



## Spiritual Formation through Christian Education: A Phenomenological Study in Higher Education

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### ABSTRACT

Spiritual formation has become a central concern in Christian higher education, particularly in responding to the moral, existential, and psychosocial challenges faced by university students in the Global South. Situated within the Indonesian context, this study examines how spiritual formation is negotiated amid academic pressures, institutional expectations, and socio-cultural realities shaping Christian higher education. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews and reflective narratives involving students and lecturers at Calvary Baptist Theological College, Jakarta, Indonesia. The findings reveal that spiritual formation emerges through three interrelated dimensions: (1) transformative learning experiences, (2) relational and pastoral engagement, and (3) the integration of faith, identity, and academic life. Within this context, Christian education is not merely perceived as cognitive religious instruction but as a formative and dialogical space where students actively construct meaning, spirituality, and vocation while navigating academic demands and communal religious expectations. This study contributes to the discourse on Christian religious education by offering an experiential framework for spiritual formation that reflects the distinctive dynamics of Indonesian Christian higher education and provides insights for curriculum development and pedagogical practices in Global South contexts

## **INTRODUCTION**

Christian higher education increasingly faces complex challenges arising from rapid social change, academic pressure, and shifting spiritual landscapes among university students. Beyond cultivating intellectual competence, Christian institutions are called to nurture holistic student formation, particularly in response to faith fragmentation, existential uncertainty, and declining mental well-being in post-pandemic contexts (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). These challenges highlight the urgent need for Christian education that integrates theological understanding with lived spiritual formation. At the same time, students often experience tensions between academic demands, identity development, and spiritual commitment. Performance-oriented learning environments and exposure to secular worldviews can lead to the compartmentalization of faith as peripheral to academic life (Smith, 2009). When Christian education is reduced to the cognitive transmission of theological knowledge, it risks prioritizing information over transformation, thereby neglecting the experiential and relational dimensions essential to students' struggles with meaning, vocation, and spiritual identity (Palmer, 2007).

Spiritual formation, however, lies at the heart of Christian educational philosophy. It refers to a dynamic process of inner transformation through which individuals grow in faith, character, and relational intimacy with God, shaping how they live, learn, and engage with the world (Foster, R. J., 1998). Spiritual formation is not merely an individual or private endeavor; it is inherently communal and contextual, influenced by educational practices, mentoring relationships, worship experiences, and reflective engagement with life's challenges. In higher education, spiritual formation is expected to occur through the intentional integration of faith and learning, supported by pedagogical practices and relational environments that foster reflection, discernment, and meaning-making.

Previous scholarship on Christian education and spiritual formation has contributed valuable theological frameworks and pedagogical models. Studies have emphasized holistic education, formative pedagogy, and the integration of faith and learning as essential elements of Christian higher education (Holmes, A. F., 2001). However, much of this literature remains conceptual or prescriptive, focusing on what Christian education should be rather than how it is actually experienced by students. Empirical research that foregrounds students' lived experiences of spiritual formation within Christian higher education contexts remains relatively limited.

Moreover, existing empirical studies often rely on survey-based or evaluative approaches that measure spiritual outcomes through predefined indicators. While such approaches provide useful insights, they may not capture the depth, complexity, and subjective meaning of spiritual experiences. Spiritual formation is inherently experiential and interpretive, involving personal narratives, relational encounters, and moments of transformation that resist simple quantification (Tisdell, E. J., 2003). Consequently, there is a growing need

for qualitative approaches that can illuminate how students themselves perceive and experience spiritual formation within Christian education.

This gap is particularly evident in the context of the Global South, where Christian higher education operates within unique cultural, social, and religious dynamics. Research from these contexts is underrepresented in international scholarship, despite offering rich insights into how Christian education functions amid pluralism, socio-economic challenges, and rapidly changing youth cultures (Schreiter, R. J., 1997). Understanding spiritual formation from students' perspectives in these settings is essential for developing contextualized and responsive models of Christian education.

Phenomenology offers a methodological framework well suited to addressing this gap. As a qualitative approach, phenomenology seeks to understand the essence of lived experience by attending closely to how individuals make meaning of their experiences (van Manen, M., 2016). Applied to Christian education, phenomenology enables researchers to explore how students encounter, interpret, and internalize spiritual formation through educational practices, relationships with lecturers, and engagement with academic life. Rather than imposing external definitions of spirituality, this approach privileges participants' voices and narratives, allowing spiritual formation to emerge as it is lived and understood within specific contexts.

Against this backdrop, the present study explores spiritual formation through Christian education in higher education using a phenomenological approach. The study focuses on students' lived experiences to examine how Christian education contributes to the formation of faith, identity, and meaning-making within the university context. Particular attention is given to the interplay between academic learning, pastoral relationships, and everyday student life, recognizing that spiritual formation often occurs at the intersection of these dimensions rather than within formal curricula alone.

### **Research Objectives**

This study aims to:

1. Explore the meanings and lived experiences of spiritual formation among university students within Christian education contexts.
2. Examine how Christian education contributes to students' faith development, identity formation, and sense of purpose.
3. Analyze the relational and pedagogical factors that shape students' experiences of spiritual formation in higher education.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do students experience spiritual formation through Christian education in higher education?
2. What factors shape and influence the process of spiritual formation among students?
3. How do learning experiences, pastoral relationships, and academic life interact in the formation of students' spirituality?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **a. Spiritual Formation**

Spiritual formation is commonly understood as an ongoing process of inner transformation that shapes an individual's faith, character, and way of life. Within Christian theology, spiritual formation involves the reorientation of the self toward God, resulting in moral integrity, spiritual maturity, and embodied practices that reflect Christian virtues (Foster, R. J., 1998). Rather than a static achievement, spiritual formation is dynamic and lifelong, integrating belief, affect, and action in daily living.

Importantly, spiritual formation extends beyond personal piety or private religious experience. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes its communal and contextual nature, arguing that spiritual formation occurs within relational networks such as faith communities, educational institutions, and cultural contexts (Willard, D., 2002). Practices such as worship, mentoring, service, and reflective learning function as formative spaces where individuals negotiate meaning, identity, and vocation. In educational settings, these practices are mediated through pedagogy, curriculum, and relational engagement, highlighting the inseparability of spiritual formation from social and institutional contexts.

In higher education, spiritual formation is increasingly framed as a holistic process that integrates intellectual development with spiritual and moral growth. Scholars argue that authentic spiritual formation requires intentional structures that support reflection, discernment, and integration of faith with academic inquiry (Smith, J. K. A., 2009). Without such intentionality, spirituality risks becoming fragmented or marginalized within students' educational experiences.

### **b. Christian Education in Higher Education**

Christian education in higher education is fundamentally concerned with the integration of faith, learning, and life. Rather than viewing faith as an isolated component of religious instruction, Christian education seeks to shape how students think, learn, and live in light of their Christian worldview (Holmes, A. F., 2001). This integrative vision positions education as a formative journey that encompasses intellectual rigor, spiritual depth, ethical responsibility, and vocational discernment.

A key distinction in the literature is between instructional and formational approaches to Christian education. Instructional approaches prioritize content delivery, theological knowledge, and doctrinal clarity, often employing lecture-based pedagogies and assessment-driven outcomes. While these approaches contribute to cognitive understanding, they may inadequately address students' spiritual and existential development (Palmer, P. J., 2007). In contrast, formational approaches emphasize transformation, relational learning, and reflective engagement, positioning education as a process that shapes identity, character, and spiritual practices.

Formational Christian education highlights the role of educators as mentors and spiritual companions, not merely transmitters of knowledge. Learning environments are designed to foster dialogue, critical reflection, and integration of faith with lived experience (Pazmiño, R. W., 2008). Within higher

education, this approach aligns with holistic educational models that recognize students as meaning-making agents navigating complex personal, academic, and spiritual realities. However, the extent to which such formational ideals are realized in practice remains an open empirical question.

### **c. Phenomenology in Religious Education Research**

Phenomenology offers a methodological lens that prioritizes the study of lived experience (*Erlebnis*) as the primary source of meaning. Rooted in philosophical traditions that seek to describe phenomena as they are experienced by individuals, phenomenology is particularly well suited for exploring religious and spiritual dimensions that resist objective measurement (Husserl, E., 1970). In religious education research, phenomenology enables scholars to attend to how learners experience faith, spirituality, and formation within specific educational contexts.

Unlike positivist or quantitative approaches, phenomenology does not aim to generalize findings through statistical inference. Instead, it seeks to uncover the essence of experiences by analyzing participants' narratives, reflections, and meanings (van Manen, M., 2016). This approach is especially relevant for studying spiritual formation, which often manifests through subtle, relational, and transformative experiences that cannot be easily quantified or standardized.

In the context of Christian education, phenomenological research allows for a nuanced understanding of how students encounter spiritual formation through pedagogical practices, relationships with educators, and engagement with academic life. By foregrounding students' voices, phenomenology challenges normative assumptions about what spiritual formation should look like, offering insights grounded in actual educational experiences.

### **Research Gap**

Despite growing interest in spiritual formation and Christian education, existing scholarship reveals a significant gap in empirically grounded, student-centered studies that explore spiritual formation as lived experience in higher education contexts. Much of the current literature remains conceptual, prescriptive, or institution-centered, with limited attention to how students themselves experience and interpret spiritual formation through Christian education (Astin, A. W., Astin, H. S., & Lindholm, J. A., 2011).

This gap is particularly pronounced in the context of the Global South, where cultural, social, and religious dynamics shape distinct expressions of spirituality and education. Research from these contexts is underrepresented in international discourse, resulting in models of spiritual formation that may not adequately reflect diverse educational realities (Schreiter, R. J., 1997). Consequently, there is a need for phenomenological studies that offer contextually grounded and experiential models of spiritual formation, informed by the voices of students in Christian higher education.

Table 1: Instructional vs Formational Approaches in Christian Education

Aspects	<b>Instructional Approach</b>	<b>Formational Approach</b>
Main Focus	Transfer of theological knowledge	Spiritual transformation and character formation
Learning Objectives	Understanding of doctrines and concepts of faith	Integration of faith, identity, and life
Student Role	Recipient of information (cognitively learner-centered)	Subject of formation (holistic learner)
Lecturer Role	Teacher/presenter of material	Mentor, facilitator, and spiritual companion
Learning Methods	Lectures, exams, academic assignments	Reflection, dialogue, narrative, and mentoring
Spiritual Dimension	Implicit and secondary	Explicit, intentional, and reflective
Expected Outcomes	Faith knowledge	Growth in faith, meaning of life, and practice
Relationship with Life	Separated from life experience	Integrated with academic and personal experiences

Table 2: Theoretical Basis → Interview Focus

<b>Literature Framework</b>	<b>Conceptual Implications</b>	<b>Phenomenological Interview Focus</b>
Spiritual Formation as a Process of Inner Transformation	Spirituality is dynamic and meaningful	Experiences of change in faith, character, and meaning of life
Spirituality is Communal and Contextual	Formation occurs in relationships and environments	Relationships with lecturers, the community, and the campus context
Christian Education as an Integration of Faith, Learning, and Life	Education influences identity and life practices	Integration of faith with studies and daily life

Formational Approach	Education as a formation process	Learning experiences that shape spirituality
Phenomenology (Lived Experience)	Meaning emerges from participants' narratives	Student stories, reflections, and personal experiences

### Phenomenological Interview Instruments

#### A. Spiritual Formation Experience

1. Can you describe your experience of spiritual growth during your time in Christian higher education?
2. What moments or experiences have most influenced your faith and spiritual life as a student?

#### B. The Role of Christian Education

1. How do courses or learning activities in Christian education shape your understanding of faith beyond academic knowledge?
2. Can you share learning experiences that helped you connect faith with real-life situations?

#### C. Relationships and Mentoring

1. How do relationships with lecturers or mentors influence your spiritual journey as a student?
2. In what ways does the campus community support or hinder your spiritual formation?

#### D. Academic Life and the Meaning of Life

1. How do academic pressures and challenges affect your spiritual life?
2. Has Christian education helped you find meaning or purpose amid academic demands?

#### E. Integrative Reflection

1. How would you describe the relationship between your faith, your studies, and your identity as a student?
2. What does spiritual formation mean to you after experiencing Christian education in higher education?

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach using thematic phenomenological analysis to explore students' lived experiences of spiritual formation through Christian education in higher education. Phenomenology was selected because it allows for an in-depth examination of how individuals perceive, interpret, and make meaning of their spiritual experiences within specific educational contexts (van Manen, M., 2016). Rather than seeking causal explanations or generalizable outcomes, this approach focuses on understanding the essence of participants' experiences as they are lived and narrated.

By adopting phenomenology, the study positions students' voices at the center of inquiry, recognizing spiritual formation as a subjective, relational, and contextual process. This approach is particularly appropriate for investigating spiritual dimensions of education that are not easily captured through quantitative measures.

### **Research Participants**

The participants in this study consisted of 15 undergraduate students and 5 lecturers involved in Christian education at a Christian higher education institution, Calvary Baptist Theological College, Jakarta, Indonesia. Students were selected based on their active involvement in Christian education courses, ensuring that participants had sufficient experience to meaningfully reflect on spiritual formation in an academic context. Lecturers were included to provide complementary perspectives on the pedagogical and pastoral dimensions of Christian education.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who could provide rich, reflective, and relevant data (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N., 2018). The final number of participants was determined by data saturation, whereby no new significant themes emerged from subsequent interviews.

### **Data Collection Techniques**

Data were collected using two primary qualitative techniques: in-depth semi-structured interviews and written reflective narratives.

### **In-depth Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow participants to share their experiences in their own words while providing sufficient structure to address the research questions. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to reflect on their spiritual journeys, learning experiences, and relational dynamics within Christian education. Interviews were conducted in a conversational manner to foster trust and openness, essential for exploring spiritual and personal experiences (Seidman, I., 2019).

### **Reflective Narratives**

In addition to interviews, participants were invited to submit brief written reflections describing significant experiences related to spiritual formation during their studies. Reflective narratives complemented interview data by allowing participants to articulate insights that might emerge through personal contemplation rather than immediate verbal interaction.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was employed as an analytic strategy within a phenomenological orientation, ensuring that themes remained grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than abstract categorization. The data were analyzed using thematic phenomenological analysis, which integrates phenomenological sensitivity to lived experience with systematic thematic coding (Braun, V., & Clarke, Y., 2006). The analysis followed several stages:

1. Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts and reflections.
2. Initial coding to identify meaning units related to spiritual formation, Christian education, and lived experience.
3. Clustering of codes into emergent themes that capture shared patterns of meaning.
4. Phenomenological interpretation to articulate the essence of spiritual formation as experienced by participants.

Throughout the analysis, the researcher engaged in reflexive journaling to bracket personal assumptions and remain attentive to participants' meanings.

### **Trustworthiness and Validity**

To ensure the rigor and credibility of the study, several strategies were employed. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with participants to confirm accuracy and resonance with their experiences (Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G., 1985). Triangulation of data sources was achieved by comparing insights from student interviews, lecturer interviews, and written reflections. These strategies enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings and minimized interpretive bias.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical integrity was maintained throughout the research process. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Participants' identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms, and all data were stored securely to ensure confidentiality. Given the personal and spiritual nature of the data, particular care was taken to create a respectful and non-coercive interview environment (Orb, A., Eisenhauer, L., & Wynaden, D., 2001).

### **Findings: Thematic Presentation**

The phenomenological analysis revealed three interrelated themes that describe how students experience spiritual formation through Christian education in higher education. These themes reflect shared meanings across participants' narratives and illuminate spiritual formation as a lived, relational, and integrative process rather than a purely instructional outcome.

#### **Theme 1: Christian Education as Transformative Encounter**

Participants consistently described Christian education not merely as an academic requirement or theological subject, but as a space of spiritual encounter. Learning experiences were often perceived as moments of personal confrontation, reflection, and transformation, where students encountered God, themselves, and existential questions about life and purpose. Rather than emphasizing doctrinal mastery alone, participants highlighted experiences that challenged their assumptions, reshaped their faith perspectives, and invited deeper self-awareness.

Several students articulated that Christian education courses became meaningful when they addressed real-life struggles, doubts, and questions.

These moments enabled students to experience learning as spiritually formative rather than cognitively detached. This finding aligns with the understanding of spiritual formation as an experiential process that engages the whole person—mind, heart, and life praxis (Foster, R. J., 1998).

From a phenomenological perspective, these encounters functioned as transformative moments, where learning was experienced as personally significant and spiritually resonant. Christian education thus emerged as a formative journey rather than a static transmission of religious knowledge.

### **Theme 2: Relational and Pastoral Dimension**

A second prominent theme highlighted the central role of relationships in spiritual formation. Participants emphasized that their spiritual growth was deeply influenced by interactions with lecturers, mentors, and the broader faith community on campus. Lecturers who embodied authenticity, spiritual integrity, and pastoral sensitivity were frequently described as significant agents of formation.

Students noted that when lecturers engaged them relationally—through dialogue, encouragement, and personal accompaniment—Christian education became a space of trust and openness. These relational dynamics enabled students to articulate doubts, reflect on spiritual struggles, and experience guidance without fear of judgment. Such relationships were perceived not merely as academic interactions, but as pastoral encounters that nurtured spiritual growth.

Additionally, peer relationships and communal practices such as worship, small groups, and shared reflection were identified as formative contexts. This finding underscores the communal nature of spiritual formation, supporting the view that spirituality is shaped through relational belonging and shared practices rather than isolated individual effort (Smith, J. K. A., 2009).

### **Theme 3: Integration of Faith and Academic Life**

The third theme revealed that spiritual formation was most deeply experienced when students perceived a meaningful integration of faith with academic life, personal identity, and vocational aspirations. Participants described spiritual growth as emerging when faith was not compartmentalized but allowed to inform how they studied, made decisions, and understood their future calling.

Students who experienced Christian education as integrative reported a growing awareness of their identity as both learners and believers. Academic challenges, ethical dilemmas, and career planning were interpreted through a faith-informed lens, enabling students to find coherence between belief and practice. In contrast, participants noted that when faith and academics were disconnected, spiritual formation felt superficial or fragmented.

This theme highlights spiritual formation as a process of meaning-making, where students interpret academic experiences within a broader spiritual narrative. Such integration reflects the core aim of Christian education in higher education: fostering holistic formation that connects faith, learning, and life (Holmes, A. F., 2001).

### **Thematic Synthesis**

Taken together, these themes suggest that spiritual formation through Christian education is not confined to formal curricula or instructional content. Instead, it unfolds through transformative learning encounters, relational and pastoral engagement, and intentional integration of faith with academic and personal life. These findings reinforce the conceptualization of Christian education as a formative space where spirituality is lived, interpreted, and embodied within the realities of higher education.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Spiritual Formation within the Moral Economy of Indonesian Higher Education**

Spiritual formation in Christian higher education does not occur in a social vacuum. Rather, it is embedded within broader cultural, economic, and institutional contexts that shape how faith, success, and meaning are perceived and negotiated by students. In the Indonesian Global South context, where religiosity remains publicly affirmed and educational achievement is closely associated with social mobility and future security, spiritual formation unfolds within what can be understood as a moral-economic landscape in which religious commitment, institutional expectations, and aspirations for stability intersect (Berger, 1967; Gifford, 2004).

From a phenomenological perspective, participants' narratives in this study indicate that spiritual formation is experienced not only through explicitly religious practices, but also through everyday academic pressures, performance-oriented learning environments, and future-oriented concerns related to vocation and livelihood. Students frequently described subtle tensions between the spiritual ideals articulated within Christian education and the pragmatic demands of higher education, including assessment regimes, competition, and expectations of productivity. These tensions were rarely expressed as overt spiritual conflict; instead, they were internalized and negotiated through ongoing processes of interpretation and meaning-making.

Within this context, Christian education functions as a critical mediating space. When pedagogical practices emphasize reflection, pastoral presence, and the integration of faith with lived experience, students are better able to interpret academic and vocational challenges through a spiritually formative lens. Conversely, when Christian education implicitly mirrors dominant institutional logics of achievement and efficiency without sustained theological and reflective engagement, spiritual formation risks being subtly reframed in instrumental terms – valued primarily for its capacity to enhance resilience, moral discipline, or future success rather than for its formative orientation toward faithfulness and transformed desire.

When read phenomenologically and hermeneutically, the apostolic warning in 1 Timothy 6:5–10 can be approached not as doctrinal prescription, but as an interpretive lens that illuminates how spiritual meaning may become entangled with economic rationalities. Rather than condemning material aspiration per se, the text foregrounds the risk of reorienting godliness toward utilitarian ends. Within the Indonesian higher education context, this

reorientation is often subtle, emerging through normalized expectations of academic success and social advancement rather than through explicit prosperity-oriented theology.

Participants' experiences suggest that spiritual formation is most deeply sustained when Christian education actively disrupts these taken-for-granted assumptions. Practices such as reflective dialogue, mentoring relationships, and integrative learning experiences enable students to critically engage dominant narratives of success and to reinterpret vocation as faithfulness rather than mere achievement. In these moments, spiritual formation is experienced as a process of re-centering—reshaping desires, identities, and hopes in ways that resist reduction to instrumental outcomes.

This analysis highlights a distinctive Global South contribution to the study of spiritual formation. Unlike Western contexts where secularization often marginalizes spirituality, Indonesian Christian higher education operates within a social landscape in which faith remains publicly visible yet increasingly entangled with socio-economic aspiration (Schreiter, 1997; Song, 2010). Spiritual formation, therefore, is challenged not primarily by irrelevance, but by over-accommodation—the absorption of spiritual language and practices into institutional and economic frameworks without sustained critical discernment.

By situating students' lived experiences within this moral-economic context, the study underscores that spiritual formation is not merely an individual or curricular concern, but an institutional and cultural one. Christian education plays a decisive role in shaping how students interpret faith amid competing academic and social demands, and whether spirituality remains genuinely formative or becomes functionally instrumental. From a phenomenological standpoint, spiritual formation emerges as an ongoing interpretive process through which students learn to inhabit their faith meaningfully within the lived realities of higher education.

The findings of this study reinforce the paradigm of holistic Christian education, which views education not merely as intellectual instruction but as a comprehensive process of spiritual, moral, and personal formation. Participants' experiences demonstrate that Christian education becomes spiritually formative when it engages students' lived realities, relationships, and meaning-making processes. This supports the foundational claim in Christian educational theory that authentic learning involves the transformation of the whole person—mind, heart, and life praxis (Holmes, A. F., 2001).

### **Holistic Christian Education and Spiritual Formation**

The first theme, Christian Education as Transformative Encounter, highlights learning as an experiential and transformative process rather than a cognitive exercise alone. This aligns with classical and contemporary understandings of spiritual formation, which emphasize inner transformation through reflective engagement and lived practice (Foster, R. J., 1998). Spiritual formation, as evidenced in this study, emerges when students encounter learning as personally meaningful and spiritually resonant, challenging existing assumptions and reshaping faith perspectives. Such encounters reflect the

holistic nature of Christian education, where intellectual inquiry and spiritual reflection are integrally connected.

### **Spiritual Formation as Dynamic, Reflective, and Relational**

The second theme underscores spiritual formation as a dynamic and relational process. Participants' emphasis on pastoral relationships and communal belonging confirms that spiritual growth is not an isolated individual endeavor but is mediated through trusted relationships and supportive communities. This finding resonates with theories of spiritual formation that stress the formative role of communal practices, mentoring, and relational accompaniment (Smith, J. K. A., 2009). The relational dimension also aligns with transformative learning theory, which recognizes dialogue and relational trust as essential conditions for deep learning and perspective transformation (Mezirow, J., 1997).

Reflection emerged as a critical mechanism linking experience and transformation. Students' narratives revealed that spiritual formation was facilitated through reflective engagement with life experiences, academic challenges, and relational encounters. Such reflection enabled students to reinterpret their experiences through a faith-informed lens, fostering growth and spiritual resilience.

### **Christian Education as a Formative Journey**

The third theme, *Integration of Faith and Academic Life*, reveals Christian education as a formative journey rather than a discrete curricular component. When faith was integrated with academic pursuits and vocational discernment, students experienced spiritual formation as coherent and meaningful. This finding supports the view that Christian education functions as an ongoing journey of formation, shaping identity, purpose, and praxis over time (Palmer, P. J., 2007).

From a transformative learning perspective, this integration reflects a process of perspective transformation, where students critically examine previously held assumptions and reconstruct meaning in light of new insights (Mezirow, J., 2000). Christian education, therefore, serves as a context in which transformative learning and spiritual formation converge, enabling students to develop a faith-informed worldview that guides academic and life decisions.

### **Theoretical Implications**

By linking phenomenological findings with theories of spiritual formation and transformative learning, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Christian education operates as a formative process in higher education. The findings suggest that spiritual formation is best understood as dynamic, reflective, and relational, unfolding through intentional pedagogical design and authentic relational engagement. This reinforces calls within the literature for Christian education that prioritizes formation over mere instruction and positions educators as facilitators of transformative learning journeys.

The findings of this study need to be understood within the specific context of the Global South, particularly Indonesia, where spiritual formation is

deeply shaped by communitarian culture, strong public religiosity, and post-pandemic realities. Unlike individualistic contexts often reflected in Western literature, participants in this study experienced spiritual formation primarily through relational and communal engagement. Relationships with lecturers, mentors, and faith communities functioned as central formative spaces, highlighting the culturally embedded nature of spirituality in Indonesian higher education. Furthermore, in a context where faith remains publicly visible yet increasingly fragmented by academic pressure and socio-economic uncertainty, spiritual formation was experienced as an integrative process of meaning-making rather than mere personal piety. The post-pandemic context intensified this process, as students navigated collective trauma, vocational uncertainty, and existential questions. These contextual dynamics suggest that models of spiritual formation developed in Western settings may require contextual reinterpretation when applied to Christian higher education in the Global South.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study generate significant implications for both theory and practice in the field of Christian education in higher education. By illuminating spiritual formation as a lived, relational, and integrative process, this research contributes to ongoing scholarly discourse while offering concrete directions for educational praxis.

#### **a. Theoretical Implications**

This study offers a phenomenologically grounded framework of spiritual formation in Christian higher education that foregrounds students' lived experiences. Unlike normative or prescriptive models that define spiritual formation primarily through theological ideals or curricular intentions, the framework emerging from this study conceptualizes spiritual formation as an experiential process shaped by transformative encounters, relational engagement, and integration of faith with academic life (van Manen, M., 2016).

The proposed framework advances existing theories of spiritual formation by emphasizing its dynamic, reflective, and contextual nature. Spiritual formation is not portrayed as a linear or uniform outcome of Christian education, but as an evolving journey influenced by pedagogical practices, communal relationships, and personal meaning-making. This perspective complements and extends theoretical work on holistic Christian education by providing empirical insight into how formation is actually experienced by students (Smith, J. K. A., 2009).

Furthermore, by integrating phenomenological methodology with theories of spiritual formation and transformative learning, this study contributes a methodological perspective that bridges theological reflection and educational research. It demonstrates the value of phenomenology for capturing the depth and complexity of spiritual formation, thereby enriching theoretical conversations in Christian education research.

## **b. Practical Implications**

### **Curriculum Development for Formational Learning**

The findings suggest that Christian higher education institutions should intentionally design curricula that prioritize formation alongside instruction. Curriculum development should move beyond content coverage toward learning experiences that foster reflection, dialogue, and integration of faith with real-life contexts. This includes incorporating reflective assignments, experiential learning, and opportunities for spiritual discernment within academic courses (Holmes, A. F., 2001). Such formational curricula can create learning environments where spiritual formation is embedded across disciplines rather than confined to specific religious courses.

### **Strengthening the Role of Lecturers as Educator-Mentor-Pastor**

A second practical implication concerns the role of lecturers in Christian higher education. The study highlights the formative impact of lecturers who engage students not only as educators but also as mentors and pastoral companions. Institutions should therefore support the development of lecturers' pedagogical, spiritual, and relational competencies, recognizing their multifaceted role in students' formation (Palmer, P. J., 2007). Professional development programs that integrate pedagogical training with spiritual and pastoral formation can equip lecturers to accompany students effectively through their academic and spiritual journeys.

Collectively, these practical implications underscore the need for institutional cultures that value formation as a core educational outcome. By aligning curriculum design and faculty roles with a formational vision of Christian education, higher education institutions can more effectively nurture students' holistic development.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study concludes that Christian education in higher education plays a significant role in nurturing students' spiritual formation when it is intentionally designed as a holistic, relational, and reflective learning process. Through a phenomenological exploration of students' lived experiences, the findings demonstrate that spiritual formation is not an automatic outcome of curricular presence, but a formative process that emerges through meaningful encounters, relational engagement, and integration of faith with academic and personal life.

The study affirms that spiritual formation is dynamic and contextually grounded, shaped by pedagogical practices that invite reflection, dialogue, and engagement with real-life challenges. When Christian education moves beyond instructional transmission toward a formational orientation, students experience learning as spiritually transformative, enabling them to construct meaning, identity, and vocation within their academic journey (Foster, R. J., 1998).

Furthermore, the findings highlight the centrality of relationships and pastoral presence in Christian higher education. Lecturers who embody roles as educators, mentors, and pastoral companions significantly contribute to students' spiritual growth by creating spaces of trust, accompaniment, and reflective engagement. This relational dimension reinforces the understanding of

Christian education as a communal practice of formation rather than an individualistic or purely cognitive endeavor (Palmer, P. J., 2007).

By foregrounding students' voices, this study contributes to the discourse on Christian education by offering an experiential and phenomenologically grounded understanding of spiritual formation, particularly within a Global South context. The findings underscore the need for Christian higher education institutions to intentionally align curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, and faculty roles with a holistic vision of formation. In doing so, Christian education can more faithfully fulfill its formative mission – cultivating graduates who integrate faith, learning, and life in meaningful and transformative ways (Smith, J. K. A., 2009).

### **FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, as a phenomenological inquiry, the findings are based on a relatively small and context-specific sample, which limits the generalizability of the results beyond similar Christian higher education settings. Second, the study relies on self-reported narratives, which may be influenced by participants' reflective capacity and subjective interpretation of spiritual experiences. Future research could expand this work by employing comparative or mixed-methods designs to examine spiritual formation across diverse institutional contexts, cultural settings, and denominational traditions. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to explore how spiritual formation develops over time and how formative experiences during higher education shape graduates' faith, identity, and vocation beyond university life.

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