

Book Review

Arend van Dorp, *Ethnic Diversity and Reconciliation: A Missional Model for the Church in Myanmar*

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Van Dorp, Arend (2022). *Ethnic Diversity and Reconciliation: A Missional Model for the Church in Myanmar*. Langham Global Library, 124 pp., £12.99 / \$19.99, paperback, ISBN: 978-1839736506.

Both authors and reviewers have their own contexts, and in this instance I should begin this review with a bit of my own background. I have been working as an expatriate in Myanmar and with its people since 2006. Some of that time was in the US, heavily engaged with diasporic communities of various Chin, Sgaw Karen, Kachin, and even some Myanmar Muslims. My work is philanthropic and attempts to walk the very fine line between “paying unto Caesar” and offering our services across a very wide spectrum of Myanmar Christians. I must state, however, that most of my work now is among the Chin of Myanmar, Mizo, Falam, and Tedim/Zomi especially.

I find this disclosure of positionality important because as I read *Ethnic Diversity and Reconciliation* I found myself bristling at every corner, even though I am very pleased that Van Dorp engaged with many scholastic sources that most Christian scholars ignore when writing about Christianity in Myanmar, especially Melford Spiro’s inimitable *Buddhism and Society*. However, his overreliance on secondary source materials contributes to the limitations of this book.

Chapters 1 and 2 offer a very cursory outline of Myanmar. Chapter 1 (5-18) covers the legacy of post-colonialism, histories of the British encounter to the Bamar and then the Karen, the history of Buddhism in Myanmar, how Christianity interacted with Buddhism, Buddhist dogmas, Nat worship, worldview, Buddhist nationalism, racism, and inter-ethnic conflict—each of which deserves its own dissertations and publications. All this is covered in 13 pages and relies heavily on secondary source material.

Chapter 2 (19-34) attempts to outline “Ministry Context in Myanmar.” Rather than focus on a particular denomination or a particular church, Van Dorp discusses how the arrival and interaction with Christian missionaries caused the Bamar to double-down on Buddhist nationalism, while minorities in Myanmar saw Christianity as a way to contest and distinguish themselves as non-Buddhists (20-21). While this analysis is sound, it does not deal with the ethnographic realities of tribalism within these tribal nomenclatures—namely that not only did *most* of the Karen *not* convert (even among the Sgaw), but they maintained their Buddhist identity (including, but not limited to, the Pwo). Van Dorp then assigns this motive (of religion as a “minority religion”) to the other ethnic groups that claim a Christian identity—the Chin and the Kachin—who had very different interactions with the Bamar than did the Karen.

Chapter 2 continues with a discussion on how theological institutions and Christianity itself became overly associated with the West, such that “another weakness observed in theological education in Myanmar is a lack of contextualization” (28). Van Dorp also notes that this connection with the West was vital for maintaining orphanages while decrying that “It is unfortunate that the genuine concern from the international Christian community has helped to foster such

individualism and fragmentation” (24). He concludes the chapter by suggesting that Malaysia might offer a better model of Christianity for Myanmar Christians (30-34).

Chapter 3 (37-64) is a literature review that covers theology, Myanmar studies, ecclesiology, missiology, and multi-ethnic churches. There is a noticeable lack of Myanmar sources (only one: Samuel Ngun Ling). This lack, in my preliminary analysis, is the ongoing flaw of this work: an over-reliance on secondary source material.

Chapter 4 (65-88), in an odd departure, shifts into “Theological Reflection on the Church in a Pluralist Society.” The first portion (65-75) is a New Testament exposition on the nature of the Church in which Van Dorp argues for a “Multiethnic Mosaic.” Page 75 begins Van Dorp’s remedy for Myanmar Christians to become missional. He identifies several barriers for Myanmar Christians to become missional—which are all different from the problems outlined in the first chapter. The first barrier set forth is “ethnically based denominations,” a characteristic concerning which Van Dorp concludes “... is not particularly helpful for a church wanting to be missional” (77). The second problem he identifies is the “clergy-lay distinction” where he argues that, in a highly hierarchical society, it would be better if clergy trained all the church members to do the work ministry and adopt a more democratic model of ministry. The reasons Myanmar pastors do not do this, he suspects, are because pastors “might derive their identity from doing ministry,” or they fear they will not be needed anymore (79). Finally, in a section that reads more like a sermon, Van Dorp concludes the chapter by suggesting that Myanmar Christians should work not only for reconciliation but also diversity (83-88). The discussion assumes they do not seek either.

Chapter 5 (91-96) is a very brief (only five pages) explanation of Van Dorp’s recommendations. Those include moving away from a discipleship model that focuses on an individual’s relationship with God to a more outward focused “life-changing conduct of Christians within their spheres of influence”—with the obvious implication that current discipleship programs are inept to accomplish this (92). He then argues that Christians should not focus on their ethnic identity and should eschew their languages in order to become more “outward looking” (93). He concludes the chapter by arguing the Myanmar church needs to do more contextualization (again, undefined) for a Buddhist Burmese context.

Chapter 6 (97-99) offers a conclusion where Van Dorp states the reason he wrote this book: to “inspire the church in Myanmar to expand beyond the confines of its historical boundaries and reach out to the communities around it” (97).

One aspect of Van Dorp’s work that is admirable, as I already mentioned, is his use of secondary sources to get large overviews of the country, its history, and Buddhism. He also uses several Chin scholars and a few Karen to back up his claims. Utilizing these sources is important, but it ultimately does not go far enough, as he uses few primary sources.

The first major issue that is problematic for the book is its implied assumption that Myanmar is, was, or ever will be a nation-state. Rather, Myanmar should be viewed as a state-of-nations. Never have the Bamar had hegemony of the current political boundaries that comprise Myanmar. The Kachin, similarly, have been involved in centuries long contestations of “boundaries” with the Shan, Bamar, Yunnanese, and, now, the Tatmadaw. Similar negotiations can be said of the Chin with India, Rakhine State, and Sagaing Division, as well as for the Karen with the Bamar and with their Thai and Lao neighbors. The assumption that all the ethnic groups and the Bamar are in close proximity to each other creates the “problem” (16-18; 24-34) for Van Dorp that there are not

enough interethnic or ministries to the Buddhist Bamar. In a country the size of Texas—but without highways and railways—Van Dorp’s discussion assumes that those from Austin and those from El Paso ought to be in closer relationship with each other as well as those in Dallas.

This assumption about Myanmar being a single nation-state is closely related to the problem of the book’s scope: it is unwieldy. Van Dorp presents Christianity in Myanmar as something ubiquitous that is not engaged in reconciliation *as he sees it*. One must *infer* when—or if—he is talking about churches in the city, churches in the village, or churches in their ethnic regions. He does not differentiate, at least explicitly. Furthermore, there is no acknowledgement that among these ethnic minorities there are several languages. So, an ethnically Chin church is missional if it uses Lai to reach Falam, Matu, and Haka parishioners. Even within most “ethnic” churches there are, in fact, significant reconciliation movements. The Christians with whom I interact have outreaches to Buddhist regions, laity/discipleship training, and engage with their local spheres. I thus kept wondering throughout the book, “Who exactly is he talking about?”

The second major issue I see in Van Dorp’s overall presentation is one of positionality. Whereas his intended purpose is “to explore a model for churches in Myanmar, in order that they may become more diverse and welcoming to various ethnicities in the country” (98), he explores neither a model for reconciliation nor Myanmar Christianity itself to meet his claims. This book ultimately undermines Van Dorp’s purpose in that it is (no doubt unintentionally and unwittingly) reductionist, paternalist, and inaccurate in its understanding and representation of Myanmar Christianity. For example, Malaysia is set forth as a model for Myanmar Christianity, but Van Dorp does not offer a case study or show how the situation in Malaysia is in any way like Christianity in Myanmar. He does not provide any rubric for his “contextualization” and ignores important ways the church in Myanmar has in fact indigenized Western ecclesial models. Fanny Crosby is beloved among most Burmese Christians I know as it has been over a generation since her introduction by the American Baptists. Her hymns are as much theirs as they were my father’s. Moreover, a Western ecclesial model retains an important role in distinguishing what is Christian and what is Buddhist, Muslim, or Hindu in Myanmar. This differentiation is vital for burgeoning churches in Buddhist areas to give the Buddhist quartermasters a clearly distinguishable “Christian” church versus some perversion of Buddhism that refuses to participate with other Sangha events.

A third issue I have with the book lies in Van Dorp’s theoretical framework. He apparently never once considers that the erasure of various groups’ languages in worship or their cultural identities would lead to *Burmanization*, or that retaining the cultural identities is necessary for those moving from their ethnic regions into the city. This oversight was the final blow for me, for what the book is in fact arguing for is assimilation, especially when language, race, and religion are so closely intertwined for the Burmese. Van Dorp seems to assume that retaining a language other than Burmese is simply a gospel-inhibiting ethnic preference, and he never considers the numbers of ethnic minorities moving from the village to the city, often with little or no formal education in Burmese. This detail about Christians’ actual lives in Myanmar is so significant that it ultimately leads me to wonder how much genuine exposure the author had to Myanmar during his years living there.

It is for these reasons, as well as others not mentioned here, that I have serious reservations about and indeed do not recommend this book. I struggle to see its value for theologians as it is not theology, even though I am partial to *every* book mentioned in his literature review. The author

has, in effect, created a caricature of Christianity in Myanmar which he was then able to analyze and critique. This caricature of “Christianity in Myanmar” is not accurate. If Van Dorp had instead limited his study of Christianity in Myanmar to a particular church or organization and used an ethnographic methodology, his claims may have been possible. Even if the book would have taken such an approach, it still would have faced the tedious tasks of finding both an analogous situation in Malaysia as well as closer ties between those books in the literature review and their relevance for Asia. I hope more accurate presentations than *Ethnic Diversity and Reconciliation* of Christian communities, challenges, and testimonies in Myanmar, as well as constructive comparisons with other Asian settings (and elsewhere), will emerge soon.