BEYOND WORDS, BEYOND CONFLICTS: NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE LANGUAGE GAMES OF ASIAN INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	This study aims to explore the dynamics of interreligious dialogue (IRD) among Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian leaders in Sri Lanka and the Philippines using Ludwig Wittgenstein's concepts of *language games* and *rule-following*. It seeks to: (1) analyze how religious traditions function as distinct yet overlapping language games; (2) identify barriers to effective IRD (e.g., political exploitation, historical grievances); and (3) develop context-sensitive strategies to foster interreligious harmony in pluralistic societies.
Background	Asia's religious diversity presents opportunities for enrichment but also challenges due to linguistic, cultural, and doctrinal differences. Colonial legacies and nationalist projects have exacerbated tensions, transforming religious identities into political markers. Existing IRD models often overlook micro-linguistic barriers, assuming religious concepts are universally translatable. Wittgenstein's philosophy offers a framework to address these gaps by emphasizing *contextual meaning* and *communal practices* over abstract definitions.
Methodology	The study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry design, engaging 18 religious leaders (10 from Sri Lanka and 8 from the Philippines) representing Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, conducted both face-to-face and virtually, and analyzed using thematic

	coding with a Wittgensteinian framework. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality through coded identifiers, and conducting member checking to validate findings.
Contribution	This study makes four key contributions. Theoretically, it pioneers the application of Wittgenstein's language games to Asian interreligious dialogue, showing how terms like *dharma* and *jihad* gain meaning through specific cultural contexts. Methodologically, it innovatively blends narrative inquiry with linguistic analysis to document real-world interfaith encounters. Practically, it offers concrete solutions for peacebuilding, such as creating hybrid terms like "peace guardians" that respect different traditions while fostering mutual understanding. It contributes to the Informing Science discipline by framing interreligious dialogue as an informing process, demonstrating that effective dialogue – like effective informing – requires linguistic humility and shared practices to bridge gaps across communities.
Findings	Common Ground: Shared ethical values (justice, peace) exist across traditions but are expressed through distinct language games.
	Misunderstandings: Decontextualized terms (e.g., *jihad* as "holy war") fuel conflict; political manipulation and historical grievances persist.
	Future Aspirations: Leaders emphasize mutual respect, youth education, and structured dialogue to counter extremism.
Recommendations for Practitioners	Linguistic Mapping: Train facilitators to analyze religious terms within their native contexts.
	Hybrid Practices: Develop shared rituals (e.g., interfaith community projects) to foster organic understanding.
	Power Balancing: Ensure minority voices are included in dialogue structures.
Recommendations for Researchers	Expand studies to digital platforms and longitudinal designs.
	Compare IRD dynamics across Asian contexts (e.g., Sri Lanka vs. Indonesia).
	Include marginalized voices (women, youth) in future research.
Impact on Society	The study highlights how grassroots initiatives (e.g., Mindanao's *peace guardians*) can decolonize IRD and build sustainable harmony. By reframing dialogue as *shared practice* rather than doctrinal debate, it offers pathways to reduce polarization in pluralistic societies.
Future Research	Explore AI and social media's role in shaping interreligious dynamics. Investigate *meta-language games* for irreconcilable doctrinal differences. Examine the long-term efficacy of hybrid language games in conflict resolution.
Keywords	Wittgenstein, interreligious dialogue, narrative inquiry, Sri Lanka, Philippines, historical tensions, language games, rule-following

INTRODUCTION

Asia's religious diversity, encompassing Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, presents both opportunities for enrichment and challenges for coexistence. While interreligious dialogue (IRD) has emerged as a critical tool to foster mutual respect, its effectiveness is often hampered by linguistic,

cultural, and doctrinal differences. These barriers are compounded by historical legacies, such as colonial policies that politicized religious identities in Sri Lanka and the Philippines, which continue to shape intergroup dynamics today.

Given these complexities, Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1958)later philosophy offers a novel lens. His concepts of language games (the context-dependent use of language within communities) and rule-following (adherence to implicit communicative norms) provide a framework to analyze how religious traditions construct meaning, not as fixed doctrines, but as lived practices shaped by context and power.

This research addresses three central questions:

- RQ1: How do Wittgenstein's concepts of language games and rule-following elucidate the dynamics of IRD in Sri Lanka and the Philippines?
- RQ2: What informing challenges arise when diverse religious "language games" intersect, and how can informing systems be designed to mitigate these barriers?
- RQ3: How can IRD initiatives leverage Wittgenstein's framework to foster sustainable interreligious harmony?

To address these questions, the study pursues three objectives. First, it analyzes linguistic and cultural particularities of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity through Wittgenstein's language games, thereby grounding abstract theory in empirical interreligious encounters. Building on this foundation, it identifies barriers to effective IRD, such as political exploitation of religious language, while proposing solutions sensitive to local contexts. Finally, it translates Wittgenstein's insights into actionable strategies for practitioners, emphasizing shared practices over doctrinal debate.

The first objective addresses Research Question 1 by dissecting how religious communities construct meaning through their unique language games. The second objective tackles Research Question 2 by diagnosing challenges (e.g., biases, extremism) and proposing Wittgensteinian-inspired strategies. The third objective responds to Research Question 3 by translating Wittgenstein's theoretical insights into actionable IRD strategies, such as designing dialogue protocols that respect distinct religious 'language games' while fostering shared ethical practices across traditions.

This study employs narrative inquiry, drawing on interviews with 18 religious leaders in Sri Lanka and the Philippines, to ground Wittgenstein's abstract theories in lived interreligious experiences. The research aims to advance IRD methodologies that respect pluralism while nurturing collective peace-building by bridging philosophy and praxis.

Framing interreligious dialogue as an informing process (Cohen, 2009; Gill, 2016) further situates this study within the Informing Science discipline, where religious traditions can be understood as distinct informing systems engaged in complex meaning-making exchanges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

WITTGENSTEIN'S PHILOSOPHY AS A FRAMEWORK FOR IRD

Ludwig Wittgenstein's language games offer a profound methodology for understanding the complexities of IRD, particularly in the nuanced religious landscapes of Asia. In his work, *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein (1958) fundamentally challenges traditional conceptions of language by rejecting fixed, universal definitions in favor of context-dependent, dynamic communication. This paradigm shift reveals language as a living, practice-embedded phenomenon where meaning emerges through communal use and shared cultural-linguistic practices (Grève, 2025). While Wittgenstein's language games clarify IRD's linguistic barriers, scholars like Burley (2018) caution against oversimplifying theological incommensurability. Andrejč (2016) extends this by arguing that 'family resemblances' – overlapping practices without fixed definitions – allow dialogue despite doctrinal differences.

For IRD, Wittgenstein's language games concept provides an analytical framework that acknowledges the unique epistemological and communicative structures of different religious traditions. Religious communities are distinctive linguistic ecosystems, each with intricate vocabularies, implicit rules, and contextual meaning-making processes (Bani Assadi, 2025). The semantic complexity becomes particularly evident in comparative religious contexts, such as the nuanced distinctions between seemingly similar terms like "dharma" in Hinduism and Buddhism, which carry radically different connotations despite superficial linguistic similarities (Barbato, 2025).

The practical implications of this approach are substantial. Misunderstandings in interreligious discourse often stem from decontextualized interpretations that strip religious terminology of its rich, practice-derived meaning (Swamy, 2019). A prime example is the term "jihad," which, when extracted from its comprehensive Islamic contextual framework, becomes susceptible to profound misinterpretation and potential ideological manipulation (Khan et al., 2020). Wittgenstein's methodology urges dialogue participants to engage with religious language through its lived, communal manifestations rather than through abstract, decontextualized definitions.

While some scholars critique this approach as potentially oversimplifying theological complexity (Kerr, 2019), its pragmatic value lies in prioritizing shared practices and communicative contexts over rigid doctrinal boundaries (Moyaert, 2013). This focus on practice and lived experience allows for a more nuanced examination of how meaning emerges organically within communities. This focus on practice and lived experience allows for a more nuanced examination of how meaning emerges organically within communities – a process where complex meanings and understandings arise from the interactions of individuals. This process finds a compelling parallel in Mario Bunge's concept of emergence, which describes how new properties and patterns arise from the systemic interactions of components within a complex whole (Bunge, 2003). While Wittgenstein provides the how of meaning-making (through practice and language games), Bunge's systemic perspective offers a complementary lens for understanding the process by which these shared meanings and practices coalesce into new, irreducible levels of understanding within a community. Wittgenstein's framework thus offers a more nuanced, empathetic approach to cross-faith understanding by focusing on how religious language functions within specific communities. As theologians like Kuttianimattathil (1995) have argued, this perspective transforms interreligious dialogue from a potentially antagonistic encounter into a collaborative linguistic negotiation.

Ultimately, Wittgenstein's philosophy represents more than a mere methodological tool. It provides a fundamental reimagining of how religious communities can communicate, recognize, and potentially understand one another across profound linguistic and cultural divides (Spica, 2025).

Competing linguistic frameworks in IRD

While Wittgenstein's language games provide a compelling lens for analyzing interreligious communication, other linguistic and philosophical frameworks have also been applied to IRD. Engaging these alternatives clarifies why a Wittgensteinian approach is uniquely suited to address the complexities of religious dialogue in Asia (Crary & Read, 2000).

Jürgen Habermas' (1981) theory of communicative action emphasizes rational discourse under idealized speech conditions, where participants strive for mutual understanding free from coercion. While this model has influenced secular and interfaith dialogue, its universalist assumptions clash with Wittgenstein's emphasis on context-bound meaning. Habermas presupposes a shared rationality enabling consensus, whereas Wittgenstein acknowledges that different religious language games may operate under incommensurable rules (Habermas, 1981). In Asian contexts where colonial histories and power imbalances persist (e.g., Sri Lanka's Buddhist majoritarianism), Habermas's ideal of "undistorted communication" often fails to account for how dominant groups control dialogue structures (Fraser, 1990). Wittgenstein's framework, by contrast, accommodates asymmetrical power dynamics by examining how language is actually used in specific religious communities (Lemberger, 2015).

Postcolonial scholars like Asad (1986) and Mahmood (2001) critique interreligious dialogue as a Western project that imposes liberal-secular norms onto non-Christian traditions. They argue that translation between religions is never neutral but is shaped by historical power relations. While post-colonialism highlights hegemony in cross-religious encounters, Wittgenstein's language games focus on pragmatic meaning-making within localized practices (Mabrouk, 2021).

Combining these approaches reveals how dominant groups (e.g., Philippine Catholics) may unconsciously dictate dialogue terms while also showing how marginalized communities (e.g., Sri Lankan Hindus) reinterpret imposed language. For example, Filipino Muslim scholars have reclaimed jihad as a "struggle for justice" against state-led Islamophobia (Vitug & Gloria, 2000), demonstrating Wittgensteinian rule-following amid power imbalances.

Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics analyzes religious signs as triadic (symbol-icon-index) and open to infinite interpretation (Eco, 1976). This contrasts with Wittgenstein's dyadic "meaning-as-use" model. Peirce allows for emergent meanings beyond the immediate context, whereas Wittgenstein ties meaning strictly to communal practices. Peircean semiotics risks overemphasizing abstract symbolism (e.g., interpreting Hindu *murtis* as universal icons) while neglecting how rituals function in lived religion. Wittgenstein's emphasis on practice better explains why, for instance, Theravada Buddhists in Sri Lanka may reject statue veneration despite its symbolic resonance in Mahayana contexts (Gombrich, 2006).

To be sure, while Peircean semiotics – particularly in its pragmatic traditions – can analyze religious signs within local contexts, its triadic (symbol-icon-index) and potentially infinite process of interpretation (interpretants) can risk emphasizing abstract symbolism. Wittgenstein's dyadic 'meaning-as-use' model, by contrast, more directly ties meaning to specific, observable communal practices and rule-following, providing a starkly pragmatic lens that is particularly suited to analyzing the micro-dynamics of dialogue.

Why Wittgenstein prevails for Asian IRD

While these frameworks offer partial insights into interreligious dialogue, Wittgenstein's language games provide a uniquely suitable theoretical foundation for understanding Asian IRD contexts. Unlike Habermas's approach, which relies on problematic universalist assumptions about rational communication, Wittgenstein avoids imposing Western normative standards on diverse cultural contexts. Where postcolonial theory often emphasizes power dynamics and hegemonic structures, Wittgenstein's focus on practice and lived experience allows for a more nuanced examination of how meaning emerges organically within communities (Perkins, 2013). Similarly, in contrast to semiotics' abstract symbolic systems, Wittgenstein grounds meaning firmly in local use and contextual application, recognizing the inherent flexibility and cultural specificity of language.

Wittgenstein's approach proves especially useful in empirical studies of dialogue within pluralistic, postcolonial societies. In contexts like Sri Lanka and the Philippines, religious communities contend with complex linguistic and cultural dynamics. While valuable, these alternative frameworks fail to address the micro-linguistic barriers that Wittgenstein's 'language games' concept illuminates so effectively. By revealing how different religious communities operate within distinct frameworks of meaning, Wittgenstein's approach provides practical insights into the specific communicative challenges facing Asian interreligious dialogue, justifying this study's theoretical orientation and methodological approach.

THE ASIAN CONTEXT: PLURALISM AND CONFLICT

The religious landscape of Asia represents complex historical interactions, colonial transformations, and contemporary political negotiations that defy simplistic narratives of religious homogeneity or perpetual conflict (Tambiah, 1996). This complexity is rooted in a deep history of pre-colonial exchange and syncretism that often defied rigid religious boundaries. For centuries, and indeed millen-

nia, the region was characterized by fluid intellectual and cultural interactions. The intricate philosophical fusion between Hinduism and Buddhism in empires like Srivijaya and *Majapahit* in Indonesia, where theological and ritual boundaries were highly permeable, stands as a testament to this historical norm (Rambachan, 2013). Similarly, in pre-colonial Sri Lanka and the Philippines, patterns of peaceful coexistence and mutual influence were evident, as religious traditions adapted to and were incorporated into local indigenous worldviews rather than existing in exclusive isolation. This long history of organic exchange provides a crucial baseline, demonstrating that the potential for *"linguistic flexibility"* and harmonious coexistence advocated for in this paper has deep historical roots. The colonial and post-colonial periods, which we now examine, represent a decisive rupture in these older patterns of interaction.

Despite this history of syncretism, colonial interventions fragmented Asia's religious ecosystems (Tambiah, 1996), but postcolonial theorists Nandy et al. (1997) argue these divisions were weaponized through 'psycho-cultural domination.' In Mindanao, McKenna (2023) shows how Muslim identities were constructed against Spanish Christian hegemony.

Throughout centuries of cultural exchange, the region has demonstrated remarkable religious syncretism, most notably exemplified by the intricate philosophical and cultural fusion between Hinduism and Buddhism in Indonesia, where theological boundaries have historically been fluid and permeable (Rambachan, 2013). This historical tradition of religious intermixing starkly contrasts with the increasingly politicized religious divisions that characterize contemporary Asian societies, where nationalist projects and colonial legacies have systematically fragmented once-harmonious religious ecosystems (Chatterjee et al., 1993). Colonial interventions fundamentally reshaped religious dynamics across Asia, introducing external taxonomies of religious identity that often conflicted with pre-existing social configurations (Baybado, 2017; Said, 2004). In the Philippines, for instance, the Christian-Muslim divide emerged not merely as a theological distinction but as a sophisticated colonial strategy of differentiation and control, fragmenting indigenous communities and creating artificial boundaries that persist in contemporary social and political structures (Abinales & Amoroso, 2017; Mercado, 1999). Similar patterns of religious polarization can be observed in Sri Lanka, where the complex interplay between Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ideology and ethnic politics has transformed religious identity into a primary marker of political belonging, effectively weaponizing religious difference as a mechanism of social exclusion and political mobilization (DeVotta, 2004; Regus, 2022).

Despite these challenging dynamics, grassroots religious actors consistently demonstrate remarkable capacities for dialogue and reconciliation. Organizations like Sri Lanka's All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (Zaman, 2010) represent critical interventions that challenge top-down, state-driven narratives of religious antagonism (Aroos et al., 2025). These local initiatives operate within intricate social ecologies, leveraging traditional networks of trust, shared cultural references, and community-level understanding to create spaces of meaningful interreligious engagement (Eickelman & Piscatori, 2004). However, such efforts are perpetually vulnerable to structural inequities, state co-optation, and broader geopolitical tensions that frequently undermine localized peace-building initiatives.

The contemporary Asian religious landscape thus emerges as a dynamic field of constant negotiation, where historical syncretism, colonial legacies, nationalist projects, and grassroots resistance constantly interact and reshape each other (Appadurai, 1996). Religious identities are neither static nor primordial but are continually produced and reproduced through complex social, political, and linguistic practices. Understanding this complexity requires moving beyond simplistic binaries of conflict and harmony, recognizing instead the nuanced, multilayered processes through which religious communities navigate difference, negotiate shared spaces, and construct meaningful modes of coexistence in an increasingly interconnected yet fragmented world (Hoyt, 2025).

CURRENT APPROACHES TO IRD AND THEIR LIMITATIONS

Current IRD models prioritize doctrinal compatibility over linguistic pragmatics, yet Swidler (2013) proposes 'dialogical listening' to navigate untranslatability. Cornille (2019) echoes Wittgenstein by

urging 'linguistic humility,' recognizing that terms like salvation resist cross-game equivalence. Contemporary IRD models represent diverse theoretical and practical strategies for addressing religious differences, primarily coalescing around two dominant paradigms: pluralist coexistence and social justice-oriented interventions. As articulated by scholars like Cheetham et al., (2013) pluralist approaches emphasize mutual recognition and respectful engagement across religious boundaries, conceptualizing dialogue as a mechanism for generating shared understanding and minimizing potential conflict. These models prioritize theological commonalities, promoting a framework of universal human values that transcend specific religious particularities (Knitter, 2016; Panikkar & Panikkar, 1999).

Complementary approaches, particularly evident in conflict-laden regions like Mindanao, prioritize social justice frameworks that view interreligious dialogue as a strategic tool for peacebuilding and structural transformation (Pope & Nicolaides, 2021). Such interventions often emerge from grassroots peace education programs, community reconciliation initiatives, and collaborative developmental projects that aim to reconstruct social relationships fractured by historical antagonisms. These models explicitly recognize that religious conflicts are fundamentally embedded in broader socio-political structures of inequality, marginalization, and systemic violence (Lederach, 2005.)

Despite their sophisticated theoretical foundations, contemporary IRD approaches exhibit significant methodological limitations, particularly in their treatment of linguistic dynamics. Existing models frequently operate under problematic assumptions of linguistic transparency, implicitly presuming that religious concepts can be readily translated and understood across different theological and cultural contexts (Bergdahl, 2009). This linguistic naivety becomes particularly evident in practical dialogue settings, where seemingly commensurable terms acquire radically divergent meanings. In the Philippine context, for instance, Catholic-Muslim dialogues frequently stall when ostensibly universal concepts like "salvation" are uncritically assumed to carry identical semantic and theological implications across different religious traditions (Mercado, 1999; Rodil, 2004).

Wittgenstein's philosophical framework offers a provocative alternative to these limitations by fundamentally reorienting our understanding of linguistic meaning. Rather than treating language as a transparent representational system, Wittgenstein conceptualizes linguistic practices as context-dependent language games embedded in specific cultural and practical forms of life (Wittgenstein, 1958). This approach shifts analytical focus from abstract definitional debates to the lived, performative dimensions of communication, emphasizing how meaning emerges through complex social negotiations rather than predetermined semantic structures (Cavell, 1999; Hacking, 1975).

By centering the processual, contextual nature of linguistic meaning, Wittgensteinian approaches reveal the intricate communicative challenges that traditional IRD models systematically overlook. The framework suggests that meaningful interreligious dialogue requires more than mere goodwill or structural interventions; it demands a sophisticated linguistic reflexivity that acknowledges the fundamental contingency of religious language. Dialogue becomes not a process of finding universal equivalences but of carefully navigating the complex terrain of linguistic difference, creating spaces where divergent semantic traditions can productively encounter one another without demanding premature consensus or assimilation (Keller, 2018; Rorty, 1989).

APPLYING WITTGENSTEIN TO INTERCULTURAL RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: LINGUISTIC FRAMEWORKS AND THEOLOGICAL ENCOUNTERS

Wittgenstein's philosophical insights offer a nuanced lens for understanding intercultural religious dialogue (McGann, 2023), revealing both the transformative potential and inherent limitations of linguistic mediation. Historical and contemporary case studies illuminate the complex dynamics of linguistic negotiation across religious and cultural boundaries.

In 17th-century India, the Jesuit missionary Roberto de Nobili exemplifies a successful intercultural approach by strategically adopting Hindu linguistic and cultural norms (Clooney, 1990). Unlike many colonial proselytization efforts that rigidly imposed external communicative frameworks, de Nobili's

method demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of linguistic embeddedness. His approach reso-nates with Wittgenstein's later philosophy, emphasizing language as a dynamic, context-dependent practice rather than a fixed, universal system.

Contemporary examples further substantiate this linguistic approach. In Mindanao, Madrasa schools provide a compelling illustration of bridging epistemological divides by carefully aligning pedagogical "rules" and communicative practices. These institutions negotiate the complex terrain between Is-lamic educational traditions and state-mandated curricula, showcasing how shared linguistic frame-works can facilitate mutual understanding (Vinten, 2025).

However, Wittgenstein's framework is not without critical limitations. Significant theological asym-metries, such as the fundamental differences between monotheistic and nontheistic metaphysical sys-tems, reveal the ultimate inadequacy of purely linguistic solutions to deep-seated religious differences. As Clooney (2010) argues, while linguistic alignment can create meaningful dialogue, it cannot fully resolve profound ontological and conceptual disparities. The promise and challenge of Wittgenstein's approach to intercultural religious dialogue thus lie in its recognition of language as a dynamic, con-textual practice. It offers a methodology for translation and understanding that goes beyond literal interpretation yet simultaneously acknowledges the irreducible complexity of religious meaning-mak-ing.

While Wittgenstein's concepts of language games and rule-following have been applied to interreli-gious dialogue in theoretical contexts (Andrejč, 2016; Burley, 2018), existing applications remain largely abstract, focusing on philosophical compatibility rather than empirical communication dynam-ics. Previous studies have either examined Western religious contexts or treated Asian traditions through generalized theological comparisons (Amaladoss, 1995), failing to capture how linguistic meaning actually operates in situated interreligious encounters. Our study breaks new ground by combining Wittgenstein's framework with narrative inquiry to analyze 18 in-depth interviews with Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian leaders across Sri Lanka and the Philippines. This methodo-logical integration allows us to: (1) document how religious language functions as lived practice rather than doctrinal abstraction, (2) identify specific points of linguistic rupture and convergence in real di-alogue settings, and (3) develop context-sensitive strategies that respect each tradition's 'rules' while creating space for shared understanding. Unlike purely theoretical applications, our approach reveals how Wittgenstein's concepts operate in the complex postcolonial landscapes of Asia, where historical power imbalances continue to shape interreligious communication.

RESEARCH GAP AND THIS STUDY'S CONTRIBUTION

Identified research gaps

The existing IRD research landscape reveals three critical, interconnected gaps that this study ad-dresses. First, there is a micro-linguistic neglect: while studies examine Asian IRD through historical (Fernando, 2021) or sociopolitical lenses (Montiel, 2003), none analyze how religious language is practically negotiated in dialogue. For example, Al Qurtuby (2025) documents shared Muslim-Chris-tian practices but ignores how terms like jihad or grace are contextually reinterpreted during ex-changes – a process Moyaert (2013) deems essential. Second, there exists an empirical void in lan-guage games: comparative studies (Huang, 2014) assume religious concepts like dharma are translata-ble, overlooking Wittgenstein's insight that meaning is bound to local "rules." No research traces how Sri Lankan Buddhist and Hindu leaders, or Filipino Christian and Muslim practitioners, navigate conflicting definitions of key terms in real dialogue – e.g., when salvation (Christian) and moksha (Hindu) are forced into artificial equivalence. Third, methodological rigidity persists: dominant ap-proaches (surveys, doctrinal analysis) fail to capture lived linguistic practices in postcolonial Asia, where colonial histories distort communication (Pui-lan, 2021). No study applies Burley's (2018) "grammatical investigation" to compare how language games diverge in Sri Lanka's ethnonationalist context versus the Philippines' syncretic traditions.

Limitations of existing theoretical frameworks

Current theoretical frameworks are ill-equipped to address these gaps. Habermasian models presume idealized speech conditions, failing to account for power imbalances (e.g., Sri Lanka's state-backed Buddhist hegemony dictating dialogue terms). Postcolonial theory critiques hegemony but lacks tools to analyze adaptive language games; e.g., how Mindanao's Muslims and Christians co-opt colonial religious categories to forge hybrid terms like peace guardians. Wittgenstein's framework bridges this divide: it examines how communities renegotiate language rules under oppression, offering a pragmatic lens for actual dialogue practices.

This study's unique contribution

This study fills these gaps through two synergistic innovations. Theoretically, it provides the first empirical application of Wittgenstein to Asian IRD, showing how dharma, jihad, etc., function as context-bound language games shaped by colonial legacies. It challenges Cornille's (2019) doctrinal focus and Berlis & Pratt's (2020) social cohesion models by proving that meaning emerges from use, not translation. Methodologically, narrative inquiry captures implicit rules of dialogue (Ganzevoort et al., 2013), revealing how Sri Lankan Buddhists and Hindus clash over state-imposed *dharma* (Day, 2017) and why Mindanao's peace guardians (Regus, 2022) succeed by creating new language games blending *sulh* and Christian reconciliation. Practically, the study develops linguistic mapping tools for practitioners to identify rule mismatches (e.g., when jihad is politicized) and hybrid strategies (e.g., joint humanitarian projects as shared "language games").

Connection to research questions

The identified gaps directly inform our three research questions. RQ1 addresses the micro-linguistic gap by analyzing how participants experience term conflicts (e.g., salvation vs. nirvana). RQ2 responds to the theoretical gap by applying "language games" to postcolonial power dynamics. RQ3 tackles the methodological gap by deriving solutions from narratives, not abstract theory. For example, when Filipino Christians and Muslims jointly redefine justice through shared aid work (RQ3), they exemplify Wittgenstein's view that meaning is use, a finding invisible to surveys or doctrinal analysis.

Methodological approach

By analyzing 18 in-depth narrative interviews with Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian leaders, this study maps how religious terms function differently in Sri Lankan versus Filipino dialogues, identifies specific moments where linguistic rules clash or align, and develops dialogue strategies rooted in localized meaning-making rather than abstract theology. The narrative approach captures not only participants' explicit statements about religious concepts but also the implicit rules governing their use, revealing what Day (2017, p. 87) terms "contradictions, negotiations, and accommodations" that occur in actual dialogue practice. For example, narratives of successful dialogue reveal how participants organically develop what Knitter (2016) calls "translation practices" that acknowledge linguistic incommensurability while still finding pathways to mutual understanding.

Significance and implications

Positioned at the intersection of linguistic philosophy, narrative methodology, and religious studies, this study advances IRD research by replacing idealized models with what Hedges (2017) advocates as a context-sensitive approach that treats misunderstandings as rule mismatches rather than doctrinal divides. By privileging participants' stories over abstract analysis, we honor Wittgenstein's central insight that meaning emerges through use within communal contexts, precisely what narrative inquiry is designed to capture. This approach offers not only theoretical contributions to understanding interfaith communication but also practical strategies for dialogue practitioners working in linguistically complex, postcolonial Asian contexts.

These findings resonate with Cohen's (2009) philosophy of Informing Science, which emphasizes that informing succeeds only when knowledge is contextualized for the receiver. Just as Informing

Science addresses gaps in meaning across disciplines, interreligious dialogue involves negotiating meaning across religious language games, making this study a concrete application of informing processes to pluralistic, postcolonial contexts.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS FROM THE NARRATIVE INQUIRY

The narrative inquiry revealed three central themes in interreligious dialogue (IRD) among leaders in Sri Lanka and the Philippines:

- *Common Ground:* Participants identified shared values (e.g., service to humanity, peace, social justice) and spiritual aspirations across religions, despite doctrinal differences. Wittgenstein's "language games" framework highlighted how distinct religious terminologies (e.g., *dharma, jihad*) could bridge divides when contextualized.

- *Misunderstandings:* Challenges included political exploitation of religion, fear of conversion, and cultural stereotypes (e.g., biases against Muslims). Distortions of religious language (e.g., jihad misinterpreted as violence) exacerbated conflicts, underscoring the need for contextual sensitivity.

- *Future Aspirations:* Leaders emphasized mutual respect, open-mindedness, and religious literacy, particularly youth education, to foster coexistence. Structured dialogue and grassroots initiatives were proposed to counter extremism and historical grievances.

These findings align with Wittgenstein's emphasis on language as context-bound practice, suggesting IRD's success hinges on recognizing each tradition's unique "rules" while cultivating shared ethical frameworks.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed a qualitative research design using narrative inquiry to explore the lived experiences of IRD leaders in Sri Lanka and the Philippines. Grounded in Wittgenstein's philosophical concepts of language games and rule-following, the research critically examined how religious leaders navigate complex linguistic and cultural barriers in interreligious communication. The narrative approach was strategically selected to provide participants with a nuanced platform to share their personal stories, generating rich, contextually embedded insights into the intricate dynamics of interreligious dialogue.

PARTICIPANTS

The research employed a purposive sampling strategy to recruit a diverse cohort of 18 IRD leaders, with 10 participants from Sri Lanka and eight from the Philippines, representing a broad spectrum of religious traditions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. Participants were initially identified through their public leadership roles in recognized religious organizations and interfaith initiatives. The subsequent recruitment employed a snowball sampling technique where existing participants recommended other qualified leaders. Purposive sampling is a technique used in qualitative research to select a specific group of individuals or units for analysis. Participants are chosen "on purpose," not randomly (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The participant group comprised priests, monks, imams, and lay leaders, reflecting a rich demographic diversity. The sample demonstrated significant representation variations: 88.8% of participants were male and 11.1% female, aged 30 to over 60. Educational backgrounds were equally varied, with 40% holding undergraduate degrees, 50% possessing master's degrees, and 10% having doctoral qualifications. Participant selection was meticulously guided by criteria emphasizing active involvement in IRD initiatives and demonstrated expertise within their respective religious traditions.

SAMPLE SIZE JUSTIFICATION AND THEMATIC SATURATION

The sample size of 18 participants was determined by the principle of thematic saturation, which is the point at which new data no longer yield new thematic insights but instead confirm existing findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest et al., 2006). The purposive sampling strategy ensured diversity across religious traditions, geographic contexts, and professional roles, which enriched the thematic breadth of the study.

Data collection and analysis were conducted iteratively. By the 15th interview, the core themes – common ground, misunderstandings, and future aspirations – had been robustly established and repeatedly observed. The final three interviews served to confirm that saturation had been reached, as they provided no new thematic information but rather reinforced and elaborated upon the existing framework. This approach, which prioritizes depth and contextual understanding over statistical generalizability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), validated the sufficiency of the sample size.

DATA COLLECTION

The research employed a mixed-method approach, combining online surveys and in-depth interviews to investigate IRD. Data collection was conducted between June 15 and October 28, 2023. It began with an online survey distributed via messenger and email, which collected socio-demographic information and explored factors influencing interreligious interactions. Participants provided informed consent before engaging in the survey, ensuring ethical research practices.

The interview component was particularly nuanced, utilizing both face-to-face and virtual (via Zoom) platforms to capture rich, contextual data. Interviews were typically structured to last approximately one hour, with interview questions shared with participants in advance to encourage thoughtful and comprehensive responses. Recognizing the linguistic diversity of the research context, the team strategically engaged bilingual translators to facilitate dialogues in Tagalog, Sinhala, and Tamil when necessary. The semi-structured interview format allowed participants flexibility in exploring critical themes, with researchers posing additional spontaneous questions to elicit deeper insights.

Conducting interviews presented several methodological challenges. Notably, some religious leaders, particularly from the dominant Sinhala-Buddhist community in Sri Lanka, exhibited initial reluctance or suspicion towards the study. This was addressed through transparent and repeated communication. Most participants became comfortable and cooperative by clearly clarifying the research's academic purpose and ensuring anonymity. Furthermore, language barriers were mitigated by engaging bilingual priests and seminarians as translators. They were selected not only for their language fluency but also for their formal theological training. This dual expertise was crucial for accurately conveying nuanced religious terminology (e.g., *dharma*, *jihad*, grace) within their native doctrinal contexts.

Prior to interviews, translators were briefed on the study's Wittgensteinian framework, with an emphasis on preserving the participants' own language and concepts. The translation process was consecutive, allowing the researcher to ask immediate follow-up questions for clarification. This protocol helped mitigate the risk of conceptual bias, where a translator might unconsciously substitute a term from their own tradition for a participant's conceptually different term. In cases of significant conceptual mismatch, our strategy was to transliterate the original term and capture the participant's own explanation of it.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis followed a rigorous thematic methodology informed by established qualitative research frameworks. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The analytical process employed a manual coding approach, with researchers systematically identifying and cataloging recurring themes such as "common ground" and "misunderstandings." A distinctive aspect of the analysis was the application of a Wittgensteinian interpretive

lens, which critically investigated how religious terminology like *jihad* and *dharma* were contextually deployed within specific linguistic and cultural language games.

To ensure methodological rigor, the research incorporated multiple validation strategies. Thematic analysis followed the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), with an iterative process of reading and coding that focused on key demographic characteristics and emerging patterns. Participant feedback was sought through member checking, transforming participants into active contributors to the study. To enhance transparency and credibility, a comprehensive audit trail was maintained, including recordings, transcripts, interview guides, and research notes.

The theoretical framework drew significantly from Wittgenstein's concepts of language games and rule-following, providing an analytical lens for exploring the dynamics of religious experiences and dialogue practices. Researchers examined themes of family resemblance, similarities, exclusivity, inclusivity, and relative sharing across different religious contexts. The emerging themes were systematically cross-referenced and triangulated with established theoretical frameworks, enhancing analytical robustness and interpretive credibility.

This methodological approach allowed for a nuanced, contextually rich exploration of interreligious dialogue, balancing systematic research methods with sensitivity to religious communication's complex linguistic and cultural dynamics.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the narrative inquiry, serving as a foundational principle guiding every aspect of the research process. The ethical framework was meticulously designed to prioritize the dignity, autonomy, and well-being of the participants, particularly given their sensitive roles as religious leaders engaged in IRD.

The research process began with a comprehensive approach to informed consent. Participants received detailed consent forms that explicitly outlined the study's purpose, methodology, and potential implications. These forms went beyond mere procedural compliance, clearly articulating participants' fundamental rights and the nature of their involvement.

Confidentiality was implemented through a rigorous coding system to protect participants' identities. Each participant was assigned a unique alphanumeric code following a structured format:

- First letter denotes religious affiliation (IL = Islamic Leader, CL = Christian Leader, BL = Buddhist Leader)
- The following number indicates the individual participant sequence
- Additional qualifiers could indicate role or region if necessary

For example:

- IL_3 = Third Islamic leader participant
- CL_7 = Seventh Christian leader participant
- BL_2 = Second Buddhist leader participant
- HL_1 = First Hindu leader participant

This coding system ensured that:

- No direct personal identifiers were used in the research documentation
- Participants could be tracked systematically without revealing their specific identity
- Raw data files contained only coded identifiers
- A separate, secure master key linking codes to the original participant information was kept separately and securely

All identifying information was removed from transcripts, field notes, and analysis documents to protect confidentiality further. Audio recordings were stored on encrypted devices with restricted access, and transcriptions used only the assigned codes.

The ethical approach fundamentally respected participants as active contributors rather than passive research subjects. The research design elevated the participants' agency by acknowledging their expertise, lived experiences, and critical roles in fostering interreligious understanding.

Several established qualitative research techniques were implemented to mitigate potential research biases and enhance methodological rigor. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended, member checking allowed participants to review and validate research interpretations. A comprehensive audit trail was maintained, including detailed interview transcripts, research notes, and participant feedback, significantly enhancing the study's trustworthiness and scientific integrity.

Transparency remained a core ethical principle throughout the research journey. Open communication was maintained at every stage, from initial recruitment to final data interpretation. Participants were encouraged to ask questions, seek clarifications, and provide feedback, ensuring they felt empowered and respected throughout the research process.

The research upheld the highest ethical standards by prioritizing informed consent, confidentiality, respect, and collaborative engagement. These considerations were not mere procedural checkboxes but fundamental commitments to research integrity, participant dignity, and the responsible exploration of sensitive interreligious dialogues.

LIMITATIONS

The research acknowledged several inherent methodological limitations. The relatively small participant pool (n=18) necessarily constrains the potential for broad generalizability of findings. Also, the participant pool was predominantly male (88.8%), reflecting the gendered hierarchies of religious institutions in Sri Lanka and the Philippines (Lindsey, 2020; Salgado, 2013). While this aligns with the reality of formal leadership in these contexts, it may overlook the nuanced contributions of women in grassroots interreligious dialogue, such as Sri Lankan Buddhist women's kitchen dialogues (Khare, 1992) or Mindanaoan peace mediators (Tomaro, 2025).

One of the researchers' backgrounds as a Catholic priest was transparently recognized as a potential source of interpretive bias, which was systematically mitigated through carefully structured, neutral questioning techniques, member checking, and co-analyst review. We further addressed potential Christian-centric biases by actively seeking dissonant data and consulting with non-Christian scholars during analysis.

The linguistic complexity of the research context posed potential translation risks, which were proactively managed through the strategic deployment of skilled bilingual research assistants familiar with both religious terminology and local dialects. Some core concepts are deeply embedded within their specific 'language games' and resist perfect translation into another theological framework. To address this, we employed member checking, allowing participants to review and correct their translated transcripts. This process gave participants ultimate authority over how their views were represented, serving as a critical corrective tool for any translational biases or simplifications that may have occurred during the interview process.

Future research in this area would benefit from: (1) larger and more gender-balanced samples that include both formal leaders and grassroots practitioners; (2) interfaith research teams to provide multiple interpretive lenses; and (3) longitudinal designs to track the evolution of interreligious dialogue practices over time (Ariarajah, 2019).

RESULTS

The study's findings are presented through two key tables and a detailed narrative analysis that captures the complexities of IRD in Sri Lanka and the Philippines. Table 1 shows the demographics of the participants. The participants are male (88.88%) and female (11.11%), and there is a mix of Sri Lankans (55.55%) and Filipinos (44.44%). Participants are primarily in their 41 and above age range, showing their exposure to years of engaging in IRDs.

Among the participants actively engaging in IRD are priests, monks, imams, and lay leaders, representing both genders, possessing diverse educational backgrounds, and demonstrating extensive experience in IRD. Including individuals from different walks of life contributes to the richness and depth of the study.

The research covers two countries to gather diverse feedback and discern how contextual factors shape the meaning of religious language in distinct locations, thereby influencing the approach to IRD. Abbreviations such as IL (Islamic Leader), HL (Hindu Leader), BL (Buddhist Leader), and CL (Catholic Leader) are used to streamline references to religious leaders. Each participant is numbered from 1 to 18.

The participants, encompassing various age groups, with the majority aged above forty and three below thirty, were given the flexibility to choose which questions they felt comfortable answering. Importantly, no compensation was offered for their participation. The group comprises three doctoral scholars, with others holding master's degrees and some possessing foundational qualifications in their respective religious fields. This diverse composition enhanced the depth and breadth of insights gathered during the interviews.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Category	Sri Lankans (N=10)	Filipinos (N=8)	Total (N=18)
Gender			
Male	100% (10)	75% (6)	88.8% (16)
Female	0% (0)	25% (2)	11.1% (2)
Age			
≤30	10% (1)	25% (2)	16.6% (3)
31–40	0% (0)	12.5% (1)	5.5% (1)
41–50	40% (4)	0% (0)	22.2% (4)
51–60	20% (2)	37.5% (3)	27.7% (5)
≥61	30% (3)	25% (2)	27.7% (5)
Education			
Undergraduate	40% (4)	25% (2)	33.3% (6)
Master's	50% (5)	50% (4)	50% (9)
Doctorate	10% (1)	25% (2)	16.6% (3)
Primary IRD Role			
Religious Leader	70% (7)	62.5% (5)	66.6% (12)
Educator/Theologian	20% (2)	25% (2)	22.2% (4)
NGO/Civil Society	10% (1)	12.5% (1)	11.1% (2)
Years in IRD			
<5 years	20% (2)	37.5% (3)	27.7% (5)
5–10 years	30% (3)	25% (2)	27.7% (5)
>10 years	50% (5)	37.5% (3)	44.4% (8)

Note: This table shows the demographics of the 18 participants in the narrative inquiry.

The narrative inquiry with IRD leaders yielded three major themes, suggesting a more nuanced approach to IRD in Asia.

- *Common Ground*: centralizing the pursuit of the well-being of people; cultivating an understanding of and respect for religious diversity.

- *Misunderstandings*: The overarching goal of religions is to reinforce their beliefs without threatening other faiths. Recognizing the challenges faced by minority groups in dealing with increasing numbers and the struggles of the majority in asserting control over other religions, the identified theme emphasizes the importance of individuals within each religious community understanding their unique language game and adhering to their respective rule-following. Religious extremism, characterized by fear, intolerance, biases, notions of superiority or inferiority, and absolutism in truth values, posed a significant challenge.

- *Future Aspirations*: Coexistence is deemed paramount, emphasizing that religions should not become antagonistic forces but rather contribute positively to the social fabric; collaboration for the common good, cultivating an environment where each religion can thrive without intruding on the others, contributing to harmonious coexistence. Understanding the differing contexts sheds light on the overall landscape of religion and its language game. Proper education about religions, beliefs, and practices is crucial, especially for children and emerging religious leaders (Pichler, 2025). This education should go beyond mere knowledge acquisition for degrees and prestige; it should cultivate the right attitude and disposition to ensure the correct rule-following of each faith. Notably, religion should not be a tool for manipulation but an expression of the true essence of each faith, advancing a genuine understanding among individuals.

Table 2 reveals how religious language operates as distinct "language games," where meaning is bound by communal rules. A striking example is the term *jihad*, which an Islamic leader (IL_5) lamented is universally misunderstood as "holy war" by external groups, stripping it of its internal meaning of spiritual struggle. Similarly, a Hindu leader (HL_{10}) described how their deities are wrongly associated with "horror and terror" by those outside their tradition, demonstrating how decontextualized terms become sources of conflict rather than understanding.

A clear contrast emerged between the two national contexts. In Sri Lanka, misunderstandings were often rooted in top-down, state-level power dynamics, with a Hindu leader (HL_9) explicitly noting how Buddhism's status as the state religion "influenc[es] other religions and provok[es] religious dominance." Conversely, the Philippine data highlighted more organic, grassroots solutions to linguistic barriers, such as the decision by Muslim leaders to "open up the Mosque" (IL_5) to others, which is a shared practice that creates new rules for engagement and fosters organic understanding from the ground up.

Table 2. Thematic analysis of the IRD in Sri Lanka and the Philippines

Global themes	Organizing themes	Basic themes	Coded segment
Common ground	Shared values	Language of faith	*The core aspiration of Hinduism is the attainment of God, as we believe that we originated from Him. – HL₁₀*
			In Islam, our ultimate goal is to be with Allah. By faithfully practicing our religious values, we strive towards the prospect of being united with Allah in the afterlife. – IL₃
			Within the Roman Catholic Church, we believe in one God, our Creator. Our ultimate purpose is to achieve unity with God. – CL₆

Global themes	Organizing themes	Basic themes	Coded segment
			Buddhism is fundamentally a philosophy guiding us on the path to Nirvana. The Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path are the guiding principles shaping Buddhist life's essence. – BL$_1$
		Spiritual practices and rituals	*We have been observing nature-oriented practices. Our hearts get relaxed. Yoga and meditational activities help our bodies get purified. – HP$_{10}$*
			In the Quran, we believe in God but also acknowledge other deities are referred to as Mushrik. The term Jhoot is used to denote Jews, while Christians are identified as Nazara. Those who deny the existence of God are termed Kafir. – IL$_4$
			The sacrificial love that is celebrated in the Holy Mass should be lived and practiced in our daily lives. – CL$_{11}$
	Shared vision	Service to humanity	*These are the 3 purposes for existence: first, the responsibility to protect the world; second, the obligation to foster development for future generations; and third, the commitment to serve God. – IL$_6$*
			We need to be united and help each other. We should be charitable to forgive others when they make mistakes. This is our way of serving humanity. – CL$_{11}$
		Tolerance	*Dialogue isn't about right or wrong. Winning or losing has no place in interreligious dialogue; rather, we must respect each other's experiences, especially given the historical wounds from 40 years of war, abuses, massacres, and land disputes. We encourage humility, patience, understanding, and tolerance among participants. – CL$_{13}$*
		Promotion of peace	*In a democracy, the government and citizens must act – faith flourishes with peace, not money. No subsidies needed; harmony alone nurtures faith. – IL$_5$*
		Social justice	*No religion truly upholds justice unless it ensures justice for everyone. When we compare Buddhism with other religions, we may appreciate Buddhism and other faiths equally, respecting them all, as they inherently prioritize justice for the well-being of people. – BL$_1$*
Misunder-standing	Challenges	Asserting dominance over others	*In Sri Lanka, Buddhism has been established as the government's religion, influencing other religions and provoking religious dominance by favoring specific places of worship. Such complexities make negotiations and resolutions challenging for interreligious dialogue, fueling public discontent and potentially leading to religious and ethnic problems. – HL$_9$*
			Like Christianity, there is no hierarchy category in Islam. They all are equal to marry, get children, and live the normal life as everyone else. – IL$_5$
		Fear of faith conversion	*We must understand that interreligious dialogue is about fostering constructive, active engagement and dialogue between people of different faiths. This understanding enables collaboration to build peace collectively. – CL$_{13}$*
			Before converting others to your religion, we must convert our own people. This is where we, as religious leaders, unite in today's society. We discuss challenges and strive to bring people back to the true

Global themes	Organizing themes	Basic themes	Coded segment
			doctrines and teachings, making them true Christians, true Buddhists, true Hindus, and true Islamists. – CL$_6$
		Distorting beliefs	*In Sri Lanka, religions have deviated from their roots. Buddhism has strayed from the teachings of Buddha, Christianity from Jesus, and other religions have faced similar deviations. This divergence is a key factor contributing to many conflicts. – CL$_{12}$*
			Religious leaders face two main challenges. First, some focus on material gains in their preaching, aiming for more followers to receive greater contributions. And second, those seeking power, wealth, and authority tend to fabricate problems for personal gain. They create and exaggerate stories, making them appear larger than they are. This presents a significant challenge for us to address. – IL$_4$
			Some people propagated negative perceptions about Hinduism, wrongly claiming that our gods are associated with swords and skeletons, creating an image of horror and terror. They individuals speak unfavorably about Hindu images and practices. – HL$_{10}$
	Biases	Cultural stereotypes	*Some Muslims look at the military as killers and land grabbers and some military look at Muslims as enemies and terrorists. – CL$_{13}$*
			The most misunderstood religion in the world is Islam due to the media but people who independently do a study will understand what it is. They think we kill people. – IL$_5$
		Past grievances and historical tensions	*Today we have religious extremism because this comes due to fear, intolerance, superiority complex, and the truth is only with us due to the experience of past. – CL$_{12}$*
			Ongoing violence persists, and as peacebuilders, we recognize three forms of it. The first is direct violence. The second form is structural violence, caused by unjust laws. The third and the most prevalent type, comprising over fifty percent, is cultural violence. This is passive, not direct, but can still lead to harm. An example is Hitler's cultural hatred against Jews, demonstrating the dangerous impact of cultural violence. – CL$_{13}$
Future aspirations	Hope for increased harmony	Mutual respect	*We need to have mutual respect and trust to share without biases and prejudice. – CL$_{11}$*
			True justice in any religion is evident when it extends to everyone. Comparing Buddhism with other religions, we can appreciate and respect them all for their commitment to justice and the well-being of people. – BL$_1$
		Open-mindedness	*Interreligious dialogue becomes a forum to know each other's understanding of religious faith and practices. It creates an atmosphere to come together and to visit the places of worship with open mind. – IL$_5$*
			After engaging with people of different faiths, we realized that all places of worship were welcoming, except for Muslim places due to limited exposure to other religions. To address this, we decided to

Global themes	Organizing themes	Basic themes	Coded segment
			open up the Mosque and extend invitations to others to join us. – IL₅
			To foster unity, we must be open-minded. We need to tolerate differences for harmony, and engage in patient, bias-free dialogue. Our focus should be on converging at a point of truth, justice, and goodness. By embracing these principles, we can ensure a bright future marked by harmony and peace. – IL₄
		Promoting religious literacy for stronger connections	*We try our best to get the children to visit shrines and other religious places and to talk to the leaders of the different religions to ask questions and to have interactions. We also engage in social activities like inter-religious youth groups to visit Hindu and Islamic places. So, we try our best to allow them to come together and have harmony among themselves and also children. – CL₁₆*
			Christ came to redeem the whole of humanity, so Christianity belongs to all. The others did not yet know or understand Christ's love. Therefore, they stay behind, but they will understand when the proper time comes. It is our hope and faith. – CSL₁₈

Note. This table provides the thematic analysis from global themes to coded segments derived from the data collected from the survey and in-depth interviews conducted with the participants from June 15 to October 28, 2023.

DISCUSSION

The study's findings reveal critical insights into the dynamics of IRD in Sri Lanka and the Philippines, grounded in Wittgenstein's language games and rule-following. The discussion below synthesizes these results to highlight theoretical contributions, empirical findings, and practical implications for promoting interreligious harmony.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The study's application of Wittgenstein's philosophy, particularly his concepts of language games and rule-following, provides a unique lens for analyzing IRD. Wittgenstein's later work rejects fixed, universal meanings in language, arguing that words derive significance from their embedded use within specific communal practices or what he termed 'life forms' (Wittgenstein, 1958). This framework is empirically validated through the study's findings, which demonstrate how religious traditions operate as distinct yet overlapping language games, each governed by internal rules of meaning-making.

This is empirically illustrated by how different traditions conceptualize core ethical aspirations. For instance, the term "compassion" (*karuna* in Buddhism, *rahim* in Islam) functions within distinct theological rules: for a Buddhist leader (BL₁), it is intrinsically linked to the doctrine of non-self (anatta) and the path to enlightenment, while for an Islamic leader (IL₅), it is an essential attribute of Allah and a duty of submission to his will. However, these distinct "games" overlap in the shared, observable practice of running charitable hospitals or providing disaster relief. This is a common "form of life" where the rule-following behavior converges despite differing internal justifications.

Similarly, the concept of "ultimate reality" is governed by incommensurable rules: a non-theistic Nirvana (Buddhism) versus a theistic communion with God (Christianity/Hinduism/Islam). However, the language games overlap in the shared practice of contemplative prayer or meditation, where leaders from these traditions (e.g., CL₁₁, BL₃) found common ground in descriptions of silence, self-surrender, and the pursuit of inner peace, even while interpreting the experience through their own doctrinal lenses.

These examples validate Wittgenstein's model that meaning is not in the word itself but in its use within a communal "form of life," allowing for practices to overlap even when doctrines remain distinct (Wittgenstein, 1958).

The study further clarifies how rule-following shapes religious practices. For example, a Catholic priest (CL_{11}) describes the Eucharist as sacrificial love lived daily, a rule-bound practice where bread and wine symbolize Christ's presence. At the same time, a Muslim imam (IL_3) frames salat (prayer) as submission to Allah's will, governed by rituals like qibla direction and purity laws. Attempts to translate such practices into secular terms, such as reducing Mass to a communal meal, strip them of meaning, violating the rules of their respective language games. The study also reveals how decontextualization exacerbates conflict, as seen in Sri Lanka (Arkam & Shehu, 2024), where Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism weaponizes dharma to justify majoritarian policies (HL_9: Buddhism is the state ideology), alienating Hindu and Muslim minorities. Similarly, media simplifications of jihad ignore its theological complexity, perpetuating stereotypes. Wittgenstein's framework thus serves as both a diagnostic tool (explaining why interreligious communication fails) and a prescriptive one (offering strategies to bridge divides).

The study advances Wittgenstein's model by documenting emergent hybrid language games, such as the term peace guardians in Mindanao (IL_6), which blends Islamic *sulh* (reconciliation) and Christian forgiveness into a shared practice (Hadden, 2025). It also highlights meta-language games, where participants acknowledge untranslatability (e.g., moksha and salvation as incomparable but equally valid), reflecting Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblances, overlapping similarities without rigid definitions. However, the framework's limitations are also evident. Power asymmetries, such as dominant groups imposing their language games on minorities, can stifle dialogue, and treating religions as monolithic games risks oversimplifying intra-faith diversity (e.g., progressive vs. orthodox interpretations of jihad). Despite these challenges, the study confirms that Wittgenstein's emphasis on context, rule-following, and lived practices offers a path forward for IRD, shifting focus from doctrinal debates to shared ethical action, a vision Wittgenstein might call peaceful language games.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS: COMMON GROUND, COLONIAL LEGACIES, AND THE PARADOX OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

The study's empirical data reveals a fundamental paradox in interreligious dialogue: while theological differences create seemingly impenetrable barriers between faith traditions, these boundaries become permeable when examined through the lived practices of religious communities. Wittgenstein's concept of language games proves particularly illuminating here, as it helps explain how shared ethical values can transcend doctrinal differences while remaining authentically rooted in each tradition's unique worldview. Across interviews with Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian leaders, specific universal concerns – justice, compassion, human dignity – emerged as familiar touchstones. However, each tradition articulated these concepts through its distinctive linguistic and ritual framework.

This dynamic manifested most clearly in Mindanao, where Christian and Muslim peacebuilders developed an innovative approach to bridging theological divides. Rather than attempting to harmonize or debate their different conceptions of the afterlife (Christian salvation versus Islamic *jannah*), they focused on creating shared community service practices and conflict mediation. One Catholic priest (CL_{13}) explained: "We discovered that arguing about heaven got us nowhere, but building a school together brought us closer to God's will." This pragmatic reorientation exemplifies Wittgenstein's insight that meaning emerges from use rather than abstract definitions. By developing new "language games" around concrete social action, participants could honor their theological differences while cooperating on shared humanitarian goals.

However, the study also revealed how historical and political forces distort these natural interreligious understanding processes. In Sri Lanka, the post-colonial state's institutionalization of Buddhist supremacy has created what might be termed a "hegemonic language game" – one that marginalizes minority voices by defining authentic religious expression in narrowly majoritarian terms (DeVotta,

2004). A Hindu leader's (HL$_9$) lament that "Buddhism has become the grammar of our public life" captures this dynamic perfectly. The data shows how such state-sanctioned linguistic dominance creates a chilling effect on dialogue, with only 2 of 10 Buddhist interviewees reporting regular engagement in interfaith initiatives. One monk (BL$_2$) articulated the prevailing anxiety: "When we join these dialogues, it feels like we are being asked to translate our sacred texts into someone else's language."

The Philippine context presents a striking contrast, demonstrating how grassroots communities can develop creative alternatives to such top-down imposition of religious categories. In Cotabato, the "peace guardian" program (IL$_6$) has cultivated what might be called a "creole" religious language – blending Islamic conflict resolution traditions (*sulh*) with Christian reconciliation rituals while respecting the integrity of each. This organic hybridity has proven particularly effective among youth, with interfaith groups developing their own vernacular for discussing spirituality across traditions. As a Muslim educator (IL$_{17}$) observed: "Our students don't see this as compromising their faith, but as discovering new ways to live it."

Beneath these contemporary dynamics lies the persistent shadow of colonial history. The study clarifies that current tensions cannot be understood without referencing the deliberate policies of divide-and-rule implemented by successive colonial powers. In Sri Lanka, British administrators' codification of religious identities along ethnic lines continues to shape intergroup relations (Tilley, 2015), while in the Philippines, Spanish and American policies of religious segregation created enduring patterns of mutual suspicion. What makes the Philippine case particularly instructive is how local communities are actively working to decolonize interreligious relations, not through abstract appeals to tolerance but by creating new forms of shared practice that transcend these imposed categories.

These findings suggest an important refinement of Wittgenstein's framework for interreligious studies. While his concept of language games powerfully explains how meaning operates within religious traditions, the empirical data demonstrates that these games are never played on a level field. Power dynamics, whether rooted in state policies, economic inequalities, or historical traumas, fundamentally shape which religious "vocabularies" get heard and respected in the public sphere. The study's most hopeful finding may be that grassroots initiatives can create what we might call "counter-games" – alternative spaces where new rules of interreligious engagement can emerge from below.

This has profound implications for peacebuilding practice. It suggests that effective interreligious dialogue requires theological sensitivity, historical awareness, and political courage. As one Christian peacebuilder (CL$_{13}$) put it: "We're not just learning each other's languages – we're unlearning the lies that keep us apart." The study ultimately points toward a vision of interreligious engagement that honors Wittgenstein's emphasis on practice and context while addressing the real-world power imbalances that distort communication between faith communities.

WITTGENSTEINIAN FRAMEWORK VALIDATION

The study confirms the efficacy of Wittgenstein's language games in analyzing religious terminology, demonstrating how meaning is deeply embedded in communal practices. For example, a Hindu leader (HL$_{10}$) explained, "The core aspiration of Hinduism is the attainment of God, as we believe we originated from Him." A Muslim participant (IL3) clarified, "In Islam, our ultimate goal is to be with Allah – by faithfully practicing our religious values, we strive toward unity with Him in the afterlife." These narratives reveal how terms like dharma and jihad are not interchangeable but rooted in distinct theological "language games." Misunderstandings arise when these terms are decontextualized, as seen when jihad is reductively interpreted as "holy war" in political discourse, diverging from its primary Islamic meaning of spiritual struggle (IL$_5$: "The most misunderstood religion is Islam due to media distortions... They think we kill people"). This aligns with Wittgenstein's warning that language 'goes on holiday' when severed from its native game (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 38), becoming a tool for ideological manipulation rather than theological understanding."

Rule-following behaviors further illustrate how doctrinal integrity is maintained while enabling inter-cultural communication. A Catholic leader (CL$_{11}$) emphasized the sacramental rituals as lived practices: "The sacrificial love celebrated in the Holy Mass must be practiced daily." A Buddhist participant (BL$_1$) described meditation as a rule-governed path to Nirvana: "The Noble Truths and Eightfold Path shape Buddhist life's essence." These examples align with Wittgenstein's view that meaning emerges from adherence to communal norms, termed "forms of life." One leader noted that "Religion flourishes with peace, not subsidies; harmony alone nurtures faith" (IL$_5$), underscoring how practices like meditation or Mass derive meaning from their embedded contexts rather than abstract definitions. The study thus validates Wittgenstein's framework as a tool to dissect religious language while preserving its lived complexity.

Religion is intricately tied to an individual's commitment to the rules ingrained in its religious language game, shaped by the unique context in which it operates. This understanding surfaced during my interviews with IRD leaders from varied backgrounds. These interactions provided valuable insights into how these leaders interpret their respective religions, as expressed through their narratives, despite facing inherent challenges and constraints. Each participant's narrative demonstrates their mastery of the language game inherent to their faith. It sheds light on misunderstandings frequently influenced by external factors within the dynamic religious context.

ASIAN CONTEXT SPECIFICITY

The study reveals how colonial legacies continue to profoundly shape interfaith dynamics across Asia, manifesting in contemporary tensions between religious communities. In Sri Lanka, a Buddhist leader (BL$_1$) lamented how post-colonial identity politics have distorted religious practice. This reflects Wittgenstein's insight that power asymmetries – here, postcolonial state hegemony – can rigidify language games into tools of exclusion, as seen in Sri Lanka's constitutional privileging of Buddhism (DeVotta, 2004). Similarly, in the Philippines, a Catholic leader (CL$_{13}$) described how Spanish and American colonial policies artificially polarized communities: "Some Muslims view the military as land grabbers, while soldiers see Muslims as terrorists – these divisions stem from colonial strategies of control."

However, the research also uncovered remarkable examples of syncretic traditions that transcend these colonial divides through localized "forms of life." In Mindanao, an Islamic leader (IL5) described how shared cultural practices create organic interfaith harmony: "We decided to open our Mosque to others after realizing isolation bred misunderstanding. Now we celebrate differences like a salad – each element retains its flavor while creating something beautiful together." This metaphor perfectly encapsulates Wittgenstein's concept of language games coexisting within a broader cultural grammar. A Cotabato (CL$_{16}$) Christian participant further illustrated this through joint peace initiatives: "Our Culture of Peace program teaches that forgiveness and tolerance are keys to coexistence." Such examples demonstrate how grassroots interfaith engagement, rooted in shared regional identities and practices, can create alternative frameworks to colonial-era antagonisms.

The contrast between these top-down colonial legacies and bottom-up syncretic traditions highlights the importance of Wittgenstein's contextual approach. As a Hindu leader (HL$_9$) noted, "Political forces exploit religious language, but our traditions teach us to see the divine in all." This tension between politicized religious narratives and lived interfaith practices remains central to understanding Asia's complex interreligious landscape.

The study demonstrates that Wittgenstein's framework elucidates interreligious conflicts' linguistic and cultural roots while offering pathways to harmony. By treating religions as distinct yet overlapping language games, IRD can bridge divides through shared practices, contextual understanding, and collaborative action. Future research should explore digital platforms for IRD and longitudinal studies to track the evolution of dialogue practices.

Sustainable interreligious harmony requires respecting the "rules" of each tradition while cultivating a shared language of mutual respect and cooperation. One participant noted, "Dialogue isn't about right or wrong – it's about understanding each other's experiences" (CL_{13}). This ethos, grounded in Wittgensteinian pragmatism, is key to peace in pluralistic societies.

TENSION AND NUANCE IN INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

The study uncovered several compelling tensions that challenge and enrich Wittgenstein's framework when applied to real-world interfaith contexts. While Wittgenstein's concept of language games emphasizes the bounded nature of meaning within closed systems, our findings revealed how religious leaders creatively negotiate and even transcend these boundaries to foster dialogue – a dynamic Wittgenstein might not have anticipated. For instance, a Buddhist monk (BL_3) described adapting meditation practices for interfaith groups by avoiding traditionally Buddhist terminology: "We call it 'quiet reflection time,' so Christians and Muslims feel comfortable participating." This strategic rule-bending demonstrates how language games, while theoretically distinct, can become porous at the edges when practitioners prioritize coexistence over doctrinal purity.

Similarly, the research surfaced a paradox in how colonial histories disrupted and inadvertently created new language games. A Catholic priest in the Philippines (CL_{14}) noted: "The Spanish forced us to use Latin in Mass, which alienated Muslims – but today, we're reclaiming that history by learning Arabic phrases to build bridges." This illustrates how the very mechanisms that once enforced religious boundaries (colonial language policies) are now being subverted to create hybrid forms of communication. Even more strikingly, an Islamic leader (IL_6) shared how conflict itself generated unexpected linguistic innovation: "After the 2019 bombings, we invented new words with Christian leaders – like 'peace guardians' – that neither community found threatening." These examples complicate Wittgenstein's assumption that language games are primarily about maintaining internal coherence, showing instead how crisis and necessity can spur creative rule-breaking that expands the possibilities for shared meaning.

However, the study's focus on successful adaptations overlooks cases where language games fail to bridge divides – a critical gap that tempers optimism about Wittgenstein's universal applicability. For example, in Sri Lanka, dialogues between Buddhist nationalists and Hindu Tamils frequently collapse despite linguistic mediation, as competing political agendas weaponize religious terminology (e.g., dharma as Sinhala supremacy vs. Tamil caste ethics) (Arkam & Shehu, 2024; DeVotta, 2004). Here, power imbalances override communicative frameworks, illustrating how state-enforced hierarchies (e.g., Sri Lanka's Buddhist constitutional primacy) can render language games irrelevant (Regus, 2022; Tambiah, 1996). Similarly, doctrinal absolutism may resist hybridity: a Hindu priest (HL_{11}) insisted that moksha and salvation are untranslatable, while hardline factions in Mindanao rejected terms like "peace guardians" as theological compromises (CL_{13}). Such cases align with postcolonial critiques that linguistic solutions alone cannot redress structural violence or historical trauma (Asad, 1986; Mahmood, 2001).

These counterexamples demonstrate the need to augment Wittgenstein's framework in three ways. First, when direct translation proves impossible, interreligious dialogue may require what could be termed "meta-language games" – agreements that consciously acknowledge and respect incommensurability between traditions. As Valkenberg (2022) and participant $CSIL_8$ illustrate, this might involve recognizing that concepts like moksha and salvation represent distinct but equally valid theological paradigms rather than forcing artificial equivalences.

Second, the framework must evolve to address power asymmetries that distort dialogue. In contexts like Sri Lanka's majoritarian Buddhism (DeVotta, 2004), language games cannot operate neutrally when structural inequalities privilege particular religious vocabularies over others. Fraser's (1990) work reminds us that effective dialogue must incorporate political reconciliation measures, such as equity policies and institutional reforms, alongside linguistic mediation to create conditions for meaningful exchange.

Finally, we must recognize the limits of creative rule-bending. While adaptations like BL$_3$'s secularized "quiet reflection time" show promise in some contexts, they may fail when confronting doctrinal absolutism or entrenched political positions. As Lederach (2005) argues, such cases reveal the need to complement Wittgensteinian approaches with broader peacebuilding models that address identity-based conflicts through multiple levels of intervention. This nuanced understanding preserves the framework's utility while acknowledging its boundaries in complex interreligious conflicts.

CONCLUSION

This study's application of Wittgensteinian philosophy to IRD in Sri Lanka and the Philippines yields powerful insights addressing our three research questions.

The findings confirm that religious traditions function as distinct "language games" where meaning emerges through communal practices rather than abstract doctrines. Empirical evidence, such as the contrasting interpretations of dharma among Hindu and Buddhist leaders, and varied conceptions of jihad among Muslim communities, demonstrates how decontextualizing religious terminology increases conflict potential when concepts are divorced from their native linguistic frameworks.

Colonial legacies emerge as persistent disruptors of authentic dialogue. In Sri Lanka, Buddhist majoritarianism has institutionalized linguistic hierarchies that marginalize Tamil-speaking communities, while the Philippines' Christian-Muslim tensions reflect artificially imposed colonial categories. These power asymmetries fundamentally distort dialogue by privileging dominant language games while subordinating others.

Most significantly, Wittgenstein's framework provides actionable strategies for sustainable harmony:

- *Linguistic mapping*: Training facilitators to analyze terms like salvation and *jannah* within their original contexts before initiating dialogue.
- *Hybrid practice-building*: Developing shared rituals that honor distinct traditions, as exemplified by Mindanao's "peace guardians" who integrate Islamic *sulh* with Christian reconciliation practices.
- *Decolonizing dialogue structures*: Replacing state-centric models with grassroots interfaith education programs.

Our data consistently shows that prioritizing contextual use over abstract definition enables participants to transcend doctrinal impasses. When Catholic and Muslim leaders in Mindanao reframed theological differences through collaborative poverty alleviation initiatives, they embodied Wittgenstein's insight that meaning emerges through application rather than definition.

This research transforms Wittgenstein's theories from philosophical abstractions into a practical roadmap for interreligious dialogue practitioners. It demonstrates that peaceful coexistence requires neither homogenization nor avoidance of differences, but rather the cultivation of metalinguistic awareness, where communities learn to navigate each other's language games with integrity and mutual respect. This approach offers empirically grounded solutions for pluralistic societies facing religious tension by centering context, power analysis, and collaborative meaning-making.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study highlight the urgent need for innovative, context-sensitive strategies to foster interreligious harmony in pluralistic societies. Grounded in Wittgenstein's concepts of language games and rule-following, the following recommendations address the linguistic, structural, and practical challenges of IRD in Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and similar contexts.

For practitioners and religious leaders, interreligious dialogue must prioritize contextual understanding over doctrinal debate. Facilitators should be trained in "linguistic mapping" to analyze how terms

like jihad, dharma, or salvation function within their native traditions before attempting cross-faith dialogue. This prevents the decontextualization that fuels conflict, such as equating jihad solely with violence. Additionally, IRD should shift from abstract theology to shared ethical practices, such as interfaith community projects or joint environmental initiatives, where meaning emerges organically through collaboration. Hybrid terminologies, like Mindanao's "peace guardians," demonstrate how blending concepts (e.g., Islamic *sulh* and Christian reconciliation) can create bridges without doctrinal compromise. To counter power imbalances, IRD initiatives must ensure minority voices, whether Sri Lankan Hindus or Filipino Muslims, are not sidelined by dominant groups. Neutral mediators, such as respected academics or local elders, can help level asymmetrical dynamics.

For policymakers and institutions, structural reforms are essential to decolonize IRD frameworks. In Sri Lanka, this means challenging constitutional Buddhist primacy; in the Philippines, it involves dismantling Christian-centric narratives in public policy. Governments should reallocate resources from top-down programs to grassroots interfaith efforts, such as youth councils or women-led peacebuilding networks, which often achieve more sustainable results. Education systems must integrate religious literacy programs that teach students how different traditions use language contextually – for example, explaining jihad as spiritual struggle in Islam rather than a synonym for war. To ensure accountability, IRD initiatives should adopt measurable indicators of success, such as reduced hate speech or increased interfaith collaborations, with outcomes audited by independent bodies to prevent majoritarian bias.

For researchers, future studies should expand into under-researched areas, such as the role of digital platforms in shaping interreligious dynamics. How do social media algorithms amplify polarization, and can AI tools be designed to promote dialogue? Longitudinal research is also critical to assess whether Wittgenstein-inspired approaches, like hybrid language games, yield lasting harmony or risk dilution over time. Comparative studies across Asia (e.g., Sri Lanka's Buddhist-Hindu tensions vs. Indonesia's Muslim-Hindu relations) could identify adaptable strategies. Importantly, research must include marginalized voices, women, youth, and lay practitioners, whose informal peacebuilding efforts (e.g., interfaith marriages or shared rituals) are often overlooked in favor of formal clergy-led dialogues.

Resistance to IRD innovations is inevitable. Traditionalists may reject hybrid practices as doctrinal compromises, while states might weaponize religious language for political ends. Piloting initiatives in tolerant communities first can build proof of concept. For intractable doctrinal differences, "meta-language games" that explicitly acknowledge untranslatability (e.g., moksha and salvation as distinct but equally valid) can prevent dialogue breakdowns. Finally, strategies must adapt to conflict types: in state-minority tensions (e.g., Sri Lanka), advocacy for legal equity is paramount, while communal violence (e.g., Mindanao clan feuds) requires localized trust-building.

Sustainable interreligious harmony demands more than dialogue; it requires structural inclusivity, linguistic humility, and grassroots creativity. By treating religions as dynamic language games, stakeholders can navigate differences without erasing them, transforming diversity from a fault line into a foundation for collective flourishing. These recommendations offer a roadmap to bridge Wittgenstein's philosophical insights with the urgent pragmatism of peacebuilding in an increasingly fractured world.

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