

Book Review

Iyadurai, J. 2023. *Social research methods for students and scholars of theology and religious studies*. Chennai: Marina Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Religion. 263 pages. ISBN: 978-93-5620-82-9. ISBN: 978-93-5627-844-8 (eBook).

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This published work by Joshua Iyadurai is very timely and relevant for theologians, scholars in the field of religious studies, and students of different cultures and institutions. In this work, Iyadurai proposes multidisciplinary approaches in the study of religions that consider strategies rooted in social sciences.

Most scholars of religious studies and theologians do not agree with social scientists. For most theologians and scholars of religious studies social scientists attempt to puncture their religious faith. In many cases, they attempt to deconstruct religious beliefs and practices and reconstruct new ones with their research methods. In this regard, Iyadurai suggests to theologians and scholars of religious studies to intensify and imbibe the culture of scientific objectivity, rigorous analysis, and instrumental reasoning within the context of research strategies in social sciences. The focal point is an interdisciplinary approach to lived experiences and lived religion. He argues for a more empowering theological research approach that strengthens wisdom in the contemporary era.

For Iyadurai, theologians and scholars of religious studies must know that the current world of scholarship is interdisciplinary in which a multidisciplinary wisdom is essential for an in-depth analysis of a living reality like religion and any narrative associated with it. He calls for and proposes a diversely rich context of research in theology and religious studies that is more mature. The central thought of his book is best expressed as an empowering

form of theological reasoning guided by social science research strategies. The expanded horizon he highlights in detail draws heavily on the research tools of social sciences.

This book is divided into nine chapters or subthemes. The subthemes are structured in a detailed manner to give students and scholars a firm footing from choosing a theological topic for research till reporting the research outcome. The book uniquely presents a way or method in which researchers and scholars could redefine research problems by critically engaging the literature. In this unique work, Iyadurai notes that a research problem is a conceptual statement based on the literature about the issue and conversations around the matter under investigation. In this regard, various gaps which the work itemizes are identified. Therefore, the uniqueness of the book manifests in the outline of describing a problem with detailed contextual factors to apply in resolving the problem by referring to literatures.

In this fascinating book, the author brings to the fore the fact that people's lived experiences are valid sources for sound theological and religious research. He draws into the fact that in the contemporary scholarship, students and scholars turn to researching lived religion, lived theology, including lived experiences, using contextual and liberative approaches as platforms. The work creates an avenue to harmonize lived realities of the oppressed in light of theological reflection. It leads one into the domain of the complex web of the social world, where reality is perceived differently by different players. According to Iyadurai, its hermeneutical tools differ.

For theologians and scholars in religious studies to enter the social world and study lived realities, Iyadurai notes that they ought to engage the tools of social sciences, leading to a multidisciplinary approach – hence, the need and relevance of this timely book. Indeed, an interdisciplinary approach to research opens ways to creative ideas for research. It avails researchers the grace to think from below and come up with findings that are groundbreaking. The book, being a well-researched work, suggests to scholars to move beyond their disciplinary enclave and discover something more enriching, more in-depth and thorough, with facts that portray the inner beauty of truth.

All in all, Iyadurai points out the common challenges of research in theology. It focuses on God who is not a reality subject to analyze as we have it in social structures. Yet, the questions theologians ask necessarily guide them to reflect on human experiences in society. For Iyadurai, “theology aims at understanding God's activity in relation to human community and the world.

Therefore, theology cannot insulate itself but must engage social sciences to study lived theology and or lived religion” (Iyadurai 2023:xxiv). He correctly notes that theology using a social scientific research method, does not abandon its unique perspective but incorporates insights from other disciplines to enhance its own specific research question. This brings about fresh insights to both theology and social sciences in relation to God and the mysteries of Christ. With this, interdisciplinary approaches to research in theology make the research problem and findings more intelligible in engaging the world. This confirms that a person’s cultural and socio-historical context is a key factor in how they understand God and articulate theological, philosophical, and social teachings. With the tools of social sciences, scholars and students of theology and religious studies discover dynamism and relationality that allow access to the domain of the divine. Moreover, the basic assumption in the social sciences that serves as a window to conceive God is that all of reality is interrelated. Thus, this work in scientific research methods is a major contribution that deals with designing and conducting qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research. The study benefits the clergy, pastoral caregivers, academics in religious studies, and students in social sciences and humanities in writing a dissertation or thesis, and educators in guiding researchers and assessing research projects. It comes highly recommended.

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