

Our Hope and Their Hope: Reading Amos' Justice Message in Myanmar Context

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Introduction: Cries for Justice

The theme for the 2002-2003 academic year of Myanmar Institute of Theology was "Let justice roll down like waters."¹ When one reads the whole message of prophet Amos, one will see the aggressive concerns and cries of the prophet for justice in the land of Israel. The justice message of Amos was originally addressed not only to the prophets and religious leaders of Israel at that time, but significantly to the whole nation. God's primary purpose was not to bring doom to the nation, but so that the nation may turn from sin to establish justice in the land, and so that the land may in turn enjoy the goodness of the Lord and the fullness of life. "Seek me and live., Hate evil and love good and establish justice in the gate," cried the prophet Amos."²

Actually, the popular expectation of the people and the nation's leaders in Amos' time conformed to the future promises of God to Israel that were recorded in their traditions. People strongly expected the glorious day of Yahweh when all promises of God to Israel were to be fulfilled, and when Israel would triumph over all her enemies. With this hope and expectation, the nation's development and prosperity were interpreted as a sign of God's favor. However, in contrast to peoples' hope, Amos saw in the nation only darkness and disaster. Here, two kinds of hope emerge as the crisis point—the prophetic, *truthful hope* in God, and the erratic, *false hope* in human capacity. Against this background, Amos daringly predicted the coming of doom, darkness, and God's judgment over the nation of Israel. Amos forcefully and aggressively preached on justice and righteousness of conduct rather than on issues of faith, worship, and cultic practices. Amos severely condemned external cultic practices of religion that de-emphasized or even distorted the internal justice values of individual religious life.

Reading Amos' Justice Message with a Myanmar Christian's Eyes

Amos tried to challenge his people and nation on what the religion of Yahweh essentially meant to them. His challenge was in the form of questions: "Is not justice the essence of religion? Are not the cultic practices, rituals, sacrifices and music merely the external forms of a religion?" Amos finally called for an end or cessation of the external, shallow belief of a religion that often neglected internal relations with God and God's people. The heart of Amos' justice message was, therefore, the conviction that only a nation in which justice

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¹ Amos 5:24

² Amos 5:4, 15.

flows like a river can be, in a true sense, a people in covenant with God. So for Amos, the future of Israel wholly depended upon her in-depth relationship with God. This means that being divorced from the justice of God, the nation of Israel might quickly perish or suffer from doom. In a wider sense, it can be said that the fall of nation states would significantly be due to: (a) morally corrupt acts of individuals such as dishonesty of judges, cruelty of the nation's leaders, and exploitations of business peoples or landlords; and (b) lack of undertaking justice responsibilities by both political and religious leaders of the country. In other words, one could say that the leaders of Israel's nation in Amos' time had completely forgotten that God's justice and holiness upheld their nation in the past.

Amos was serious about moral corruption that pervaded his nation. He questioned the whole system of society, with its political, judicial and cultic institutions, and raised an aggressive voice against poverty and exploitation, wealth and wickedness, and corruption at all levels. One of the very sad things that had happened in his time was that the rich bought the poor and sold them for a pair of shoes, yet their sacrifices made to God in the temples were not denied by the priests.³ The religious leaders, the priests of Amos' time, kept themselves deliberately blind so as not to see the realities of the situation. Having seen such a terrible situation, especially for the poor and the marginalized, Amos painfully felt the need to stand for justice in the midst of all kinds of exploitation and injustice that swept over the nation. He rose up and denounced all ritualistic external showroom of religion that had often overlooked the suffering of the poor people. Amos' demand was vividly the fact that justice and righteousness are to be carried out in right conduct, and in the right relationship with one another for God's delight. Moreover, the loss of freedom and dignity that were once given to many poor and marginalized people in Amos' time now became the reason for God to annihilate all achievements of political and religious leaders. The period of Amos could, therefore, be regarded as one of the *kairos* moments in human history when God demanded *justice praxis*—i.e. socio-politico-religious transformation. This, however, meant the need to overhaul the whole structure of religious, social, and political institutions.

Reading Myanmar Situation with the Eyes of Amos' Justice Message

Amos' justice message— i.e. critiquing the "selling of righteousness for money," "selling of the needy for a pair of shoes," "trampling the head of the poor and turning aside the way of the afflicted"⁴—is a very appealing and challenging theological agenda for Christian and non-Christian religious communities in Myanmar and Asia today. Some relevant issues in Myanmar that correspond to Amos' justice message in his own time are the following:

Selling Righteousness: Political Injustice

How to sell righteousness for money? Who can sell the needy for a pair of shoes but the power-holders who have obtained their power through many means and for different purposes? When a military group seized power in the form of a military *coup d'etat*, their

³ Amos 2:6-7.

⁴ Amos 2:6-7.

power is more or less a sudden violent seizing of state power by a small elite group that has not been elected democratically. Such a dictatorial form of seizing power is political injustice. Power abuse becomes a culture of the ruling military regime, which exercises political power violently and unjustly, justifying it in the name of national peace and reconciliation. Myanmar experiences the longest military rule in the world today. In such a militarized context, where military power and ethnic rights are in constant conflict, people have often tended to overlook the root causes that lie behind the conflict. Political turmoil or conflicts arose many times as the result of mismanaged, scandalous, and corrupt social, economic, and political systems.

It is clear that what the military regime means by peace and freedom is not the peace and freedom the Myanmar people really want. Here again we see peace as crisis that results in hopelessness against people's real hope. What the military regime means by peace is subjugating people to military rule. Militarism is an armed force used for controlling people in the name of peace, without paying attention to the demands of the majority of the people who struggle for freedom and human rights. Strictly speaking, militarism is a denial of peoples' right to life. It is the root of systematic violence. Militarism is a system that terrorizes people with force. Every act or movement of those who oppose the socio-political systems of militarism is simply regarded as an act of violence, neglecting the people's struggles against the central power or control. Human rights activists categorize violence into two forms: *unjust* and *just* forms of violence. The former means violence that goes counter to the trends of human history or that enslaves humankind; the latter means violence that liberates people and human history.⁵ Unjust violence occurs when militarism is mistakenly exercised to terrorize or threaten people against their will. Hence, militarism threatens life, instills fear, intimidation and anxiety, and creates ambiguity, psychological breakdowns and various other types of moral confusion. There is no justice in militarism.

No Delight in Your Feast: Religious Injustice

By religious injustice, we mean all kinds of discrimination, negligence, exclusion, isolation, classification, oppression, and exploitation on the basis of religion or belief. In many cases, religious injustice means religious oppression and discrimination. A great religious injustice that was committed by the powerful and the rich in the time of the prophet Amos, as indicated earlier, was "the selling of the poor for a pair of shoes." Reading the Myanmar context in view of this Amos' message, there also exist different forms of discrimination, oppression, and exploitation on the basis of religion or belief.⁶

Favored Religion: Such a religious discrimination often happens in a situation where the religion of one group is given a special status or favor over religions of other groups.

⁵ For instance, in Myanmar history, the nationalist movements under Independence hero, General Aung San (father of Aung San Suh Kyi) and other nationalists, such as Saya San and U Wisara since the Anglo-Burma wars (1826-1855) throughout the colonial period (1855-1947), represented liberation movements that have demonstrated 'just violence' in over a century-old history of the British Burma.

⁶ For instance, a government servant who is a Christian may be denied promotion to a higher rank because he or she is a Christian, while a Buddhist gets free access to a higher position.

Religious discrimination in Myanmar has much to do with the idea of *favor-ism or favoritism* of the majority's religion. To make this idea clear, I would like to give Buddhism in post-colonial Myanmar as an example. Post-colonial Buddhism in Myanmar took a form of resurgence because of its closer and stronger connections with transitory socio-political powers and roles.⁷ The present military government repeatedly makes a claim to people of all faiths saying that there is freedom of worship and no discrimination on religious grounds.⁸ But Buddhism, which before was a religion simply favored by the state, is now not only reaffirmed by the present military government, but also enjoys a *special distinctiveness or status*⁹ over other religions, and has the state's backing in all its activities. What this *special status* of Buddhism means is the continuity of the socio-political power of Buddhism pointedly sanctioned against the freedom and movements of other religions in the country. The ideology of this "favored religion" tends to minimize the freedom of other "un-favored religions while it claims to embrace all religions to flourish together peacefully and harmoniously. The net result is that the concept of "favor-ism or favoritism" brings about religious discrimination or injustice between different religious adherents in the country, along ethnic/racial lines. This is the ground against which the minority ethnic Christians (un-favored adherents) and the majority Burman Buddhists (favored adherents) have encountered each other in a conflict, leading to a breach of communication between them. This conflict resulted consequently in an *identity crisis*, when an ethnically Burman Buddhist became a Christian. For a Burman Christian who was converted from a Buddhist background, to become a Christian means to abandon his or her socio-cultural identity. It is again based on this wrong conception that many Burman Buddhist nationalists have misinterpreted becoming Christian as an act of disloyalty to the Buddhist society and nation.

Un-favored Religion: As a result, almost all typical Myanmar Buddhists tend to look at Christianity and its adherents with nationalistic eyes, regarding it as an alien element that is connected with Western cultural imperialism, an imported Western religion associated with colonial schemes and movements of the past and from which the whole nation had gained its full independence.¹⁰ In that context, it was the British colonization that made Christianity in Myanmar culturally alien and socio-politically undesirable for typical Myanmar Buddhists who always consider their "Buddhist faith the very *raison d'être* of their state."¹¹

Christianity continues to remain an alien and undesirable element in the eyes of Buddhist nationalists in post-independence period. Hence, the growth of Christian churches in Myanmar continue to be looked at enviously and suspiciously as being part of Western cultural interference in the country's internal affairs, and as being associated with the

⁷ The successive military governments named themselves as State and Law Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and as State and Peace Development Council (SPDC).

⁸ *The New Light of Myanmar* (in English), (5 January 2003): 9.

⁹ *Mirror (Kye-mun)*, a Burmese Newspaper (20, 21, 22 August 2002).

¹⁰ Myanmar was invaded by the British in 1825, 1852 and 1885. Since (1885) then the whole country became the province of India until 1937. Regaining independence on 4 January 1946, at 4:20 am under the leadership of General Aung San, Myanmar joined the United Nations the same year and became a member of ASEAN in 1997.

¹¹ G. E. Harvey, *British Rule in Burma, 1824-1942* (London, 1946), 25-26.

missionary agencies or churches serving as sponsoring bodies. In response to these challenges, the Baptist churches which represent the majority Christian population in Myanmar have developed three self-dependent principles—self-support, self-propagation and self-governance—in order to deconstruct and reconstruct in a new way with the aid of available Myanmar resources. Such a deconstruction and reconstruction process of contextualizing missionary Christianity is a challenging theological task which the Myanmar churches have undertaken since post-missionary period.

Trampling Upon the Poor: Social Injustice

Social justice is the recognition of the rights and obligations of individuals and society. One of its goals is full participation in the institutions and processes of society. The reverse of this action, such as exclusion and marginalization of the poor, is a form of social injustice.¹² Social injustice in Myanmar may take the form of women trafficking, child labor, and discrimination on the basis of race and religion. Myanmar women experience male-dominated patriarchal cultures that are inextricably connected with the existing Buddhist, Christian, and primal faith traditions. It was through these faith-based patriarchal cultures that Myanmar women were acculturated to being subjugated and treated as inferior to men. Myanmar Buddhist girls are not normally allowed, for instance, to go through *shinpyu*—a ceremony of initiation into Buddhist novicehood. Myanmar Buddhist women are not qualified to enter Nirvana, and to be a woman is considered a result of bad *karma* (deeds) in the past life. Christian women are no exception in that their ministerial ordination is still rejected by many church leaders. Religion and culture have, therefore, strongly dominated the Buddhist, Christian and primal religious Myanmar women's lives so that even educated women will support a view that they are less worthy than men, and that they do not need liberation from male dominance.¹³

Violence against Women: One form of violence against women is rape deliberately committed by military personnel in certain regions. In regions where minority ethnic people reside, there are often reports of incidents of rape and other forms of sexual violence committed by military men. Many Myanmar women dare not report such incidents because of fear of being tortured by the perpetrators or because of the Myanmar culture (Buddhist and primal religious) of *shame* or *secrecy* on sexual matters. There have been verbal reports on cases of sexual harassment against women believed to have happened between military men or officers and women office workers or young attractive girls in several ethnic regions. Some young girls in certain ethnic regions have reportedly been systematically forced into sex work by military men through well-paid sexual brokers. Due to the increased militarization and anti-insurgency measures in some Thai-Myanmar border regions such as Wa and Shan states, women are made increasingly vulnerable to

¹² Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 152.

¹³ Anna May Say Pa, "Birthing an Asian Feminist Theology in the Face of the Dragon: A Burmese Perspective," in *WAYS MIT Journal of Theology*, Vol. 3 (February, 2002), 21.

¹⁴ See *License to Rape*, a research book on women's issues by the Shan Human Rights Foundation and the Shan Women's Action Network (May, 2002).

¹⁵ Reinhold Traiter-Espiritu, "Violence Against Women's Bodies," in *Women Resisting Violence:*

rape or forced marriage to military men.¹⁴ In such a situation, rapes often take place when girls or women are caught outside a village or porter camp, when women are forced to porter, and when they are forced to stop at military checkpoints. Since women's bodies are often viewed (by the male armies in this context) as sexual objects of self-enjoyment, "physical violence against women has become an important gender-related dimension."¹⁵ This violence against women becomes almost like a universal culture of militarism. Hence, rehabilitation of the lives of prostituted women, promotion of the social status of tortured, raped, despised women, securing the security of assaulted and oppressed women, protecting the rights of outcast, dispossessed and discriminated women, and spiritual care or counseling for HIV/AIDS women victims have become the most challenging theological issue and highly demanded mission task of the church in Myanmar today.

Child Violence: Child violence in the forms of child molestation, child sexual abuse, and child pornography that are rampant in the West are not known in Myanmar. But child labor and child soldiers are issues that have received attention from international communities. Many children of poor families from rural areas in Myanmar today are seen engaging themselves in hard labor in order to earn less than a dollar per day for their daily survival. Each year child labor rapidly increases in number especially in commercialized cities like Yangon, Mandalay and Bagan where many tourists can visit. Many times, these child workers are treated violently by their employers and forced to work in places such as restaurants, roadside tea/coffee shops, and car workshops, where work can go beyond their young age and beyond the time limit. In cities, a child laborer is usually paid an estimated amount from 200 to 500 kyats¹⁶ per day, although he or she may work full-time or even do overtime from 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. almost every day. Adjusting themselves quickly to living in cities, some rural children choose not to work but to beg for a pittance from pedestrians, motorists and car drivers on the streets, in the market places, in front of restaurants or hotels, in stores, and in many other places. Although these children survive by living from hand to mouth on a daily basis, moving from one location to another, most of the time they suffer homesickness, feel insecure or helpless, experience dispossession or neglect and sense being despised or disregarded. Their life experiences lead them to various kinds of physical deficiency, psychological depression and moral breakdowns so that they grow up as victims of hopelessness and meaninglessness for their future. In 2003, the child labor issue in Myanmar attracted serious attention from the military government when a group of parents sold their children to brokers to work in Thailand. Six Myanmar girls, aged 6 to 12, were trafficked into Thailand for child labor.¹⁷ According to a Myanmar newspaper, these six children were from the regions of Mya-wa-dy and Belin townships from lower Myanmar and they were lured from their parents in person by traffickers and sold into Thailand in 2002. It was learned that these children were forced to sell candies and flowers at Karaoke clubs and bars in Bangkok, Thailand. They were, however, brought back to Myanmar safely on January 2, 2004, after two years of labor in Thailand, with the cooperative assistance from the Myanmar Embassy in Bangkok, and from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, the Bureau of Anti-Trafficking in Women

Spirituality for Life, edited by Mary John Mananzan and et. al. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 69.

¹⁶ This is an equivalent to 20 to 50 cents in US currency at the black market rate at that time.

¹⁷ *The New Light of Myanmar* (Saturday, 3 January 2004), 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

and Children of the Development and Welfare of Thailand, which provided custody to the victims and transferred them to the Myanmar government.¹⁸ Similar cases of child labor issue seem to be widespread all over the country, though no serious attention has been given by present military government till today.

Turn aside the Needy: Economic Injustice

By economic injustice, we mean an unequal or imbalanced distribution of wealth, properties, land, resources, and denial of individual rights or access to education, business, and livelihood.

Economic Corruption: Minority ethnic Christians, particularly of the hill ethnic groups, have experienced a variety of economic hardships during the past decades of repression and military rule. These experiences, combined with corrupted moral and socio-political suppression, have kept people in fear and anxiety. In order to survive, people have developed a coping mechanism which is daubed "corruption-adapted common way of life" and which is potentially harmful for both the individual and society. Hence, knowingly or unknowingly, many people, young and old, get involved in doing some things that would have been considered illegal or unethical. No one knows for sure about the political and economic future of Myanmar. Fear, anxiety, ambiguity, uncertainty and distress are common experiences, coupled with continuing nationwide economic nightmares. All these have dampened peoples' moral obligation to uphold truth and justice.

Collapse of University Education: Due to isolation since the mid-1960s from the world community and academic inquiry, university education in Myanmar has collapsed.¹⁹ A policy of university education management often places students of non-Buddhist groups, as well as female students of any religious group, in low priority for acceptance into government-supported universities and colleges. Short courses, poor instruction, lack of textbooks, outdated and limited resources, all result in poor quality university education. When universities and colleges were officially reopened in 2000 after a twelve-year long collapse (1988-2000), many university students and teachers were deliberately dispersed in study centers, which were relocated in the suburbs with poor transportation and communication facilities. Since many poor students could not afford commuting with these distant learning centers located in suburban areas of the cities, many young people have given up their university education. High school and primary teachers spend more time giving private home tuition because they earn three times of their monthly salaries by private home tuition outside the school. Those school teachers who make money and who do not have genuine interest in teaching have to continue teaching because they are not allowed to resign or transfer from their teaching jobs.

Seek Me and Live: Quest for a New World

¹⁹ Before the 1960s, Myanmar (Burma) prided herself in having a literacy rate of more than 90% and in placing high value on youth education. Since 1988, literacy rates began to decline to 83% (See *World Almanac*, 2002). As universities were closed from 1989 through 2000 many students (estimated at 300,000 students in 2000) are waiting for acceptance at some tertiary education institutions.

The aforementioned issues have compelled us to think about a new way of thinking, reflecting, and doing theology in Myanmar. The world we live in today is in the very midst of hopelessness, extreme violence, terror, war and natural disaster. Hopelessness and terror are etched on the face of our planet. Is a new world possible? This is not only a challenging question but also a demanding factor in Myanmar context. We, Christians in Myanmar live with *our hope* (in Christ) against *their hope* (in power) for survival, sustainability and liberation. Here is a crisis point between *our hope* and *their hope*. Despite many sorts of injustice, economic tragedies, religious oppressions, and suffering of life, we wish to find even in this situation of hopelessness a glimmer of hope to make our dim future bright. We believe that hope in Christ is a hope that transcends all difficulties, that enriches possibility of a new world and life, and that empowers us to resist life-threatening power of global evils. When doing theology in Myanmar, we hope to deal not only with liberating poor peoples from their economic poverty, but also with empowering peoples to courageously face and overcome the hard realities of life. Christians must continue to overcome the oppressive structures and evil systems of militarism and globalization that ruin Myanmar society.

The following are suggested future actions to help build a new world in this troubled land:

- (i) Sharpen our vision and hope for holistic liberation and fullness of life, and strengthen our theological voice as an instrument of liberation.
- (ii) Take a stand against death-dealing evil forces in politics, economy, social and religious life, and identify alternatives to a better life and a new world.
- (iii) Work for religious liberation and develop spirituality of peoples' struggle for justice and equality.
- (iv) Engage in a dialogue on practical issues at the grassroots level and network with peoples' movements (workers, farmers, indigenous peoples, fisher folks, urban poor).
- (v) Draw upon common values of religions to struggle against militarism and globalization and build together a common future.
- (vi) Affirm the rights of women and children and develop them as an integral part of peoples' struggle for liberation.
- (vii) Translate all challenges into specific calls and actions at community and national level.

I want to conclude my sharing with a final note on Amos' justice message, the content of which has been already highlighted in the preceding pages. In the time of prophet Amos, once corruption prevailed, the whole nation, people and land fell apart, and faced the misery of life. The nation, people and land have become polluted when the powerful and the rich bought the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and when the wages of laborers were unpaid until the next morning. But even in this context, it seems that a new world is possible when justice is let to roll down like waters. With this inspiration in mind, a new world in our land is possible when justice prevails in this land. A genuine spirituality of any religious community is a spirituality that seeks justice, peace and holiness in all aspects of life. Justice is the central theme of God's salvation in all religions. It is also

²⁰ Deut. 16:20.