


Enhancing theological imagination in Indonesian higher education: Pedagogical strategies

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The theopoetic imaginative approach in theological education offers a new paradigm that connects theological tradition with dynamic sociocultural contexts. This approach emphasises local imagination and symbolism and helps students develop a critical and contextual reflection on Christian teachings. Through integrating local cultural symbols, such as *Dalihan Na Tolu* in Batak culture or *gotong royong* in Javanese culture, theology is understood as a static doctrine and a living and relevant reflection. Theopoetic imagination also encourages interfaith and cultural dialogue, allowing Christian theology in Indonesia to interact creatively with other traditions. This approach provides students with space to think more creatively and become agents of change who can respond to social and spiritual challenges in a relevant manner.

Contribution: This study enriches theological pedagogy by offering a creative, imagination-based approach relevant to pluralistic socio-cultural contexts. This approach also contributes to interdisciplinary dialogue that connects aesthetics, theology and social reality.

Keywords: theopoetics; imagination; education; local symbolism; interfaith dialogue.

Introduction

Theological education in Indonesia is currently at a crucial crossroads, where students' low level of critical and reflective abilities is a significant challenge that needs to be addressed immediately. Based on the evaluation of Bloom's taxonomy, the quality of education in Indonesia only reaches the level of understanding and application with the ability to rise to levels C4 (analysing), C5 (evaluating) and C6 (creating). Ulfah and Opan Arifudin (2023) find that the affective and psychomotor domains, which involve moral aspects, attitudes and practical applications, have not been optimally applied, so students tend to be weak in developing critical attitudes and the ability to apply theory to real life. This problem is further exacerbated by the rise of plagiarism and the reliance on technologies such as ChatGPT.

Rather than being a tool for the development of knowledge, these technologies are often used as shortcuts, thereby reducing the critical and reflective thinking processes that should be at the heart of theological education (Manurung et al. 2023; Pantan 2023).

This condition significantly reduces the quality of theological education and distances students from the primary goal of theological studies, namely developing critical, reflective and contextual thinking. Students tend to avoid the process of deep and reflective thinking, which is the essence of theological education, and prefer instant solutions offered by technology. This condition is worrying because technology erodes theological students' reflective abilities instead of enriching learning.

The problem of plagiarism and misuse of technology has eroded students' critical thinking. On the one hand, technology has great potential to support the learning process, but if misused, technology can replace the process of deep reflection with instant answers. This is contrary to the basic principles of theological education, which emphasise the importance of reflective and imaginative processes in understanding the complexity of faith and life. Theology is not only about studying dogma or texts textually, but is an effort to respond to fundamental questions about the relationship between humans and God, the world and others. In this context, the power of imagination plays a significant role in building a theology that is relevant and responsive to the challenges of the times (Dewantoro & Sinaga 2023). Julian N. Hartt (1978), in 'Theological Method

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and Imagination', states that theological imagination is an essential tool for understanding complex reality. Hartt (1978) argues that imagination allows theologians to go beyond the constraints of traditional rationality and open up space for understanding God through more profound symbols and narratives.

The discussion about imagination in Christianity is not new, especially related to its constructive and destructive role in knowing God. Imagination can bring someone to a deeper understanding of God, but it also has the potential to lead, someone astray. Moreover, in the Christian perspective, imagination is not only about its potential for good or bad, but also reflects the nature of God himself. Clyde S. Kilby, an English writer, emphasised that God loves form and beauty, as reflected in the creation story in the Book of Genesis (Langan 2002). According to Kilby, beauty or aesthetics is always related to form, and God formed the earth, which was initially irregular. For God, aesthetics is not an accident, but the result of His imaginative work and effort.

Paul Ricoeur views theological imagination as an aesthetic tool and an essential hermeneutical tool for understanding the deeper meaning of symbols and narratives in sacred texts. Ricoeur (1986:312) emphasises that theological imagination should not be separated from rationality, but rather part of a hermeneutical effort that helps individuals explore richer and more contextual theological meanings. However, the approach to theological education in Indonesia, which is still very deductive and textual, often fails to develop students' critical and creative abilities. Education that only focusses on mastering doctrine makes students unable to answer various complex societal problems, let alone integrate faith with the ever-changing reality. Joas Adiprasetya (2018), in his book *An Imaginative Glimpse: The Trinity and Multiple Religious Participations*, emphasises the importance of imagination in constructive theology. According to Adiprasetya, imagination allows for creative dialogue between theological traditions and the context of religious and cultural plurality in Indonesia. This is very relevant considering the complex and diverse socio-cultural context of Indonesia. Without the involvement of imagination, theology in Indonesia risks becoming rigid and losing its relevance in responding to various socio-political dynamics and spiritual challenges in society (Adiprasetya 2018).

Insight confirms that theology requires intellectualism and a solid imagination to respond to increasingly complex social and spiritual dynamics. Therefore, a fundamental reform is needed in the pedagogical approach to theological higher education in Indonesia. Teaching that focusses on cognitive and doctrinal aspects must be transformed into an approach that encourages the development of theological imagination. Hospitality, theopoetics, local symbolism and cultural narratives can be practical pedagogical strategies to encourage students to think critically and creatively in building contextual theology. This enriches the learning process and helps students feel more reflectively in answering various theological questions faced by the Indonesian church and society today.

This study aims to examine pedagogical strategies that can strengthen the development of theological imagination in theological higher education in Indonesia. By integrating creative methods, it will explore how such pedagogical approaches can help theology students develop more critical, reflective and contextual thinking. Effective theological education must be able to bridge theory with practice, text with context and tradition with imagination so that students can develop a more holistic and relevant theological understanding of the challenges of the times.

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a literature study method that critically analyses the theory of theological imagination and theopoetics in theological education. Data were collected through a literature review of constructive theology sources, local symbolism and cultural narratives to develop a pedagogical model relevant to Indonesia's socio-cultural context. This research uses a constructive approach that focusses on pedagogical strategies based on theological imagination, in line with the principles of constructive theology developed by Joas Adiprasetya (2023). This constructive approach aims to not only describe existing phenomena, but also design innovative pedagogical models that combine theological traditions with diverse social, cultural and religious realities in Indonesia (Fink 2014:3). Adiprasetya emphasises that theological imagination functions as a creative bridge connecting theology with contemporary challenges, thus preventing theological education from being trapped in a rigid and limited approach to doctrine. This study relies on a critical analysis of relevant literature, primarily focussing on Adiprasetya's (2018) work, as well as theories that support the concept of constructive theology and theological imagination. Through this approach, this study will adapt the ideas of theological imagination to the context of higher theological education in Indonesia. This constructive approach allows for exploring the application of creative methods, such as local symbolism, cultural narratives and theopoetics in theological learning, to enrich the dialogue between tradition and context (Hasiholan 2024). The expected result is the creation of a pedagogical model that not only addresses the low critical and reflective abilities of students, but also encourages the development of a theological imagination that is contextual, relevant and able to respond to the social and spiritual dynamics faced by the church and Indonesian society (Setyobekti et al. 2024).

From dogmatic to imaginative: Integrating the theological imagination in pedagogy

Dogmatic theology is a subdiscipline that focusses on understanding and transmitting essential Christian faith teachings that must be passed down from generation to generation. In the context of theological education in Indonesia, this term has long been used to discuss basic teachings in the Christian faith. Dogmatics began to become popular in the 17th century, one of which was through the

work of L. Reinhardt in 1659. Its influence grew more substantial in the 20th century through the theology of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner (Adiprasetya 2019:2). The dogmatic approach emphasises the delivery of stable and constant teachings without opening much room for innovation or new interpretations. However, much criticism is directed at dogmatics, especially regarding its tendency to be rigid and not allow for dialogue with dynamic social and cultural changes. Dogmatics is often seen more as an attempt to traditionalise faith than a creative and contextual reinterpretation, thus inhibiting renewal in theology.

Meanwhile, constructive theology, the root of the imagination in theology, emerged as a response to the limitations of dogmatic and systematic theological approaches by offering a more open and creative way of thinking. Constructive theology emphasises that the Christian theological tradition is a vast reservoir of meaning, but only some things must be accommodated in every context. Through this approach, theologians are positioned as figures who build new theological frameworks using materials from tradition and non-theological sources, such as philosophy, sociology or psychology (Adiprasetya 2019:7). Constructive theology not only aims to develop a systemic understanding, but also to show the aesthetic and performative aspects of theology as a theological work of art. Constructive theology emphasises the importance of imagination in constructing new interpretations of Christian teachings relevant to the ever-changing social and cultural context while also opening up space for contributions from other disciplines in forming theological understanding.

The shift from a dogmatic to an imaginative approach in theological education is a crucial response to contemporary theological education's intellectual and spiritual challenges, especially in Indonesia. Previously, theological education was coloured by a dogmatic method that focussed on deriving doctrines authoritatively and tended to be rigid. This approach emphasised obedience to texts and teachings without giving room for creative exploration and contextual interpretation (Allen 2022). Although this dogmatic teaching is necessary for building a solid theological foundation, it must be improved to allow students to engage in critical reflection and dialogue with dynamic and pluralistic socio-cultural contexts.

The development of constructive theological thought has paved the way for a transition to a more imaginative pedagogical approach. Theological imagination is not merely a decorative element in the study of theology, but a critical component that bridges theological tradition with the reality of cultural and religious plurality. Imagination in the context of theology is a creative tool and a hermeneutical means that allows students to engage deeply with theological narratives and present theological reflections relevant to the times' challenges. This approach encourages theology to remain relevant amid ongoing social, political and spiritual changes without losing its doctrinal integrity.

Theological education that focusses too much on dogma without involving imagination often fails to develop students' reflective and critical abilities. Based on the evaluation of Bloom's taxonomy, many theology students are still trapped at the basic level of understanding and need help to reach higher levels of analysis and creation. Rigid, dogmatic theological education limits the development of critical and reflective abilities, so students need help responding to increasingly complex social and spiritual challenges. In response to this phenomenon, the theological imaginative approach offers an alternative that allows students to understand doctrine textually and translate it into a constantly changing socio-cultural context.

Kanuka and Anderson review the literature on educational technology and constructivism. They developed a framework to represent the 'constructivist epistemological position'. Their primary goal was to 'make some sense out of the chaos – and often conflicting information – in the literature on constructivist learning theory' (Kanuka & Anderson 1999). This framework involves four positions and two dimensions in constructivism. The first dimension considers the extent to which reality is objective and separate from the learner or the extent to which reality is subjective and based on the learner's reality. The second dimension identifies the extent to which knowledge is constructed from social, cultural or contextual sources or the extent to which knowledge is individually constructed. The four positions include cognitive constructivism, radical constructivism, situated constructivism and co-constructivism. Western Governors University (2020) summarises the general idea of constructivism with the following explanation:

[C]onstructivism is based on the idea that people actively construct or create their knowledge and that reality is determined by your experiences as a learner. Essentially, learners use their prior knowledge as a foundation and build on it with new things they learn. So, each person's experiences make their learning process unique. (p.1)

Theological imagination is a creative bridge connecting theological teachings with cultural plurality in Indonesia. This approach allows theology students to understand the Christian faith within a diverse cultural and social framework, reflecting the pluralistic reality of Indonesian society. Theological imagination stimulates creative thinking and enriches students' ability to engage in contextual theological reflection. This is in line with Kilby's (2000) thinking, which emphasises the importance of imagination in creating structure and meaning in life.

Imaginative theological education also involves an aesthetic element, where local art and symbolism are essential in helping students understand theology contextually. Dorothy Sayers (1941) asserts that art is a participation in the divine life, where human creativity reflects God's creativity. Thus, theological education integrating aesthetic elements such as theopoetics and local symbolism can help students develop a

richer and more reflective theological understanding. This approach allows students to learn doctrine cognitively and live their faith through creative creation and reflection.

The transformation from a dogmatic to an imaginative approach is also driven by the critical role of imagination in shaping contextual theological understanding. As Northrop Frye (1982:17–32) explains, imagination is the primary mode of human interaction with reality. Education that ignores imagination loses the ability to develop a deeper relationship with the world, even in a religious context. Imagination allows students to reinterpret the social and spiritual realities around them. Thus, it becomes essential to develop a relevant and responsive theology that meets the challenges of the times. In *Visual Thinking*, Rudolph Arnheim emphasises that the ability to ‘see’ and understand reality depends on the imagination, which can simplify and interpret experience (Arnheim 1969). Therefore, in theological education, theological imagination plays a vital role in helping students overcome doctrinal rigidity and opening up space for critical reflection and creative interpretation. Theological imagination is a tool for studying theology and a medium for students to respond to the social and spiritual challenges they face.

The imaginative approach helps create a dialogue between tradition and context, where local symbolism, cultural narratives and theopoetics are essential in enriching theological pedagogy. Imagination-based theological education enhances students’ reflective abilities and encourages them to think critically and creatively in answering relevant theological questions. Thus, the integration of theological imagination in theological education pedagogy brings about an essential shift from a dogmatic approach to a more dynamic, imaginative and contextual approach. This enables students to develop a more holistic theological understanding relevant to the social, political and spiritual challenges the church and society face in Indonesia. Through a creative and reflective approach, theological imagination becomes essential in building a relevant and responsive theology.

The use of local symbolism and narratives to enhance theological relevance

In the context of imaginative theology, integrating local symbolism and narratives is one of the essential methods to make theology more relevant to the pluralistic and dynamic reality in Indonesia. This approach goes beyond contextual theology, which, on the face of it, seems friendly to the unique locus of society. However, contextual theology still tends to degrade local wealth. Adiprasetya states that contextual theology begins its theological reflection process by emphasising the context of real life, not just the text. In this case, humans’ concrete situations and experiences in various aspects of life are taken seriously. Methodologically, contextual theology begins with a description and in-depth understanding of the concrete reality faced. After that, a more in-depth

analysis of the situation is carried out. The next step is the theological interpretation of the analysis results, which ends with actions or practices aimed at transforming the adverse conditions identified in the previous process (Adiprasetya 2019:6). Therefore, the imagination serves as a tool for interpreting sacred texts and a creative medium that can bridge theological traditions with changing cultural contexts. As part of the cultural context, local symbolism and narratives allow for a more lively dialogue between the teachings of the Christian faith and the concrete experiences of local people.

Local symbolism in theology plays an essential role in the inculturation of Christian teachings. As emphasised by Robert Schreiter (1985:23–25), local cultural symbols connect the Gospel’s teachings with the community’s daily life. These symbols, such as the Ulos cloth in the Batak tradition, have rich spiritual meanings and can be used to convey theological concepts such as love, blessings and unity. Integrating these symbols into the liturgy or church teaching strengthens the relevance of theology and helps deepen the people’s spiritual experience in their local context. In his speech, Francis Borgias also emphasised the importance of a deep understanding of local symbolism as an integral part of developing contextual theology (Borgias 2016).

In addition, local narratives, such as myths, legends and folktales, can be used as a medium to convey theological messages that are more easily understood by the community. Narratives about local wisdom, for example, can be adapted to describe theological themes such as salvation, God’s presence and community cooperation. In this context, theology is not only understood as a collection of dogmas imposed from ‘above’, but as a living reflection of the spiritual experience of the community coloured by their own cultural and historical context (Pamungkas 2023). This aligns with the principle of imaginative theology, which sees imagination as a bridge between tradition and context.

Penggunaan simbolisme dan narasi lokal ini juga memberikan ruang bagi pemahaman teologi more participatory and inclusive. Clemens Sedmak (2002) asserts that constructive theology allows for intercultural dialogue, where local symbols and folklore can function as theological media. Here, theological imagination is crucial in connecting individual faith experiences with the broader community while creating a more dynamic and relevant theological understanding. This theological imagination not only creates space for new interpretations, but also gives local communities the freedom to express their faith through symbols and narratives that are familiar to them.

The use of local symbolism and narratives shows that this approach increases the relevance of theology amid society and contributes to the development of global theological thought. As constructive theologians such as Oliver Crisp and Fred Sanders (eds. 2017:15) have argued, local symbolism can enrich the understanding of universal theology by providing a more contextual and specific perspective. This is also emphasised by Gerhard Sauter (2003), who stated that

theology that does not take cultural context into account will lose its relevance in a world that is constantly changing. Local narratives also can embrace the unique social and spiritual experiences of communities in different parts of the world. In the Indonesian context, where cultural and religious plurality is an integral part of everyday life, local narratives can be used to convey theological messages that are inclusive and pluralistic. This approach enriches theological understanding and strengthens social cohesion in a diverse society.

Imaginative approaches that use local symbolism and narratives also provide new challenges for theological education. In theological education, this approach can encourage students to develop critical and reflective thinking skills, inviting them to connect theological teachings with the socio-cultural realities they face. Thus, theological students learn about Christian doctrine and are trained to become creative thinkers who can respond to the times' challenges. This aligns with the principle of constructive theology, which emphasises the integration of theological tradition and socio-cultural context. The use of local symbolism and narratives in theology is an approach that increases the relevance of theological teachings and enriches the theological learning process. Local symbolism and narratives allow theological teachings to be more deeply rooted in the people's real lives and provide space for theological imagination to develop in the context of cultural and religious plurality. Thus, this approach is not only relevant to the Indonesian context, but also has the potential to be applied in a global context, where theology continues to adapt to changing cultural and social realities.

Theopoetic imagination in higher theological education to build constructive dialogue between tradition and context

Traditional theological education in Indonesia, as explained in previous documents, is often trapped in rigid and static dogma. Dogma in theology is a pure transfer of teachings from generation to generation without providing enough space for innovation or renewal. Criticism of this dogmatic approach arises because it cannot respond to social change and contextual needs. Therefore, there is a shift from a dogmatic approach to a more imaginative theological approach, primarily through the framework of theopoetics. Theopoetics is an approach that emphasises creativity and aesthetics in theology, where theology is not only a discipline that focusses on doctrine, but also an art that allows for dialogue between faith and reality (Olsman 2022).

In theological higher education, the theopoetic imaginative approach offers a new perspective that connects established theological traditions with dynamic socio-cultural contexts. This approach allows students to understand theology through traditional teachings and interpret them creatively and reflectively according to the realities of their lives. Theopoetic imagination encourages students to create new

meanings through local symbols and cultural narratives, providing space for integrating Christian teachings with their local contexts. For example, symbols found in Batak, Javanese or Dayak cultures can be used to explain how Christian theology can be applied and understood in everyday life. In Batak culture, for example, *Dalihan Na Tolu* – which reflects social relations in society – can be combined with the Trinity in Christian theology, creating a more relevant and down-to-earth reflection for the local community.

The theopoetic imaginative approach also emphasises the importance of dialogue between tradition and context. Although theological tradition has universal value, it must be presented contextually to address modern society's socio-cultural challenges. This approach invites students to reinterpret classical theological texts by considering existing social conditions so that theology is no longer seen as something static, but as a living practice that continues to develop according to the needs of the times.

Beauty also plays a vital role in this approach. In her work *Beauty and the Creative Impulse*, Luci Shaw asserts that beauty is a divine impulse that permeates all aspects of creation. In the context of theological education, beauty is not only seen as an aesthetic element, but as a medium that bridges theological teachings with contemporary reality (Shaw 2002). Art, whether poetry, music or visuals, can be a tool for expressing rich and reflective theological truths. Through art, students can explore new aspects of the Christian faith that are normative, but also meaningful and aesthetic.

Moreover, this imaginative approach encourages students to be more creative in their theological reflections. Imagination provides space for exploring new meanings of Christian teachings relevant to the modern socio-cultural context. For example, the concept of *gotong royong* in Javanese culture can be connected to God's justice, where justice is not only about punishment, but also about collective efforts for the common good. This approach helps students understand that theology is not just a doctrine to be memorised, but something that can be practised and reinterpreted in their lives.

In the context of Indonesia, which is rich in tradition and cultural diversity, this theopoetic approach is very relevant. Local traditions can be seen as expressions of divine beauty that the Creator has embedded in human culture. This approach teaches that theological education is a place to learn about doctrine and create a dialogue between the Christian faith and local cultural values. Theopoetic imagination allows students to find the relevance of Christian teachings in their society without losing its theological essence. In addition, this approach also opens up opportunities for interfaith and intercultural dialogue. Theology based on theopoetic imagination invites students to be more open to symbols and narratives from other religious traditions, thus creating a more inclusive dialogue

and enriching the understanding of Christian theology. For example, in Bali, Hindu symbolism such as *Tri Hita Karana* can be used to understand the relationship between humans, nature and God in Christian teachings, providing a new, more holistic perspective in theological approaches. Another example in Toraja culture is 'Rambu Solo'; a well-known death ritual with profound significance. This ritual is not merely a farewell procession for the deceased, but also embodies values such as resilience, communal solidarity, and reverence for ancestors. Its implementation involves a series of ceremonies that affirm the spiritual connection between humans, ancestors, and the transcendent realm. The spiritual values embedded in this ritual reflect the Toraja belief in the afterlife and the importance of the soul's journey to the next realm. Thus, 'Rambu Solo' is not only a cultural tradition, but also holds a strong theological dimension in the life of the Toraja people (Pantan, Pakpahan & Wiryohadi 2024).

Thus, the theopoetic imaginative approach offers a powerful way to build a constructive dialogue between tradition and context. Combining creativity, critical reflection and local symbolism makes theological education more relevant, dynamic and inclusive. This approach enriches students' theological understanding and prepares them to become agents of change who can respond to socio-cultural challenges through creative and meaningful theological reflection.

Conclusion

The theopoetic imaginative approach in theological education opens opportunities for integration between theological traditions and dynamic socio-cultural contexts. By emphasising imagination as a tool to create new meanings through local symbolism and cultural narratives, this approach allows students to live Christian teachings creatively and relevantly. Amid the challenges of students' low critical and reflective abilities and the increasing misuse of technology, this approach offers an alternative that emphasises the importance of theological reflection that is not only dogmatic, but also creative. Theopoetic imagination invites students to view theology as an open space for new interpretations that are contextual and relevant while maintaining doctrinal integrity. In the context of theological education in Indonesia, which is rich in tradition and cultural diversity, this approach offers a way to bridge the gap between universal Christian teachings and unique local realities. Students can find the relevance of Christian theology in everyday life by using local symbolism such as *Dalihan Na Tolu* in Batak culture or *gotong royong* in Javanese culture. In addition, this theopoetic approach also encourages interfaith dialogue, where narratives and symbols from other traditions, such as *Tri Hita Karana* in Hinduism, can enrich a more inclusive theological understanding. This approach ultimately plays a vital role in preparing theology students to become creative thinkers and agents of change who can respond to socio-cultural challenges through theological reflection that is more critical, contextual and responsive to the times.

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M.T. is the sole author of this research article.

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Disclaimer

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