

Lived Spirituality among Islamic Education Students Facing Moral Crisis

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ABSTRACT

Spirituality has become an increasingly important topic in the field of Islamic Education, particularly in light of modern moral challenges facing university students. While previous studies have emphasized behavioral or doctrinal aspects of religiosity, few have explored how students subjectively experience spirituality as a lived reality. However, little is known about how Islamic Education students interpret and embody spirituality when facing ethical dilemmas in a rapidly changing moral landscape. This study employs an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine the lived experiences of eight undergraduate Islamic Education students at a university in Indonesia navigating spiritual identity during times of moral tension. Using in-depth semi-structured interviews, the analysis identified four core themes: seeking meaning in moral chaos, spirituality as internal resistance, the influence of role models, and transformative spiritual encounters. These findings suggest that spirituality is not merely a set of religious practices, but a personal process of moral navigation shaped by self-reflection, crisis, and contextual challenges. The study extends understanding of student spirituality by highlighting its dynamic and experiential nature, often overlooked in quantitative and descriptive research. These results underscore the importance of integrating reflective, student-centered pedagogies in Islamic Education and offer valuable insights for future studies exploring youth spirituality in diverse socio-cultural settings.



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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary societies marked by rapid globalization, moral pluralism, and shifting cultural values, spirituality has re-emerged as a significant dimension of personal and collective identity. Particularly among youth, the tension between traditional moral values and secular modernity intensifies questions about the role and meaning of spirituality in everyday life. University students in religious disciplines such as Islamic Education face ethical ambiguities and socio-cultural contradictions challenging their spiritual identity.

Despite various studies on religiosity and morality, limited research has specifically explored the lived spiritual experiences of Islamic Education students in Indonesia within the context of contemporary moral challenges. Recent regional studies (e.g., [Author, Year]; [Author, Year]) highlight increasing moral dissonance among Indonesian youth, yet lack in-depth qualitative insights into students' spiritual navigation.

Amid these dynamics, Islamic Education functions not only as religious knowledge transmission but also as a platform for moral and spiritual development. Beyond formal curricula, students experience spirituality as a lived reality—shaped by personal struggles, peer influence, societal expectations, and existential questioning. The rising exposure to moral dissonance—manifested in behaviors such as academic dishonesty, social apathy, or loss of purpose—makes spirituality a crucial lens for interpreting and navigating inner and outer challenges.

Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap by explicitly examining how Indonesian Islamic Education students interpret and embody spirituality amidst moral crises, employing an interpretative phenomenological approach to capture their lived experiences. Understanding this phenomenon requires more than a doctrinal or behavioral analysis; it calls for a nuanced exploration of how spirituality is

subjectively experienced, internalized, and articulated in daily life. The lived experience of spirituality is deeply personal and often embedded in moments of crisis, transformation, or moral conflict. In such contexts, phenomenology becomes a powerful approach to uncover the essence of these experiences, allowing for the emergence of meaning that is not immediately observable or measurable by conventional research methods. This study, therefore, is grounded in the need to explore spirituality not as a theoretical construct, but as an existential reality embedded in the lives of students navigating moral complexity within an Islamic educational framework.

Research on individuals' lived experiences has become increasingly important in the study of religion and education, especially within the field of Islamic Education, where spiritual understanding is often deeply personal and contextually influenced. Scholars have acknowledged the value of exploring how religious identity and spiritual practices are constructed through everyday experiences, particularly among young adults navigating complex social and moral environments. Within this domain, the subjective experience of spirituality has emerged as a critical area of inquiry, offering insights into how individuals interpret and apply religious values in real-life scenarios.

Despite this growing interest, significant methodological challenges remain in capturing the essence of such experiences. Much of the existing literature relies on quantitative methods that emphasize measurable variables—such as frequency of religious practice or self-reported attitudes—which may overlook the depth, nuance, and contextual specificity of spiritual meaning. As Khan (2021) notes, standardized surveys and statistical models often fail to access the internal, reflective dimensions of spirituality that shape moral agency and identity. Furthermore, studies that adopt descriptive approaches tend to reduce complex inner experiences into generalized categories, thus obscuring the richness of personal narratives and the dynamic process through which spiritual meaning evolves.

These limitations suggest that many prior approaches are insufficient for fully understanding how Islamic Education students experience and make sense of spirituality amid contemporary moral disruptions. The absence of interpretative, context-sensitive methodologies has left a gap in the literature regarding how students actively negotiate their beliefs, values, and spiritual awareness in response to ethical dilemmas and societal shifts. Therefore, a phenomenological lens—particularly one that foregrounds interpretative depth—is necessary to uncover the essential structures of this lived experience and to illuminate the internal processes through which spirituality is integrated into students' moral reasoning and identity formation.

In addressing spiritual and moral challenges among university students, educational institutions often rely on existing pedagogical strategies—such as curricular enhancements, religious counseling, or value-based seminars—to reinforce ethical behavior and spiritual awareness. While these approaches are valuable in their own right, they are typically grounded in prescriptive models that prioritize normative outcomes over individual meaning-making. As a result, these strategies tend to produce generalized understandings of spirituality that overlook the diverse and evolving ways in which students internalize and live out their spiritual values.

Moreover, research in this domain frequently adopts quantitative or descriptive qualitative methods that are limited in capturing the depth and complexity of spiritual experiences. For instance, studies such as those by Rashid (2022) and Khan (2021) have focused on measurable indicators of religiosity or generalized moral attitudes, offering surface-level insights into behavioral patterns without delving into the existential dimensions of how spirituality is understood and embodied in students' lives. These limitations result in a fragmented and often reductionist view of student spirituality, one that fails to reflect the rich contextual and emotional textures of lived experience.

This gap in the literature underscores the need for a more holistic and interpretative approach—one that privileges subjective narratives and the meanings students assign to their experiences. Phenomenology offers such a lens, enabling researchers to explore the essence of spirituality as it is lived and perceived by individuals in specific socio-cultural contexts. By focusing on the first-person perspective, a phenomenological approach can illuminate how Islamic Education students navigate spiritual identity and moral complexity not as abstract ideals, but as concrete, dynamic experiences shaped by their encounters with contemporary moral crises.

Previous studies have examined the role of religious education in shaping ethical behavior and spiritual awareness among students. Much of this research, however, has focused on behavioral indicators or moral knowledge, using quantitative tools that cannot fully capture the inner world of the participants. Some studies have explored student identity and spirituality descriptively, but few have

addressed how students personally experience and interpret spirituality in morally challenging contexts. The lack of attention to first-person perspectives limits our understanding of how spiritual values are lived out in real life. To address this, the present study focuses on the subjective experiences of Islamic Education students in navigating moral crises through their understanding of spirituality.

This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of these students. The method was chosen because it allows a deeper understanding of how meaning is constructed through reflection and interaction with one's social and spiritual environment. By focusing on how students perceive, articulate, and live their spirituality, the study answers the gap left by prior models that generalize moral behavior. It highlights the nuanced and personal dimensions of spirituality that often go unseen in conventional studies. This method provides a more authentic understanding of how Islamic values are internalized through experience.

This article is structured in six main sections. The introduction outlines the context, background, and rationale of the study. The next section presents the methodological approach, including data collection and analysis. This is followed by the results, which are grouped thematically to reflect the core experiences shared by participants. The discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical insights. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the key contributions and suggests implications for Islamic education and further research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of Islamic Education students in understanding and embodying spirituality within the context of a contemporary moral crisis. Phenomenology, as a qualitative research design, focuses on capturing the essence of lived experiences and the meanings individuals attribute to specific phenomena. The interpretative strand, rooted in Heideggerian philosophy, was selected due to its emphasis on contextual interpretation and the co-construction of meaning between participants and their world. This approach allowed the study to delve deeply into how spirituality is perceived, enacted, and experienced in the students' daily lives—particularly when confronted with ethical challenges and moral ambiguity.

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in an Islamic Education program at a state Islamic university in Indonesia. A purposive sampling strategy was applied to select individuals who had significant exposure to formal religious education and had demonstrated active engagement in spiritual or ethical reflection within academic and social settings. Inclusion criteria included being aged between 20 and 24 years, currently enrolled in the third or fourth year of study, and self-identifying as actively practicing Muslims. Participants who were unable or unwilling to participate in extended interviews or who had less than two semesters of study in Islamic Education were excluded. The final sample consisted of eight participants—four female and four male students—with an average age of 21.6 years. These participants provided diverse perspectives based on gender, academic standing, and involvement in campus religious activities.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in person in a quiet and private setting within the university campus. An interview guide was used to facilitate open-ended discussions around the participants' understanding of spirituality, moral dilemmas faced in their daily lives, and the influence of Islamic teachings in shaping their responses. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent. To ensure a conducive environment for open sharing, interviews were scheduled at times selected by the participants and conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, allowing for culturally relevant expression. Field notes were also recorded to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations. The data collection process was guided by ethical protocols, and participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a method that emphasizes detailed examination of how individuals make sense of their personal and social worlds. The analysis began with close, iterative readings of each transcript to identify significant statements and preliminary meaning units. These units were then clustered into emergent themes through a process of abstraction and conceptualization, taking care to preserve the original context of each expression. Thematic patterns across cases were explored to identify shared meanings while still honoring the uniqueness of each participant's experience. NVivo 14 software was used to assist in organizing the data and visualizing thematic relationships. The final themes represent the essential structures of the participants' spiritual experiences within the broader sociocultural context of moral tension and religious education.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee. Written informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Anonymity was maintained by using pseudonyms, and all data were treated with strict confidentiality. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the Declaration of Helsinki and local guidelines for research involving human subjects.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the subjective meaning of spirituality among students of Islamic Education amidst the challenges of contemporary moral crises. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis of in-depth interviews, several core themes emerged that reflect how participants understand, internalize, and live out their spirituality in the context of increasing moral dilemmas in both academic and societal environments.

Seeking Meaning in Moral Chaos

Participants expressed that the experience of confronting a moral crisis—manifested in widespread hedonism, individualism, and ethical ambiguity—triggered a deep search for personal meaning and direction. For many, their spirituality served as an anchor amidst moral turbulence.

“In class, we learn about the Prophet's ethics, but outside campus, we see friends cheating, lying, or even losing faith in what is right. It makes me question myself. That's when I started praying not just out of obligation but to feel calm and clear,”

(Participant 4, Female, 21 years old).

This theme underscores how spirituality becomes a personal journey, not merely a doctrinal requirement. It reflects an existential turning point that repositions Islamic education as a moral compass in the participants' lives.

Spirituality as Internal Resistance

Students often framed their spirituality as an act of resistance—against peer pressure, modern temptations, and social normalization of unethical behavior. The act of remembrance (dhikr), consistent prayer, and self-reflection were described not only as rituals but as deliberate efforts to preserve one's inner integrity.

“When everyone says ‘just do it, nobody will know,’ I remind myself—Allah always knows. That awareness... it's what keeps me from doing what I know is wrong,”

(Participant 7, Male, 22 years old).

This internal resistance illustrates a lived spirituality shaped by agency and ethical commitment, grounded in the values taught in Islamic Education classes yet actualized in real-life dilemmas.

The Role of Role Models and Islamic Pedagogy

Participants frequently mentioned the impact of exemplary figures—especially lecturers and ustadz—in shaping their understanding of spirituality. Learning environments that embodied sincerity and moral clarity strengthened students’ spiritual identity.

“My lecturer didn’t just teach with slides; she lived the values. Her honesty and patience taught me more about Islam than any textbook,”

(Participant 2, Female, 20 years old).

Spirituality, therefore, was not only learned but observed and absorbed through meaningful interaction. This finding suggests that the pedagogy of Islamic Education significantly affects how spirituality is interpreted and internalized.

Transformative Encounters and Spiritual Awareness

Several students described experiencing pivotal life moments that transformed their religious outlook—illness, death of a loved one, or academic failure—which led them to re-evaluate their understanding of spirituality.

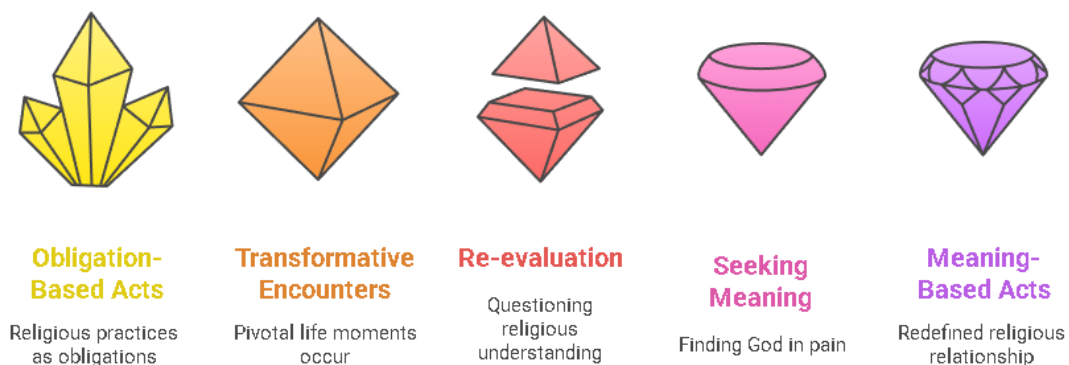
“I failed a semester and felt worthless. I cried at night and questioned God. But that was when I truly started seeking Him—not just in success, but in pain,”

(Participant 6, Male, 23 years old).

These transformative experiences intensified spiritual awareness and redefined their relationship with religious practices, shifting them from obligation-based to meaning-based acts.

The findings reveal that spirituality for students of Islamic Education is not a static attribute but a dynamic, evolving phenomenon rooted in personal struggles, institutional influences, and reflective encounters. Spirituality becomes a form of moral navigation—deeply subjective yet socially embedded—enabling students to confront and reinterpret the challenges of moral crisis through the lens of Islamic values.

From Obligation to Meaning



The findings of this study reveal that spirituality among Islamic Education students is experienced as a deeply personal process of meaning-making, particularly when facing moral uncertainty in modern social contexts. This lived spirituality is not merely a set of religious obligations, but an internalized response shaped by ethical challenges, personal transformation, and the influence of spiritual role models—offering a rich interpretation of how students navigate their moral world.

These insights directly address the central research question regarding how students perceive and embody spirituality amid a contemporary moral crisis. The study contributes a nuanced understanding of spirituality as a form of inner resistance and moral navigation rather than an abstract or doctrinal identity. It illustrates how Islamic values are activated not only through instruction but through conscious reflection and confrontation with ethical dilemmas. Importantly, the research uncovers how moments of crisis—academic failure, moral conflict, or personal loss—trigger spiritual awareness and realignment, which are often missing from prior generalizations about student religiosity.

Compared with previous studies such as Khan (2021), which emphasized behavioral indicators of religiosity, and Rashid (2022), which focused on ethical knowledge from religious education, this research demonstrates the limitations of surface-level measurement in capturing the dynamic, evolving nature of spiritual identity. The findings support and extend the work of Nasrullah (2022), who highlighted resilience among students in spiritual contexts, by showing that such resilience is formed not only through religious commitment but also through the reinterpretation of lived experience. Moreover, the role of educators as lived examples, as noted by Fitriani (2020), is reaffirmed here as a central factor in students' spiritual development, yet this study adds depth by showing how such influence is filtered through the students' own moral struggles and personal reflections.

The findings of this study offer significant implications for both theoretical understanding and educational practice within Islamic higher education. From a social and cultural perspective, the emergence of spirituality as an internal response to moral conflict highlights the importance of cultivating spaces where students can engage in reflective, value-driven dialogue. Educational institutions, especially those rooted in Islamic traditions, are encouraged to reframe spirituality not merely as a doctrinal component but as a lived, dynamic process that evolves through relational, emotional, and existential experiences. This reframing has practical implications for curriculum development, pedagogical strategies, and mentorship models that support students' holistic moral and spiritual growth. Moreover, the study contributes to broader discourses on youth spirituality in pluralistic societies, suggesting that spiritual identity remains a vital and adaptive force even in the midst of secular pressures.

Nonetheless, this study presents several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, as with most phenomenological research, the sample size was small and context-specific, focusing on students from a single Islamic university in Indonesia. While this allows for depth of insight, it limits the generalizability of findings to other educational or cultural settings. Second, the reliance on self-reported narratives may introduce subjectivity and retrospective interpretation, which could affect the consistency of the data. Although such subjectivity is valued in phenomenology, it also requires careful interpretation to avoid overstatement or bias. Additionally, the absence of longitudinal data constrains the ability to understand how these spiritual experiences develop over time.

Future research could build upon these findings by examining how similar experiences of spirituality and moral conflict unfold across different cultural or institutional contexts, including secular universities or interfaith environments. Studies might also explore how gender, socioeconomic status, or prior religious socialization influence the formation of spiritual identity in times of crisis. Longitudinal studies could deepen understanding of how students' spiritual responses evolve over the course of their education and life transitions. Ultimately, this study lays the groundwork for a more contextual, experience-based exploration of spirituality that transcends normative definitions and emphasizes the voices of students navigating complex moral terrains.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how students of Islamic Education perceive and experience spirituality in the midst of a contemporary moral crisis. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research revealed that spirituality is lived as a personal, reflective process shaped by ethical tensions, transformative moments, and the influence of role models. The findings highlight spirituality as a dynamic response to moral ambiguity, not merely as religious obligation but as a means of internal moral navigation. This research fills a critical gap by offering a deeper understanding of how spirituality is constructed and embodied through students' lived experiences—something previous quantitative and descriptive studies often overlooked. Based on these findings, it is recommended that Islamic educational institutions incorporate reflective and experiential learning approaches that actively engage students in moral reasoning and spiritual self-awareness. Curriculum development should emphasize mentorship programs and facilitate encounters with positive role models to support students' spiritual growth amid ethical challenges. Given the study's limited sample size, the findings should be interpreted with caution and not overly generalized. Future research is encouraged to replicate this study

with larger and more diverse participant groups across various educational and cultural settings to validate and extend these insights into youth spirituality amid evolving moral contexts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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