

Satanun Boonyakiat. *A Christian Theology of Suffering in the Context of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand*. Carlisle: Langham, 2020. 180 pages. \$ 23.00. ISBN: 178368786X

Using Thailand as a context, suffering as a theme, and the Trinity and the Buddha as sources, Satanun Boonyakiat made an important interpretation and implication of Asian comparative theology of suffering. This is a published version of Boonyakiat's Fuller Seminary dissertation under the supervision of three Western theologians—William Dyrness, Veli-Matti Karkkainen, and Terry Muck—who have erudite and ethnographic knowledge of Thai Theravada Buddhist context. This book is a result of the author's lived experience as a Christian pastor and theologian in the context of Theravada Buddhist domination in Thailand. To be sure, this book is not a systematic theological discussion of suffering, but rather it is a contextual exercise in a comparative study between Christian and Buddhist foundational doctrines of suffering. In this book, Boonyakiat attempts to develop a comparative theology of suffering that is relevant to the Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhist context of Thailand. The book has four chapters.

The opening chapter is tended to justify the methodological issue. Using a comparative theological approach to religions as a methodological tool, the author argues that a Christian theology of suffering is relevant to the Thai context of Theravada Buddhism, yet it must be both faithful to the Christian belief in the Trinity and grounded in a trinitarian comparative theology of religions. For Boonyakiat, a Christian intra-understanding of suffering is not sufficient for the Thai context where the majority Buddhists and minority Christians face the reality of human suffering. Boonyakiat helpfully engages with some comparative theologians, such as Francis Clooney, James Fredericks, and others, and shows how a comparative approach to the Christian-Buddhist interreligious doctrines of suffering is needed in the context of Thailand. Grounding his work in a trinitarian comparative theology of religions, the author explores how the Buddhist doctrine of suffering could challenge, enrich, and deepen a Christian perspective on suffering. Like Jurgen Moltmann, Boonyakiat believes that a trinitarian theology of suffering enables us to comprehend the truth that all the persons of the Trinity are actively involved in the event of cross. The same triune God is actively participating in the lived reality of human suffering. This opens up the possibility of interacting with and listening to the voices of Buddhists.

In chapter two, Boonyakiat compares and contrasts the basic Christian and Buddhist understanding of suffering. He pays particular attention to the reality of suffering from the comparative perspectives. He examines a comparative study of Buddhist understanding of suffering and Christian biblical understanding of suffering. He demonstrates the complexity of human suffering and then critically assesses the assumption that all forms of human suffering are not necessarily part of the created order. He argues that Buddhist First Noble Truth of the reality of suffering could enable Christians to better comprehend the reality of suffering and to accept that some forms of suffering can be part of human nature. It also "prevents Christians from upholding the traditional theological understanding that all suffering is the result of sin" (79).

He then moves to the exploration of the causes of suffering in chapter three. Boonyakiat approaches the causes of suffering through the lens of liberation theologian. The goal is to discern and develop the Christian practical understanding of the causes of suffering that is practically relevant to the Thai context of Theravada Buddhism. The author also brings the Book of Job into a conversation with the suffering of the innocent sufferers in Thailand. Given that the causes of human suffering in Thailand are the results from the socio-political injustice and oppression, Boonyakiat suggests that Christians and Buddhists should move beyond the traditional western doctrine of theodicy that address a more abstract response to the reality of human suffering. He

emphasizes the ethics of solidarity and advocacy, which calls for Thai Christians' solidarity with the afflicted people regardless of religions in larger society.

In the final chapter, the author pays particular attention to the interreligious ethical role of Christians and Buddhists in addressing and transforming the reality of suffering. He offers a brief discussion of the Third and Fourth Noble Truths (the end of suffering and the path leading to the end of suffering) as well as an examination of the Christian understanding of God's presence to the problem of human suffering as found in the event of the cross of Christ. This chapter seems to be the heart of Boonyakiat's book. He also interacts with some leading Christian theologians who have profoundly reflected on the theology of suffering. They include Martin Luther, Jurgen Moltmann from the West and Kazoh Kitamori and Kosuke Koyama from Asia. While appreciating their groundbreaking works, Boonyakiat tries to go beyond them by highlighting some major similarities and differences between Buddhology and the Christian theology of suffering and by suggesting how Thai Christians should respond to the reality of suffering. One of the major differences between Christians and Buddhists is that Buddhists believe that the path leading to the end of suffering depends on human efforts, while Christians depend on God's intervention in solving suffering. Choosing the middle ground, Boonyakiat rightly argues that humans' efforts play an important role in God's ultimate transformation of human suffering.

Overall, this is an excellent book. We had read some excellent writings by Western theologians, such as Luther, Barth, Bonhoeffer, and Moltmann on a theology of the cross, but they do not bring a Christian theology of suffering in conversation with Asian Buddhist theology of suffering. Bonyakiaat's work is a critical, creative, and constructive conversation with Buddhist theology of suffering without losing the Scriptural teaching of suffering. This book is methodologically and contextually exemplary in suggesting that Christian theology of suffering in Asia cannot be done without interaction with Buddhist doctrine of suffering. One of the limitations is that the author fails to address the relationship between a theology of suffering and a theology of spirituality. How might suffering shapes one's spirituality? Nevertheless, this book represents a wonderful example of the author's academic and lived reflections on the doctrine and reality of suffering in Thailand. As a result, this book is not just for Christian theologians. It is valuable for both academic and lay persons from both religious backgrounds, who are interested in a comparative theology of Christian-Buddhist dialogue, discussion, and debate on suffering. Pick up and read it; you would be enriched by this fine work. I highly recommend it.

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