

# The Buddhist Nuns and Dialogue in Wartime Myanmar: Understanding the ‘Banality of Othering’

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**Abstract:** This paper contends that dialogue must be understood dispassionately with the aim to appreciate what David Bohm (2013) called ‘incoherence’, and the need to embrace multiplicity in narratives, even if that implies incongruence in the understanding of dialogue. Using ethnographic methods and findings, I situate the politics of self and the other, and argue that determining the other and acknowledging the ‘banality of othering’ need to be examined in discussions around dialogue. I present a background of the interfaith tensions between the Buddhists and the Muslim-Other in Myanmar and by means of ethnographic anecdotes unpack the underplayed importance of determining the other within one’s own faith tradition and emphasise the needs and possibilities of engaging with them. Female religious leaders are often the innate other in many religious traditions, and their stories, experiences, and recommendations are disproportionately discounted, and that necessitates redressing. In a first, this study reports the role of Buddhist nuns, or the lack of it, in transitional Myanmar in the belief, practice, and scholarship of dialogue, and emphasises the need for their meaningful involvement.

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**Keywords:** Dialogue, Othering, Communal violence, Buddhist nuns, Myanmar

## Contextualising Dialogue: Postmodern Approach to Premodern Questions

‘Interfaith dialogue’ (IFD) or ‘dialogue of civilisations’ received significant momentum after the tragic September 11, 2001 attacks. The world since then has become more conscious of the identities they ascribe, and the boundaries and fears that come with that. Dialogue is, as David Bohm maintained, ‘a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us’ (2013, 7). Dialogue is subjective, and inherently means different things to different people and contexts. One can derive what dialogue means to them, rather than the system imposing the perceptible sense of the term. Modular forms of dialogue can blur boundaries, can sometimes create them, and given the

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context, can embody the boundary itself. Theological and political influences have enabled and limited the manner in which these boundaries and fears are produced, propagated and protected. The process of ascribing and acquiring identities enforces the phenomenon of self and the other, where the members of the in-group or out-group are valued (or de-valued) on the basis of who they are; and by logical extension, our *becoming* involves who we include or exclude in the process. The process of othering is highly significant in the discourse of religious consciousness and practice, and in this article, using the concept of ‘the banality of othering’, along the lines of ‘the banality of evil’ by Hannah Arendt, I discuss how IFD is founded on the principles of the self-other continuum. This continuum, not binary, is socially and politically constructed, and when engaging in productive IFD, it is important to be mindful of these socio-political undercurrents. IFD has undergone several radical changes, and today, it has implicit and explicit manifestations of politics and power, while the purported objective it serves continues to be highly valuable. In this article, I not only aim to critically examine dialogue as a possibility in a transitional country, but also raise questions about the epistemological, structural and relational subject of dialogue itself. This paper contends that dialogue must be understood dispassionately with the aim to appreciate what Bohm called ‘incoherence’ (2013, ix), and the need to embrace multiplicity in narratives, even if that implies incongruence in the understanding of dialogue. The ‘grand narrative’ of the dominant modernist theories that monotonised the non-western other is pervasive in the field of dialogue as well, and both Said (1979) and Derrida (1984) were critical of the tendency to essentialise these concepts. Therefore, it follows that this article has adopted a postmodern framework to address questions around dialogue.

In order to illuminate the complex trajectory of dialogue, I draw on my ethnographic exposition and exploration of working with the female monastic community in transitional Myanmar. It is important to note that much of the scholarship around dialogue is theologically examined and debated. While theological discourses indeed offer insights and methodologies to deeply consider intertextuality and challenge the linear totalities in the field, ethnographic studies bring in synergies among complex lived aspects of dialogue. I am persuaded to argue that Myanmar as a field site and Buddhist nuns as research participants can offer novel and thorough insights into the problematic portrayals and undercurrents of dialogue. The fieldwork in Myanmar was conducted from September 2019 until January 2020, across five cities – Mandalay, Meiktila, Mingun, Sagaing and Yangon.<sup>1</sup> During this study, I spoke with about a hundred and twenty Buddhist monastics and about a score of religious leaders from Christian, Hindu, and Muslim backgrounds. I had in-depth conversations with eighty-eight Buddhist nuns who belong to a wide-ranging age group – from

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1 These cities were chosen on the basis of the number of Buddhist nuns and accessibility, and also that most of these cities have a history of communal tension.

21 to 91, and of them, about fifty percent were between 40 and 50. The research participants were selected mostly by the process of 'snowballing', and the methods were observational, participatory, and conversational. Semi-structured interviews helped with biographical information of the Buddhist nuns, while conversations helped to probe deeper and engage lived experiences. As Walton (2017) rightly suggested, in regions like Myanmar, where conflict is widespread and ongoing, people are scared to talk about their casual experiences and it may be difficult to conduct interviews. Conversations ease the pressure of the need to be precise and allow for a 'free-flow' of discussions and are less structured, permitting the speaker to express more spontaneously and the listener to grasp emotion and experiences that are not merely responses to questions, rather, are whole stories that the person has lived. Conversations and anecdotes are central to my methodologies. This has allowed me a good range of flexibility and helped me get access to original and authentic experiences and expressions.

Ethnography of or in violence is fundamental to my methodology. Nordstrom and Robber (1995) argued in their seminal work *Fieldwork Under Fire* that in order to study violence, one must go to the place where the violence is taking place. 'Fieldwork and violence' is a unique subject because it presents more questions than it has answers for. Issues of ethics and risk envelop the entire process, and the ethical dilemmas are concurrent with this line of study. We as researchers talk to victims and agents of violence and listen to the lived experiences and dire consequences that the research participants are probably sharing for the first and only time. It is our ethical responsibility to handle the information with the utmost care and respect, and to represent their voices justly. Methodological underpinnings in ethnographic studies pose concerns in form, practice, and interpretations, and these concerns swell when the fieldwork is in spaces submerged in tension. It follows that distinct methods emerge and evolve from the mediations and negotiations of the processes that constitute the tensions. In my study, I have examined the methods both within and outside the discursive traditions which feed into or offer alternatives to the existing frameworks of anthropological methods of ethnography of/in violence. I lived in nunneries throughout my study and participated in their everydayness. It is only with the full consent and enthusiasm of the research participants that this study is progressing.<sup>2</sup>In the past few years, Myanmar has experimented with several formats of inter- and intra-faith dialogue facilitated by the government or non-state organisations; however, the prolonged economic instability, geo-political influences, and the government's political will continue to pose difficult questions about the discourse of dialogue.

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2 This paper is a result of my doctoral studies, and I am still in the process of writing my thesis. Broadly, my research examines how Buddhist nuns in Myanmar affect and are affected by the communal conflicts, and how their agency can meaningfully shape the conflict reconciliation processes.

While I present a background of the interfaith tensions between the Buddhists and the Muslim-Other, the core intent of the paper is to index the underplayed importance of determining the other within one's own faith tradition, and to examine the needs and possibilities of engaging with them. In the course of this article, we not only unpack the politics of the other, but also what constitutes the self; and how dialogue not only helps to combat violence, but also how the discourse of dialogue may awaken latently expressed forms of violence. In a first, this study reports the role of Buddhist nuns in transitional Myanmar, or the lack of it, in the belief, practice and scholarship of dialogue, and emphasises the need for their meaningful involvement.

## **The Banality of Othering and Dialogue**

Hannah Arendt, who witnessed the war crimes trial of Adolph Eichmann in 1961 for spearheading the transportation of millions of Jews and others to various concentration camps in the execution of the Nazis' Final Solution, asked a question: Does one need to be evil to do evil? She was astonished to see that Eichmann was 'terrifyingly normal' and in 1963, she titled her case study 'A report on the banality of evil'. She noted that evil often surfaces from 'mechanical thoughtlessness' and that the perpetrator, in this case, Eichmann, was 'not aware of what he was actually doing' – and this, she argued is the commonplace (Arendt 2000, 47). She underpins and underlines the notions of unawareness, and the abundance, and the large extent of normalisation. Borrowing her framework, I propose the idea of 'The banality of othering', by which I imply that othering as a process escapes conscious culpability and is often involuntary. I am aware that the context in which she contrived the phrase is distinctly dissimilar from the manner in which I deploy it; however, I must clarify that the prime focus here is not the context, rather the 'banality'. In her writings, she expressed the magnitude of the 'evil' that remains unobtrusive, and the danger in how it is a commonplace. Othering, too, is a commonplace that thwarts acknowledgement and examination. As a process, othering is easy to be left unattended and unaccounted for because it is naturalised to a great extent, and the everydayness and the blanket-effect of the process makes it a flashpoint of banality. In discussions around inter- or intra-faith dialogue, it is pertinent to be mindful of the continual process of othering and the banality that comes with it.

Stephan and Stephan's (2017) theory leveraging the understanding of othering and Intergroup Threat Theory (ITT) has gained understandable momentum. The ITT posits that othering stems from perceived realistic and symbolic threats. Realistic threats comprise economic, physical, and political compromises that result in intergroup competition over material and economic conflicts of interests. Symbolic threats are outcomes of perceived group differences in values, beliefs, and practices. The core concept is that these resources and values are threatened by the out-group, leading to anxiety and uncertainty in the in-group. Drawing on the ITT framework,

Alorainy et al. (2019) argue that othering is a process and a tool to convey divisive sentiments and antagonistic or subtle hate expressions where 'send them home' or 'we need to teach them all' become justifiable. Similar to ITT that is centred around threat, this threat can come from someone who may be a member of the in-group, but due to their challenging and opposing ideologies, they too may form a subset of the Other. Understanding and engaging with the in-group other is sometimes more difficult, and other times, it defies sustained examination. This may occur due to the insecurities of the in-group (Alorainy et al. 2019) and the potential struggles the group may need to cope with the insider's perceived threats, especially those that challenge the central dogmas and narratives within the in-group.

The identities of self-other and the threats are culturally defined myths (Sémelin 2007), and may offer a robust gateway to understanding the relationship between conceptualisation and actualisation of different forms of violence. In addition, culturally propagated imageries shape the collective practices of violence and are key representations of othering. Linked to imageries is the term 'radicalised othering' that Bailey and Harindranath (2005) deployed to describe how news media captures and portrays the other, and how the othering curates politics of controlling the other. While othering as a process has links to violence, the gulf between othering and actual actions of violence is often not elaborately addressed (Holslag 2015). An example is Holslag's discussion of Claude Lanzmann's movie *Shoah* (1985). In his 1986 article on violence and memory, Holslag describes the journey from 'desire to kill' to 'the act itself'. Ervin Staub (1989) calls this journey 'the continuum of destruction' (1989, 17) and Gerd Baumann (1999) theorises that the gulf between desire and act is bridged by consolidating the identities of the other as demanding destruction in gradual steps, whereby both the in- and out-groups somewhat estimate and anticipate the radical outcomes. For Holslag, the desire to kill and the actual act are not dichotomies, rather facets of a process that culminate in a genocide. He clarifies that the process of building the bridge starts with the *sociale imaginaire* where the imagination creates the other, and slowly, this other is given a more tangible form that can be destroyed. He further argues that the objective of the process is not just destruction of the other, but the creation of a 'new self'.

Kiblinger (2017) studied Buddhist attitudes towards the religious other and argues that each religious community is aware of the existence of the other, and it is up to their willingness to decide how would they respond to the other or something that is the other's. It is important to address that Buddhism has demonstrated considerable inclusivity. There are scholars who have documented their concerns regarding Buddhism being overtly tolerant and inclusive. Hakamaya (1977) in his studies of critical Buddhism, suggested that Buddhism should be wary of too much compromise and mushy tolerance. Hans Kung (1986), a world-renowned scholar and philosopher

known for his efforts on pluralism has written that Buddhism can be in danger of ‘easy and cheap’ tolerance. Furthermore, Monier-Williams (translated in 2014) has cautioned that Buddhism may not be able to survive intact if it continues to be so liberal and tolerant. Charles Elliot (1962), after studying the religious exchanges between Buddhism and the West found Buddhism to be ‘dangerously tolerant’. Deliberations around Buddhism and its perception of the religious other have taken the centre stage since the Rohingya repression that has startled the world. There is a worldwide clamour to exhort peace-making initiatives between the Buddhists and the Muslim communities in Myanmar in order to ease the communal discord, and chart peaceful possibilities for the country’s future. These peace-making initiatives may tend to overlook important contributors and actors, whose absence can spell failure for the dialogue projects. While Buddhist men, more centrally, Buddhist monks, are seen as leaders of dialogue, Buddhist nuns continue to occupy peripheral spaces within the discourse of dialogue. The Buddhist nuns, in many ways, embody *otherness*, and as a result, their stories are not substantially understood and annotated. Buddhist nuns in Myanmar navigate through the crossroads of gender and religious imparities and understanding dialogue from their frame of reference can yield meaningful and nuanced insights into the discourse of dialogue.

## Contextualising Communal Tensions in Myanmar

‘What will you do if your home/place gets filled with dirt & garbage due to dirtstorm? Simply, you’ll remove dirt to clean your home. Otherwise the place becomes disgusting for you & family. Islam is the dirtstorm. May be, you weren’t able to stop it, but now you can remove it.’

This was posted on Twitter by the leader of the ultranationalist organisation MaBaTha<sup>3</sup> Monk Wirathu<sup>4</sup> in June 2020. The profile was reported and blocked in four days, but it was retweeted over 1000 times and liked over 2600 times before it could be taken down. His usual tweets are emotive and are used to mobilise people in order to penalise the wrongs Muslims have allegedly committed. He is often seen validating violence and greatly emphasising ‘reactionary violence’, ‘just war’ and ‘punishment’ as ways to ‘teach’ the other a lesson. He ensures that the communal hostilities are in line with Buddhist teachings, contingent upon recognising that these actions help in protecting the religion and the country. This viewpoint in Myanmar today is so pervasive that it has made its way into religious rhetoric and cultural axioms and has wracked the country since 2012. My definition of communal violence in the context

3 MaBaTha is the Burmese acronym for *Ah-myo Batha Thatana Saun Shaung Ye a-Pwe* which is translated to English as *Association for Protection of Race and Religion*

4 Monk Wirathu is infamously known for his brazen interview with The Times Magazine in 2013, where he was called ‘The face of Buddhist Terror’.

of Myanmar draws heavily from Cheesman (2017) who categorised 'communal violence' as comprising 'recurrent, sporadic, direct physical hostility realised through repeated public expressions that Muslims constitute an existential threat to Buddhists' (2017, 335). The communal conflicts in the country are animated by an array of factors ranging from historical to socio-political, and have led to the largest and fastest growing group of refugees in the world. The factual data are significant, but in this article, I present experiences that are lived and the narratives that are generated and how that enables violence. Uncovering impetuses and justifications capacitating violence or warranting its motifs and outcomes are effective methods to engage in constructive dialogue.

Communal violence in Myanmar, especially since the 2012 riots in Rakhine, has ranged from local inter-group agitations based on ascriptive identities to nationwide organised violence, some events that are known to have been actively supported by actors from the government or the military. Rakhine, or the Arakan state is populated largely by the descendants of immigrants from the Chittagong District of East Bengal, which is present-day Bangladesh. They migrated into Arakan after the state was surrendered to British India under the terms of the Treaty of Yandabo (Chan 2005, 397). The anti-Muslim sentiment that has been erratic and decentralised through much of Burmese history has been mobilised under the current alliance between Buddhism and politics, particularly enhanced by the leadership of eminent Buddhist monks who have championed the narrative of protecting their land and religion from the Muslim outsiders. The 969<sup>5</sup> movement, which became popular only after the 2012 Rakhine war, has roots in the 1990s and the 1988 revolution, where several nationalist monks came together in the hope that Myanmar could be made into a Theravada Buddhist country, and gradually Monk Wirathu became the de facto face of the movement. Since the demolition of Buddhist temples in Afghanistan by the Taliban, and the 9/11 attacks later that year, Wirathu has been known to have taken 969 to grave levels (Marshall 2013). Wirathu, in his speeches, called for the Buddhist people to unite and resist the Muslim adversaries. For him, 969 is a grassroots movement, that pits itself against the influence of Islam and Muslims on Myanmar which he considers an essentially Buddhist homeland. He has urged Buddhists not to marry outside their religion, to boycott Muslim businesses, and not to hire Muslims in government positions or in Buddhist-owned workplaces. He has accused the Muslims of terrorism and rape and often cited examples from Myanmar and outside. Mosques have been categorised as 'enemy bases' (Marshall 2013). 969 has given rise to MaBaTha which has become virtually synonymous with Buddhist nationalism and anti-Muslim discrimination and violence in Myanmar (Walton 2017) and is widely misunderstood

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5 969 is the nationalist movement that aims at protecting and promoting Buddhist values in Myanmar and refers to the 9 virtues of the Buddha, 6 core practices of Buddhism, and the 9 principles of the Buddhist community.

by the people inside and outside the country, including the Burmese government (Crisis Group 2017)<sup>6</sup>. MaBaTha is the Burmese acronym for Ah-myo Batha Thathana Saun Shaung Ye a-Pwe which is translated to English as Association for Protection of Race and Religion and was established in 2013. After having foregrounded their ideas and teams, MaBaTha launched several nationwide campaigns after June 2013. Most of these campaigns addressed the four pillars that the organisation embodied and were termed ‘religious protection laws’. It aimed at addressing and monitoring i) interreligious marriages; ii) polygamy; iii) religious conversions; and iv) family planning. In 2015, these four ‘religious protection laws’ that were demanded by MaBaTha were passed by the government and enforced as law. Once their mandates had been transfigured into law, they publicly expressed their opinions about political parties and representatives to the Parliament.

Many of the active members in MaBaTha are Buddhist nuns, or the thila-shins.<sup>7</sup> The order of Bhikkhuni in Myanmar was interrupted around the thirteenth century (King and Queen, 1996), and since then, the country has struggled to reinstate the complete ordination of the nuns. Today, the female renunciants of Buddhism in Myanmar are best known as ‘thila-shins’. Thila (or ‘sila’ in Pali) means morality, and shin refers to those who embody and practice the morality. The thila-shins follow the ‘Ten Precepts’<sup>8</sup> instead of the 311 rules that are to be followed by the Bhikkhunis. They are not fully ordained and are not complete members of the religious order; however, they are seen as ‘in-between’ laity and the monks, making their position more crucial for facilitating understanding and dialogue within the Buddhist community. The thila-shins see a purpose and value in their agency by contributing to MaBaTha and their motivation is twofold. One, the organisation values their contributions and their agency is taken seriously; and secondly, they find common ground between the narrative where the country is seen as being oppressed and their own oppressions, making them essential to the cause of protecting their country’s honour (Roy 2021). The thila-shins in MaBaTha occupy intriguing socio-political and religious spaces and are role-models for the thila-shins who view the MaBaTha members as changemakers. I was told by the de facto leader of MaBaTha that they do not have systematic registration of members, but at any given time, the women range from 40–60% of its members, and of them, a

6 <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar> [accessed on 6th August, 2020]

7 Throughout this paper, I use the terms ‘Buddhist nuns’ and ‘thila-shins’ synonymously and interchangeably because this journal and the contributions cater to the English-speaking audience where the term ‘Buddhist nuns’ eases the manner in which we conceptualise this community and helps us to relate better. However, etymologically, these two terms are different and imply different socio-political and religious spaces.

8 Ten Precepts, or *dasa-sīla* in Pali, refers to the ten (*dasa*) morality (*sīla*) codes that the thila-shins must vow to abstain from, and this is the core of their spiritual existence.



large percentage comprises the thila-shins. In conversation with an abbess thila-shin from Sagaing, I learnt that on one end, many thila-shins are indebted to the MaBaTha because the organisation makes donations to the nunneries and builds schools and colleges for the nuns, and on the other end, being members of the MaBaTha, the nuns learn leadership qualities, help in community services, and most importantly get to serve their country and protect their religion, which is their foremost duty. It is important to note that the thila-shins' 'in-between' status puts them in a perpetual state of becoming. Thus, they are willing to perpetually participate in tasks that value their agency and contributions. While their incomplete-ordained status brings with it a host of gender dynamics and imposes socio-cultural hierarchies, their 'on the edge' status sometimes helps them to navigate boundaries and identities. Their roles are less explored and even lesser understood in terms of contributing to communal violence, and it raises the question why. Their agency from both sides of the divide, in facilitating and preventing communal violence is barely studied, and I implore in this article that addressing this gap can advance the dialogue not only between Buddhists and Muslims, but also within the Buddhist communities.

## **Politics of Inter-faith Dialogue in Transitional Myanmar**

An independent report by the government of former President Thein Sein documented that communication between Buddhists and Muslims and IFD, among other educative and economic exchanges and opportunities, were key to the reconciliation and peacebuilding processes of Myanmar (Walton and Hayward 2014). At a high-level diplomatic forum in 2017, Aung San Suu Kyi, even though defensive in her tone, underscored that dialogue is the way ahead for conflict management and mitigation, (Gonzales 2017).<sup>9</sup> There has been a series of IFD – international intervention, state-organised and also local community-driven (Kyaw, 2019) – and the need for continual IFD for the country's better future is established (Hlaing Bwa 2015). Monks, who personify the spirit of Buddhism and nationalism in Myanmar, are seen as the 'natural representatives' and spokespersons in dialogue forms. Interestingly, Walton and Hayward (2014) noted ambiguity in the discourse of IFD in the country, where influential monks are front liners in MaBaTha but, quite contrastingly, also take part in dialogue proceedings.

In conversation with a nationwide known interfaith activist who is a professor at Yangon University, age 48, and a Christian pastor by vocation, he explained to me the grassroot dynamics of dialogue.

'Muslims in Myanmar, generally speaking, are sincere and hardworking. They are aware that they have limited options of livelihood given the blatant

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9 <https://theasiadialogue.com/2017/10/02/aung-san-suu-kyi-the-rakhine-state-and-myanmars-dual-government-dilemma/> [accessed on 9th August 2020]

discrimination by the government starting from schooling to securing jobs, so they work hard, and mostly focus on small-scale businesses. This is why the ultranationalist movements initially targeted the Muslim businesses, urging the Buddhists to not collaborate with them or buy goods from Muslim shops. Despite the structural discrimination and physical violence, the Muslims try to carry on.... No matter which interfaith gathering I go to, no matter who the stakeholders are, I always see the Muslim participants, especially the Imams, being the most active participants. They utilise these opportunities to engage in dialogue, to tell their stories, and to clarify their positions. They are almost always apologetic in their bodily gait and tone and are compassionate listeners and speakers. Contrastingly, the Buddhist religious leaders, are the most complacent ones, and in most cases, they do not participate in interfaith dialogues. When asked, their reasons are simple – they see ‘no need’ for dialogue.’ (Conversation, Yangon: January 2020)

A fifty-four-year-old Buddhist monk who is an abbot of the Vibhissa Monastery and monastic school in Mandalay and is highly revered in the region for advocacy in interfaith understanding, shared his concerns about the future of dialogue in Myanmar after the recent turn of events.

‘Not too long ago some of us started persuading extremist Buddhist, especially eminent religious leaders, to participate in dialogue and follow the ‘middle path’, as per Buddha’s teachings. Many hardliners had only started to understand the importance of dialogue, but, with the international rage against the Burmese Buddhists, as read and seen on the news, many of these Buddhist hardliners have turned further hostile. In their opinion, Muslims have garnered sympathy from other countries given their power and their ties with the Islamist nations. There is an overwhelming narrative that the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has influenced other countries to defame Myanmar and its Buddhist people, and that OIC funds the media that reports false or half-true news. The allegations of genocide and the legal jurisdiction at the International Court of Justice has further aggravated the aggressions against the Muslims in Myanmar because several Buddhists perceive that the Muslims are responsible for denigrating Myanmar and Buddhism in the global framework. Some of us are trying to educate our peers and encouraging them to engage with those who they frame as the other. But we have a long way to go. The disparities within Buddhism in Myanmar are such that we can barely think of presenting a united front in conversation with the other.’ (Conversation, Mandalay: December, 2019)

From the aforementioned anecdotes, it becomes clear that i) the majority of Burmese Buddhists are not yet ready to engage in dialogical conversations with ‘the religious other’; ii) much needs to be discussed within the Buddhist communities before engaging with the ‘Muslim-Other’; and iii) while monks are representative of authority and the ‘Buddhist way of life’ (Walton 2015; King & Owen 2020), Buddhist nuns,

though a significant number of more than 60,000,<sup>10</sup> are barely recognised as leaders who are needed in the process of dialogue or can affect changes. Female monastics who carry untapped and transformational potential in terms of facilitating inclusive and sustainable peace (Saf 2019, 1) are often excluded from these processes. Not many studies address the influence of the female faithful on the processes of dialogue and the influence of dialogue on the female faithful. When understanding intra-faith dialogue in Myanmar in the next section, we assess why these influences are critical in the light of religion, violence, gender, dialogue, and the politics of 'self' and 'the other'. Monks, given their position in the society and the respect they command, have been prominent in dialogical processes. In contrast, the Buddhist nuns mostly assume supportive roles (Kawanami 2015). Buddhist nuns occupy a unique position in discussions around IFD. They belong to the religion of the majority in Myanmar, and yet in some situations, they experience subjugation.

A forty-two-year-old Buddhist nun from the Dhammakaya nunnery in Yangon who is known for her IFD work in Myanmar and abroad held that Myanmar is essentially a patriarchally structured society, the gender hierarchy is found in all realms, and the distinction swells in the institution of religion. The androcentrism in the interpretation of religious traditions and in the practice of dialogue deters placing feminist frameworks within these matrices of experiences.

I have studied dialogue, and I am a trained facilitator of intercultural and interreligious dialogue. In several high-level meetings, including that hosted by the United Nations, I have presented speeches on issues of communal harmony and have received delightful feedback. But, given the social make-up of our society, despite trying hard, I am often not accepted as a participant or a facilitator for inter-religious dialogue. Not too long ago, in an inter-faith dialogue between Buddhists and Muslim religious leaders in Yangon, monks held that they would not share the dialogue tables with the nuns, because it negatively impacts their religiosity. Not just the monks, we nuns receive resistance even from the laity. They perceive monks as "the authority" on the subject of religion and dialogue, and nuns are welcome in the audience or as supporters, but not so much in the formal dialogue processes. After years of experience in this field, I am convinced that interfaith dialogue cannot be successful or sustainable without intra-faith dialogue. Even though the latter is more difficult, we have to engage in it more often. (Conversation, Yangon: November 2019)

One of the drawbacks of the IFD is its inability to include women's voices and their experiences in formal processes (Kwok, 2014). While side-lining women has proven

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10 <http://www.mahana.org.mm/en/religious-affairs/the-account-of-wazo-monks-and-nuns-in-1377-2016-year/> [accessed on 14th August 2020]

harmful, what is further distressing is the manner in which women's expressions are misappropriated. This was explained well by a thirty-six-year-old nun<sup>11</sup> I spoke with in Meiktila, a city which has experienced grave communal tensions since 2013:

Our nunnery hosted several families who were affected by the communal riots in March 2013; some of them were Muslims. They lived with us for a few days until they could return to their homes safely. We were aware that giving refuge to non-Buddhists could be dangerous for our nunnery, but the situation in most of the city was such that we thought it is our duty to protect those we can, irrespective of their religious identities. Also, many years ago, we had Muslim families who were our regular donors; this is to say that we have had close ties with the Muslims.... In 2016, there were local efforts to address the communal tensions and our abbess was invited for a dialogue event. Several eminent monks and local politicians were to grace the occasion. We were pleased and thought it would be an appropriate occasion to share our experiences and add to the ongoing efforts of interfaith engagements. At the gathering, only male Imams and monks were given the due time and respect to speak and they spoke on behalf of our abbess and later presented a token of appreciation for our abbess' welfare works. What they said on behalf of us was not untrue, but only half true, and that is dangerous on two accounts. One, half-truths are factually incorrect after all; and secondly, it continues to impose power hierarchies and snubs several diverse voices. (Conversation, Meiktila: December 2019)

This anecdote highlights what Rita Gross called 'inappropriate appropriation' (Gross 2001, 89). It is an underestimated and even lesser understood phenomenon where the people in power assume that they can express on behalf of others, and the institutions and societal structures enable these misappropriations. Unpacking these complicated layers that denote symbolic and structural violence, it is important to acknowledge the power imbalances and the epistemic privileges that render violence in the field of dialogue. Gendered practices within religious institutions are intricately wired into discourses of hierarchies and dominations that implicate inequality, subjugation, and control. Egnell (2003) argued that the 'patriarchal exploitation' and 'malestreaming' (2003, 116) of dialogue escapes attention and critical examination often, leading to failure of the process of dialogue. Ursula King had long argued that a feminist approach is the missing link in the dialogue of religions (King 1998), but even to this day, we have addressed this gap mostly in formats of lip-service, and not much in action-oriented ways. Analysis of the scholarship and practice of dialogue raises questions on issues of the representation and agency of women in dialogue. It is safe to assert that every society and religion unevenly distributes epistemological and ontological privileges among its people. Despite the development of feminist theology, Gross (2001) noted,

11 I deliberately do not mention the name of the nunnery here because the information shared is highly confidential. I ensured her that I will write the story, but not the details about the nun and the nunnery.

that interreligious dialogue has been unwilling to embrace it, while also critiquing feminist theology itself. Gruber (2020) lamented that in fact, interfaith dialogue continues to be premised at the crossroads of white, male, Christian privilege. Thus, the road to dialogue itself is discriminatory and unfair to say the least.

## Politics of Intra-faith Dialogue in Transitional Myanmar

In studying the microcosm of peacebuilding structures in Myanmar, it becomes evident that several structured and semi-structured programmes are operational in order to combat tensions within and between communities in the country which are dialogical and mediative in nature. Kramer (1990) long established the existential interdependence between intra-faith and interfaith dialogue, and that all interfaith dialogues should have elements and opportunities of intra-faith exchanges. For Kramer, intra-faith dialogue has distinct steps, and usually commences with texts or transitional religious encounters common to the participants. Both these types of dialogical exchanges should hold to its foundation that there is no pressure to reach a defined objective (Panikkar 1999) and that each of the two 'implies, requires and may sometimes directly stimulate' the other (Cheetham *et al.* 2013, 3). The scholarship and practice of dialogue make sense when intra- and interfaith dialogue are understood in relation and in support of one another. But often, in discussions around religion and dialogue, negotiating with the religious other shadows the importance of negotiating within the religion. As Jonathan Smith (1985) has explained, the ontological basis of the 'other' is not a descriptive category, rather, a political and linguistic one. The otherness in intra-faith dialogue could stem from an array of socio-cultural reasons, from diverse hermeneutical understandings of the same texts to one's political standing in a society. This otherness manifests in not just people 'like us' versus 'not like us'; it occurs equally between people who are 'too much like us.' Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another* (1994) offers a robust framework to understand the 'self', 'other' and the relationship between the two. He indexed that a person's view of their subjectivities and the hermeneutics of the self and identities that are associated with selfhood are constructed by socio-cultural parameters. Ricoeur's untangling of self and the other allows for understanding identities are defined by the interplay between self and the other, that are conceptualised on the basis of the sameness and the differences consciously perceived by a person. The self and the other may or may not exist as dichotomies; they may be relational, contextual and exist as a continuum. Ricoeur (1990) suggested an epistemological and ontological paradigm of understanding self and the other where he hypothesised that 'selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other' (1990, 3). As Kiblinger (2017) rightly suggested, 'the real orientation of the religious other is hard to define' because the imagery that we mostly draw upon is what interreligious scholar David Tracy (1990) calls 'the projected other' or philosopher Thomas Kasulis (1991) calls 'the displaced other'. The self projects the other in relation to itself. These

complexities are further problematic when the other is within one's own community. While the politics of the other belonging to the out-group are unconcealed, the politics around the other of the in-group reveals symbolic exclusion that is more difficult and complex due to its inconspicuous nature and the tendency of the in-group members to deny the existence of exclusions. When discussing otherness and intra-faith tensions within the Buddhist monastic community in transitional Myanmar, I explore two issues: i) dissonance of practised gender hierarchies; and ii) dissonance on their take on the Muslim-Other.

To examine the two questions, I draw on my experiences from the field study. I took part in intra-faith dialogues and facilitated some; most of these dialogues involved only Buddhist nuns, and there were a few with monks as well. As Panikkar (1999) suggested, intra-faith dialogue involves conversations about people rather than conversations about religions. In the section below, I present how people orient themselves in the discourse of dialogue, and how they respond to it. The two most prominent concerns that emerged from the conversation with the Buddhist nuns were, firstly, how they often felt that they were 'second-class' citizens, and their positions were continually inferior to the monks; and secondly, how Buddhist nuns' perception of the Muslim-Other were diverse, and there is evident dissonance in the extent to which they wish to engage with the Muslim-Other.

### ***Intra-faith dialogue and dissonance of practised gender hierarchies***

An eminent seventy-two-year-old monk from Kalaywa Monastery in Yangon accompanied me to meet with a thila-shin because he was very curious to learn about her experiences and motivations for being a Buddhist nun. She is in her early fifties, is well-educated, and heads the Shwewo nunnery in the outskirts of Yangon. Usually, thila-shins gather alms to run their nunneries and look after their basic everyday needs; however, this thila-shin had adopted an economically backward village, and collected donations not only for her nunnery, but also for the entire village. She helped in bringing electricity and institutional education to the village. The monk knew of her but had not had the chance to meet her before. After an hour of initial conversations and tea, he asked her if and how he could help her in the good work she had been doing. In response, she said, '*Please can you convene a meeting with the local Sangha<sup>12</sup> monks and request them to be open to listen to me and a few more thila-shins in this village? I have been working in the field of community development for years but am never allowed to participate in any formal decision-making processes.*' She explained that her village has people of different faith traditions, but she has had the most difficulty

12 Sangha is the monastic order that traditionally comprises four pillars: monks, nuns, lay men and lay women. In today's times it oversees socio-political and general management of the Buddhist communities and holds at its core that a Buddhist community is four-fold and each of the four parts have essential roles to play in keeping the Buddhist community whole.

in conducting conversations with the male Buddhist clergy, simply because her socio-religious status is viewed as inferior. This inferiority is expressed in Saba Mahmood's (2011) elucidations that systematised how social structures control women in a way such that they have limited access to the society's symbolic and material resources. The Buddhist nun further narrated that *'the monks, who I respect a lot indeed, refused to speak with me on several occasions because they said I was apparently doing the work that male clergy are responsible for, and that brought dishonour to my religion.'* Religious interpretations may be linked to deliberation of gender inequality (Abu-Lugodh, 1986), and the deliberation is socially constructed and reproduced.

In an all-nuns dialogue space where the participants and facilitators were all Buddhist nuns, there emerged stories where the nuns had experienced symbolic and structural violence from their very own faith denomination, some subtle, many not. Two thila-shins from Yangon who had been invited for an interfaith dialogue event organised by the government shared that the monks who were co-participants threatened to leave if the nuns were included, citing religious reasons. The nuns obliged by leaving, but this was not addressed by the organisers or the participants of that forum. Another thila-shin expressed that her spiritual and monastic vocation was questioned in public when she voiced her concern regarding Buddhist intervention in dealing with the non-Buddhist other in everyday encounters. She lamented that many thila-shins in the gathering discouraged her and were of the view that the Buddhist nun faltered when she spoke in the midst of highly venerable male clerics. This feeds into the argument of Kumkum Sangari (1993), who held that patriarchy successfully flourishes by the coercion and consent of women, who hold considerable responsibility for not just maintaining patriarchal ideologies but also are in charge of resisting forces that challenge it. Gender in every religion is disproportionately discriminatory to women; however, addressing this and enabling gender inclusivity should become a mainstream format of dialogue.

### ***Intra-faith dialogue and dissonance on their take on the Muslim-Other***

Religious discrimination and apathy are usually discussed in relation to the other of a different faith tradition. The religiously informed responses to these discussions also focus on the specifics of the other religion. However, often, the in-group fomentation of disagreements is left unattended, and in the long run, these divergence can turn hostile, creating cracks within sects and denominations within the same religious school. In the case of Myanmar, almost all Buddhists are from the Theravada school of thought; however, depending on their vocation, aspirations, and political influences, their lens for viewing the Muslim-Other greatly varies. On one side, there are Buddhist monasteries that are founded and funded by Muslim families, and the polar extreme is where the mosques are vandalised as a result of perceived disrespect or threat to the Buddhist community. Below, I present an example where we see how the Buddhist

nuns occupy different shades within the spectrum of their perception of the Muslim-Other, and how incongruences within them do not just deter interfaith dialogue but also problematise it.

A teacher at Chekavati Buddhist University and a head nun of a township in the Sagaing region commented on the topic of International Court of Justice proceedings of the genocide of the Rohingyas while she sat reading the newspaper.

‘As much as I am against the use of the term ‘genocide’ and the shame it is bringing to our country, I cannot deny that the Buddhist community has had blood on their hands. I do understand when people are angry and some of the violence is truly reactionary; however, this is not the reasonable way. Disproportionately harming a community on the basis of their identity is wrong... but you know Burmese Buddhists paint all Muslims with a single brush. For them, a Muslim who vandalised a Buddhist temple in Afghanistan is the same as the Muslim living across the street; hence, they treat the Muslim across the street with suspicion and contempt. I have been a teacher for three decades. I have studied the relationships of people within and between communities and can tell you that debating with one’s own is far more difficult. I engage with Hindus, Christians, and Muslims often, and explaining my viewpoint to them is easier. When I explain my position to Buddhists, some think I am way too intellectual and impractical, others think I am superficial, and there are still some who think I’m a traitor only because I have compassion for the religious other. Plus, the social media has become a weapon in disguise. A Buddhist sharing a story of a personal unpleasant experience with a Muslim swiftly mobilises people to unite against the entire Muslim community. I use social media only to read, and barely post anything... Only some weeks ago a lay Buddhist donor shared a story of her divorce with her Muslim husband, and there were so many people who wanted to avenge this using phrases like ‘all Muslim men are...’ or ‘Islam is...’ I try to educate my fellow thila-shins and ask them to keep an open mind, but I am aware this is not taken in the right spirit. Some thila-shins are willing to understand the other, but for several others, “if the Muslims cannot live in our country following our culture, they should leave” attitude is pervasive. I have had warnings from the monks in this region that I should step down as the head nun if I continue to spread messages against the welfare of the Buddhist *Dhammā*<sup>13</sup> and *Sāsana*<sup>14</sup>... I have tried to speak with those monks, but to no avail...’ (Conversation, Sagaing: January 2020)

13 *Dhammā* in Pali and Dharma in Sanskrit refers to a host of meanings that are loosely translated to English as righteousness, fundamental path, or the most important principle in the life of a Buddhist. Literally, the word is derived from ‘to bear, support or hold together’. The *Dhammā* is the natural law that holds together the cosmos physically and morally, which the Buddha is believed to have taught.

14 *Sāsana* is the Pali and *Śāsana* is the Sanskrit word for doctrine, practice or tradition.



This conversation underpins the layered complexities that situate and surround inter- and intra-community relationships. The thila-shin here reveals that 'the other' is not an essentialised entity, rather, 'other' is ontologically constructed and is relational. The relationality assists in charting the diverse ways in which the other can be understood, accommodated, and respected. Wingfield (2013) argued that the other is fundamentally distinct from us/we and is a part of the process of symbolic exclusion. This 'other' is anyone who is usually marginal and exists at the edge, or sometimes even beyond the edge, of civil contracts. These marginalities are marked not on geographical coordinates, but on cultural discourses. The thila-shin in the aforementioned case is at the margins of her own community and may be perceived as the other because of the stark difference in opinions. As a part of a core identity, the other is obliged to carry the marginality, which is typically loaded with stigma and disadvantages and may gradually become what Crenshaw (2010) called 'the moral enemy' who we should be wary of.

## Conclusions

In the seminal text 'Of God Who Comes To Mind', Emmanuel Lévinas sought answers to the phenomenological concreteness of staging and expressing what one means by 'God'. In his quest, he asserted that in order for a society to have meaningful and spiritual experience, the I has to engage with the distinct You; and what lies between the *I* and *You* is dialogue. For Lévinas, dialogue is a philosophy that insists on a dimension of meanings that is built on the interrelations of human beings and has an original sociality and a spiritual authenticity of its own (Lévinas 1998). Religions by nature are not inclined to understand one another (Cornille 2008), and by extension, in knowing the religious other, the other is viewed as a challenge, as a mystery, as a new resource, or an entity that can inform about the self. On one polar end, the other is expected to be an entity which is not self, yet the inference from all meanings to the purposeful life implies that the other is understood as an alterity to the self, that is constituted in me and by me. This self is instinctively predisposed to othering because selfhood presupposes incongruence with the other. The other typifies the nonrelative or absolute exteriority that remains a fiction unless studied in relation to what Lévinas (1987) defined as 'ego'. The genesis of narratives and portrayals depicting the other are rooted in the juxtapositions of experience and in the sense of identity that underpin the social contracts. The manner in which we imagine and respond to inter- and intra-communal relationships is guided by sets of ideas that emanate from presuppositions of the self the other.

Myanmar is undergoing transitions of several sorts that have precipitated into transformations in tangible forms and have offered symbolic promises for a better future. Given the current political instability and religious tensions across the country, it is imperative that their future policymaking strategies on principles of negotiations

and mutual borrowing in and between communities. The phenomenon of 'us' versus 'them' will continue parallel to human existence; however, it is important to acknowledge the other and the otherness while trying to be open about the complexities the differences bring with them. It is equally important to address the conceptual and methodological concerns that threaten the socio-cultural fabric where both the 'us' and 'them' cannot share mediative relationships and find ways to redress this. In this journey, the state, non-state and local actors have to cooperate and collaborate to enable sustainable relationships between people and communities. Though international interventions, especially since 2012, have been somewhat helpful, constructive and lasting change can come about only when the policies are drafted in close partnership with the people at the grassroots and the actions are community-driven. The monastic community in Myanmar is highly revered, and it is true that their influence in the country is irreplaceable. Therefore, the monastic community should all the more be included in the formal peace-making and community-building processes, while being inclusive of the female faithful. The thila-shins of Myanmar are pious and judicious and are devout servants of their religion and their country. It is important that their agency is utilised efficiently, not because their participation in dialogue processes shall illuminate and empower them, but because the thila-shins can illuminate and empower the process of dialogue itself.

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