

David Thang Moe. *Beyond the Academy: Lived Asian Public Theology of Religions*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2023, xix + 227 pp. Paperback. ISBN 9781666764263.

In *Beyond the Academy*, David Thang Moe offers a bold, timely, and deeply contextual vision for thinking and practising public theology in Asia. Moe's most significant contribution arises not from the heights of academic institutions but from living the faith and witnessing grassroots Christian communities in Myanmar. Moe argues for a "lived Asian public theology of religions" that takes seriously the realities of religious pluralism, mass poverty, and ethnic conflict. Moe combines ethnographic research, theological reflection, and contextual analysis to present a synthetic methodology that bridges the gap between academic theology and the daily practices of ordinary grassroots believers.

1. Overview

The central thesis of *Beyond the Academy* is that public theology, particularly in Asia, must shift from being a top-down academic approach to a bottom-up dialogue that engages with the lived experiences of grassroots Christians. Moe critiques the dominant models of Asian public theology, particularly those associated with theologians like Aloysius Pieris and Felix Wilfred, for being insufficient to incorporate grassroots voices and overstating political liberation at the expense of spiritual dimensions of faith. Moe proposes a "new triple dialogue" as the methodological core of his project, which includes:

- An intra-Christian dialogue between the academy and the grassroots;
- An interreligious dialogue between Christians and practitioners of other religions (especially Buddhists); and
- A glocal dialogue between Asian and non-Asian theologians.

Each of the five chapters builds upon this overarching aim. Chapter one outlines "unhappy gaps" between the academy and the church, showing how public theology often bypasses the voices of those on the margins.

Chapter two outlines the motivations and methodologies for engaging grassroots communities. Chapter three engages with an ethnographic account of lived Christian witnesses in Myanmar. Chapter four revisits the contributions of key Asian theologians, critiquing their shortcomings and highlighting the potential of grassroots-centred theology. Finally, chapter five synthesizes academic and grassroots perspectives, offering a model for lived public theology that is both contextual and dialogical.

2. Key Themes

2.1. Theology from Below

At the heart of Moe's project is a commitment to "first theology" (*theologia prima*), the idea that theology does not begin with academic discourse but with the worship, prayer, suffering, and lived faith of ordinary Christians. Furthermore, Moe acknowledges the limitations of the grassroots and refuses to romanticise them, but insists they provide valuable insight into the nature of faith and public life. He critiques theologians who merely speak on behalf of the oppressed without incorporating their actual voices, arguing instead that theology must begin "from the ground up."

This theme is especially highlighted in chapter three, where Moe recounts how grassroots Christians in Myanmar engage in practices of preaching, worship, and prayer that embody their theological commitments. Moe observes how their theology of salvation emphasises themes such as Christus Victor and the priestly work of Christ, which are often overlooked in academic theological discourse but deeply meaningful in contexts of spiritual warfare and political oppression.

2.2. Critique of Top-Down Public Theology

Moe offers a penetrating critique of the way public theology in both Western and Asian contexts. Drawing on Miroslav Volf's observation that academic theology has "lost its voice" in public discourse, Moe highlights how many Asian public theologians, such as Pieris and Wilfred, fail to engage with grassroots communities and instead speak within narrow academic circles. Moe argues that such theology often pays scant attention to spiritual realities, by excessively focusing on structural sin, and ignoring the lived faith of those on the margins.

However, Moe's critique is also constructive. He offers a pathway forward through the "new triple dialogue" that opens public theology to a broader array of voices and experiences. By integrating social science methods, particularly ethnography, Moe grounds his theology in real-life contexts, enabling a theology that is both prophetic and participatory.

2.3. The Myanmar Context and Religious Nationalism

While Moe's vision is pan-Asian in scope, it is firmly rooted in the particular context of his home country. The book's fourth chapter provides a sobering account of Buddhist nationalism and the ethnic discrimination faced by minority Christians in Myanmar. Moe draws on political science and sociology to explain the rise of Burman-Buddhist dominance and its impact on Chin, Karen, and Kachin Christian communities. He critiques the ideology of "Burmanization" and the slogan "to be a Burman is to be Buddhist," demonstrating how such narratives marginalize non-Buddhists and fuel ongoing conflict in the region.

In this context, Moe's vision of public theology takes on a deeply urgent and pastoral dimension. It is not a luxury of the academy but a life-line for communities struggling to make sense of their suffering and to articulate as well as express their faith in an environment that is oppressive and hostile to their growth.

2.4. A Synthetic and Dialogical Methodology

Moe's synthetic methodology, bringing together academic theology, ethnographic research, and grassroots voices, is the book's greatest strength and innovation. He positions himself as a "theologian of the bridge," seeking to reconcile the concerns of scholars with the lived realities of believers. His proposal for a "new triple dialogue" is especially noteworthy for its inclusivity, contextual nuance, without neglecting the church's place in the wider world.

Unlike previous models that centre interreligious dialogue in academia, Moe insists on the inclusion of "little traditions" and ordinary practitioners. He also calls for glocal dialogue that bridges the global body of Christ, engaging both Majority World and Western theologians in mutual learning. This methodological breadth makes the book relevant beyond Myanmar (and as the title suggests, beyond the academy) offering a blueprint for theological engagement in other postcolonial and pluralistic contexts.

3. Evaluation

3.1. Strengths

Beyond the Academy is a groundbreaking and moving work. One of its greatest strengths is its authentic voice. Moe writes not just as an observer but as an insider, a participant from the grassroots who has lived through the traumas of ethnic conflict and spiritual oppression and now brings these experiences into conversation with the academy. His dual identity as a grassroots insider and Yale-trained academic gives the book both credibility and emotional depth. Having grown up in Indonesia during Suharto's regime in the 1980s and 1990s, the writer resonated deeply with many of the struggles Moe outlines. While the context in Indonesia was, in many ways, different from that of Myanmar, the themes of political repression, ethnic tension, and the resilience of grassroots faith communities feel strikingly familiar.

The book is also commendable for its clear structure and logical progression. Each chapter builds on the last, culminating in a synthesis that feels both intellectually rigorous, contextually relevant, and spiritually grounded. Moe's writing is clear and passionate, balancing scholarly critique with deep pastoral concern.

Moreover, the book challenges readers in the West to consider broadening their theological categories. Moe's emphasis on spiritual powers, personal sin, and holistic salvation offers a corrective to the overly political and sometimes secularised versions of liberation theology found in Western academia.

3.2. Criticisms

While the book is rich in insight, there are a few areas where it could be strengthened. First, while Moe mentions the limitations of grassroots theology, it might be worth a more detailed exploration of potential pitfalls, for example the danger of theological syncretism, prosperity gospel distortions, or anti-intellectualism, which are commonly known in these contexts. Engaging these concerns directly would strengthen his argument by anticipating and addressing potential critiques.

Second, the synthetic methodology, while commendable, occasionally feels more aspirational than fully realised. The book gestures toward a mutual enrichment between academic and grassroots theology, but the

integration could be more developed. For example, while Moe reports on grassroots practices and critiques academic theology, a deeper analytical synthesis and a real-life case study where this is demonstrated, albeit in early stages, would further ground his proposal.

Finally, while this may be beyond the scope of Moe's work, it would be valuable to explore how grassroots theology takes shape within Myanmar ethnic churches in the diaspora (particularly in the United States, where Moe now resides). The writer's own experience ministering among Indonesian Christians in Australia shows that past oppression continues to influence their theology and community practices abroad. Tracing how lived public theology is recontextualized in these diaspora communities could offer a rich avenue for further research and reflection.

4. Conclusion

Beyond the Academy is a vital contribution to public theology, contextual theology, and World Christianity. It calls for theologians, pastors, and scholars to reimagine the sources and methods of theological reflection, to listen deeply to the voices of those on the margins, and to engage the real challenges of life in postcolonial, pluralistic societies. David Thang Moe's work is courageous, thoughtful, and prophetic, a clarion call to theologians everywhere to move beyond the academy and into the lives of those they serve.

For readers seeking a theology that is not only relevant but responsive, one that emerges from the struggles, prayers, and hopes of ordinary believers, *Beyond the Academy* is essential reading.

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