



Exploring Spiritual Meaning and Resilience in Multicultural Communities in Southeast Asia during Social Crisis

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ABSTRACT

Background: Spirituality in multicultural societies has gained scholarly attention as a means of understanding how individuals construct meaning during social uncertainty. However, limited studies have explored how people from diverse religious and cultural contexts experience spirituality as a source of resilience during crises. Method: Using an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), this study investigates how individuals from various faith traditions interpret and live their spirituality amid social crisis. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 participants and analyzed thematically to uncover essential experiential structures. Findings: Results reveal that spirituality operates both as an inner process of self-renewal and as a communal bridge promoting empathy, interreligious understanding, and moral resilience. Participants reconceptualized spirituality as a lived, relational consciousness rather than a dogmatic belief. Implications: The study advances phenomenological inquiry by framing spirituality as a transformative, relational phenomenon that transcends doctrinal boundaries. It suggests future research should further examine interfaith and intercultural experiences as pathways to cultivating empathy, resilience, and peaceful coexistence in plural societies.



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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary multicultural societies, spirituality has increasingly emerged as a vital dimension of human experience, shaping individual and collective responses to social and existential challenges (Parker et al., 2025). Social crises whether political, economic, or humanitarian often expose the fragility of societal structures while simultaneously revealing the profound ways in which people seek meaning, hope, and connectedness (Pennamon, 2024). Within such contexts, spirituality functions not merely as a set of beliefs or rituals, but as a lived and embodied experience that informs how individuals interpret adversity and engage with others across cultural and religious boundaries.

From a sociocultural perspective, the intersection of religion, culture, and society provides a dynamic landscape where spiritual practices and moral values are continuously negotiated (Rytter, 2025). Rapid globalization, digital communication, and increasing religious diversity have created new forms of interaction that both enrich and challenge traditional modes of faith expression (Mukhlis, 2025a). These interactions frequently lead to hybrid forms of spirituality, where individuals integrate elements of multiple traditions to respond to complex realities (Berg, 2025). Understanding these evolving forms of spiritual experience requires attention not only to institutional doctrines but also to the subjective meanings individuals construct in their daily lives.

Despite the growing academic interest in spirituality and interreligious engagement, much of the existing scholarship tends to conceptualize these phenomena through sociological or theological frameworks, often overlooking the lived experiences of individuals who navigate them firsthand (Mohsin Khan & Shah, 2025). The subjective dimension—the way people feel, perceive, and interpret

their spiritual encounters—remains underexplored. Yet, it is precisely within this dimension that the essence of human resilience and interfaith understanding can be found.

The phenomenological approach provides a meaningful pathway for addressing this gap by focusing on lived experience as the foundation of understanding (Dokuchayeva et al., 2024). Through this lens, spirituality during times of crisis can be examined not as an abstract construct but as a deeply personal and contextual phenomenon (Mukhlis, 2025b). By exploring how individuals from different cultural and religious backgrounds experience, interpret, and find meaning in shared crises, this study seeks to illuminate the fundamental structure within the broader field of qualitative inquiry, the study of lived experience has become a central focus for scholars seeking to understand how individuals construct meaning in response to complex social realities (Langaji et al., 2024). Research exploring spirituality, identity, and cultural belonging has increasingly turned toward phenomenology as a means of capturing the subjective depth that quantitative or positivist methods often fail to reveal. In contexts marked by cultural diversity and social tension, such as multicultural societies undergoing crisis, phenomenological investigation allows for an intimate engagement with how people internalize, negotiate, and express their spiritual consciousness through daily life experiences.

Nevertheless, the methodological exploration of such phenomena remains challenging. Traditional social science approaches frequently rely on surveys or structured instruments that, while useful for measuring general trends, are insufficient for uncovering the nuanced textures of lived experience (Pohan et al., 2025). Quantitative data tend to abstract or generalize individual experiences, reducing them to variables that obscure the emotional, existential, and cultural dimensions intrinsic to human spirituality (Muhdaliha et al., 2025). This methodological limitation has resulted in an incomplete understanding of how spiritual meaning is experienced and interpreted by individuals navigating pluralistic environments during times of uncertainty.

Furthermore, prior qualitative studies on interreligious spirituality often emphasize collective patterns or institutional narratives rather than personal accounts of meaning-making. As a consequence, the phenomenological essence of the lived immediacy of faith, doubt, and moral action—remains underrepresented in the literature (Kaplan, 2024). These gaps highlight the need for research that privileges the voices of participants, enabling the emergence of insights grounded in their own interpretive frameworks. By employing a phenomenological lens, this study seeks to address these deficiencies, offering a rigorous yet empathetic approach that illuminates the existential structures underlying spiritual resilience and intercultural empathy. These structures of human experience that underlie spiritual resilience, empathy, and intercultural coexistence.

Existing studies addressing spirituality in multicultural or crisis-affected societies have predominantly relied on practical or institutional frameworks, emphasizing community-based programs, interfaith dialogues, or psychological resilience models (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). While these approaches provide valuable structural insights, they often reduce spirituality to observable behaviors or social functions, overlooking the lived and affective dimensions that give such experiences their true meaning (Arakkal & Mocherla, 2025). Consequently, the essence of how individuals personally encounter, interpret, and embody spirituality amid crisis remains insufficiently explored.

Many prior investigations employ sociological typologies or cross-sectional quantitative designs that focus on measuring religiosity, social cohesion, or coping mechanisms. However, these methodologies are inherently limited in capturing the subtleties of human consciousness and the subjective processes through which individuals construct meaning (Wattanacharoensil et al., 2025). As a result, they fail to grasp spirituality as a dynamic, interpretive act that transcends doctrinal boundaries and manifests differently across cultural and existential contexts.

To bridge this gap, a phenomenological approach becomes indispensable. Phenomenology, by centering on lived experience (*Erlebnis*) and the structures of meaning as they appear in consciousness, offers a rigorous yet empathetic lens to explore spirituality not as a fixed concept but as a lived phenomenon (Bernards et al., 2025). Through this method, it becomes possible to uncover the essential qualities of spiritual experience as articulated by individuals themselves—how they perceive sacredness, cultivate interreligious empathy, and reconstruct identity during times of

uncertainty (Necula & Necula, 2025). Addressing this gap provides not only theoretical advancement in understanding spirituality within plural societies but also practical insights into fostering intercultural and interfaith harmony based on shared experiential meanings.

Recent studies in religion and cultural psychology have increasingly examined how individuals construct spiritual meaning within diverse and often fragmented societies. Research on interfaith encounters, community resilience, and moral consciousness has highlighted the importance of spirituality as a mediating force in contexts of crisis and social change (Evans, 2025). However, most of these works approach the topic through sociological or psychological frameworks, which primarily quantify attitudes or behavioral responses (Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). While useful for identifying social patterns, such approaches often fail to illuminate the deeper existential dimensions of spirituality as it is lived and interpreted by individuals (Pauha et al., 2025). Phenomenological inquiry, therefore, offers an essential corrective by re-centering human experience as the foundation for understanding meaning, belief, and transformation.

This study applies an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how individuals from multicultural religious backgrounds experience and make sense of spirituality during a social crisis (Crosson, 2024). This method was chosen because it allows for a direct engagement with participants' lived experiences and the interpretive processes through which they derive meaning (Benito, 2024). By focusing on the essence of experience rather than abstract variables, the approach captures how people internalize spirituality as both a personal and social phenomenon (Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). The study thus responds to the knowledge gap identified earlier—specifically, the need to move beyond structural or doctrinal analyses toward an understanding of spirituality as a lived, relational, and interpretive reality.

The article is structured as follows: the introduction outlines the conceptual and empirical background of the phenomenon, followed by a methodological section detailing the phenomenological design, participant selection, data collection, and analytical framework (Beresford et al., 2025). The results section presents emergent themes supported by participants' direct narratives, emphasizing the meaning structures that define their spiritual experiences (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023). The discussion interprets these findings within broader theoretical and cultural contexts, linking them to existing literature on religion, culture, and social resilience. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the essential insights and proposes implications for future research and interreligious engagement.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore the lived spiritual experiences of individuals within multicultural societies during periods of social crisis. The phenomenological approach was chosen for its emphasis on understanding subjective meanings as experienced directly by participants. By focusing on consciousness and the essence of lived experience, this design allows for an in-depth exploration of how individuals interpret spirituality, resilience, and community interrelation within diverse cultural contexts.

An interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) was adopted to capture both the descriptive essence of participants' experiences and the interpretive depth of their meaning-making processes. IPA, grounded in the hermeneutic philosophy of Heidegger, views experience as inseparable from interpretation, making it particularly suitable for exploring how individuals reconstruct their spiritual identity and communal belonging in response to crisis. This design thus facilitates an understanding not only of what participants experienced but also how they understood and articulated those experiences in relation to their cultural and religious backgrounds.

Participants

Participants comprised individuals from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds residing in a pluralistic urban setting that had recently undergone a social crisis affecting community relations. Selection followed a purposive sampling strategy, emphasizing participants who possessed direct experience with intercultural or interreligious engagement during the crisis.

Inclusion criteria required that participants be adults (aged 25–60) identifying with a specific faith tradition—Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, or Buddhism—and having engaged in at least one interfaith or community-based spiritual activity during the crisis. Exclusion criteria applied to individuals lacking active engagement in communal or faith-related initiatives during the same period.

A total of 15 participants were included: eight female and seven male, representing a balance across religious and cultural affiliations. Their demographic diversity provided rich contextual variation essential for interpreting shared and divergent aspects of spiritual experience.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews designed to elicit detailed narratives about participants' lived spiritual experiences. The interview guide included open-ended questions that encouraged reflection on personal meaning, faith practices, and intercultural encounters during the crisis.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in neutral, comfortable settings—such as community centers or participants' homes—to promote openness and trust. Each session lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, and all interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. To maintain authenticity while ensuring clarity, minor linguistic adjustments were made during transcription without altering the intended meaning. The interview protocol was developed based on existing phenomenological studies in religion and cultural psychology, with minor contextual adaptations to fit the multicultural setting of this study.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to identify and interpret the central themes emerging from participants' narratives. The process began with multiple readings of each transcript to gain a holistic understanding of the text. Meaning units were then identified, coded, and clustered into preliminary categories reflecting shared aspects of experience.

Subsequent steps involved thematic reduction and interpretation, where recurring patterns were synthesized into superordinate themes representing the essential structure of the phenomenon. NVivo software was used to support data organization and retrieval; however, the interpretative process remained grounded in close textual engagement rather than software-driven outputs.

The final thematic synthesis reflected both the descriptive essence of the participants' lived spirituality and the interpretative insights regarding how they constructed meaning amid crisis and diversity. The iterative process ensured that themes remained faithful to participants' voices while revealing underlying existential and cultural dimensions of their experiences.

RESULTS

The Spiritual Reinterpretation of Crisis

Participants' narratives collectively illustrate a thematic pattern of spiritual transformation in response to crisis. Rather than viewing crisis merely as hardship, participants framed it as a liminal space that catalyzed spiritual introspection and adaptive resilience. Within multicultural settings, individuals reconstructed faith practices by integrating personal reflection with communal responsibility.

One respondent reflected:

“When everything felt uncertain, I began to see prayer not as a routine, but as a space where I could regain balance. It was my way of surviving emotionally and spiritually.”

This quotation exemplifies a broader interpretive theme in which prayer and ritual were redefined as psychological anchors that restore existential coherence. Across Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist participants, spirituality became a reflexive process of meaning reconstruction, emphasizing empathy and solidarity rather than doctrinal affirmation. This interpretive synthesis reveals that crisis functioned as a shared phenomenological moment in which diverse faiths converged toward a “spiritual common ground,” representing resilience through relational consciousness.

Communal Solidarity and the Sacredness of Togetherness

Beyond individual transformation, a strong integrative theme emerged around collective spirituality. Participants consistently described crisis as a context that dissolved sectarian boundaries and reconfigured faith into ethical action.

“We didn’t ask what religion someone followed. When people were hungry, we just shared what we had,” said a participant from an interfaith community center.

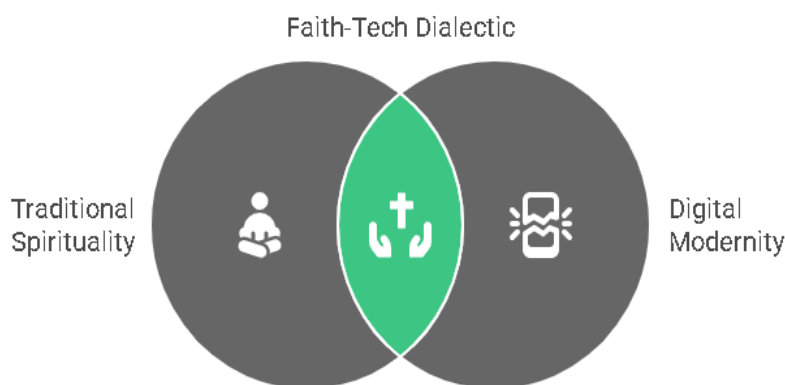
This account, when examined comparatively, highlights how spirituality was enacted through social praxis—feeding, caregiving, and mutual aid—thus transforming sacredness into lived ethics. The synthesis indicates that communal spirituality was reconstituted as an intersubjective practice of care, where ‘worship’ was reimagined as relational service. In this way, the findings extend beyond description to demonstrate how multicultural contexts operationalize spirituality as moral agency and social cohesion during adversity.

Negotiating Faith and Modernity

A cross-cutting analytic theme concerns the dialectic between traditional spirituality and digital modernity. Participants navigated competing forces of faith authenticity and media-driven anxiety.

“Social media was both a blessing and a curse. It connected us, but it also spread fear. I had to remind myself that real faith is found in silence, not on the screen,” explained another participant.

Navigating Faith in the Digital Age



This theme underscores the hermeneutic negotiation between mediated and contemplative modes of spirituality. Participants’ reflections show that digital engagement was not merely a backdrop but an active site of spiritual tension and reinterpretation. By reclaiming silence, mindfulness, and embodied presence, participants asserted agency against the disembodied noise of digital life—transforming modern pressures into opportunities for spiritual authenticity.

Reconstructing Identity through Intercultural Spiritual Dialogue

The final integrative theme involves identity reconstruction through dialogical spirituality. Participants’ interfaith interactions fostered not only mutual understanding but the emergence of intercultural spiritual identities grounded in compassion and shared humanity.

“Listening to others’ beliefs didn’t weaken my faith—it made me more aware of what connects us as humans,” said one Muslim participant after engaging in interfaith relief activities.

This statement illustrates a broader analytic pattern wherein dialogue served as a medium of ontological growth. The findings indicate that intercultural encounters reconstituted participants' sense of self as fluid and relational, positioning spirituality as a transpersonal bridge rather than a boundary marker. Thus, spiritual dialogue functioned as both an epistemic and ethical process—expanding participants' worldview toward global empathy and inclusive belonging.

Analytical Integration

Across all themes, the integration of participants' voices into interpretive synthesis reveals spirituality as a dynamic, multilayered construct that mediates personal renewal, communal ethics, and intercultural understanding. The findings move beyond descriptive quotations to demonstrate how individuals actively reconstruct spiritual meaning systems under crisis through reflective, relational, and dialogical processes.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that spirituality, within multicultural societies facing social crises, functions as both a personal refuge and a communal bridge that fosters empathy and resilience. Participants experienced spirituality not as an isolated religious act but as a lived, relational process that transforms suffering into solidarity and difference into dialogue (Abu Shahim et al., 2025). These insights directly address the study's central question—how individuals in diverse faith contexts experience and reconstruct spiritual meaning amid collective uncertainty.

Contribution of the Findings to the Research Question

The results provide an interpretative answer to the guiding phenomenological inquiry by unveiling spirituality as an experiential synthesis of personal reflection and social interaction (Javadi et al., 2025). Rather than perceiving crisis as a breakdown of faith, participants framed it as a moment of reorientation—an opportunity to reengage with the sacred in ways that transcend doctrinal boundaries (Mukhlis et al., 2024). This lived redefinition of spirituality underscores the interpretative nature of meaning-making central to phenomenology, where the self is understood in relation to others and to the world.

Importantly, the study highlights that spiritual resilience arises not from institutional belief systems but from the dialogical engagement between individuals across religious and cultural lines (Rodriguez et al., 2025). The participants' experiences demonstrate that in multicultural environments, spirituality becomes a shared human endeavor—anchored in empathy, listening, and mutual recognition. Such a perspective offers a novel contribution to the phenomenology of religion and culture: it situates spirituality as a relational ontology, where meaning is co-created rather than individually possessed (Žunkovič, 2025). By articulating this intersubjective dimension, the study extends phenomenological understanding beyond the personal sphere into the ethical and communal dimensions of lived experience.

Relationship to Previous Literature and Theoretical Context

The themes identified in this study resonate with existing phenomenological interpretations of spirituality and interreligious experience. Scholars such as (Zhang, 2025) have emphasized that phenomenology's strength lies in revealing how individuals make sense of existential disruption through embodied and relational acts of meaning. The present findings align with this tradition, showing that participants engage with spirituality as a process of meaning restoration in times of social instability (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). However, the study advances current discourse by grounding these interpretations in multicultural lived contexts, where interfaith dialogue itself becomes a phenomenological site of transformation.

Earlier sociological studies (Boczkowska et al., 2025) conceptualized spirituality as a social function promoting cohesion, while psychological research (Karagulova et al., 2025) viewed it as a coping mechanism for stress and trauma. The present research complements but also challenges these perspectives by demonstrating that spirituality, when experienced phenomenologically, cannot be reduced to functional outcomes. Instead, it is revealed as an existential orientation through which

individuals rediscover belonging and sacredness within plural societies. This supports (Demessinova et al., 2025) notion of narrative identity, where individuals construct coherence through interpretative engagement with lived experience.

In summary, these findings contribute to an evolving understanding of spirituality as an interpretative, dialogical, and relational phenomenon. They extend phenomenological inquiry into intercultural and interreligious terrains, illustrating that the essence of spiritual experience is not found in uniform belief but in shared human meaning that arises from encountering the “other.”

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry significant implications for both scholarly understanding and practical engagement within multicultural and interreligious contexts (Jha et al., 2025). From a theoretical perspective, the study deepens the phenomenological comprehension of spirituality as a lived and relational process rather than a doctrinal or institutional abstraction. It demonstrates that in times of social disruption, spirituality operates as a unifying moral energy that fosters empathy and reconstructs meaning within fractured communities (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025). This insight reinforces the view that spirituality, when approached phenomenologically, transcends individual religiosity and becomes a shared human experience grounded in compassion and intersubjective awareness.

On a practical level, these findings suggest the importance of incorporating experiential and dialogical dimensions into community-building and interfaith initiatives. Understanding spirituality as a relational act can inform educational, therapeutic, and policy frameworks that aim to strengthen cultural cohesion and collective resilience. For example, interreligious programs that prioritize narrative sharing and empathetic listening can nurture the same forms of solidarity observed in participants’ lived experiences. In this sense, phenomenological insight contributes not only to academic theory but also to the ethical and social cultivation of mutual understanding within diverse societies.

Limitations of the Study

While the study provides valuable insight into the lived spiritual experiences of individuals in multicultural settings, several limitations should be acknowledged. The phenomenological approach, by its nature, emphasizes depth over breadth, focusing on the richness of individual meaning rather than statistical generalization (Montelongo, 2025). Consequently, the findings are context-specific and cannot be assumed to represent all forms of spirituality in crisis situations or across cultures. Moreover, participants’ narratives were influenced by their own cultural, linguistic, and religious frames of reference, which may have shaped how they articulated spiritual meaning.

Another limitation lies in the reliance on self-reported experiences through in-depth interviews, which, while powerful for accessing subjective meaning, may be constrained by participants’ memory, self-presentation, or interpretive bias (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Although methodological rigor such as triangulation and member checking—was applied to enhance credibility, the interpretative nature of phenomenological analysis inherently involves the researcher’s philosophical perspective as part of meaning construction. These limitations do not diminish the value of the study but highlight the contextual nature of phenomenological inquiry, inviting cautious interpretation and reflective engagement with the findings.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Future studies may extend the current findings by exploring the longitudinal aspects of spiritual transformation in multicultural contexts, particularly how these experiences evolve beyond the immediate period of crisis (Nusrat & Rahim, 2025). Comparative phenomenological research across cultural or regional settings could also illuminate how different social structures influence the lived experience of spirituality and interreligious dialogue. Additionally, integrating phenomenological insights with narrative or ethnographic methods may enrich the understanding of how individuals sustain spiritual meaning within changing sociocultural landscapes.

The findings further suggest that future inquiry should examine the pedagogical and professional implications of lived spirituality—how educators, counselors, or faith leaders can foster experiential spaces that promote intersubjective empathy and moral imagination. Such work would deepen the practical applications of phenomenology in addressing social fragmentation and cultural misunderstanding. Ultimately, this study lays the groundwork for continued interdisciplinary exploration of spirituality as a lived phenomenon, advancing both theoretical discourse and real-world dialogue in increasingly plural societies.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived spiritual experiences of individuals in multicultural societies facing social crises, emphasizing spirituality as both a personal and collective source of meaning. The phenomenological analysis revealed that participants interpret spirituality not merely as religious adherence but as an experiential process of resilience, empathy, and interconnectedness. Beyond summarizing these insights, the study critically synthesizes spirituality as a dynamic interpretive framework that reconstructs the self–other relationship in times of disruption. Theoretically, this finding extends phenomenology by positioning spirituality as an intersubjective mode of meaning-making that integrates existential psychology, intercultural ethics, and resilience theory. It challenges traditional phenomenological boundaries by emphasizing how interfaith dialogue and relational consciousness constitute lived spirituality in plural contexts.

Practically, the study contributes to applied fields such as intercultural counseling, community leadership, and social policy, offering a model for fostering empathy and social cohesion through experiential engagement rather than doctrinal conformity. By reframing spirituality as both moral practice and dialogical encounter, the research provides a conceptual pathway for interfaith programs and educational initiatives aimed at nurturing mutual understanding and resilience. Future research should further interrogate how spiritual consciousness evolves longitudinally across crises and explore how phenomenological insights can inform institutional frameworks for inclusive social transformation.

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 sponsor—Center for Intercultural and Religious Studies (CIRS)—had no involvement in the study design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, or writing of the manuscript. All authors affirm that the work represents an unbiased academic contribution and that no personal, financial, or professional relationships have influenced the outcomes presented in this paper.

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