

Integrating Emotional Intelligence in Faith Formation

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Abstract

This article argues that Emotional Intelligence (EI) is underrepresented in Christian faith formation. It attributes this to historical, philosophical and cultural factors. The rise of mental health issues highlights the need for EI in faith formation. The article proposes a framework for incorporating EI into Christian faith formation, emphasizing self-awareness, empathy and emotional regulation. The Bible itself is a resource for developing EI. By integrating EI, Christian communities can empower individuals and revitalize faith formation practices. Future research should explore methods for integrating EI into faith formation contexts. It could lead to a more holistic approach to Christian faith formation.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence (EI), Christian Faith Formation, Self-awareness, Empathy, Emotional Regulation, Mental Health, Christian Communities.

Introduction

Daniel Goleman, a science writer and psychologist, first promoted the idea of emotional intelligence (EI) in his best-selling book *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* in 1995. It has since become a commonly used tool across many academic disciplines. EI is ‘the capacity to identify and regulate our own emotions, recognize the emotions of others and feel empathy toward them, and use these abilities to communicate effectively and build healthy, productive relationships

with others.’ (Corliss 2020, p. 3). This article begins to posit that religious formation methods do not adequately acknowledge the significance of emotional intelligence. It then goes on to make the case that religious formation centers and the Church should embrace the development of emotional intelligence. Finally, it offers suggestions for practical implementation and extra materials to integrate EI into developing a faith. This article also acknowledges that the importance of emotions in human relationships has been studied by numerous disciplines in recent decades, including EI. Scholars who have approached the study of emotions from the perspectives of virtue ethics and divine motivation theory, such as Linda Zagzebski (2004) and Robert C. Roberts (2003) have made significant contributions. The relationship between emotion and reason has been extended philosophically in the writings of Robert Gordon (1987), Patricia Greenspan (1988) and Robert Solomon (1976). Essential studies on emotions from experimental psychology, neuroscience, social psychology, and psychiatry have been published in the last few decades. Notable authors include Jonathan Haidt (2012), Batja Mesquita (2022), Bessel van der Kolk (2014), Antonio Damasio (2018), Lisa Feldman Barrett (2018), and Daniel Kahneman (2011). However, this article aims to draw attention to what seems to be an underrepresentation of purposeful, emotional training in forming faith.

Emotional Intelligence: An Underrepresented Category?

Christian faith formation practices and understandings have historically undervalued emotions due to several historical factors. Greek philosophy of antiquity placed reason above emotions, influencing much of modern Western intellectual and cultural thought. Reason is the charioteer in Plato’s well-known charioteer image, firmly grasping the reins of the two horses, which stand for the positive and negative facets of the soul’s emotions (Plato, *Phaedrus* 246b, 2022). The negative feelings are inconsistent and disturbing. Many scholars argue that Christian theologians were reluctant to attribute emotions to God, or at least emotions that resembled human emotions, because of the influence of Platonic, Aristotelean and Stoic philosophies (Harnack 1986, 207, 211-12; Moltmann 1993, 267-75; Matz and Thornhill 2019, 1-11; Mozley 1926, 7-126). However, other scholars contend that this so-called ‘Hellenization of the gospel’ concept has been overstated and that the development of Christian theology has revealed a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of God’s emotions than its critics have acknowledged (Weinandy 2000; Gavrilyuk 2004).

The Arian argument over Christ's deity contributed to the Christian tradition's supremacy of reason over emotion and cognition over affect. Instead of behavioral change, accurate belief emerged as the primary indicator of Christian identity (Kreider 2016). Aristotelean philosophy was incorporated into Christian theology during the medieval era, which increased the emphasis on the exact, propositional articulation of Christian doctrines. As Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and the English Reformers fought Roman Catholic ideas they perceived to be at odds with scripture, the Protestant Reformation carried this emphasis on right believing. Modern science and technology have strengthened the tendency to approach emotions suspiciously, which dates to the seventeenth century. The 'left' rational brain seems to be preferred by the emerging scientific method over the 'right' emotive and intuitive brain (McGilchrist 2009). The idea of emotional intelligence in contemporary psychology had to go over 'an entrenched view of emotions as destabilizing, disorganized forces that prevent logical reasoning' (Bracket et al. 2016, p.514).

Some of the more enthusiastic parts of the Great Awakenings in England and the American colonies in the eighteenth century contributed to fears that strong emotions in religion could be hazardous and divisive (Lovejoy 1969). Such religious 'enthusiasm' was seen by many of the more traditional clergy in the Church of England and the established churches in the colonies as a danger to orthodoxy, church order and a more logical form of religion. In his influential work, *Treatise of the Religious Affections*, Jonathan Edwards argued strongly for the rightful place of emotions in religious life. He did this even though he acknowledged the occasional periods of emotional extremes that occurred during the Great Awakening. He claimed that 'true religion, in great part, consists in holy affections and that suppressing religious emotions inhibits the life and power of religion and dampens the graces of many saints' (Edwards 2009, 95,121). Many religious members were cautious of emotion because of the nineteenth-century frontier revivals in Kentucky and Cane Ridge, Tennessee, which strongly emphasized making instant decisions for Christ and having emotional conversion experiences (Thompson 1963). A reaction against 'excessive concern for physical and emotional signs' emerged among leaders of the established churches in the twentieth century, following the Azusa Street revival of 1906 and the emergence of the modern Pentecostal movement, which stressed speaking in tongues as the 'initial physical evidence' of the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Dayton 1987, p.177).

Finally, social psychologists point to individualism, characterised by a strong sense of autonomy and self-directed action, as a potential factor. Individuals shaped by this worldview may be less attuned to receiving the thoughts and feelings of others while being highly aware of expressing their own (Markus and Kitayama 1991, p. 246). This emphasis on individual expression within an increasingly interconnected world can hinder cross-cultural understanding (Sampson 1989). Thus, these historical, philosophical, and cultural factors have likely resulted in the underrepresentation of emotions in Christian faith formation.

Emotional Intelligence: A Crucial Necessity

Several societal and religious movements emphasize the importance of EI. The ‘I Gen’ or ‘Gen Z’ generation spends much time on social media and less time with friends and family in person. According to reports, they are going through unprecedented levels of loneliness, despair, and anxiety (Twenge 2017). Although they are proficient at using technology, many of them lack social and verbal abilities. According to a meta-analysis of 72 prior studies, college students’ levels of empathy have decreased by 40% over the past 20 years, as determined by standard psychological tests (Turkle 2015; Konrath et al. 2014). There was a suggestion that the decline resulted from students interacting with one another less directly in person. The priests and religious are suffering from high levels of job discontent. Most of them suffer from compassion fatigue and require emotional support since they work in a field that can seem like a never-ending cycle of attempting to meet people’s expectations (Burns, Chapman, & Guthrie, 2013). There is evidence that the faith formation programs now in use in churches have not significantly changed the spiritual lives of people.

Willow Creek researchers opine that ‘increased participation in church activities by themselves barely moved our people to love God and others more’ (Hawkins & Parkinson, 2011, p. 17). The faith formation procedures used in most churches have not focused on training and cultivating healthy emotions. Church attendance and membership have generally been declining in the post-Covid environment. Through a thorough analysis of religious changes in the post-COVID situation, a Princeton scholar, Mark Chaves, notes that ‘no indicator of traditional religious belief or practice is going up. There is a rise in diffuse spirituality, but this should not be confused with a rise in conventional religiosity. If one exists, less religion is the trend (Chavez, 2011, 110).

These trends may indicate that churches need to give focused attention to the emotional as well as cognitive needs of the faithful.

Recent advances in cognitive psychology and neuroscience have demonstrated that human behavior and motivation are driven by emotion and desire. Western psychology and medicine have functioned with a Cartesian separation of mind and body, ignoring the emotions and their consequences on the mind and body, as Antonio Damasio argues in *Descartes' Error* (Damasio 1995). 'Emotions permeate our existence and significantly impact our decisions. Sensations give us essential information about the state of society in which we live and about continuous crises, threats and dangers that must be avoided' (Damasio, 2018, p. 139). We risk everything by ignoring them.

In his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, psychologist Daniel Kahneman makes a strong case for the idea that emotion influences intuitive decisions far more than previously acknowledged. Many decisions in economics, politics and ordinary life are guided directly by feelings and emotions rather than reasoning. In recognition of his groundbreaking studies on the influence of emotion and intuition on economic decision-making, Kahneman received the Nobel Prize in Economics. In her book *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain*, psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett of Northeastern University synthesizes recent social psychology and neuroscience research. Her studies in emotion science highlight the interdependencies between the body, mind, emotions and society. She concurs with her coworker Antonio Damasio's assessment that 'the mind requires passion for wisdom. Every decision is inextricably linked to affect' (Damasio, 1995; Barrett, 2018, 80). If appropriate emotions are necessary to inform wisdom, faith formation also requires this information.

Emotional Intelligence: Practical Implementations and Suggestions

The Bible portrays God as a being embodying the very essence of emotional intelligence. Unlike the capricious deities of some ancient mythologies, the Christian God displays perfect self-awareness (Ps 139:1-4). He intimately understands human thoughts and feelings (Ps 139:23). Passages like Isaiah 63:9 illustrate God's profound empathy for his people, sharing their burdens. Furthermore, God responds to human emotions with purpose. He rejoices over a repentant sinner (Lk 15:10) and expresses righteous anger towards injustice (Amos 5:24). These attributes of God – self-awareness, empathy, and appropriate emotional response – constitute the core of emotional intelligence. The

Bible further reveals God himself experiencing emotions such as joy and peace. He delights in his creation (Ps 104:31) and finds joy in the fellowship with his Son and the Holy Spirit (Jn 17:13). These emotions are not fleeting or reactive but intrinsic aspects of God's nature (McCullough, 2000). *Shalom* (peace) in the Old Testament signifies not merely the absence of conflict but a deep sense of wholeness, serenity, and flourishing that characterizes God himself (Hawthorne, 2004, p. 246). The experience of joy and peace by Christians, then, is not merely psychological well-being but a participation in the very essence of God (Wright, 2006).

Nurturing Emotional Intelligence

A cornerstone passage for understanding how to cultivate emotional intelligence is Philippians 4:4-9. Here, the Apostle Paul offers practical guidance for navigating challenging emotions. The passage emphasizes rejoicing (v. 4) as a central theme. At first glance, it may seem paradoxical to be commanded to feel joy, an emotion often perceived as beyond our control. However, Paul clarifies that rejoicing is not simply a spontaneous feeling, but an attitude cultivated through specific actions. The first action is prayer (v. 6). When we express our anxieties and concerns to God, we gain emotional distance from immediate pressures (Ellison, 1983). Gratitude (v. 6) is another crucial element. Recognizing and acknowledging God's blessings fosters a positive emotional state (Emmons & McCullough, 2004). The Holy Spirit's presence within believers (v. 7) empowers them to participate in the joy Jesus himself experiences in his relationship with the Father (Jn 17:13).

Directing Our Focus

Cultivating emotional intelligence requires an intentional focus on positive aspects. Cognitive psychology offers valuable insights into this process. Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman (2011) proposes a model where the quality of our lives (QL) can be understood as a product of three factors: the quality of the objects we pay attention to (Qobj), the quality of our attention itself (Qatt), and the amount of time we spend focusing (Tatt). For instance, dwelling on harmful social media content (low Qobj) with divided attention (low Qatt) for extended periods (high Tatt) will negatively impact our emotional well-being. Conversely, meditating on scripture (high Qobj) with focused attention (high Qatt) for a significant duration (high Tatt) will enhance our emotional

intelligence and overall well-being. Philippians 4:8 instructs believers to ‘think about these things.’ The Greek word here, *logizomai*, means ‘consider, meditate upon or reckon with’ (Rienecker & Rogers, 1976). Paul emphasizes the importance of directing our attention towards objects that will enhance our relationship with Christ and improve the quality of our lives. This aligns with the executive function in the prefrontal cortex, which allows us to focus on specific thoughts and emotions (Miyake et al., 2000).

The quality of attention (Qatt) also plays a crucial role. Cognitive psychologists distinguish between focal attention (consciously directing focus) and divided attention (being pulled towards distractions) (Siegel, 2018). Emotional intelligence involves managing our attention effectively, resisting the constant pull of notifications and distractions, and intentionally focusing on high-value objects like scripture and the character of God. The specific content of our focused attention is critical for cultivating emotional intelligence. Philippians 4:8 elaborates on what we should focus on true things (*aletheia*), worthy of respect (*semna*), just and righteous (*dikaia*), morally pure (*hagna*), lovely (*prosphelea*), admirable (*euphemea*), virtuous (*arete*) and praiseworthy (*epainos*) (Rienecker & Rogers, 1976). These qualities resonate with the classical Greek and Christian traditions that emphasize truth, goodness, and beauty (Sire, 1988).

Truth: Contemplating truths can provide stability and hope during challenging times. This includes doctrinal truths of Christianity, scientific discoveries revealing God’s creation, and personal truths about us and our life journeys. Reflecting on the Apostle’s Creed, for example, with its affirmations of Christ’s return and the resurrection of the body, can offer comfort in the face of loss or illness (Wright, 2010).

Goodness: The character of God exemplifies these qualities (Thiessen, 2008). Both secular and religious leaders are called to embody these virtues (1 Tim 3:8,11; Tit 2:2). Reflecting on such qualities and figures as Martin Luther King Jr. or Mother Teresa can inspire us and foster a sense of purpose (Morris, 2017).

Beauty: Beauty can be found in various forms: the visual and performing arts, music, nature, and even the beauty of good human character. Making conscious choices about the media we consume, our time on social media, and how we engage with nature can significantly impact our emotional well-being (Walton, 2017).

Philippians 4:8 goes beyond emphasizing qualities; it also encourages us to consider ‘whatever is admirable and well-spoken of’. This suggests the importance of learning from positive examples. Reading biographies of historical figures who displayed courage, integrity, and perseverance can inspire us and provide role models (McCall, 2013). Similarly, reflecting on personal experiences of God’s faithfulness in our lives can foster gratitude and emotional resilience (Ellison & Krause, 2007). The Bible offers a rich resource for cultivating emotional intelligence. By recognizing God as the ultimate source of emotional intelligence and following the practical steps outlined in Philippians 4:4-9, Christians can develop a deeper understanding and management of their emotions. Focusing on God’s character, cultivating an attitude of gratitude, and directing attention towards truth, goodness, and beauty are vital strategies for enhancing emotional intelligence and living a more fulfilling life (Worthington & Greenberg, 2018).

Conclusion

Christian faith formation has traditionally prioritized intellectual comprehension of religious doctrines. This article contends that EI, the ability to understand and manage one’s own emotions and the emotions of others, has been underrepresented in this process. The underrepresentation can be attributed to historical, philosophical and cultural factors. The rise of mental health issues in the contemporary world underscores the necessity of integrating EI into faith formation. Traditional methods, which may focus solely on cognitive assent to doctrines, might not adequately equip individuals to navigate the complex emotional challenges of modern life. This article proposes a framework for incorporating EI into Christian faith formation. Drawing on both psychological research on EI and biblical teachings, this framework emphasizes the cultivation of self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation. The Bible itself serves as a rich resource for developing EI. God exemplifies perfect emotional intelligence, and passages like Philippians 4:4-9 offer practical guidance for managing emotions. By integrating EI into faith formation, Christian communities can empower individuals to cultivate deeper relationships with God and others, ultimately leading to more fulfilling lives. This approach has the potential to revitalize faith formation programs and enhance the relevance of Christianity in the 21st century. Future research should explore the most effective methods for integrating EI into diverse faith formation contexts. This research could involve developing

age-appropriate curriculum materials, training clergy and religious leaders in EI principles, and conducting studies to assess the impact of EI-based faith formation programs on participants' emotional well-being and spiritual growth. It could contribute significantly to a more holistic approach to Christian faith formation, fostering intellectual understanding and emotional intelligence, ultimately leading to a more vibrant and impactful expression of Christian faith in the contemporary world.

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