

***A Christian Theology of Suffering in the Context of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand.* By Satanun Boonyakiat. Carlisle: Langham Monographs, 2020. xiii +180 pp. \$29.99 (paperback). ISBN: 978-1-78368-786-2 (paperback)**

This book describes itself as a work of comparative theology, but despite framing itself in relation to the works of Francis Clooney, James Fredericks, and Keith Ward it reads far more like a work of apologetics. The author is clear that while accepting certain principles of comparative theology, he is ultimately unsatisfied with the kind of deferral of truth claims suggested by Clooney and opts for what is termed a “Trinitarian comparative theology” (37–45) which foregrounds a non-negotiable set of Christian claims as a benchmark. I will discuss this further as the review proceeds.

In four main chapters, with a brief introduction and more substantial conclusion, the author in the first chapter sets out a comparative theology that is partly contrasted with a theology of religions approach, before examining across chapters two, three, and four “the reality of human suffering,” “the causes of suffering,” and “the ways to the extinction of suffering,” following the pattern of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. I will address the first chapter and the author’s apologetic comparative theology first, before addressing chapters 2 to 4 together to help explicate this.

As noted above, the author rejects a traditional theology of religions, which is in line with arguments in the comparative theology literature. However, far from the moratorium suggested by the likes of Clooney and Fredericks, the author sets out, firstly, Kärkkäinen’s version of the threefold typology of exclusivisms-inclusivisms-pluralisms, i.e. ecclesiocentrism-christocentrism-theocentrism, which effectively only renames the typology with a particular spin, before adding a discussion on pneumatocentrism and trinitarianism. The author positions himself around the latter phrase, arguing that foregrounding the Trinity is “the most appropriate approach because it remains faithful to the traditional Christian tradition, yet is able to respond to the challenge of pluralism effectively” (24). Notably, after rejecting the traditional theology of religions typology, the author also uses it to describe Thai Christians but criticises those so described, noting that exclusivists are too closed to Buddhism, while both inclusivists and pluralists “often give up absolute truth claims and the uniqueness of Christian faith” while he suggests his trinitarian approach gives an “ability to promote an authentic interfaith dialogue” (25). I spend some time on this, for although the author leaves the theology of religions to discuss comparative theology, his approach here seems framed within a very conservative trinitarianism that leads to apologetics in his trinitarian comparative theology.

I should note what Boonyakiat sees as the three components of comparative theology and his critique of them. Firstly, he says an advantage is the comparative methodology which allows Christianity to learn from other religions (37–39). Secondly, it can bring about “development” in Christian theology with its “reflexive nature, and openness to other religions” (39), and thirdly allows an engagement “with the followers of other faiths in a non-threatening and more constructive manner” (39). Yet he sees two “critical drawbacks” in it: no clear method; and, no clear criterion to balance “faithfulness” with “vulnerability” (41). As such against a comparative methodology which he sees as “driven by the pluralistic agenda” he offers is trinitarian approach as a “Christian comparative theology” (44). This results in an approach that seems out of kilter with the forms of the comparative theology we may be more familiar with today, which has been

termed a “new comparative theology” marked by an open and non-judgemental approach which defers truth claims. While Boonyakiat is careful not to directly criticise Buddhism and often uses the language of humility in how Christian truth claims are advanced in Thailand, it is clear that he sees Buddhism as only a partial and incomplete system which is deficient compared to Christianity. As such, far from advancing a comparative theology, as it would be understood today, this book might best be understood, perhaps, as a modern day version of apologetics using such language to promote an older, inclusivist form of fulfilment theology, wherein the inadequacy of Buddhism, as the author sees it, is placed alongside a statement of what are seen as Christian truths. Certainly, missiological works which simply denigrate other religions have long been seen as outmoded, so this work fits a trajectory of how a fulfilment theology would look when placed into a contemporary comparative theology frame.

Turning to chapters two through four, these can be dealt with together. Generally, each chapter follows a common pattern in which a classical Buddhist reading of the Noble Truths are set out: chapter two dealing with the first Noble Truth of *dukkha* (inadequately translated as “suffering”, and the wider nuances are noted here); chapter three with the second Noble Truth of the causes of suffering; and chapter three addressing both the release from this (nirvana) and the eightfold path as the route to this. Given the comparative theological approach, there is generally a fair and good account of each of the Noble Truths with rich citation from both the Tripitaka (Canonical Buddhist texts of the Theravadin tradition) and commentaries and other works, though chapter two does this far more than the later chapters, where anything beyond the Tripitaka is often neglected. This is followed by a discussion of some Christian theological approaches, and then some discussion on how this may be understood today in a Thai context.

Throughout, the author is keen to suggest that Christians can learn something from Buddhists, and he points to what he sees as the merits of the Buddhist approach. However, any semblance to comparative theology is soon lost. For instance, in chapter two having noted that while some traditional Christian theology saw suffering as having no place before the fall while Buddhism sees it as intrinsic in the human condition, rather than seeing how a Buddhist position may inform the Christian tradition, Boonyakiat engages in a discussion of various Christian theologies that argue that suffering must have been inherent in the prelapsarian condition. As such, any learning takes place is purely an intra-Christian and biblically informed conversation. Again, in chapter four, while having noted some aspects of similarity between the eightfold path and Christian teachings (137–38), the author quickly points out that any assumptions about “the work of the Spirit in other religions must be consistent with the persons and work of the Father and Jesus Christ” (138). This is within a context where we get frequent warnings from the author that “Buddhism and Christianity ultimately offer different solutions to the problem of evil” (137). Though the author notes that “they do *not totally* oppose one another” (156, italics in original). Indeed, the author is clear that what these Buddhist teachings offer is only the ability to “avert preventable suffering to a certain degree” which is directly contrasted with “the Triune God” who “can bring suffering to a complete extinction” (157). Hence a clear hierarchical relationship is set up in the text, where Buddhism is judged against what the author avers to be Christian truth.

The book is certainly not without its merits. It offers a far more nuanced and detailed reading of basic Buddhist teachings than you will get in many introductions to Buddhism, which often reduce this aspect of Buddhism to a flat statement of four basic principles. Yet it is not a full

statement. For instance, the author puts much emphasis on Buddhist detachment and seems to suggest it is a fleeing from the world, so neglecting the role that such things as *metta* (loving kindness) and the wider context of the four Brahma Viharas (loving-kindness [Pali: *metta*]; compassion [*karuna*]; sympathetic joy [*mudita*]; and, equanimity [*upekkha*]) play within this system. This helps set up an apologetic contrast between the two traditions. Also praiseworthy is the author's strong engagement with Asian theologians, especially the Japanese pair of Kazoh Kitamori and Kosuke Koyama, while Latin American liberation theology is also invoked and deployed. Yet this again points to the uneven balance of the book, because in the outlining of primarily only early texts in Buddhism to explain its tents, Boonyakiat allows himself full reign to invoke a global range of Christian theologians and texts spanning the centuries. So, for instance, he deploys Christian liberation theology to show a richness and depth to Christian engagement with suffering, but cites no Buddhist liberation theologians. He also feels free to discuss God's suffering as part of his argument, especially citing here Kitamori alongside Moltmann, but neglects that this puts him outside the historical tradition if judged against Chalcedonian orthodoxy, which set an anathema against anyone who claimed that God suffered. Yet while he does not invoke it this Chalcedonian tradition is integral to his trinitarian claims. This is then far from the careful and nuanced reading of traditions we see in Clooney's work, but a chosen set of ideas seemingly to advance apologetic ends, in which Christianity is allowed to deploy any resources that advances its cause, but a limited reading of Buddhism is offered.

In conclusion, this book will not so much appeal to contemporary students of comparative theology so much as students of Christian mission and apologetics. It, in effect, from a scholarly angle does not add, as it seemed to promise, a non-Western addition into the contemporary development of the new comparative theology, but simply to rehash older apologetic fulfilment theology paradigms. It may be described as old wine in new flasks.

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