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Realize a dialogical and transformative Christian education in the context of pluralism

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the urgency of dialogical and transformative Christian Religious Education (PAK) in the context of a pluralistic society. It examines the thoughts of Paul F. Knitter and Pahala J. Simanjuntak as representatives of the theology of interreligious dialogue and prophetic educational practice in Indonesia. Knitter's idea of mutual transformation in the theology of religions offers a new paradigm for the existence of Christian faith amidst plurality, while Simanjuntak's approach emphasizes the importance of contextual, liberating, and social justice-oriented Christian education. This article employs a qualitative approach with a critical-hermeneutic analysis of the main works of both figures, and examines them within the framework of Paulo Freire's pluralistic theology of religions and critical pedagogy. The results demonstrate that the integration of dialogical theology and transformative pedagogy enables the realization of PAK that not only maintains the authentic identity of the Christian faith but also opens itself to interreligious dynamics and global humanitarian challenges. Thus, Christian Education can become a field of liberatory practice that brings together spirituality, critical reflection, and social transformation in the light of the Gospel.



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Introduction

The global social reality of the 21st century is characterized by what Hans Küng calls *Weltethos* an awareness of the need for a global ethic amidst cultural and religious diversity (Kung, 2008). Within this context, the role of religious education, particularly Christian Religious Education (PAK), is becoming increasingly strategic in shaping religious individuals who not only have dogmatic faith but also possess the ability to engage in open, critical, and contextual dialogue. Indonesia, as a historically, sociologically, and politically pluralistic country, presents complex challenges to faith education (Boehlke, 1997). Therefore, an exclusive, apologetic, and ahistorical approach to PAK is not only inadequate but also potentially counterproductive in building a peaceful, just, and inclusive society. Visionary Christian education must transcend doctrinal formalism and open itself to the practice of

dialogue and social transformation, as emphasized by leading contemporary thinkers such as Paul F. Knitter and Pahala J. Simanjuntak.

Paul F. Knitter is a central figure in the construction of a pluralistic theology of religions, which seeks to integrate the Christian faith with the reality of the presence of other religions within a framework that is not relativistic, but dialogical and collaborative. In his monumental work, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (2002), Knitter proposes what he calls an “acceptance model” that rejects the exclusivist approach of Karl Barth and the pseudo-inclusivism of Rahner, replacing it with an approach of mutual transformation, namely the belief that interfaith encounters can deepen the understanding of each other’s faith (Knitter, 2002). He consistently links interfaith dialogue with issues of social justice, stating that “there is no peace among the nations without peace among the religions, and no peace among the religions without dialogue among them.” (Knitter, 2005). Herein lies Knitter’s theoretical strength: Christian faith education must be grounded in the ethics of dialogue and transformational praxis.

In the Indonesian context, Pahala J. Simanjuntak advocates the importance of grounding theology in the nation’s socio-political realities. Through a contextual-transformational Christian educational theology approach, he asserts that Christian education must shape individuals rooted in Christ yet open to the social dynamics and religious plurality of the Indonesian nation. Faith education is not merely the transmission of dogmatic knowledge, but the formation of prophetic character that strives for justice, truth, and humanity (Freire, 2000; Simanjuntak, 2020). He proposes Christian Education as a praxis of social transformation in the light of the Gospel, not merely a cognitive activity or narrow identity formation. This aligns with the thinking of James L. Drexler and Perry L. Glanzer (2007), who emphasize that Christian education must integrate faith and learning in a public context in a critical and relevant manner.

To formulate the conceptual framework for this study, two major theories were used: first, Knitter’s *theologia religionum*, based on religious pluralism, and second, Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy. Knitter provides a solid theological foundation for how the Christian faith can coexist creatively and transformatively with other faiths without losing its integrity (Knitter, 2021). Meanwhile, Freire, in his work *“Pedagogy of the Oppressed”* (1970), taught that education must be a praxis of liberation developing critical awareness (*conscientização*) of structures of oppression and injustice, and fostering actions to transform reality. This synergy between religious pluralism and critical pedagogy opens up space for a dialogical and prophetic Christian Education (PAK) approach: a faith rooted in Christ but crossing boundaries toward others with love and liberation (Knitter, 2002).

The framework used in this study is built on three main axes. First, Knitter’s dialogical theological approach opens a new hermeneutic horizon, viewing other religions not as threats, but as coexistent partners in a shared humanitarian project. Second, Simanjuntak’s transformational theology positions the Christian faith as an active force in bringing justice and reconciliation within the pluralistic Indonesian context. Third, the integration of critical pedagogy enables Christian Education to function as a transformative praxis that produces subjects capable of reading reality theologically and acting prophetically. Thus, Christian education is no longer sectarian, but rather serves as a space for dialogue, reflection, and transformative action in a pluralistic and wounded world (Lestari, 2015).

Although Christian education has long been part of the Indonesian education system, its approach tends to be dogmatic and less responsive to the context of pluralism (Groome, 1980). However, in the context of interfaith tensions and structural poverty, a new approach is needed that can liberate and bridge differences. Here, the thinking of Paul F. Knitter and Pahala J. Simanjuntak can serve as a conceptual basis for developing dialogical and transformative Christian education in the context of Indonesian pluralism.

Studies on theology of pluralism and prophetic pedagogy have been conducted separately, both in global and local contexts. However, studies that explicitly synergize Paul F. Knitter’s thoughts on theological pluralism with Pahala J. Simanjuntak’s critical and prophetic pedagogical approach within the framework of Christian Religious Education (PAK) in Indonesia are still very limited. This limitation indicates a gap in the academic literature, especially regarding the integration of pluralistic theological thought and contextual pedagogical practice that can respond to the multicultural and multireligious

realities in Indonesia. Therefore, this paper aims to offer a critical synthesis of these two thinkers as a conceptual basis for a more inclusive, contextual, and transformative PAK model.

Method

The analytical model used in this study is a critical-hermeneutic analysis model that combines textual and contextual approaches (Moleong, 2004). This approach allows for an in-depth theological reading of the ideas of Knitter and Simanjuntak, as well as a reinterpretation of the relevance of their thoughts in the context of contemporary Indonesian Christian Education. At the interpretive stage, a narrative-conceptual analysis of the main works of both figures is conducted, while at the reflective stage a critical synthesis is carried out regarding the challenges of pluralism and Christian education. Thus, this study not only presents a theoretical analysis but also offers a new paradigm of Christian Education practice: dialogical and transformative, theological and pedagogical, and faith and praxis in one breath. This study analyzes five main works of Knitter and two main works of Simanjuntak using qualitative text analysis methods. The validity of the interpretation is maintained through triangulation of concepts from secondary literature such as Küng, Freire, and Drexler.

Results and Discussions

Concept of Thinking: Contextual Theology and Inclusivity by Pahala J. Simanjuntak and Paul F. Knitter

Simanjuntak's concept of thinking is contextual theology, understood not simply as the adaptation of theological teachings to local culture, but as a dialogical process between biblical texts (the Bible), faith traditions, and social context. In this regard, Simanjuntak aligns with other contextual theology thinkers in Asia, such as C.S. Song and Aloysius Pieris, who emphasize the importance of bridging the Christian faith with the reality of Asian societies filled with plurality and suffering. Furthermore, Simanjuntak emphasizes the importance of inclusivity in the identity of God's people. This inclusivity does not mean eliminating Christian identity, but rather opening up space for encounters with "others" in religion, culture, and ideology, as part of the calling of faith. God's people are called to be active dialogue partners, not only on a theological level but also in the shared struggle for social justice and peace (Simanjuntak, 2020).

In the Indonesian context, rife with interfaith tensions and identity conflicts, this approach is highly relevant. Simanjuntak recognizes that religious exclusivism is often a source of conflict, so God's people must present a welcoming face to differences and become pioneers of social reconciliation. In this regard, the church's mission is no longer understood hegemonically, but rather as participation in God's comprehensive work for the world. This concept of thinking is also a theological reflection built on contextual, multicultural, and dialogical awareness (Tanya, 2009). It rejects a normative-dogmatic theological approach and replaces it with a more dynamic, participatory, and transformative framework (Budiman, 2018). In Indonesia's diverse context, this concept of thinking is crucial to ensuring the relevance of Christian faith in real life (Sitepu, 2021).

Simanjuntak begins with the understanding that theology cannot exist in a vacuum. Theology must be present in context, especially in a pluralistic society like Indonesia. Therefore, he adopts a contextual theological approach, a theological way of thinking that departs from the concrete realities of society (Brummelen, 2019). This encompasses socio-political conditions, local culture, and existing religious dynamics. In this context, human experience, particularly experiences of injustice, marginalization, and interfaith encounters, becomes an important source for understanding God's will. Second, the concept of thinking in this book is also dialogical (Verkuyl, 1978). Simanjuntak emphasizes that God's people are called to build open and equal relationships with other religious and cultural groups. He rejects the exclusivism and theological superiority that often close the door to interfaith dialogue. Instead, God's people are invited to see "the other" not as a threat, but as a partner in building the integrity of creation. Thus, the concept of thinking offered places a strong emphasis on relationships and collaboration across boundaries/without boundaries. Third, in his thinking, Simanjuntak employs an interdisciplinary approach. He speaks not only from the perspective of systematic theology but also

incorporates aspects of sociology, anthropology, and ethics. This is evident in his discussion of the church's position in society, the social responsibility of Christians, and the church's involvement in public issues (Homrighausen, et al, 2007; Samartha, 1990). With this approach, theology is no longer seen merely as a discussion of supernatural matters, but as a practice of faith in everyday life.

Fourth, his concept of thought is transformative. This thinking aims not only to build new understanding but also to encourage changes in the attitudes and actions of the congregation. The church is called to be an agent of social transformation, not just an internal worship community. Within this framework, God's people are seen as a community sent to respond to the challenges of the times, whether in the areas of poverty, interfaith conflict, social inequality, or the ecological crisis (Hunsberger, 1996). With this approach, Simanjuntak offers a concept of thought that is not only theological but also practically relevant. He invites Christians to think critically, openly, and reflectively in responding to the realities of nationality and humanity.

Paul F. Knitter, in his book **One Earth, Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility**, offers a powerful thesis on the importance of interreligious dialogue as a theological and ethical response to an interconnected global reality (Knitter, 2021). This view reflects a profound reflection on the tension between particular religious identities and the need for interfaith cooperation to address universal global crises such as poverty, injustice, and environmental degradation. Knitter's central insight can be summarized as follows: interreligious dialogue is not an optional choice for the world's religions, but rather a moral and spiritual imperative to collectively address global challenges. He states that in a "one earth" world, it is not enough for religions to consider only the safety of their own communities. Religions must move beyond doctrinal exclusivism to foster solidarity in the struggle for justice and sustainable coexistence.

Conceptual Thinking: From Exclusivism to Transformative Dialogue

Knitter's conceptual thinking is built on a critique of three major approaches in the theology of religions: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. He believes that exclusivism, which claims only one true religion, is no longer adequate in a diverse global society. Inclusivism, while more open, still maintains an implicit hierarchy that places one religion as the center of truth. Knitter advocates a critical pluralist approach, an attitude that acknowledges the existence and value of truth in other religions, while still allowing for discussion and evaluation of each tradition. He rejects total relativism but also rejects the notion of singular superiority. Within this framework, religions are viewed as different responses to the same transcendent reality, albeit constructed within diverse cultural and linguistic frameworks.

Furthermore, Knitter proposes transformative dialogue, a form of interfaith dialogue that aims not only to understand each other but also to enrich and transform each other practically. The dialogue is not merely intellectual or theological but also touches on ethical and social dimensions. In such dialogue, religions can learn from one another and form moral coalitions to address global issues.

Ethical Dimensions and Global Responsibility

The ethical aspect of Knitter's conceptual thinking is a central point in his book. He emphasized that interfaith dialogue is not merely about creating harmony, but must be realized in concrete actions to fight for global justice. He called this global responsibility. In his view, global responsibility is the shared duty of religious communities to collectively respond to humanitarian and ecological crises. Knitter cited examples from various interfaith movements working in the fields of peace, human rights, and environmental sustainability. For him, such collaboration is not only possible but necessary for the continuation of life together. He considered theology that does not address the realm of social practice to be incomplete.

Pluralist and Relational Epistemology

Knitter rejects absolutist epistemological approaches. He does not assume that one religion has a monopoly on truth, but rather that all religions seek to uncover the same mystery in different forms. This demonstrates a pluralist and relational way of thinking: truth is not static, but is discovered in encounter, experience, and dialogue. He proposes critical pluralism, a form of pluralism that does not fall into relativism but still opens up space for mutual evaluation and learning. This indicates that religious truth can be "interactive," where religions mutually enrich one another without negating their

individual identities (Sianipar, 2024). This approach shifts epistemology from dogmatic certainty to dialogical openness.

Pluralist and relational epistemology also carries significant ethical and pedagogical implications for Christian education in pluralistic contexts. By grounding knowledge in relational encounter rather than isolated doctrinal certainty, Knitter's epistemology invites learners to develop epistemic humility and moral responsibility toward religious others. Knowledge is no longer treated as an instrument of domination or exclusion, but as a shared process shaped through listening, dialogue, and critical reflection. In this sense, knowing becomes an ethical act, as openness to the religious other demands respect, empathy, and accountability. Simanjuntak's contextual theology resonates with this view by emphasizing that faith understanding in Indonesia must be formed within lived interreligious relationships, where learning occurs through social interaction and shared experience. Thus, pluralist and relational epistemology not only reframes how truth is known but also how ethical responsibility is cultivated through dialogical educational practices (Knitter, 2012; Simanjuntak, 2020).

Open and Responsive Theology

Knitter's concept of theology is transformative. He developed a dialogical theological approach that draws from the global experience of humanity and interfaith interactions. According to Knitter, good theology is responsive to the social and global context, not merely focused on the internal doctrines of a religion. He rejected theological exclusivism, particularly within Christianity, which positions Christ as the only way to salvation in a literal sense. Instead, he proposed an understanding of Christ as an expression of universal love that can also be present in other forms across different religious traditions (González, 2010). This is a form of theological reinterpretation that emphasizes Christ's ethical and soteriological function, not merely his metaphysical status.

An open and responsive theology, as advanced by Knitter, also redefines the task of Christian theology as a continuous process of discernment shaped by human suffering, injustice, and global crises. Theology is not produced in isolation from reality but emerges through engagement with concrete ethical challenges such as poverty, violence, ecological destruction, and religious conflict. This responsiveness requires theologians and educators to listen attentively to voices from other religious traditions and marginalized communities, recognizing them as partners in the pursuit of truth and liberation. Simanjuntak echoes this perspective by arguing that theology in the Indonesian context must remain open to social transformation and interreligious cooperation rather than retreating into doctrinal defensiveness. Consequently, open and responsive theology functions not only as a theoretical framework but also as a practical orientation that shapes Christian education toward ethical commitment, social engagement, and transformative action in a pluralistic world (Knitter, 2012; Simanjuntak, 2020).

Global Ethics and Shared Responsibility

Knitter's conceptual thinking is not merely speculative but has strong practical implications. He believes that the primary goal of interreligious dialogue is the formation of an ethical coalition to address global challenges: poverty, injustice, violence, and environmental degradation. In this regard, religion should not be merely contemplative but must become an agent of social transformation. Knitter invites religions to build "global solidarity," a collective moral responsibility in a world that is interconnected economically, politically, and ecologically. He offers a model of thinking that integrates spirituality with social praxis. This is the main strength of his thinking: uniting faith with action. Paul Knitter's conceptual thinking forms a dynamic, inclusive, and ethical framework. He challenges the dominance of exclusivist theology and offers a more open theological approach to religious plurality and global responsibility. In the context of education, spirituality, and interfaith relations, this concept is highly relevant as a foundation for building a peaceful and just world.

Global ethics and shared responsibility, therefore, demand a reorientation of Christian education toward active participation in global and local ethical struggles. From Knitter's perspective, ethical responsibility cannot be confined to intra-Christian morality but must be exercised collaboratively across religious boundaries. This shared responsibility is grounded in a common concern for human dignity and the integrity of creation, which transcends doctrinal differences. Simanjuntak reinforces this vision by emphasizing that Christians in plural societies, particularly in Indonesia, are morally called to contribute to social harmony, justice, and peace through interreligious cooperation. In

educational settings, this ethical framework encourages learners to see themselves as global citizens shaped by faith, capable of engaging in collective action for the common good. Consequently, global ethics becomes a transformative educational mandate that integrates faith formation with social responsibility and interfaith solidarity (Knitter, 2012; Küng, 1991; Simanjuntak, 2020).

Theological and Philosophical Foundations of Christian Education in the Context of Pluralism: Highlighting the thoughts of Paul F. Knitter and Pahala J. Simanjuntak on pluralism

Pluralism represents both a challenge and a significant opportunity in contemporary Christian education. Amidst the increasingly ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse global society, Christian education is required not only to maintain its faith identity but also to build dialogical and transformative relationships with the reality of this diversity. In this context, the ideas of Paul F. Knitter and Pahala J. Simanjuntak are highly relevant to study as the theological and philosophical foundations for developing a contextual and inclusive model of Christian education.

Pluralism is not only a sociological fact but also a theological context that cannot be ignored in the practice of Christian education. In a pluralistic society, education is not simply about imparting doctrine; it must also shape characters who are open, tolerant, and critical of differences. Pluralism encourages Christian education to shift from an indoctrination model to dialogic learning, where encounters with others become a vehicle for growth in faith and understanding (Hermanto, et al, 2023; Sanneh, 2002).

From this perspective, Christian education is not only about conveying the content of faith, but also about how that faith engages in critical and contextual dialogue with the world. This idea is strongly reflected in the thinking of two figures: Paul F. Knitter, a prominent Western pluralist theologian, and Pahala J. Simanjuntak, an Indonesian theologian who emphasized the importance of contextual Christian education sensitive to social realities. Paul F. Knitter is known as a key figure in the development of pluralist theology. In his work "Introducing Theologies of Religions," Knitter developed a typology of approaches to theology of religions, ranging from exclusivism to inclusivism to pluralism. He chose a pluralist approach because he believed that God works not only in Christianity but also in other religions. He proposed a paradigm of equal dialogue between religions as the basis for authentic and mutually enriching relationships.

Within this framework, Christian education must shape students who are able to see the values of truth in other religions, without losing their commitment to the Christian faith. Faith is not a barrier to dialogue, but rather a foundation for openness to others. Knitter even stated that interfaith dialogue is not merely an option, but a theological imperative in an interconnected world. Therefore, Christian education is no longer merely apologetic but also hermeneutical and communicative. Knitter also emphasized that Christian education grounded in pluralism must not be relativistic. He continues to recognize the uniqueness of Christ, but not in a supremacist framework, but rather as a source of inspiration for dialogue. This theology forms the basis for education that respects differences, builds justice, and empowers students to actively engage in social transformation.

Meanwhile, Pahala J. Simanjuntak has made significant contributions to formulating Christian education in the culturally and religiously pluralistic context of Indonesia. In his various writings, he emphasizes that Christian education must be rooted in context and oriented toward social change. Education is not merely the transmission of theological information, but the transformation of the whole person in the light of the Gospel. Simanjuntak rejects a dualistic approach to faith and social life. He asserts that Christian education must shape responsible citizens who love justice and are able to coexist peacefully with others. In the Indonesian context, where diversity is often a source of conflict, Christian education needs to instill the values of dialogue, cooperation, and interfaith solidarity.

According to Simanjuntak, his educational philosophy is holistic: encompassing cognitive, affective, and axiological dimensions. He combines a liberation theology approach with a spirituality of service, so that Christian education becomes a means of liberation from injustice and oppression. In this regard, pluralism is not simply accepted as fact, but rather used as a source of learning and constructive encounters.

Simanjuntak emphasizes the importance of developing a contextual theology relevant to the reality of Indonesia's diversity. He invites Christians to understand themselves as part of the "people of God"

living in a multicultural and multireligious society. In this context, Christian faith must not be exclusive and closed off, but rather open to interfaith dialogue and cooperation. Simanjuntak emphasizes that the presence of God's people in Indonesia must have a real impact on building justice, peace, and shared prosperity. The contextual theology he proposes is dialogical, inclusive, and practical. Christians are called to build harmonious relationships with fellow citizens of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. He also emphasized that the calling of God's people is not merely to verbally express faith, but also to manifest God's love through concrete actions in social life. Therefore, the church is challenged to focus not only on internal faith formation but also to actively address the nation's social, economic, and political challenges. This requires a renewal of Christian thinking and action to be more sensitive to local and national contexts.

Meanwhile, Paul F. Knitter offers a pluralist approach to interfaith relations. He argues that in a global world filled with shared challenges such as poverty, injustice, and environmental degradation, religions cannot act in isolation. Knitter proposes that interfaith dialogue is not simply about tolerance, but about active cooperation in addressing global responsibilities. He introduces the concept of a "dual commitment" being faithful to one's own faith tradition while simultaneously being open to and learning from other faith traditions. Interfaith dialogue offers not syncretism but mutual transformation, namely mutual enrichment through honest and open encounters. Knitter sees religions as possessing moral and spiritual resources that can be combined to create positive global change. He calls for theology to be oriented not only toward individual salvation but also toward humanity's collective responsibility toward the earth and each other.

Both Pahala Simanjuntak and Knitter offer a vision of Christian faith that is open, contextual, and oriented toward social justice. Both emphasize the importance of interfaith dialogue that is not merely a formality but a space for encounter that liberates and unites. Their perspective challenges dogmatic rigidity and invites Christians to recognize the call of faith in a complex and pluralistic world.

Simanjuntak and Knitter's thinking encourages Christian Religious Education to be more contextual, dialogical, and transformative. Education should not solely focus on doctrine, but should also shape students who are sensitive to diversity, capable of interfaith dialogue, and actively advocate for social justice. This fosters a faith that is inclusive, critical, and relevant to the challenges of the times. By integrating the values of openness, solidarity, and global responsibility, Christian Religious Education becomes a means of forming Christian character capable of peaceful coexistence in a pluralistic society.

A Dialogic Model of Christian Education: An Interreligious Approach in Knitter and Simanjuntak's View

In the context of education, Knitter encourages teaching the Christian faith in an atmosphere of openness to the religious experiences of others. This creates space for students to develop a more mature and contextual understanding of faith (Irvin, 2017). Knitter states that interreligious dialogue in education does not mean relativizing faith, but rather enriching and deepening it through encounters with others. Knitter's dialogic model of Christian education rests on two principles

Inclusive-Relational Theology

Inclusive-relational theology affirms that God's presence and salvific activity are not confined exclusively to the Christian community but are also at work within other religious traditions and human experiences. For Knitter, this theological stance does not deny the uniqueness of Christ but understands Christ as relationally connected to the wider reality of God's universal love. In Christian education, this principle encourages learners to approach religious diversity not as a threat but as an opportunity for deeper faith understanding. By acknowledging God's action beyond ecclesial boundaries, education becomes a space for humility, openness, and mutual respect, allowing students to engage others without fear of losing their Christian identity.

Dialogue as an Ethical Commitment

Dialogue, in Knitter's model, is not merely a methodological option but an ethical obligation rooted in the Christian call to justice, peace, and solidarity. Interreligious encounter is understood as a moral practice that resists exclusion, violence, and domination, especially in contexts marked by religious conflict and inequality. Dialogue thus functions as an expression of ethical responsibility, where listening to the other becomes an act of recognizing their dignity and humanity. Within Christian education, this principle forms learners who are not only theologically informed but also morally

accountable, capable of building peaceful relationships and contributing to social reconciliation in pluralistic societies.

Education as Personal and Social Transformation

Based on these principles, Christian education is redefined as a transformative process that shapes both personal faith and social engagement. Education is not limited to the transmission of doctrines or religious knowledge but aims at forming individuals who embody compassion, justice, and responsibility in their lived contexts. Through dialogical learning and ethical reflection, students are invited to critically examine social realities and participate actively in transforming unjust structures. This transformative vision positions Christian education as a catalyst for social change, fostering respect for human dignity across religious boundaries and equipping learners to contribute to a more just and peaceful world

Unlike Knitter, who emerged from a Western context, Pahala J. Simanjuntak offers Christian educational ideas rooted in the Indonesian context a nation rich in culture and religion. Simanjuntak emphasizes that Christian education must recognize the socio-cultural context in which it exists and incorporate that context into the educational process. In several of his works, Simanjuntak proposes a dialogical and transformative model of Christian education. Christian education, he argues, must equip students with the ability to engage in active and critical dialogue with people of other faiths without losing their faith identity (Barton, 2015). Dialogue in Christian education should not be seen as a threat to faith, but as an opportunity to broaden horizons, build solidarity, and realize justice.

Crucial in Simanjuntak's ideas is the integration of contextual theology and dialogical praxis. Christian education should not be limited to doctrinal understanding but must be practical, addressing real societal issues such as poverty, injustice, and discrimination. This is where dialogue becomes a vehicle for building interfaith cooperation for the common good.

Social Transformation Through Christian Education: A Contextual Theological Perspective

In a world constantly changing and filled with the realities of inequality, injustice, and religious-based conflict, Christian education is called to be not only an agent of faith transmission but also an agent of social transformation. Christian education that focuses solely on spiritual formation without social sensitivity will lose its relevance and prophetic power (Brewer, 2019). Therefore, it is necessary to develop a Christian educational paradigm that not only educates in the spiritual realm but also shapes students as agents of social change in a pluralistic society (Bosch, 1991).

Paul F. Knitter and Pahala J. Simanjuntak are two thinkers who emphasize the importance of the transformational dimension in Christian education. Both, with their different contexts, advocate the urgency of a contextual theological approach in education as a means of liberating and empowering the people.

Christian education, when grounded in contextual theology, recognizes that faith formation must be inseparable from the lived realities of learners and their communities. Knitter's dialogical and pluralist theology encourages Christian education to engage critically with social structures that produce marginalization and exclusion, particularly in multireligious societies. Education thus becomes a praxis-oriented process, where theological reflection is continuously shaped by concrete experiences of suffering, injustice, and interreligious encounter. Similarly, Simanjuntak argues that Christian education in the Indonesian context must respond to social fragmentation and religious tension by nurturing values of solidarity, justice, and mutual responsibility. Through contextual engagement, Christian education functions as a liberating force that empowers learners to participate actively in social transformation rather than remain passive recipients of religious instruction (Knitter, 2012; Simanjuntak, 2020).

Furthermore, a contextual theological perspective situates Christian education within a broader vision of societal renewal and reconciliation. Drawing on transformative pedagogies, education is understood as a formative space where critical consciousness (*conscientization*) is cultivated, enabling learners to analyze social realities and act ethically within them. Knitter's emphasis on interreligious cooperation for global justice aligns with this vision, as social transformation is seen as a shared moral responsibility rather than a unilateral religious mission. Simanjuntak reinforces this approach by highlighting the role of Christian education in fostering peaceful coexistence and civic responsibility in

Indonesia's plural society. Consequently, Christian education becomes a strategic locus for shaping morally engaged citizens who integrate faith, social awareness, and transformative action in pursuit of a more just and inclusive world (Freire, 1970; Knitter, 2012; Bosch, 1991).

Contextual Theology: A Framework for Liberating Education

Contextual theology emphasizes that concrete human experience is a crucial source for understanding and interpreting the truths of faith (Armstrong, 2002; Dyer, 2006). Unlike abstract and systematic theological approaches, contextual theology begins with reflection on the social, cultural, and political realities in which the people find themselves. In this approach, theology speaks not only about God but also about how humans live with God in their real situations (Castleman, 2013; Lamfort, 2017).

Pahala J. Simanjuntak emphasizes that liberating Christian education must be grounded in the social context of Indonesian society, especially those experiencing oppression, marginalization, and identity conflict. Dialogical and contextual Christian education must side with the vulnerable. In this regard, education is not merely a transfer of knowledge, but also a mobilizing of awareness, shaping conscience, and encouraging concrete action for social transformation. Knitter also emphasized that Christian education has a global ethical responsibility. In an increasingly connected world, the suffering of others far away also becomes our responsibility. Transformative Christian education will foster solidarity across borders, foster ecological awareness, and encourage collective action for a more humane world.

Within this framework, contextual theology reshapes Christian education into a participatory and emancipatory pedagogical practice. Learning is understood as a dialogical process in which students critically reflect on their lived experiences in light of faith, rather than passively receiving theological formulations detached from reality. This pedagogical orientation aligns with liberative education, where learners are empowered to name injustices, challenge oppressive structures, and imagine alternative social realities grounded in gospel values. Knitter's emphasis on global responsibility complements Simanjuntak's local contextual focus, together forming a holistic vision in which Christian education nurtures critical awareness, moral agency, and commitment to transformative action. As a result, contextual theology functions not only as a theological method but also as an educational framework that equips learners to participate actively in liberation, reconciliation, and sustainable social change (Freire, 1970; Knitter, 2012; Simanjuntak, 2020).

Synthesis: A Dialogic-Transformative Christian Education Model

In responding to the need for a Christian Religious Education (PAK) approach capable of addressing the challenges of diversity in Indonesia, a synthesis of the ideas of Paul F. Knitter and Pahala J. Simanjuntak offers a strong conceptual foundation. Knitter emphasizes the importance of interfaith dialogue as a manifestation of awareness of religious pluralism, while Simanjuntak emphasizes prophetic education that is liberating, transformative, and contextual. These two approaches, when combined, produce a dialogic-transformative model of Christian education: education rooted in Christian faith identity, open to diversity, and committed to social justice.

Table 1. Comparison of Knitter and Simanjuntak's Perspectives in the Indonesian PAK Context

Aspect	Paul F. Knitter	Pahala J. Simanjuntak	Indonesian PAK Context
Main Focus	Religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue	Contextual prophetic pedagogy	Multiculturalism and social justice
Educational Goals	Opening space for dialogue and tolerance	Liberation and transformation	Preparing students to live peacefully and justly
Strategy	Interfaith dialogue and global awareness	Critical reflection and contextualization	Integrating Christian values within local culture
Dangers to Avoid	Exclusivism and fundamentalism	Theological rigidity and decontextualization	Religious polarization and intolerance

The dialogic-transformative model integrates the strengths of both approaches: openness to diversity (Knitter), yet remaining responsive to social realities that require change (Simanjuntak). This model can be described as a three-way process: dialogue–critical reflection–transformative action.

Applicable Elements

Religious Education Curriculum

The Religious Education curriculum needs to be developed to incorporate interfaith and social justice themes. For example, the topic "Jesus and Tolerance" is linked to the practice of coexistence in a pluralistic society. Learning materials can also include comparative religious studies and local narratives that demonstrate peaceful practices between faiths.

In addition to integrating interfaith and social justice themes, the curriculum should be designed around dialogical learning objectives that emphasize critical reflection and ethical engagement. Rather than presenting religious knowledge as fixed and isolated, curricular content can invite students to explore how Christian values intersect with real social issues such as poverty, discrimination, and ecological responsibility. Case-based learning, problem-posing methods, and reflective assignments can help students connect theological concepts with lived experiences in pluralistic settings. In this way, the curriculum functions not only as a knowledge framework but also as a formative space where students learn to interpret faith as a resource for dialogue, empathy, and social transformation.

Religious Education Teacher Training

Religious Education teachers need to be equipped with two core competencies: (1) dialogic competency, the ability to engage in interfaith dialogue without losing their Christian faith identity, and (2) transformative competency, the ability to critically read social realities and facilitate students to become agents of change. Training should be participatory and context-based.

Beyond acquiring dialogic and transformative competencies, teachers must also develop reflexive awareness of their own theological assumptions and social positions. Teacher training programs should therefore include opportunities for self-reflection, intercultural immersion, and interreligious encounters that challenge exclusivist attitudes. By engaging directly with diverse communities and social realities, teachers can model dialogical openness and ethical responsibility in the classroom. This formation enables educators to function not merely as transmitters of doctrine but as facilitators of transformative learning processes that empower students to think critically, act compassionately, and engage constructively with religious difference.

Interfaith Projects in Schools/Churches

Interfaith practices can be implemented through collaborative projects, such as joint social activities, interfaith youth dialogues, or interschool cultural forums. For example, Christian and Muslim students collaborate on environmental projects as a manifestation of faith working through love and shared responsibility. This model aims to create a Christian education that not only strengthens students' faith but also shapes them into open, just, and responsible individuals amidst Indonesia's pluralistic reality.

Interfaith projects gain deeper transformative impact when they are sustained, reflective, and integrated into the broader educational vision rather than treated as occasional activities. Structured reflection sessions before and after interfaith engagements allow students to process their experiences theologically and ethically, helping them recognize the presence of shared values across religious traditions. Such projects foster experiential learning, where students encounter religious others not as abstract categories but as partners in addressing common concerns. Over time, these practices cultivate habits of cooperation, trust, and shared responsibility, reinforcing the idea that faith-based education is intrinsically connected to peacebuilding and social solidarity.

Conclusions

This paper emphasizes the importance of developing contextual, dialogical, and transformative Christian Education in response to the reality of pluralism, particularly in Indonesia, by integrating Paul F. Knitter's pluralist theology and Pahala J. Simanjuntak's contextual educational thought. Christian education is no longer understood as a one-way transmission of doctrine, but as an open dialogical process that respects diversity while fostering humility, openness of faith, and a commitment to social

justice. Knitter highlights interreligious dialogue as a call of faith that recognizes God's work beyond church boundaries, while Simanjuntak stresses Christian education that is rooted in social realities, liberative in nature, and responsive to the experiences of marginalized communities. From these perspectives, relevant Christian education must be grounded in inclusive theological awareness, openness to interfaith engagement, a commitment to justice and humanity, and curricula and practices that are contextually based, so that Christian education becomes a space for dialogue and transformative action that embodies faith through active engagement in a plural and challenging world.

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