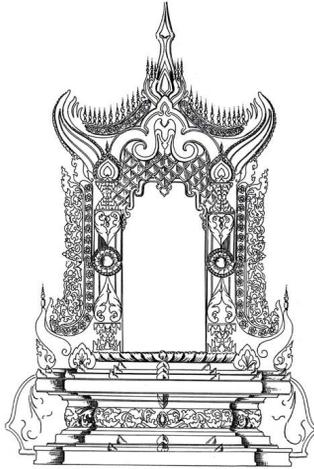


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*Volume 9
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Special Issue

*In Homage to
U Pe Maung Tin*

Featuring Articles by:

Anna Allott

Denise Bernot

Tilman Frasch

Patricia Herbert

Jacques Leider

Alan Saw U

U Tun Aung Chain

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PROFESSOR U PE MAUNG TIN

A Gentle Genius, A Meek Master

Alan Saw U*

It is a great privilege and honor to provide a brief reflection on the life of Professor U Pe Maung Tin as a practicing Christian. His achievements as a Pali scholar and as a pioneer in the study of Burmese literature and history are all well documented. It is to be regretted, therefore, that there is much less on record, let alone published, regarding his teaching of Christianity and the Christian ministry in Burma. Consequently, this article will be a very general one as it is based simply on my limited readings of the few available papers written by him as a Burmese Christian leader and a communicant member of the Anglican Church in Burma.

CHRISTIAN HERITAGE

U Pe Maung Tin's father, U Pe, was a very strong and devout Baptist Christian. He had been baptized by his own father, the Reverend Tha Dun Aung, first national pastor of the Burmese Baptist Church in Henzada in the delta region of Burma. U Pe and his family were said to have been deeply influenced by a book on the Christian way of life written by J. N. Derby, a founder of the Church of the Plymouth Brethren, and also by John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. An adapted translation by U Pe of the latter, called *Ko Thuka, the Traveller*, was published by the Burma Christian Literature Society, as well as two other works by him in Burmese, *Christian Families in the Bible* and *Life of the Apostle Paul*.

Later, when the family moved to Rangoon, they met with Mr. Galstin, an Armenian missionary belonging to the

*Executive Secretary and Editor of the Myanmar Christian Literature Society. This article was developed from a paper read at the September 1988 symposium the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, in honor of Professor U Pe Maung Tin.

Church of the Plymouth Brethren. When U Pe discovered that his own Christian beliefs corresponded to the teachings of the Plymouth Brethren, he and his family formed a church of their own. Following Mr. Galstin's death, U Pe's brother, U Tun Nyein, assumed leadership of the Brethren Church. This uncle of U Pe Maung Tin was known as a pioneer lexicographer, having compiled an English-Burmese dictionary as early as 1906. U Tun Nyein also initiated the preparation of the Bible Society's Burmese translation of the Bible, commonly known as the Gerrad version to distinguish it from the Baptist version by Adoniram Judson.

During his tenure as a professor in Rangoon, U Pe Maung Tin attended the Anglican Holy Cross Church, close to the university compound. There he was genuinely moved by the teachings and sermons of the Reverend George Appleton and decided to go forward for confirmation. When the Burma Christian Literature Society was reorganized after the war, under the auspices of the Burma Council of Churches, he became its first director, and for many years served as the chairman of its study commission on Buddhism. During the early 1960s, in the interest of increased interfaith understanding between Christians and Buddhists, he published three works in English and one in Burmese.¹

CHRISTIAN ATTITUDE

U Pe Maung Tin was convinced that in order to create a trusting bond with others of different faiths, relationships needed to be based upon love, a desire to learn, and patient understanding. He believed that communication needed to be a two-way process, receiving as well as giving. In 1961, in an outspoken and challenging paper, "Certain Factors in the Buddhist-Christian Encounter," U Pe Maung Tin pointed directly to several ways in which the Christian attitude to mission and ministry needed to be changed:²

A few years ago on the centenary of Adoniram Judson, I had occasion to make a careful

comparison of Judson's Bible and the Burmese Bible of the British and Foreign Bible Society. I discovered to my surprise that while the Society Bible was a correct translation according to Anglo-Burmese syntax, the Judson Bible approached nearer the style of the Burmese Buddhist writings, so that it was found more readable by the Buddhist monks unacquainted with English.

One example will show that Judson consulted learned Buddhist monks in preparing his translation. He must have found the Holy Spirit very difficult to put into Burmese. The usual Burmese word *nat* for spirit would not be appropriate as it would suggest animistic ideas or a deity or divine inhabitant of the heavenly worlds. To translate the Holy Spirit literally as Holy Ghost would be ludicrous in Burmese.

Judson ultimately chose *vinyana* [in Burmese ဝိညာဏ်], a Pali word meaning consciousness. Objection against it might be made on the ground that consciousness as one of the 12 factors of 'conditioned genesis'—which teaches that everything is conditioned, relative, and interdependent—leads to decay and death, and as such is not a suitable rendering for the Holy Spirit.

But *vinyana* is the very word used by some sections of Buddhist thought in Burma to denote supermundane consciousness, which, they say, transcends the law of 'conditioned genesis' and persists in Nirvana after a man's death. That Judson chose this word for the Holy Spirit shows that he was well acquainted with the finer shades of Buddhist philosophy. . . .

The successors of Judson have neglected scholarship. They have not followed up the lead

that Judson gave in Burmese scholarship. Most of the tracts that they have written in Burmese are not so readable as the Judson Bible. They have not produced a standard grammar and dictionaries based on Judson's work. And they have not studied Buddhism. They evidently came to teach not to learn.

In their eagerness to serve the lay people, they have neglected the Buddhist monks, not realizing that the monks are the custodians of the Buddhist faith. They have not even produced a life of the Buddha as the Catholic Bishop Bigandet did. . . .

And Judson College imported Pali lecturers from India instead of from the USA. How a Christian mission could hope to succeed in making Burma Christian without studying Buddhism and converting the monks passes my understanding. . . .

To preach the gospel of Christ without any knowledge of the life of the Buddha, presenting Christ to the peoples of Burma as though he were a westerner, is to ignore the historical background of the three wise men from the east and all the Buddhist-Christian parallels. One would have thought that the first thing to do in approaching Buddhists was to arouse their interest by drawing attention to these parallels.

These Buddhist-Christian parallels in the lives of Buddha and Christ should lead to research into the possibility of parallels in the doctrines of Buddhism and Christianity. The following subjects for comparative study suggest themselves:

- Christian and Buddhist ideas of selflessness
- The idea of God in Buddhism

- Faith and grace in Buddhism
- Christian prayer and Buddhist meditation
- Nirvana and the Kingdom of Heaven
- Buddhist *metta* and Christian charity
- Man in Buddhism and Christianity

It should be mentioned, however, that it is not enough merely to state the parallels legendary or doctrinal between the two religions or to stress the historical precedence of the Buddhist versions. What is important is *for the Christian to study the Buddhist way of presenting and solving the various problems, and to adjust his own approach to Buddhism in the light of such study.*

U Pe Maung Tin follows this useful general advice to Christian missionaries by revealing comments on the reorganization of the University of Rangoon after 1948:

There is a lesson to learn from the closing down of Judson College—one of the original constituent colleges of the University of Rangoon founded in 1920.³ When Burma regained her independence she lost no time in changing the University from the collegiate pattern into the unitary pattern, against the recommendation of the Rangoon University Reorganization Committee.

It was an open secret that this was done not because the unitary pattern was preferred to the collegiate one but simply because the unitary pattern left no room for Judson College to continue to function as an individual college. Judson College was closed down because it was an American missionary college. It is significant that while the memory of Judson was held in respect, the college which bore his name should have been closed down. The Judson Bible was a

welcome contribution to Burmese literature and the Buddhists would never dream of burning it, but Judson College with its fine academic record was closed down.

It was the foreignness of the presentation of Christianity to which objection was raised. Burmans had lost their country to the politicians but they were determined not to lose their religion and culture to the missionaries. One did not fully realise what it meant to Burmese Buddhists to become Christians in the days of the British regime: *it was not simply a change of faith. It meant that on becoming a Christian, a Burman became de-burmanised and pro-western.* They are content with the heritage of their Buddhist culture and will not willingly change it for the Western form of Christianity that has brought war and strife in its wake.

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The life and work of U Pe Maung Tin are in direct contradiction to this comment. All that he did and achieved exemplified that in becoming a Christian, a Burman could also become more truly Burmese, more patriotic, more deeply understanding of his country's religion and history, and better able to interpret it to foreigners.

U Pe Maung Tin's colleagues, friends, and pupils were all touched and awed by his serenity, sincerity, simplicity, humility, and honesty. His basic Christian conviction was that one should think less of one's own self than of the needs of others. Throughout his life he lived not to be served, but to serve.

Footnotes

¹ *Prayer and Meditation* (Rangoon: Burma Christian Council, 1960); *Buddhist-Christian Parallels* (Rangoon: Burma Christian Council, 1961); *How to Read the Old Testament* (Rangoon: Burma Christian Literature Society, 1962, in Burmese); and *Buddhist Devotion and Meditation: An Objective Description and Study* (London: Society for the Promotion of

Christian Knowledge, 1964). These correspond to nos. 177, 180, 185, and 194 in Herbert's bibliography, this volume.

²This unpublished paper was presented in February 1961 by U Pe Maung Tin at a seminar in Rangoon on the theme of the Buddhist-Christian encounter. The seminar was jointly sponsored by the East Asia Christian Conference and the World Council of Churches. The full text was later published by the Myanmar Christian Literature Society as *Buddhist-Christian Encounter Series No. 1* for limited circulation for the symposium held in September 1998 at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, in honor of U Pe Maung Tin.

³ See Allott article, this volume.