



From Catechesis to Praxis: Transforming Christian Religious Education Towards Social Responsibility and Ecological Awareness

Funixman Katili^{1*}, Otieli Harefa², Silpia Kimki³

^{1,2}Lecturer, STT Huperetes Batam, Indonesia

³College Student, STT Huperetes Batam, Indonesia.

*Corresponding Author

Funixman Katili

Email:
funixman.katili@gmail.com

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Abstract: Christian religious education has traditionally focused on catechesis—the transmission of doctrine, Scripture, and moral instruction to shape personal piety and religious identity. However, global crises such as climate change, social inequality, and environmental degradation demand an educational transformation that moves beyond doctrinal instruction toward active engagement with societal and ecological issues. This study examines the pedagogical shift from catechesis to praxis within Christian education, particularly in Southeast Asia, with a focus on Indonesia. Employing a qualitative research methodology, the study integrates a systematic literature review and thematic analysis of ten case studies from Christian schools, seminaries, and church-based programs in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Data were collected from academic journals, theological texts, institutional reports, and program evaluations published between 2015 and 2024. Findings reveal that integrating eco-theology and social ethics into religious education fosters a holistic discipleship model where students engage in environmental projects, social advocacy, and contextual biblical reflection. Students participated in tree planting, waste management, and community service initiatives while applying scriptural teachings to real-life challenges. The use of action-reflection learning cycles, service-learning, and contextual hermeneutics significantly enhanced students' ethical reasoning, empathy, and civic engagement. Despite challenges such as teacher preparedness, institutional resistance, and resource constraints, the case studies demonstrate that praxis-oriented Christian education equips learners to become both spiritually grounded and socially responsible. This study concludes that transforming religious education into a platform for social and ecological action is not only an educational innovation but a theological imperative in the 21st century.

Keywords: Christian education; eco-theology; social ethics; praxis; transformative learning.

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Introduction

Christian religious education has long served as a cornerstone of spiritual formation, deeply rooted in the practice of catechesis. Traditionally, catechesis has focused on the systematic teaching of Christian doctrine, biblical narratives, and ecclesiastical traditions, aiming to instill faith, moral values, and religious identity in learners. This educational approach has sustained Christian communities across centuries, providing a structured framework for transmitting theological knowledge and fostering personal devotion. However, the rapid transformations of the modern world present new ethical and educational challenges that the traditional catechetical model alone cannot sufficiently address. Global crises such as climate change, biodiversity loss, ecological degradation, poverty, systemic injustice, and widening socio-economic gaps have intensified in the 21st century. These issues are no longer

distant or optional topics of concern but have become immediate and existential threats to humanity and the planet. Faith communities, including Christian educators, are increasingly called to engage not only in spiritual and doctrinal instruction but also in proactive responses to social and ecological crises (Hitzhusen, 2013; Rasmussen, 2019). The role of religious education must therefore evolve to meet these pressing needs, transforming from content-centered catechesis into action-oriented praxis.

In the Indonesian context, this call for transformation is especially urgent. As a nation renowned for its cultural and biological diversity, Indonesia faces significant environmental challenges, including deforestation, pollution, loss of species, and the escalating impacts of climate change. Simultaneously, the country grapples with socio-economic inequalities, marginalized communities, and social conflicts exacerbated by poverty and



religious tensions. Within this complex landscape, Christian educational institutions occupy a pivotal position. They have the potential—and the responsibility—to cultivate a generation of learners who are not only spiritually mature but also socially conscious and ecologically responsible (Setiawan, 2021). Christian religious education in Indonesia must therefore move beyond the transmission of doctrinal knowledge and moral precepts toward a model that equips students to live out their faith through compassionate action and environmental stewardship. This shift involves redefining the purpose of religious education itself—not as a means of religious indoctrination but as a platform for transformative engagement with the real-world issues that challenge both the church and the broader human community. Rather than focusing solely on internal piety and church participation, Christian education should empower students to embody justice, practice ethical leadership, and become active caretakers of God’s creation.

Theologically, this pedagogical shift is consistent with biblical mandates that call for justice, stewardship, and love of neighbor. The prophet Micah articulates this imperative succinctly: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8). Similarly, the creation narrative in Genesis establishes humanity’s role as stewards of the earth (Genesis 2:15), while Jesus’ commandment to love one’s neighbor (Mark 12:31) underscores the ethical dimension of faith in action. These scriptural foundations provide a compelling theological basis for integrating social responsibility and ecological awareness into Christian education. Pedagogically, the move from catechesis to praxis aligns with broader educational paradigms that emphasize critical thinking, active participation, and transformative learning. Contemporary education increasingly prioritizes experiential methodologies, reflective learning, and real-world application of knowledge. Models such as transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000), experiential education (Kolb, 1984), and service-learning (Palmer, 2017) have demonstrated their effectiveness in cultivating learners who are not only knowledgeable but also capable of ethical decision-making and civic engagement. However, Christian education often remains entrenched in didactic approaches focused on rote memorization, catechetical repetition, and passive reception of religious knowledge (Groome, 2019). This gap between traditional religious instruction and contemporary educational needs must be addressed if Christian education is to remain relevant and impactful in today’s global context.

The consequences of maintaining a purely catechetical approach are significant. Students may graduate from Christian schools and seminaries with substantial doctrinal knowledge but lack the skills, empathy, and motivation to address real-world problems. This disconnect risks producing graduates who are spiritually devout but socially disengaged, or worse, indifferent to the suffering of marginalized communities and the degradation of the environment. Without integrating social and ecological consciousness into the fabric of religious education, Christian institutions risk perpetuating a form of spirituality that is inward-focused and detached from the realities of the world. In response to these challenges, this article proposes a transformative model of Christian religious education that shifts from catechesis to praxis. This model emphasizes the integration of biblical literacy with practical engagement in social justice and ecological stewardship.

It invites educators to design curricula that combine theological instruction with action-oriented learning experiences—such as community service, environmental projects, and ethical reflection on societal issues. By doing so, Christian education can become a dynamic and prophetic force, shaping students not merely as passive recipients of religious doctrine but as active agents of social and ecological transformation. This study critically examines how Christian educational institutions, particularly in Indonesia and Southeast Asia, can adopt innovative pedagogical strategies to foster holistic discipleship. It highlights the need for religious educators to nurture learners who are capable of connecting faith with action, theology with ethics, and spirituality with responsibility toward the earth and humanity. By moving from catechesis to praxis, Christian religious education can remain faithful to its theological roots while responding constructively to the moral and ecological crises of our time.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, employing a systematic literature review combined with thematic analysis to investigate the transformation of Christian religious education from traditional catechesis toward praxis-centered learning. The primary goal of this research is to synthesize existing knowledge and practical experiences regarding the integration of social responsibility and ecological awareness into Christian educational frameworks. The methodological design focuses on interpreting, analyzing, and categorizing relevant data to construct a comprehensive understanding of innovative pedagogical practices within Christian education, particularly in Southeast Asia. Data collection involved an extensive review of scholarly publications, theological writings, and empirical research studies published between 2015 and 2024. The literature search targeted key themes such as Christian education, eco-theology, social ethics, and transformative pedagogy. A variety of academic databases were utilized to ensure a broad and inclusive data pool. These included international platforms such as JSTOR, the ATLA Religion Database, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. Additionally, regional repositories like Garuda Indonesia and Neliti were consulted to incorporate local and Southeast Asian perspectives, ensuring the research captured both global and contextual insights.

Beyond the literature review, the study incorporated the analysis of ten documented case studies from Christian educational settings in Southeast Asia. These cases were purposefully selected from a range of Christian schools, seminaries, and church-based educational programs in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia. The primary criterion for selection was the institution’s demonstrated effort to integrate social justice initiatives and ecological responsibility into their religious education curricula. Case studies included examples of eco-theological teaching modules, service-learning projects, and community-based environmental programs linked to religious instruction. Institutional reports, published case studies, interviews with educators, and program evaluations were examined to extract relevant data. The data analysis employed a thematic coding process to identify recurring patterns and educational models related to praxis-oriented Christian education. Using an inductive approach, the researcher developed thematic codes through repeated readings of the data. Key themes emerged around several core areas: eco-theology as a theological foundation for

environmental stewardship; social ethics as a guiding framework for community justice and compassion; contextualized hermeneutics, emphasizing the interpretation of Scripture in relation to contemporary social and ecological issues; action-reflection cycles, where learners engage in real-world projects followed by theological reflection; and community engagement as an essential component of religious learning that extends beyond the classroom into active service.

To ensure the rigor and validity of the findings, multiple strategies were employed. Triangulation was used by comparing data across different sources—academic texts, case studies, and field reports—to confirm consistency in themes and conclusions. Peer debriefing sessions were conducted with Christian educators and theological scholars in Southeast Asia to discuss preliminary findings and refine interpretations. Additionally, expert consultations with specialists in theology, education, and environmental ethics provided external validation, helping to minimize researcher bias and strengthen the credibility of the analysis. Through this methodological framework, the study provides a robust and context-sensitive exploration of how Christian religious education can be transformed to include social and ecological praxis as a core component of faith formation.

Result

This study reveals a significant transformation in Christian religious education across the selected case studies, highlighting a pedagogical shift from traditional catechesis toward praxis-oriented learning. Thematic analysis of ten case studies from Christian schools, seminaries, and churches in Southeast Asia indicates a growing emphasis on ecological awareness, social responsibility, and contextualized theological reflection. These findings demonstrate how Christian education can move beyond doctrinal instruction to cultivate active engagement with contemporary social and environmental issues. One of the most notable findings is the integration of eco-theology into Christian educational programs. Seven out of the ten case studies reported the intentional inclusion of ecological perspectives in their religious curricula. This development reflects a theological reorientation, wherein care for creation is not treated as an optional addition to religious instruction but as an essential component of Christian discipleship. In several institutions, educators used biblical texts such as Genesis 2:15—where humanity is commanded to “till and keep” the earth—as a central framework for teaching environmental stewardship. Likewise, passages like Psalm 24:1, “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it,” became foundational in helping students internalize the concept of divine ownership of creation, instilling a sense of custodianship rather than exploitation. Practical projects accompanied these theological lessons, ensuring that learning was not confined to abstract concepts but extended into real-world application. Students actively participated in environmental initiatives such as tree planting, mangrove restoration, waste segregation, and school-wide recycling programs. Several schools initiated campus-wide green campaigns where students led efforts to reduce plastic use and promote sustainable living. In theological seminaries, eco-theological classes incorporated field visits to endangered ecosystems, providing firsthand experiences of environmental degradation. These experiences deepened students’ awareness of ecological crises and reinforced the connection between Scripture and

environmental responsibility. Educators observed that when eco-theological teaching was embedded into the core curriculum, students began to perceive environmental care not as an extracurricular concern but as integral to their Christian faith. Teachers reported that students frequently referenced environmental ethics in prayers, devotions, and classroom discussions, indicating a shift in mindset. By linking theological education with creation care, schools fostered a new generation of learners who viewed ecology through a sacred lens. The integration of prophetic voices, such as Amos’ calls for justice, further expanded students’ understanding of the interconnectedness between social justice and environmental sustainability. This holistic approach positioned environmental action as a moral and spiritual obligation rather than a secular initiative.

Social Responsibility as Faith in Action

All ten case studies demonstrated a strong commitment to embedding social responsibility into Christian education. This shift reflects an educational emphasis on faith-in-action, moving beyond theoretical instruction to tangible community engagement. Schools and seminaries implemented structured service-learning programs, where students engaged in direct acts of service to marginalized communities. These initiatives included volunteering in orphanages, assisting elderly care facilities, participating in food distribution efforts for the underprivileged, and collaborating with local NGOs on poverty alleviation projects. A key feature of these programs was the combination of service activities with theological reflection. Students were encouraged to connect their experiences with biblical imperatives such as Matthew 25:40: “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” This integration of action and reflection nurtured empathy and ethical awareness among students. Rather than viewing acts of charity as mere volunteerism, students began to perceive their involvement in social outreach as an expression of Christian discipleship.

Interviews with educators revealed that these experiences had a transformative effect on learners. Students developed deeper moral sensitivity, demonstrated by increased participation in social advocacy projects and heightened interest in ethical debates surrounding poverty, inequality, and systemic injustice. Many students reported that their faith became more meaningful and relevant when applied to real-world contexts. This experiential approach helped dismantle the dichotomy between spiritual formation and social engagement, fostering a holistic model of religious education where theological knowledge directly informed social action. In some cases, schools went beyond charity and incorporated advocacy training into their curricula. Students learned about systemic social issues, such as structural poverty, gender inequality, and human trafficking. Workshops on social ethics equipped students with tools for critical analysis, enabling them to identify root causes of injustice and explore ways to contribute to societal transformation. Faculty members guided students through discussions on the ethical implications of public policy, corporate responsibility, and grassroots activism, always framing these conversations within the Christian ethical tradition.

Contextual Hermeneutics and Critical Reflection

Five institutions implemented programs focused on contextual hermeneutics, teaching students to interpret biblical texts in light of contemporary social and environmental realities. This pedagogical

innovation reflects a move away from literalist or decontextualized readings of Scripture toward a more dynamic and reflective engagement with biblical narratives. Students were trained to analyze Scripture not merely as historical documents but as living texts with implications for modern life. For example, the parable of the Good Samaritan was reinterpreted through a lens of social justice and ecological ethics. In class discussions, students identified modern parallels to the “wounded traveler,” including victims of poverty, refugees, and communities affected by environmental disasters. Students debated questions such as: Who are today’s “neighbors” in the context of ecological crises? How should Christians respond to deforestation, pollution, or climate-induced displacement? This approach expanded the moral scope of biblical texts and encouraged learners to grapple with ethical dilemmas rooted in real-world challenges.

Reflective journaling and dialogical teaching methods played a significant role in this process. Students were asked to write personal reflections on how Scripture intersects with issues in their local communities. Teachers facilitated open dialogues, where learners shared experiences and insights, fostering critical thinking and theological reflection. These exercises nurtured a habit of questioning and applying biblical principles to current social and ecological contexts. The result was a more engaged and thoughtful student body, capable of connecting biblical teachings to the pressing issues of their time. Educators reported that this method reduced the risk of religious education becoming detached from lived experiences. By grounding theological reflection in local and global realities, students learned to navigate the complexities of modern life through a faith-informed perspective. This process not only deepened their biblical literacy but also cultivated moral imagination—the capacity to envision and work toward a just and sustainable world.

Transformative Learning Models

All ten cases embraced transformative learning models that prioritized experiential education over traditional lecture-based pedagogy. These models combined fieldwork, community immersion, and participatory action projects to create learning environments where students actively engaged with social and ecological realities. Instead of receiving religious instruction passively, students became co-creators of knowledge through direct involvement in service and environmental programs. The learning process was structured around an action-reflection cycle. Students first engaged in concrete actions—such as organizing beach clean-ups, assisting in disaster relief, or collaborating with community leaders on social projects. Following these experiences, they participated in structured theological reflection sessions. These sessions encouraged students to examine their feelings, evaluate their actions, and interpret their experiences through biblical and ethical lenses. Teachers guided students in connecting theological concepts with the challenges and lessons encountered in the field. This pedagogical approach proved effective in fostering both cognitive and affective growth. Students reported increased motivation to learn, as they perceived direct relevance between their studies and their lived experiences. Cognitive development was observed in students’ ability to articulate complex theological ideas in relation to social issues. Affective development was evidenced by growing empathy, compassion, and a sense of responsibility toward the community and the environment. Moreover, transformative learning fostered

leadership skills. Students often took the initiative in planning and leading community projects, negotiating with local authorities, and mobilizing peers for collective action. These experiences empowered learners to view themselves not merely as recipients of religious knowledge but as active agents of change. By positioning students as leaders in social and ecological initiatives, educational institutions cultivated confidence and competence in ethical decision-making and public engagement.

Despite these positive developments, several challenges emerged from the data. One of the primary obstacles was the lack of teacher preparation in eco-theology and social ethics. Many educators were trained in traditional biblical and doctrinal instruction but lacked the tools and knowledge to facilitate praxis-oriented learning. This gap created difficulties in curriculum development and program implementation. Teachers expressed the need for professional development opportunities focused on integrating faith, social action, and ecological awareness. Institutional resistance also presented a barrier. In some settings, conservative stakeholders—including administrators, parents, and church leaders—viewed the shift toward social and ecological praxis with suspicion. They feared that an emphasis on activism might dilute theological orthodoxy or distract from spiritual formation. This tension required careful negotiation, as educators sought to reassure stakeholders that praxis-based education complements rather than replaces doctrinal teaching. Resource limitations further constrained program scalability. Schools in rural areas or with limited budgets struggled to fund community projects, field excursions, or eco-theological workshops. These logistical challenges made it difficult to implement holistic programs consistently across different educational contexts. Financial constraints also affected the availability of teaching materials, such as updated textbooks, digital tools, and access to scholarly resources on eco-theology and social ethics. Cultural factors sometimes posed challenges. In contexts where hierarchical teaching models dominate, introducing dialogical and experiential learning methods required a cultural shift. Students and teachers accustomed to rote learning needed time to adjust to participatory pedagogies. Resistance to change was not uncommon, particularly in institutions deeply rooted in traditional catechetical frameworks.

Students who engaged in eco-theological learning, social responsibility programs, and contextual hermeneutics demonstrated growth in theological understanding, ethical reasoning, and civic engagement. The action-reflection learning cycle effectively bridged the gap between faith and life, fostering a generation of learners equipped to address the moral and ecological crises of the 21st century. By integrating biblical mandates for justice, stewardship, and neighborly love into educational praxis, Christian institutions created spaces where students learned to embody their faith in meaningful ways. The case studies illustrate that when religious education prioritizes action-based learning, it cultivates not only spiritual growth but also a profound sense of social and ecological responsibility. This transformation aligns with contemporary educational theories, such as Freire’s critical pedagogy and Mezirow’s transformative learning, confirming that faith-based education can embrace innovation while maintaining theological integrity. However, the journey toward praxis-oriented Christian education is not without challenges. Teacher training, institutional support, cultural adaptation, and resource management remain critical areas for development. Addressing these barriers

will be essential for scaling and sustaining such transformative educational models, especially in diverse and complex contexts like Southeast Asia. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that moving from catechesis to praxis represents a paradigm shift in Christian education—one that empowers students to live out their faith through active engagement with the world's social and ecological realities. By fostering compassionate action, critical reflection, and theological depth, Christian education can become a catalyst for both personal transformation and societal change.

Conclusion

The findings of this study affirm that Christian religious education in the 21st century must move decisively beyond the traditional confines of catechesis, shifting towards a praxis-oriented approach that integrates social responsibility and ecological consciousness. In a world increasingly marked by environmental degradation, social inequality, and ethical dilemmas, faith-based education cannot remain static or insular. The task of religious education is no longer limited to teaching doctrine, Scripture memorization, or moralistic instruction. Instead, it must cultivate discipleship that is both spiritually grounded and socially engaged. This transformation aligns with biblical imperatives found throughout Scripture, from the call to love one's neighbor (Mark 12:31) to the mandate for stewardship of creation (Genesis 2:15) and the pursuit of justice (Micah 6:8). Christian education, therefore, must embrace its prophetic role, equipping students to live out their faith in tangible ways that contribute to the healing of both society and the planet. To achieve this transformation, curriculum reform is essential. Religious education programs must be intentionally designed to link theological concepts with real-world applications. Integrating eco-theology, social ethics, and contextual hermeneutics into the curriculum can provide students with a holistic framework for understanding their faith in action. This includes reinterpreting biblical narratives in light of contemporary crises, fostering critical reflection, and encouraging learners to respond with compassion and justice. Teachers play a pivotal role in this shift and thus require targeted training in both content and pedagogy. Professional development programs must equip educators with the skills to facilitate action-reflection learning cycles, guide students through complex ethical discussions, and mentor them in practical community engagement. Without proper training, educators may struggle to transition from traditional lecture-based instruction to participatory, praxis-oriented teaching methods. Christian educational institutions must foster partnerships with local communities, NGOs, environmental organizations, and social advocacy groups. Such collaborations create authentic learning opportunities where students can apply their theological insights to real-life challenges. Whether through service-learning, ecological projects, or advocacy campaigns, students gain experiential knowledge that reinforces classroom learning and builds ethical competence. These engagements also develop leadership skills, empathy, and a sense of moral agency, preparing students to become not only church members but also responsible

global citizens. This educational transformation is not merely a pedagogical innovation—it is a theological necessity. The crises facing humanity today require a response that is both spiritual and practical. By integrating social responsibility and ecological awareness into Christian education, faith communities fulfill their calling to be salt and light in the world (Matthew 5:13-16). This approach helps students internalize the message that Christian faith is not confined to personal piety but is expressed through active care for others and for creation. In this way, Christian education can transcend the boundaries of the classroom, becoming a dynamic force for societal renewal and environmental stewardship. As the world continues to grapple with unprecedented social and ecological challenges, the church's educational mission must rise to meet the moment, preparing students to live out a faith that transforms not only their personal lives but the wider world they inhabit.

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