Embracing Psychology for Theology:
The Role of Developmental Theories in Christian Spiritual Formation

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ABSTRACT

Spiritual formation is a critical component in faith development toward Christlikeness. When the Christians are no longer growing, they are actively dying. Therefore, various efforts need to be made to help Christians grow. However, many spiritual formation efforts are still segregated, fragmented, or isolated from other discourses. This approach tends to focus only on the spiritual dimension and ignores that an individual has complex dimensions that cannot be separated from one another. To realize a more holistic spiritual formation, this article explores some developmental psychological theories to find approaches that might help to nurture the faith of believers holistically. The research method employed for this research is descriptive qualitative. Data collection was done by library research on various developmental theories from various developmentalists. From the results of the investigation, the author found different insights to realize more effective spiritual formation, namely by involving the community as a social context, taking into account every human dimension, giving space to the process, accommodating the nature of spiritual growth as multi-faceted and multi-directional, and presenting various experiences in the process of forming spiritual disciplines.

Keywords: spiritual formation, lifespan, developmentalism, human development, Christlikeness

INTRODUCTION

Spiritual formation is a significant concern for any Christian ministry and education. The rapid changing of the world is often associated with secularism and materialism that penetrate the church and community of believers. Rozuel (2014) asserts that modernization, marked by the dominant paradigm of business, has degraded ethical values, morals, and spirituality. This phenomenon creates profane Christians who are ignorant of spirituality. Christianity can sometimes then be embraced as a formality without spirituality. Meanwhile, Strohminger and Nichols's (2014) research shows that spirituality is the most essential characteristic of personality, self-identity, and soul. This situation is of serious concern because spirituality shapes the personality and becomes the highest moral center that focuses on the essence of human existence (Yachina, 2015).

In its nature, spirituality is related to being (ontology) and doing (praxeology) (Barus, 2016, pp. 26–29). Spirituality is closely related to values, behavior, and decisions to live life according to the will and guidance of God (Harefa, 2019). Spirituality allows Christians to become more mature and like Christ (1 Jn 3:2-3).

Spiritual formation is the key to a healthier and more mature Christian faith. It brings awareness about the importance of nurturing the Christian faith. Van Nunspeet and others emphasize that spirituality and moral values are more important person's characteristics than competence (Van Nunspeet et al., 2014). Hence, out of many options, taking psychological principles into Christian practice is getting familiar in order to foster spiritual growth. Scazzero (2011) sees a healthy spirituality as central to Christian life maturity. Spiritual growth will be accompanied by other dimensions of life, especially the emotional dimension. Therefore, it is worth looking at psychological principles that might be relevant to nurture faith among believers.

The problem, however, in this effort is the long debate in integrating Theology and Psychology among theologians and Christian counselors. Arguing that the two cannot be integrated, some choose the segregating theology and psychology approach. This approach is taken because some argue that integrating psychology and theology would implicitly threaten the church and biblical authorities (Carter & Narramore, 1979, pp. 10–11). Several prominent theologians such as Bobgan & Bobgan (1987), MacArthur & Mack (2017), Jay E. Adams (2010), and Gary A. Collins (1980) strongly rejected the attempts to integrate psychology and theology.

Bobgan & Bobgan's (1987) objection to this effort is based on the understanding that psychology is a human theory and effort to understand existence and human problems. MacArthur and Mack (2017) believe the "mixing" of psychology and theology is foolish because it equates behavioral change with spiritual sanctification. Papaleontiou-Louca & Kitromilides (2021) asserts that this effort is considered an act of humiliating Theology since both of them are in conflicting interest, whereas J. E. Adams (2010) sees

the Bible as the only authority that can be a reference for all the information and experience needed by a mentor without having to study psychology.

In contrast to this, human complexity, which not only consists of matter and the immaterial (dichotomy) but also consists of body, soul, and spirit (trichotomy), requires various approaches to see humanity holistically. The sinful nature of human beings after the "garden tragedy (Gen. 3)" caused "damage" to all aspects of human beings, not only spiritually but also psychologically. Therefore, an individual cannot be viewed in a fragmented manner by sorting and separating one dimension from another. Thus, the approach and results of psychological studies can complement data and facts about human beings (Carter & Narramore, 1979). Susabda (2021, p. 145) believes psychology provides tools to help Christian counselors more effectively.

Embracing psychology aims to get a better understanding of humans as complex beings (neither segregated nor fragmented). At the practical level, this effort is expected to present a model/form of ministry that addresses human needs based on appropriate analysis and empirical studies. In particular, this study will discuss how the church or faith community can provide a ministry for spiritual formation.

In this study, the author acknowledges the usefulness of psychology in light of the Bible. In other words, the author does not necessarily reject psychology but does not mix the two without any theological grounding. Within spiritual formation, the author will follow in the footsteps of several writers such as Cully (1979), Stonehouse (1998), Harris & Moran, (1998), who use prominent psychologists' thoughts, such as Erikson, Piaget, Kohlberg, and Fowler, to provide insight for the Christian ministry toward spiritual formation.

However, the author will take the discussion into further thought by evaluating various developmental theories and proposing approaches to Christian ministry. The purpose of this writing is to get informed from the findings from psychology to provide a window on spiritual formation. It bases its arguments on the assumption that because humans are developmental beings, their spiritual development occurs during this process (Downs, 1994; Ward, 1995). This reason makes Christian educators and ministers utilize the works of some human development theorists in practice.

This paper will attempt to explain the role of developmental theories in understanding spiritual formation. The discussion is divided into three sessions: essential ideas on how developmentalism utilizes Christian education and ministry in fostering spiritual formation; some notes on several developmental theories that need to be considered before implementing psychological ideas into the ministry; and then will close with the conclusion of the discussion.

METHOD

This article uses a descriptive qualitative research method with a literature review approach. The nature of qualitative descriptive research is to describe a social phenomenon to solve present and future problems (Suardi, 2017). In this research, the data collection methods are documentation and literature studies. Literature research is conducted by searching for various written sources, including books, archives, magazines, articles and journals, and documents that can help the researcher explore development theories (Sugiyono, 2017).

The main sources studied are the writings of developmentalists such as Erik Erikson, Abraham Maslow, Albert Bandura, Lev Vygotsky, and Lawrence Kohlberg. The author also collected secondary data from various literature in the form of books and recent journal articles relevant to the writing topic.

In the evaluation section, the author also presents a study of various Bible verses with a thematic study approach. The author systematically presents verses that are relevant to the topic under discussion. When selecting and examining these verses, hermeneutical rules and principles of biblical interpretation such as context, syntactical meaning and theology of the text are taken into account.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Definition of Spiritual Formation

Originally, the term "spiritual formation" denoted the training of full-time ministers in both the academic arena and spiritual disciplines such as prayer, bible reading, and fasting (Horan, 2017). These practices are rooted in past church traditions. Studies on this topic show that such spiritual disciplines have long been the practices of the church's desert fathers in early Christian history (Whiteaker, 2020). Throughout the history, the term is used in broader spectrum, which is not only limited to a spiritual practice of certain group of believers, but also for every person regardless of one's religious faith (Boa, 2020). This spiritual practice is considered as discipleship process that believers must be part of as true followers of Christ.

A number of studies have suggested that spiritual formation involves different dimensions within each individual (Hodge et al., 2020; Jensen, 2021; Lloyd et al., 2021). Human spiritual formation involves either the spiritual realm or the social-cultural elements surrounding the person (Hall, 2016; Hardy & Davis, 2018; Jatmiko, 2021; Whiteaker, 2020). Wilhoit views that a person is formed either positively or negatively and the formational process takes place throughout one's life (Wilhoit, 2009).

Spiritual formation is not only about religious practices that focus on the inner person. Indeed, the discipline of these practices should encourage Christians to articulate more visibly the fruits of piety. In other words, spiritual formation practiced through

prayer, meditation, contemplation of God's word, *Lectio Divina*, fasting, is also balanced with mercy efforts, changing a Christian's lifestyle, values and behavior (Tang, 2014). These studies show the critical need to promote spiritual formation in order to bring about real-life changes in the Body of Christ. In addition, a new way of thinking is needed to bring transformational experiences to each believer. Therefore, a review of developmental theories is expected to contribute to the process of maturing believers.

The Contribution of Developmental Theories on Spiritual Formation

Humans are complex beings, multidimensional as well as multidirectional. Christian spiritual formation has always seen human beings as holistically and undivided persons. The development of one's faith cannot be separated from human existence as a social, biological, and psychological being. Various developmental theories, which are findings in psychology, provide some important understandings about humans and how spiritual formation can occur. The following are some developmental theoretical contributions that can be used as a framework for thinking in spiritual formation.

Spiritual Formation Requires Social Context

Vygotsky, Erikson, Bandura, and Kohlberg saw the social context as an essential contributor to the development of an individual. A child does not grow in a "vacuum." Vygotsky's *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD) (Berk, 2015, pp. 236–237) significantly focused on the importance of social and cultural interaction - culture and social interaction drive cognitive development. Individual action does not only occur internally but also includes learning activities to use findings from society. Social interaction is the scaffolding that helps learners. It could be in the form of guidance, warning, encouragement, or outlining problems in other states that enable students to be independent (Padayachee et al., 2011).

In his Psychosocial Theory, Erikson argues that every individual struggles to find self-identity through interaction with his social environment in every stage of life (Erikson, 1994). According to him, new experiences and information obtained from daily interactions with others will encourage the development of ego identity. Psychosocial understanding essence is understanding and acceptance, both for oneself and society (Miller, 2002). Family and community have a vital role in the psychosocial development of an individual throughout his life (Feist et al., 2006, p. 217).

Albert Bandura's (1977) social dimension development theory understands that a child's development involves principles of modeling and self-efficacy. A child develops by imitating/imitating other people, both good and bad behavior (e.g., aggressive behavior). Albert Bandura argues that social systems, in which behavior is learned through social contact by imitating the observed model through direct personal experience, are the foundation upon which humans are built. One gains total familiarity

with a variety of topics through interaction, including norms, moral principles, sexual roles, collaboration, and how to form relationships (Rumjaun & Narod, 2020).

Kohlberg's theory of moral development also emphasizes that more mature figures contribute to realizing one's moral development (Kohlberg & Gilligan, 2014). The social and family environment influences individual moral development as a dominant factor in shaping self-morality (Setiono, 2009). Social context, peers, teachers, and especially parents have a significant role in realizing one's growth.

Developmental theories emphasize the importance of social influence on growth. Similarly, Neal notes (Neal, 1995):

> The Christian faith has a relational dynamic, and hence, 'it cannot be understood that the developing human person apart from the relationships that help shape that development,' noting that faith grows in a context, from macro to micro, paralleling Christianity as a macro- context, to the home, church, classroom as micro contexts of spiritual formation.

Christian spiritual development cannot take place in a vacuum. In the community, there is always a proper spiritual development of Christians. People are social creatures. A person must develop while the community's spiritual formation process occurs. Even though Christians are on individual journeys, they all need traveling companions. They learn from one another and others who are more mature and can guide them as spiritual companions or friends (Neal, 1995). Mentoring and modeling are essential to Christian spiritual formation in the community (Anderson & Reese, 1999, pp. 33–60).

The process of spiritual formation requires the context of community, "for none of us lives to himself alone" (Rom. 14:7). Believers grow and become whole as they live with and are sharpened by others. They learn to give and to receive, to teach and to learn, to correct and to be corrected, to grow and to help others succeed in the community. Paul urges the Thessalonians to "encourage one another and build each other up, just as you are doing" (1 Thess. 5:11). To believers in the city of Ephesus, Paul teaches of communication in the community: "Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak the truth, each one of you, with his neighbor, for we are members of one another" (Eph. 4:25). In the letter to the Colossians, he challenges them to "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (Col. 3:16). James also challenges his readers to "confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (Jas 5:16).

Christians within the faith community learn to be accountable to one another as they practice living their way. The most knowledgeable person recognized the value of responsibility and urged everyone to "follow your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account" (Heb. 13:17). Too often, "the way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice" (Prov. 12:15).

But "iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (27:17). God's family will be held accountable to God for how they treat one another; "why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat" (Rom. 14:11, 12).

Spiritual Formation Involves Holistic Elements of Development

Psychology is generally understood as a science that examines the human psyche (Lutz et al., 2015). This study is also part of philosophy because it touches on ontology and epistemology about humans. Psychology then developed from the philosophical realm to studying axiology and human behavior as an organism. This discipline integrates various approaches (neurobiological, behavioral, cognitive, psychoanalytic, and phenomenological) to read, understand, and explain human behavior (Holt et al., 2019).

Human development theories explain that humans are complex entities. It includes various dimensions that together become an integral part of human beings. Likewise, spiritual formation cannot ignore the various dimensions that belong to humans.

Psychological studies strengthen theological thinking by providing other dimensions of the human being. Psychological development and spiritual formation must be examined jointly to seek a holistic view of human development. Various theories of human development provide an understanding that humans are not only creatures with a spiritual dimension but also have social, emotional, cognitive, and physical dimensions that need to be understood.

Spiritual formation is not the result of a single factor but multiple factors that coalesce within the individual. Willard (2021, pp. 30, 40–41) says spiritual formation only occurs when each essential dimension of the human being is proportionally developed. The holistic approach maintains that all aspects of the individual, in addition to the psychological, physical, and social, must be included as part of spirituality and health. Spiritual formation is seen as more than any developmental theory can address. It is the result of multiple factors.

Christian educators or ministers need to be more concerned about individual development holistically. People are multidimensional beings. Therefore, the process must take into account the whole person. Jesus modeled how to serve holistically. In His ministry, Jesus dealt with the spiritual needs of the people and other elements of human beings. For instance, Jesus provided the basic human needs by feeding and resting them (Mat. 14:13-21; addressing physical needs), convinced that He is a good shepherd who loves and accepts them (Jn. 10; Lk. 15:11-23; addressing physiological needs), He taught with valuable and meaningful teaching (Mat. 4:23; touching cognitive element), and deployed the disciples as salt and light of the world (Mat. 5:13-14; providing them self-esteem and self-actualization). Jesus sees every dimension as essential to save and nurture the soul.

Spiritual Formation Takes Place as a Process

Developmental theories see growing up as a process. Humans develop with a series of characteristics at certain levels that extend to higher levels. Bandura, Vygotsky, and Erikson seek the interaction process of an individual (child) with the social context as an important stage in their development. Psychosocial theories view development as the result of a person's interaction with their social context (Mulyadi et al., 2016).

Developmentalism views human behavior as not merely an automatic reflex to a stimulus (Stimulus-Response Bond) but also a result of reactions that arise from environmental interaction processes. Constructivist thinking in developmental theories sees that humans develop through actions motivated by interacting with the environment. For example, Bandura uses the term vicarious reinforcement as a result of observing other people, which will then change a person's behavior and decisions (Saleh, 2018). This process allows imitation and presentation of behavior (modelling) for someone.

Developmental theories assert that humans grow in the process. This is an essential basis for the spiritual formation to provide space for the process to work. Changes in character, maturity of faith, and Christlikeness do not happen overnight. Whiteaker (2020) says:

> Our becoming like Jesus involves growth, which spans our entire lifetime. We never arrive on this side of heaven, so we trek onward through a vast series of relationships and circumstances designed to conform us to the likeness of Jesus. Spiritual formation, the process of us being molded into a distinct representation of Jesus with all of our uniqueness of personhood intact, is a journey.

Spiritual Formation is a life journey through which the Christians open their hearts to a deeper connection with God. In this process, they are required to actively participate with God's grace in deepening their relationship with Christ. Spiritual formation is the transformation of the inner dimension of the human being, the heart, which is the same as the mind or will (Willard, n.d.). Spiritual formation is the process by which people are transformed inwardly so that the person and deeds of Jesus Christ flow out of them in a natural way, whenever and wherever they are. In other words, it can be understood as the process by which true Christlikeness is established in the depths of one's inner being.

The progression of spiritual formation is outlined in various passages of the Bible, particularly in the New Testament. II Peter 1 said faith in Jesus should result in an increasingly high-quality faith development (Vv. 4-7). Meanwhile, Paul uses the metaphor of removing the old life and exchanging it for a new one in his teaching on the spiritual life (Col. 3:8 –14). As the person takes on the life of Jesus, a Christian experiences a richness in life and faith that is renewed daily.

Spiritual Formation must be Multifaceted and Multidirectional

Spiritual formation must be multifaceted rather than singular. It must focus on the many factors that influence the formation of spirituality. Gangel and Wilhoit state that spiritual formation is a multi-dimensional process that fosters the transformation through Christ in us so that we may become his disciples who continue to mature (Gangel & Wilhoit, 1998). Various studies in developmental theories provide a new perspective on this thinking. For example, Vygotsky's ZPD adds a new approach to understanding spiritual formation for Christian educators and ministers (Berk, 2015). Faith formation is not simply a linear or unidirectional process or stage-by-stage development. The concept of spiritual formation must be understood as a parallel process to developmentalism.

The idea of "ecology" and "zones" provides a new perspective on spiritual formation. In *The Transforming Moment*, James Loder argues that spiritual formation does not occur like other traditional developmental processes (Loder, 1981). Also, since development is not unidirectional, such a developmental perspective would lend itself to explaining how development can deteriorate. Boa confirms this in *Conformed to His Image,* which illustrates spiritual growth as a "gem with many facets" (Boa, 2020).

Developmentalism gives a broader perspective of humans as a unit of ecology where spiritual formation is integral. Within this ecology spirituality and spiritual formation occur. Ted Ward (1995) mentions this concept with "spiritual ecology," which comprises the human being's physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and moral developmental processes. This formation is considered more than any single theory of development can deal with, because it is the product of multiple factors forming a single ecology.

Similarly, spiritual formation needs to be multifaceted rather than singularly focused to consider the many factors that influence spiritual formation. Ward continues by stating that "A developmental perspective invites the educator to see each human life as a unique human being, made up of common aspects that are observable, measurable, and evaluable, but essentially a human spirit, a spirit with a spiritual reality at its core, alive by God's saving grace or spiritually dead in sin, unregenerate (Ward, 1995).

The development of faith cannot be separated from physical, emotional, intellectual, moral, and social health. By preserving and promoting an ecology conducive to spiritual formation, Christian religious education and the faith community become the environmental protection agency. Therefore, to better facilitate such an environment, Christian educators, pastors, and parents need to use the available developmental theories.

Spiritual Formation Requires Constructive Approach

Spiritual formation requires relevant and meaningful experiences. The developmentalism thinking framework can be utilized in Christian education and spiritual formation learning activities. Piaget's cognitive development can be accommodated in a

more constructive learning approach to Christian education. This will be an alternative to conventional learning and parenting approaches that see a child as a passive recipient.

Piaget believed that interaction between children and their perceptual views of an object or event in an environment drives the development process of an individual (Santrock, 2007, p. 243). In this case, new experiences will be crucial in self-development (Setiono, 2009). Spiritual formation in Christian education and ministry needs to see this approach in the self-development of students and believers. A learning approach that presents real experiences needs to be done more.

Presenting relevant experiences in the learning process will foster the formational process of the participants (Santrock, 2017). Real experience makes learning not only related to information, but education encourages the development of cognition related to how mental processes are involved and knowledge is obtained. The central beliefs of the Christian faith are not abstract concepts but can be experienced realistically when the learning process is carried out contextually; namely, students are exposed to authentic experiences. For example, the principle of love can be taught by inviting students to visit orphanages or nursing homes or do community development programs (service projects).

Some Considerations in Reviewing Developmental Theories

The previous section has explained various thoughts that can be accommodated in the spiritual formation process for a Christian. However, it is also important to carefully evaluate these theories. For example, Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories of cognitive development should not be accepted wholesale. Pieget doesn't accommodate the uniqueness of a child in his stages of development theory. This thought is not parallel with the Bible statement which says that is God the magnificent creator creates everyone unique and special (Ps. 139:13-14; Jer. 1:5). Both Piaget and Vygotsky assume synchronization and generalization of children's development (Vygotsky, 2017).

Vygotsky's theory emphasizes the critical role of teaching and helping children to understand wide cultural variations in their skills. However, this theory has received criticism that not in all cultures can this theory be implemented. In the light of the Bible, stimulus and encouragement for children are needed not only for the development of children's cognition but for various dimensions of children's growth (knowledge, emotion, moral, and spiritual) – (Prov. 22:6; Is. 54:13; Col. 3:21). Verbal communication (Language) is not the only means for the development of a child's thinking or mentality, but through observation and participation in the community can develop a child's thinking that is adapted to the surrounding culture (Deu. 6:6-7; Prov. 29:17).

Likewise, about Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, several things are important to note when this theory is applied in Christian education and ministry. Unlike Maslow's view, the Bible does not see physical needs as first and foremost that must be met before seeking to satisfy other needs. Can humans live without love from each other as long as

they are given only food and drink? Can man delay meeting his spiritual needs? God revealed that the spirit is far more important than the body (John 6:63) because the will and thoughts come from the heart. In the context of human fall, forgiveness and a relationship with the Creator is what humans need most. Humans will find themselves valuable when he returns to their relationship with God. Humans seek self-esteem needs in Maslow's theory to fulfil them. Apart from God, humans will draw it from other humans and creations that will fail to achieve it because the dignity shown by others is inconsistent and conditional, based on physical conditions and performance.

Maslow argues that human nature is not intrinsically, primarily, or supposedly evil (McCleskey & Ruddell, 2020). Thus, Maslow ignores the failure of humans in relationships that build themselves and each other (Abraham, 2013). This results in humans' difficulty meeting their needs, especially those above primary needs—the definition of Self-Actualization. Differences in Biblical anthropology and humanist psychology lead to different understandings of self-actualization. The Bible explains that human self-actualization should be what God designed for him holistically, which includes physical and spiritual, personal and social, and moral.

Maslow described this need as people's desire to experience self-fulfillment with a tendency to self-actualize. This actualization can be expressed as a desire to be what they want according to their abilities (Fallatah et al., 2018; King-Hill, 2015). This premise is inconsistent with Bible theology. Without God, who is the source of life, the source of love, and the designer of human life, humans do not understand their identity and the meaning of their existence (Jn. 15:6).

One of the criticisms of Kohlberg's theory is that it places too much emphasis on justice and ignores other norms. Consequently, the idea will not adequately assess people who use other moral aspects in acting. The Bible states that moral values have a horizontal dimension (fairness to others) and a vertical dimension through the living of God's laws.

The assumption that moral action is achieved primarily through formal reasoning has been challenged by other psychologists. Thus, the reasoning of Kohlberg and other rational psychologists is nothing more than the rationalization of intuitive choices. Of course, this negates the fact that humans have struggled with sin. All humans have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). Man's condition makes him unable to reach God's moral standard. In this situation, human power cannot do moral reasoning alone. Christian faith believes in the need for God's grace and the help of the Holy Spirit.

CONCLUSION

There is a saying that goes, "Do not throw the baby out with the bath water. It reminds us not to overgeneralize. There is always potential and positivity to be embraced as long as the effort is made to examine it. The discussion in this article concludes that ideas from social sciences, such as psychology, can contribute positively to theological

thinking. Embracing psychology (neither segregated nor fragmented) for theology conveys a holistic and humanist approach toward spiritual formation. Psychology, in particular, developmental theories, are reached resources in "equipping" Christian ministry by involving the community as a social context, taking into account every human dimension, giving space to the process, accommodating the nature of spiritual growth as multi-faceted and multi-directional, and presenting various experiences in the process of forming spiritual disciplines. However, this is not a straightforward process. It is important to remember that psychology was not developed within the Bible and Christian thought framework. Therefore, before being implemented and integrated into Christian practice, each principle must be re-examined. The Bible must remain the absolute and non-negotiable reference. Scientifically developed psychological approaches can be considered in practical Christianity if they do not conflict with ethical, moral, and theological values. Likewise, in the spiritual formation of believers, the psychological study of human beings is a worthy contribution to be considered in developing practices that foster faith.

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