

# Christian Youth Preferences in Interfaith Marriage: A Study Case in Surabaya, Indonesia

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**Abstract.** Interfaith marriages can be legally carried out in Surabaya after the Surabaya High Court approved it in July 2022. Accordingly, the state is no longer a barrier to interfaith marriages. This study explored the preferences that Christian youth have in having a partner of a different religion after the legal barriers are removed. The approach used a qualitative method using thematic analysis to analyze the data with 16 unmarried participants from Christian youth, aged 19 to 22 years old, who were studying at Petra Christian University, Surabaya, Indonesia. The results confirmed that Christian youth remained difficult to accept interfaith couples although there were no legal barriers. Personal considerations, parents, religious communities, and friends prevented them from having interfaith marriages. In conclusion, the legal aspect only made interfaith marriage easier administratively. However, it did not increase the occurrence of interfaith marriages because there were many other factors to be considered.

**Keywords:** Indonesian Christian youth, interfaith marriage, interfaith couple

## 1 Introduction

In Indonesia, marriage requires two conditions: ratification by a religion or belief recognized by the state and administrative registration. Consequently, interfaith marriages usually face difficulty fulfilling these two conditions. First, they will have difficulty in finding religious leaders who are willing to marry off couples of different religions. Religious leaders usually only want to marry couples who share the same religion as them. Second, they will have difficulty finding a registry office that accepts interfaith marriages. Actually, the registry office can indeed hold interfaith marriages, because the job of this office is to record, not ratify. However, not all registry offices want to register interfaith marriages which are more complicated.

As a result, interfaith marriage seemed problematic to be carried out in Indonesia. Actually, there was still an opportunity to do interfaith marriage in Indonesia by asking for a court order [1]. However, this method was not easy and required a relatively long time.

Accordingly, they have to choose to join one religion if they want to get married in Indonesia. Consequently, this decision can create friction between extended families in determining the religion to be used for ratification. This problem can become unsolvable if neither party is willing to budge.

Alternatively, couples who want to have an interfaith marriage must do so abroad, as exemplified by several artists who have held it in Australia, Thailand, America, Singapore, and several other countries [2,3]. This method requires a lot of money which will be difficult for most interfaith couples to go through. Moreover, one of the main problems in interfaith marriage is the legal status of the wife and children [4]. Consequently, the weak legal condition of these children requires special protection from the state [5].

The complexity of this administrative problem can be a big barrier to conducting an interfaith marriage. Fortunately, interfaith marriages can be legally carried out in Surabaya after the Surabaya High Court approved it in July 2022. As a result, the state is no longer a barrier to interfaith marriages. With the ease of administration, it is hoped that the government will be able to stand in a neutral manner, not prohibiting and not advocating interfaith marriage.

This research complemented existing research in Indonesia by looking at interfaith marriage from the side of Chinese Indonesian youth who are Christian and Catholic. This study explored the preferences that Christian youth have in having a partner of a different religion before and after the legal barriers are removed. Therefore, the study had two research questions: (1) How did these young people perceive interfaith marriage? (2) What was the impact of interfaith marriage new regulations on them?

## **2 Research Methods**

This study used a qualitative research approach where a set of open questions was presented to all participants in face-to-face meetings and conversations over the phone or on the Internet. In oral and written form, all questions and answers were in Indonesian.

Initially, questions were given in written form. However, the participants stated that they could not express their opinion at length if it was in written form, so they wanted the answer to be given orally. Questions were first sent to the participants for the study. Then according to the agreed schedule, they answered verbally via face-to-face. All answers given by participants were recorded as archives.

The approach used a qualitative method using thematic analysis to analyze the data. This study involved 16 Chinese Indonesian participants with religion Christian and Catholic, aged 19 to 22 years old, who are studying at Petra Christian University, Surabaya, Indonesia. The participants could be categorized as gender-balanced consisting of 9 women and 7 men. During high school, they attended Christian and Catholic based schools. Currently, all participants do not have a partner, so it is hoped that their opinion when accepting or rejecting an interfaith marriage is not unfounded because they already have a partner.

For data analysis, this research used thematic analysis, which is the definition of thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data [6]. The data analysis technique has been proven effective in identifying themes that emerge from qualitative data, such as interview transcripts emphasizing the individual understanding of experiences in real-life situations [7].

Data analysis was also carried out in Indonesian to ensure that the original meaning of the data was preserved. The quotes cited in this article were translated into English after the data

analysis was completed. The first step in conducting the analysis was data immersion. All data were read and understood. Then, the data was coded to mark a particular topic, for instance, code: “parent” for each data related to parent. The second step was code design. Every time a new topic was found, a new code was added. This process continued until all data had been read and all topics found were coded. The third step was forming and refining the theme from steps 1 and 2. After all of the data were coded, each related code was included in one pattern/theme. This process was continued until all code was included in a theme. In the process, one theme was able to be changed into two themes, or on the other hand, two themes were combined into one theme to make it easier to conclude. To maintain confidentiality, each data was assigned a number as the key to access the data instead of based on the participant's name. Each participant was assigned a code numbered #1 to #16.

### **3 Results and Discussion**

The discussion of the results is divided into four parts, namely the background, external influencers, the success of the interfaith marriage, and the impact of interfaith marriage regulations.

#### **3.1 Participant's Background**

First, this study looked at the experience of the participants having an interest in becoming an interfaith couple. Three male participants had experience as interfaith couples. One Christian participant had three relationships with Catholics. While the two participants were Catholic, one had a relationship with a Buddhist and the other with a Christian. On the other hand, all female participants never became interfaith couples.

Second, this research explored the current interest of the participants to become interfaith couples. The four male participants were never interested in having an interfaith partner. Only one person felt the possibility to have an interfaith partner of a certain religion: “I have absolutely no interest in religions other than Christianity or Catholicism” (#7).

Similarly, four female participants were never interested in having an interfaith partner. Furthermore, the other four were once attracted but chose not to continue the relationship. Here were the reasons they gave:

I was attracted spontaneously, without planning. I just have a crush on him because he was cute. However, I was not interested in going any further (#8).

I saw my friend's friend was handsome. However, only to this extent. So, I did not want to have a deeper relationship (#11).

I have been approached and got carried away. But then I quit before dating because I refused (#9).

I liked but never dated a different religion. I felt there would be big problems when the relationship got serious and even got married. We would get in trouble because one would go to church while the other would go to another place of worship (#15).

Third, the study looked at the tendency of the participants not to consider religion as a criterion in determining a partner. Two male participants stated that they did not consider

religion as a criterion in determining a partner. “I just followed my heart. Religion was not my main criterion for determining a partner. I considered it would be no different having a partner of any religion” (#1, #2).

Furthermore, one female participant also stated the same thing. He saw the important thing being able to have the same chemistry even though the religion was different.

I have never had a partner. However, if later on I was approached by people of different religions, then I did not immediately refuse. I wanted to go through it first to see if there was a common chemistry. If there was, I would continue. I have no problem having an interfaith partner” (#16).

The result showed some people think that religion is a relationship with God while love is a relationship with others so it cannot be confused. This result was the same as the research conducted in Manado regarding the negotiation between faith and love [8].

### **3.2 External Influencer**

Participants' opinions about interfaith marriage were influenced by their parents, friends, and religious communities.

#### **3.2.1 Parent and Relatives**

Parents and relatives played an important role in influencing participants' opinions. They exerted influence by giving approval or disapproval of interfaith marriages.

There were parents who gave a lot of advice directly related to interfaith marriage. Most of them asked the participants to marry with one religion. The rest did not give direct advice about same faith marriage but advice for building successful families such as the importance of loving one's family and working hard to provide for the family's needs.

When giving advice, parents stated the difficulty of the adjustment period that must be passed in an interfaith marriage. This advice was received by half of participants. “My parents once advised me about the difficulty of adjustment in marriage. The same religion couples still need long adjustment and have to go through many difficult processes, moreover the adjustments that must be made by interfaith marriages. The adjustments would be much more difficult and complex. (#11 and seven others).”

Parents also reminded that adjustment in marriage was not only done by married couples but also by the entire extended family of each couple. Therefore, there had to be careful consideration before getting married. “My parents asked me not to think twice but two hundred times before deciding to have an interfaith marriage. Remember in a marriage that needs adjustment, not only the couple but also the extended families (#12)”.

Moreover, parents gave an example of the failure of interfaith marriage when giving advice with the aim that their children would not experience the same failure.

My father is a pastor, so he asked me to find a partner of the same religion. My father told me about one of his congregations who had an interfaith marriage so he had to follow his partner's religion. As a result, his family was destroyed. My father emphasized to me to stay away from interfaith marriage so that my family would not be destroyed later (#3).

Conversely, some parents were not at all concerned about religious differences but ethnic differences. "My father and mother never had a problem with the religious differences of my potential partner. They emphasized the importance of the same ethnicity." (#15).

All participants tried to follow their parents' advice about interfaith partners. They decided not to have interfaith partners. However, there were participants who still decided not to have an interfaith marriage even though their parents didn't mind it. "My mom and dad never said I had to have a partner of the same faith. Nevertheless, I really did not want to. Although I had never tried, I decided not to have an interfaith marriage" (#9, #15).

Communication with parents is necessary before marriage occurs [9]. This good communication is a must for all couples, not only for interfaith couples so all the principles and values of parents can be passed on to their children properly.

### **3.2.2 Friends**

The influence of friends did not have much impact on the male participants, but had a significant impact on the female participants. Almost all male participants did not discuss with their friends about interfaith partners because they did not care about the opinions of their friends. Only one male participant in the discussion thought that his friends would support whatever he chose. "I did feel like my friends would support whatever choice I made. They would not meddle in my personal business too much" (#7).

On the other hand, the female participants were strongly influenced by their friends' opinions. Six participants told their friends about their interest in having an interfaith partner. As a result, all of them gave advice not to have interfaith partners which would later lead to interfaith marriage.

When I told my friend, she advised me to stop before going too far. This got me think further. In the end, I followed her advice (#8, #13).

My friend said it was all up to me. Only she said that my relationship had a great potential for conflict and I could be seriously injured (#9).

My friend just said that was enough so that I would not be in more pain later. This friend's words had such an impact on me that I decided to end the relationship (#11).

When I talked about my interest in people of different religions, a close friend of mine told me about her experience with an interfaith partner that ended badly. She stated that my relationship with a different religion was likely to be the same as her, not going to work. This was very eye-opening for me (#14).

In addition, there were friends who provided support to whatever the participants did. They neither forbade nor recommended, only gave full support. "My friends never gave any advice. They just told me that they would support whatever decision I made" (#16).

Support from family, including extended family, along with friends influenced the decision to have an interfaith partner [10].

### **3.2.3 Religious Communities**

In the case of interfaith marriage, the religious community, including the religious leaders of most of the participants, never discussed it. Christian and Catholic church leaders seemed to leave this topic to each individual.

One participant once knew their religious community discussed this topic but did not explicitly support or forbid it. "I heard the pastor of my church discuss the topic of interfaith marriage, but I did not hear of any prohibition against interfaith marriage" (#8).

Additionally, some participants attended a seminar discussing interfaith marriage and gave advice not to do it. "I once attended a seminar on interfaith marriage. This seminar explained the pros and cons of interfaith marriage, so it was advisable to have a same faith marriage" (#13, #14, #15).

In conclusion, the religious community and religious leaders did not have much influence on the opinions about interfaith marriage held by the participants. This result was different from the opinion of the leaders from majority religion in Indonesia who often discussed this topic openly at their religious events and have a clear position against interfaith marriage [11].

### **3.3 The success of the interfaith marriage**

Before discussing the participants' views on the success of interfaith marriage, the discussion will start with what they see about the real life of interfaith marriage, its problems and its success stories.

#### **3.3.1 Witness of interfaith marriage**

A half of participants had never seen an interfaith marriage so they were not aware of the consequences. Meanwhile, the rest of the participants saw what happened in the interfaith marriage. They saw the consequences of interfaith marriage to people who still adhere to their religion before marriage. "My friend's parent had interfaith marriage, Catholic and Muslim. My friend talked a lot about the ups and downs of his parent's interfaith marriage. Until now, each of them still embraced their religion before marriage" (#3).

On the other hand, some of them saw that one of the parties finally embraced their partner's religion. After holding on to their respective religions for years, finally one person converted to another religion. They did this because they often felt that their family was too complicated by having to attend two religious' events. The following are comments from some participants.

I had a family that was originally Buddhist married to a Christian. Finally, the Christian converted to Buddhism (#13).

My aunt had a Christian-Catholic interfaith marriage. Eventually, her originally Catholic husband converted to Christianity (#14).

I was born in an interfaith marriage family. My father was Buddhist while my mother was Catholic. They continued to embrace this religion for a dozen years. I used to come to worship in two places: the church followed my mom and the monastery

followed my dad. In 2019, my dad has converted to Catholicism so now I just had to come to church (#15).

### **3.3.2 Witness of the Problems**

There were two problems found by the participants from interfaith families: children's confusion and inheritance problems.

In relation to children's confusion, there were at least three confusions that must be faced by children from interfaith marriage. First, confusion when going to two different places of worship. "I knew my father's friend whose husband was a Christian so he went to church, while his wife was a Buddhist so she had to go to the monastery. The children were confused because they had to go to two different places of worship" (#4).

Second, the children were confused because they had to follow two different habits.

My friend had a Muslim father and a Christian mother. My friend was confused because her mother did not cook pork, but invited her to eat pork in a restaurant. She was confused about what she should do. Finally, she followed in the footsteps of her mother who only ate pork when her father did not know. Complicated problems occur when her father was unable to eat at an event held by her mother's parents. Finally, her father also forbade her to come at family events from mom's side (#14).

Third, children of interfaith couples often experienced a dilemma in choosing a religion. "I saw children from interfaith marriages who did not want to follow the religion of their parents. If she followed her father's religion, she was afraid to offend her mother, and vice versa. As a result, nowadays she did not want to be involved in any religion" (#16).

The result of these confusions was widely expressed by similar studies in Indonesia [12]. Especially if the interfaith marriage involved Islam which did have clear laws. There were clear rights and obligations for children from interfaith marriages who were married under Islamic law [13]. As a result, children from interfaith marriages could be very anti-religion [14].

The second problem relates to inheritance. There was confusion to determine the law that would be used to divide the inheritance. "I knew there was an interfaith family, with two children who have different religions. Consequently, when their parents died there was confusion in choosing the law to divide the inheritance. I did not want this confusion to happen in my family" (#7).

Actually, the inheritance issue is not a problem directly related to interfaith marriage but still has a strong relationship. People belonging to different religions must agree on the law used to divide the inheritance. The results of other studies showed the complexity of the problem of inheritance distribution in interfaith families in Indonesia [15, 16].

### **3.3.3 Witness of the Success**

Some participants saw the happy interfaith marriage of artists such as Christian Sugiono and Titi Kamal who still looked fine and rarely got bad news from the press (#10, #11).

In addition, some participants had relatives with interfaith marriages who looked happy. “Many of my brothers and sisters had interfaith marriages. Some Christians were married to Catholics, some were even Christians to marry Muslims. So far, I had seen that there were not many problems in their marriages. Their problems looked the same as the problems a same faith marriage had to deal with” (#2).

Furthermore, there was a family that used to have an interfaith marriage which later became a same-faith marriage after one person changed religions. However, this participant did not know whether this family was happier after moving to the same faith marriage. “I have a family that initially had an interfaith marriage, where Buddhism was married to a Christian. Finally, they became a same-faith marriage when the Christians converted to Buddhism. They seemed happy. However, I did not know the actual conditions because I was not close to them (#16).”

The matter of happiness is relative because what is seen on the outside can be different from what is actually experienced. Accordingly, it is not clear that interfaith marriage is more unhappy than same faith marriage.

### **3.3.4 Will interfaith marriages work?**

After seeing the problems and success stories of interfaith marriage, almost all participants stated that interfaith marriage would be difficult to find happiness. Only two participants stated that interfaith marriage could still bring happiness.

Although it could bring happiness, the path to be taken to get happiness was indeed more difficult. “I felt that interfaith marriage should be able to experience happiness. They had committed to marry on top of those differences. However, they did have to go through a path that looked more difficult than the same faith marriage” (#15).

Happiness that will be obtained depends on the belief and commitment that is owned.

I thought that religion was a personal matter between a person and his/her God, so no need to be shown in public. Religion also still contained interpretation so not everything that was written must be followed directly and literally. Accordingly, not all prohibitions must be followed immediately. As a result, I felt that an interfaith marriage was able to be successful and brought happiness when there were strong commitments and beliefs from this couple (#16).

Several studies had shown that interfaith marriage could indeed bring happiness. One of them stated that success occurred if the interfaith couple was able to have honest communication to handle all the differences they had [17]. Furthermore, children of an interfaith couple would be able to remain successful because there was no relationship between interfaith marriage and children's self-esteem, life satisfaction, and grades in school [18]. This showed that interfaith marriage was able to actually be used as an alternative to form a happy family if it was ready to go through all the processes that must be passed.



### **3.4 The Impact of Interfaith Marriage Regulations**

Most participants considered the regulations in Surabaya that allowed interfaith marriage to be beneficial. First, this regulation was able to avoid forced religious conversions. To be able to get married, the couple must have the same religion, so the easiest way is to ask one of the parties to change religion. "I felt that this regulation would have a lot of effect on avoiding forced religious conversions in order to get married. In fact, after marriage, many returned to their original religion" (#2)

Second, this regulation facilitated the administration of interfaith marriages so that they did not have to be carried out abroad. "I agreed this regulation would make interfaith couples no need to marry overseas" (#8). So, basically this regulation prevented the state from blocking interfaith marriage which was the right of citizens. "The state had to not prevent interfaith marriage because it was a citizen's right" (#10).

On the other hand, this regulation did not change the tendency for interfaith marriage. The tendency of most participants who did not want to have an interfaith marriage did not change, even though the regulation had been changed.

When the state did not participate in advising or prohibiting interfaith marriages, interfaith couples only focused on negotiating differences between themselves and their extended family. This was the ideal position that the state was able to take. These results were similar to those of a study conducted in Mauritius [19].

## **4 Conclusion**

The results confirmed that Christian youth remained difficult to accept as interfaith couples. They could make friends with anyone regardless of religion, but they were selective in choosing a partner to marry. Although there are no longer legal barriers; however personal considerations, parents, religious communities, and friends prevented them from having interfaith marriages.

In conclusion, the legal aspect only made interfaith marriage easier administratively. However, it did not increase the occurrence of interfaith marriages because there were many other factors to be considered.

This research showed that the regulation on permitting interfaith marriage facilitated its administration, but did not change the existing trend on interfaith marriage. People who really did not want to have an interfaith marriage did not change their tendencies with this regulation. To sum up, most of the participants, whether they have had an interfaith couple or not, really did not want to have an interfaith marriage in the future even though there were regulations to allow interfaith marriage.

Additionally, this research also showed that many Chinese Indonesian parents did not want their children to have an interfaith marriage. Parents and family were significant for someone in determining their partner. Moreover, the influence of friends was not important in determining partners for male participants, but it was substantial for female participants. Furthermore, religious leaders and communities were not influential in determining the interfaith couple.

However, this study did not explore the causes of all of the above aspects, so further research is needed. This research can be continued by taking participants from different ethnicities and religions. In addition, it can also be done at different age ranges, different backgrounds, and in different cities.

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