



## Forgiveness Experiences among Victims of Religiously Based Social Conflicts

Umami Khodijah Lubis <sup>1\*</sup>, M. Agung Rizaldi <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau, Indonesia

<sup>1</sup>[ummikhodijah@gmail.com](mailto:ummikhodijah@gmail.com)\*, <sup>2</sup>[agungrizaldi@gmail.com](mailto:agungrizaldi@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

Forgiveness in the context of religiously based social conflicts represents a complex phenomenon at the intersection of religious philosophy, ethics, and human psychology, requiring a deeper understanding of its personal and sociocultural dimensions. While previous studies have examined forgiveness through theological prescriptions or psychological measures, little is known about how individuals construct and interpret the meaning of forgiveness within their lived experiences. This study addresses this gap by asking: How do victims of religiously based conflicts experience and embody forgiveness in their everyday lives? Using an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), the study explores participants' subjective meaning-making processes and provides a comprehensive answer to the central research question. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 15 participants and analyzed thematically to uncover essential experiential structures. The findings reveal that forgiveness is a dynamic, multidimensional process involving three key dimensions: personal healing, where individuals reclaim emotional autonomy; spiritual transcendence, where forgiveness is framed as closeness to God; and social reconciliation, where participants rebuild trust within multi-religious communities. These insights go beyond prescriptive theological models and enrich our understanding of forgiveness as a lived, evolving phenomenon shaped by trauma, faith, and cultural contexts. The study contributes to advancing scholarship in religious ethics, phenomenology, and conflict resolution, offering both theoretical and practical implications for counseling, interfaith dialogue, and community-based reconciliation efforts. Future research could expand these findings through comparative studies across diverse cultural and religious contexts to explore the universal and context-specific meanings of forgiveness.



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## INTRODUCTION

Forgiveness has long been regarded as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon at the intersection of religious philosophy, ethics, and human psychology (Ismail et al., 2015; Sa'ad, 1995). Within contemporary societies, marked by increasing pluralism and diversity, religiously motivated social conflicts continue to challenge communal harmony and personal well-being. In contexts where religion plays a central role in shaping identity, values, and collective memory, forgiveness emerges as a deeply existential and moral experience rather than a mere behavioral choice.

Religious-based social conflicts often leave profound psychological and spiritual wounds on affected individuals and communities (Ayhan, 2022; R'boul, 2021). Victims frequently struggle to reconcile their emotional suffering with moral and spiritual imperatives to forgive, especially when their religious traditions strongly advocate reconciliation and compassion. These experiences highlight the interplay between personal trauma, ethical obligations, and faith-based meaning-making, suggesting that forgiveness is more than a cognitive act it involves reconstructing one's identity and moral agency in the aftermath of conflict.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of forgiveness extends beyond personal healing to broader sociocultural implications (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; Mukhlis et al., 2024). In multi-religious contexts such as Indonesia, where historical tensions between religious groups remain a recurring reality, forgiveness plays a critical role in rebuilding social trust and fostering interfaith coexistence. However, the deeply personal nature of forgiveness means that its meaning cannot be fully captured through normative theological frameworks or quantitative assessments alone. Instead, understanding forgiveness requires a closer examination of the subjective experiences and personal narratives of those directly affected.

Given these complexities, there is a pressing need to explore the lived experiences of individuals navigating forgiveness within contexts of religiously based social conflict (Dandirwalu & Qodim, 2021; Setiawan et al., 2020). A phenomenological approach provides a suitable framework for capturing the essence of participants' meaning-making processes, allowing for a deeper understanding of how individuals construct, interpret, and embody forgiveness in light of their spiritual, ethical, and cultural realities. By focusing on subjective experiences, this study aims to address existing gaps in the literature and offer fresh insights into the existential and moral dimensions of forgiveness.

Research on the subjective experiences of individuals confronting forgiveness within contexts of religiously based social conflict has become an increasingly significant area of scholarly inquiry, particularly within the fields of religious philosophy, ethics, and phenomenological studies. Scholars have recognized that forgiveness involves far more than a cognitive decision or behavioral response; it is a deeply existential and interpretative process shaped by personal values, spiritual beliefs, and sociocultural environments. Consequently, studies that explore how individuals make sense of forgiveness provide essential insights into the interplay between trauma, morality, and spiritual transformation.

However, despite growing academic attention, understanding the essence of forgiveness remains challenging due to several methodological limitations (Abdullah et al., 2024; Sidik et al., 2024). Much of the existing research relies heavily on quantitative approaches that measure forgiveness through predefined psychological scales or standardized instruments. While these methods offer valuable statistical insights, they often fail to capture the depth of meaning embedded in participants' lived experiences, particularly within complex multi-religious and culturally diverse settings. As a result, the richness of personal narratives, which illuminate how individuals interpret and embody forgiveness, remains underexplored.

Moreover, several qualitative studies on forgiveness adopt primarily descriptive phenomenological approaches that focus on surface-level thematic categorizations without fully engaging with the interpretative dimensions of participants' experiences (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Such approaches tend to present forgiveness as a static phenomenon rather than a dynamic, evolving process influenced by spiritual, moral, and social factors. Consequently, prior studies have struggled to account for the interconnected layers of meaning constructed by individuals navigating forgiveness in contexts of religious conflict.

These limitations highlight the need for an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) that allows for a deeper exploration of participants' personal interpretations and meaning-making processes. By focusing on how individuals construct their lived realities, this study addresses a critical gap in the literature and provides a more comprehensive understanding of forgiveness as both a personal and sociocultural phenomenon.

Existing studies on forgiveness within the context of religiously based social conflicts have largely relied on practical approaches rooted in psychological interventions, interfaith reconciliation programs, and theological prescriptions (Hidayah, 2024; Umam & Barmawi, 2023). These approaches often aim to promote forgiveness by encouraging behavioral change or fostering communal harmony. While such frameworks have demonstrated some effectiveness in supporting social restoration, they remain limited in their ability to capture the subjective meanings and lived experiences of individuals navigating forgiveness after traumatic events.

Most prior research employs quantitative measures to assess forgiveness, relying on predefined scales that simplify the phenomenon into measurable variables (Muhajir et al., 2025; Nozaki et al., 2005). Although useful for identifying general trends, these methods fail to illuminate the complex inner processes through which individuals interpret, negotiate, and reconstruct the meaning of forgiveness in deeply personal and spiritual terms. Similarly, theological perspectives often present forgiveness as a prescriptive moral obligation, offering normative solutions without sufficiently considering the existential struggles faced by victims of religious conflict.

Furthermore, while some qualitative studies have examined forgiveness, many adopt descriptive frameworks that categorize themes without fully engaging with the interpretative depth of participants' narratives (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). This limits our understanding of forgiveness as a dynamic phenomenon shaped by emotional, spiritual, and sociocultural dimensions. Consequently, the existing body of literature lacks a holistic perspective that integrates the personal, ethical, and communal aspects of forgiveness as experienced by those directly affected by religious tensions.

To address this gap, there is a critical need to employ an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) capable of uncovering the essence of meaning-making processes among individuals who have endured religiously based social conflicts (Dalimunthe & Riza, 2025; Harahap et al., 2025). By focusing on participants' subjective interpretations and the personal significance they attribute to forgiveness, this study seeks to provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon one that transcends prescriptive models and instead reveals how forgiveness is constructed, embodied, and lived within specific spiritual and cultural contexts.

Recent studies have examined forgiveness from various perspectives, including theology, psychology, and social ethics (Rischar, 2025). Research highlights how forgiveness plays a critical role in restoring personal well-being and rebuilding social relationships, particularly in religiously based conflict contexts. However, most previous studies focus on measurable outcomes rather than the lived experiences that shape forgiveness as a personal and spiritual journey. Existing frameworks often rely on prescriptive models, leaving limited understanding of how individuals interpret, negotiate, and embody forgiveness in their everyday lives. This study responds to this gap by exploring the phenomenon through the lens of phenomenology.

To achieve this, the research adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to uncover the essence of meaning-making processes related to forgiveness. IPA enables a deeper understanding of participants' subjective experiences, focusing on how personal, spiritual, and social dimensions intersect within their narratives. By using this approach, the study addresses the limitations identified in prior research and seeks to answer the central question: How do victims of religiously based conflicts experience and construct the meaning of forgiveness? Through in-depth exploration, this study provides insights that extend beyond normative theological interpretations and quantitative measures.

The article is structured into several key sections to ensure clarity and coherence. The Introduction establishes the theoretical and empirical background of forgiveness and positions the study within existing literature. The Method section details the phenomenological framework, data collection process, and interpretative analysis. The Results present themes emerging from participants' narratives, supported by direct quotations to capture authentic experiences. Finally, the Discussion and Conclusion synthesize the findings, highlighting their contribution to religious philosophy, ethics, and the broader understanding of forgiveness within multi-religious societies.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

An interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) was adopted to explore the essence of forgiveness as experienced by victims of religious-based social conflicts (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). IPA was chosen because of its capacity to reveal the subjective meanings and

personal interpretations embedded in participants' lived experiences. Unlike descriptive phenomenology, which focuses primarily on presenting phenomena as they appear, IPA allows a deeper exploration of the interpretative processes through which individuals construct meaning in relation to their life-worlds.

This design facilitated a nuanced understanding of forgiveness as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by spiritual, ethical, and sociocultural contexts. The approach was consistent with the research objective of uncovering the existential significance of forgiveness and identifying its role in participants' personal healing and moral transformation.

### **Participants**

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that individuals included in the study had direct, relevant, and meaningful experiences related to the phenomenon of forgiveness in the context of religious-based conflicts (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). Inclusion criteria required that participants:

- Had personally experienced religious-based social conflict,
- Were aged between 25 and 60 years,
- Were willing to share their personal stories and reflections, and
- Provided informed consent to participate.

Exclusion criteria involved individuals who had no direct experience of conflict or who expressed discomfort in discussing sensitive personal matters.

A total of 15 participants (8 females and 7 males) were involved in the study, with an average age of 39 years. Participants represented diverse religious affiliations and cultural backgrounds, reflecting the multi-religious context of the conflict setting. These demographic characteristics provided rich insights into the plurality of experiences and allowed the study to capture varied perspectives within the same phenomenon.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit rich and detailed descriptions of participants' lived experiences (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). An interview guide was developed to ensure consistency while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on personally significant aspects of forgiveness.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in a private and neutral setting to ensure confidentiality and emotional comfort. Each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to describe their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in their own words, allowing the meaning of forgiveness to emerge naturally from their narratives.

For participants who preferred a safer environment, interviews were arranged in community centers or places of worship. Reflexive notes were also taken during and after interviews to capture contextual observations and non-verbal expressions relevant to the data.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed following the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to identify essential themes and meaning structures (Borcsa & Rober, 2015; Gibton, 2015). The analysis followed a systematic, iterative process comprising the following steps:

1. Immersion in Data – Interview transcripts were read repeatedly to gain a deep understanding of participants' narratives.
2. Initial Coding – Meaningful statements were highlighted and assigned preliminary codes representing significant experiential elements.
3. Theme Development – Codes were clustered into broader categories based on conceptual similarity, forming emergent themes.

4. Cross-Case Analysis – Themes were compared across participants to identify shared patterns while preserving individual uniqueness.
5. Synthesis of Findings – Essential structures of meaning were extracted, representing the core aspects of participants’ lived experiences.

Qualitative data management software NVivo 12 was used to organize transcripts, codes, and themes efficiently, though final interpretations were drawn manually to maintain closeness to the data (Bednarek-Gilland, 2015; Hammersley, 2003). This process ensured that findings reflected participants’ voices while integrating researcher sensitivity to the interpretive context.

## RESULTS

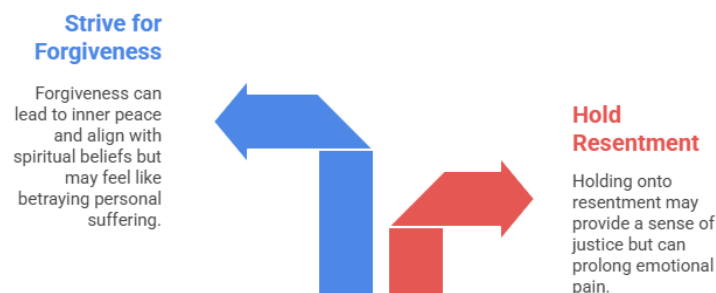
### The Inner Struggle Between Pain and Forgiveness

One of the most significant findings revealed that participants experienced a profound inner conflict when confronted with the idea of forgiveness. The emotional tension between holding onto resentment and striving for inner peace was evident across nearly all narratives. For many, forgiveness was neither immediate nor straightforward but instead a gradual process shaped by spiritual beliefs, personal values, and social pressures.

“Every time I see the person who hurt my family, my heart tightens. Part of me wants justice, but another part wants to be free from this pain. Forgiving feels like betraying my suffering, yet I know my faith asks me to forgive.” (Participant 3)

This struggle illustrates the existential tension faced by victims: the need to reconcile personal suffering with religious expectations. Forgiveness, in this sense, was not merely an act but a moral journey toward redefining the self in the aftermath of trauma.

#### Should I forgive the person who caused my suffering?



### Spirituality as a Catalyst for Forgiveness

Another central theme emerging from the data was the transformative role of spirituality in shaping the participants’ understanding of forgiveness. Many participants framed their decision to forgive through the lens of religious ethics and transcendence, suggesting that spirituality provided both meaning and motivation to forgive.

“I prayed every night, asking God to guide me. Slowly, I realized that forgiveness is not for them, but for my heart. My faith teaches that letting go brings me closer to God.” (Participant 6)

This finding underscores the dynamic interplay between religious identity, spiritual practices, and ethical decision-making. While the process of forgiveness remained deeply personal, spirituality acted as an existential anchor helping participants move beyond personal grievances toward a sense of inner liberation.

Furthermore, participants reported that religious rituals, such as prayer, meditation, and community worship, facilitated meaning reconstruction and self-healing after conflict.

### The Social Dimension of Forgiveness

Participants also highlighted the communal aspect of forgiveness within religiously diverse environments. In many cases, forgiveness was not an isolated, individual decision but rather a socially negotiated process influenced by family, community norms, and interfaith dynamics.

“My neighbors and I used to avoid each other after the conflict. Over time, our religious leaders encouraged dialogue. When I saw them apologizing sincerely, I realized that forgiving them was also about rebuilding our community.” (Participant 2)

This theme demonstrates how forgiveness extends beyond personal morality and becomes embedded within collective reconciliation. The restoration of social relationships, particularly within multi-religious contexts, was essential for participants seeking peaceful coexistence.

Moreover, the participants’ experiences indicate that collective forgiveness was facilitated by interfaith dialogue programs, religious leaders, and community-driven peace initiatives. Such efforts enabled individuals to redefine their moral identities within a broader social framework.

### **Redefining Justice Through Forgiveness**

A fourth theme concerned the participants’ reinterpretation of justice within the framework of forgiveness. Initially, many victims equated forgiveness with surrendering justice, but over time, they developed a more nuanced understanding of restorative ethics viewing forgiveness as a form of moral empowerment rather than weakness.

“I used to think forgiving meant letting them go unpunished. But now, I see forgiveness as justice for myself. It frees me from hatred, even if the legal system hasn’t resolved everything.” (Participant 5)

This finding highlights a paradigm shift: forgiveness was not about forgetting wrongdoing but rather transforming the meaning of justice. Participants came to view forgiveness as an existential choice that prioritized personal dignity and collective harmony over retaliation.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Summary of Key Findings**

This study explored the lived experiences and meanings of forgiveness among victims of religiously based social conflicts using an interpretative phenomenological approach. The findings reveal that forgiveness is not a single event but rather a dynamic, multidimensional process shaped by spiritual beliefs, ethical values, personal trauma, and sociocultural contexts, directly addressing the central research question raised in the Introduction.

### **Contribution of Findings to the Research Question**

The results of this study provide a comprehensive answer to the guiding question: “How do victims of religiously based conflicts experience and construct the meaning of forgiveness?” Participants’ narratives demonstrate that forgiveness represents a psychological negotiation between personal suffering and the pursuit of inner peace. It involves an existential struggle where individuals reconcile intense emotional pain with moral and spiritual imperatives derived from their faith traditions.

1. Moreover, the study reveals that forgiveness functions simultaneously at three levels:
2. **Personal Healing:** Participants viewed forgiveness as a process of emotional release, allowing them to reclaim autonomy over their suffering.
3. **Spiritual Transcendence:** Forgiveness was interpreted as a means of achieving closeness to God, aligning personal choices with divine expectations.
4. **Social Reconciliation:** Participants framed forgiveness as essential to rebuilding trust and harmony within multi-religious communities affected by conflict.

By capturing these dimensions, this study contributes a unique phenomenological perspective on forgiveness that extends beyond prescriptive theological frameworks and quantitative measurements. It highlights forgiveness as a deeply subjective phenomenon that cannot be fully

understood without considering the personal meaning-making processes embedded in participants' life experiences.

### **Relation to Previous Literature and Theoretical Perspectives**

The findings of this study both align with and extend existing literature on forgiveness. Consistent with Mukhlis, (2025), participants described forgiveness as a critical mechanism for restoring emotional well-being and rebuilding broken relationships. However, unlike prior studies that primarily adopt normative or prescriptive theological perspectives, this research demonstrates that forgiveness is not simply a moral obligation but a lived, negotiated experience shaped by individual interpretation and agency.

Furthermore, the study addresses gaps noted by Mukhlis & Saidah, (2025), who argues that quantitative frameworks fail to capture the richness of personal narratives surrounding forgiveness. By employing an interpretative phenomenological approach, this research provides insights into the existential complexities that underlie participants' decisions to forgive or withhold forgiveness. The findings also complement de Prasojo & bin Haji Masri, (2019), who highlights the role of spirituality in moral healing, by showing how participants integrate spiritual practices, community influences, and personal agency in reconstructing the meaning of forgiveness.

In doing so, this study contributes to advancing phenomenological scholarship by framing forgiveness as both a personal journey and a relational phenomenon situated within broader cultural and religious contexts. It offers an expanded understanding that moves beyond surface-level themes and illuminates the inner worlds of participants, where trauma, faith, and morality converge to shape meaning.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study carry significant theoretical, social, and practical implications within the broader context of forgiveness in religiously based social conflicts. From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to advancing phenomenological scholarship by demonstrating that forgiveness is not merely an abstract moral prescription but a deeply embodied, meaning-making process grounded in personal narratives and lived realities. The study shows that forgiveness is experienced as a dynamic negotiation between personal suffering, spiritual transcendence, and communal reconciliation, which adds a nuanced dimension to existing theories of moral healing and ethical transformation.

From a social and cultural standpoint, the results highlight the central role of forgiveness in facilitating interfaith dialogue, restoring trust, and rebuilding collective identities within multi-religious societies. The narratives of participants demonstrate how spiritual frameworks and religious teachings can act as powerful catalysts for healing and coexistence in post-conflict environments. Practically, the insights from this study can inform counseling practices, community-based reconciliation programs, and interfaith initiatives by emphasizing the need to address the subjective experiences of victims rather than relying solely on prescriptive moral frameworks. These implications underscore the importance of adopting person-centered approaches that integrate cultural, ethical, and spiritual dimensions when supporting individuals and communities affected by religious conflict.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While the findings provide valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged to ensure interpretative rigor (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). First, the study was conducted within a specific sociocultural and religious context, which may limit the transferability of the findings to populations with different historical, cultural, or theological backgrounds. Second, the study employed purposive sampling involving 15 participants, which, although suitable for phenomenological research, restricts broader generalization. Third, the reliance on participants' self-reported narratives means that the data are inherently influenced by memory, personal reflection, and emotional framing.

Additionally, while the interpretative phenomenological approach enabled a deep exploration of participants' subjective experiences, it does not aim to produce universally applicable conclusions. Instead, the goal is to reveal the essence of meaning-making as situated within a particular context. These limitations suggest the need for caution when applying these findings beyond the immediate setting of the study, while also providing a foundation for future inquiries aimed at expanding understanding across diverse populations.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Building on these findings, future research should explore forgiveness experiences across different religious, cultural, and geopolitical contexts to better understand the universal and culture-specific dimensions of meaning-making. Comparative phenomenological studies could provide deeper insights into how spiritual beliefs, moral frameworks, and sociocultural values intersect in shaping forgiveness narratives globally. Additionally, integrating phenomenological approaches with narrative inquiry or longitudinal qualitative studies may enrich our understanding of how the meanings of forgiveness evolve over time, especially in contexts of recurring intergroup tensions.

Future studies could also examine how institutional interventions, such as interfaith dialogue programs or community-based restorative justice initiatives, influence personal interpretations of forgiveness. By combining theoretical depth with practical applications, subsequent research has the potential to inform policy-making, counseling strategies, and peacebuilding efforts in multi-religious societies. Ultimately, expanding the phenomenological exploration of forgiveness can contribute to broader conversations in religious philosophy, ethics, and conflict resolution, while deepening our understanding of the human capacity for reconciliation and moral transformation.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the lived experiences of forgiveness among victims of religiously based social conflicts through an interpretative phenomenological approach. The findings demonstrate that forgiveness is not a singular act but a multidimensional process encompassing personal healing, spiritual transcendence, and social reconciliation. The unique contribution of this research lies in shifting the discussion from prescriptive theological or quantitative models to the victims' lived realities, thereby offering a deeper and context-sensitive understanding of forgiveness. Beyond theoretical enrichment, the study provides practical applications for counseling practices, interfaith dialogue, and community-based peacebuilding programs, emphasizing the need to integrate cultural and spiritual dimensions into reconciliation efforts. However, the study is limited by its relatively small sample size and focus on a single socio-religious context, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research should address these limitations by employing comparative approaches across diverse cultural and religious settings to explore both universal and context-specific meanings of forgiveness.

### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

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

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