

Myanmar: Buddhist Ultra-Nationalism, Anti-Muslim Sentiment, and a Pathway to Reconciliation

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1. Introduction

In the original teachings of Lord Buddha, there is no scope for feelings of hatred or discrimination. As per the tenets of Buddhism, there are only two aggregate components of all human beings – ‘*Nama*’ (mind) and ‘*Rupa*’ (physical body) – and distinctions such as men, women, individuals, creatures and deities are non-existent. This is evident in Lord Buddha’s teachings with regard to the concept of ‘*Annatta*’: the doctrine of ‘non-self’, that in humans there is no soul as there is no permanence and everything is changing.¹

The *Suta Pitaka* – a body of texts which constitutes the basic doctrinal section of the Buddhist canon and is the second of the three divisions of the *Tripitaka* or the Pali Canon – espouses that the “*Samsara* (cycle of life and death) is so long that there is no being in these infinite universes that you are not related to. You are either wife or husband, brother or sister, father or mother, son or daughter, of each other (you are all but one family) in one life cycle or the other in these thirty-one planes of existence of *Samsara* (cycle of life and death)”.²

In broad strokes, the present policy brief explores the origins and evolution of Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar and prevalent anti-Muslim sentiments in the country. It is hoped that this paper will shed light on the dangers of Buddhist ultra-nationalism, clarify misconceptions regarding the origins of Muslims in Rakhine, and propose a useful approach towards mitigating contemporary religious conflict in Myanmar.

2. The Origins of Buddhism in Myanmar

2.1. Traditional Beliefs of the Native People

According to the traditional beliefs of the native people of Myanmar (comprising an amalgamation of mythologies, legends, folklore, custom and beliefs, which are passed down largely in oral form from generation to generation), Buddhism reached Myanmar soon after the enlightenment of Lord Buddha. It is popularly believed that more than 2,500 years ago, two Burmese merchants met Lord Buddha under the Bo Tree (‘tree of awakening’) located in Bodh Gaya, Bihar, India and received the Holy Hairs of Lord Buddha. These hair relics are now enshrined in the Shwedagon Pagoda, a gilded stupa located in Yangon, Myanmar.

Most historians disagree with these traditional beliefs, for the reason that Burmans or Bamar as a race emerged only in the eleventh century A.D., during the reign of King Anawrahta, founder of the Bagan Dynasty. According to Burmese politician Khin Maung Saw, the Burmese traditionally believed that they were the descendants of the four superior gods – the ‘Brahmas’ – who came down from their abode. Two

of them became men and two became women and settled down in the Irrawaddy River basin. Khin Maung Saw also stated that the Burmese believe that they come from India and not Tibet or China, and that this belief is rooted in a desire to claim to be related to Lord Buddha, who hailed from India.³

2.2. Historical Research

According to historians, no religion originated in Myanmar, although the major religions of the world have flourished there. After Animism, Hinduism was the first major religion to reach Myanmar. Thereafter, Mahayana Buddhism and some sects of Tantric Buddhism became firmly rooted in the land. After hearing about Theravada Buddhism, King Anawrahta of the Bagan Dynasty waged a war against King Manuha of Mon Kingdom in Thaton and captured the city along with Theravada Buddhist scriptures, the *Tripitaka*.⁴

The advent of Buddhism in Myanmar is attributed to missionaries sent by Asoka, the third emperor of the Mauryan Empire in India, in the third century B.C. According to the Sinhalese chronicle, the *Mahāvamsa*, the origin of Buddhism in Myanmar can be attributed to the mission of two monks, Sona and Uttara, who in the third century B.C. came to Suvaranabhumi⁵ (Mon Kingdom), usually identified with Thaton, on the gulf of Mottama. This episode is disputed by some modern scholars.

However, it cannot be denied that Buddhism was already flourishing in Myanmar in the first century A.D., as attested to by archaeological evidence at Beikthano, a city of great significance in the Pyu era (before the emergence of the Bamar race), 145 kilometres southeast of Bagan. Buddhism was also an invigorating influence in Thayekhitaya (Sri Ksetra), one of the ancient Pyu capitals, near modern Pyay Myo, 255 kms south of Bagan, where a developed (Pyu) civilization flourished from the fifth to the ninth century. The Pyu were the earliest inhabitants of Burma of whom records are extant. They are believed to have entered the Irrawaddy valley from present day Yunnan in the second century B.C. and to have founded city states throughout the Irrawaddy valley. By the fourth century A.D., many in the Irrawaddy valley had converted to Buddhism. The archaeological findings also indicate a widespread presence of Tantric Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism in this region.

It is pertinent to note at this juncture that there are scholars, such as Dr. Than Tun, who dispute the episode of King Anawrahta seeking the Theravada *Tripitaka* scriptures at Thaton. Dr. Than Tun is of the view that there is no contemporary evidence in support of this account

¹ “Some Excerpts from the Pali Canon”, University of Massachusetts, Boston (available on its web site).

² Theravada Pali Canon (*Anamataka Thanyoke Deasana*), translated by the author.

³ Khin Maung Saw, *Behind the Mask: The Truth Behind the Name “Rohingya”*, Yangon, Myanmar, 2016, pp. 12–13.

⁴ “Keynote Address by Al Haj U Aye Lwin, Chief Convenor for the Islamic Centre of Myanmar”, Myanmar Update 2019, Australian National University, Canberra, 15 March 2019.

⁵ The *Mahāvamsa*, Chapter XII, p. 94.

and that the sources of such information are unreliable and that the accounts are contradictory.⁶

Buddhist ultra-nationalists (who are primarily responsible for religion-based hate speech against Muslims in Myanmar) believe, contrary to historical research findings, that they belong to a superior race related to Lord Buddha, known as ‘*Thargi Twe*’ (blood relations of the Buddha). They believe that the Buddha favoured them as the ‘chosen race’ by accepting two Bamar merchants as his foremost disciples. Buddhist ultra-nationalists also believe that Bamars belong to the race of Gautam Buddha (‘*Satkya Thargi*’), apparently drawing on the *Hmannan Yazawin* (The Glass Palace Chronicle), the first official chronicle of the Konbaung dynasty of Burma. Buddhist ultra-nationalists also claim that the Buddha visited Burma occasionally during his lifetime. However, it is historically verified that the missions undertaken by Lord Buddha did not extend beyond the borders of present-day India:

Relatively little is known about religion in Burma before the eleventh century A.D. An indigenous animism – the worship of *nat* spirits – coexisted and coalesced with various religions of Indian origin, including several Hindu sects and both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. Indian cultural influence became especially strong in the Mon Kingdom at Thahton, situated on the coast, and it was probably the Mon connection with the great Theravada Buddhist center at Conjeeveran, in south India, which resulted in predominance of that faith at Thahton.⁷

Regardless of the origins of Buddhism in Myanmar, after the British colonised Myanmar and placed it under India as a province, some nationalist Bamar leaders believed that in order to liberate and emancipate the Burmese from the yoke of colonial imperialism, there was a need to get rid of what they coined as ‘slave mentality’. The resistance groups that emerged right after the annexation of Myanmar following the third Anglo-Burmese war in 1885 eventually mobilized the Buddhist majority with the slogan that the race of Lord Buddha should not become slaves of the infidel non-Buddhist heathens. Thus, they referred to themselves as ‘*Thakhins*’ (masters)⁸ and they called the British as ‘*Kala Phyu*’ (White Indian) and the Indians as ‘*Kala Mae*’ (Black Indian). The word ‘*Kala*’ literally means ‘alien’,⁹ and was used in a positive sense before, but as xenophobic, racist tensions gained strength in the region, it was distorted and used to connote a negative and derogatory meaning, probably akin to calling a person of African-American origin a ‘Black-Nigger’.

Inter-communal tensions and outbreaks of violence in Myanmar are a matter of grave concern in contemporary times. The Association for the Protection of Race and Religion (commonly referred to by the acronym ‘Ma Ba Tha’) – a prominent nationalist organization made up of monks, nuns and laypeople, with the purported purpose of protection of race (Bamar), religion (Theravada Buddhism) and language (Burmese) – is a notable example of organizations engaged in espousing anti-Muslim views and inciting and condoning violence in the name of protecting religion. It has been rightly pointed out that “the biggest threat may not be the Ma Ba Tha itself, but the dynamics it has created and the individuals it has empowered that may be beyond its control”.¹⁰

3. Buddhist Nationalism in Myanmar

The origins of the Ma Ba Tha can be traced back to the now defunct

⁶ Dr. Than Tun, “History of Buddhism in Burma A.D. 1000-1300”, in *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, 1978, vol. 61, nos. 1 and 2, pp. 51–52.

⁷ Donald Eugene Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, Princeton University Press, 2015, p. 12.

⁸ Niklas Foxeus, “The Buddha Was a Devoted Nationalist: Buddhist Nationalism, *Ressentiment*, and Defending Buddhism in Myanmar”, in *Religion*, 2019, vol. 49, no. 4, pp. 666–667.

⁹ Michal Lubina, “Overshadowed by Kala: India-Burma Relations”, in *Po-liteja*, 2016, vol. 1, no. 40, pp. 435–454.

¹⁰ International Crisis Group, “Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar”, Asia Report No. 290, 5 September 2017, Executive Summary, p. ii.

969 Movement, which first became prominent in the southern city of Mawlamyaing in 2011. The designation ‘969’ is a numerological shorthand for the special attributes of the Buddha and his teachings, and a riposte to the number ‘786’, a folk Islam representation of ‘*Basmala*’, long used by Muslims in Myanmar and elsewhere to identify Halal restaurants and Muslim-owned shops.¹¹ The 969 Movement, a loose association of monks, was widely believed to be linked to a wave of violence against the Muslim minority in Myanmar in 2012 and 2013. The 969 Movement preaches intolerance and urges a boycott of Muslim businesses.¹²

Anti-Indian and anti-Muslim violence is not new in Myanmar. It is rooted in the country’s colonial history and demographics, and the rise of Buddhist nationalism in that context. But the rise of authoritarian influence and the greater availability of modern means of communication in present times entails a much higher risk of violence.¹³

A popular song from the 1930s contained lyrics saying that Indians were ‘exploiting our economic resources and seizing our women, we are in danger of racial extinction’. Such allegations are strikingly similar to the terms in which the present-day nationalist agenda is framed.¹⁴

Although the 969 Movement is new, it is repeating old prejudices. A British colonial inquiry into anti-Indian riots in Yangon in 1938 noted that “at least one social problem has emerged, upon which Burmese feel strongly, in the conditions of marriage between their women and Indians and other foreigners in the country”.¹⁵

There has been no official census in Burma since its independence from Britain in 1948. According to estimates by the Burmese government, Muslims constitute some four percent of the country’s population, whereas Islamic leaders believe that Muslims make up nearly ten percent.¹⁶

Examples of anti-Muslim sentiment in Myanmar are abundant. During the reign of the prominent Buddhist King U Aung Zay Ya (Alaungphaya), founder of the royal city of Shwebo, ultra-nationalist Buddhist ministers in the King’s court conspired against four Sufi saints who were highly revered by the King. The saints were accused of anti-Buddhist schemes and forced to eat pork to prove their innocence. When they refused, they were slaughtered. After the conspiracy was discovered by the King, he buried the four Sufis according to Islamic rites and a mausoleum was built housing the saints’ tombs. Four gilded mosques around Shwebo and Myay Du were constructed in their honour.¹⁷ Muslims were well-integrated within Myanmar society and often held important occupations as officials, traders, religious personalities and public intellectuals. Several of them served as loyal servants to successive Myanmar Buddhist kings and contributed to the state-building endeavour, especially during the Konbaung dynasty (1752–1885). Several attempts were made by Buddhist extremists to prejudice court officials against Muslims during the reign of King Bodawpaya of the Konbaung dynasty. For example, a royal decree was issued to restrict Muslims’ religious activities in Myanmar, which was eventually revoked.¹⁸

Over the last few decades, religion has continued to be manipulated and used for political gains. The military has been stirring up ultra-nationalist sentiments among Burmese Buddhists since the 1962

¹¹ The ‘*Basmala*’ is the Islamic phrase which actually stands for ‘In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful’.

¹² “Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar”, 2017, p. 8, see above note 10.

¹³ International Crisis Group, “The Dark Side of Transition: Violence against Muslims in Myanmar”, Asia Report No. 251, 1 October 2013, Executive Summary, p. i.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁵ Burma Riot Inquiry Committee, *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee*, Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery, Rangoon, 1939, p. 289 (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/jyq4ev/>).

¹⁶ “Crackdown on Burmese Muslims”, *Human Rights Watch*, 18 July 2002 (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/f9n0v8/>).

¹⁷ “Keynote Address by Al Haj U Aye Lwin”, 2019, see above note 4.

¹⁸ “Tha Daw Oo Tin Hlwa Kyan (Supplication to the King)”, 3rd ed., Islamic Council of the Union of Myanmar, July 2012.

coup by projecting Islam as the main threat to Buddhism. The Union Solidarity and Development Party ('USDP'), backed by the military, which won the 2010 elections in Myanmar, has followed a strategy of instigating hatred against the Rohingyas in Rakhine and other non-Rohingya Muslims in different parts of the country.

Renewed nationalism arose around 2012, when the rape of a young Buddhist woman in Rakhine State spurred an outbreak of communal violence in the region.¹⁹ About 200 people were killed, countless injured, and more than 70,000 rendered homeless. The rise of nationalism in Myanmar spurred conflicts in different cities. A wave of violence in 2013 left 43 dead, 68 injured, and more than 1,300 buildings destroyed.²⁰

The Ma Ba Tha allied itself with the USDP (led by then-President Thein Sein) during the 2015 elections, campaigning against Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy ('NLD'). The USDP's election slogan was 'protection of race (Bamar) and religion (Buddhism)'. Ultra-nationalist Buddhist monks proclaimed that the NLD was "pro-Muslim".²¹ The USDP also enacted four 'Protection of Race and Religion' laws in May and August 2015 in the lead-up to the elections,²² which drew considerable international attention for being discriminatory against Muslims and potentially violating Myanmar's constitutional provisions on freedom of religion.

The Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee ('Ma Ha Na'), Myanmar's state-backed Buddhist authority, announced that Ma Ba Tha was an unlawful organization in 2017. However, the organization continues to operate following a name change: it is now known as the Buddha Dhamma Charity Foundation.²³ At the time of writing, the military leadership has resuscitated Ma Ba Tha and is using it in its fight against democratic forces.

4. The Rohingyas of Rakhine

Arakan is bounded in the north by India, in the south and west by Bay of Bengal and in the east by the Yoma mountains. In the north and west, Arakan had a common boundary with Bengal in the river Nat which still forms the borderline between Bangladesh and Burma. The old Kingdom of Arakan stretched from north to south along the coastline, divided by the high, stiff and inaccessible Yoma mountains from Burma.²⁴

There are several distinct Muslim communities in Myanmar. The largest concentration of Muslims is in northern Rakhine State. The Rohingyas of Rakhine consider themselves to be indigenous to the region, whereas Buddhist nationalists believe that the Rohingyas are descendants of people who arrived in Rakhine during the British colonial period. This is a question of intense disagreement in Myanmar. The main argument of this policy brief does not depend on any particular position in these controversies.

However, the presence of Muslims in Rakhine prior to the first Anglo-Burmese war (1824–1826) can and should not be disputed. The frequent commentator on Myanmar affairs, Bertil Lintner, chose to put it in these common-sense terms: "the first Muslims on the Arakan coast were Moorish, Arab and Persian traders who arrived between the ninth and the fifteenth centuries. Some of them stayed and married local women. Their offspring became the forefathers of yet another hybrid race, which much later was to become known as the Rohingyas".²⁵

¹⁹ "Four Killed as Rohingya Muslims Riot in Myanmar: Government", *Reuters*, 9 June 2012.

²⁰ Mon Mon Myat, "Buddhist Morality in Myanmar: Religious Nationalism and Solidarity after the Coup", in *Peace and World Affairs*, Berkeley Center for Religion, 15 March 2021.

²¹ "Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar", 2017, p. 14, see above note 10.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

²³ Moe Moe, "Ma Ba Tha Changes Name, Still Officially Illegal", *The Irrawaddy*, 3 September 2018.

²⁴ Abdul Karim, *The Rohingyas: A Short Account of Their History and Culture*, Arakan Historical Society, Bangladesh, 2000, p. 14.

²⁵ Bertil Lintner, *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency Since 1948*, Silk-worm Books, Chiang Mai, 1999, p. 45.

According to Arakanese chronicles, following a period of exile in Bengal (imposed by Burmese troops from the Kingdom of Ava), King Min Saw Mun of the Mrauk-U dynasty regained control over Arakan in 1430 A.D. with military aid from the Sultan Jalal ud-din Mohammad Shah of Bengal. According to Dr. Abdul Karim, the reason could have been as follows:

At the present stage of our knowledge, we know for certain that a Sultan of Bengal, Jalal-ud-Din Muhammad Shah reinstated an Arakanese King Min Saw-Mun (Narameikhla) to his throne. This must have been done through an agreement between the two kings; otherwise the Bengal Sultan would not have incurred such a huge expenditure for fitting an army.²⁶

Dr. Karim elaborated further:

With the restoration of Min Saw Mun to his throne, a big contingent of Muslims entered into Arakan. The contingent included the army, not one army but two, of which the members of the first expeditionary force spread over the country and mixed with the people. The second army also must have been a big one, because they had to fight against both Arakanese and the first contingent of Bengal army. Next, the contingent included the administrators, officers and intellectual persons.²⁷

During the reign of King Min Saw Mon, ambassadors from Islamic countries stationed in the capital built a number of mosques and invited Islamic religious scholars from Persia, Arabia and India to propagate and spread Islam.²⁸ As a result, quite a number of natives converted to Islam. The Mrauk-U dynasty was defeated by the Konbaung dynasty in 1784–85 and Arakan fell to Burmese forces.

According to Charles Paxton, the sub-commissioner of Arakan, the population in Arakan in 1826 (following the first Anglo-Burmese war) was as follows: 60,000 Maghs (Rakhine Buddhists), 30,000 Muslims, and 10,000 Burmese.²⁹ Therefore, Dr. Karim has explained:

So on the date of the conquest of Arakan by the English, there had already been living thirty thousand Muslims and the thirty thousand Muslims were living there from before, now their descendants and successors have increased by leaps and bounds.³⁰

The term 'Rohingya' is a Bengali word used to identify the people living in Rakhine. Muslims who have been living in Rakhine for centuries trace their lineage to diverse ethnic origins and social backgrounds and have not tied their origin to a single identity. They also state that they have their own dialect which is different from Bengali and Hindi.³¹ Financial secretary James Baxter's report on Indian Immigration released in 1940 accurately stated that:

There is little objection to assuming that all the Hindus were Indian but it is not so true to assume that all the Mohamedans were Indian. There was an Arakanese Muslim community settled so long in Akyab District that it had for all intents and purposes to be regarded as an indigenous race.³²

5. The Role of Religious Leaders in Mitigating Hatred

The Rohingyas in Myanmar are victims of widespread human rights abuses and violent conflict. Several hundred thousand Rohingyas have fled Myanmar following waves of violence in 2016 and 2017.³³

²⁶ Karim, 2000, p. 41, see above note 24.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

²⁸ Sayar Gyi U Tha Thun Aung, *Rakhine Yar Za Win Daw Gyi* (Royal History of Rakhine), Sittwe, 1927 ('Royal History of Rakhine').

²⁹ Charles Paxton, "A Short Report on Arakan", 26 April 1826; Anil Chandra Banerjee, *The Eastern Frontier of British India: 1784–1826*, A. Mukherjee and Co., Calcutta, 1946, p. 351.

³⁰ Karim, 2000, p. 113, see above note 24.

³¹ Dagon Taryar, *Punna*, Sar Pae Beikman Press, pp. 172–180.

³² James Baxter (Commissioner of Inquiry, Government of Burma), "Report on Indian Immigration", 12 October 1940, p. 4.

³³ "'Bangladesh is Not My Country': The Plight of Rohingya Refugees from

In August 2017, the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State (chaired by late Kofi Annan) issued its final report titled ‘Towards a Peaceful, Fair and Prosperous Future for the People of Rakhine: Final Report of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State’.³⁴ The report mentioned that the “question should not be whether Rakhines and Muslims will live together, but rather *how* they will live together. Reintegration, not segregation, is the best path to long-term stability and development in Rakhine State”.³⁵ The report with its 88 recommendations was lauded by fair and democratic-minded groups both locally and internationally, as well as by the Rohingya community and sober and pragmatic Rakhine liberals. However, ultra-nationalists in Myanmar have ignored the findings and recommendations of the report and have threatened to boycott the Advisory Commission.

Key findings of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (‘USCIRF’) Annual Report 2021 noted that,

[i]n 2020, religious freedom conditions in Burma remained poor. The government continued to commit widespread and egregious religious freedom violations, particularly against Rohingya Muslims. Denial of basic citizenship rights and systematic discrimination based on ethnic-religious affiliation severely restricted the freedom of religious or belief of minority communities.³⁶

In its recommendations to the United States Government, the USCIRF mentioned, *inter alia*, that Burma is “engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA)”.³⁷ The USCIRF has redesignated Burma as a Country of Particular Concern in its Annual Report 2022.³⁸

Against this backdrop, it is incumbent on religious leaders of all faiths in Myanmar to curb the tide of misinformation, hate speech and prejudice against religious groups, by advocating for peace, inter-faith harmony and justice. The need of the hour is the enhancement of both intra- and inter-faith *education*. Religious leaders play a very important role in this regard. People are afraid of things they do not know or understand. Leaders of Islam should attempt to dispel misconceptions and prejudice against Muslims, and thus seek to counter Islamophobia. One may draw inspiration from the concept of fairness and justice as set out in the Qur’an itself:

O you who believe, be upright for Allah, bearers of witness with justice; and do not let hatred of a people incite you not to act equitably. Be just; that is nearer to observance of duty. And keep your duty to Allah. Surely Allah is aware of what you do.³⁹

One such area in which misconceptions about Islam may be dispelled is polygamy. Polygamy in Islam is allowed only as an exception, pursuant to certain conditions. Common misconceptions regarding polygamy in Islam may be thwarted by adherence to verses of the Qur’an:

Myanmar”, *Human Rights Watch*, 5 August 2018.

³⁴ “Final Report of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State: Towards a Peaceful, Fair and Prosperous Future for the People of Rakhine”, August 2017 (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/c76b63/>).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11 (italics added).

³⁶ USCIRF, “Annual Report, 2021”, April 2021, pp. 14–15.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ USCIRF, “Annual Report, 2022”, April 2022, p. 14.

³⁹ Maulana Muhammad Ali, *The Holy Qur’an with English Translation and Commentary*, 2010, 5:8.

And if you fear that you cannot do justice to orphans, marry such women as seem good to you, two, or three, or four; but if you fear that you will not do justice, then (marry) only one or what your right hands possess. This is more proper that you may not do injustice.⁴⁰

Buddhist leaders also ought to impress upon their followers the Buddhist practice of the ‘mundane right livelihood’. Right livelihood is of two kinds:

1. When the noble disciple, avoiding wrong living, gets his livelihood by a right way of living: this is called mundane right livelihood (*lokiya samma-ajiva*), which yields worldly fruits and brings good results.
2. But the avoidance of wrong livelihood, the abstaining, desisting, refraining therefrom – the mind being holy, being turned away from the world, and conjoined with the path, the holy path being pursued – this is called supramundane right livelihood (*lokuttara samma-ajiva*) which is not of the world, but is supramundane and conjoined with the path.⁴¹

While religion is often contorted and manipulated to spread hatred against persons belonging to other faiths, most religions in their unadulterated form advocate for harmony and tolerance among peoples. The task then is to identify avenues through which hate speech which could turn into violent extreme radicalization may be mitigated. In this regard, Religions for Peace, Myanmar (‘RfP-M’) has approached genuine spiritual Buddhist leaders and has sought their wisdom and leadership as it did with other inter-faith leaders. RfP-M has held three fora with the hope of finding a way for national reconciliation and peace in Myanmar. The aim was to create a space for all stakeholders to air their views.

One of the potential ways forward then is for religious leaders to shed light and spread awareness on the underlying tenets of religion and distinguishing that from rhetoric propagated by a small number of extremist leaders. Identifying pathways to reconciliation may be a fruitful first step in healing religious fault lines.

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⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 4:3.

⁴¹ Nyanatiloka Mahathera, *The Word of the Buddha: An Outline of the Teachings of the Buddha in the Words of the Pali Canon*, Buddhist Publication Society Inc., Kandy, 2001, p. 58.

