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The Model of Interfaith Pluralism among University Communities in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia

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Abstract: This study examines the dynamics of interfaith relations and religious tolerance among students and lecturers in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), Indonesia—a pluralistic region known for its strong communal values and peaceful coexistence. The research aims to uncover how everyday interfaith interactions, embedded in local traditions, contribute to maintaining religious harmony amidst global trends of rising extremism and polarisation. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from 961 respondents across 47 universities through a structured questionnaire. Statistical analyses, including descriptive statistics and one-way ANOVA, were conducted to explore patterns of interfaith engagement, negative experiences, and exclusivist attitudes. Findings indicate a high frequency of positive interreligious interactions and minimal negative experiences such as discrimination or exclusion. Both students and lecturers strongly reject religious exclusivism and violence, with lecturers demonstrating slightly higher tolerance levels. Based on these insights, the study introduces the NTT Interfaith Pluralism Model, which comprises four core principles: interpersonal proximity, cultural anchoring, mutual visibility, and educational responsibility. These principles reflect how religious harmony in NTT is sustained through daily practices, local wisdom, and the role of educators as moral exemplars. The study offers practical implications for fostering inclusive religious environments, especially in multi-faith societies across the Global South. Rather than focusing solely on policy or formal dialogues, this model highlights the power of informal social interaction and community-embedded ethics. The originality of this research lies in its context-sensitive approach and contribution to understanding pluralism in peaceful settings, offering a scalable and replicable framework for other plural societies.

Keywords: Cultural anchoring; educational responsibility; interfaith harmony; interpersonal proximity; religious tolerance.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji dinamika hubungan antarumat beragama dan toleransi religius di kalangan mahasiswa dan dosen di Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT), Indonesia—sebuah wilayah pluralistik yang dikenal dengan nilai-nilai komunal yang kuat dan kehidupan bersama yang harmonis. Tujuan utama penelitian ini adalah untuk mengungkap bagaimana interaksi sehari-hari lintas agama yang tertanam dalam tradisi lokal berkontribusi dalam menjaga harmoni keagamaan di tengah meningkatnya ekstremisme dan polarisasi global. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif dengan melibatkan 961 responden dari 47 perguruan tinggi di NTT. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner terstruktur dan dianalisis menggunakan statistik deskriptif dan uji ANOVA satu arah untuk mengeksplorasi pola interaksi lintas agama, pengalaman negatif, serta sikap eksklusivis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan tingginya frekuensi interaksi positif lintas agama serta sangat rendahnya pengalaman negatif seperti diskriminasi atau pengucilan. Baik mahasiswa maupun dosen secara konsisten menolak sikap eksklusivisme dan kekerasan berbasis agama, dengan dosen menunjukkan tingkat toleransi yang lebih tinggi. Berdasarkan temuan ini, penelitian ini merumuskan Model Pluralisme Antariman NTT yang terdiri dari empat prinsip utama: *kedekatan interpersonal*,

jangkar budaya, *visibilitas bersama*, dan *tanggung jawab edukatif*. Model ini menunjukkan bahwa harmoni keagamaan di NTT tumbuh secara organik dari praktik sosial harian dan etika komunal. Kontribusi orisinal penelitian ini terletak pada pendekatannya yang berbasis konteks damai dan menawarkan kerangka kerja pluralisme yang dapat direplikasi dan diskalakan, terutama bagi masyarakat multireligius di kawasan Global South.

Kata Kunci: Penanaman budaya; tanggung jawab pendidikan; harmoni antariman; kedekatan interpersonal; toleransi beragama.

1. Introduction

Across the globe, societies are grappling with the mounting challenges of religious extremism, ideological polarisation, and the gradual erosion of communal trust. These phenomena have increasingly threatened the fabric of social cohesion, particularly in pluralistic and multicultural contexts. Religious extremism, in particular, has shown a disturbing tendency to take root among young populations, often in regions marked by political instability and weak institutional resilience (Dosmakhambetuly et al., 2019). Exposure to communal violence has been shown to exacerbate exclusionary attitudes, foster fundamentalist beliefs, and diminish confidence in political systems, creating fertile ground for radical ideologies to flourish (Finkel et al., 2021). These patterns are not isolated but resonate across diverse geopolitical contexts, from Central Asia to West Africa, where communities have experienced heightened support for violent religious extremism in the wake of sustained conflict and marginalisation.

Ideological polarisation further compounds these challenges. Research suggests that individuals who are embedded in socially or ideologically homogenous networks tend to adopt more rigid and extreme positions over time (Everton, 2016). This "group polarisation effect" is not limited to political views but extends deeply into religious worldviews, reinforcing intolerance and a willingness to defend one's beliefs through exclusion or even violence (van Prooijen & Kuijper, 2020). Concurrently, the erosion of communal trust—particularly in contexts where religious freedoms are restricted—has been strongly associated with an increase in religiously motivated conflict, including domestic terrorism and civil strife (Saiya, 2015). Marginalisation and perceived bias against religious groups, especially in regions such as Central Asia or among Christian communities in parts of Nigeria, have further strained relations between religious and secular institutions (Khamidov, 2013; Ukah, 2011).

In light of these global trends, the question arises: how do certain regions maintain robust interfaith relationships and a high degree of religious tolerance despite pluralistic diversity? East Nusa Tenggara (Nusa Tenggara Timur—NTT), a predominantly Christian province in Indonesia with significant Catholic and Muslim minorities, offers a compelling counter-narrative. Here, everyday social interactions between members of different faiths—such as visiting one another's homes, exchanging religious holiday greetings, and engaging in community-based activities—are common and appear to be instrumental in sustaining harmony. Initial findings from recent surveys suggest that both students and lecturers in NTT demonstrate high levels of interreligious tolerance and low incidences of exclusivist or violent religious attitudes. This phenomenon warrants critical academic attention, as it challenges prevailing global assumptions that pluralism inevitably leads to tension or conflict.

Understanding the lived experience of pluralism in NTT provides empirical insight and practical implications for policymaking and peacebuilding in other multi-religious societies. In a global climate increasingly defined by division and fear, regions that exemplify inclusive interfaith practices deserve closer scholarly and institutional focus. Within this context, the present study situates itself—seeking to explore, analyse, and model the mechanisms through which everyday interreligious interactions in NTT contribute to the cultivation and sustainability of communal trust and religious harmony.

Previous research on interfaith relations and religious tolerance can be categorised into three major themes. The first theme emphasises the importance of interfaith dialogue in fostering mutual understanding and social harmony across religious communities. Akhunzada (2014) and Ramli et al. (2023) highlight how interfaith dialogue plays a vital role in promoting peace, especially in societies

experiencing religious diversity or tension. Regular and inclusive dialogue sessions are proven to foster respect and reduce prejudice. However, many of these studies focus primarily on formal or institutionalised dialogue, leaving less attention to everyday, informal interactions that may play a more significant role in building grassroots tolerance.

The second category focuses on educational interventions and community-based efforts. Moritz et al. (2018) demonstrated that both educational and metacognitive approaches are effective in reducing interreligious stereotypes, while studies by Susanto (2024) and Al-Karbi et al. (2025) reveal the importance of cultural traditions and local leadership in sustaining interfaith tolerance in communities such as Nglinggi Village in Indonesia and UAE society. The third category discusses challenges to interfaith tolerance, particularly those arising from strong religious bonding or social hostility, as highlighted by Sumaktoyo (2021) and Nasution et al. (2025). While these studies offer insights into structural and psychological barriers to tolerance, they often neglect regions where interfaith coexistence is relatively peaceful, such as East Nusa Tenggara. There is still limited scholarly exploration into how tolerance is embedded and sustained through daily practices in pluralistic societies that are not marked by conflict—an area this study aims to address.

This study aims to address the gap in existing literature by examining how interreligious tolerance is maintained through everyday social practices in a relatively peaceful and pluralistic setting, specifically in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), Indonesia. While previous research has extensively focused on interfaith dialogue, formal education, and the mitigation of conflict in tension-prone areas, this study shifts attention to informal, lived experiences of tolerance in a non-conflict context. By investigating the patterns of daily interaction—such as shared meals, greetings during religious holidays, participation in interfaith activities, and the rejection of exclusivist attitudes—among students and lecturers of different religious backgrounds, this research seeks to uncover the sociocultural mechanisms that underpin and sustain interfaith harmony. The study not only fills a crucial gap by providing empirical data from a unique Indonesian province often overlooked in global discourse but also contributes a culturally grounded model of religious pluralism that may serve as a reference for peacebuilding strategies in other diverse societies.

This study is guided by the argument that informal, everyday interfaith interactions are a foundational mechanism for cultivating and sustaining religious tolerance in pluralistic societies. Grounded in Allport's Intergroup Contact Theory (1954), the research proposes that frequent interpersonal engagements—when occurring under conditions of equality and mutual respect—can effectively reduce prejudice and foster positive intergroup attitudes. Unlike approaches that rely solely on formal dialogue or top-down initiatives, this perspective emphasises the importance of embedded cultural practices and shared communal values in shaping tolerant dispositions. Theoretical insights from Binder et al. (2009) and Hewstone & Voci (2009) further suggest that regular social contact can enhance empathy and trust, mainly when supported by a social environment that encourages cooperation. In culturally cohesive contexts, these interactions become part of a broader social habitus that normalises coexistence. Thus, this study argues that interfaith tolerance can be most effectively understood as a lived social practice rooted in daily experiences and cultural norms rather than as an outcome of formal policy or institutional frameworks alone.

2. Methods

This study focused on two primary units of analysis: students and lecturers from various higher education institutions across East Nusa Tenggara Province (NTT). These groups were selected to represent the religious and social diversity characteristic of the region, providing a relevant context to explore issues related to interfaith relations, tolerance, and exclusivist attitudes in academic environments. The inclusion of both students and lecturers allowed for a comparative analysis of intergenerational perspectives and the role of educational institutions in shaping religious attitudes (Idi & Priansyah, 2023).

A quantitative approach was employed in this study to systematically assess the behaviours and perceptions of the target groups. This design was chosen for its ability to generate measurable data,

enabling statistical comparison across different subgroups and institutions (Mey, 2022). By using structured instruments and established scales, the study aimed to identify patterns, trends, and statistically significant differences in interfaith attitudes based on factors such as religion, role (student or lecturer), and geographic location within NTT.

The primary data source comprised responses collected from students and lecturers in 47 universities and higher education institutions spread across four major islands: Timor, Flores, Sumba, and Alor. These respondents represented various religious affiliations, including Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam. Secondary data was drawn from the official Higher Education Database (PDDIKTI) for the odd semester of the 2022/2023 academic year. This supplementary information provided the demographic and institutional context necessary for interpreting the findings.

Data was gathered through a structured questionnaire distributed both digitally via Google Forms and physically during campus visits. Researchers visited 11 universities to raise awareness about the research objectives and ensure clarity in survey completion procedures. The instrument consisted of 51 statements tested for validity and reliability using a pilot sample of 200 students from UNIKA Santu Paulus Ruteng. Based on the test results, 41 items met the required correlation threshold ($r \geq 0.138$), while 10 items were removed. The reliability of the final instrument was confirmed by a Cronbach's Alpha value exceeding 0.7, indicating high internal consistency.

The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistics and one-way ANOVA to identify patterns and compare responses across subgroups based on variables such as religious affiliation, gender, and institutional roles (students or lecturers) (Sarwono, 2006). Descriptive statistics were employed to summarise key trends, while ANOVA provided insights into the significance of observed differences. The entire analytical process was conducted using SPSS software to ensure accuracy and reliability. Findings were then thematically categorised in accordance with the research objectives. Although this study adopted a quantitative approach, the results offer a strong foundation for future qualitative exploration into the lived experiences and cultural logics that underpin tolerance within pluralistic societies.

3. Results

Inter-religious Relations

To assess interfaith relations, this research questioned five elements related to common daily contact and interactions in a pluralistic society: "Dining at the home of a friend who practices a different religion", "Extending well wishes on holidays of other religions", "Participating in religious ceremonies of other faiths", "Engaging in interfaith dialogues", and "Patronising stalls or shops owned by individuals of different religions". The results are as follows.

Firstly, a comparison between lecturers and students was conducted. The respondents' responses are displayed in Table 1, and the mean score for the five indicators is shown in Figure 1 using percentage techniques. The description of the mean value, minimum value, maximum value, and standard deviation are shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Inter-religious Relations Among Students and Lecturers

Indicators	Students			Lecturers		
	Often	Rarely	Never	Often	Rarely	Never
Dining at the home of a friend who practices a different religion	44.6%	44.2%	11.2%	60.6%	39.4%	0%
Extending well wishes on holidays of other religions	7.4%	88.2%	4.4%	9.9%	89.4%	0.7%
Participating in religious ceremonies of other faiths	3.2%	73%	23.8%	7.7%	90.2%	2.1%
Engaging in interfaith dialogues	21.9%	53%	25.1%	18.3%	52.1%	29.6%

Patronizing stalls or shops owned by individuals of different religions	86.5%	11.7%	1.8%	90.8%	8.5%	0.7%
Mean	32.72%	54.02%	13.26%	37.46%	55.92%	6.62%

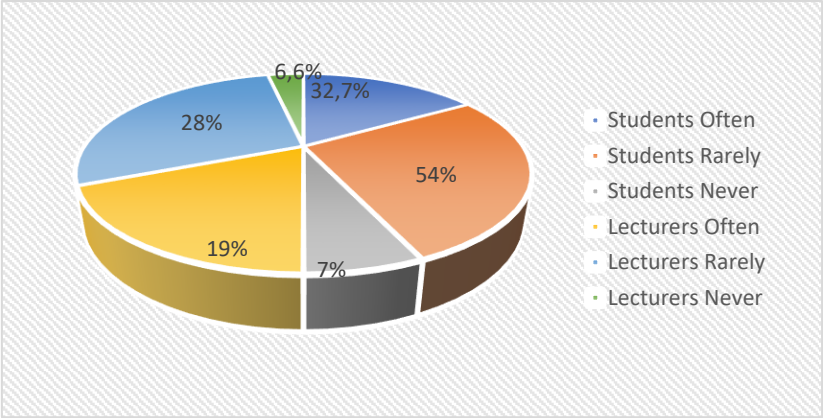

Figure 1. Common daily contact and interactions in a pluralistic society

Table 1 and Figure 1 indicate that the inter-religious relationship between students and lecturers in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) concerning interfaith relations is at a very good level. Despite the varying frequencies at which the five measured indicators were executed, the results still suggest that the inter-religious relationship is very good.

Table 2. Mean, Minimum Value, Maximum Value, and Standard Deviation of Inter-religious Relations among Students and Lecturers

Students/ Lecturers	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Minimum	Maximum
Students	819	1.867	0.8307	0.290	1.0	2.8
Lecturers	142	1.966	0.8538	0.716	2.0	2.8
Total	961	1.881	0.8344	0.269	1.0	2.8

Is there a difference in attitudes and appreciation of tolerance between students and lecturers? To answer this question, a one-way ANOVA analysis was conducted. The results of the analysis are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. ANOVA Test on Attitudes and Appreciation of Tolerance Between Students and Lecturers

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	119.884	1	119.884	1.723	0.190
Within Groups	66721.775	959	69.574		
Total	66841.659	960			

Table 3 shows that the Sig. value is 0.190. This value is greater than the critical or alpha value (0.05). Therefore, it can be stated that there is no difference in attitudes and appreciation of inter-religious tolerance among students and lecturers. Both show the same tendency.

Secondly, this study conducted a comparative analysis of inter-religious relations based on the respondents' religious affiliations—namely Catholic, Christian (Protestant), and Islamic. The analysis employed percentage techniques to examine responses across five indicators of daily interfaith interaction: dining at the home of a friend from another religion, extending holiday greetings to those of other faiths, participating in religious ceremonies of other religions, engaging in interfaith dialogues, and patronising shops owned by people of different religions. The detailed responses are presented in

Table 4, while the mean scores for each religious group are illustrated in Figure 2, and the descriptive statistics—including mean, minimum, maximum, and standard deviation—are summarised in Table 5.

Table 4. Inter-religious Relations based on Religion

Indicators	Catholic			Christian			Islamic		
	Often	Rarely	Never	Often	Rarely	Never	Often	Rarely	Never
Dining at the home of a friend who practices a different religion	44.4%	44.6%	11.0%	56.2%	37.8%	6.0%	43.3%	48.9%	7.8%
Extending well wishes on holidays of other religions	6.9%	89.7%	3.4%	0.5%	97.2%	2.3%	32.2%	56.7%	11.1%
Participating in religious ceremonies of other faiths	3.4%	77.3%	19.3%	0.5%	75.5%	24.0%	15.6%	62.2%	22.2%
Engaging in interfaith dialogues	19.4%	52.2%	28.3	24.9%	51.6%	23.5%	26.7%	60.0%	13.3%
Patronizing stalls or shops owned by individuals of different religions	87.3%	10.6%	2.1%	92.2%	6.9%	0.9%	73.3%	27.7%	0.0%
Mean	32%	55%	13%	35%	54%	11%	38%	51%	11%

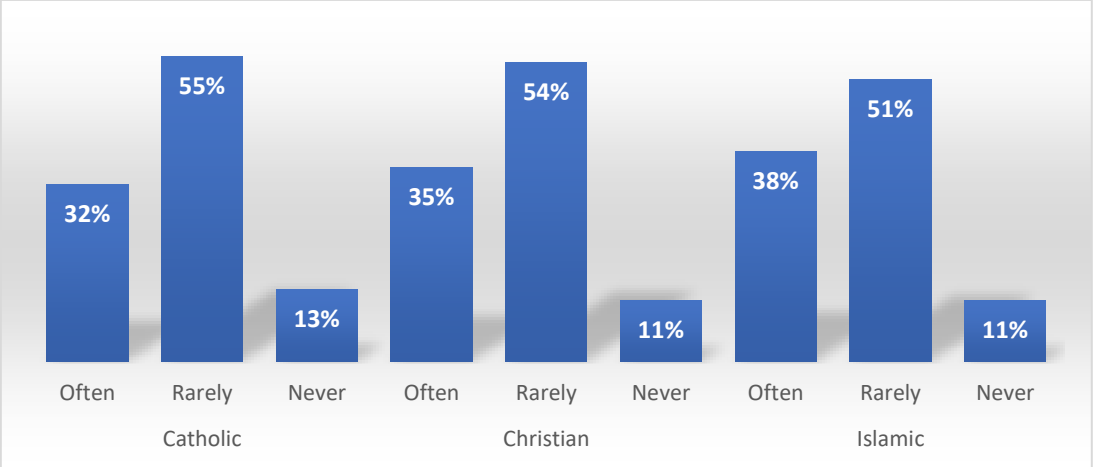

Figure 2. Inter-religious Relations based on Religion

The data reveal intriguing results regarding interfaith relations based on the respondents' religions. Statistically, according to the Anova analysis, there is no significant difference in attitudes and appreciation of interfaith relations and tolerance between students and lecturers, irrespective of their religious affiliations, as indicated in Table 6. This is evidenced by a significance value (0.336) greater than the alpha level (0.05). Thus, both students and lecturers, whether Catholic, Christian, or Muslim, exhibit positive attitudes, practices, and perceptions in interfaith relations. They frequently dine at friends' homes of different religions, exchange holiday greetings, participate in religious

services of other faiths, engage in interfaith dialogue, and patronize stores owned by individuals of different religions.

Table 5. Description of Mean Value, Minimum Value, Maximum Value, and Standard Deviation of Inter-religious Relations Based on Religion

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Minimum	Maximum
Catholic	653	1.855	0.836	0.328	1	2.8
Christian	217	1.920	0.829	0.563	2	2.8
Islamic	90	1.973	0.829	0.873	2	2.8
Total	960	1.881	0.835	0.269	1	2.8

Is there a difference in attitudes and appreciation of tolerance between students and lecturers based on their respective religions? To answer this question, a one-way ANOVA analysis was conducted. The results of the analysis are displayed in Table 6.

Table 6. Results of the One-Way ANOVA Analysis

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	152.097	2	76.048	1.091	0.336
Within Groups	66679.399	957	69.675		
Total	**66831.496**	**959**			

Table 6 shows that the Sig. value is 0.336. This value is greater than the alpha value (0.05). Therefore, it can be stated that there is no difference in attitudes and appreciation of inter-religious tolerance between students and lecturers based on the religion they adhere to.

Students and lecturers, whether Catholic, Protestant, or Muslim, demonstrate positive attitudes, practices, and perceptions regarding inter-religious relations. They frequently visit the homes of friends of different religions, extend greetings on religious holidays of other faiths, attend religious events of other faiths, participate in *dialogue lintas agama* (interfaith dialogues), and shop at stores owned by individuals from different religions (Wang, 2023).

The findings of this study reveal several intriguing patterns that merit further analysis. In comparing students and lecturers, it was observed that lecturers attend religious events of other faiths more frequently than students. This reflects the role of lecturers as models of inclusive relationships in society, providing an example for younger generations in fostering tolerance and interfaith harmony. Conversely, students displayed slightly lower levels of engagement across all indicators of inter-religious relations, which may be influenced by factors such as age, experience, or limited access to interfaith environments.

Based on religious affiliation, another noteworthy pattern is the higher level of engagement among Muslims in extending greetings on religious holidays of other faiths and visiting the homes of friends who practise a different religion, compared to Catholics and Protestants. On the other hand, Protestant respondents showed the lowest frequency in extending greetings on other religious holidays, with only 0.5% doing so regularly. This pattern reflects variations in the level of interfaith interaction, which may be influenced by religious doctrines, traditions, or community values.

These findings are consistent with the cultural characteristics of East Nusa Tenggara (*Nusa Tenggara Timur* or NTT), which is known for its high level of diversity and a culture that upholds the value of pluralism. The high levels of engagement in activities such as visiting the homes of friends of other faiths or shopping at stores owned by individuals from different religions reflect the community's appreciation of diversity. However, the relatively low participation in *dialogue lintas agama* (interfaith dialogue) suggests that interfaith interactions in this region occur more often in informal contexts rather than formal ones, such as in daily life rather than organised events.

This study also supports the existing literature highlighting the roots of diversity in NTT, which are influenced by local traditions such as *gotong-royong* (mutual cooperation) and the values of tolerance. These traditions continue to be reinforced through interfaith interactions, fostering a distinctive atmosphere of harmony within the community. Therefore, it is essential for educational institutions and religious leaders to promote inclusive inter-religious relationships, ensuring that these values of tolerance are passed on to future generations and further strengthen harmony in pluralistic societies.

Negative Experinces in Inter-religious Relations

Negative experiences in interfaith relations were explored with four survey questions: "Discriminated against by adherents of other religions", "Bullied by followers of other religions", "Ostracized by practitioners of other religions", "Treated unfairly due to religious or cultural differences". Each statement provided three alternative answers: Often, Rarely, and Never.

Firstly, a comparison between lecturers and students was conducted. Using percentage techniques, the respondents' responses are displayed in Table 7 and mean score in Fugure 3. The description of the mean value, minimum value, maximum value, and standard deviation are shown in Table 8.

Table 7. Negative Experiences of Lecturers and Students

Indicators	Students			Lecturers		
	Often	Rarely	Never	Often	Rarely	Never
Discriminated against by adherents of other religions	0.0%	10.1%	89.9%	0.0%	23.3%	76.7%
Bullied by followers of other religions	0.0%	7.3%	92.7%	0.0%	18.3%	81.7%
Ostracized by practitioners of other religions	0.0%	6.6%	93.4%	0.0%	14.8%	85.2%
Treated unfairly due to religious or cultural differences	0.0%	7.3%	92.7%	0.0%	21.1%	78.9%
Mean	0%	8%	92%	0%	19%	81%

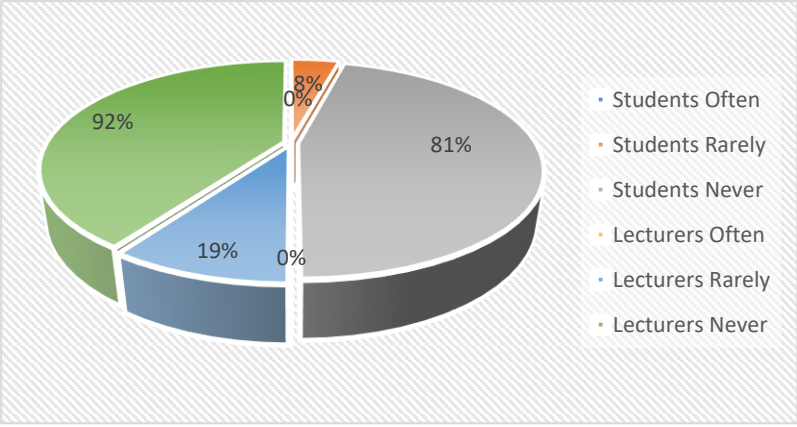

Figure 3. Negative Experiences of Lecturers and Students

Table 8. Description of Mean Value, Minimum Value, Maximum Value, and Standard Deviation

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Minimum	Maximum
Students	819	2.927	2.034	0.0711	2.0	3.0
Lecturers	142	2.815	3.309	0.2777	2.0	3.0
Total	**961**	**2.910**	**2.301**	**0.0742**	**2.0**	**3.0**

Is there a difference in negative experiences between students and lecturers in interfaith relations? This question is answered with the results of the One-Way ANOVA test shown in Table 9.

Table 9. ANOVA Results of Differences in Negative Experiences Between Students and Lecturers

ANOVA

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	152,003	1	152.003	29.575	0.000
Within Groups	4928,798	959	5.140		
Total	5080,801	960			

Table 9 shows that the Sig. value is 0.000, which is smaller than the alpha value (0.05). Therefore, it can be stated that there are differences in negative experiences between lecturers and students in interfaith relations. Compared to lecturers, students experience more negative experiences in interfaith relations, albeit in limited forms.

Secondly, a comparison based on religion was conducted. Using percentage techniques, the respondents' responses are displayed in Table 10 and mean score in Figure 4. The description of the mean value, minimum value, maximum value, and standard deviation are shown in Table 11.

Table 10. Negative Experiences Based on Religion

Indicators	Catholic			Christian			Islamic		
	Often	Rarely	Never	Often	Rarely	Never	Often	Rarely	Never
Discriminated against by adherents of other religions	0.0%	11.9%	88.1%	0.0%	12.0%	88.0%	0.0%	12.2%	87.8%
Bullied by followers of other religions	0.0%	9.0%	91.0%	0.0%	7.8%	92.2%	0.0%	10.0%	90.0%
Ostracized by practitioners of other religions	0.0%	8.0%	92.0%	0.0%	7.8%	92.2%	0.0%	3.3%	94.7%
Treated unfairly due to religious or cultural differences	0.0%	10.1%	89.9	0.0%	9.2%	90.8%	0.0%	3.3%	96.7%

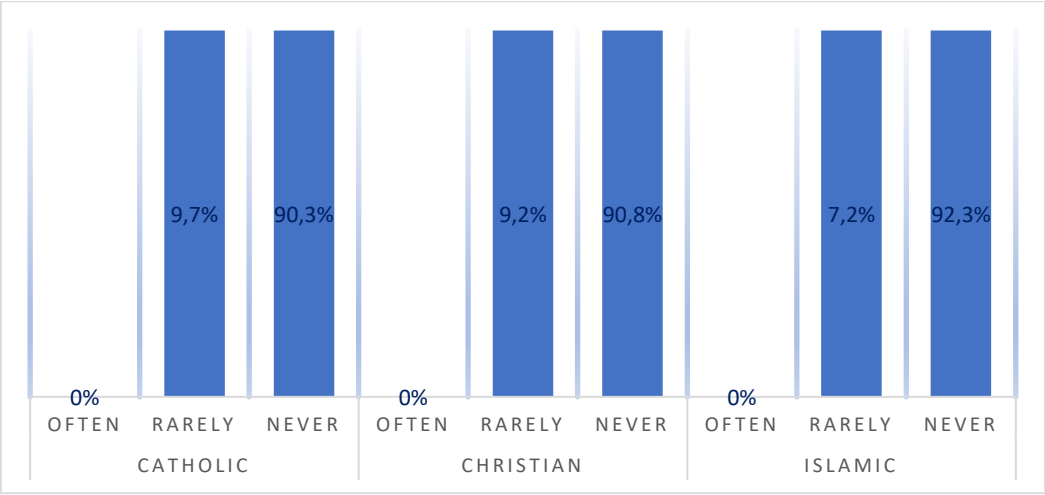

Figure 4. Negative Experiences Based on Religion

Table 11. Description of Mean Value, Minimum Value, Maximum Value, and Standard Deviation of Negative Experiences Based on Religion

Religion	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Minimum	Maximum
Catholic	653	2.909	2.331	0.091	2.0	3.0
Christian	217	2.913	2.255	0.153	2.0	3.0
Islamic	90	2.927	1.993	0.210	2.0	3.0
Total	960	2.911	2.283	0.074	2.0	3.0

Is there a difference in negative experiences between lecturers and students based on their respective religions? This question is answered with the results of the One-Way ANOVA test shown in Table 12.

Table 12. ANOVA Results of Negative Experiences Based on Religion

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2.665	2	1.333	0.255	0.775
Within Groups	4995.185	957	5.220		
Total	**4997.850**	**959**			

Table 12 shows that the Sig. value is 0.775, which is larger than the alpha value (0.05). Therefore, it can be stated that there is no difference in negative experiences in interfaith relations between students and lecturers; all students and lecturers have never experienced negative experiences in the context of interfaith relations. This is confirmed in Table 10, where both students and lecturers have zero percent (0%) answering often to each negative survey statement.

The findings of this study reveal that no respondents, whether students or lecturers, reported experiencing negative interfaith relations *often*. However, the data also highlight that students are more likely to report negative experiences compared to lecturers, albeit in limited forms. For example, 10.1% of students reported having experienced discrimination by adherents of other religions, compared to 23.3% of lecturers who reported the same. This underscores that, although negative experiences are relatively rare, students appear to be more vulnerable to certain forms of discrimination than lecturers.

The patterns emerging from the study indicate slight differences between students and lecturers in their negative experiences. Lecturers tend to report more positive experiences, which may reflect their more established social positions and greater involvement in formal interfaith interactions. Conversely, students, as a younger group with possibly less experience, are more likely to report incidents of discrimination or unfair treatment in interfaith contexts.

When examined by religion, the findings show that negative experiences are generally low across all religious groups, with minor differences among Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims. This may reflect the cultural characteristics of East Nusa Tenggara (*Nusa Tenggara Timur* or NTT), where the majority of the population is Protestant. The dominance of a Protestant majority culture may contribute to stability and harmony, significantly reducing the potential for religious conflict. However, the data also reveal small pockets of intolerance, as indicated by respondents reporting experiences of discrimination or unfair treatment.

Although negative experiences in interfaith relations are very low, the data suggest the need for vigilance regarding potential intolerance. Instances of discrimination, though minimal, still warrant specific attention, particularly in campus environments where students are reported to be more vulnerable to such experiences than lecturers. This highlights the need for educational institutions to foster more inclusive and supportive environments.

For instance, universities could implement programmes that promote interfaith tolerance and directly address issues of discrimination. Such initiatives might include diversity training, *dialogue lintas agama* (interfaith dialogues), and discussion forums, all of which aim to increase awareness and foster more harmonious relationships among religious groups. By adopting these measures, educational institutions can not only mitigate potential discrimination but also reinforce the culture of tolerance that already exists within NTT's society.

Views and Attitudes of Exclusivism towards Other Religions

Exclusive attitudes and views towards other people's religions in interfaith relations were explored with eight statements: "My religion is the truest, others aren't", "Other faiths are pagan", "Only my religion leads to heaven", "It's permissible to harm those opposing my faith", "Suicide martyrdom promises heaven", "Violence is justified for truth", "Violence against non-believers is worship", "Those committing religious violence should be severely punished". Each statement provided five alternative answers: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree.

Firstly, a comparison between Students and Lecturers was conducted. Using percentage techniques, the respondents' responses are displayed in Table 13 and mean score in Figure 5. The description of the mean value, minimum value, maximum value, and standard deviation are shown in Table 14.

Table 13. Views and Exclusivist Religious Attitudes of Students and Lecturers

Indicators	Students					Lecturers				
	SA	A	N	D	SD	S	A	N	D	SD
My religion is the truest, others aren't.	0.1%	2.0%	16.2%	32.7%	49.0%	0.0%	5.6%	13.4%	29.6%	51.4%
Other faiths are pagan.	0.4%	1.3%	9.5%	34.8%	54.0%	0.0%	1.4%	5.6%	33.1%	59.9%
Only my religion leads to heaven.	0.9%	0.9%	8.1%	30.5%	59.7%	0.0%	1.4%	9.1%	28.9%	60.6%
It's permissible to harm those opposing my faith.	2.0%	3.7%	27.6%	43.8%	23.0%	1.4%	2.8%	11.3%	33.1%	51.4%
Suicide martyrdom promises heaven.	1.0%	4.6%	29.1%	40.5%	24.8%	0.0%	0.0%	9.2%	34.5%	56.3%
Violence is justified for truth.	2.0%	7.7%	13.4%	45.3%	31.6%	0.0%	0.0%	4.2%	33.1%	62.7%
Violence against non-believers is worship.	0.2%	2.4%	10.0%	42.6%	44.7%	0.0%	0.0%	2.8%	29.6%	67.6%
Those committing religious violence should be severely punished	10.5%	31.6%	27.7%	19.0%	11.2%	35.2%	28.9%	14.1%	7.7%	14.1%

*SA (Strongly Agree), A (Agree), N (Neutral), SD (Strongly Disagree), D (Disagree)

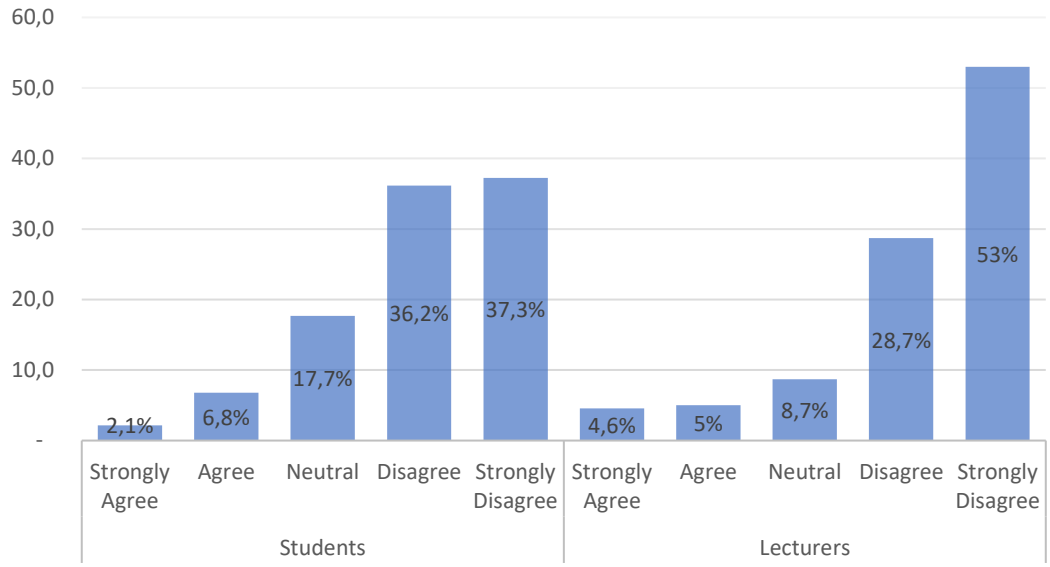

Figure 5. Views and Exclusivist Religious Attitudes of Students and Lecturer

Table 14. Mean, Minimum Value, Maximum Value, and Standard Deviation of Exclusivist Attitudes

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Minimum	Maximum
Students	819	4.038	0.468	0.163	2.3	5.0
Lecturers	142	4.375	0.449	0.377	3.0	5.0
Total	961	4.088	0.480	0.155	2.3	5.0

Is there a difference in exclusivist religious attitudes between students and lecturers? This question is answered in the results of the One-Way ANOVA test shown in Table 15

Table 15. Differences in Respondents' Exclusivist Religious Attitudes Based on Status (Students and Lecturers)

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1380.471	1	1380.471	63.830	0.000
Within Groups	20740.544	959	21.627		
Total	22121.016	960			

The table above shows that the Sig. value is 0.000, which is smaller than the alpha value (0.05). This means that there are differences in exclusivist religious attitudes between students and lecturers in interfaith relations. Albeit in limited phenomenon, the students are more exclusive than the lecturers.

Secondly, exclusivist attitudes based on Religion were assessed. Using percentage techniques, the respondents' responses are displayed in Table 16 and mean score in Figure 6. The the description of the mean value, minimum value, maximum value, and standard deviation are shown in Table 17.

Table 16. Respondents' Responses on Exclusivist Religious Attitudes Based on Religion

Indicators	Catholic					Christian					Islamic				
	SA	A	N	D	SD	SA	A	N	D	SD	SA	A	N	D	SD
My religion is the truest, others aren't.	0.0%	1.7%	14.1%	31.2%	53.0%	0.0%	4.1%	18.9%	34.6%	42.4%	11.1%	4.4%	21.1%	33.4%	40.0%
Other faiths are pagan.	0.2%	0.5%	6.9%	32.0%	60.5%	0.0%	1.8%	12.0%	41.0%	45.2%	2.2%	6.7%	16.7%	36.6%	37.8%
Only my religion leads to heaven.	0.6%	0.3%	5.7%	27.4%	66.0%	0.0%	2.3%	11.1%	36.4%	50.2%	3.3%	2.2%	20.0%	35.6%	38.9%
It's permissible to harm those opposing my faith.	1.5%	1.8%	24.5%	42.0%	30.2%	2.3%	4.6%	27.2%	41.9%	24.0%	3.3%	13.3%	25.6%	45.6%	12.2%
Suicide martyrdom promises heaven.	0.5%	4.1%	27.3%	38.1%	30.0%	1.4%	3.2%	26.3%	38.7%	30.4%	2.2%	4.4%	17.8%	53.4%	22.2%
Violence is justified for truth.	1.2%	5.7%	12.3%	42.1%	38.7%	2.3%	9.2%	10.7%	41.9%	35.9%	3.3%	6.7%	14.4%	57.8%	17.8%
Violence against non-believers is worship.	0.3%	1.7%	8.0%	39.1%	51.0%	0.0%	3.2%	10.2%	35.9%	50.7%	0.0%	2.2%	13.4%	64.4%	20.0%
Those committing religious violence should be severely punished	14.2%	29.2%	26.5%	17.5%	12.6%	12.0%	26.7%	25.3%	22.6%	13.4%	17.8%	56.7%	21.1%	4.4%	0.0%

*SA (Strongly Agree), A (Agree), N (Neutral), SD (Strongly Disagree), D (Disagree)

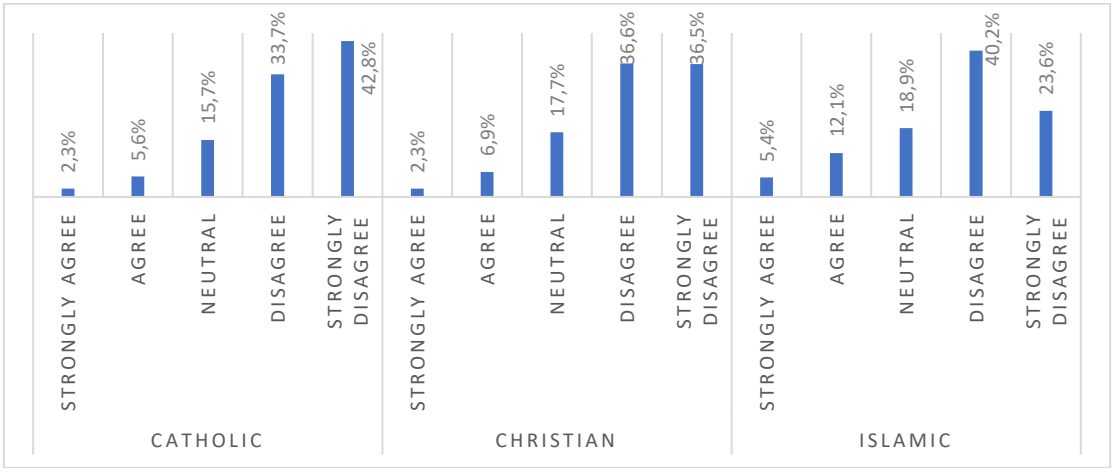

Figure 6. Respondents' Responses on Exclusivist Religious Attitudes Based on Religion

Table 17. Description of Mean Value, Minimum Value, Maximum Value, and Standard Deviation of Exclusivist Religious Attitudes Based on Religion

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Minimum	Maximum
Catholic	653	4.14	0.467	0.830	2.3	5.0
Christian	217	4.00	0.494	0.335	2.5	5.0
Islamic	90	3.91	0.470	0.496	2.5	5.0
Total	960	4.087	0.4800	0.155	2.3	5.0

Is there a difference in exclusivist religious attitudes of respondents based on their respective religions? This question is answered through the results of the One-Way ANOVA analysis shown in Tables 18 and 19.

Table 18. Differences in Respondents' Exclusivist Religious Attitudes Based on Religion

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	622.388	2	311.194	13.870	0.000
Within Groups	21472.335	957	22.437		
Total	22094.724	959			

Table 19. The Anova Analysis on Comparison of Exclusivist Attitudes Among Religions

(I) Religion		Mean Difference(I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
Catholic	Christian	1.400*	0,371	0.001
	Islamic	2.277*	0,533	0.000
Christian	Catholic	-1.400*	0,371	0.001
	Islamic	0.878	0,594	0.302
Islamic	Catholic	-2.277*	0,533	0.000
	Christian	-0.878	0,594	0.302

In general, there is a difference in the appreciation of religious exclusivism between students and lecturers based on the religion they adhere to. This can be seen from the Sig. value (0.000) in Table 18. Do all religions have different exclusivist attitudes? Table 19 shows that the differences are between respondents of the Catholic and Christian faiths (Sig. = 0.001), and between Catholics and Muslims (Sig. = 0.000). However, there is no difference between respondents of the Christian and Muslim faiths (Sig. = 0.302).

The findings of this study indicate that students tend to have more exclusivist attitudes compared to lecturers in interfaith relations. However, several anomalies warrant attention. For instance, 2% of students agreed that violence can be justified to defend religious truth, even though the majority of students rejected this statement. Additionally, 1% of students agreed that suicide martyrdom guarantees entry to heaven. While these figures are low, their presence still reflects extreme attitudes that deserve further scrutiny.

The study also reveals interesting patterns regarding exclusivism based on religion. Muslim students exhibit higher levels of exclusivism compared to Catholic and Protestant students. This is evident from the higher percentage of Muslim students agreeing with statements such as "Only my religion leads to heaven" or "Other faiths are pagan" compared to respondents of other religions. This pattern may be influenced by the local context in East Nusa Tenggara (Nusa Tenggara Timur or NTT), where the majority of the population is Protestant. As a minority group, Muslim students may feel a stronger need to maintain their religious identity, which is reflected in their exclusivist attitudes.

Conversely, Catholic students demonstrate more inclusive attitudes, as shown by the higher percentage rejecting extreme statements such as "Violence against non-believers is worship." Meanwhile, Protestant students tend to fall in the middle, displaying higher levels of exclusivism than Catholics but lower than Muslims. This pattern suggests a unique dynamic in interfaith relations in NTT, shaped by the region's demographic composition and the historical experiences of its religious communities.

These findings have significant implications for efforts to strengthen tolerance in NTT. While the majority of respondents exhibit moderate attitudes, the presence of respondents who support extreme statements highlights the need for vigilance against potential intolerance. For instance, the higher levels of exclusivism among Muslim students indicate the need for tailored approaches to strengthen interfaith dialogue, particularly in predominantly Protestant areas such as NTT.

Literature such as Abu-Nimer (2016) underscores the importance of multicultural education in higher education institutions to reduce exclusivist attitudes and promote tolerance. Universities can play a pivotal role by implementing programmes that foster cross-cultural awareness and interfaith dialogue, such as diversity training, *lokakarya multikultural* (multicultural workshops), and interfaith discussion forums. These initiatives not only help create a more inclusive campus environment but also contribute to broader societal stability and harmony in NTT.

Furthermore, these findings highlight the need for community-based approaches to address potential exclusivist attitudes. Initiatives involving religious leaders, community leaders, and educational institutions can help foster more inclusive relationships, reinforce pluralistic values, and mitigate the risk of extremism in a multicultural society like NTT.

Emerging Model of Interfaith Pluralism in NTT

The findings across the dataset consistently point to a high level of interfaith engagement and tolerance among students and lecturers in East Nusa Tenggara (Nusa Tenggara Timur-NTT). As shown in Tables 1 and 4, most respondents frequently engage in positive interreligious interactions, such as visiting friends of different faiths, extending holiday greetings, and participating in shared communal spaces. Complementing this, negative interfaith experiences—such as discrimination, exclusion, or unfair treatment—are reported at very low rates, with nearly all respondents indicating they had never encountered such incidents (Tables 7 and 10). Furthermore, Tables 13 and 16 reveal a strong rejection of exclusivist views and religiously motivated violence, with the majority of students and lecturers disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with statements endorsing such attitudes. Notably, lecturers demonstrate slightly higher tolerance and inclusivity levels than students (as reflected in Tables 3 and 15), suggesting their significant role as moral exemplars and influencers within academic settings. These findings suggest a strong culture of religious coexistence shaped by grassroots social habits and institutional leadership.

The model of interfaith pluralism that emerges from the findings in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) is deeply embedded in everyday social life and reflects values that have been internalised through lived experiences. One of the core principles evident from the data is interpersonal proximity, whereby frequent, informal interactions across religious boundaries—such as visiting the homes of friends from other faiths, exchanging holiday greetings, and shopping at interfaith-owned stalls—play a vital role in fostering tolerance (see Tables 1 and 4). These types of daily interactions align closely with Allport's Intergroup Contact Theory, which posits that, under conditions such as equal status and cooperative norms, interpersonal contact can significantly reduce prejudice (Allport, 1954; Binder et al., 2009; Hewstone & Voci, 2009). Mechanisms that facilitate this reduction include anxiety reduction, enhanced empathy, and reclassification of social categories (Chen et al., 2024; Tropp & Molina, 2012; West, 2020). In the context of NTT, such informal and community-based interactions operate as effective prejudice-reducing tools by embedding religious identity within the social fabric, rather than treating it as a source of division. This is further supported by studies demonstrating the effectiveness of both direct and digital contact in reducing intergroup bias (da Costa et al., 2024; Imperato et al., 2021). Thus, NTT

exemplifies how proximity through ordinary contact can build bridges across religious groups and act as a buffer against exclusivism, echoing broader intergroup research across diverse global contexts.

The second principle, *cultural anchoring*, highlights how religious tolerance in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) is not primarily shaped by legal enforcement or abstract moral doctrines, but is deeply embedded in the region's local traditions and communal practices. Long-standing values such as *gotong royong* (mutual help) and *mufakat* (consensual agreement) operate as internalised social norms that inhibit religious confrontation and sustain harmonious coexistence. While these cultural elements were not directly measured in the survey, their influence is apparent in the very low levels of support for religious violence (see Table 13 and 16) and the broad rejection of exclusive theological claims. This finding aligns with studies indicating that predominant religious subcultures in a region can shape general attitudes of tolerance within the broader community (Olson, 2019). Moreover, in the Indonesian context, cultural values rooted in local wisdom and nationalism have been found to mediate the relationship between religious tolerance and non-violence (Syahputra & Syaltout, 2024). These forms of cultural anchoring foster cognitive openness and prosocial attitudes, consistent with research highlighting the role of intellectual humility and cognitive flexibility in supporting religious tolerance (Lubis & Sianipar, 2022). Collectively, these insights reinforce the idea that tolerance in NTT is not simply a policy outcome but a cultural habitus—sustained by inherited communal ethics and supported by socio-religious norms that privilege coexistence over confrontation.

A third principle that reinforces the model is mutual visibility, which refers to the public acknowledgment and shared participation in religious life across communities. In the context of NTT, although participation in one another's religious celebrations is not routine, its occurrence—alongside widespread public recognition of religious holidays—acts as a form of *symbolic inclusion*. These practices contribute to normalising religious differences within public spaces and reduce the sense of otherness experienced by minority groups. As Gasser (2022) suggests, recognising the legitimacy of different religious practices can weaken exclusivist attitudes and foster a more tolerant epistemic environment. Similarly, Macdonald (2020) argues that when diversity is publicly visible and socially affirmed, it transcends passive tolerance and becomes a shared social identity. This is especially impactful in multicultural societies, where symbolic acts such as interfaith greetings or the visible celebration of religious holidays help minority and majority groups perceive each other as integral parts of the social whole (Becci, 2021; Fierro et al., 2025). These public symbols of respect and co-presence foster mutual trust and reinforce cohesion, aligning with findings that inclusive public space and intergroup visibility are vital components of sustainable social harmony (Glasford & Johnston, 2018; Qi et al., 2024).

Finally, educational responsibility plays a pivotal role in sustaining the values of pluralism, particularly through the influence of lecturers who serve as role models for inclusive and tolerant behaviour. In the context of NTT, data from Tables 3 and 15 indicate that lecturers consistently show higher levels of tolerance and significantly lower support for exclusivist or violent attitudes compared to students. This finding aligns with the notion that educators are more than transmitters of content; they are agents of civic formation and moral exemplars within the academic community. Their influence—expressed through classroom dialogue, mentoring relationships, and institutional ethos—contributes to fostering an environment where diversity is normalised and mutual respect is encouraged. This resonates with the framework of value-creating education that emphasises pluralism, ethical consciousness, and humanistic learning (Bosio & Guajardo, 2024). Moreover, as argued by del Dujo and Vallejos (2011), schools and universities are critical sites for transmitting civic values necessary for peaceful coexistence in plural societies. Educational pluralism also ensures that diverse cultural and religious identities are accommodated, reinforcing learners' sense of agency and belonging (Berner, 2024; Wodon, 2021). In NTT, this responsibility is magnified by the region's strong communal ethos, positioning the academic sphere as a strategic arena for cultivating inclusive citizenship and embedding pluralistic values into everyday life.

These four principles form the foundation of NTT's lived model of interfaith harmony. Rather than emerging from top-down policies or abstract doctrines, this model is organically cultivated through daily social practices, inherited communal ethics, and the exemplary role of educators. It offers not only a descriptive account of how tolerance operates in context but also a replicable framework for plural societies seeking to promote social cohesion through inclusive, community-embedded strategies. The integrated nature of this model can be visually summarised through a layered pyramid that captures its structural logic—from foundational cultural values to protective mechanisms against exclusivism.

Figure 1 below illustrates the Emerging Model of Interfaith Pluralism in NTT, depicting how each principle plays a role within a cohesive system that sustains religious harmony.

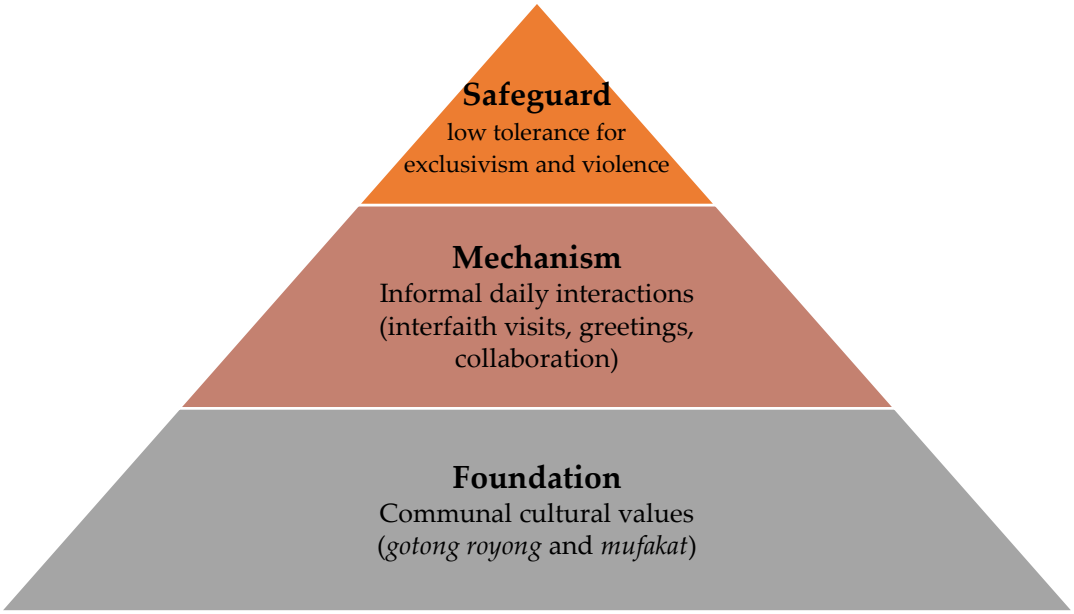

Figure 1. NTT Interfaith Pluralism Model

As illustrated in Figure 1, the NTT Interfaith Pluralism Model is structured as a layered triangle consisting of three interrelated components that together form a cohesive framework of religious harmony. At its base lies the foundation of communal cultural values—particularly *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) and *mufakat* (consensual decision-making)—which serve as the ethical and social bedrock of tolerance, arising organically from local traditions rather than external enforcement. The middle layer, representing the mechanism, comprises daily informal interactions such as interfaith visits, greetings on religious holidays, and collaborative social practices that operationalise tolerance in a lived, interpersonal manner. These routines build empathy and reduce prejudice more effectively than formalised dialogue settings. The top tier, labelled as the safeguard, reflects the community's low tolerance for exclusivism and religious violence, acting as a social bulwark against radical ideologies. Empirical findings show that both students and lecturers in NTT overwhelmingly reject notions of religious superiority or violence, thereby reinforcing the durability of this pluralistic model. Collectively, the three layers illustrate how NTT sustains interfaith harmony through culturally embedded practices and social norms, offering a replicable yet context-sensitive model for other diverse societies seeking peaceful coexistence.

The foundation of the model is rooted in the cultural values of *gotong royong* and *mufakat*, which are more than mere traditions—they are deeply internalised social practices that shape how individuals relate to one another regardless of religious background. *Gotong royong* encourages mutual cooperation in daily life, such as helping neighbours during religious events, funerals, or communal activities, while *mufakat* promotes decision-making through collective consensus rather than confrontation. These values are transmitted across generations through family, community rituals, and local education, embedding a strong sense of social responsibility and inclusion. In NTT, these cultural foundations do

not distinguish between faiths; instead, they unify community members under shared responsibilities and mutual respect, making them an enduring bedrock for fostering tolerance.

The mechanism of the model is enacted through habitual and informal interfaith interactions that occur naturally in everyday life. Unlike top-down programs or structured forums, this mechanism relies on organic social behaviours such as students sharing meals with friends of other faiths, lecturers participating in religious celebrations of other communities, or neighbours casually exchanging greetings during holidays. These acts, while seemingly simple, are powerful in reducing stereotypes and building emotional connections across religious lines. The data show high participation rates in these interactions, highlighting that tolerance in NTT is not just a value but a lived experience. This mechanism transforms the abstract ideal of harmony into tangible, daily practices that bridge differences and build mutual understanding without requiring formal interventions.

The safeguard layer of the model serves as a cultural filter that actively resists the entry of exclusivist ideologies and religious-based violence. This resistance is not enforced by legal threats or institutional censorship but is instead upheld by social norms and moral expectations that discourage intolerance. The study revealed that both students and lecturers consistently reject statements promoting violence or claiming absolute religious truth, showing a collective awareness of the dangers posed by radicalism. This cultural climate acts as a self-sustaining protective layer: individuals who exhibit exclusivist or intolerant attitudes are likely to be socially marginalised or gently corrected by their peers, creating an environment where extremist ideas fail to take root. In this way, the community's internal values provide resilience, ensuring that harmony is not only built but continuously defended through shared ethical boundaries.

These three interrelated components—foundation, mechanism, and safeguard—provide a concrete framework for understanding how interfaith pluralism is both sustained and internalised in East Nusa Tenggara. Rather than relying on top-down regulations or coercive legal structures, the NTT model is rooted in cultural intimacy, lived social practices, and moral leadership within educational settings. Its effectiveness lies in its organic integration into daily life and community values. The broader implications of this culturally embedded model, including its adaptability and potential as a reference for pluralistic policies in other multi-religious regions, will be examined in greater depth in the following discussion section.

4. Discussion

This study explored the dynamics of interfaith relations and religious tolerance among students and lecturers across universities in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), a predominantly Christian region in Indonesia. The findings reveal a consistently high level of interreligious engagement, characterised by frequent informal interactions, such as visiting friends of different faiths, exchanging holiday greetings, and engaging in communal activities. Negative experiences in interfaith settings, including discrimination or exclusion, were reported at notably low levels. Furthermore, both students and lecturers demonstrated a strong rejection of exclusivist and violent religious attitudes, with lecturers consistently exhibiting higher levels of tolerance. These patterns suggest that religious harmony in NTT is underpinned by deeply embedded cultural values, daily social practices, and the moral influence of educators.

The high level of interfaith tolerance observed in NTT can be explained by the interplay between frequent informal contact and deeply rooted communal values. According to Allport's Intergroup Contact Theory (1954), sustained and cooperative interactions between individuals of different groups can significantly reduce prejudice, especially when these interactions occur under conditions of equality and shared objectives. In NTT, these conditions are met through everyday practices such as interfaith visits, communal gatherings, and shared celebrations, which are embedded in local traditions of *gotong royong* and *mufakat*. These cultural norms not only facilitate regular contact but also frame such interactions as moral obligations, thereby strengthening social cohesion. Furthermore, the consistent role of lecturers as moral exemplars—engaging students through inclusive discourse and value-driven mentorship—reinforces these intergroup dynamics within academic spaces (Bosio &

Guajardo, 2024). As a result, tolerance in NTT appears not as a top-down imposition but as a lived and socially reinforced norm.

These findings resonate with Widyawati's (2024) research, which documented openness and inclusivity among Indonesian students in contexts promoting interfaith dialogue and mutual respect. Similarly, Qodir (2021) highlighted how religious communities in Central Kalimantan create *third spaces* (neutral zones for interfaith engagement) for peaceful coexistence, further supporting the importance of informal interactions in strengthening tolerance (Uysal, 2016). Despite the overall positive findings, this study uncovers nuanced differences, including *seeds of exclusivism* among a small minority of respondents. Approximately 2% of students supported justifying violence for religious purposes, reflecting a concerning yet limited trend. This mirrors observations by Abu-Nimer and Smith (Abu-Nimer & Smith, 2016), who argue that exclusivism often catalyses radicalism and intolerance. Similarly, studies in Muslim-majority regions have reported higher instances of exclusivist attitudes, contrasting with the predominantly inclusive culture of NTT.

The higher exclusivist tendencies among Muslim students in NTT, compared to Catholic and Christian respondents, may reflect identity preservation behaviours as a minority group in a predominantly Christian region. This aligns with findings by Parker et al. (2014), who noted the influence of cultural and religious norms on interfaith relationships and interactions. Negative experiences, such as discrimination, bullying, or unfair treatment, were rare across all religious groups, with no statistically significant differences between Catholics, Christians, and Muslims (*Sig.* = 0.775). However, instances of negative treatment were occasionally reported, underscoring the need for vigilance. These findings complement research by Yasin et al. (Yasin & Mantu, 2021), which highlighted how legal and cultural barriers can challenge religious freedom and interfaith harmony in Indonesia.

The findings underscore the importance of education in promoting pluralism. Multicultural programmes in *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) have successfully fostered religious moderation and critical thinking. Universities in NTT can adopt similar approaches, integrating interfaith dialogue and conflict resolution into their curricula. Additionally, community-driven initiatives, such as interfaith activity groups, can help mitigate *seeds of exclusivism* while enhancing interpersonal connections (Larson & Shady, 2009). From a broader perspective, this study contributes novel insights by highlighting NTT's unique position as a model for interfaith harmony in Indonesia. While previous research has focused on challenges in Muslim-majority regions, this study offers a hopeful perspective, demonstrating that inclusivity and tolerance can thrive in pluralistic societies.

These findings underscore the importance of fostering pluralism and inclusivity in educational settings. The presence of exclusivist attitudes, albeit limited, highlights the need for proactive measures to address potential intolerance (Schmidt-Leukel, 2009). For instance, campuses can implement multicultural education programmes, as suggested by Abu-Nimer, to counter exclusivism and promote interfaith understanding (Sofjan, 2020). Moreover, the minimal participation in formal interfaith dialogues suggests an opportunity for universities to create more engaging and accessible platforms for such initiatives. Leveraging informal cultural practices, such as family visits and community gatherings, could enhance the effectiveness of interfaith programmes.

The findings of this study carry significant social and ideological implications, suggesting that interfaith harmony in NTT is not merely a product of formal policy but a reflection of deeply internalised cultural and communal practices. This aligns with studies in various Indonesian contexts, where local traditions and social norms play a central role in fostering tolerance. For instance, Sodiqin and Umroh (2023) highlight how the community in Kaloran integrates religious tolerance through culturally embedded wisdom rather than regulatory enforcement, while Susanto (2024) documents how village rituals in Nglinggi sustain interfaith harmony through shared practices and leadership. Similarly, Pajarianto et al. (2022) demonstrate how kinship-based values in Tongkonan promote inclusive religious attitudes. These examples support the notion that tolerance in NTT is grounded in communal ethics such as *gotong royong* and *mufakat*, shaping lived social experiences that transcend doctrinal differences. Moreover, psychological traits like intellectual humility and cognitive flexibility—both shaped by cultural contexts—further mediate tolerant behaviour (Lubis & Sianipar,

2022). Ideologically, this challenges secular assumptions that equate tolerance with legal frameworks, and instead affirms the potential of culturally embedded models to foster sustainable pluralism, particularly in Global South contexts where identity and spirituality are deeply intertwined.

The findings of this research offer both functional and cautionary implications. Functionally, they affirm the strength of local cultural frameworks in fostering interfaith harmony, demonstrating that socially embedded ethics and informal practices can be more effective than formal interventions in cultivating inclusive attitudes. The consistency with which tolerance is exhibited by both majority and minority groups in NTT provides a powerful model for other pluralistic societies, particularly in the Global South, where religious and communal life are closely linked. Despite the promising signs of social harmony, this study reveals several potential dysfunctions that warrant attention. The overreliance on informal social norms—such as cultural customs and interpersonal harmony—while effective in the short term, risks producing a superficial form of tolerance that lacks critical resilience. As Verkuyten et al. (2020) argue that cultural-based tolerance often suffers from definitional ambiguity and inconsistent application, which can impede the development of robust and scalable pluralism. Moreover, the minimal engagement in structured interfaith dialogue spaces, particularly among youth, limits opportunities for critical reflection, ideological negotiation, and deep intercultural learning (Orton, 2016; Pope, 2021). This absence can make tolerance vulnerable to political manipulation or extremist narratives that thrive in the absence of formal education and discourse. Additionally, the subtle but measurable exclusivist tendencies found among some minority group members may reflect an identity defence mechanism in a majority-dominated context—a dynamic also observed in studies by Fleischmann et al. (2019) and Samuel (2019), which shows that perceived discrimination can lead to stronger in-group identification and defensive religious postures. Collectively, these dysfunctions suggest that while cultural embeddedness is a strength, it must be complemented by institutional mechanisms that promote sustainable and reflective pluralism.

Based on the findings, several concrete policy actions are needed to strengthen interfaith tolerance and address its potential limitations. First, universities in NTT and similar pluralistic regions should institutionalise interfaith dialogue by integrating structured and facilitated programmes into academic and extracurricular activities. These spaces should especially target youth engagement, encouraging critical reflection and ideological exchange (Orton, 2016; Pope, 2021). Second, capacity-building for educators is essential; lecturers and staff should be equipped with intercultural communication skills and trained to model inclusive values through curriculum design and mentorship (Bosio & Guajardo, 2024). Third, local governments and educational institutions should collaborate with community leaders to formalise cultural practices—such as *gotong royong* and *mufakat*—into peace education modules, ensuring their transmission across generations. Finally, early warning mechanisms must be developed to monitor exclusivist tendencies and prevent ideological radicalisation. These actions, if taken collectively, will not only preserve NTT's existing harmony but also enhance its resilience, offering a scalable model of culturally grounded and institutionally supported pluralism.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that interfaith harmony in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) is strongly upheld through everyday informal social interactions and deeply rooted cultural values such as *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) and *mufakat* (consensual decision-making). The main finding reveals that both students and lecturers from different religious backgrounds—namely Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim—demonstrate a high level of tolerance, with minimal reports of negative interreligious experiences and widespread rejection of exclusivist and violent religious attitudes. Nevertheless, limited signs of exclusivist tendencies, particularly among minority groups, highlight the need for continued vigilance to prevent the growth of intolerance.

The key scholarly contribution of this research lies in its presentation of a culturally grounded model of pluralism that is both replicable and context-sensitive, especially relevant to plural societies in the Global South. This study adds to the body of knowledge on religious tolerance by emphasising the role of socially embedded practices and communal ethics, rather than relying solely on top-down

policy or formal interventions. The NTT model offers a conceptual framework that integrates interpersonal proximity, cultural anchoring, symbolic recognition, and educational responsibility as pillars for sustaining interfaith harmony.

However, this research is not without limitations. The scope was restricted to a single province with a specific demographic composition, limiting generalisability to other regions. Additionally, the exclusive use of quantitative survey methods does not capture the depth of subjective experiences or the nuanced motivations behind individual attitudes. Future studies would benefit from employing qualitative or mixed-method approaches to explore the psychological dynamics of identity construction, the role of religion in shaping social behaviour, and the effectiveness of formal interfaith programmes in preventing radicalism within academic settings.

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