

The Oikonomia Network, in partnership with ICETE, has commissioned writers from four global regions to share the developments, challenges and opportunities involved in overcoming the sacred/secular divide in theological education in their contexts. These articles are for your personal use as you prepare to attend ICETE C-18, so our time in Panama City will be as fruitful as possible; please do not publish or redistribute them. The Oikonomia Network is a community of evangelical theological educators and schools dedicated to preparing church leaders to bear God's image, bear witness and bear fruit in every area of life, and to help others do so, with particular emphasis on needed growth in whole-life discipleship, fruitful work and economic wisdom; for more information see oikonomianetwork.org.

ICETE 2018: The Secular/Sacred Divide and Theological Education

LATIN AMERICA

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In Latin America everything is sacred. Christian or not, most people are happy to see all spheres of life as somehow divine or at least inspired by some other force. However, what that looks like in practice is another matter. How theological education can be more holistic in its shaping of Christian leaders is a fundamental task and challenge of schools across the region.

Despite the growing relativism and materialism in Latin America, the secular/sacred divide is much more of a North American or European concern. Yet in a globalized world, the interconnections and relationships from one continent to another shape and challenge the way we think about theological education and the formation of leaders.

Evangelical Growth and Political Change

Two key factors have contributed to increased interest and focus within theological education to train and form Christians to live out their discipleship in all spheres of life and in all areas of society. One factor is the rapid numerical growth of evangelicals within the region. The other is the multiple changes in the political and economic situation of Latin America in the late 20th century.

With the growth of evangelicalism, there was hope that society would change as a result – after all, there are more committed Christians than before. Yet this growth in Christianity did not produce the changes people hoped for.

This led to questions about the holistic nature of theological training and discipleship programs. What areas of theological formation are deficient that need addressing so that we begin to see concrete changes across the region and in all of areas of society?

Politically and economically, much of the region moved from military dictatorships and extremely high inflation to democratic regimes and some economic growth. While things are far from stable, such changes raised an awareness of the greater need for Christian voices in spheres other than the church. How can we train Christians who are going into law or business? What does mission in politics look like?

Theological Institutions for God's Mission

Within this context theological institutions increasingly ask, "What does participation in God's mission look like in 21st century Latin America?" How can such mission be effective in all areas of our societies? How can mission training thrive when so many of our models of education are based on North American or European curricula that don't really translate into this context?

As in many other parts of the world, the religious landscape of Latin America is also changing due to the increased numbers of refugees and asylum seekers, many of whom come to the continent with another faith. Theological training that overcomes the sacred/secular divide knows that welcoming the stranger and foreigner in our midst is not a problem to be overcome but a gift through which God speaks to us.

In those places where Christians have already been thinking about mission in a broad and all-encompassing sense, wonderful examples of loving God and neighbor have enabled those Christians leaders to engage with and to share the kingdom of God with those in their workplace, schools, markets, etc. For example, there are churches and theological schools in São Paulo, Brazil, where pastors-in-training are taught about other faiths and encouraged to come alongside and to listen to those we consider to be “outsiders.” Transformation happens through genuine encounter (e.g. Acts 10 and the meeting of Peter and Cornelius).

In a leadership training program in a poverty-stricken region in Lima, Peru, the very impetus to be with the poor and to strive towards economic and political justice is itself theological education that presumes there is no secular/sacred divide. The teachers in this program have themselves come from the slum, gone on to get formal post-graduate degrees in theology or related fields, then returned to their place of origin to train local leaders and pastors, many of whom don’t even have a basic primary education. The doctrine of the Incarnation is not an abstract teaching, but is embodied in the people, in the presence of Jesus among them through their shared gifts and Spirit-filled life. The demand of Jesus upon the whole church to be a people of justice, a people that embodies God’s peace and the ethics of jubilee is itself a call to stand against the sacred/secular divide. This is happening in Honduras, Peru, Colombia, Paraguay and many other countries in Latin America.

Some of the best training programs are not those in theological institutions but are ones that engage directly at the grassroots levels, where disenfranchised young people are taught a skill such as artisanal baking or carpentry, that enables them to escape the life of gangs and violence or where local pastors join community groups in the struggle to stop violence against women. In Curitiba, Brazil, the day starts with morning prayers and scriptural readings; the doctrines of creation and eschatology are taught while planting an urban garden or while students learn about animal husbandry and recovering nearly lost species of farm animals in a joint program with the state university. These types of gatherings embody the good news of the gospel at the same time as they display participating in God’s mission in all spheres of life.

Facing Challenges in the Spirit

Secularism remains a huge challenge in the region. Cultures in Latin America typically accept and encourage an individualistic mentality that is itself pervasive among evangelical churches. Even in those places where holistic mission has been part of the curriculum for many decades, there is still a fear of actually being with those who are different. It is easier to label people with various “isms” – liberalism, conservatism, feminism, Marxism and so on. Yet when we pursue education only within our silos, we end up limiting the very discipleship and transformation we seek.

Another practical challenge to theological education is the accreditation system. In many countries, theology as an academic discipline is a relatively new phenomenon. The curriculum is set by the state, usually drawing on foreign models and often limiting the ways in which a broader sense of mission theology can be taught. This makes life especially difficult for inter-confessional schools that do not have a denomination to support and sustain them with a steady flow of new students.

The same Spirit that was at work in the early church is at work in Latin America today. God’s Spirit enables us for mission, and perhaps part of that mission today is recapturing the early church’s emphasis on “tent-making.” Discipleship formation that overcomes the sacred/secular divide is formation that sees tent-making not as a simple means to an end – i.e. how to support myself while doing “real ministry” – but as the sphere and place where mission happens and grows. Finding new ways to engage in tent-making *as mission* will be key to the future of theological education on this continent and around the globe.

Resources

<http://businessasmission.com/sacred-secular-americas/>

<http://nz.langham.org/thirst-whole-life-discipleship-seven-champions-global-change/>

"Ethnicity and the people of God." Milton Acosta Benitez.

[https://www.academia.edu/1908998/Ethnicity and the People of God](https://www.academia.edu/1908998/Ethnicity_and_the_People_of_God)

Comentário Bíblico Contemporâneo, C. René Padilla (gen. ed.). Forthcoming.