



## RESENSI BUKU

**Samuel, Joshua. *Untouchable Bodies, Resistance, and Liberation: A Comparative Theology of Divine Possessions*. Leiden: Brill, 2020; 276.**

In *Untouchable Bodies, Resistance and Liberation*, Joshua Samuel offers “a comparative theology of liberation” (CTL), which is built upon threefold strategies: people-centered theology, non-othering theology, and comparative liberation theology (see ch. 1). How does CTL work? Samuel compares how the theology, which centers upon the “untouchable bodies” through the concept of divine possessions (as one example) from the Paraiyar Dalits community, either Christians or Hindus, could deliver the message of resistance and reveal liberating praxis to countermeasure the oppression (74).

Then, the untouchable bodies become the theological source from the “people-centered” point of view. From that standpoint, Samuel highlights the importance of the theology of the body or the divine possessions, either from the Hindu’s (see ch. 3-4) or Christian’s Dalit perspectives (see ch. 5-6). One of the examples is how Christians and Hindus (especially the Paraiyar community) describe the body of a human as a “dwelling” place of the divine through its possession. While the possession for the Hindu Dalit means becoming a medium for gods and goddesses (temporary or enduring) through the ceremony or ritual, the Christian Dalit also recognizes the Holy Ghost activities in the human body as a “dwelling place” through sacrament and baptism. A brief note, Samuel uses Pentecostal and Catholic theology for defining the Christian theology of divine possession. Hence, as Samuel has shown, the Dalit’s body’s divine possessions imply two critical messages: resistance (see ch. 7) and liberation (see ch.8).

Before I discuss how Samuel explores the divine possession of the Dalit’s community bodies as the narrative of resistance and liberation, it is important to note how Samuel uses non-othering and comparative liberation theology. By comparing the experience of the Hindu and Christian Dalit communities, Samuel constructs a non-othering theology by acknowledging the intersectionality of the identity of the Paraiyar Dalit community. Moreover, comparing the intersection of Paraiyar Dalit identities

promotes dialogue between Christian and Hindu theology by revisiting the oppression from multi-layered perspectives, such as the experience of oppression, and social-political areas. Also, by promoting the comparison between the two communities from a people-centered standpoint, Samuel demonstrates that liberation theology springs not only from the elites in academia but also from the grassroots. Therefore, as Samuel himself suggests, academics should learn from grassroots movements where the liberating practice is already embedded in their everyday lives (224).

The last important piece is how the divine possessions could deliver a resistance and liberation message? Samuel discusses a hefty, robust answer to this question (see. Ch. 7). One important note is how Samuel outlines that the belief in divine possession gives the Dalit, either the Christian or Hindu, a sense of identity amid the rejection from the community through the caste system in India. Then, affirming the divine possession of God provides the Dalit community strength to resist oppression. As a result, the realm of the divine empowers the body of the Dalit with a liberating power: the divine possesses the Dalit person and pulls them from the evil that positioned them as the outcasts in society. Hence, the divine possession marks ownership of the divine realm, not the oppressor.

Now, I have two main concerns with CTL. Following the divine possession while comparing it with the theology of *kairos* as the climax of the arguments, could it be that CTL can lead to a form of “religious escapism” that “liberates” the adherents to escape oppressive reality? Hence, amid the violence, discrimination, and banality of evil from the “joiner” or the perpetrator (borrowing this term from Hannah Arendt), I am wondering (as an Indonesian who is unbound by the caste system), will the Dalit community take a passive resistance while giving up the active political liberating stance by going into a safe “religious space?”

Next, I believe that cooperation is important to confront the structural evil that binds society. Also, each society has its own “evil-ness.” Then, if embracing liberation theology implies confronting evil(s), is there an “ecumenical” CTL? If the answer is yes, will the Paraiyar Dalit will be a type of comparative theology for other Dalit communities? Also, another problem that arises, methodologically speaking by moving from text into experience-based theology (people-based and non-othering theology), is how to deal with the diversity of other Dalit community experiences?

Despite my two concerns, I highly appreciate Samuel's effort in proposing CTL, at least for two reasons. First, finding a solution for a complex problem from the matrix of oppression requires a holistic approach. Samuel offers a new permutation in

the study of comparative theology, as John Thatamanil argues,<sup>1</sup> through implementing ethnographic studies into comparative theology. Likewise, Samuel, in my opinion, contributes a fresh approach by using a more “complex” multi-layered strategy to address the problem of oppression using theology, anthropology, and history.

Second, I believe that CTL will become a crucial approach for embracing Indonesia’s multireligious and multicultural public space. At least two theological movements respond to the diversity in Indonesian public space with the intertwining contexts above. The first is contextual theology, highlighting the importance of cultural identity in Indonesia. The use of ethnography studies or anthropological insights has become one of the essential sources for this movement. Yet, at the same time, the trend to utilize the comparative theology method in Indonesia is also increasing. Despite comparative theology’s status as an emerging field, even in the USA, names such as A. Bagus Laksana and Hans Abdiel Harmakaputra have become proponents of its movement in Indonesia. So then, seeing CTL from those two theological movements to a certain extent can be a new model on how theologians embrace multicultural and multireligious situations in Indonesia for proposing a more contextual approach to Indonesia.

**Adrianus Yosia**

Sekolah Citra Kasih-Citra Berkat, Indonesia

---

<sup>1</sup> John Thatamanil, “Integrating Vision: Comparative Theology as the Quest for Interreligious Wisdom,” in *Critical Perspectives on Interreligious Education*, eds., Najeeba Syeed and Heidi Hadsell (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 103.