Editorial: Public Theology In Extremis

This edition of the International Journal of Public Theology differs from its predecessors. Its focus is upon one particular crisis. It represents an intimation of a public theology for the current situation in Myanmar in the wake of the military coup led by the Tatmadaw in February 2021. It is an extreme situation. The articles that follow represent the thinking of participants and eyewitnesses in residence as well as insights arising while living in diaspora. In each one of the articles there is ample testimony to the brutality and trauma of the context as well as its sheer complexity. The level of risk evident in this task is reflected in the decision by one writer to publish his work under a pseudonym. That is not the usual route for a theologian in this field. Nor indeed for pastors and ‘ordinary’ Christians whose comments have been reported in the media. The construction of a public theology here is far removed from the forms of such a discipline in a liberal western democracy or another inter-religious context like Indonesia.

There have been initiatives in a public theology for Burma in the past. Oliver Byar Bowh Si most notably published a series of articles between 2004 and 2010 on the theme of God in Burma1 – hence before the coup that lies behind this collection. Another book on a related theme of faith and politics is Engaging Politics in Myanmar by Aung Htoo.2 Placing Walter Wink’s political theology in critical conversation with the works and lives of Aung San Suu Kyi and Martin Luther King’s politics of nonviolence resistance, Htoo explores how the shared Buddhist and Christian interreligious ethics of nonviolence and public engagement should be applied for the transformation of Myanmar. In the near future an anthology, Toward a Public Theology in Myanmar, edited by Lal Tin Hre and David Selvaraj is to be published.3 The third one represents a collaborative venture between theologians from India and Myanmar on the theme of public

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3 Lal Tin Hre and David Selvaraj, eds, Toward a Public Theology in Myanmar, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, September, 2023).
witness. There have also been a handful of recent articles as the necessity for a faith that addresses the socio-political (dis)order is painfully obvious.4

In his work Byar Bowh Si explored a range of themes to do with theology, a civil society and the nature of the public sphere in the Burmese context. These explorations were carried out from the perspectives of marginality, the experience of suffering, and possibilities of inter-faith dialogue. In these first intimations of a public theology Byar Bowh Si noted a difference between those who might engage in this kind of task. Those who lived and worked in the cities like Yangon were more likely to want to explore what makes a civil society; those who belonged to an ethnic minority that was Christian were more attracted to a liberation theology.

In the intervening years the agenda, the kairos moment for a public theology has changed. It has done so in several ways. Burmese public theologians were writing at a time when Burma was ‘unexpectedly making a transition into a new semi-civilian government after so many years of struggle for democracy at the cost of so many innocent lives.’ It was a qualified transition inasmuch as it was nevertheless ‘very carefully controlled by the military’: the Tatmadaw (the military) was guaranteed 25% of parliamentary seats, the generals still headed all governmental departments.5 The coup of 1 February 2021 witnessed the Tatmadaw’s response to an election result that it deemed to be unacceptable and, indeed, fraudulent. It was not. The coup led to the return of the direct military rule and massive protests calling for a revised and inclusive form of federal democracy. The defensive resistance has led to the renewal of armed conflict and the disregard of humanitarian well-being. It is no longer the same context in which some Burmese Christian theologians were writing.

In seeking to nurture a public theology for a national trauma like the current crisis in Myanmar there are evident questions as to how to proceed and organize material. For the sake of an external audience there is an obvious need to explain as succinctly and clearly as possible the background to the coup: what were its causes? who took exception to the regime change, how and why? who

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5 Byar Bowh Si, God in Burma, p. 1.
are its victims and how are the tensions between suffering and hope, between resilience and vision for a safer future being managed? For the sake of those embroiled in this crisis where is meaning to be found and what biblical and theological resources lie at their disposal? In a nation where the Christian faith itself is represented in tribal minorities what kind of praxis is possible, not just in response to the military force but also alongside those protesting citizens who are Buddhists and other religious activists?

The construction of a public theology in the present context of Myanmar must necessarily consider the forces that lay behind the military coup that took place on 1 February 2021. It must also seek to imagine what an alternative ordering of the state in which the common good, a civil society and human rights for all should look like. In this setting it means that the foundations for a public theology should be interdisciplinary and, given the minority status of the Christian faith, should be inclusive of all those who make a stand for the ending of the military regime and work for an inclusive democracy. One feature of this task is to situate this aim within the broader sweep of the country’s history – without which the powers behind the coup cannot be fully understood. This historical narrative is offset by a vision of a common good and civil society that is organized around the hope of a polycentric federalist democracy.

In this particular collective reading of the situation in Myanmar the first article is by a diplomat. Scot Marciel was formerly the United States’ Ambassador to Myanmar, hence in a unique position to offer a perspective on the possibility of a civil and equitable society. Marciel is under no illusions with regards the Tatmadaw. The most pressing task is its removal from political power. On the back of his professional experience Marciel considers what building blocks will be needed for the sake of a future democracy. That list includes ‘restructuring the security forces, developing and implementing a system of federalism, building rule of law, tackling long-standing identity issues, and rebuilding and reinvigorating the economy.’ Marciel disagrees with those who believe that the Tatmadaw can be a part of this democratic future: ‘the period of military rule has been an unmitigated disaster in every respect’.

‘Elijah Young’ writes under a pseudonym on the role of the ethnic resistance organizations. The very possibility of a Burmese public theology cannot do other than engage with the struggle for the rights and recognition of minorities. Marciel likewise presumed as such but there is a further dimension to this claim. The Christian presence is at its strongest among the Kachin, Karen and Chin peoples and the armed forces of resistance in these regions are Christian-led. ‘Elijah’ gives an account of the impact of the coup in several ways. The comparison is made with the practice of the armed resistance movements before and after the coup. The tendency was to withdraw from ceasefire
agreements and call for the restoration of democracy. That declaration of intent was accompanied by a formal commitment to protect protesters and innocent victims. As the Tatmadaw began to engage in brutal retaliatory measures the necessity for such became progressively more evident. The ethnic resistance organizations have subsequently provided shelter and humanitarian aid as well as military training to civilian activists. All the while Christian leaders, churches and services of worship (along with schools and hospitals) have been violated.

Writing as a political scientist Tun Myint assumes this tumultuous history and the brutality of the Tatmadaw’s counter-insurgency. The focus of his writing lies in the case he makes for a polycentric federal democracy that is inclusive of the ethnic diversity. In this regard Myint examines more closely the plight of the Rohingya Muslims who are denied citizenship. Myint’s personal circumstances are a little different from the others which shows the benefit of how a Christian public theology must engage with a company of strangers and others. He was one of the student leaders in the 1988 uprising; he is not writing out of a Christian background. His sense of the common good lies in the desire to construct a viable state that rejects a Leviathan-like unitary model and embraces the nation’s ethnic and religious pluralism. For this to happen Myint sees more clearly the need for history to be released from a state-centred, state-controlled rendering. Myint writes on the need for a properly researched public memory.

These first three articles prepared the ground for a more explicit turn to a theological response. The reflective task is made primarily through a drawing upon biblical themes, most notably a reading of Romans 13:1–7 and the parable of the [good] Samaritan. The transition from the socio-political trauma to the biblical and theology response is mediated through Timothy Geoffrion’s research into the intersection of spirituality and suffering. What resources does faith provide for the Christian citizens to Myanmar to endure the violence and chaos as well as persevere in a hope? Geoffrion makes particular use of a typology of spirituality taken from Corinne Ware in order to evaluate what he has discerned through living in Myanmar, teaching and leading retreats. This turn to spirituality is relatively unique in a public theology. It is seldom addressed head-on even though it lies at the core of both a personal and public expression of faith. What is evident in Geoffrion’s reading of the coup is that this is a spirituality that is responding to and marked by trauma. It sits as such on the edge of another theme that a public theology in Myanmar might explore at some later date – the impact of trauma.

The article by David Thang Moe and James C. Scott on the hidden transcripts of a public theology wrestles with a text of some importance in this
particular context. It is one that requires attention when there is a mix of civil disobedience and armed resistance. The issue at stake is how to read Romans 13:1–7. Is it to be interpreted within its own setting within the Roman Empire and is, as such, rather different here and now of the coup in Myanmar? Is it a text that conveys Paul’s thinking on how followers of Christ should be obedient to the political and civil authorities in a way that transcends time and place? Or, can this passage be read in a way that both enables and justifies patterns of resistance? The dilemma lies in how to reconcile the verses that refer to the call to ‘be subject to the governing authorities’ that Paul deems to have been ‘instituted by God’ and the apparent expectation that they should be ‘servants of your good’. It is a potentially awkward text inasmuch it possesses the capacity to be oppressive. Moe and Scott effectively argue that the reference to servants of the good does not justify submission to that which denies justice and compassion. It should indeed be read alongside the call at Romans 12:9 to resist evil and love good. Moe and Scott thereupon explore how the Pauline passage can be read in the light of Paul being empire into a hidden and indirect way. This text that might otherwise be critical of the civil disobedience movement establishes, instead, a biblical basis for everyday forms of hidden and public resistance to the coup.

Layang Seng Ja takes a different route. The parable of the [good] Samaritan has been increasingly deployed in contemporary geopolitics on account of its privileging of the category and duties of the neighbour. The parable itself has also been looked upon as a key formative text for a public theology for that very same reason. Seng Ja assumes a hermeneutic of correspondence between the parable’s original setting in Jesus’ ministry and the contemporary experience of the coup. Who is the neighbour? Who are those who walk by on the other side and refuse to assist the man whom robbers have left ‘half-dead’? Who ‘goes and does likewise’ imitating the compassionate response of the Samaritan? Seng Ja sets the parable partly in the midst of Myanmar’s nearby neighbours, noting their reluctance to call the Tatmadaw to account and how they have their own particular interests which they seek to serve. The neighbourly act that becomes exemplary is the one that assists the victim and is willing to engage in a ‘cross-cultural act of healing, assisting, and advocating for the victims, prisoners and refugees.’ In its original setting the practice of this neighbourly concern is less overtly political, structural: it is inter-personal, face to face, and local. It becomes as such a lens through which to put some meaning upon the surprising level of solidarity across ethnicity and religion. It does so from a distinctively Christian perspective but the parable also possesses the capacity to be classical: it can engage with related themes of neighbours and compassion in other religious traditions – as well as secular experience.
The parable of the Samaritan also features in Moe’s article on an interreligious solidarity and interethnic reconciliation. It is the most thorough, most sustained overture of a public theology – hence the climax of this collection. It presumes the socio-political, anthropological and biblical work previously done. It is the intimation of a public theology that arises out of a situation in extremis and is, accordingly, not just a theoretical or detached exploration of common themes between and among religions. The specificity it addresses is the kairos condition of contemporary Myanmar. It is able to draw upon Buddhist ideas and customs and set them alongside the everyday practice of religious life in a very diverse and plural nation. It is as such a theology that does not seek to be confined to the academy; it is a type of ‘everyday theology’, though the everyday here is one of crisis and conflict. The overriding theme of reconciliation attracts to itself terms like hospitality and healing (both of which are found in the parable). Even though the Christian faith in which Moe stands is a small minority it is a public theology that is not afraid to make use of the language of repentance and forgiveness. Its aim is a reconciliation that aspires after a vision of a flourishing society that is consistent with the regular invocation of a federal democracy to be found in the movements opposed to the Tatmadaw.

It is likely that the global interest in a public theology is not so attuned to how this discipline has taken on the role that it has done in Myanmar. The standard practice is to look towards what is happening in Europe, North America, South Africa, Brazil, Australia, parts of Africa and Indonesia. The issues that are often the most prominent have to do with refugees, cities, welfare organizations, climate, economics, the nature of a civil society. Myanmar presents a public theology which is evolving in an extreme situation. In some respects it is raw and far from ‘finished’.

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**FIGURE 1** Protesters openly resisting military coup in a mass strike, 22 February 2021 (BBC News).