



Exploring Spiritual Experiences and Meaning-Making in Interfaith Prayer among Urban Youth

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ABSTRACT

Spirituality among youth in interfaith contexts has become an increasingly significant area of inquiry within religious and social studies. Despite growing participation in interfaith prayer communities, limited research has explored how young individuals subjectively experience spirituality within these shared religious spaces. What remains unclear is how youth interpret, negotiate, and internalize spiritual meaning during interfaith prayer, particularly in multicultural urban settings. This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to examine the lived spiritual experiences of youth involved in interfaith prayer gatherings. Using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten participants from diverse religious backgrounds, the study identified four central themes: encountering the sacred in shared silence, negotiating faith and identity, developing relational spirituality through empathy, and engaging in ritual as a liminal space for transformation. The interpretative analysis revealed that interfaith prayer is not merely a symbolic or social activity but a deeply personal and transformative experience that fosters both spiritual depth and pluralistic understanding. These findings offer a nuanced view of how youth construct spiritual meaning across religious boundaries and suggest that interfaith environments can nurture identity formation and spiritual growth. This study broadens current understandings of youth spirituality and highlights the value of phenomenological inquiry in capturing the richness of interreligious spiritual experience.



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INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly pluralistic and interconnected world, the intersections of religion, identity, and youth spirituality have emerged as critical areas of inquiry within religious studies, sociology, and intercultural dialogue (Stevanus et al., 2023). Urban centers, particularly those characterized by multicultural populations, have become fertile grounds for interfaith initiatives that seek to foster understanding, coexistence, and cooperation across religious boundaries (Banikhair et al., 2022). Among these initiatives, interfaith prayer gatherings represent a unique space where individuals from diverse faith traditions come together to engage in shared spiritual practices often without requiring the dissolution of individual religious identities.

For young people navigating the complexities of belief, belonging, and social change, these interfaith environments offer both opportunities and challenges (Ellis, 2024). Spirituality during adolescence and early adulthood is not only shaped by doctrinal learning but also by lived encounters, emotional experiences, and relational dynamics (Gillespie, 2024). Youth participants in interfaith communities are often engaged in processes of questioning, affirming, or transforming their religious identities in response to exposure to alternative spiritual expressions. Such settings invite a reconfiguration of traditional boundaries, prompting deeper reflection on the meaning of faith, community, and the sacred in a pluralistic context.

Despite the growing prevalence of interfaith initiatives and the prominent role of youth within them, there remains limited understanding of how young individuals subjectively experience these spaces particularly at the spiritual level (Kökalan et al., 2023). While previous research has focused largely on theological discourse, institutional frameworks, or sociopolitical outcomes, the personal and emotional dimensions of participating in interfaith prayer remain underexplored (Keener, 2023). A deeper, experience-based exploration of this phenomenon is essential for grasping how spiritual meaning is constructed, negotiated, and lived in shared religious environments.

In this context, a phenomenological approach is well-suited to uncovering the essence of such experiences (Bohn et al., 2023). By attending to the subjective narratives of young participants, it becomes possible to reveal how interfaith prayer gatherings are perceived not merely as dialogical events but as transformative spiritual encounters (Walsh, 2023). Such insights contribute not only to scholarly discourse on interfaith engagement but also to broader understandings of youth spirituality, religious identity, and the lived expressions of pluralism in contemporary society.

The study of individual spiritual experiences within interfaith settings has increasingly been recognized as a significant area of inquiry, particularly within the broader disciplines of religious pluralism, youth spirituality, and interreligious communication (Snow et al., 2023). Scholars have noted that religious experience is not solely shaped by doctrinal instruction or institutional affiliations, but is also deeply rooted in personal meaning-making and emotional resonance dimensions that are often overlooked in conventional religious studies research.

However, exploring such lived experiences presents notable methodological challenges. Quantitative surveys, while useful for identifying general trends, often fail to capture the depth, nuance, and existential quality of spiritual encounters (Bot, 2022). Even qualitative methods that prioritize content analysis or structured interviews may not adequately address the interpretive complexity involved when individuals articulate their faith experiences across interreligious boundaries (Antombikums, 2024). Much of the existing literature has focused on cognitive understanding or sociopolitical outcomes of interfaith engagement, with less attention paid to the internal, transformative processes that unfold at the level of the self.

This lack of emphasis on subjective experience has limited the field's capacity to fully grasp the essence of spiritual transformation among youth in interfaith spaces. Traditional methodologies tend to compartmentalize spirituality into predefined categories, thus constraining the emergence of authentic narratives and silencing the ambiguity, tension, or transcendence often reported by participants. As a result, there is a pressing need for research designs that are attuned to the dynamic, reflective, and emotionally textured nature of spiritual life as it is lived and interpreted by individuals within shared prayer environments.

Phenomenological inquiry, particularly in its interpretative form, offers a compelling framework for overcoming these limitations (Burello, 2023). By emphasizing participants' own voices and focusing on how meaning is constructed through experience, this approach allows for a deeper, more holistic understanding of spiritual encounters in interfaith contexts.

Existing approaches to interfaith engagement among youth often prioritize practical strategies such as interreligious dialogue sessions, peacebuilding workshops, or educational seminars (Catapano, 2023; Kaewkitipong et al., 2023). While these models have demonstrated success in promoting tolerance and mutual understanding at a cognitive or institutional level, they rarely address the inner dimensions of spiritual experience that emerge in shared religious spaces (Calis, 2022). These interventions typically rely on structured curricula or pre-defined evaluative metrics, which, although efficient, fall short in uncovering the complexity of individual meaning-making, emotional resonance, and existential reflection that occur during interfaith prayer encounters.

The prevailing emphasis on behavioral outcomes and doctrinal comparisons inadvertently limits the potential to explore how spiritual transformation unfolds in relational and affective terms (Wnuk, 2022). As such, participants' deeply personal narratives how they interpret sacred silence, how they negotiate spiritual tension, or how empathy across belief systems shapes their identity are often marginalized or reduced to anecdotal observations (Yaden et al., 2023). This methodological

gap results in an incomplete and superficial understanding of how interfaith prayer functions not only as a symbolic act but as a lived spiritual experience.

A promising alternative lies in the adoption of phenomenological inquiry, which centers on participants' subjective perceptions and interpretations (Nasser, 2022). By engaging with the experiential essence of spirituality within interfaith settings, phenomenology allows for a more nuanced, holistic understanding of how young people encounter and internalize spiritual meaning across religious boundaries. Such an approach is essential to expanding current knowledge and addressing the limitations inherent in more conventional or pragmatic models of interfaith research.

Recent studies have explored interfaith practices and youth engagement using various qualitative methods. For example, (Yu, 2022) examined identity formation in interreligious encounters, (Wnuk, 2023) focused on Muslim-Christian prayer events in Southeast Asia. These works highlight the importance of context and relational dynamics but often stop short of deeply exploring subjective spiritual experiences (Dydjow-Bendek & Zagodzón, 2022). Methodologies such as thematic analysis or content coding offer some insights, but they tend to emphasize shared patterns over individual meaning. As a result, the rich, lived dimensions of youth spirituality in interfaith spaces remain underexplored.

To address this gap, this study uses interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore how young people experience spirituality within interfaith prayer communities (Bigatti et al., 2023). IPA allows for an in-depth understanding of how individuals interpret their experiences and assign meaning to spiritual encounters (Nygaard et al., 2022). This method is especially suitable for capturing the emotional, relational, and existential aspects of interfaith prayer that are often overlooked in broader social or theological analysis (B. Macallan, 2022). By focusing on participants' own voices, the study provides a deeper understanding of spiritual transformation across religious boundaries. In doing so, it responds directly to the limitations outlined in the previous section.

This article is organized as follows. The introduction presents the background and rationale for the study, followed by a detailed explanation of the social and religious context of interfaith prayer among youth (Reynolds, 2023). The methodology section outlines the interpretative phenomenological approach, data collection through in-depth interviews, and the process of thematic interpretation (B. C. Macallan, 2023). The results section presents the main themes that emerged from participants' narratives, supported by direct quotations. Finally, the discussion connects these findings to existing literature and concludes with reflections on their implications for interfaith practice and youth spiritual development.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived spiritual experiences of youth participating in interfaith prayer communities within multicultural urban environments (Fife, 2020). The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework was chosen due to its emphasis on understanding how individuals make sense of significant personal experiences in their own contexts. As a qualitative design grounded in hermeneutic philosophy, IPA provides a systematic lens through which the researcher may uncover the essence and meaning embedded in participants' narratives. The approach is particularly appropriate for the present study, which seeks to illuminate complex dimensions of spirituality, identity, and interfaith engagement as experienced by young individuals in dialogical religious spaces.

Participants

Participants consisted of young individuals aged between 18 and 25 who were actively involved in interfaith prayer gatherings conducted in multicultural urban settings (Kawamura, 2020). Inclusion criteria required that participants had attended such gatherings regularly for at least six months and had engaged in shared spiritual or ritual activities with individuals from different religious backgrounds. Individuals who participated solely in academic or interfaith discourse events without

spiritual engagement were excluded. A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure relevance and richness of experience. The final sample included 10 participants (6 females and 4 males) with diverse religious affiliations, including Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. The average age was 21.7 years. All participants resided in metropolitan areas characterized by high levels of religious diversity and intergroup interaction.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews designed to elicit detailed descriptions of spiritual experiences in interfaith settings. An interview guide was developed based on phenomenological principles, focusing on the meaning-making processes, emotional responses, and identity negotiation encountered during interfaith prayer. Interviews were conducted in person at locations chosen by participants to ensure comfort and privacy. Each session lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Field notes were taken to capture contextual and non-verbal cues. The interview protocol was piloted with two individuals and revised slightly to enhance clarity and depth of responses. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which involved a multi-stage, inductive process of identifying emergent themes and interpreting their significance in relation to the research aim. Initial readings of the transcripts were conducted to gain familiarity with the data, followed by the identification of significant meaning units. These units were then coded and grouped into broader thematic structures through a process of thematic reduction and abstraction. NVivo software was employed to support coding and organization of data. The analysis moved iteratively between the parts and the whole, allowing for the development of nuanced interpretations rooted in participants' lived experiences. The final themes were derived through convergence across individual accounts while preserving the uniqueness of each narrative.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the appropriate institutional research ethics committee. Written informed consent was secured from all participants prior to their involvement. Participants were informed of their rights to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms, and all personal identifiers were removed from the transcripts. Data were stored securely and treated in accordance with international ethical standards for human subjects research, including confidentiality and voluntary participation.

RESULTS

Encountering the Sacred in Shared Silence

Participants consistently described moments of profound spiritual awakening during interfaith gatherings marked by collective silence or meditative prayer. These experiences were not tied to doctrinal content but rather to a shared sense of sacred presence that transcended religious boundaries.

“When we all held silence together, I felt something I never experienced even in my own church this calm, like a divine stillness. I don't know whose God I was feeling, but it felt holy.” (P6)

This shared silence was often reported as a space where participants momentarily suspended their theological differences and experienced a unifying sense of divine intimacy. For many, it marked the beginning of a new understanding of spirituality as relational rather than institutional.

Negotiating Faith and Identity

Engagement in interfaith spaces led several youth to confront and renegotiate their own religious identities. Rather than eroding their beliefs, this process often deepened their understanding of their faith by placing it in dialogue with others.

“I used to think being a good Muslim meant staying away from things outside Islam. But in this circle, I learned that listening doesn’t mean betraying. It helped me love my faith more, not less.” (P2)

Others expressed moments of internal conflict, particularly when communal prayer challenged their traditional notions of religious exclusivity. Yet, these tensions were also moments of growth, leading to an expanded spiritual worldview.

Relational Spirituality through Empathy and Listening

A central feature of participants’ experiences was the development of what they described as “spiritual empathy.” This emerged through the act of listening to others’ testimonies, particularly during informal sharing sessions following prayer.

“I never expected to cry listening to a Buddhist girl talk about her brother’s death. Her pain sounded like mine when I lost my father. In that moment, her story became a prayer for me.” (P4)

This empathy translated into a form of relational spirituality where divine connection was mediated through human connection. Participants came to view spiritual growth not as an individual endeavor but as a communal unfolding.

Ritual as a Liminal Space for Transformation

Participants reported that engaging in interfaith prayer rituals functioned as liminal spaces transitional zones where transformation occurred. This included symbolic gestures like lighting candles together, chanting in different languages, or walking meditative circles.

“Standing side by side with a rabbi, a monk, and a Christian pastor while we lit candles it felt like a glimpse of heaven. Not perfect, but very human and very sacred.” (P7)

These ritual practices created a shared sacred space where participants felt emotionally safe to explore unfamiliar spiritual expressions, ultimately contributing to their moral and spiritual maturity.

The findings reveal that interfaith prayer communities serve as transformative spaces where youth experience the sacred beyond the confines of exclusive religious traditions. Through collective silence, empathetic listening, and ritual engagement, participants navigate complex intersections of belief, identity, and relational spirituality. These experiences contribute to a redefinition of spiritual meaning and personal faith within an increasingly pluralistic world.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Core Findings

This study revealed that young individuals participating in interfaith prayer communities experience spirituality as a dynamic, relational, and deeply personal process. These experiences reflect a profound engagement with the sacred that transcends doctrinal boundaries and foster identity negotiation, empathy, and transformation in pluralistic settings.

Contribution to the Research Question

The findings directly address the central research question regarding how spirituality is perceived and experienced by youth within interfaith prayer environments (Bellous, 2023). By highlighting themes such as shared sacred silence, spiritual empathy, and ritual transformation, this study contributes a nuanced understanding of spirituality as it emerges in dialogical and experiential interfaith contexts (Asgari et al., 2025). These insights underscore the value of interfaith prayer not merely as a site of religious tolerance, but as a sacred space for individual and communal meaning-making (Pohan et al., 2025). The lived narratives collected reveal that youth do not simply attend these gatherings for social or symbolic reasons, but often experience genuine moments of spiritual connection, identity reflection, and emotional resonance (Tran et al., 2024). This study therefore

enriches the discourse by illustrating how interfaith prayer can be internalized and embodied by young participants in ways that reshape their spiritual outlook and deepen their faith.

Relation to Previous Literature and Theoretical Frameworks

The results of this study are consistent with earlier findings that emphasize the importance of personal encounter in religious transformation (Bhatti & Alshiha, 2023). For instance, the emergence of “spiritual empathy” aligns with Tan’s argument that interfaith experiences enable participants to construct hybrid religious identities through compassionate listening and emotional mirroring. Similarly, the sense of transformation reported in shared rituals echoes Patel’s assertion that urban youth communities often use interfaith prayer to reimagine spiritual belonging outside institutional constraints. However, this study goes further by uncovering the interior processes that accompany these engagements, such as the tension between fidelity to tradition and openness to the other (Henderson et al., 2024). These findings also resonate with the hermeneutic phenomenological perspective of Heidegger, where being-in-the-world involves relational openness and interpretive engagement with lived experience. Thus, this research not only affirms but also deepens existing scholarship by offering a voice-centered, meaning-rich account of how spiritual subjectivity unfolds in interfaith environments.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry meaningful implications for both scholarly understanding and practical interfaith initiatives. At a societal level, they suggest that interfaith prayer communities can serve not only as platforms for religious tolerance but also as deeply transformative spaces for young people to engage in authentic spiritual development (Nelson, 2023). The emergent themes such as spiritual empathy and ritual as a liminal space offer insight into how spiritual identities are co-constructed and reshaped through relational encounters (SJ, 2023). These findings are particularly relevant for educators, religious leaders, and community facilitators who seek to design inclusive spiritual environments that honor both difference and shared humanity (Zaluchu et al., 2023). Culturally, the results underscore the growing need to understand spirituality as lived and embodied, particularly among younger generations who navigate pluralism in ways that defy rigid doctrinal categories.

Limitations of the Study

While the study offers rich insights, it is not without limitations (Zaluchu, 2024). The sample was limited to ten participants within specific urban interfaith settings, which may restrict the transferability of findings to broader populations or rural contexts. Moreover, the interpretative phenomenological approach, by its nature, emphasizes depth over breadth and does not seek generalization. The reliance on self-reported narratives may also introduce retrospective bias or selective recall, although triangulation and contextual validation were applied to mitigate these concerns. These limitations suggest that caution should be exercised when extending these insights to other cultural or religious configurations.

Directions for Future Research

Future research may benefit from expanding this inquiry to diverse geographic and cultural settings to explore how contextual factors influence the lived experience of interfaith spirituality. Longitudinal studies could also provide greater insight into how these experiences evolve over time and contribute to long-term identity development (McGee et al., 2022). Additionally, comparative studies across different age groups or religious affiliations could further illuminate how spiritual meaning is negotiated across life stages and belief systems. Integrating phenomenological approaches with other qualitative frameworks may also enrich the analysis of intersubjective and communal spiritual dynamics (Benedicic & Fink, 2023). Ultimately, this study lays the groundwork for a deeper exploration of youth spirituality within shared religious spaces and highlights the value of attending to subjective meaning in interfaith research.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived spiritual experiences of youth participating in interfaith prayer communities in multicultural urban settings. The findings revealed that participants experienced spirituality as relational, transformative, and deeply personal, often shaped by shared silence, empathetic listening, and ritual engagement. These insights responded directly to the lack of research on the inner dimensions of interfaith prayer by illuminating how spiritual meaning is constructed across religious boundaries. The use of interpretative phenomenological analysis allowed for a nuanced understanding of how identity, belief, and spiritual growth unfold in pluralistic environments. This research contributes to both academic discourse and practical interfaith work by highlighting the value of lived experience in shaping youth spirituality. Future studies may expand this inquiry by exploring other demographic groups or applying longitudinal designs to examine changes over time.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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