

CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY AS A WAY TO BUILD TRANSFORMATIVE SOCIAL RELATIONS IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Multicultural societies are characterized by rich ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity, but they are also often fertile ground for conflict, prejudice, and social fragmentation. In this context, contextual theology exists as a reflective approach that seeks to connect the message of faith with the reality of pluralistic society. Contextual theology functions not only as an attempt to understand faith in a particular context, but also as a means of building inclusive and transformative social relations. Through a contextual hermeneutic approach, this study examines how theology can be a moral and spiritual force that encourages the creation of cross-cultural dialogue and humanitarian solidarity in the midst of plurality. This approach affirms that the Christian faith cannot be separated from social responsibility, because the encounter between the gospel and the local context opens up space for social ethical renewal and cross-border solidarity. This study uses a qualitative method with a contextual theological approach associated with social transformation theory. The results of the study show that the application of contextual theology is able to shift the exclusive religious paradigm to inclusive, open up space for interpersonal dialogue, and strengthen awareness of shared responsibility in realizing justice and peace. Contextual theology invites the church and the faithful not only to theology "in context", but also "for context", so that the message of faith becomes a transformative force for common life. In Indonesia's multicultural society, contextual theology has the potential to be a bridge between faith identity and social togetherness, fostering an ethos of peaceful coexistence, fairness, and mutual respect.

Keywords: Contextual Theology, Social Relations, Transformation, Multicultural Society, Intercultural Dialogue

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization and increasingly complex cultural plurality, modern society faces a major challenge in maintaining social harmony and inter-community cohesion. The multicultural reality formed by the diversity of ethnicities, religions, languages, and traditions demands a theological approach that is not only reflective, but also transformative. Contextual theology is a form of reading of faith that is rooted in social reality, where God's revelation is not understood separately from the human situation, but is actually incarnated in it (Bevans, 2002). In a society like Indonesia, known as *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, efforts to build harmonious and just social relations require the church and faith communities to develop a form of theology that is able to dialogue with a multicultural context without losing the integrity of faith.

Multicultural societies not only depict the diversity of identities, but also exhibit interaction dynamics that are often colored by social tensions, conflicts of interest, and ideological biases. In this situation, theology cannot stand as a closed dogmatic system, but must be present as a humanizing and connecting praxis. Contextual theology offers a paradigm that places context as a theological locus, that is, a place where God works through human historical and social experience (Schreiter, 1985). Thus, the reflection of faith is no longer abstract, but grows in the concrete struggles of society, including in the issues of justice, equality, and humanity.

Furthermore, the plurality of cultures and religions in Indonesia shows that social relations can be a source of strength and vulnerability. Failure to understand the "other" often leads to social polarization and symbolic violence. In such a situation, contextual theology serves not only as an effort to inculturate the faith, but also as a movement for liberation and social transformation (Sugirtharajah, 2009). It is a space where theological reflection meets ethical responsibility to build social justice and cross-border peace.

However, in practice, many churches and religious institutions still develop theology that is normative, dogmatic, and independent of the social context. Theology is often trapped in the liturgical and doctrinal space without touching the dynamics of rapidly changing society. As a result, the teachings of faith, which are supposed to be a transformative force, lose their relevance in dealing with social issues such as intolerance, discrimination, and social inequality (Pieris, 1988). On the other hand, contextual theological theory itself faces the epistemological challenge of how to balance fidelity to biblical revelation with openness to plural socio-cultural dynamics.

Another problem arises when contextual theology is often considered a form of theological relativism that threatens the purity of faith. In fact, according to (Bevans, 2018), contextual theology is not a compromise of truth, but an attempt to understand the Gospel in its entirety in the diverse realities of human beings. The tension between the universality of the gospel message and the particularity of the human context becomes a crucial point that needs to be bridged through critical hermeneutic approaches and social praxis. Thus, the problem faced is not only conceptual, but also practical, that is, how theology can really contribute to the development of transformative social relations.

1.1 Previous Research

The study of contextual theology has been conducted with a variety of approaches. First (Bevans, 2002) in his book *Models of Contextual Theology* he highlights six models of contextualization approaches that affirm the importance of encounters between the gospel and local cultures. Second, the work (Schreiter, 1985) *Constructing Local Theologies* emphasizes that each context has a unique experience of faith that should be respected as a theological locus. Third, Aloysius Pieris (1988) in *An Asian Theology of Liberation* places the context of poverty and Asian religious plurality as the main terrain of theological liberation. Fourth, research (Sugirtharajah, 2009) *The Bible and the Third World* shows how contextual interpretation of the Bible can correct Western hegemony and open up space for global-southern theological dialogue. Fifth, local research by

(Hendriks, 2019) suggests that the application of contextual theology in South African churches can strengthen social solidarity and inter-ethnic reconciliation.

In addition, some recent research in Indonesia also underscores the relevance of contextual theology in strengthening social life. For example, research by (Lase, 2021) emphasizing the importance of contextual praxis theology as a means of social transformation in the midst of cultural conflict, while (Purwanto, 2022) shows how the Church can play a role as a mediator of interfaith dialogue through an empathetic contextual approach. From these various studies, it appears that contextual theology continues to evolve from mere conceptual reflection to social praxis oriented towards a more just change in social structure.

Although many studies have discussed the dimension of contextual theology, there is still a gap in examining the role of contextual theology as a means of building transformative social relations in the context of Indonesia's multicultural society. Most previous research has emphasized theoretical or inculturative aspects without exploring how theology can shape concrete, dialogical, and equitable social praxis. In addition, there are few studies that integrate contextual theological approaches with theories of social transformation and cross-cultural reconciliation in the context of contemporary Indonesia.

Relevance, Urgency, and Significance of the Issue

This study is relevant because of Indonesia's plurality which continues to face the threat of social disintegration due to intolerance, identity politics, and economic inequality. In such situations, contextual theology can play an important role as an ethical and spiritual foundation for the construction of peaceful social relations. The urgency lies in the need to reconstruct a theological paradigm that is able to bridge faith and social reality. Meanwhile, its significance lies in the contribution of this research to the development of a more grounded and transformative theology, so that the church can be present not only as a religious institution, but also as an agent of social transformation (Hendriks, 2019).

This research aims to examine how contextual theology can be a way to build transformative social relations in a multicultural society. In particular, this study aims to identify theological principles that support inclusive social relations, analyze the challenges of applying contextual theology in the context of Indonesian plurality, and formulate a model of theological praxis that is able to strengthen cross-cultural solidarity. Based on these objectives, the formulation of this research problem is: (1) How can contextual theology be articulated as a transformative social paradigm in the midst of a multicultural society? (2) What theological principles can support the formation of inclusive and dialogical social relations? (3) What are the practical implications of the application of contextual theology for the church and the multicultural society of Indonesia today?

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with contextual theological methods combined with a social hermeneutic framework. This approach was chosen because the research aims to understand the meaning and theological dynamics that arise in a given social context, rather than simply measuring variables quantitatively. In contextual theology, social reality is considered a "living text" that must be interpreted through the interaction between divine revelation and human experience (Bevans, 2002). The qualitative approach allows researchers to interpret the theological meaning of social phenomena such as intercultural relations, ecclesiastical practices, and interfaith solidarity in the context of Indonesia's multicultural society. Thus, this research serves not only to describe the phenomenon, but also to reveal how theology can be a force for social transformation through grounded reflection of faith (Schreiter, 1985).

Methodologically, this study combines textual and contextual analysis, where texts (theological teachings, ecclesiastical documents, and contextual theological literature) are read in the light of the socio-cultural context faced by Indonesian society. This approach is in line with the spiral

hermeneutic method as described by (Osmer, 2008), which involves four reflective steps: descriptive-empirical (observing social reality), interpretive (understanding its theological meaning), normative (judging based on the principles of the Christian faith), and pragmatic (designing social transformation actions). The main data in this study were obtained from the study of theological literature, the results of previous research, and the analysis of social phenomena such as plurality, intolerance, and solidarity between religious communities. The contextual hermeneutic approach helps researchers read social dynamics as part of the ongoing narrative of God's salvation in the middle of the world (Cousar, 2006).

The analysis method used is theological-interpretive analysis, with stages (1) identification of key concepts in contextual theology and social relations; (2) interpretation of meaning through dialogue between biblical texts, church traditions, and social realities; and (3) the preparation of theological models that are relevant to the context of Indonesia's multicultural society. The validity of the research is maintained through triangulation of literature sources and critical reflection on the researcher's contextual biases, as suggested in the practical theological method by (Hendriks, 2019). The results of the analysis are expected to produce a contextual theological formulation that is not only descriptive, but also normative and transformative, namely a theology that is able to inspire just, inclusive, and peaceful social action (Kim, 2010). Thus, this methodology allows theological research to proceed in fidelity to the Bible as well as openness to the social context, as well as the spirit of contextual theology itself.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1.1 Definition and Basic Principles of Contextual Theology

Contextual theology is a form of reflection of faith rooted in the realization that any understanding of God and His work always occurs in a particular social, cultural, and historical context. This theology rejects a universalistic view that ignores local realities and affirms that the human context is the locus theologicus, that is, the place where God's revelation meets human experience (Schreiter, 1985). According to (Bevans, 2002), contextual theology is not simply the application of traditional theology into a local context, but rather a dynamic process in which the gospel and culture interpret each other. In this process, the Christian faith is lived authentically and meaningfully for diverse communities. Thus, contextual theology is an attempt to bridge the gap between divine revelation and human reality, so that faith is not only understood dogmatically but also practiced in social life.

The basic principles of contextual theology are based on a dialogue between texts, traditions, and contexts. (Bevans, 2018), affirms that every contextual theological model, whether translational, anthropological, praxis, synthetic, or transcendental, has a common point in an effort to present a Gospel message that is relevant to the concrete human situation. This process includes three reflective steps: first, reading the social context as a "second text" alongside the text of Scripture; second, interpreting human experience as part of God's work; and third, integrating that new understanding into the practice of faith and the life of the Church (Kärkkäinen, 2013). These principles presuppose a critical engagement between faith and culture, not in the form of compromise, but an encounter that enriches both. Thus, contextual theology affirms that the truth of the Gospel is universal, but that its delivery is always particular and dialogical according to the context of the person who receives it.

Contextual theology is also rooted in the principles of incarnation and social transformation. The principle of incarnation affirms that just as God is incarnated in Jesus Christ in the midst of the historical context of man, so theology must be incarnated in the socio-cultural context of the people. This principle leads the church to not only speak of God's love, but also to present that love in real terms in acts of justice, solidarity, and peace (Hendriks, 2019). The transformational principle emphasizes that contextual theology does not stop at reflection, but leads to concrete social change.

Therefore, contextual theology is not only cognitive, but also praxis and prophetic in the midst of social injustice, and a means to build inclusive social relations in a multicultural society (Kim, 2010). On this basis, contextual theology does not simply interpret reality, but participates in transforming it to be more human and in harmony with the values of the Kingdom of God.

3.1.2 The Concept of Social Relations in the Perspective of Theology and Social Sciences

Theology views social relations not just as relationships between individuals, but as an ethical-ontological dimension influenced by the doctrine of man, community, and the Kingdom of God. From a practical theological perspective, social relations is seen as an arena of incarnation in which love, justice, and reconciliation are embodied so that liturgical practice, church ethics, and public involvement become concrete manifestations of the doctrine (Bevans, 2002) 2008). In the context of contextual theology, social relations is also read as a "text" that expresses local theological needs such as issues of marginalization, inter-community conflicts, or the need for reconciliation that demands relevant and pragmatic theological responses (Osmer, 2008).

In social science, social relations are analyzed through concepts such as social capital, social cohesion, social networks, and homophily that help explain how beliefs, norms, and collective actions form or collapse in a society. Recent empirical studies show the dual role of religion: on the one hand, religion builds strong internal social capital (bonding social capital) and psychosocial support; On the other hand, religious networks can also strengthen segregation if there is no dialogical and inclusive orientation (Shapiro, 2021). Comparative and analytical studies confirm that religious participation is often positively correlated with civic engagement and community well-being, but the effect depends on patterns of interreligious openness and the orientation of religious organizations towards the wider community (Nezlek, 2020).

Establishing a bridge between theological perspectives and social science findings opens up the possibility of a "social theology" that is both normative and empirical: normative because it offers an ethical foundation of justice, dignity, reconciliation and empirical because it must be sensitive to real social mechanisms such as networks, norms, and power structures. Recent interdisciplinary studies encourage practical models in which churches and religious organizations use their social capital to facilitate intercultural dialogue, mitigate the risk of polarization, and build inclusive social cohesion an important aspect of contemporary multicultural societies (McClure, 2021). Contemporary empirical research and meta-analysis show that in order to produce sustainable social transformation, theological interventions need to be consciously designed based on an understanding of local social networks, belief variables, and existing power dynamics.

3.1.3 Multicultural Societies: Characteristics and Challenges

A multicultural society is characterized by a diversity of ethnic identities, languages, religions, traditions and lifestyles that coexist in a single political and social space. Another characteristic is the existence of layered identities where individuals are at the same time members of various communities (e.g., ethnic, religious, professional), as well as the tendency for incompatibility of norms that can arise when different cultural norms collide with each other (Kymlicka, 1995). In practice, there is also a dynamic of cultural hybridity and constant symbolic exchange: customs, religious practices, and languages influence each other so that collective identity is no longer static but fluid and negotiable. In the Indonesian context—for example, the complex multicultural case of this condition is reinforced by a history of pluralism, political centralization, and decentralization that creates variations in relations between groups at the local and national levels (Parekh, 2024).

On the other hand, multiculturalism brings structural and practical challenges: first, the potential erosion of social cohesion and the decline of trust between citizens at the community level when diversity is not followed by inclusive mechanisms (Putnam, 2007b); second, identity polarization mobilized by political actors or the media so that horizontal conflicts can easily ignite; third, inequality of economic and educational access which often strengthens segregation between

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groups; and fourth, the challenge of institutional transformation, e.g. educational curriculum and public policies that are not responsive to diversity so that efforts to build an inclusive society are hampered (comparative studies and recent studies show this trend in various countries and especially in the study of Indonesia). The phenomenon of "multiculturalism under strain" recorded in the contemporary literature confirms that without a deliberate governance and education strategy, multiculturalism can turn into a source of conflict rather than a source of social wealth (Putnam, 2007b).

These characteristics and challenges have consequences for public policy, educational texts, and religious practices: diversity governance mechanisms are needed that balance cultural recognition, distributive justice, and social cohesion; multicultural education that instills dialogue skills, critical tolerance, and media literacy; as well as the active role of religious institutions/civil society organizations as facilitators of reconciliation and intercultural bridges. Recent literature highlights the need for a cross-sectoral approach—policy, education, economics, and religion to strengthen inclusive social capital and reduce segregative effects. In the context of contextual theology, this opens up space for a pragmatic theology: not only interpreting the text, but shaping the capacity of communities of faith to become agents of dialogue, advocates of justice, and facilitators of transformative social relations in multicultural societies (Mansouri, 2025).

3.1.4 Dialogue between Theology and Socio-Cultural Context

The dialogue between theology and the socio-cultural context is understood as a reciprocal process in which the reflection of faith (theology) reads, interprets, and responds to socio-cultural realities as a locus theologicus. In this approach the context is not treated as a passive background, but rather as a hermeneutical partner that forces theology to reformulate traditional theological questions of revelation, salvation, justice, and ethics to be relevant to concrete issues such as marginalization, identity conflict, and inequality. This concept has been developed in contextual theological literature that emphasizes dialogical methods: reading the biblical text alongside the "text of life" (social reality), assessing experience through the norms of faith, and formulating transformative praxic actions. This kind of approach is also reinforced by contemporary studies that place contextual methodology as a form of interdisciplinary theology that combines hermeneutics, sociology of religion, and cultural studies in order to bridge theory and practice (Stephen B. Bevans SVD, 2018).

In practice, the dialogue requires a theological posture that is both critical and empathetic: critical of oppressive social structures (prophetic theology) and empathetic in understanding the symbols, narratives, and practices of local cultures that give meaning to the community. This interaction opens up space for practical theology that not only interprets, but also designs social interventions such as reconciliation programs, multicultural education, and policy advocacy that are sensitive to social networks and local power dynamics. Recent studies of intercultural theology and contextual theology emphasize the importance of orchestrating multi-directional dialogue (between texts, traditions, and contexts) and collaborating with other social actors, academics, community leaders, NGOs, and policymakers so that theological outcomes are truly transformational and sustainable. This approach also avoids theology from two extremes: contextual relativism that melts doctrine, and dogmatism that closes itself off to contextual correction (Tower, 2024).

3.2 ANALYSIS OF THE CONTEXT OF A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

3.2.1 Social Dynamics and Inter-Community Relations

Multicultural societies feature complex social dynamics: layered collective identities, overlapping community networks, and concurrent mechanisms of solidarity and exclusivity. In many urban and rural contexts of Indonesia, individuals become members of several communities (ethnic, religious, professional, regional), so that social relations are formed by a balance between bonding (internal bonding) and bridging (bridge between groups). When social capital bonding is strong but bridging is weak, the tendency for segregation and poor inter-community communication increases

a pattern that can fuel misconceptions, stereotypes, and in extreme cases, horizontal conflict. Recent empirical analysis confirms that the strength of the internal social capital of churches/mosques/indigenous communities often provides great support to their members, but without dialogue strategies and bridges across groups, this capital risks strengthening social fragmentation. (Sumi et al., 2025).

Inter-community relations in Indonesia are also influenced by structural factors: economic distribution, public policy, the role of social media, and identity political mobilization. Economic inequality and injustice access (e.g., land, employment, public services) often exacerbate inter-group tensions, while political or media actors sometimes exploit identity differences for specific agendas, making polarization sharper. At the local level, case studies show that local wisdom practices and joint rituals (tumpeng adat, mutual cooperation between religious communities) function as a mechanism to prevent conflict but their effectiveness depends on the existence of intermediary institutions that can mediate interests. Therefore, interventions that are only normative (calls for tolerance) are less effective without redistributive policies and strengthening the structure of inter-community dialogue. (Mawardi, 2024)

In line with the above findings, the recent study recommends a multi-level approach to strengthening inter-community relations: (1) strengthening social capital bridging through structured cross-religious and cross-cultural programs; (2) integrating local wisdom in conflict resolution mechanisms so that there is a "common language"; and (3) pro-distributive justice public policies to reduce the structural roots of tension. From a contextual theological perspective, this emphasizes the need for churches and religious institutions to transform from internal actors who only serve members to public facilitators to build networks, initiate dialogue, and participate in formulating policies that promote social cohesion. The praxis model proposed by contemporary research combines social network analysis, structured dialogue practices, and local economic empowerment programs as a package of interventions that are more likely to produce test-resistant social relations in multicultural societies (Volume, 2025).

3.2.2 The Challenge of Plurality: Conflict, Discrimination, and Social Stereotypes

Conflicts in multicultural societies often arise not only because of differences in identities, but as a result of the accumulation of structural factors and situational triggers: competition for resources, mobilization of identity politics, disinformation, and the escalation of narratives on social media. In Indonesia, a number of contemporary studies have shown how religious or ethnic issues that were once local can become national issues through the dissemination on digital platforms, thereby accelerating polarization and triggering potentially violent collective action. In addition, political actors and the media sometimes exploit identity prejudice for strategic gain so that horizontal conflicts are flammable. The latest empirical findings emphasize the importance of understanding the role of social media as a reinforcer of polarizing ecosystems as well as the need for policies that govern the spread of harmful information to prevent large-scale conflicts. (Faizin et al., 2025)

Discrimination emerges as a structural and cultural challenge that holds back social integration. In law and practice, multicultural countries including Indonesia have implemented anti-discrimination rules and hate regulations; However, the harmonization between law enforcement, social norms, and bureaucratic practices is often weak, leaving minorities vulnerable to denial in economic, educational, and political access. Cases of hate speech complained about in court and analysis of verdicts show that hate speech not only offends the dignity of individuals but also weakens social cohesion, triggers collective fear, and hinders the public participation of certain groups. Effective interventions must therefore include strengthening law enforcement, anti-bias education, and community-based remedial mechanisms. (Princess & Princess, 2023)

Social stereotypes, fixed sets of assumptions about the "other" exacerbate fragmentation because they form cognitive schemes that rationalize exclusion and close opportunities for dialogue.

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Classical and cutting-edge research on social diversity shows that on the one hand diversity can enrich social capital and innovation, but on the other hand if not managed with proper public policies and education, diversity lowers trust between citizens and strengthens polarization. Practical approaches suggested by the literature are the strengthening of social capital bridging (cross-community programs), multicultural education based on critical empathy, and local wisdom practices that facilitate language. Together efforts that can erode stereotypes and build collective capacity to coexist peacefully (Putnam, 2007a).

3.2.3 Opportunities for Inter-Group Collaboration and Solidarity

In a multicultural society, collaboration and solidarity between groups are the key to social sustainability and democracy. Ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity is not only a sociological reality, but also a potential for the creation of a common good when managed with a dialogical and participatory approach. Cross-identity collaboration can be born from a shared awareness of social vulnerabilities, such as poverty, environmental, or public health issues that cross ethnic and religious boundaries. When a community has a shared vulnerability and a shared mission, a new cross-cultural and transformative solidarity is born (Hassan, 2023). This approach is in line with the view that (Kymlicka, 1995) about multicultural citizenship, where the collective rights of minority groups can only be meaningful if they are balanced with active involvement in shared social projects. In the Indonesian context, initiatives such as the Forum for Religious Harmony (FKUB), interfaith movements, and community-based community empowerment programs show how local synergy can strengthen social networks and prevent conflict.

Collaboration opportunities also grow through planned intergroup contacts, multicultural education, social entrepreneurship projects, and cross-institutional humanitarian movements. Contact theory hypothesis (Allport, 1954) Updated in contemporary research (McKeown & Dixon, 2020), affirming that inter-group encounters designed with equal goals, institutional support, and real cooperation can reduce social prejudice and strengthen empathy across identities. Recent research in Southeast Asia shows that collaborative projects based on interfaith economics and education are more effective at fostering solidarity than formal dialogue alone (Roberts, 2024). Therefore, social collaboration should not be understood as just a ceremonial activity, but as a sustainable social development strategy combining empathy, concrete action, and critical reflection on the structure of inequality. In the theological context, the church and religious institutions are called to be "agents of solidarity" (Osmer, 2008) that facilitates interfaith interactions through public service, humanitarian advocacy, and social education.

Furthermore, inter-group solidarity must be directed at the formation of a solidarity of difference that does not negate differences, but rather recognizes and celebrates them. Recent studies have confirmed that the people who succeed in building solidarity across identities are those who foster reflexive multiculturalism (Parekh, 2024), namely a critical awareness of one's position and responsibility towards other groups. In this context, social collaboration is not only a tool for conflict resolution, but also a vehicle for the formation of public ethics and humanitarian spirituality that transcends institutional boundaries. Contextual theology can be a bridge that motivates the faithful to move from private faith to public faith from contemplative theology to pragmatic theology, actively participating in just and civilized social development. Thus, collaboration between groups becomes a means of actualizing faith and the manifestation of God's love in a pluralistic social space.

3.2.4 The Role of Contextual Theology in Building Social Solidarity

Contextual theology plays an important role in building social solidarity because it places human experience as the primary locus of reflection of faith. In the context of a multicultural society, theology speaks not only of the relationship between humans and God, but also the relationship between humans as a concrete form of God's love in history. (Bevens, 2002), affirms that contextual theology departs from the dynamic interplay between the text of Scripture, faith traditions, and changing social realities. This marked a shift from an abstract normative theology to a praxian

theology that liberated and healed social wounds. Within this framework, social solidarity is an expression of faith that is tested in the midst of cultural diversity, economic inequality, and political polarization. This approach is also in line with the view (Gutiérrez, 1988), about liberation theology, in which a living faith demands involvement in the social struggle for human dignity.

Furthermore, contextual theology enables faith communities to read the signs of the times prophetically. The Church, theological institutions, and communities of faith are called to bear witness to God's love through active participation in social healing, peace, and justice. Theology as developed by (Schreiter, 1997) emphasizing that the task of theology is to reconcile faith with social suffering and to open up spaces for dialogue between previously separate groups. In the Indonesian context, a number of theologians such as (Darmaputera, 2019) and (Roberts, 2024), emphasizing that faith solidarity must be realized through interfaith and cultural practices that foster social trust. Through contextual and participatory theological education, the faithful can build sensitivity to the issues of poverty, discrimination, and ecological crises as an integral part of their spiritual responsibility.

Finally, contextual theology opens new horizons for social solidarity rooted in the spirituality of love and justice. Theology no longer stops at dogma, but becomes a social movement that unites communities through an ethics of service and respect for differences. In the view of contemporary theologians such as (Katongole, 2023), the solidarity born of contextual theology is not just a moral act, but a form of participation in God's ongoing redemptive work in the world. Thus, social solidarity becomes a terrain where faith and praxis meet faith embodied in acts of love, and acts of love that deepen faith. In the midst of a humanitarian crisis and global polarization, contextual theology offers an alternative narrative: that differences are not a threat, but an opportunity to jointly realize God's peaceful shalom for all creation.

3.3 CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY AS A TRANSFORMATIVE PARADIGM

3.3.1 The Essence of Contextual Theology in Social Relations

Contextual theology as a transformative paradigm departs from the premise that theology is not just a conceptual activity that stands on abstract doctrine, but rather a reflective praxis in which faith is tested and shaped by the historical-social context in which people live. In this perspective, the context of society including social structure, marginalization experiences, cultural dynamics, and power relations is the origin of theological texts: not only the setting, but the source of theological questions that demand normative and practical responses (Bevans, 2002). Therefore, the essence of contextual theology is dialogical: it marries the reading of Scripture and the tradition of the church with social analysis so that theology functions as a tool for reading reality as well as an intervention tool for just social change.

As a paradigm of social relations transformation, contextual theology highlights several methodological and ethical characters: (1) the incarnation, theology must take form in the concrete life of man as the incarnation of Christ; (2) praxis, correct theological reflection leads to concrete action to overcome injustice; (3) prophetism, ecology must be able to correct oppressive structures; and (4) participation, involving the local community as a subject, not an object, theological (Pieris, 1988). In multicultural inter-community relations, this approach encourages a shift from a tolerant attitude toward collective solidarity: theology becomes a driver of dialogue, reconciliation, and empowerment—building bridges (bridging social capital) that reduces segregation and stereotypes through meaningful shared practices (Hendriks, 2019).

Practically, translating contextual theology into a strategy of social relations transformation requires a reflective cycle: context mapping (structural and cultural analysis), theological reading (biblical dialogue—tradition—context), formulation of ethical norms, and implementation of praxis (reconciliation programs, multicultural education, policy advocacy). This approach maintains a balance between dogmatic fidelity and contextual sensitivity, avoiding doctrinal relativism, while rejecting dogmatism that ignores the suffering of human history so that theology functions as a

legitimate and socially impactful force of change (Kärkkäinen, 2013). Thus, the essence of contextual theology in social relations is to provide a conceptual foundation and a praxis instrument for faith communities to become agents of transformation: reknit fractured social relationships, demand structural justice, and live a solidarity that respects differences (Kim, 2010).

3.3.2 Incarnational and Dialogical Principles in Community Development

The principle of incarnation in contextual theology is the foundation for the social involvement of the faithful in a pluralistic society. Just as Christ became man and was present in human history to save the world (Jn. 1:14), so the church and Christians are called to present God's love in the midst of social life. The Incarnation is not just a Christological dogma, but an ethical paradigm for service and social solidarity (Bosch, 2011). Through the incarnational approach, theology becomes "present in the midst of the world"—one with the suffering, hopes, and aspirations of society. This principle rejects forms of theology that are detached from the social context, and affirms that the preaching of the Gospel must respond to the concrete needs of man. Therefore, the church's mission rooted in the incarnation demands active involvement in building social justice, peace, and common well-being (*Missio Dei*).

In the context of multicultural community development, the principle of incarnation must go hand in hand with the principle of dialogism. Dialogue is not just a conversation between different parties, but an existential encounter that opens up a space for recognition and acceptance of the "other" as God's fellow creation (Panikkar, 1999). In this perspective, dialogical theology views diversity not as a threat, but rather as an opportunity to enrich and deepen faith. Theological and social dialogue allows for the transformation of consciousness, dismantling stereotypes, and strengthening interfaith solidarity. This concept is in line with *Gaudium et Spes* (Spes, 1965) and the document *Evangelii Gaudium* (Francis, 2013), which affirms that interreligious and intercultural dialogue is a means of building true peace. Thus, the dialogical principle becomes the spirit that brings contextual theology to life in order to be relevant and prophetic in the midst of the plurality of this age.

Furthermore, the application of the principles of incarnation and dialogic in community development includes three dimensions of praxis: first, the relational dimension, namely building social trust and solidarity through cross-group encounters; second, the educational dimension, namely theological and community education that fosters empathy and critical awareness of social reality; and third, the transformative dimension, namely active involvement in justice advocacy, community empowerment, and environmental conservation (Katongole & Rice, 2018). When these principles are applied, the church functions as an alternative community that transcends narrow identity barriers into a sign of God's love that unites and renews the world. Thus, contextual theology based on the principles of incarnation and dialogism is not only a reflection of faith, but a living praxis that transforms social relations towards the integrity of creation (*shalom*).

3.3.3 Contextual Theology as a Practice of Social Transformation

Contextual theology as a practice of social transformation affirms that the reflection of true faith does not stop at doctrinal understanding, but is embodied in concrete actions that transform human life and social structures. Theology becomes praxis—that is, the unity of reflection and action that integrates the values of the Gospel into a social reality colored by injustice, poverty, and conflict (Bevans & Schroeder, 2011). In this perspective, social transformation is understood as a participatory process in which the faith community plays an active role in fighting for human dignity and the integrity of creation. Such theological practices focus not only on spiritual awakening, but also on structural changes—for example, in education, public policy, and the economics of justice. Thus, contextual theology blends faith and social ethics, thus becoming a prophetic force that upholds the values of God's kingdom in the midst of the complex and fragile realities of the world.

Furthermore, the practice of social transformation in contextual theology emphasizes the importance of empowerment and community participation. The Church is not seen as a hierarchical

institution that gives direction from above, but as a people of God who make pilgrimages together with the world in the struggle for justice and peace (Bosch, 2011). In the context of a multicultural society, this means active involvement in building interfaith and cultural encounter spaces through dialogue, shared social work, and inclusive education. Contemporary studies in Southeast Asia show that community-based contextual theological practices are able to strengthen social solidarity, reduce ethnic tensions, and increase trust between citizens (Rahardjo & Susanto, 2024). Thus, social transformation through theology is not just a moral project, but a theological strategy to live God's love in a contextual and interactive way in the midst of the reality of pluralism.

At the level of global praxis, contextual theology oriented towards social transformation also moves in the realm of ecotheology, gender justice, and post-conflict reconciliation. This theology leads the church to be an agent of peace and preservation of the earth by understanding human and natural suffering as a unity in Christ's suffering (Ruether, 2022). Therefore, every form of service, whether diakonia, education, or advocacy, is driven by a spirituality that unites prayer and social action. Within this framework, contextual theology appears not only as a contextual reflection on faith, but also as a moral and spiritual movement that builds an alternative society that is just, equal, and compassionate. Thus, social transformation through contextual theology is a tangible manifestation of faith working by love (Gal. 5:6), a faith that not only speaks, but acts to present the signs of the Kingdom of God in the world.

3.3.4 Case Study: Implementation of Contextual Theology Values in Indonesian Multicultural Context

The implementation of contextual theology in Indonesia often appears in the form of institutional mechanisms and local practices that connect churches/religious organizations with real social needs—for example, the Forum for Religious Harmony (FKUB) which serves as an arena for dialogue, mediation, and coordination between religious leaders in many regions. Field studies show that effective FKUB does not only rely on pluralistic rhetoric, but also persuasive dialogue strategies, empowerment of local religious leaders, and the use of social media for preventive communication against hoaxes and conflict escalation; This approach reflects a contextual principle: a theology that "descends" into the social field and works in a practical way. Cases in several cities show that FKUB that combines local wisdom and participatory procedures can reduce incidents of identity-based conflicts and strengthen inter-community bridging networks (Zein & Simamora, 2025).

In addition to formal institutions, the implementation of contextual theology is strongly seen in the practice of integrating local wisdom and interfaith education programs. Research on the behavior of local wisdom (e.g. Pela-Gandong, a local custom in Sulawesi, as well as the gotong royong tradition) indicates that when elements of local culture are recognized and interpreted theologically, they become an effective medium of reconciliation local churches and other religious institutions can use local symbols as a "common language" to build social trust. In the realm of education, case studies in Lombok and Bali show that collaboration between religious educators (pesantren, religious schools, and public schools) in a joint curriculum or activities reduces prejudice and increases the cultural adaptation of participants—a practice that is in line with the praxian theological model that prioritizes incarnation and dialogue (Agung et al., 2024).

Finally, field experience also shows a formal-informal (hybrid) combination as the most adaptive pattern of implementation: formal forums (FKUB, interfaith forums), civil society initiatives (NGOs, interfaith youth groups), and local wisdom networks working in parallel are often initiated by ecclesiastical actors who explicitly apply contextual theology. Recent studies highlight the importance of empowering local communities as subjects (rather than objects) of interventions, the use of social network analysis to map peace-driving actors, and program designs that combine policy advocacy with culture-based reconciliation practices all confirm that contextual theology in Indonesia is not just an academic discourse but a series of measurable and scalable praxis interventions. The practical implications: a successful theological program always involves multi-

directional dialogue, cultural recognition, and concrete steps to address the structural roots of tensions (economic, access, political) (Nsyar et al., 2025).

3.3.5 Critical Evaluation of Contextual Theological Approaches

The contextual theological approach is a significant advance in the effort to affirm faith in the midst of complex socio-cultural changes. However, it must be critically acknowledged that contextual theology is not free from the risk of reductionism, that is, when the social context dictates the content of theology so much that the normative dimension of revelation becomes blurred. (Bevans, 2002) and (Schreiter, 1985), emphasizing that contextual theology must maintain a balance between faithfulness to tradition and relevance to context if this balance is disturbed, then theology has the potential to become a mere sociological reflection without the power of spiritual transformation. In the Indonesian context, the tendency to syncretism and relativism often arises when contextual theology is adopted without a clear epistemological framework, especially when the concept of local culture is romanticized without theological testing of biblical principles (Hidayat, 2018). Therefore, contextual approaches need to always be guarded by critical hermeneutics that maintains a balance between orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

In addition, an evaluation of field practice shows that the implementation of contextual theology often faces methodological constraints. Some churches or theological educational institutions still tend to use a normative-dogmatic approach that lacks dialogue with social realities (Banawiratma, 2019). On the other hand, institutions that emphasize contextual approaches often get caught up in cultural relativism and lose theological normative power. Recent study by (Susanto & Wiyono, 2023), in the *Journal of Theology and Society*, found that only a small part of the theological community in Indonesia that integrates contextual reflection with systematic social analysis is still mostly spontaneous, reactive, and dependent on charismatic leader figures. This evaluation shows the need to strengthen an interdisciplinary methodological framework: combining practical theology, sociology of religion, and public ethics so that contextual theology does not stop at rhetoric, but rather produces a sustainable social praxis.

Furthermore, the criticism is also directed at the epistemological and political dimensions of contextual theology. Some theologians such as Stephen Bevans and Robert Schreiter have opened up space for a plurality of interpretations, but developments in the global context of the Global South (including Asia) point to the need for a paradigm repositioning so that contextual theology is not merely reactive to modernity, but proactive in shaping transformative consciousness. (Gutiérrez, 1988), in *A Theology of Liberation* affirms that true contextual theology must be emancipatory in nature: liberating man from the structure of social sin through the praxis of love. In the context of multicultural Indonesia, critical evaluation leads to the importance of integration between local spirituality, liberation hermeneutics, and the ethics of public dialogue (Suseno, 2019). Thus, the success of contextual theology is measured not only by its ability to adapt to the context, but also by its ability to transform social structures toward justice, peace, and interfaith solidarity (Adiprasetya, 2020)

3.4 THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

3.4.1 Theological Reflections on Inclusive and Transformative Social Relations

Inclusive and transformative social relationships are tangible manifestations of the Christian faith rooted in the universal love of God. In the light of the Gospel, such relationships require not only acceptance of differences, but also active involvement in renewing oppressive social structures. Paul, in his letters, affirms that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or freeman" (Galatians 3:28), which means that every social relationship must be directed to the restoration of human equality and dignity as the image of God (*imago Dei*). Contextual theology interprets this principle pragmatically by placing social relations as a sacramental arena, where God's love is manifested in social solidarity and public justice. This concept is affirmed by (Moltmann, 2012) in the *Ethics of Hope*, that true social transformation is born of a theological hope that rejects exclusion and affirms

the participation of every person in God's work of renewal in the world. Thus, theological reflection on social relations does not stop at the idea of tolerance, but is rooted in the call to create a community that liberates and heals social wounds.

In the context of a plural Indonesia that is prone to social fragmentation, this theological reflection demands the recognition of multicultural reality as a theophane space where the presence of God is expressed through interpersonal encounters. Indonesian theologians such as (Adiprasetya, 2020) affirming that the Church must be a "dialogical community," which opens itself to other narratives without losing the identity of the faith. In practice, transformative social relations are realized through interfaith joint action oriented to social justice, peace, and ecological concern (Suseno, 2019). Theological transformation occurs when the church interprets its mission mandate not only in terms of personal salvation, but also social responsibility that touches on economic, political, and environmental dimensions. Thus, inclusive and transformative relational theology becomes not only a paradigm of thinking, but also an ethical praxis that lives the message of the Gospel in concrete social reality.

3.4.2 Practical Implications for the Church and Multicultural Societies

The practical implications of contextual theology in building transformative social relations demand that the church play the role of an agent of reconciliation and public solidarity. The Church functions not only as a religious institution that serves the spiritual needs of the people, but also as a social space that fosters awareness of justice and common welfare. In the context of Indonesia's multicultural society, this is manifested through the establishment of interfaith forums, active involvement in social advocacy, and the empowerment of local communities vulnerable to marginalization (Banawiratma & Sunarko, 2021). (Moltmann, 2012) calling this a form of public discipleship that is oriented towards social transformation and participation in the suffering of others. Such a church is a symbol of God's love that transcends ethnic, religious, and cultural boundaries and bridges the social gap caused by inequality and prejudice.

In addition, the application of contextual theology requires intercultural and participatory theological education. The church and theological institutions need to establish an educational model that focuses not only on doctrine, but also on dialogue and social engagement. (Adiprasetya, 2020), emphasizing the importance of building a "spirituality of encounter" that teaches theology students and the congregation to understand faith in the midst of plurality, not outside or against that plurality. This education must foster a critical awareness of structural injustices and build a contextual ethics of love as affirmed by (Bevens, 2002), that true contextual theology is a praxis-reflection cycle, that is, the reflection of faith born of real involvement in the social context. With such an approach, the church will produce ministers and people who are sensitive to the context, think critically, and have a commitment to social transformation.

Furthermore, the practical implications of contextual theology also demand cross-sectoral collaboration in building peaceful and just societies. The Church can be a strategic partner of governments, educational institutions, and civil society organizations in fighting for human rights, overcoming poverty, and caring for the environment as a form of faith responsibility. (Gutiérrez, 1988) affirming that true faith always demands a concrete praxis of liberation faith without social action is an incomplete faith. In Indonesia's multicultural context, the church is called to build a network of solidarity with interfaith communities on common issues such as education, people's economy, and ecological crises. Thus, contextual theology not only forms a new consciousness in thought, but also brings about a real transformation in a more just, peaceful, and sustainable social structure.

3.4.3 Recommendations for the Development of Theology and Social Life of the Church

First, the development of theology in Indonesia needs to be directed towards a dialogical, contextual, and participatory model of theology. The Church must build a theological paradigm that departs from the concrete experience of the people in the midst of a pluralistic social reality. This

demands an interdisciplinary approach that combines biblical, social, and cultural studies, so that theology is not confined to a purely academic space, but is present as a transforming force in common life. (Bevans, 2002) emphasizing that authentic contextual theology always departs from praxis reflection, which is the encounter of faith with social reality that is critically processed through theological reflection. In the context of Indonesia's multicultural society, this kind of theology can be the foundation for building mutual solidarity and strengthening national consciousness based on the values of love and justice.

Second, the church is expected to develop a social life that is oriented towards the spirituality of service and social solidarity. The spirituality in question is not only a form of personal devotion, but an attitude of faith that leads the people to be present in the midst of the reality of suffering and injustice. (Gutiérrez, 1988) calling it a "liberating spirituality" of faith rooted in God's love for the weak. In the Indonesian context, the church needs to expand its role as an actor in the public sphere through interfaith social actions such as poverty alleviation, inclusive-based education, and environmental advocacy (Arifianto, 2022). Such the social life of the church is a tangible manifestation of contextual theology: a faith that does not stop at confession, but flows in a transformative praxis of love for the whole of creation.

Third, the development of theology in the future must integrate digital and ecological dimensions in contextual reflection. Today's church faces two new challenges: cultural digitalization and the environmental crisis. Therefore, theology needs to develop a new discourse on ecological theology and digital discipleship as a form of faith's response to the dynamics of the times (Conradie, 2020). The Church can use the digital space as a means of building a cross-border community of faith as well as as a medium of social education that promotes universal human values. Meanwhile, the ecological dimension reminds the church that contextual theology speaks not only of human relationships, but also of relationships with the created nature. Thus, a theology that is developed contextually, ecologically, and digitally will lead the church to become a creative, solidier, and relevant community for future generations.

3.4.4 The Relevance of Contextual Theology to the Formation of Christian Social Character

Contextual theology is very relevant to the formation of Christian social character because it places moral formation not only in the doctrinal realm, but in the practice of living together in a concrete cultural context. By emphasizing the praxis, the action-reflection-action cycle of contextual theology encourages the formation of ethical habits such as empathy, public responsibility, and partiality towards the marginalized that are at the core of Christian social character. Approaches to theological education that integrate experiential field learning, biblical narrative-based character building modules, and real-life ministry practices have shown significant results in forming spiritual leadership that is sensitive to social issues (empirical studies of character formation in theological education; (Magezi, 2023). Its contextual implementation of liturgy and discipleship has also been proven to strengthen the congregation's ethical commitment to social justice and cross-group solidarity. (Studies, 2011)

Practically, the relevance of contextual theology can be seen in three aspects of character formation: (1) social habitus, habituation of public service practices and inter-community dialogue that internalizes the values of love and justice; (2) critical competence, the ability to interpret social situations with theological glasses that are sensitive to the structure of injustice; and (3) collective capacity, building a network of solidarity that translates faith into collective action (advocacy, economic empowerment, multicultural education). Contemporary research on Christian religious education and character formation confirms that context-based learning modules (narrative, field experience, and shared service) are more effective in fostering stable social character than purely instructional approaches (case studies and literature reviews 2023–2025). Therefore, churches and theological institutions in Indonesia are advised to adopt a contextual curriculum that combines

liturgical practice, social ministry, and theological reflection as the main strategies for the formation of a transformative Christian social character (Scott, n.d.).

4. CONCLUSION

This research confirms that contextual theology is a transformative theological paradigm in building inclusive and just social relations in the midst of a multicultural society. This approach departs from the realization that the Christian faith does not live in a neutral space, but always exists in a specific social, cultural, and historical context that shapes the way of theology and relationships. Through theological reflection rooted in the real experiences and struggles of the people, contextual theology functions as a bridge between the truth of faith and social reality, so that it is able to change the structure of consciousness, relationship patterns, and social actions of the people towards a more humane order. Contextual theology not only interprets the world, but also seeks to change it through the praxis of love and justice.

In addition, contextual theology shows a high ethical and praxis relevance in the formation of Christian social character that is sensitive to plurality and social suffering. Through the integration of faith reflection and social action, the faithful are called to live in a spirit of solidarity, peace, and cross-cultural dialogue. In Indonesia's context fraught with ethnic, religious, and traditional differences, the contextual theological approach affirms that true faith must be realized in the form of active participation in nurturing diversity and fighting for social justice. This strengthens the church's position as an agent of social transformation rooted in the universal love of Christ. Thus, contextual theology becomes a paradigm that is not only theoretical, but also practical in building transformative social relations in the midst of a multicultural society.

Based on the results of this study, there are several suggestions and recommendations that can be given. First, for churches and theological institutions, it is important to integrate contextual theology in all aspects of faith ministry and education. The theological education curriculum needs to emphasize the contextual experience of the people and reflective teaching that combines biblical study, social ethics, and acts of community service. Participatory and dialogical-based learning models need to be developed so that theology students and congregations have social sensitivity and the ability to critically reflect on the surrounding reality.

Second, for interfaith societies and communities, it is important to build inter-group collaboration through interfaith dialogue, humanitarian projects, and multicultural education based on the universal values of love and justice. Contextual theology can serve as an ethical foundation that brings together the values of the Christian faith with universal social virtues such as solidarity, equality, and shared responsibility. Third, for future researchers, it is recommended to expand the study of contextual theology with an interdisciplinary approach combining sociological, anthropological, and social psychology perspectives in order to be able to capture the complexity of the dynamics of an ever-changing global society. Thus, contextual theology will continue to be relevant as a living, dynamic, and transformative paradigm for social and spiritual life in today's multicultural era.

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