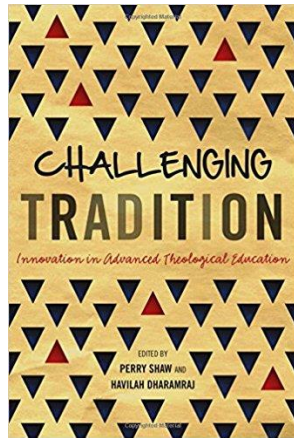


A Review of:

Perry Shaw and Havilah Dharamraj (editors)

Challenging Tradition: Innovation in Advanced Theological Education

(Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Global Library, 2018).



PhDs are an almost universal entrance ticket or apprenticeship pathway into academia. Yet the single dissertation model and its form and methodology is also arguably narrow in its Western Enlightenment assumptions of empiricist, linear-thinking of Western males. *Challenging Tradition* upholds the importance of quality doctoral education, but argues for a broadening of what it might look like, especially for the Majority World.

Perry Shaw is an Australian theological educator who has served in the Middle East since 1990, currently as Professor Education at Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut. Author of *Transforming Theological Education*, he consults and lectures widely on curriculum redesign. Havilah Dharamraj is Academic Dean and Head of Old Testament at South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies in Bangalore, India. She has a research and creative interest in the enjoyment and use of poetic, epic and narrative literature in theology and education. Together they have compiled this volume of twenty-three global theological leaders contributing frameworks and examples for innovative approaches to doctoral studies and dissertations.

The first section outlines the need and principles for innovation in advanced theological studies. Accreditation bodies in the broader tertiary sector are accepting higher degree programs that demonstrate competency without narrowly prescribing a particular form. Theological education can follow these benchmarking trends without compromising quality, and in fact while enhancing relevance. Chapter writers critique problems of disengagement from ministry and local issues, disciplinary siloes, financial and wellbeing costs for students and their families, and

the typical ignorance of cultural factors and lack of collaboration in doctoral study. They point towards more holistic, experiential, communal, multidisciplinary, contextualized, culturally intelligent, locally grounded, emancipatory and “Freirean” directions.

For example, Evan Hunter’s chapter argues that PhDs carry high costs financially and time-wise, and are all too often disconnected from local contextual and church issues. He describes how more Majority World seminaries are developing doctoral programs. They are increasingly giving greater attention to integration and collaboration, cultural differences, and upskilling students for entry into the academic community including capacity for teaching, engaging context, prophetically addressing public issues and meaningfully researching practical issues. Leaders he interviewed have told him “The Western approach is that you write for the scholarship, while ... the African approach ... wants to see how the community will benefit from your research” (p22). Hunter argues for focusing not on developing people as scholars but as theological leaders.

The second section presents innovative possibilities for the dissertation. Different chapters explore possibilities for and case studies of use of problem-based learning, action research, joint and collaborative approaches, utilisation of orality, culturally appropriate hermeneutics and learning from those on the margins, and greater integration (interdisciplinary, embracing sacred and “secular”, and theory and practice). The most interesting chapter for this reviewer, however, was Dharamraj’s treatment of comparative literature studies. She appealed for theological leaders to bring local literature, classical and contemporary, text and digital media (and the arts), into dialogue with Scripture. This is especially critical in pluralistic contexts, and in a world of cyberspace and its whole new world of meaning-making.

The third section explores innovative forms of advanced theological studies other than dissertations which might better serve local contextual needs. These alternative

forms of scholarship often require more engagement of text and context, and certainly more creativity: portfolios, digital scholarship, autoethnography or “doing theology from the middle”, and some beautiful examples of theological reflection on story, proverb and poetry.

My favourite chapter in this final section was Xiaoli Yang’s reflection on how she refreshingly finds God and her self in poetry, and how her PhD compared Chinese poetry with Jesus in Luke, and what it showed about a post-Mao search for purpose. She queries insightfully: “Why must theological reflection be cognitive and scientific, rather than poetic and imaginative, which can also reflect the all-encompassing reality of God? ... Holistic theological training need to involve not just a cognitive plane, but also hands and hearts, not just spoken words, but also feelings and experiences. May we never lose our wonder and awe at the world around us, and never forget the poetic treasure in the human heart.” (p441) She illustrates how a poetic epistemological lens can open the mind and heart to truth and beauty with one of her own poems (pp. 441f, from *Imagine*, eds. Janette Fernando and Maree Silver, Montrose: Poetica Christi, 2016, 16):

Theology

systemizes our thoughts
of the eternal mass
into categories

creates words of
paradox and abstraction
and labels them
in the safe box of our distractions

we think
the epistemology of God

and God winks.

Challenging Tradition clearly resonates with the aims and methodologies of research in practical theology with its attentiveness to experience, context and real-world application. Across all disciplines it is an outstanding resource full of challenging concepts and examples for broadening doctoral research possibilities. Written primarily for Majority World institutions, it is thought-provoking and challenging for those of us from the Western (or Minority) World as well. It belongs on the desk of doctoral research deans, supervisors and candidates, especially those with the courage to re-envision theological education research training in out-of-the-box directions.

About the Reviewer

Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw,
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