by San Aung, below p. 122 f

28 *E.g. Ethnicity, Religion and Theology, A Consultation on Ethnic Minorities in the Mekong Region*, Editor-in-Chief Hanns Hoerschelmann, Ass. Ed. Queenie P.Y. Wong and Josephine Leung, Hong Kong: Lutheran Theological Seminary, 2007; *Mission and Dialogue, A Consultation on Mission and Interfaith Dialogue in the Mekong Region*, Editor-in-Chief Hanns Hoerschelmann, Ass. Ed. Queenie P.Y. Wong and Josephine Leung, Hong Kong: Lutheran Theological Seminary, 2008; *Mission and Identity. A Consultation on Mission and Identity Crisis in a Globalized Mekong Region*, Editor-in-Chief Hanns Hoerschelmann, Ass. Ed. Emily Li Pui Yee and Rose Chue, Hong Kong: Lutheran Theological Seminary, 2009; *Mission and Development, In Search for a Mission Strategy in the Mekong Region*, Editor-in-Chief Hanns Hoerschelmann, Ass. Ed. Grace N.L. Luk and Rose Chue, Hong Kong: Lutheran Theological Seminary, 2011; *Contextual Theological Education. Practice and Reflections from the Mekong Region*, Editor-in-Chief Christa von Zychlin, Ass. Ed. Enoch Wong and Rose Chue, Hong Kong: Lutheran Theological Seminary, 2012; *Suffering: Eyes to See and Ears to Hear, A Theological Consultation from the Mekong*, Editor-in-Chief Christa von Zychlin, Ass. Ed. Rose Chue and Sophie Chuek, Hong Kong: Lutheran Theological Seminary, 2012

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10	R. Kit Ling Chan	Towards an Inclusive Ecclesiology	2022
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Karl-Hermann Mühlhaus and Peter K. H. Lee compile diverse perspectives of Myanmar Christian theologians responding to the challenges posed by the Buddhist majority and ethnic Christian contexts. Historically linked to Western colonialism through the “three Ms” (Merchant, Mission, Military), Christianity in Myanmar is often perceived as a foreign and politically suspect religion, especially among Buddhists equating national identity with their faith. To counter such suspicion, theologians emphasize on contextualizing Christianity as a homegrown tradition, fostering interreligious dialogue and peace. Their core concern is how Christianity, with its Western heritage, can take root in a deeply Buddhist culture and coexist with Buddhist nationalism. The work serves as a key resource for understanding the evolving contextual theologies that aim to bridge ethnic and religious divides in Myanmar. This requires humility, respect, and an openness to learn from others, shifting from proselytizing to mutual truth-seeking.

