

Drowning in context: Translating salvation in Myanmar

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Recent reforms in Myanmar afford local Christians new opportunities to more actively share the gospel with Buddhists. In doing so they enter into a public sphere tentatively emerging from five decades of censorship and other restrictions on expression. This article explores the place of misunderstanding and translation in encounters between evangelists and Buddhist audiences. For evangelists, to go public is to open oneself to the possibility, even the likelihood, of being misunderstood. Such misunderstandings emerge in part from the negotiation of similarity and difference entailed by translation practices. I situate these practices in a conceptual and linguistic space partly shaped by nineteenth-century missionary efforts, and also by state attempts to regulate the public use of Buddhist language.

How to preach the gospel in Myanmar? This was the topic of a seminar held one afternoon in September 2016 at New Life, a small Pentecostal church on the top-floor of a skinny apartment building above a noisy bus stop in a neighbourhood northeast of Yangon's downtown.¹ It had been almost a year since the election that brought the National League of Democracy to power, ostensibly drawing five decades of military rule to a close. New Life was part of a network of churches experimenting with more public forms of evangelism in this changing context. A set of reforms since around 2011 – the tentative easing of censorship, the relaxation of restrictions on assembly, the holding of relatively free elections – had afforded the space in which some Christians felt newly free to share the gospel with Buddhist audiences. The changes promised the end of misrule by an authoritarian government that had, at times, sought legitimacy through its strategic promotion of Buddhism.² For Christians at churches like New Life, the reforms also heralded a coming rupture – one in which God would rescue Myanmar by bringing the country to democracy and its Buddhist-majority population to Christ.

Yet all was not unfolding exactly as believers hoped. God was working, they insisted, in his own time. But there was mounting evidence that the rupture was still somehow off: new limits on expression;³ a crony class cementing its economic dominance;⁴ and little progress on peace negotiations between the state and various ethnic armed groups.⁵ There was also the intensification of a strain of Buddhist nationalism,⁶ rendering the status of Muslims especially precarious, and forcing to the centre of the apparent transition the question of “Who belongs in the new Myanmar.”⁷ The state's treatment of the Rohingya, culminating in episodes of ethnic cleansing, was in part an expression of this trend. If now was the time for the gospel's deprivatization, the moment when believers could – indeed, should – enter the public sphere to proclaim the good news to Buddhists, how was this task to be approached on such shifting and still unstable ground?

Leading the seminar at New Life was Pastor Khai, a charismatic preacher in his early thirties with a fashionably shaggy haircut. His desire to be part of Myanmar's “spiritual awakening” had drawn him home from the Philippines, where he had been attending a bible college. He started the seminar by talking about how Christians could draw inspiration from John Harper, the Scottish evangelist who shared the gospel with passengers on the sinking Titanic in the final hours after its collision with the iceberg. This was a model of commitment that believers in Myanmar would do well to emulate. They shouldn't be disheartened by the fact that, two centuries on from the arrival of Adoniram Judson, the pioneering American Baptist missionary, Christians made up only about 6% of the population. But commitment was not

all, as the pastor made clear by recounting a story from a gospel trip to an area southwest of Yangon. The group were on a boat travelling down the Irrawaddy River when a violent storm broke out. In the deluge one evangelist started handing out copies of a gospel tract to the Buddhist passengers on board. The pamphlet, which featured on its front page a drawing of a person flailing in a body of water, was called “The Drowning Man” (*ye niq thu*) (Figure 1).

A popular tract amongst evangelists in Myanmar, it tells the story of a man who takes a dip in a lake under a sign that reads “No swimming”. A passer-by sees him thrashing about in the water and tries to save him by demonstrating how to swim. “You have to move your arms like this,” he yells from the shore. A second person then scolds the man for his failure to follow the rules: “Didn't you read the sign?!” But then, just at the moment when the man starts to sink below the lake's surface, a third person dives in and rescues him, saying, “Don't be scared, friend. I'm coming.” Evangelists like the tract, they say, because of the contrast it draws between merit (*kutho*) with grace (*che zu daw*), which is the main distinction on which their evangelism turns, capturing how Jesus saves you, while the Buddha only shows you how to save yourself. Crucially, it does all this indirectly, without mentioning “Buddhism,” which is key in a setting where doing so risks inviting angry responses from Buddhists, as well as potential prosecution under colonial-era laws that criminalize “insulting” religion or “wounding” religious feeling.⁸ With permissible speech thus circumscribed, evangelists go public with caution; if comparisons are drawn between Buddhism and Christianity, it is usually only obliquely.

<Figure 1 to appear about here>

Figure 1. “The Drowning Man”

In the spirit of John Harper, the Christian on the Irrawaddy River had seized an opportunity for evangelism during the storm. But his effort had backfired. The Buddhists on the boat took the distribution of the “The Drowning Man” as a “bad omen” (*ni mak ma kaun bu*) that they themselves might be about to drown. This was not what effective communication looked like. Instead of opening the door to Jesus, the pastor said, this misstep had slammed it shut. The anecdote was meant to be funny. It drew embarrassed laughter from members of the small audience, some of whom recalled finding themselves in similar, if not quite so dramatic, situations. But there was also a serious point about the possibility of misunderstanding that attended evangelism in Myanmar. To be misunderstood was to risk having the gospel ignored or rejected by Buddhists, just as it has been, with very few exceptions, for about two hundred years. “When we go and preach outside (*a pyin*),” the pastor said, “we need to preach simply, in a language outsiders can understand (*na leh nain*).”

This article takes Pastor Khai's lesson as a point of departure to explore the work of misunderstanding in Christian forays into Myanmar's new public sphere. Encounters across lines of religious difference always carry the potential for misunderstanding, the possibility that interlocutors might fail to converge on the meanings of the words they exchange – especially where the available vocabulary is constrained by direct and indirect censorship. The same could be said of all instances of communication, which succeed, it has been argued, only to the extent that each party enters the encounter in a spirit of interpretive charity, willing to go “beyond the words” spoken towards less precise but somehow deeper forms of understanding grounded in “similarities in human experience”.⁹ But encounters involving religion offer especially fertile ground for the emergence of misunderstanding, bringing into contact and comparison not just different words but different worlds, and trading in concepts whose meanings are expected to elude usual modes of interpretation. As such they necessarily also entail practices of translation.¹⁰

Whenever members of a religious community attempt to convey something of their beliefs and traditions to others, they partake in translation, de- and re-contextualizing concepts – even in encounters between speakers of the same language. What Pastor Khai was calling for, was, in essence, for Christians to pay greater attention to how they were translating the gospel, and to the potential misunderstandings that might ensue. More specifically, he was pushing for translations that, in a helpful distinction, tended towards “domestication,” which reduces the foreignness of a text, rather than “foreignization,” which leaves a “remainder” of the foreign that cannot be fully reconciled into the domestic.¹¹ For churches like New Life, this went beyond translation theory; translation mattered, not just for the effectiveness of evangelism, but also for the perceived status of Christians as a minority in a setting where tensions about national belonging turned sharply on religious adherence.¹² Indeed, one of the biggest challenges evangelists say they face is overcoming the perception, a product of Myanmar’s colonial and postcolonial history, that the gospel is “foreign” (*nain’gan ja*), and that Christians, by extension, might in some sense be foreign too.

Exercises in religious publicity often raise questions about translation and misunderstanding. For Pentecostal evangelists in Myanmar, to go public is to open oneself to the possibility, even the likelihood, of being misunderstood. As much as our understanding of public religion now benefits from a greater focus on the sonic, visual, and affective entailments of the media through which religion goes public,¹³ the place of language continues to warrant attention. This is not to re-centre the liberal figure of the disembodied reader in understandings of the public sphere.¹⁴ Nor is it out of some anachronistic commitment to the decoding of meaning. It is, rather, with an eye to meaning’s limits,¹⁵ which is key to grasping the dynamics of public religion, especially in encounters across difference. One challenge to the Habermasian model of public communication has been to question its implicit assumption that such talk is “fully comprehensible and linguistically transparent.”¹⁶ This assumption reappears in the language ideology underlying much of Christian evangelism and attendant translation practices: a faith that language “transparently conveys the message of salvation and the sincere commitment of believers to this message.”¹⁷

A belief in translatability – a belief that emerges under particular historical and ideological conditions¹⁸ – was what Pastor Khai professed at New Life: the conviction that it was possible for evangelists to avoid misunderstanding in their reaching out to Buddhists. But the pastor’s appeal was more easily made than acted on. For starters, even seemingly successful attempts at domestication and contextualisation could lead to misunderstanding – as when “The Drowning Man” was received as a bad omen. But it was also not always clear that understanding and transparency were totally desirable. Rather, believers at churches such as New Life seemed to appreciate, at some level, the usefulness of misunderstanding and the productivity of mistranslation, especially amidst the still uncertain unfolding of Myanmar’s transition. In any event, what constituted “understanding”, and the best way to get there, was never obvious. And what’s more, even if Christians could be confident about which words to use in public, another problem, as we will now see, is that they weren’t entirely free to use them.

Sense and Censorship

In April 2018, a friend sent me an image that had been circulating online amongst Christian Facebook users in Myanmar: a photograph of a statement by the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, the government-appointed council of senior Buddhist monks. It had been issued in response to reported instances of Christians “appropriating” (*yu ngin*) several “Theravada Buddhist terms.” One case was a signboard reportedly erected outside an Anglican church in Kayah State that referred to its ministers as “*thanga*,” the Burmese version of the Pali *sangha* used to refer to the community of Buddhist monks. The statement warned that such usage

could lead to conflict. In the interests of inter-religious harmony, it said, the Committee had ruled against any further appropriation of Buddhist terms by “people of other religions” (*a’cha batha win*).

The statement could be interpreted in different ways. One might read it is a genuine effort to avert religious conflict. The Committee had recently attempted to ban Ma Ba Tha, the main nationalist group, and it seemed to be showing interest in reining in hardline Buddhist monks responsible for spreading hate speech against Muslims.¹⁹ But it is also possible to consider the statement in the context of the state’s broader regulation of religious difference in Myanmar.²⁰ By fixing a boundary around “Buddhist” language, the Committee was frustrating the move that Pastor Khai was pushing for in his lesson. It was obstructing Christian attempts at “domestication”, thus reinforcing Christianity’s “foreign” status. For many Christians I knew, restrictions of this nature were evidence of ongoing censorship, part of a pattern of continuing persecution that also included restrictions on church construction and the harassment of some Buddhist-Christian converts.²¹

Myanmar was once notorious for having one of the world’s strictest censorship regimes. Printed materials had to be submitted prior to publication to the Press Scrutiny Board, which was established by the military government that came to power in 1962. Chunks of text were routinely blacked out in newspapers. Foreign radio stations – which the junta accused of spreading a “skyful of lies”²² – had their broadcasts jammed. Burmese authors working under the regime relied heavily on metaphor and allegory, discussing politics only obliquely in an attempt to evade censors.²³ The easing of censorship in 2012 was one of the first reforms implemented as part of the transition. More recent events, however, have pointed in the opposite direction. New forms of online censorship and the ongoing intimidation of journalists suggest that the space for freedom of expression has not expanded as widely as initially hoped.²⁴

Censorship has, over the years, posed a particular problem for evangelism. Alongside the prohibitions on “insulting” religion, there was also, until recently, a list of approximately 100 “Buddhist” words that Christians were told not to use in their religious publications. Like the Committee’s statement, this list focused on loanwords from Pali, the language of the Theravada Buddhist canon, and included words such as *metta* (loving-kindness) and *dukkha* (suffering). It also included *paya*, a Burmanized Pali word that Christians use to refer to “God”. The issue was that *paya* is also used in Burmese as one of several ways to refer to the Buddha. Believers thought that anxieties surrounding the Christian usage of this particular word cut both ways: Buddhists might be unhappy with the freestanding use of *paya*, which could lead people to confuse God with the Buddha. But they might also be unhappy with use of “Everlasting God” (*tawara paya*), a term seen to contrast directly with the Buddha’s self-professed status as, like all things, impermanent. In other words, the state’s discomfort with the public use and circulation of “Buddhist” terms by non-Buddhists seemed to be motivated by a set of anxieties about the possible comparisons facilitated or frustrated by translation. Here, as elsewhere, the state’s “regulation of religion’s public forms” was part of its management of religious difference.²⁵

Early missionaries to Burma faced the challenge of how to convey Christian concepts in Burmese, a language whose vocabulary draws heavily on Pali, especially in areas of religion, government, and philosophy.²⁶ In his study of Muslim-Hindu encounter in precolonial Bengal, Tony Stewart describes the process of translating Islamic texts into Bengali as a “search for equivalence”: an effort to “articulate a Muslim vision in the local vernacular, a language that bore the weight of centuries of Hindu adaptation.”²⁷ This process was facilitated by Bengali’s “special relationship” with its “parent” languages, particularly Sanskrit, which provided words relating to specific areas of expertise.²⁸ In their own search for equivalence, Christian missionaries to Burma shortened the conceptual distance between Buddhism and

Christianity, even as they sought to emphasise the latter's distinctiveness. At the forefront of these efforts was Judson, the American Baptist missionary who arrived in Rangoon in 1813. While his initial efforts were met mostly with indifference – “It is more difficult for a Burman to become a Christian than it is to extract a tooth from a tiger's mouth,” Judson wrote²⁹ – he and other missionaries would go on to have success with groups in the country's borderlands such as the Karen, Kachin, and Chin. His Burmese version of the bible, which he completed in 1834, is still the most widely used in churches like New Life.³⁰ Like today's evangelists, Judson was also a firm believer in the power of tracts to bring Burmese Buddhists to Christ.³¹ After bringing the first printing press to Burma, Judson produced several tracts in which he argued for the superiority of Christianity, relying on “Buddhist” terms to do so, and thereby shaping the linguistic landscape that today's evangelists now navigate.

In an analysis of two of the most famous tracts – “A View of the Christian Religion” (1816) and “The Golden Balance” (1829) – the theologian La Seng Dingrin identifies at least 80 such terms used by Judson.³² That Judson was able to draw on an existing Buddhist vocabulary shows, according to Dingrin, that there is a “linguistic affinity between Burmese Buddhism and Christianity ... [and] that there might be ‘points of contact’ in Burmese Buddhist culture to which the gospel could be linked.”³³ Taking the example of *tawara paya* – which, he says, is able to “convey the concepts of God as taught by Christianity” – Dingrin argues for what he sees as the “translatability” of the gospel into a Buddhist linguistic and cultural context.³⁴ In other words, Judson had succeeded at effectively “commensurating” Christianity and Buddhism. In his study of conversion and translation, Hanks defines “commensuration” as a process that brought Spanish and Maya “into alignment, so that meaning can move from one to the other.”³⁵ In identifying “points of contact,” Judson succeeded, according to Dingrin, in commensurating Buddhism and Christianity, even as he was able to stress the distinctiveness of the gospel. At play here is the same Protestant language ideology that animated Pastor Khai's lesson, with its faith in translatability and in the potential of any language to act as a vehicle for the gospel's authentic expression. It was these very “points of contact” that the Committee's statement could be read as denying today's Christians. All the same, one legacy of Judson's translations is that, like translations elsewhere, they have continued to “keep the foreign in circulation, hence saving it for those who come later.”³⁶

The challenge this now poses for evangelism was obvious that afternoon at New Life. The seminar was part of a program of activities taking place in churches across Yangon in the run-up to a major outdoor event being organised by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Set to feature Franklin Graham, the son of the famous evangelist, the “Love Joy Peace Festival” was being spoken about, by US organizers and local partners alike, as a milestone – not least because the military had expelled foreign missionaries after it seized power in 1962. Also significant was the event's public nature. Since 2011 there had been a noticeable increase in the number of Christian events taking place outside church settings, in convention centres, stadiums, and public parks. But this was set to be the largest. The challenge, though, was how to make sure that non-believers also turned up at the Festival so that they could be saved.

To this end, organizers were rolling out “Operation Andrew,” a program whereby Christians would reach out to non-believers to invite them to the event. To do so effectively, Pastor Khai said at the seminar, Christians needed to be careful with what he called “Christian language” (*cri'yan saga*). Examples included “fellowship” (*meithahaya*) and “grace” (*che zu daw*). Such words could pose a problem, both because non-believers were not able to easily grasp their meaning, and also because their use came across as “foreign.” That evangelists came mostly from ethnic-minority backgrounds meant that linguistic choices risked reinforcing their doubly marginal status. Translation here, as elsewhere, was a “wager” made in the shadow of relations of power unequal in ways that have shifted over time.³⁷ The pastor's view about “Christian language” was borne out to some degree in conversations with Buddhists during

fieldwork. One Buddhist friend who worked as an interpreter for foreign journalists would reach for the dictionary whenever there were Christian terms I wanted to discuss with him. A Buddhist university student, who inquired into my research, asked whether it had been difficult to learn not just “regular” Burmese, but also the “weird” Burmese he had heard Christians speak. At one point, when I asked an interpreter for help translating a gospel tract, he told me, in English, that he was unable to do so because he was “not familiar with the concepts of Christianity.” To the ears of these Buddhists, the language that Christians spoke was different – not indecipherable, but made odd and other by the use of distinct Christian terms for which Judson bore significant responsibility. Pastor Khai was warning that this “weird” language risked getting in the way. The question, though, was which words to use instead?

Jesus and the Hungry Ghost

It wasn't easy for evangelists in Myanmar to avoid “Christian language” altogether in their increasingly public outreach, but neither was it totally desirable. For all the emphasis on “domestication,” some degree of difference still mattered, for today’s evangelists just as for Judson. Language requires “a signifier foreign to it” in order to be able to “seduce anyone.”³⁸ To remove all traces of the foreign from evangelism would be to obscure its difference altogether. The “coefficient of weirdness,” which for Malinowski set magical language apart, here too helped to render the gospel distinct.³⁹ Evangelists were keen to confront the perception that Christianity was entirely other. But they were also eager to avoid the impression that it was too much “the same” (*tu tu*) and, as such, just another “religion” (*batha*). To communicate the gospel’s otherness – what made it different – was at a fundamental level the whole point of evangelism. This was not about offering belonging in a transnational Christianity community beyond the nation.⁴⁰ Rather, sharing the gospel involved encounters with Buddhists around “the simultaneous allure and danger of the foreign.”⁴¹ As much as currents of Burman Buddhist nationalism have shaped the country, often through the politics of language,⁴² this has often unfolded alongside a more ambivalent attitude towards the foreign.⁴³

This played out in Christian-Buddhist encounters in more and less subtle ways. Alongside the busy program of events, Pentecostal churches were pursuing other approaches to evangelism, including door-to-door preaching. Such activities were no less public for taking place inside people’s homes. The defining feature of all evangelism was that it occurred, as Pastor Khai put it, “outside” (*a pyin*): beyond church walls, at the interface between the believer self and the non-believer other. As much as Pentecostal publicity can often be noisy, with the attendant anxieties that Andrea Grant discusses in her contribution to this collection, it can also be quiet and intimate. Features of Myanmar’s recent political history – pervasive surveillance, censorship, restrictions on assembly – also make it important to resist drawing any clear line between “private” and “public” that would map transparently onto other settings.⁴⁴

Devoting a great deal of energy to door-to-door preaching was Hope, an independent Pentecostal church loosely affiliated with New Life. Hope sends out evangelists several times a week, mostly to areas on the city’s peri-urban periphery (Figure 2). One of these evangelists was Suan, a young woman born in Chin State whose two sisters also worked at the church. Suan was responsible for the evangelism program in a part of Thanlyin, a township on the southern side of the Bago River, a two-hour bus trip from downtown. On November 7, 2015 I accompanied Suan and another evangelist, Kim, to Thanlyin. It was the day before the election that would sweep the NLD to power. As the evangelists set out to talk to Buddhists about Jesus, political parties were moving through the city on last-minute campaign drives. It would be the first election in which Suan and Kim had voted. They were excited, but also

nervous about how the military would react to a likely NLD victory, recalling what happened after the 1990 election when the generals ignored the result and proceeded to hold power for another two decades.

One person they spoke to that day was an elderly woman named Daw Than Than. We sat on the floor of her one-room thatch hut. Above our heads was an altar with a small image of the Buddha, a laminated photograph of the Shwedagon Pagoda, and a poster of Sitagu Sayadaw, Myanmar's most famous monk. It is not possible here to recount the conversation in full; as was often the case, it lasted about an hour. But I want to pull out some details that give a sense of how evangelism usually unfolded and the interplay of translation and misunderstanding it involved. After some small talk, Suan proceeded to preach. She spoke about how the "good news" (*tha'din kaun*) she was sharing concerned what happens after death:

"So the first way is the law (*taya*) as in 'do not murder,' 'do not commit adultery,' and so on. ... But we can't follow these laws. Think about it: We always do the wrong thing. And since we can't do it, God provided grace (*che zu daw*). ... Most people think, 'What we get depends on what we do.' They think they must get merit (*kaun'hmu kutho*). That's how they get to nirvana (*neikban*). ... But think about it. ... If we compare the good things we do and the bad things we do, the bad things are always more, no matter how much effort we make."

Suan, in this typical exchange, was shifting between Christian and Buddhist registers. Like the story told in "The Drowning Man," her evangelism turned on the distinction between merit and grace. Grace was a free gift from Jesus, she continued, that would release Daw Than Than from her "suffering" (*dukkha*) and carry her to "everlasting heaven" (*tawara kaun kin boun*). Like Burmese authors working under censorship, Suan was proceeding obliquely, careful never to mention Buddhism directly. She was drawing together Christian and Buddhist concepts – grace, merit, suffering, nirvana, heaven – as commensurable factors in a single soteriological calculation about what might happen in Daw Than Than's "next life" (*nauk baw*). Doing so involved deploying the kind of "Christian language" that Pastor Khai criticized, but also the kind of "Buddhist language" that the Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee warned Christians against using. Suan continued like this for another thirty minutes. "This is not just for Chin people," she said at one point. "It's not just for foreigners (*nain'gan cha tha*) but also for all the Myanmar people."

Daw Than Than was listening and nodding politely. But she was starting to look a bit distracted.

"So how do you feel about what I've just said?" Suan asked. "Is any of it unclear?"

"No, I understood (*na leh deh*) everything that you said," Daw Than Than replied. "It's right. It's true. Yes, I understand."

"But how does it actually make you feel?"

"Um, how does it make me feel? Well, ... yes, all [religions] are the same (*tu tu*)."

This was a recurring possibility, that Buddhists would dismiss Christianity not because it was too other, but because it was too much the same. Just as there was a danger of presenting the gospel in language that was too "foreign," too much commensuration posed the opposite risk of concealing its important – and hopefully appealing – alterity. This prompted Kim, who had been sitting quietly on the other side of the room, to intervene:

“So you think this god (*paya*) is the same? In the next life, where will your spirit go? Currently, if you die, you’ll go to hell (*nga yeh*). ... God will sit on the throne and a lot of people will stand in front of him. ‘Oh Daw Than Than is not here,’ he’ll say. Her name wasn’t included. Then you’ll say, ‘Oh, but I always worship God. I meditate everyday.’ ... But if you accept and believe [in Jesus], you’ll get eternal life (*tawara a’theq*) in nirvana (*neikban*). ... But now, if there’s a car accident, where will you go? Your karma is still tangling you (*wit ma kyut*), right? You might become a hungry ghost (*pate tar*).”

The encounter went on like this for another twenty minutes. In their efforts to convince Daw Than Than that only Jesus could deliver her from “suffering,” Kim and Suan continued to oscillate between domesticating and foreignizing approaches to translation. Doing so required conceding some conceptual ground to Buddhism, to a world in which karma, nirvana, and hungry ghosts exist. It also entailed a slippage between “heaven” and “nirvana.” Like other evangelists, Suan and Kim were aware that these terms had different meanings in Buddhism: heaven referring to certain other planes of existence through which people move in the cycle of birth and death; nirvana referring to release from that cycle. But they proceeded to use these words as equivalents. Several months later, when I spoke with the director of Hope’s evangelism program about this move, he explained:

“Their [Buddhists’] belief is that if they practice, they’ll reach nirvana (*neikban*). ... As for heaven (*kaun kin*), that’s the place where we would be reborn. Even though our bodies die, our spirits will get there. That’s heaven. As for nirvana, there’s nothing any more. Everything vanishes. Everything gets extinguished (*hnjein*) ... So to speak of the exact meaning, that’s the difference. But, to generalize, ‘Do you want to get to heaven?’ ‘Do you want to get to nirvana?’ Eh ... like this – we use the words interchangeably.”

It is perhaps unsurprising that Christians perform such acts of bricolage given the political and linguistic contours of the public sphere they enter. Religious publicity often involves “proximation,” a “condition of variable ‘closeness’ between categories of activity otherwise regarded as separate or autonomous.”⁴⁵ We should also not overstate the commitment of everyday Burmese Buddhists to the goal of nirvana, as the total cessation of existence, in their next life.⁴⁶ Still, it is worth pausing to consider the potential for misunderstanding that these translations place at the heart of the evangelistic encounter. In the act of making Christianity and Buddhism commensurable at one level – contextualizing the gospel in the terms of Buddhist cosmology – evangelists open up possibilities for misunderstanding at another level. They do so while testing their faith in the gospel’s translatability against the mostly indifferent – and at times intolerant – reception that it receives in a public sphere where the limits of acceptable speech are still unclear.

The “search for equivalence,” writes Stewart, “is an attempt to be understood, to make oneself understood in a language not always one’s own.”⁴⁷ Suan drew on Buddhist language in an effort to help Daw Than Than understand the significance of the message being shared. Kim attempted to correct what she saw as Daw Than Than’s misapprehension about the gospel by further situating it in the terms of karma. Such attempts to “repair” misunderstanding through appeal to context, however, are not without their “perils.”⁴⁸ Misunderstandings are not always corrected – they can in fact be deepened – through contextualization. Context has the power to both clarify and confound. What, then, are the consequences of public speech that collapses nirvana and heaven into one another? What to make of the willingness of believers to pursue evangelism knowing that an albeit unlikely conversion might be premised on a belief that Jesus will release a Buddhist person from *samsara*, deliver them to nirvana, and ensure they don’t become a hungry ghost? What kind of a conversion would that be?

Conclusion: Translating success

In Daw Than Than's case, this last question may have been rather moot. Towards the end of their hour together, when Suan asked if she would be willing now to accept Jesus as her personal saviour, Daw Than Than declined. We left soon after and began the journey back over the river to the church, minds fixed on the events of the following day. The next morning Suan and Kim would post selfies on Facebook, holding up little fingers stained with purple ink: proof they had voted in the election whose result was already looking clear. Less clear was the outcome of the fairly routine conversation with Daw Than Than. Such encounters were rarely the total failure that Pastor Khai spoke about in his lesson at New Life. But if the encounter with Daw Than Than was not exactly a failure, does that mean it was a success?

Daw Than Than had not been visibly put off by the "weirdness" of Christian language. In the spirit of Judson, Suan and Kim had done much to avoid that outcome. By attempting to draw out "points of contact," as Dingrin puts it, they had gone so far as to assent to the existence of karma, nirvana, and hungry ghosts. In using nirvana and heaven interchangeably, they had engaged in the kind of "appropriation" of Buddhist language whose public use the Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee had sought to regulate in its missive on permissible translations. In doing so, they had attempted to "domesticate" the gospel in Buddhist conceptual and linguistic space, even as they also sought to "foreignise" it by explaining how it stands apart, how it is not, as Daw Than Than put it, "the same."

"Dialogue," write Bender and Cadge in their study of an interfaith initiative between American Buddhist and Catholic nuns, "is always full of imprecise translations and misunderstandings," resulting in a situation in which participants often appear "to be talking at cross-purposes despite their endeavours to deepen their connections with others."⁴⁹ Such a situation is far removed from a vision of the public sphere that, like the language ideology thought to underlie evangelism, privileges "the power of particular forms of communication to commensurate morally and epistemologically divergent social groups."⁵⁰ But it clearly resonates with what we see in the encounter above: the imprecision, the speaking at cross-purposes, the preconceptions bundled into the encounter.

It resonates too with some of the analysis that has surrounded the hopes for Myanmar's apparent salvation through democratic transition. In a *New York Times* article published four months out from the election, Thomas Fuller expressed concern that the apparent lack of a developed political vocabulary in Burmese risked hampering democratisation. "Today, as Myanmar embraces change," wrote Fuller, "many foreign words are being imported wholesale, but their meanings are getting lost in translation."⁵¹ Scholars were quick to point out that this narrative risks ignoring the "creative – and arguably more relevant – traditions of political and democratic thinking in Myanmar."⁵² One of many examples of concepts emerging from a Burmese political vernacular is *nalehmu*, often translated as "understanding." Emerging in the shadow of Myanmar's unpredictable and oppressive state, *nalehmu* refers to the "personalized network of implicit mutual obligations, reciprocity and trust established through long term interactions" that ordinary people relied upon to secure access to goods and services.⁵³

These networks of mutual understanding helped ordinary people survive the long years of military rule – a period from which, it seemed to Suan and Kim, Myanmar might be tentatively emerging. For Christians like them, seeing God's hand at work in the transition, now was a moment to take the gospel public. This meant attempting to translate it for Buddhist ears. The goal was not necessarily to establish long-term relations of trust in the spirit of *nalehmu*; or at least that wasn't the principal objective. Nor was it deepen

“connections” with Daw Than Than or other Buddhist interlocutors in the spirit of an interfaith dialogue. Rather, in taking the gospel public, believers were engaging in a simultaneous forging and severing of connections – between people, languages, and concepts – oscillating between an emphasis on similarity and an emphasis on difference. As much as the gospel always entails difference insofar as it offers a new path to salvation, evangelism is also dependent on a universalising logic of translatability that sees all people as potential converts.⁵⁴ In Myanmar, balancing similarity and difference has bearing not just on whether the message of salvation is or isn’t understood, but also on the status of minority Christians in a public sphere where the question of national belonging turns increasingly around religion. To present the gospel – as more or less similar or more or less different – is also to present the self to a Buddhist public in those same terms.

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¹ The names of churches and individuals in this article have been changed.

² Schober, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures*.

³ Brooten, McElhone, and Venkiteswaran, “Myanmar Media,” 39-41

⁴ Jones, “The Political Economy of Myanmar’s Transition,” 158-163.

⁵ Pedersen, “Myanmar in 2018: New Democracy Hangs in the Balance”, 158-163.

⁶ Foxeus, “The Buddha was a Devoted Nationalist”

⁷ Schober, “Belonging in the New Myanmar,” 160.

⁸ Frydenlund, “The rise of religious offence in transitional Myanmar”

⁹ Wikan, “Beyond the Words,” 461.

¹⁰ Israel, “Translation and Religion,” 323.

¹¹ Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation*.

¹² Nyi Nyi Kyaw, “Islamophobia in Buddhist Myanmar”; Than, “Nationalism, religion, and violence.”

¹³ Hirschkind, *Ethical Soundscape*; Meyer, *Sensational Movies*; Engelke, “Angels in Swindon.”

¹⁴ Cody, “Populist Publics”

¹⁵ Tomlinson and Engelke, *Limits of Meaning*.

¹⁶ Fraser, “Transnationalizing the Public Sphere,” 12.

¹⁷ Schram, “Tapwaroro is True,” 260.

¹⁸ Liu, “The Question of Meaning Value”.

¹⁹ International Crisis Group, “Buddhism and State Power.”

²⁰ Crouch, “Constructing Religion by Law in Myanmar.”

²¹ Fleming, “Hidden Plight.”

²² Brooten, McElhone, and Venkiteswaran, “Myanmar Media,” 23.

²³ Leehey, “Reading Saturn”; Allott, *Inked Over, Ripped Out*.

²⁴ Brooten, McElhone, and Venkiteswaran, “Myanmar Media,” 37.

²⁵ Heo, *Political Lives of Saints*, 20.

²⁶ Waxman and Soe Tun Aung, “The Naturalization of Indic Loan-Words into Burmese”; Wheatley and San San Hnin Tun, “Languages in Contact,” 63-66.

²⁷ Stewart, “In Search of Equivalence,” 269.

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- ²⁸ Ibid., 274.
- ²⁹ Clasper, “Buddhist-Christian Encounter,” 43.
- ³⁰ De Jong, “Adoniram Judson and the Burmese Bible,” 335.
- ³¹ “I am more and more convinced,” wrote Judson, “that Burmah is to be evangelized by tracts and portions of scripture. ... The press is the grand engine of Burmah. Every pull ... at the press sends another ray of light through the darkness of the empire.” Wayland, *A Memoir*, 510.
- ³² La Seng Dingrin, “Is Buddhism Indispensible.”
- ³³ “Is Buddhism Indispensible,” 4.
- ³⁴ “Is Buddhism Indispensible,” 16, 17.
- ³⁵ Hanks, *Converting Words*, 160
- ³⁶ Rafael, *Promise of the Foreign*, 15.
- ³⁷ Liu, “The Question of Meaning Value,” 34-5
- ³⁸ Derrida, “Pharmacia,” 71.
- ³⁹ Malinowski, *Coral Gardens*.
- ⁴⁰ Roberts, *Foreignness of Belonging*.
- ⁴¹ *Promise of the Foreign*, 12.
- ⁴² Walton, “Wages of Burman-ness”; Than, “The Languages of Pyidawtha”.
- ⁴³ Ikeya, “The Modern Burmese Woman”; Keeler, “Shifting Transversals.”
- ⁴⁴ Prasse-Freeman, “Grassroots Protest Movements,” 75.
- ⁴⁵ Elisha, “Proximations of Public Religion,” 75.
- ⁴⁶ Walton, *Buddhism, Politics, and Political Thought*, 44.
- ⁴⁷ Stewart, “In Search of Equivalence,” 286.
- ⁴⁸ Fabian, “Ethnographic Misunderstanding.”
- ⁴⁹ Bender and Cadge, “Constructing Buddhism(s),” 244.
- ⁵⁰ Povinelli, “Radical Worlds,” 326.
- ⁵¹ Fuller, “Those Who Would Remake Myanmar Find That Words Fail Them.”
- ⁵² Wells and Walton, “Is Democracy Really Lost in Translation?”
- ⁵³ Roberts, “Nalehmu.”
- ⁵⁴ Keane, *Christian Moderns*, 43

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