

**MARTIN LUTHER'S THEOLOGY OF TWO KINGDOMS IN BUDDHIST AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES: TRANSFORMING CONTEMPORARY MYANMAR SOCIETY**, by Pa Yaw, Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2024. 243 pages. \$115.00.

Burma has known neither peace nor prosperity since 1948, when it became independent from Britain, because generation after generation of military tyrants have spoiled and savaged the nation. Its citizens from all races, religions, and languages have painfully suffered the effects of military dictatorship: widespread poverty, extreme political violence, and catastrophic civil war. In the face of persecution and brutality committed by the state through the military, generations of Christians have encountered a critical question of separation between church and state. Using impressive sources, Pa Yaw studies Martin Luther and Dietrich

Bonhoeffer and states that church and state are institutionally separated, but functionally related (4).

Pa Yaw presents an account of structural exclusion and oppression perpetrated and perpetuated by the majority Buddhists in Burma, who have consistently controlled the military, against religious minorities (chapter 1). He, then, meticulously explores Martin Luther's theology of two kingdoms to address the underlying question of separation between church and state against the backdrop of violence and suffering in Burma (chapter 2). He subsequently examines the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was enormously influenced by Martin Luther while resisting the Nazi regime (chapter 3). After unpacking and analyzing the works of Luther and Bonhoeffer, Pa Yaw discusses Buddhist activism and religious collaboration among Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, and Hindus in Burma (chapter 4). Finally, he challenges the Burmese Baptist understanding of total separation between church and state and the absolute submission of the church to the state, saying that God constantly calls upon the church to resist the state if and when it becomes oppressive. It is also his thought that Christians need to work with their Buddhist counterparts to make a better future for every Burmese (chapter 5).

This book is an important contribution to scholarship on Burma. Pa Yaw provides a nuanced account of Burmese Buddhism by underscoring striking episodes of activist monks resisting dictators for freedom and democracy while criticizing nationalist monks stoking the flames of fears and brutalizing minorities. This illustrates the profound contrast between progressive monks representing compassion, love, and peace, and nationalist monks embracing exclusion, hatred, and enmity. And, when he decries xenophobic Buddhists for perpetrating sectarian violence against minorities, Pa Yaw calls on progressive Buddhists and Christians to work together to reimagine and rebuild the nation, stressing the importance of collaboration among religions for the common good. He urges the Burmese from all religions to cherish diversity as an enduring source of strength, not a problem to be solved, to make a better future for every Burmese. A balanced account like this is vital if Burma is to see peace and prosperity in the future.

Pa Yaw, moreover, brings to light the plight of minorities by recounting why and how military tyrants have persecuted Christians and Muslims. People in the West often think of Buddhism as a religion of peace and empathy, embodied by the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh or Aung San Suu Kyi. That is true, but the other side of the story is that Buddhist nationalists, intoxicated with hatred, have maltreated minorities and

subsequently distorted the sacred tenets of Buddhism. Burma is, for instance, a nation of permanent suffering for ethnoreligious minorities, partly because of Buddhist nationalism. This book splendidly provides an insider's perspective.

That Pa Yaw studies Luther in the terrible political context of Burma is notable, given the vital question of separation between church and state facing Burmese Christians. His work on Luther will be helpful for Christians there while practicing their faith in the midst of extreme violence and suffering caused by the military state. When articulating the interaction between church and state, Pa Yaw, with Luther, precisely writes, "Spiritual authorities are charged with the administration of the Word of God and the sacraments, while temporal authorities bear the sword and law in their hands to punish the wicked and protect the good" (64). Pa Yaw also studies Bonhoeffer, who courageously resisted the Nazi regime to the end, with reference to military tyranny in Burma; the situation the Burmese encounter now, as then, is, in many ways, similar to what Bonhoeffer faced more than eighty years ago. Negating the idea of total separation between church and state, Pa Yaw, with Bonhoeffer, states that the lordship of Christ essentially includes "Both church and state" (98). His comprehensive study of Luther and Bonhoeffer in relation to Burma is rich, timely, and relevant; this will enlighten Burmese Christians to rethink and reimagine the relationship between church and state.

Moreover, Pa Yaw accurately argues that the presence of the loathed military in politics has been the root cause of political crisis shattering the nation. General Ne Win, a master dictator, seized power in 1962 and his men have ruled the land ever since; people wonder whether the country owns the military or the military owns the country. As long as the military remains in politics, Burma will never see peace and prosperity. What Pa Yaw argues, after all, is that though nonviolence is the best way to solve problems, it has failed to solve our political crisis in Burma, because our military tyrants stop at nothing to remain in power. Drunk with power, they have slaughtered men, women, and children. Unable to think of being sent back to the dark era of military rule, young people have militarily resisted the present junta after the 2021 coup, demonstrating that nonviolence has failed.

Pa Yaw also articulates the constructive role of Christianity in fortifying the distinct ethnic identities of illiterate upland people against Burmanization. Missionaries created the written scripts and translated the Bible into those languages, subsequently protecting upland races from Burmanization (12). It is a sure thing that students, scholars, pastors,

monks, policymakers, and all readers interested in Burmese studies, public theology, conflict resolution, and Buddhist-Christian relations will read this book for generations to come.

Pum Za Mang  
Displaced Burmese Scholar  
Princeton, NJ