

Materialism In Modern Education: A Philosophical Analysis And Theological Criticism From The Perspective Of Christian Religious Education

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Artikel

Article history:

Accepted: 24 Januari 2026

Publish: 01 Februari 2026

Keywords:

Materialism;

Philosophy of Education;

Christian Religious Education;

Spirituality;

Christian Anthropology;

Abstract

Materialism is a philosophical school that views matter as the highest reality and rejects the existence of the spiritual dimension. This view has had a major influence on the development of modern science and education, especially in the emphasis on cognitive, empirical aspects and measurable achievements. This article aims to examine the basic concept of materialism, the main figures who influence it, and the implications of its application in the world of education. Furthermore, this article critically analyzes materialism from the perspective of Christian faith and Christian Religious Education (PAK). Through a literature review approach and theological analysis, it was found that materialism has made a positive contribution to the development of scientific methods, but at the same time has serious weaknesses because it reduces humans to purely physical creatures. This view is contrary to the teachings of the Bible which emphasizes humans as God's creation who have a body, soul and spirit. Therefore, this article recommends that Christian Religious Education develop a holistic educational approach by integrating cognitive, moral and spiritual aspects, so that students are not trapped in a materialistic mindset.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The development of modern human civilization is inseparable from advances in science, technology, and scientific rationality. (Sidabutar & Situmorang, 2022) Throughout the history of Western thought, this progress has been heavily influenced by the philosophical school of materialism, which positions matter as the highest and most fundamental reality. Materialism emerged as a philosophical approach that seeks to explain all natural phenomena and human life through physical, biological, and chemical processes without involving spiritual or transcendent dimensions. This view gained strong legitimacy as modern science explained various aspects of reality empirically and systematically. (Syafei, 2025)

In contemporary society, materialism not only functions as a philosophical theory but has also developed into a worldview that shapes human values, goals, and orientation. (Feriyansyah & Supartiningsih, 2024) Success is often measured by material achievement, comfort, and economic productivity. Spiritual and moral values tend to be positioned as private matters that have no significant place in the public sphere, including in the world of education. As a result, modern education is often geared toward producing intellectually competent and professionally prepared individuals, but lacks depth of character and spirituality.

The influence of materialism in education is evident through its emphasis on cognitive aspects, scientific methods, and quantitative evaluation. (Rahmawati et al., 2023) The educational curriculum is designed to develop logical, analytical, and technical thinking skills, while the affective and spiritual dimensions are often considered difficult to measure and less relevant to the demands of the times. While this approach makes a positive contribution to the advancement of science and technology, education risks becoming reductive when humans are understood solely as objects of learning whose intellectual capacities must be optimized.

From a Christian perspective, a materialistic view of humans and reality raises serious theological issues. (Siswanto, 2024) The Bible firmly states that humans were created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26–27) and possess both physical and spiritual dimensions. (Karlau, 2022) Humans are not merely biological organisms, but individuals in relationships with God, others, and all of creation. This spiritual dimension gives humans dignity, intrinsic value, and a purpose in life that transcends mere physical and material existence. (Sudimin et al., 2019)

When materialism reduces humans to mere physical beings, understanding of human dignity, morality, and the purpose of life becomes obscured. (Aziz & Biografi, 2024) Moral values tend to be understood as social constructs or the result of biological evolution, rather than as the normative will of God. (PF & Purwadi, 2023) In the long term, this perspective has the potential to give rise to a crisis of meaning, moral relativism, and a lifestyle oriented toward material gratification. This condition poses a major challenge for the church and Christian Religious Education, which are called to shape human beings holistically and based on faith. (Simanjuntak, 2021)

Christian Religious Education (PAK) has a strategic role in responding to the dominance of materialism in the world of education. (Simanjuntak)1& Laoli, 2025) Christian Religious Education (PAK) functions not only as a religious subject but also as a means of faith formation that guides students to understand reality holistically. Within this framework, PAK is called to integrate faith and science, so that students are able to appreciate scientific progress without losing their spiritual and moral orientation. (Kia et al., 2025) Christian education does not reject the scientific approach, but places it in the light of faith in God as Creator and source of all truth. (Tung, 2021)

Against this backdrop, the study of materialism becomes highly relevant and urgent, particularly in the context of Christian education and faith. A critical understanding of materialism enables educators and students to recognize the strengths and limitations of this philosophical school. Furthermore, a theological critique of materialism helps Christian Religious Education maintain its identity and calling in developing individuals who are not only intellectually intelligent but also spiritually mature and morally responsible.

Therefore, this article aims to comprehensively examine the basic concept of materialism, the figures who influenced it, and its implications for modern education. Furthermore, this article analyzes materialism from the perspective of Christian faith and Christian Religious Education to emphasize the importance of a holistic, integrative, and Christ-centered educational approach amidst the challenges of modern world philosophy.

2. METHOD

This article uses library research, analyzing various sources, including philosophy books, theology journals, and scholarly works related to materialism, educational philosophy, and Christian

Religious Education. The analysis is descriptive-analytical and critical, using a theological approach to assess the compatibility of materialism with the Christian faith.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Results of Philosophical Analysis of Materialism in Modern Education

Based on a review of modern philosophical and educational literature, it was found that materialism has become one of the dominant frameworks of thought in contemporary educational systems. Modern education generally starts from the assumption that valid reality is that which can be observed, measured, and empirically verified. As a result, educational success is often reduced to students' academic achievement, technical competence, and economic productivity. (Heeng, 2023) The results of the analysis show that the materialistic approach in education is apparent through several main characteristics, namely:

1. Emphasis on cognitive and psychomotor aspects as the main indicators of learning success.
2. The use of scientific methods and quantitative evaluation as standards of educational objectivity.
3. Neglect of spiritual and moral dimensions because they are considered to be unable to be measured empirically.
4. Utilitarian orientation, where education is directed to meet the needs of the labor market and economic growth.

Philosophically, this approach is in line with the materialist view, which positions humans as purely biological and rational creatures, not as spiritual individuals who have transcendent goals.

2. The Impact of Materialism on the Concept of Humanity in Education

The results of the study show that materialism directly influences educational anthropology, namely, the way education views human nature. In the materialist paradigm, humans are understood as:

- Product of biological evolution,
- Subjects whose behavior is determined by genetic and environmental factors,
- An individual whose life value is measured by productivity and material usefulness.

This view has an impact on educational practices, which tend to:

- Treating students as objects of learning,
- Ignoring the spiritual uniqueness and life calling of each individual,
- Emphasizing competition over character building and love.

In this context, education loses its personal and relational dimensions, even though the Christian faith views humans as individuals created by God to relate to Him and to one another. (Siswanto, 2024)

3. Implications of Materialism for Modern Educational Practices

The research results show that materialism has real implications in modern educational practices, including:

1. Reduction of Educational Goals

Education is no longer geared toward developing the whole person, but toward achieving academic goals and practical skills. Faith, ethics, and spirituality are often viewed as complementary rather than central to education.

2. Moral Values Crisis

When education is detached from its transcendent foundation, moral standards become relative and dependent on social norms. This has the potential to create a character crisis in students.

3. Instrumentalization of Education

Education is seen as a tool to achieve economic success, not as a means of forming personality and life calling.

4. Degradation of Students' Spirituality

Students are at risk of growing into individuals who are intellectually intelligent but lacking in meaning, empathy, and spiritual sensitivity. (Swastoko, 2022)

4. Theological Critique of Materialism from the Perspective of Christian Religious Education

From the perspective of Christian Religious Education, materialism is considered inadequate as a foundation for education. Theological analysis reveals several key criticisms:

a. Materialism Contradicts the Biblical View of Man

The Bible affirms that humans are God's creations, consisting of body, soul, and spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:23). Materialism, which reduces humans to mere physical beings, contradicts the concept of humans as the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26–27).

b. Materialism Ignores God's Role in Education

In the Christian faith, God is the source of wisdom and knowledge (Proverbs 1:7). Education based on materialism removes God's role and replaces it with mere human rationality.

c. Materialism Weakens the Foundation of Christian Morals

PAK emphasizes that morality stems from God's character and His word. In contrast, materialism views morality as a social construct or a result of evolution, thus losing its absolute and normative nature.

d. Materialism Denies the Eternal Purpose of Christian Education

The goal of Christian Education (PAK) is not only to equip students with knowledge, but also to guide them toward maturity in faith and a life that glorifies God. Materialism fails to explain the eternal purpose of human life. (Sirangki & Noval, 2025)

5. Relevance and Challenges for Christian Religious Education

The results of the discussion indicate that Christian Religious Education is in a strategic and challenging position amidst the dominance of materialism. Christian Religious Education is required to:

- Developing a holistic approach to education,
- Integrating faith and science,
- Reaffirming the spiritual dimension as the core of education,
- Educate students to be critical of materialistic culture.

PAK does not reject science and rationality, but places them in the light of Christian faith, so that education does not lose its theological meaning and direction.

6. Synthesis of Discussion

Based on the results and discussion above, it can be concluded that materialism has indeed made a positive contribution to the development of modern scientific and educational methodology. However, when used as the primary paradigm, materialism tends to diminish human nature and shift the goal of education from faith and character formation to solely material interests.

Therefore, Christian Religious Education is called to provide theological correction and offer a Christ-centered educational paradigm, which views humanity as a whole and positions education as a means of restoring the image of God in students.

4. DISCUSSION

Materialism as a Philosophical School

Materialism is a philosophical school that places matter as the most fundamental basis of reality. In this view, everything that exists—the universe, human life, and consciousness—is understood as the result of material processes subject to the laws of physics and biology. Thus, nonmaterial realities such as the spirit, the soul, or God are not recognized ontologically. (Hidayati, n.d.)

Historically, materialism emerged as a response to mythological and religious explanations of the universe. (Del Medico, 2024) Materialist philosophers sought to provide rational and empirical explanations of reality by eliminating supernatural elements. This view then developed rapidly along with the advancement of modern science, which emphasizes observation, experimentation, and empirical verification as the basis of truth.

However, materialism's claim that only matter is real has serious consequences for how humans understand themselves and the world. When reality is reduced solely to what can be seen and measured, existential aspects of human existence, such as the meaning of life, moral values, and spiritual purpose, become difficult to adequately explain. (MUSTOVAL, 2025)

Materialist View of Humans and Consciousness

One of the most crucial aspects of materialism is its view of human beings. From a materialistic perspective, humans are understood as complex biological organisms, the result of evolutionary processes and chemical interactions within the body. Consciousness, thought, emotion, and free will are considered nothing more than activities of the brain and nervous system.

This view rejects the existence of the soul or spirit as a distinct entity. As a result, religious experience, prayer, and faith are understood solely as psychological phenomena or neurological reactions. Humans are no longer viewed as individuals in a transcendent relationship with God, but rather as biological objects completely subject to natural determinism.

In the context of education, this view impacts how students are understood and treated. Students tend to be viewed as individuals who must develop their cognitive abilities and skills to the maximum, without paying attention to the in-depth development of character, morals, and spirituality. (Hariyono et al., 2024)

Materialist Figures and Their Thoughts

Materialism did not develop in a single entity, but rather through the contributions of many figures from various eras and disciplines, from ancient Greek philosophy to modern philosophy, to contemporary thought in science and education. The following are the main figures in materialism and their central ideas.

1. Democritus (460–370 AH) (Rahman, 2013)

Democritus is known as the father of classical materialism. He proposed the theory of atomism, the view that all reality is composed of tiny, indivisible atoms that move in a vacuum. According

to Democritus, all changes in nature, including human life and thought, occur due to the movement and combination of these atoms.

In his view:

- There is no divine purpose in nature.
- Everything happens mechanically.
- The human soul is also composed of fine atoms.

Democritus's thoughts became the initial foundation for a worldview that rejected metaphysical and transcendent elements.

2. Epikuros (341–270 SM)

Epicurus continued Democritus's atomism, but with an ethical focus. He argued that the goal of human life is to achieve ataraxia (peace of mind), which is achieved by avoiding fear, including fear of the gods and death.

In Epicurean materialism:

- Gods do not interfere in human life.
- The soul is material and will disappear at death.
- There is no life after death.

His thinking encourages a view of life that negates spiritual and eschatological responsibility.

3. Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679)

Hobbes was an early modern materialist who viewed humans as biological machines. In his work Leviathan, Hobbes stated that:

- Thoughts are mechanical movements in the brain.
- Will and emotion are physical reactions.
- Morality arises from the social contract, not from divine law.

This view greatly influences modern secular political and anthropological thought.

4. Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709–1751)

La Mettrie is best known for his work, L'Homme Machine (Man as Machine), in which he explicitly stated that humans are nothing more than complex biological machines.

The main idea:

- There is no soul separate from the body.
- Consciousness comes entirely from brain function.
- Education should focus on physical and intellectual development.

This thinking is the basis for reductionist psychology and education.

5. Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872)

Feuerbach developed anthropological materialism. He argued that God is not an objective reality, but rather a projection of human desires and needs.

According to Feuerbach:

- Theology must be replaced by anthropology.
- Religion was born from human psychological needs.
- The nature of humans is material and social.

This view has been very influential in modern criticism of religion, including in the academic world. (Yuana, 2010)

Materialist thought developed through the contributions of various important figures. Democritus, a pioneer of classical materialism, stated that everything is composed of atoms moving in space. This view became the foundation for a mechanistic understanding of nature.

In the modern era, Karl Marx developed historical materialism, emphasizing that economic conditions and structures of production determine human consciousness. In Marx's view, religion was understood as a reflection of material conditions and was considered a tool that could obscure people's critical awareness of social injustice.

Ludwig Feuerbach also made a significant contribution by arguing that God is merely a projection of human needs and desires. This view strengthened the critique of religion and encouraged a separation between faith and objective reality. The thinking of these figures has greatly influenced modern education, particularly in its emphasis on rationality, science, and empirical approaches.

Implementation of Materialism in Modern Education

The influence of materialism in modern education is evident in curricula, teaching methods, and evaluation systems. Education tends to emphasize mastery of scientific knowledge, technical skills, and quantitatively measurable academic achievement. Student success is often assessed based on test scores, academic achievement, and readiness to enter the workforce.

This approach has positive impacts, such as improving the quality of science, technology, and professionalism. However, when education focuses solely on material and cognitive aspects, the moral and spiritual dimensions of human development risk being neglected. Education can lose its role in shaping individuals with character, ethics, and a sense of the meaning of life.

In the long term, the dominance of a materialistic approach to education can produce a generation that is intellectually intelligent but spiritually and morally impoverished. This poses a serious challenge to Christian education, which aims to shape the whole person.

Materialism also has the potential to undermine the moral foundation of education. When moral values are viewed as social constructs or the result of biological evolution, ethical standards become relative and fluid. In contrast, Christian faith affirms that moral values stem from God's character and His absolute Word.

Christian Religious Education plays a strategic role in critiquing and complementing materialistic approaches. Christian education does not reject science and rationality, but places them within a holistic framework of faith. Science and faith are understood as two complementary aspects in understanding the reality of God's creation.

Implications of Materialism for the Practice of Christian Education

If Christian education becomes trapped in a materialistic mindset, religious instruction can be reduced to merely the transfer of theological knowledge without a transformation of faith. Students' spirituality is no longer understood as the work of the Holy Spirit, but rather as the result of mere psychological training.

Therefore, Christian Religious Education needs to consciously develop an approach that balances cognitive, affective, and spiritual aspects. Christian Religious Education teachers are called to not only teach concepts but also to model faith and guide students in authentic spiritual growth.

Thus, Christian education can be a means of forming human beings who are not only intellectually capable but also spiritually mature and morally responsible in an increasingly materialistic world.

4. CONCLUSION

Materialism is a philosophical school that places matter as the ultimate reality and rejects the existence of a spiritual dimension in understanding humans and the universe. This view has made significant contributions to the development of modern science through its emphasis on rationality, empirical observation, and the scientific method. In an educational context, materialism encourages an objective, measurable approach to learning that is oriented toward cognitive achievement and practical skills.

However, a critical analysis from the perspective of Christian faith and Christian Religious Education (PAK) shows that materialism has fundamental limitations. By reducing humans to mere biological beings, materialism ignores the spiritual dimension that is an essential part of human existence as God's creation. This view not only contradicts the Bible's testimony that humans are the image and likeness of God but also has the potential to undermine understanding of human dignity, the purpose of life, and the absolute foundation of morality.

In the world of education, the dominance of a materialistic perspective risks giving rise to learning practices that emphasize academic achievement and material success, while leaving little room for the development of character, ethical values, and spirituality in students. As a result, education can lose its primary function as a means of developing the whole person. Therefore, Christian Religious Education is called to provide a critical and constructive theological response to materialism by developing a holistic, integrative, and Christ-centered educational approach.

By integrating faith and science, Christian Religious Education does not reject scientific progress but rather places it within a framework of sound spiritual values. This approach enables students to grow in a balanced intellectual, moral, and spiritual way, enabling them to face the challenges of the modern world without becoming trapped in a materialistic mindset. In this way, Christian Religious Education can remain faithful to its theological calling to shape whole, meaningful individuals oriented toward the values of the Kingdom of God.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author expresses his gratitude to God Almighty for His love and guidance, enabling the successful completion of this article, "Materialism in Modern Education: Philosophical Analysis and Theological Critique from the Perspective of Christian Religious Education." He also expresses his gratitude to the lecturers who provided guidance, direction, and motivation throughout the writing process.

My gratitude goes to my supervisor, Doden, and fellow students for their support, discussions, and constructive feedback. I also acknowledge the limitations of this article, and therefore welcome constructive criticism and suggestions for future improvements.

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