



Reviews



Marvin Oxenham, *Character and Virtue in Global Theological Education: An Academic Epistolary Novel* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2019), pp. 393, ISBN 978-783686971. £19.99

Oxenham's work proposes a new model of theological education aimed at developing students of character and virtue who can participate in God's mission in the world through service to the church and the broader society. A lucid and enjoyable read, the book consists of letters exchanged between two fictional characters – an unnamed narrator and a person called Siméon, the latter of whom has been given the task of proposing a new model of theological education after the institution in which he teaches loses accreditation. Their exchange – which comprises the entirety of the book – proceeds in three parts: the first articulates a theoretical framework for their vision and the second discusses its inherently theological character. The final and most interesting part of the book considers some of the practical issues related to organizing the envisioned theological institution and includes the more tangible aspects of Oxenham's proposal.

The book begins by describing an Aristotelian framework for theological education centred on character formation and virtue. Oxenham sets out this framework most thoroughly in what he calls "A Manifesto for Character and Virtue in Theological Education", a chapter in which he discusses the aims of his vision and its projected impact, the kind of character and virtue he aims to foster among participants, action plans for implementing his proposal, and a brief description of the various stakeholders who should support the vision (pp. 131–39). Both clear and affective, the Manifesto presents a fairly compelling case for Oxenham's Aristotelian framework and invites readers to think about theological education as a holistic task that develops virtuous individuals rather than merely persons of academic ability.

Part Two presents readers with a theology of virtue and character education by constructing a broad historical narrative that combines

religious and non-religious texts, traditions and thinkers as a way of accentuating the importance of recovering virtue and character education in a post-modern world. Unfortunately, the narrative is cast too broadly and fails to persuade, demonstrating little more than a surface-level reading of texts, traditions and figures that many historians, philosophers and theologians may find problematic. To take but one example, Oxenham suggests that readers might view the concept of virtue as a synonym for Paul's understanding of righteousness in the book of Romans (pp. 209–10). While the claim is provocative and interesting, he would have done well to engage with some of the biblical and theological debates generated by Paul's use of righteousness over the years. Instead, however, Oxenham relies more upon Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas, two intellectuals whose expertise falls outside of biblical theology and whose work aligns well with Oxenham's overall project. In short, Oxenham comes across as fitting his reading of Paul into a rather narrow metaphysical straitjacket, aligning his interpretation of scripture to his Aristotelian project rather than the other way around.

The third and final section of the book discusses the concrete details of Oxenham's proposal, setting out a list of virtues central to his model for theological education and discussing the ways in which these virtues might be 'sought', 'caught' and 'taught' in all that the institution is and does. According to Oxenham, seeking virtue in the institution tasked with theological education involves little more than being intentional about the practices many institutions already have in place: vision and mission statements should be appropriately crafted; objectives and plans for achieving those objects should be set out; and the physical space, schedules, routines, and activities of the institution should all clearly relate to its vision and mission (pp. 294–97).

'Catching' these virtues, however, is a bit more interesting. According to Oxenham, the institution should develop virtue through communal practices that include both those who work at the institution and its students (p. 303). Hiring the right staff and educators means prioritizing persons of virtue rather than intellectual or educating abilities. In the same way, the institution ought to think carefully about its selection process for students, prioritizing those who demonstrate

a commitment to character development rather than those who merely perform well in academics (pp. 306–7). Though Oxenham acknowledges some concerns about discriminating in these selection processes, he fails to propose any significant safeguards. In particular, more needs to be said about how underprivileged students whose circumstances present obstacles for developing or demonstrating the type of virtue he has identified can be included within such a scheme and about how diversifying the student and staff population might enhance his vision for communal life by fostering a level of understanding and inclusion among those from different backgrounds, cultures and socio-economic spectrums.

As part of his reflection on ways to ‘catch’ virtue in theological education, Oxenham also discusses a number of other interesting issues, including locations and spaces appropriate for achieving his vision for theological education, the structure of the program and its components. However, it’s not so much his conclusions as his analysis and description of the many options facing those with decisions about these matters that might prove helpful to readers. For example, while Oxenham ultimately supports a residential model of education, he has surprisingly good things to say about online education and offers a few reflections about how it could potentially fit the sort of scheme he proposes (pp. 311–13).

In the final portion of his model, Oxenham reflects upon how character and virtue might be ‘taught’, discussing his vision for the institution’s curriculum and issues surrounding its accreditation. In terms of the former, he envisions combining traditional courses with untraditional components aimed at fostering character and virtue within participants and offers a few examples as to what this might look like (pp. 333–35). Less interesting are his reflections upon accreditation, which essentially amount to Oxenham’s conceding the possibility that traditional accreditation agencies might not recognize the sort of model he proposes and that other standards or avenues for quality assurance might need to be sought after or developed (pp. 357–60).

In the end, Oxenham’s model of theological education is simply not realistic, a fact he concedes in the introduction to the text (p. 3).

Anyone who does not share his confidence in Aristotelian virtue or believes aspects of the current state of theological education are worth preserving may find this a rather unhelpful book. However, be that as it may, anyone willing to exercise a little charity when reading and who shares Oxenham's commitment to a form of theological education that prepares students to participate in God's mission in the world will surely find some common ground in its pages and perhaps even a few helpful suggestions.

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Ben Pugh, *SCM Studyguide to Theology in the Contemporary World* (London: SCM Press, 2017), pp. xi + 207, ISBN 978-0334055747. £19.99

Ben Pugh's *SCM Studyguide to Theology in the Contemporary World* serves as a sound introductory resource for students of theology who are seeking a general – albeit, somewhat selective – working ‘roadmap’ of the contemporary theological scene. Its eight main chapters primarily serve to descriptively touch upon a handful of important conversations that are of emerging and continuing relevance today – the most balanced chapter perhaps being the opening one on “The Quests for the Historical Jesus”, which helpfully extends the Historical Jesus conversation beyond the First and Second Quests (that are often covered in textbooks on nineteenth- and twentieth-century theology) to the Third Quest that is currently unfolding in the first half of the twenty-first century.

Aside from this first chapter, however, it is those who have a strong interest or connection to evangelicalism in general, and to the ecclesiological context of England in particular, who are likely to benefit most from Pugh's efforts at curation. This is because Pugh's own English (not Scottish) backdrop is very much on display throughout the overall work. At the same time, many of the study