



# Critical Philosophies and Christian Education in the Digital Era

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**Abstract.** Contemporary Christian Education has been documented to be catching up with technological and educational advancements of the digital era in its praxis. However, there needs to be more discussion about changes and challenges around the underlying educational philosophies in Christian Education as a result of information technology and globalization. More than just adopting the new communication technologies in teaching, contemporary Christian Education needs to equip children and youth to negotiate new ideological encounters enabled by technologies and to navigate through a world of multiplicities. The main argument in this article is that critical philosophies are useful for navigating such a world, and Christian educators might find benefits in adopting critical philosophies with a purpose of re-thinking and re-practicing Christian education that is relevant and connected to 21st-century contexts. Through critical reflections on his experience as a Christian educator and an academic, the author explores the ways Christianity responded to the changing world throughout the history, and elaborates why critical philosophies are relevant for our contemporary world(s). The implications are discussed in terms of what parts of and how Christian Education should change when Christian educators adopt critically-oriented reforms.

**Keywords:** Christian Education, Critical Philosophy, Digital Era

## 1 Introduction

Industrial Revolution 4.0., Society 5.0., digital era, globalization, information and communication technology, artificial intelligence, computer-mediated communication, nanotechnology, the Internet of things. Every day we are bombarded with these terms. Some of us might know the precise meaning of each of this term; some of us might only have vague ideas of what these terms are referring to. Not a big deal, one minute of Google search will bring us on the same page to start a conversation.

Google, emails, zoom meetings, WhatsApp messages, online shopping, Facebook posts, Instagram stories, YouTube videos, Netflix series, Spotify podcasts, food deliveries, dating apps. Every day we use these innovative digital products and services for various purposes, from entertainment, work, education, running errands to self-representation.

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The world is changing, or to be precise, the world is being revolutionised by digital technologies. Life is not the same, it is completely different from our parents' world one generation ago. Education, including Christian Education, which has been criticised for being too slow to change and adapt to the ever-shifting contemporary world [1], nevertheless, is changing too. Kevin Lawson, the chief editor of *Christian Education Journal* – a leading international academic publication platform in the field of Christian education – precisely highlighted these technological revolutions in his introduction to the special issues celebrating 40 years of *Christian Education Journal* while being in COVID lockdown, amazed about how the world, and Christian education, has been enabled in various ways by the new digital technologies [2].

In fact, Christian Education all over the world has been documented to begin catching up with technological and educational advancements, from devising Biblical online education [3, 4], using digital technology for disciple-making [5], incorporating information technologies in field-based Christian education programs [6], to ministering congregations using digital technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic [7].

But there is something else happening here, something larger and more fundamental. Beyond our excitement about how technology may transform the practice of Christian Education, we might also need to think about the challenges and changes regarding the underlying educational philosophies and ideologies enabled by information technology and globalisation. The role of global capitalism in transforming the nature of knowledge and learning, for example, is still not commonly discussed in Christian Education. The facts that knowledge, including theological knowledge, now becomes a commodity rather than a sacred matter [8], and theological expertise becomes a game of metric optimisation, citation, and h-index, rather than spiritual depth [9, 10], have increasingly become the accepted norm. Further, Christian students' encounters with very different ways of seeing, ways of being, and ways of doing previously inaccessible now take place at an unprecedented rate, far beyond what has ever happened in human civilisation. Within such encounters, clashes of ideologies, contestations of truth, and questionings of long-held traditions and beliefs are inevitable, particularly Christian traditions and beliefs. There are significant conceptual challenges Christian educators need to address in the current digital era.

Take myself as an example. Growing up in the religious contexts of Indonesia as a pious son of a church minister, I was taught within one particular Christian tradition and believed in one version of Christian truth. A postgraduate scholarship took me to a Western country where, for the first time in my life, I met people who explicitly identify themselves as atheists. This is precisely what sociologists have pointed out, that globalization has been “placing so many people of such diverse beliefs in immediate proximity” [11, p. 16]. Further, I was also exposed, again for the first time in my life, to different strands of theology that felt connected with my persistent interests in social justice, from liberation theology, black theology, feminist theology, to queer theology. Such encounters shook up my deep-seated religious consciousness, and forced me to reconfigure my sense of who I am as a Christian. Fast forward a decade and a half, nowadays I find my students are experiencing similar encounters and even more diverse global discourses, which may be different from conventional Christian

values from which there were brought up; thanks to globalised media, including social media, and the advancement of digital culture.

Climate crisis, women empowerment, racial discrimination, LGBT sexualities, abortion, the idea of a family, diverse and multi-religion societies, religious extremism, and religious conflicts are some of the pressing ideological issues faced by the younger generation. More than just adopting the new communication technologies in teaching, contemporary Christian Education needs to equip children and youth to negotiate such ideological encounters enabled by technologies, and to navigate through a world of multiplicities. But how?

My reflections on this condition indicated that critical philosophies - that generally deal with ideological tensions – might offer some new constructive insights for Christian education. Therefore, the aim of this article is to explore how Christian educators might find benefits in adopting critical philosophies in re-thinking and re-practicing Christian education that is relevant and connected to 21st century contexts and able to address aforementioned significant conceptual challenges. I will first illuminate what I refer to as critical philosophies, reflect on the historical relationship between Christianity and social changes, then examine in what ways Christian education might be in tension with critical philosophies, and finally, I offer some ideas to reconcile such tensions.

## **2 Method**

As this piece is not an empirical study, but instead a viewpoint type of academic article, the method in this article is reflective critical analysis [12]. Reflective critical analysis generates knowledge both empirically, self-reflectively, or in interactive processes with a purpose of analyse, resist, and change power relations, structures, and ways of being [13]. Specifically, I critically reflect on my readings of relevant academic, historical, and contemporary sources, and my own experience as a Christian educator. These reflections were then structured into a piece of writing that sought to respond to the aim of this article. It is important to note that religio-social location from which I speak in writing this article is my personal contexts of being a Protestant in the Global South.

## **3 Findings and Discussion**

### **3.1 Critical Philosophies in a Nutshell and Their Relationship with Christian Education**

What is critical philosophy? There might not be one simple definition, as critical thinkers would always disagree with each other. For the sake of keeping the current article within the word limit, let us over-simplify this huge debate into one common feature distinguishing critical scholarship from other fields of academic knowledge, namely, an analysis of power. From Immanuel Kant to Karl Marx to Friedrich Nietzsche to Edward Said, critical philosophers have demonstrated how knowledge and

social practices are not simply objective, neutral, and universal, but instead, socially and ideologically constructed, and imbued with interests and power relations. Whether they criticise capitalism, colonialism, racism, or patriarchy, their utmost concerns are mainly social justice, emancipation, or freedom from oppression.

In my interactions with other Christian educators, they have traditionally been hesitant to deal with critical philosophies and, consequently, have distanced themselves and their students from such philosophies. International sources also showed a similar tendency [e.g., 14]. Why should Christian students have anything to do with Marxism when Karl Marx [15] himself called religion “the opium of the people”? Postmodernism, the philosophy that characterises contemporary world as the collapse of grand narratives [16], was feared to lead students to relativism [17] where Christian truth might be considered as equally true as other religious or worldly truths. Reading feminism might encourage students to question the ubiquitous male gaze, tone, and interpretations in reading the Bible and mainstream Christian teachings.

All was well before the digital revolution. Such allegedly ‘dangerous’ philosophies might not have easily exposed to our youth. However, the problem is that the world has changed, and ideological debates are just one click away from our students’ fingertips, represented in interesting ways for them, like TikTok reels. We, as Christian educators, cannot avoid such critical conversations. Who has not heard of LGBT identities nowadays? Who has not been exposed to the idea of gender equality? The information youth accessed may not align with conventional Christian values. Unfortunately, Christian educators can no longer say that things are right or wrong because ‘the Bible says so’ without specific justifications connected with contemporary youth’s critical ways of thinking. When Christian Education is perceived as ‘no longer making sense’ by youth, their consumerist habit could prompt them to leave their Christian faith and find other, better ways of understanding the world readily available to choose from, as endless options are offered in the socio-ideological, digitally-enhanced market. We might have to learn to engage with critical philosophies and transform our ways of teaching Christian Education. Luckily, history is on our side.

### **3.2 Christianity and Critical Social Issues: A Lesson from History**

Christianity, as many other religions too, is not static, but dynamic; it continuously adapts and reinvents itself so that it has not only survived but also thrived throughout its 2000-year history. Despite enduring persecution under the Roman Emperor Nero, Christianity spread out from the ancient Israel. Surviving abuse of power by church authorities during the medieval age, Protestantism was born and Christianity was reinvigorated. During the rise of modern scientific rationalism, Christianity has proven to be resilient as secularisation (hypo)thesis is now considered unproven.

Regarding critical social issues, while Christian teachings have been drawn upon and Christian institutions have supported injustices, Christian figures and sacred texts have also repeatedly defeated those injustices and initiated new eras of Bible-based social justice. Trans-Atlantic slave trade, for example, was initially supported by the church, citing Biblical verse in the Ephesians 6: 5 “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ”. But

the leader who ended slavery in the United States of America was also a pious Christian man, Abraham Lincoln. Another example is colonialism, with European colonial missions frequently citing the slogan “Gold, Gospel, and Glory” as their motives. Christianity supported colonialism because it brought Gospel to faraway worlds. But on the other hand, in the case of Indonesia, Abraham Kuyper – a neo-Calvinist theologian – was one of the first Dutch prime ministers to propose independence for Indonesia or Dutch East Indies at that time. While racial segregation had existed in American churches from before the U.S became a country until the modern age, it was Pastor Martin Luther King, Jr. who led civil right movements in the 1950-60s that virtually ending the practice of racial segregation. In short, social critiques and social changes were not foreign to Christianity.

But Christianity did change in response to the changing world, and not without sacrifice too. When the church was separated from the State, churches eventually lost most financial support they used to receive from the European governments. White Christians must accept that Black Christians can worship in the same church building, despite their possible initial feelings of uneasiness. Change is essential to survive, although change could be discomfoting.

To adapt to the digitally and globally changing world, particularly the critical philosophical dimensions of the digital era as described, Christian Education may need to return to the heart of the Protestant reformation: *ecclesia semper reformanda* – the church must always reform itself. The question now is, what parts of Christian Education must be sacrificed for such reformation to occur, and are we prepared to make those sacrifices?

### **3.3 The Ways in which Christian Education would be Challenged by Critical Philosophies**

In this article, I identify at least three aspects of Christian Education that would be challenged when educators adopt critical theories as their educational philosophy [1]. Firstly, the claim of single truth is challenged. In his recent reflections on Christian Education, Stephen Maitanmi [17], the assistant editor of the internationally renowned *Journal of Research on Christian Education (JRCE)*, claims that the purpose of education is “directing the child to do the right thing” (p. 91). However, with the advancement of information and communication technologies, critical philosophies have unmistakably exposed the epistemological plurality so that a claim of truth, such as ‘the right thing’ above, cannot be easily and authoritatively made. Multiple hermeneutics become self-explanatory and are taken for granted. Teaching one single truth about God, or anything, is not only ineffective, but also unintelligible.

Secondly, the scriptural authority is challenged. Since the collapse of grand narratives, authority to claim truth is now dispersed. The individuals have relative freedom to decide which epistemological authority ‘make sense’ for them. The Bible as an absolute source of truth is questioned, and even which interpretation of the Bible is authoritative is contested, considering the wide range of denominational variety and their theological differences. In fact, the only Protestant axiom that was not derived from the Bible is the claim that the Bible is inerrant and infallible since such claim is

not explicitly written in the books in the Bible. This is because at the time the books in the Bible were written, canonisation of those books as the Bible has not been done. Consequently, for contemporary Christian Educators, expectations of students' obedience and piety based on scriptural authority might not be as relevant anymore.

Thirdly, a focus on after-life salvation and evangelism is challenged. The traditional central focus of Christian Education, particularly Protestantism, on after-life salvation and subsequently the social obligation of spreading the Gospel so that people can be saved from worldly sufferings by converting them to Christianity, might now be at odds with contemporary critical consciousness enabled by digital revolutions. Evangelism might be considered irrelevant in the face of religious plurality, or even colonial considering the history of Western imperialism in the Global South. At the same time, many youths may see other crucial issues to deal with, from poverty, war, refugee crisis, human rights abuse, injustices, to climate emergencies.

I am cognisant that some readers may consider these three aspects as fundamental to Christian faith and therefore non-negotiable. However, the long history of Christianity shows that what were once thought as absolute 'fundamentals' of Christian faith had been challenged and redefined many times. An exemplary case would be the ways in which the medieval Catholic church's authority as the source of religious truth was challenged and turned upside down by Protestant reformations. Once again, *ecclesia semper reformanda*. The question now is how to reconcile Christian education with critical philosophies that ostensibly challenge 'the fundamentals' of Christian faith.

### **3.4 Equations Reconciling Christian Education and Critical Philosophies**

How can we reform Christian Education in the digital era by drawing upon insights from critical philosophies? While there may not be a straightforward answer to this question, I argue that there are small steps we can take to move in this direction.

Firstly, Christian educators should act as learning facilitators rather than as sources of truth or authority to be obeyed. In this approach, it is essential to be open to discussing various perspectives without imposing one's own as the final truth, allowing every student to arrive at their own conclusions [18]. To support this attitude, classrooms should be managed democratically, avoiding traditional forms of power and authority over students. Participatory learning methods and assessments will be beneficial in this approach.

Secondly, it is important to recognise the nature of sacred texts as interpretive. Christian educators should acknowledge and even encourage students to explore various interpretative theological communities within Christian denominations and other religions. This approach aligns with contemporary views on the globalised world [19]. Educators' engagement with Christian teachings should be continuously reworked through the understanding of knowledge as multiple, contradictory, and imbued with power and ideologies. Hermeneutical plurality is crucial, particularly when discussing Christian groups often labelled as sects. Within this epistemological positioning, the moral and ethical implications of Christian teachings in the contexts of contemporary society would be an interesting debate to explore with students. Equipping students to

think critically for themselves may require accepting that not all students will eventually agree with our moral positions, such as if they take up Christianity as a fluid, personal spiritual journey instead of an organised religion with a set of fixed doctrines and moral codes [e.g., 20].

Thirdly, Christian Education needs to cross-reference Christian faith with contemporary global issues. The themes typically taught in classes, such as the doctrine of salvation, the doctrine of Christology, or the doctrine of Trinity, may need to be re-considered. Contextualising Christian faith within the contemporary challenges of the digital era, which go beyond individual salvation or prosperity in this world, could be beneficial. Critical and theological dialogues or cross-referencing between traditional Christian doctrines and contemporary social issues are needed. I find that the key unifying point is the notion of social justice, which has been evidently espoused by both Christianity and critical philosophies. The Bible can be interpreted and taught in ways that speak to contemporary social and ecological problems. Jesus' act of turning over tables at the temple, for example, can be seen as an expression of anger towards injustices against the poor caused by the coalition of corrupt political and religious leaders. The first step to achieving this is, of course, the slow and painful process of transforming educators' own religious subjectivity from conventional Christians to critical Christians.

## 4 Conclusion

To conclude, this article has demonstrated why and how Christian education can be transformed philosophically to address conceptual challenges in the context of 21st-century digital era. As the aim of this article is to explore how Christian educators might benefit from adopting critical philosophies, the discussions have highlighted challenges and pathways of reconciling critical philosophies and Christian education. By departing from the typical way of discussing digital revolution and Christian education (i.e., technological adaptation), the current article contributed a new perspective to this field, that is, understanding the digital revolution as a space of ideological contestation and exploring ways in which Christian education may engage and address it by drawing upon critical philosophies.

Adopt critical ways of thinking in its pedagogies could benefit Christian Education, making it more relevant to the contemporary world inhabited by our students, and therefore, more relatable on personal, rational, and emotional levels. In short, Christian education will feel connected with the zeitgeist of the 21st century digital era.

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