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Setting the Oppressed Free: Ministry among the Chin in Myanmar

By

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REL 432 World Mission Area Studies

Prof. Jenny Collins

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I. Introduction

While the Chin people of Myanmar as a whole have largely embraced a Christian identity, their country as a whole has not been reached by the gospel. This presents significant challenges for them in a ministry context, such as the continued hostility of the Burmese government and military towards ethnic and religious minorities. Thus, although there is not a significant need for evangelization among the Chin, they have many other ministry needs that are currently being met by several nonprofit organizations. This includes both organizations that have sent workers from abroad and indigenous organizations comprised of Chin people themselves. By reviewing the strategies of these organizations as well as the religious history of the Chin, appropriate strategies for holistic outreach can be determined.

II. Religious Demographics in Myanmar

As a whole, Myanmar is nearly entirely Buddhist, at 89% (Rogers 61). Conversely, the Chin people are about 90% Christian (Ling, "Religious Persecution" 11). However, several Chin subgroups are not Christian, including the Songlai, which is 65% Buddhist, the Laitu, which is 60% Buddhist, and the Asho, which is 60% Buddhist. Other minority ethnic groups that are largely Christian include the Karen and the Kachin (Joshua Project). The total number of Christians in Myanmar is 4.3 million, with the largest subset being Protestants at 2.7 million (Johnson 555). The single largest Protestant denomination in the country is Baptist with 1.8 million members. Independents number another 680 thousand and Catholics are at 660 thousand. Evangelicals number 1.6 million with an annual growth rate of 1.63%. In comparison, Buddhism is growing at 1.01% and Islam is growing at 0.66% (Johnson 555).

Another significant minority religious group is the Rohingya Muslims. The Burmese government has targeted the Rohingya since 2012, "committing the crimes against humanity of

apartheid, persecution, and severe deprivation of liberty” against the 600,000 Rohingya remaining in the country (“Myanmar: Coup”). These crimes include killings, rape, and arson and have caused many people to flee the country as refugees. The International Court of Justice is currently investigating the actions of the Burmese government against the Rohingya people to determine whether they meet the international standard of genocide, while organizations such as Human Rights Watch claim that the actions meet the standard (“Myanmar: Rohingya”).

Although this paper’s primary focus is the Chin people, the Chin and the Rohingya face similar oppression at the hands of the government. Chin activists such as Cheery Zahau feel that there ought to be a connection between the two groups because of this. In an interview, Zahau discussed the idea that some citizens of Myanmar are sympathetic to the Chin but not the Rohingya. She challenged this worldview, saying, “We can argue about this all night, who is [an officially recognized] ethnic [group], who is not, but on humanitarian grounds, we cannot leave people out to sea and leave them to die. If Jesus was alive today he would not allow us to do that” (Slow). This attitude demonstrates that ideally, the Chin feel that other oppressed groups can turn to them when faced with a crisis so that they can oppose oppression together.

III. Christian History and Current Nonprofit/NGO Work

Although there were several failed Catholic missions to Burma during the sixteenth century, it was not until 1813 that the Baptist missionaries Adoniram and Ann Judson established a more permanent presence within the country. They did not see the fruit of their labor immediately, only baptizing their first convert six years after arrival. However, some of their efforts, such as their Bible translation, have had long-lasting impacts on the country, with Christians in Myanmar widely using their Bible translation to this day (Johnson 556). Another 30 years passed before the Judsons were able to reach the Chin in 1845. After this first contact with

the Chin, not much missionary activity took place in the Chin Hills until 1899 when Baptist couple Arthur and Laura Carson arrived as permanent missionaries. They and their colleagues worked for years until they saw their first Chin convert, Thuam Hang, in 1906 (Mang, “Politics” 202). During this period, these missionaries established at least eight mission schools within the Chin Hills region (Mang, “Christianity” 100). The body of believers grew steadily in this region due to missionary activity until 1945 when responsibility for the churches was transferred to indigenous leaders (Johnson 556). The Chin church continued to grow under their guidance, with about 30% of the Chin identifying as Christian by the early 1960s (Mang, “Christianity” 101). In 1966, shortly after the military took control of the government, they kicked many foreigners, including 375 missionaries, out of the country (Hunt). The government continued to highly restrict missionary activity for several decades until the mid-2010s, with groups with a longstanding history in Myanmar such as the St. Columban Missionary Society returning in 2013 (“Columban Missionaries”). By 2020, “the government generally regulated foreign religious groups in a manner similar to nonreligious foreign aid groups,” although it is not clear how this policy has changed given the 2021 coup (Office of International Religious Freedom).

A number of both foreign and indigenous nonprofits currently work in Myanmar on behalf of the country and the Chin people. One of the largest foreign nonprofits in Myanmar is the Christian Aid Mission, with 626 workers in the country (Newell 518). Christian Aid “has worked in Myanmar for more than three decades in partnership with civil society in standing together for dignity, equality and justice” and focuses on areas such as poverty reduction, promotion of peace, and humanitarian relief (“Christian Aid in Myanmar”). One example of their accomplishments is the Humanitarian Programme Plan, which has reached 17,565 people in conflict-affected communities with “livelihood support, hygiene practices, waste management

and protection services” (“Christian Aid in Myanmar”). Because of the ongoing coup causing humanitarian crises all over the country, this work is desperately needed. Other foreign nonprofits with a significant presence in Myanmar include World Concern with 94 workers, Scriptures in Use with 100 workers, and International Partnership Ministries Inc. with 29 workers (Newell 518).

Several indigenous organizations working within Myanmar include the Bible Society of Myanmar, the Chin Human Rights Organization, and the Chin Baptist Convention. The Bible Society of Myanmar, founded in 1889, works in the realm of translation and has completed 39 translation projects since 2010 (“About Us”). The Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO) promotes human rights protections on behalf of the Chin people specifically through “monitoring, research, documentation, education and advocacy” (“Who We Are”). CHRO emphasizes that freedom of religion should exist for all minority groups in Myanmar, not just the Chin. Unlike the Christian Aid Mission, which does work on the ground, CHRO works primarily by creating reports and documentation of the crises in order to spread awareness (“Who We Are”). Finally, the Chin Baptist Convention, formally the Chin Hills Baptist Association or the Zomi Baptist Convention, is an important unifying organization among the Chin. The Convention was founded in 1907 as the Chin Hills Baptist Association (Sakhong 226). It was the first Chin organization that “represented and unified their entire national population,” something that would have been impossible before their conversion to Christianity due to how Christianity caused the traditional isolationist culture of individual tribes to become more collectivist (Mang, “Christianity” 99). One of the main efforts of the Convention has been Chin for Christ in One Century, which was an indigenous missionary program whose goal was for all Chin people to become Christians by the end of the twentieth century (Ling, “Role of Christianity”). This

program was at its height from the late 1970s to the 1990s and was largely successful, given that the Chin went from being 70% Buddhist in 1960 to 90% Christian today (Ling, “Role of Christianity”). This success happened despite governmental restrictions on missionary activity.

IV. Christianity and Chin Culture

Since Christianity has such a long and influential history among the Chin people, it is no surprise that Christianity has heavily influenced Chin culture, with the religion and the culture influencing each other to the point “that Chin identity and Christianity have become interwoven” (Mang, “Politics” 201). Rather than Christianity reshaping the culture entirely or Chin culture solely altering Christian practices, Pum Za Mang writes that they have “reciprocally impacted on and adapted to one another in influencing and animating the shared life of the Chin as a single distinct people” (Mang, “Politics” 202). Because of the interwoven nature of these two aspects, the distinction between which one influenced the other first can sometimes be unclear.

Some of the ways that Christianity has influenced Chin culture include solidifying a unified identity and promoting solidarity with other people groups in Myanmar. As mentioned in the previous overview paper on the Chin people’s ethnography and culture, the Chin’s conversion to Christianity caused a unified sense of Chin identity to emerge. Rather than only caring about and interacting with one’s own tribe, people from Chin subgroups began to feel a sense of kinship with other Chin groups as well due to their shared Christianity. This then allowed them to become a stronger political force when fighting for democracy and their rights as a minority group (Mang, “Politics” 201). Not only did the Chin develop connections within their groups, but Christianity also influenced them to form connections with other minority groups. For example, when the Chin first began converting to Christianity, many of them interacted with other minority groups within the country as missionaries, making “a significant

contribution to religious conversion among the Cho tribe in the Matupi region, consequently laying the basis for national solidarity” (Mang, “Politics” 205). As previously mentioned, some Chin activists such as Cheery Zahau also wish to develop this sense of national solidarity with the Rohingya Muslims based on the idea that “if Jesus was alive today he would not allow us to [leave them to suffer]” as well (Slow). This sense of solidarity allows each of the groups to more impactfully campaign for the protection of human rights for all and not just one group.

Chin culture has, in turn, influenced their practice of Christianity through their emphasis on particular values, such as collectivism as expressed through religious feast days. Although the Chin often hold the foreign missionaries who helped convert them in high regard, some Chin scholars have criticized some of the missionaries for “undermining some constructive moral and spiritual virtues deeply rooted within Chin religion and for not paying adequate attention to the indivisible nature of old beliefs... overlook[ing] ‘noble spiritual virtues such as ecological spirituality, communal spirit, social concern, and veneration of life ... in the religion of the tribal peoples’” (Mang, “Politics” 206). Despite some missionaries de-emphasizing Chin values, Chin Christianity has largely incorporated them, especially “communal spirit.” Chin feasts and festivals, which originated with their traditional religion, act as a demonstration of this idea. The feasts originally expressed “love, joy, and success” and acted to “united members of family, clan, and subgroup” (Mang, “Politics” 205). The Chin have kept this part of their culture by Christianizing the celebration of the feasts, “epitomising a gentle religious transition from Chin religion to Christianity without undermining the existing social fabric in Chin society. Love was now at the centre of feasts and festivals in the new society, and different Chin subgroups were bound with the love of God that transcended the barrier of clan and linguistic group and were also united in Jesus Christ” (Mang, “Politics” 205). These sorts of feasts are not seen in all

Christian traditions, meaning that traditional Chin culture influenced how certain Christian values present themselves throughout the people group.

V. Ministry Challenges and Strategies

One of the greatest challenges to Christian ministry in Myanmar is the fact that the government restricted missionaries from entering the country beginning shortly after the military took over in the 1960s (Johnson 557). Although the government had eased restrictions on foreign missionaries from around 2010 to 2020, the International Religious Freedom Report for 2011 still indicated that “the government discouraged proselytizing by non-Buddhist clergy, often through the use of censorship” even as they loosened restrictions (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor). The easing of restrictions seemed to reach its height in 2020, in which the same Report said that foreign religious groups were treated similarly to nonreligious aid groups. However, since it was the military government that banned missionaries in the first place and the military has once again taken over the country in 2021, restrictions will likely tighten in the upcoming years.

Another challenge for ministry among the Chin is the distrust that the larger Burmese society sometimes exhibits toward Christianity. In Burmese education, Christianity is often “represented [as] another branch of the colonial armoury, the three Ms, missionaries, merchants, and military,” leading to distrust of any Christian groups, including the Chin (Mang, “Christianity” 78). This distrust has often blossomed into persecution, another major challenge to Christian ministry in Myanmar. Charles Maung Bo, the Archbishop of Yangon, writes that Christians in Myanmar face “the silent night of gripping fear” due to unjust imprisonment, displacement, starvation, and other hardships caused by governmental persecution (92). Additionally, because “Christianity and the Chin identity are inseparably intertwined with each

other,” religious persecution serves as a political tactic meant to “eliminate a distinctive Chin identity” (Mang, “Politics” 207).

Some of the most helpful ministry strategies among the Chin right now involve a focus on demanding justice, especially as an interfaith and interracial effort. Charles Maung Bo has emphasized that in the face of human rights abuses, Myanmar needs to hear Jesus’ message in Luke 4 about “bring[ing] good news to the poor, proclaim[ing] liberty to captives, giv[ing] sight to the blind, set[ting] the oppressed free, and announc[ing] the year of the Lord” (92). Christians have effectively enacted this message in Myanmar in a variety of ways. First, they have participated in protests against the coup, “alongside their Buddhist neighbors, ... believing that God is on the people’s side and praying desperately for him to bring justice” (Shellnut). This is a tangible demonstration of the solidarity between religious and ethnic groups that activists like Cheery Zahau desire to see. It practically demonstrates the love of Jesus by showing that he and his people do not tolerate oppression or injustice. It is also important for the Church in Myanmar to promote education and health development for both their own groups and other groups affected by the coup, with Bo recommending “a preference for girls and women” due to their higher vulnerability (93). Finally, it is important that the Church “play a watchdog role” in collaboration with NGOs within the country so that funds intended for humanitarian relief are not misused (Bo 94). All of these strategies both show love within the body of Christ to those who are suffering under the regime as well as demonstrate the love of Christ to non-Christian groups by showing that Jesus cares about the oppression that they face.

Additionally, since there is a large Chin community in Indianapolis, some specific ministry strategies are appropriate among the Hoosier Chins. In an interview about the coup, the president of the Chin Community of Indiana, Peter Thawngmung, stated that some ways to

support the Burmese and Chin communities in Indianapolis are “public acknowledgment, public demonstration, and influencing our representatives in the [United States] powers-that-be” (Salaz). Although the coup may seem far away from Indiana, the United States government has influence in international affairs. This means that if citizens of the United States petition their representatives to take action on the issue, they may be able to influence the quality of life in Myanmar. Zam Muan, a Chin student who immigrated to Indianapolis as a refugee with his immediate family, also stated that it was important his family had access to those who could help them overcome the language barrier, barriers to learning at school, bureaucratic barriers stemming from unfamiliarity with American systems, and barriers faced by parents who do not know how to help their children culturally transition (Muan). Some of these needs were met by professionals, while others were met by his peers in high school and at Taylor University. Zam believes that the Chin population in Indiana needs to be “seen the way God sees [them]—as a rainbow with many colors,” meaning that it is important for others to recognize that the diverse perspective brought to the community and Church by the Chin people is valued by God.

VI. Conclusion

It is both joyful and saddening to learn about the ways that God has been working through the Chin. The way that they have integrated but not syncretized Christianity with their culture is admirable. Many Chin do important activist, humanitarian, and missionary work in the face of persecution and oppression. As we consider how we can come alongside the Chin church, it is important to remember that the Chin are made up of many subgroups and each of these groups has its own history, culture, and needs. This paper provides an overview of the larger group, but it is always prudent to seek out specific information about a subgroup if relevant.

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