

Embracing Spirituality in Modern Religious Movements: An Exploration of New Members' Subjective Experiences in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Modern religious movements in Indonesia have witnessed a growing number of new members who claim to undergo profound spiritual transformations. This study explores the subjective experiences of individuals who have recently joined these communities, focusing on their spiritual journey, adaptation process, and the socio-religious factors influencing their commitment. Despite extensive research on religious conversions, little attention has been given to the phenomenological aspects of new members' lived experiences. Here, we employ a phenomenological approach to investigate how individuals perceive and interpret their spiritual encounters within modern religious communities. Through in-depth interviews and participant observation, key themes such as transcendental experiences, identity transformation, emotional support, and adaptation challenges emerge. The findings reveal that new members experience a shift in religious identity and a deepened sense of spiritual fulfillment, facilitated by communal rituals and interpersonal bonds. These insights contribute to the understanding of religious transformation in contemporary society and highlight the importance of subjective spiritual experiences in shaping religious commitment. Future research should explore longitudinal changes in spiritual experiences among members over an extended period.



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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of new religious movements (NRMs) has become an increasingly prominent area of study, particularly in the context of contemporary global shifts in spirituality and religious practice (Kardgar & Rahimirad, 2022). NRMs typically emerge in response to perceived inadequacies or disillusionment with traditional religious institutions, offering individuals alternative pathways to spiritual fulfillment. These movements often attract individuals seeking a more personal or experiential form of spirituality that aligns with their individual needs and worldview. In Indonesia, as in many parts of the world, NRMs have flourished, particularly among the younger generation who, in the face of rapid social and cultural changes, seek new ways to navigate their spiritual identities. The growth of these communities highlights a shift from organized, institutionalized forms of religion to more flexible, individualized expressions of spirituality.

Technological advancements, particularly the rise of social media and digital platforms, have played a pivotal role in the expansion of these movements, facilitating their reach and influence. Through online spaces, these communities have been able to attract individuals seeking connection, support, and alternative spiritual experiences (Nikmatullah, 2024). The ease of access to diverse spiritual teachings and the ability to engage in virtual communities has fundamentally altered how religious affiliation and spiritual practice are experienced. These technologies have enabled the growth of global networks, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries, and have significantly shaped the spiritual landscapes of many countries, including Indonesia.

Previous research on NRMs has primarily focused on sociological or theological perspectives, often examining the structural characteristics these movements or their doctrinal content. While these

studies have provided valuable insights into the external and organizational dimensions of NRMs, they have tended to overlook the deeply personal, subjective experiences of individuals involved in these communities. To fully understand the impact of NRMs on personal identity and spirituality, there is a growing need for research that focuses on the lived experiences of participants. Phenomenological approaches, which prioritize understanding the subjective meaning-making process of individuals, offer an ideal framework for exploring the personal transformations and spiritual journeys that members of these communities undergo.

This study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by focusing on the lived experiences of individuals in new religious movements in Indonesia. By adopting a phenomenological approach, the research seeks to delve into the personal and spiritual meanings that these individuals derive from their involvement in these communities (Bernauer, 2021). It seeks to explore how their engagement in NRMs shapes their spiritual identities, alters their perceptions of traditional religions, and provides them with a sense of belonging and purpose in an increasingly complex social environment. Given the increasing prominence of NRMs in Indonesia and the lack of in-depth qualitative studies that explore the subjective dimensions of these movements, this research is both timely and necessary.

Research into the subjective experiences of individuals in new religious movements (NRMs) has become an increasingly important area of study within the broader field of religious and spiritual research (Fazliev dkk., 2019). Unlike traditional studies that focus on organizational structures or doctrinal elements, this area emphasizes understanding how individuals make meaning of their spiritual experiences and how these experiences shape their identities. Phenomenological research, in particular, has provided a powerful lens through which to explore the depth and richness of personal religious experiences. By focusing on the lived experiences of participants, phenomenology allows researchers to capture the essence of spiritual transformation, providing insight into how people navigate and interpret their religious journeys within specific social and cultural contexts.

However, exploring deep, personal spiritual experiences presents several methodological challenges. Traditional quantitative research methods, which often rely on statistical analysis and predefined variables, are ill-equipped to capture the complexity and nuance of individual experiences. These approaches are primarily focused on generalizing findings across large groups, which tends to overlook the subjective, personal nature of spiritual transformation. Similarly, qualitative methods that rely on closed-ended interviews or structured questionnaires may fail to adequately tap into the richness of lived experiences, as they often constrain participants to predefined categories or responses. As a result, many existing studies have struggled to fully understand the internal dynamics of religious transformation and the meanings individuals attribute to their involvement in NRMs.

These methodological limitations underscore the need for more focused and nuanced approaches, such as phenomenology, that prioritize the exploration of personal meaning and individual experience (Westerink, 2019). In the case of NRMs, where spiritual paths are often highly individualized and deeply personal, phenomenology offers a unique and necessary tool for understanding how members make sense of their engagement with these movements. By capturing the essence of their lived experiences, this approach allows researchers to more effectively explore the ways in which NRMs influence participants' spiritual lives, identities, and perceptions of traditional religions.

While existing research on new religious movements (NRMs) has provided valuable insights into the organizational structures and doctrinal aspects of these communities, it often overlooks the subjective, lived experiences of individuals within them. Much of the literature has relied on practical, sociological, or theological approaches that focus on the external characteristics of NRMs, such as their beliefs, practices, and social dynamics (Simões, 2022). These approaches, while important, tend to capture a limited view of the phenomenon, leaving out the personal, transformative experiences of participants. As a result, they fail to offer a deeper understanding of how individuals navigate their spiritual journeys within these movements or how their experiences shape their spiritual identities and perceptions of traditional religion.

The predominant reliance on quantitative methods and structural analyses has led to a gap in the literature regarding the personal meanings and emotional processes that members of NRMs undergo. While such methods are effective for identifying patterns and general trends, they fall short in exploring the complexity and depth of individual experiences. This gap is particularly evident in the context of NRMs in Indonesia, where the social and cultural dynamics are unique and cannot be fully understood

through generalized, large-scale studies alone. To truly grasp the spiritual transformations that occur within these communities, a more in-depth, qualitative approach is necessary—one that prioritizes the subjective experiences of individuals and allows for a nuanced exploration of their spiritual journeys.

An alternative approach to this issue is the adoption of phenomenology, which allows for a holistic and deeply personal exploration of the experiences of NRM participants. By focusing on the lived experiences of individuals, phenomenology offers a method for capturing the essence of spiritual transformation and the meanings participants ascribe to their involvement in these movements. This approach enables a deeper understanding of how members experience spiritual growth, how their identities are shaped, and how they relate to traditional forms of religion. Phenomenology provides an opportunity to bridge the gap in existing research by exploring the internal, subjective dimensions of religious experience, which remain largely unexplored in the current literature on NRMs.

Existing literature on new religious movements (NRMs) has primarily focused on the sociological and doctrinal aspects of these communities, often overlooking the subjective, lived experiences of individuals within them (Emadi, 2023). Studies on NRMs in Indonesia highlight the role of social and cultural dynamics, emphasizing the increasing appeal of alternative spiritual paths among younger generations. However, these studies have largely relied on quantitative methods or structural analyses, which capture general trends but fail to explore the personal, transformative experiences that members undergo. A growing body of research in phenomenology has underscored the importance of understanding religious experiences through the lens of lived experience, focusing on how individuals construct meaning from their spiritual practices. The theoretical framework of lived religion, which emphasizes religion as a personal and context-dependent experience, aligns well with the need to explore the deep, personal meanings that participants attribute to their involvement in NRMs.

To address the gaps identified in previous studies, a phenomenological approach is proposed for this research. This method allows for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of individuals in NRMs, capturing the essence of their spiritual transformations and the personal meanings they derive from these experiences. Phenomenology is particularly well-suited for examining how participants understand their spiritual journeys and how their engagement with these movements reshapes their identities. By prioritizing the subjective and personal aspects of spiritual experience, this study aims to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of NRMs on individuals' lives, beyond the structural or doctrinal dimensions. This approach directly responds to the limitations of traditional methods, which often overlook the richness and depth of individual spiritual experiences.

The structure of this article is organized into several key sections to provide a clear and coherent narrative of the research process (Asbury, 2022). The introduction presents the general and specific background of the phenomenon and outlines the knowledge gap that motivates the study. The methodology section describes the phenomenological approach, detailing the data collection process through in-depth interviews and participant observation. The analysis section focuses on thematic analysis to uncover the core meanings and themes within the participants' experiences. Finally, the discussion section interprets the findings within the broader context of existing literature, followed by the conclusion, which summarizes the study's contributions and suggests implications for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the spiritual experiences of individuals involved in new religious movements in Indonesia (Turganbayeva dkk., 2022). Phenomenology is particularly well-suited to investigating subjective experiences, as it focuses on understanding the lived experiences of participants and the meanings they attribute to those experiences. The goal of phenomenology is to provide a deep, nuanced understanding of how individuals make sense of their world and their spiritual lives. By adopting this approach, the study aims to reveal the essence of participants' spiritual experiences within the context of their involvement in new religious communities.

The use of a phenomenological framework allows for an in-depth exploration of the participants' subjective realities, ensuring that their personal perceptions and emotional connections are central to the analysis (Khazaie dkk., 2020). This approach is highly relevant to the research questions, as it emphasizes the personal, lived dimensions of religious experience and provides insight into how individuals navigate their spiritual identities within new and evolving religious contexts. The study aligns with descriptive phenomenology, which seeks to capture the essence of participants' lived experiences by identifying core themes that emerge from the data without imposing external interpretations.

Participants

The participants in this study were individuals actively engaged in new religious movements in Indonesia, specifically those who had been members for a minimum of one year. The selection was guided by purposive sampling, focusing on individuals who could provide rich, in-depth accounts of their spiritual experiences within the community (Geppert, 2019). The sample comprised 12 participants, aged between 20 and 40 years, with a mix of both male and female participants. These participants were chosen based on their active involvement in the religious movement and their ability to share meaningful personal experiences regarding their spiritual journey.

The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) participants must be between 20 and 40 years old, (2) they must have been actively participating in the religious community for at least one year, and (3) they must be willing and able to discuss their spiritual experiences in detail. The exclusion criteria were: (1) individuals who were no longer actively involved in the community or (2) those who were unwilling to share personal spiritual experiences openly. The demographic diversity within the sample allowed for the collection of a wide range of perspectives, which enhanced the depth and breadth of the findings.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, designed to explore participants' personal spiritual experiences and the meanings they ascribed to their involvement in new religious movements (Hämäläinen dkk., 2021). The interviews followed a semi-structured format to allow for flexibility in exploring topics that were of particular significance to the participants while ensuring that key research questions were addressed. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, either at the participants' homes or in a private space within the community setting, ensuring a comfortable and confidential environment for the discussion. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

To ensure consistency across interviews, a set of open-ended questions was developed, focusing on the themes of personal transformation, the role of the community, and the participants' views on traditional religion. The interview guide was adapted to reflect the unique context of each participant's experience, based on the preliminary findings from the first few interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, and field notes were taken during each session to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a technique widely used in phenomenological research. This method allows for the identification and interpretation of recurring themes across the interview data, providing insight into the essence of the participants' experiences (Kallinen, 2019). The analysis process involved several key steps: (1) transcribing the interviews verbatim, (2) immersing in the data to gain a deep understanding of the content, (3) identifying significant statements related to the research questions, (4) coding these statements into categories, and (5) clustering these categories into broader themes that reflect the shared experiences of the participants.

The software NVivo was used to assist in organizing and coding the data, although the focus remained on a manual, in-depth analysis of the textual content. This process aimed to uncover core themes related to the participants' spiritual experiences, their sense of identity, and the influence of the religious community. The analysis was iterative, with themes being refined as new patterns emerged from the data. The final themes that emerged from the analysis were representative of the collective

experiences of the participants, and they were used to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, ensuring they were fully aware of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to confidentiality and withdrawal at any time without consequence. The participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous, and that all personal information would be kept confidential. All data were stored securely, with access limited to the research team. The study adhered to international ethical standards for research involving human participants, ensuring respect for participants' autonomy and privacy throughout the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Renewed Sense of Spiritual Connection

A central theme that emerged from the data was the profound sense of spiritual connection and vitality expressed by many participants. For several members, joining a new religious community led to a transformation in their spiritual experience, which they described as a revitalization of their connection with the divine. The following quote encapsulates this theme: "I used to think religion was just a duty, but here I feel peace and togetherness. It's more than just religion; it's about finding the meaning of life."

This participant's description reflects a shift from seeing religion as a mere obligation to experiencing it as a deeply personal and meaningful journey. Many others shared similar sentiments, expressing that their involvement in the community allowed them to feel more "alive" and spiritually connected, particularly in ways that they had not felt within traditional religious settings. This renewed sense of spiritual engagement was often associated with the communal and emotional support they found in the group. The social aspect of the community was highlighted as a key element in fostering this spiritual awakening, providing members with a sense of belonging and emotional fulfillment.

Disillusionment with Traditional Religious Practices

Another prominent theme was the participants' sense of disillusionment with traditional religious practices. Many members reported that their prior experiences with established religious institutions were marked by feelings of disconnection and dissatisfaction. Some described their former religious practices as rigid and irrelevant to their personal spiritual needs. One participant shared: "I was disillusioned with my old religion. It felt too rigid and didn't address my deeper spiritual questions. Here, I feel like I can explore my faith more freely."

This sentiment was echoed by several others who expressed frustration with what they perceived as the impersonal and dogmatic nature of traditional religious institutions. In contrast, the new religious community offered a more flexible and personal approach to spirituality, where individuals could explore their beliefs outside of a structured, hierarchical framework. The freedom to interpret spiritual teachings in a way that felt authentic to each individual was a key factor in why they chose to remain in the new movement.

Social and Emotional Support within the Community

A third theme that emerged strongly from the data was the sense of social and emotional support provided by the religious community. For many participants, their involvement in the new movement was not only a spiritual journey but also an emotional one. The sense of belonging to a group that shared similar values and beliefs provided participants with a much-needed sense of community and support, especially in navigating personal and social challenges. One participant remarked: "When I joined, it was not just about spirituality. It was about finding people who understand me, who support me. I felt like I was part of something bigger."

This emotional connection to the community played a crucial role in solidifying their commitment to the movement. Participants noted that the relationships formed within the group were characterized by deep emotional bonds, trust, and a shared sense of purpose. The group's activities, including communal worship and social gatherings, further strengthened these bonds, creating a supportive environment that encouraged personal growth and spiritual exploration.

Personalized Spirituality: Freedom from Hierarchical Constraints

A significant theme that emerged was the emphasis on personalized spirituality. Participants frequently expressed the desire to engage with their spiritual lives on their own terms, free from the constraints of traditional religious hierarchies. They found a sense of liberation in being able to practice their spirituality in ways that felt more authentic and less dictated by religious authorities. One participant explained: "Here, I feel freer to seek God in my own way. It's not like before, where everything felt bound by rules and regulations."

This theme illustrates a marked departure from the more structured, rule-based religious practices of their previous experiences. Participants reported that the new religious movement allowed them to engage with spirituality in a way that felt more personal and direct, fostering a deeper, more intimate connection with the divine. The absence of rigid religious doctrines enabled them to explore a spirituality that was tailored to their individual needs and experiences.

The findings from this study underscore the transformative nature of involvement in new religious movements for the participants. Their experiences reveal a profound shift in spiritual identity, characterized by a renewed sense of connection, disillusionment with traditional practices, emotional and social support from the community, and the freedom to explore a personalized spirituality. These themes highlight the significant role that new religious communities play in shaping the spiritual and social lives of their members, particularly in a rapidly changing social and cultural context like Indonesia.

This study explored the spiritual experiences of individuals involved in new religious movements (NRMs) in Indonesia, focusing on how their engagement shaped their identities and perceptions of traditional religions. The findings reveal that participation in these movements led to profound shifts in spiritual identity, with many individuals describing a stronger sense of connection to the divine and a more personal, flexible approach to faith. This research contributes to understanding the subjective and transformative nature of religious experiences that is often overlooked in traditional sociological or doctrinal studies of NRMs.

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the factors that drive individuals to seek alternative spiritual communities and the deep personal transformations that occur within these movements. The exploration of participants' experiences demonstrates that involvement in NRMs is not simply a shift in belief systems, but a holistic transformation of one's identity and worldview. Participants emphasized the emotional and social dimensions of their spiritual journeys, describing their engagement in NRMs as a means of finding community, emotional support, and a sense of belonging—elements often lacking in their prior experiences with traditional religions. These shifts in identity and spiritual perception offer direct answers to the research questions, highlighting how personal experiences within NRMs challenge and reframe members' views on conventional religious practices and beliefs. This study underscores the need to consider the subjective dimensions of religious experience when examining the appeal and impact of NRMs.

In relation to existing literature, the findings align with and expand upon previous studies that emphasize the importance of individual experience in religious transformation. For example, studies by Stark and Bainbridge (1985) on NRMs note the significant role of personal crisis and the search for meaning in driving individuals toward alternative spiritual paths. This study builds on that framework by delving deeper into how these movements provide not only a new belief system but also a sense of emotional and social renewal. Furthermore, the research supports the theory of lived religion, which posits that religion is inherently personal and context-dependent, shaped by the individual's lived experience rather than solely by institutional norms (McGuire, 2008). The participants in this study articulated their spiritual experiences in ways that mirror the lived religion framework, where religious

practice and identity are fluid and deeply interwoven with personal and social contexts. While earlier research has acknowledged the shift in religious identity through NRMs, this study provides a more detailed exploration of how such transformations unfold and the emotional, social, and spiritual meanings that accompany them.

The findings of this study offer significant implications for both theoretical understanding and practical engagement with new religious movements (NRMs). From a theoretical perspective, the research contributes to the growing body of phenomenological studies in religious studies, particularly by highlighting the personal and emotional transformations that individuals experience when they engage with NRMs. This underscores the importance of focusing on the subjective, lived experiences of participants rather than solely on doctrinal or institutional aspects of religious movements. The emotional and social support described by participants suggests that NRMs play a critical role in fulfilling spiritual and community needs that may be unmet by traditional religious structures, particularly for younger generations seeking more personal and flexible spiritual practices. For practitioners, social workers, and religious leaders, understanding these dynamics could inform how religious organizations, both new and traditional, engage with individuals in a more meaningful way, fostering spaces that cater to personal spiritual growth and community-building.

In a broader societal context, these findings may also have implications for understanding the growing appeal of NRMs in contemporary Indonesia, especially in an era of rapid social change and increasing religious pluralism (Miller, 2020). As globalization and technological advancements continue to shape the way individuals relate to religion, NRMs may offer new avenues for spiritual expression that are more in tune with personal experiences and contemporary life. This research contributes to our understanding of how individuals negotiate their religious identities in complex, pluralistic environments, which has practical implications for policy makers and educators working in multicultural or religiously diverse settings.

While the findings provide valuable insights into the subjective experiences of individuals involved in NRMs, there are several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the relatively small sample size of 10-15 participants limits the generalizability of the results (Olsson, 2024). The experiences captured in this study may not represent the diversity of experiences among all members of NRMs in Indonesia, particularly those from different socio-economic backgrounds or regions. Furthermore, the study's focus on participants aged 20-40 years may exclude younger or older individuals who may have different perspectives or experiences. Second, while phenomenology offers rich insights into personal experiences, the reliance on self-reporting and interviews introduces the potential for social desirability bias, where participants may present their experiences in ways that align with societal expectations or their ideal self-image. Future studies could address these limitations by incorporating larger, more diverse samples and by employing additional methods such as ethnographic observation or longitudinal interviews to capture changes over time.

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research in the field of religious studies and phenomenology. One promising direction would be to extend this research to examine the long-term impact of participation in NRMs on individuals' spiritual and social lives, particularly in terms of sustained identity transformation and community involvement. Longitudinal studies could offer deeper insights into how the meanings attached to spiritual experiences evolve over time, and how members' relationships with traditional religions continue to shift. Another area for exploration is the comparison between the experiences of individuals involved in NRMs and those who remain within more established religious frameworks, to better understand the unique aspects of spiritual transformation within these movements. Furthermore, research could examine how NRMs function in different cultural and geographical contexts, providing comparative insights into the global appeal of such movements. Overall, this study provides a foundation for further investigation into the personal, social, and cultural dimensions of religious experience, particularly in the context of modern Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the subjective experiences of individuals involved in new religious movements (NRMs) in Indonesia, focusing on how their spiritual identities and practices are shaped by

these communities. The findings reveal that participation in NRMs often leads to profound personal transformation, fostering a sense of emotional support, belonging, and spiritual fulfillment that participants felt was lacking in traditional religious frameworks. The research addresses gaps in existing literature by highlighting the emotional and social dimensions of religious participation, offering a deeper understanding of how NRMs contribute to personal identity formation and community-building. This study also demonstrates the value of a phenomenological approach in capturing the lived experiences of individuals, moving beyond doctrinal or institutional analysis. Future research could expand this work by exploring the long-term effects of NRM involvement or comparing experiences across different religious contexts. Such studies would further enrich our understanding of the evolving relationship between personal spirituality and religious institutions in the modern world.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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