

Reconceptualizing Spiritual Authority: A Dialogical and Epistemic Approach to Theological Anthropology and Formation in the Age of Generation Z

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Abstract: This article examines spiritual authority in theological higher education as a multidimensional construct shaping the ethical and character formation of Generation Z students in Indonesia. The unit of analysis focuses on the conceptual relationship between spiritual authority, epistemic authority, and character formation within contemporary theological learning environments. The study aims to reconceptualize spiritual authority beyond hierarchical domination into a dialogical, epistemic, and formative framework responsive to digital-era learners. Employing a qualitative conceptual approach based on critical literature analysis, the article integrates theological reflection, Michael Polanyi's epistemology of personal knowledge, and socio-cultural insights from Indonesian intellectual discourse. The study finds that traditional models of authority as unilateral knowledge transmission are increasingly ineffective among Generation Z, who engage knowledge through decentralized and interactive platforms. As a result, spiritual authority must be reframed as epistemic guidance, where lecturers function as "wisdom curators" who facilitate discernment, integrate knowledge, and cultivate responsible freedom within a community of inquiry. This reconceptualization constitutes the article's primary novelty, offering a dialogical model of authority that is both theologically grounded and pedagogically adaptive. The article contributes to the discourse on theological education by proposing a framework in which spiritual authority operates as formative stewardship, enabling the development of altruism, resilience, and vocational integrity in contemporary students.

Keywords: Spiritual Authority; Theological Higher Education; Generation Z; Epistemic Authority; Character Formation; Dialogical Learning; Indonesia

1. Introduction

The discourse on authority in higher education is undergoing significant transformation in response to rapid socio-cultural change, digitalization, and generational shifts, particularly with the emergence of Generation Z as the dominant cohort in universities (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Turner, 2015; OECD, 2021). In Indonesia, these changes are intensified by national education reforms such as *Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM), which promote autonomy, flexibility, and student-centered learning (Directorate General of Higher Education, 2023). Empirical studies show that Generation Z students exhibit distinct learning characteristics, including digital immersion, preference for participatory engagement, and skepticism toward hierarchical authority structures



(Mulyono, 2022; Prensky, 2001; Kirschner & De Bruyckere, 2017). Globally, similar trends have been observed, where students increasingly rely on decentralized knowledge sources such as social media, online platforms, and peer networks (Selwyn, 2016; Siemens, 2005). In theological education, these developments generate a unique tension, as institutions remain rooted in traditions that affirm divine revelation and doctrinal authority while simultaneously being required to adapt to democratic and dialogical learning environments (Banks, 1999; Farley, 1983). Consequently, the question of how authority can remain meaningful and formative—rather than coercive or obsolete—has become a pressing concern within contemporary theological higher education.

Scholarly discussions on authority, particularly within philosophical and theological traditions, have long emphasized its complex and contested nature. Hannah Arendt (1968) conceptualizes authority as distinct from coercion and persuasion, rooted instead in legitimacy and tradition, while Weber (1978) classifies authority into traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal forms, each with distinct sources of legitimacy. In theological discourse, authority has been understood as divinely instituted and oriented toward moral formation and truth preservation (Calvin, 1960; Kuyper, 1931; Wolters, 2005). Contemporary scholarship has expanded this understanding by integrating epistemological perspectives, particularly through Polanyi's (1958) notion of personal knowledge, which highlights the role of trust and tacit understanding in the transmission of knowledge. In educational research, authority has also been examined in relation to pedagogy, with Freire (1970) critiquing "banking models" of education and advocating dialogical approaches that empower learners. Recent studies in higher education further explore authority as relational and co-constructed within learning communities (Biesta, 2013; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). However, despite these rich theoretical contributions, there remains limited research that explicitly integrates theological authority, epistemic authority, and generational dynamics—particularly within non-Western contexts such as Indonesia (Aritonang & Steenbrink, 2008; Darmaputera, 1994; Magnis-Suseno, 1997).

This gap becomes particularly evident when examining how spiritual authority is enacted within theological higher education in contemporary Indonesia. While previous studies have addressed Christian ethics, contextual theology, and educational transformation (Kristanto, 2020; Karman, 2017; Rakhmat, 2008), few have systematically analyzed how authority can be reconceptualized in response to Generation Z's epistemic habits and socio-cultural realities. Moreover, existing research tends to treat authority either as a theological doctrine or as an institutional structure, without adequately exploring its role as a formative and epistemic practice within educational processes (Banks, 1999; Astin & Astin, 2000). Empirical studies on Generation Z highlight their preference for interactive learning and their resistance to hierarchical control (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Susanto, 2023), yet these findings have not been sufficiently integrated into theological frameworks of authority. As a result, a conceptual and contextual gap persists in understanding how spiritual authority can function constructively within a digital, participatory, and pluralistic academic environment. This article seeks to address this gap by examining spiritual authority as a multidimensional construct that is simultaneously theological, epistemological, and socio-cultural.

Building upon this gap, this article argues that spiritual authority in theological higher education must be reconceptualized as dialogical, epistemic, and formative guidance rather than hierarchical domination. Drawing from theological reflection, Polanyi's epistemology, and Indonesian socio-

cultural discourse, the study proposes that authority functions most effectively when it operates as “epistemic accompaniment,” enabling students to engage in responsible truth-seeking within a community of inquiry (Polanyi, 1958; Garrison et al., 2000). This reconceptualization positions lecturers not as unilateral transmitters of knowledge but as “wisdom curators” who facilitate discernment, integrate diverse sources of knowledge, and model ethical integrity. The article hypothesizes that such a model of authority contributes significantly to the formation of character traits such as altruism, resilience, and vocational commitment among Generation Z students. In this sense, authority is not antithetical to freedom but constitutes its necessary condition, providing structure, coherence, and moral orientation within the learning process (Biesta, 2013; Freire, 1970). Therefore, by integrating theological, philosophical, and contextual insights, this study contributes to the development of a more relevant and transformative model of authority in contemporary theological education.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptualizing Spiritual Authority: From Domination to Formative Stewardship

Spiritual authority has been widely discussed within philosophical, theological, and sociological traditions as a complex construct that transcends mere institutional power (Arendt, 1968; Weber, 1978). Classical sociological theory conceptualizes authority as legitimacy grounded in tradition, charisma, or rational-legal systems, each shaping different forms of social obedience and structure (Weber, 1978). In contrast, Arendt (1968) distinguishes authority from coercion and persuasion, emphasizing its reliance on recognition and legitimacy rather than force. Within theological discourse, authority is traditionally understood as divinely ordained, rooted in Scripture and ecclesial tradition, and oriented toward moral formation and truth preservation (Calvin, 1960; Kuyper, 1931; Wolters, 2005). Contemporary theological scholars, however, increasingly challenge hierarchical and authoritarian interpretations of authority, arguing for more relational and participatory models that align with modern democratic values (Banks, 1999; Farley, 1983; Hauerwas, 1981). Empirical studies in religious leadership further demonstrate that authority grounded in authenticity, integrity, and service tends to be more effective in shaping moral communities than authority based on institutional hierarchy (Northouse, 2018; Fry, 2003). These perspectives collectively suggest that spiritual authority must be reinterpreted not as domination but as formative stewardship that nurtures growth, trust, and ethical responsibility within communities of faith and learning.

Recent interdisciplinary scholarship further expands the understanding of spiritual authority by integrating epistemological and pedagogical dimensions, particularly in educational contexts (Polanyi, 1958; Biesta, 2013). Polanyi’s concept of personal knowledge emphasizes that knowledge transmission is inherently relational and fiduciary, requiring trust in epistemic authorities who guide learners into traditions of understanding (Polanyi, 1958). In educational theory, authority is increasingly framed as a dialogical process, where teachers function not as authoritarian figures but as facilitators of meaning-making and critical inquiry (Freire, 1970; Garrison et al., 2000). Studies in higher education indicate that authority that is relational, dialogical, and responsive to student agency fosters deeper engagement and ethical development (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Biesta, 2013). Within theological education, scholars argue that spiritual authority should embody Christ-like servanthood, emphasizing humility, relationality, and transformative guidance (Banks, 1999;

Palmer, 1998). Moreover, research on leadership in faith-based institutions highlights the importance of integrating spiritual authority with ethical accountability and community participation (Fry, 2003; Sanders, 2007). These developments indicate a paradigm shift toward understanding spiritual authority as epistemic and formative guidance, rather than hierarchical control, thereby opening new possibilities for its application in contemporary theological education.

2.2. Epistemic Authority and Learning in the Digital Age

The concept of epistemic authority has gained increasing attention in educational research, particularly in response to the challenges posed by digitalization and the proliferation of information sources (Goldman, 1999; Sperber et al., 2010). Epistemic authority refers to the recognition of certain individuals or institutions as credible sources of knowledge, a recognition that is increasingly contested in the digital age (Origgi, 2012). Studies show that students today navigate complex information ecosystems where traditional authority structures are often replaced by decentralized networks of knowledge (Selwyn, 2016; Siemens, 2005). This shift has significant implications for higher education, as learners must develop critical skills to evaluate the credibility and relevance of diverse information sources (Wineburg & McGrew, 2017). Research on digital literacy indicates that many students struggle to distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources, highlighting the need for guided epistemic authority within educational settings (Leu et al., 2015). In this context, educators play a crucial role not as sole knowledge providers but as mediators who help students develop critical thinking and epistemic discernment (Biesta, 2013; Garrison et al., 2000). These findings suggest that epistemic authority must be redefined as facilitative and dialogical, enabling learners to navigate complex knowledge landscapes responsibly.

In theological education, the transformation of epistemic authority is particularly significant, as students increasingly engage with theological content through digital platforms such as online sermons, blogs, and social media (Campbell, 2013; Hutchings, 2017). Generation Z learners are characterized by their preference for interactive, participatory, and technology-mediated learning environments, which challenge traditional models of authority based on information control (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Kirschner & De Bruyckere, 2017). Empirical studies show that these students value authenticity, transparency, and relational engagement in their interactions with educators (Turner, 2015; OECD, 2021). Consequently, the role of educators is shifting toward that of “knowledge curators” or “learning facilitators” who guide students in integrating diverse sources of information into coherent frameworks of understanding (Siemens, 2005; Selwyn, 2016). In theological contexts, this role becomes even more complex, as educators must balance doctrinal authority with openness to critical inquiry and contextual interpretation (Farley, 1983; Banks, 1999). Research suggests that when epistemic authority is exercised as guidance rather than control, it enhances students’ intellectual autonomy, ethical awareness, and spiritual maturity (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Biesta, 2013). Therefore, reconceptualizing epistemic authority is essential for addressing the challenges and opportunities of learning in the digital age.

3. Spiritual Authority and Character Formation in Generation Z

The relationship between authority and character formation has long been a central concern in educational and theological scholarship, with numerous studies highlighting the role of authority figures in shaping moral and ethical development (Lickona, 1991; Astin & Astin, 2000). In higher

education, character formation is increasingly understood as a holistic process that integrates cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, requiring intentional pedagogical strategies and supportive learning environments (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Nucci & Narvaez, 2008). Within theological education, character formation is often linked to spiritual formation, which emphasizes the development of virtues such as humility, integrity, and service (Willard, 2002; Foster, 1998). Research indicates that educators who model ethical behavior and relational authenticity significantly influence students' moral development (Palmer, 1998; Astin & Astin, 2000). Moreover, studies in leadership and education suggest that authority grounded in service and ethical accountability fosters trust, engagement, and character growth among students (Fry, 2003; Northouse, 2018). These findings underscore the importance of rethinking authority as a formative force that contributes to the holistic development of learners.

In the context of Generation Z, character formation presents unique challenges and opportunities, as this cohort is shaped by digital culture, social media, and global interconnectedness (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Twenge, 2017). Empirical research shows that Generation Z students tend to value diversity, social justice, and personal authenticity, while also exhibiting higher levels of anxiety and uncertainty compared to previous generations (Twenge, 2017; OECD, 2021). In Indonesia, these characteristics are further influenced by socio-cultural dynamics, including religious pluralism and post-authoritarian political experiences (Aritonang & Steenbrink, 2008; Magnis-Suseno, 1997). Studies on character education in Asian contexts highlight the importance of integrating cultural values with global competencies to foster holistic development (Tan, 2018). Within theological education, this requires a nuanced approach that combines doctrinal fidelity with contextual relevance and dialogical engagement (Banks, 1999; Kristanto, 2020). Research suggests that when spiritual authority is exercised as relational and participatory guidance, it enhances students' capacity for ethical reflection, resilience, and vocational commitment (Willard, 2002; Foster, 1998). Therefore, understanding the role of spiritual authority in character formation is essential for developing effective educational practices that respond to the needs of Generation Z.

3. Methods

This study employs a qualitative conceptual approach grounded in critical literature analysis to examine the reconceptualization of spiritual authority in theological higher education, particularly in relation to the ethical and character formation of Generation Z students in Indonesia. Rather than relying on empirical field data, the unit of analysis focuses on key theoretical constructs—namely spiritual authority, epistemic authority, and character formation—as they are articulated within theological, philosophical, and educational discourses. This approach is appropriate given that the study seeks to develop a normative and integrative framework, drawing from interdisciplinary sources to address a contemporary conceptual gap. Conceptual research in this sense aims not merely to summarize existing literature but to critically synthesize and reconstruct theoretical perspectives in order to generate new insights and models (Jaakkola, 2020).

The data for this study consist of peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and policy documents relevant to theological education, authority, epistemology, and Generation Z learning characteristics. Literature was selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: (1) relevance to the core themes of authority and education; (2) scholarly credibility, including publications indexed in Scopus or equivalent databases; and (3) contextual relevance to Indonesian

or Global South perspectives where available. Key sources include classical works on authority (Arendt, 1968; Weber, 1978), theological foundations (Calvin, 1960; Kuyper, 1931; Wolters, 2005), epistemological frameworks (Polanyi, 1958), and contemporary educational research on Generation Z and digital learning (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Selwyn, 2016). This selection ensures both theoretical depth and contextual sensitivity.

The analytical procedure follows a three-stage process. First, conceptual mapping is conducted to identify how authority is defined and problematized across different disciplinary perspectives, including theology, philosophy, and education. This stage involves comparing key concepts such as *auctoritas*, *exousia*, epistemic authority, and pedagogical authority in order to clarify their meanings and interrelations. Second, critical synthesis is employed to examine tensions and convergences among these perspectives, particularly in relation to contemporary challenges posed by digitalization and generational change. At this stage, insights from Polanyi's theory of personal knowledge are integrated to reinterpret authority as epistemic guidance rather than hierarchical control. Third, constructive reconstruction is undertaken to formulate a dialogical and epistemic model of spiritual authority that is responsive to Generation Z learners and the Indonesian socio-cultural context. This model is developed by integrating theological reflection, educational theory, and contextual analysis into a coherent framework.

To ensure analytical rigor, the study applies criteria of conceptual clarity, internal coherence, and contextual relevance (Jaakkola, 2020). Conceptual clarity is achieved by explicitly defining key terms and avoiding ambiguity in their usage. Internal coherence is maintained by aligning theological, philosophical, and educational arguments within a consistent interpretive framework. Contextual relevance is ensured by engaging Indonesian socio-cultural discourse and contemporary higher education dynamics, including the impact of digital learning environments and generational shifts. While the study does not claim empirical generalizability, it offers analytical generalization by providing a theoretically grounded framework that can inform future empirical research and practical applications in theological education.

In line with the study's focus, the Indonesian context is treated not as an empirical case study but as a contextual horizon that shapes the interpretation of spiritual authority. References to Generation Z students and contemporary theological institutions are therefore used illustratively rather than representationally. This methodological positioning allows the study to remain analytically robust while avoiding unsupported empirical claims. Overall, this approach enables the development of a nuanced and interdisciplinary understanding of spiritual authority as a dialogical, epistemic, and formative practice in theological higher education.

4. Result

4.1. Transformation of Spiritual Authority in Generation Z Learning Contexts

The data indicate that the meaning and function of authority in higher education have undergone significant transformation in response to the emergence of Generation Z as the dominant student population (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Twenge, 2017; OECD, 2021). Empirical studies consistently report that Generation Z students demonstrate a strong preference for participatory, collaborative, and technology-mediated learning environments (Kirschner & De Bruyckere, 2017;

Selwyn, 2016; Siemens, 2005). Survey-based research across multiple countries shows that over 70% of Generation Z students rely on digital platforms as primary sources of knowledge, including YouTube, online forums, and social media (Pew Research Center, 2018; OECD, 2021). In Indonesian contexts, similar patterns are observed, where students display high levels of digital engagement and critical attitudes toward hierarchical authority structures (Mulyono, 2022; Susanto, 2023). These patterns suggest that traditional authority models based on institutional position and information control are increasingly less effective in shaping learning processes. Instead, authority is recognized through credibility, relevance, and relational engagement (Biesta, 2013; Garrison et al., 2000). Therefore, the data demonstrate a structural shift from positional authority to relational and epistemic authority in contemporary learning environments.

Further evidence shows that the epistemic behavior of Generation Z is characterized by non-linear knowledge acquisition and multi-source validation processes (Wineburg & McGrew, 2017; Leu et al., 2015). Studies on digital literacy reveal that students frequently cross-check information across platforms but often lack the ability to critically evaluate source credibility (McGrew et al., 2018; Breakstone et al., 2021). In theological education, this pattern is particularly evident, as students engage with diverse theological interpretations from online sermons, blogs, and digital communities (Campbell, 2013; Hutchings, 2017). Quantitative studies show that exposure to multiple and sometimes conflicting theological perspectives increases both cognitive engagement and epistemic uncertainty among students (Selwyn, 2016; Siemens, 2005). These findings indicate that authority is no longer derived from informational exclusivity but from the capacity to guide interpretation and integration of knowledge (Origgi, 2012; Goldman, 1999). Consequently, the role of educators shifts toward facilitating epistemic navigation rather than controlling access to knowledge. The data thus confirm that authority is increasingly defined through epistemic mediation within distributed knowledge environments.

In addition, research on student-teacher relationships highlights the importance of trust, authenticity, and relational interaction in establishing authority in contemporary classrooms (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Palmer, 1998). Empirical findings indicate that students are more likely to accept authority when it is perceived as supportive, transparent, and ethically grounded (Astin & Astin, 2000; Fry, 2003). Studies in higher education show that relational authority significantly enhances student engagement, motivation, and ethical development (Garrison et al., 2000; Biesta, 2013). In Indonesian contexts, cultural values such as relational harmony (*rukun*) and moral credibility (*kewibawaan*) further reinforce the importance of relational authority (Magnis-Suseno, 1997; Aritonang & Steenbrink, 2008). These findings demonstrate that authority is not rejected by Generation Z but is redefined through relational and ethical dimensions. Therefore, the transformation of authority in Generation Z contexts is characterized by a shift from hierarchical control to relational, epistemic, and dialogical engagement.

4.2. Epistemic Authority as Curatorial Guidance in Digital Learning Environments

The data reveal that epistemic authority in higher education is increasingly enacted through curatorial practices rather than direct knowledge transmission (Siemens, 2005; Selwyn, 2016). Studies on digital pedagogy indicate that educators function as mediators who select, organize, and contextualize information within complex knowledge ecosystems (Garrison et al., 2000; Biesta, 2013). Empirical research shows that students benefit from structured guidance in navigating digital

content, particularly when dealing with fragmented or contradictory information (Leu et al., 2015; McGrew et al., 2018). In theological education, this role becomes more pronounced due to the interpretative nature of theological knowledge and the diversity of doctrinal perspectives (Farley, 1983; Banks, 1999). Studies demonstrate that students exposed to curated theological content develop higher levels of coherence in their understanding and greater confidence in their interpretative abilities (Hutchings, 2017; Campbell, 2013). These findings suggest that epistemic authority is exercised through the capacity to curate and integrate knowledge rather than merely transmit it.

Moreover, research on knowledge construction highlights the importance of tacit knowledge and experiential learning in developing epistemic competence (Polanyi, 1958; Eraut, 2000). Empirical studies in higher education show that students acquire deeper understanding when educators model interpretative processes and critical thinking skills (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Garrison et al., 2000). In digital contexts, this involves guiding students in evaluating sources, synthesizing information, and applying knowledge to real-world contexts (Wineburg & McGrew, 2017; Breakstone et al., 2021). Studies also indicate that epistemic authority is strengthened when educators demonstrate methodological rigor and intellectual humility (Biesta, 2013; Goldman, 1999). In theological settings, this includes engaging Scripture, tradition, and contemporary issues in a coherent and contextually relevant manner (Wolters, 2005; Kristanto, 2020). These findings demonstrate that epistemic authority operates as a form of guided participation within communities of inquiry, where knowledge is co-constructed rather than imposed.

Additionally, empirical evidence shows that students respond positively to learning environments that emphasize dialogical interaction and collaborative inquiry (Freire, 1970; Garrison et al., 2000). Studies indicate that dialogical authority enhances critical thinking, ethical reflection, and intellectual autonomy (Biesta, 2013; Baxter Magolda, 2004). In digital learning environments, this is facilitated through interactive platforms, discussion forums, and collaborative projects (Selwyn, 2016; Siemens, 2005). Research in theological education shows that dialogical approaches enable students to engage more deeply with theological concepts and develop integrative understanding (Banks, 1999; Farley, 1983). These findings suggest that epistemic authority is most effective when it fosters dialogue, participation, and critical engagement. Therefore, the data confirm that epistemic authority in contemporary education is characterized by curatorial, dialogical, and participatory practices.

4.3. Spiritual Authority and Character Formation in Theological Education

The data indicate that spiritual authority plays a significant role in shaping character formation within theological education (Lickona, 1991; Astin & Astin, 2000). Empirical studies show that character development is influenced by both formal curriculum and informal interactions with educators (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Nucci & Narvaez, 2008). Research in faith-based education demonstrates that students who experience consistent moral modeling from educators exhibit higher levels of ethical awareness and integrity (Palmer, 1998; Willard, 2002). In theological institutions, spiritual authority is often embodied through practices of mentoring, teaching, and community engagement (Banks, 1999; Foster, 1998). Studies indicate that such practices contribute to the development of virtues such as humility, responsibility, and service (Fry, 2003; Northouse,

2018). These findings suggest that spiritual authority functions as a formative influence that shapes students' moral and ethical dispositions.

Further evidence highlights the role of structured learning environments in fostering resilience and vocational commitment among students (Astin & Astin, 2000; Baxter Magolda, 2004). Empirical research shows that students who are challenged academically while receiving relational support demonstrate higher levels of perseverance and self-regulation (Zimmerman, 2002; Duckworth et al., 2007). In theological education, this is reflected in the integration of academic rigor with spiritual formation practices (Wolters, 2005; Kristanto, 2020). Studies also indicate that students develop stronger vocational identity when educational experiences are aligned with broader mission and purpose (Damon, 2008; Astin & Astin, 2000). In Indonesian contexts, this alignment is influenced by cultural values and religious commitments, which shape students' understanding of vocation and service (Magnis-Suseno, 1997; Aritonang & Steenbrink, 2008). These findings demonstrate that spiritual authority contributes to the development of resilience and vocational commitment through structured and supportive learning environments.

Finally, empirical studies show that Generation Z students respond positively to authority that is perceived as meaningful, relevant, and aligned with their values (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Twenge, 2017). Research indicates that students are more engaged when they perceive coherence between educational practices and broader social and ethical concerns (OECD, 2021; Tan, 2018). In theological education, this involves connecting academic content with issues such as social justice, community development, and interreligious dialogue (Banks, 1999; Farley, 1983). Studies show that such connections enhance students' sense of purpose and commitment to societal transformation (Damon, 2008; Willard, 2002). These findings suggest that spiritual authority is most effective when it is integrated with meaningful and contextually relevant educational practices. Therefore, the data confirm that spiritual authority contributes to character formation by fostering ethical awareness, resilience, and vocational commitment among students.

5. Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate a clear transformation in the nature of authority within theological higher education, particularly in response to the epistemic and relational characteristics of Generation Z learners (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Twenge, 2017; OECD, 2021). The findings show that authority is no longer primarily derived from institutional position or control over knowledge but increasingly from relational credibility and epistemic guidance (Biesta, 2013; Garrison et al., 2000). This shift reflects broader trends in higher education, where digitalization and access to distributed knowledge networks have redefined the dynamics of teaching and learning (Selwyn, 2016; Siemens, 2005). Empirical research confirms that students engage more deeply when authority is exercised through dialogue, trust, and authenticity rather than coercion or hierarchy (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Palmer, 1998). In this sense, the findings align with contemporary educational theory, which emphasizes learner-centered approaches and the co-construction of knowledge (Freire, 1970; Biesta, 2013). Therefore, the transformation of authority identified in this study is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a broader epistemic shift in higher education.

Reflecting on these findings, it becomes evident that the reconceptualization of authority is closely linked to the changing epistemic conditions of learning in the digital age (Goldman, 1999;

Origgi, 2012). The data indicate that students operate within complex information ecosystems, where knowledge is fragmented, contested, and continuously evolving (Wineburg & McGrew, 2017; Breakstone et al., 2021). In such contexts, authority cannot be sustained through informational dominance but must be enacted through interpretative and integrative competence (Leu et al., 2015; McGrew et al., 2018). This reflects Polanyi's (1958) notion of personal knowledge, where trust in epistemic authorities is essential for meaningful learning. Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of relational authority in fostering trust and engagement, particularly in culturally sensitive contexts such as Indonesia (Magnis-Suseno, 1997; Aritonang & Steenbrink, 2008). These reflections suggest that authority in contemporary theological education must be understood as both epistemic and relational, operating within dynamic and contextually embedded learning environments.

Interpreting these results within a theological framework reveals that the shift toward dialogical and epistemic authority is consistent with broader developments in theological education (Banks, 1999; Farley, 1983). The findings indicate that authority, when exercised as guidance rather than control, supports deeper engagement with theological content and promotes integrative learning (Hutchings, 2017; Campbell, 2013). This aligns with research showing that dialogical pedagogies enhance critical thinking and ethical reflection in religious education (Garrison et al., 2000; Biesta, 2013). Moreover, the emphasis on epistemic authority as curatorial guidance reflects the interpretative nature of theology, where understanding is constructed through engagement with Scripture, tradition, and context (Wolters, 2005; Kristanto, 2020). Studies in theological education further suggest that such approaches foster spiritual maturity and intellectual autonomy among students (Willard, 2002; Foster, 1998). Therefore, the interpretation of these findings supports the argument that spiritual authority can be effectively reconceptualized as dialogical and epistemic guidance within theological higher education.

Comparing these findings with previous research highlights both continuity and innovation in the understanding of authority and character formation. While traditional studies emphasize the role of authority in moral development (Lickona, 1991; Astin & Astin, 2000), the present findings extend this understanding by demonstrating how authority operates within digital and participatory learning environments (Selwyn, 2016; Siemens, 2005). Empirical research shows that Generation Z students respond positively to authority that is aligned with their values of authenticity, participation, and social relevance (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Twenge, 2017). This is consistent with studies indicating that meaningful learning experiences are those that connect academic content with real-world issues and personal purpose (Damon, 2008; OECD, 2021). In theological education, this involves integrating doctrinal teaching with contextual engagement and social responsibility (Banks, 1999; Farley, 1983). The findings also resonate with leadership studies, which emphasize the effectiveness of servant leadership in fostering trust and ethical behavior (Fry, 2003; Northouse, 2018). Therefore, the comparison suggests that the reconceptualization of authority proposed in this study is both grounded in established theory and responsive to contemporary challenges.

Building on these insights, the study identifies several implications for future research and practice in theological higher education. The findings suggest the need for further empirical investigation into how dialogical and epistemic models of authority are implemented in specific institutional contexts (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Garrison et al., 2000). Longitudinal studies could examine the impact of such models on students' character development, including resilience, ethical

awareness, and vocational commitment (Duckworth et al., 2007; Zimmerman, 2002). Additionally, comparative research across different cultural and institutional settings would provide valuable insights into the contextual adaptability of these models (OECD, 2021; Tan, 2018). In practical terms, the findings highlight the importance of developing pedagogical strategies that integrate digital literacy, critical thinking, and spiritual formation (Leu et al., 2015; Breakstone et al., 2021). These strategies may include collaborative learning, mentoring systems, and participatory curriculum design, which have been shown to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes (Biesta, 2013; Freire, 1970). Therefore, the study contributes to ongoing efforts to develop more relevant and transformative approaches to authority in theological education.

6. Conclusion

This study identifies a significant transformation in the nature of spiritual authority within theological higher education, particularly in relation to the learning characteristics of Generation Z. The findings show that authority is no longer primarily grounded in hierarchical structures or institutional legitimacy, but increasingly in epistemic credibility, relational trust, and dialogical engagement. Empirical literature consistently indicates that Generation Z students prefer participatory and interactive learning environments, where authority is recognized through authenticity and guidance rather than control (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Twenge, 2017; OECD, 2021). In digital learning contexts, students navigate multiple sources of information, which requires educators to function as facilitators of interpretation rather than transmitters of knowledge (Selwyn, 2016; Siemens, 2005). These findings demonstrate that spiritual authority, when exercised as epistemic and relational guidance, plays a crucial role in shaping meaningful learning experiences. Therefore, authority in contemporary theological education is best understood as a dynamic, dialogical, and formative practice.

From a scientific perspective, this study contributes to the development of a conceptual framework that integrates theological, epistemological, and educational perspectives on authority. By reconceptualizing spiritual authority as dialogical and epistemic guidance, the study extends existing theories that have traditionally emphasized hierarchical or doctrinal dimensions of authority (Banks, 1999; Farley, 1983). The integration of Polanyi's concept of personal knowledge with contemporary educational theory provides a novel lens for understanding how authority functions in knowledge construction and character formation (Polanyi, 1958; Biesta, 2013). Furthermore, the study contributes to the limited body of research on theological education in non-Western contexts, particularly Indonesia, by situating authority within its socio-cultural and generational dynamics (Aritonang & Steenbrink, 2008; Magnis-Suseno, 1997). These contributions offer a more comprehensive and contextually relevant understanding of authority that can inform both academic discourse and educational practice. Thus, the study advances theoretical discussions on authority while addressing contemporary challenges in higher education.

Despite its contributions, this study also highlights the need for further research to deepen and validate its conceptual findings. Future studies should incorporate empirical methods, such as interviews, surveys, or case studies, to examine how dialogical and epistemic models of authority are implemented in specific theological institutions. Longitudinal research could explore the impact of such models on students' character development, including resilience, ethical awareness, and vocational commitment (Duckworth et al., 2007; Zimmerman, 2002). Comparative studies across

different cultural and institutional contexts would also provide valuable insights into the adaptability of these models (OECD, 2021). Additionally, interdisciplinary research that integrates digital pedagogy, theology, and leadership studies could further enrich the understanding of authority in contemporary education. These directions are essential for developing evidence-based strategies that enhance the relevance and effectiveness of theological education. Therefore, future research is crucial to operationalize and empirically test the conceptual framework proposed in this study.

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