University Student’s Perceptions on Interfaith Marriage in Indonesia: Openness, Idealism, and Reality

Fransiska Widyawati

Department of Theology Education, Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng, Ruteng 86511, Indonesia; fwidyawati10@gmail.com

Abstract: This study investigates Indonesian students’ viewpoints on interfaith marriages in East Nusa Tenggara. A total of 819 students from 52 universities and colleges participated in the poll, and their answers were improved through focus groups and interviews with various student and non-student groups. The findings show that the students are quite open to interfaith relationships and exhibit reasonable reasoning. Interfaith dating is common in academic environments, which encourage acceptance of interfaith unions. In an effort to foster tolerance, students are advocating for legislative changes that would facilitate interfaith marriages. However, there are several challenges on the path to interfaith marriages. The rigid restrictions of family, culture, and religion that dictate marriage decisions regularly clash with the idealism of students. Decisions about marriage are not just driven by personal preferences, but they are heavily influenced by religious, cultural, familial, and customary norms. Religious differences are still thought to be potential triggers for family conflicts, effects on social status, inheritance issues, and challenges in passing along knowledge to future generations. As a result, many students believe that religious conversion is a better option than interfaith marriage. Students’ views on interfaith dating and marriage may seem idealistic in light of the current social, cultural, religious, and political circumstances.

Keywords: interfaith marriage; religious conversion; Indonesia; students; culture

1. Introduction

Indonesia is a country of diversity, where interactions between individuals of different religions are commonplace. Demonstrating a growing sense of religious harmony and tolerance, the nation frequently emphasizes the motto “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika”, a euphemism for “Unity in Diversity”. Interfaith connections are frequently commended and emphasized on social media platforms. However, it is relatively rare to find interfaith marriages. Such unions, when they occur, are viewed as either special (in a positive sense) or unusual and deviant (in a negative sense). In more pluralistic regions of the country, however, it is more common to find extended families with members of different religions. This is usually due to one partner converting to the other’s religion rather than interfaith marriage. In fact, conversion for marriage is the most prevalent reason for religious change in Indonesia (Seo 2013; Widyawati 2020). For many Indonesians, conversion is seen as a more acceptable and reasonable practice than interfaith marriage (Aini 2008; Nasir 2020).

Since 1974, marriage has been regulated under the Marriage Law No. 1 of 1974. The law does not provide articles for interfaith marriages, but for internation marriage (between an Indonesia and non-Indonesian citizen). Article 1 paragraph 2 states, “A marriage is legitimate if it adheres to the laws and customs of the respective religions”. Article 2 states “All marriages must be documented in accordance with the applicable legal regulations”. To be legal, a couple intending to marry are obligated to first conduct a religious ceremony, followed by the official registration at a state institution. Actually, an earlier draft of the law included interfaith marriages. Numerous prominent Islamic organizations staged mass demonstrations and protests. As a result, the clause pertaining to interfaith marriages was
not included in the final law. There have also been many fatwas from Muslim organizations and leaders forbidding interfaith marriages (Ali 2002; Hedi et al. 2017; Mutakin et al. 2021).

The lack of laws regulating interfaith marriages could be a reason for many religious leaders refusing to bless interfaith couples, even if the religious teaching may allow interfaith marriage. Many studies on interfaith marriage in Indonesia have highlighted the legal aspect as the root of the problem (See Koschorke 2019; Lukito 2012; Nasir 2020; Suhasti et al. 2018). Observers in the field of human rights have expressed criticism toward the law (Maloko et al. 2024). There have been many parties who have proposed a judicial review of the law, but all have failed (Bukido et al. 2020). In 2023, the Central Jakarta District Court’s approval of an interfaith marriage request case sparked substantial criticism from Islamic groups.

As a result, the Supreme Court issued Circular Letter (SEMA/Surat Edaran Makamah Agung) Number 2 on 17 July 2023 which explicitly prohibits judges in any courts in Indonesia from issuing approval for interfaith weddings. This regulation has a substantial impact on minority communities. The Indonesian bishops conference and Christian association community formally requested the revocation of the SEMA, but they did not succeed (Permanasari 2023; Vania Crisdi Gonadi and Djajaputra 2023). The Indonesian state’s influence over its citizens’ private life is significant. Even though non-Muslims may have a more open stance toward interfaith marriages in their doctrines, the “majority voice” has been exceptionally strong in establishing common knowledge, mindset, and national imagination against interfaith marriage. With the rise of religious fundamentalist groups, religious differences, interfaith marriages, and religious conversions are increasingly seen as a big problem and sensitive topic. The mindset of rejecting interfaith marriage has been consistently emphasized in family upbringing, religious education at school, and within religious communities.

This collective opposition has become a challenge for young individuals navigating interreligious relationships among peer circles. Unfortunately, studies on young individuals’ openness to interfaith marriage remain scarce in academic research. Parker and Hoon (2014) surveyed 3000 senior high school students in five provinces (Jakarta, West Sumatra, Yogyakarta, Central Kalimantan, Bali). Similarly, Larson (2022) conducted a study among senior high school students in North Sulawesi. Both surveys concluded that interreligious relations generally exhibit a good trend, with Catholic students displaying the most favorable sentiments toward the practice. The majority of respondents expressed disapproval of interfaith marriages based on religious doctrines. Although their research offers vital insights into the significance of schools and the educational process in fostering interfaith partnerships, it is crucial to acknowledge that senior high school students are generally not old enough to consider marriage.¹

Our study aims to gather the perspectives of university students, who are in the phase of active dating and exhibit a greater inclination toward contemplating a future marriage. This research was done in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT/Nusa Tenggara Timur) province. While extensive research on interreligious relations has primarily centered around western Indonesia, where Islam constitutes the majority, this study takes place in a predominantly Catholic region where people navigate their lives amidst the interplay of traditional agricultural and modern influences. NTT is renowned for its ethnic diversity, enduring traditional practices, economic challenges, and yet an exceptionally high degree of religious harmony. Starting from 2012, the Ministry of Religion has constantly designated NTT as the top best province in Indonesia with regard to religious harmony. This assessment is based on three key characteristics, namely interfaith tolerance, collaboration, and equality. The distribution of religious groups in NTT is as follows: Catholics (52.45%), Protestants (39.26%), Muslims (8.09%), Hindus (0.19%), Buddhists (0.01%), with the remaining individuals identifying as Confucians and others.² Since before the achievement of independence, the Church has played a key role in the advancement of society, namely in the realm of education. Many colleges are either affiliated with the Catholic/Christian faith or have significant connections to these religions.
The province displays a significant level of cultural diversity, with over 1200 islands and a wide range of languages (60) and nationalities. Despite the variety, marriages among tribes continue to be uncommon as a result of cultural customs. Nevertheless, interethnic marriage can still occur. Marriage is perceived as a robust connection that interweaves family, customs, forebears, cosmos, ancestors, and the Divine. The blessings of parents and extended family on a marriage purport to guarantee happiness. Men, as clan leaders, also want to guarantee a family inheritance. Weddings demand the expenses for bride-wealth, ceremonies, and festivities. This is difficult to handle by one person alone. Thus, marriage traditions highlight the significant role of the family in overshadowing the desires of a newlywed couple.

Within the unique social, cultural, and religious landscape of NTT, and considering the broader context of national perceptions regarding interfaith marriage, how do the students perceive such unions? This study reveals that students in NTT exhibit a remarkable openness and positive views toward interreligious relations. Interfaith dating experiences are commonplace in university settings, leading students to view interfaith marriage positively. They express support for the government to amend the regulations to facilitate interfaith marriages, recognizing this as a means to promote tolerance. However, despite this favorable outlook, the road ahead for interfaith marriages remains challenging. As students, their idealism clashes with the formidable forces of family, tradition, and religious norms that govern marital decisions. While students embrace openness at school, their autonomy and agency in deciding to marry are limited. Marriage lies beyond their personal domain alone, as it is ultimately shaped by customs, family expectations, cultural traditions, and religious considerations. Consequently, it is unsurprising that many students still perceive religious conversion as a more practical and reasonable path than interfaith marriage. The difference in religions continue to be viewed as a potential source of family discord, compromised social status, inheritance complexities, and even challenges in education for their future children.

2. Finding and Discussion

The students’ opinions presented in this study are the result of a survey conducted among 819 students who were enrolled in 52 higher education institutions situated on the five primary islands of the NTT province: Timor, Flores, Sumba, Alor, and Rote. There were 49 private and three state universities. Islamic foundations (2), Christian foundations (2), Catholic foundations (5), and public foundations (40), which comprise non-religious private foundations. Despite the fact that campuses are associated with specific religions, the religious composition of students on those campuses is diverse. Even on campuses affiliated with Islamic organizations, Catholic or Christian students are exceedingly prevalent, consistent with the demographic makeup of the campuses. In addition, even though a campus is not affiliated with a particular religion, the religious environment could be strong in terms of activities and spirits.

The respondents comprised 68.38% Catholics (132 males, 428 females), 20.71% Protestants (42 males and 144 females), and 8.91% Muslims (14 males and 59 females). The proportion of males was 23%, while the proportion of females was 77%. The online platform poll was disseminated to all campuses with the assistance of campus leaders and lecturers. Respondents were given 10 multiple-choice questions, which they could answer by selecting from the available options. The questions were: Do you have friends from various religions? Have you been in a relationship with someone from a different religion? Do you support interfaith marriages? Are you considering marrying someone from a different religion in the future? Do your religious leaders prohibit interfaith marriages? Is your family against interfaith marriages? Do you believe that interfaith marriages can undermine religious beliefs? Do you think that interfaith marriages can enhance understanding and tolerance? Do you agree that the government should enact regulations to support couples who wish to have interfaith marriages? Do you think it is preferable for a partner from a
different religion to convert to their spouse’s religion rather than maintaining their original faith in an interfaith marriage?

In addition to the survey, the study also utilized Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) and interviews with student groups to explore how they connected various circumstances to their decision-making and autonomy regarding interfaith marriage. Non-student interviews were also conducted to understand the broader social issues. This study examined three primary dimensions: interfaith friendships, dating, and marriage. The subsequent content comprises insights derived from the students and the circumstances that influence their reasoning. However, prior to the presentation of the data, it is important to understand the experience of being an Indonesian university student.

2.1. Being a University Student

For the majority of Indonesians, being a student remains a noteworthy accomplishment. Statistics indicate that a mere 35% of high school graduates continue their education in college. A significant proportion of the remaining students are unable to pursue their academic endeavors as a result of the financial limitations experienced by their family. It is worth noting that undergraduates are usually 18–26 years old, while the average marriage age in Indonesia is 22–24 for men and 19–21 for women. Women marrying before 18 account for only 9% in NTT. As national data on the average marriage age are unavailable, these statistics may be lower than the national ones. Therefore, when students are studying at college, many of their former classmates might be married.

According to the National Central Statistics Agency data, in 2022, the overall student population in Indonesia amounted to 9,231,795. It consisted of 7,875,281 students registered at universities affiliated with the Ministry of Education and Culture and 1,356,514 students affiliated with the Ministry of Religion. Indonesia has a grand total of 3994 universities, comprising 184 state institutions (125 under the Ministry of Education and Culture and 59 under the Ministry of Religion) and 3810 private universities (2982 under the Ministry of Education and 828 under the Ministry of Religion). The proportion of female students exceeds that of male students, standing at 51.2% compared to 48.8%, respectively.

The 2022 student population in East Nusa Tenggara amounted to 127,036. Numerous other students study outside of NTT, while only a few students from outside NTT choose to study in the province. The reasons for this trend are that many students opt for campuses with a stronger reputation than those within NTT. Additionally, urbanization and the allure of big cities also play a role in encouraging students to pursue their education outside NTT. Within the province, there are 67 universities/colleges which comprise 63 private and four state universities. The dispersion of colleges in the province is rather limited, as these institutions are predominantly found on five of the total 40 inhabited islands. Many universities are placed in provincial capitals, and a smaller number is located in each district capital. It is worth noting that secondary schools have a greater degree of dispersion throughout nearly all sub-districts. Therefore, the pursuit of higher education frequently requires individuals to leave their parents’ home and potentially relocate on other islands or in different provinces.

The majority of students who do leave choose to reside in boarding houses, which range from basic to luxury. Some do reside with relatives or in the dorms offered by academic institutions or religious orders. Mostly, students prefer the “freedom” provided by boarding houses compared to the regimented regulations of dormitories and residing with relatives. When they refer to “freedom”, it means that they have autonomy over their daily schedules. Specifically, there are no constraints on entry–exit times nor on visitors, and no strict study times, similar to the setup of a typical dormitory. In daily conversations, living in such free boarding houses is also associated with the freedom to date, including the practice of engaging in sexual relations in the boarding rooms. Certain universities may enforce sanctions against students who are caught having sexual intercourse, especially if it leads to pregnancy. Premarital sex is strongly considered both a sin and a taboo subject.
There are concerns that students may resort to illegal abortion, despite the fact that abortion is prohibited and contraception education is discouraged (Lon 2020; Edu et al. 2020).

College students rely heavily on their parents for financial support. Notwithstanding economic adversity, numerous families in NTT make concerted efforts to provide financial assistance for their children’s education, resorting to the sale of land or cattle and even loan money from the bank or other resources. Parents get a strong sense of satisfaction from their children’s academic accomplishments. Graduation photographs conspicuously displayed in living rooms are a representation of familial prestige. Graduation ceremonies are joyous familial occasions, and parents shoulder the substantial expenses of transportation to partake in these significant occasions and throw a party. The ceremonies and parties are considered to be as much the parent’s achievement as they are the student’s.

After graduating from college, most graduates return home and live with their parents. Only a small minority are able to find work. Parents usually continue to support their children even after they get married. Within local cultures, the responsibility of arranging marriages for children lies with the parents and extended family. In everyday conversations, parents often express this sentiment by saying, “our two big duties are ensuring education and facilitating marriage”. Without a doubt, the family support for their children’s education and marriage affects the children’s autonomy and freedom to enter into matrimony, as well as to deal with associated factors.

2.2. Interfaith Relations

The first question in the survey asked whether the student had a friend of a different religion. As a result, a mere 10% of them declared they did not have friends from another religion, while 90% did. The next three questions examined the patterns observed in interfaith friendships using three indicators: dining at friends’ residences, exchanging holiday greetings, and attending the religious services of other faith backgrounds. The findings indicated that 11% of individuals never dined at the residences of cross-religious acquaintances, whereas 44% occasionally did and 45% frequently did so. Regarding sending holiday greetings, a mere 4% refrained from doing so, whilst 88% occasionally did so and 7% frequently did. Subsequently, 24% acknowledged that they had never participated in any other religious ceremonies, while 73% reported occasional attendance and 3% reported frequent attendance.

These results indicate that NTT university students commonly create interfaith bonds. The people of NTT have strong and authentic social connections. Not just students, but most people enjoy socializing for various reasons. The students said that religion is not the main reason for making friends, but rather interests, hobbies, status, habits, ethnicities, etc. They take pride in having friends belonging to various religious backgrounds and attend their religious or family gatherings. They enjoy posting about their experiences on social media as role models for Indonesia. “This is NTT”, “NTT is distinct”, “We are East people” are provocative captions commonly employed by numerous individuals from NTT on social media to depict the concept of tolerance in NTT which sets it apart from other parts of Indonesia where intolerance can be frequently observed. Interestingly, in colloquial discourse, the phrase “East people” is commonly employed to denote attributes that are often perceived negatively and linked to race, such as poverty, underdevelopment, darker skin, and curly hair. In addition to religious intolerance toward minority groups, another significant issue in Indonesia pertains to racial attitudes toward the “eastern people” (Panji and Pratama 2023). Often looked down upon for being “backward”, their religious tolerance scores much higher than that found in other places in Indonesia.

As interfaith relationships have been problematic in other regions in Indonesia, including inside campuses, the results from this survey are positive. Notably, the 1998 fall of the Soeharto regime boosted religious extremist groups, particularly among Muslims. Religious-based intolerance and fundamentalism in Indonesia among the students has grown in recent years. Schools and campuses in Java have been used as places to spread radical religious views (Rahmat and Yahya 2022; Achmad et al. 2023; Syafruddin et al. 2016).
No research has been done to determine if campuses and students in NTT are radicalized, something which could harm interreligious relations. In addition to the results from this survey, it can be easily observed how students in NTT do not have difficulties making friends with individuals belonging to different religions with whom they mingle, dine, celebrate holidays, and attend religious services. All are reflective of the NTT community relations environment. People have strong social interactions with other inhabitants. Socioreligious activities that unite people belonging to different religions also foster brotherhood. This does not mean that religious conflicts are gone. Interreligious conflicts in this region are unique in Indonesia, as Christians dominate the public discourse with Muslims, rather than the other way around (Setiawan et al. 2018). The establishment of worship houses, halal and haram disputes, conversion, faith propagation, and fights between youth groups precipitated by drinking can spark interreligious conflicts and disputes (Hutagalung 2016; Lon and Widyawati 2019; Widyawati 2020). However, confrontations rarely cause widespread upheaval. Tule (2004) and Rodemeier (2010) found that community relationships and local norms and knowledge unify and settle problems. Those studies’ findings also demonstrate that interfaith marriages create interreligious kinship relationships. Interfaith brotherhood and camaraderie are strong, and disagreements are rare since people are reluctant to attack their “family”. Local communities may influence college campuses.

Apprehension that some campuses served as breeding grounds for intolerance has prompted the government to establish inclusive environments free from intolerance and welcoming to diverse perspectives. The phrase “religious moderation” has become popular in recent years and dialogue programs on college campuses are supported by the government. During interviews with several campus officials in NTT, students enthusiastically described how their college was involved in interreligious programs. For instance, Muhammadiyah4 campuses in Alor and Maumere take pride in the fact that the majority of their students are not Muslims. They also provide space for campus-wide activities that have a Christian or Catholic flavor for both students and faculty. In Flores and Kupang, Catholic campuses also offer opportunities for non-Catholic students to engage in a variety of campus activities, some of which incorporate an Islamic religious element. Both students and professors commonly acknowledge the authenticity of interfaith tolerance and friendship within and beyond the college environment.

2.3. Interfaith Dating

On interfaith dating, our survey queried students’ prior experiences of engagement in relationships with individuals with a different religious affiliation. The findings were highly unexpected, since 43.1% of the whole of the respondents confirmed that they had engaged in a romantic relationship with an individual holding a different religious belief. Upon analysis of the replies based on religion, it was found that, among Catholic students, 241 out of 560 individuals (43%) said that they had been involved in a relationship with someone having a different religious affiliation. Among Protestant participants, 81 out of 166 individuals (49%) acknowledged engaging in a romantic relationship with someone holding a different religious belief. Among 73 Muslim students, 31 individuals (42%) indicated that they had been in a romantic relationship with someone of a different faith. Thus, for these three religions, the result was relatively similar.

Dating is understood and practiced differently by various groups of students. For some students, dating is a special relationship that blossoms when a couple fall in love, but it does not necessarily involve significant intimacy. Common activities for these couples might include walking together to and from college. They might also eat together occasionally and engage in shared activities such as visiting places of worship, beaches, or watching public sporting matches. Thus, they spend time together in public spaces. Communication between them often involves texting or calling each other to share news and express concerns. Physical intimacy in these relationships can be quite limited, perhaps extending only to holding hands or an occasional kiss in a secluded spot, such as a quiet
street, a corner of the house, or the living room of their guest house. For those who are more conservative, they might avoid visiting private spaces when alone, such as bedrooms or houses. They might also choose to keep their relationship a secret from friends, or at least not publicly acknowledge that they are dating. Another group was found to engage in open dating, openly revealing their relationships to their intimate acquaintances, roommates, peers, and, occasionally, even their parents, particularly if they reside with them. Their dating behaviors may bear resemblance to the first category, avoiding sexual intercourse.

Another category comprises individuals who are in a romantic relationship and do not hesitate to engage in sexual intercourse. Within this cohort, sexual intercourse typically takes place clandestinely, unbeknownst to their parents or university authorities. Some of their closest friends may know, but it is commonly regarded as a highly confidential matter due to the potential ramifications associated with its exposure. When students were asked about “how far” they went in their dating relationships, it was found that this could potentially impact their “status” due to societal norms. Furthermore, many universities have penalties for students who have sexual intercourse, become pregnant, or impregnate. Religion, specifically Christianity, exerts a significant impact on the moral dimensions of matrimony, particularly with regard to the perspectives of the NTT people regarding sexuality and the institution of matrimony. According to Erb’s (1991), Catholic sexual and marital moral values, sometimes, even conflict with indigenous customs.

According to our survey, many students dated someone from a different religion. This implies that interfaith relationships are prevalent, and that religion does not prevent personal interactions. Although their parents may disagree, students do not mind dating someone from another religion. Common reasons given for this included: “Anybody can fall in love with anyone, regardless of their background or religion”. During the focus groups, some students said having a boyfriend or girlfriend in college is a “style”, or they are “searching”, “trying”, or it is only “temporary”. These relationships are not serious and may end simply. Most people view dating as an explorative activity rather than as a final path to marriage, which is more complicated and solemn. This is supported by Martin and Dowson (2009), who argue that dating helps young people socialize. Focus group discussions, especially among men, suggested that repeated dating is necessary before getting married. This implies that young people are searching for a “soul mate”. It may be “monkey love” or “location love” too. Like monkeys swinging from tree to tree, “monkey love” is love that is transferred from one person to another. Teens usually do this. “Location love” is affection for a location or event. Closeness or existence of a shared place might increase love.

Certain students made the deliberate decision to avoid romantic involvement with individuals of a different faith. To avoid falling in love, some individuals avoid getting too close to friends of the opposite sex. They establish what Larson (2022) underlines as “limits/borders” for romantic sentiments, which they deem “dangerous”. They frequently uttered the phrase “do not bring us to the temptation”, which is included in the “Our Father” prayer. Some respondents believed that they would be “inviting trouble” by courting an interfaith partner, especially if their parents found out. Parental guidance discouraging their children from dating individuals of different religions is prevalent. They frequently express the following sentiments: “Even if your partner is not good, as long as your faith is the same, it is better than having different faiths”. Some Muslims reject conventional courting practices in favor of “taaruf”, which are Muslim-specific dating customs. Dating non-Muslims is not only discouraged, but also prohibited by convention. Participants were preoccupied by the concept of a “prohibited relationship”.

2.4. Interfaith Marriage

Although a considerable proportion of people engaged in relationships with individuals of different religious backgrounds, a mere 9% of all participants expressed the belief that they have the ability to marry their boy/girlfriend in the future. A total of 76.3% of respondents stated that their parents prohibited it and 61% of respondents admitted that
their religion prohibits interfaith marriages. Even if an individual’s freedom to choose a spouse is great, they have little say in relation to wedding customs. Parents and the extended family matter more. The parents usually decide how their children marry. Thus, the influence of family and religion is significant in shaping an individual’s marriage, driving their choices in dating and relationships.

Moreover, for most of NTT society, marriage is an integral component of traditional rites. It serves as a means to maintain and extend the influence and authority of the clan and family. It entails a reciprocal transfer of rights and responsibilities between “wife giver” and “wife taker” families. Marriage elevates a family’s social and cultural standing, resulting in many outcomes that impact individuals before, during, and after marriage, as well as throughout their lifetime. There is a multifaceted cultural process of a marriage that involves several stages, including introduction, courtship, engagement, negotiation, payment of bride-wealth, and the ceremonial act of formalizing a traditional marriage. All activities are conducted through ceremonial practices that require the participation of both extended families and ancestral spirits. A marriage that deviates from conventional ceremonies will be perceived as a perilous departure that poses a threat to the institution of marriage and may even result in calamities for the community. The role of the family is significantly more influential in comparison to the involvement of the bride and groom themselves (Allerton 2004; Erb 1991; Fox 1980; Lon and Widyawati 2018; S. Lon 2021).

Within this particular environment, marriages that involve individuals who share similar characteristics or backgrounds are more widely embraced within the community of NTT. Therefore, interfaith marriages can be challenging due to the potential conflicts in ideals that may occur, in particular for individuals who identify as Catholics/Protestants and Muslims. Pigs hold significant importance in the traditional wedding rites of NTT, serving as both integral participants in the festivities and valuable commodities exchanged as part of the bride-wealth tradition. The marriage legalization ceremony is typically distinguished by the use of pig’s blood. This could provide a challenge if either the bride or groom’s family are Muslim. We can see that the rejection of mixed marriages is not solely based on religious precepts, but also on the repercussions of cultural practices. It is unsurprising that parents or family members may be unsympathetic toward interfaith weddings.

In a patriarchal group, the male is designated as the inheritor of the clan. Additionally, they will inherit assets from their parents. Unsanctioned relationships might potentially lead to the risk of forfeiting inheritance and the authority as the clan’s leader. Men may endeavor to persuade their partners to convert to their religion so as to protect future wealth. As the heirs to the clan, men encounter challenges in social interactions, particularly when it comes to the prospective marriages of their offspring if the marriage does not obtain consent. Unsurprisingly, some male respondents expressed that interfaith weddings incur substantial costs and commonly entail extensive familial assemblies. If the family disapproves of an interfaith marriage, it brings up the issue of who would provide backing for the marriage, thus rendering such a union nearly unattainable.

While differences in race and ethnicity can pose challenges in marriage, they are not as significant as religious differences. When the ethnic backgrounds differ but the religion is the same, negotiations tend to be more manageable. Interfaith marriage is challenged by religious teachings. Both Muslims and Catholics/Protestants generally prioritize marrying someone who shares the same religious beliefs. The Catholic faith allows for interfaith marriages, albeit with stringent requirements. Catholic Canon Law article 1024–1025 permits interfaith marriages under the condition that a bishop grants a dispensation. In order to acquire this dispensation, a couple must be willing to sign a letter of agreement that explicitly states their commitment to uphold the ideals of the Catholic religion. Similarly, a comparable phenomenon exists in Christianity. While the potential for acceptance always exists in accordance with the law, an interfaith marriage is not easily attainable or executable.

This is also the case with the teachings of Islam. In the Indonesian context, Islam generally opposes interfaith marriages; however, there may be varying interpretations of
this matter. In Islamic jurisprudence, it is permissible for Muslim males to marry women from other religious backgrounds. However, due to their role as the spiritual leaders within the family, they assume the position of ritual leaders. Consequently, it is anticipated that the wife will conform to the husband’s faith. The inference is that non-Muslim women who marry Muslims are expected to convert, but the opposite is not expected. Meanwhile, according to Islamic legal thought, women are forbidden from marrying those who hold different religious beliefs. There are also limitations in place to prevent them from converting to their husband’s non-Muslim religion. Many prominent Islamic groups have consistently issued fatwas explicitly against interfaith marriage. The restriction of interfaith marriages is justified within families through the transmission of strict religious norms and instructions on this topic.

Another concern among the students related to the question of the children’s religion in an interfaith family. Religious differences within the family are perceived as potentially “confusing” for children and may conflict with the “values” they are taught to adhere to. Moreover, 31% of respondents believed that interfaith marriages could endanger their faith. In local Christian tradition, the concept of the family as the “temple of God”, as a “mini church”, and as a “house of worship” have been strongly emphasized. The existence of different religions can challenge these views. Likewise, in Islam, praying together is important. However, prayers from different religions have not become commonplace.

Given these issues, it is no wonder that a total of 72.6% of respondents would prefer changing a partner’s religion over having an interfaith marriage. This high number actually reflects all the available explanations. Having the same religion is still a common norm in many circles in Indonesia. Equality is considered a source of harmony. Therefore, people like uniformity. The existence of different things can be a threat to others. Likewise, especially in marriage, the same religious basis is considered to be the principle for a family. However, students still held a positive view of interfaith marriages in general. There were 58.7% of respondents who agreed with the idea of interfaith marriage. A total of 66.5% respondents viewed interfaith marriage as a way to increase harmony between religious communities, and 54% of respondents advocated for a revision of state regulations that hinder interfaith unions. However, support and a positive attitude were found to apply primarily “to other person” and not “me or us”. This is quite common when dealing with problematic choices or social ethics in general. That is, people do not object to a certain norm or choice, but not for themselves and their own family. They may not mind other people marrying people of different religions, but, when it comes to their own actions and those of their children or close family, they will not agree.

3. Conclusions

The study indicates that East Nusa Tenggara students enjoy a strong religious community with many friendships and respect-building activities. Student behavior reflects an inclusive, cooperative, welcoming, and flexible culture. Many students are open to dating people of different religions, a fact which is surprising. While dating as a student can foster social relationships, it may not lead to a more serious marriage commitment. Relationships with people of other religions allow one to understand other people’s opinions. During this phase, people can express themselves more openly, feeling as if they have more freedom. These issues differ, however, when it comes to marriage. Marriage is no longer private. Marriage is a complicated social event, since it combines family, clan, religion, and state concerns. Thus, while students were more open to date people of different religions as young people, most would not marry a person of another religion. They know their family and religious community would oppose their marriage. Interfaith marriages challenge families, customs, and social-cultural ties. Men face consequences for bride-wealth, inheritance, and clan leadership. Thus, same-faith marriage is seen as the most secure option. Men make sure their wives follow their religion to maintain cultural, familial, and religious stability. The high expense of marriages makes the parents’ financial support
Thus, an interfaith marriage is difficult and practically impossible if the parents refuse interfaith weddings. According to this study, interfaith connections create a friendly and inclusive social atmosphere for people to communicate and enjoy social and religious differences. Self-governing and individualized dating for young people is usually limited to the period of residency at university. In the context of society, culture, religion, and nationality, at this time, students’ views on interfaith dating and marriage may seem idealistic.

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**Notes**

1. The Marriage Law Number 1 of 1974 in Indonesia originally established the minimum age for marriage as 19 years for males and 16 years for females. Nevertheless, Law Number 16 of 2019 superseded this law and the minimum age for marriage is 19 years for individuals of both genders. Nevertheless, child marriages may still take place in actuality, frequently necessitating specific authorization. The schools indicated in the two prior studies could be classified as schools catering to upper middle-class families. It is highly probable that students from these schools would seek more education upon completing high school.

2. In Indonesia, the government recognizes six religions: Islam, Catholic, Protestant, Hindus, Buddhist and Confucians. All Christians denomination outside Catholics are classified as Protestant. In daily terms, however, Catholics are often called Christian Catholics and Protestants as just Christians.

3. [https://pddikti.kemdikbud.go.id/](https://pddikti.kemdikbud.go.id/) (accessed on 10 April 2024).

4. Muhammadiyah is a major Islamic organization in Indonesia. It has embraced a reformist agenda that integrates religious education with modern education. This approach aims to facilitate the social advancement of Muslims towards more ‘modern’ societies. It founded numerous schools and universities in all over Indonesia.

5. Within the majority of NTT social systems, marriage results in the division of the family into two distinct groups: the group that provides the woman (wife giver) and the group that receives the wife (wife taker). Every tribe possesses its own terminology to delineate these two factions. The individuals that provide gifts to the wife are the bride’s family members, particularly her father, uncles, brothers, and male cousins. Their increased status is attributed to the act of bestowing their daughter (the bride) upon the groom’s family, commonly referred to as the wife’s receiving family. Consequently, the family that receives the woman is obligated to provide bride-wealth to the family that gives the wife.

**References**


