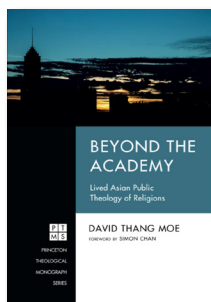


BOOK REVIEW

Beyond the Academy: Lived Asian Public Theology of Religions

By David Thang Moe. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2024. xxiv + 178 pp. ISBN 979-8-3852-1808-0. \$29.00 (paperback); \$44.00 (hardcover); \$29.00 (e-book).



Public theology has emerged as an essential role, taking deep roots in theological reflection of God's work in societal issues and faith engagement in the public sphere. In the fifty years since the term was introduced, papers on public theology tend to have been written for audiences within the narrow academy without sufficiently engaging the voices of grassroots Christians in their theological reflections.

In *Beyond the Academy: Lived Asian Public Theology of Religions*, David Thang Moe gives a fresh perspective on public theology and convincingly addresses the need to engage with the lived experiences and voices of the grassroots Christian. He reconstructs Asian public theology by bridging the gaps between the academic and the grassroots voices. Moe points out the limitations and insufficient engagement of the previous scholars doing public theology and how they failed to address liberation from demonic spiritual forces and the ecclesial movement in society. Utilizing the lived experiences and voices of the grassroots Christian community from the context of political oppression and ethnic persecution in Myanmar indeed turns the lived Asian public theology into a renewal theology.

Beginning his exploration of the unhappy gaps between the grassroots and academic voices, in the first chapter, David Moe reconstructs the old triple dialogue of Asian Theology and proposes a new, fresh triple dialogue on Academy-grassroots church dialogue, Christian-Buddhist dialogue, and global dialogue with non-Asian public theologians. He then describes four communities for doing public theology: Church, Academy, Society, and State. In chapter two, David Moe elaborates on his motivations and methods for engaging in the lived community. Chapter three is significantly powerful as he unpacks and analyzes the works of his interview on how

grassroots Christians express their witnesses of lived faith. In chapter 4, Moe traces the roots of Asian public theology and explains how the concept had already appeared in Asia before the term developed in the West. In the final chapter, Moe calls for a holistic understanding of the lived public theology that should be performed as everyday theology, rather than solely as academic reflection in the academy—“weekday theology”—and doxology in the church—“Sunday theology” (114). David Moe emphasizes the need for interreligious, prophetic witness in the context of Asia, particularly in the political turmoil in Myanmar, envisioning interethnic co-existence, reconciliation, and cooperation with other religious groups to foster socio-political transformation in the post-coup landscape.

Beyond the Academy is a compelling work and a massive contribution to scholarship on Asian public theology, especially in Myanmar. David Moe reinvigorates the discipline of public theology with a fresh, necessary perspective by collecting the different stories and theological insights of grassroots and engaging their voices in lived public theology. Through interviewing grassroots Christians from various backgrounds, positions, and places in Myanmar, he investigates their perception of the Church, Salvation, and Salvation-public life relation. Their stories indeed paint a vibrant picture resonating with the current Christianity in Myanmar. David Moe’s contribution in this book is also very ecumenical and insightful, discussing the soteriology and ecclesiological lived public theology as he engages with the grassroots from different Christian denominations in Myanmar, including Presbyterians, Baptists, and Pentecostals (53). The way he integrates the voices of the grassroots is significant in supporting the main argument of this book.

In his exploration of the origin of Asian public theology, David Moe convincingly illustrates how public theology was developed in Asia before the term formally emerged in the West. Through the lens of the Karen ethnic minority in Myanmar, he emphasized how the communities had embodied their faith in public life without knowing the academic concept of “public theology.” A critical gap in Asian public theology is that while interreligious dialogue has thrived, academy-church, intrareligious dialogue has always been overlooked. Thus, David Moe thoughtfully acknowledges the works of influential figures like the earlier theologians M.M. Thomas and Shoki and critiques their limitations of integrating the role of ecclesiology and the voices of the grassroots church as sources for developing Asian public theology of liberation. Then, he moves to the contemporary context and evaluates the works of Felix Wilfred and Aloysius Pieris as fresh perspectives of Asian public theology. David Moe persuasively argues that these four

main theologians still failed to develop the role of the Spirit in Asian public theology and that there is a need to balance the political and pastoral role of the church in public witness. In Moe's view, the grassroots church has been just a recipient, not a collaborator. Whereas Christology has been emphasized as a major theme in Asian public theology, ecclesiology has been neglected (116). While Moe highlights the role of the Spirit in Asian public theology and the Asian people's struggles of spiritual powers, it is not immediately clear what kind of spiritual powers are being referred to. A clearer distinction between divine and evil spiritual forces would be helpful.

Moe's call for an integrated approach to public theology, reconciliation of ethnic minorities, and collaboration with other religious groups sets a fresh discipline in public theology and a blend of scholarly insight. He proposes a new, fresh triple dialogue focusing on academy-grassroots church dialogue, Christian-Buddhist dialogue, and global dialogue with non-Asian public theologians. He adds a third reality (majority-minority ethnic conflict) of the Asian context to the twofold reality (multifaceted religiosity and mass poverty), which Sri Lankan liberation theologian Aloysius Pieris neglected. Moe also profoundly promotes inclusivity by highlighting women's role in witnessing Jesus's resurrection. However, even though he highlights the importance of involving both males and females in his approach to the church's public witnesses in Asia, the practical engagement of women and their experiences are not discussed enough in-depth, and how women are contributing in a particular context could have been further developed. Moe also provides a fresh view of biblical hermeneutics, re-reading the Parable of the Good Samaritan by highlighting the most often neglected role of the innkeeper (143). Anchored in the context of Myanmar's political situation, Moe vividly illustrates the embodiment of the politics of hospitality in Myanmar, like the innkeeper in the parable; it is in this way that the religio-ethnic communities supported each other and collaborated to resist the violent coup as a common enemy.

While Moe is trying to bridge the gap between academics and the grassroots, many may still arguably challenge whether the book sufficiently addresses the lived faith of the public, especially when gathering the voices of the grassroots from Myanmar. The lived faith of the grassroots communities in ways that are distinctive and relevant to their particular context could be further broadened. While acknowledging David Moe for highlighting grassroots voices comprehending soteriology, ecclesiology, and the prophetic mission of the Church in politics, the engagement with these voices is not sufficiently deep as the center of the theological reflection. As its goal is to move beyond the Academy, the book should give more

space to the stories of suffering, lived experiences, and perspectives of the grassroots Christians in Myanmar. The empirical foundation and the practical strategies of the grassroots Christian witness in political turmoil could be further enhanced to move completely beyond the academy. It can also be constructively criticized and raise the critical question of whether the book fully addresses the complexities of ethnic and religious conflict within Asia, especially how the majority religious or ethnic groups can oppress the minority groups. It is acknowledged that Moe is trying to encourage interreligious collaboration, however, it is also necessary to critique the root cause of the issues of the Buddhist nationalism instead of praising certain aspects of religious traditions. Moreover, in promoting a dialogical approach to other faiths and reconciliation for interethnic co-existence, the role of the ecumenical movement in social-political transformation and interdenominational collaboration among Christian grassroots individuals in the context of political unrest also needs to be further deepened, as it is essential for lived faith witness in public theology.

However, these insufficient engagements do not prevent me from recommending this book. David Moe is a great scholar for Myanmar, and *Beyond the Academy* is a powerful testimony regarding the urgent need for lived public theology. Moe challenges the status quo of the lived Asian public theology of religions both in a theoretical dimension and in the practical application of public theology, including the pastoral public witness of spiritual powers to engage the lived experiences and communal struggles. Cooperating with the ordinary Buddhists who shared the same experience in the Myanmar Military Junta, he called for reconciliation, unity, solidarity, and prophetic resistance in the post-coup periods to do socio-political transformation together. This book is a must-read for theologians, practitioners, and those who are interested in discussing lived faith in the public sphere.

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