



Reflective Spirituality and Character Formation among Theology Students in Indonesia's Multicultural Context

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aims to examine the process of internalizing reflective spirituality among theology students and to analyze its contribution to character formation in Indonesia's multicultural context, particularly in bridging personal faith growth with contextual ethical and social attitudes. **Methods:** This study employed a qualitative approach with an interpretive phenomenological design. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, written spiritual reflections, limited contextual observations, and institutional document analysis. The participants consisted of eight active theology students from diverse cultural backgrounds and two lecturers or spiritual coaches as triangulation informants. The data were analyzed manually and reflectively using phenomenological thematic analysis. **Findings:** The findings show that reflective spirituality is internalized through continuous self-reflection, cross-cultural critical dialogue, and experiential learning within academic communities and social service activities. This process contributes to the development of empathy, ethical awareness, openness to difference, and social responsibility among theology students. **Research Implications:** The study implies that theological education institutions need to integrate structured spiritual reflection, intercultural dialogue, community-based learning, and social service into student formation programs. Such integration can strengthen character development and prepare theology students to respond ethically and responsibly within multicultural society. **Originality:** The originality of this study lies in its conceptualization of reflective spirituality as a transformative mechanism for character formation among theology students in Indonesia's multicultural context. It contributes to theological education studies by offering a contextual framework that integrates spiritual reflection, cross-cultural experience, and character formation.



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INTRODUCTION

Theology education at the global level is facing serious challenges related to the formation of student character in the midst of the dynamics of pluralism, globalization, and an increasingly complex moral value crisis. Studies have confirmed that religious higher education can no longer focus solely on the transmission of doctrine and cognitive competence, but rather needs to integrate a reflective and transformative dimension of spirituality in the learning process (Megawati & Sulisworo, 2024). Reflective spirituality is seen as an important means of fostering students' self-awareness, moral integrity, and social responsibility in the face of multicultural realities (Nelson & Furr, 2025; Nasution & Fauzan, 2025; Mamirjonovna, 2023). Thus, theological education is challenged not only to produce graduates who are doctrinally competent, but also to form individuals who are ethically mature, socially responsive, and capable of living faithfully within plural and dynamic social contexts.

Globally, research on spirituality in higher education shows increased attention to the relationship between reflective practices, character building, and students' social readiness. Recent studies indicate that reflectively internalized spirituality contributes significantly to the development of empathy, relational ethics, and values-based leadership (Porter, 2023). Nevertheless, the dominant body of research still tends to examine spirituality within the broader context of general higher education or secular universities, rather than within theological education as a distinctive formational setting. In addition, many studies employ quantitative approaches that position spirituality

primarily as an individual or neurotheological variable (Pazer, 2024; Wang et al., 2023). Consequently, the subjective, relational, and culturally embedded dimensions of students' spiritual experiences remain insufficiently explored.

In the Indonesian context, the challenge of character formation of theology students has become increasingly complex due to the reality of a multicultural, multiethnic, and multireligious society (Pangalila & Rumbay, 2024; Suryani & Muslim, 2024). Theological education in Indonesia is not only dealing with academic and ecclesial problems, but also with social demands to form graduates who have cross-cultural sensitivity and national commitment. Several national studies show that the practice of spiritual formation in theological schools still tends to be normative and ritualistic, thus lacking in encouraging critical reflection and integration of faith with social reality (Al Mahdiyin et al., 2025). The central problem addressed in this study is that spiritual formation in theological education has not always been sufficiently connected to contextual character formation, particularly in preparing students to respond reflectively and ethically to Indonesia's multicultural realities.

From the perspective of scientific studies, there is a significant research gap in the study of theological education. Previous research has generally examined spirituality as a formal religious practice or as an individual attitude without deeply linking it to the process of internalization and character formation in multicultural contexts (Amelda et al., 2024). This gap is not merely empirical, but also conceptual, because existing studies have not adequately explained how reflective spirituality moves from personal spiritual practice into character transformation within students' lived experiences. Moreover, studies using a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of theology students remain very limited, especially in the Southeast Asian context. As a result, the ways in which theology students experience, interpret, negotiate, and internalize reflective spirituality in culturally diverse academic communities have not been sufficiently elaborated.

Recent studies emphasize the importance of contextual approaches in theological education that are responsive to local social and cultural realities (Odei et al., 2025). However, these studies have not specifically explained the mechanism through which reflective spirituality functions as a transformative process in student character formation. In particular, there is still a lack of a clear conceptual framework that integrates spiritual reflection, cross-cultural dialogue, community-based experience, and social responsibility as interconnected dimensions of character formation. This condition indicates the need for research that focuses on the subjective experiences of theology students within Indonesia's multicultural context.

The main problem addressed in this study is that reflective spirituality has not been sufficiently formulated as a clear transformative mechanism that connects personal spiritual reflection with ethical awareness, cross-cultural openness, community engagement, and social responsibility. As a result, the process through which theology students experience, interpret, and internalize reflective spirituality into character formation remains underexplored, particularly in the multicultural context of Indonesia. Therefore, this study is guided by the following research question: How is reflective spirituality experienced, interpreted, and internalized by theology students, and how does this process contribute to their character formation in Indonesia's multicultural context? Based on this question, this study aims to examine students' experiences and interpretations of reflective spirituality, analyze its internalization through spiritual reflection, cross-cultural dialogue, community-based experience, and social responsibility, and explain its contribution to the formation of empathy, ethical awareness, openness to difference, and social responsibility among theology students in Indonesia's multicultural context.

Based on the background and research gap described above, this study aims to examine in depth the process of internalizing reflective spirituality among theology students and to analyze its contribution to character formation in the context of multicultural Indonesian society. More specifically, this research seeks to understand how spiritual reflection, cross-cultural dialogue, community experience, and social engagement shape students' ethical and social attitudes. By employing an interpretive phenomenological approach, this study places students' lived experiences at the center of analysis in order to reveal the meaning-making process through which reflective spirituality becomes internalized as part of character formation.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of theological education studies by presenting a contextual and experience-based conceptual understanding of reflective spirituality. This study expands the discourse on spirituality in higher education by positioning it not merely as a personal religious practice, but as a dynamic, relational, and transformative process of internalization. Practically, the findings of this research are expected to provide a basis for the development of curricula, spiritual formation models, and theological education policies that are more responsive to Indonesia's multicultural reality. In this way, the study is expected to support the formation of theology students as future ministers, ethical leaders, and socially responsible agents within plural societies.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis design. This approach was chosen because the research aims to deeply understand the process of internalizing reflective spirituality experienced by theology students and its contribution to the formation of ethical and social character in the context of multicultural Indonesian society. The research focus is directed at how the experience of spiritual reflection bridges the growth of personal faith with contextual ethical attitudes and social responsibility. A relevant interpretive phenomenological approach is used in the study of theological education because it places students' subjective experiences as the primary source of meaning-formation (Murphy, 2021). In this context, spirituality is understood not simply as a ritual or doctrinal practice, but as a transformative process of reflective internalization, which is reflected in changes in ethical awareness, social relations, and openness to diversity.

This research was carried out at a Theological College (STT) in Indonesia which has students with diverse cultural, ethnic, and regional backgrounds. The institution was chosen because it actively organizes spiritual formation programs, structured spiritual reflection practices, and social service activities that involve cross-cultural interactions. The institutional context represents the reality of Indonesian theological education in a multicultural and plural society, so it is relevant to examine the role of reflective spirituality in the formation of students' character ethically and socially. Data collection was conducted over a four-month period, from September to December 2025, allowing sufficient time for repeated engagement with participants and iterative reflection during the research process. The population of this study is all active students of the theology study program at the institution where the research is located. The main subjects of the study are active theology students, with the following inclusion criteria:

- 1) active students at least semester III;
- 2) have participated in a spiritual formation program or campus spiritual formation;
- 3) have experience in spiritual reflection in academic and social service contexts;
- 4) come from a different cultural or regional background; and
- 5) willing to participate voluntarily.

In addition to the main participants, this study also involved two (2) lecturers or spiritual coaches as supporting informants for the purpose of triangulating data and strengthening institutional perspectives. The sampling technique used is non-probability sampling, especially purposive sampling, which is the deliberate selection of participants based on the suitability of their experiences with the focus of the research, especially spiritual reflection experiences and cross-cultural interactions (Murphy, 2021). The number of main participants in this study was eight (8) theology students, which was considered adequate to achieve data saturation and depth of meaning. This sample size is consistent with recommendations for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which prioritizes in-depth exploration of lived experiences over statistical representation and commonly employs small, information-rich samples. Data collection is carried out through several complementary techniques to capture the internalization process of reflective spirituality and its implications for character formation.

- 1) First, semi-structured in-depth interviews are conducted individually with a duration of 45–60 minutes. The interview guide was developed based on the study of reflective spirituality, character building, and multicultural education, including self-reflection experiences, cross-cultural dialogue, experiential learning, and changes in students' ethical and social attitudes.
- 2) Second, written spiritual reflection is used to explore the internal and personal dimensions of students in bridging personal faith with academic and social experiences.
- 3) Third, limited contextual observations were conducted in a non-participatory manner on campus worship activities, cross-cultural reflective discussions, and social services, to capture concrete manifestations of the internalization of reflective spirituality.
- 4) Fourth, documentation analysis is carried out on the spiritual development curriculum, spiritual formation modules, and guidelines for student activities in order to understand the institutional framework for student character formation.

To improve the transparency of the research instrument, the semi-structured interview guide was organized around several key aspects related to reflective spirituality, multicultural experience, and character formation, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Research Aspect	Focus of Question	Example of Interview Question
Experience of reflective spirituality	Students' understanding and personal experience of spiritual reflection	How do you understand reflective spirituality in your life as a theology student?
Internalization of spiritual reflection	The process through which reflection shapes personal faith and ethical awareness	How does spiritual reflection influence the way you evaluate your attitudes, decisions, and responsibilities?
Cross-cultural dialogue	Students' experiences in interacting with peers from different cultural or regional backgrounds	How have interactions with friends from different cultural backgrounds shaped your spiritual and ethical awareness?
Academic community experience	The role of campus life, group discussion, and community learning in character formation	How does your experience in the academic community contribute to the formation of your character?
Social service experience	The connection between spirituality, service, empathy, and social responsibility	How does your involvement in social service help you understand the relationship between faith and social responsibility?
Character formation	Changes in empathy, openness, ethical awareness, and responsibility	What changes have you experienced in your character through reflective spirituality and multicultural interaction?

The research was carried out systematically, starting from institutional licensing, participant selection according to criteria, data collection through interviews, written reflection, observation, and documentation, to data processing and analysis. The entire process is designed to allow for reflective deepening and meaningful participant engagement. The four sources of qualitative data were not analyzed separately but were integrated through a convergent interpretive process. Interview transcripts served as the primary source of meaning-making, while written reflections, contextual observations, and institutional documents were used to corroborate, refine, and enrich emerging interpretations. This integration enabled triangulation across data sources and strengthened the credibility and contextual depth of the identified themes.

Data analysis was carried out using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis procedures. First, all interview transcripts, written reflections, observation notes, and relevant documents were read repeatedly to obtain a holistic understanding of participants' lived experiences. Second, initial noting was conducted by identifying significant statements related to spiritual reflection, cross-cultural interaction, academic community experience, social service, and character formation. Third, emergent themes were developed from these significant statements by interpreting the meanings expressed by participants. Fourth, related themes were clustered into broader thematic categories that represented the internalization process of reflective spirituality. Fifth, a cross-case analysis was conducted to identify similarities and differences among participants' experiences. Finally, the themes were synthesized conceptually to explain how reflective spirituality functions as a transformative mechanism in the character formation of theology students. The analysis process is carried out manually and reflexively with the support of analytic memoing (Keane, 2022; Naeem et al., 2023)

Data analysis was carried out using phenomenological thematic analysis, with stages: verbatim transcription, repeated reading, initial coding, grouping of codes into essential themes, thematic interpretation that links reflective spirituality to the formation of ethical and social characters, and conceptual synthesis (Naeem et al., 2023). Open coding was initially conducted line by line to identify meaningful units, followed by axial grouping of related codes into broader conceptual categories and finally selective synthesis into overarching themes reflecting participants' lived experiences. The analysis process is carried out manually and reflexively with the support of analytic memoing

The validity of the data is maintained through triangulation of sources and techniques, member checking, and audit trail to ensure the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of research findings (Bang, 2024). Source triangulation was achieved by comparing information obtained from students, lecturers, written reflections, observations, and institutional documents. Member checking involved returning preliminary interpretations to selected participants for confirmation and clarification, while an audit trail documenting coding decisions, analytic memos, and theme development was maintained throughout the study to enhance methodological transparency. This research upholds the ethical principles of qualitative research, including participant consent, confidentiality of identity, participant's right to withdraw, and the use of data solely for academic purposes (Alhabsi, 2024). Participants' spiritual experiences were treated with respect and ethical sensitivity.

RESULTS

The analysis identified four major themes that explain how reflective spirituality is experienced and internalized by theology students in Indonesia's multicultural context. These themes are continuous self-reflection, cross-cultural critical dialogue, experiential learning in the academic community, and social service as a manifestation of social responsibility. The themes were developed through an interpretative reading of interview transcripts, written spiritual reflections, contextual observations, and institutional documents. In this study, M refers to student participants, while D refers to lecturers or spiritual coaches who provided supporting institutional perspectives.

The findings indicate that reflective spirituality was not experienced as a single event or isolated spiritual activity. Rather, it appeared as a gradual process in which students encountered academic, relational, cultural, and social experiences, reflected on these experiences, reinterpreted personal values, and reported changes in ethical awareness, openness to difference, empathy, and social responsibility. Therefore, the internalization of reflective spirituality is understood in this study as a process of meaning-making through which spiritual reflection becomes connected to students' character formation.

Table 2. Expanded Summary of Themes, Subthemes, Evidence, and Character Dimensions

Theme	Subthemes	Empirical Evidence	Supporting Data Sources	Character Dimensions Reported
Continuous Self-Reflection	Inner dialogue, self-evaluation, faith-based interpretation, moral awareness	Students reported that reflection helped them revisit attitudes, decisions, and responsibilities as prospective ministers.	Student interviews, written spiritual reflections, lecturer interviews	Moral awareness, humility, personal integrity
Cross-Cultural Critical Dialogue	Encounter with difference, discomfort, reinterpretation of prejudice, openness	Students described dialogue with peers from different cultural backgrounds as a process that challenged exclusive attitudes and encouraged respect.	Student interviews, contextual observations of reflective discussions, lecturer interviews	Ethical awareness, openness to diversity, relational sensitivity
Experiential Learning in the Academic Community	Communal life, cooperation, patience, negotiation of differences	Students reported that academic community life helped them practice empathy, patience, cooperation, and responsibility.	Student interviews, contextual observations, institutional documents	Empathy, cooperation, responsibility
Social Service as a Manifestation of Social Responsibility	Faith in action, encounter with social realities, empathy, service responsibility	Students interpreted social service as a concrete space for connecting faith with social responsibility.	Student interviews, written reflections, contextual observations, lecturer interviews	Social responsibility, empathy, ethical commitment

Table 3. Cross-Case Matrix of Themes Across Student Participants

Participant	Continuous Self-Reflection	Cross-Cultural Dialogue	Academic Community Experience	Social Service	Dominant Character Dimension Reported
M1	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moral awareness and personal integrity
M2	Moderate	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Openness to difference
M3	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Humility and self-evaluation
M4	Moderate	Moderate	Strong	Moderate	Responsibility and cooperation
M5	Moderate	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Ethical awareness and intercultural sensitivity
M6	Moderate	Moderate	Strong	Moderate	Empathy and communal responsibility
M7	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Strong	Social responsibility
M8	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Strong	Empathy and social sensitivity

Note: The terms strong and moderate indicate the relative emphasis of each theme in participants' narratives and do not represent statistical measurement. This matrix shows that the four themes appeared across participants with different levels of emphasis, rather than each theme being represented by only one or two students.

Continuous Self-Reflection as the Foundation for the Internalization of Reflective Spirituality

The first theme shows that the internalization of reflective spirituality begins with continuous self-reflection. Students did not understand self-reflection merely as an individual introspective activity, but as a spiritual process that allowed them to reinterpret academic, relational, and service experiences in the light of faith. Through this process, students reported becoming more aware of their attitudes, personal limitations, and ethical responsibilities as theology students and prospective ministers.

Students described self-reflection as a space of inner dialogue that connects faith with daily life. One participant stated, *"Through personal reflection, I learned to revisit my attitudes and decisions, not only from an academic perspective, but from the responsibility of my faith as a prospective minister"* (M1, interview, October 5, 2025). This statement shows that reflection helped the participant connect academic learning with personal and ministerial responsibility. Reflection was not only about thinking back on experiences, but also about evaluating whether attitudes and decisions were consistent with the values of faith.

A similar experience was expressed by another participant, who emphasized the repetitive and gradual nature of reflection: *"Reflection is not a one-off. Every experience, especially a difficult one, I always carry in prayer and contemplation, and from there my character is slowly formed"* (M3, interview, October 8, 2025). This quotation indicates that self-reflection was experienced as a continuous process rather than an immediate transformation. Difficult experiences became material for prayer, contemplation, and self-evaluation, through which students reported a gradual formation of character.

Evidence from written spiritual reflections supported this theme. Students' written reflections showed that self-reflection often involved recognizing impatience, pride, judgmental attitudes, or difficulty in accepting differences. These reflections expanded the interview findings by showing that reflective spirituality did not only produce positive feelings, but also involved moments of self-criticism, discomfort, and moral reconsideration. Thus, reflective spirituality was internalized through repeated efforts to evaluate personal attitudes in relation to faith and social responsibility.

From the perspective of lecturers, student self-reflection was observed as part of spiritual maturation. One lecturer stated, *"Students who are accustomed to reflection usually show a real change in attitude, are more humble and socially responsible"* (D1, interview, October 10, 2025). Another lecturer emphasized the integrative dimension of reflection: *"Spiritual reflection helps students integrate faith with action, not just theological knowledge"* (D2, interview, October 12, 2025). These lecturer statements were used as institutional perspectives to support students' accounts, but they are not treated as substitutes for students' direct experiences. D1 and D2 provided observations based on their involvement in spiritual coaching, academic mentoring, and student formation activities.

The internalization process in this theme can be understood as moving through several stages: students first encountered academic or relational experiences, then reflected on them through prayer and contemplation, evaluated their attitudes, reinterpreted their responsibilities in the light of faith, and reported changes in moral awareness and personal integrity. Therefore, continuous self-reflection functions as the initial mechanism through which reflective spirituality becomes connected to character formation.

Cross-Cultural Critical Dialogue in the Formation of Ethical Awareness

The second theme shows that cross-cultural critical dialogue was experienced as an important medium for deepening reflective spirituality. Theology students live and study in an academic environment marked by cultural, ethnic, regional, and social diversity. In this context, dialogue with peers from different backgrounds encouraged students to reconsider assumptions, prejudices, and exclusive attitudes that had previously been accepted without critical reflection.

One student expressed a change in perspective through cross-cultural dialogue: *"Discussions with friends from different cultures made me realize that my faith should be manifested in an attitude of mutual respect, not feeling the most right"* (M2, interview, October 6, 2025). This statement indicates that intercultural dialogue helped the participant reinterpret faith in relational and ethical terms. Faith was not understood only as personal conviction, but also as responsibility to respect others.

Another student emphasized the reflective dimension of dialogue: *"Cross-cultural dialogue forced me to rethink the way I perceive others, and it deeply shaped my character"* (M5, interview, October 9, 2025). The word "forced" is important because it shows that cross-cultural dialogue was not always easy or comfortable. Dialogue created tension, discomfort, and a need to reconsider how the participant viewed others. This finding suggests that reflective spirituality can develop through constructive tension and negotiation of differences, not only through harmonious interaction.

Contextual observations of cross-cultural reflective discussions supported this finding. During reflective discussions, students were observed listening to different cultural perspectives, negotiating meanings, and sometimes hesitating before responding to views that differed from their own assumptions. These observations show that ethical awareness emerged through interaction and reflection. Students learned not only to accept diversity at a normative level, but also to interpret differences as part of their spiritual and ethical responsibility.

From the lecturers' perspective, cross-cultural dialogue was seen as a concrete space for ethical and spiritual learning. D1 stated, "*Critical dialogue between students from different backgrounds becomes a space for real and contextual spiritual reflection*" (D1, interview, October 10, 2025). D2 added, "*Through cross-cultural dialogue, students learn that true spirituality always has an impact on social attitudes and relational ethics*" (D2, interview, October 12, 2025). These statements confirm that cross-cultural dialogue was institutionally viewed as part of spiritual formation. However, the main empirical basis of this theme remains students' direct experiences of discomfort, reinterpretation, and ethical learning.

The internalization process in this theme began with encounters with difference. These encounters encouraged students to recognize assumptions and prejudices, reflect on them in relation to faith, reinterpret the meaning of respect and humility, and report greater openness to others. Thus, cross-cultural critical dialogue functioned as a relational mechanism of reflective spirituality. It helped students move from merely knowing about diversity to interpreting diversity as part of ethical and spiritual responsibility.

Experiential Learning in the Academic Community

The third theme shows that experiential learning in the academic community contributed to the internalization of reflective spirituality. Students described the theological campus not only as a place for formal learning, but also as a community where they practiced patience, empathy, responsibility, cooperation, and openness in daily interaction. Through reflective discussions, group work, worship activities, and communal life, students experienced spiritual values in concrete and relational ways.

One student stated, "*Studying in a community made me not only understand theory, but also learn to be patient and responsible towards others*" (M4, interview, October 7, 2025). This quotation shows that the participant experienced community life as a space that connected theological learning with ethical practice. Learning was not limited to cognitive understanding, but involved the practice of patience and responsibility in relation to others.

Another student added, "*The experience of living together on a theological campus greatly shaped my character, especially in terms of empathy and cooperation*" (M6, interview, October 11, 2025). This statement indicates that empathy and cooperation were experienced through concrete communal life rather than through classroom instruction alone. The academic community became a setting where values discussed in theological learning were tested and practiced in everyday relationships.

Contextual observations of campus worship activities, reflective discussions, and group activities supported this theme. Students were observed negotiating responsibilities, listening to different opinions, and adjusting personal habits to communal expectations. Institutional documents, including spiritual formation modules and student activity guidelines, also emphasized reflective discipline, communal life, and service as part of student formation. These documents helped explain why the academic community became an important context for the formation of student character.

Lecturers also confirmed the role of the academic community in student formation. D1 stated, "*Students who are active in the academic community show more mature character development*" (D1, interview, October 10, 2025). D2 added, "*The community becomes a space for the praxis of reflective spirituality that is irreplaceable*" (D2, interview, October 12, 2025). In this study, these lecturer statements are treated as supporting institutional observations. They help contextualize students' experiences but do not replace the participants' own meaning-making.

The internalization process in this theme occurred through repeated participation in community life. Students encountered differences, responsibilities, and interpersonal tensions. These experiences encouraged reflection on patience, empathy, and cooperation. Through repeated practice, students reported that these values became increasingly connected to their understanding of spiritual responsibility. Therefore, experiential learning in the academic community can be interpreted as a social context in which reflective spirituality is practiced and gradually embodied.

Social Service as a Manifestation of Social Responsibility

The fourth theme shows that social service was experienced as a concrete space for connecting reflective spirituality with social responsibility. Students did not describe social service only as an institutional requirement, but as an encounter with social realities that encouraged reflection on faith, empathy, vulnerability, and ethical

commitment. Through service activities, students reported that they became more aware of the relationship between spirituality and responsibility toward others.

One student affirmed the transformation of his understanding of faith through service: *“Social service opened my eyes that faith must be manifested in concrete actions to society”* (M7, interview, October 13, 2025). This statement shows that social service helped the participant reinterpret faith as action-oriented responsibility. Faith was not understood only as belief, worship, or theological knowledge, but as concrete involvement in the needs of society.

Another student highlighted the reflective dimension of service: *“Through service, I learned empathy and social sensitivity that I didn’t get from class alone”* (M8, interview, October 14, 2025). This statement indicates that social service offered experiential learning that differed from formal classroom learning. Empathy was formed through direct encounter with people and social situations beyond the campus environment.

Written spiritual reflections after service activities also supported this theme. Students reflected on humility, responsibility, and sensitivity toward people from different social backgrounds. Some reflections showed that service activities challenged students’ assumptions about ministry and encouraged them to connect theological knowledge with concrete social needs. Contextual observations further showed that social service was often followed by reflective conversations in which students discussed the meaning of service in relation to faith and character.

Lecturers viewed social service as an indicator of reflective spirituality in practice. D1 stated, *“Social services are an indicator that student spirituality has been internalized reflectively”* (D1, interview, October 10, 2025). D2 added, *“Students who actively serve show strong and consistent social responsibility”* (D2, interview, October 12, 2025). In this revised interpretation, these claims are presented carefully. Rather than proving long-term or causal character change, the lecturer statements indicate that students were perceived by institutional actors as demonstrating greater social responsibility during the observed period.

The internalization process in this theme moved from social encounter to reflective interpretation and reported ethical commitment. Students first encountered social realities through service. These encounters encouraged them to reflect on faith, responsibility, empathy, and social concern. Students then reported a stronger awareness that spirituality should be expressed through care for others. Therefore, social service can be understood as a context in which reflective spirituality becomes visible in reported attitudes and actions. However, because the study was not longitudinal, the findings are limited to participants’ reported and observed experiences rather than claims of permanent character transformation.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that reflective spirituality contributes to character formation through a gradual interpretative process rather than through a direct causal mechanism. Across the four themes, students experienced reflective spirituality through academic, relational, intercultural, communal, and service contexts. These experiences were then interpreted through reflection, prayer, dialogue, and participation in community life. Through this process, students reported changes in moral awareness, empathy, openness to difference, ethical sensitivity, and social responsibility.

The process of internalization identified in this study can be understood as a cyclical and relational process. Reflective spirituality begins with concrete experiences encountered by students in academic community life, cross-cultural interaction, and social service activities. These experiences are then processed through personal reflection, prayer, contemplation, and critical dialogue with others. Through this reflective process, students reinterpret their values, evaluate their attitudes, and connect personal faith with ethical responsibility. This process leads students to report the development of empathy, ethical awareness, openness to difference, and social responsibility. These reported changes do not represent a final stage, but become new material for further reflection, creating an ongoing cycle of spiritual and character formation.

In this process, academic community experience and social service function as spaces where students encounter concrete realities, while personal reflection and cross-cultural dialogue function as interpretative mechanisms. Through these mechanisms, students evaluate their attitudes, reinterpret the meaning of faith, and relate spirituality to ethical and social responsibility. Therefore, reflective spirituality in this study is not understood as a linear or one-time process, but as an ongoing process of experience, reflection, value reinterpretation, ethical awareness, and reported attitude or behavioral change.

The finding on continuous self-reflection is in line with the theory of spiritual formation, which views reflection as an internal process that allows the integration of life experience and faith consciousness (Lu, 2021; Kieliszek, 2025). Continuous self-reflection places students as active subjects in the process of spiritual formation, not merely as recipients of doctrine. In this study, self-reflection helped students evaluate their attitudes and decisions in relation to their responsibilities as theology students and prospective ministers. This finding is also consistent with the concept of

the reflective practitioner, in which reflection becomes a means of transformative learning in professional and ethical contexts (Johns, 2025; Kreber, 2022).

From the perspective of deep learning theory, self-reflection enables students to move beyond memorizing concepts toward internalizing values (Siregar et al., 2025; Kreber, 2022). Students did not only understand faith cognitively, but also reported efforts to live it through attitudes and decisions. Within the framework of moral development, self-reflection allows students to move toward more autonomous moral consideration, in which actions are based on internalized values rather than mere obedience to external rules (Song, 2021). However, the findings of this study should be understood as participants' reported and interpreted experiences, not as evidence of permanent moral transformation.

The finding on cross-cultural critical dialogue supports the theory of social constructivism, which emphasizes that learning and meaning formation occur through social interaction (Mishra, 2023). Cross-cultural dialogue provided a space for students to build new understanding through encounters with different perspectives. Previous research in multicultural education emphasizes dialogue as a means of building tolerance and social cohesion (Arfaton et al., 2025). The present study extends this perspective by showing that cross-cultural dialogue can also have a spiritual dimension when students interpret respect for difference as part of faith responsibility.

The ethical awareness that developed through cross-cultural dialogue is also related to intercultural competence, which emphasizes empathy, critical reflection, and cultural sensitivity as important competencies in plural societies (Enamhe et al., 2025). From a contextual theological perspective, cross-cultural dialogue reflects a practice of faith that is responsive to plural and multicultural social realities (Reaves, 2024). In this study, students reported that dialogue helped them reinterpret faith without losing spiritual identity, while also becoming more open to others. Therefore, cross-cultural dialogue needs to be consciously integrated into theological learning as a structured and reflective practice (Fader, 2023; Hamsah & Soehadha, 2024).

The finding on experiential learning in the academic community is consistent with experiential learning theory, which emphasizes that learning occurs through cycles of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation (Bayram, 2024). In the context of theological education, the experience of living and learning in a community became an important source of value internalization. Students did not only learn about spirituality, but also practiced patience, cooperation, empathy, and responsibility in daily relationships.

The academic community can also be understood as a form of hidden curriculum that implicitly shapes students' values and attitudes (Koutsouris et al., 2021). Daily interactions, group work, shared responsibilities, and conflict negotiation became informal spaces for ethical and spiritual learning. Previous studies also show that learning communities contribute to empathy, responsibility, and social awareness (Sorenson, 2022; Schlosser, 2025). The present study adds that community experience becomes spiritually formative when it is interpreted reflectively by students. Transformative learning may begin when students encounter tensions between theological ideals and practical realities, which then encourage reflection and value reinterpretation (Hunter, 2023; Chasokela, 2025). Therefore, theological education should recognize the academic community as a major context for character formation, not merely as a supporting environment. Community-based learning can strengthen student engagement and the internalization of values when it is deliberately integrated into the curriculum (Quibrantar & Ezezika, 2023).

The finding on social service supports the framework of practical theology, which views faith as something that must be embodied in social action (Skubikowski et al., 2023). Social service became a context where students connected personal faith with social responsibility. In the perspective of character education, service learning can encourage empathy, social awareness, and civic responsibility (Thelma, 2024; Pong & Leung, 2023). However, this study shows that service becomes more meaningful when it is accompanied by reflection. Without reflection, service may remain an institutional activity; with reflection, it becomes a space for interpreting faith in relation to social responsibility.

Social service in a multicultural context also exposed students to diversity, social vulnerability, and concrete community needs. Previous research emphasizes that contextual theological education must be rooted in real social engagement (Bergmann & Vähäkangas, 2021). From the perspective of transformative learning, social service can function as a disorienting experience that challenges students' prior assumptions and encourages deeper reflection (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2021). This supports the idea that reflective spirituality is a cycle between experience, reflection, and action. Reflective service learning is therefore more effective in shaping students' values than service activities that are conducted without guided reflection (Whitney & Clayton, 2023).

The conceptual contribution of this study lies in presenting reflective spirituality as a cyclical and relational process. Reflective spirituality is not only personal contemplation and not merely participation in religious activities. It is a process in which students encounter lived experiences, reflect on them, reinterpret values, and report changes in ethical and social attitudes. This framework connects spiritual reflection, cross-cultural dialogue, community

experience, social service, and character formation in a more systematic relationship. Thus, the four themes should not be understood as separate activities, but as interconnected dimensions of reflective spirituality internalization.

Practically, the findings suggest that theological education institutions need to design student formation programs that integrate structured self-reflection, facilitated cross-cultural dialogue, community-based learning, and reflective social service. Reflection should not be treated as an additional activity, but as an intentional pedagogical process that helps students interpret academic, cultural, communal, and social experiences in relation to faith and character formation. Previous research also emphasizes that undirected reflection tends to be superficial and less transformative (Austin, 2024). Therefore, reflective journals, spiritual guidance, intercultural discussions, and service-based reflection should be systematically embedded in theological education.

The study also clarifies the scope of its claims. Because this research did not use before-and-after measurement, longitudinal observation, or long-term behavioral records, the findings do not claim to prove permanent or causal character change. Instead, the study shows that participants perceived, interpreted, and reported reflective spirituality as contributing to their character development. The lecturer perspectives and institutional documents support these interpretations, while observations provide contextual evidence of how reflection, dialogue, community life, and service were practiced in the institution.

Overall, the findings should be interpreted within the specific institutional and cultural context of this study. Participants' narratives may reflect personal motivations and socially desirable expressions of spirituality. Therefore, the themes identified in this study are not intended for broad statistical generalization, but for a deep contextual understanding of how theology students experience, interpret, and internalize reflective spirituality in Indonesia's multicultural context.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that reflective spirituality among theology students is internalized through a continuous and interrelated process involving personal self-reflection, cross-cultural critical dialogue, experiential learning in the academic community, and active involvement in social service. These processes were perceived by participants as contributing to the development of empathy, ethical awareness, openness to diversity, and social responsibility within Indonesia's multicultural context. Reflective spirituality, therefore, is not merely a personal or ritual practice, but a relational and contextual process through which students interpret faith in connection with ethical and social responsibility. The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its formulation of reflective spirituality as a cyclical mechanism of character formation. This mechanism involves concrete experience, reflective processing, value reinterpretation, ethical awareness, reported attitude change, and renewed reflection. In this way, the study offers a contextual understanding of character formation in theological education by linking spiritual reflection, intercultural encounter, community experience, and social service as interconnected dimensions. Practically, the findings suggest that theological education institutions should integrate structured reflection, facilitated intercultural dialogue, community-based learning, and reflective service activities into student formation programs to strengthen character development in multicultural settings.

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