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Navigating Civic Agency and Civic Space Amid Authoritarian Realities in Myanmar: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Concept of Divine Mandate as Public Theology

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Abstract: In recent years, civic space has been deteriorating in many countries in Southeast Asia, and there is an urgent need for a more proactive and mindful civic agency to foster a humane society. Drawing inspiration from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's concept of divine mandate, this paper proposes a public theology within an authoritarian regime, namely Myanmar. It explores divine mandates as essential for protecting civic space, advocates for Christian discipleship as a means of civic agency, and sparks moments of possibility by recognizing the hidden God in times of suffering. This paper highlights that an ethic of responsibility towards others lies at the core of divine mandate. It encompasses being an agent of direction, memory, linguistic self-consciousness and transformation.

Keywords: authoritarianism; divine mandate; Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Myanmar; public theology

1. Introduction

"Civic space is the bedrock of any open and democratic society. When civic space is open, citizens and civil society organizations are able to organize, participate and communicate without hindrance. In doing so, they are able to claim their rights and influence the political and social structures around them" (CIVICUS 2020). While an open and tolerant civil space does not ensure a society aligned with God's will, it does offer a better chance for self-improvement through critical and open debates, accumulating social capital and nurturing civic agency. More importantly, it reduces the chance of the use of violence in handling political differences. I consider a primary task of public theology is to safeguard, expand and actively engage in civic space. From a theological perspective, civic space can be seen as orders of preservation entrusted by God to shield people from the abuses of sin and as a divine mandate in which we can encounter God's saving work and learn to exercise our responsibility within a fallen world. However, we are currently facing a troubling trend of shrinking civic spaces influenced by factors such as political authoritarianism, (ethnic) nationalism, populism, poverty, religious fundamentalism and sexism (Hummel and Strachwitz 2023; Andersen et al. 2021). This study focuses on Myanmar, which is under an authoritarian governance and has civic spaces that, according to CIVICUS, is categorized as closed. During my visit to Yangon, Myanmar in early November 2024, I had the opportunity to meet with over forty individuals. This experience not only offered me insights into the current situation in Myanmar but also allowed me to cross-reference and authenticate information about Myanmar from various written materials and media sources. The gender ratio is evenly split at 50–50, with the majority being church workers and a small number working as schoolteachers. I intend to examine this theme through the theological lens of divine mandates in the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), whose public theology,

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shaped by his resistance to Nazi authoritarianism, ethnic nationalism and populism, makes him a relevant figure for this analysis.

2. Divine Mandates and Public Theology

Bonhoeffer's theology revolves around Christ, viewing Christ not just in an abstract theological sense but at "the centre of human existence, history, and nature" (*DBWE 12*, Bonhoeffer 2009, p. 324). The follow-up questions for him are how his Christological beliefs are in dialogue with his engagement in socio–political contexts, and conversely, how these contexts shape his Christology. This interplay is evident in his seminal work *Creation and Fall*, delivered during the winter semester of 1932/33 and marked by the decline of the Weimar Republic and the birth of the Third Reich. In his work, Bonhoeffer interprets creation through the lens of Christ. Since Christ is both the end and the beginning of a new era (*DBWE 3*, Bonhoeffer 2004, pp. 21–22), Bonhoeffer presents a theology of creation fundamentally different from his contemporary German liberal theologians, including Paul Althaus, Emanuel Hirsch and Gerhard Kittel. Bonhoeffer's Christo–eschatological interpretation of creation distinguishes between orders of creation and orders of preservation. In the moment of original creation, "creation and preservation are two sides of the same activity of God" (*DBWE 3*, Bonhoeffer 2004, p. 45), but the fall of humanity altered the meaning of orders of preservation. God's preserving is no longer understood as the way in which "the world is continually wrested anew out of nothingness" (*DBWE 3*, Bonhoeffer 2004, pp. 46–47). The orders of preservation are not given with creation and cast in concrete forever afterward but, rather, they are the means by which God preserves the world from plunging into chaos in anticipation of its redemption. Yet with the fall into sin, when Adam and Eve wanted to become *sicut Deus* (like God), they lost their unique state before God and became alienated and isolated from themselves and one another. As Michael Mawson notes, "with the fall into sin, 'new social basic-relations' emerge" (Mawson 2018, p. 103). Instead of existing in harmony and community with God and one another, "every person exists in complete, voluntary [i.e., willful] isolation; everyone lives their own life, rather than living the same life in God" (Mawson 2018, p. 103). Therefore, it is important to emphasize that it is not "being in Adam" that humans learn to be humans but it is "being in Christ" with whom we are called to be. "Being in Adam" as the fallen humanity characterized by his "disunion" (the divided self) needs redemption from Christ in order to be "being in Christ" as a new creation characterized by "union" (the unified self) (Zimmermann 2019, pp. 129–138). The different understanding of preservation before and after the fall should not be confused. Bonhoeffer critiques liberal theology for overlooking the fall of humanity, leading to being less critical of human accomplishments and upholding the status quo until the coming of Christ. Consequently, liberal theology legitimizes specific forms or expressions of worldly order as orders of creation and lacks openness to God's revelation in Christ, that is, God's judgment and grace. In Bonhoeffer's context, theologians with strong ties to Nazi thinking used the concept of orders of creation to argue for God's inviolable creation and its orders. The Nazi regime's claim to ontological validity was based on orders of creation and the German "people" (*Volk*) as part of the orders of creation. Alternatively, Bonhoeffer contends that orders of preservation do not grant ontological validity to both the government and human cultures but focus on the government as God's vicarious representative action on earth exemplified by Christ. He states, "The government is to protect human beings from the chaos that sin causes" (*DBWE 16*, Bonhoeffer 2006, p. 509). "We recognize as order as God's order of preservation if the gospel can still be heard in it" (*DBWE 11*, Bonhoeffer 2012, p. 268). In cases where the government makes improper demands that cause discrimination, and the gospel cannot be freely preached in a given order, Bonhoeffer asserts that disobedience becomes the duty of Christians (DeJonge

2018; Pangritz 2019). For instance, the Nuremberg Laws (September 1935), the Law on the Alteration of Family and Personal Names (August 1938), the Decree on Passports of Jews (October 1938) and the Police Regulation on the Marking of Jews (September 1941) were passed into law during the Nazi regime but did not promote penultimate goodness and justice. Bonhoeffer writes, "All orders of our fallen world are God's orders of preservation that uphold and preserve us for Christ. They are not orders of creation but orders of preservation. They have no value in themselves; instead, they find their end and meaning only through Christ" (*DBWE 3*, Bonhoeffer 2004, p. 140).

The notion of orders of preservation is not used in Bonhoeffer's later works, but his concern with and insights into orders of creation and preservation still continue, and this is expressed in the notion of divine mandates in his work *Ethics*, written in 1940–43. This shift in emphasis reflects the pressing urgency of Nazism. Bonhoeffer explains, "We speak of divine mandates rather than divine orders because thereby their character as divinely imposed tasks, as opposed to determinate forms of being, becomes clearer" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 68). On the other hand, the notion of divine mandates responds to Bonhoeffer's concern with the structure of the new social order that was to be rebuilt after the war. The notion of divine mandates not only demands our obedience and discernment reflected in our exercise of responsibility but also that we witness God's presence amid a sinful world.

Along with orders of preservation, the notion of divine mandates aims to overcome the distinction between the worldly and spiritual realm, the here and now and the ultimate. There are not two realms, only the one realm of the Christ-reality in which the reality of God and the reality of the world are united (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, pp. 58–59). The divine mandates are not derived from our empirical existence but are built on the Christ-reality. Bonhoeffer writes, "It is not because work, marriage, government and church are that they are commanded by God, but it is because they are commanded by God that they are. And they are divine mandates only in so far as their being consciously or unconsciously is subordinated to the divinely imposed task" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 208). However, neither order of preservation nor divine mandates have salvific value. They are necessary for the continued existence of all creation because the world has no reality of its own independent of God's revelation in Christ. The task of public theology then is about "how this reality of God and of the world that is given in Christ becomes real in our world" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 55). Bonhoeffer's position is that it "allows the world to be world and reckons with the world as world, while at the same time never forgetting that the world is loved, judged, and reconciled in Jesus Christ by God" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 264). In this sense, the notion of divine mandates serves as a mediation bridging the Christ-reality and world-reality with concrete domains and insights for analogical reasoning and practice. Bonhoeffer elucidates the concept of divine mandates as "the concrete divine commissions grounded in the revelation of Christ and the testimony of Scripture; it is the authorization and legitimization to declare a particular divine commandment, the conferring of divine authority on an earthly institution. A mandate is to be understood simultaneously as the laying claim to, commandeering of, and formation of an earthly domain by the divine command" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 389). An immediate question is the adequacy of Bonhoeffer's proposed four mandates, namely work (culture), marriage and family, government and church in capturing the whole reality of life. I leave it open because the number of divine mandates does not affect the appropriateness of Bonhoeffer's idea of divine mandates. Divine mandates in Bonhoeffer's understanding are not rules but function like focal images in guiding analogical reasoning. Brian Brock rightly explains that "the mandates are thus not properly understood as metaphysical axioms, ethical blueprints, or programs; they are Christologically keyed signposts indicating the

features of reality that allow us to encounter Christ" (Brock 2007, p. 90). The fundamental concern of the divine mandates lies in the concrete forms of life expressed in four domains through which we can encounter God's action and experience, suffer and receive His will. For Bonhoeffer, the divine mandates form a real presence of Christ in the same sense that Luther spoke of the Lord's Supper. In the following, let us discuss some considerations stemming from the notion of divine mandates for public theology.

Firstly, no mandate is self-sufficient, but each mandate is with-one-another, for-one-another and over-against-one-another (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 393). They rely on each other to fulfill their purposes in serving others. There is no hierarchy among them; none can claim superiority, but all are mutually accountable. When one mandate infringes upon another, the entire system is disrupted. Bonhoeffer highlights that "the divine mandates of government presuppose the divine mandates of work and marriage. Therefore, it preserves what has been created, maintaining it in the order which is assigned to it through the task which is imposed by God" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 72). Unlike the mandates of work and marriage, the government cannot generate life or values on its own. Its role is to serve other mandates, not the other way around. When the government fails to recognize its boundaries and respect the integrity of other mandates, it oversteps its mandate of preservation toward redemption, ultimately harming God's creation and causing chaos, as seen in authoritarian regimes. Further, Bonhoeffer notes that the government has no knowledge to understand that the purpose of the law in restraining sin is for the sake of redemption and that this requires the guidance of the Church for understanding. Politically, the notion of divine mandates provides a system of checks and balances, the principle of subsidiarity and a focus on the common good. I will revisit these points when we discuss civic space.

Secondly, the notion of divine mandates is not rooted in natural law based on orders of creation. It is derived from the Christ-reality taking form in the world in concrete ways. In this context, Bonhoeffer introduces the ideas of ultimate and penultimate to clarify our life under the divine mandates. In short, "the penultimate is everything that precedes the ultimate, everything that precedes the justification of the sinner by grace alone, everything which is to be regarded as leading up to the last thing when the last thing has been found. It is at the same time everything which follows the ultimate and yet again precedes it" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 159). It is only in light of the ultimate that the penultimate becomes penultimate. The penultimate is a period permitted by God, characterized by anticipation, preparation and the grace of salvation (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, pp. 160–61). The penultimate is God's time in human time. Aware of the tendency of either radical detachment from or compromise to the penultimate, Bonhoeffer explains, "A Christian ethic built only on the incarnation would lead easily to the compromise solution; an ethic built only on the crucifixion or only on the resurrection of Jesus Christ would fall into radicalism and enthusiasm. The conflict is resolved in their unity" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 157). This is a kind of realized eschatology. Nevertheless, life in the penultimate is full of complexities because there is world reality. Despite this, the penultimate is not wasted time. Bonhoeffer argues that "The penultimate will be swallowed up by the ultimate, yet it retains its necessity and its right as long as the earth endures" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 168), and this is how Matthew 3:1–6 talks about preparing the way of the Lord. Bonhoeffer writes, "To give bread to the hungry man is not the same as to proclaim the grace of God and justification to him, and to have received bread is not the same as to have faith. Yet for him who does these things for the sake of the ultimate, and in the knowledge of the ultimate, this penultimate does bear a relation to the ultimate" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 163). It is crucial to recognize that the ultimate and penultimate do not oppose nature and natural life. Bonhoeffer clarifies, "Natural life is formed life. The natural is the

form that inheres in and serves life. If life severs itself from the form, if it tries to assert itself in freedom from this form, if it will not allow itself to be served by the form of the natural, then it destroys itself down to its roots. Life that makes itself absolute, that makes itself its own goal, destroys itself" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 208). The distinction between the natural and the unnatural lies in the latter's attempt to close itself off from Christ's coming (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 173). However, as a result of the fall, the natural "has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor" (Rom 8:22), eagerly awaiting God's redemption. It is in the divine mandates in which humans vis-à-vis "the one and whole reality find it revealed in Jesus Christ" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 74). The notion of ultimate and penultimate provides us with an important lens for articulating and imagining divine mandates as living in the tension between hope and reality.

Related to the second observation, the notion of divine mandates within the penultimate realm is fluid, contextual and filled with tensions. There is no fixed-in-advance, once-and-for-all principle, but a decision is made in the given situation. Bonhoeffer aptly stated, "No one has the responsibility of turning the world into the kingdom of God, but only of taking the next necessary step that corresponds to God's becoming human in Christ. The task is not to turn the world upside down but in a given place to do what, from the perspective of reality, is necessarily objective and to carry it out. But even in a given place, responsible action cannot always immediately do what is ultimately right. It has to proceed step by step, ask what is possible and entrust the ultimate step, and thus the ultimate responsibility, to another hand" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, pp. 257–58). There are several implications for living in the penultimate. First, living a responsible life in the penultimate entails living, acting and suffering with and for others, mirroring Jesus Christ's vicarious representative action. Bonhoeffer notes that "all human beings, not only Christians, participate in Christ's vicarious representative action and operate within vicarious structures, as parents, as teachers, etc." (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 258). Esther Reed explains Bonhoeffer's sense of responsibility as a You–I–You structure, not an I–You–I structure (Reed 2018). It begins in the other, not I. Therefore, responsibility is not about an affirmation of personal freedom and autonomy but, in a sense, of Christ's vicarious representative action. Second, a responsible action has to correspond with reality, action fitting context to it. Responsibility is located not in an ideal or abstract concept but at a particular time, place and event: "At the moment of being addressed, the person enters a state of responsibility or in other words, of decision" (*DBWE 1*, Bonhoeffer 1998, p. 159). In certain scenarios, "the free responsibility of the one who acts, a responsibility not bound by law" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 273). Violation of the law in those cases does not constitute a rejection of the law; rather, what occurs in those situations is an "act of breaking the law to sanctify it," or a "suspension of the law" that "serve[s] its true fulfillment" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 400). Third, in the pursuit of responsible action, decisions are never flawless, and guilt may seem inevitable. A responsible person does not excuse his/her action, but as Bonhoeffer says, "The man who acts out of free responsibility is justified before others by dire necessity; before himself, he is acquitted by his conscience, but before God he hopes only for grace" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 283). Divine mandates are about a path of obedience with a clear destination, but the journey through the middle distance remains uncertain. Navigating this middle ground requires courage, discernment, knowledge, patience, responsibility, companionship (solidarity) and empathy, among others. These qualities are about civic virtues and civic agency, which I will follow up on in the upcoming discussion.

The notion of divine mandates is a Christo–eschatological ethic that takes the fallen world seriously. In the light of the ultimate, the penultimate is not simply a space and time waiting for something to happen and which we are not able to change, but rather, the divine mandates bring salvation and transformation in the here and now. The divine mandates

free us from self-justification and laws on the one hand and demand our responsibility for our neighbors on the other.

3. Divine Mandates and Civic Spaces

The government is one of the four divine mandates according to Bonhoeffer's understanding. The key question that arises is how the government as a divine mandate is understood. Christians are used to understanding the government as outlined in Romans 13:1–7 and 1 Peter 2:13–17, upholding what is right and punishing what is wrong, and how we are asked to be obedient. While I appreciate a government that fulfills its duties, I also see a potential issue with this view as it may inadvertently foster passivity among the populace. Individuals should not be one-sidedly asked to submit to governing authorities, but they have the right to participate in governance and request that the government hear and respect the voice of the people. I find the concept of civic space helpful in reflecting the interaction of the government and the people and articulating the meaning of divine mandate in public life. Unlike a Gramscian understanding of civil society as a battleground against hegemony, civic space includes the so-called opponents in civil society and acknowledges conflicts within the traditional view of civil society. More importantly, civic space emerges from processes of "co-production" between people and the state (Biekart and Fowler 2023, p. 34). Both people and the state have benefited from safeguarding civic space. On the contrary, "when civic space is restricted, human and civil rights are denied, government accountability is jeopardized, citizen voices are silenced, civic energy is sapped, confidence in state authorities is eroded and opportunities for dialogue and development are lost" (Malena 2015, p. 14). On the one hand, civic space is dependent upon the government's awareness of its boundary, legitimacy and accountability. "This (civic space) can only happen when a state holds by its duty to protect its citizens and respects and facilitates their fundamental rights to associate, assemble peacefully and freely express views and opinions" (CIVICUS 2020). On the other hand, civic space fosters a sense of civic agency that goes beyond mere submission to authority. Civic agency is "a human predisposition toward, and a capability for, leading life together with others in a society with concern for the whole" (Biekart and Fowler 2023, p. 36). The concept of civic space expands the role of the government beyond simply enforcing laws. It embodies a government that is of the people, by the people and for the people.

According to the notion of divine mandates, the government derives its legitimacy from God. In modern politics, this legitimacy has shifted from God to the people. This transition should not be negatively viewed as anthropocentric versus theocentric because the government is always a human institution. On the contrary, a concern of legitimacy reflects that the authority of the government is not self-defined. Even authoritarian governments often claim that they are of, for and by the people, forming the bedrock of their legitimacy. It is the people who grant legitimacy to their governments to govern. To ensure this is not merely a slogan, the government must demonstrate this in concrete ways. In this paper, by safeguarding and expanding civil space, governments honor the legitimacy bestowed upon them by the people. Civic space refers to the set of conditions that enable all members of society to exercise freely and effectively their basic civil rights without discrimination. Such an idea of civic space was not prevalent in biblical times, and so caution is needed when applying biblical principles to modern politics. Since we are called to love God and our neighbors, loving our neighbors entails seeking the common good rather than meeting the needs of one particular class or race. As St. Ignatius of Loyola aptly put it, "The more universal the good is, the more it is divine". Unfortunately, there is a historical tendency to overlook the vulnerable, leading to discrimination based on factors such as disability, gender, race and religion. At times, the Church aligns itself more with cultural norms than

with divine mandates, as seen in the case of German Christians during the Nazi era. The Church is not immune to distortion, yet the Holy Spirit works within and without the Church. God is present within his mandates, and by living in these mandates, we encounter God. This is the meaning of the divine mandates.

Divine mandates highlight that there are boundaries to government. In the context of God's creation, God's act of drawing a boundary is an act of giving space for others to thrive, grow and interact rather than simply an act of separation. Recognizing and respecting boundaries is crucial in preventing corruption and enabling the government to fulfill its divine mandate of preservation within its designed scope. According to Bonhoeffer's view on divine mandates, the government's authority is constrained by other mandates, namely, the Church, family and work, which operate independently from governmental influence. The divine mandates are "with, for and against" each other. However, in authoritarian regimes, sectors such as education, family, media and others are often tightly regulated, and individuals are compelled to comply with government directives. The lines between different sectors of society in an authoritarian regime are blurred. During Bonhoeffer's era, the Nazi regime was the case. In contrast, civic space emphasizes the distribution of power and acts as a mechanism for checks and balances to limit the government's authority and safeguard individuals from coercion. Government interference in other mandates is required only when inaction would lead to injustice or public harm. It could be deemed tyrannical for the government to take action when private initiative could effectively address the issue equally well. This principle may be applied to other mandates in their relation to the government. This is seen in Bonhoeffer's resistance to Hitler's government.

I find that the Catholic social teaching of the principle of subsidiarity provides us with a different lens to understand both divine mandates and civic space. The principle has its roots in 19th-century social thought in France and Germany and first appears in Catholic social teaching in Pope Pius XI's encyclical *Quadragesimo anno* Pope Pius XI (1931).

> The supreme authority of the State ought, therefore, to let subordinate groups handle matters and concerns of lesser importance, which would otherwise dissipate its efforts greatly. Thereby the State will more freely, powerfully, and effectively do all those things that belong to it alone because it alone can do them: directing, watching, urging, restraining, as occasion requires and necessity demands. Therefore, those in power should be sure that the more perfectly a graduated order is kept among the various associations, in observance of the principle of "subsidiary function", the stronger social authority and effectiveness will be the happier and more prosperous the condition of the State. (Article 80)

The principle of subsidiarity emphasizes that larger social entities should not take over decisions that are the responsibilities of small groups or associations (Pope John Paul II 1991; Wishloff and Pierucci 2024). It serves as a counter to collectivism, setting boundaries on state intervention to protect individuals. However, the principle is not understood as collectivism versus individualism because humans are social beings. Therefore, the principle of subsidiarity requires that governments are obliged to assist or support lower levels of the community in achieving their legitimate objectives, facilitating but never supplanting their initiatives. Further, the principle of subsidiarity does not weight civil communities over governments; both must work together to meet the common good in the prevailing circumstances and conditions of human life. Governments should protect, support and intervene less in civic space instead of scrutinizing and suppressing it. Authoritarian governments are used to limit and suppress civic space in the name of national security and social stability. They consider that this is the way to safeguard their authority. Paradoxically, the suppression of civic space brings insecurity and instability, not only because the legitimacy of the government comes from people rather than suppression

but also because people have very limited non-violent effective channels to express their concerns about government policy. In this paper, I argue that obedience to divine mandates involves safeguarding and fostering civic space to maximize the potential of the four domains outlined by Bonhoeffer and ultimately promote flourishing lives.

4. Military Authoritarianism in Myanmar

Civic space conditions are measured across five dimensions, namely, freedom of information and expression, the right to assembly and association, citizen participation, non-discrimination and rule of law (Malena 2015). According to CIVICUS in 2024 (CIVICUS 2024), Myanmar is rated as a closed civic space. On 17 September 2024, the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner published its latest report on the human rights situation in Myanmar, detailing a range of serious violations that continue to underscore the deepening crisis and lack of rule of law throughout the country. Since the coup, at least 5350 civilians have been killed and more than 3.3 million displaced (OHCHR 2024). Myanmar has been under military authoritarian rule since Ne Win seized power in a coup d'état back in 1962 (Yamahata and Takeda 2023; Connelly and Loong 2024, pp. 37–62). Military authoritarianism is basically a system of managing the government with the military, and it relies primarily on coercion. While there were slight openings toward democratic progress in the early 2010s, the military government still retained significant control. In a notable shift, the National League for Democracy emerged victorious in the November 2015 election, despite a quarter of the seats being reserved for the military. However, the 2008 constitution prevented Aung San Suu Kyi from assuming the presidency due to a clause disqualifying individuals with foreign citizen children. Consequently, she was appointed as State Counsellor, effectively serving as the Prime Minister. Nonetheless, the military continued to exert influence over the country.

In the national elections on 8 November 2020, the National League for Democracy secured an even greater majority than in 2015. However, on 1 February 2021, the military claimed the election was fraudulent, declared a national emergency, seized control, arrested Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint and established a government comprising generals under Min Aung Hlaing, the Chairman of the State Administrative Council and Commander-in-Chief of the Myanmar Armed Forces (Connelly and Loong 2024, pp. 13–18). Following the coup d'état in February 2021, Myanmar's military regime made sweeping changes to the country's law, introduced new regulations and issued orders under the emergency clauses of the military-drafted Constitution of 2008. These led to the suspension of fundamental human rights that are protected under domestic and international laws, resulting in the unjust arrest and loss of lives of many innocent civilians. Numerous demonstrations erupted across the nation, which later became known as the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), but were met with severe crackdowns by the junta on both peaceful protests and armed opposition (Connelly and Loong 2024, pp. 116–20). In response to the activities of the opposition/resistance, especially in the Chin, Kachin, Rakhine, Sagaing and Shan states, the *junta* has imposed several incident-based restrictions targeting the whole population, as it labels everyone as "opposition". Villages suspected of supporting the opposition have been destroyed, with civilians and opposition members being massacred (Mon 2024). Tragically, thousands have lost their lives at the hands of the military, and over twenty-five thousand individuals have been detained. The political upheaval and ongoing fighting have plunged the country into a humanitarian crisis. In the following, I share my recent visit to Yangon in early November 2024, during which I met nearly forty people on various occasions.

A Chin Christian family resides in Yangon and comes from a middle-class background. Their daughter, in her late twenties, participated in the CDM against the 2021 coup d'état

and was subsequently arrested and detained. Regrettably, her parents were unable to visit her, resorting to bribery to send her parcels and gather information about her well-being. After a challenging legal process, she was sentenced to 32 months in prison. The military regime occasionally grants amnesty on special occasions like National Day, raising hopes for her family that she might be released, but luck was not on their side. The prison conditions were deplorable, devoid of basic human rights. Eventually, she was freed in November 2023 and sought refugee status in a neighboring country. Tragically, the family's son, in his early twenties, was found dead in April 2023, with the suspicion that he was a victim of military violence. These heartbreaking events led the couple, now in their mid-fifties, to make the difficult decision to flee the country and live as displaced individuals out of fear of persecution by the military.

The people I met expressed concerns about the conscription law, which targets men aged 18–35 and women aged 18–27. Another order conscripts men up to age 65 to form local militia groups known as public security forces (Linn 2024). A 48-year-old man shared with me how he dangerously fled to Thailand to escape the conscription order with the help of revolutionaries, spending nine months in exile (Head 2024). On the other hand, many families found all possible means to send their children away from Myanmar. A woman shared with me that her daughter made the bold decision to leave university during her final year to join the protests against the government's dismissal of teachers supporting the CDM. She mentioned that numerous young people opted to forgo their education to protest against the government interference in the university system. With the financial assistance of her relatives in Great Britain, the girl was able to secure a UK visa and safely depart Myanmar recently.

Another man opened up to me about the traumatic experiences faced by many. He shared, "Every time when the doorbell rings at home, fear grips me as it reminds me of the impending of the police. I believe this is a common experience among people. We are on high alert". Since the police force has lost the trust of the people, the pressing question arises: who will ensure the safety of the people? While I did not personally witness any crimes during my time in Yangon, a friend informed me that incidents of kidnapping and robbery are unfortunately common occurrences.

During my visit to Yangon, I learned that nearly one-third of the city's population are not locals, and they come from different states in search for refuge. While some are taken in by relatives, many find themselves homeless, with their children lacking access to schools. Since the coup, foreign investors have fled, leading to rising inflation and widespread unemployment. Official reports from Myanmar's Directorate of Investments and Company Administration indicate that foreign investment amounted to USD 150 million in the first seven months of 2024, a stark contrast to the USD 3.8 billion recorded in 2020. The living conditions for the people must be incredibly challenging. A man overseeing a church office's support for the internally displaced people of the Chin ethnic group expressed, "We have 100,000 internally displaced people. The needs are immense. How to have enough food and reach them pose significant challenges. We find ourselves in a seemingly hopeless situation".

This visit brings to mind Psalm 13 (NRSV),

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I bear pain in my soul

and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

> Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!
>
> Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
>
> and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed";
>
> my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

How can public theology lead people to rejoice in God's salvation and sing to God? What would characterize a public theology in this context? What Christian symbols can inspire the development of public theology? I consider that it is about civic agency.

5. Discipleship and Civic Agency

The concept of civic space is intricately linked to civic agency. Civic agency breathes life into civic space, just as civic space nurtures and sustains civic agency. Civic agency is defined as "a human predisposition toward, and a capability for, leading life together with others in a society with concern for the whole" (Biekart and Fowler 2023, p. 36). While civic agency can be influenced by civic space, it is not solely dictated by it. There is ample evidence of individuals exemplifying civic agency even within authoritarian regimes. In this study, Dietrich Bonhoeffer is an example of this. He shows us that Christian discipleship is about civic agency. Christian discipleship is to follow Jesus Christ and to be in Christ. Since Christ is the life of others, Christian discipleship illustrates the formation and practice of civic agency.

It is quite natural to connect Christian discipleship with Bonhoeffer's work *Nachfolge*. Bonhoeffer's *Nachfolge*, published in 1937, provides an answer to these questions: What did Jesus want to say to us? What does he want from us today? How does he help us to be faithful Christians today? (*DBWE 4*, Bonhoeffer 2001, p. 37). The content of this book is primarily about his lecture course (1935–37) for a preacher's school at Finkenwalde. It was an illegal seminary, training pastors for the Confessing Church. Five sessions were completed before the Gestapo closed the seminary in September 1937. The title of the book is very biblical because we are called to follow Jesus. At that time, the political title of Hitler was *Führer*, and his supporters were his followers. We may assume that Bonhoeffer's use of *Nachfolge* also had a political agenda. Christians should follow Jesus as the Confessing Church, not *Führer* as the German Christians' Faith Movement did. This context sheds light on why obedience is portrayed as the unequivocal response to Jesus' call in his work. Bonhoeffer articulates, "Only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes" (*DBWE 4*, Bonhoeffer 2001, p. 63). However, in a prison letter to Bethge on 21 July 1944, the day after the assassination attempt failed, Bonhoeffer reminisced critically on *Nachfolge*.

> I remember a conversation that I had in America thirteen years ago with a young French pastor. We asked ourselves quite simply what we wanted to do with our lives. He said he would like to become a saint (and I think it's quite likely that he did become one). At the time I was very impressed, but I disagreed with him, and said, in effect, that I should like to learn to have faith. For a long time I didn't realize the depth of the contrast. I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life, or something like it. I suppose I wrote *Nachfolge* as the end of that path. Today I can see the dangers of that book, though I still stand by what I wrote. (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 486)

Bonhoeffer's acknowledgment of *Nachfolge*'s semi-Pelagian undertow helps us see something else as well. His confession only a few days earlier—"only the suffering God can help" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, p. 479)—means that even *Nachfolge*'s commanding Christ cannot help. However, his commanding Christ Christology with a semi-Pelagian and obedience-focused anthropology is to respond to a Church mired in cheap grace. By con-

sidering Bonhoeffer's theological insights and taking Myanmar seriously, I reflect on what a public theology that nurtures civic virtues and embodies civic agency would be.

5.1. Politics Is Not Everything

Everything is politics, yet politics is not everything. The divine mandate for governance is just one of the four mandates. It holds power and affects our lives, but it does not define the entirety of divine mandates. It is the Christ-reality that imbues meaning. Individuals always retain an agency to respond to divine mandates in diverse ways. While individuals may face limitations in governmental participation, they can still engage in other domains of divine mandates such as family, church and work/culture, which are equally significant. Firstly, the notion of divine mandates is inherently public, making family, church and work/culture inherently public as well. Secondly, all four mandates are intricately interconnected and indivisible, meaning that our engagement in domains other than the government indirectly influences governance. In fact, no one can decide which divine mandate is more influential. Focusing on or exploring opportunities beyond the governmental sphere does not indicate avoiding politics. Rather, it strives to embody civic agency in alignment with divine mandates. In Yangon, I visited one school and talked to the headmaster and a few teachers. I found that there are teachers who aim to motivate and empower students rather than merely echoing the government's stance. There are churches dedicated to serving their communities regardless of their size or perceived significance. There are families who open their homes to house internally displaced people. We do not know to what extent these conscientious efforts can expand and strengthen civic space, but in Bonhoeffer's perspective, divine mandates are not understood as metaphysical axioms, ethical blueprints or programs. Instead, they are Christologically keyed signposts indicating the features of reality that allow us to encounter Christ. While the military may hinder our ability to encounter Christ in the realm of politics, it cannot prevent the presence of Christ in our daily lives. However, if the need arises to challenge the unjust government directly, we should not shy away from it. Bonhoeffer himself is an example of resistance to Hitler's regime. Despite this, Bonhoeffer warns that violation of the law in special situations does not constitute a rejection of the law. Among the revolutionaries in Myanmar, there are Christians. A young man expressed remorse when he shared with me, "I fear I may not be deemed worthy of heaven because I have taken the lives of military personnel". I empathized with his dilemma, and finally, I shared Bonhoeffer's words with him, "Those who act responsibly place their action into the hands of God and live by God's grace and judgment" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, pp. 268–69).

5.2. Friendship as Civic Virtue

Civic agency comprises people with civic virtues. Civic virtues are neither simply an inward journey nor a conformity to social norms. Rather, civic virtues include leading life together with others in a society that has concern for the whole. In Bonhoeffer's understanding, Christ's vicarious representative action (*Stellvertretung*) is a Christian civic virtue. Christ's work as *Stellvertreter* moves sinful humanity from being "in-Adam" to being "in-Christ". As God was freely for humanity in Christ, God's Church is now free for the other in love. The Church lives "with the readiness to do and bear everything in the neighbor's place, indeed, if necessary to sacrifice [oneself], standing as a substitute for [one's] neighbor" (Mawson 2018, p. 137). In an authoritarian regime, the civic virtue of Christ's vicarious representative action is best interpreted as friendship because authoritarian governments are used to create political dichotomy to divide and control people. Jesus' vicarious representative action in terms of friendship is to break down the dichotomy set by the authorities. Jesus was the friend of tax collectors and sinners (Matt. 11:19; Lk. 7:34).

Friendship in Jesus' words includes laying down one's life for one's friend (John 10:15; 1 John 3:16). Jesus laid down his life for people who were against him and crucified him. He died for us (Romans 5:8) in order that we would be healed and saved (1 Peter 2:24). Jesus' death is not simply a response to miserable people but an act of love transcending status and social boundaries. Friendship with Jesus is not confined to the inner circle between Jesus and his disciples but is a command that Jesus gave his disciples to love as he had loved (John 15:12, 14). Friendship from, of and with Jesus is always therefore an extended and inclusive invitation. Friendship as civic virtue is firstly a solidarity with suffering and suffering in solidarity. Second, it is to nurture and uphold a community vision characterized by a just, inclusive, peaceful and participating community. Third, friendship is to empower people to have the courage to make a new beginning in relationships. This is important for ending the cycle of revenge and overcoming dualism in terms of enemies and friends.

In Myanmar, there are more than three million displaced people, with many of them seeking refuge in Yangon. Many residents of Yangon generously offer them shelter and sustenance. My friend, a single woman, has taken in a baby girl whose father fell in the war and whose mother was too young to care for her. My friend tells me that this is not uncommon. A friend confided in me that he and his church have been steadfast in visiting and supporting a 40-year-old pastor sentenced to 18 years, a 31-year-old pastor sentenced to 15 years and a 22-year-old female university student sentenced to 10 years, as well as four widows of supporters of the CDM. Standing by each other in various ways has become a hallmark of life during these challenging times. In fact, people from overseas also show solidarity with the people in Myanmar.

5.3. Hidden Transcript and Hidden God

Hidden transcript is a concept employed by James Scott. It refers to forms of resistance and dissent that are kept out of sight from those in power. Ideas and visions of hidden transcripts are carefully kept below the radar by dissenting groups and individuals as a way of remaining safe in the face of power. People pretend to follow the hegemonies defining their social situation—something Scott called orthopraxy—and follow the social and cultural formats that protect them from sanctions but without agreeing to the ideologies informing the formats (Scott 1992). In Myanmar, the General Strike Coordination Body, which organizes boycotts of the military, has urged the people not to use the products owned by the military, such as beer and cigarettes. These are a form of political consumerism. Unlike expressing their political views and demands through the conventional electoral systems, political institutions and organized political movements, people involved in political consumerism exercise their political power through their wallets and their role as consumers. Firstly, this shopping for change signifies a more conscientious action. Secondly, it is the politicization of everyday life choices, including ethically, morally or politically inspired decisions. Thirdly, these lifestyle politics can be both individual and collective, encompassing lifestyle change, mobilization and politics. Boycotting military products demonstrates that individuals can make a difference, regardless of how small their actions or impacts may be. It is a movement driven by self-awareness and personal lifestyle change.

Many people choose to leave Myanmar but most of them remain due to various reasons. A man shared with me, "I had the opportunity to move to Australia, but I found a more compelling reason to stay. It is God's calling to stand by my people". He went on to express, "The hidden God reveals himself/herself in the depth of our affliction. God is here". Bonhoeffer highlights that "the Bible however directs him [sc. man] to the powerlessness and suffering of God; only a suffering God can help". He said, "So it is good to learn early enough that suffering and God is not a contradiction but rather a

necessary unity; for me the idea that God himself is suffering has always been one of the most convincing teachings of Christianity" (*DBWE 16*, Bonhoeffer 2006, p. 294). Moltmann adds, "A God who cannot suffer cannot love either" (Moltmann 1981, p. 38). The idea of the suffering God can be traced back to Bonhoeffer's Lutheran tradition. In the Heidelberg disputation of April 1518, Martin Luther commented that "a theologian of glory calls evil good, and good evil" (Forde 1997). Luther called them glory liars. They accept two perspectives on their existence. In the outer world, evil things may occur. In the inner world, God has already won the struggle and all his followers have achieved glory. For Martin Luther, this is a false story, a dishonest way of telling the history of human beings. "A theologian of the cross", continues Martin Luther, "calls the thing what it actually is". For Luther, the main difference between the theology of the glory and the theology of the cross is a question of the understanding of power. The theologians of glory understand the divine power in the Scriptures as the political power of contemporary society. They may presume that divine power is a multiplying and exaggerated version of human power. Only the theology of the cross will bring human beings to a reality in which they are forced to face facts and what really happens, and give an understanding of what happens. The suffering God understands our suffering and, through his suffering, is ultimately dealing with the evil behind it. In other words, the suffering of Christ beckons us to embrace a view from below and in solidarity with the vulnerable and survivors. Who are the theologians of glory in Myanmar? Could they possibly be synonymous with the authoritarian regime? They love power more than using power to serve; they dwell in their own myths rather than being honest with reality. The suffering of the people in Myanmar offers us a perspective to go into God's mystery, the divine presence in times of suffering, and the assurance that God is with us and for us.

5.4. A Reflection

Civic agency encompasses civic responsibility, which embodies various roles. Firstly, civic responsibility involves being an agent of direction as interpreting the signs of the times. The concept of divine mandates serves as a reminder that we need not be disheartened by politics because God is present in our daily lives, allowing us to encounter the divine in our everyday experiences. Secondly, civic responsibility includes being an agent of memory. It is the suffering Christ in whom the memory of suffering is expressed through solidarity, resilience and hope. We must not abandon those in prison or exile or who are left alone. Thirdly, civic agency involves being an agent of linguistic self-consciousness. We must be cautious not to be consumed by the rhetoric of revenge, hatred and violence even in the face of injustice. Instead, we should strive to embrace the language of love. Finally, civic responsibility encompasses being an agent of transformation committed to bringing peace and justice to society. At the seminar, participants engaged in a discussion about whether Myanmar needs public theology or liberation. Regardless of the path chosen, they see themselves as catalysts for transformation.

To what extent can such a civic agency contribute to the emergence of civic space? To what extent can such a civic agency empower people not to lose hope? In Myanmar, public universities are under complete government control, whereas theological seminaries enjoy a certain extent of autonomy. These seminaries continue to offer courses like public theology and feminist theology, focusing on fostering civic engagement. For example, during a politically challenging period, a two-day seminar on public theology took place in November 2024, aiming to develop a curriculum on public theology for theological seminaries in Myanmar. While I am uncertain about the impact of such initiatives on Myanmar's civic space, the essence of Christian discipleship always demonstrates resilience and perseverance. Rebecca Solnit writes,

> Hope locates itself in the premises where we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty there is room to act. When you recognize uncertainty, you recognize that you may be able to influence the outcomes–you alone or you in concert with a few dozen or several million others. Hope is an embrace of the unknown and knowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists. Optimists think it will all be fine without our involvement; pessimists take the opposite position; both excuse themselves from acting. It's the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand. We may not, in fact, know them afterward either, but they matter all the same, and history is full of people whose influence was most powerful after they were gone. (Solnit 2016, p. xiv)

Solnit does not approach her writing from a Christian perspective. Her exposition of hope is more about her conviction of a utopia, not reality. Nevertheless, her insight encapsulates the essence of civic agency. It is the agency itself that holds significance, not just the outcomes and impacts. Civic agency retains the power to spark moments of possibility. Jay Winter refers to these as minor utopias (Winter 2006). They produce "moments of possibility, of openings, of hopes and dreams rarely realized, but rarely forgotten as well". These are the narratives of people in Myanmar. In the light of the Christ-reality, truth, peace and justice prevail.

6. Conclusions

How to engage in public theology within an authoritarian regime is the research question of this paper. Drawing on Bonhoeffer's notion of divine mandate, this paper suggests that the divine mandate to the government is never isolated and, in fact, it exists within a complex interplay of various mandates. They are one way or another with, for and against each other. Therefore, individuals and churches should not fixate solely on the divine mandate of the government. Our participation in everyday life, guided by divine mandates, holds equal significance and even challenges the divine mandate of the government. However, the current shrinking of civic spaces in Myanmar is disheartening. Many consider leaving their countries while those who stay may feel powerless. Despite this, in the light of Christ-reality, the present moment as the penultimate is not time wasted. This is the time for responsibility. Vaclav Havel stresses the importance of living in truth to combat political falsehood, while Bonhoeffer speaks of discipleship as observing divine mandates and bearing one another's cross as God bears ours in Christ. Each person "takes up his position against the world in the world; the calling is the place at which the call of Christ is answered, the place at which a man lives responsibly... Vocation is responsibility and responsibility is the whole response of the whole person to reality as a whole" (*DBWE 6*, Bonhoeffer 2008, pp. 290–91, 93). Bonhoeffer writes,

> Thinking and acting for the sake of the coming generation, but being ready to go any day without fear or anxiety—that, in practice, is the spirit in which we are forced to live. It is not easy to be brave and keep that spirit alive, but it is imperative. (*DBWE 8*, Bonhoeffer 2010, p. 50)

Fuelled by Christian images of Christ-reality (such as the kingdom of God, Sabbath rest, marriage feasts, the garden of God, the city of God and the last judgment), Christians cultivate their civic agency in distinctive ways. This embodiment of hope in action underscores their commitment to remaining responsible and compassionate towards others.

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