


Post-conservative: A proposal for theological polarisation in Indonesia

**Author:**Jannes E. Sirait¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Christian Education, Faculty of Theology, Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Bethel Indonesia Jakarta, Jakarta, Indonesia

Corresponding author:

Jannes Sirait,
jannes.sirait@sttbi.ac.id

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Indonesia, as a country with rich diversity, faces a significant challenge in the form of polarisation, which occurs not only in the political sphere but also in religion and belief. In the context of Christian theological education in Indonesia, polarisation also occurs between conservative and liberal views. Conservatives adhere to literal interpretations and established doctrines, while liberals are more flexible and open to contextual interpretations. To address this polarisation, an approach that transcends both extremes is needed. This article proposes post-conservative thought as a conceptual solution for theological education in Indonesia. Postconservatism positions itself in the middle between conservative and liberal, recognising the importance of fundamental principles of faith while also being open to change and dialogue. This article employs a literature review method to analyse and develop a theoretical framework supporting the application of post-conservatism in Christian theological education in Indonesia. The analysis shows that postconservative theological education needs to be transformative, constructive-creative and liberating to break down polarisation and create inclusive, relevant and impactful education for society.

Contribution: This study helps in integrating postconservative theology within theological education, fostering a more nuanced and transformative approach to interpreting Scriptures and addressing ethical and social issues. Interdisciplinary implications involve collaboration with social sciences, education, peace studies and health sciences to develop comprehensive strategies for community engagement, conflict resolution and holistic well-being.

Keywords: post-conservative; Christian education; polarisation; conservative-liberal; inclusivity; transformative approach; Indonesia; constructive-creative.

Introduction

As a country with such rich diversity, Indonesia faces a significant challenge in the form of polarisation. In recent years, this polarisation has coloured electoral politics in Indonesia. This polarisation is not entirely within the political realm but has intersections with issues of religion and belief. For example, in the 2017 election, which brought together two competitors, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) and Anies Baswedan, highlighted their differences in religious ideology. At that time, Anies Baswedan represented a conservative Islamic group, while Ahok, a Christian, represented a more plural or liberal group. This polarisation also occurred in more substantial national political contestations, namely the presidential elections in 2014 and 2019. With a similar pattern, Jokowi, who was later elected president, was supported by more open groups, while Prabowo Subianto was supported by Islamic groups who were conservative. This polarisation is quite sharp because both parties used various methods to win the contest, which caused the emergence of sectarianism in the Indonesian society, often leading to conflict. In her research, Eve Warburton argues that Indonesia can be categorised as a polarised country (Warburton 2020:65).

The polarisation of understanding between conservatives and liberals seems to be one of the factors that persists in Indonesian religious society. Conservative views tend to understand faith fundamentally, emphasising everything written in the holy books (textualist or scripturalist). Meanwhile, liberal views often leave the text behind and tend to be secularist. This is what then creates a clash between these two religious thoughts, which leads to political and even practical actions (Evi Sopandi 2017:75). However, several observers point out that conservative groups are becoming stronger and dominating several political and social aspects (Bruinessen 2013). In Christianity itself, the denominations in Indonesia are also categorised into polarisation: between communities that are more inclusive and open to other groups and even religions and communities that require themselves to be exclusive and actively seek the conversion of non-believers (Hoon 2016:31). As Hoon points out, the polarisation within the Christian community in Indonesia is

often divided between a more inclusive group, which is open to interfaith dialogue, and a more exclusive group, which emphasises the importance of maintaining Christian identity and making efforts for conversion. This polarisation affects interfaith relations and permeates Christian theological education, creating a dichotomy in theological understanding and religious practice. This condition demands a new approach to educational theology that can go beyond the conservative-liberal dichotomy and open space for more constructive and inclusive dialogue. Thus, post-conservative becomes a relevant proposal to overcome this polarisation through a transformational, constructive-creative and liberating approach.

In this case, polarity is also an issue in Indonesia's Christian theological education process. There is a binary perspective on understanding various aspects of theological education in Indonesia, including curriculum, theology, churches, Christian schools and religious education. This then deepens polarisation in Christian religious education. A dichotomy is created that Christian education is only related to teaching religion or the Christian faith in schools and/or churches or that Christian education aims to only facilitate learning in schools and universities following the Christian faith (Sidjabat 2019:9). Christian education outside the school or church, such as in the family and in public spaces, receives less attention. The concept of 'public space' refers to areas outside churches and schools, which are also important places for implementing Christian education. Christian education should not only be limited to formal institutions such as schools and churches but should be expanded into a broader context, including families and public spaces. These public spaces include various aspects of daily life where Christian values can be applied and lived so that Christian education can be more relevant and significantly impact society as a whole. So, an epistemology of Christian education that goes beyond this polarity is needed (Wisarja & Sudarsana 2017:285).

One understanding that tries to mediate this polarity is post-conservative. Post-conservatives can be understood as a movement or ideology that understands itself as beyond conservative ideology but at the same time remains within it. Postconservative is a middle or moderate position from the two extreme poles between conservative and liberal. It helps to provide a critical alternative and open, constructive dialogue on both liberal and conservative sides (Olson 2007).

In this article, I will propose how postconservative understanding can become a proposal for a theological education paradigm in Indonesia. It is hoped that post-conservative ideology will be able to provide a perspective that goes beyond the dichotomy between conservatives and liberals, which will then open up space for constructive dialogue between the two camps. How can post-conservative understanding be applied in Christian theological education in Indonesia to overcome the current polarisation? This article has a thesis statement that applying postconservative

concepts and characteristics in Christian theological education can overcome polarisation in Christian theological education in Indonesia through a transformative, constructive-creative and liberating approach.

Research method

This article uses a literature review approach to propose its argument's core. A research literature review is a systematic, explicit and reproducible method for identifying, evaluating and synthesising the body of completed and recorded work produced by researchers, academics and practitioners (Fink 2014:3). This article will utilise various academic sources such as journal articles and books related to the topics explored namely conservative, post-conservative, polarity and things that intersect with them. The search for this article is then divided into three parts. The first is to explain the characteristics of conservative ideology in Christianity. The data analysis technique or journal used in this article is through a literature review approach. In this approach, the author systematically identifies, evaluates and synthesises existing works relevant to the topic discussed, namely polarisation in Christian theological education in Indonesia and the post-conservative approach. This analysis is carried out by dividing the literature search into three main parts: firstly, explaining the characteristics of conservative ideology in Christianity; secondly, describing how post-conservative characteristics can mediate the polarisation between conservatives and liberals and thirdly, proposing post-conservative characteristics in the paradigm of theological education, especially in Indonesia.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Bethel Indonesia Jakarta. This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Result and discussion

Looking at the characteristics of conservatives in Christianity

Church culture, with its deep historical roots, has played a pivotal role in the historical development of Christianity in the United States. Since the arrival of early European settlers, the church has been a central force in shaping the social and moral life of society. The 18th and 19th centuries saw religious revivals like the Great Awakening, which bolstered the conservative influence of the church, emphasising individual morality, devotion to God and adherence to biblical teaching. This influence was further solidified by 20th-century religious movements, including the rise of Christian fundamentalism in response to modernism and theological liberalism. Conservative churches in the United States began to align themselves with resistance to social and cultural changes that were seen as a threat to traditional values. This alignment deepened the polarisation in American politics, with conservative ideology emphasising the security of faith and liberal ideology highlighting social activism as an expression of faith (Utter & True 2004).

Central to this cultural church conservation is a strong emphasis on tradition, established doctrine and long-standing worship practices. Conservative churches typically adhere to a literal interpretation of Scripture, considered the final authority in religious life. This emphasis then impacts various practices carried out in the church, such as the arrangement of worship, music, posture during worship, art, architecture, colours used, priests' clothing and even the annual calendar (Farley 2008). Scripture is understood in at least two central qualities: inerrant and infallible. Inerrancy is the understanding that the Bible contains no errors and is entirely accurate in what it teaches (e.g., regarding history or other sciences). Meanwhile, infallibility is the belief that the Bible can be trusted entirely as a guide to the life of faith towards salvation and will not fail to fulfil its purpose (Chung 2018).

Because of this basis on the Bible, conservative ideology considers that all humans and the social world have fallen into sin because of Adam and Eve, which is seen as a deliberate rebellion against God. According to this logic, Adam and Eve's original sin created the basis for a fundamentally depraved human condition characterised by selfishness and a reluctance to submit to any divine authority. Research on this topic was conducted by Lynn M. Hempel et al. In this case, it was found that these conservative theological beliefs created a tendency to be less trusting of other people outside their community (Hempel, Bartkowski & Matthews 2012). Theologically, conservatives may view other people's beliefs as unwise because they show a lack of belief in the literal things written in the Bible. Yoel Inbar and David A. Pizarro demonstrate that the tendency of this conservative ideology has even led to disgust towards identity and what is understood outside of its understanding. Conservatives often feel disgusted by behaviour that is considered to violate the norms of purity and morality related to the purity of sexuality, such as homosexuality or abortion, sex outside marriage, adultery, pornography, teenage contraception and sex education in schools (Inbar, Pizarro & Bloom 2009). However, it is essential to note that these views do not always reflect a universal perspective and may be contested in a broader context, especially when considering human rights and the need for more inclusive dialogue.

Churches with conservative views also often have strict views on morality and ethics. This transformed into a purity culture movement. It is estimated that this movement itself only emerged around the 1960s as a movement against secular movements trying to expand sexual expression outside the boundaries of marriage. Conservative evangelicalism, in this case, understands that sexual acts have sacred values because, in them, God has a divine purpose. Again, basing it on what the scriptures say literally, conservative understanding understands that men act as heads of the family, and wives must be under their husbands. This culture seeks to maintain the moral integrity of the church community and educate its members to live according to moral teachings that are considered timeless and universal

(Edger 2012). Those who disobey or behave immorally will suffer consequences; for example, they will disappoint God, have marriage problems, become trapped further into other negative things such as drugs and prostitution, become sexual predators and even experience a tragic death.

However, purity culture, with all the conservative ideas behind it, has negative impacts and problems. An online activism movement has emerged with the hashtag #ChurchToo, which explains that churches that emphasise purity culture have cases of sexual violence and harassment which are covered up by their religious leaders.¹ Purity culture, as explored by Katie Cross, creates unrealistic expectations and even standards, especially for young women, making it very difficult for the person to meet these standards mentally. Women's bodies that are deemed not to fulfil the culture of holiness are considered worthless and sinful, and the blame cannot be separated from their behaviour and decisions (Cross 2020).

This literalistic emphasis on the Bible also impacts how conservatives view other non-theological issues. For example, Bernard Daley Zelaha and Andrew Szasz highlight the fact that conservatives (in the American context) have an anti-climate change attitude. This is mainly because the attitude of protecting nature is suspected to be an act of neo-pagan style 'nature worship' that does not follow Biblical values (Zaleha & Szasz 2015). Another example is from Christopher G. Ellison et al., who see that conservative Christian ideology justifies child discipline using violence because it is written in the Bible, which is without error and can be trusted to guide all human affairs (Ellison, Musick & Holden 2011). This is contrary to the results of studies that have proven that acts of violence against children based on discipline are completely unjustified because they cause various negative impacts on children's growth and development.

Conservative ideology can also be traced to its partisanship on political issues. For example, in Israel the debate regarding Israel and territories such as the West Bank, Jerusalem and Gaza often becomes a source of significant tension, particularly in political and religious contexts. There are differing views on the status of these territories. Some view Israel's actions as an effort to defend historical rights and patriotism, including rights acquired through conflicts won. On the other hand, some see this situation as part of a more complex dynamic related to territorial management and human rights. To fully understand this issue, it is essential to acknowledge the various existing perspectives and promote constructive dialogue (Gries 2015). Their involvement with Jews, especially their support for the state of Israel, often stems from a particular interpretation of Biblical prophecy. One model of prophetic interpretation popular among evangelicals is premillennial dispensationalism, which emerged in the 19th century and encouraged literal, futuristic

1. The #ChurchToo hashtag is a development of the #MeToo hashtag, which advocates for victims of sexual harassment in the United States to voice their experiences as solid criticism. This hashtag later developed into #NeverAtChurch, which emphasises that institutions such as churches should have zero tolerance for acts of sexual violence. See (Colwell & Johnson 2020).

interpretations. Dispensationalists focus on seven eras or 'dispensations' in which God tested humanity's faithfulness, as well as a pessimistic view of the state of the Church and the world. They believe that only divine intervention through the Second Coming of Jesus can reverse the decline of civilisation in the current era. This search for a literal application of prophecy led dispensationalists to pay attention to the fate of the Jewish people and the growing Zionist movement. So because of its focus only on individual conversion and apocalyptic hopes regarding the end times, conservative Protestantism in the late 20th and early 21st centuries was often less vocal in its support for systemic social and political change (Williams 2016).

From conservative to post conservative: Exploring characteristics

Postconservatives are committed to three worlds, namely modern, postmodern and biblical, and they are committed to issues from these three worlds (Sherman 2008). When it is said that it goes beyond conservative boundaries without rejecting everything in them, then the Bible remains an essential basis for postconservative understanding. However, post-conservatives, in this case, do not only understand that the Bible is infallible (inerrant) and can be trusted (infallible) so rigidly, the impact is that the Bible can answer all empirical problems experienced by humans (Canale 2011). For conservatives, theology is an ongoing and unfinished task. So, postconservative theology will be more open in proposing doctrinal corrections based on an open analysis based on God's Word. The Bible does not contain a single theology but contains various theological testimonies. This makes the Bible serve as a dialogue partner for postconservatives rather than a fixed theological summary that is only quoted literally (Pinnock 2018).

According to Roger Nolson, postconservative and conservative theologians share a commonality in their commitment to the Bible as the primary source of theology, a worldview centred on God's revelation in Jesus Christ and salvation through faith in Christ. However, post-conservative theologians differ in their openness to re-examining traditional doctrines, the belief that no human interpretation of Scripture is perfect and willingness to move beyond traditional boundaries when called by the Holy Spirit through Scripture (Olson 2007). They believe that theology is never finished because God always has new light to reveal from his Word.

Furthermore, several primary characteristics of conservative ideology can be explored. The first characteristic of postconservatives is the emphasis on personal transformation through revelation rather than the mere transmission of information. Conservatives emphasise the importance of revealed information, such as theological facts. In contrast, postconservatives regard revelation as a greater transformational force than mere propositions or information. In this case, the post-conservative group does not reject these

revelations' proportional, factual and informative aspects. However, they prefer to emphasise that this revelation is the primary source for transformation through human personal encounters and relationships with God. The non-propositional aspect is considered more valuable as a theological effort. This makes post-conservatives emphasise theology that contains narrative, which becomes a force to change someone rather than just theological propositions (MacGregor 2020).

The second characteristic is that theology is an ongoing journey, not a final discovery. Postconservatives see theology as a constructive task always open to reconsideration and reconstruction in light of discoveries and different contexts (Olson 2007). Therefore, conservative groups appreciate the 'imagination' aspect of a theological formulation. This means that theology is not just the act of 'thinking thoughts about God and after Him' or fixing specific thoughts (doctrines) that are timeless and impenetrable. Theology must implement creative performances based on the revelation of the Holy Scriptures and Christian traditions throughout the centuries (MacGregor 2020).

A third characteristic is discomfort with reliance on enlightenment and modern modes of thought. Although many conservative theologians condemned modernity, the irony is that Enlightenment principles influenced the evangelical movement itself (Olson 2007). For example, conservative groups that emphasise the rational certainty of certain theological prepositions are a disguised form of enlightenment. This is where postconservative ideology insists that one side of theology must be free from dependence on aspects of enlightenment, which then incorporate aspects of postmodern thought to provide liberating perspectives (MacGregor 2020).

Then, if conservative groups sometimes have an antipathetic attitude towards other ideologies, the fourth characteristic is that post-conservatives see that they are still part of the conservatives. Conservative understanding is understood as the centre of their understanding. The fifth characteristic is that conservative understanding sees the true core of faith as a spiritual experience, not just doctrinal beliefs. MacGregor explained that postconservative ideology, which emphasises spiritual aspects, may have its roots in 17th-century Pietism, which emphasised experiential aspects.

Alternative polarisation: Seeking postconservative openness for today's theological higher education

Post-conservatives offer an idea to mediate the conservative-liberal polarisation in theological colleges in Indonesia philosophically. In this article, I summarise the characteristics of post-conservatives into five things whose existence can be guaranteed to break down the polarised philosophy of theological education: transformational, constructive-creative, and liberating.

Transformative Christian education was discussed academically between Andrew Wright and Elmer Thiessen. Wright highlights the attitudes of Christian groups in understanding education. The attitude of liberal Christianity refers to compatibility or not combining secular and Christian scientific disciplines at all because each has its compatibility. Meanwhile, conservative attitudes usually take a reconstructive stance, namely an effort to rebuild the education system based on Christian principles. Wright then proposed the principle of transformative education, namely, when all secular norms need to be changed through Christian values (Wright 1998). Responding to Wright, Thiessen responded by proposing an attitude that went beyond the three. Thiessen disagrees with Wright's proposal, arguing that Christianity needs to change public education to be more Christian. Thiessen then considered that attitudes towards Christian education were valid because they had their truth (Thiessen 1999).

Thiessen's response is a post-conservative form; it is not an attempt to create a new pole. Post-conservatives must be understood as a middle path between polarisation between conservatives and liberals. Transformative postconservative theological education involves understanding the fact that theology does have boundaries between itself and other fields, but that is where theology is called not only to Christianise these fields but also to carry out an interdisciplinary collaboration process. This then gave rise to a holistic education and transformed the process of theological education.

While this proposal has the strength of creating a middle ground between conservative and liberal positions, some weaknesses must be considered. One major area for improvement is that this approach may be completely free from the shadow of strong influence from one extreme or the other. In other words, despite its attempt to be neutral, there is a risk that this post-conservative approach will still tend to be influenced by conservative or liberal views, depending on the context and interpretation used. Furthermore, in its attempt to find a balance, this proposal may only partially satisfy both sides, so polarisation may persist or even be exacerbated.

Postconservative Christian theological education also needs to be constructive and creative. Conservatism seems to surround itself with only a single view that has the central authority, namely the Bible, which seems only to be quoted literally. Meanwhile, post-conservatives understand the fact that the Bible is the primary source of theology, but various human interpretations are so imperfect that there is no perfection or finality of understanding. What is understood by post-conservative understanding resonates with developments in understanding constructive theology today. From the perspective of constructive Christian theology, the biblical text is not only understood in one hermeneutic dimension/perspective. Constructive efforts can involve materials outside the Bible and provide creative new insights

(Wyman 2017). The constructive perspective in constructive theology offers a reflective narrative about faith in an inter-contextual, intercultural and interreligious manner in a Gospel that may be applicable. However, it is never 'universal' (Grau 2020:56). So theological education may need to go beyond the walls of the Church and collaborate with others for peace and justice (Susanta 2021).

The third proposal states that postconservative education is a liberating pedagogy. Marion Grau explains that from a constructive perspective, theology always has political implications and emphasis. No theology is politically neutral. So, theology must consider human suffering as a source in producing a theological reflection. Conservative-style theological education sometimes ignores the sufferings of humans around them because it is more directed towards the ego, spirituality and morality of its adherents. Theological education, which is characterised by liberation in this case, needs to be understood not only as if it emphasises the humanisation of education and throws away its sacredness. So, in the context of liberating education, theological education in Indonesia also needs to be understood as a prophetic act. This prophetic (prophetic) meaning is often narrowed to matters of 'mystical' messages in futuristic words, which are only used to develop human potential through the suggestion of belief and self-motivation for success. The true prophetic meaning is broader and more profound, including a call for social change and justice through liberating theological education. Education that is not prophetic will always serve the interests of certain authorities. So, theological education needs to stand with oppressed people as Jesus did. In this way, theological education also pays attention to humanity while maintaining its sacredness (Madero 2019:434).

This proposal seeks solutions that promote dialogue and mutual understanding in a complex situation such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the Indonesian context, where there is a diversity of views reflecting support for both Israel and Palestine, it is essential to approach this issue with the primary goal of promoting peace and respect for humanity.

Humanity, in its broadest definition, is about respecting the dignity of every human being and seeking to alleviate suffering, regardless of political or religious affiliation. This means opposing all forms of terrorism and violence that harm human life and well-being. At the same time, humanity also means seeking just and sustainable solutions to end the cycle of violence while respecting the fundamental rights of all parties involved.

The tragedy of 07 October and other incidents remind us of the importance of an approach focusing on security, justice and peace. Thus, this proposal does not encourage 'bowing in' to terrorists but underscores the need for a comprehensive approach to addressing the root causes of conflict and terrorism, with the ultimate goal of creating sustainable peace.

To resolve the polarisation in theological education today, the author proposes the development of a curriculum that does not only focus on teaching conservative doctrines, but also encourages integration across disciplines and religions. For example, theological institutions can develop study programmes that combine courses on social justice, the environment and interfaith dialogue. These courses are designed to invite students to understand and respond to contemporary issues with a more inclusive and contextual approach, so that graduates not only have a deep theological understanding, but are also able to contribute to discussions and solutions to complex social problems.

As a concrete step, the author also proposes the implementation of a community service programme that requires students to be directly involved in social work in interfaith communities. This programme aims to build broader understanding, reduce prejudice between groups and create a space for constructive dialogue. With this approach, theological education is not only limited to classroom teaching, but also to character development and cross-cultural and religious understanding, which can ultimately help reduce polarisation in society.

Conclusion

The polarisation in Indonesia, especially in political and religious contexts, shows how important it is to find an approach to reduce tensions between conservative and liberal groups. In Christian theological education, this polarisation is also clearly visible, with conservative views that tend to be textualist and exclusive and liberal views that are more open and secularist. Postconservatism exists as an answer to this tension, offering a middle way that recognises the importance of traditional values while remaining open to correction and dialogue. Through a transformative, constructive-creative and liberating approach, postconservative theological education is expected to create an inclusive and reflective academic environment that teaches doctrine and promotes critical engagement with contemporary issues.

Applying post-conservative understanding in theological education in Indonesia offers a solution to reduce the polarisation between conservative and liberal views. By adopting a transformational, constructive-creative and liberating approach, theological education can move beyond existing dichotomies and open space for constructive dialogue. Post-conservatives are committed to the basic principles of faith while being open to contextual interpretation and social change so that they can create theological education that is more inclusive, relevant, meaningful and impacts the broader community.

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Author's contribution

J.E.S. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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