

# Challenging Tradition

## Innovation in Advanced Theological Education

Edited by

Perry Shaw and Havilah Dharamraj

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# Ethnohermeneutics and Advanced Theological Studies: Towards Culturally Appropriate Methodologies for Doctoral Programs

Larry Caldwell

## Introduction: Why Ethnohermeneutics?

"If Jesus or Paul were in my hermeneutics class, they would have failed!"

This sentence uttered by my seminary professor startled me. I was a first-year seminary student sitting in my first course on Bible interpretation. For the past several weeks we had been examining many of the grammatical-historical techniques considered necessary for good Bible interpretation. With a bit of trepidation I raised my hand to ask the esteemed professor a question. "Sir," I said, "this is all good material that we're learning here. But I'm wondering why Jesus and Paul didn't use these grammatical-historical techniques when they interpreted the Old Testament. They just seemed to pull verses totally out of context and use them for their own purposes. What do you think of their methodology?"

And thus my professor's reply that began this chapter. Of course, he said this half-jokingly, and everyone in the class laughed. But his answer got me to thinking: "If the Son of God would have failed your hermeneutics class, whose fault would it be?" I laughed along with the others, but today I laugh no longer.

The reply of my professor put me on a quest that has lasted almost forty years now: What are the best ways to interpret the Bible, especially ways that are culturally appropriate? I found that both Jesus and Paul weren't just pulling verses out of context; rather they were using a culturally appropriate first-century hermeneutical technique known as *midrash*.<sup>1</sup> *Midrash* "actualizes" the text; in other words it makes the Old Testament text come alive for, in this case, their New Testament audiences. Both Jesus and Paul were experts in this hermeneutical technique, as well as in other hermeneutical techniques that were a part of their first-century hermeneutical milieu.

And this is precisely what ethnohermeneutics is all about: looking for and using hermeneutical methods that are already a part of the culture, rather than importing predominantly Western methods like the ones that I was learning in that seminary classroom. Here's my definition of ethnohermeneutics:<sup>2</sup>

Bible interpretation done in cross-cultural, multi-cultural and multi-generational contexts that, whenever possible, uses culturally appropriate dynamic hermeneutical methods already in place in the culture; the primary goal being to interpret the Bible, as well as to communicate the truths of the Bible, in ways that will be best understood from within the worldview of the receptor culture.

In a nutshell, ethnohermeneutics empowers individuals to use their own dynamic culturally appropriate hermeneutical methods as they approach the

Bible. At the same time, ethnohermeneutics places a high priority on making the results of this approach understandable to the local people.

So what does the discipline of ethnohermeneutics have to do with questions about new ways of doing advanced theological studies? Precisely the fact that my professor's attitude – in regards to the supposedly substandard hermeneutical techniques of Jesus and Paul – is the same attitude that many seminary and graduate school professors have today in regards to the best methodologies to follow in order to obtain an advanced theological degree. Though the subject matter is different, the logic is the same. It goes something like this:

If a Majority World student is in my doctoral program they will fail if they do not follow accepted Minority World methods that ultimately produce a written dissertation.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, it is basically a case of "doing it my way" (i.e. a typical doctoral dissertation arrived at through scrupulously following standard Minority World methods), "or not doing it at all" (i.e. your Majority World culturally appropriate ways of researching and expressing doctoral-level expertise are not allowable).<sup>4</sup> As with ethnohermeneutics so, too, with culturally appropriate ways to demonstrate advanced theological expertise. We today who are involved in the training of doctoral candidates in advanced theological studies need to look at alternatives to the way we do doctoral education.<sup>5</sup> This will include looking at both culturally appropriate methodologies and culturally appropriate demonstrations of doctoral-level expertise, "actualized"

1. For a more in-depth analysis of the apostle Paul's hermeneutical methods, particularly *midrash*, see Larry W. Caldwell, "Reconsidering Our Biblical Roots: Bible Interpretation, the Apostle Paul and Mission Today," Parts 1 and 2, *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 29, nos. 2–3 (2012): 91–100 and 113–121.

2. For more information on the discipline of ethnohermeneutics see, for example, Larry W. Caldwell, "Towards the New Discipline of Ethnohermeneutics: Questioning the Relevancy of Western Hermeneutical Methods in the Asian Context," *Journal of Asian Mission* 1, no. 1 (1999): 21–43; and "Towards an Ethnohermeneutical Model for a Lowland Filipino Context," *Journal of Asian Mission* 7, no. 2 (2005): 169–193.

3. I am following the nomenclature used by Perry Shaw elsewhere in this book. The term "Minority World" is used instead of "the West" or the "Western world," while the term "Majority World" is used instead of "the non-West" or the "non-Western world." It is time that scholars, especially Western scholars, recognized the realities of our twenty-first-century world.

4. Here in this chapter I am speaking especially for Majority World students enrolled in our Minority World seminaries and graduate schools. However, what I write here advocating for more flexibility in the research and dissertation models applies equally to all Minority and Majority graduate students studying in both Minority and Majority World seminaries and graduate schools worldwide.

5. This is increasingly important as more and more Majority World theological schools begin offering their own doctoral programs; see, for example, Evan Hunter, "A Tectonic Shift: The Rapid Rise of PhD Programs at Evangelical Theological Schools in the Majority World," *InSights Journal for Global Theological Education* 1, no. 2 (2016): 41–60.

methodologies and demonstrations that will make such academic work come alive for both church-based and secular audiences.

To that end the remainder of this chapter will explore the possibilities of using Majority World culturally appropriate demonstrations of advanced theological studies and doctoral-level expertise through the grid of ethnohermeneutics.<sup>6</sup> Part 1 will frame the discussion through asking the question, “Why Culturally Appropriate Methodologies?” Part 2 will continue the discussion by drawing upon ethnohermeneutics for possible culturally appropriate strategies, culminating in a “Culturally Appropriate Strategies for Doctoral Programs” scale. Part 3 will look at four examples that illustrate how culturally appropriate strategies might be carried out in advanced theological studies. Finally, the chapter will conclude with five recommendations towards culturally appropriate methodologies in advanced theological studies.

### Part 1: Why Culturally Appropriate Methodologies?

The short answer to “Why culturally appropriate methodologies?” is easy: because using culturally appropriate hermeneutical methodologies, coupled with receptor-oriented demonstrations of doctoral-level expertise, will help ensure that the final doctoral product is both relevant and read (or listened to, or watched, or participated in, and so on).

The long answer is more difficult. We look for culturally appropriate advanced degree methodologies because if we do not do so we will continue the long line of colonialist thinking that has plagued graduate-level education for at least the last century: the hegemony of mainly white male scholars and what they deemed to be proper advanced theological education. Most of us have probably never thought about the possibility that our understandings of advanced theological studies are rooted in issues of racism and colonization. However, this reality must be squarely faced before any talk of culturally appropriate methodologies can move forward.

Elsewhere I have written at length about colonization in relationship to Asian theological education, especially in regards to curriculum relevance

6. The discussion in this chapter will primarily be in regards to doctoral programs, but the analysis applies to master's level programs as well.

and to the dismissing of local ways of teaching and learning.<sup>7</sup> In brief, recent ethnographic research has come to label the influence of colonization under the category of “authoritative knowledge.” This categorization shows how the colonizers came to other cultures with what they considered to be authoritative knowledge: knowledge that was seen by the colonizers as superior to any knowledge found at the local level. In the case of advanced theological education this came to mean a “correct” or “standard” way to both do research and demonstrate an expertise in that knowledge. Eventually, those who were colonized, including graduates of Western-oriented seminaries and graduate programs, eventually took on as authoritative a certain way of thinking or knowing that was foreign to their particular culture.

Anthropologist Brigitte Jordan expands upon this colonization process:

... frequently one kind of knowledge gains ascendance and legitimacy. A consequence of the legitimization of one kind of knowing as authoritative is the devaluation, often the dismissal, of all other kinds of knowing . . . The constitution of authoritative knowledge is an ongoing social process that both builds and reflects power relationships within a community of practice. It does this in such a way that all participants come to see the current social order as a natural order, that is, the way things (obviously) are.<sup>8</sup>

Jordan's words concerning the dismissal “of all other kinds of knowing” are particularly relevant to doctoral-level education. The norms of Minority World authoritative knowledge have not allowed us, either as Majority or Minority World scholars, to value the other kinds of knowing that we have mostly categorically dismissed. Minority World scholars, as the colonizers, have not even thought of this possibility; Majority World scholars, as the colonized, have oftentimes forgotten the relevancy of their own culture's learning and knowing

7. See Larry W. Caldwell, “How Asian Is Asian Theological Education?” in *Tending the Seedbeds: Educational Perspectives on Theological Education in Asia*, ed. Allan Harkness (Quezon City: Asia Theological Association, 2010), 23–45.

8. Brigitte Jordan, “Authoritative Knowledge and Its Construction,” in *Childbirth and Authoritative Knowledge*, ed. Robbie E. Davis-Floyd and Carolyn F. Sargent (Berkeley: University of California, 1997), 56.

styles. Indigenous anthropologist Linda Tuhiwai Smith calls this “establishing the positional superiority of western knowledge.”<sup>9</sup>

As a result, both Minority and Majority World scholars must re-examine the validity of other ways of knowing and see how these other ways might be better incorporated into doctoral-level programs. This will give all of us more of an awareness of the transcultural perspective of education. As educational anthropologist George D. Spindler notes: “a transcultural perspective on education is essential, for education is a cultural process and occurs in a social context. Without attention to cultural difference and the way education serves those differences, we have no way of achieving perspective on our own culture and the way our educational system serves it or of building a comprehensive picture of education as affected by culture.”<sup>10</sup> What it all really comes down to is recognizing that our traditional ways of doing advanced theological studies have originated from positions of power, power of the minority over the majority. In this regard I’m reminded of the African proverb: “Until the lion learns how to write, every story will glorify the hunter.”

While in the past we have been largely ignorant of this power differential, today we have no excuse. As Spindler says, “a transcultural perspective of education is essential.” Thus, as we address the issue of culturally appropriate strategies, we do well to keep these past colonization and power issues in mind.

So, if we are going to equip both Minority and Majority World students to use more culturally appropriate advanced degree methodologies, what might this look like? To that we turn next.

## Part 2: Culturally Appropriate Strategies for Doctoral Programs

Elsewhere I have argued – in relationship to the overall ethnohermeneutical Bible interpretation process – for the need to exegete at length *both* the biblical text as well as the cultural context in which that text is to be interpreted and

applied.<sup>11</sup> In that article I devised a gradation scale of minimal, mid-level, and maximal strategies specific to both the context of the biblical text and the interpreter’s particular cultural context.<sup>12</sup> In like manner, I would like to propose a similar gradation scale of culturally appropriate strategies especially for doctoral-level research. The purpose of the “Culturally Appropriate Strategies for Doctoral Programs” scale is twofold. First, as an evaluative template, the scale can be used to assist schools in assessing where they are at present in terms of culturally appropriate strategies. Second, the scale can be used to challenge schools to work step-by-step towards maximal levels.

This scale is designed primarily for Majority World doctoral students but it has implications for the doctoral programs of Minority World students as well. The scale is suggested here merely as a starting point in the discussion of culturally appropriate doctoral-level strategies; some Minority and Majority schools have already made some progress in these strategies. Furthermore, the scale assumes that both Majority and Minority World doctoral students will be thoroughly trained in appropriate, culturally neutral, Minority World academic methods that are part and parcel of the established norms and procedures of the particular academic discipline.<sup>13</sup> The scale is shown in figure 15.1.

9. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed. (London/New York: Zed Books, 2012), 62.

10. George D. Spindler, *Education and Cultural Process: Anthropological Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Long Grove: Waveland, 1997), 272.

11. See Larry W. Caldwell, “Interpreting the Bible *With* the Poor,” in *Social Engagement: The Challenge of the Social in Missiological Education*, APM Association of Professors of Mission (Wilmore: First Fruits, 2013), 165–190. For a practical application of these ethnohermeneutical principles, see Larry W. Caldwell, *Doing Bible Interpretation! Making the Bible Come Alive for Yourself and Your People* (Sioux Falls: Lazy Oaks, 2016).

12. Caldwell, “Interpreting the Bible *With* the Poor,” 177–183.

13. By this I mean training in basic research methods, how to compile, analyse, and interpret data, how to demonstrate a unique contribution to the discipline, and so on.

**Minimal culturally appropriate doctoral strategies:**

1. Accepting the legitimacy of the student's specific culture.
2. Recognizing that the student is an expert of his/her own specific culture.
3. Forming doctoral committees made up of both majority and minority world advisers.

**Mid-level culturally appropriate doctoral strategies:**

4. Demonstrating language fluency (speaking, reading, and writing) by the student in his/her area of doctoral research.
5. Discovering by the student how his/her doctoral research relates to issues/problems/questions relevant to his/her specific culture.
6. Presenting familiarity with the culture-specific oral and written literature in the student's doctoral research.

**Maximal culturally appropriate doctoral strategies:**

7. Completing the final project using the student's native language.
8. Relating a significant portion of the final project to issues/problems/questions found in the student's specific culture.
9. Exhibiting in the final project the student's ability to dialogue with his/her specific culture's oral and written material.

**Figure 15.1: Culturally Appropriate Strategies for Doctoral Programs**

Let us examine the scale in more detail.

### ***First, Regarding the "Minimal" Culturally Appropriate Doctoral Strategies***

#### **1. Accepting the Legitimacy of the Student's Specific Culture**

This strategy may seem obvious but it is foundational to any culturally appropriate strategy. *Both* the faculty and the student, whether from the Majority or Minority World, must recognize the validity of the student's culture and that it merits significant research efforts at the doctoral level. This validity will include the totality of the student's culture, including the culture's learning styles and how they demonstrate expertise and competency.

#### **2. Recognizing That the Student Is an Expert of His/Her Own Specific Culture**

Once again, this strategy may seem obvious at first glance, but what it really implies is that expertise is not in the hands of faculty only but it is also in the hands of the doctoral student. The role of the faculty is to assist the student in using his or her cultural expertise to the betterment of his or her overall doctoral research. In this regard the faculty member is more of a curator of the specific discipline than the all-knowing expert. Recognizing the student as a fellow expert also applies to minority faculty and students who, though they are from the same cultural group, most likely will still have significant generational (age) gap differences that are essentially cultural differences. Incorporating this strategy will help both faculty and student move beyond issues of authoritative knowledge and power.

#### **3. Forming Doctoral Committees Made Up of Both Majority and Minority World Advisers**

This strategy will not always be possible since it depends on the faculty make-up of the particular institution. However, it is a goal to be worked towards, undoubtedly reflecting the need for most faculties to recruit more diverse members.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Second, Regarding the "Mid-Level" Culturally Appropriate Doctoral Strategies***

#### **4. Demonstrating Language Fluency (Speaking, Reading, and Writing) by the Student in His/Her Area of Doctoral Research**

This strategy relates to the student's ability to adequately handle the language(s) necessary for the successful completion of doctoral research. For example, for Bible-related doctoral study this will typically mean a familiarity with Greek and/or Hebrew; it will not necessarily mean handling tangential languages

14. Some Majority World institutions, like the South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies (SAIACS) in India, are already doing this. When they have a dissertation that is specific to a particular culture they get the SAIACS supervisor (if not of the same cultural group) to coordinate with a consultant from that culture. This consultant is usually an academic or a practitioner. The wide alumni network of SAIACS makes this relatively easy.

(e.g. Latin, German, and French) that may relate more to the power needs of Minority World academics than to achieving academic prowess in the particular discipline. In fact, it may be more appropriate for Majority World scholars to have an ability in a cognate language from their own geographical/cultural area; for example, Swahili for African context students, Mandarin for Asian context students, and so on.

### **5. Discovering by the Student How His/Her Doctoral Research Relates to Issues/Problems/Questions Relevant to His/Her Specific Culture**

Here the doctoral student begins to wrestle with the question of research relevancy. Scholarship in the Majority World in the past has been relevant to very few. And it did not need to be; it was just an understood part of primarily white male minority privilege. As Professor Paul Yachnin points out: "Most faculty members have made their way in the profession along the well-established lines of the conference presentation and journal and book publication. The audience or readership they seek to engage is comprised of faculty members, postdocs, and senior graduate students. They have learned to write in ways that are familiar within their disciplines but often inaccessible to people outside their disciplines."<sup>15</sup> Today, with the pressing needs of the Majority World, this Minority World privilege of restricted relevancy is no longer warranted. Majority world doctoral research must be geared to issues facing the Majority World, and Majority World doctoral students must be encouraged to pursue such relevant research.<sup>16</sup>

### **6. Presenting Familiarity with the Culture-Specific Oral Traditions and Written Literature in the Student's Doctoral Research**

This strategy goes without saying. All cultures have vast oral traditions, with many also having significant written literature. However, in the past

15. Paul Yachnin, "Instruments of Knowledge: Toward the Reform of the Ph.D. Dissertation," Council of Graduate Schools, accessed 20 January 2017, [http://cgsnet.org/sites/default/files/DissFwd\\_Print%20All%20Papers.pdf](http://cgsnet.org/sites/default/files/DissFwd_Print%20All%20Papers.pdf).

16. Some Minority World groups, like Langham Partnership International, do encourage doctoral students that it sponsors to develop dissertations that are relevant to their cultural context. May their tribe increase.

these resources were neglected in favour of minority language preferences for English, German, French, or Dutch, with most of the doctoral research restricted to these privileged languages. Such neglect has no place in culturally appropriate doctoral programs. Here doctoral students must be empowered to use resources that are particular to their culture. Specifically, familiarity with oral sources germane to their area of expertise – and recognizing that they are as academically valid as the minority academic emphasis upon written texts – is especially necessary here.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Third, Regarding "Maximal" Culturally Appropriate Doctoral Strategies***

#### **7. Completing the Final Project Using the Student's Native Language**

If the "minimal" and "mid-level" strategies outlined above are followed, then this first maximal strategy is a natural outgrowth of all that has come before. Certainly this will take some creativity on the part of the doctoral faculty. There will be challenges related to fluency issues for minority faculty, and the like. However, there are ways around this, including comprehensive overviews of the dissertation research and summative results in the minority language of the faculty. What also needs to be addressed here is whether or not the minority view of scholarship – in reference to stylistic matters concerning footnotes, bibliography, and so on – is appropriate for Majority World scholarship. In my way of thinking, the stylistic tyranny of the Minority World should have little place in Majority World scholarship; it is a holdover from colonial thinking and has much to do with issues of power and control. While there is legitimate concern for guarding intellectual property, and giving proper credit to whom it is due, nevertheless Majority World doctoral students oftentimes spend an inordinate amount of their time with the *Chicago Manual of Style*, or some such Minority World instrument of academic torture.

17. While the academic discipline of orality studies does recognize the value of oral sources, this has not really taken root yet in advanced theological studies.

### 8. Relating a Significant Portion of the Final Project to Issues/Problems/Questions Found in the Student's Specific Culture

This strategy is perhaps most vital of all. It builds upon strategy 5: doctoral research that is culturally relevant. Now, at the end stages of the doctoral program, the doctoral student should make every effort to show how his or her long years of research and study relate directly to issues/problems/questions found in his or her own culture. The research results should not just be read by a handful of minority scholars and then put on a dusty library shelf, never to be disturbed again. Rather, the results should, as much as possible, be made relevant and applicable to the specific culture of the doctoral student. In this way scholarship is no longer just a part of the world of a privileged few but rather is made accessible to a much broader audience.

### 9. Exhibiting in the Final Project the Student's Ability to Dialogue with His/Her Specific Culture's Oral and Written Material

Again, if the above "minimal" and "mid-level" strategies are followed, this strategy will naturally happen as well. Creativity, like that mentioned above in strategy 7 with the uses of native language, will likewise need to occur here.

The above "Culturally Appropriate Strategies for Doctoral Programs" scale is but the "skeleton" for some of the foundational elements as we move towards a framework of culturally appropriate advanced theological studies. There is a growing literature of what the "flesh" of such studies might look like, including many of the chapters found in this book.<sup>18</sup>

So what is my own involvement with culturally appropriate advanced theological studies? It is now time to look at some examples of how this has worked out in my own experience.

18. See also the "Dissertation Model Discussions Papers" from the Council of Graduate Schools (USA) "Future of the Dissertation" Workshop held in January 2016, <http://cgsnet.org/future-dissertation-workshop>. Though geared to the Minority World of the North American context, there are many helpful suggestions of possible ways forward for both Minority and Majority World scholarship. Cf. the #alt-academy website that also examines the future of the dissertation, accessed 28 February 2017, <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/alt-ac/cluster/beyond-dissertation-1>.

## Part 3: Culturally Appropriate Advanced Theological Studies: Four Examples

What follows are four examples of culturally appropriate advanced theological studies that I have been directly or indirectly involved in over the years. They come from both Minority and Majority World contexts: the Philippines, Tonga, Cameroon, and North America. As these four examples are discussed here they will also be compared with the above "Culturally Appropriate Strategies for Doctoral Programs" scale to illustrate how various strategies of the scale might be implemented.

### 1. From the Philippines

I was director of the doctor of missiology (DMiss) program of the Asia Graduate School of Theology–Philippines (AGST–P) for many years. Though the AGST–P required a dissertation, we strived to make the final products of the DMiss doctoral students as relevant and useful to their ministry settings as possible. In so doing we easily incorporated the above "minimal" strategies while at the same time using some of the "mid-level" and "maximal" strategies as far as possible. To this end we had several dissertations that resulted either in direct publication in book form or simultaneously in the form of a doctoral project and a book. Let me here give one example of the latter.<sup>19</sup>

Jojo Manzano, a Filipino missions leader, did extensive research on developing appropriate training models for Filipinos involved in cross-cultural ministry while also examining existing cross-cultural training models available in the Philippines. His final dissertation project was a written summary of his research in typical dissertation format combined with a locally published eight-lesson church-based training course for Christian Filipinos who would soon be leaving the Philippines as overseas foreign workers. This training course in book form is entitled *Worker to Witness: Becoming an OFW Tentmaker*.<sup>20</sup>

19. Other examples of my former students' dissertations to books, especially using strategies 5 and 7, include the following: Antonia Leonora van der Meer, *Misionários Feridos: Como Cuidar dos que Servem* (Viçosa: Ultimato, 2009); Patrick Lai, *Tentmaking: The Life and Work of Business as Missions* (Colorado Springs: Authentic, 2005); and Anne C. Harper, *Understanding the Iglesia Ni Cristo: What They Really Believe and How They Can Be Reached* (Baguio City: APTS, 2014).

20. Jojo Manzano and Joy C. Solina, eds., *Worker to Witness: Becoming an OFW Tentmaker* (Makati: Church Strengthening Ministry, 2007).

The book takes the readers, together with their local church, step-by-step through the preparation process of planning, application, departure, and actual employment as overseas foreign workers (OFWs). It provides a basic practical understanding of the essential elements needed for Christian OFWs to become viable witnesses and tentmakers for Christ in a cross-cultural context.

In relationship to the “Culturally Appropriate Strategies for Doctoral Programs” scale, Manzano’s doctoral program certainly incorporated strategies 1 and 2, though strategy 3 used Minority World committee members (though they all lived in the Philippines). Strategies 4 and 7 were not issues since English is a national language of the Philippines, while strategies 6 and 9 were not applicable. It was in strategies 5 and 8 that the final book project especially demonstrated that the doctoral research related to issues/problems/questions found in Manzano’s specific culture, namely the high number of Christian OFWs and the need for them to receive some kind of cross-cultural training prior to their deployments overseas. Manzano’s example is a good model for those doctoral programs that wish to maintain more rigid minority academic qualifications while at the same time continue to be relevant to the student’s primary ministry context.

## 2. From Tonga and Oceania

Tongan Old Testament scholar Nāsili Vaka’uta has recently completed a pioneering work in the field of ethnohermeneutics. It is entitled *Reading Ezra 9–10 Tu’a-Wise: Rethinking Biblical Interpretation in Oceania*.<sup>21</sup> In what was originally his doctoral dissertation from the University of Auckland, New Zealand, Vaka’uta gives high praise to his doctoral advisors who, in his words, “allowed this work to be different.”<sup>22</sup> And indeed it is. Drawing

21. See Nāsili Vaka’uta, *Reading Ezra 9–10 Tu’a-Wise: Rethinking Biblical Interpretation in Oceania*, International Voices in Biblical Studies 3 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011). Cf. his “Tālanga: Theorizing a Tongan Mode of Interpretation,” *Alternative* 5, no. 1 (2009): 127–139. For an entire listing of Vaka’uta’s publications, many incorporating ethnohermeneutical principles, see <http://www.trinitycollege.ac.nz/images/Publications.pdf>, accessed 28 February 2017. See also the collection of ethnohermeneutically related works found in Jione Havea, David J. Neville, and Elaine M. Wainwright, eds., *Bible, Borders, Belonging(s): Engaging Readings from Oceania*, Semeia Studies 75 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), including Vaka’uta’s chapter: “Border Crossing/Body Whoring: Rereading Rahab of Jericho with Native Women,” 143–155.

22. Vaka’uta, *Reading Ezra 9–10 Tu’a-Wise*, xi.

upon the work of myself, Justin Ukpong, and R. S. Sugirtharajah,<sup>23</sup> Vaka’uta uses ethnohermeneutical principles, which he calls “contextual biblical interpretation,” in order to use his own Tongan culture as a valid jumping-off place for an indigenous hermeneutical methodology. His brilliant result is a landmark study on how to do Majority World ethnohermeneutics in a format conducive to Minority World academic sensibilities.

Vaka’uta summarizes his approach as follows:

Reading *tu’a-wise* (Tongan *lau faka-tu’a*) is an attempt to interpret the Bible based on Tongan cultural resources and social arrangement, through the “eye-/I-s” of a Tongan commoner (*tu’a*). *Lau faka-tu’a* emphasizes contextualizing the task of biblical interpretation rather than contextualizing the Bible per se. Contextualizing interpretation uses contextual or specifically indigenous categories of analysis, while contextualizing the Bible applies the insights from one’s reading to one’s situation. *Lau faka-tu’a* offers “an-other,” uniquely Oceanic, way of reading[,] . . . engages critically with existing literature on contextual biblical interpretation and existing interpretations of the chosen text, Ezra 9–10, and aims at making biblical interpretation practice-based, nonelitist, noncontinental, transparent, and accountable.<sup>24</sup>

His overarching purpose “is to develop, on the one hand, an ‘alternative’ approach to biblical interpretation from a Tongan standpoint and to depart, on the other hand, from theories and methods that dominate biblical scholarship.”<sup>25</sup>

In relationship to the “Culturally Appropriate Strategies for Doctoral Programs” scale, clearly strategies 1, 2, and 4 were followed, and especially strategies 5, 6, 8, and 9. Strategy 7 was not followed, but nevertheless the work uses many Tongan words and phrases throughout, complete with a lengthy glossary of Tongan terms. Vaka’uta’s work merits serious study by all Minority World scholars who are doing advanced theological studies with Majority World students.

23. Vaka’uta, 3, n. 8.

24. Vaka’uta, back cover.

25. Vaka’uta, 2.

### 3. From Cameroon

I recently returned from Cameroon where I facilitated a course on the general topic of contextualization with a doctor of ministry (DMin) cohort made up of mostly Cameroonian students. I use the word “facilitated” purposefully since they were definitely the experts of their own culture and I treated them as such. I brought with me some general characteristics of what good contextualization is and looks like. But that was the extent of my contribution. From then on, through a collaborative process over several days, they came up with a consensus concerning what the relevant theological issues were for Cameroon and Cameroonians, those that needed to be contextualized, and what that contextualizing might look like. Though we talked about the need to contextualize Minority World theological topics – such as God, the Bible, Jesus, sin, salvation, the church, the Holy Spirit and the last things – we all quickly came to see that the Cameroonian worldview demands much more. It demands a contextualization that deals with their own specific Cameroonian Majority World theological needs concerning topics such as death and resurrection; witchcraft and occultism/spiritism; child initiation and secret societies; and family issues dealing with marriage, singleness, polygamy, inheritance and succession, to name but a few. Furthermore, they would address these issues through the framework of ethnohermeneutics, a discipline they had just recently been exposed to. This is an ongoing process. They are trying to move beyond the Minority World “authoritative knowledge” that their Cameroonian seminaries instilled in them and attempt to rediscover their own Cameroonian hermeneutics. They are hoping that their final project will be a collaborative effort demonstrating their expertise through developing a practical theology concerning many of the issues listed above for the Cameroonian people. This end product will hopefully then be published by their Cameroonian denominational press and distributed throughout their Cameroonian constituency.

In relationship to the “Culturally Appropriate Strategies for Doctoral Programs” scale, we at Sioux Falls Seminary are committed to implementing as many of the strategies as possible with this particular DMin cohort. We see this as an opportunity “to do doctoral education right.” Time will tell how well we were able to do this, but I am hopeful.

### 4. From North America

One of my recent MA in Bible and Theology pre-PhD students – Jordan Minnich Kjesbo – did his thesis on the theology of former Beatle John Lennon as contrasted with the theology of Jesus.<sup>26</sup> By using Lennon’s famous song *Imagine*, Kjesbo sought to compare and contrast Lennon and Jesus through the grid of ethnohermeneutics. Kjesbo’s motivation was an attempt to reconcile the gospel of Jesus with the postmodern world’s deconstruction worldview and its effect on Christians today, especially Christian millennials. By deconstructing the idea of “the gospel,” Kjesbo compares it with *Imagine*: “*Imagine* . . . has themes that have superficial resonance, such as promoting peace and rejecting materialism, and dissonance, like imagining a world without religion, with contemporary Christian teachings. Additionally it deals with themes such as soteriology through its challenge to imagine no heaven and hell . . . *Imagine* is fundamentally a song about transformation . . .”<sup>27</sup>

Kjesbo’s purpose is to seek “to find points of resonance between critiques of the gospel . . . in an attempt to more clearly understand what the gospel is not and is” and, additionally, “finding the points of resonance and dissonance between *Imagine* . . . and the Gospels.”<sup>28</sup> With that backdrop he then proceeds to compare and contrast the messages of Lennon and Jesus through exegeting the words of *Imagine* – especially the phrases “imagine there’s no heaven,” “imagine there’s no countries,” “imagine no possessions,” and “you may say I’m a dreamer” – and comparing and contrasting them with the words of Jesus.

In relationship to the “Culturally Appropriate Strategies for Doctoral Programs” scale, Kjesbo’s work significantly demonstrates strategies 5, 6, 8, and 9. This is especially seen in his use of an oral source that still greatly impacts cultures worldwide (Lennon’s song, “Imagine”) and deconstructing Jesus and the gospel in light of that oral source. Kjesbo’s thesis shows how advanced

26. See Jordan Minnich Kjesbo, “The Gospel of John . . . Lennon” (master’s thesis, Sioux Falls Seminary, 2016). Kjesbo has recently applied his same ethnohermeneutical principles to *Imagine*, this time using Paul’s speech in Athens in Acts 17; see his “John Lennon and the Unknown God” (paper, Evangelical Missiological Society North Central Meetings, 18 March 2017).

27. Kjesbo, “Gospel of John . . . Lennon,” 22–23.

28. Kjesbo, 24.

theological studies can dig deeply into the biblical text while at the same time resonate with the realities of modern culture.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion: Towards Culturally Appropriate Methodologies

I, as a Minority World scholar, must honestly ask myself (as must we all): How am I doing in terms of developing culturally appropriate methodologies for my doctoral students? As with most of us – Minority and Majority World alike – I believe that I, and we, are on the way. Though the journey will be long, and filled with lots of twists and turns, I believe that this is the direction that most of us want to go. However, we still have some way to go. What follows are five recommendations that will hopefully help continue to move us in the right direction.

1. *Name past colonialism and the controlling role of Minority World power.* We need to acknowledge the fact that our current system of advanced theological education is rooted in a colonial past in which the Minority World was both powerful and fully in control. As a result, this minority was able to make the “rules” for what constitutes today’s understandings of what advanced theological education should look like. Acknowledging this will help us to better understand why we need to move beyond where we currently are.
2. *Recognize Majority World realities and resulting changes that must occur.* As the Eagles sang in the lead song on their 1976 album *Hotel California*, “there’s a new kid in town.” The “new kid” in advanced theological studies is the Majority World and the innumerable Majority World scholars who have arisen over the past several decades. This number will only increase in future. Consequently, these Majority World scholars must move beyond accepting Minority World “authoritative knowledge.” Instead they need to shape advanced

29. It should be noted that Kjesbo’s primary thesis reader, a Minority World theologian, wrestled for a while with some of the ethnohermeneutical manoeuvrings Kjesbo was doing with both the biblical text and the *Imagine* text. Happily he came around in the end.

theological studies in their own image, in ways that make sense for their Majority World.

3. *Rethink academic vocabulary.* We need to rethink what we mean by using words and phrases like “academic,” “scholarly research,” “original contribution,” “significant academic achievement,” and the like. Vocabulary must be redefined so that it meets the needs of Majority World scholarship and not just that of the Minority World. These revised definitions will greatly assist in this task.
4. *Rethink the purpose of the final project/dissertation.* All advanced theological scholars need to show both originality and significant academic achievement, but there are other ways to do this besides the written dissertation. Everyone – Majority and Minority World scholars and graduate programs – must come up with viable and relevant alternatives that are both original and significant. There already is a growing acceptance of such alternatives in scholarship outside the realm of advanced theological studies.<sup>30</sup>
5. *Rethink relevancy.* Advanced theological studies can no longer afford to be irrelevant. While this is true for the Minority World, it is especially pertinent for the Majority World. The old Minority World model of a dissertation read by three people and then placed on a shelf hidden somewhere in the depths of a library is untenable today. There is just too much time, money, and energy invested in advanced theological studies to allow this to continue to happen. Again everyone – Majority and Minority World scholars and graduate programs alike – must make every effort to ensure that the work of their scholars is accessible and relevant for the church – and world – at large.

This chapter has covered much ground. Using the discipline of ethnohermeneutics as a grid for looking more closely at developing culturally appropriate methodologies in advanced theological studies, we have seen that the discipline has much to offer in terms of both where we have been and where we need to go. Certainly there is much for us to ponder as we seek to make

30. For example, see the “Dissertation Model Discussions Papers” referred to above in footnote 18.

advanced theological studies in our seminaries and graduate institutions as effective as they might be.

## Discussion Questions

1. What feelings were aroused as you read the opening section of this chapter? Fear, anger, repulsion, amusement, hope . . .? Why do you think these emotions emerged?
2. To what extent do you agree with Larry's suggestion that the grammatical-historical approach to hermeneutics is culture-bound? What concerns would you have in embracing ethnohermeneutical approaches to biblical interpretation? What are some of the strengths and benefits that you see potentially for your own context?
3. What are some ways in which there is dissonance between the grammatical-historical methodology and standard interpretive approaches common in your situation? Describe one or two tacit hermeneutical patterns that you believe shape the worldview of people in your own local context, and which might be used to better communicate the biblical message. Explain.
4. Imagine what it might look like if you were to empower the use of local hermeneutical strategies for a master's or doctoral project. Briefly describe what you think might be key features of such a project in terms of both the content and the methodology. Which of the elements described in the section on "culturally appropriate doctoral strategies" do you think could/should be embraced and developed?
5. Consider in turn each of the four case study examples of ethnohermeneutical approaches to Scripture. Which of these do you think would best resonate with students in your own local context? Why?

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## About the Contributors

**Stephanie Black**, PhD, currently based in Dublin, Ireland, serves as an international theological education specialist with Serge in partnership with World Outreach of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. She is also Affiliate Associate Professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary. Her doctoral work was in biblical Greek and linguistic theory. She describes her many years teaching in theological higher education in Ethiopia, Kenya, and India as an ongoing journey of discovery – about God, about herself, about culture, and about the gospel: "It's theology on safari!" She is grateful to the students and colleagues from around the world who have joined and guided her in this journey.

**Larry W. Caldwell**, PhD, is Academic Dean and Professor of Intercultural Studies at Sioux Falls Seminary in Sioux Falls, SD. In addition, he is Director of Training and Strategy for Converge Worldwide. Prior to this, he and his family were missionaries with Converge for twenty-one years in Manila, Philippines, where he was Academic Dean and Professor of Missions and Bible Interpretation at Asian Theological Seminary, as well as Director of the Doctor of Missiology program of the Asia Graduate School of Theology, Philippines. Larry teaches regularly on contextualization and cross-cultural Bible interpretation (ethnohermeneutics) at missionary training institutions throughout the world. He has authored dozens of books and articles, and for several years edited the *Journal of Asian Mission*. His latest book is *Doing Bible Interpretation: Making the Bible Come Alive for Yourself and Your People*.

**Ashish Chrispal**, PhD, is a pastor, grassroots missionaries' trainer, and theological education facilitator. Ashish has served with Overseas Council for the last ten years equipping seminaries in Asia to rethink theological education through being missional and ministry-oriented with a scholarly focus for the Lord's glory.

**Paul Allan Clark** is the Director of Education and Engagement with Overseas Council, where he oversees the Institute for Excellence. Pastoral and