"My Concerns Were Unproven": A Phenomenological Study on Tolerance Experiences of Non-Muslim Students at Muhammadiyah University

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ABSTRACT

Muhammadiyah University (PTM), as an educational institution with a distinct ideological mission, frequently admits non-Muslim students. This phenomenon theoretically creates a quo-vadis scenario, and the primary objective of the university is to instill the ideology of association in students. However, there is an interest for Muhammadiyah to emphasize its position as a moderate organization that upholds religious tolerance. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the experiences of non-Muslim students at Muhammadiyah University in Yogyakarta, particularly in terms of religious tolerance. This study used a qualitative with a phenomenological method. In-depth interviews were conducted with 7 non-Muslim students who had completed studies at Muhammadiyah University. Subsequently, data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. The results showed that non-Muslim students experienced tolerance when studying. Based on the report, initial concerns were unproven, as students felt comfortable with differences, worshiped according to beliefs, and were free from discrimination. Moreover, Muhammadiyah University provided a platform for interfaith dialogue, facilitating a shift from mere tolerance theology to active engagement. The results showed the significant role of Muhammadiyah University in fostering tolerance education for non-Muslim students.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a multi-religious country, integrating religious tolerance into educational practices is essential for promoting a tolerance mindset and harmonious relations between religious communities in Indonesia (Supriyadi et al., 2024). The issue of relations between religious communities cannot be separated from the influence of the religion embraced by individuals, as religion generally not only influences personal attitudes but also shapes interpersonal relationships vital for social sustainability (Alabdulhadi, 2019; Supriyadi et al., 2024). Mismanaged diversity can cause vulnerability and tension in intergroup relations, especially when there is a significant disparity between minority and majority groups (Hakim, 2021; Yuniarto, 2021). A high level of plurality, without accompanying public awareness of tolerance, often causes friction, tension, and even conflict among members of society, including between religious groups and even in the same religion with different beliefs/organizations (Saihu, 2019). Moreover, the reality in Indonesia is that religious conflicts accompanied by acts of violence and anarchy between religious communities have occurred frequently in recent years (Tholkhah, 2013). Incidents of violence concealed behind religious symbols is a phenomenon that can either promote

harmony or trigger conflict (Syukron, 2017). Efforts to reduce conflict between religious communities require the development of a tolerant moral character (Syarif, 2021). Tolerance means sympathy for differing perspectives and actions of others (Spring et al., 2010). This can be proven when individuals actively acknowledge and respect the distinct beliefs and customs of others (Cochrane, 2021). Meanwhile, religious tolerance is an attitude that relects willingness to accept differences held by others without prejudice or discrimination (Khalek & Mokhtar, 2022). To cultivate this attitude of tolerance, religious tolerance education is crucial, necessitating the consideration of education stakeholders in Indonesia. University plays a significant role in organizing religious tolerance education (Abdullah, 2017). This type of education aims to shape knowledge, attitudes, and respect for religion, culture, ethnicity, as well as other forms of diversity (Potgieter et al., 2014; Supriyadi et al., 2024). Furthermore, it is expected to improve collaboration, mutual understanding, and respect for diversity, reducing tensions caused by differences (Ozhiganova, 2017). University should raise awareness among students about the importance of appreciating and understanding cultural diversity and playing a crucial role in transforming societal culture and managing cultural diversity (Irawati, 2021).

Muhammadiyah University (PTM) is the largest network of private universities in Indonesia. With 170 universities spread across the country, the number of Muhammadiyah University surpasses government-owned. Based on this extensive presence, the university is expected to play a significant role in promoting tolerance education. Muhammadiyah University has made various efforts to bridge the values of Islam, Indonesianness, and modernity (Fuad, 2004; Kamil, 2020). As a nation-state with the largest Muslim population in the world, achieving harmony between Islam, Indonesianness, and modernity is an ideal that needs to be realized (Suyatno et al., 2022). According to Muhammadiyah, education is the most viable way to achieve this vision (Vliek, 2019). Muhammadiyah leaders often describe tolerance model developed in Muhammadiyah education as "tolerance in action," an aspect which helps build harmonious relationships with non-Muslim environments (Mu'ti, 2016). In a Muslim-majority society, non-Muslims can attend schools and universities in Muhammadiyah educational institutions. Similarly, in areas with a non-Muslim majority, Muhammadiyah institutions remain highly inclusive, with some universities and schools having a majority of non-Muslim students (Pajarianto, 2016). However, as an educational institution based on Islamic values, Muhammadiyah University is often perceived as less friendly or inclusive for students from different religious backgrounds. Therefore, non-Muslim students may be concerned about facing discrimination or encountering challenges in adapting to an academic environment where the majority of students are Muslim. This situation presents a kind of quovadis dilemma between Muhammadiyah's objectives of instilling an ideology of association in students and a desire to be positioned as a key agent of tolerance education in Indonesia. Therefore, investigations on how universities foster an attitude of tolerance among students are essential.

Several studies have been conducted on the relationship between Muhammadiyah education and the issue of tolerance. For instance, Muthohirin & Suherman (2024) examined the philosophy of Muhammadiyah education and its relationship to the principles of Islamic moderation. The results showed that although Muhammadiyah adhered to the ideology of purifying Islam, it strengthened the religious movement and thought by renewing the Islamic education movement to prioritize rational, modern, and scientific thinking. Husnaini et al. (2021) explored the Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyahan (AIK) learning model for non-Muslim students at Muhammadiyah University of Unimuda Sorong, Papua. The results showed that AIK learning model was taught as a science rather than a doctrine, emphasizing the communication between non-Muslim students and lecturers. The study also showed the importance of making non-Muslim students the primary

informants. The curriculum reform by Muhammadiyah in addressing the problem of the educational dichotomy in Indonesia was discussed (Hamami & Nuryana, 2022). The results showed that Muhammadiyah education used a holistic-integrative model-based curriculum, with the aim of integrating spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and transcendental intelligence. Moreover, Tohari et al. (2022) investigated the role of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah educational institutions in preventing the potential for radicalism in Lamongan and Malang areas. Using a phenomenological method, the results showed NU and Muhammadiyah were two key educational institutions in Indonesia that played an important role in developing religious tolerance values. NU education promotes Aswaja values, while Muhammadiyah emphasizes AIK values. Both can serve as catalysts for tolerance in responding to diversity within Islam and between religions, as their daily lives are often marked by differences. Other studies have focused on the values of religious moderation in Muhammadiyah textbooks (Arofi et al., 2024), the role of Muhammadiyah education curriculum in supporting moderate Islam (Azizah, 2024), and efforts to integrate Islamic, Indonesian, and modern values (Suyatno et al., 2022).

There is limited study on the experiences of non-Muslim students at Muhammadiyah University, particularly in terms of religious tolerance. To address the gap, this current study was crucial as several Muhammadiyah Universities had accepted students from non-Muslim backgrounds without officially implementing friendly educational model. Therefore, the results were expected to serve as a model for tolerance education in other institutions.

2. METHODS

2.1 Study Design

This study used a qualitative design with a phenomenological method, specifically explaining the meaning of various symptoms and phenomena (Hicks & King, 2009; Noon, 2018; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Furthermore, phenomenological method helped to explore the experiences of participants when navigating the lecture process amidst cultural and religious differences from personal perspectives.

2.2 Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Ames et al., 2019; Etikan et al., 2016) based on the following criteria: 1) Non-Muslim students at Muhammadiyah University in Yogyakarta, 2) Voluntarily willingness to participate in the study. Based on these criteria, 7 non-Muslim students were recruited, as the number met the minimum requirement for qualitative study (Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

2.3 Data Collection Method and Instrument

In line with the characteristics of phenomenological study, the primary data collection method used was semi-structured interviews (Elida Fuster Guillen Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, 2019). This study was supported by interview guidelines previously developed (Asih & Dewi, 2005; Vespa, 2008).

2.4 Data Analysis Method

Data analysis method used was interpretative phenomenological analysis (Brooks et al., 2017), following these steps: 1) Reading the transcript repeatedly: The transcripts were read multiple times, 2) Initial noting: The transcripts were annotated with comments and codes, 3) Developing emergent themes: Notes were made and reinterpreted until conceptual words or phrases emerged, 4) Identifying relationships in the themes: Conceptual words or phrases were grouped based on similarities in meaning and labeled as subthemes, 5) Identifying patterns: All

identified subthemes were grouped according to the similarities in scope and labeled as larger themes, and 6) Describing the main themes: The main themes were identified and accompanied by interview quotes. A report was subsequently compiled based on the theme table. These steps as presented as Figure 1.

Figure 1. Data analysis steps

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

Based on the data analysis, four key themes were identified, namely unproven concerns, comfort in differences, comfort in carrying out worship, and no coercion or discrimination in worship, as presented as Table 1.

Table 1. Themes and Codes Generated During Data Analysis

Extracted data	Code	Theme
"I was nervous even when I had to go to campus several times to collect registration documents", "I was initially afraid and did not even want to drink from a campus glass because it was awkward, especially when the glass was used by non-Muslims"	Initially nervous, feeling afraid, awkward, eventually comfortable	Unproven concerns
"I feel grateful because I am surrounded by people who can accept differences and do not consider differences as a problem", "During college, I had a close friend who could even be called a bestie"	Feeling grateful, not having a problem with differences, a close friend	Comfort in differences
"We share each other's beliefs", "They also do not demand me to wear a hijab on campus, they respect differences", "Because I am not Muslim, I am not required to take the Qur'an reading test on campus"	Sharing, not forcing in worship	Comfort in carrying out worship

Extracted data	Code	Theme
"I did not feel that I am being shunned because of my different beliefs", "I did not feel like a stepchild", "My fellow students and lecturers do not differentiate between Muslims and non-Muslims"	Not being shunned, considered the same, not being treated like a stepchild	No discrimination

Source: Primary data processed, 2024

3.1 Unproven Concerns

All participants were concerned about not being accepted by lecturers, colleagues, or other administrators when deciding to study. The concerns originated from the belief that Muhammadiyah University aimed to spread Islamic teachings and non-Muslim students would be treated differently. Nine codes were mentioned to describe these feelings, namely initially afraid, nervous, should be accompanied, not confident, specifically different, not as thought, not scary, awkward, and only thoughts. R1 explained how the fear emerged before deciding to attend the university: The first time I became a student here, honestly I was nervous. Moreover, when I had to go to campus several times to collect registration documents, I invited a friend because I was afraid and not confident being different on my own, specifically the way I dressed. However, when I arrived on campus, it turned out not to be as scary as I thought. I was served well, and the process was made easy [R1]. The statement showed that the concern about becoming a new student started during the registration process. Furthermore, this concern was not only experienced by the participant but also a friend who knew about the plan to study at Muhammadiyah University: Some of my friends who know that I study here often ask, "Do you like studying there? Is it safe there?" I was actually very happy, there were many things I could learn from everyone I met on campus.

The student further stated: At first, I was afraid and did not even want to drink from a campus glass because it felt awkward, specifically when the glass was used by non-Muslims. Although it seems cliché, I once had an unpleasant experience that made me afraid people around me would feel uncomfortable. It turned out that it was just a thought. Not only drinking, we also usually snacked and occasionally had lunch. The concern gradually diminished and eventually eroded as the student became more involved in various activities in the study program: Over time, I felt like campus was like my second home, and going to campus became a mandatory routine as a final year student. Similar experience was shared by R4: Because my Indonesian was not good enough, when I first entered school, I doubted myself and my superiors from time to time. Is it because I am not liked? Will my lecturers and classmates have negative opinions about me? When I worked in a group, some did not want to be in the same group as me. But in reality, the lecturers and classmates were very kind. They patiently guided me when I had questions I did not understand, and all my shortcomings were accepted. For example, I did not understand the lecturer's words during class. When I am confused about an assignment, my classmates patiently explained to me again, and did not ignore me [R4].

3.2 Comfort in Differences

Most of students were comfortable despite the differences in religion and physical appearance. The differences in appearance, a crucial part of identity, did not cause awkwardness as students' were accepted, even by the campus administrators, lecturers, and peers. According to R1, comfort in differences originated from mutual respect and acceptance of diversity: I feel grateful because I am surrounded by people who can accept differences and do not consider differences as a problem. I feel this when my friends remind me to pray every 12 pm and 6 pm. Likewise, I sometimes remind them

to pray before continuing other activities (R1). This interaction of mutual respect also occurred in personal relationships: During college, I had a close friend who could even be called a bestie. She helped me during the lecture process and outside of lectures. She was also very fun and open-minded. Even outside of class, she often took me to church, reminded me about church activities. I also sometimes accompanied her to break the fast (R2). The form of respect for differences was also reflected in daily activities, as expressed by R3, who felt warmth amid religious differences: When my friends pray during class hours, they always say goodbye to me. This is simple, but it makes an impression on me. I feel that my friends do not consider me different, as they treat me as a brother (R3). R3 felt appreciated by friends and lecturers without any difference in treatment: I still remember that in December 2018, when I celebrated Christmas, my classmates dropped me off in front of the church because I did not have a vehicle. They also prepared food for me and my younger sibling. Moreover, the lecturers treated me the same as other students, professionally without discrimination (R3).

In interactions with colleagues, a sense of brotherhood in differences was also established: My colleagues accepted me as a brother. My friends invited me and taught me how to manage a school. I was invited to break my fast with them, and I even fasted when my friends were fasting (R4). Generally, comfort in differences was formed through an attitude of mutual respect and sharing, without feelings of alienation due to differences in religion, culture, or beliefs.

3.3   No Coercion in Worship

Muhammadiyah University aimed to instill Islamic teachings in students. However, this objective was certainly not imposed on non-Muslim students. Based on the interviews, none of students experienced coercion to worship from any party when studying. According to R2, "They also do not demand that I wear a hijab on campus, as they respect differences." This showed an attitude of mutual respect for personal choices, without pressure to follow certain norms. The participant further stated, "Because I am not Muslim, I am not required to take the Qur'an reading test on campus," (R2). This confirmed diversity of beliefs was accepted with full understanding in the academic environment. According to an experience shared by R3 when participating in activities at Yogyakarta Education Quality Assurance Institute (LPMP): At Yogyakarta LPMP, during prayer time when people rush to the mosque, a lecturer, Mr. S, invited me to wait around the mosque. However, the lecturer said, "Mr. F, let us just wait here, do not wait there. Do not be alone there." This invitation touched my heart and made me feel much appreciated, confirming the lecturer's attentiveness to religious differences (R3).

In conversations between friends with different beliefs, sharing about religion was commonplace: We share about each other's beliefs. For example, we Catholics pray in front of the Statue of Jesus and the Virgin Mary as symbols of our religion, even though in their religion it is considered idolatry. However, that is a difference that we appreciate to strengthen the unity of Indonesia, different but still one (R5). Generally, these experiences showed there was no coercion in worship, but mutual respect and space for differences in a harmonious framework of togetherness.

3.4   No Discrimination

R4 reported that there was no discrimination related to differences in beliefs during the lecture process: I do not feel that I am shunned because of my different beliefs. Fellow students and lecturers do not differentiate between Muslims and non-Muslims. Students and lecturers are always friendly in greeting and helping me when I experience difficulties. The lecturers openly guide me, and this is evident because I am one of the first three people to graduate in our class (R4). The experience showed that despite differences in beliefs, harmonious relationships were maintained without

discriminatory treatment: Fellow students and lecturers did not hide their experiences and knowledge from me because I have a different faith. However, all knowledge is transferred by lecturers to students without exception for Muslims and non-Muslims (R4). There were no restrictions or discrimination based on religion in the academic aspect, as reported by R6: The lecturers did not treat me as an individual with a different faith or like a stepchild. The grades given by the lecturers were purely based on students' abilities, not family factors or similarities in beliefs and culture (R6). The experience confirmed that assessments on campus were carried out objectively based on ability, not religious background. Generally, discrimination was not recorded in this academic environment as students were treated equally, regardless of differences in beliefs.

DISCUSSION

The novelty of this study lies in the phenomenological method used to explore the experiences of non-Muslim students at Muhammadiyah University. The results were relevant in identifying a pattern of lectures that were accommodating to non-Muslim students. The research question examined the features of non-Muslim students' experiences in feeling or not feeling tolerance when studying. The data showed that non-Muslim students experienced tolerance, as reflected in four themes, namely unproven concerns, comfort in differences, comfort in carrying out worship, and no discrimination. These themes identified two important dimensions related to the experiences, namely the significance of a university as a place to foster interfaith experiences and the shift from mere tolerance theology to action.

The Importance of University as a Place to Foster Interfaith Experiences

The results showed that the experiences of non-Muslim students at Muhammadiyah University emphasized the importance of direct experience and interpersonal interaction in addressing prejudice and building a deeper understanding of religious and cultural diversity. Based on analysis, participants were concerned about not being accepted by lecturers, staff, and peers before attending college due to religious and cultural differences, although these concerns were typically unproven. Therefore, the initial stereotypes or prejudices about Islamic-based campus environments, specifically Muhammadiyah, were not entirely accurate. The first-hand experiences transformed perceptions to the diversity, tolerance, and inclusivity present at the university. This showed the importance of forums facilitating dialogue and real-life experiences, bringing students from diverse religious backgrounds. Based on analysis, Muhammadiyah University played a crucial role in instilling tolerance through the dynamics of students diversity. The presence of non-Muslim students in Islamic educational institutions can provide opportunities for intercultural interaction and deep mutual understanding. In this friendly and open environment, non-Muslim students feel accepted and appreciated, while Muslim students can broaden the understanding of religious and cultural diversity. The participation of non-Muslim students also facilitates more open and productive interfaith dialogue in Muhammadiyah University (Hamzah et al., 2021). Through discussions, seminars, and joint social activities, students from various religious backgrounds can share experiences, break down stereotypes, as well as deepen the understanding of each other's religious beliefs and practices. Therefore, diversity not only enriches learning experiences but also strengthens the values of tolerance and mutual respect among students. The role of the university in promoting tolerance transcends the formation of tolerance values through the curriculum, as it also includes the management and development of an inclusive environment for students from diverse religious backgrounds (Rahmat et al., 2019). This reflects the institution's commitment to building a united society based on mutual respect and cooperation across faiths.

From Tolerance Theology to Action

The second significant conclusion was that Muhammadiyah University showed consistency between educational theology and actions. Muhammadiyah's educational theology states that Muhammadiyah is an Islamic organization that values multicultural principles. This is reflected in the recognition of Indonesia as *darul ahdi wasyyahadah*. Muhammadiyah acknowledges the concept of a nation-state, which has implications for the awareness of living harmoniously with adherents of other religions in Indonesia. For Muhammadiyah University, diversity is viewed as God's blueprint, which should be embraced. The encounter with cultural differences is seen as a necessity (Qorib, 2024). The tangible demonstration of tolerance is also a manifestation of the *tawasuth* theology, which understands Islam as a middle path (Suyatno et al., 2022). Moderation places Islam in a balanced position between two extreme poles, embodying values inherited from the Qur'an and the traditions of the prophet (Abidin & Aziz, 2018). Moderation promotes a non-extreme understanding, advocating for a middle way that is not fanatical, but fosters rational thinking and actions (Haris et al., 2023; Subaidi, 2020). Moderate Islam is characterized by the practice of flexible Islamic values, corresponding to the principles of Islamic *da'wah bil hikmah* (wise and intelligent preaching), *da'wah bil mauidhal hasana* (teaching well), and *wa jadil hum bilati hiya ahsan* (engaging in good dialogue and argumentation) (Nashir, 2010).

The values of tolerance derived from moderate Islamic teachings are essential in building a diverse Indonesian society in terms of ethnicity, religion, race, and class. An attitude of tolerance leads people to respect the existence of others, despite diversity (James, 2019). Tolerance is also a reflection of the *rahmatan lil alamin* theology, stating that the benefits of the teachings are not only meant for internal Muslim circles but should also extend outward, hence, the benefits of Islamic teachings can be shared with circles outside Muslims (Kuntowijoyo, 1996). Muhammadiyah University has helped in deepening dialogue and interaction between religious communities in the diversity of Indonesian society (Mu'ti, 2016). Muhammadiyah's cultural preaching has fostered accommodating and tolerant attitudes toward the cultural diversity of society (Syamsuddin, 2017). In this context, the term "Christian Muhammadiyah" (Krismuha) has emerged, refering to Christians studying at Muhammadiyah University (Akib et al., 2020). This phenomenon further confirms tolerance as not mere theology but an action proven, evidenced in various situations. The results were supported by previous studies, where those affiliated with Muhammadiyah tended to be tolerant toward adherents of other religions (Shidiq et al., 2023). Promoting the values of religious pluralism is crucial for Muhammadiyah, as Indonesia is a multicultural country with diverse tribes, cultures, and religions (Biyanto, 2020). Therefore, the Islam understood by Muhammadiyah association is highly accommodating to the concept of multiculturalism (Lukman & Siga, 2024).

4. CONCLUSION

This study showed non-Muslim students at Muhammadiyah University experienced tolerance. Although there were initial concerns regarding differences in beliefs, the experiences on campus showed these stereotypes and concerns were unproven. Furthermore, in the academic environment of Muhammadiyah, non-Muslim students felt appreciated and accepted by peers and lecturers, who treated with respect regardless of religious background. This fostered a sense of comfort in differences, where each individual was allowed to practice different beliefs without coercion, specifically in worship, sharing spiritual experiences to enrich various perspectives. There was also no discrimination in academic assessments, as all students were assessed based on abilities and achievements, not religion or cultural background. The results showed the importance of interfaith experiences, where interfaith dialogue strengthened brotherhood and built deeper understanding

between individuals of different beliefs. Muhammadiyah University, with the motto of tolerance theology, not only taught the principles of tolerance but also implemented the principles through real actions in the education sector. This practice fostered an inclusive, harmonious, and equitable academic climate, allowing students to develop intellectually and spiritually, without feeling discriminated.

There were several limitations to be considered despite the valuable insights provided on the experiences of non-Muslim students at Muhammadiyah University regarding tolerance. First, the limited number of participants affected the generalizability of the results to a broader context. Second, this study used a phenomenological method, relying on individual perspectives. Therefore, the results might not fully describe the collective experiences of all non-Muslim students. Future studies were expected to expand the number of participants to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of non-Muslim students in Muhammadiyah University across Indonesia. This could help assess the extent to which the results applied in a broader context. In addition, future studies were expected to explore the role of lecturers and academic staff in fostering an atmosphere of tolerance in universities, as well as examine how the curriculum and academic climate of the campus could better support the development of tolerance attitudes and religious diversity.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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