



Spiritual Encounters in Indonesian Communities: A Qualitative Study on Fostering Interfaith Empathy and Religious Diversity Awareness

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly pluralistic world, understanding how spiritual encounters shape perceptions of religious diversity is essential. This study aims to examine how personal spiritual experiences foster interfaith empathy and awareness of religious diversity. Employing a qualitative narrative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with participants from Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism to capture the transformative nature of such encounters. Data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns across faith traditions. Key findings indicate that spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, and religious conversion often transcend doctrinal boundaries, enabling recognition of shared values across religions. Interfaith dialogues—sometimes emerging from initial discomfort or conflict—were found to create opportunities for deeper connection and self-reflection. These experiences promoted emotional resonance, respect, and inclusive perspectives, shifting participants' views from rigid doctrinal identity toward more fluid, experience-based understandings of faith. The study contributes to discussions on religious pluralism by highlighting the value of subjective spiritual narratives. Practical implications include the integration of interfaith experiential learning into educational, community, and policy initiatives to enhance cooperation and mutual understanding in multicultural societies.



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INTRODUCTION

Religious pluralism is an increasingly significant phenomenon in both global and local contexts, driven by migration, globalization, and cultural interconnectedness (Lauwers, 2019; Samuri & Khan, 2021). These dynamics intensify encounters between individuals of different faiths, creating both tensions and opportunities for deeper interreligious understanding (Bingol dkk., 2024). While pluralism is often discussed from structural or theological perspectives, its impact on personal religious identity remains underexplored.

Existing scholarship has largely focused on interfaith dialogue, doctrinal comparison, and sociological patterns, yet has paid limited attention to the lived, subjective experiences that shape how individuals perceive and respond to religious diversity (Chitwood, 2022; Salim & Abdullah, 2025). Such experiences—prayer, meditation, conversion, or interfaith encounters—are deeply personal, emotionally charged, and embedded in cultural contexts, making them difficult to capture through quantitative measures alone.

This gap is compounded by the dominance of survey-based or structured-interview approaches, which tend to generalize experiences and overlook the nuanced ways people interpret their spirituality within pluralistic settings (Arbabzadah & Green, 2022; Chen & Dorairajoo, 2020). As a result, the intimate, transformative aspects of spiritual encounters—and their role in fostering empathy and religious diversity awareness—remain insufficiently examined.

To address this gap, the present study adopts a phenomenological approach, grounded in the descriptive tradition of Edmund Husserl, to explore how individuals from different faiths make meaning of their spiritual experiences in relation to other religions. This method allows for an in-depth understanding of the essence of such experiences, capturing emotional, cognitive, and ethical dimensions often missed in conventional research. By focusing on first-person narratives, the study seeks to contribute to religious pluralism scholarship through a more human-centered and experience-driven lens, offering insights relevant for interfaith education, community building, and policy development.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of individuals from diverse religious backgrounds, with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of how spiritual experiences shape perceptions of religious pluralism. Phenomenology was chosen as the research design because it allows for the in-depth exploration of lived experiences and the meanings participants attribute to them. The focus of phenomenology is on understanding how individuals experience and interpret phenomena in their daily lives (Chong dkk., 2023). By utilizing this approach, the study provided insights into how spiritual experiences influence interfaith understanding, a key element of the research questions.

Given the research context, a descriptive phenomenological approach was applied. This approach, based on the work of Edmund Husserl, focuses on describing the essence of lived experiences without imposing preconceptions or theories. The emphasis was on capturing the raw, first-person experiences of participants in relation to their religious beliefs and practices, with an aim to uncover common themes that transcend individual differences. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached—defined as the point where no new themes or significant variations emerged from subsequent interviews—ensuring sufficient depth and breadth in the data.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that individuals who had relevant experience and insight into the research topic were included. The sample consisted of 12 individuals from various religious traditions, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and those who had undergone religious conversion. All participants were adults aged between 25 and 60, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives while maintaining relevancy to the phenomenon of religious experience and pluralism.

The inclusion criteria required participants to have at least five years of active religious practice or engagement in their respective faith traditions. Individuals who had no religious affiliation or had practiced a religion for less than five years were excluded (Temirgazina dkk., 2023). Gender, age, and cultural background were not limiting factors, as the focus was on the diversity of spiritual experiences and perspectives on religious pluralism.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided flexibility while ensuring consistency in exploring participants' experiences. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in a quiet and private setting, allowing for an open and comfortable environment where participants could share their experiences freely. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The interview protocol was developed to include open-ended questions that encouraged participants to reflect on their spiritual experiences, beliefs, and perspectives on religious diversity.

The interviews were recorded with the participants' consent, and detailed notes were taken during each session. The main focus was to gather rich, descriptive accounts of personal spiritual experiences and how they shaped participants' views on pluralism and interfaith interactions (Roussou, 2021). No formal questionnaire or standardized scales were used; rather, the goal was to explore the unique perspectives of each participant through narrative responses.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is a widely used technique in phenomenological research. The analysis involved systematically identifying and categorizing the main themes and patterns that emerged from the interview data. The process began with a thorough reading of the transcribed interviews to gain a general understanding of the content, followed by coding significant statements related to participants' experiences of spirituality and pluralism.

Once the initial codes were generated, the data were further analyzed to group similar themes, and these themes were then examined to identify overarching patterns in the participants' experiences. Thematic analysis allowed for the extraction of essential meanings and interpretations from the data, while maintaining a focus on the participants' lived experiences. NVivo software was used to assist with organizing and managing the data, although the focus remained on interpreting the experiences and not on the software itself. Theme validation was ensured through triangulation of researchers, where two independent coders analyzed the transcripts and resolved discrepancies through discussion. Member checking was also conducted by sharing preliminary themes with selected participants to confirm accuracy and resonance with their lived experiences. An audit trail documenting coding decisions, theme development, and analytic reflections was maintained throughout the process.

Ethics

Ethical considerations were a central aspect of the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, ensuring that they understood the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to confidentiality. Participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous and that the data would be used solely for the purposes of this research.

Consent forms were signed, and the study adhered to ethical standards outlined by the relevant institutional review board (IRB) (Baysal dkk., 2024). The confidentiality of the participants' personal information was maintained throughout the study, and all data were securely stored and only accessible to the research team. The study complied with international ethical guidelines for qualitative research and phenomenological studies.

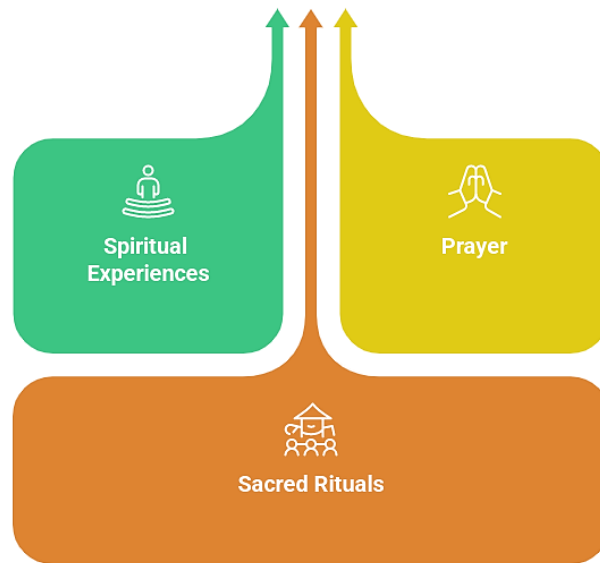
RESULTS

Spiritual Experiences as Catalysts for Interfaith Understanding

A central theme that emerged from the participants' narratives was the significant role that personal spiritual experiences play in fostering a deeper understanding of other religions. For many participants, their experiences of the divine, whether through meditation, prayer, or sacred rituals, were pivotal in shaping how they viewed religious diversity. As Participant 3 stated, "When I pray, I do not only seek personal peace, but I also recognize the divine in others, regardless of the faith they practice. My spiritual experiences allow me to see God in many forms." This reflects the way in which spiritual encounters transcended doctrinal boundaries and became a bridge for interfaith understanding.

Participant 5 elaborated on this sentiment, noting, "At times, during moments of silence in my worship, I feel a deep connection with people from all faiths. It is as if the divine speaks the same language across all religions." This suggests that personal religious experiences, though specific to one's tradition, can open pathways for empathy and respect toward other religious practices, thus supporting a pluralistic view of spirituality.

Pathways to Interfaith Harmony



The Role of Conversion in Shaping Pluralistic Views

Another key theme that surfaced was the transformative impact of religious conversion on participants' perceptions of religious pluralism. Several participants described how their own conversions – whether from one faith tradition to another or from a non-religious stance to a religious one – influenced their understanding of religious diversity. Participant 8 shared, “When I converted to Islam, I felt like I was gaining a deeper connection to the world, but also realized how much I had underestimated the beliefs of others before. Now, I appreciate how every religion holds a part of the truth.”

Similarly, Participant 2 noted, “Converting to Christianity helped me understand that belief is a journey, not a destination. It opened my eyes to the experiences of others in their spiritual paths, even if they are different from mine.” These accounts suggest that conversion, while deeply personal and often challenging, also facilitates a broader, more inclusive perspective on spirituality and religious identity.

Conflict and Resolution in Interfaith Dialogue

Another significant theme found in the data was the tension and potential conflict that can arise when individuals with different religious backgrounds engage with one another, particularly in contexts where religious beliefs are deeply held. However, participants also described moments of resolution where interfaith dialogue led to mutual understanding. Participant 7 recalled a challenging experience in an interfaith meeting: “At first, I felt uncomfortable hearing others speak about their religious practices so openly. But as we shared personal stories, I realized that we were more alike than different. It was a moment of profound connection.”

In contrast, Participant 4 discussed the role of conflict in pushing individuals to confront their assumptions, stating, “I was initially resistant to learning about other faiths, but the debates and differences became opportunities for me to reflect on my beliefs and grow.” This theme highlights the complex dynamics in interfaith interactions, where initial discomfort can lead to deeper insights and greater respect for other belief systems.

The data clearly illustrates how personal spiritual experiences, particularly those involving conversion and interfaith dialogue, contribute significantly to the participants' understanding of religious pluralism. These experiences often serve as catalysts for broadening one's view of religious diversity, creating spaces for empathy and interconnectedness among individuals of different faiths. The themes of transformative religious experiences, interfaith tension, and resolution underscore the intricate and often dynamic nature of religious interaction, offering new insights into how individuals from diverse religious backgrounds can contribute to a more pluralistic society.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that personal spiritual experiences play a pivotal role in shaping individuals' perceptions of religious pluralism (Foster, 2020). Participants consistently described how their encounters with the divine, through prayer, meditation, or other religious practices, fostered a sense of connection with individuals from different religious backgrounds. This understanding of spiritual interconnectedness highlights the transformative potential of religious experience in promoting empathy and respect across faiths. These findings address the research question regarding how personal spiritual experiences shape perceptions of religious diversity, demonstrating the profound impact that subjective religious encounters can have on fostering interfaith understanding.

The results of this study provide valuable insights into the role of personal religious experience in shaping a pluralistic worldview. As participants expressed, spiritual experiences allowed them to transcend doctrinal differences and perceive commonalities across religious traditions. This suggests that individual religious encounters are not only central to personal faith but also serve as a foundation for broader societal engagement with religious diversity. By emphasizing the personal and transformative nature of these experiences, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of religious pluralism, showing that religious experiences can facilitate a more inclusive and empathetic perspective on interfaith relations. These findings challenge the reductionist approach to religious diversity, advocating for a more holistic, experience-based exploration of the phenomenon.

The findings align with, and expand upon, existing literature on religious experience and pluralism. Scholars such as Moloney (2022) have highlighted the significance of personal, lived religious experiences in shaping individuals' understanding of the divine and their relationships with others. James, in particular, emphasized the importance of the subjective nature of religious experience in fostering spiritual connections beyond specific religious doctrines. Similarly, Eliade's work on the "sacred and the profane" underscores how religious experiences can transcend cultural and doctrinal boundaries, suggesting that the divine can be encountered in various forms across different faiths. This study supports these theoretical perspectives by showing that personal spiritual encounters are not only transformative for the individual but also foster empathy and understanding in interfaith contexts. While previous research has explored religious pluralism primarily through social or theological lenses, this study demonstrates the importance of considering the lived experiences of individuals, thus enriching the broader discourse on religious diversity.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study have both theoretical and practical implications for the understanding of religious pluralism. From a theoretical standpoint, the results underscore the importance of considering individual, lived experiences when examining religious diversity. These experiences, whether positive or challenging, can significantly shape how individuals perceive other religious traditions and engage in interfaith dialogue (Robinson & Golphin, 2021). On a practical level, the study highlights the potential for spiritual experiences to foster greater empathy and understanding across faiths, which can have profound implications for promoting peaceful coexistence in multicultural societies. For educators, religious leaders, and policymakers, these findings suggest that nurturing an individual's personal spiritual encounters could play a key role in encouraging interfaith harmony and cooperation.

The findings are also relevant to broader societal and cultural contexts. As global migration increases and societies become more pluralistic, understanding how individuals from different religious backgrounds navigate their beliefs and perceptions of others is crucial (Juergensmeyer, 2021). The study suggests that fostering an environment where individuals are encouraged to reflect on and share their spiritual experiences may help reduce prejudices and misconceptions. Moreover, this approach can contribute to the development of inclusive practices that embrace the diversity of religious beliefs and practices. These implications extend beyond academic discourse, offering practical strategies for promoting interfaith dialogue and understanding in various social and professional contexts.

Limitations of the Study

While the findings offer valuable insights, there are limitations that must be acknowledged. One of the primary limitations is the relatively small sample size, which may not fully represent the diversity of religious experiences in the broader population. The study focused on individuals who had significant personal religious experiences, and therefore, it may not reflect the experiences of individuals with more passive or less engaged religious lives. Additionally, the research was conducted within a specific cultural and geographical context, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural settings. The reliance on self-reported data, while valuable in capturing personal experiences, may also introduce biases or selective memory. These limitations suggest that further research with larger, more diverse samples and in different cultural contexts is necessary to expand upon the findings.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The insights garnered from this study open several avenues for future research. Future studies could explore the intersection of personal spiritual experiences and religious pluralism in different cultural and geographical contexts to see how these dynamics vary across populations (Tubali, 2023). Additionally, research could investigate how religious experiences interact with other social factors such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or education in shaping attitudes toward religious diversity. Longitudinal studies could also be conducted to track changes in individuals' perceptions of religious pluralism over time, particularly in response to significant life events such as religious conversion or migration. By expanding the scope and methodology of this research, future studies could further contribute to our understanding of how personal religious experiences influence societal and cultural perceptions of pluralism, offering valuable insights for both academic inquiry and practical applications in fostering interfaith understanding.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the role of personal spiritual experiences in shaping individuals' perceptions of religious pluralism, addressing a gap in the literature regarding how lived religious encounters influence interfaith understanding. The findings highlight that individuals' spiritual experiences are crucial in fostering empathy and connection with people of different faiths, demonstrating how such experiences transcend doctrinal differences and contribute to a broader, more inclusive perspective on religious diversity. By employing a phenomenological approach, this study offers a deeper, more nuanced understanding of religious pluralism, which was often overlooked in previous research that relied on quantitative or generalized approaches. The study contributes to the growing body of work on religious experience and pluralism by showing the transformative potential of individual encounters with the divine. Future research could build upon these findings by exploring how these experiences vary across different cultural contexts or religious traditions, offering further insight into the intersection of spirituality and interfaith relations. Such studies could further enrich our understanding of religious pluralism and guide practical approaches to fostering interfaith dialogue and cooperation.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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