



Lived Experiences of Spiritual Empathy and Identity Negotiation in Interfaith Volunteering

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ABSTRACT

Interfaith dialogue and religious pluralism have become central to contemporary social research as global societies increasingly confront challenges of diversity and coexistence. Within this context, interfaith volunteering provides a unique avenue for exploring how young people experience and interpret spiritual and social encounters across religious boundaries. However, despite extensive discussions on interfaith engagement, few studies have captured the subjective and meaning-making dimensions of these encounters through phenomenological inquiry. Existing literature remains largely descriptive or quantitative, failing to reveal how participants internally construct empathy and spiritual awareness. This study addresses this research gap by employing an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how young adults engaged in interfaith volunteering understand empathy, identity, and plural consciousness in multicultural urban contexts. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with twelve participants from diverse faith backgrounds and analyzed using hermeneutic and thematic interpretation. The findings reveal that interfaith volunteering serves as a transformative practice where participants experience spiritual empathy through shared service, negotiate religious identity within plural settings, and develop a plural spiritual consciousness rooted in compassion and relational understanding. This study's novelty lies in demonstrating how interfaith volunteering becomes a lived process of spiritual formation that bridges personal faith and collective pluralism—an experiential contribution often overlooked in current interfaith research. By emphasizing experience-based spirituality as a foundation for sustainable pluralism, the study enriches phenomenological scholarship on interreligious coexistence and contributes a nuanced understanding of empathy and identity in diverse societies.



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INTRODUCTION

Interfaith dialogue and religious pluralism have emerged as central themes in contemporary discussions of global coexistence, particularly within societies characterized by increasing cultural and spiritual diversity (Alimni et al., 2022). In many urban contexts, religious communities coexist within shared social spaces where boundaries between faith traditions are both visible and permeable (Hudson & Rockenbach, 2025). This coexistence gives rise to a dynamic interplay between belief, identity, and collective responsibility, where individuals from different religious backgrounds encounter one another not only as adherents of distinct doctrines but as partners in addressing shared social concerns such as poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation.

Recent decades have witnessed a growing recognition of interfaith engagement as more than a theological or diplomatic enterprise; it has become a lived, experiential practice that manifests in everyday acts of cooperation and service (Mellat et al., 2023). Within this broader landscape, interfaith volunteering stands out as a practical mode of dialogue in action — an avenue through which young people, in particular, embody values of compassion and solidarity across religious

boundaries. Such experiences offer a fertile ground for exploring how spiritual and moral understanding develops through relational encounters rather than formal doctrinal exchange.

The significance of this phenomenon lies in its deeply subjective and experiential dimension. Interfaith cooperation, when enacted through shared service, transforms from an abstract ideal into a lived reality that challenges participants' assumptions about faith, community, and otherness (Mukhlis, 2025a). These encounters often provoke emotional and spiritual reflections that reshape participants' understanding of themselves and their religious traditions (Beggiora, 2025). In multicultural urban societies, where interreligious tensions may coexist with aspirations for harmony, the subjective experiences of young people involved in interfaith initiatives provide essential insights into how empathy, tolerance, and mutual respect are cultivated in practice.

Given this context, there remains a compelling need to explore the lived meanings embedded in interfaith experience (Salimi et al., 2021)s. Quantitative studies and policy-driven analyses, while valuable, often overlook the inner processes through which individuals construct meaning in interreligious encounters. A phenomenological approach is thus necessary to illuminate how participants perceive, interpret, and internalize their interfaith engagements — not merely as social activities but as transformative spiritual experiences (Kohek et al., 2020). By focusing on the essence of these experiences, phenomenology provides a pathway to understanding how pluralistic consciousness and interreligious empathy emerge from the personal and collective journeys of those who live them.

Building upon the broader discourse on interfaith engagement, the study of individuals' lived experiences within interreligious encounters has increasingly gained scholarly attention. Research in this area underscores the importance of understanding how participants personally experience, interpret, and derive meaning from interfaith activities, particularly in contexts where religious pluralism intersects with social responsibility and youth identity formation (Pavithra & Mahadevan, 2025). These studies move beyond institutional or doctrinal analyses, seeking instead to grasp the human dimension of faith encounters as they unfold in everyday relational and emotional spaces.

Despite this growing interest, the exploration of subjective experiences in interfaith volunteering remains methodologically and conceptually challenging (Khalsa-Baker, 2024). Much of the existing literature has relied on quantitative frameworks or survey-based approaches that tend to reduce interfaith engagement to measurable indicators such as tolerance levels, participation rates, or attitudinal shifts. While informative, such data fail to capture the nuanced, emotional, and spiritual layers of interfaith encounters — aspects that define the depth and authenticity of participants' experiences (Mukhlis, 2025b). Moreover, studies that employ descriptive or thematic qualitative methods often focus on observable behaviors rather than the internal processes through which meaning and transformation occur.

These methodological constraints have limited the capacity of prior research to fully articulate the essence of interfaith experiences as lived and interpreted by those directly involved (Batalova, 2025). The absence of interpretative depth has left critical questions unanswered: How do individuals internalize their interfaith encounters as spiritual experiences? What meanings emerge when empathy, cooperation, and faith intersect in lived reality? Addressing such questions requires an approach capable of engaging with the subjective consciousness of participants — one that allows for interpretation, reflection, and the uncovering of latent meanings within human experience.

In this regard, the interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) provides a particularly fitting framework (Parker, 2021). By focusing on the interpretive act of meaning-making, IPA enables a deeper examination of how participants construct and articulate their spiritual and emotional realities within interfaith contexts (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). This approach moves beyond surface-level description to reveal how individuals negotiate identity, perceive others, and experience transcendence through interreligious cooperation (Sinclair, 2019). Hence, a phenomenological inquiry into interfaith volunteering offers not only an understanding of social interaction but also an exploration of the inner transformations that sustain plural coexistence in a diverse society.

While prior research on interfaith engagement has provided valuable insights into patterns of cooperation and tolerance across religious boundaries, most existing approaches remain grounded in practical or programmatic frameworks rather than experiential inquiry (Patrik, 2022). Studies often emphasize measurable outcomes such as improved intergroup attitudes, increased social cohesion, or enhanced civic participation as indicators of successful interfaith initiatives (Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). These findings contribute to understanding what interfaith collaboration achieves, but offer limited insight into how such experiences are lived, interpreted, and internalized by participants at the spiritual and emotional levels.

This pragmatic orientation has resulted in a substantial methodological gap. Quantitative surveys and descriptive evaluations, though effective for assessing behavioral trends, lack the capacity to capture the subjective meaning-making processes through which individuals transform interfaith encounters into spiritual and ethical experiences (Zhang et al., 2023). The focus on external indicators has obscured the internal dimensions of interfaith volunteering dimensions where empathy, faith, and identity intersect in deeply personal ways (Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Consequently, the field lacks a comprehensive understanding of the inner transformations that occur when individuals from diverse faiths engage in shared acts of service and reflection.

Furthermore, prior qualitative studies, while acknowledging the richness of interfaith dialogue, often adopt thematic or sociological lenses that stop short of uncovering the essence of lived experience (Raut & Gupta, 2019). These studies tend to describe interactions and outcomes rather than interpret the underlying meanings that shape participants' perceptions of self and other (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023). The absence of an interpretative depth leaves critical questions unanswered: How do young volunteers construct spiritual meaning through interfaith service? In what ways do these experiences influence their understanding of religious identity and pluralism?

To address these limitations, a phenomenological approach specifically the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is needed to explore the existential and emotional realities underlying interfaith volunteering. By focusing on the lived meanings embedded within personal narratives, this approach enables a holistic exploration of interfaith experiences as both spiritual and relational phenomena (Hobart, 2023). Such a method not only bridges the existing empirical gap but also enriches the theoretical discourse on how pluralistic consciousness and interreligious empathy are cultivated through lived human experience.

Previous research has highlighted the significance of interfaith engagement as a transformative practice that extends beyond institutional dialogue into the domain of lived experience. Studies by (Baghcheghi et al., 2024; Maseme & Saurombe, 2025) emphasize that interreligious cooperation fosters empathy, social harmony, and moral development among young people. However, these works often focus on sociological outcomes rather than on the subjective, spiritual dimensions of interfaith encounters (Sarkar & Garg, 2020). Existing theoretical perspectives, such as dialogical theology and pluralist ethics, provide conceptual frameworks for understanding interfaith cooperation but seldom explore how these values are personally experienced, embodied, and interpreted by individuals in their everyday lives (Mukhlis et al., 2024). The current study positions itself within this emerging area by centering on the experiential and interpretative aspects of interfaith volunteering among youth in multicultural settings.

In response to these gaps, the present research employs an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine how young volunteers make sense of their interfaith experiences (Wang et al., 2024). This approach allows the study to delve deeply into participants' inner reflections, emotions, and meaning-making processes — dimensions that remain invisible to conventional empirical frameworks (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). By focusing on lived experiences rather than abstract constructs, the study seeks to answer the question: How do young individuals experience and interpret spiritual empathy, identity negotiation, and plural consciousness through interfaith volunteering? The phenomenological approach thus provides the conceptual and methodological grounding necessary to uncover the essence of interfaith engagement as a lived human phenomenon.

The article is structured as follows: the Introduction outlines the conceptual background and identifies the research problem, emphasizing the need for phenomenological inquiry (Rush et al., 2024). The Method section details the interpretative phenomenological design, participant selection, data collection, and analytical procedures (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025). The Results section presents thematic findings that reveal the core meanings emerging from participants' narratives, followed by the Discussion, which situates these insights within broader theoretical and social contexts. The paper concludes with implications for interfaith practice, spiritual formation, and future research on pluralism and human experience.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of young individuals engaged in interfaith volunteering within multicultural urban contexts. The phenomenological design was selected for its emphasis on understanding the essence of human experience as perceived and interpreted by those who live it. This approach allows the phenomenon of interfaith engagement to be examined beyond descriptive accounts, focusing instead on how participants construct personal and collective meanings through spiritual and social encounters.

Interpretative phenomenology, grounded in Heideggerian philosophy, was particularly suited to this research as it emphasizes the contextual and relational nature of experience. The approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of how spiritual empathy, identity negotiation, and plural consciousness emerge through dialogical and service-based interfaith interactions. The design thereby enabled a nuanced interpretation of subjective experiences that reflect both individual spirituality and interreligious social dynamics.

Participants

Participants consisted of young adults aged 19 to 28 years who had been actively involved in interfaith volunteering initiatives in metropolitan areas characterized by religious diversity. The inclusion criteria required participants to have:

- (a) engaged in interfaith volunteer activities for at least six months,
- (b) interacted regularly with individuals of different faith traditions, and
- (c) demonstrated reflective awareness of interfaith experiences through dialogue, service, or advocacy.

Individuals who participated only in single-session interfaith events without sustained engagement were excluded. A purposive sampling strategy ensured that participants represented diverse religious affiliations, including Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

A total of 12 participants were included in the study (7 females and 5 males). The group reflected various educational and professional backgrounds, ranging from university students to community organizers, providing a rich spectrum of interfaith experiences and perspectives relevant to the phenomenon.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit detailed narratives about participants' experiences in interfaith volunteering. Interviews were conducted in a setting chosen by participants to ensure comfort and confidentiality, either in person or via secure online video platforms.

Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and followed an interview guide developed from existing phenomenological literature on interfaith engagement and spirituality. Questions invited participants to describe specific experiences, emotional responses, and reflections related to their

interfaith activities (e.g., “Can you describe a moment when you felt deeply connected to someone of a different faith?”).

All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized prior to analysis. Field notes were maintained to capture non-verbal cues, contextual observations, and researcher reflections that supported the interpretative depth of the analysis. The data collection process continued until thematic saturation was achieved, meaning no new significant meanings emerged from subsequent interviews.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework to uncover the essential meanings and experiential structures underlying participants’ narratives. Analysis proceeded through several systematic stages:

Immersion and Familiarization: Repeated reading of transcripts to grasp the holistic sense of each participant’s account.

Initial Coding: Identification of significant statements and meaning units related to interfaith encounters, emotional experiences, and spiritual insights.

Thematic Development: Clustering of meaning units into emerging themes that reflected shared experiential patterns.

Interpretative Reflection: Contextual interpretation of how participants’ experiences revealed deeper understandings of spiritual empathy, identity negotiation, and plural consciousness.

Analytic rigor was enhanced through iterative comparisons across transcripts and the use of NVivo software to support coding organization and thematic linkage. Throughout the process, reflexivity was maintained to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants’ lived meanings rather than researcher assumptions. The final themes represented a synthesis of descriptive fidelity and interpretative depth consistent with phenomenological inquiry.

RESULTS

Awakening Spiritual Empathy through Shared Service

Participants consistently described their involvement in interfaith volunteering as a transformative journey that transcended doctrinal differences and awakened a deeper sense of shared humanity. The act of serving alongside individuals of different faiths became, for many, an experiential form of spiritual dialogue.

One participant reflected, “Before joining the program, I thought interfaith meant debating beliefs. But when I worked with others to clean the city park, I realized it was about compassion — faith in action.”

Through repeated encounters of cooperation and reflection, participants experienced empathy not as a concept but as a lived, embodied awareness. The shared struggles in volunteer activities, such as organizing food drives or disaster relief, became a space where spiritual boundaries blurred, allowing participants to “see the divine in the other.”

Rather than merely recounting experiences, participants collectively illustrated a progression from external collaboration to internal transformation. This indicates that interfaith volunteering operates as a phenomenological process of spiritual awakening — shifting empathy from emotional resonance to moral engagement. The emergent theme reveals that spiritual empathy develops through dialogical praxis, where acts of service serve as both ethical expression and ontological realization of shared humanity.

This empathetic awakening was described as both humbling and enlightening, shifting participants’ understanding of spirituality from a personal devotion to a collective moral consciousness rooted in care and solidarity.

Negotiating Religious Identity in Plural Contexts

Engagement in interfaith volunteering required participants to continuously negotiate their personal religious identity within a plural environment. Rather than experiencing identity dilution, most described a renewed clarity of faith — one that was both self-reflective and inclusive.

As one respondent shared, “Working with my Muslim, Hindu, and Christian friends made me ask what my faith really teaches about love. I didn’t lose my beliefs — I rediscovered them.”

This theme revealed that dialogical encounters were not merely external acts of cooperation but also internal moments of spiritual questioning and reaffirmation. Analytically, this demonstrates how the negotiation of identity is both cognitive and affective — participants engage in reflexive self-inquiry while reinterpreting their beliefs in light of relational experience. Participants navigated tensions between doctrinal loyalty and relational openness, often concluding that interfaith cooperation strengthened, rather than weakened, their religious identity.

The Synergy of Faith and Inclusion



The analytic synthesis suggests that identity negotiation within plural settings functions as a hermeneutic act: through encountering the faith of the Other, participants reconstruct their self-understanding. This process underscores a dialectical movement between faith preservation and openness — a hallmark of phenomenological engagement in plural spiritual contexts.

The process, however, required emotional labor, patience, and humility — qualities many associated with authentic spirituality.

Collective Harmony and the Emergence of a Plural Spiritual Consciousness

Across narratives, participants emphasized how sustained interfaith engagement fostered a sense of collective harmony — not as an absence of difference, but as a conscious embrace of diversity. This plural spiritual consciousness was rooted in mutual respect and shared moral purpose.

A participant remarked, “We prayed differently, but we worked for the same goal — to serve people. In that moment, I felt a kind of unity that no sermon had ever given me.”

This sense of unity emerged not from theological agreement but from lived encounters that redefined how participants perceived faith. The experience of collective service was interpreted as a manifestation of “faith beyond boundaries”, where spirituality was embodied in compassionate action rather than dogmatic assertion.

Analytically, this theme synthesizes individual narratives into a broader phenomenological pattern: interfaith volunteering fosters an emergent consciousness that transcends doctrinal frames, producing what participants perceive as a ‘relational spirituality’. This consciousness is plural not by dilution but by integration — a moral-spiritual synergy grounded in coexistence, empathy, and shared purpose.

Such findings highlight how the phenomenon of interfaith volunteering serves as both a social and spiritual practice — one that nurtures moral imagination, empathy, and peaceful coexistence among the younger generation in multicultural urban spaces.

In summary, the analytic synthesis across themes reveals that spiritual empathy, identity negotiation, and plural consciousness are interrelated dimensions of a single transformative process — the lived realization of spirituality through interfaith engagement.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that interfaith volunteering functions as a deeply transformative experience through which young individuals cultivate spiritual empathy, negotiate religious identity, and develop a sense of plural consciousness (King, 2023). These experiences embody the essence of interfaith dialogue as lived encounter rather than abstract discourse, addressing the central question of how faith-based cooperation shapes spiritual and relational understanding in multicultural societies.

Contribution of the Findings to the Research Question

The study demonstrates that interfaith volunteering serves as a lived expression of dialogue where participants encounter the divine through collective service and shared humanity. The findings highlight that empathy emerges not as a theoretical value but as a spiritual realization, born from direct collaboration and emotional resonance with others of differing beliefs (DeFoor et al., 2021). This research thus contributes a unique phenomenological insight: interfaith harmony is not achieved through intellectual consensus but through embodied moral experience.

Moreover, the negotiation of religious identity among participants illustrates that pluralism is not experienced as dilution of faith but as its reinterpretation. Individuals re-encounter their own traditions through others, recognizing faith as a dynamic and relational construct (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulfaidah, et al., 2025). This discovery enriches current interfaith scholarship by shifting the analytical focus from institutional dialogues to the inner processes of meaning-making that sustain plural coexistence (Taniyama et al., 2021). The study thereby provides a nuanced understanding of interreligious engagement as both a spiritual practice and a humanizing process.

Connection with Previous Literature and Theoretical Perspectives

The interpretative themes align with earlier works emphasizing interfaith cooperation as a transformative practice (Aghamiri et al., 2025), yet they extend these findings by uncovering the subjective dimensions of that transformation. Whereas previous studies have examined the external outcomes of interfaith programs such as increased tolerance or civic participation this research deepens the conversation by exposing the intrapersonal shifts that occur through lived engagement.

The results resonate with phenomenological theories of intersubjectivity proposed by Husserl and Heidegger, suggesting that authentic understanding arises through empathetic co-presence rather than detached observation (Boonmatun & Huttayavilaiphon, 2025). Participants' experiences also echo Levinas's notion of "the face of the other," wherein ethical responsibility emerges through encounter. In this sense, interfaith volunteering represents a microcosm of relational ethics: a lived theology grounded in compassion rather than creed.

At the same time, this study complements (Walter, 2019) analysis of Southeast Asian pluralism by highlighting how youth volunteers embody pluralistic ideals through spiritual practice, not just discourse (Vasconcelos, 2021). The data thus contribute to the growing theoretical synthesis between phenomenology, interreligious dialogue, and moral philosophy, affirming that lived experience remains the most profound site for understanding the possibilities of human coexistence in religiously diverse societies.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry significant implications for both theoretical understanding and practical application within interfaith and multicultural contexts. On a social level, they

demonstrate that interfaith volunteering serves as a form of lived pluralism—one that cultivates empathy and mutual recognition through shared human experiences rather than doctrinal consensus. Such findings suggest that initiatives promoting interreligious harmony should prioritize experience-based engagement as a catalyst for empathy and transformation.

From a cultural perspective, the results highlight the potential of interfaith encounters to reshape how young adults understand spirituality, identity, and coexistence (Hrinchenko et al., 2020). The emergence of a “plural spiritual consciousness” reflects a new paradigm of faith that is relational, reflexive, and inclusive (Gutberlet, 2022). This has practical implications for educators, community leaders, and policymakers who aim to foster intercultural dialogue in divided societies. By framing interfaith cooperation as a process of meaning-making, this study contributes to rethinking peacebuilding and civic participation as spiritually grounded acts of empathy and solidarity.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study provides valuable insights, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The research involved a relatively small and context-specific sample of participants drawn from urban interfaith initiatives, which may limit the transferability of findings to other cultural or religious settings. Moreover, the phenomenological design, while powerful for exploring depth of experience, inherently emphasizes subjective interpretation and may not capture all external factors influencing participants’ engagement.

The use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) prioritizes individual meaning over generalization, which means that the results should be understood as contextual truths rather than universal claims. Future studies could enhance this understanding by incorporating longitudinal perspectives or comparative analyses across regions and faith traditions (Yousaf & Dogar, 2025). These limitations, however, are not weaknesses but reflections of phenomenology’s commitment to depth rather than breadth in capturing human experience.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The present findings open several avenues for further inquiry into the lived dynamics of interfaith cooperation. Future research may expand the phenomenological lens to include different demographic groups—such as women, educators, or religious leaders—to explore how interfaith experiences shape identity and moral reasoning across contexts. Another promising direction involves examining how digital interfaith spaces mediate spiritual encounters and empathy formation in online communities.

Additionally, integrating phenomenological insights with action research or narrative inquiry could bridge the gap between experiential understanding and social implementation, offering strategies for sustainable interreligious collaboration. Ultimately, advancing this line of research will deepen comprehension of how human beings construct shared meaning and moral solidarity amid diversity—an inquiry that remains vital to both academic and societal discourses on peace and pluralism.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of young adults engaged in interfaith volunteering within multicultural urban contexts, focusing on how such experiences shape spiritual empathy, identity negotiation, and plural consciousness. The findings revealed that interfaith engagement functions as a transformative process that allows participants to encounter shared humanity beyond doctrinal boundaries. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis, the study addressed the gap in previous research by uncovering the inner meanings and emotional dimensions of interfaith cooperation that quantitative approaches have overlooked. The results demonstrated that empathy and plural understanding arise through embodied encounters and moral reflection, offering a deeper perspective on how dialogue can be lived rather than merely discussed. Beyond summarizing its findings, this study critically highlights that phenomenological inquiry provides not only descriptive depth but also interpretive insight into how spirituality is relationally constructed in plural contexts.

This underscores the necessity of moving from surface-level narratives of coexistence toward examining the moral and affective dynamics that sustain interfaith engagement.

However, this research is not without limitations. Its small sample size and focus on urban young adults limit the transferability of findings to other age groups, rural settings, or institutional contexts. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported experiences may introduce interpretive bias inherent to qualitative reflection. Future research should address these limitations by incorporating longitudinal designs, cross-cultural comparisons, or mixed-method approaches to triangulate phenomenological insights. In practical terms, the study's findings offer actionable implications for interfaith education and peacebuilding programs: designing reflective service-learning models that integrate empathy training, identity dialogue, and communal service. Future investigations might also explore how digital interfaith networks, online volunteering, and hybrid spiritual communities reconfigure the experience of plural empathy in virtual spaces. Overall, this study contributes a nuanced phenomenological understanding of how interfaith volunteering cultivates spiritual empathy and plural consciousness, while also opening pathways for more inclusive, critically reflective, and contextually diverse research on lived interreligious engagement.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The research was conducted independently, and the funding sponsor had no influence on the study design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, or the decision to submit the manuscript for publication. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript, ensuring full academic integrity and transparency throughout the research process.

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