

Introduction

THIS BOOK IS DESIGNED TO BRING THE GREAT REFORMER MARTIN LUTHER into dialogue with Asian theology and spirituality, especially that of Mahayana Buddhism. A common basis for interreligious dialogue between Luther and Buddhism lies in the interpretation of *dukkha* (suffering), in which an attempt is made to construct a theological aesthetics of divine suffering and human suffering. Therefore, it is of special significance to contextualize Luther's theological insights and their ecumenical repercussions in an encounter with other traditions. In recent ecumenical conversation, Luther is examined in depth as we see him in his theological struggle and project. In this ecumenical dialogue we perceive well how Luther's thought was grounded in a dimension of human liberative practice and spiritual insights that has been neglected in its authentic sense throughout the history of Lutheranism. In Lutheran-Orthodox dialogue, Luther is seen as the theologian offering us a spirituality of *theosis* from the real aspect of the indwelling Christ present in faith. Moreover, liberation theology has discovered that Luther is conceived as a theologian of solidarity with those who stand for justice and liberation. However, it is not easy to see Luther as the one recognizing and affirming otherness in a postmodern, pluralistic religious context. Of course, there is a good reason for that, because Luther did not live in a world characterized by postmodernity or the contemporary awareness of religious pluralism. In addition, it is noteworthy that Luther was a man of his time, with limitations, weaknesses, and mistakes. Therefore, it would be a perilous project to transplant Luther out of his context for a cross-cultural reading. These truths notwithstanding, Luther may be reread as an important theologian in an interreligious context due to his deep insight into the suffering of God, which has been suppressed in the Christian tradition under the excessive influence of Greek philosophy.

According to John B. Cobb Jr., Luther's insight into the discovery of the Bible and his teaching of grace in particular serve as an inspiration for setting Western theology free from its bondage to Greek formulations

regarding Christian beliefs, system, and doctrine. Understood this way, Luther may encourage Christianity to undertake an encounter with otherness by listening to the word of God openly and honestly in our pluralistic context.¹ That being the case, it is still not an easy task to understand, update, and apply Luther's thought in regard to the complex situation of the Asian world and its spirituality. Some of the world's most ancient cultures and sources of religion remain alive in Asia and are still influential. The substance of culture is unthinkable without its religious dimension, especially in Asian societies. Tillich's phrase, "religion is the substance of culture, culture is the form of religion," is profoundly true of Asia.²

Buddhist-Christian dialogue shows how important the nexus between culture and religion becomes. Doing theology in an Asian context shows us an interpretation of the gospel different from Western theology. In the process of interreligious dialogue Martin Luther was recalled by Protestant scholars like Tillich and Cobb in the interest of mutual understanding and renewal. Comparing the mystic element in Luther's eucharistic thought to the nature-mysticism of Buddhism, Tillich suggested that Luther's sacramental thinking, while generating a kind of nature-mysticism, may find its influence in the later development of Protestant mysticism, such as pietism and the German romantic movement in a secularized form.³ Cobb, as we have already mentioned, notices a striking existential resemblance between the emphasis on the grace of Other-Power in the founder of Pure Land Buddhism in Japan, Shinran, and Luther's teaching of justification by faith alone. However, the issue of suffering and universal compassion may be common between Christianity and Buddhism. In Buddhist-Christian dialogue, it is worthwhile to articulate the dimension of suffering coupled with a spirituality of self-emptiness and compassion and praxis for liberation. This aspect is what this book will address in actualizing Luther's understanding of divine suffering in relation to a Buddhist idea of *dukkha*.

The notion of *dukkha* focuses Asian experience in conscious dialogue with the theology of Martin Luther and his ecumenical followers. A theological aesthetics of divine *dukkha* characterizes Asian confessional theology in regard to creation and redemption as well as in recognition of the beauty of otherness. A Latin American liberation theology's call

1. Cobb, *Transforming Christianity and the World*, 139.

2. Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 42.

3. Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions*, 44.

for a preferential option for the poor would be insufficient in the Asian church and theology, unless it takes into account the wisdom of other religious ways and a liberative dimension of self-emptying spirituality. What shapes my motivation for running into a theological aesthetics arises out of my pastoral experience of the Korean American Lutheran church in Orinda, California. Along the way of a multicultural ministry of the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) I have been engaged in psychological pain, cultural gaps, pessimism, and socio-economic disturbances among my congregation. My pastoral experience has involved a struggle with and compassion for the community of the different, innocent, and suffering. My experience with people in *dukkha* encourages me to pay renewed attention to a feasibility of the aesthetics of the *theologia crucis* as a way of understanding, recognizing, and affirming God's strange but mysterious voice of beauty coming from people of other faiths. A theological aesthetics of divine *dukkha* calls for a prophetic *diakonia* and the need for creative inculturation and contextualization of the insights of Martin Luther in relation to the beauty of otherness. An experience of God's strange beauty in *dukkha* is articulated and explored in this study of Luther and his ecumenical development from an interreligious perspective. The beauty of God's being in trinitarian fellowship, which focuses on the incarnation, life, ministry, and death on the cross of Jesus Christ, expresses from the start the heart of the wounded Trinity. The question "what moves the human heart?"⁴ is answered by God's universal compassion and mercy for all living, sentient creatures on the basis of God's suffering love. This comes from Luther's *theologia crucis*. In other words, God's beauty originates with a compassion for divine others as well as the world. Jesus Christ, the crucified and resurrected One, forms an aesthetic model of beauty, suffering, and glory. This aspect leads to a participation in divine life through the liturgy of the word and sacrament, because "whoever sees me sees the Father" (John 14:9). Liturgy, i.e., *Leit-ourgos*, which means the work of the people, is the place where people of God hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, receive the grace of forgiveness of sin, praise the glory of God, and finally are encouraged to become faithful disciples following Jesus' self-emptying life in service of the kingdom of God.

4. García-Rivera, *Community of the Beautiful*, 9. This book provides a theological aesthetics for liberation theology's move toward a balance between a theology of liberation and inculturation and popular religion.

A theology of the cross becomes a premise for the theology of glory, in so doing crossing infinite distance between God and creatures toward God's universal reconciliation with and compassion for the world. *Keine Weltlosigkeit Gottes* (There is no God without world) is what Martin Luther might bear witness to throughout his whole theological program and personal struggle. The Lutheran sense of the rose is well expressed by "a black cross in the midst of a heart surrounded by white roses." For Luther, "the Christian's heart walks upon roses when it stands beneath the cross."⁵ In a letter to Lazarus Spengler (1530) Luther articulates his sense of aesthetics toward the theology of the cross in the following way: ". . . such a heart should stand in the midst of a white rose, to show that faith yields joy, comfort, and peace. . . . Such a rose stands in a field the color of heaven, for such joy in spirit and in faith is a beginning of the heavenly joy which is to be: now already comprehended within, held through hope, but not yet manifest."⁶

Given this fact, the Reformation principle of *sola fides*, *sola Scriptura*, and *sola gratia* can recognize itself in following *solus Christus* in this world. According to Hegel, a philosophical definition of beauty as the sensuous semblance of the idea presupposes the concept of the idea as the concept of absolute spirit. In this regard, "beauty . . . is no mere formula reducible to subjective functions of intuition; rather, beauty's fundament is to be sought in the object."⁷ Hegel's aesthetic principle "Truth is concrete" becomes meaningful for a theological aesthetics focused on divine suffering in a *theologia crucis*. For Hegel "both the estrangement and reconciliation" coexist with "having in mind Christ's death upon the cross." "Reason is a rose within the cross of the present," because "the agony of the estrangement and reconciliation have already taken place within history in the suffering God."⁸

Hegel's reflection on the death of God is related to a Lutheran hymn of 1641 in which there is the phrase "God himself is dead." This phrase, according to Hegel, reflects "an awareness that the human, the finite, the fragile, the weak, the negative are themselves a moment of the divine, that

5. Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, 19.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 352.

8. Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, 17.

they are with God himself . . . This involves the highest idea of spirit.”⁹ In Hegel’s view, the death of God has an essential meaning with respect to the reconciliation between the infinite and finite. Hegel finds an idea of negation in God’s being, which constitutes a critical moment in Hegel’s dialectical framework.

However, the dilemma of theological aesthetics raises the question to what extent a language of suffering and a language of beauty can be mediated reciprocally in one another. If aesthetic theory forms itself as a way of expressing “the unconscious, mimetically written history of human suffering,” a theological aesthetics of *dukkha* appears as a protest against reason’s conspiracy and compulsion toward all-encompassing dominion and against a natural scientific optimism of social order and ecological stability without a concern for the victims and the others.¹⁰ If a theory of beauty is grounded in expression of the truth of lived experience, a theory of truth can no longer be metaphysical, or transcendental. Rather, it describes and represents a reality of human life.¹¹ The aesthetical dimension in Luther’s thought will be an objective of this book, in which justification, the *theologia crucis*, the Trinity, and Eucharistic theology will encounter the wisdom of Buddhist spirituality.

Chapter 1 describes Martin Luther in light of religious pluralism with respect to his ecumenical dialogue. A complex situation of doing theology in a postmodern context is introduced and discussed in terms of revisiting and rethinking Buddhist-Christian dialogue. In chapter 2, I deal with the uniqueness of Luther’s life and theology in tracing his Reformation principle and his controversies. Luther’s theology cannot be adequately understood apart from his spiritual and social biography. His understanding of justification, the *theologia crucis*, and some controversial debates are dealt with in modern Luther scholars’ investigations. Characterization of Luther’s theology will be made with respect to its ecumenical significance for today. Chapter 3 presents how the teaching of justification is debated in an ecumenical context today. After that we will attempt to discern Luther’s significance with an Asian focus concerning his concept of justification in relation to the theology of the cross and the doctrine of two kingdoms.

9. Hegel, *Hegel Reader*, 497f.

10. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, xiii.

11. Cf. Auerbach, *Mimesis*.

In chapter 4 I talk about Luther's theology of the cross in an ecumenical light. Luther's *theologia crucis* grows in prominence especially in Karl Barth and Jürgen Moltmann in a European context, and by Kazoh Kitamori in Japan, and finally in the liberation theology of Latin America. Furthermore, recent talk about the *theologia crucis* in relation to the cosmic Christ will show its relatedness to the Buddhist universal teaching of salvation. This chapter will discuss the significance of the theology of the cross in an interreligious context. Chapter 5 is an attempt to deepen and actualize an Asian trinitarian theology of Divine *dukkha* in dialogue with Luther and modern theologians. The traditional understanding of the humanity of Christ is seen complementarily in light of a Buddhist notion of cosmic suffering (*dukkha*). Trinity and *Sunyata* will be juxtaposed for reconstructing an Asian understanding of the Trinity. In chapter 6 we discuss Luther's eucharistic theology in relation to a Confucian spirituality of ancestral rites. The Western traditional debate about the Eucharist is seen by and large on the basis of spatial dimensions. When eucharistic theology meets Asian spirituality, it needs to be extended to include the time dimension in an eschatological sense. Here is the place where an Asian understanding of ancestors' rites would come to terms with the time dimension of the Eucharist, in which the coming Christ will be the cosmic Lord over all human beings in light of his descent into hell. Given this fact, Luther's language of Jesus' descent to hell will be compared to a Buddhist spirituality of universal compassion. An Asian reading of the story of Lot's wife will meet the Buddhist story of the woman *Janjanup*. A fusion of horizons with an Asian ecclesiology of the other will emerge.

In chapter 7 Luther and Karl Barth are brought into Buddhist-Christian encounter. Karl Barth is a follower of Luther, albeit one with reservations. Luther and Barth have not been fully discussed and integrated into interreligious dialogue. Barth's Japanese disciple, Katsumi Takizawa, responds to Barth's understanding of Japanese Buddhism. We will explore a connection between Karl Barth and religious pluralism. Luther's theological instincts of a cosmic and "universal" dimension will be explored and engaged in a dialogue with the Buddhist notion of *Sunyata*, self-awakening, *Soku*, etc. There will be a focus on three patterns of soteriology in Buddhism with respect to Luther's soteriology. Then I will ask to what extent Luther's idea of justification can converge with and diverge from the soteriology of Buddhism. A dialogue in particular will arise between Luther's justification and a Buddhist concept of justification in Shinran.

In conclusion, Luther and Asian theology will follow the same track, albeit in a different way, in the sense of doxology of God. The kingdom of God in Jesus Christ is not yet realized, but it is on the way. The mystery of the kingdom of God puts Luther and Asian spirituality before the same task of recognizing nature as the creation of God and affirming other religious ways in favor of solidarity with the humiliated and all living creatures *coram Deo et coram Mundi*. It is the theology of creation that entails also a spiritual dimension of doxology, but coming from the *theologia crucis*. In the afterword there will be a discussion of *theologia crucis* and its aesthetics in light of postmodern divinity. God's suffering on the cross revealed Godself as God's great compassion "in, under, and through" all living creatures and highlighted God's preferential option for scapegoats and victims in our postmodern world.

SAMPLE