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Humanistic and inclusive Christian education: A framework for learning transformation

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Author:
Frans Pantan[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Christian Education, Sekolah Tinggi Teologi, Bethel, Jakarta, Indonesia

Corresponding author:
Frans Pantan, franspantan@sttbi.ac.id

Christian religious education struggles to balance local relevance and theological fidelity in Indonesia. By embracing education, this approach seeks to create a learning space that respects diversity, strengthens love and encourages reconciliation between local traditions and Christian teachings. This study analysed the potential of adaptive technology to improve inclusivity and quality of learning, integrating Miroslav Volf's ideas on reconciliation and Jill W. Fresen's on digital education. Using the literature study method, it was found that technology can strengthen the principles of inclusivity and cross-cultural dialogue and encourage students' spiritual transformation. Collaboration with local communities, project-based curriculum and context-based educator training can improve the competitiveness of theological colleges in Indonesia. This study offers an educational model that is relevant and capable of being an agent of social change in a pluralistic society.

Contribution: This study integrated the approach of reconciliation theology and educational technology to create an inclusive and transformative learning model. This study contributes to cross-cultural studies by offering a dialogue-based teaching strategy to build harmony in a multicultural society.

Keywords: Christian religious education; embracing education; reconciliation; Miroslav Volf; inclusive education; adaptive technology; contextual curriculum.

Introduction

Christian religious education is a complex space in the competitiveness of education in Indonesia. Of the 385 theological colleges with Christian religious education study programmes, only one has received an A (Excellent) accreditation from the Indonesian Christian University. The rest are accredited B (Very Good) and C (Good), and many have not received accreditation from the National Accreditation Board for Higher Education (BAN-PT). Accreditation of study programmes is objective evidence that higher education institutions in Indonesia have met the established quality standards to provide education relevant to the job market's needs and global developments. In the Indonesian context, accreditation ensures that study programmes are not only by national regulations but can also contribute to developing competitive and internationally competitive human resources (Made et al. 2022; Nisa 2018). The accreditation process encourages universities to continuously evaluate and improve the academic quality and relevance of study programmes, making it a strategic tool in facing the challenges of the era of globalisation and local dynamics.

Theological colleges in Indonesia which have successfully achieved superior accreditation reflect an extraordinary ability to elaborate Christian religious education on local issues in a relevant and contextual way. The challenges faced are not easy, considering the complexity of Indonesian culture and diversity that requires sensitivity and a wise approach. This integration requires a profound effort to balance fidelity to Christian doctrine and relevance to the context of society. Without caution, such efforts can fall into syncretism, which obscures the authenticity of faith by mixing Christian teachings and local traditions without a clear theological basis (Simorangkir et al. 2022). On the other hand, the threat of liberalism is also a problem, where an approach that is too loose can reduce the essence of Christian faith to only universal values that lose biblical authority. Excellent theological colleges overcome this challenge by combining an academic approach firmly rooted in biblical theology, relevance to the needs of society and sensitivity to local culture, resulting in an education that is not only academically superior but also socially and theologically significant.

Indonesia, with more than 1300 ethnic groups and cultural, social and religious diversity, requires an educational approach that instils values of faith and builds a deep understanding of diversity. However, reality shows that Christian religious education is often trapped in a cognitive approach that emphasises memorisation of doctrine, thus ignoring the humanist dimension that can form closer relationships between humans. If we follow Bloom's Taxonomy, the quality of Christian religious education in Indonesia is still at the level of understanding and application. It is not easy to rise to levels C4 (analysing), C5 (evaluating) and C6 (creating). Ulfah and Opan Arifudin found 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 (Ulfah & Arifudin 2023).

Around 440 000 children with special needs in Indonesia need inclusive education, but only 25% of schools implement it optimally. In Christian religious education, this challenge is even more accurate because of the limitations of teachers in accommodating student diversity. Christian education not only transmits doctrine but must also be a space for character transformation and social relations. The embracing education approach, based on Miroslav Volf's reconciliation and acceptance, can create an inclusive environment, restore identity and build harmony in a pluralistic society.

The embracing education approach empowers each individual in education, improving students' psychological well-being, academic achievement and social skills (Allen & Bowles 2012). In Christian religious education, this approach addresses students' cultural, social and economic diversity. Volf asserts that every human being as an image of God has irreplaceable value, so education must respect this dignity (Volf 1996, 1998). Integrating his ideas forms a learning model based on love, acceptance and respect for differences. In addition, embracing education with technology expands access to learning for marginalised students (Fresen 2018), relevant to addressing educational disparities in Indonesia.

This study explores the construction of humanistic and inclusive Christian religious education by embracing education as a framework for learning transformation. With the integration of Miroslav Volf's ideas and the use of digital technology, this study is expected to offer an educational model that not only educates but also restores and unites amidst Indonesia's diversity. Hopefully, this will impact the quality of Christian religious education in Indonesia regarding accreditation and quality of thinking.

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a literature study method to analyse embracing education in the context of Christian religious education in Indonesia. Data were obtained through an in-depth review of relevant literature, including Volf's work and Fresen's study of educational technology. The analysis was conducted thematically to explore the relationship between humanist and inclusive education principles and local challenges in Indonesia. The study results are expected to provide a conceptual framework that can be adapted to improve the quality and relevance of Christian religious education in Indonesia.

Delivering education that embraces diversity

Embracing education is an important approach in Christian religious education in Indonesia, especially in building a harmonious learning community amidst cultural and religious plurality. Erik W. Carter identified the ten main dimensions of 'Belonging Education', which became the basis for genuinely inclusive education in faith and diversity. Firstly, presence becomes an essential dimension that ensures that each student has real access to and existence in the learning community. Secondly, active invitations are important so students are present and involved in various learning activities. Thirdly, a warm welcome creates a friendly and inclusive environment. Fourthly, knowing personally (knowledge) means that each individual is valued based on identity and uniqueness. Fifthly, unconditional acceptance ensures students do not experience discrimination and can develop without social obstacles.

Sixthly, sustainable support (supported) is critical to ensure that every student gets the practical and emotional assistance they need. Seventhly, care for welfare shows that the educational community pays attention to students' emotional and spiritual aspects. Eighthly, events such as sincere friendship (befriended) help students build meaningful social relations. Ninthly, a meaningful role in the community (needs) ensures that each individual feels he has a valuable contribution. Tenthly, in-depth love is the core of all these dimensions, creating a learning environment based on love and acceptance (Carter 2022:1–7). By integrating all these dimensions, Christian religious education focuses on transferring knowledge and acts as a means of deeper character and faith formation (Albrecht-Crane 2005).

Embracing education aligns with Christian values emphasising love, acceptance and inclusivity. In the teachings of Christ, education is not just a transfer of knowledge but also a means of character formation and spiritual transformation. An educational model that embraces diversity provides intellectual insight and prepares students to become agents of change who bring peace and justice to society. By adopting this approach in Christian religious education, educators can build a learning community oriented towards transformation, not just mastery of theological material.

In this context, embracing education creates a sense of acceptance and makes students an integral part of a mutually supportive learning community. This approach positions Christian religious education as a space where students can integrate the Christian faith with the values of diversity around them. Manalu et al. assert that inclusive Christian religious education helps students understand the value of

their faith and build an attitude of mutual respect amidst diversity (Manalu, Hardori & Trisna 2021). Thus, embracing education is not only a pedagogical tool but also a character-building strategy that is relevant to the context of a pluralistic society in Indonesia.

In embracing education, the community plays an important role as a medium for students to feel accepted and appreciated. Ideally, based on the spirit of the faith community, Christian religious education can function as a container that connects Christian values with the socio-cultural dynamics of students. The community becomes a space for students to learn about the values of togetherness, love and respect for differences, as emphasised by Campbell and Tsuria in their study of interfaith dialogue (Campbell & Tsuria 2022). Through active community involvement, students internalise theological values and develop inclusive attitudes relevant to life in a pluralistic society. In facing criticism of inclusive approaches such as embracing education, Christian religious education must balance openness to diversity with firmness towards its theological boundaries so that the identity of faith remains strong. The two central doctrines that serve as the fence of Christianity are the Trinity and the hypostasis of Jesus Christ as true God and true man. The Trinity affirms that God is one in essence but consists of three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as outlined in the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD (Adiprasetya 2013). Meanwhile, the doctrine of the hypostasis of Christ affirmed in the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD states that in one person of Christ, two natures are not mixed but not separated, namely divinity and humanity (Setyobekti 2023). Thus, in adopting an inclusive approach, Christian religious education must still adhere to this fundamental doctrine to avoid losing faith's core teachings.

The author sees embracing education as a solution to create harmony without sacrificing fundamental theological principles. In Christian religious education, this approach helps students understand that the Christian faith is not just an exclusive doctrine but a calling to live out the values of love and justice in a pluralistic society. Epafras et al. highlight the need to reread biblical texts for a more inclusive and relevant understanding (Epafras et al. 2021). This allows Christian religious education to become a learning space that strengthens faith and supports harmony between religious communities. In addition to building a sense of connectedness in the community, embracing education also plays a significant role in forming students' spiritual character. Education based on a sense of belonging allows students to experience a profound spiritual transformation. By utilising theological principles, Christian religious education can guide students to integrate the values of faith with the character they develop.

In the context of Indonesia's diversity, embracing education plays a key role in fostering respect for differences. An inclusive education model allows students from various cultural and religious backgrounds to feel accepted without losing their identity (Kaunang & Tafonao 2023).

However, criticism of this approach has emerged from those questioning whether inclusivity in Christian religious education can create a strong faith identity or lead to syncretism. Campbell, in his study on religious diversity, emphasised that the educational approach must still have clear theological boundaries to avoid getting caught in a compromise that can reduce the fundamental values of the Christian faith (Campbell 2015:37). Therefore, embracing education must be designed with the right balance by accommodating diversity without eliminating the essence of Christian teachings that are the basis for religious education. Thus, embracing education is a pedagogical tool to create a tolerant and harmonious society and an educational model that maintains the integrity of the Christian faith amidst diversity.

Technology as a bridge of inclusion

Technology is a tool for efficiency and a space to embrace human dignity. Technology, as explained by Pavel Hanes and Bram De Muynck, is an extension of human beings that has the potential to both empower and threaten human dignity. Technology can ignore human rights and values, such as privacy and social connection, when used without ethical principles for efficiency or economic gain. However, when designed to honour the divine image in each individual, technology can be a co-creative tool that supports inclusive education, strengthens social relationships, and protects human vulnerability (Hanes & De Muynck 2017). This approach emphasises that technology should be used to complete the work of God's creation, not to destroy it so that it can embrace human dignity through innovation rooted in love and social awareness (Mele 2014:2–7). However, criticism of technology in Christian religious education remains, particularly regarding the risk of individualisation that can reduce the community experience and direct interaction that is the foundation of faith education.

Volf emphasises the importance of embracing, accepting and integrating human diversity in harmony without eliminating each person's unique identity (Volf 1998). In Christian religious education, technology can provide learning experiences that respect the diversity of students, both in cultural background and educational needs (Benyamin, Sinaga & Gracia 2021). By utilising digital platforms that enable collaboration and exploration of Christian values, Christian religious education can become and/or provide a learning space that embraces the dignity of every student. However, criticism of this approach has come from theologians who see digitalisation as a threat to the experience of direct encounter that is so important in learning the faith. Technology can create a more flexible learning space, but can digital interaction completely replace the spiritual intimacy established in direct fellowship? For Pakpahan et al. (2022), this hope can be achieved if the ability to adapt to technology is made a tradition. In Indonesia, the ability to adapt is

significantly reduced because the presence of technology damages relationships with others (Pakpahan et al. 2022).

In the context of embracing education, as explained in the earlier text, Carter identifies embracing education as an approach that ensures students feel accepted, invited and fully supported in the learning community. Technology, if appropriately designed, can strengthen this dimension. For example, students' presence in online learning allows them to remain connected to the community despite being geographically separated. Moreover, digital platforms can provide cross-cultural and cross-denominational discussion spaces, encouraging students to recognise and appreciate diversity without losing their faith values (Liu & Fan 2022).

Volf's view of inclusion suggests that true inclusion involves a process of embracing – an active act of accepting diversity without diminishing the unique value of each individual (Volf 2011). In the Indonesian context, the World Bank report shows that around 30% of children with disabilities still do not have access to education (World Bank Group 2021). Technology is a solution to reach students with special needs, providing learning experiences that respect their dignity and needs through inclusive platforms (Kim 2020). Thus, technology expands access and brings to life the values of love and acceptance in Christian religious education. However, there is a debate whether technology deepens human relationships or creates an illusion of connection without true intimacy. To address this challenge, a hybrid approach that combines digital learning with physical interaction may be the best solution in Christian religious education. In Love in Contemporary Technoculture, Ania Malinowska highlights how technological developments have changed how humans experience love and intimacy. She argues that digitalisation creates a new reality in which technology increasingly mediates relationships, shifting from physical to virtual connectedness, often lacking genuine affection (Malinowska 2022:1–3). Technology has extended the reach of human communication and become an integral part of emotional experiences, where individuals have begun to rely on digital platforms to build and maintain relationships. However, while technology can increase accessibility and connectivity, it can also lead to emotional alienation as interactions become more performative than authentic (Malinowska 2022:9–10). In Christian religious education, the concept of love can be contextualised with Malinowska's analysis of digital connectedness. Religious education must develop a hybrid approach combining digital learning with physical interaction to ensure that love is an abstract concept in the digital space and an authentic experience embodied in the faith community (Malinowska 2022:35–37). As Malinowska explains, although technology offers opportunities for building relationships, there is a risk that love is understood only as technological connectedness without the depth of affection. Therefore, Christian education must emphasise that true love is not limited to virtual communication but includes real presence, active attention and concrete acts of love in everyday life.

In Volf's perspective, love is the essence of the act of embracing (Volf 1996). Love and embracing are at the heart of a humanistic and transformative approach to education. In this context, love is seen as the primary force that connects humans to their environment and others, creating empathy and a deep concern for life. Love fosters meaningful relationships in education, where students are taught to understand and appreciate human values. As Michael and Avid explain, embracing in education is embracing diversity in terms of culture, environment or individuals to enrich the learning process (Hammond-Todd & Monk 2021). By integrating love and embracing, education can produce an intellectually intelligent generation committed to building a more just, friendly and loving world. Technology allows educators to present this love through learning experiences designed to build meaningful relationships. For example, using interactive media and simulations can help students understand the values of love in the Christian faith in-depth. With technology, this value of love can be taught conceptually and through direct experiences that touch the emotional dimension of students.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO [2020]) emphasises the importance of lifelong learning as a strategy to create an inclusive and equitable society. In Christian religious education, technology becomes a medium to ensure that students can continue to learn and develop even after they leave the formal classroom. By providing learning content that can be accessed anytime and anywhere, technology supports transforming Christian religious education into a continuous learning experience, strengthening students' faith and character.

In Indonesia's multicultural society, religious education is important for building harmony between groups through humanistic education. Technology can be a medium to build an inclusive learning community where students are taught to live in love and respect diversity. Volf stated that true community can be created only when we embrace others as part of ourselves. By strategically utilising technology, Christian religious education can become a learning space that embraces the diversity of Indonesian culture and instils universal Christian values.

To strengthen the application of technology in Christian religious education, it is necessary to identify specific relevant platforms and methods, accompanied by an evaluation of the challenges that may arise in their implementation. Platforms such as Google Classroom or Moodle can deliver materials online, support collaboration through virtual discussions and provide space for reflection through online forums. In addition, applications such as Kahoot or Quizizz can make learning more engaging through interactive quizzes, which test theological knowledge and motivate students to learn more dynamically. Video conferencing-based technologies such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams enable cross-geographical teaching, which is crucial in reaching students in remote areas. However, challenges in implementing this technology include the digital divide, limited internet access and lack of

technological literacy among educators and students. To overcome this, technology training for educators and providing offline-based devices compatible with areas with limited access are strategic steps. With this approach, technology becomes a tool and a means of transformation that empowers learning and strengthens the value of inclusivity in Christian religious education.

Balancing relevance and authenticity: Avoiding syncretism and liberalism in Christian religious education

Implementing inclusive embracing education brings challenges to Christian religious education in Indonesia. The challenge is the big dilemma in maintaining the balance between local relevance and theological fidelity. Local relevance often demands the integration of local cultural traditions in teaching. However, without a careful theological approach, this risks producing syncretism, where elements of local traditions are mixed without a solid theological foundation. Likewise, when open to the local context, the threat of liberalism can reduce Christian faith to universal values without a deep spiritual dimension. These two challenges underline the importance of an approach that is not only locally relevant but also theologically faithful in building a Christian religious education curriculum.

The strategy that theological colleges in Indonesia should adopt is to integrate the local context of Indonesia into the curriculum of Christian religious education. As a multicultural country, Indonesia offers a wealth of local traditions that can be used as a learning medium. Local-based curriculum must reflect the needs of the local community without losing fidelity to the teachings of the Bible. This approach involves adapting culturally relevant teaching materials and providing space for dialogue between local traditions and Christian faith, as recommended by Volf, through an embracing approach that does not simply accept but integrates diversity in harmony. Honest and open dialogue must be prioritised when integrating local context and Christian insight. Amos Yong proposes that the spirit of dialogue is a valid and appropriate way to mediate it (Yong 2014).

Volf emphasises that reconciliation is not merely a cognitive process but an active act that involves recognising the 'other' as an integral part of the community's identity. In Christian religious education, this principle of reconciliation can be applied through curriculum design that encourages cross-cultural and interfaith dialogue. For example, the curriculum can include courses or modules that invite students to reflect on cultural and religious differences through a theological perspective while building a more inclusive understanding of diversity.

Amos Yong strengthens the idea of reconciliation by emphasising the importance of the spirit of dialogue as a theological approach that maintains the orthodoxy of faith and opens up space for social transformation. To implement

reconciliation in the curriculum of theological colleges, a practical step that can be taken is to design a project-based learning programme that involves students in research or direct service activities in local communities. In each project, students can collaborate with indigenous community leaders, church leaders and educators to explore local values that align with Christian teachings. Theological colleges can also organise cross-cultural and denominational seminars, presenting speakers from various backgrounds to encourage productive discussions. In addition, compulsory courses on intercultural dialogue and the integration of theology with local traditions can be included in the curriculum, with assessments based on students' ability to apply the dialogue results to fundamental service strategies. To strengthen its implementation, theological colleges can build partnerships with indigenous institutions and local church organisations to ensure continuity between theory and practice, making students academically competent and socially relevant.

Another important strategy is to build close partnerships with local communities. This collaboration can be realised through research, community service and training programmes that involve local traditional and religious leaders. By engaging local communities, theological colleges can ensure that their educational programmes are relevant to the community's needs and reflect the diversity of Indonesian culture while remaining rooted in the values of the Christian faith. Elaine Graham emphasises the importance of theological praxis that empowers communities to become agents of change (Graham 2002). This idea is relevant in designing a Christian religious education curriculum, where each learning module should be oriented towards real applications, such as the formation of inclusive communities in Christian schools. The curriculum can include experiential learning that allows students to face the challenges of diversity in authentic contexts while being supported by a theology of love and acceptance.

To improve the capacity and quality of education, theological colleges must utilise adaptive technology as a strategic tool. Technology enables wider access for students from various backgrounds, including those from remote areas or with special needs. Digital platforms designed with inclusivity can support embracing education, such as support and love. In addition, technology can also be used to connect students with local traditions through interactive, culture-based learning.

Theological colleges should prioritise training educators to understand and implement the principle of embracing in their teaching. Educators should be equipped to analyse local traditions in light of the Bible to facilitate healthy dialogue between faith and culture. In addition, this training should include technology and inclusive learning strategies to ensure education is responsive to the needs of students from diverse backgrounds.

Assessment in education should also be designed to reflect local relevance and inclusivity. Theological colleges can develop assessment systems that assess theological understanding and students' ability to integrate Christian values with local culture. These assessments can include community-based projects, local case studies and personal reflections that promote spiritual transformation. Theological colleges should ensure that the principle of lifelong learning is an integral part of their educational strategy. By designing curricula that allow students to continue learning and growing after graduation, theological colleges can produce graduates who are not only academically competent but also socially relevant. Technology is key in supporting this lifelong learning, providing ongoing access to theological resources and global learning communities.

The embracing education approach in Christian religious education has great potential to significantly contribute to the global discourse on inclusive education, especially in pluralistic societies. Amid global challenges such as the migration crisis in Europe, educational inequality in developing countries and social polarisation in the United States, embracing education can be an educational model that answers the need for inclusivity. The main principle of this approach is integrating technology as a bridge to reach students from various cultural, religious and geographical backgrounds. For example, digital platforms such as online learning can be a strategic tool to provide access to education for students in remote areas, immigrants or marginalised groups. In a global context, this technology can create a space for cross-cultural dialogue that facilitates collaborative learning, strengthens the values of tolerance and builds reconciliation in divided societies.

Furthermore, this approach is relevant to the vision of global sustainable education as promoted by UNESCO through Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Inclusive and Quality Education). Technology based on embracing education can be used to narrow the educational gap between developed and developing countries through locally based content that can be accessed globally. For example, platforms such as Moodle or Google Classroom can be used to deliver modules designed to integrate the values of social justice and reconciliation according to the needs of each country's local context. By adopting this approach, embracing education not only addresses the challenge of accessibility but also contributes to building a more just and harmonious global society. This approach positions technology as a means of transforming education, prioritising human dignity and the value of love, and making it relevant in an increasingly connected world.

Conclusion

Christian religious education in Indonesia has an excellent opportunity to become a relevant, inclusive, and transformative learning space despite facing complex challenges in balancing theological fidelity and local relevance. By integrating the principles of embracing education based on love, reconciliation, and respect for human dignity, Christian religious education can answer educational needs appropriate to Indonesia's pluralistic society. Adaptive technology is a strategic means to expand access, improve the quality of learning and create a space for cross-cultural and denominational dialogue so that Christian religious education can contribute to developing a more harmonious and just society.

Fresen, in his study of digital education, emphasises that technology can be a catalyst for creating inclusive, adaptive and contextual education. He argues that when well-designed, digital education can reach students from diverse backgrounds, including those with limited access to geographic, economic or special needs. Digital education offers flexibility in learning, allowing the use of online platforms, multimedia resources and interactive tools to create personalised and meaningful learning experiences.

In curriculum design, the idea of reconciliation can be implemented through three strategic steps: Firstly, designing courses that explicitly explore the theology of reconciliation with case studies from the multicultural Indonesian context to build cross-cultural and religious understanding; secondly, integrating community-based projects that involve fieldwork with cross-cultural and religious groups as a means to teach the value of reconciliation practically; and thirdly, providing a reflective evaluation space in each learning module, where students can evaluate their experiences of interacting with other communities, highlighting how the values of theology of love influence their attitudes and actions in authentic contexts. Through an approach that combines biblical theology with sensitivity to local cultures, Christian religious education can function as a place to form students' spiritual character that respects diversity without losing the essence of the Christian faith. With strategic steps, such as building local partnerships, utilising technology and involving communities in developing project-based curricula, theological colleges in Indonesia can strengthen their educational competitiveness while becoming agents of social transformation that are academically relevant and theologically significant.

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