

A Christian Appropriation of Montessori's Holistic Vision of Education

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Abstract: The Montessori Method is a widely recognized educational approach for young children around the world. There have been, however, few attempts to appropriate this comprehensive system of children's education into a Christian's educational philosophy. By surveying Montessori's holistic vision of education, this article attempts to use the Inverse Consistency Protocol to examine which aspects of this method can be adopted by the Christian educator. It is proposed that several principles may be appropriated into a Christian philosophy of education.

Keywords: Montessori, Holistic, Education, Christian, Appropriation

Introduction

Many words describe the Montessori approach to education: child-centered, self-directed, active-independent learning. When people think of Montessori, some envision aesthetically pleasing classrooms with natural-made toys, sensorial learning materials, and child-sized furniture, while others think of phrases such as maximum effort, practical life, and the absorbent mind. Although these concepts describe aspects of Montessori's approach, the core of her method was her holistic vision of education. This vision

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ultimately undergirds all of Montessori's principles and practices. By surveying Montessori's holistic vision of education, this article aims to appropriate this vision into a Christian philosophy of education by using the Inverse Consistency Protocol.²

The Inverse Consistency Protocol is a hermeneutical framework developed by John David Trentham, Associate Professor of Leadership and Discipleship at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. The framework assists Christians as they responsibly engage and interpret the social sciences with biblical discernment. The purpose of using the Inverse Consistency Protocol is to faithfully and constructively appropriate social scientific and human development models. The goal of this article is to employ the Inverse Consistency Protocol to evaluate Maria Montessori's method of education, namely her view of the child, the role of the teacher, and the prepared environment, to theologically discern what Christians can and cannot appropriate into a philosophy of education.

To accomplish this goal, this article first considers the background of Maria Montessori with a primary focus on her seminal work, *The Montessori Method*.³ Subsequently, by using the Inverse Consistency Protocol, Montessori's holistic vision of education is examined with the aim of articulating three central focus areas: her view of the child, the role of the teacher, and the prepared environment.⁴ In so doing, this article concludes with several ways

² The Inverse Consistency Protocol is a model developed by John David Trentham in his series of articles: "Reading the Social Sciences Theologically (Part 1): Approaching and Qualifying Models of Human Development," *Christian Education Journal* 16, no. 3 (2019): 458–475; "Reading the Social Sciences Theologically (Part 2): Engaging the Appropriating Models of Human Development," *Christian Education Journal* 16, no. 3 (2019): 476–494.

³ Maria Montessori, *The Montessori Method* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1912). This book is a translation of Montessori's earlier Italian edition, *Il Metodo della Pedagogia Scientifica applicato all'educazione infantile nelle Case dei Bambini*, published in 1909.

⁴ Chloë Marshall states, "Central to Montessori's method of education is the dynamic triad of child, teacher and environment" ("Montessori Education: A Review of the Evidence Base," *NPJ Science of Learning* 2, no. 11 [2017]: 1).

that principles of Montessori's educational approach can be appropriated into a Christian philosophy of education.

Background of Maria Montessori

Maria Montessori (1870–1952) was a pioneer thinker, an educational reformer, and a children's advocate. Having first trained as a medical doctor at the University of Rome, Montessori quickly turned her attention to the study of children's diseases. She frequently observed the children in Rome's insane asylums and was influenced by the pedagogical work of Itard⁵ and Edward Séguin.⁶ Montessori carried out their educational methods for special needs children and later implemented her own ideas in the State Orthophrenic School, which she directed for more than two years.⁷

After successfully educating special needs children through her respect for the child and her didactic learning materials, Montessori began to contemplate whether her method could be used for children without physical or mental disabilities.⁸ As a result, in 1907,

⁵ About Itard, Montessori states, "After this study of the methods in use throughout Europe, I concluded my experiments upon the deficient of Rome, and taught them throughout two years. I followed Séguin's book, and also derived much help from the remarkable experiments of Itard. Guided by the work of these two men, I manufactured a great variety of didactic material. These materials, which I have never seen complete in any institution, became in the hands of those who knew how to apply them, a most remarkable and efficient means, but unless rightly presented, they failed to attract the attention of the deficient" (*Montessori Method*, 36).

⁶ About Séguin, Montessori writes, "I became conversant with the special method of education devised for these unhappy little ones by Edward Séguin, and was led to study thoroughly the idea, then beginning to be prevalent among the physicians, of the efficacy of 'pedagogical treatment' for various morbid forms of disease such as deafness, paralysis, idiocy, rickets, etc." (*Montessori Method*, 31). She held a different view from her colleagues and concluded that "mental deficiency presented chiefly a pedagogical, rather than mainly a medical, problem" (31). She states, "But the merit of having completed a genuine educational system for deficient children was due to Edward Séguin, first a teacher and then a physician" (34).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁸ Montessori describes the history of methods in chapter 2 of *The Montessori Method*. She writes, "From the very beginning of my work

Montessori opened a school called *Casa dei Bambini* or “The Children’s House,” where she worked with disadvantaged children (ages 3–6) in the slums of Rome for two years.⁹ This school became the backdrop for the clinical observations that she documented in her book, *The Montessori Method*. Throughout her life, Montessori continued to refine her views and ultimately developed her own unified system of education that included her rationale and pedagogy, as well as her careful design of learning materials.¹⁰ Her model

with deficient children (1898 to 1900) I felt that the methods which I used had in them nothing peculiarly limited to the instruction of idiots. I believed that they contained educational principles *more rational* than those in use, so much more so, indeed, that through their means an inferior mentality would be able to grow and develop. This feeling, so deep as to be in the nature of an intuition, became my controlling idea after I left the school for deficient, and little by little, I became convinced that similar methods applied to normal children would develop or set free their personality in a marvellous and surprising way” (ibid., 32–33).

⁹ Montessori states, “This present study deals in part with the *method* used in experimental pedagogy, and is the result of my experiences during two years in the ‘Children’s Houses.’ I offer only a beginning of the method, which I have applied to children between the ages of three and six. But I believe that these tentative experiments, because of the surprising results which they have given, will be the means of inspiring a continuation of the work thus undertaken” (ibid., 30).

¹⁰ This assertion is made by Henry W. Holmes in the Introduction to Maria Montessori’s *The Montessori Method*, “But before Montessori, no one had produced a system in which the elements named above were combined. She conceived it, elaborated it into practice, and established it in schools” (xix). Holmes comments, “We have no other example of an educational system—original at least in its systematic wholeness and in its practical application—worked out and inaugurated by the feminine mind and hand” (xvii–xviii).

Several additional notable works by Maria Montessori include: *The Absorbent Mind* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), *The Advanced Montessori Method: Spontaneous Activity in Education* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1917), and *The Secret of Childhood* (Amsterdam: Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company, 2017).

proved effective in the Children's House¹¹ and her method quickly gained popularity.¹²

After years of observation and experimentation in the Children's House, Montessori combined several ideas to create a unified system that she later refers to as the Montessori method, in her book by the same title. The Montessori Method is unique in that it encapsulates the work of one woman who embedded her philosophy into her principles and practices.¹³ The Montessori Method was the product of Montessori and she herself "was her method."¹⁴ Montessori's view of children, their acute stages of development, and how they best learn was cultivated over many years. Montessori sought to promote holistic education and in so doing, began a new era of education that helped children reach their fullest potential in many areas of life.¹⁵ Although Montessori viewed her system as a unified whole, many

¹¹ Montessori writes, "The 'Children's House' has a twofold importance: the social importance which it assumes through its peculiarity of being a school within the house, and its purely pedagogic importance gained through its methods for the education of very young children, of which I now made a trial" (*Montessori Method*, 44).

¹² Angeline S. Lillard states, "Montessori's method quickly spread to serve different populations of children. In just five years, Montessori classrooms had opened round the world" ("Playful Learning and Montessori Education," *The NAMTA Journal* 38, no. 2 [2013]: 139).

¹³ About this uniqueness, Jaekuk Jeong states, "The genius of Montessori lies in her unified system knitting her philosophy into each of her principles and practices altogether" ("Montessori as a School Reform Alternative Reflecting Biblical Anthropology," *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 29, no. 3 [2020]: 311).

¹⁴ Jerome Berryman, "Montessori and Religious Education," *Religious Education* 75, no. 3 (1980): 299.

¹⁵ Ian Moll observes, "Montessori insisted that the method must lead to the realization of a child's full potential in all areas of life ('the whole child'), including health, social skills, physical coordination and all mental aspects (cognitive and emotive)" ("Towards a Constructivist Montessori Education," *Perspectives in Education* 22, no. 2 [2004]: 39).

people have evaluated Montessori's epistemology,¹⁶ metaphysics,¹⁷ and religion¹⁸ to gain a broader understanding of her methodology. Some of her principles have proved universal in scope whereas others were limited to a specific context.¹⁹

Montessori was a strong advocate for the holistic education of children regardless of socio-economic boundaries. She challenged the traditional classroom model of rote memorization and teacher-directed learning that pervaded the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²⁰ Despite the challenges for women in the academy, Montessori created a progressive system for child-directed education, leading the child toward independence.²¹ She trained teachers to carry

¹⁶ Emel Últanir, "An Epistemological Glance at the Constructivist Approach: Constructivist Learning in Dewey, Piaget, and Montessori," *International Journal of Instruction* 5, no. 2 (2012): 195–212.

¹⁷ Patrick Frierson, "Maria Montessori's Metaphysics of Life," *European Journal of Philosophy* 26, (2018): 991–1011.

¹⁸ Berryman, "Montessori and Religious Education," 294–307.

¹⁹ David Elkind asserts that the reception of Montessori's work has been met by two extremes: rejection and unquestioned acceptance. Elkind evaluates Montessori's contributions to the field of early childhood education and proposes change for some practices to reflect the current cultural context of contemporary children. ("Montessori Education: Abiding Contributions and Contemporary Challenges," *Young Children* 38, no. 2 [1983]: 3–10).

²⁰ Barbara Thayer-Bacon argued that even though Montessori was contemporary with John Dewey (father of pragmatism) and she, too, had much to add to the field of progressive/democratic education, her initial reception in America was short-lived after facing criticism from William H. Kilpatrick (student and colleague of Dewey), who claimed that Montessori's view of the child, role of the teacher, and curriculum proved "inadequate and unduly restrictive" ("Maria Montessori, John Dewey, and William H. Kilpatrick," *Education and Culture* 28, no. 1 [2012]: 15). Thayer-Bacon quoted Rita Kramer (one of Montessori's biographers) who commented that Montessori's "educational techniques were too much at variance with the prevailing American school philosophy, the late nineteenth-century progressive movement that saw schools primarily as instruments of social reform as articulated by Dewey and his followers in the early years of the (twentieth) century" (16).

²¹ Montessori states, "An educational method that shall have *liberty* as its basis must intervene to help the child to a conquest of these various

out her method, which ultimately led to the development of Montessori schools and the acceptance of her approach as a viable educational model around the world.²²

Regarding Montessori's holistic vision of education, her method is built on the premise of the liberty of the child and that if given the correct environment and proper encouragement, the student will learn.²³ As Thayer-Bacon summarizes, "Montessori discovered that preschool-age children have a strong desire to learn, and that they can learn on their own if placed in an environment that allows them the opportunity to do so."²⁴ This holistic vision of education was to nurture the physical, social, emotional, and spiritual development of children by providing opportunities for them to engage in a prepared

obstacles. In other words, his training must be such as shall help him to diminish, in a rational manner, the *social bonds*, which limit his activity. Little by little, as the child grows in such an atmosphere, his spontaneous manifestations will become more *clear, with the clearness of truth*, revealing his nature. For all these reasons, the first form of educational intervention must tend to lead the child toward independence" (*Montessori Method*, 95). She continues, "Any pedagogical action, if it is to be efficacious in the training of little children, must tend to *help* the children to advance upon this road of independence" (97).

²² According to Thayer-Bacon, "In January 1913, Montessori ran her first international teacher training program with students from all over the world (Germany, Switzerland, Ireland, Australia, Africa, India, and England, including 67 students from the U.S.), who went back to their home countries to start Montessori schools" ("Montessori, Dewey, and Kilpatrick," 8). Thayer-Bacon notes that there are now "over 3,000 Montessori schools in over 80 different countries" (4).

²³ Montessori states, "Even so those who teach little children too often have the idea that they are educating babies and seek to place themselves on the child's level by approaching him with games, and often with foolish stories. Instead of all this, we must know how to call to the *man* which lies dormant within the soul of the child. I felt this, intuitively, and believed that not the didactic material, but my voice which called to them, *awakened* the children, and encouraged them to use the didactic material, and through it, to educate themselves" (*Montessori Method*, 37). She continues, "The pedagogical method of *observation* has for its base the *liberty* of the child; the *liberty is activity*" (86).

²⁴ Thayer-Bacon, "Montessori, Dewey, and Kilpatrick," 7.

environment that supports their natural curiosity and instinctive desire to learn.²⁵

An Analysis Using the Inverse Consistency Protocol

The way that Christians have approached the social sciences has varied historically. Some have taken the position of integrating the social sciences with theology,²⁶ whereas others have posited that the secular sources of the social sciences must be rejected before any integration may be attempted.²⁷ Through the Inverse Consistency Protocol, Trentham proposes a third option that appropriates aspects of the social sciences upon careful evaluation and biblical reflection. Trentham summarizes, “This perspective reads social scientific literature with the presumption that a discerning interpretation will typically align neither with full commendation nor full condemnation.”²⁸ The Inverse Consistency Protocol is therefore a

²⁵ Montessori states, “The child is a body which grows, and a soul which develops, – these two forms, physiological and psychic, have one eternal font, life itself” (*Montessori Method*, 104). Montessori later writes, “Certainly here is the key to all pedagogy: To know how to recognize the precious instinct of concentration in order to make use of it in the teaching of reading, writing and counting and, later on, of grammar, arithmetic, foreign languages, science, etc. After all, every psychologist is of the opinion that there is only one way of teaching, that of arousing in the student the deepest interest and at the same time a constant and vivacious attention” (*The Child*, 3rd ed. [Adyar, Madras 20, India: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1961], 24).

²⁶ A spectrum outlining the various integration models is found in chapter two of James R. Estep and Jonathan H. Kim, *Christian Formation: Integrating Theology & Human Development* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 45–46.

²⁷ David Powlison, “Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies),” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 25, no. 2 (2007): 5–36. Powlison establishes three epistemological priorities for Christians to consider: (1) to articulate positive biblical truth, (2) to expose, debunk, and reinterpret alternative models, whether secular or religious, and (3) to learn what we can from defective models (13–14).

²⁸ Trentham, “Reading the Social Sciences Theologically (Part 2),” 482.

mediating position that allows for the Christian educator to appropriate principles and insights from the secular social sciences.²⁹

The goal of employing the Inverse Consistency Protocol is, as above, appropriation. About this, Trentham writes:

Christians who approach and engage social scientific models must do so with a keen sense of their distinctive doctrinal commitments and theological bearings, and also with an interest in being sharpened for more faithful service in God’s kingdom. The purpose of identifying and employing a guiding hermeneutical principle is to serve the end of constructive, faithful appropriation.³⁰

The inverse consistency protocol includes four phases for the Christian to evaluate human development models. The interpretive steps and aims are as follows:

Step one: Envision redemptive maturity. *Develop a thoroughgoing confessional-doctrinal vision and imagination for human development unto Christlikeness.*

Step two: Read for receptivity. *Gain a deep and thorough understanding of the proposed paradigm, with intellectual honesty and precision.*

Step three: Employ reflective discernment. *Interpret the paradigm from a critically-reflective and charitably-reflective perspective.*

²⁹ Trentham defines the principle: “Social science models of human development are typically oriented unto counter-biblical ideals, even while they may describe modes and means of growth that reflect authentic patterns of personal maturity” (“Reading the Social Sciences Theologically [Part 2],” 483). Typically, the social sciences will operate from a secular paradigm in opposition to biblical realities. However, due to preservation of the *imago Dei* in all humans as well as common notions and common grace, unbelievers can recognize God’s truth and “observe reality with legitimacy” (483). Therefore, Christians can critically engage with the social sciences and integrate aspects of these models into Christian thinking.

³⁰ Trentham, “Reading the Social Sciences Theologically (Part 2),” 487.

Step four: Identify appropriate outlets. *Carefully identify the various contexts and processes in which the model may be utilized to inform or enhance the practice and administration of Christian education.*³¹

By using the Inverse Consistency Protocol, Christians can responsibly engage with the task of interpreting the social sciences while still holding fast the faithful word (Tit 1:9).

In the pages that follow, these four steps are implemented in providing a theological analysis of the Montessori Method: (1) The Christian Holistic Vision of Education, (2) Montessori's Holistic Vision of Education, (3) A Christian Evaluation of Montessori's Holistic Vision of Education, and (4) A Christian Appropriation of Montessori's Holistic Vision of Education.

Step One: The Christian Holistic Vision of Education

Before considering Maria Montessori's holistic vision of the child, the Christian must develop an educational vision based on the biblical view of humanity. From the creation narrative recorded in Genesis 1–2, all humans were made in the image of God (*imago dei*) (Gen 1:27). As created image bearers, humans were to mirror and represent God. However, this image was distorted with the fall of mankind (Gen 3) and as such, humans are not able to completely reflect God's image as had been intended. Ultimately, the way for the image of God to be fully redeemed is through the person and work of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:21). Through the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, the believer takes part in a continual process of renewal through the work of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 3:18; 4:16). The full restoration and completion of the image of God will take place in the life to come (Rom 8:29–30; 1 John 3:2).³²

³¹ Trentham, "Reading the Social Sciences Theologically (Part 2)," 488.

³² George R. Knight states, "As a result, part of the educative function of redemption is to restore individuals to health in each of these aspects and in their total being. Restoration of the image, therefore, has social, spiritual, mental, and physical ramifications, as does education" (*Philosophy & Education: An Introduction in Christian Perspective* [Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews U P, 2006], 208).

Foundational to the many aspects of biblical anthropology is the concept of the individual as a holistic being made in the image of God.³³ Scripture describes humans as whole and unitary beings, complex yet one in personhood (e.g., Matt 10:28; 1 Cor 5:3; 3 John 2). As Anthony Hoekema states, “One of the most important aspects of the Christian view of man is that we must see him in his unity as a whole person.”³⁴ Although the Bible does seem to draw a distinction between the physical and nonphysical aspects of humans, these are still understood as inseparable elements (Deut 6:5; Matt 22:37). Hoekema asserts that the human is best viewed as a unitary being and the human person must be understood as an “embodied soul” or a “besouled body.”³⁵ Various theologians arrive at similar conclusions. For example, Lewis Sperry Chafer writes, “Divine revelation makes it clear that man is a unity—one being,”³⁶ and Charles Ryrie asserts that man is a bipartite unity or “material and immaterial combined to produce a single entity.”³⁷ In a similar vein, Gregg R. Allison asserts,

We human beings are not made in a piecemeal way and put together, like the many pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Rather, in our humanness, we are constructed holistically with a wholeness and completeness that

³³ Knight makes these assertions, “First, the Bible treats individuals as holistic units” (ibid., 208). He continues, “The whole person is important to God. Whatever affects one part of an individual affects the whole. Balance among the spiritual, social, physical, and mental aspects of a person is the ideal as it is seen in the development of Jesus (Luke 2:52)” (208).

³⁴ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 203.

³⁵ Ibid., 216. Hoekema proposes psychosomatic unity where humans have both a physical and mental/spiritual side that cannot be separated. He states, “Though the Bible does see man as a whole, it also recognizes that the human being has two sides: physical and nonphysical” (217).

³⁶ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology: Volume II—Angelology, Anthropology, Hamartiology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary P, 1947), 146.

³⁷ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 223.

does not allow us to be divided into this part or that part. We are human beings in our entirety . . . created in the image of God.³⁸

These theologians point to the fact that humans are holistic beings. Humans are composed of both material and immaterial aspects; they have a physical as well as a spiritual side (John 4:23–24). Both aspects are important for human persons to interact with and relate to God, others, and the world around them. If this is the case, then it corresponds that humans likewise learn best in a holistic manner, where the teacher seeks to engage not only the mind, but also the emotional and spiritual aspects of the student.

Having a solid biblical understanding of humans is essential before examining the various social sciences and their views of humanity. As Knight astutely observes, “It makes a great deal of difference in education if a student is viewed as Desmond Morris’s ‘naked ape’ or as a child of God.”³⁹ The Bible values children as individuals created in the image of God.⁴⁰ Children are holistic beings with both physical and nonphysical aspects (spiritual, emotional, cognitive, etc.). Children are created for relationship, with purpose, and intrinsically have potential (Ps 139:13–18; Eph 2:10). Jesus himself was quite clear about the value, dignity, and importance of children (Matt 18:2–5, 10, 14; 19:13–14).

Step Two: Montessori’s Holistic Vision of Education

Montessori’s vision of education was shaped through her eyes as a scientist. In many ways, her classroom served as her laboratory. There she was able to observe the children and their various developmental stages which she later termed “sensitive periods.”⁴¹ During these “periods of sensibility or sensitive periods,” the child develops rapidly and if given the right opportunities, can accomplish

³⁸ Gregg R. Allison, “Humanity, Sin, and Christian Education,” in *A Theology for Christian Education*, ed. James Riley Estep, Jr., Michael J. Anthony, and Gregg R. Allison (Nashville: B&H, 2008), 180.

³⁹ Knight, *Philosophy & Education*, 20.

⁴⁰ Knight comments, “Therefore, although people are twisted and lost as a result of the Fall, they are still human. They still have godlike potentials and characteristics” (ibid., 205).

⁴¹ Montessori, *Absorbent Mind*, 96.

age-appropriate activities.⁴² Montessori discovered that under certain circumstances (“a prepared environment”) and nurturing guidance and care from the teacher (whom she referred to as the “directress”⁴³), the child could realize his or her true potential. Ian Moll summarizes,

Careful, systematic observation of young children led Montessori to conclude that they realized their potential in an ongoing way through purposeful activity. Thus, the method that she developed is based on the principle that young children learn best in an environment that is nurturing and supportive, and that makes available to them materials providing experiences that are developmentally appropriate and demanding self-directed, independent learning. Montessori insisted that the method must lead to the realization of a child’s full potential in all areas of life (“the whole child”), including health, social skills, physical coordination and all mental aspects (cognitive and emotive). This notion of a holistic curriculum is central to Montessorian thinking, and leads to its emphasis on the ultimate integration of carefully sequenced exercises of practical life.⁴⁴

In this way, Montessori advocated a holistic education that was based firmly upon her empirical classroom observation.⁴⁵

⁴² Ron Miller states, “One of the guiding principles of Montessori pedagogy, the concept of ‘sensitive periods,’ expresses her observation that young children move through periods of development during which they are especially attuned to particular characteristics in the environment” (“Nourishing the Spiritual Embryo: The Educational Vision of Maria Montessori,” *Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice* 17, no. 2 [2004]: 18).

⁴³ Anne H. Adams notes, “The word, ‘teacher,’ was deliberately not employed by Montessori” because she believed that the teacher’s main task was not to teach, but to direct” (“Selected Principles and Methodology of Maria Montessori,” *Educational Horizons* 48, no. 4 [1970]: 125).

⁴⁴ Moll, “Towards a Constructivist Montessori Education,” 39.

⁴⁵ Montessori writes, “The method of observation is established upon one fundamental base — *the liberty of the pupils in their spontaneous manifestations*” (*Montessori Method*, 80).

Montessori's View of the Child

Montessori placed a high priority on the child and viewed children as separate from adults.⁴⁶ She compared the child to a caterpillar and the adult to a butterfly when she writes, "In the same way, the caterpillar and the butterfly are two creatures very different to look at and in the way they behave, yet the beauty of the butterfly comes from its life in the larval form, and not through any efforts it may make to imitate another butterfly."⁴⁷ This view was especially unique to Montessori during the age of industrialization. In this way, she went against the dominant culture's perspective of children and viewed them within their own specific stage of development, not merely as "little adults."⁴⁸ In a time when the study of early childhood education was not yet established, she viewed this specific stage in a child's life important to their present and long-term growth.⁴⁹ She

⁴⁶ Montessori states, "The child was only a 'future-being'. He was not envisaged except as one 'who is to become,' and therefore he was of no account until he had reached the stage in which he had become a man. Yet the child, like all other human beings, has a personality of his own" (*Child*, 7).

⁴⁷ Montessori, *Absorbent Mind*, 194.

⁴⁸ Adams notes the fundamental difference between a child and an adult. She concludes, "A child is not molded prematurely into the form of an adult; he is treated as a developing person rather than as one expected to behave and reason on a mature level" ("Principles and Methodology of Maria Montessori," 124).

⁴⁹ Montessori asserts, "The discovery that the child has a mind able to absorb on its own account produces a revolution in education" (*Absorbent Mind*, 28). She also states, "We all know that the age of development is the most important period of the whole life. Moral malnutrition and intoxication of the spirit as fatal for the soul of man as physical malnutrition is for the health of his body. Therefore, child-education is the most important problem of humanity" (*Child*, 10). In *The Child*, she continues, "We must now be content with a much more modest role, that required by the interpretation that Emerson gave of the message of Jesus Christ: Infancy is the eternal Messiah, which continuously comes back to the arms of degraded humanity in order to entice it back to heaven. If we consider the child in this light, we shall be forced to recognize, as an absolute and urgent necessity, that care must be given to childhood, creating for it a suitable world and suitable environment" (10).

sought to let the child develop naturally and to see life as a child would, still untainted by the norms of traditional school.⁵⁰

The Role of the Directress

Whereas traditional educational philosophies centered on the teacher's role as the sole dispenser of knowledge, Montessori proposed an alternative role.⁵¹ In Montessori classrooms, the directress serves as the guide who assists the children in their own innately driven quest for knowledge.⁵² As such, the directress is not to interrupt the children in their work.⁵³ The directress is not a dispassionate observer,⁵⁴ but rather the one who sets the scene so that

⁵⁰ Montessori describes public school education during her time, "In such a school, the children, like butterflies mounted on pins, are fastened each to his place, the desk, spreading the useless wings of barren and meaningless knowledge which they have acquired" (*Montessori Method*, 14).

⁵¹ Adams states, "The teacher in the early century in Europe was considered to be a stern dictator, given to lecturing and to frequent use of the rod" ("Principles and Methodology of Maria Montessori," 125). As such, Montessori writes, "Actual training and practice are necessary to fit for this method teachers who have not been prepared for scientific observation, and such training is especially necessary to those who have been accustomed to the old domineering methods of the common school" (*Montessori Method*, 88).

⁵² About the directress in a Montessori classroom, Montessori states, "In our system, she must become a passive, much more than an active, influence, and her passivity shall be composed of anxious scientific curiosity, and of absolute *respect* for the phenomenon which she wishes to observe. The teacher must understand and *feel* her position of *observer*: the *activity* must lie in the *phenomenon*" (*Montessori Method*, 87).

⁵³ Miller summarizes Montessori's approach and states, "'All beings develop by themselves' and adults 'cannot do better than not to interrupt that development'" ("Nourishing the Spiritual Embryo," 19).

⁵⁴ About the role of the directress, Montessori states, "But here a very important principle must not be forgotten—giving freedom to the child does not mean to abandon him to his own resources and perhaps to neglect him. The help that we give to the soul of the child must not be passive indifference to all the difficulties of its development. Rather we must second it with prudence and affectionate care. However, even by merely preparing with great care the environment of children, we shall have

the children can succeed on their own.⁵⁵ Just as an adult continually learns through experience and their own “work” (often “vocation” or “occupation”), children learn through their own work (often “play”).⁵⁶ In this way, children learn best and develop skills most rapidly through playful learning.⁵⁷ The teacher is not merely one who supervises the child, but rather the one who facilitates learning by means of guiding, helping, and encouraging the child as needed.⁵⁸

already done a great task, because the creation of a new world, a world of the children, is no easy accomplishment” (*Child*, 11).

⁵⁵ Montessori describes the directress, “She can not understand that her new task is apparently *passive*, like that of the astronomer who sits immovable before the telescope while the worlds whirl through space. This idea, that *life acts of itself*, and that in order to study it, to divine its secrets or to direct its activity, it is necessary to observe it and to understand it without intervening” (*Montessori Method*, 88). She continues, “The teacher has thus become a *director* of the spontaneous work of the children. She is not a *passive* force, a *silent* presence” (371).

⁵⁶ David Elkind notes Montessori’s conception of play was derived from nineteenth-century philosopher, Cesare Lombroso, who stated, “Play is for the child an occupation as serious, as important, as study is for the adult; play is in his means of development and he needs to play, just as the silkworm needs continually to eat leaves” (qtd. in “The Role of Play in Religious Education,” *Religious Education* 75, no. 3 [2006]: 284). Elkind also writes, “The conception of play, then, which was in vogue when Montessori wrote, held that it was the natural activity of the child and that its function was to prepare the child for adult life” (284).

⁵⁷ Lillard defines playful learning as “child centered, constructivist, affectively positive, and hands-on” (“Playful Learning and Montessori Education,” 138). Playful learning falls in between free and guided play. Lillard determines what aspects of a Montessori education relates to playful learning (overall structure, use of small objects for learning, individualized lessons, free choice, peer involvement, fun, and lack of extrinsic rewards) and what does not (having a specific set of materials, less free choice in interacting with materials, calling children’s activity ‘work,’ and lacking any pretend play” (163).

⁵⁸ Adams comments, “The Montessori directress is the passive partner, and the child is the active partner, the link between the directress and the child being the planned environment. The directress must encourage the child, yet not spoil him with too much praise. Furthermore, she is responsible for enforcing the boundaries of the planned environment and

The Prepared Environment

In a Montessori classroom, the setting plays a significant role in assisting the child in becoming an active and independent learner. This is referred to as the “prepared environment,” about which Montessori writes, “The first aim of the environment is, as far as it is possible, to render the growing child independent of the adult.”⁵⁹ Anne H. Adams describes this prepared environment as “a world in miniature, a created and tailored environment in which the child lives and grows.”⁶⁰ The Montessori classroom is intentionally designed as a home for children and is complete with child-sized furniture and practical life materials.⁶¹ There are numerous “shelf activities” that encourage a progression of learning where children develop autonomy as they freely choose their materials according to their interest.⁶² Montessori prioritizes the prepared environment to foster the child’s autonomy, creativity, and love for learning.⁶³ In addition, these materials are intended to develop the child’s fine and gross

for insuring the freedoms which this environment contains” (“Principles and Methodology of Maria Montessori,” 125).

⁵⁹ Maria Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood* (Amsterdam: Montessori-Pierson Publishing Company, 2017), 267.

⁶⁰ Adams, “Principles and Methodology of Maria Montessori,” 125.

⁶¹ About this, Adams states, “The Children’s House is a home of new dimensions where the adult world has been displaced in favor of the child’s world” (*ibid.*, 125). Montessori comments, “The principal modification in the matter of school furnishings is the abolition of desks, and benches or stationary chairs” (*Montessori Method*, 81).

⁶² Lillard describes the process: “Working materials, kept on shelves and freely available to the children, are organized into topics such as language, math, and so on. The materials are designed so that if children make mistakes, they can see and correct them without close teacher supervision or intervention” (“Playful Learning and Montessori Education,” 139).

⁶³ Montessori asserts, “Let us therefore discard our role of prison warden, and let us instead preoccupy ourselves with preparing an environment in which as far as possible we shall try not to harass him by our supervision and by our teaching. We must become persuaded that the more the environment corresponds to the needs of the child, the more limited becomes the activity of the teacher” (*Child*, 11).

motor skills while simultaneously providing the opportunity to gain sensory and practical life experiences.

In summary, through Montessori's unique perspective on the child, the role of the directress, and her approach regarding the classroom as a prepared environment, Montessori sought to nurture the physical, social, emotional, and spiritual aspects of children.⁶⁴

Step Three: A Christian Evaluation of Montessori's Holistic Vision of Education

In some respects, Montessori's holistic vision of education has stood the test of time and has proven effective in the world's eye among secular circles and international communities. Upon further examination from a Christian perspective, though, the question must be considered as to what aspects of Montessori's vision can be appropriated into a Christian philosophy of education. Montessori's holistic vision of education was built upon her view of children and was founded on her devout Roman Catholic beliefs.⁶⁵ Jaeuk Jeong, in his article, "Montessori as a School Reform Alternative Reflecting Biblical Anthropology," asserts, "The Montessori system was built upon the Christian theological anthropology that the main source of failure in our education is humanity's original sin and sins preventing us from fulfilling the *Imago Dei*."⁶⁶ Jeong's assertion is that Montessori's biblically-based anthropology of children stands in

⁶⁴ Montessori states, "Humanity shows itself in all its intellectual splendour during this tender age as the sun shows itself at the dawn, and the flower in the first unfolding of the petals; and we must *respect* religiously, reverently, these first indications of individuality. If any educational act is to be efficacious, it will be only that which tends to *help* toward the complete unfolding of this life" (*Montessori Method*, 87–88).

⁶⁵ Jeong states, "Though Montessori's worldview is devout Catholic Christian, she counterpoises her languages so deftly as to be acceptable to those with other religious background" ("Montessori Reflecting Biblical Anthropology," 312). Similarly, Miller notes, "It is significant that her teachings have been respected and even revered by people of many cultures and faiths, including Jews, Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists" ("Nourishing the Spiritual Embryo," 16).

⁶⁶ Jeong, "Montessori Reflecting Biblical Anthropology," 315.

stark contrast to other progressive educational models.⁶⁷ He concludes, “Though she didn’t use Christian theological jargons, what she highlights in the child is the *Imago Dei*, the center of the child’s whole being created after God’s image.”⁶⁸ This holistic understanding of the child is evident in Montessori’s educational practices.

Although Montessori was a scientist, she did not shy away from spirituality. Her method was a blend of the sacred and the secular, drawing from special revelation revealed in God’s Word and general observations found in the laws of nature.⁶⁹ In this sense, Montessori integrated multiple sources to create her own approach. Throughout her writings, she focused on the holistic nature of children by combining the psychological and spiritual with the physical aspects of development. In this way, Montessori’s holistic approach to education is quite similar to a biblical perspective. Just as Montessori viewed the child as a holistic being, so does the Christian. Furthermore, just as Montessori believed children have potential and intrinsic value, again, so does the Christian. This is not to say that Montessori held entirely to historic orthodox Christianity; she certainly did not. Yet when it comes to her holistic vision of education, her ideas align closely and are actually quite orthodox.

In addition to Montessori’s view of the student as a holistic being, two impactful aspects of her method are the role of the directress and the classroom setting as a prepared environment. Montessori sought to encourage spiritual formation in addition to physical and intellectual development of children.⁷⁰ She did this through self-

⁶⁷ Miller comments, “Montessori saw children growing from the inside out, from a spiritual source, where Dewey saw the human being developed through dialogue and negotiation with the social environment” (“Nourishing the Spiritual Embryo,” 20).

⁶⁸ Jeong, “Montessori Reflecting Biblical Anthropology,” 313–314.

⁶⁹ Miller notes that Montessori’s work, though resting on medical/psychological/biological insight which was ahead of her time, is also “laced with Biblical imagery and religious fervor. This respected physician/scientist would unflinchingly refer over and over again to God, Christ, Scripture, and various saints” (“Nourishing the Spiritual Embryo,” 15).

⁷⁰ Montessori states, “We have been mistaken in thinking that the natural education of children should be purely physical; the soul, too, has

directed activities and sensorial learning materials within the prepared environment. Miller states, “Montessori frequently commented that the child creates the adult—not, as our modern common sense has it, the other way around.”⁷¹ In her approach, the directress serves as a guide who assists children in their own process of learning.⁷² This is an aspect of Montessori’s method that warrants careful consideration from a biblical perspective.

Although the Christian educator understands that the teacher has multiple roles such as that of an instructor, encourager, equipper, guide, advocate, and mentor, one point of concern is that the child cannot construct his or her own reality.⁷³ Since Montessori’s method is constructivist in nature, it assumes the intrinsic goodness of children and that they construct their own education.⁷⁴ Fisher notes

its nature, which it was intended to perfect in the spiritual life, —the dominating power of humane existence throughout all time. . . . If physical care leads the child to take pleasure in bodily health, intellectual and moral care make possible for him the highest spiritual joy, and send him forward into a world where continual surprises and discoveries await him; not only in the external environment, but in the intimate recesses of his soul” (*Montessori Method*, 375–376).

⁷¹ Miller, “Nourishing the Spiritual Embryo,” 18.

⁷² In discussing the spirit of the teacher, Montessori states, “From the child itself he will learn how to perfect himself as an educator” (*Montessori Method*, 13).

⁷³ About this, Montessori asserts, “Each one of them perfects himself through his own powers, and goes forward guided by that inner force which distinguishes him as an individual” (*ibid.*, 374).

⁷⁴ Montessori states, “The children work by themselves, and, in doing so, make a conquest of active discipline, and independence in all the acts of daily life, just as through daily conquests they progress in intellectual development. Directed by an intelligent teacher, who watches over their physical development as well as over their intellectual and moral progress, children are able with our methods to arrive at a splendid physical development, and, in addition to this, there unfolds within them, in all its perfection, the soul, which distinguishes the human being” (*ibid.*, 375). Additionally, she writes elsewhere, “The most difficult thing is to make the teacher understand that if the child is to progress she must eliminate herself and give up those prerogatives that hitherto were considered to be the sacred rights of the teacher. She must clearly understand that she cannot have any immediate influence either upon the formation or upon the inner

that Montessori believed, “No human being is educated by anyone else. He must do it himself or it is never done.”⁷⁵ Similarly, Miller comments,

It is the environment that educates, not the teacher directly; more precisely, it is the child’s inherent formative energies, finding material in the environment to act upon purposefully, that calls or brings forth ... the child’s true nature. The educational process starts with the individual, with self-formation.⁷⁶

Although the practice of self-directed learning is a valuable method in education for student autonomy, it does not translate well for the Christian’s view of life and reality, especially when it comes to teaching biblical truth. As fallen and sinful people (Eph 4:18), humans—including children—are unable to grasp the mysteries of the gospel message (1 Cor 2:14). According to Scripture, the child will not arrive at a knowledge of the gospel message without someone teaching it to them (Rom 10:14; Acts 8:31). As such, the Christian educator is an integral part of the educational process. In contrast to Montessori’s approach, the Christian educator seeks opportunities to actively teach rather than passively guide.

Step Four: A Christian Appropriation of Montessori’s Holistic Vision of Education

With these considerations in mind, the Montessori Method can be carefully incorporated into a Christian educator’s philosophy of education, given the above caveat. As Knight astutely comments:

It is a part of the task of the Christian educator to evaluate the assumptions underlying these theories in the light of Christian philosophy, and then to build a personal educational theory that utilizes, where helpful, the discoveries of the educational philosophers and theorists. That conclusion does not imply the wholesale adoption

discipline of the students, and that her confidence must be placed and must rest in their hidden and latent energies” (*Child*, 25).

⁷⁵ Dorothy Canfield Fisher, *The Montessori Manual* (Chicago: W. E. Richardson Co., 1913), 19–20.

⁷⁶ Miller, “Nourishing the Spiritual Embryo,” 20.

of a theory, but rather the building of a theory of Christian education upon a Christian philosophic position.⁷⁷

In contrast to many educational theorists, Montessori's holistic vision of education is not all that far from what the Christian educator readily embraces. The major distinction is that the Christian educator will not accept Montessori's view that the child constructs his or her own reality. The Christian will reject Montessori's assertion that children are capable of learning—especially the gospel message—completely on their own, without the active teaching of an adult (or at the very least, a peer). In this way, Montessori's overarching holistic vision can be applied, while still rejecting this principle.⁷⁸

Montessori's overarching holistic vision of education can be appropriated in a variety of settings. Jeong asserts, "The Montessori Method can be proposed as one of the most feasible school reform alternatives."⁷⁹ Perhaps most simply, Montessori's holistic vision can be incorporated into early childhood and elementary education classrooms. However, it is not a far step to propose that her approach can be incorporated into a variety of Christian settings: church education,⁸⁰ secondary education, as well as higher education. The

⁷⁷ Knight, *Philosophy & Education*, 146.

⁷⁸ It is certainly true that some of Montessori's principles will not apply to culture today. Miller comments, "In assessing Montessori's vision . . . it is useful to separate the *principle* that the growing child requires a spiritual home that enables the true self to develop from the *prescription* of what that environment must entail" ("Nourishing the Spiritual Embryo," 20).

⁷⁹ Jeong, "Montessori Reflecting Biblical Anthropology," 323.

⁸⁰ Holly Allen discusses five models of church-based children's ministry in her chapter, "Curriculum and Children's Ministry," in *Mapping Out Curriculum in Your Church*, ed. James Riley Estep, Karen Lynn Estep, and M. Roger White (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2012), 239–252. What she describes as the Contemplative Approach aligns with Montessori principles and practices. Allen states, "This more contemplative approach gives children space—space to think, space to listen, space to be" (245). Examples of authors who use varieties of what Allen calls the Contemplative Approach include Catherine Stonehouse and Scottie May, *Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010) and Jerome Berryman, *Godly Play: A Way of Religious Education*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991). Others

holistic nature of the Montessori Method—although originally focused on children—is broadly applicable to many settings since adolescents and adults, like children, are holistic beings. Two specific ways in which this holistic vision of education can be applied are the role of the directress and the prepared environment.

Regarding the role of the directress, Christian educators would do well to prioritize student-centered learning. Although this looks different depending on the context, the Christian teacher can employ various projects and self-directed learning activities in the classroom. Some possible examples include actively encouraging students to find what interests them most, treating students as fellow image bearers, and providing opportunities for playful learning. As Christian educators facilitate learning by means of guiding, helping, and encouraging, they simultaneously embrace Montessori's holistic vision of education as well the biblical mandate to care for children as made in the image of God.

Regarding the role of the prepared environment, Christian educators can set the scene in such a way to maximize a child's learning potential. By using resources such as child-sized furniture and sensory learning materials, the teacher provides an atmosphere that encourages the enjoyment of learning. Simple steps such as adjusting the classroom lighting, providing practical life materials, and offering shelf activities that align with the student's interest and ability levels provide meaningful experiences for children to thrive. By providing an intentionally prepared environment, the Christian educator treats children in a way that encourages their independence, autonomy, creativity, and love for learning.

who have incorporated the teaching of Montessori in religious education include Sophia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi, *Teaching Doctrine and Liturgy: The Montessori Approach*, 2nd ed. (Staten Island: Alba House, 1964); Gianna Gobbi, *Listening to God with Children: The Montessori Method Applied to the Catechesis of Children* (Loveland, OH: Treehaus Communications; 2000), and Jeannine Schmid, *Religion, Montessori, and the Home*, 2nd ed. (New York: Benzinger, Inc., 1970).

Conclusion

Maria Montessori sought to provide a revolutionary approach to childhood education. Through her holistic vision of education—focused on physical, social, emotional, and spiritual development—Montessori provided opportunities for children to naturally develop their passion for learning. This holistic vision of education undergirded all aspects of Montessori’s method, principles, and practices. Although little has been written regarding a biblical analysis of the Montessori Method, this article has attempted to analyze her method on a small scale using Trentham’s Inverse Consistency Protocol. Specifically, this article has proposed that Montessori’s holistic vision of education can be appropriated into a Christian philosophy of education. Despite Montessori’s constructivist approach, her method provides key insights for the Christian educator, especially regarding the role of the directress and the prepared environment. As the Christian educator continually seeks to refine his or her approach to teaching, Montessori provides much-needed clarity on the importance of student-centered learning.