



Exploring the Lived Experience of Suffering and Moral Reflection among Post-Secular Urban Youth: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Suffering and moral reflection have long been central concerns within the field of Religious Philosophy and Ethics, particularly as modern societies grapple with questions of meaning in a post-secular world. Within this broader discourse, little is known about how young adults in urban contexts interpret suffering as a moral and spiritual experience rather than merely a psychological or sociological condition. This study addresses that gap by asking: How do individuals in post-secular environments experience and reinterpret suffering as a process of moral and spiritual transformation? Using a Hermeneutic Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (HIPA), the research explores the lived experiences of twelve urban participants who engage with suffering as a reflective dialogue between faith, morality, and transcendence. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analyzed thematically to uncover essential structures of meaning. The findings indicate three central insights. First, suffering functions as a moral space where ethical consciousness and spiritual renewal gradually emerge. Second, participants describe suffering not as a threat to faith but as an interpretative journey that strengthens their moral identity. Third, suffering becomes a reflective encounter that broadens existential understanding and fosters deeper relational empathy and hope. These results extend the phenomenological understanding of spirituality by demonstrating how personal pain can become a transformative ethical encounter. The study contributes to current debates in Religious Philosophy and Ethics and opens pathways for future interdisciplinary research on moral consciousness and spiritual resilience in post-secular contexts.



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INTRODUCTION

Across contemporary societies, the experience of suffering has transcended its traditional theological interpretations and has become a complex moral and existential issue (Arief et al., 2025). In the post-secular world where religion no longer occupies an exclusive public role but continues to shape individual consciousness young adults are confronted with an intricate interplay between faith, identity, and moral reasoning. Modern urban life, characterized by rapid technological progress, pluralism, and moral ambiguity, creates a context in which the meaning of suffering is often negotiated outside institutional religion (Zuk et al., 2024). To maintain conceptual focus, this study emphasizes suffering as a lived moral experience rather than expanding on broader philosophical debates. Within this environment, spirituality persists as an inner dialogue that seeks coherence between moral integrity and lived experience.

The phenomenon of religious reflection amid suffering holds particular importance in the study of Religious Philosophy and Ethics, as it touches upon the deepest dimensions of human consciousness how individuals perceive transcendence, construct meaning, and navigate moral tension (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023; Mukhlis, 2025b). Existing philosophical and psychological

discourses frequently approach suffering as a problem to be resolved, yet phenomenology invites a different orientation: to understand how suffering is lived, felt, and given meaning by those who experience it (Braga & Ribeiro, 2025). Through this perspective, suffering is not merely an obstacle to human flourishing but a potential avenue for moral awakening and spiritual insight. The phenomenological approach therefore becomes indispensable in examining the subjective dimensions of faith that shape ethical awareness and existential understanding.

Within this broader philosophical landscape, the study of post-secular religiosity among urban youth underscores the ongoing human need for transcendental meaning (Mamcarz, 2023). Despite secularization, individuals continue to interpret their experiences through moral and spiritual frameworks, reconstructing faith in ways that align with personal authenticity and ethical reflection (Garaschuk & Sokolovskyi, 2025). However, existing discussions often remain theoretically fragmented, leaving insufficient attention to how these frameworks are personally interpreted in moments of suffering. Consequently, a phenomenological exploration of this phenomenon is essential to capture the nuances of how faith, ethics, and human suffering intersect in contemporary existence.

Research on the lived experience of individuals encountering moral or spiritual struggle has become a significant and evolving area within phenomenological philosophy and applied ethics. Scholars have increasingly recognized that moral consciousness and religious reflection cannot be fully understood through abstract theorization alone but must be approached through the first-person perspective of lived experience (Bosire et al., 2025). This shift has placed phenomenology at the center of contemporary inquiries into how individuals experience, interpret, and ascribe meaning to suffering, faith, and ethical responsibility in daily life. Within this sub-area, phenomenological inquiry seeks not to explain or quantify experience but to reveal the essence of meaning as it is lived and embodied by the subject.

Despite its growing importance, exploring the depth of such experiences presents substantial methodological challenges (Mahjoubi et al., 2025). Many prior studies within psychology and theology have relied heavily on quantitative or positivist frameworks that focus on behavioral indicators or cognitive patterns rather than the subjective, affective, and existential dimensions of religious experience. Such approaches often fail to capture the texture of moral reflection or the silent, interpretative dialogue that occurs within the consciousness of those grappling with spiritual suffering (Hidayati et al., 2022). Even within qualitative research, the descriptive focus of traditional phenomenology sometimes remains limited in addressing the interpretive and hermeneutic layers through which meaning is continually reconstructed by the individual.

These methodological limitations underscore the need for a deeper interpretative approach capable of bridging phenomenology and moral hermeneutics (Alexander et al., 2025). Existing methods frequently overlook the relational and contextual character of moral awareness how meaning arises not in isolation but through dialogue between the self, others, and the transcendent. Consequently, a refined methodological orientation, such as Hermeneutic Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (HIPA), becomes essential. This approach allows for the articulation of moral and spiritual meaning as an evolving, reflective process embedded within lived experience (Ermansyah, 2025). By adopting such a perspective, the present study aims to address the persistent gap in understanding how individuals in a post-secular context internalize suffering as a moral and religious phenomenon.

Although the moral and spiritual dimensions of suffering have been explored in various disciplines, much of the existing research has relied on practical or cognitive-behavioral approaches that prioritize coping mechanisms, emotional regulation, or theological interpretation (Cheatham & Fernando, 2022). These frameworks have contributed valuable insights into how individuals respond to adversity, yet they tend to conceptualize suffering as a problem to be solved rather than a meaning to be lived. Consequently, such studies often overlook the subjective moral transformation and existential depth that accompany the lived experience of suffering in a post-secular context.

The predominant reliance on psychological and sociological paradigms limits the ability to understand how moral consciousness and spiritual reflection emerge through the inner dialogue between faith, pain, and meaning (Heuser et al., 2023). While these approaches may quantify

behavioral outcomes or categorize belief systems, they rarely capture the phenomenological essence the way individuals feel, interpret, and give form to meaning in their moral suffering (Qiu et al., 2024). The absence of this interpretative depth creates a conceptual void in understanding how urban youth, navigating secular environments, construct their spiritual identity and moral awareness through suffering.

To address this limitation, a phenomenological approach, particularly one informed by hermeneutic interpretation, is necessary (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Phenomenology allows for the exploration of suffering as a lived, reflective process in which meaning unfolds through experience rather than being imposed externally. By employing the Hermeneutic Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (HIPA), this study seeks to illuminate how suffering becomes a moral and spiritual dialogue an evolving interpretative process that connects human vulnerability with the pursuit of transcendence. This orientation not only fills a methodological gap but also deepens the theoretical understanding of how faith and morality are reconstituted within the consciousness of individuals in a post-secular age.

Previous research in religious philosophy, psychology, and moral theology has examined how individuals interpret suffering and spirituality within diverse cultural contexts. Studies such as (Kumala et al., 2025) revealed that suffering often functions as a psychological coping mechanism or a theological symbol of redemption. However, these investigations rarely address how the lived meaning of suffering unfolds through reflective awareness and moral consciousness. Phenomenological perspectives, especially those grounded in hermeneutic interpretation, have begun to fill this gap by emphasizing the internal, experiential process of finding meaning (Dishman & Smith, 2023). This body of work demonstrates the need for a method that captures both the existential and ethical dimensions of human suffering in post-secular contexts.

To respond to this need, the present study adopts a Hermeneutic Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (HIPA) framework. This approach integrates phenomenology's focus on lived experience with hermeneutics' emphasis on interpretation and meaning-making. It allows for an exploration of how young urban individuals experience suffering as both a moral challenge and a spiritual dialogue (Harris et al., 2024). By focusing on participants' reflective narratives, the study reveals how moral awareness emerges through the intersection of pain, faith, and transcendence. In doing so, it directly addresses the gap identified earlier by uncovering the moral and spiritual essence of human experience beyond behavioral or doctrinal explanations.

This article is structured as follows. The introduction outlines the theoretical and contextual background of the phenomenon and situates it within current scholarly debates (Mukhlis et al., 2024; Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). The Method section describes the phenomenological design, participant selection, data collection, and interpretative analysis process (Vasconcelos, 2021). The Results section presents thematic findings that capture the essence of moral and spiritual reflection through suffering. Finally, the Discussion and Conclusion sections integrate these findings with existing literature, highlighting their implications for contemporary studies in religious philosophy and ethics.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of urban youth who interpret suffering within their religious reflection in a post-secular context (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). The phenomenological design was chosen because it enables an in-depth understanding of subjective consciousness and the meaning structures underlying personal experiences of moral and spiritual struggle. Through this lens, the study sought to uncover how suffering becomes a source of ethical awareness and spiritual transformation rather than merely a psychological burden.

The Hermeneutic Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (HIPA) approach was applied, combining Heidegger's existential phenomenology and Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. This interpretative model allowed for a reflective engagement with participants' narratives, where meanings are co-constructed through dialogical interpretation rather than extracted as objective data. The method emphasized the contextual and moral dimensions of spiritual experience, aligning closely with the philosophical orientation of Religious Philosophy and Ethics. Additionally, HIPA was selected because its emphasis on interpretative depth aligns with the study's goal of understanding nuanced moral and existential meanings embedded in experiences of suffering, thereby justifying its suitability for the research context.

Participants

Participants consisted of twelve young adults (aged 21–35) living in major urban centers who identified themselves as religious or spiritual but not bound to institutional traditions (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). All participants had encountered personal experiences of suffering or moral conflict that led to reflective engagement with their faith. The selection followed a purposive sampling approach to ensure that only individuals with deep, reflective encounters relevant to the study's phenomenon were included.

Inclusion criteria comprised: (1) individuals with demonstrated engagement in personal or communal spiritual practices, (2) openness to discussing moral and existential experiences, and (3) willingness to reflect on the meaning of suffering. Exclusion criteria included individuals without reflective engagement in religious experience or those currently undergoing severe psychological distress. The participants represented diverse professional and educational backgrounds, enhancing the contextual depth of their narratives while maintaining focus on the shared phenomenon of spiritual reflection in moral dilemmas.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted face-to-face in private and quiet settings to preserve reflective depth and comfort (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, guided by open-ended questions designed to elicit the participants' lived experiences of suffering, faith, and moral consciousness. The interview protocol encouraged narrative reflection, focusing on how participants described, interpreted, and found meaning in their experiences.

Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes were taken to capture non-verbal expressions, environmental cues, and reflective insights that emerged during the conversations. To ensure authenticity, participants were encouraged to revisit their narratives through member checking, verifying the resonance between their words and the interpreted meanings. The data collection took place over a three-month period in 2024 across community centers, spiritual discussion groups, and private settings conducive to introspection.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Hermeneutic Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (HIPA) technique (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). The process began with repeated readings of the transcripts to achieve immersion and to identify significant statements or meaning units that reflected participants' moral and spiritual experiences. These meaning units were then organized into preliminary categories through thematic reduction, focusing on how suffering and reflection shape ethical consciousness.

Using NVivo software, codes were assigned to recurring ideas, emotions, and symbols that conveyed participants' engagement with religious meaning (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). The hermeneutic circle guided the interpretative process understanding each part of the text in relation to the whole and vice versa until essential themes were established. These themes were synthesized into interpretative narratives that captured the essence of the phenomenon. The outcome of this analytic process was the articulation of existential and moral structures underlying the experience of suffering and faith among post-secular urban youth.

RESULTS

The Encounter with Moral Dilemma as a Catalyst for Spiritual Reflection

Participants revealed that moral dilemmas serve as profound moments of inner struggle that challenge their spiritual identity. These experiences are not merely ethical conflicts but occasions for existential questioning about divine will and personal conscience. One participant, Brother L., expressed, “When I am faced with a choice that challenges my beliefs, it is not fear that dominates me it is silence. In that silence, I search for what God truly wants me to become.”

This reflection indicates that moral dilemmas are internalized as spaces of divine encounter rather than sources of anxiety. Participants described such moments as both unsettling and transformative, suggesting that the moral struggle becomes a path toward deeper authenticity in faith. By situating these struggles within a phenomenological framework of lived religious experience, the data reveal that moral dilemmas function as interpretive thresholds in which individuals renegotiate the meaning of obedience, agency, and spiritual identity. Rather than remaining at the level of narrative description, participants’ responses illustrate how existential questioning becomes a methodological bridge connecting subjective experience to the broader philosophical inquiry on moral self-formation. The phenomenon reveals that ethical uncertainty, when interpreted through religious consciousness, turns into a medium of spiritual refinement and moral maturity.

Suffering as a Pathway to Transcendent Meaning

Suffering emerged as a central theme in participants’ narratives, not as a negative experience but as a sacred process that illuminates the relationship between human fragility and divine compassion. One participant, Sister M., reflected, “My pain is the language through which God speaks to me. Without it, I might have never listened.”

Such expressions demonstrate that participants perceive suffering as revelatory it awakens awareness of dependence on the divine and facilitates reconciliation with the human condition. The phenomenological essence of this theme suggests that suffering, when embraced with reflective awareness, transforms into a moral and spiritual dialogue between self and transcendence. Rather than resisting pain, participants described it as a form of sacred participation in the moral order of existence.

The Post-Secular Search for Authentic Faith

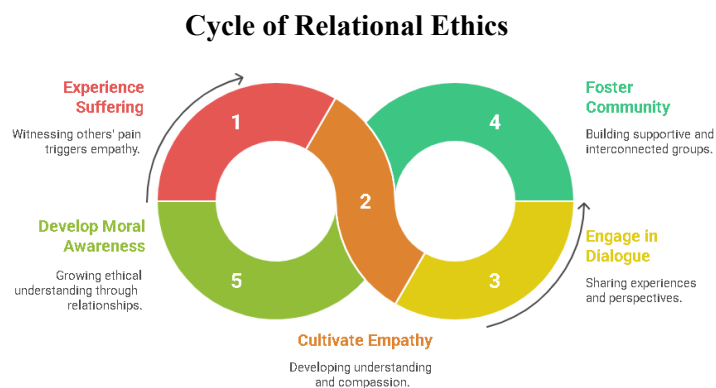
Living within an urban post-secular environment, participants often grapple with religious doubt and pluralism. Yet, their experiences highlight a renewed authenticity in spirituality a return to personal conviction beyond institutional authority. One monk shared, “In the city, faith is no longer inherited; it must be rediscovered every day among the noise.”

This articulation underscores the existential texture of post-secular religiosity: faith becomes an act of conscious choice and ethical perseverance rather than social conformity. The participants’ reflective practices meditation, journaling, silent prayer illustrate a moral reorientation toward lived spirituality. Their accounts show that modern religiosity is sustained not by dogma but by continuous ethical self-examination in response to the ambiguities of contemporary life.

The Moral Consciousness of Relational Responsibility

Participants emphasized that moral awareness develops through relational contexts community, dialogue, and empathy. Suffering and moral struggle are not solitary experiences but intersubjective encounters where understanding and compassion are mutually cultivated. As Brother T. explained, “When I see another person’s pain, I feel part of their calling. Ethics is no longer a rule; it becomes a relationship.”

This theme highlights the transition from an individualistic moral outlook to a relational ethics grounded in shared humanity. The phenomenological insight here is that moral identity is co-constituted through others: the self discovers its moral essence by being responsible for another’s suffering. Such intersubjectivity redefines ethics as participatory, dialogical, and spiritually embodied.



The Hermeneutics of Hope Reconstructing Meaning Through Faith

Hope surfaced as the underlying moral force that integrates suffering, doubt, and faith into a coherent experience of meaning. Participants consistently described hope as a “silent conviction” that sustains them amid uncertainty. One statement captured this succinctly: “Hope is not optimism; it is faith breathing through pain.”

Through interpretative phenomenological analysis, hope is revealed not as an abstract virtue but as a lived hermeneutic a way of interpreting one’s existence within divine narrative. Participants’ reflections show that moral resilience arises when faith transforms despair into understanding, thereby allowing ethical action to emerge from spiritual insight. Hope thus functions as the phenomenological bridge between human limitation and divine possibility.

DISCUSSION

Summary of the Main Findings

The phenomenological analysis revealed that suffering, when interpreted through reflective faith, becomes a moral and spiritual process that reshapes ethical awareness and existential meaning. Rather than merely describing participants’ meaning-making, this interpretation demonstrates how suffering functions as an active moral catalyst that reorganizes one’s relational, existential, and spiritual orientation. The essence of this experience lies in the participants’ recognition of suffering as a sacred dialogue between human vulnerability and divine transcendence a discovery that directly addresses the guiding question of how post-secular individuals internalize and reinterpret pain within a religious and moral framework.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The findings illuminate that moral consciousness does not emerge solely through rational deliberation or religious doctrine but through lived engagement with suffering (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Participants’ narratives demonstrated that the moral and spiritual self is continuously reconstituted through experiences of inner conflict, relational empathy, and hope. Importantly, the study shows that suffering is not only transformative but also structurally reorganizes the individual’s moral horizon, compelling them to re-evaluate ethical commitments and relational responsibilities. These insights directly answer the research question by showing that suffering acts as a transformative ethical phenomenon a space where individuals negotiate between personal fragility and moral strength. The study contributes a distinctive understanding to the field of Religious Philosophy and Ethics, suggesting that in the post-secular age, spirituality is not a static belief system but an evolving hermeneutic process of meaning-making (Sekar & Sangeetha, 2025). This deepens philosophical discourse on ethics by presenting suffering as the phenomenological ground for moral reflection, rather than a condition to be resolved or transcended.

Relationship with Previous Literature and Theoretical Perspectives

The results resonate with Schnell's (2020) assertion that meaning in suffering arises from existential interpretation rather than external prescription, while also extending Zock's (2019) findings by situating such meaning within a relational moral context. The study aligns with Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology, emphasizing that truth and understanding emerge through lived experience and interpretive reflection. Yet, it challenges traditional theological models that treat suffering primarily as a test of faith, proposing instead that suffering is a dynamic site of moral formation and ethical awareness. These findings also complement De Jaegher's (2021) view of shared suffering as intersubjective, reinforcing that moral identity is co-constructed through empathy and responsibility toward others. The integration of these perspectives underscores the novelty of this study: it reframes the phenomenon of suffering from a passive endurance to an active hermeneutic process that shapes one's spiritual and ethical being.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study offer significant philosophical and social implications for understanding how moral and spiritual identity develops in post-secular societies. From a phenomenological perspective, suffering emerges as a moral horizon in which individuals reconstruct meaning, not through external doctrine, but through reflective engagement with their lived experiences (Bansal & Kapur, 2023). This insight holds practical relevance for pastoral care, counseling, and ethical education, as it emphasizes the necessity of accompanying individuals in their interpretative process rather than prescribing fixed solutions. Socially, the study underscores that spirituality among urban youth is evolving into an individualized yet ethically grounded form of religiosity one that reconciles doubt, vulnerability, and transcendence within a pluralistic world. On a broader cultural level, these findings encourage a rethinking of moral discourse, situating faith and suffering not as opposites but as coexisting dimensions of human moral growth and spiritual resilience.

Limitations of the Study

This study's insights should be interpreted within the context of certain methodological and contextual boundaries. The participant group was limited to a specific demographic young adults in urban post-secular environments which may not capture the full diversity of spiritual experiences across different ages, cultures, or religious traditions. Moreover, phenomenological inquiry, by its nature, prioritizes depth over breadth; hence, the findings illuminate essences of meaning rather than statistically generalizable patterns (Aunchistha, 2025). The reliance on self-reflective narratives may also introduce interpretive subjectivity, though this is inherent to phenomenological validity rather than a flaw. Recognizing these limitations, the study positions itself as an interpretive rather than predictive contribution, intended to open reflective dialogue rather than establish universal claims.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Future studies may extend these findings by examining how the moral and spiritual meanings of suffering evolve in collective or intercultural settings, where shared reflection shapes communal ethics (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Comparative phenomenological analyses across different religious traditions or secular moral frameworks could also deepen understanding of how transcendence is experienced and interpreted in diverse contexts. Additionally, integrating phenomenological insights with ethical praxis in psychology, theology, and social care could yield transformative approaches to human suffering that bridge reflection and action. Longitudinal studies exploring how individuals' interpretations of suffering change over time would further enrich this discourse. Ultimately, future research inspired by this study may contribute to a more holistic understanding of how the moral and spiritual dimensions of human existence are continuously reinterpreted in a plural and post-secular age.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experience of suffering among post-secular urban youth, revealing how pain becomes a moral and spiritual dialogue that shapes ethical awareness and self-understanding. The findings demonstrate that suffering is not merely endured but interpreted as a reflective process through which individuals rediscover faith, morality, and transcendence. By employing the Hermeneutic Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (HIPA), the study addressed the limitations of prior research that treated suffering as a psychological or theological problem rather than an experiential phenomenon. The results enrich the field of Religious Philosophy and Ethics by positioning suffering as a transformative space where meaning and morality are co-created through reflection and relational empathy. This research contributes a deeper interpretative framework for understanding spiritual resilience and ethical consciousness in contemporary post-secular life. Practically, the findings offer insights for educators, counselors, and religious practitioners in recognizing suffering as a constructive ethical encounter, thereby guiding the development of pastoral, pedagogical, or community-based interventions that nurture reflective moral growth rather than merely addressing emotional distress.

Theoretically, the study acknowledges its limitation in focusing predominantly on post-secular urban youth, which may not fully capture diverse cultural, religious, or socio-economic contexts of suffering. The interpretative lens of HIPA also inherently prioritizes personal meaning-making, which may overlook structural or communal dimensions emphasized in other ethical or philosophical traditions.

By articulating these contributions and boundaries, the study advances current discourse in Religious Philosophy and Ethics by reframing suffering not as a passive condition but as an active philosophical site where ethical insight emerges through embodied reflection, dialogical interpretation, and relational sensitivity. Future studies may expand this approach to explore interreligious or intercultural dimensions of moral reflection, broadening the phenomenological understanding of human transcendence.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the design, execution, or publication of this study. The research was conducted independently, and the funding sponsor, Center for Philosophical and Ethical Studies (CPES), had no influence on the study's conceptual framework, data interpretation, or the final conclusions presented in this article.

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