October 30, 2026

INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES, NUS

Beyond Tokenistic Tolerance:

How Everyday Interfaith Encounters Can Reduce Bias & Build Social Cohesion

Evidence from interfaith youth and everyday peacebuilding in Yogyakarta, Indonesia



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The Science and Practice of Reducing Bias

More than a slogan

Tokenistic Tolerance

One-off ceremonies, diversity campaigns, and public declarations can signal goodwill while leaving stereotypes, unequal participation and discrimination untouched.

Everyday Inclusion

Repeated relationships create opportunities to learn about people beyond religious labels, practise mutual support, and respond together to exclusion.





Yogyakarta: a qualitative study (ethnography) – YIPC & SRILI

- **18 key informants, ages 23–34**. Diverse backgrounds: Muslim traditions, Christian, Buddhist, and indigenous-belief backgrounds.
- **Fieldwork:** 2022–2023; participatory observation, informal conversations, and documentation.
- **Analytical lens:** Roger Mac Ginty's everyday peace continuum: sociality, reciprocity, and solidarity.

Structured encounters met everyday interaction

PEACE CAMP

Facilitated dialogue, group activities, and discussions. YIPC's camp model included a three-day, two-night format.

SCRIPTURAL REASONING

Participants read religious texts, asked questions, and explored beliefs, differences, and misunderstandings.

VISITS & SHARED ACTIVITIES

Visits to religious sites, meals, coffee gatherings, cooking, reading, jokes, and other informal routines.



Why does the combination matter?

Structured activities create a reason to meet and a setting for difficult questions.

Informal, repeated contact lets relationships continue beyond the scheduled session.

Frequency varied across activities; this was not one standardised intervention with a uniformed dose.

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Dismantling prejudice during "Peace Camp"

From Muslim to Christian participants:

- "*Why is Jesus worshipped if he was crucified?*"
- *"What is the concept of the Trinity?"*
- *"What is the difference between the Holy Spirit, God, and Jesus?"*
- *"What does pork taste like?"*

From Christian to Muslim participants:

- *"Why do Muslims like polygamy?"*
- *"Why are there many who are cruel and like to discriminate against other groups?" or "Why do they feel self-righteous?"*
- *"Why do they like to use religion in politics?"*



What can we take as a lesson?

- Direct confrontation of misconceptions
- Structured dialogue process
- Mutual learning and retrospection

From encounter to change: three linked process

1 SOCIALITY

Ordinary interaction—coffee, meals, humour, reading, and shared tasks—makes people more than a category. Personal knowledge can challenge simplified assumptions.

2 RECIPROCITY

Visits, practical help, and emotional support make respect observable. Mutual contribution can build trust and make cross-group ties more durable.

3 SOLIDARITY

Shared concern about religious freedom and exclusion can turn interpersonal ties into collective support and action.

Familiarity → trust → willingness to support one another

Individual accounts show how perspectives can shift

Manuel - Christian

Initially approached interfaith encounters expecting debate as a Christian apologist. Then he realized not all Muslims are exclusive and evil.

Tulo - Muslim

Having initially followed the anti-dating movement and avoided friendships with Christians, he are now an active interfaith advocate.

Meutia - Muslim women

She originally joined the interfaith movement to investigate Christianization plots, but today she shares close bonds with Christian friends and is married to a Hindu man.

Pandu - Buddhist

Once fearful around Muslims, he now regularly work together and welcome Muslim friends to temple events and excursions to ancient temples.

What these cases indicate

- **Attitude and interpretation:** participants narrated changes in how they understood other religious communities
- **Relationships and roles:** contact could continue into facilitation, organising, and sustained engagement.
- **Evidence type:** retrospective participant accounts and ethnographic observation.

Five design principles for practitioners

1	**Repeat contact**	Build a series of encounters, not a single showcase event.
2	**Mix formats**	Pair facilitated dialogue with informal shared routines.
3	**Make reciprocity real**	Give everyone a role; avoid treating minorities as educational exhibits.
4	**Protect voice and safety**	Set ground rules, confidential feedback and clear responses to harassment.
5	**Link ties to change**	Create routes from personal trust to collective action and fair institutional practice.

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Measure what changes--not just who attends

ATTITUDES

Social distance
Stereotypes
Trust

RELATIONSHIPS

Cross-group friendship
Repeated contact
Mutual support

BEHAVIOUR

Cooperation
Speaking up against bias
Support for targeted groups

INSTITUTIONS

Fair access
Response to discrimination
Participant safety

An evaluation design

- Baseline and follow-up measures; check whether changes persist.
- Combine surveys with interviews, observation, and feedback
- Disaggregate participation and outcomes by group; ask who feel safe to disagree

Takeaway: contact creates opportunities for change; equity, safety and sustained practice determine whether those opportunities can last.

Limits and Difficulties

01

POWER & LAUGHTER

Majority voices often set the terms of religious humour.

Minority laughter may be politeness or self-protection—not agreement.

The issue is what can be joked about safely. Intergroup contact needs conditions of safety, voice and relative equality.

Unequal freedom to speak

02

GENDER & QUEER VISIBILITY

Women navigate patriarchal pressure and surveillance.

Queer participants manage disclosure—even in “safe” spaces. Participation can carry hidden social and emotional costs.

Safety is not guaranteed

03

THE 2015 MAWLID-CHRISTMAS

After threats and intimidation, organisers cancelled the public plan and moved the event to a different venue, holding it more privately.

One participant later described severe anxiety among the organisers.

Mitigation of risk and anxiety needed

EVERYDAY PEACE IS POSSIBLE—but not automatically equal, safe, or accessible.

Closing



Beyond Tokenistic Tolerance

"Tolerance becomes meaningful when it is lived in **everyday relationships**--even in very mundane forms--protected by **equitable institutions**, and **sustained beyond the event**.

The question is not simply whether we have brought people together. It is whether they-&-we can **live**, **disagree**, **participate**, and belong on more **equal** terms."

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Thank You

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