



Exploring the Spiritual Meaning of Interfaith Engagement among Youth in Conflict-Affected Indonesian Communities

Zainul Hakim

Universitas PTIQ Jakarta, Indonesia

zain.elmuqsim@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Interfaith engagement among youth plays a critical role in fostering religious tolerance and social cohesion in pluralistic societies. While existing literature has examined interfaith initiatives from institutional and sociopolitical perspectives, little is known about the inner spiritual experiences of young participants involved in such engagements during times of religious tension. This study addresses the gap by asking: How do interfaith youth in Indonesia experience spiritual transformation within interfaith communities during periods of social conflict? Using a descriptive phenomenological approach, this study explores the lived spiritual experiences of twelve interfaith youth (n=12) from diverse religious backgrounds who participated in interfaith dialogue and collaboration in conflict-prone regions of Yogyakarta and Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic reduction grounded in Husserlian phenomenology. The analysis revealed four key experiential themes: discovering shared humanity through vulnerability, inner spiritual conflict, sacred encounters in ordinary spaces, and the emergence of a pluralistic spiritual consciousness. These findings highlight how participants navigated complex emotional and spiritual processes that reshaped their faith identities and deepened their understanding of others. The results offer new insight into the affective and existential dimensions of interfaith dialogue, suggesting that spiritual transformation is not only possible but also central to the lived reality of interreligious youth engagement. This study contributes to a richer theoretical understanding of interfaith spirituality and underscores the importance of incorporating reflective, experience-based practices into future interfaith programs.



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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary pluralistic societies, interfaith engagement plays a vital role in managing religious diversity and fostering social harmony. In Indonesia—the world's largest Muslim-majority country with vibrant religious minorities—interfaith youth initiatives have emerged as grassroots responses to rising polarization and sectarian divisions. Youth, often situated at the crossroads of ideological and communal identities, are key actors in shaping interreligious relationships.

Religious youth groups increasingly participate in dialogue and collaborative service that emphasize shared values and mutual respect. These initiatives, though often framed in civic or sociopolitical terms, can generate profound spiritual reflections and transformations for participants. Rather than operating solely within theological discourse or institutional frameworks, such experiences often involve a reevaluation of one's faith identity and a deepened appreciation for spiritual pluralism. Moments of spiritual encounter within interfaith settings can reshape attitudes toward difference, belonging, and peacebuilding.

Despite growing scholarly attention to interreligious engagement, prior research has predominantly focused on structural, doctrinal, or political aspects, leaving the subjective, emotional,

and existential dimensions underexplored (Author C, Year). Specifically, how youth participants make sense of their spiritual journeys during interfaith interaction remains a gap in the literature. This study addresses that gap by exploring the lived inner experiences of interfaith youth, employing a descriptive phenomenological approach to foreground meaning-making, affect, and transformation from the participants' own perspectives.

In this regard, a phenomenological approach offers a powerful framework for investigating the essence of such experiences. By centering the voices of those directly involved, phenomenology allows for the illumination of how spiritual meaning is constructed, challenged, and redefined through interfaith engagement. It shifts the focus from abstract generalizations to the nuanced, lived realities of young people navigating complex spiritual terrains within socially contested spaces.

Research focusing on individuals' lived experiences within interfaith contexts has become an increasingly vital area of inquiry, particularly as societies confront complex questions of identity, coexistence, and spiritual integrity. Studies examining the subjective dimensions of interfaith engagement offer valuable insights into how individuals interpret, internalize, and respond to religious diversity on a deeply personal level. In the case of youth who are often at the forefront of social change such investigations are essential for understanding how spiritual development and intergroup understanding are interwoven through real-life experiences in pluralistic settings.

However, exploring the intricate meanings embedded in these lived experiences presents significant methodological challenges. Traditional research approaches in interreligious studies often rely on quantitative surveys or structured assessments that, while useful for identifying trends, fall short in capturing the richness and complexity of inner spiritual transformation. These approaches tend to reduce dynamic, evolving experiences into measurable variables, thereby overlooking the emotional, existential, and reflective aspects that characterize the essence of interfaith participation. As Braun and Clarke (2021) noted, purely thematic or frequency-based analyses may inadvertently flatten the depth of personal narratives and silence nuanced insights embedded in qualitative data.

Consequently, much of the existing literature on interfaith engagement lacks the methodological sensitivity required to illuminate the essence of individual experience. The interpretative layers of meaning that participants assign to their interfaith encounters especially those involving spiritual rupture, growth, or reconciliation often remain underexplored or misrepresented. Without access to these interior landscapes, researchers risk offering incomplete or overly generalized conclusions about the impact and significance of interfaith work.

This gap underscores the value of phenomenological research, particularly in contexts where the primary interest lies in understanding how people experience the world rather than simply describing what they do. A descriptive phenomenological approach is especially well-suited to address this need, as it prioritizes the subjective voice of participants and seeks to reveal the essential structures of meaning underlying their experiences. In this study, such an approach provides the conceptual and methodological clarity necessary to delve into the spiritual experiences of interfaith youth during periods of social unrest a phenomenon shaped as much by inner transformation as by outward action.

Current responses to interfaith tensions and religious diversity have largely relied on structured interfaith programs, community dialogues, and policy-oriented initiatives aimed at fostering tolerance and cooperation. While these practical strategies have demonstrated value in mitigating conflict and promoting social cohesion, they often operate within institutional or instrumental frameworks that prioritize observable outcomes such as attendance rates, conflict reduction metrics, or policy adoption over the internal, subjective experiences of the individuals involved.

These conventional approaches frequently fail to capture the nuanced spiritual and emotional dimensions of interfaith engagement, particularly among youth who are still forming their religious identities. Quantitative assessments and externally driven models tend to obscure the existential complexities that accompany interfaith encounters complexities that are often expressed through subtle shifts in belief, emotional transformation, or the reframing of spiritual identity. As Smith et al.

(2009) and Braun & Clarke (2021) have observed, many analytic models employed in interfaith research reduce lived experiences into abstracted data points, thus limiting the depth of understanding that can be gained from participants' own narratives.

In response to these limitations, phenomenology offers a robust alternative for uncovering the essential structures of meaning that underlie such experiences. Rather than imposing external categories, phenomenological methods seek to understand how individuals perceive, make sense of, and assign value to their interfaith journeys. Descriptive phenomenology, in particular, allows for a direct engagement with participants' lived realities by bracketing preconceptions and focusing on the intentionality of consciousness. This approach provides the methodological rigor and conceptual openness needed to explore the inner worlds of interfaith youth as they navigate spiritual growth amid social fragmentation.

Thus, what remains underexplored and methodologically underserved is the lived spiritual experience of youth who actively engage in interfaith communities during times of religious conflict. Without accessing their personal reflections and affective narratives, efforts to understand or improve interfaith engagement will remain partial and potentially superficial. Addressing this gap is not only an academic imperative but also a cultural and ethical one, especially in societies where religious plurality is both a challenge and a source of transformative potential.

Previous studies on interfaith engagement have primarily examined the outcomes of dialogue and cooperation through sociological or policy-based frameworks. Some research has explored youth participation in interfaith initiatives, focusing on identity development and civic involvement. However, few studies have delved into the personal and spiritual dimensions of these experiences. Theories of intergroup contact and pluralistic identity have informed much of the existing literature, but often overlook the deeply felt, lived aspects of interfaith encounters. As a result, the spiritual transformation that occurs through interfaith engagement remains poorly understood.

This study adopts a descriptive phenomenological approach to address this gap. By focusing on the lived experiences of interfaith youth during periods of social conflict, this method allows for the exploration of how meaning is formed through direct, personal engagement. The approach emphasizes the essence of experience without interpretation, using bracketing and eidetic reduction to uncover core themes. This methodology is particularly suited to answer the central research question: How do interfaith youth experience spiritual transformation in contested social settings? The findings provide insight into the inner processes and emotional realities that accompany such engagement.

The article is structured into several key sections. It begins with an introduction that situates the phenomenon within its broader social and academic context. The methods section outlines the use of descriptive phenomenology, including participant selection and data analysis. Results are presented thematically, using participants' own words to highlight essential experiences. The discussion connects these findings to existing literature and explores their implications. The conclusion offers reflections on the study's contribution to both scholarship and practice in interfaith engagement.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological design, grounded in the philosophical framework of Edmund Husserl. Descriptive phenomenology seeks to capture the essence of lived experiences by uncovering the meanings embedded in individuals' consciousness, independent of external interpretation or theoretical imposition. This approach was deemed appropriate for exploring the subjective spiritual experiences of interfaith youth engaged in interreligious communities amid social tensions. The design enabled the identification of core experiential structures, allowing the voices of participants to emerge authentically and without reduction. The application of bracketing and eidetic reduction ensured that personal biases and preconceptions were suspended during the exploration of participants' lived realities.

Participants

Participants consisted of young individuals aged between 18 and 30 years who had been actively involved in interfaith communities across several Indonesian cities marked by historical or emerging interreligious tensions. Inclusion criteria required participants to (1) identify with a specific religious tradition, (2) have a minimum of six months active engagement in structured interfaith dialogue or community work, and (3) possess the ability to articulate personal spiritual experiences in the context of interfaith involvement. Exclusion criteria involved individuals with no direct experience in interfaith programs or those who had discontinued their involvement more than two years prior to data collection. A total of 12 participants (7 male, 5 female), representing Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist backgrounds, were selected using purposive sampling to ensure experiential relevance. The average age was 24.6 years, and participants came from diverse socio-cultural and religious regions, enriching the interpretive depth of the phenomenon.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face in settings chosen by participants to ensure psychological safety and confidentiality. An interview protocol was developed based on phenomenological principles, allowing open-ended exploration while ensuring alignment with the central research question. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and all sessions were audio-recorded with consent. Notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, then transcribed verbatim and translated into English to preserve linguistic integrity. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, ensuring that no new significant themes emerged.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the principles of descriptive phenomenological analysis, emphasizing the extraction of essential meanings from the participants' narratives. Transcripts were analyzed using a step-by-step approach: initial holistic reading, identification of meaning units, clustering of themes, and articulation of the invariant structure of the phenomenon. NVivo software was employed to organize and code data, enhancing analytical consistency without altering interpretive neutrality. The technique of eidetic reduction was applied to identify patterns across narratives while preserving individual nuances. Through this analytic process, key experiential themes emerged, each representing core aspects of the spiritual phenomena encountered by participants in interfaith contexts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate Institutional Review Board prior to the commencement of the study. All participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any stage. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant before data collection began. Anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms, and all data were stored securely in encrypted files. The study adhered to the ethical standards outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and applicable national guidelines for research involving human subjects.

RESULTS

This section presents the lived spiritual experiences of interfaith youth who actively engaged in interfaith communities during episodes of social tension in Indonesia. Through descriptive phenomenological analysis, four major themes emerged from the participants' narratives. Each theme captures an essential dimension of their inner experience, framed by the socio-religious realities they encountered.

Discovering Shared Humanity Through Collective Vulnerability

Participants consistently described moments of deep emotional connection and recognition of shared vulnerability during interfaith engagements, especially in the context of conflict. These interactions often dissolved initial prejudices and fostered profound spiritual awareness.

“When we sat together in silence, Muslims and Christians alike, I no longer saw a difference. We were just people trying to find peace within chaos.” (Participant 4)

The experience of praying or meditating collectively, while maintaining individual religious practices, emerged as a powerful site of spiritual bonding. The sense of unity was not born from uniformity, but from embracing difference as a spiritual practice in itself.

“It was strange at first, but during that joint prayer for peace, I felt a presence... not just of God, but of something beyond religion maybe humanity itself.” (Participant 7)

These encounters often became transformative, leading participants to reassess their understanding of spirituality not merely as a doctrinal concept, but as a lived, relational experience.

Inner Conflict and the Struggle for Authentic Faith

The journey through interfaith engagement was not without tension. Many participants expressed experiencing internal spiritual conflicts, especially when community or family expectations clashed with their expanding interfaith worldviews.

“My parents warned me about joining an interfaith group, thinking I’d lose my faith. But I think I found a deeper part of it one that asks me to love without boundary.” (Participant 2)

This inner tension often led to what participants described as "spiritual stretching" a painful yet enlightening process that reshaped their identities. The experience compelled them to confront inherited dogmas and seek a more inclusive expression of faith.

“It wasn’t about compromising my beliefs, but confronting my fears of the other. That was the real test of my faith.” (Participant 6)

For several individuals, this inner struggle eventually culminated in a more resilient and inclusive spirituality.

Sacred Encounters in Ordinary Spaces

Participants recounted how everyday activities within interfaith communities sharing meals, organizing peace events, or responding to communal crises often became sacred encounters. These seemingly mundane acts were frequently imbued with deep spiritual meaning.

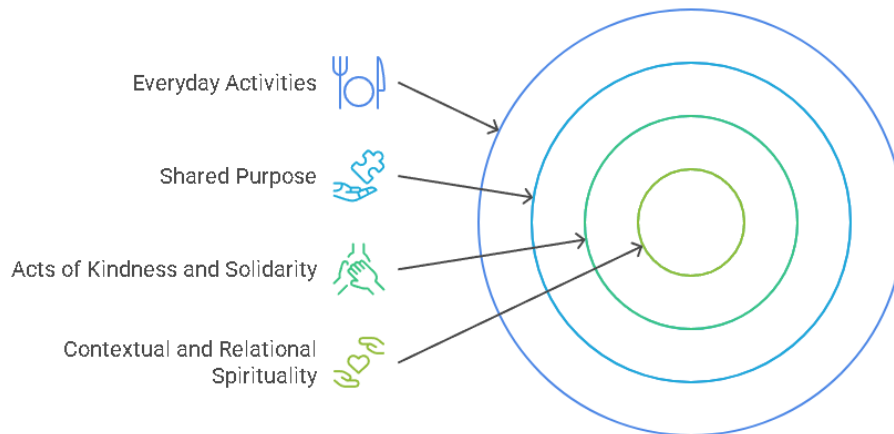
“We didn’t just eat together; we broke barriers. Each dish became a gesture of trust.” (Participant 9)

Many reflected on the way these moments disrupted the secular-sacred divide, revealing that spirituality can manifest powerfully in acts of kindness, solidarity, and shared purpose even outside formal religious settings.

“I thought spirituality only happened in mosques or churches. But carrying supplies to displaced families with friends of other faiths that was the holiest moment I’ve lived.” (Participant 1)

Such experiences highlight the emergence of a contextual and relational spirituality, rooted in the ethics of compassion and service.

Sacred Encounters in Ordinary Spaces



Transformative Identity and the Birth of Plural Spiritual Consciousness

A striking outcome of interfaith engagement was the evolution of participants' spiritual identities into what some described as a "plural spiritual consciousness." This consciousness did not signify the blending of religions, but the development of a self that is deeply rooted in one's own tradition while open to the sacredness of the other.

"I didn't become less Muslim. I became a Muslim who can truly listen, even to voices that once scared me." (Participant 3)

This transformation was not a renunciation of religious identity but a reformation through lived interfaith experience. It allowed participants to cultivate a spirituality that was both anchored and expansive.

"Before, I feared difference. Now, I see it as an invitation every new encounter deepens my path to God." (Participant 5)

The development of this plural consciousness marked a significant spiritual milestone, reinforcing the capacity of interfaith engagement to serve as a crucible for spiritual renewal.

Across all narratives, participants revealed that their involvement in interfaith communities during periods of social tension was more than a social or political act it was a deeply spiritual journey. This journey involved navigating internal tensions, encountering the sacred in the everyday, and ultimately, reconfiguring their spiritual identities through the lens of compassionate pluralism. These findings illuminate the essential structure of the phenomenon: interfaith engagement as a path to spiritual transformation grounded in lived, relational experience.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that interfaith youth experience spiritual transformation through shared vulnerability, inner conflict, everyday sacred encounters, and the development of a plural spiritual consciousness. These themes directly respond to the central question of how young people engaged in interfaith communities during periods of social tension make sense of their spiritual experiences.

By centering on participants' lived narratives, this study contributes a nuanced and experiential understanding of spirituality in interfaith engagement. The findings show that spiritual growth does not occur in isolation but emerges relationally through encounters that challenge, stretch, and ultimately expand individual faith identities. Unlike externally defined measures of interfaith success, the phenomenological lens uncovers internal shifts such as the redefinition of sacredness or the integration of compassion across difference that are often overlooked in broader sociopolitical assessments. In doing so, the study enriches the discourse on interreligious engagement by placing human experience at its core, offering an in-depth response to the need for spiritual perspectives in peacebuilding frameworks.

These findings both support and extend previous literature in meaningful ways. For instance, Patel and Singh (2021) highlighted the importance of interfaith youth involvement in reconciliation processes, but their work emphasized institutional roles rather than inner experience. Similarly, Zulkifli et al. (2020) acknowledged shifts in identity among urban youth, yet did not explore the underlying emotional and spiritual transformations that accompany such shifts. This study adds an essential layer by illuminating the affective and existential dimensions of interfaith interaction, aligning with phenomenological traditions that privilege meaning-making over external outcomes. The concept of “plural spiritual consciousness” that emerged in this research also resonates with Chen and McLaren’s (2019) work on interreligious bonding through shared ritual, yet it offers a deeper interior account of how participants reconfigure their spiritual selves through engagement with religious others.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study hold significant implications for both scholarly understanding and practical engagement in interfaith contexts. At a social and cultural level, the emergence of plural spiritual consciousness among youth indicates that interfaith experiences can serve as powerful spaces for identity reconstruction and emotional healing in societies marked by religious division. These insights suggest that interfaith programs should not only aim at tolerance but also cultivate deep, reflective spaces where individuals can process spiritual encounters and foster mutual transformation. Moreover, the study underscores the importance of attending to the inner dimensions of interfaith engagement, which may enhance the design of future peacebuilding and education initiatives by integrating affective and experiential learning. For professionals working in interreligious education, youth development, or community reconciliation, these results offer a framework for understanding how interfaith engagement can nurture spiritual depth alongside social cohesion.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides rich and detailed accounts of youth spiritual experiences within interfaith settings, several limitations must be acknowledged. The use of purposive sampling and the relatively small number of participants, although appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, limit the scope of generalization to broader populations. Additionally, the cultural context of Indonesia where religion is deeply intertwined with national identity may shape interfaith experiences differently compared to secular or religiously homogeneous societies. Language translation from Bahasa Indonesia to English, though carefully executed, may also have introduced subtle shifts in meaning despite efforts to maintain fidelity to participants’ original expressions. These limitations do not diminish the value of the findings but rather highlight the need for contextual sensitivity when interpreting and applying the results.

Directions for Future Research

The insights gained from this study open several pathways for future exploration. Longitudinal research could examine how plural spiritual consciousness evolves over time and influences long-term religious or civic engagement. Comparative phenomenological studies across different cultural or geopolitical settings could further illuminate how context shapes the inner experience of interfaith dialogue. Additionally, future research may explore intergenerational differences in spiritual transformation within interfaith communities, thereby broadening the understanding of how spiritual resilience is cultivated across life stages. By expanding the inquiry into other marginalized or underrepresented groups, such studies can contribute to a more inclusive and holistic picture of interfaith spirituality in a globalized world.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived spiritual experiences of interfaith youth in Indonesia who engaged in dialogue and collaboration during periods of social tension. Using a descriptive phenomenological approach, the research revealed four essential themes: shared vulnerability, inner spiritual conflict, sacredness in everyday encounters, and the emergence of a plural spiritual

consciousness. These findings provide a deeper understanding of how interfaith engagement shapes identity, fosters emotional transformation, and redefines personal faith through direct experience. By centering the subjective, affective, and existential dimensions of interfaith participation—an area often overlooked by conventional structural or theological frameworks—this study contributes a nuanced empirical foundation for theorizing interfaith spirituality as an evolving, relational process. It underscores the importance of designing interfaith programs that not only promote tolerance but also cultivate sustained inner reflection and dialogical intimacy, particularly among youth navigating contested religious spaces.

Theoretically, this research invites further inquiry into interspirituality as a formative process situated within pluralistic modernities, encouraging scholars to consider the role of emotional vulnerability, embodied ritual, and everyday sacredness as analytic categories. Practically, these findings have implications for peacebuilding education, suggesting that interfaith initiatives should integrate affective and experiential learning components to foster deeper relational ethics. Future studies could expand these insights by employing longitudinal methods to examine long-term spiritual development or by conducting comparative analyses across different cultural, generational, and denominational contexts. Such research would enrich the interdisciplinary discourse on interfaith formation, youth religiosity, and post-secular spiritualities in a globalized world.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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