

# Book Review

## ***Challenging Tradition: Innovation in Advanced Theological Education*, eds. Perry Shaw and Havilah Dharamraj. Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2018.**

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### Summary

*Challenging Tradition*, this book's title, indicates that this is not another *traditional* resource on theological education (TE). Rather, it is a thought-provoking volume that evaluates the current trajectory of doctoral studies and suggests creative new methods in TE. *Challenging Tradition* critiques usual ways of pursuing postgraduate-level research in theology and concludes that the Western model is not the only way and may not fit every context.

This book's three sections and twenty-three chapters are woven into a colorful tapestry whose authors are highly esteemed scholars – theologians and leaders, women and men, representing different cultures, languages, backgrounds, writing styles, church traditions, and contexts. For one, the editors, Perry Shaw and Havilah Dharmraj, are, respectively, an Australian educator who has enriched the Middle East with his dedicated ministry in TE for nearly three decades, and an exceptionally creative female Indian scholar.

As the contributors import innovative ideas from their own experiences in TE, one can easily trace “innovation” in three of the book's sections. The first section, “Principles for innovation in advanced theological studies,” considers the wider issues that shape advanced TE. These are primarily philosophical, theological, and contextual. The second section, “Innovative possibilities for the dissertation,” integrates problem-based learning, collaborative research, action research, and contextual ways of knowing in dissertation research. The third section, “Innovative forms of advanced theological studies,” questions whether the typical dissertation method should continue to be the sole form for advanced theological studies and suggests alternatives, such as a portfolio, autoethnography, poetry, and tales and proverbs.

At the end of every chapter, key questions help orient readers and summarize important points.

## Critical Assessment

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This resource is indispensable for students and educators in TE. It examines a significant question: What kind of leaders does TE equip for the church and society? Ashish Chrispal, in tracing his personal journey into TE, helps us to conclude that the church is in dire need of equipped leaders, servants, and teachers in seminaries who can approach the Gospel in different contexts and academic disciplines. These servant-leaders would be individuals who can fill the gap between what is “theological” and what is “educational,” as Chrispal articulates: “My challenge to those of us who are educators is this: let us make theological education both theological and educational; we need theological leaders, not academicians” (18-19). Pursuing advanced theological studies might be one way to train godly, committed leaders to meet the world’s pressing challenges – not only to sharpen one’s skills but, through painful moments (18-19), to develop a spirituality embedded in the dedicated life of a scholar.

Culture and context in relation to TE is another major theme discussed in different parts of the book; Lal Senanayke’s, Perry Shaw’s, and Stephanie Black’s chapters are but a few examples. Context, however, does not always provide what students need concerning theological education. As an Arab doctoral student, I feel the irony of having to pursue my research on a topic that is concerned with the Middle East in a Western context and institute. Stimulating as the experience has been, I mourn the inability to pursue doctoral research in my homeland, Palestine, or in the wider Middle East. This situation has compelled me to opt for an ethnographic methodology that allows me to continue to be grounded in the Middle East by conducting field research there. So I resonate with Samuel Ewell’s chapter on integrating personal experience in theological research (375-392).

Perry Shaw’s chapter on culture, gender, and diversity explores cultural issues in necessary detail. Shaw exposes that “...global higher education in general and theological education in particular has been shaped by empiricist, linear-thinking white Western males for empiricist, linear thinking white Western males” (89). A Western male theological educator who endorses the work of Majority World scholars speaks volumes to a Middle Eastern female researcher like myself. Further, as one who constantly has to familiarize herself with Western educational methods, I found that Shaw’s examples of Richard Nisbett’s research (94-102) revealed a more culturally meaningful approach to education. However, speaking about Majority World scholars, Allan Harkness rightly explains: “They are reluctant to critique, assuming the common usage of ‘critical’ as commenting negatively on the insights of others. Instead they need to learn that critical thinking entails appraising those insights, recognizing strengths and weaknesses in the content and logic, and identifying gaps” (79). We can thank the West for introducing us to this form of critique and requiring it from us; however, this method is only one among many others.

At this point, Evan Hunter's chapter becomes relevant, "Context Conducive to Innovation." Among other things, Hunter addresses attempts to develop Majority World doctoral programmes: "Evangelical seminaries in the Majority World have created new doctoral programs because Western training has been incomplete and at times inadequate to meet the current needs of the church" (35). You may have heard that "necessity is the mother of invention," and in the same vein, Hunter concludes that "necessity has led to innovation" (35). For innovation to happen, a doctoral program should develop theological leaders with the following: a capacity to teach, a capacity to engage with context, a capacity for prophetic engagement, and a capacity to conduct meaningful research (32-34). Adding to Hunter's suggestions, I believe that a typical research PhD program would not necessarily accomplish all of this. I believe that students would benefit from engaging with opportunities beyond their degree to sharpen these capacities.

Bassem Melki and Caleb Hutcherson's chapter discusses incorporating action-research principles in an Arab context. It highlights the pressing need for more faculty with PhDs who can supervise action research projects and promote this methodology. The authors appropriately see this methodology as a "powerful tool for promoting theological integration in life and ministry that seems to lead to needed social change" (248). Given the complexities of the Arab region, their perceptive statement could not be more welcome.

I found Marvin Oxenham's chapter on digital scholarship to be particularly relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic. Oxenham's chapter argues that different ways to do advanced theological studies "might be explored through the changes that are brought by digital technology and in particular the internet" (351). The phrase "quickly changing landscape" could not be more true now. Since March 2020, we have witnessed libraries being forced to close and theological colleges compelled to turn more and more to digital scholarship and its three elements outlined in the chapter (digital, networked, and open). In this context, many academics will be compelled to become "enthusiasts of digital technologies" (351). Perhaps "the digital revolution" is becoming "commonplace, even in our ivory towers of theological education" (352) and will influence how learners and educators proceed.

This collection incentivizes me as an Arab woman to dare to dream of a future where we are not entirely dependent on the West for our academic structures (though we are truly grateful for that so far) – where perhaps in the next decade, we can see a PhD program born in the Middle East, where students may be able to pursue postgraduate degrees with less financial cost, less cost on family life, less cost on personal wellbeing, and less cost on ongoing ministry and mission (80- 83), and, equally important, to be able to write in their "heart" languages (5). As I write this, I think particularly (but not exclusively) of many Arab women who may not be able to travel for postgraduate studies abroad because of cultural restrictions or language inhibitions – but who would be able to access postgraduate education in their contexts. Therefore, embracing innovation in

theological education is not to be feared but celebrated.

As enriching as this book is, I would have liked to have heard more directly from current Majority World doctoral students who have engaged with the process of studying for an advanced degree. That way, the book would not only speak about them but give them an opportunity to assert their own voices.

Overall, Shaw and Dharamraj's resource is an excellent illustration of East and West working harmoniously towards the expansion and refinement of TE.

## **References**

- Nisbett, Richard. *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently...and Why* (New York: Free Press, 2003).
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