



Being the Image and Likeness of God: The Integration of Genesis 1:27 into the Spiritual Competence of Christian Religious Education Teachers at SMP Negeri 2 Mandrehe

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ABSTRACT

Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers play a crucial role in shaping students' spiritual and moral development. The theological concept of imago Dei (image of God) from Genesis 1:27 provides a foundational framework for understanding human dignity and spiritual identity. However, the integration of this biblical principle into teachers' spiritual competence remains underexplored, particularly in Indonesian educational contexts. This study examines how Genesis 1:27 is integrated into the spiritual competence of Christian Religious Education teachers at SMP Negeri 2 Mandrehe, exploring the theological understanding, practical application, and challenges faced in embodying the imago Dei concept. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, utilizing in-depth interviews with six CRE teachers, classroom observations, and document analysis. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes related to spiritual competence and theological integration. Three major themes emerged: (1) teachers demonstrated varied theological understanding of Genesis 1:27, ranging from basic knowledge to deep theological reflection; (2) integration into teaching practice occurred through character modeling, pedagogical approaches emphasizing human dignity, and creating inclusive learning environments; (3) challenges included limited theological training, cultural-contextual tensions, and difficulties translating theological concepts into practical pedagogy. The integration of Genesis 1:27 into spiritual competence requires intentional theological formation, contextual application strategies, and institutional support. Recommendations include developing comprehensive spiritual formation programs, establishing mentoring systems, and creating theological-pedagogical resources tailored to Indonesian contexts.

Keywords: *imago Dei, spiritual competence, Christian Religious Education, Genesis 1:27*

INTRODUCTION

Christian Religious Education (CRE) in Indonesia serves as a vital platform for spiritual formation and moral development within the national education system. The role of CRE

teachers extends beyond academic instruction to encompass spiritual mentorship and character formation, requiring teachers to possess not only pedagogical competence but also deep spiritual competence rooted in biblical principles (Cooling, 2017; Sitompul & Simanullang, 2021). Genesis 1:27 presents the foundational theological concept that humanity is created in the image and likeness of God (*imago Dei*): "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." This verse establishes the inherent dignity, worth, and spiritual capacity of every human being. For CRE teachers, understanding and embodying this theological truth becomes essential to their spiritual competence and professional identity (Middleton, 2005; Wright, 2018). Spiritual competence encompasses teachers' theological knowledge, spiritual practices, character qualities, and ability to integrate faith into educational practice (Palmer, 2017). However, research on how specific biblical texts, particularly Genesis 1:27, inform and shape the spiritual competence of CRE teachers remains limited, especially within the Indonesian context where diverse cultural and religious contexts intersect with Christian education.

SMP Negeri 2 Mandrehe, located in Nias Islands, North Sumatra, represents a unique educational setting where Christian values interface with local cultural traditions and the broader Indonesian educational framework. Understanding how CRE teachers at this institution integrate Genesis 1:27 into their spiritual competence provides valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of faith-integrated education in pluralistic contexts. This study addresses three research questions: (1) How do CRE teachers at SMP Negeri 2 Mandrehe understand the theological concept of *imago Dei* in Genesis 1:27? (2) In what ways do teachers integrate this biblical principle into their teaching practice and spiritual competence? (3) What challenges do teachers face in embodying and applying the concept of being created in God's image within their professional roles?

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the integration of Genesis 1:27 into the spiritual competence of CRE teachers. This methodology was chosen to capture the depth and complexity of teachers' lived experiences, theological understanding, and practical applications (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 2 Mandrehe, Nias Islands, North Sumatra, Indonesia. Six CRE teachers participated in the study, selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) minimum of three years teaching experience in Christian Religious Education; (2) active involvement in church ministry or spiritual activities; (3) willingness to participate and share experiences. The participants included four female and two male teachers, with teaching experience ranging from 5 to 18 years. Semi-structured interviews lasting 60-90 minutes were conducted with each participant. Interview questions explored teachers' understanding of Genesis 1:27, personal spiritual practices, integration of biblical principles into teaching, and challenges faced. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each teacher was observed during two teaching sessions to document how theological concepts were integrated into pedagogical practice. Field notes captured teaching methods, teacher-student interactions, and manifestations of spiritual competence. Lesson plans, teaching materials, and school documents related to CRE curriculum were analyzed to identify explicit and implicit references to *imago Dei* and related theological concepts. Thematic analysis was

conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: (1) familiarization with data through repeated reading of transcripts; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; (6) producing the report. NVivo 12 software was used to facilitate coding and theme development. Triangulation of data sources enhanced credibility and trustworthiness. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board. Informed consent was secured from all participants, who were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were assigned pseudonyms, and identifying information was removed from transcripts.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Analysis revealed three levels of theological understanding among participants regarding Genesis 1:27 and the *imago Dei* concept. Two teachers demonstrated fundamental awareness that humans are created in God's image but struggled to articulate theological implications. Teacher Maria stated, *"I know the verse says we are made in God's image, but I mostly teach it as meaning we should be good people."* This surface-level understanding limited integration into broader spiritual competence. Three teachers showed deeper engagement with the concept, connecting *imago Dei* to human dignity, moral responsibility, and spiritual capacity. Teacher David explained, *"Being God's image means every student has inherent worth regardless of academic ability or family background. This changes how I see and treat them."* These teachers demonstrated intentional application to educational contexts. One teacher, Pastor Samuel (who also serves as a church pastor), exhibited sophisticated theological understanding, integrating *imago Dei* with Christology, pneumatology, and theological anthropology. He articulated, *"The image of God is both given in creation and renewed in Christ. My role is helping students discover and restore that divine image through spiritual formation, recognizing that the Holy Spirit works within each person."*

Integration into Teaching Practice

All teachers recognized that embodying the *imago Dei* through personal character was foundational. Teacher Ruth emphasized, *"I cannot teach about God's image if my life contradicts it. Students watch how I handle frustration, show respect, and demonstrate love."* Teachers consciously modeled patience, integrity, compassion, and humility as expressions of reflecting God's image. Teachers integrated the concept through specific teaching strategies. Teacher Esther described using collaborative learning to honor each student's unique contribution: *"When students work in groups, I emphasize that each person brings different gifts—all reflecting aspects of God's creativity. No one is inferior."* Differentiated instruction was framed as respecting God's diverse creation rather than merely accommodating learning differences. Understanding *imago Dei* led teachers to create spaces where all students felt valued. Teacher Daniel explained his approach to students with disabilities: *"A student with special needs reflects God's image just as fully as the highest achiever. I ensure classroom activities include everyone, adapting as needed."* This theological conviction challenged cultural stigmas and promoted dignity-centered inclusion. Teachers incorporated prayers, devotions, and reflection exercises that emphasized students' identity as image-bearers. Teacher Maria guided students

through self-reflection exercises: *"I ask students to identify gifts and talents God gave them, helping them see themselves as God sees them—precious and purposeful."*

Theological Understanding and Competence Development

The varied levels of theological understanding among participants reflect broader issues in Indonesian Christian teacher education. While pedagogical training is emphasized, systematic theological formation often receives insufficient attention (Nainggolan, 2019; Telaumbanua, 2020). The gap between basic knowledge and advanced theological integration suggests the need for differentiated professional development that meets teachers at their current level while challenging them toward deeper understanding. The finding that deeper theological understanding correlates with more intentional and comprehensive integration into practice aligns with research on teacher beliefs and practice (King & Nash, 2011). Teachers cannot effectively integrate what they do not deeply understand. This underscores the necessity of robust theological education as foundational to spiritual competence.

Practical Integration and Pedagogical Implications

The four mechanisms of integration—character modeling, pedagogical approaches, inclusive environments, and spiritual formation activities—demonstrate that spiritual competence manifests through multiple dimensions. This multidimensional expression resonates with Palmer's (2017) concept of teaching as spiritual practice, where who the teacher is proves as important as what the teacher knows. The emphasis on character modeling reflects Jesus' incarnational pedagogy, where life and teaching integrated seamlessly (Wilhoit & Dettoni, 1995). For CRE teachers, embodying *imago Dei* through personal character provides students with tangible examples of theological concepts, moving from abstract doctrine to lived reality. The challenge of translating theology into practice highlights a persistent gap in teacher education: the separation of theological knowledge from pedagogical application. Effective integration requires what Cooling (2017) terms "theological-pedagogical wisdom"—the capacity to discern how biblical truths inform specific educational decisions and practices. The tension between traditional Nias cultural values and the egalitarian implications of *imago Dei* illustrates the complexity of contextual theology in education. Genesis 1:27's radical affirmation of universal human dignity challenges hierarchical structures present in many traditional societies (Sanneh, 2015). CRE teachers must navigate between honoring cultural values and prophetically challenging cultural practices that contradict biblical principles. This tension requires what Bevans (2002) describes as critical contextualization—engaging culture thoughtfully rather than either uncritically accepting or wholesale rejecting cultural norms. Teachers need support in developing skills for this nuanced cultural-theological navigation. The absence of systematic spiritual formation programs for CRE teachers represents a significant gap. While secular professional development focuses on pedagogical skills, CRE teachers require ongoing spiritual formation that integrates theological depth, spiritual practices, and pedagogical application (Smith & Smith, 2016). Effective support systems should include: (1) regular theological education opportunities tailored to teachers' contexts; (2) mentoring relationships with experienced spiritual leaders; (3) peer learning communities for shared reflection and support; (4) resources

that bridge theology and pedagogy; (5) sabbatical opportunities for spiritual renewal and theological study.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the integration of Genesis 1:27 into the spiritual competence of Christian Religious Education teachers is multifaceted, challenging, and essential. Teachers' understanding of *imago Dei* directly influences their pedagogical practices, student relationships, and professional identity. However, effective integration requires intentional theological formation, contextual wisdom, and institutional support. The call to integrate Genesis 1:27 into spiritual competence is ultimately a call to authentic Christian witness in education. CRE teachers who deeply understand and embody the truth that all persons are created in God's image become agents of transformation, creating educational spaces where human dignity is honored, diverse gifts are celebrated, and students encounter not just religious information but the living God whose image they bear. This sacred calling requires ongoing commitment to spiritual growth, theological learning, and pedagogical excellence—a journey worthy of the profound responsibility entrusted to Christian educators.

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