

Exploring University Students' Perceptions and Experiences of Religious Education in Multicultural Contexts

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ABSTRACT

Religious education plays a key role in shaping students' values and beliefs, especially in multicultural societies where diverse religious traditions coexist. While much research has examined religious education in diverse environments, there is limited understanding of how students experience and interpret these teachings within their own cultural contexts. Specifically, how students' personal and cultural backgrounds influence their understanding of religious education remains underexplored. In this study, we employed a phenomenological approach to explore how students perceive and make sense of religious education in multicultural settings. Through in-depth interviews with 15 university students from various religious and cultural backgrounds, we identified how their multicultural experiences influenced their religious understanding. The results revealed that students' perceptions of religious education were shaped by their diverse cultural contexts, leading to more open-minded and tolerant views of other religions. Phenomenological analysis identified three key themes: (1) the negotiation of religious identity within culturally diverse environments, (2) the development of interreligious understanding through everyday interactions, and (3) the emergence of reflective and inclusive religious perspectives shaped by multicultural experiences. These themes illustrate how students actively reinterpret religious teachings in ways that promote mutual respect, empathy, and appreciation of diversity. This study highlights the importance of considering students' individual backgrounds in religious education and suggests that educational frameworks should be more inclusive of diverse perspectives. These findings contribute to our understanding of religious education in multicultural contexts and provide a foundation for future research on the role of culture in shaping students' religious beliefs and values.



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INTRODUCTION

Religious education plays a significant role in shaping individuals' beliefs, values, and worldviews, especially in multicultural societies where diverse religious traditions coexist (Altinyelken, 2021). In such contexts, religious education is not merely a process of transmitting doctrine but also a space where students encounter, negotiate, and interpret religious meanings in relation to cultural diversity, social interaction, and pluralistic values. Students' experiences with religious education can significantly influence their attitudes toward other religions and shape their identity in a pluralistic society (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). However, the ways in which students interpret and internalize religious teachings in such diverse environments remain underexplored, especially when considering the subjective experiences that shape these interpretations.

Given the complexity of this phenomenon, there is a critical need for an in-depth exploration of students' lived experiences in navigating religious education within multicultural settings (Minor et al., 2023). Phenomenology, with its focus on understanding the essence of human experience, offers a suitable approach for this exploration. By focusing on the subjective experiences of individuals, phenomenology allows for a nuanced understanding of how students make sense of religious education

and how their personal and cultural backgrounds influence their perceptions. This research aims to fill the gap in existing literature by providing a deeper insight into the personal, lived experiences of students and their perceptions of religious education in a multicultural context.

Research into the lived experiences of individuals within specific phenomena has emerged as a critical area of study, particularly in the field of religious education within multicultural contexts. Understanding how individuals interpret and make meaning of their experiences in a pluralistic society requires a methodological approach that goes beyond simple descriptions of behavior or attitudes. Phenomenology has proven to be an effective framework for exploring such subjective experiences, as it allows for an in-depth examination of how people perceive and engage with the world around them (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Specifically, phenomenological research has become instrumental in investigating how students experience and interpret religious education, particularly in diverse educational settings where cultural and religious pluralism plays a significant role in shaping their perceptions.

However, methodological challenges persist when attempting to fully capture the nuances of such experiences (Kaufman, 2025). Traditional quantitative approaches, with their reliance on statistical analysis, often fail to address the complexity and richness of subjective experiences. These methods tend to reduce individuals' perceptions and meanings to numbers, overlooking the deeply personal and contextual nature of the experiences themselves. In contrast, qualitative methods like phenomenology, while more appropriate for exploring personal experiences, still encounter limitations in their ability to fully uncover the essence of these lived experiences, particularly when addressing a phenomenon as multifaceted as religious education in a multicultural environment.

Given these challenges, much of the previous research has been unable to provide a comprehensive understanding of the essential meanings behind students' perceptions of religious education. The lack of studies employing a phenomenological approach leaves a significant gap in understanding how students navigate and interpret religious teachings within the complexities of a multicultural society (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; Mukhlis et al., 2024). This gap highlights the necessity of utilizing a phenomenological lens to fully explore and understand the subjective experiences of students in religious education settings.

While previous studies on religious education often utilize practical, established approaches, such as quantitative surveys or general qualitative analyses, these methods have significant limitations when it comes to capturing the depth of students' personal experiences and the meanings they attribute to their religious education in a multicultural context (Kuhlken, 2021; Noor & Lee, 2021). These traditional approaches, though useful for measuring attitudes and behaviors, fail to provide a holistic understanding of how students truly experience and make sense of their educational encounters in relation to their cultural and religious backgrounds (Ikhwan et al., 2025). As a result, the current body of literature remains limited in its ability to offer rich, nuanced insights into the subjective realities of students navigating religious education in a pluralistic society.

In contrast, phenomenology offers an alternative approach that is specifically designed to delve deeply into the lived experiences of individuals. By focusing on the essence of those experiences, phenomenological methods allow for a more comprehensive exploration of the meanings and interpretations that students attach to their religious education within a multicultural framework. This method emphasizes the importance of understanding the participants' perspectives in their own terms, making it an ideal tool for uncovering the complex layers of meaning that are often overlooked by more traditional research methods (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). The need for such an approach is clear: to move beyond surface-level descriptions and engage with the core of students' perceptions and experiences, providing a deeper understanding of religious education in the context of cultural diversity.

Research in the field of religious education within multicultural contexts has predominantly focused on understanding the role of formal education in shaping students' religious beliefs and values. Studies have highlighted the importance of religious education in promoting interfaith tolerance, yet few have explored the subjective experiences of students as they navigate their religious teachings in

diverse cultural environments (Ansyari, 2023; Faridi & Umiarso, 2024). Previous work has often utilized quantitative or general qualitative methods, which, while helpful in identifying trends and behaviors, fall short of capturing the depth of individual experiences. Theoretical frameworks in this area tend to focus on broader societal and institutional influences, but they do not always address the nuances of personal meaning-making (Chanifah et al., 2021). Thus, while much has been done to examine the effects of multiculturalism on religious education, gaps remain in fully understanding how students perceive and interpret these teachings on a deeply personal level.

To address these gaps, this study employs a phenomenological approach to explore students' lived experiences within religious education in a multicultural society. Phenomenology is uniquely suited for this inquiry, as it emphasizes the importance of understanding participants' subjective experiences and the meanings they attach to their education. By adopting an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework, the research seeks to uncover the essence of students' perceptions of religious education and how their cultural and social backgrounds influence these perceptions (Mustapa et al., 2025; Yusuf et al., 2021). This approach allows for a deeper exploration of students' personal reflections, providing insights that quantitative methods cannot offer. The focus of this study is to gain a holistic understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of religious education through the lens of individual experiences.

This article is structured as follows: The introduction provides an overview of the context and importance of the phenomenon being studied, highlighting the gaps in current research. The methodology section explains the phenomenological approach adopted, detailing the data collection process through in-depth interviews and the steps taken for data analysis (Abidin et al., 2025). The findings and discussion then present the essential themes emerging from students' experiences and relate them to broader debates on religious education and multiculturalism (Mukhlis, 2025b; Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). Finally, the conclusion offers a summary of the key insights and outlines potential directions for future research in this area.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

The study employed a phenomenological approach to explore students' perceptions of religious education in a multicultural society. Phenomenology was chosen as the research design due to its ability to delve deeply into the subjective experiences and meanings of individuals (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). This approach is particularly relevant for investigating how students interpret their educational experiences in relation to their cultural backgrounds, as it allows for a rich exploration of the lived experiences of participants. The study utilized an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework to understand how students make sense of their religious education in a multicultural context. IPA is well-suited for examining how individuals interpret and understand personal experiences within the context of broader societal influences, such as diversity and multiculturalism. The unit of analysis was the individual student's lived experience, particularly how participants interpreted, negotiated, and reflected on religious education within culturally and religiously diverse learning environments.

Participants

Participants in this study were university students who have experienced religious education in a multicultural environment. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who met specific criteria relevant to the research questions. Participant recruitment was conducted through announcements distributed via university networks, student organizations, and religious education classes. Interested students were first provided with an information sheet explaining the study aims, eligibility criteria, interview procedures, confidentiality protections, and voluntary nature of participation. Potential participants were then screened to ensure that they met the inclusion criteria before being invited to take part in the interview. The inclusion criteria required participants to be enrolled in a university, have received formal religious education, and have lived in a multicultural setting for at least three years (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). Exclusion criteria included

individuals who did not identify as students of religious education or those whose primary education did not involve exposure to diverse religious and cultural contexts. A total of 15 participants, with an equal representation of male and female students, participated in the study. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 25 years, and they came from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, including Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. This diversity ensured a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Recruitment continued until the interview data reached saturation, indicated by the absence of substantially new themes, categories, or meanings in the final interviews. After the thirteenth interview, repeated patterns began to emerge, and two additional interviews were conducted to confirm thematic saturation.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interviews were designed to explore participants' personal experiences, perceptions, and reflections on their religious education in a multicultural society. The interview protocol was developed to encourage participants to discuss their experiences in an open-ended manner, allowing for the emergence of themes relevant to the research questions (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). The interview guide was developed through a review of literature on religious education, multicultural learning, interreligious interaction, and student identity formation. Initial questions were aligned with the research objectives and focused on participants' experiences of religious education, perceptions of cultural and religious diversity, classroom interaction, and the perceived relevance of religious education to social coexistence. The guide was reviewed by qualitative research experts to assess clarity, relevance, and alignment with the phenomenological design. A pilot interview was also conducted with one student who met the general eligibility criteria but was not included in the final sample. Feedback from this pilot interview was used to refine the wording, sequence, and probing questions. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was conducted in a quiet, private location to ensure that participants felt comfortable and free to share their thoughts. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, and notes were taken during the interviews for further reference. All data were collected in accordance with the ethical guidelines established for the study.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The first step in the analysis involved transcribing the audio recordings of the interviews verbatim. Following transcription, the data were systematically coded to identify key themes and patterns that emerged from the participants' accounts (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). The coding process was iterative, allowing for the identification of both individual and shared experiences across participants. Themes were then clustered and analyzed to explore the deeper meanings behind participants' experiences of religious education in a multicultural context. The analysis was conducted using NVivo software to assist with the organization and categorization of data, although the focus remained on the interpretative process rather than the use of software tools. This approach allowed for the extraction of essential insights into the lived experiences of participants.

Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee prior to the commencement of data collection. All participants were informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to confidentiality and voluntary participation. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring their awareness of the study's objectives and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). To protect participants' privacy, all data were anonymized, and personal identifiers were removed. The study adhered to international ethical standards for research, ensuring the protection of participants' rights and the confidentiality of their data throughout the research process.

RESULTS

The Influence of Multicultural Backgrounds on Students' Perception of Religious Education

One of the most significant themes emerging from the data is how students' perceptions of religious education are influenced by their multicultural backgrounds. Participants emphasized the impact of growing up in a society with diverse religious and cultural beliefs. As one participant, Yanti, a second-year university student, shared:

“My understanding of religious education was shaped not only by the lessons but by the people around me. Coming from a multicultural community, I saw how different religions coexisted, and this made me appreciate the religious values in a broader context.”

This perspective is shared by other participants, who expressed that their experiences with religious education were often challenged or enriched by the cultural diversity they encountered. The importance of understanding religious values in a pluralistic society was repeatedly highlighted, with students reflecting on how these experiences led to a more tolerant and open-minded approach to religion. Taken together, the participants' narratives suggest that multicultural backgrounds encouraged students to move beyond a purely doctrinal understanding of religion toward a more dialogical, relational, and socially responsive interpretation of religious values.

The Role of Religious Education in Identity Formation

Another crucial theme that emerged from the interviews was the role of religious education in shaping students' personal and social identities. For many students, religious education was not just about learning religious doctrines, but also about negotiating their identity in a diverse society. One participant, Dedi, explained:

“Religious education helped me understand who I am and where I come from, but it also taught me to respect others' beliefs. It shaped my identity, especially as I interacted with people from different religious backgrounds.”

This theme of identity formation was evident across all participants. For some, religious education served as a grounding force, helping them navigate the complexities of belonging to a faith while living in a society that embraces religious diversity. For others, it was a means of reconciling their personal beliefs with the broader social context.

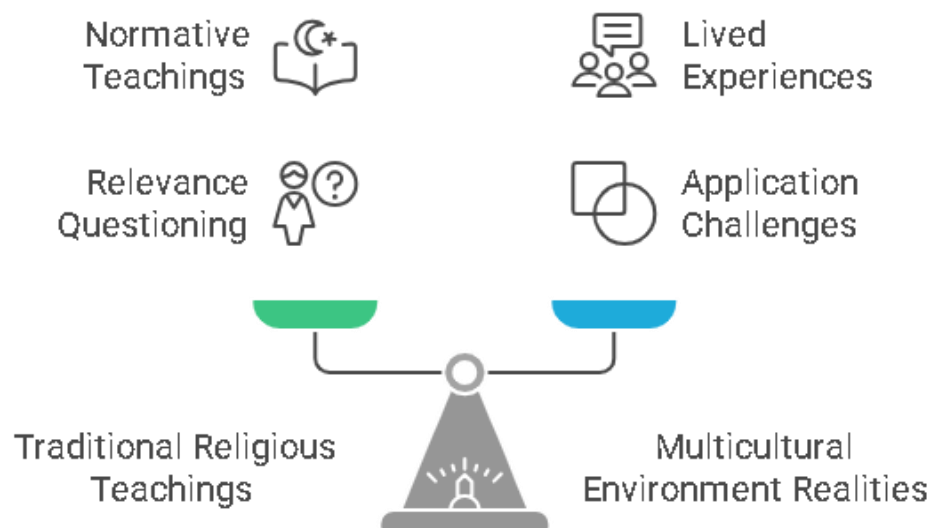
Challenges and Tensions in Interpreting Religious Teachings in a Multicultural Context

The third theme focused on the challenges and tensions students face when interpreting religious teachings within a multicultural context. Many participants revealed that they often struggled with reconciling traditional religious teachings with the realities of a diverse society. As Maria, a student from a mixed-religion background, remarked:

“It's challenging to reconcile what I've been taught with the realities of a multicultural environment. Sometimes, what I learned in religious classes doesn't align with the way people of other religions live.”

This theme highlights the tension between religious education's normative teachings and the lived experiences of students in a diverse society. Several participants noted that this dissonance led to a deeper questioning of the relevance and application of certain religious principles in contemporary society. Rather than weakening the role of religious education, these tensions appeared to create opportunities for deeper reflection. Students' struggles reveal the need for religious education that explicitly addresses difference, ambiguity, and interreligious encounters as part of the learning process.

Balancing Religious Teachings with Multicultural Realities



The Impact of Educational Environment on Religious Education Perceptions

Another theme that emerged from the data was the role of the educational environment in shaping students' perceptions of religious education. Students who studied in institutions with a more homogeneous student body reported a different experience compared to those who were exposed to a more diverse student population. One participant, Denny, shared:

“In my previous school, everyone was from the same religious background, so religious education felt more like a routine. But here, in university, it's different. We are encouraged to discuss different views, and that makes the learning process more meaningful.”

This finding suggests that the level of exposure to diverse perspectives within the educational environment plays a significant role in shaping students' understanding and interpretation of religious teachings.

The findings from this study reveal that students' perceptions of religious education are deeply influenced by their multicultural backgrounds, personal identity formation, the challenges they face in interpreting religious teachings in a diverse society, and the educational environment in which they learn. These themes collectively illustrate the complex and multifaceted nature of religious education in a pluralistic society, offering valuable insights into how religious education can be understood and applied in contemporary, multicultural contexts.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Key Findings

The findings of this study reveal the significant impact of multicultural backgrounds on students' perceptions of religious education. Participants expressed that their understanding of religious teachings was deeply influenced by the cultural and social diversity surrounding them, leading to a more open-minded and tolerant approach to religious beliefs. However, these findings should not be interpreted as suggesting that multicultural exposure automatically produces tolerance. Rather, the data indicate that tolerance emerges through students' active negotiation of difference, reflection on prior assumptions, and engagement with religious meanings in socially diverse settings. These insights provide valuable answers to the central research question posed in the introduction, which aimed to understand how students navigate and make sense of religious education within a multicultural context.

Contribution to Research Question

This study contributes uniquely to our understanding of religious education by uncovering how students' personal, cultural, and social backgrounds shape their engagement with religious teachings.

The participants' experiences revealed that religious education is not just an academic subject but also a deeply personal and contextualized process that is influenced by the diversity within their environments (Ozer et al., 2024). The findings suggest that students' perceptions are not merely shaped by formal curricula but by the interplay of their lived experiences in a multicultural society. This finding advances the research question by showing that students do not passively receive religious knowledge; instead, they interpret, question, and reconstruct it through encounters with cultural plurality. By using a phenomenological approach, this research highlights the complex ways in which students interpret religious teachings, showing that these interpretations are not static but dynamic and deeply tied to the individual's background.

Connection to Literature and Previous Theories

The findings align with existing literature on religious education in multicultural societies, which has emphasized the importance of diversity in shaping students' religious perspectives (Boubker, 2024; Taufiq & Herdi, 2020). These studies suggest that students' experiences in multicultural environments can significantly influence their understanding of religious teachings, supporting the notion that religious education is a process of negotiation between personal belief and social context. However, this study extends the literature by providing a detailed phenomenological account of how these processes occur in the lived experiences of students, emphasizing the role of individual interpretation. Unlike some previous studies that have focused primarily on the structural aspects of religious education, this research brings to light the subjective dimensions of how religious teachings are experienced and understood in diverse settings. Moreover, the findings challenge some of the more traditional, one-size-fits-all approaches to religious education, suggesting that more personalized, contextually aware methods may be necessary to address the unique needs of students in multicultural environments.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study have both theoretical and practical implications. On a theoretical level, they contribute to a deeper understanding of how religious education is experienced in multicultural settings, particularly in terms of how personal and cultural backgrounds influence religious beliefs and values (Qomaruzzaman, 2021). This insight is crucial for the development of educational frameworks that are more sensitive to the diverse religious and cultural identities of students. Practically, the results suggest that educators and policymakers need to adopt more inclusive and contextually aware approaches to religious education. This could involve integrating diverse perspectives and fostering environments where students feel comfortable sharing their beliefs and learning from others. The findings also emphasize the need for religious education that not only teaches doctrines but also nurtures critical thinking and intercultural understanding, which are essential for navigating the complexities of a pluralistic society.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights, there are several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small, consisting of 15 participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings (Mulyani et al., 2021). The study was also conducted in a specific cultural and educational context, which may not fully represent the experiences of students in other multicultural environments. Additionally, the use of phenomenology, while offering rich insights into individual experiences, does not provide a comprehensive overview of broader trends or structural influences. Future studies could expand on these findings by including a larger, more diverse sample or exploring different multicultural settings to enhance the generalizability of the results. Moreover, further research could incorporate longitudinal approaches to track how students' perceptions evolve over time.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

This study opens several avenues for future research in the field of religious education in multicultural societies (Ujvári, 2023). Future studies could examine how religious education is perceived by students from different educational levels, such as primary or secondary school, and how these experiences compare to those of university students. Moreover, exploring the role of religious

educators in shaping students' perceptions in diverse classrooms could provide further insights into the dynamics of religious teaching and learning. Future research should also examine contrasting institutional contexts, such as religiously homogeneous schools, interfaith educational settings, and secular institutions, to determine whether multicultural interaction produces similar or divergent patterns of religious understanding. Longitudinal studies that track the evolution of students' religious identities and perceptions over time would also provide valuable data on the lasting impact of multicultural religious education (Hastuti & Saputro, 2020; Ilham et al., 2025). Finally, research could explore the perspectives of religious educators themselves to understand how they navigate the challenges of teaching in diverse environments and how their experiences align with those of their students.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how students perceive and engage with religious education in a multicultural society, addressing the gap in understanding the personal, subjective experiences that shape these perceptions. The findings reveal that students' cultural backgrounds significantly influence their understanding of religious teachings, leading to more tolerant and open-minded views. By employing a phenomenological approach, this research provides valuable insights into the dynamic, lived experiences of students, highlighting the importance of considering individual backgrounds in religious education. The study also contributes to existing literature by offering a deeper understanding of the complex ways in which students interpret religious teachings, something that prior research has overlooked. From a practical perspective, these findings suggest that religious education in multicultural classrooms should adopt culturally responsive pedagogical approaches that acknowledge and integrate students' diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. Religious educators are encouraged to facilitate dialogic learning, interfaith discussions, and collaborative activities that promote mutual respect, empathy, and critical reflection on religious differences. Furthermore, curriculum design should incorporate multicultural perspectives and real-life contexts to help students develop inclusive religious understandings and strengthen social cohesion in diverse educational settings. Future research could expand this study by including a larger, more diverse sample or exploring how these perceptions evolve over time in different educational settings. Additionally, examining the role of religious educators in facilitating these perceptions could further enhance our understanding of religious education in multicultural contexts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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

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