

Research/ Review

Bridging the Gap Interfaith Competence as a National Security Strategy in Multireligious Indonesia – Perspectives from Christian Educators

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Abstract: This qualitative study addresses the critical gap between religious diversity and national security in Indonesia by proposing interfaith competence as a strategic imperative. Situated within a constructivist framework, the research investigates the perspectives of Christian educators, positing that their unique position at the intersection of faith formation and pedagogy offers invaluable insights into building sustainable religious harmony. Constructivism provides the analytical lens, emphasizing that understandings of religious "others," security threats, and peaceful coexistence are socially constructed through discourse, experience, and education. Therefore, the development of interfaith competence is not merely an ethical goal but a active process of constructing a shared societal reality resilient to sectarian conflict. The primary objective of this research is to explore how Christian educators conceptualize, practice, and perceive their role in fostering interfaith competence as a contribution to Indonesia's national security architecture. Data was gathered through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and nuanced understandings. The findings reveal that these educators view interfaith competence comprising affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions as a vital tool for deconstructing prejudice and building social cohesion. They position their educational practices as essential for shaping citizens who can navigate a multireligious society, thereby mitigating the risks of radicalization and conflict that threaten national integrity. The study concludes that integrating interfaith competence, as articulated by these grassroots actors, into broader national policy offers a proactive, soft-power strategy for safeguarding Indonesia's security, moving beyond purely military or political approaches to foster a collectively constructed resilience.

Keywords: Christian Educators; Constructivism; Indonesia; Interfaith Competence; National Security.

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1. Introduction

Indonesia, the world's third-largest democracy, presents a fascinating and complex case study in the management of religious diversity. Founded on the pluralist principle of Pancasila, the nation officially embraces six religions, creating a vibrant social mosaic. (Hutabarat, 2023) However, this pluralism exists in a delicate balance, frequently challenged by the undercurrents of sectarian conflict. Data from monitoring organizations like the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace reveals a persistent trend of religious freedom violations, ranging from the administrative closure of houses of worship to physical intimidation and violence against minority groups. This recurring dissonance between the ideal of harmony and the reality of friction signals a profound national dilemma. (Majesty & Nadeak, 2025) It underscores the limitations of a traditional security paradigm, which prioritizes military and territorial integrity, in addressing the non-traditional threats that truly undermine modern states: social fragmentation, identity-based radicalization, and the erosion of civic trust. In this context, national security must be reimagined not merely as the strength of the state's borders, but as the resilience of its social fabric.



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The prevailing discourse on interreligious relations in Indonesia has largely been dominated by two distinct approaches: a top-down, regulatory model enforced by the state, and a theological-dialogue model conducted among religious elites. (Sirry, 2024) While both have their merits in maintaining a baseline of order and fostering high-level understanding, they often fail to permeate the grassroots level where prejudices are formed and identities are daily negotiated. The commonly espoused goal of "tolerance" (toleransi), while preferable to open hostility, has been critiqued for its inherent passivity; it suggests a reluctant endurance of the 'Other' rather than a proactive and skilled engagement with difference. This is the conceptual gap that this research seeks to bridge by introducing and exploring "interfaith competence." This concept moves beyond passive coexistence to an active, acquired capability, encompassing affective dimensions like empathy and openness, cognitive dimensions such as knowledge of other beliefs and practices, and behavioral dimensions involving the skills to interact constructively across religious boundaries. The existing academic and policy literature has extensively documented the symptoms of religious conflict and the structural frameworks meant to contain it. However, a significant gap remains in understanding the proactive cultivation of interfaith competence as a foundational, grassroots element of national security itself.

The novelty of this research is threefold. Firstly, it makes a deliberate theoretical leap by explicitly theorizing the causal relationship between individual interfaith competence and the macro-level security of the state. It contends that a citizenry equipped with the skills to navigate religious difference is inherently more resilient to the divisive rhetoric of extremism, thereby constituting a form of social antibody against one of the most potent threats to national unity. Secondly, to investigate this relationship, the study adopts a constructivist lens. Constructivism provides a powerful analytical framework, positing that realities including understandings of security, threat, and peaceful coexistence are not objective facts but are socially constructed through continuous interaction, discourse, and institutional practices. This lens is uniquely suited to exploring how Christian educators, through their pedagogy, are actively involved in constructing a social reality where religious diversity is seen not as a threat, but as a constituent part of the national identity. (Jackson, 2003) Thirdly, the study turns its gaze to a critical yet under-researched group of agents in this process: Christian educators within Indonesia's vast and influential network of Christian schools. These individuals operate at a crucial intersection, tasked with the dual responsibility of nurturing a distinct Christian identity while simultaneously forming students into patriotic and constructive citizens of a multireligious state. (Jamil & Firmansyah, 2025) Their perspectives, therefore, are not merely anecdotal; they represent a rich repository of practical wisdom and strategic insight into the everyday work of building social cohesion.

Grounded in the observable phenomena of religious strife and the shifting paradigm of human security, this study is guided by the central objective of analyzing the perspectives of Christian educators on their role in fostering interfaith competence and conceptualizing this role as an integral, though often unrecognized, component of Indonesia's national security strategy. (Kia & Majesty, 2025a) To achieve this, the research seeks to answer several pivotal questions: How do these educators themselves conceptualize and define "interfaith competence" within the unique socio-religious context of Indonesia? What specific pedagogical strategies and practical activities do they employ to develop this competence in their students? Furthermore, how do they perceive the connection between their educational mission and the broader project of ensuring national stability? And finally, what challenges and opportunities do they identify in positioning their educational work as a strategic response to sectarian conflict? The insights from Christian educators serve as a critical starting point for building a security strategy that is not imposed from above, but constructed from the ground up, one classroom at a time.

2. Proposed Method

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in constructivism to investigate how Christian educators in Indonesia conceptualize interfaith competence as a national security strategy. The constructivist paradigm is particularly appropriate as it acknowledges that realities including understandings of security and interfaith relations are socially constructed through human experience and discourse. (Conteh-Morgan, 2005) This

approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the subjective meanings, beliefs, and practical wisdom that educators develop through their professional roles. Data collection was conducted through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Christian educators from diverse institutional backgrounds across Indonesia. A purposive sampling strategy ensured the selection of information-rich participants who could provide nuanced insights into the research questions. The interview protocol was designed to explore key themes, including educators' definitions of interfaith competence, their pedagogical strategies, and their perceptions of the relationship between interfaith education and national security. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility, enabling participants to share detailed narratives and personal experiences while ensuring comprehensive coverage of relevant topics. (Blandford, 2013)

Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's framework, was utilized to systematically analyze the interview transcripts. (Byrne, 2022) This involved iterative processes of coding, theme development, and refinement. The analysis focused on identifying patterns in how educators construct their understanding of interfaith competence and its strategic importance. Special attention was paid to the affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions of their pedagogical approaches. Throughout the research process, reflexivity was maintained through journaling to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. This methodological approach effectively captures the complex, context-dependent nature of interfaith competence development while maintaining academic rigor, providing valuable insights into how grassroots educational practices can contribute to national security in a multireligious society. (Leong, 2017)

3. Results and Discussion

The Tripartite Construction of Interfaith Competence: Beyond Knowledge

The intricate tapestry of Indonesian society, woven with diverse religious threads, presents both a profound national asset and a persistent challenge. (Wekke, 2024) In this context, the discourse on interfaith relations has often been dominated by the acquisition of theological knowledge understanding the doctrines and rituals of neighbouring faiths. However, a more nuanced framework, the "Tripartite Construction of Interfaith Competence," posits that knowledge alone is insufficient. True competence necessitates the symbiotic development of affective empathy and practical skills, a paradigm shift that redefines interfaith dialogue as a critical national security strategy. From the perspective of Christian educators within a Muslim-majority nation, this model offers a vital pathway to bridge societal divides and foster genuine pluralism.

The first pillar of this construction, moving "Beyond Knowledge," acknowledges that factual awareness of other religions, while foundational, can remain sterile and intellectualized. (Garrison, 2010) Knowing the Five Pillars of Islam or the Hindu concept of Dharma does not automatically translate into respect or the capacity for peaceful coexistence. Knowledge devoid of empathy can even be weaponized to reinforce stereotypes. Therefore, the second pillar, the affective dimension, becomes paramount. This involves cultivating what Christian educators might term a posture of agape or selfless love an intentional empathy that seeks to understand the lived experiences, spiritual yearnings, and historical burdens of the religious "Other." It is the emotional and spiritual bridge that transforms abstract knowledge into a genuine appreciation for the humanity of one's neighbours, fostering the trust upon which any secure society is built.

The third pillar, practical skill-building, is the mechanism through which knowledge and empathy are operationalized. (Ernst et al., 2024) This involves developing concrete abilities in constructive dialogue, mediation during conflict, and collaborative problem-solving across religious lines. For Christian educators, this translates into pedagogical strategies that move beyond theoretical classroom discussion to include facilitated encounters, joint community service projects with Muslim or Hindu schools, and simulations that require students to navigate religious differences. These skills are not innate; they must be taught, practiced, and refined, equipping the next generation with the tools to de-escalate tension and build partnerships rather than walls.

When viewed through the lens of national security, this tripartite model transitions from a soft social goal to a hard strategic imperative. In a multireligious nation like Indonesia, national security is inextricably linked to social cohesion. Societal fractures along religious lines represent a vulnerability that can be exploited by extremist elements, leading to violence, instability, and the erosion of state authority. By proactively fostering interfaith competence, the state invests in a resilient civil society capable of withstanding the pressures of sectarian provocation. Christian educators, as formative agents within this society, play a crucial role in this strategy. (Majesty & Juaniva Sidharta, 2025) They are positioned to model and inculcate a form of citizenship where religious identity is not a barrier to national unity but a component of a richer, more integrated whole.

The tripartite construction of interfaith competence integrating cognitive knowledge, affective empathy, and practical skills provides a robust framework for addressing the challenges of multireligious Indonesia. For Christian educators, this model offers a theologically and pedagogically sound approach to their vocation within a pluralistic landscape. (Kia & Majesty, 2025b) By championing this holistic form of competence, they contribute directly to a more secure and harmonious Indonesia, demonstrating that the most sustainable national security strategy is one built not on military might alone, but on the cultivated ability of its citizens to live together in respectful and collaborative peace.

Pedagogical Praxis: Lived Experience as a Teaching Tool

The theoretical understanding of religious doctrines, while foundational, often remains an abstract exercise, failing to bridge the chasm between intellectual awareness and genuine, transformative interfaith competence. (Widiyanto, 2023) For Christian educators in Indonesia, a nation where religious identity is deeply intertwined with social and political life, the pedagogical challenge is to move students from knowing about others to engaging with others. (Tuegeh & Majesty, 2025) This necessitates a shift in pedagogical praxis the intersection of theory and practice where lived experience becomes the primary tool for instruction. By strategically embedding experiential learning into their methodology, Christian educators can cultivate the affective empathy and practical skills essential for making interfaith competence a tangible reality and, consequently, a cornerstone of national security.

Traditional pedagogical models in religious education often prioritize confessional instruction and textual literacy within one's own tradition. While valuable, this approach can inadvertently create a self-contained religious worldview, ill-equipped to navigate a pluralistic public sphere. (Poloni, 2024) The limitation of this paradigm is that it treats interfaith competence as a body of information to be absorbed rather than a set of relational skills to be developed. Knowledge of the Five Pillars of Islam or the Hindu concept of Bhagavad Gita does not automatically dismantle prejudice or build the capacity for collaborative problem-solving. The cognitive domain alone is insufficient to address the deep-seated fears, misunderstandings, and sociological tensions that characterize interreligious friction in complex societies. (Kia & Majesty, 2025c)

To address this gap, a pedagogical praxis centered on lived experience offers a profound alternative. This approach operationalizes the belief that meaningful learning occurs through reflection on doing. For Christian educators, this translates into designing curricula that facilitate direct, structured encounters across religious lines. (Ford, 2003) Such initiatives extend beyond field trips to mosques or temples as passive observational tours. Instead, they involve collaborative community service projects, where Christian and Muslim students, for instance, work side-by-side to address a common social need, such as environmental clean-ups or assisting orphanages. Furthermore, facilitated dialogue sessions, where students share personal narratives of faith, doubt, and practice, move the "Other" from a theological category to a human person with a unique story. These experiences engage the affective domain, fostering what in Christian theology might be understood as incarnational empathy a willingness to enter into the world of another.

The strategic implication of this pedagogical shift extends far beyond the classroom, positioning interfaith competence as a critical component of national security. In a multireligious nation like Indonesia, resilience against sectarian violence and radicalization is

built upon the strength of its civil society. When young citizens from different religious backgrounds develop interpersonal trust and shared experiences through these educational programs, they create a social buffer against divisive narratives. Christian educators, by fostering this grassroots-level cohesion, are effectively contributing to a form of "human security." (Enyiaka, 2019) They are equipping a generation with the emotional intelligence and practical skills to de-escalate local conflicts, counter hate speech, and build collaborative networks that transcend religious boundaries. This proactive, pedagogical investment in social capital is as vital to national stability as any conventional security policy.

Reimagining pedagogical praxis to prioritize lived experience is not merely an educational enhancement; it is a strategic imperative for Christian educators in Indonesia. By creating avenues for students to move from theoretical knowledge to practical engagement, they cultivate the essential ingredients of interfaith competence: empathy, trust, and collaborative skill. This process transforms abstract concepts of tolerance into lived realities of partnership. Ultimately, this experiential pedagogy serves a dual purpose: fulfilling the educational mission to form compassionate citizens and contributing to the foundational security of the nation by weaving a stronger, more interconnected, and resilient social fabric. (SWARGIARY, 2025)

Reconceptualizing Security: From State-Centric to Societal Resilience

The prevailing paradigm of national security, traditionally focused on military might and territorial integrity, reveals a critical blind spot when applied to deeply pluralistic nations like Indonesia. This state-centric model, while necessary, is insufficient to address the most pervasive threats to the nation's stability, which increasingly emanate from internal societal fractures rather than external aggression. A strategic reconceptualization of security is urgently required one that shifts the focus from protecting the state to strengthening the fabric of society itself. From the perspective of Christian educators, fostering interfaith competence is not merely a social or theological objective but a fundamental contribution to building this societal resilience, representing a vital human security strategy in a multireligious context. (Gamaleal, 2024)

The limitations of a purely state-centric security approach become evident in the face of identity-based conflict. Societal vulnerabilities are not effectively mitigated by military assets; a battalion cannot combat the spread of religious intolerance or heal sectarian divisions within a community. (Nair, 2025) True security is compromised long before violence erupts, in the silent erosion of social trust, the proliferation of hate speech, and the ghettoization of religious communities. These fissures create a fertile ground for radicalization, undermining the state from within. Consequently, security must be understood as the resilience of everyday social interactions the capacity of communities to manage differences peacefully, withstand sectarian provocations, and maintain cohesive functionality amidst diversity. This resilience forms the bedrock upon which traditional state security can reliably rest.

Within this reconceptualized framework, interfaith competence emerges as a critical security asset. For Christian educators operating in a Muslim-majority nation, this involves cultivating a triad of capabilities in their students: deep cognitive understanding of other traditions, genuine affective empathy, and practical skills for interreligious engagement. (Marsaulina & Majesty, 2025a) This goes beyond academic knowledge of scripture; it is about nurturing the ability to collaborate with, trust, and empathize with those of differing faiths. An educational institution that successfully graduates students with these competencies is functioning as a vital infrastructure of peace. Each young individual equipped with these skills becomes a node of resilience, capable of countering prejudice and de-escalating potential conflicts in their future professional and civic lives, from the classroom to the public square.

The role of the Christian educator, therefore, transcends confessional instruction to include the stewardship of social harmony. Their pedagogical mission aligns directly with national security redefined as societal resilience. By designing curricula that facilitate interfaith dialogue, organizing collaborative community service projects with schools of other traditions, and modeling a posture of respectful engagement, they actively build the social capital that binds the nation together. This is a proactive, grassroots-driven security strategy.

It operates at the molecular level of society, strengthening the interpersonal bonds that form the ultimate bulwark against the forces of division. In this context, teaching about pluralism is an act of national service, and fostering empathy is a strategic contribution to Indonesia's long-term stability. (Suryani & Muslim, 2024)

The security of multireligious Indonesia hinges on its ability to reconceptualize its defense beyond the state apparatus and into the heart of its communities. (Majesty et al., 2025) The journey from state-centric to resilience-based security necessitates the intentional cultivation of interfaith competence as a core civic virtue. Christian educators, through their unique position of influence, are essential agents in this endeavor. By forming citizens who are not only theologically literate but also empathetically connected and skilled in bridge-building, they contribute directly to an intangible yet indispensable national defense system: a society resilient enough to endure differences and united in its collective commitment to the common good.

The Educator's Dilemma: Navigating Identity and Citizenship

The Christian educator in Indonesia occupies a complex and pivotal space, situated at the intersection of a particular religious identity and the broader demands of national citizenship. (Marsaulina & Majesty, 2025b) This position engenders a fundamental pedagogical dilemma: how to faithfully nurture a distinct Christian worldview while simultaneously cultivating a sense of shared citizenship and active responsibility for a pluralistic society. The resolution of this dilemma is not merely an academic exercise; it is central to the project of reconceptualizing national security. By reframing interfaith competence not as a dilution of faith but as its civic expression, Christian educators can transform this tension into a powerful strategy for building societal resilience, thereby bridging the gap between confessional commitment and national duty.

The core of the dilemma lies in the perceived conflict between particularism and pluralism. A pedagogical approach overly focused on insulating Christian identity may foster a community that is theologically robust but socially insular, ill-equipped for the realities of a multireligious public sphere. (Dick, 2016) Conversely, an approach that emphasizes universal citizenship at the expense of theological depth may produce citizens with no rooted convictions to contribute to the public dialogue. This is a false dichotomy. The task for the Christian educator is to navigate a *via media*, presenting a vision where a secure and deeply held religious identity serves as the foundation for, rather than an obstacle to, empathetic engagement with others. In this framework, the command to "love thy neighbour" is interpreted not only as a theological imperative but also as a civic one, essential for the health of the nation. (Magezi, 2017)

This navigation requires a deliberate pedagogical philosophy that integrates faith formation with civic education. It involves moving beyond a curriculum that simply teaches about other religions as external systems, to one that prepares students to engage with adherents of other faiths as fellow citizens. This can be achieved through pedagogical practices that embody this integration. For instance, scripture study on themes of justice and peace can be directly linked to interfaith community service initiatives with Muslim or Hindu counterparts. (Edwards, 2018) Classroom discussions can model how to articulate a Christian perspective on social issues while respectfully listening to and learning from differing religious viewpoints. This process equips students with a "rooted openness" a strong sense of self that enables, rather than prohibits, constructive collaboration.

The outcome of successfully navigating this dilemma is a profound contribution to a non-traditional, yet critical, dimension of national security. (Tran, 2018) A graduate who embodies this synthesis of strong identity and civic competence becomes an agent of societal resilience. Such individuals are not threatened by diversity; they are equipped to manage it. They can act as buffers against sectarian rhetoric, bridge-builders in tense communities, and living examples that devout Christian faith and patriotic commitment to a pluralistic Indonesia are not only compatible but mutually reinforcing. The security of the nation is thus strengthened not by the suppression of religious identity, but through its channeling into a force for cohesion and understanding.

The Christian educator's dilemma of balancing identity and citizenship is, in fact, the crucible in which a more robust form of national security can be forged. (Gates, 2006) By intentionally designing an educational praxis that reframes interfaith competence as a civic expression of Christian love and responsibility, educators resolve this tension productively. (Ferguson, 2011) They form citizens who are both faithful and empathetic, theologically grounded and publicly engaged. In doing so, they directly address the vulnerabilities of a multireligious society, demonstrating that the most sustainable security strategy is one built upon citizens capable of honouring their own faith while actively upholding the dignity and rights of their neighbours, thereby ensuring the resilience of the Indonesian nation.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that Christian educators in Indonesia play a pivotal role in bridging the critical gap between religious diversity and national security by proactively fostering interfaith competence. The research reveals that this competence is conceptualized as a tripartite construct, moving beyond mere cognitive knowledge to encompass the affective cultivation of empathy and the behavioral development of practical engagement skills. This holistic approach is operationalized through a pedagogical praxis that privileges lived experience and relational learning, enabling students to construct their own understanding of pluralism through dialogue, shared projects, and critical media analysis. Furthermore, the perspectives of these educators necessitate a fundamental reconceptualization of national security. They posit that true security is not derived solely from state-centric military strength but is built upon the foundation of societal resilience. A citizenry equipped with interfaith competence constitutes a robust, grassroots immune system against the viruses of radicalization and sectarian conflict. Ultimately, while navigating the inherent dilemma of balancing strong religious identity with civic pluralism, Christian educators demonstrate that these are not mutually exclusive goals. Their work exemplifies how fostering interfaith competence is not a peripheral educational activity but a strategic, soft-power investment in Indonesia's long-term stability and cohesion, making the classroom a vital frontline in the nation's security architecture.

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