

Sacred and secular: A plea to re-examine the worldview among Myanmar Christians

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Abstract: The Myanmar Christian worldview on sacred and secular is the product of primarily two basic grounds; the Burmanization and Myanmar Christian understanding of Church and State, which eventually lead subjugation of the Church to the political authority of the Burman government. As a result, it leads one to see political and social actions as secular, and Christians, therefore, need to be restrained from that sort of thing. But anything is secular or sacred depending on the direction being used: in obedience or disobedience towards God's law and order. The Church as a community of God's people has a responsibility as a voice and witness of God for restoring God's standards of life aspects; culture, social activities, politics, business, education, and so on in the fallen community and society.

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INTRODUCTION

For the past 70 years, Myanmar has not known what it means to be politically, socially, economically, and religiously stable and peaceful. Today, the ongoing civil war has a world record for the longest civil war, probably in modern history. In almost every aspect of living matter in society and community, the Christian voice has been unheard in Myanmar ever since. The Christian belief, values, and stance towards the current political unrest, social justice, reconciliation, and peace-making process in the country have never been taken into consideration. Christianity is voiceless in these aspects. What has caused the Christian Church in Myanmar to this situation as voiceless in respect of injustice, suffering, crying, mourning, oppression, and discrimination while it claims to be the people of God who is the God of justice, mercy, righteousness, and cares for the oppressed? What should the Church do as it reconsiders its current situation?

This article argues that the main cause for the Church in Myanmar to have come to this situation of a voiceless people of God is because of its worldview on sacred and secular, mainly caused by Burmanization and the Church's theological conviction on Church and state. After this, it presents the creation mandate and the new creation mandate, and structure and

direction as the possible cures for Myanmar's Christian worldview of the dichotomy between sacred and secular. It then concludes the Church as the community of God's people is most vital and significant as a media through which God's laws and standards are articulated in the community and transform it.

METHODS

This article used a descriptive analysis method with the literature study approach. Some works of literature like journals articles and books were used to collect data for describing the problems that shall be solved. Besides, the kinds of literature were also used to build the argument for analyzing the situation that became this research focus.

DISCUSSION

Mapping the Problem

Myanmar is a very ethnically diverse country with over 135 official different ethnic groups of which the majority of Burman ethnic¹ makes up around 60 percent of its 50 million population. Since the independence from the British in 1948, the governance power has been in the hands of Burmans, and other ethnic minority groups have been dealt with and treated as second citizens, which means no equal rights with every possible discrimination and injustice. This is basically the strategy, known as Burmanization, which the Burman government has been using to suppress other ethnic minorities. Burmanization simply means the program of national assimilation into one nation, one race, one language, and one religion (Buddhism). This strategy is worked out through actions like religious persecutions over any religion other than Buddhism, ethnic genocides, violation of human rights of all sorts, forced labor, using ethnic villagers as human minesweepers, raping ethnic minority women, burning down villages, churches, and corps of ethnic minorities which have created in the ethnic minorities a great fear of anything Burman emotionally, mentally, and psychologically. For instance, ethnic children from a particular region in the Shan State will always run into their house from their playground simply because they hear someone speaking the Burmese language. Another sad instance is that the Burman government has been committing ethnic genocide over the Karen ethnic minority since the 1950s. In a public statement in 1992, Major General Ket Sein proclaimed the Burman regime/government's intention or plan towards the Karens, saying "In ten years all Karen will be dead. If you want to see a Karen, you will have to go to a museum in Yangon."²

Despite these evil and inhumane actions, the Burman government has always spoken about "peace and stability nationally and internationally. But sadly, the "peace and stability" they talk about simply means absolute submission to the oppressive law, constitution, and order which are systematically planned and organized to give the Burmans superiority in every life matter and issue, and silent subjugation to the total control of the government made up of majority Burmans. Any action or activity of political matters is accused of a challenge to the so-called "peace and stability." Also, when they speak about national unity it simply means the assimilation of all ethnic minority groups into Burmanization, doing everything in Burman's ways.

¹ "Burman" refers to the majority ethnic group in Myanmar whereas "Burmese" represents the entire citizens of the country regardless of their ethnicity, religion, and culture.

² Benedict Rogers, *A Land without Evil: Stopping the Genocide of Burma's Karen People* (Grand Rapids: MI: Kregel Publications, 2004), 40.

During such cruel, evil, and inhumane socio-political actions toward ethnic minorities, the church in Myanmar has been silent. The presence of churches, Christian organizations, pastors, and Christian government personnel has not done anything for the liberation of minorities from their social, political, economic, and religious sufferings, injustice, and discrimination. What has caused this silence?

This failure of the Church in Myanmar has been mainly caused by its belief in the dichotomy between church and state, sacred and secular which is the result of the worldview the Burman government has implanted through the strategy of Burmanization in which the Burman ethnic is always to be feared and respected, to be given the first place in every aspect of life, is superior in political issues, educational matters, social and cultural heritage over the other ethnic minorities in the country. As this strategy of Burmanization has been articulated for decades through human violence, injustice, discrimination, and persecutions, it has implanted in the minds of Christians a conviction of belief and worldview that politics, for instance, is secular and involving in it will cost violence and is, therefore, to be avoided as Christians.

Another cause for this belief and worldview is no doubt the church's theological conviction on church and state. Christianity in Myanmar is predominantly Baptist in its belief and practice since then. It means, in general, that church and state are separate entities, and are dichotomous in nature and calling. Nigel G. Wright, a prominent Baptist spokesman, in his *Whitley Lecture 1996-1997*, entitled *Power and Discipleship Towards a Baptist Theology of the State*, claims;

the state, by which I mean the central repository of social power and political force within any given territory, is a necessary but complex and theologically ambiguous power that is properly both 'secular' and religiously 'neutral.' Correspondingly, the church of Christ, although profoundly interested for God's sake in the public and political spheres and able to speak prophetically to specific situations, best fulfills its mission when it maintains a critical distance from established political parties and interests.³

This is exactly the conviction of Myanmar Christians towards politics, actions on social justice, and so on. Romans chapter 13, which says believers are to submit to the authorities as their authority comes from God, has always been the proof text for their justification in these matters. In this understanding to obey the rulers, no matter how cruel and oppressive they are, is to obey God, and disobedience to the rulers is akin to disobedience to God's command. This is the current worldview of the majority of Christians in Myanmar today. Therefore, it seems justifiable to say that the current situation of the Church in Myanmar as a voiceless body is the product of Burmanization and the Church's theological conviction on the dichotomous nature of Church and state as these two (Burmanization and the Church's theological conviction) complement each other.

Possible Cure for The Problem

Before going to further discussion, it is most appropriate here to see what worldview is. James H. Olthuis defines worldview as "a framework or set of fundamental beliefs through which we view the world and our calling and future in it."⁴ A worldview may be significantly refined through cultural-historical development, and is a channel for the ultimate beliefs which offer direction and meaning to one's life. Moreover, worldview is the integrative and interpretive

³ Nigel G. Wright, *Power and Discipleship: Towards a Baptist Theology of the State*. The Whitley Lecture 1996-1997 (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 1996), 5.

⁴ James H. Olthuis, "On Worldviews," in *Stained Glass: Worldviews and Social Science*, Pail Marshall, Sander Griffioen, and Richard Mouw, eds., (New York: New York University Press of America, 1989), 29.

framework by which order and disorder are judged or determined, a standard by which reality is managed and pursued, a set of hinges on which one's everyday thinking and doing turns. Besides these, regardless of being individual, one's worldview not only binds its adherents together into one community but also shapes the worldview of that community itself into development.⁵

Worldview is shaped by the beliefs of people, or individuals, in each community, and this worldview shapes one's culture through which one's culture and beliefs in life are shaped in turn. Therefore, worldview is "the comprehensive framework of one's basic beliefs about things"⁶ which functions as "a guide to our life" to determine what is right and what is wrong in each community.⁷ Therefore, worldview is contextual and is shaped by the beliefs, culture, and experience of people in that context. In line with this, it is justifiable to say that the Myanmar Christian worldview has been shaped by Burmanization and the theological conviction of the Church on Church and state.

Two Mandates

Talking about the definition of worldview in the *Oxford Dictionary of English* which says Christian worldview as revolving around the battle of good and evil, Griffioen adds a comment, saying, "the centrality of 'Creation' is essential to many Christian worldviews."⁸ In order to understand the structure and direction of God's creation it is helpful to see the two mandates of Christians, namely; the creation mandate and the new creation (Gospel) mandate.

Creation mandate is concerned about the cultural and social matters of every human being as they are created in the image of God, no matter how fallen and marred this image has been. According to the creation mandate, life itself is sacred and work is good. Humans have divinely been given authority over creation, and are therefore stewards of the environment, society, and community. Particularly after the fall, human government becomes necessary to order social life, protect basic human rights, and restrain the destructive outworking of human sinfulness (Romans 13; 1 Peter 2:13-14). In other words, God's creation structure or order, which is good, needs to be protected, preserved, and restored in the fallen society, culture, and government of humanity into the creational standard of dignity, justice, and compassion with creational ethics.

While the creation mandate is given to all humanity in general, God's people have a special responsibility to lead the community in its fulfillment of God's standard and order. This can be understood as new creation mandate. This mandate calls the Church into participation in human society and community by way of social justice for freedom from fear as a foretaste or forerunner of the new creation (Rev. 21-22). Therefore, involving in politics, social justice actions, activities for freedom, and environmental stewardship are not secular activities in themselves but rather are the Church's missionary calling and responsibility as God's people among and within the fallen society and community. This new creation mandate is primarily concerned with mending of the broken relationship between God and humanity through words and deeds, which is the ultimate source of human suffering, injustice, oppression, and discrimination.⁹

⁵ Olthuis, "On Worldviews," 29.

⁶ Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 14.0/284.

⁷ Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 18.5/284

⁸ Sander Griffioen, "On Worldviews," *Philosophia Reformata*, 77 (2012): 21.

⁹ Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss, and Timothy C. Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baber Book House, 2010), 150.

Therefore, as people of God, the Church has this divine calling and responsibility of participating in God's plan of restoring the fallen creation into the new creation. This is one of the basic reasons why politics, for instance, is not secular in itself but rather needs to be done by Christians in the society and community in such a way that fulfills God's order and original intention for his creation. Therefore, when Christians see politics as purely secular and abstain from it, the people who are left to do it are only non-Christians, and there is very little expectation and possibility that it be done in God's way, standard, and order. This way, as a result, God's creation order and intention in his creation will never be restored in this fallen society and community. Therefore, Christians as God's people are rather called to engage in social, political, and environmental matters of the fallen society as testimony and voice of what a restored (new)creation order looks like in compassion, love, and justice. This calling continues as a responsibility of the Christians until the new creation is reached ultimately.¹⁰ In short, Christians as God's people have a divine calling of articulating creation and new creation mandates in the society and community as a demonstration of God's standard and order in his world. A proper understanding of these two mandates is hoped to challenge the Church in Myanmar to reconsider its theological conviction on Church and state, and its worldview on sacred and secular.

Structure and Direction

The idea of structure and direction is also helpful in reconsidering the theological understanding of church and state, and the worldview on sacred and secular. Basically, structure means the creational decrees or orders of God's good creation that constitute different kinds of creatures. Direction, by contrast, means the order of sin and redemption. In other words, direction means the distortion of God's good creation through sin and the redemption and restoration of the fallen creation through Christ. This way, anything can be done in the direction to God's way or against God's way, in obedience or in disobedience to God's law.¹¹ Therefore, the question is it is; to what extent does Christian involvement in political and social justice activities for the good of society (God's creation) reduce the quality of Christian discipleship and spirituality? In other words, is it a must for Christians to pursue discipleship wholeheartedly that they need to restrain themselves from involving in politics and social issues in the community? The point is all about how it is done toward what direction. Rather, Christian faith is inherently political. By this is meant that Christianity, especially in its redemption message, affords us a vision of the whole of God's creation and human life, including its social and political aspects. God's redemption is not just about redemption and restoration of souls but also of God's whole creation (Rom. 8:19-23).

Christians, the Church, are redeemed and called to the task of recovering God's creation which is marred and distorted by sin and the fall. The Church as God's people has this divine mandate. Essentially God's creation is peaceful and human beings are created harmonious and cooperative in relationships which reflects in a human community the communion of the Triune God. The fall into sin has smothered the divine intention in the creation and substantially replaced it with a pattern of violence, conflict, and domination. The original version of God's creation has been covered over in this way by sin through the fall and its subsequent results of violence, injustice, hatred, oppression, and so on. But remnants of the original version of God's creation remain and need to be recovered despite the distortions of

¹⁰ Richard Mouw and Sander Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons: An Essay in Christian Public Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 103.

¹¹ Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 123.6/284.

sin. This work or task of recovery of God's creation into its original intention started in and at the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ which we now know as the new creation. God has started writing the story or narrative about his redemption and the new creation of the fallen creation, and we Christians must participate and continue to write it until its ultimate fulfillment (Rev. 21-22).

God's Community in God's World

In the recovery of God's original version of creation, which is peaceful, harmonious, and cooperative, Christian existence as a community of God's people must be the Church's pattern of life. This needs to be the basis of ecclesiology and soteriology which have the conviction that the Church of Christ exists as a regenerated community of disciples, who are offering themselves for the fulfillment of the divine plan of new creation, and who are the earthly instruments of God in the work and process of reconciling all things to himself into a new creation. They need to complement each other in such a way with the conviction that the God who created the world is also redeeming the world, and the life of the community of God's people is central to this activity. Therefore, the Church must be a community of spokesman for love and justice in society and community. Within this community of believers, a new way of life is based, tasted, and experienced in and through Christian characteristics which characterized the community as of God's people, reaching their apex in impacting the political and social systems of the society into God's standard and order.

God's story or narrative of redeeming his creation into new creation takes place in this world which never ceases to be God's world although fallen into sin, and the community of God's people needs to shape the larger community within which it exists. Therefore, the community must neither be conformist nor dismissive to the larger community but rather be a missionary in nature. It is called and entrusted to the task of redeeming and restoring the larger community and is therefore unable to give up, yet it is neither able to accept the larger community in the way its injustice and violence. For this sake, the Church as a community of God's people needs to be able to offer to the larger community within which it finds itself an alternative way of life, relationship, cooperation, and greater hope for now and for the future.

Also important is that when it says the Church as a community of God's people it does not mean that Christians should remain and live collectively (exclusively) in the larger community. Individuals of the community should be scattered throughout all organs of society, involving themselves as best they can in human social and political life. Only by and in their scattered existence in the community in social and political life will they be able to impact the worldly systems of the wider community into God's standard of justice, peace, and reconciliation.

How do we do that task of transforming the larger community we live in? In this case, newspapers, publications, journalism, and those sorts are very useful means by which we can impact the wider community for through them we can not only introduce biblical standards of life, ethics, business, politics, justice, etc...but also, we can expose falsehood, lies, and corruptions done in the ways of the fallen world. The difficulty with some Christians is that they only see those media as only secular and not for Christians while these ordinary jobs are actually divine callings.¹² Or at least they do not see those as a means by which God's justice and truth and his standard and order can be introduced and displayed in the community for his kingdom work. This idea also applies to teaching at public schools, law courts, and those

¹² B. J. van der Walt, "What does it mean to be Reformed?: An Answer from a Worldview Perspective," *In die Skrifling* 35 no. 2 (2001): 306.

so-called secular carriers. Unless and until we can see those ordinary jobs as basically good means through which we can impact and transform the wider community into God's standard and order, there is no hope for the people around them to see God's standard and order in those areas. As long as only pastoral ministry, missionary, and evangelist works are seen as a spiritual and holy ministry and service to God, there will be very little impact Christians can make on the larger community of unbelievers in contexts like that of Myanmar. The truth is those pastors, missionaries, evangelists, and teachers at seminaries make up only around 3 to 4 percent of believers in a given context. So, what about the rest, the 96 or 97 percent of believers whose ordinary jobs or public involvements are only secular and have nothing to do with God's mission of restoring his creation? They are certainly holy vocations in God's eyes if done in the right direction because work itself is good and not secular. God created work, ordained it, audits it, and governs it.¹³ God actually knows, hears, governs, and is in control of what is being told, discussed, planned, and done in the secular spheres of life. While work itself is good, it is also toilsome, a tool of oppression, injustice, and suffering, and is broken by the fall. Therefore, what is important is the worldview we have toward work, business, and politics. What matters is how we do these for what purpose and in what direction.

Section Two of *The Cape Town Commitment* under the title of *Truth and the Workplace* is very clear in this regard of sacred and secular or order and direction. It beautifully says:

The Bible shows us God's truth about human work as part of God's good purpose in creation. The Bible brings the whole of our working lives within the sphere of ministry, as we serve God in different callings. By contrast, the falsehood of a 'sacred-secular divide' has permeated the Church's thinking and action. This divide tells us that religious activity belongs to God, whereas other activity does not. Most Christians spend most of their time in work that they may think has little spiritual value (so-called secular work). But God is Lord of all of life. 'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men,' said Paul, to slaves in the pagan workplace...We have failed to regard work in itself as biblically and intrinsically significant, as we have failed to bring the whole of life under the Lordship of Christ. We name this secular-sacred divide as a major obstacle to the mobilization of all God's people in the mission of God, and we call upon Christians worldwide to reject its unbiblical assumptions and resist its damaging effects. We challenge the tendency to see ministry and mission (local and cross-cultural) as being mainly the work of church-paid ministers and missionaries, who are a tiny percentage of the whole body of Christ. We encourage all believers to accept and affirm their own daily ministry and mission as being wherever God has called them to work...We need intensive efforts to train all God's people in whole-life discipleship, which means to live, think, work, and speak from a biblical worldview and with missional effectiveness in every place or circumstance of daily life and work.¹⁴

Therefore, the dichotomy between sacred and secular must be re-examined. Many Christians tend to see and accept that religious works or jobs such as pastoral ministry, missions, and evangelism as sacred, and God is interested only in those things. They see ordinary jobs or careers in the public arena/square as secular, and thus God is not so much interested in them. The reality is that most Christians are spending most of their time and energy on those things done in the public arena. Consequently, the result, when ordinary jobs and carriers in the public arena are seen as secular, is that Christians tend to see and understand God is not aware of their actions and deeds in their daily life in those spheres. A

¹³ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 223-29.

¹⁴ *The Cape Town Commitment: A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action* (Cape Town: The Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, 16-25 October, 2010), 23-24, accessed on December 20, 2021. <https://www.lausanne.org/docs/CapeTownCommitment.pdf>.

sad result of that is that, since they cannot see those ordinary jobs as means or ways they can serve God as the light and salt of the world, they do not tend to try to be unique in their character and ways of life among the unbelieving people they work and deal with in the society or community on a daily basis. The fallen society, therefore, is not impacted or transformed into God's standard and order. But the truth is that God is the Lord of all spheres of life, and he is interested in them.

Hermeneutical Reconsideration

Also important is the fact that how some Christians interpret and understand biblical passages like Romans chapter 13 needs to be reconsidered in light of structure and direction. This text can no way be used to justify a wholesale validation of all governments in whatever they want to do. Christians are called to submit to the "powers" which is being providentially overruled by God. They are called to obedience to the "powers" not because those "powers" have God's approval in all that they do. It means that the Church as a community of God's people can speak up for and against the "powers" when things are done against God's standard and order. The Church as a community of God's people has collective power and voice in the community that it may become a means whereby it is the refuge, hiding place, shelter, hope, and voice of justice for the poor, helpless, and the oppressed. This principle is very important for the Church as Abraham Kuyper has said "If the battle is to be fought with honor and with a hope of victory, then principle must be arrayed against principle..."¹⁵ To use this principle requires Christians to have organizations in every aspect/organ of life sphere that serves the community in matters of justice and love for good purpose to get the love and trust of the community. But to be cautious is that those Christian organizations are not to simply seize power in the community but to be a voice and testimony of God's standard and order in every aspect of life whenever God's laws, standards, and orders are challenged. What John Stott has said regarding this point is very important. He said, "Whenever laws are enacted which contradict God's law, civil disobedience becomes a Christian duty" and the utmost purpose for this disobedience to the laws of the government is nothing other than demonstrating Christian submission to God, not simply opposing, or fighting against the government itself.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

The challenge the Church in Myanmar is facing today regarding sacred and secular worldview is no doubt a challenge to many other Christians around the world in their respective contexts too. To reconsider it biblically requires one to remember that Christians have creation and new creation mandates. In these mandates, Christians have the responsibility of being a voice for the voiceless, the oppressed, and the marginalized as advocates of God's standard and order in the fallen community and society until the new creation of God is reached ultimately. Hence, the worldview of the dichotomy between Church and state as well as sacred and secular needs to be reexamined considering the idea of structure and order. Political and social engagements of Christians are not secular in themselves, but rather are very useful means by which God's standards and orders are articulated, and possibly transformed by the fallen community and society. Such things as political and social activities are sacred or secular only based on being done in what direction. God is interested also in our daily life spheres and has called us to be light among people in the wider community as a community of his people.

¹⁵ Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 11.

¹⁶ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*. The Bible Speaks Today Series (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 342

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