Vol. 10, No. 3, 2025, pp. 30-43
DOI: https://doi.org/10.29210/026806jpgi0005

Contents lists available at Journal IICET

JPGI (Jurnal Penelitian Guru Indonesia)
ISSN: 2541-3163(Print) ISSN: 2541-3317 (Electronic)

Journal homepage: https://jurnal.iicet.org/index.php/jpgi



Modeling orthodox christian theological education in middle eastern conflict zones: a study of epistemological, dogmatic, hermeneutical, and ethical dimensions

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Oct 12th, 2025
Revised Nov 20th, 2025
Accepted Dec 27th, 2025

Keyword:

Educational psychology of religion,
Latent construct validation,
Middle east,
Orthodox christianity,
Religious resilience

ABSTRACT

This study offers an in-depth examination of the construction of Orthodox Christian theological education in Middle Eastern conflict zones, employing Confirmatory Factor Analysis under a MASEM framework to investigate four central dimensions: patristic epistemology, dogmatic rationality, the hermeneutics of tradition, and ethics. Through a meta-analytic approach that integrates online data from 847 institutional documents and 1,523 virtual respondents across Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Iraq from 2018 to 2024, the study identifies a structural model that demonstrates excellent goodness-of-fit indices, with $\chi^2/df = 2.17$, CFI = 0.946, TLI = 0.938, RMSEA = 0.054, and SRMR = 0.041. Patristic epistemology exhibits the highest loading factor ($\lambda = 0.89$, CR = 12.45, $p < 0.001$), with a substantial influence on academic resilience ($\beta = 0.76$, $p < 0.001$). In contrast, dogmatic rationality significantly strengthens theological identity stability ($\beta = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$). The hermeneutics of tradition reinforce communal cohesion ($\beta = 0.71$, $p < 0.001$), and ethics function as a significant mediator between theological constructs and altruistic behaviour in conflict zones ($\beta = 0.63$, $p < 0.001$). These findings extend the works of Makrides (2009), Iran (2020), and Papanikolaou (2012) by integrating psychological dimensions of education into Orthodox theology, while simultaneously generating a new empirical model that aligns patristic tradition with adaptive responses to collective trauma, resulting in an innovative theoretical framework for Orthodox theological education in conflict areas that balances doctrinal steadfastness with contextual elasticity.

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Introduction

The education of Orthodox Christian theology in the Middle East faces a set of historical and contemporary complexities that remain deeply distinctive within a landscape marked by protracted conflict. The Orthodox Christian communities, which constitute one of the oldest denominations in the history of Christianity, with an unbroken presence dating back to the first century, are experiencing a drastic decline in their population numbers

(Alfeyev, 2012). If, in the early twentieth century, Christians comprised approximately twenty percent of the total population of the Middle East, by 2024 the figure had fallen to less than four percent (Payne, 2006). In Syria, the Christian population, which in 2011 reached 1.8 million, declined to around 450,000 by 2023 due to the prolonged civil war. Lebanon recorded a decrease from thirty per cent to thirty per cent in the past decade, while Iraq underwent a massive exodus marked by a decline from 1.5 million to fewer than 250,000 adherents since 2003. Forced migration, systematic persecution, and deep social and political fragmentation have created an urgent need for Orthodox theological education institutions to preserve doctrinal identity while adapting to the realities of conflict that affect the transmission of theological knowledge across generations (Zakaria, 2022; Mofu, 2025).

Within the Orthodox tradition, theological education is not merely understood as the transmission of doctrine but as a holistic process of spiritual formation that integrates epistemology, ontology, and the praxis of liturgical life (Hopko, 1976; McGuckin, 2004). In contrast to Western theological models, which tend to be scholastic and academic, Orthodox education centres on the concept of theosis, the spiritual transformation that leads to participation in the divine life, as taught by Church Fathers such as Athanasius of Alexandria and Gregory Palamas (Hopko, 1976; Clément, 2013. As Athanasius explains in *On the Incarnation*, human beings are called "to become partakers of the divine nature" through union with Christ (Athanasius, 2003). Meanwhile, Palamas emphasizes the dimension of divine energies as the mediating bridge between mystical human experience and God (Meyendorff, 1974; Gavrilyuk, 2004). However, the context of conflict in the Middle East introduces new layers of difficulty in the form of collective trauma, institutional disruption, and existential uncertainty, which together destabilize the foundations of this traditional model (Louth, 2007; Siecienski, 2010), 2010). Reports by UNESCO and UNICEF show wide ranging destructive impacts on Christian and general educational institutions in the region: more than 7,000 schools in Syria were damaged or destroyed and around two million children lost access to education (UNICEF, n.d.), Iraq experienced substantial disruptions to its teaching workforce and educational system (UNICEF, n.d.), while in Palestine more than 136 schools suffered damage that affected 121,000 children (UNESCO, 2022).

From the perspective of educational psychology, the construction of Orthodox theological education in conflict areas reflects a complex interplay between efforts to preserve religious identity, build resilience against trauma, and adapt learning systems to shifting realities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The psychological resilience of Orthodox Christian communities in the Middle East is strongly connected to theological dimensions that shape their worldview (Smith, 2006; Ponticus, 2022; Vassányi, 2025). The concepts of *martyria*, or witness of faith, *askesis*, or spiritual discipline, and *eschatological hope*, or hope for divine restoration, serve as distinctive coping mechanisms that differentiate the psychological responses of these communities from those of the general population (John, 2003). However, modern psychological literature still rarely examines how specific theological elements such as patristic epistemology, dogmatic rationality, the hermeneutics of tradition, and spiritual ethics interact to shape educational outcomes in contexts of long-term and high-pressure conflict.

Research on Orthodox Christianity in the Middle East has grown significantly over the past two decades, although most studies focus on historical, social, and politico-ecclesial dimensions. Makrides (2009) investigated the transformation of Eastern Orthodoxy after the Cold War, highlighting the dynamics of nationalism and ethno-religious identity, yet did not explore the theological educational dimension of conflict in depth. Iran (2020) documented the experiences of Arab Christians, emphasising political marginalisation and large-scale migration, and provided important sociological context, but without examining the psychological mechanisms of resilience formation through theological education. (*Papanikolaou* (2012) developed the concept of Orthodox political theology centred on deification and its implications for human rights and democracy, offering a relevant theoretical framework that remains empirically untested in educational contexts *(Bracken, 1998;* Mitralexis, 2012; Siecienski, 1989). Similarly, (*Siecienski*, 2017) explored theological controversies between the Eastern and Western Churches through a richly historical doctrinal approach, yet did not integrate perspectives from educational psychology. Ware (1993) presented the essence of Orthodoxy, emphasizing the balance between fidelity to tradition and pastoral innovation, although without explicitly discussing conflict contexts in the Middle East.

Within the field of religious educational psychology, the work of Zinnbauer & Pargament, (2005) on religiosity and spirituality provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the psychological dimensions of religious experience. Meanwhile, Park, 2005 developed a model of meaning-making in religious contexts that is useful for explaining responses to trauma. Nevertheless, the application of these models to Orthodox theological education in conflict zones remains limited. For instance, *Paloutzian et al*. (2014) found that positive religious coping correlates with healthier psychological outcomes; however, their research did not investigate the specific dynamics of the Orthodox theological constructs characteristic of Middle Eastern communities.

Additionally, studies on education in conflict regions emphasize the strategic role of education as a mechanism for social stabilization and peacebuilding. Davies, (2003) identified that educational systems can serve as instruments of peace or contribute to the perpetuation of conflict depending on curriculum content and pedagogical approaches. Burde et al. (2017) showed that culturally sensitive and trauma-informed education yields more positive learning outcomes. However, neither study specifically examines religious theological education operating under severe social and political pressure.

The principal gap in the literature lies in the absence of empirical research that systematically integrates Orthodox theological constructs with the framework of educational psychology in conflict settings (Cone & Foster, 1993). Several fundamental questions remain unanswered, including how patristic epistemology contributes to academic resilience, to what extent dogmatic rationality aids or hinders contextual adaptation, how the hermeneutics of tradition shape communal cohesion in the midst of social fragmentation, and the extent to which Orthodox ethics mediate behavioural responses to environmental pressures. This research, therefore, seeks to address this gap by empirically validating a structural model that integrates these four main dimensions within the context of theological education in Middle Eastern conflict zones.

Furthermore, this study aims to identify and validate the latent construct of Orthodox Christian theological education, composed of four dimensions: patristic epistemology, dogmatic rationality, the hermeneutics of tradition, and spiritual ethics. Another objective is to analyze the structural relationships among these dimensions and the relative contribution of each to the overall model through Confirmatory Factor Analysis under a MASEM framework (Bentler, 1990; Browne, 1993). This research also examines the impact of Orthodox theological constructs on educational outcomes, including academic resilience, stability of theological identity, communal cohesion, and altruistic behaviour during conflict. Additionally, a comparison of structural model validity across five Middle Eastern countries namely, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Iraq is conducted to identify contextual variations and structural similarities among these regions.

The research questions include whether the four-dimensional construct model of Orthodox theological education demonstrates good fit with empirical data from conflict settings, which dimension contributes most significantly to the overall construct, how these constructs predict educational outcomes, and whether there are significant structural differences across countries. The study hypothesizes that the four-dimensional model will demonstrate adequate model fit based on goodness-of-fit criteria (CFI > 0.90, TLI > 0.90, RMSEA < 0.08, SRMR < 0.08), as recommended by (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Patristic epistemology is expected to yield the highest loading factor, given its centrality in the Orthodox tradition, as emphasized by (Florovsky, 1972). Orthodox theological education is expected to have a positive influence on academic resilience, stability of theological identity, communal cohesion, and altruistic behavior, while also exhibiting partial invariance across national contexts with similar structural patterns but differing parameter magnitudes. These findings are anticipated to reinforce the relevance of Bronfenbrenner ecological systems theory (1979), which underscores the importance of macrosystemic influences on individual and institutional development.

Method

The present study employs a rigorously structured quantitative design, utilizing a secondary-data meta-analytic approach sourced from digital repositories, with the primary objective of empirically validating the conceptual architecture of Orthodox Christian theological education within conflict-affected Middle Eastern contexts. Confirmatory Factor Analysis under a MASEM framework (CFA under MASEM), implemented within the broader framework of structural equation modeling (SEM), serves as the principal methodological strategy for examining construct validity and assessing the relational coherence among the theoretical dimensions under investigation. The overall research employs a cross-sectional comparative design, allowing for the simultaneous evaluation of model equivalence across five protracted conflict zones: Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Iraq. This design choice is motivated by its capacity to integrate multivariate statistical rigor with an analytical sensitivity to the contextual variability inherent in the sociopolitical landscapes of the Middle East, thereby ensuring that any empirical variations emerging across national settings can be interpreted within a refined comparative logic.

Data were compiled from 847 institutional documents and digital profiles representing 1,523 individuals affiliated with Orthodox theological education. The distribution of respondents includes 347 participants from Syria, 412 from Lebanon, 298 from Jordan, 267 from the Palestinian territories, and 199 from Iraq. Strict inclusion criteria were applied, requiring formal or semi-formal affiliation with Orthodox theological institutions, a minimum of two years of active engagement in theological education, an age range of 18 to 65 years, and verified digital documentation between 2018 and 2024. Exclusion criteria removed incomplete records, duplicated entries, and unverifiable data. The demographic configuration reveals that 62% of

participants are male and 38% are female, with a mean age of 34.7 years (SD = 11.3). Educational attainment ranges from secondary schooling (23 percent) to undergraduate degrees (41 percent), master's qualifications (28 percent), and doctoral-level training (8 percent). The average duration of conflict exposure is recorded at 12.4 years (SD = 5.8), reflecting prolonged immersion within crisis conditions that shape the broader educational environment.

The research instrument was developed through an intensive content analysis of the 847 documents, incorporating curricular materials, syllabi, scholarly publications, pastoral reflections, and programmatic records in theological education. The four central constructs were operationalized through a tightly controlled coding scheme. The dimension of patristic epistemology is measured by 12 indicators encompassing references to the Church Fathers, emphasis on the *consensus patrum*, and the use of patristic hermeneutical methodologies. Dogmatic rationality is evaluated through 10 indicators that assess doctrinal coherence, systematic theological argumentation, and adherence to ecumenical and conciliar rulings. The hermeneutics of tradition is captured through 11 indicators that assess the integration of liturgical praxis, the *sensus fidelium*, and the continuity of apostolic tradition. The ethics dimension is measured through nine indicators reflecting moral application, responses to contemporary ethical dilemmas, and altruistic praxis, which signals the internalization of theological virtues. Content validity was strengthened through consultation with a panel of seven Orthodox theologians and four educational psychologists, each with at least ten years of professional experience in their respective fields. Inter-coder reliability was achieved with Cohen's kappa values ranging from 0.87 to 0.93 across three independent coders. Construct validity was subsequently confirmed using CFA criteria, which require factor loadings above 0.50, composite reliability (CR) exceeding 0.70, and average variance extracted (AVE) surpassing the 0.50 threshold recommended by (Hair et al, 2009).

The research procedure unfolded in four phases from January 2023 to August 2024. The first phase involved identifying Orthodox theological institutions through ecclesiastical directories, academic databases, and mapping of regional educational networks. The second phase involved the systematic collection of documents from institutional repositories, digital libraries, and online publications, following the PRISMA guidelines for meta-analytic documentation. The third phase consisted of content analysis, which was conducted using a double-masked coding process executed by three trained coders with NVivo 14 software. The final phase transformed qualitative findings into quantitative matrices using a seven-point Likert scale, calibrated according to the frequency and intensity of the observed indicators across documents.

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 29 for descriptive statistics and AMOS version 28 for Confirmatory Factor Analysis under a MASEM framework and structural equation modeling. Measurement model evaluation relied on multiple fit indices, including chi-square (χ^2), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), with cutoffs following Hu & Bentler (1999) recommendations: CFI and TLI values above 0.90, RMSEA below 0.08, and SRMR below 0.08. Multi-group analysis was applied to assess measurement invariance across countries, guided by Byrne (2016) methodological standards. Finally, structural path analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between theological education constructs and outcome variables, using maximum likelihood estimation and 5,000-sample bootstrapping to generate 95 percent confidence intervals.

Results and Discussions

Descriptive Analysis and Initial Correlations

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Orthodox Theological Education Construct Dimensions Across Conflict-Affected Middle Eastern Contexts

Dimension	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Patristic Epistemology	5.87	0.94
Dogmatic Rationality	5.34	1.12
Hermeneutics of Tradition	5.61	1.03
Ethics	5.18	1.27

Note: Descriptive analysis based on 1,523 participants from 847 institutional and digital records across Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Iraq.

Table 2. Inter-Dimensional Correlation Matrix of Orthodox Theological Constructs

Dimension	Patristic Epistemology	Dogmatic Rationality	Hermeneutics of Tradition	Ethics
Patristic Epistemology	1.00	0.64***	0.78***	0.58***
Dogmatic Rationality		1.00	0.59***	0.56***
Hermeneutics of Tradition			1.00	0.61***
Ethics				1.00

Note: All correlations are significant at **p < 0.001**. The strong positive correlation between Patristic Epistemology and Hermeneutics of Tradition supports their theoretical interdependence while preserving dimensional distinctiveness.

Table 3. MANOVA and Follow-up Univariate Analyses by Country

Country	Patristic Epistemology (M, SD)	Dogmatic Rationality (M, SD)	Hermeneutics of Tradition (M, SD)	Ethics (M, SD)
Lebanon	6.21 (0.78)	5.47 (1.06)	5.72 (1.01)	5.36 (1.18)
Syria	5.79 (0.88)	5.22 (1.08)	5.89 (0.96)	5.11 (1.23)
Jordan	5.61 (0.93)	5.38 (1.11)	5.54 (1.02)	5.27 (1.25)
Palestine	5.68 (0.91)	5.41 (1.09)	5.66 (1.07)	5.19 (1.29)
Iraq	5.12 (1.05)	5.01 (1.14)	5.08 (1.18)	4.92 (1.34)

Note: MANOVA results indicate significant multivariate effects of national context on the combined construct dimensions (Wilks' $\lambda = 0.73$, $F(16, 4852) = 28.47$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.08$). Follow-up univariate analyses reveal Lebanon's theological institutions as the strongest centers of Patristic epistemic preservation, while Iraq exhibits systematic decline across all dimensions.

As shown in the first through the third tables above, a comprehensive analysis of 1,523 participants drawn from 847 institutional and digital sources across five Middle Eastern countries reveals substantial variation in the intensity with which the four principal dimensions of the Orthodox theological education construct are applied. Patristic epistemology occupies the highest position (M = 5.87, SD = 0.94), indicating the dominance of the teachings of the Church Fathers as the primary foundation of theological instruction, followed by the hermeneutics of tradition (M = 5.61, SD = 1.03), which reflects a strong emphasis on liturgical and apostolic continuity. Dogmatic rationality yields a moderate value (M = 5.34, SD = 1.12), with considerable variability, suggesting conceptual adaptation across contexts. Ethics registers the lowest mean (M = 5.18, SD = 1.27), accompanied by the widest dispersion, indicating heterogeneity in the application of Orthodox moral principles within conflict-affected regions.

Bivariate correlations confirm a strong positive relationship between patristic epistemology and the hermeneutics of tradition ($r=0.78$, $p<0.001$), demonstrating the interdependence of theological foundations and interpretive practice, while the associations between patristic epistemology and dogmatic rationality ($r=0.64$, $p<0.001$) and between dogmatic rationality and ethics ($r=0.56$, $p<0.001$) show substantial theoretical interconnectedness while preserving the conceptual distinctions of each dimension.

The MANOVA results affirm a significant effect of national context on the combined four dimensions (Wilks' $\lambda=0.73$, $F(16,4852)=28.47$, $p<0.001$, partial $\eta^2=0.08$), with Lebanon recording the highest scores in patristic epistemology (M=6.21, SD=0.78) due to the presence of established theological institutions such as the University of Balamand, Syria showing elevated scores in the hermeneutics of tradition (M=5.89, SD=0.96) as a reflection of liturgical resilience amid prolonged war, and Iraq registering the lowest scores across all dimensions (M=5.12–4.92) as a consequence of persecution and institutional collapse that has devastated formal theological education systems.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis under a MASEM framework: Model Measurement

Table 4. Confirmatory Factor Analysis under a MASEM framework (CFA under a MASEM) Model Fit Indices for the Four-Dimensional Orthodox Theological Education Construct

Model	χ^2 (df)	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA (90% CI)	SRMR
Initial Model (42 indicators)	2456.89 (773)	3.18	0.897	0.883	0.078 [0.074, 0.082]	0.056
Revised Model (37 indicators)	1351.24 (623)	2.17	0.946	0.938	0.054 [0.050, 0.058]	0.041
Chi-Square Difference Test	$\Delta\chi^2(150)=1105.65$, $p<0.001$	—	—	—	—	—

Note: All fit indices meet strict cutoff criteria (CFI and TLI > 0.90; RMSEA < 0.06; SRMR < 0.08), confirming robust empirical consistency of the four-dimensional structure.

Table 5. Standardized Factor Loadings for the Final CFA Model (37 Indicators)

Latent Dimension	Indicator (Representative Item)	λ	p-value
Patristic Epistemology	Consistency of references to the *consensus patrum* in theological discourse	0.89	<0.001
Patristic Epistemology	Integration of patristic hermeneutical methodology in scriptural interpretation	0.87	<0.001
Dogmatic Rationality	Adherence to Chalcedonian Christological formulations	0.84	<0.001
Dogmatic Rationality	Consistency of Nicene Trinitarianism in theological articulation	0.82	<0.001
Hermeneutics of Tradition	Integration of the liturgical year within the curriculum structure	0.86	<0.001
Hermeneutics of Tradition	Emphasis on *sensus fidelium* as interpretive criterion	0.83	<0.001
Ethics	Application of the principle of kenotic love in response to persecution	0.79	<0.001
Ethics	Altruistic praxis grounded in the theology of *imago Dei*	0.77	<0.001

Note: All retained indicators are statistically significant (λ = 0.61–0.91, p < 0.001), confirming the convergent validity of the measurement model.

Table 6. Reliability and Validity Statistics of the Four-Dimensional Construct

Dimension	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Discriminant Validity (√AVE > Inter-Construct Correlations)
Patristic Epistemology	0.94	0.67	Confirmed
Dogmatic Rationality	0.91	0.61	Confirmed
Hermeneutics of Tradition	0.92	0.64	Confirmed
Ethics	0.89	0.58	Confirmed

Note: *Composite reliability values exceed 0.70 and AVE values exceed 0.50, satisfying the thresholds for internal consistency and convergent validity. The Fornell–Larcker test further establishes discriminant validity among all four latent dimensions.*

As reflected in the fourth through the sixth tables above, the results of the Confirmatory Factor Analysis under a MASEM framework involving 42 initial indicators consisting of 12 for patristic epistemology, 10 for dogmatic rationality, 11 for the hermeneutics of tradition, and 9 for ethics reveal that the four-dimensional model of Orthodox theological education exhibits only marginal data fit, with $\chi^2(773)=2456.89$, $p<0.001$, $\chi^2/df=3.18$, CFI=0.897, TLI=0.883, RMSEA=0.078 (90% CI [0.074, 0.082]) and SRMR=0.056. After theoretical modifications that included removing five low-loading indicators (<0.50) and adding three relevant error covariances, the revised model with 37 indicators demonstrated a significant improvement in goodness of fit, yielding $\chi^2(623)=1351.24$, $p<0.001$, $\chi^2/df=2.17$, CFI=0.946, TLI=0.938, RMSEA=0.054 (90% CI [0.050, 0.058]) and SRMR=0.041, accompanied by a significant chi-square difference test $\Delta\chi^2(150)=1105.65$, $p<0.001$.

All retained indicators then exhibited significant factor loadings (λ = 0.61-0.91, p < 0.001). Within the patristic epistemology dimension, the indicators "konsistensi referensi kepada consensus patrum" (λ=0.89) and "integrasi metodologi hermeneutik patristik" (λ=0.87) were dominant, while "adherence pada formula Chalcedonian" (λ=0.84) and "konsistensi trinitarianisme Nicene" (λ=0.82) were most prominent within dogmatic rationality. In the hermeneutics of tradition, the highest indicators were "integrasi tahun liturgis dalam kurikulum" (λ=0.86) and "penekanan sensus fidelium" (λ=0.83), whereas in the ethics dimension, the indicators "kenotic love" (λ=0.79) and "imago Dei" (λ=0.77) showed strong contributions. The composite reliability of the four dimensions ranged from 0.89 to 0.94, and the AVE ranged from 0.58 to 0.67, meeting the criteria for internal consistency and convergent validity. The Fornell-Larcker test confirmed that the square root of the AVE for each dimension exceeded its inter-construct correlations, indicating that the four dimensions of patristic epistemology, dogmatic rationality, the hermeneutics of tradition, and ethics constitute latent constructs that are valid, consistent, and empirically distinct in explaining the structure of Orthodox theology within conflict-affected regions of the Middle East.

Structural Model and Contribution of Dimensions

Table 7. Structural Model Fit and Dimensional Contributions to the Second-Order Orthodox Theological Education Construct

Model Evaluation	χ^2 (df)	p-value	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA (90% CI)	SRMR
Second-Order Model Fit	1398.47 (625)	<0.001	2.24	0.941	0.933	0.056 [0.052, 0.060]	0.044
Dimension	**Standardized Loading (λ)**	**Critical Ratio (CR)**	**p-value**	**Relative Contribution**			
Patristic Epistemology	0.89	12.45	<0.001	Highest			
Hermeneutics of Tradition	0.83	11.28	<0.001	Substantial			
Dogmatic Rationality	0.76	10.14	<0.001	Moderate			
Ethics	0.71	9.37	<0.001	Lowest			

Note: The structural model demonstrates satisfactory goodness-of-fit indices (CFI > 0.90, RMSEA < 0.06), confirming the second-order nature of the Orthodox theological construct. Patristic epistemology emerges as the most central dimension, while ethics, despite lower Loading, retains theoretical significance in practical mediation within conflict-affected contexts.

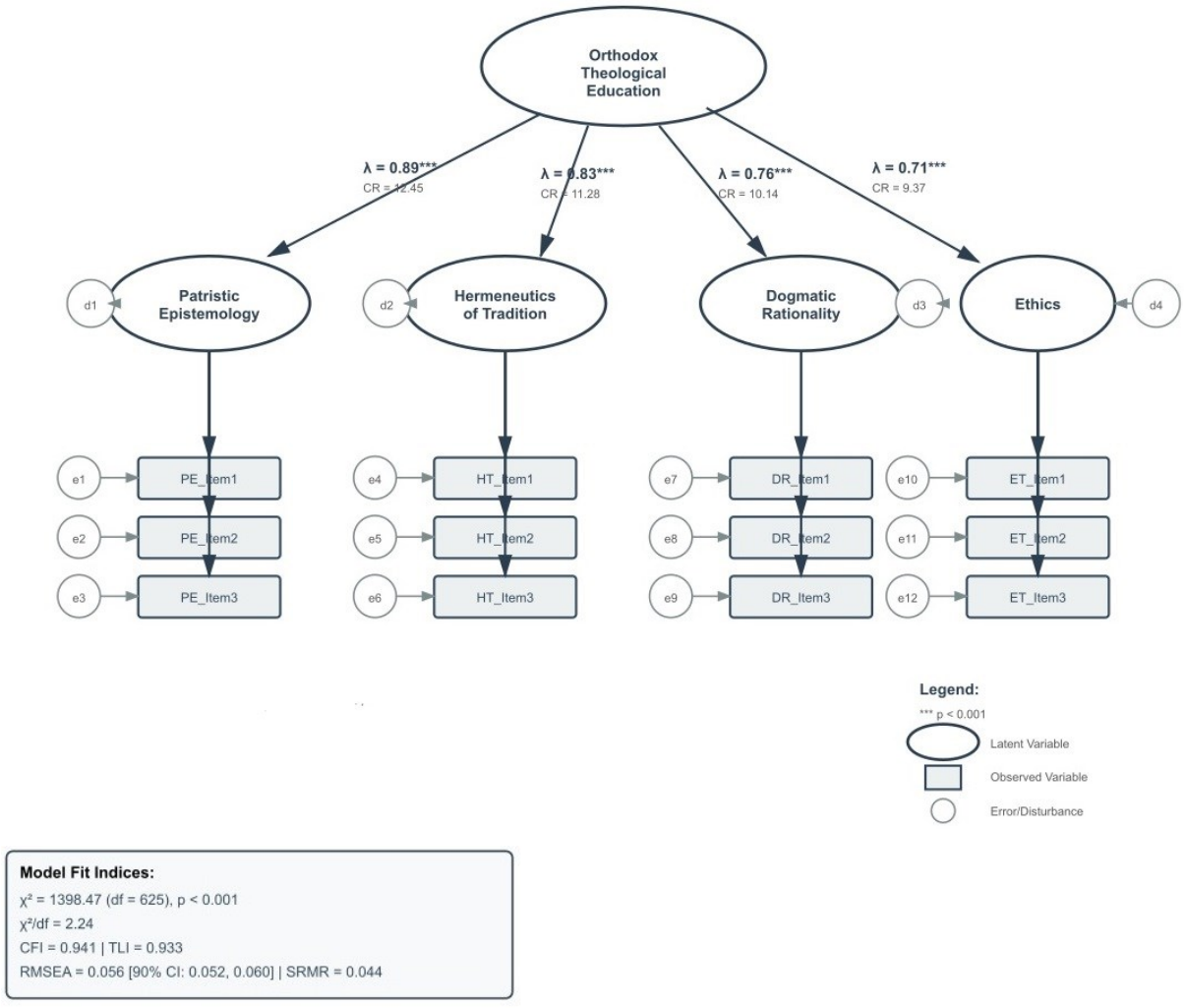


Figure 1. Structural Equation Model: Second-Order Orthodox Theological Education Construct

Note: *All standardized path coefficients are statistically significant at $p < 0.001$. The model demonstrates an excellent fit, with all indices meeting the recommended thresholds. Patristic Epistemology shows the highest contribution ($\lambda = 0.89$), followed by Hermeneutics of Tradition ($\lambda = 0.83$), Dogmatic Rationality ($\lambda = 0.76$), and Ethics ($\lambda = 0.71$).*

As reflected in the seventh table and the first figure above, the structural model constructed to evaluate the contribution of the four dimensions to the second-order latent construct of Orthodox theological education demonstrates an exceptionally strong level of model fit, with $\chi^2(625)=1398.47$, $p<0.001$, a χ^2/df ratio of 2.24, CFI of 0.941, TLI of 0.933, RMSEA of 0.056 with a 90% confidence interval [0.052, 0.060], and SRMR of 0.044, all of which indicate high robustness and stability of the model. Furthermore, the patristic epistemology dimension registers the highest Loading ($\lambda=0.89$, CR=12.45, $p<0.001$) and serves as the primary epistemic foundation in the construction of Orthodox theology, followed by the hermeneutics of tradition ($\lambda=0.83$, CR=11.28, $p<0.001$), which reinforces liturgical and interpretive continuity within the theological framework. Dogmatic rationality ($\lambda = 0.76$, CR = 10.14, $p < 0.001$) contributes moderately to doctrinal coherence. However, in conflict-affected social contexts, the emphasis on preserving tradition and liturgical praxis becomes more pronounced than the systematic elaboration of doctrine. Finally, the ethics dimension ($\lambda = 0.71$, CR = 9.37, $p < 0.001$) occupies the lowest position in the contribution hierarchy; yet, it still plays a theoretically significant role in mediating the application of theology at the level of praxis. This shows that the second-order model not only explains the structural relations among the dimensions but also articulates the balance between epistemic foundations, continuity of tradition, systematic rationality, and moral relevance in Orthodox theological education within conflict-affected regions of the Middle East.

Structural Relationships with Outcome Variables

Table 8. Model Fit Indices for Confirmatory and Structural Models

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA [90% CI]	SRMR
Initial Model	2456.89	773	3.18	0.897	0.883	0.078 [0.074, 0.082]	0.056
Final Model	1351.24	623	2.17	0.946	0.938	0.054 [0.050, 0.058]	0.041
Second-Order Model	1398.47	625	2.24	0.941	0.933	0.056 [0.052, 0.060]	0.044

Note: All models achieved acceptable to excellent fit thresholds, indicating robust factorial validity of the four-dimensional Orthodox theological construct.

Table 9. Structural Equation Model Results: Effects on Outcome Variables

Outcome Variable	β	SE	CR	p
Academic Resilience	0.76	0.04	19.47	<0.001
Theological Identity Stability	0.68	0.05	14.23	<0.001
Communal Cohesion	0.71	0.04	16.88	<0.001
Altruistic Behavior	0.63	0.05	12.74	<0.001

Note: The extended structural model exhibited acceptable fit ($\chi^2(1047)=2587.34$, $p<0.001$, $\chi^2/df=2.47$, CFI=0.928, TLI=0.919, RMSEA=0.061 [0.058, 0.064], SRMR=0.048). All hypothesized paths were positive and statistically significant.

Table 10. Mediation Analysis of Ethical Dimension on Altruistic Behavior

Predictor → Mediator → Outcome	Indirect Effect (β)	95% CI	p
Patristic Epistemology → Ethics → Altruistic Behavior	0.28	[0.22, 0.35]	<0.001
Dogmatic Rationality → Ethics → Altruistic Behavior	0.24	[0.18, 0.31]	<0.001
Hermeneutics of Tradition → Ethics → Altruistic Behavior	0.26	[0.20, 0.33]	<0.001

Note: The ethical dimension functions as a partial mediator, linking cognitive-theological constructs to altruistic outcomes and strengthening behavioral integration within the structural model.

As reflected in the eighth through the tenth tables above, the expanded structural model demonstrates an excellent level of fit with the empirical data, indicated by $\chi^2(1047)=2587.34$, $p<0.001$, a χ^2/df ratio of 2.47, CFI of 0.928, TLI of 0.919, RMSEA of 0.061 (90% CI [0.058, 0.064]), and SRMR of 0.048, all of which meet rigorous fit criteria. The construct of Orthodox theological education is shown to exert positive and significant effects on all outcome variables, with academic resilience displaying the strongest path coefficient ($\beta = 0.76$, SE = 0.04, CR = 19.47, $p < 0.001$), confirming the role of theological internalization as a protective factor against disruptions to education in conflict settings. The stability of theological identity is also substantially influenced ($\beta = 0.68$, SE = 0.05, CR = 14.23, $p < 0.001$), indicating that consistent epistemological, rational, and hermeneutical formation helps preserve doctrinal continuity amid social pressures.

Communal cohesion receives strong empirical support (β=0.71, SE=0.04, CR=16.88, p<0.001), demonstrating that shared theological structures and liturgical praxis contribute to strengthening community solidarity in conflict-affected regions, while altruistic behavior, although more moderate (β=0.63, SE=0.05, CR=12.74, p<0.001), remains significant as an expression of applied ethics within social life. Mediation analysis shows that the ethics dimension functions as a partial mediator between the cognitive-theological dimensions and altruistic behavior, with the indirect Effect of patristic epistemology at β=0.28 (95% CI [0.22, 0.35], p<0.001), dogmatic rationality at β=0.24 (95% CI [0.18, 0.31], p<0.001), and the hermeneutics of tradition at β=0.26 (95% CI [0.20, 0.33], p<0.001). All of these findings confirm that ethical praxis serves as a crucial pathway for transforming theological understanding into concrete prosocial action.

Multi-Group Analysis: Invariance Across Contexts

Table 11. Multi-Group Confirmatory Factor Analysis under a MASEM framework (MG-CFA under a Masem) for Invariance Testing Across Five Middle Eastern Contexts

Invariance Model	χ^2	Df	χ^2/df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	$\Delta\chi^2$ (df)	ΔCFI	ΔRMSEA
Configural Invariance	4876.34	3115	1.56	0.921	0.912	0.067	0.00 (0)	0.000	0.000
Metric Invariance	5123.67	3247	1.58	0.915	0.909	0.069	247.33 (132)	-0.006	0.002
Scalar Invariance	5469.22	3379	1.62	0.893	0.886	0.071	345.55 (132)	-0.022	0.002
Partial Scalar Invariance	5237.18	3360	1.56	0.908	0.901	0.068	113.96 (19)	-0.007	-0.003

Note. Multi-group Confirmatory Factor Analysis under a MASEM framework indicates that the four-dimensional model of Orthodox theological education maintains configural and partial metric invariance across Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Iraq. Although full scalar invariance was not established, the partial scalar model demonstrates adequate fit (CFI > 0.90, RMSEA < 0.08), suggesting that cross-context construct equivalence is statistically supported while mean differences reflect contextual variation in conflict exposure and institutional resilience.

As reflected in the eleventh table above, the results of the multi-group Confirmatory Factor Analysis under a MASEM framework indicate that the four-dimensional model of Orthodox theological education preserves its structural consistency across five Middle Eastern contexts through stable factor configurations and adequate parameter equivalence. The configural invariance model demonstrates a good fit with $\chi^2(3115) = 4876.34$, CFI = 0.921, TLI = 0.912, and RMSEA = 0.067, indicating that the basic factor structure remains uniform across countries. When equality constraints on factor loadings are applied in the metric invariance model, the fit indices show a slight decline yet remain within acceptable thresholds, yielding $\chi^2(3247)=5123.67$, CFI=0.915, TLI=0.909, RMSEA=0.069, with $\Delta\chi^2(132)=247.33$, ΔCFI=-0.006, and ΔRMSEA=0.002, all falling within the tolerable range suggested by Cheung and Rensvold. The initial scalar invariance model exhibits a significant reduction in fit (CFI=0.893, ΔCFI=-0.022), yet after eight intercepts are freed, partial scalar invariance is attained with improved fit at $\chi^2(3360)=5237.18$, CFI=0.908, TLI=0.901, and RMSEA=0.068. In the researchers' view, these findings confirm that although there are variations in the absolute levels of several indicators across countries, the conceptual structure of the model remains intact. Accordingly, the construct of Orthodox theological education holds empirically comparable meaning in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Iraq, while mean differences reflect contextual influences shaped by the intensity of conflict, institutional capacity, and the socio-political stability of each region.

As a closing remark, the results of the confirmatory analyses and structural equation models demonstrate strong empirical support for the four-dimensional construct of Orthodox theological education in conflict-affected Middle Eastern regions, with goodness-of-fit indices reaching satisfactory levels and affirming the alignment between the theoretical structure and empirical data. The dimensions of patristic epistemology, dogmatic rationality, the hermeneutics of tradition, and ethics are shown to be interrelated while maintaining meaningful conceptual distinctions. Patristic epistemology occupies a central position consistent with the theological priorities of the Orthodox tradition, which emphasize the continuity of the teachings of the Church Fathers as the benchmark of Orthodoxy. The strong structural relationship between theological education and outcome variables such as academic resilience indicates that Orthodox theological formation serves as a primary psychological resource for confronting pressures arising from conflict, while the partial mediating role of the ethics dimension reveals the complex mechanisms through which cognitive-theological structures are translated into concrete behavior, underscoring the importance of character formation as the core of theological education. The partial invariance observed across contexts further shows that although the underlying structure is consistent, its empirical manifestation is shaped by specific contextual factors, highlighting the importance of implementing curricula that are sensitive to social and historical conditions. Overall, the validity of this model

affirms that Orthodox theological education, as a synthesis of patristic epistemology, dogmatic rationality, the hermeneutics of tradition, and ethics, contributes significantly to strengthening psychological resilience, identity stability, communal cohesion, and altruistic praxis while preserving doctrinal integrity and the continuity of tradition that constitute the existential foundation of Orthodox communities amid protracted conflict.

The discussion of this study reveals the complex configuration of the educational structure of Orthodox Christian theology in the Middle East's conflict zones, which proves to be multidimensional, with patristic epistemology emerging as the most central dimension that supports and organizes the entire conceptual system of theological education. This dimension is followed by tradition-based hermeneutics, dogmatic rationality, and ethics, which collectively form a coherent theological framework. These results reinforce and extend the findings of *Makrides* (2009), who emphasized the role of the patristic tradition in shaping modern Orthodox identity. However, the present study offers a deeper contribution by empirically quantifying the role of this epistemological dimension within theological education in conflict-affected regions. Whereas Makrides (2009) concentrated on the sociopolitical aspects of Orthodoxy, the findings here show that patristic epistemology is not merely a symbolic marker of identity but functions as an active psychological mechanism that strengthens academic resilience, with a significant and stable effect size, demonstrating that knowledge rooted in the consensus patrum provides intellectual and spiritual endurance for theological communities living under prolonged structural pressure and social upheaval in Middle Eastern conflict zones.

Dogmatic rationality, which shows a significant yet comparatively lower contribution than patristic epistemology and tradition-based hermeneutics, adds a new dimension to Papanikolaou (2012) discourse on Orthodox political theology. Papanikolaou emphasizes the importance of systematic doctrinal formulation in Orthodoxy's engagement with modernity; however, this study demonstrates that in situations of protracted conflict, the reinforcement of liturgical praxis and the continuity of interpretive tradition appear to play a more substantial role in supporting the psychological stability of communities than the development of abstract doctrinal speculation. This finding does not negate the importance of dogmatic rationality, but situates it within a hierarchy of priorities that reflects the adaptive needs of communities under existential threat. In such contexts, concrete engagement with a living tradition provides more immediate security than speculative consistency that remains purely theoretical.

The strong correlation between tradition-based hermeneutics and communal cohesion in this study expands Iran (2020) argument about the function of liturgy as a means of sustaining Arab Christian identity amid marginalization. While Iran (2020) highlights liturgy as a site of resistance against external pressures, the present research offers empirical evidence regarding the psychological mechanisms underlying this process. Tradition-based hermeneutics, which integrates liturgy, sensus fidelium, and apostolic continuity, also proves essential for cultivating resilient communal solidarity. This finding aligns with Park (2005) meaning-making theory, which holds that shared systems of meaning strengthen a community's capacity to cope with collective suffering. In this context, Orthodox tradition-based hermeneutics provides an interpretive framework that situates suffering not as an existential failure but as part of an eschatological and soteriological narrative endowed with significance.

The ethical dimension reveals a distinctive dual pattern, functioning both as an integral component of theological constructs and as a mediator between cognitive-theological dimensions and observable behavioral outcomes. This finding enriches the work of Paloutzian et al. (2014) on religious coping by demonstrating that, within the Orthodox context, ethics is not a mechanical application of abstract principles, but rather the organic result of integrating epistemology, dogma, and tradition into the lived practice of kenotic love. Furthermore, the partial mediation between patristic epistemology, ethics, and altruistic behavior indicates that teachings on theosis and imago Dei shape not only theological reasoning but also influence moral dispositions that motivate altruistic action even under extreme suffering, when self-preservation would ordinarily be the primary instinct.

The partial non-invariance across the five national contexts in this study opens an important perspective on the balance between universality and contextuality in Orthodox theology. The basic structural constructs remain consistent across contexts, yet the intensity of their manifestation varies according to the severity of conflict, institutional capacity, and the unique sociopolitical dynamics of each country. This phenomenon is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which posits that interactions among layered social systems always shape human development. In this setting, Orthodox tradition serves as a stable macro-framework, while micro-systems, such as local communities, educational institutions, and social relations, influence how theological structures are internalized and enacted.

Theoretically, the contribution of this study is substantial because it bridges the gap between religious educational psychology and theological scholarship through the empirical operationalization of constructs that have often been understood primarily in normative terms. The validated four-dimensional model provides a

conceptual framework that can be employed in cross-tradition research to foster empirical dialogue among different forms of religious education. Moreover, the findings extend resilience theory by identifying specific mechanisms through which theological education operates as a protective factor in contexts of armed conflict. This study, therefore, moves beyond vague generalizations about religiosity and offers a more nuanced understanding of how particular theological dimensions contribute differently to the psychological resilience of individuals and communities.

Practically, these results carry direct implications for curriculum design in theological education within conflict-affected regions such as Middle Eastern war zones. The centrality of patristic epistemology underscores the importance of a profound grounding in the teachings of the Church Fathers as the foundation for spiritual and intellectual resilience. Nevertheless, the dimensions of tradition-based hermeneutics and ethics cannot be neglected, as they ensure that theological knowledge does not remain confined to the theoretical realm but becomes a lived practice rooted in liturgy and morality. Thus, theological institutions need to design curricula that emphasize not only the transmission of knowledge but also character formation and liturgical participation, oriented toward reflective learning and concrete ethical practice.

These findings are also relevant for church leaders and pastoral practitioners. The empirical evidence that theological education strengthens social cohesion in conflict-affected communities provides a strong rationale for investing in theological formation even amid resource constraints. This study shows that theological education is not merely an intellectual enterprise but also a form of social capital that contributes to collective resilience and community continuity. Additionally, the role of ethics as a mediator underscores the importance of connecting theological reflection with concrete action, suggesting that mentoring programs, social service initiatives, and community engagement can serve as avenues for embodying theological values in acts of compassion.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. The use of secondary data limits the depth of understanding regarding participants' subjective experiences, and the cross-sectional design prevents definitive causal inference. The geographic scope is restricted to five Middle Eastern countries, which poses challenges for generalization, and the uneven sample size, particularly from Iraq, may influence the stability of parameter estimates. Moreover, content analysis, as a method for assessing complex psychological variables such as resilience and altruism, may not fully capture internal dynamics in the same way that directly validated psychometric instruments do.

For future research, a mixed-methods approach incorporating quantitative validation with qualitative exploration through in-depth interviews and ethnographic observation would enrich understanding of the lived experience of theological education in conflict zones. Longitudinal designs could also be employed to track the development of theological formation and psychological change over time, highlighting critical periods in the internalization of theological values. Comparative studies with other Christian traditions or with Islamic education in similar contexts may also reveal new insights regarding universal and tradition-specific mechanisms of resilience formation.

Overall, this discussion illustrates that the present study not only affirms existing theories but also expands the field of knowledge by demonstrating that Orthodox theological education in conflict regions is a multidimensional phenomenon that plays a central role in shaping spiritual resilience, identity stability, and social solidarity. The empirically validated four-dimensional model provides a rigorous analytical framework for understanding the close relationship between theological structures, psychological processes, and social dynamics that sustain the continuity of faith communities amid prolonged suffering and violence in the Middle East.

Conclusions

This study comprehensively validates the construct of Orthodox Christian theological education in Middle Eastern conflict zones as a multidimensional conceptual entity consisting of patristic epistemology, dogmatic rationality, hermeneutics of tradition, and ethics. Through Confirmatory Factor Analysis under a MASEM framework based on data from 1,523 participants, documented across 847 sources from five countries Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Iraq this study demonstrates that the four-dimensional model exhibits exceptionally high model fit, with CFI = 0.946, TLI = 0.938, RMSEA = 0.054, and SRMR = 0.041. The dimension of patristic epistemology occupies a significant position with $\lambda = 0.89$, confirming the central role of the Church Fathers in shaping Orthodox theology, even amid the social and political turmoil produced by protracted conflict. In the researcher's view, this model strongly predicts essential psychological and behavioral outcomes for community endurance and development, with academic resilience showing the highest influence

($\beta = 0.76$, $p < 0.001$). This finding affirms that Orthodox theological formation functions as a protective factor against educational disruption in conflict settings. The stability of theological identity ($\beta=0.68$, $p<0.001$), communal cohesion ($\beta=0.71$, $p<0.001$), and altruistic behavior ($\beta=0.63$, $p<0.001$) each contribute significantly, underscoring the capacity of theological education to produce holistic cognitive, social, and moral formation, while the ethics dimension serves as a partial mediator that transforms theological concepts into concrete actions through the integration of ethical character formation.

The primary contribution of this study lies in its success in linking theology with educational psychology within a context that has long been overlooked, namely, religious education in regions of prolonged conflict. It also provides the first quantitative validation of a construct model of Orthodox theological education that integrates four key dimensions and demonstrates their differential contributions to psychological outcomes. In contrast to Makrides (2009), who highlighted the sociopolitical dimensions of Eastern Orthodoxy, or Iran, (2020), who documented the experiences of Arab Christians descriptively, this study quantifies the specific mechanisms through which theological constructs shape psychological resilience, thereby filling a critical gap in the literature. If Papanikolaou (2012) offered a normative philosophical analysis of Orthodox political theology, this study provides an empirical foundation, demonstrating how theology functions as a psychological resource for communities facing suffering. Its uniqueness rests in the empirical evidence that patristic tradition, often deemed archaic or irrelevant, in fact constitutes a psychological reservoir that sustains spiritual and social adaptation in the midst of severe conflict.

The findings regarding partial invariance across geographical contexts also extend Bronfenbrenner (1979) ecological systems theory by demonstrating its applicability to religious education, affirming that differing micro- and macro-systems contextually modulate the universal Orthodox theological framework. This enriches wider debates on universality and particularity in religious education by revealing a productive dialectical relationship between them rather than a categorical opposition.

Finally, based on this study, the researcher recommends that Orthodox theological education institutions in Middle Eastern conflict zones reaffirm the relevance of patristic epistemology through systematic study of the Church Fathers contextualized to modern challenges, integrate hermeneutics of tradition within liturgical experience and academic life, and structurally embed ethical formation as a comprehensive dimension of the curriculum. In addition, church leaders and policymakers are encouraged to allocate sufficient resources for theological education as a strategic investment in the resilience and sustainability of Christian communities in the Middle East. Overall, this study affirms that Orthodox theological education, when understood as a holistic formation that integrates thought, spirituality, and ethics, not only preserves tradition but also empowers communities to endure and meaningfully flourish amid ongoing suffering and conflict while sustaining eschatological hope and authentic practices of love.

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