

A Psychotheological Approach to the Development of Children's Faith and Personality in Christian Religious Education

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the integration of developmental psychology and Christian theology in understanding the formation of children's faith and personality through Christian Religious Education (CRE). A psychotheological approach is employed to bridge the scientific understanding of human psychological and spiritual development with the dimension of faith derived from divine revelation. Employing a qualitative library research design, this study examines James Fowler's theory of faith development, Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory, and the biblical perspective on children's spiritual growth. The analysis reveals that the development of faith and personality in children cannot be separated from their dynamic relationship with God, the family as the primary institution of faith formation, and the faith community as a formative environment. Psychotheologically-based CRE equips teachers to become facilitators of holistic faith development, addressing the cognitive dimension through doctrinal understanding, the affective dimension through spiritual experience, and the moral dimension through Christian ethics, thereby systematically forming Christlike character within the child. This study also outlines practical implications for curriculum development and teaching methodologies in CRE that are responsive to children's developmental stages and grounded in strong theological principles.

Keywords: Psychotheological Approach; Faith Development; Personality Formation; Children; Christian Religious Education

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INTRODUCTION

According Christian Religious Education (CRE) aims for more than the mere transmission of theological knowledge or doctrine. It seeks to holistically nurture a living faith one that is internalized and manifested in a personality aligned with the values of Christ (Anthony, 2007). In the contemporary educational landscape, the understanding of children has evolved significantly; they are no longer viewed as "tabula rasa" or passive recipients of teaching but as active individuals developing holistically across biological, cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions (Benson et al., 2006; Santrock, 2019). This paradigm shift necessitates a comprehensive understanding of developmental psychology for Christian educators so that faith formation can be optimally adjusted to children's maturity levels and specific developmental needs.

However, faith as a human response to God cannot be fully understood through purely empirical psychological approaches. Faith involves a transcendent dimension an existential relationship with God that transcends mere rationality or observable psychological processes (Fowler, 1981; Vitz, 1994; Pargament, 2013). This is where the psychotheological approach finds its profound relevance. This approach seeks to integrate scientific insights from developmental psychology with theological perspectives on the work of the Holy Spirit in shaping faith and character (Boa, 2001; Coe & Hall, 2010).

Such integration is vital because there is often a dichotomy within CRE practice. On one hand, there is a tendency to overemphasize cognitive or doctrinal aspects without considering how these are processed and internalized by children at particular developmental stages (Estep et al., 2008). On the other hand, some approaches place excessive emphasis on emotional or experiential aspects without a solid theological foundation (Yust et al., 2006). The psychotheological approach offers a strong bridge to overcome this dichotomy, ensuring that faith education remains both psychologically realistic and theologically authentic (Ratcliff, 2004; Miller-McLemore, 2012).

Contemporary research indicates that the integration of faith and personality development significantly influences children's holistic well-being, including their moral reasoning, emotional resilience, and social competence (King & Roeser, 2009; Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Children's faith education should therefore be directed toward spiritual growth that aligns with their personality development, enabling them to mature in Christ and reach "the full measure of the stature of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13, New International Version). This requires an understanding of how faith and personality mutually shape and strengthen one another (Erikson, 1968; Fowler, 1981; Parks, 2000).

Despite the critical importance of this integration, significant gaps remain in the literature. First, while theoretical models exist, there is limited empirical research examining how psychotheological principles can be practically implemented in CRE curricula, especially for children (Stonehouse & May, 2010; Anthony & Benson, 2011). Second, most existing studies focus on adolescent or adult faith development, leaving childhood a critical period for foundational faith formation underexplored from an integrated psychotheological perspective (Yust et al., 2006; Csinos & Beckwith, 2013). Benson et al. (2003) argued that childhood spirituality remains significantly understudied within the developmental sciences, while Hay and Nye (2006) demonstrated that children's spirituality is characterized by a distinctive relational consciousness qualitatively different from adult spiritual experience. Third, there is insufficient attention to the specific competencies required of CRE teachers to effectively facilitate this integrated approach (Estep et al., 2008; Anthony & Benson, 2011). This study addresses these gaps by providing a comprehensive framework that synthesizes psychological and theological insights specifically for children's faith education.

Research Questions. Based on the foregoing background, this study addresses the following questions:

1. How is the reciprocal relationship between children's faith development and personality development understood from the perspectives of developmental psychology and Christian theology?
2. How can the principles of the psychotheological approach be effectively integrated and applied in the design and implementation of Christian Religious Education for children?
3. What are the concrete implications of applying the psychotheological approach for the role and competencies of CRE teachers in facilitating the formation of children's faith and Christian character?

Research Objectives. This study aims to: (1) analyze and synthesize the interconnection between children's faith and personality development from the perspectives of developmental psychology (particularly Fowler and Erikson) and Christian theology; (2) comprehensively explain the fundamental principles of the psychotheological approach and elaborate on its application model in the context of CRE for children; and (3) specifically demonstrate the strategic role of CRE teachers and the competencies required in implementing this psychotheological approach to optimize children's holistic faith formation.

The psychotheological approach represents a conceptual framework that endeavors to integrate two disciplines traditionally viewed as separate psychology and theology in an effort to understand humans holistically, both as spiritual and psychological beings (Vitz, 1994). Within the context of faith education, psychotheology emphasizes that faith development is not merely a linear outcome of cognitive, affective, or sociocultural processes alone. Rather, it acknowledges the work of the divine the ministry of the Holy Spirit which mysteriously yet tangibly interacts with human psychological dynamics to shape, nurture, and mature faith (Paloutzian, 2017).

Paul Vitz (1994), one of the pioneers in the integration of psychology and Christianity, argued that authentic Christian psychology must acknowledge the reality that all dimensions of the human psyche including thoughts, emotions, and will have been affected by the fall into sin, while simultaneously possessing the potential for restoration and transformation through God's grace working in and through Christ. Thus, the psychotheological approach fundamentally positions Christ as the center in understanding personality and faith development, viewing Him as the primary agent of transformation and integration (McMinn & Campbell, 2007). Within this framework, psychology provides a map of how humans function, while theology provides a compass indicating why and in what direction humans should grow spiritually.

Within this integrated framework, psychology helps us understand children's developmental stages, learning mechanisms, motivation, and the emotional challenges they face. Meanwhile, theology provides the grand narrative about God, the purpose of human life, the nature of sin, grace, and the call to live holy lives (Issler & Habermas, 1994). When these two perspectives are unified, Christian education can be developed that is not only pedagogically relevant but also deeply rooted in divine truth and oriented toward the formation of holistic Christian character. This approach avoids reductionism, whether reducing faith to a mere psychological phenomenon or ignoring the psychological realities of human beings in faith formation (Watts, 2002).

James W. Fowler (1981) proposed one of the most influential faith development theories, identifying six stages of faith development that reflect how individuals construct meaning, find life's purpose, and relate to the transcendent. Although these stages are universal in their structural progression, experiences at each stage are significantly influenced by cultural context, personal experiences, and education (Fowler & Dell, 2006). Subsequent scholars have both expanded and critiqued this framework, noting its predominantly cognitive emphasis and calling for greater attention to affective, social, and cultural dimensions of faith development (Dykstra & Parks, 1986; Parks, 2000; Streib, 2001).

Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective Faith (Ages 2–6). At this stage, children's faith is heavily influenced by fantasy and imagination. Children accept religious stories and symbols literally, often without distinguishing between reality and fantasy (Fowler, 1981). Images of God are frequently projected from important authority figures in their lives, particularly parents. The role of CRE teachers here is to present biblical stories in visually and aurally engaging ways, emphasizing God's loving and protective character, and encouraging positive formative experiences with spirituality (Stonehouse, 1998).

Stage 2: Mythic-Literal Faith (Ages 7–12). This is the stage where the majority of elementary school-age children reside. They begin to understand religious stories and symbols more literally but are also capable of constructing more coherent and logical narratives (Fowler, 1981). Religious rules and norms are very important to them, and they tend to expect clear moral justice. Moral functioning is at the conventional level (Kohlberg, 1984), where "good" and "bad" are often defined by consequences or rules. Teachers can help children interpret biblical stories as historical and relevant faith experiences, teaching basic doctrinal concepts in concrete and understandable ways (Stonehouse & May, 2010).

Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith (Ages 13–18). Adolescents at this stage begin to form a more independent personal identity and seek coherence in their value systems. Their faith becomes "synthetic," combining various perspectives from peers, family, and religious figures (Fowler, 1981). They tend to internalize their community's faith without deep critical reflection, and the greatest crisis at this stage occurs when differing viewpoints cause confusion or doubt (Parks, 2000). Understanding Fowler's stages is crucial because it demonstrates that what is relevant and comprehensible to children at one stage may not be effective or may even be counterproductive at another stage (Nye & Hay, 1996).

Erik Erikson (1963, 1982) offered eight stages of psychosocial development that highlight personality formation through a series of crises that must be resolved. Each stage carries a specific developmental task that, if successfully completed, produces positive ego strength (Erikson, 1968). Three stages are particularly relevant to childhood faith education.

Trust vs. Mistrust (Birth–1 year). The foundation of personality is laid through the formation of basic trust in the world and caregivers. In the context of Christian education, children's early experiences with religious authority figures parents and teachers must foster a sense of security and trust in God (Ratcliff, 2004). A child who develops basic trust is more likely to relate positively to a God described as loving and faithful.

Initiative vs. Guilt (Ages 3–5). Preschool children develop initiative to explore and create. Good Christian education encourages active participation and imagination in religious learning without inducing unnecessary guilt (Coles, 1990). This stage aligns directly with Fowler's Intuitive-Projective stage, where storytelling and creative engagement with faith symbols are especially effective.

Industry vs. Inferiority (Ages 6–12). Elementary school-age children focus on developing competence and skills. Christian education should offer opportunities for children to feel successful in religious tasks memorizing Scripture, participating in ministry, or contributing to the faith community to build a sense of industry and worthiness in faith (Erikson, 1968; Yust et al., 2006). Personality vulnerabilities such as excessive shame, guilt, or inferiority can hinder faith growth, causing children to struggle in trusting a loving God (Pargament, 2007).

The relationship between faith and personality is reciprocal and dynamic (Allport, 1950; Park, 2005). Mature faith is reflected in a stable, authentic personality that is open to new experiences, possesses the capacity for love and service, and demonstrates moral integrity. Faith provides a framework of meaning, life purpose, and a strong value system that, in turn, shapes an individual's personality structure (Vitz, 1994; Emmons, 1999). A child with strong faith tends to demonstrate empathy and humility characteristics of a Christian personality (King & Boyatzis, 2015).

Conversely, a healthy personality characterized by self-confidence, balanced autonomy, initiative, and a sense of competence becomes fertile ground for faith growth. Children with healthy personalities tend to be more open to exploring faith questions, overcoming doubts, and internalizing spiritual values (Oman & Thoresen, 2003).

Therefore, Christian education that ignores aspects of children's personality development will consistently fail to facilitate holistic and robust faith growth (Balswick et al., 2016). This reciprocal dynamic constitutes the foundational premise for the psychotheological approach in CRE.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative library research methodology (*penelitian kepustakaan*). Library research is defined as research conducted through systematic exploration, collection, and critical examination of relevant literature, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and primary theological texts, without the collection of field data (Zed, 2008). This approach is appropriate for conceptual and theoretical studies in Christian education and theology, where the goal is to synthesize existing knowledge and develop integrated frameworks for practice (Coe & Hall, 2010; McMinn & Campbell, 2007).

The data sources consist of two categories: (1) primary sources, namely foundational theoretical works directly related to the core topics including the seminal works of Fowler (1981), Erikson (1963, 1968), Vitz (1994), and other primary theological and psychological texts; and (2) secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters that critically analyze, apply, or extend these foundational theories within the context of Christian religious education and child development.

The analytical approach follows an integrative review framework, which seeks to synthesize insights from two complementary disciplines developmental psychology and Christian theology without reducing one to the other. Data analysis was conducted through thematic content analysis, in which key themes related to children's faith and personality development were systematically identified, compared, and synthesized across the selected literature. The synthesis aimed to construct a coherent theoretical framework with clear practical implications for CRE curriculum design, pedagogical strategy, and teacher professional development. Consistent with the psychotheological approach, the epistemological stance of this study acknowledges both empirical-psychological and revelatory-theological sources of knowledge as legitimate and complementary (Watts, 2002).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Psychotheological Dimensions in Children's Faith Education

Effective children's faith education must consciously integrate psychological and theological dimensions to create a personal and transformative learning experience. This integration ensures that the formation process is not only aligned with children's cognitive and emotional capacities but also rooted in divine truth and guided by spiritual purpose. The results of this integrative review reveal two inseparable dimensions that must operate simultaneously in CRE practice.

Teachers and curriculum developers must possess a deep understanding of how children learn, think, feel, and interact at each stage of their development (Piaget, 1964; Erikson, 1963). For elementary school-age children at Piaget's concrete operational stage, abstract theological concepts such as the Trinity or God's sovereignty must be presented through concrete examples, accessible metaphors, or relevant biblical narratives (Fowler, 1981). Teaching should be narrative and symbolic rather than abstractly dogmatic. Faith involves not only what is known but also what is felt and valued; teachers therefore need to create safe and loving learning environments where children feel comfortable expressing emotions, doubts, or questions about faith without fear of judgment (Palmer, 1998). Activities such as singing, spontaneous prayer, artistic expression, and drama help

children connect their emotional experiences with faith truths, while simultaneously building the foundational trust that Erikson (1963) identifies as essential to healthy development.

The Theological Dimension. This dimension emphasizes that faith growth occurs not merely through human effort but through the work of the Holy Spirit, who actively guides children to know God's love, experience His redemption, and grow in holiness (Vitz, 1994). CRE must teach that God is a personal being who actively reveals Himself through Scripture, creation, and especially through Jesus Christ (Wright, 2005). Teachers must acknowledge and teach that it is the Holy Spirit who convicts of sin, grants new birth, and enables children to understand and internalize spiritual truth (Calvin, 1559/1960). The ultimate goal of CRE is not merely to make children know about Christ but to make them like Christ (Ephesians 4:13) forming character, values, and ethics aligned with Jesus' teachings, including love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23).

The psychotheological approach demands the integration of both dimensions so that the faith learning process becomes personal, relevant, and transformatively meaningful. This avoids CRE that is either too dry and dogmatic neglecting child psychology or too shallow and sentimental neglecting theological depth. Within this integrated framework, the role of CRE teachers shifts from merely delivering information to facilitating faith growth and modeling Christian character (Palmer, 1998), serving as living bridges between theological truth and children's psychological reality.

The Role and Competencies of CRE Teachers

The effectiveness of a psychotheological approach in CRE depends critically on the professional and spiritual formation of the teacher. Based on the synthesis of literature reviewed in this study, four essential competency domains emerge for CRE teachers operating within this framework.

Developmental Knowledge and Adaptive Teaching. Teachers must possess strong knowledge of children's cognitive, psychosocial, and faith development theories (Piaget, Erikson, Fowler). This understanding enables teachers to adapt content by presenting biblical truth in age-appropriate language and methods suited to children's comprehension capacity. For example, avoiding abstract explanations of theodicy for elementary-age children and instead focusing on concrete narratives of God's faithfulness. Teachers should employ diverse, interactive, and participatory teaching methods including storytelling, drama, games, guided discussion, art, and music that effectively engage children's cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions (Anthony, 2007).

Pastoral Care and Relational Facilitation. Teachers do not merely transfer knowledge but guide students to experience a personal relationship with God. This requires creating environments where children feel secure asking questions, expressing faith doubts, and sharing spiritual experiences without fear of judgment. Teachers need pastoral skills to accompany children in facing faith doubts or inner conflicts that arise during their growth, including empathy, active listening, and the ability to direct children toward biblical truth and experiences of God's grace (Palmer, 1998). This pastoral role is particularly important during the transitions between Fowler's developmental stages, where cognitive restructuring can produce significant spiritual disorientation.

Authentic Modeling of Christian Character. Children, especially at the mythic-literal developmental stage, are profoundly influenced by adult models. CRE teachers who are authentic in their faith and consistently demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23) become powerful role models for children (Palmer, 1998). Teachers not only teach Christian values but also embody them in daily interactions with children, colleagues, and parents. This includes love, patience, gentleness, self-control, and justice. Teachers who maintain a living personal

relationship with God can inspire children through testimony, prayer, and attitudes of dependence on the Lord not through projected perfection but through sincerity in the faith journey.

Community and Partnership Building. Acknowledging parents' primary role in children's faith education, CRE teachers must build strong partnerships with parents, providing resources and support for faith formation at home (Stonehouse, 1998). Teachers must also facilitate children's sense of belonging to the larger faith community the church where they can experience support, fellowship, and opportunities to serve (May et al., 2005). This community dimension is consistent with Erikson's (1968) understanding of the social context as essential to healthy identity formation and with Fowler's (1981) recognition that faith is always formed within a community of shared meaning.

Implications for Christian Character Formation

The psychotheological approach firmly asserts that faith education must be directed toward forming a character increasingly conformed to Christ (Balswick & Balswick, 2014). This Christian character is not merely a collection of isolated moral traits but rather a manifestation of life led by the Holy Spirit. Based on the theoretical synthesis presented in this study, five core dimensions of Christlike character emerge as targets for formation through CRE:

Agape Love. The capacity to love God and others unconditionally, to serve with humility, and to forgive as Christ forgave grounded in the theological understanding of God's unconditional love demonstrated in the incarnation and atonement (Willard, 2002).

Humility. Acknowledging dependence on God and appreciation for others while avoiding pride a disposition formed through consistent encounters with grace and the recognition of one's creatureliness before God (Boa, 2001).

Self-Control. The ability to manage emotions, desires, and behaviors according to Christian principles a competency that develops progressively across Erikson's (1968) psychosocial stages, beginning with the formation of autonomy and culminating in mature identity in Christ.

Steadfastness of Faith. The strength to remain faithful to Christ amid challenges, doubts, and temptations a character quality that emerges through the successful navigation of faith crises at each of Fowler's (1981) developmental stages, particularly the transition from Mythic-Literal to Synthetic-Conventional faith.

Moral Integrity. Consistency between beliefs, words, and actions reflecting the integration of cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of faith that the psychotheological approach seeks to facilitate (Emmons, 1999; King & Boyatzis, 2015).

Consequently, the CRE learning process must transcend cognitive theological learning to actively involve personal reflection inviting children to contemplate biblical truth and its relationship to their lived experiences. The learning environment should encourage spiritually edifying interactions among teachers, fellow students, and authentic experiences of prayer and worship. CRE must provide opportunities for children to practice Christian values in daily life through simple acts of service, deeds of kindness, or addressing conflicts in biblically grounded ways a "learning by doing" process that forms spiritual habits over time (Anthony, 2007; Palmer, 1998). The psychotheological approach, in this way, ensures that CRE produces not merely individuals who know about Christ but those who know Christ personally and live like Christ, so that their faith is manifested in a whole and impactful character.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the psychotheological approach provides a robust and essential conceptual foundation for developing holistic and effective Christian Religious Education, particularly in the context of children's faith and character formation. Through the careful integration of developmental psychology especially the theories of James Fowler and Erik Erikson with Christian theology emphasizing imago Dei, spiritual growth, and the work of the Holy Spirit, a richer and more complete understanding of children's spiritual growth becomes possible.

Children's faith and character development are dynamically interconnected and mutually enriching. Faith provides spiritual direction, meaning in life, and an ethical framework for character formation, encouraging individuals to grow in love, humility, and integrity that reflects Christ. Conversely, a healthy personality characterized by basic trust, autonomy, initiative, and competence becomes a conducive psychological vessel for faith to grow robustly and manifest authentically in every aspect of a child's life. Psychotheologically-based CRE therefore enables teachers to transcend the traditional role of information provider, becoming skilled facilitators who guide children to experience a personal relationship with God and develop a Christlike character.

Several important implications emerge for educational practice and professional development. First, CRE teachers need to be intensively equipped with deep understanding of children's faith and personality development from both psychological and theological perspectives, so that designed learning strategies become contextually relevant, developmentally responsive, and spiritually effective. Second, faith education must be designed to engage all aspects of a child's being: mind (cognitive), feelings (affective), and behavior (conative), employing diverse methodologies that include storytelling, personal reflection, open discussion, and experiential opportunities to practice Christian values. Third, Christian educational institutions and churches must review and develop CRE curricula that explicitly balance theological depth with psychological relevance, supporting Christian character development progressively and comprehensively. Finally, continuous professional development programs for CRE teachers are essential, focusing on how to integrate psychology and theology creatively, pedagogically, and pastorally. This study contributes to the growing body of scholarship seeking to make children's faith education both academically rigorous and spiritually transformative.

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