

# *Cultural Competence as Calling*

*Theological Librarianship in the Age of Global  
Theological Education*

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**T**here is no doubt that international students now make up a significant portion of contemporary theological education. In 2010, the Association of Theological Schools members in North America had 6,550 international students, and by 2017, the number had increased to 8,087 (of a total of 72,896 students) (Tanner 2015). In 2022, this development experienced a decline, which may have been caused by COVID-19 and other factors (Tanner 2022); however, the numbers are now increasing again. This shift in demographics certainly has bearings on theological librarianship. As students with diverse academic backgrounds, particularly those that differ from the Western or American model, enter theological schools and seminaries, theological librarians need to understand how library services can and should be adjusted to serve students from all constituencies as effectively as possible. This chapter examines two key challenges faced by international students: developing academic

critical thinking and navigating the dynamics of authority. It examines how culturally competent theological librarians can respond with wisdom and love.

## *Critical Thinking*

One of the central challenges this chapter explores is academic critical thinking, particularly as it relates to international students' engagement with research.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have often pointed out that, for international students, critical thinking and other skills related to academic writing, such as argument building or constructing new concepts, do not come naturally (Shaheen 2012; see also Kelley 2008, Deakins 2009, and Cheng 2000). While those who have grown up in the West are often consistently exposed to critical thinking and are taught how to use it in their research and writing, this is not always the case for international students. For example, East Asian students have sometimes found it challenging to grasp the meaning of critical thinking or have been hesitant to use the skill due to their cultural background. While Western critical thinking theory and education often emphasize critical thinking as a skillful skepticism and encourage doubting one's own assumptions, beliefs, and traditions (Siegel 1988; Durkin 2008), students from East Asia tend to believe it is unhelpful or even absurd to try to contradict oneself, to argue with established scholars, or to confront other writers (Durkin 2008). Moreover, East Asian students tend to place more importance on maintaining harmony and avoiding conflict than on challenging others, even when seeking to identify what is more rational or reasonable. As a result, when discussing ideas, the focus is often on accepting others' input and aiming for respectful dialogue and compromise, rather than proving one's own rightness (Durkin 2008).

Another example concerns sub-Saharan Africa. While the governments in the region have emphasized critical thinking as a key outcome in education to improve their position in the global economy, it has been noted that many educational systems have not fully achieved the goal. Some scholars suggest the reason for this is that Western models of critical thinking are taught without being fully contextualized and without utilizing effective pedagogies (Giacomazzi et al. 2022). As a result, students from that region are

more likely to struggle with critical thinking when they move to the West to pursue a degree.

International students in theological schools and seminaries experience similar challenges. For those who have not been sufficiently trained in critical thinking or who are hesitant to apply this skill in their research due to discomfort with disagreement or confrontation, academic success can be challenging. International students often look up to their professors and try to align with their views or those of the scholars their teachers approve of or endorse. Their general tendency is then to seek out acceptable—and thus “good” and “authoritative”—sources and cite them to justify preexisting positions. Rather than evaluating sources and finding scholars to disagree with by thinking critically, the method they often employ is to gather all the resources they believe are respected and supported by their tradition or teachers. When they encounter voices that differ from what they or their community consider to be “right,” they often either ignore them or use them as examples of “those who got it wrong,” without delving deeper into why their argument is not as convincing. Their papers then sometimes become a collection of citations whereby their own voice is either weak or absent.

What is the theological librarian’s role in this issue? Some may say that teaching critical thinking skills is not our task, but as early as the 1980s and 1990s, it has been emphasized that the academic librarian’s job is not simply to explain how to do certain things in a “how-to-use approach” (Goetzfridt 1993, 6). Librarians must also teach students skills in critical evaluation of information they find and in discerning the validity of their arguments and views (McCormick 1983). This corrects the idea that librarians are merely to offer “a mechanistic, tool-based approach to library skills and will consider critical thinking outside the scope of their responsibilities” (Gibson 1995, 30).

Moreover, the kind of critical thinking librarians help cultivate is beyond source evaluation; it plays a vital role throughout the research process. We can help and teach students to develop a strong research question. Our instruction can also involve guiding students to develop a flexible and reasoned plan that will support their critical research. As research continues, the evaluation of the information should delve deeper, utilizing clear standards and thoughtful analysis (Gibson 1995). In this regard, theological librarians, accepting their role as educators, play a crucial part in supporting the development of critical thinking skills in international students. We have

a duty to teach students how to become active learners rather than passive receivers of knowledge (Phillips 2004).

There are, in fact, two reasons theological librarians may be more profoundly related to this particular matter. First, as noted earlier, theological schools and seminaries in affluent countries are admitting a large number of international students. As the population of students who are not accustomed to academic critical thinking increases in theological education, our responsibility also grows. Second, theological librarians need to be acutely perceptive in navigating this topic because it has deeply personal, emotional, spiritual, and ethical components. Teaching critical thinking to international theology students requires more than just instructional skills. It, in fact, demands cultural competence, spiritual sensitivity, and a pastoral attitude. Many international students come from educational or church contexts in which questioning a respected book, a renowned theologian, or an eminent scholar may be perceived as disrespectful or even spiritually dangerous. Theological librarians, then, should guide with cultural intelligence, remembering that this reluctance is not an intellectual deficiency but rather an attitude of reverence or communal identity. The virtues of humility and patience on our part is crucial.

It is also our duty to help students develop the virtues of bravery and discernment. On par with faculty, we reinforce that no theologian or scholar is beyond criticism (as no one is always right), and that it is allowed and even expected to challenge them, if students do so with sound reasoning and humility. Furthermore, it would be prudent not to insist that Western academic critical thinking is inherently superior. Instead, we can affirm the cultural backgrounds and intellectual traditions international students bring with them and support them in integrating these with the critical thinking expected of them in Western academia.

Finally, it is crucial to teach that critical thinking can be a practice of faithfulness. It can be taught as a discipline that allows students to love God with their minds and to discern what is excellent for the sake of the church and the world, rather than as a tool to demean or attack others.

## *Overcoming the Issue of Authority*

Another important matter concerns the relational dynamic between theological librarians and international students. In general, students view academic librarians as faculty members who are respected for their subject expertise and associate research as their most important specific skill and area of strength (Fagan et al. 2021). While there is limited literature on how international students perceive academic librarians specifically, there is strong consensus that many international students tend to see faculty as authority figures (Unruh 2015; Times Higher Education 2023). As theological librarians often hold faculty status and interact with students in instructional roles, international students are likely to approach them as figures of authority. To be sure, this can be a beneficial mode of perception. When international students have respect for their theological librarians, it is easier to guide them effectively.

However, there is also a negative side to this. When librarians are perceived as authority figures, international students may be inclined to prioritize pleasing them over being transparent about their research progress and seeking help. The shame and honor culture can sometimes influence international students in a way that causes them to be more interested in trying to impress the faculty than in honestly sharing their struggles and growing through those experiences (Huang and Brown 2009). Some international students may also experience pressure to perform competently rather than actually develop their skills.

Here again, it seems prudent to cultivate cultural competencies and spiritual virtues. Cultural humility, sensitively communicated to a student, will open many doors. Rather than assuming one culture is inherently better than another, we approach it with a humble heart, recognizing that a student's starting point is valid and worthy of respect. International students from high-context cultures may not verbally express their struggles, so it is essential to be aware of their nonverbal cues and proactively ask gentle yet thorough questions to discover what is at stake.

In terms of spiritual virtues and a pastoral approach, perhaps the virtue of compassion best describes it. Without deeply caring for the international students and being keenly aware of their troubles and struggles, it is impossible to act upon it. To be alert and realize the perplexity shared among a specific group of students is the first, and

yet profound, step. Moreover, cultural competence means guiding international students with gentleness and discussing issues with them in a manner that builds up rather than tears down. Practicing patience, we are to walk with students as they grow while allowing time for their difficult journey of academic formation.

Another key virtue is discernment. While helping students develop discernment, librarians model this virtue by carefully observing whether a student genuinely understands and follows guidance, or whether they attempt to leave a good impression while missing the advice. For example, when a student repeatedly nods in agreement during a reference interview, it may not always indicate understanding. It could be a culturally conditioned expression of respect or an attempt to avoid appearing ignorant. Recognizing this, we should gently follow up with clarifying questions or offer additional support without making them feel exposed.

The goal of developing cultural competencies, spiritual virtues, and skills in pastoral guidance is not an abstract objective. Instead, these can also serve as means by which we foster authentic learning and empower students to grow in confidence and independence. The ultimate goal is to help students thrive in theological education, develop intellectual virtues, and grow to embrace the role God has called them to pursue.

## *Conclusion*

As international students make up a significant and growing part of theological education, theological librarians face a new and unique way to reimagine our services. Among various challenges, we have explored issues such as academic critical thinking and the problem of authority. These aspects arise not due to a lack of international students' abilities, but stem from different traditions, cultures, and educational approaches. Theological librarians then serve not only as resource guides but also as educators and pastoral figures. The librarian must help bridge the gap between different academic expectations rather than endorse one culture over another. Moreover, compassion, gentleness, discernment, and many other spiritual virtues are indispensable in supporting international students. These responsibilities—and indeed callings—are undoubtedly all complex and challenging, but they are worthwhile, as the work of theological

librarians meaningfully contributes to students' academic, intellectual, and spiritual growth.

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## Notes

- 1 When using “critical thinking,” I do not refer to the general sense of the word, the comprehensive idea that points to a process of analyzing information from observation or reasoning, as that is a common human trait across cultures. What I do in fact indicate is specifically academic critical thinking, which refers to evaluating sources, identifying underlying assumptions, engaging constructively with multiple perspectives, and, perhaps most important, filling a scholarly gap by disagreeing with preexisting arguments.