



Spiritual Reflection and Meaning-Making among Religious Education Students

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ABSTRACT

Religious education plays a vital role in nurturing moral, ethical, and spiritual growth by connecting faith, reflection, and human experience within educational contexts. In recent years, reflective learning has emerged as an essential pedagogical approach, yet limited research has explored how students experience and make meaning of spiritual reflection as a lived phenomenon. What remains unclear is how reflective learning in religious education shapes students' spiritual awareness and moral development at the experiential level. Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, this study examines the lived experiences of secondary school students engaged in reflective religious learning to uncover the essence of their spiritual encounters. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with twelve participants and analyzed thematically to identify key experiential patterns. The findings reveal three major themes: self-encounter through reflection, inner transformation through spiritual awareness, and the embodiment of faith through moral consciousness. Together, these themes illuminate reflection as a transformative process through which students internalize and live their faith authentically. This study explicitly addresses a research gap by examining spiritual reflection as an experiential process rather than a cognitive or instructional outcome, an area that has received limited scholarly attention. The novelty of this study lies in its phenomenological uncovering of how reflective learning mediates the interplay between spiritual awareness and moral action among adolescents—an aspect rarely explored in prior religious education research. By articulating this contribution, the study offers new insights into the experiential mechanisms through which reflective pedagogies cultivate authentic faith formation. These insights have important implications for educators and curriculum developers seeking to promote reflective pedagogies that cultivate spiritual and ethical formation in diverse learning environments.



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INTRODUCTION

Building upon the general significance of reflection in religious education, research focusing on individuals' lived experiences of spiritual reflection has become an increasingly important subfield within phenomenological inquiry (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023; Mukhlis, 2025b). Scholars in this area aim to uncover how learners internalize, interpret, and embody religious meaning through reflective practice. Studies by (Sudnick, 2022) indicate that spiritual reflection functions as both a pedagogical and existential process, allowing students to connect their faith to personal experience. Yet, while these works affirm the transformative potential of reflection in education, they often emphasize outcomes or theoretical implications rather than the immediate experiential process through which learners make sense of their spirituality. A growing body of research thus recognizes the value of reflection but has not adequately explored how students personally experience spiritual meaning-making as it unfolds.

Despite growing academic interest, methodological challenges persist in exploring the depth and complexity of spiritual experience (Islam et al., 2024). Traditional empirical or quantitative approaches, although valuable for assessing behavioral and cognitive outcomes, frequently fail to capture the nuanced, emotional, and interpretive dimensions of faith (Aivaz & Petre, 2024). Quantitative data, by its nature, abstracts individual subjectivity into numerical generalizations, thereby neglecting the existential texture of lived religious experience (Conroy, 2020). Furthermore, many qualitative studies within religious education employ surface-level thematic analysis without engaging in the interpretive depth required to reveal how meaning emerges through personal consciousness and reflection. As a result, these studies tend to describe what happens during religious learning but not how participants experience and interpret these moments internally.

These methodological constraints highlight a critical need for approaches capable of engaging directly with the subjective essence of experience (Tretter, 2025). The interpretative phenomenological framework, particularly Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), provides a powerful means to bridge this gap by focusing on the lived meaning and intentionality of the reflective act (Wong, 2024). Through detailed, narrative-based exploration, IPA allows researchers to reveal the inner structures of consciousness that underlie participants' spiritual awareness and moral growth (de Souza, 2017; Everington, 2018). Such an approach moves beyond descriptive reporting toward interpretative understanding, enabling the identification of patterns of thought, emotion, and transformation embedded within the experience itself.

Therefore, within the context of reflective learning in religious education, the phenomenological approach becomes essential to uncover how students experience, construct, and transform meaning through reflection. This interpretative focus not only deepens our understanding of spirituality as a lived reality but also addresses the theoretical and methodological limitations of previous research, which has often reduced faith-based learning to observable outcomes rather than inner realities.

Although reflection has long been recognized as a valuable pedagogical tool in religious education, most existing research continues to rely on didactic or cognitive-based frameworks that emphasize curriculum design, moral instruction, or behavioral assessment. These practical approaches, while useful in understanding measurable educational outcomes, remain insufficient for capturing the inner dimension of spiritual experience the lived, felt, and interpreted aspects of faith as encountered by learners (Harshe, 2024). For instance, studies by Conroy (2020) and Everington (2018) primarily focus on the role of reflection in promoting moral reasoning and religious literacy, yet they overlook the deeply personal and emotional processes through which students internalize spiritual meaning (Mohamed Hussin & Aho, 2025). As a result, the existing body of knowledge presents an incomplete picture of how reflection actually transforms the self within educational contexts.

Current educational models also tend to treat spirituality as an outcome rather than an ongoing experiential process (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). This reductionist perspective confines spirituality to observable behaviors or cognitive constructs, thereby neglecting the subjective and phenomenological essence of how students experience faith in reflective learning environments (Rush et al., 2024). Quantitative surveys and surface-level qualitative analyses often fail to grasp the subtle interplay between thought, emotion, and belief that shapes one's spiritual identity (Miner & Beilharz, 2023). Consequently, the intricate process through which reflection fosters self-awareness, transformation, and moral consciousness remains largely underexplored.

To address these limitations, a phenomenological approach specifically the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) offers a more suitable framework for exploring the essence of spiritual reflection. Unlike conventional methods, IPA enables a deep engagement with participants' lived experiences, uncovering how they construct and ascribe meaning to their encounters with faith. This interpretative lens goes beyond description to reveal the existential significance embedded within students' narratives (DeFoor et al., 2021). Hence, the present study seeks to bridge this gap by

employing phenomenology to illuminate how reflective religious learning shapes students' spiritual awareness and moral development at a lived experiential level.

Recent studies in religious education have emphasized the importance of understanding learners' inner experiences and the role of reflection in spiritual formation. Scholars such as (Satriadi, 2025) have highlighted how reflective learning fosters moral and spiritual awareness, yet their analyses often remain descriptive rather than interpretative (Hamid, 2020). Theoretical contributions from phenomenology, particularly those grounded in Heideggerian and hermeneutic traditions, suggest that spiritual experience is best understood through lived meaning rather than external observation. Prior research has thus laid a conceptual foundation but has not adequately illuminated how learners personally experience and interpret reflective religious practice. This gap provides a strong rationale for employing a phenomenological framework to reveal the inner texture of students' spiritual experiences.

To address this, the present study adopts Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the guiding methodological approach. IPA enables a focused exploration of how students make sense of their reflective encounters, emphasizing the personal meanings attached to their spiritual growth. This approach directly responds to the limitations identified in previous literature by engaging with the depth, context, and emotional reality of the lived experience (Boonmatun & Huttayavilaiphan, 2025). Through this interpretative process, the study seeks to uncover the essence of spiritual reflection as a transformative dimension of learning. In doing so, it offers a deeper understanding of how reflection facilitates the integration of faith, morality, and self-awareness in educational settings.

The article is structured as follows. The Introduction outlines the theoretical and empirical context of the phenomenon and the research problem that motivates the study (Tian, 2024). The Method section describes the phenomenological approach, participant selection, and procedures for data collection and analysis using IPA. The Results section presents the thematic findings that capture the essence of students' reflective experiences (Umar et al., 2025). Finally, the Discussion and Conclusion sections interpret the implications of these findings for theory, pedagogy, and future research in religious education. This structure ensures a coherent flow from conceptual background to phenomenological insight, reflecting both rigor and depth in exploring lived spiritual experience.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This research employed an interpretative phenomenological design to explore the lived spiritual experiences of students engaged in reflective learning within religious education (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). Phenomenology, as a qualitative approach, emphasizes understanding the subjective meanings individuals assign to their experiences, enabling the discovery of the essence of a particular phenomenon through participants' own perspectives. The interpretative variant of phenomenology (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis or IPA) was utilized to uncover the depth and complexity of students' reflective encounters, allowing the identification of underlying meanings that shape their spiritual consciousness. To ensure rigor within the interpretative process, the researcher engaged in ongoing reflexivity through memo-writing and bracketing, documenting prior assumptions and monitoring how personal perspectives might shape analytical decisions. Peer debriefing with two qualitative research experts was also conducted to minimize potential interpretive bias and strengthen the credibility of thematic insights.

This design was chosen because it aligns with the study's focus on the inner world of participants how they perceive, interpret, and internalize religious reflection as a transformative experience. By engaging with participants' narratives, the study aimed to reveal the essence of faith-based reflection as a lived reality rather than as a theoretical construct. The interpretative orientation of IPA provided the framework for a dialogical understanding between participants' accounts and the broader meaning structures of spirituality within the educational context.

Participants

Participants consisted of secondary school students enrolled in a religious education program that incorporated reflective learning components (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). The selection followed a purposive sampling approach, ensuring that participants had direct and meaningful engagement with the phenomenon under study. Inclusion criteria required students to (a) be between the ages of 16 and 18, (b) have completed at least one semester of reflective religious education activities, and (c) be willing to articulate their experiences in an in-depth interview. Students with limited attendance in reflective sessions or without prior engagement in reflective learning were excluded to maintain data relevance.

A total of twelve participants (six males and six females) took part in the study. Their ages ranged from 16 to 18 years with varied religious and socio-cultural backgrounds representative of a multicultural educational environment. The diversity of perspectives provided a rich context for exploring individual experiences of spiritual reflection within pluralistic classroom settings.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit rich, personal accounts of participants' reflective learning experiences (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in a quiet, comfortable room within the school environment to ensure confidentiality and emotional safety. The interview protocol was guided by open-ended prompts such as: "Can you describe a moment during reflection that deeply influenced your understanding of faith?" and "How did the reflective process affect your daily spiritual life?"

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim. Observational field notes were also taken to capture nonverbal expressions and contextual nuances that enriched the interpretative process. The data collection process continued until thematic saturation was achieved, ensuring that no new significant insights emerged from additional interviews. Throughout the process, participants' comfort and autonomy were prioritized, and opportunities were provided for clarification or withdrawal at any stage.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the structured stages of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). The process began with repeated readings of each transcript to achieve immersion in the participants' narratives. Subsequently, significant statements and meaning units were identified, reflecting participants' descriptions of their spiritual and reflective experiences. These units were then coded and clustered into emerging themes that represented shared experiential patterns.

Themes were refined through an iterative process of interpretation and cross-comparison, moving from individual experiences to collective meanings. The use of NVivo 14 software supported the organization of data without replacing the interpretative role of the researcher. Analytical reflection was guided by the hermeneutic circle, ensuring continuous movement between parts and the whole of the text to achieve depth of understanding. The analysis culminated in the formulation of essential themes that encapsulated the core meanings of spiritual transformation within reflective learning.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the educational institution where the study was conducted (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). Participation was entirely voluntary, and written informed consent was secured from all participants and their legal guardians prior to data collection. Anonymity was maintained by assigning pseudonyms to each participant, and all personal identifiers were removed from transcripts and reports.

Confidentiality of data was ensured through secure storage in password-protected digital files, accessible only to authorized personnel. The study adhered to the ethical standards of the Declaration

of Helsinki (2013) and complied with institutional guidelines governing research involving human subjects. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty, and their well-being remained a priority throughout the research process.

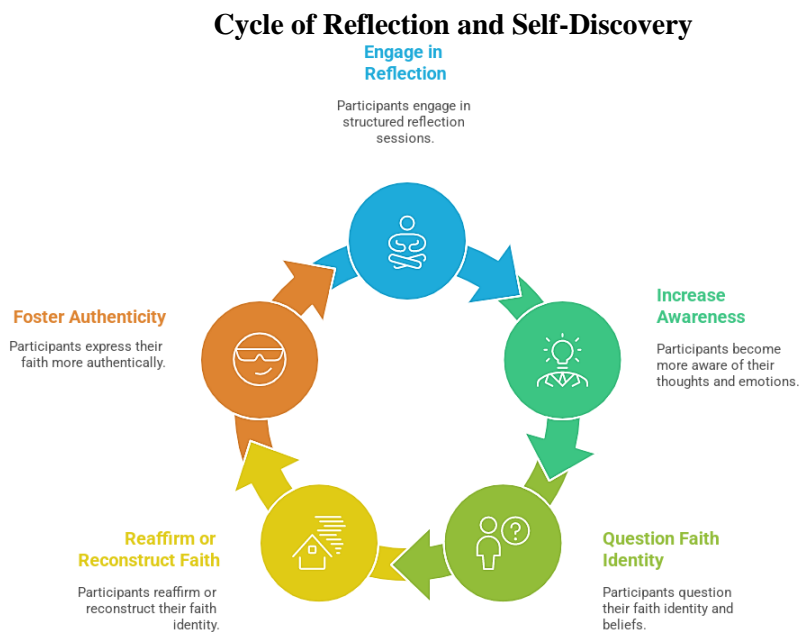
RESULTS

Encountering the Self through Reflection

Participants described reflection as a personal and transformative moment of confronting one’s inner self. Through structured religious reflection sessions, students reported an increased awareness of their thoughts, emotions, and spiritual state. Many participants conveyed that this process allowed them to question, reaffirm, or reconstruct their faith identity.

“During reflection, I realized that my faith was not just about rituals. It was about who I am when no one sees me how I live out the values I believe in,” (Participant 3).

This theme underscores that reflective learning fosters a form of self-discovery and spiritual introspection. Students experienced a dialogical engagement between their faith and their sense of self, where religious reflection became a tool for understanding their existence in relation to divine principles. The act of reflection served as a catalyst for authenticity in faith expression, aligning with the hermeneutic view that spirituality is not externally imposed but internally interpreted through lived experience.



Experiencing Inner Transformation and Spiritual Awareness

The second theme captures how participants experienced inner transformation as they moved from cognitive understanding to affective realization of religious values. Students consistently emphasized that reflection sessions enabled them to internalize moral and spiritual meanings rather than merely memorize doctrinal content.

“Before, religion felt like school knowledge. But through reflection, it became something alive within me. I started to see my daily struggles as part of my journey with God,” (Participant 7).

“I learned to be more patient and grateful. I used to think of prayer as a duty; now, it feels like a conversation with God,” (Participant 2).

This transformation manifested as spiritual awareness, marked by emotional resonance, moral sensibility, and a deeper understanding of divine-human relationships. The process reflected the

phenomenological principle of intentionality, where consciousness is directed toward the essence of experience in this case, the experience of encountering the sacred within ordinary contexts. The participants’ narratives revealed that the internalization of faith through reflective learning nurtures not only personal spirituality but also ethical maturity and empathy toward others.

Integrating Faith into Daily Life and Moral Consciousness

The third theme demonstrates how reflective religious learning extends beyond the classroom into students’ moral reasoning and daily behavior. Participants articulated that reflection helped them translate abstract religious values into practical moral decisions and interpersonal relationships.

“When I reflect on the lessons, I start thinking about how I treat people around me. I began to forgive more easily and judge less,” (Participant 5).

“Our teacher asked us to write what forgiveness means to us. I realized I hadn’t really forgiven myself for past mistakes. That moment helped me change,” (Participant 6).

Through continuous reflection, students developed an integrated understanding of faith and morality, suggesting that spirituality becomes embodied through ethical action. This theme highlights the existential dimension of religious education where learning is not only about knowing the faith but living it. The findings suggest that reflective pedagogy cultivates moral consciousness grounded in compassion, humility, and moral responsibility.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Theme	Essence of Experience	Illustrative Meaning
Encountering the Self through Reflection	Self-awareness and spiritual introspection	Reflection fosters awareness of faith identity and authenticity
Experiencing Inner Transformation and Spiritual Awareness	Affective realization and moral sensitivity	Reflection transforms cognitive belief into lived spiritual experience
Integrating Faith into Daily Life and Moral Consciousness	Embodied spirituality through moral practice	Reflection connects religious understanding to ethical living

Essential Meaning of the Phenomenon

Across the three themes, the essence of the phenomenon lies in the transformative role of reflective learning as a spiritual journey that bridges belief, experience, and moral action. Reflection in religious education emerges as both a pedagogical practice and a spiritual discipline, enabling students to interpret their faith existentially and to live it authentically. The findings reveal that the act of reflecting is not merely an academic task but a sacred encounter where learners reframe their understanding of self, others, and the divine.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Key Findings

The findings of this study reveal that students experience spiritual reflection in religious education as a deeply transformative process characterized by self-awareness, inner renewal, and the integration of faith into daily moral practice (Mukhlis et al., 2024; Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). Through the interpretative phenomenological lens, the study identified three essential meanings of this experience self-encounter through reflection, inner transformation through spiritual awareness, and the embodiment of faith through moral consciousness which together illuminate how reflective learning nurtures personal spirituality and moral identity. These insights directly respond to

the central research question concerning how students experience and make meaning of reflective religious learning within their educational context.

Contribution of the Findings to the Research Question

The results provide a nuanced understanding of how reflective practices in religious education serve as catalysts for spiritual growth and ethical formation. Students' narratives reveal that reflection functions as a dialogical encounter between faith and self, allowing learners to move from doctrinal understanding toward lived spirituality. This process of meaning-making demonstrates that spiritual awareness is not a static acquisition but an evolving interpretative journey shaped by introspection and personal context (Ryan & Cruse, 2025). The findings therefore extend existing knowledge by emphasizing that the essence of religious learning lies not in the transmission of moral principles but in the students' phenomenological engagement with their faith experiences. Through reflection, learners reinterpret their beliefs in light of lived realities, transforming religious education into a process of existential understanding rather than doctrinal conformity. This represents a significant contribution to the field, offering an interpretative model of spiritual learning that is both pedagogically meaningful and experientially grounded.

Relationship with Previous Literature and Theoretical Perspectives

The results resonate strongly with previous research that highlights the reflective and transformative dimensions of spiritual learning. Astley (2021) and Parker (2019) both argue that reflection fosters authenticity and moral consciousness within faith-based education, a position reaffirmed by the current study's findings. However, this study advances the discussion by providing empirical evidence of how such transformation occurs internally, within students' lived experiences (Sideris, 2020). The interpretative process revealed that reflection operates as a bridge between cognitive belief and emotional engagement an idea aligned with Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world, where understanding emerges through experiential interpretation rather than abstract reasoning.

Moreover, the findings refine the theoretical propositions of (Sheffield, 2022), who emphasizes moral reasoning in religious education but gives less attention to the existential depth of spiritual experience (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). This study complements his view by demonstrating that moral reasoning is inseparable from spiritual awareness, both of which develop through reflective self-dialogue. Similarly, de (Tseng et al., 2025) assertion that spirituality is a dynamic and contextual process finds support here, as students' accounts highlight that spiritual growth is shaped by relational and emotional experiences within their learning environments. In this way, the present research not only corroborates but also expands existing theoretical frameworks, illustrating that spiritual reflection is best understood as a phenomenological process that integrates cognition, emotion, and ethical consciousness into a coherent experience of faith.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry significant implications for both the theoretical and practical dimensions of religious education. From a pedagogical perspective, they suggest that reflection-based learning enables students to internalize spiritual values through personal engagement rather than didactic instruction. This transformation shifts the role of educators from transmitters of doctrine to facilitators of spiritual meaning-making highlighting the importance of dialogical, student-centered learning environments. On a broader social and cultural level, the study underscores the relevance of reflective religious education in nurturing empathy, tolerance, and moral discernment among youth living in pluralistic societies. By framing reflection as a lived spiritual practice, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how education can serve not only cognitive growth but also existential and ethical formation, aligning with the phenomenological goal of uncovering meaning within human experience.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the results of this research. First, the sample size, while adequate for phenomenological depth, limits the generalizability of the findings beyond similar educational settings. The study focused on students within a specific age range and cultural context, which may influence the ways in which reflection and spirituality are experienced. Second, as the data were derived from self-reported narratives, the findings depend on participants' ability and willingness to articulate their inner experiences an inherent challenge in phenomenological inquiry (Mansur & Vardar, 2025). Third, although the interpretative phenomenological approach provides rich insights into meaning construction, it relies on interpretive subjectivity, which, while central to the method, may introduce subtle bias in theme development. These limitations, however, do not undermine the study's validity but rather illuminate the contextual and interpretative nature of phenomenological research, offering pathways for future exploration.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Future research could expand on these findings by exploring how reflective spiritual practices function across diverse cultural, educational, and religious contexts (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Comparative phenomenological studies might examine how different pedagogical traditions such as Islamic, Christian, or interfaith education shape students' lived experiences of reflection and moral awareness. Additionally, longitudinal designs could trace how reflective learning influences the evolution of spiritual and ethical identity over time. Methodologically, integrating phenomenological interviews with narrative or arts-based inquiry could further enrich the understanding of how students embody and express spirituality in nonverbal or creative forms. Ultimately, extending this line of inquiry will deepen our understanding of spirituality as a lived, dynamic, and transformative dimension of education, reinforcing the broader significance of phenomenology as a human-centered approach to meaning and moral development.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived spiritual experiences of students engaged in reflective learning within religious education, addressing the need to understand how reflection shapes faith and moral awareness at a personal level. The findings revealed that reflective practices facilitate self-encounter, inner transformation, and the embodiment of faith through moral consciousness, providing insight into the dynamic relationship between belief, experience, and ethical development. By employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study filled a gap in prior research that often emphasized cognitive or behavioral outcomes while neglecting the subjective essence of spirituality. The results contribute to both educational theory and practice by positioning reflection as a transformative process that bridges personal faith and moral formation in diverse learning contexts. These insights highlight the importance of fostering reflective pedagogies that honor students' lived experiences and spiritual agency. Future studies may expand this exploration across cultural or interfaith settings to further understand how reflective learning cultivates spirituality in varied educational landscapes.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. All stages of this research including design, data collection, analysis, and publication were conducted independently and without any influence from the sponsoring organization or affiliated institutions.

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