

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personal use as you prepare to attend ICETE C-18, so our time in Panama City will be as fruitful as possible; please do not publish or redistribute them.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

ASIA

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What makes for an equipping that trains servant leaders in all walks of life? How is this concretely expressed in a Majority World graduate theological school? At Asian Theological Seminary (ATS) in the Philippines, we serve students in a variety of professions, which reveals an equipping that goes beyond training workers in the organized church and attracts student leaders from all walks of life. This holistic experience is hardly unique to ATS. I surveyed 19 theological institutions across Asia – from Jordan to Taiwan – and received testimony of many similar experiences. The theology and practices that proffer such holistic equipping, and the challenges we face in this mission, are key to the future of theological education.

Serving People in Many Professions

In a recent survey of the professions of students who graduated from ATS in the years 2010-2016, we find that alongside those working in the organized church, prominent professions include community development workers, teachers and school administrators, Bible translators, marketplace professionals and Christians in business. We have graduates who continue to seek deeper understanding and practice of their evangelical faith as medical doctors, lawyers, police officers, engineers, architects and even a scientist. Evening and Saturday classes, an evening chapel service, and hybrid and fully online programs accommodate the continuing influx of student-professionals in the seminary.

This aligns with the testimony of other schools from across Asia. "Since our school's inception more than 40 years ago, theological education by extension (TEE) for the laity has always been part of us," writes a representative of China Graduate School of Theology in Hong Kong. From Malaysia Evangelical College comes this explanation of their service to Christians in many professions: "We see this as a partnership with them in their Christian vocation and calling so that they become more effective in the mission of God at their daily work place and the communities they live in."

Theological Bases

The theological bases undergirding our practices at ATS have a big-tent evangelical orientation. ATS is an interdenominational "mainstream evangelical seminary," which is also contextual and transformational in its training. It emphasizes classical evangelical faith, holistic transformation and cultural sensitivity in its equipping of pastors and workers for God's work in Asia and beyond. Early in its history, ATS was exposed to a more irenic Reformed theology of cultural engagement, emphasizing transformation rather than withdrawal from the world. Later on, the seminary cemented its partnership with the Christian Reformed World Mission, thus deepening its own creation-wide understanding and

theology of redemption in Christ, as well as rejecting the unbiblical sacred-secular divide in faith and practice.

We have adopted a biblical theology of work and vocation that supports the diverse witnesses of Christians in the marketplace. This avoids the dualistic understanding that the “real” work is going on in the ordained ministry while “ordinary” work is merely a necessity for living and an opportunity for witnessing. Rather, daily work mirrors God the worker and finds its purpose in being regents under God working to shape our natural and social worlds according to God’s kingdom purposes. A biblical-theological understanding of vocation calls every Christian to service, not merely intimacy with Christ. It means “that we are not only called to be ministers and missionaries but called to serve God in every sphere of life. Therefore, whether we are pastors, politicians, or artists, we are called to serve God and the neighbor in all that we do.”¹

Similar theological foundations are present in theological education from multiple traditions across Asia. “All of our courses look at the spiritual dimension of life and discuss how God’s values have an impact on Christian behavior in the personal sphere and beyond – in one’s family, in the local neighborhood, at work and in church,” testifies a colleague from the College of Christian Theology Bangladesh. From a colleague at New Theological College, in India, comes this succinct but powerful word: “NTC believes in the physical and metaphysical aspects of Christian theology because the God of the Bible is the incarnate God in Jesus Christ.”

Institutional and Practical Outworking

ATS has sought to represent this faith and life integration in communal terms through its training programs. In the early 1990s, we expanded our mission to include training lay leaders who are salt and light in the workplace, instead of just professional Christian ministers such as pastors and missionaries. The seminary hosted the first-ever consultation of “Christians in the Marketplace” in 1993, which resulted in the creation of Fellowship of Christians in Government (FOCIG) and the Christians in the Workplace fellowships. More recently, in the aftermath of super typhoon Haiyan in 2013, through its counseling department ATS sent teams to disaster areas to provide psycho-spiritual counseling to several thousands of people and their families. This led to ATS facilitating certificate programs on psycho-spiritual support and theology of disaster, particularly to disaster prone areas in the country.

The seminary has been teaching a full course on the theology of work since 2004. The seminary has also pioneered a unique program for movement leaders among the urban poor.² Since the mid 1990s it has also offered courses on eco-theology and creation care, with biblical theology and the Lausanne declarations providing the missional theological bases for teaching and practice. Stewardship in all of life is a core value of the seminary; the Center for Biblical Stewardship was created in 2007, later renamed the ATS Strategic Leader Development Center. We began offering an MBA in Biblical Stewardship and Christian Management in 2004.

Schools across Asia are adopting similar practices. Reformed Theological Seminary of Indonesia has student internships in businesses as well as in churches. Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary shares a list of courses, such as The Servant, State and Society, that connect theological education to daily life. St. Thomas' Theological College in Pakistan has required courses on work ethics and social participation, and has students work with impoverished people to learn about and help them think about their work challenges. Shalom Bible Seminary in India divides all faculty and staff into service

¹ Ibid., 23. See also Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1999).

² For an account of this initiative, see the account of the former academic dean of ATS, Larry Caldwell, “How Asian is Asian Theological Education?” in *Tending the Seedbeds: Educational Perspectives on Theological Education in Asia*, Alan Harkness (ed.), (Manila: ATA Publications, 2010) 37-40.

groups with particular responsibilities to connect with and serve specific populations outside the seminary (such as in hospitals, prisons, drug rehabilitation centers and orphanages).

Challenges

The programs we have adopted raise questions about our identity as an institution that are sometimes challenging. A recent consultation with global theological educators posed this question to ATS: Is the inclusion of a Christian MBA and a master's track that focuses on community development a deepening of what theological education is about – or is it a misunderstanding of, if not a dissociation from, its true nature and task? Our sustainability is directly linked to how clearly we understand our mission and vision as an institution of theological education. In what sense is ATS a school for Christian business/workplace as well as urban poor community leaders? Should we not just focus on training of pastors and church workers? This is how ATS began; is it really what seminary is about? Our current leadership affirms the expanded notion of theological education as a biblical and contextual response to the Philippine and Asian church situation; global realities in theological education, however, continue to challenge us to be reflective about our understanding and practices.

Resources

Allan Harkness (ed.), *Tending the Seedbeds: Educational Perspectives on Theological Education in Asia*, ATA Publications, 2010.

Mark Labberton, *Called: The Crisis and Promise of Following Jesus Today*, InterVarsity Press, 2014.

John Suk (ed.), *Doing Theology in the Philippines*, Asian Theological Seminary, 2005.