Revitalizing Gen-Z Christians in Indonesia towards a realistic, pluralistic, and activist spirituality based on the theory of Thomas à Kempis

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Abstract: Generation Z of Indonesian Christians, who are full of knowledge and technology, tend to ignore their identity as followers of Jesus. Anarchic, destructive, and immoral behavior has become a regular trend among Generation Z Christians. In order to address this problem, relevant teaching approaches and sources are needed. The approach offered is teaching-encountering-based discipleship and teaching sources through reincarnating the thoughts and spirituality of Thomas à Kempis as Devotio Moderna. The Kempis trilogy's offering, namely the opposition pairs in the fabric of today's reality, God's sovereignty, and the obedience of God's people, need to be echoed for Generation Z. This research aims to extract the spirit of Thomas à Kempis for the life of Generation Z of Indonesian Christians. The method used is historical research, the primary source of which is the book *De Imitatione Christi* by Thomas à Kempis. The results of the study show that Generation Z of Indonesian Christians can vitalize a realistic, pluralistic, and Activist spirituality if (i) they understand the essence and purpose of life, (ii) realizing that there is a confusion of values and culture; (iii) wise and critical in accepting new information and lifestyles; (iv) dare to speak out on sensitive issues that occur in the general public and the Church.

Keywords: activist, Gen-Z Christians, pluralist, realistic, Thomas à Kempis

1. Introduction

Christianity gives the ultimate goal of living in a world similar to Jesus. This goal must be pursued because it is a commandment (Matt 5:48). Jesus is the Imago Dei that humans must emulate. The main reason is that Jesus is perfect and flawless from any side.[1] Regarding spirituality, Jesus is the person of God. Man never sinned during His life on earth.[2] The sinlessness of Jesus was not because He was never tempted like humans in general, but because He was able to win the game of faith

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[1] Victoria L. Campbell, 'Understanding Christian Perfection and Its Struggle with Antinomianism', *The Asbury Journal* 68, no. 2 (2013): 58–77, https://doi.org/10.7252/Journal.01.2013F.04.

[2] Anne Sophie Vivier-Mureşan, 'The Eternal Manifestation of the Spirit through the Son: A Hypostatic or Energetic Reality? Inquiry in the Works of Gregory of Cyprus and Gregory Palamas', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 113, no. 3 (2020): 1041–68, https://doi.org/10.1515/bz-2020-0044.

when tempted by the Devil. It is explicitly explained in the Gospel of Matthew 4:1-11. Jesus had the potential to sin, but the fact that He did not sin is a great provocation to life. When he was reviled, he was rewarded with blessings, and when he suffered, Jesus was silent like a sheep going to the slaughter.

Intellectually, Jesus was an intelligent and capable person who explained religious and general knowledge at that time. Luke 2:52 writes that Jesus grew in wisdom and knowledge so that others liked him even though he was only twelve. On the leadership side, Jesus is the most successful leader in the New Testament because of his enormous influence on the social life of first-century Israel. Servant leadership model highlighted. The person of Jesus inspires and imparts the spirit of ministry to anyone, regardless of social status, education, and other differences.[3] When examined from another side, the Christian faith will direct the person of Jesus as an example during the process in the world.

The highest concept is the lofty aspiration of the Christian faith, which is very far from approaching today. Especially among the Z generation (from now on abbreviated as Gen-Z) who wallow in knowledge and technology. The generation was born between 1995 and 2010, or according to the Statistics Indonesia, between 1997 and 2012. They can use technology well. That is why Harris Poll calls them the creative and digital native generation. However, the progress of the times is different from the spirituality of Gen-Z Christians in social life. Research conducted by Morrow photographed Gen-Z Christians spirituality in everyday social life. Morrow says that only 34% of Gen-Z Christians agree that lying is morally wrong. The rest stated that lying could be justified morally, mainly if lying was associated with doing good (often called "lying for the sake of goodness"). 24% said what is morally right and wrong changes over time based on the social dynamics of society. Christian Gen-Z believes there is no absolute truth but that everything is relative according to a specific locus and time. Fifty-eight percent of Gen-Z Christians agree that multiple religions can lead to eternal life; there is no one true religion.[4] Gen-Z Christians understanding is influenced by a postmodern style of thinking that is closely related to relativism in judging anything.

Bilangan Research Center (BRC) released data for 2019 regarding the dynamics of the spirituality in Indonesia's young Christian generation. The section on spirituality and personality of the younger generation that Paw Liang researched shows that popular culture is the prima donna of the younger generation. The survey results show that over 90.8% like "new experiences" through social media. The era of

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[3] Hannas Hannas and Rinawaty Rinawaty, 'Kepemimpinan Hamba Tuhan Menurut Matius 20:25-28', *Evangelikal: Jurnal Teologi Injili Dan Pembinaan Warga Jemaat* 3, no. 2 (2019): 207–23, https://doi.org/10.46445/ejti.v3i2.156.

[4] Jonathan Morrow, "Why Generation Z Is Less Christian than Ever -- and Why That is Good News," Fox News, 2018.

popular culture influences Gen-Z Christians in Indonesia in three dimensions: spiritual experience with Jesus, spiritual friendship in the Christian community, and wisdom in sorting and choosing.[5] These three dimensions are interconnected in the formation of Gen-Z spirituality, which is reflected in the social community.

Spiritual experience with Jesus is assessed by the intensity of prayer, reading the Bible, and worshipping.[6] 53.5% of respondents are warm in association and easily carried away by emotions. More than 50% admit they are open, and only 44.5% consider themselves quiet and closed. Regarding religiosity, those with a high-intensity relationship with God have high critical power (60%) and a higher level of creativity (47%). Compared to their low level of religiosity, their critical and creative power is lower, and they only carry out programs according to everyday habits. Liang examines the differences between those who worship and find a purpose in life and those who only worship in the Church. The survey results state that respondents with a purpose in life in Jesus are more motivated. Only 12% who have a high purpose in life in Jesus have ever contemplated suicide, while those who do not have a higher purpose in life, namely 27.3%.[7] The data above shows that Gen-Z has a more positive attitude towards God than the Church. The Church is not a desirable community but avoided. BRC states that only 35.7% of Gen-Z look forward to the Sunday or youth service. Meanwhile, those who attend regularly and need spiritual food are only 19.4%.[8]

Another aspect presented by the BRC also shows the low spirituality of Gen-Z Christians in Indonesia. 43.5% like watching pornographic videos, 14.6% are used to consuming alcoholic beverages, and 2.3% have had sex outside of marriage. Regarding spiritual life, two out of five Gen-Z do not necessarily take time to read the Bible once a week. The same data is also parallel in terms of prayer.[9] The narrative "We cannot stand it anymore" is the framing that BRC provides for the spirituality that occurs among Gen-Z Christians in Indonesia.

Like an iceberg, so are the problems of Gen-Z Christians in Indonesia. It is a question as well as the responsibility of the Church today: why is Gen-Z Christian like this? Is the idea of attending Church in worship and programs enough? Then what concrete actions should be taken to improve the spirituality of Gen-Z? What kind of Gen-Z spirituality revitalization is needed in response to this question? Is Gen-Z just a generation with various problems and shortcomings? Is there a positive spirituality

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[5] The Paw Liang, 'Spiritualitas Dan Kepribadian Generasi Muda', in *Dinamika Spiritualitas Generasi Muda Kristen Indonesia*, ed. Bambang Budijanto (Jakarta: Gramedia, 2018), 151–70.

[6] Leonard Epafras et al., 'Transitional Religiosity: The Religion of Generation Z', in *Proceedings of the 3rd International Symposium on Religious Life*, 2021, https://doi.org/10.4108/eai.2-11-2020.2305063.

[7] The Paw Liang, "Spiritualitas Dan Kepribadian Generasi Muda.

[8] Bambang Budijanto, *Buku Dinamika Spiritualitas Generasi Muda Kristen Indonesia* (Jakarta: Bilangan Research Center, 2018).

[9] Budijanto.

that belongs to Gen-Z?

Realistic spirituality emphasizes the importance of integrating faith with everyday reality, thus helping individuals acknowledge the challenges and complexities of life without losing the foundation of faith. On the other hand, pluralist spirituality highlights the acceptance and respect for religious and cultural diversity, which is an essential foundation in a multicultural society like Indonesia. Meanwhile, activist spirituality emphasizes the importance of active involvement in social issues, such as justice, the environment, and human rights, as a concrete manifestation of faith that impacts social change. These three approaches provide a comprehensive spiritual framework for Gen-Z, combining personal, communal, and social aspects of a life of faith. Revitalizing the spirituality of Gen-Z can be done with thoughts from Thomas à Kempis about the imitation of Christy.

Living in the Middle Ages was closely related to the dark ages of the Church and the hardships of life. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were times of stark contrast. Plagues, crop failures, and floods hit poor countries. The hundred years of Crusades, the rivalries and tensions between the nobility and the bourgeoisie, and the rise of nationalism marked the complexity of human relations. Church life and religiosity suffered under pressure from ecclesiastical taxes, simony, the secularization of church leaders, the decline of religious life, hierarchical dislocation, conciliarism, and schisms.[10] This can be responded to with a loss of hope.

However, there are also signs of hope. From the early Middle Ages, the poor of Christ (they called it pauperes Christi) worshiped Christ through personal poverty. They are poor with poor Christ.[11] Likewise, the women's movement (*mulieres religiosae* or *Beguines*) came with the monastic reforms of the *Premonstratensians* and *Cistercians*. Carthusians disseminated spiritual and mystical texts with ascetics living in society. In developing urban centers, the monks present a life of solidarity with the poor and marginalized.[12] Beguines and other mystics became heralds of Divine Love, including Thomas à Kempis. Kempis wrote a book entitled The Imitation of Christ with oppositional content in the weaving of reality, God's sovereignty, and the obedience of God's people, which changed the congregation's spirituality at that time.[13]

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[10] Anggi Maringan Hasiholan, Asigor P Sitanggang, and Petrus A. Usmanij, 'The Theology of Community Survival: A Study of Migration Theology, Pentecostalism, and West Kalimantan Gawai Culture', *Jurnal Lektur Keagamaan* 21, no. 2 (2023): 383–410, https://doi.org/10.31291/jlka.v21i2.1126.

[11] Conor Kostick, 'God's Bounty, Pauperes, and the Crusades of 1096 and 1147', *Studies in Church History* 46, no. 2 (2010): 66–77, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0424208400000504.

[12] Magda Hayton, 'Mulieres Religiosae. Shaping Female Spiritual Authority in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods', *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 67, no. 2 (2016): 414–16, https://doi.org/10.1017/s002204691500281x.

[13] Thomas À Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (USA: The Catholic Primer's, 2004).

Because today's post-Christian culture increasingly marginalizes Christianity, it is essential for churches concerned with Gen-Z not to take a "business as usual" approach in the formation of Gen-Z faith. Gen-Z will be separated from life with God if it is not responded to quickly. Therefore, Thomas à Kempis can provide a foundation for Gen-Z through historical reconstruction. Research related to the life of Thomas à Kempis has been carried out by J. Huls, which emphasizes the use of the Bible as the foundation of Christian life to be similar to that of the Lord Jesus.[14] Likewise, Tirza Rachmadi explored the content of doctrine in the life of Thomas à Kempis, especially in his book on Catholic and Protestant orthodoxy.[15] Meanwhile, this study aims to revitalize a realistic, pluralistic, and activist spirituality using Thomas à Kempis' spirit to mature Gen-Z Christian spirituality in Indonesia.

2. Research Methods

The research method used is qualitative with a historical approach.[16] This method is chosen because the researcher wants to reveal historical events and figures in a particular locus and period. The main thing to consider is whether the topics discussed have historical value and significant influence. Historical research does not only systematically reveal the history of a theology or church school but must have implications for contemporary and future life.[17]

In the discussion, Thomas à Kempis' teachings are positioned as a bridge between medieval spiritual practices and the contemporary faith journey of Gen-Z Christians in Indonesia. His emphasis on humility, self-reflection, and inner transformation is analyzed to demonstrate its relevance in addressing modern existential and spiritual challenges faced by the younger generation. Historical research, therefore, does not merely present the systematic history of theology or a theological school but must also provide implications for contemporary and future contexts. The essence of Thomas à Kempis can be internalized by Gen-Z Christians today, fostering a transformative impact on their spiritual growth and shaping the future landscape of faith practice.

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[14] J. Huls, 'The Use of Scripture in The Imitation of Christ by Thomas a Kempis', *Acta Theologica* 8 (2006): 63–83, https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v27i2.52315.

[15] Tirza Rachmadi, 'What Can We Learn From the Imitation of Christ of Thomas a Kempis?', *Verbum Christi: Jurnal Teologi Reformed Injili* 6, no. 1 (2019): 61–71, https://doi.org/10.51688/vc6.1.2019.art4.

[16] Eva Syarifah Wardah, 'Metode Penelitian Sejarah', *Jurnal Agama Dan Budaya Tsaqofah* 12, no. 2 (2018): 165–75.

[17] Anggi Maringan Hasiholan and Andreas Budi Setyobekti, 'Implikasi Hikmat Menurut Paulus Dalam Menentang Pengaruh Ajaran Kaum Sofis Di Korintus', *Manna Rafflesia* 8, no. 1 (2021): 27–52, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.38091/man_raf.v8i1.194.

3. Results and Discussion

Characteristics of Generation Z

Various studies across continents highlight Generation Z's diverse yet cohesive characteristics, leading researchers to label them "global Gen-Z traits." These characteristics, shaped by complex regional and global dynamics, span the Americas, Europe, Africa, and Southeast Asia. The insights come from independent research and theoretical literature, painting a multifaceted picture of this generation. In examining Gen-Z's distinctive traits, we draw on overlapping categories to illuminate the consensus among various sources.[18]

One core characteristic is Gen-Z's realism and pragmatic outlook. Born between 1995 and 2010, this generation has been shaped by global crises and economic instability. For example, a McKinsey study in Brazil highlights that Gen-Z tends to approach decisions analytically and with an intense curiosity for their surroundings, partly due to Brazil's economic challenges.[19] This aligns with James Emery White's observation that Gen-Z desires to make a tangible impact, navigating a world of instability.[20] Other studies suggest that this pragmatic disposition is influenced not only by economic crises but by technological advances that provide Gen-Z with immediate access to information, fostering an analytic mindset from a young age.

The second key trait is Gen-Z's immersion in global diversity, manifesting in an inclusive and adaptable identity. In the United States, nearly half of Gen-Z identifies as non-white, embracing a wide array of ethnic backgrounds. David and Jonah Stillman describe this as "Hyper-Customization," where Gen-Z goes beyond race, gender, and religion to define themselves, integrating hobbies, passions, and perspectives. Studies in Brazil further reflect Gen-Z's dialogic approach, favoring open communication over confrontation within families and institutions. In South Africa, Liquid Telecom labels them the "born-free generation," as they were raised in a post-apartheid era. This generation rejects stereotypes, crafting personal identities that honor differences across gender, beauty standards, and family backgrounds, celebrating freedom as foundational.

Finally, Gen-Z is marked by an active commitment to social change and advocacy, with social media as a powerful mobilization tool. Deloitte's global youth

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[18] In my previous writing, I explored it comprehensively; this section is to sharpen what I have outlined in the following text. See Aldi Abdillah and Anggi Maringan Hasiholan, '"Beri Aku Air Hidup, Tuhan!": Seru Perempuan Samaria Dan Gen-Z (Suatu Tafsir Kontrapuntal Yohanes 4:14 Sebagai Laku Spiritualitas Generasi Z Indonesia Era Postmodern)', *Jurnal Abdiel: Khazanah Pemikiran Teologi, Pendidikan Agama Kristen Dan Musik Gereja* 5, no. 2 (2021): 176–91, https://doi.org/10.37368/ja.v5i2.291.

[19] Tracy Francis and Fernanda Hoefel, '"True Gen": Generation Z and Its Implications for Companies', *McKinsey & Company*, 2018.

[20] James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z: Understand and Reaching the New Post-Christian World* (Michigan: Baker Books, 2017).

survey reveals that Gen-Z deeply engages with environmental sustainability, economic inequality, and racial justice issues. In Southeast Asia, specifically Myanmar, Gen-Z has used social media to organize and rally support against political oppression, forming the Milk Tea Alliance—a coalition with Gen-Z from Hong Kong, Thailand, and Taiwan advocating for democracy and freedom. The term "Milk Tea Alliance" symbolizes their shared ideals despite cultural differences. This digital activism connects Gen-Z across borders, driven by a shared desire for justice and a rejection of discrimination. Studies by the Pew Research Center and other independent institutions show that Gen-Z is not only tech-savvy but also purposeful in their use of technology, using platforms like Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram to raise awareness about global and local issues.

These characteristics—realism, inclusivity, and a commitment to advocacy—define Generation Z as a distinct generation with a global consciousness and a desire for authentic impact. Emerging research also suggests that as Gen-Z enters the workforce, their values and tech fluency may continue to reshape societal norms, making their role in future leadership and civic life increasingly influential.

Despite various spiritual challenges, Gen-Z has a unique advantage that can be an essential foundation in revitalizing their spirituality. As a digital native generation, Gen-Z demonstrates extraordinary aptitude in technology. They grew up with rapid technological advancements, making them adept at using various digital platforms to share information, build communities, and support social causes. This ability gives them a strategic advantage in navigating the modern, digitally connected world. In the context of spirituality, this ability opens up opportunities to create relevant spiritual content, expand online services, and build inclusive discussion spaces so that they can live their faith amidst the dynamics of global technology.

In addition, Gen-Z is known for its strong spirit of inclusivity, which is reflected in the way it builds cross-cultural and interfaith dialogues. An open attitude towards differences is essential for them, especially in a multicultural society like Indonesia. This generation respects diversity and actively strives to promote equality in their communities. In the context of Christianity, this spirit of inclusivity offers them the opportunity to build constructive interfaith dialogues. Thus, they can present relevant and authentic testimonies of faith, which are accepted by the Christian and wider communities.

Gen-Z's potential in social activism is also essential for revitalizing their spirituality. This generation shows deep concern for global issues such as social justice, climate change, and human rights. Using digital platforms, they voice their opinions and mobilize actions, directly impacting society. In the life of faith, this social activism becomes a means to realize Christ's love and justice in public life. Therefore, this study aims to explore how the values of Thomas à Kempis can be integrated into

the spiritual life of Gen-Z in Indonesia. By considering their strengths in technology, inclusivity, and social activism, the Kempis approach can be reinterpreted to build a realistic, pluralistic, and activist spirituality relevant to the times' needs.

De imitatione Christi in the Perspective of Thomas à Kempis

Kempis' works exemplify the ideas of devotion moderna and emphasize the example of Christ seeking a spiritual lifestyle. While writing several literary works, he is best remembered for one book, The Imitation of Christ, which consists of four parts written between 1420 and 1427. The first book deals with the first steps to living the monastic life, the second and third books deal with the spiritual life, and the fourth considers receiving Holy Communion.[21] However, some scholars question the originality and unity of these four parts. Jacques Huijben and Pierre Debongnie say that *Imitatio Christi* was not written from scratch as one book but as four independent works. The earliest manuscript was written in the 1420s, and gradually, the four books were assembled into one volume, the final version of which was copied and signed by Kempis in 1441.[22] However, this opinion could be more robust because internal and external evidence shows that this is Kempis' work. After all, the central concept of writing this book lies in the *rapiaria* (spiritual recorder) as the monks' daily meditation practice.

This book is a compilation of mystical and religious ideologies typical of late medieval monastic circles. Its primary purpose is to bring praxis ideas to approach and live a spiritual life. Thanks to this book, from the thirteenth century, ideas belonging exclusively to the monks began to leave the monastic pen to bring a set of rules that sought to regulate congregational life to spiritual life and, in turn, direct social action.[23] However, his work went almost unnoticed throughout the fifteenth century. Only in the second half of the 16th century did it become popular, echoed by the Church, and became a rhetorical tool of counter-reformist moral logic. Ideas related to the search for God, the renunciation of wealth, the diminishing of the quest for knowledge, and the world's accomplishments hang over the Church and the state.

Kempis' book experienced success within the Christian community, and printing began in 1472. Prior Pirkhamer in 1494, as quoted by Vincent Scully, gave an enthusiastic argument for the publication of Kempis' book by stating: "*Nothing more holy, nothing more honourable, nothing more religious, nothing in fine more profitable*

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[21] Aiko Okamoto-MacPhail, 'Musing on the Sources Cintemptus Mundi in Japan 1596', *CECIL: Cahiers d'études Des Cultures Ibériques et Latino-Américaines* 8 (2022): 63–84, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.21409/c8_4.

[22] Jacques Huijben and Pierre Debongnie, 'L'auteur Ou Auteurs de l'Imitation', *Hispania Sacra* 10, no. 19 (1957): 213–40.

[23] Juan Pablo Cruz Medina, 'La "Imago" de Kempis: El Discurso Barroco Como Constructor de Realidad En La Nueva Granda Colonial', *Historia y Sociedad*, no. 33 (2017): 245–77, https://doi.org/10.15446/hys.n33.62216.

for the Christian commonweal can you ever do than to make known these works of Thomas à Kempis."[24] Over the years, Kempis' books have been translated into over fifty languages. Even John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, firmly believed this book was the best summary of the disciplined Christian life. The popularity of The Imitation of Christ has remained throughout the centuries. Even Lorne Zrlyck considers it the most beloved Christian book after the Bible.[25]

Kempis' work led Gen-Z to follow Him. Of the four parts of his book, the second and third books are the focus of this study. For Kempis, following Jesus will not walk in darkness. In Christ's words, Gen-Z is advised to imitate His life and habits to be truly enlightened and free from all blindness of the heart. Kempis wrote, as quoted by Nayaswami Nakin, "*Let it be our main concern to meditate on the life of Jesus Christ. It is impossible to imitate Christ without knowing him first, and the best way to do this is to reflect on his life as described in the four Gospels.*"[26]

The teaching of Christ is better than all the advice of the saints, and the Christian who has His spirit will find in it the hidden manna. Today, many people often hear the gospel but do not care about it because they do not have the spirit of Christ. However, anyone who wants to fully understand the words of Christ must try to model his whole life on Christ. If a Christian had ever entered ideally into the heart of Jesus and felt something of His burning love, then that person would have cared nothing for the gains or losses of life. Without Jesus is the saddest hell; to be with Jesus is to know the sweetness of heaven. If Jesus is with you, no enemy can hurt you.

Concept of Perfection of Jesus

Matthew 5:48 explicitly describes Jesus exhorting His disciples to be perfect. "*Therefore, you must be perfect, just as your Father who is in heaven is perfect.*" The word "perfect" is translated *teleios*. The semantic range of *teleios* defined by the BDAG means "*to have reached a complete, or perfect end or purpose.*" This word describes a person who is "*fully developed in the moral sense.*"[27] This concept is contrasted with "*a person who fully meets the standard in certain respects, perfect, complete, expert.*"[28] Therefore, the perfection Jesus desired in his disciples was total moral maturity versus flawless perfection.

Jesus used *teleios* in Matthew 19:21. The NASB translates the word to

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[24] Vincent Scully, 'Thomas à Kempis', in *The Catholic Encyclopedia Vol. 14* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14661a.htm.

[25] Lorne Zelyck, "An Evaluation of Thomas À Kempis' The Imitation of Christ," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, 2005, 77–88, https://faithalone.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/zelyck.pdf.

[26] Nayaswami Nakin, 'Thomas à Kempis: In the Footsteps of Christ (1379-1471)', Ananda.org, 2008, https://www.ananda.org/blog/kempis-christ-saint.

[27] Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

[28] Zelyck, 'An Evaluation of Thomas À Kempis' the Imitation of Christ'.

"complete." The context of Jesus' words began when a wealthy young man while obeying God's commands, served another master. Thus, the young man served God and wealth. The correct concept should be that wholeness (or perfection) means a willingness to give up his wealth, but he does not want to and leaves the presence of Jesus incomplete. Therefore, it seems that Jesus did not use *teleios* to mean "sinless perfection," but rather, a relatively complete, undivided devotion to God expressed through acts of love. After the antithetical statement of Matthew 5:21-47, it is only possible for some disciples to perfectly achieve these standards on an ongoing basis.[29] The fact that humans cannot reach this standard does not mean that it will be lowered; instead, it means that we need God's grace and forgiveness to overcome our remaining sins.

Kempis advises his students to achieve perfection through persistently seeking perfection (In Book Number I, Part 17: page 1),[30] having a consistent desire to achieve perfection (I 19:2),[31] and living a perfect life for Jesus (I 19:1).[32] While Jesus understood wholeness as devotion to God that expresses itself through acts of love, Kempis believed that perfection could be attained through a mystical, subjective experience. Kempis encourages his students to become like the saints who can "attach" themselves to God. Saints can attain perfection by trying to turn off worldly desires completely. Thus, the Saints can bind themselves to God with all their hearts and are free to concentrate their innermost thoughts on God (I 11:2).[33] As a student, being able to experience something of heavenly contemplation through perfect numbing of the body and not allowing distractions to enter Gen-Z minds. This can be achieved by surrendering oneself to God (III 31:1),[34] completely humiliating the body, and "*offering the heart completely to God, uniting it to Him; soul in perfect union with God*" (IV 13:3).[35] Therefore, perfection negatively signifies freedom from mortal sin, and positively, permanent supernatural attachment to God.

Kempis offers more concrete ways for a disciple to reach perfection, such as "*not believing every storyteller*" (I 4:1)[36] or "*letting the mind relax in observing heavenly things*" (III 26:1),[37] "*selling all*" (III 56:2)[38] and submission to superiors (I 18:5).[39] Partaking of the Eucharist is also seen as the perfect source of freedom from

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[29] Peniel C. D. Maiaweng, 'Inkarnasi: Realita Kemanusiaan Yesus', *Jurnal Jaffray: Sekolah Tinggi Theologia Jaffray* 13, no. 1 (2015): 97–120, https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.25278/jj71.v13i1.114.

[30] The following will be abbreviated

[31] Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, bk. I.

[32] Kempis.

[33] Kempis.

[34] Kempis, bk. III.

[35] Kempis, bk. IV.

[36] Kempis, bk. I.

[37] Kempis, bk. III.

[38] Kempis.

[39] Kempis, I.

sin: "*You must frequently return to the divine source of grace and mercy, to the source of perfect goodness and purity, if Christians are to be free from passions and vices, if you are to become stronger and be more aware of all the temptations and deceptions of the devil*" (IV 10:1).[40] The most unsettling aspect of The Imitation of Christ is Kempis' belief that a disciple can attain perfection without sin. This view is evident when he says, "*we become perfect by uprooting one vice each year*" (I 11:5)[41] and we must, "*strive earnestly for perfection in a short time [we] shall receive the reward of [our] labor us]*" (I 25:1).[42] Kempis believes sinless perfection can be achieved because of the example of the saints.

Saints who perform are given contemplation, can completely turn off all worldly desires, and attach themselves to God (I 11:2).[43] They are also free from lust (I 11:3),[44] possess the light of true perfection (I 18:1),[45] and their lives bear witness that holy and perfect people have conquered the world (I 18:5).[46] Responding to such high standards of perfection, Kempis ironically assures his readers that the path of perfection should not cause one to bow down, but spur us to seek perfection (III 32:2).[47] In perhaps the darkest part of the entire book, Kempis expresses the turmoil of a human who knows sinless perfection is meant for him but finds himself unable to achieve it.

The Life of Humility

What is the use of speaking in a learned way about the Trinity if, without humility, that pleases the Trinity? Indeed, not learning makes a person pure, but a virtuous life endears him to God. I would rather feel sorry than know how to define it. What good is it for us to know the whole Bible by heart and the principles of all the philosophers if we live without God's grace and love? Pride is vanity; everything is vanity except love Allah and serve Him alone.

It is the most incredible wisdom to seek the Kingdom of Heaven through contempt of the world. Therefore, it is vanity to seek and trust perishing wealth. It is also vanity to respect honor and to be arrogant. Vanity follows the lusts of the body and desires things that will later be met with severe punishment. It is vanity to wish for a long life and yet care little for the life being lived in the present. However, it is also a waste to only think about the present and not prepare for things to come

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[40] Kempis, IV.
[41] Kempis, I.
[42] Kempis.
[43] Kempis.
[44] Kempis.
[45] Kempis.
[46] Kempis.
[47] Kempis.

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(future). Moreover, it is vanity to love what is fleeting and not look ahead to where eternal joy dwells (eternity).

A humble person who is protected and delivered by God. To the humble, He will turn and give great mercy so that after the humiliation of the believer, He will exalt him to glory. He reveals his secrets to humble people and with a kind invitation that believers come to Him.[48] So, the humble person enjoys peace because his trust is in God, not the world. Therefore, Gen-Z should only think they have made progress once they consider themselves lower than everyone else.

Goodness and Peace in Man

The peace that must be achieved is peace with oneself, which correlates with bringing peace to others. Peaceful people do betterthan educated people. While passion turns good into evil and is quick to believe evil, Peace, being good itself, turns everything into good.[49] A person who feels perfectly at ease never suspects many suspicions plague anything but a restless and dissatisfied soul. He did not rest himself or allow others to do so. He often says what should not be said and ignores what should be done. He cares about other people's duties but neglects his own. Therefore, direct the Gen-Z spirit first to yourself, then you can reasonably direct it to the people around you.

Love the Cross of Jesus

Being proactive and loving is a lifestyle that must be followed. Kempis gives two categories of love. First, if a person wants good for himself, that is lustful love. On the other hand, if someone wishes good for others, that is sincere and pure love. According to Kempis, this concept is In *Cruce Salus* (on the Cross, there is Salvation) (II, 2, 2).[50] Christians will get true happiness if they know what it means that Jesus loves them. However, if the believer also sets himself aside for Jesus' sake. Christians must put everything aside for Him because they love Jesus more than anything else. The love of creatures is deceitful and uncertain, whereas Jesus is faithful and eternal. If the heart is attached to a creature, then Christian will fall together with the creature that shakes. However, if you hold fast to Jesus, you can stand firm forever.

In love for Jesus, Christians must also love His Cross. This is what is called self-denial. Denying oneself means "considering oneself non-existent," allowing oneself to be "forgotten" for Jesus' sake. Humans (probably almost everyone) want them to be the best and most important. Denying this may mean ignoring or "no longer thinking

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[48] Kempis, III.
[49] P. G.R. de Villiers, Peace in the Spirituality of Thomas á Kempis. An Aesthetic Perspective on the Imitatio Christi 4.25," *Acta Theologica* 2022 (2022): 137–56, https://doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.Sup33.11.
[50] Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*.

about their interests." Self-denial can be said that we dare to say no to "certain actions" that we could not refuse before, even though we like that situation.

Apart from that, Kempis also encourages Christians to have the courage to follow Jesus fully. The phrase "follow me" in Greek uses the word *akoloutheō*, which means "behind". Apart from that, following Jesus here may also be interpreted as "*becoming a disciple*," "*becoming His follower*," or "*going with him.*" So, you can imagine what a follower of Jesus must do immediately. In Matthew 16:25-26, Jesus said: "*For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?*" (NIV). It is imperative to acknowledge that no external entity or individual can facilitate the acquisition of genuine eternal life. Material possessions, including financial wealth, political authority, and symbolic representations of status, such as thrones and crowns, are ultimately inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. The sole means of attaining salvation and entering into a state of eternal existence is through the agency of Jesus Christ. In his last message to his disciples, Jesus imparted a directive that would define the course of their future mission: "... *go and make disciples of all nations.*" (Matt 28.19; NIV).[51]

Internalization of Christian Identity for Gen-Z Indonesia

Christian identity lies in the spirituality that is lived daily. This opinion is very factual with Gen-Z Christians in Indonesia who are struggling to internalize the truth of God's Word. Though mixed, intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual intelligence is a holistic dimension. A realistic, pluralist, and activist spirituality results from combining all these dimensions. All three are Spirituality that must be attached to Gen-Z Indonesian Christians. By seeking to be realistic, pluralist, and activist, Gen-Z Indonesian Christians can contribute to world transformation.

Balancing between encounter and teaching in discipleship is a method for achieving spiritual maturity. This achievement is because, in discipleship, the process dimension is obvious. Edmund Chan emphasized that the intentional dimension is seen in the process of discipleship, which enables a Gen-Z to achieve God-likeness. The fundamental teachings and praxis of encounter are the process of discipleship that responds to the characteristics of Gen-Z Christians in Indonesia.[52] Cell Community is a place for Gen-Z to get teaching. Using materials from Kempis, Gen-Z can discuss the basis of Christian faith and identity as a response to postmodernism.

[51] Handreas Hartono, 'Mengaktualisasikan Amanat Agung Matius 28:19-20 Dalam Konteks Era Digital', *Kurios: Jurnal Teologi Dan Pendidikan Agama Kristen* 4, no. 2 (2018): 157–66, https://doi.org/10.30995/kur.v4i2.87.

[52] Tanu Biswas, 'Letting Teach: Gen Z as Socio-Political Educators in an Overheated World', *Frontiers in Political Science* 3, no. April (2021), https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2021.641609.

Meanwhile, retreats and personal devotions are dimensions of a personal encounter with the Supreme Being. Retreats and quiet time provide an intimate atmosphere for the spiritual life of Gen-Z.

Spiritual mentors must balance the two dimensions of teaching and encounter. It was this dimension that Kempis showed in medieval times to maintain the Christian faith amid challenging situations. The Bilangan Research Center expanded the two dimensions above into seven dimensions. The dimensions of teaching are the fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith, exclusivity (understanding the uniqueness of the Christian faith), and the meaning of life in this world. Meanwhile, the dimension of encounter is external practice, namely corporate worship activities, spiritual experience in living daily life, personal practice with God in a contemplative form, and aspects of evangelism and discipleship as implementation platforms.

An essential aspect of the imitation of Christ is its honesty. Rachmadi even stressed that there is another level of honesty, namely acknowledging our existence as it is, even the priority of Christ is a principle spread in Kempis' writings. Jesus is a person who pays attention to and understands life's situations, even listening to the cries of Gen-Z, who need living water. This truth brings Gen-Z to (1) understand the essence of their life in the world, (2) realize that there is a confusion of values and culture, (3) be wise and critical in accepting new information and lifestyles, (4) dare to speak out on sensitive issues that occur in the general public and the Church. Thomas à Kempis' approach to *Imitatio Christi*, invites various critiques, particularly regarding its applicability in the Asian context, especially in Indonesia, where cultural and social realities differ significantly from the medieval European environment in which Kempis lived.

One of Thomas à Kempis' fundamental limitations is his emphasis on individualism and asceticism, which are not in line with communal values in Asia, especially Indonesia. Asian cultures tend to place social relationships and togetherness as core elements of spirituality. Kempis' teachings can be adapted through a community-based approach, such as using small groups or cell communities to bridge this gap. In these groups, spiritual practices such as prayer, reflection, and Bible study can be done collectively by the spirit of cooperation deeply rooted in Asian culture. This not only maintains the core values of Kempis' teachings but also ensures their relevance in the social context of Indonesian society. In addition, Kempis' teachings on simplicity can be integrated with local principles such as social harmony and respect for nature.

In many Asian traditions, harmony with the environment and individual relationships are expressions of profound spirituality. These values align with Kempis' teachings, which emphasize detachment from worldly desires. However, adjustments need to be made so that the teachings focus not only on personal detachment but also on contributing to the community and ecological balance. Thus,

the Kempis approach can be expanded to include social and environmental responsibility, making it more contextual and relevant to Gen-Z in Asia.

This reinterpretation can also strengthen the dimension of social activism in Gen-Z spirituality. Gen-Z in Indonesia shows great interest in social issues such as justice, inclusion, and climate change. The Kempis approach, which is initially oriented towards personal spiritual transformation, can be combined with the spirit of collective action that characterizes Gen-Z. For example, the meditation practices taught by Kempis can be directed towards building sensitivity to social needs, which are then manifested in concrete actions such as serving the marginalized or preserving the environment. In this way, the Kempis teachings serve as spiritual guidance and a catalyst for positive social change.

First, there is a contextual limitation due to cultural relativity. Kempis' *Imitatio Christi* is deeply rooted in the monastic and ascetic religious experience of medieval Europe, where spirituality was often associated with personal isolation, asceticism, and a total devotion detached from societal roles. In Asia, especially Indonesia, religious devotion is intricately woven with communal and familial interactions, emphasizing balancing spiritual life with social engagement. Applying Kempis' teachings literally may appear less relevant, as it risks overlooking the cultural importance of social relationships and community in Asian spirituality.

Second, Kempis' ascetic approach contrasts with the social and communal lifestyle central to Indonesian culture. While Kempis emphasizes solitude and self-isolation as a means of spiritual closeness with Christ, young Christians in Indonesia—particularly Gen-Z—seek a spirituality that thrives within community relationships. In the Indonesian tradition, community and interpersonal connections form the foundation of faith, making an ascetic approach potentially alienating a society that values communal harmony and interaction.

Third, Kempis' teachings on inner spirituality may need to be revised when addressing the socially solid activism evident among Gen-Z. One of the defining aspects of Gen-Z's spirituality is their engagement in social issues such as justice, environmental responsibility, and human rights. Kempis primarily focuses on inner spiritual growth and a personal relationship with God, which might not fully support the activist spirit intrinsic to today's young Christians in Indonesia. In a nation where social issues often require proactive church involvement, Kempis' emphasis on introspective spirituality may seem inadequate in fostering the social consciousness younger generations seek.

Fourth, Indonesia's pluralistic context calls for an inclusive spirituality that acknowledges religious diversity. Indonesia is highly religiously diverse, necessitating a spiritual approach that encourages harmony across religious boundaries. Kempis' *Imitatio Christi* does not explicitly address the need for pluralism or interfaith

interaction in a communal setting. Gen-Z Christians in Indonesia need a spirituality that nurtures a profound inner life and fosters harmony and respect within a multi-faith society.

Fifth, adapting *Imitatio Christi* to meet Gen-Z's spiritual needs in Indonesia requires a recontextualization of Kempis' teachings. While Kempis' work has undeniable value, applying it meaningfully in Indonesia calls for integrating ascetic values with an emphasis on social responsibility and relational spirituality, recognizing diversity as an integral part of the faith experience. This contextual re-interpretation would provide a more affluent foundation for Gen-Z Christians in Indonesia, enabling them to engage more fully with their spiritual growth in a way that values social interaction and active involvement within society.

To make *Imitatio Christi* a spiritual foundation for Indonesian Gen-Z, Kempis' approach must be attuned to the realities of Indonesian society. This alignment can be achieved by blending ascetic principles with a spirituality that honors social relationships, values responsibility toward the community, and embraces diversity as part of the spiritual journey. Reinterpreting Kempis' teachings with an Asian contextual awareness can thus enhance the spiritual internalization process for young Indonesian Christians, making it more relevant and actionable in daily life, where social interaction and community engagement are essential.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of contextualizing Thomas A. Kempis' *Imitatio Christi* for Gen-Z Christians in Indonesia to foster a more dynamic and applicable spirituality. While Kempis' ascetic and introspective approach offers valuable insights into deepening one's relationship with Christ, it requires adaptation to resonate with Indonesian society's communal, pluralistic, and socially engaged character. By reinterpreting Kempis' emphasis on personal holiness and self-denial within a framework that values social responsibility, community harmony, and relational spirituality, the teachings of *Imitatio Christi* can be made relevant to young Christians today, encouraging a holistic Christian identity that aligns with the unique challenges and cultural nuances faced by Gen-Z in Indonesia.

This study underscores the potential for Kempis' spiritual framework to inspire Gen-Z Indonesian Christians by fostering a balanced approach that integrates both personal devotion and active engagement in society. Kempis' legacy of Christlike imitation can guide Gen-Z Christians toward meaningful spiritual maturity through the intentional combination of teachings and encounters in discipleship and the promotion of social consciousness within a multi-faith context. Such an approach strengthens individual faith and empowers Gen-Z to contribute positively to Indonesian society, embodying Christian values responsive to contemporary social and cultural landscapes.

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