religions

MDPI

Article

Interreligious Conversations: A Sociological Analysis of Practices of Otherness and Identity in a Museum of Sacred Art

Marco Bontempi

Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Florence, Via delle Pandette, 21, 50127 Florence, Italy; marco.bontempi@unifi.it

Abstract

(1) Background: From a post-secular perspective, the relationship between religions in the public sphere is conceived as an exchange in which religious beliefs, when formulated as rational arguments, contribute to building a shared public culture and foster a democratic transformation of interreligious relations. This article critiques this approach, highlighting its neglect of the lived experience of religion and, in particular, the situated and situational nature of processes of religious identity and religious difference formation. (2) Methods: Ethnographic observation of a performance held in a sacred art museum in Tuscany by immigrants from different religious backgrounds, four semi-structured interviews with performers, and one interview with the museum director were conducted. (3) Results: Personal and religious narratives, along with face-to-face interactions, generate dynamics of identification, differentiation, and situated identity redefinition. Interaction with the artwork, framed as a shared space, facilitates shifts in religious self and other positioning. It also reconfigures the boundaries between "us" and "them." The artwork acts as a symbolic device that enables multiple interpretations and unexpected forms of recognition. (4) Conclusions: Relations of identification and distinction among religious identities are transformed not through abstract rational deliberation but through concrete, discursive, and performative practices.

Keywords: interreligious dialogue; inter-faith; lived religion; religious identity; performative practices; alterity and recognition; museum ethnography; post-secularism

check for updates

Academic Editors: Giuseppe Giordan and Olga Breskaya

Received: 10 June 2025
Revised: 30 August 2025
Accepted: 8 September 2025
Published: 15 September 2025

Citation: Bontempi, Marco. 2025. Interreligious Conversations: A Sociological Analysis of Practices of Otherness and Identity in a Museum of Sacred Art. *Religions* 16: 1189. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16091189

Copyright: © 2025 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

1. Introduction

1.1. The Two Reasons for Interreligious Dialogue

Why engage in dialogue, and what conditions have made interreligious encounters possible? The explanation most commonly offered points to the growth of immigrant communities, their cultural and religious diversity, and the utility of dialogue for local inclusion and security policies. While these factors are significant, a sociological understanding requires examining the processes of change that illuminate the emergence of motivations for dialogue among Europeans themselves, not solely among immigrants. Among influential approaches to understanding the development of motivations for interreligious events (Griera and Nagel 2018), Habermas' "post-secular society" theory (Habermas 2003, 2006; Larouche 2006; Ferry 2015) provides useful insight into the public legitimation of interreligious dialogue, yet it remains limited in capturing other equally important drivers of its dynamism.

From Habermas's perspective, religious actors may participate in the democratic public sphere to the extent that they translate religious reasons into secular arguments. This

translation is not merely a communicative effort but reflects a profound shift in religious experience. Interreligious dialogue requires traditions that manifest openness, tolerance, and mutual recognition. However, this raises a central issue: deriving mutual recognition from respective doctrines presupposes, in principle, that essential principles align across religions. Dialogue is thus impossible as long as the truth of each religion is seen as originating exclusively within its own framework.

Jean-Marc Ferry emphasises that dialogue entails a reversal of perspective: "si l'on dialogue, c'est que l'on peut apprendre de l'autre. (. . .) on apprend de Dieu en apprenant les uns des autres" (Ferry 2015, p. 119). In the dialogical move, the other—their religious otherness—becomes central, and one's own beliefs are understood relationally without losing foundational elements but enriching them unexpectedly. In this conception, doctrines are not abandoned; religious otherness resides in the person present and their lived experiences of faith. The relationships of otherness shift as participants change; each combination defines a distinct composition of differences and religious boundaries. Ferry further notes: "L'exposition est personnelle. Alors, l'expérience religieuse, qu'inaugure sans doute la résolution de croire, devient communicable dans un langage profane. Elle se laisse argumenter comme un choix d'existence accessible à tous" (Ferry 2015, p. 120). The ability to translate religious reasons into secular arguments becomes accessible through this reversal of the relationship to truth. Once the distinction between certainty and truth is internalised—the former subjectively felt by the person, the latter real but not the possession of anyone—religious expression is legitimised to enter the public sphere without restriction regarding the beliefs it must defend, as it can perform the translation required by democratic principles.

Today, this democratising perspective informs the practices of many political and institutional actors engaged in governing religious pluralism, particularly at the local level. Through encounters and cooperative activities, members of different communities are encouraged to learn mutual reasonableness, ideally entering into a process of democratic transformation. As capacities for recognition and respect develop, religion contributes to social cohesion and gains social value even for non-believers.

Post-secular impetus encourages religious actors to cultivate openness and cooperation for the common good, such as social solidarity and peacebuilding. Yet, as in secular democracies, transformation is uneven: not all actors participate, some struggle to keep pace, and others abstain. The anticipated linear progression of the change fragments sometimes fails entirely or partially. The transformation of participants is, therefore, heterogeneous, temporary, and marked by visible failures.

The translation of religious reasons into secular arguments largely remains a regulative ideal, rendering interreligious dialogue a paradox in post-secular theory (Everett 2018). What critical theory often overlooks is that the centrality of the individual in dialogue is not primarily a logical necessity, but a socio-historical phenomenon. This reflects a profound transformation in how religious identity is lived: increasing importance is attributed to personal experiences and practices that extend beyond institutional "church religion", evolving into diverse forms of spirituality. At the individual level, transformations of religious identity do not follow linear rationalisation, but involve the recomposition of multiple identity elements across differences and even across religious boundaries, as shown by Hervieu-Léger (1999, 2000) and many others. Religious identity is always in the making, even when conceived as fixed (Ammerman 2021). Therefore, interreligious dialogue is never complete; it is a performative process.

As such, dialogue relies on face-to-face interactions and the mobilisation of shared meanings. Individual centrality does not negate collective identities; rather, the work of leaders and representatives is shaped not only by instrumental interests but also by personal

sensibilities and capacities for regulation, inclusion, and boundary-making (Nagel 2019). Religious experiences are communicated through confessional traditions and personal elaborations developed over individual life trajectories. Its expression takes the form of personal exposure, marked by dialogical openness but also by possible resistance, refusal, or dissonance. It does not claim absolute truth but appears as an existential choice, interwoven with emotions, memories, and inner tensions.

On these grounds, interreligious encounters may unfold in ways that diverge from conventional formats, such as public meetings for mutual acquaintances or institutionalised dialogue with local authorities. A particularly noteworthy example of these unconventional forms within the European context is the AMIR project.

1.2. What Is AMIR and Why It Matters for Research on Interfaith Activities

The AMIR project (Alliances, Museums, Encounters, and Relations)[1] was launched in 2018 following a series of meetings between museum directors in Florence and Fiesole (a town near Florence) and the directors of several state museums in Berlin. Since 2015, Berlin museums have been running the MULTAKA project, with the aim of engaging Arabic-speaking immigrants from Syria and other Middle Eastern countries, enabling them to present to visitors selected historical and artistic objects in the museum originating from Islamic societies in the Middle East.

While sharing the broader aim of enhancing the visibility of immigrant cultures and religions through their involvement in museum activities, the AMIR project took a distinctly different direction than the Berlin experience. These two features were particularly significant. First, AMIR did not restrict participation for Arab or Muslim immigrants, but extended it to migrants from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. Second, it did not link the presentation of artworks to the culture or religion of the participants: each participating immigrant was able to select and present any artwork within the museum that captured their interest, regardless of its provenance or religious affiliation.

AMIR has developed as a network of seven museums, each defining and implementing its own activities involving immigrants. Over the years, around 70 migrants have participated, most without prior training in European culture or art, and often with limited formal education. What united them was their interest in engaging with the cultural heritage of the Florentine and Fiesolan museums. Participants received a short introductory training followed by thematic sessions, conducted in collaboration with the University of Florence, on European art history and then, in collaboration with museum educators, contributed to activities autonomously designed and conducted by each museum.

Within the network, the Museo Bandini in Fiesole, dedicated entirely to sacred art, houses a collection of Tuscan Christian Catholic paintings and sculptures from the 14th to the 16th century. The AMIR activities carried out here are particularly significant for the sociology of interfaith initiatives. Their method emphasises immigrant participation in all stages—conceptualisation, planning, and realisation—of activities that have increasingly taken the form of performance over time. Since 2018, a group of around ten immigrants, coordinated by the museum director with support from museum educators, has produced 7 performances, often repeated multiple times in the same year. These have addressed both intercultural and interfaith themes.

One of the most successful and frequently repeated interfaith performances is "Mary: Woman among Women." First presented to the public in 2023, it has since been staged twice a year, with five iterations completed to date. Starting from the late medieval and Renaissance Tuscan paintings of Madonna, this performance has been reinterpreted through the voices of three performers: a veiled Muslim woman from Egypt, a Protestant woman from Cameroon, and a Candomblé-Catholic woman from Brazil.

1.3. The Preparatory Work for the Performance

The preparatory work for the performance is structured in three phases. In the first phase, meetings are dedicated to identifying the theme around which the performance will be developed. During these discussions, the museum director suggests potential themes, often drawing on previous performances. Participants then deliberate, propose modifications, additions, or new directions. Several meetings may be required, and the definition of both the theme and the artworks to be included is reached only when full consensus among participants has been established.

In the second phase, a set of sub-themes is identified, and all members of the group are invited to contribute to subsequent meetings by bringing personal reflections, practices, and examples from their own religion and culture. This work is entirely individual and self-directed, carried out outside group meetings, and later collectively discussed within them. In the interviews I conducted, participants unanimously emphasised the significance of this task for each of them, as they felt personally encouraged to view their religion and culture through a lens of valorisation and in relation to a European audience. This invitation is perceived as particularly motivating as it overturns the conventional dynamics between immigrants and Italian citizens.

In Italy, the religious and cultural identities of immigrants are frequently relegated to marginal or irrelevant positions and, in many cases, even stigmatised, especially in the public sphere. However, within this context, the project offers immigrants an opportunity for expression and recognition. This occurs through the interpretation, shaped by the subjective sensibilities of the participants, of religious artefacts of high symbolic and cultural value belonging to the majority religion in Italy.

Once group discussions have taken place, the museum director collects the texts presented by the participants and drafts a provisional text within a few days, taking into account the debates and suggestions. This draft is then circulated to all members for possible additions and revisions. The discussions that take place within working groups during the preparatory phases are occasions of interreligious exchange and dialogue. The interviews I conducted clearly show that interpersonal relationships forged through participation in the design and implementation of the performances—despite moments of tension and, at times, even sharp disagreements—have progressively consolidated into relationships of mutual respect and trust. Compared to the initial nucleus of participants in 2018, the AMIR performances at the Bandini Museum have gradually expanded, welcoming new members, most recently in 2024, without generating conflict.

The third phase consists of the collective drafting of the final version of the text and the decision regarding which participants will take part in the performance. Indeed, performances are not tied to fixed individuals; rather, participants may rotate. The preparation concludes with several rehearsal sessions that serve to refine the itinerary of the performance and its overall duration.

AMIR interreligious performances frame religious diversity and the boundaries between religions in the form of encounters that are distinctive for several reasons. The first lies in the involvement of immigrants from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds in the interpretation of Italian works of Catholic sacred art. The second is the particular combination of personal religious or spiritual expression with group work, in which such expressions are deepened, negotiated, and structured for public presentations. The third is the mediating role of the artwork in negotiating the boundaries between performers' religious traditions and Catholicism embodied in the work of art. In this way, a distinctive dialogical interaction between religions and religious experiences takes place. Through resonances, associations, and memories, the figures and themes of the artwork are connected

with "other" religious practices, alternately marking and softening the boundaries between different faith traditions as they emerge.

The fourth distinctive feature is that this boundary work, addressed to an audience, anticipates and encourages the possibility of audience participation through questions or objections. Thus, the public brings additional voices and perspectives—religious or otherwise—into the interreligious conversation, reacting to the work of the performers. As the interviews reveal, what is often triggered in these exchanges is the questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions regarding the meaning of the artwork and the drawing of religious boundaries. The unsettling effect of this disruption of the implicit is met with varied responses ranging from resistance to curiosity and interest in new forms of appropriation of what had previously seemed unproblematically familiar.

The fifth distinguishing element is the absence of religious leaders or formal community representatives. Each participant spoke only from their own experiences and personal conceptions of religion and religious diversity. This creates a rare condition of symmetry among participants in interfaith activities (Körs and Nagel 2018) in which identities and differences can be expressed more explicitly. Audience statements about the religious identity of others are, in fact, less filtered and self-censored than those typically voiced in formal interfaith dialogues (Nagel 2019). The secular setting of the museum provides a different frame, one in which individuals feel freer to voice their reactions—even at times, to resist the unsettling experience, as confirmed by all interviewees. This effect is likely related to the specific definition of the situation enacted by the performance. Whereas the mainstream museum framing typically positions the audience as "learners" before the "guide-expert", thus producing a situation akin to Goffman's "platform format" (Goffman 1983), the AMIR performances subvert this expectation.

The sixth distinctive feature is the peculiar combination of heterogeneous situational frames—at once theatre, guided tour, workshop, and interfaith encounter—which contributes to defining the situation as open-ended and unsettling.

Finally, the seventh lies in the paradox that despite the absence of religious leadership or community representation, these "interreligious conversations" are designed, prepared, and implemented within the cultural policy framework of the museum. They pursue community-oriented goals, particularly combating prejudice and promoting experiences of openness and encounters that highlight religious diversity and minority identities. From a museological perspective, the museum director emphasised in an interview that through these religious and cultural performances the museum seeks to redefine its relationship with the community it serves, valorising immigrants, their cultures, and their religions as interpretive resources capable of offering interreligious and intercultural perspectives to the city, and a plural perspective on historical–artistic heritage, consistent with the inclusion policies promoted by the Municipality of Fiesole.

1.4. Classifying AMIR

How can these performances be situated within the phenomenology of interreligious activities as discussed in sociological research? Within the framework of the "staged activity/unstaged encounters" distinction formulated by Gidley et al. (2018), the design and implementation of performance clearly intertwines both dimensions. On the one hand, preparatory work is largely unstaged, particularly in the free discussions on the theme and various contributions offered. In these exchanges, religious and cultural differences among participants are addressed and elaborated on with reference to a shared goal. On the other hand, the director introduces a staged dimension by orienting the discussion in light of the group's institutional objectives, although not in a directive manner.

Considering the three common features of interreligious initiatives, encounters, and activities identified by Griera and Nagel (2018), AMIR performances display either full or partial correspondence with each other. First, they fully meet the first criterion, namely the participation of individuals from at least two distinct religious traditions. Moreover, the individual and not community-based engagement of participants is at least partially comparable to the figure of the "fellow" described by Prideaux and Dawson (2018). Second, with respect to planning and duration, AMIR performances exhibit a hybrid character. On the one hand, each performance takes the form of a single event; on the other hand, they cannot be classified as situative incidents of interreligious encounters (Griera and Nagel 2018, p. 305), given that the performances have been staged biannually since 2019. Third, this repetition has certainly reinforced aspects of the third criterion, particularly by deepening interaction and mutual understanding among individuals of different faiths, although without direct effects in terms of community cohesion.

Beyond these general features, it is important to stress that interreligious encounters, initiatives, and activities always unfold in the presence of an audience whose composition may vary significantly depending on the motivations for attending. Audience members may include representatives of the communities involved, but also non-believers, adherents of other religions interested in dialogue, journalists, local politicians, enthusiasts of interfaith activities, or casual visitors. The audience's reactions shape the atmosphere of the encounter and can generate tensions or open up reflections on issues unforeseen by organisers. Thus, the audience should be considered a constitutive actor in interreligious activities. Systematic research into its motivations and responses would likely provide valuable insights for further development of the sociology of interreligious initiatives.

In terms of the motivations that drive the organisation of such encounters, as identified by Nagel and Kalender (2014), two of the four outlined can be discerned in AMIR performances, albeit with a distinction between those of the museum's leadership and those of the performers. For the museum, AMIR is situated within social cohesion policies, particularly through the construction of faith-based social capital. As noted earlier, the project represents a response to the need to open the museum to its community by reorienting its cultural offerings toward the valorisation of immigrant cultures and minority religions. This objective is also closely linked to the local political agenda of promoting cultural empowerment policies for minority groups within the community (Griera and Nagel 2018). From this politico-institutional and cultural empowerment perspective, AMIR performances also resonate with some elements of the typology of action repertoires proposed by Griera et al. (2018). In particular, their design and organisation align with the type of activities aimed at raising awareness, carried out with institutional support.

For performers, however, their motivations are partly different. Their involvement in the AMIR project overlaps with what Nagel and Kalender (2014) describe as symbolic interests, such as improving the public image of one's own religious tradition. This is especially evident for Muslim performers.

Finally, can the AMIR museum network be considered a form of multilevel or local governance of religious diversity (Griera 2020; Emmerich 2018, 2023; Griera et al. 2018; Prideaux and Dawson 2018)? Elements of multilevel governance may be identified given the intersection of different institutional levels; the AMIR network encompasses state, municipal, and private museums, while funding comes from both the Region of Tuscany and from a private banking foundation. At present, however, there is a lack of research that would provide a well-grounded answer to this question. In the case of the Bandini Museum, a link with municipal cultural empowerment policies for minorities is evident, but this single connection is not sufficient to establish the AMIR as a fully developed form of governance of religious diversity.

2. Methods

This study combines ethnographic observation and qualitative interviews to investigate the dynamics of AMIR performances. Data collection involved five semi-structured interviews and an ethnography of the performance Maria donna tra le donne through passive participant observation, audio recording, and systematic field-note writing. The observation took place in May 2024 and covered the full duration of the performance (approximately two hours).

Following this observation, I conducted four individual interviews with performers and one with the museum director. All interviews were audio-recorded, fully transcribed, and subjected to an initial pre-categorisation of responses using Atlas.ti 22. Further coding categories were subsequently developed inductively, following the grounded theory principles of iterative comparison and theoretical sensitivity.

The analysis was structured around five thematic clusters: (i) Knowledge of the AMIR project and motivations for participation; (ii) the extent to which involvement in AMIR fostered greater awareness of participants' own cultural and religious traditions and its perceived impact on personal transformation; (iii) the negotiation of religious differences and boundaries, both among performers and in interactions with audiences; (iv) distinctive features of AMIR performances; and (v) the significance of presenting interreligious performances in the secular institutional setting of the museum.

The interview with the museum director was organised along three thematic axes: (i) the development of the AMIR network and inter-museum relations; (ii) guiding principles and organisational practices shaping the design and delivery of performances; and (iii) the management of tensions during preparatory meetings and the promotion of difference as a value.

The scope of the analysis in this study is deliberately delimited. It does not address the material setting of the analysed performance or provide a systematic analysis of audience reactions. Instead, attention is directed to how performers present artworks and the interreligious dynamics that these presentations bring to the fore. This choice reflects the interpretive richness of performers' accounts, in which religious differences and affinities, inter-traditional boundaries, and processes of negotiation and transformation are explicitly thematised, always from the standpoint of lived religious experience.

The interviews, which refer to the entirety of the performers' experiences rather than only the event analysed here, also include their retrospective accounts of audience reactions across different performances. Through these accounts, the notion of "interreligious conversations" between performers and audiences emerges. However, the present study does not provide a direct analysis of these conversations or interactional exchanges. An ethnographic reconstruction of such dynamics is envisaged as the future stage of this research.

The use of ethnographic excerpts in dialogue with theoretical concepts does not imply generalisability to all members of the speaker's religious tradition. Rather, these excerpts serve to connect situated empirical accounts with broader conceptual fields of sociological theory. The validity of this approach is grounded not in statistical representativeness, but in logical adequacy and interpretive plausibility. In other words, the analysis offers a sociological interpretation of lived experiences, as articulated by the participants.

3. Results

3.1. Performance Analysis of Maria: Woman Among Women

3.1.1. Narrative Registers

For the purposes of this analysis, it is useful to distinguish in the performers' narratives between the denotative level—that is, the content of the narration—and the connotative level—the manner in which that content is expressed. The first corresponds to the theme of

the discourse and its conceptual content, while the second concerns the narrative register, which, as Barthes (1983, pp. 89–94) has shown, constitutes in itself a structure of signification.

In our analysis, this distinction is crucial because the narrative register may function within the performance as a metalanguage: a means through which performers evoke not merely specific content but also types of situations and their corresponding definitions. In sacred artwork, this distinction is often intrinsic to the work itself. For instance, a Madonna and Child does not solely depict Mary and Jesus; it simultaneously evokes the broader register of motherhood, that is, the universal mother–child relationship.

As we will see, performers' narrations operate precisely at this level, deploying a narrative register that allows specific Christian content to become a point of recognition beyond Christian audiences. In so doing, performers actively engage with and reconfigure religious boundaries.

The performance on the figure of Mary is developed through narratives that move from the presentation of six works depicting scenes in which Mary is caught in her relationship with Jesus: from the Annunciation to the condition of a pregnant mother, from the Nativity to her presence during Jesus' crucifixion[2]. The performers act out the narrative according to two main narrative registers, the first being the register of tenderness between a mother and her child. The emotional and expressive possibilities that this register contains make it an effective ground in which to bring the figure of Mary closer to everyday life and foster in those present the experience of strong emotional sharing, regardless of whether they are Christians, believers of other religions, or non-believers. At the same time, this register allows performers to greatly reduce the formal distance between the audience and the person illustrating the work, including through the expression of personal experiences and memories. One performer[3], in presenting a pregnant Madonna, says:

> What do mothers do when they are pregnant? You can really see that she is pregnant and caressing her baby to help it grow. I like that so much. I always remember my mom when she was pregnant with my baby brother; she always had her hand on her belly. For us Africans, when a woman is pregnant, she is held like that, with her hand on her belly to caress the baby.
>
> (P2b)

Another performer brings attention to the details of the mother-baby relationship and this relationship in the Qur'an:

> And he [the baby] you see, he bends his leg close to the mother; you can clearly see that he wants to get very close to the mother, and this hand Holding the hem of the dress looks like a sign of seeking the mother's protection. The look, if you see the look, it's kind of sad, and also the closeness, the fact of the closeness, of bringing her head closer to him and him to her. Wonderful. You can really see that it is a mother and her child.
>
> (P1f)

> In the Qur'an, when a blessed woman is mentioned, she is referred to as the "daughter of", the "wife of", or the "mother of", whereas she is referred to by her name, Mary. In fact, if we are to talk about Jesus, he was always the "son of Mary." To give even more importance to Jesus, because she was already a privileged woman in the Qur'an.
>
> (P1a)

Within the emotional context of the mother's tenderness towards her son, expressions of sadness are prominently featured, indicating a maternal concern for her child's future,

which Mary perceives and fears, a classic theme in this genre of painting. The performer accentuates this characteristic on several occasions.

> We see a beautiful image, a really beautiful image of the intimacy of the mother and child. However, if we look closely at the images, what does Mary look like? This distant look is also sad at the same time. She sees this son with tenderness and this intimacy between mother and son (...) there's something in the look of the two of them, their way, um, you can see that they know about their destiny, they know what they're going to face, what's going to happen.
>
> (P1f)

The focus on sadness initiates the first interfaith exploration of the theme of accepting suffering as being aligned with divine will. When presented with three distinct artworks, the Islamic faith performer remarks:

> Gabriel goes to Mary and speaks to her. She accepts her fate, however, she is concerned, rightly so.
>
> (P1a)
>
> The central message in the Christian religion, the most important thing, knowing the fate as it turns out, is the fact of accepting, accepting. They accept this fact, and who gives them the strength to accept it? faith? The affection between mother and son gives them the strength to accept a really difficult fate. They face it, both mother and son. This accepting destiny whatever it may be is a message not only in the Christian religion, in my opinion, because even the Muslim religion, I am talking about Islam, says that accepting helps a lot; in fact, they say, "if you accept destiny you will have happiness, if you do not accept what you have, however it will be a pain.
>
> (P1f)
>
> Before Christianity, there was the model of pain and suffering, and after the arrival of Christianity, it changed and became a model of acceptance, of accepting one's destiny. Acceptance is important in both Christian and Islamic religions.
>
> (P1d)

The second register was developed with reference to prevalent devotional practices. The figure of Mary is subject to various forms of inculturation across numerous regions globally. It is not uncommon for these processes of inculturation within Catholicism to occur in conjunction with other pre-existing religions, such as the Andean religions in Latin America, or with religions that later became predominant, as exemplified by Islam in Egypt. The maternal bond offers an entry point for the development of multireligious devotional practices concerning Mary in Brazil and Egypt. A Brazilian performer confirms the importance of this mother-son bond in popular devotion in Latin America:

> We always say: "Ask the mother, the son answers". She is always the main intermediary. Christ is the only Lord and Saviour. However, there is nothing wrong with asking the mother. Until today, we human beings, when we ask the son, we always ask the mother first, and we always ask her to intercede.
>
> (P3e)
>
> The Egyptian performer in presenting a Nativity from the 14th century takes up the episode of Mary, Joseph and Jesus' escape to Egypt to escape Herod's persecution. The Holy Family's journey through Egypt is the source of many popular devotional practices, which developed along a traditionally handed down itinerary, at the stages of which churches were built and dedicated to Mary.

> My husband's cousin lives in Matariyyah, it is in northwest Egypt (...) he said it is known that there is a very important church there, there is a "tree of Mary." This tree, with this church next to it, is important because it was always felt that not only Christians but also Muslim girls who have a problem having children would go there to pray to fulfil this dream.
>
> (P1c)
>
> In the south, there is a well-known church, and many Christians make pilgrimages there, but not only Christians. I remember, because I come from the south of Egypt, it always comes to my mind that my grandmother, who was always in the south, never moved, sometimes, when we would visit her, she would say, "I came back from that place, that church." It was strange for me to hear, but they did so willingly. They also feel a duty to go because they pray.
>
> (P1c)

The integration of personal and familial memories as an expressive register aligns with the narrative framework of popular devotional practices utilised in this narrative. This rhetorical approach facilitates the establishment of an intimate and participatory relationship between performers and audiences. By emphasising the biographical and subjective dimensions, the work is reframed as a relational device. At the same time, its reception is oriented toward an experience in which subjectivity functions as the medium through which the work is symbolically, affectively, and evocatively activated.

3.1.2. Cognitive Contamination: The Artwork in the Discursive Strategies of Affirmation and Distinction of Religious Identities

In the performance, various religious identities are invoked in mutual relation and elaborated through a narrative that originates from the Catholic character of the artwork and interacts with the distinct religious identity of the performer, thereby highlighting their affinities or dissonances. This narrative journey is developed through doctrinal references drawn from sacred texts, socio-historical contextualisations, and personal narratives that tend to transcend the confines of the work itself, engaging the viewer in an experience that surpasses the aesthetic datum. The resulting movement can be understood as dialogical, intentionally structured to foster a relationship of recognition with religious otherness. Rather than excluding or negating it, the movement affirms intersubjective engagement as a constitutive dimension of the encounter. However, it is often punctuated by clarifications and distinctions that underscore differences between religions. The overall effect on the participants is the experience of a dual movement: one of bewilderment and one of openness. For a substantial portion of the audience, largely composed of individuals from a Christian–Catholic cultural background—even when non-practising or non-believing—the subject of the artwork and the characters that constitute its narrative framework are immediately familiar or at least recognisable. Such recognisability is not merely the result of conscious adherence to the relevant religious tradition but rather the effect of a cultural habitus that assumes those references as part of the implicit "background" of taken-for-granted social experience. Initially, the public attributes a distinctly Christian meaning to the work, perceiving it in many cases as the only plausible interpretation. This pre-comprehension orients and limits the interpretive expectations of the viewer. When the performer's narrative introduces a reinterpretation of the artwork by another religious tradition—which not only does not reject the Christian artwork but integrates it into its own network of meanings—a rupture in the audience's taken-for-granted perception is generated. The cognitive dissonance that emerges from the undermining of an artwork's taken-for-granted meanings destabilises the audience's religious common sense. Through unexpected appropriations and exclusions of characters and meanings, re-read in light

of their own religious affiliation, the performers open new interpretive horizons for the audience. Thus, alternative meanings and different structures of the plausibility of religious experiences emerge. Peter Berger (2014) has termed this outcome of the encounter between different religions as *cognitive contamination*[4]. This logic emerges clearly in the narratives offered from an Annunciation:

> To me, this picture is common to the Islamic and Christian religions (...) To me, it is a picture that tells a chapter from the Qur'an. Except for some images in the left corner [she points to the figure of God]. But really, it tells so much (...) Now we discover at the top that image which is difficult for me to talk about: God "the Father", let's say, sending rays of light and the dove: power of God. The "Father" that's what to me ... everything else is okay, but the presentation of God as a person in the Islamic religion is not there. That's why I have a hard time saying it, though, I mean, I mean, with imagination...
>
> (P1a)

Mary's figure is particularly significant in affirming and distinguishing religious identities. It acts as a symbolic topos through which appropriations and distinctions are drawn:

> Mary is the only woman who has had her own chapter in the Qur'an. There is no other woman; she is the only one. She is the only woman mentioned in the Qur' an, which refers to her name 33 times. In the Qur'an, when a blessed woman is mentioned, it is as the "daughter of", "wife of", or "mother of", but not with her own name. (...) because, in our opinion, she is not just anyone, she is not just any woman, she was already prepared for this. In fact, the Qur'an, when it talks about this surah, this chapter, says that in the beginning she was prepared. (...) This is Mary, as the Qur'an has seen her, and it is very close to Christianity. Does the Qur'an know about Mary's virginity? Yes, yes. Mary is a virgin, this is also confirmed by the Qur'an (...) Moreover, Islam does not recognise the Incarnation, not even the Trinity. Jesus came by the will of God, but he is not Son of God, huh!
>
> (P1a)

> Catholic Christians pray through Mary, but we Protestants speak to Jesus. Jesus is our mediator. Many Catholics pray to Mary, the mediator between men, but we Protestant Christians do not believe this to be true.
>
> (P2b)

Alternative religious and cultural perspectives reveal distinct frameworks of plausibility. For example, a Brazilian performer places side by side a 14th-century painting, Crowning of Mary, and what she calls "another kind of coronation", an anonymous painting from 1725, a copy of a 1520 original, now preserved in Buenos Aires, La Virgen del Cerro, which depicts Mary in the dual bodily form of mother and mountain, according to the ancient Andean cult of mountains, a symbol of Mother Earth.

The painting is composed as a polysemous cultural artefact, whose interpretation is contingent upon the symbolic framework and regime of visibility employed by observers. Two interpretive frameworks are discernible: the colonial Catholic framework, emblematic of the Spanish perspective, and the indigenous Andean framework, grounded in pre-Columbian cosmology. Each perspective activates distinct semantics of the sacred, power, and mediation between humans and the divine.

The Spanish frame of the image is structured according to the principles of Tridentine theology and imperial sovereignty. At the base, the silver sphere represents the earthly world, which is ordered and dominated by the church and the empire. The figures of

Emperor Charles V, the Pope, and the bishop express the legitimisation of colonial power and the centrality of authority in social and religious hierarchies. In the centre, Mary's pregnant figure presents a body that is both a biological and symbolic space: a mediator of divine incarnation and an instrument of moral and social order. The upper level of the painting, with the image of the crowning of the Virgin, the Trinity, and the archangels, depicts a symbolic universe that reflects the hierarchical order of colonial Europe.

Within the indigenous frame, the same image is reinscribed within a relational and horizontal cosmology in which nature, divinity, and humanity are in constant interaction. The three levels of the artwork do not represent a theological ascent but rather a mineral and symbolic stratification: silver, bronze, and gold. These metals are not just resources but vital forces that structure the Andean cosmos.

> The first is the silver level, the second is bronze, and the third is gold. La Virgen brings abundance, fertility, recalls Mother Earth. In the centre, they see King Tupac and his son behind this wall. In this painting, the wall is made to protect the mine from the Spanish, and the natives are behind it. This great mountain is Mother Earth, protecting those who worship her. On a higher level is the sun, which is male energy, and the moon, which is female energy, and gold and wealth. Two different things according to the two perspectives. In the end, it is the same Madonna, the same Mary, the same woman.
>
> (P3e)

This dual reading generates symbolic tension between hierarchical, universalist rationality, and relational, context-specific logic. The figure of Mary functions as a "symbolic interface", serving as a point of intersection and mediation between these two symbolic worlds. Devotional practices directed toward this painting activated distinct interpretive horizons, yet these were not entirely separate.

It is important to note that the "narrative frame" is explicit and intelligible to any observer, provided they are competent in understanding the meanings and symbols of both symbolic worlds. The dual layers sanctioned by the painting allowed the individual observer, according to their cultural affiliation and personal devotion, to perform an act of selective foregrounding, placing one layer in the background and the other in the foreground. In this way, an indigenous observer could emphasise the symbols of the pre-Columbian tradition, while a Spanish observer could foreground those of Catholicism, reproducing the boundaries of their respective religious frameworks. However, this duality also permits a "dual devotion", a practice that the performer invokes in relation to another configuration in which the figure of Mary is associated with polytheistic deities.

> In my city, Salvador Bahia (...) we have the feast of Iemanjà, the "queen of all waters." Many people pray to the saints of the Catholic Church, Mary and Jesus. (...) They ask Iemanjà, they make some vows, and also for Mary, the mother of Jesus. (...) I also do that; I pray for both Mary and Iemanjá.
>
> (P3e)

It is worth noting that the devotional practice of praying to Mary and Iemanjà is rooted in a complex history: next to Mary, introduced by colonial Spain, is placed Iemanjà a deity developed in colonial times in connection with the pre-Columbian Pachamama cults by Africans of Yoruba origin, deported to Brazil as slaves, and plays a central role in the Candomblé pantheon, which was forbidden and secretly practiced throughout the colonial era.

The autobiographical narrative of the performer confirms the plurality of cultural contributions and devotional practices that, even today, remain alive, but introduces an inversion of perspective: what in the past was experienced as a split between colonial

imposition and the "clandestine" devotion of slaves, today is experienced unitedly as a characterising part of one's personal and collective religious experience.

3.2. Analysis of the Interviews[5]

Religious Identity: Negotiating Colonisation and Authenticity

In the performances of the AMIR project, the theme of religious colonisation and decolonisation frequently emerges and is developed in various ways by individual performers, contingent on their personal experiences and perspectives. In this context, the divergence between the positions articulated in interviews by two performers from Angola regarding the colonisation-authenticity nexus in Angolan religious practices is noteworthy. The first performer perceives Catholicism, imposed in Angola by the Portuguese, as a potent mechanism for the denial of the collective authenticity of the Angolan people, which, in his view, continues to generate alienated forms of self-identity:

> It makes me angry when I see Angolans who are Christians. Yes, this has always been the case; I did not find them a, how to say, right thing towards history (...) a little bit immoral, let us say. Yes, because the Catholic Church baptised people who were kidnapped; that is, they consented to the kidnapping of people. So, now you tell me you are Angolan, you are Catholic, this thing made me uneasy (...) I was seeing that some Angolans have the need to look more like Europeans. Only then do they see themselves as better people–civilised, educated, and principled. (...) there is this leaving behind one's own culture to identify with the other's culture.
>
> (P)

The second affirms his identity as Angolan through Catholicism. He confronts two ways of living the faith: the one he learned in Angola and the one he encountered in Italy. This comparison surprises him. Where he expected distance, he found similarities; where he thought he recognised himself, he discovered differences instead:

> First, when I came to Italy, I was really amazed to see so many churches. In every corner, you have no excuse not to go pray on Sunday. Every corner you turn, you have a church; you can safely go to make your confession and pray there. The second factor is mass. I heard the Mass the same, without any change. I thought it was different. However, the Mass remained the same. (...) [in Italy] someone who has not gone to Mass for ten years and does not go to confession goes [to church], takes communion, and goes home. When I saw these things, I said to myself, "But what's going on? What's going on with these Christians?" (...) I really got angry, "but what kind of Christian is this? He yells, he doesn't respect, he says the bad words" (...) You now have another way of doing religious practices; instead, we have a much more, I can say, sacred way; we give a much more sacred meaning to all things. I am not saying that you do not give it, no, it is not that, but in Angola, you give a greater value, a much greater value. (...) I have found many more Muslims who have the qualities that a Christian should possess. This is absurd to me, but that is what happened.
>
> (E)

Decolonizing the Take-for-Granted

In encounters with religious diversity, the dynamics of expectations concerning differences and similarities assume a central role in shaping cognitive processes. In numerous AMIR performances, audiences often implicitly assume that substantial religious differences will emerge between the meanings conveyed by Christian artworks and the narratives presented by performers of other faiths. The unforeseen emergence of similarities

challenges these expectations, disrupting the anticipated framework and engendering interpretive disorientation.

In most instances, the audience's attention is more readily drawn to differences rather than similarities. Highlighting the latter necessitates time and a certain level of discursive engagement from performers. It is only through more comprehensive narrative efforts that a perceptual shift can be induced, enabling visitors to recognise that what initially seemed radically "other" is not so disparate from their existing knowledge. This cognitive shift often becomes evident only at the conclusion of the performance, when some participants express surprise.

> People are just focused on the differences, and when they don't find them, they get a little upset and think, "what did I see?"
>
> (E)

> It has happened to me sometimes that someone has said to my face, "no, what you say is not right" or "that's not true." Yes, it has happened when I talk about the role of women in Islam. (...) I always say that Islam is one thing and being Muslim is another. Islam said that, if there are Muslims who do not do that, it is not what my religion represents. When I say that for Islam the woman must be respected (...) in the beginning they don't believe it. I say it, though, and then I can see the reaction of people immediately. I am very pleased if someone asks me a question when they have a doubt.
>
> (S)

However, this process is not uniformly activated and is significantly influenced by the audience's presuppositions. Notably, in certain contexts, the absence of anticipated differences can lead to frustration: among visitors, those who adhere to a preconceived notion of otherness may experience disorientation or disappointment when their expectations are unmet. These disruptions of expectations are crucial for initiating dialogue between performers and the audience, which is a central component of this project.

In this context, it is noteworthy what a performer who also serves as a guide at the Florence Mosque articulated. She notes that the audience visiting the mosque with the intent to learn about Islam is markedly distinct from those attending performances centred on artwork. These represent two categories of participants with different expectations and dispositions. Individuals engaging in mosque tours seek to acquire knowledge about the Islamic faith and often exhibit an attitude characterised by a more respectful reception of the content. Visitors generally accept the information presented to them as an authentic representation of Islamic doctrine, regardless of their personal level of adherence. Even when reservations or doubts are present, there is a prevailing attitude of acknowledgement of the authority of religious discourse, which is neither questioned nor subjected to interpretative modification. In contrast, in the performances, he observes:

> I like Amir more because I like to hear what others think, free to say it without being conditioned by anything. In my opinion, this is good, so I reach others better. Then, if it gets to a point where we cannot ... it's okay, let's not comment; however, let's respect each other. (...) there is always the comparison, it comes normal, I say my opinion, then everyone gives their opinion, and it comes normal to make the comparison between one and the other.
>
> (S)

> "We are here in front of this painting, I think you all know what it represents", and they reply, "Yes, we know, this is the Annunciation, this is the arrival of the Three Kings". I mean, they are familiar with the artworks they are looking

> at. Then, when you provide insights related to the work, but take the audience into another context, another "territory", here you hear people saying, "what a beautiful reflection! I've never looked at this work in this perspective." (...) There is always an attempt to listen to what you want to say to be able to understand. Then, we do the reflections right along with the audience, which participates.
>
> (P)

The process of performance preparation activates, in the performers themselves, a dynamic of reflexivity that questions assumptions taken for granted within their own religious and cultural experiences. The need to elaborate on their personal contribution to the reading and contextualisation of the artwork prompts them to embark on a path of deepening their own tradition of belonging. In this process, gaps in knowledge and unexpected awareness emerge, revealing how the confrontation with the other—mediated by the work—triggers a confrontation with themselves, producing a renegotiation of their own knowledge and identity.

> When the museum director started asking us, "what do you guys have, you, to say?" I was like, "but what do I have to say? what do I have to say?" I realised that I knew very little about my own culture. I'm not talking about the aspects of daily life (...) I'm really talking about the ancestors, or the history [of my country].
>
> (E)

> The Amir project made me learn even more about my world, something I had never thought about. During the visits, in the comments that are made on the artwork, we have to put our culture; this is the extra thing that we have to do, different from others. I learned more about my world through this project than I could have ever imagined.
>
> (S)

> I find in this project opportunities to explain things that, in my opinion, have been told in a wrong way, intentionally, just to denigrate being black, the African, and their way of seeing life and their worldview (...) this pairing of the description of the work (...) with your [cultural] background, made me develop almost a need for myself, the need to bring something original, that is, something of my own. (...) A personal thing.
>
> (P)

Otherness: From Inclusion to Relationship

In contemporary museum practices, particularly in initiatives aimed at incorporating an "other" perspective on cultural heritage, a notable trend has emerged. Individuals from diverse backgrounds who embody this "other" perspective are frequently invited to engage with artworks through emotional and subjective responses. Emphasis is placed on personal experience rather than interpretive analysis, which may have broader significance. This approach risks rendering the contribution as "other" merely because it is articulated in a manner distinct from the institutional norm. The museum guide refrains from referencing personal emotions or autobiographies, favouring an impersonal exposition that is considered universally valid. Consequently, the foreigner is "included" in museum practice, yet remains othered, as their communicative space is confined to expressing an emotional relationship with the artwork, as if they are incapable of offering intellectual insights: an Orientalist primitivism that gives a voice while denying the capacity for thought.

Otherness is perpetuated and solidified through the dichotomy of two perspectives: centrally positioned is the interpretation of the expert, while at the periphery lies the emotional and subjective input of the "outsider", confined to a perpetual state of minority

with no prospect of resolution, thereby remaining consistently marginalised. (Simmel [1908] 1971).

The performance that we analysed intentionally adheres to a different rationale. It is predicated on a participatory model that acknowledges and appreciates the cultural and religious diversity of individuals engaged in the project. The museum director stated that the development of this model has emerged with time and experience:

> Initially, this was not entirely clear to us. When the people involved began to share their first impressions, often very emotional ones, I began to think. I wondered why, in front of the work of art, I could talk about my own culture and bring a personal point of view, while the foreigner must remain confined to an emotional or subjective register. Why must his presence be reduced to an exotic touch, a mere complement to the official interpretation provided by the guide? Why can he not have a voice, his own reading, autonomous and critical?
>
> (D)

To address these enquiries, a method has been developed over time, whereby participants are encouraged to interpret artwork from the perspectives of their cultural, religious, and traditional backgrounds. This is facilitated through intensive group work, wherein both participants and coordinators engage deeply on personal, relational, and intellectual levels. Such involvement fosters meaningful communication by drawing on participants' knowledge and experience. Mere technical expertise is insufficient; what distinguishes this approach is the willingness to incorporate one's own cultural and interpretive background into an exchange with others, thereby decentralising the traditional narrative and enabling recognition of the cultural significance of each individual's contribution. The decisive step, says the director,

> Is in recognising the value of all people, the cultural value, that is, *that each person is capable and has everything it takes to give their own interpretation of heritage*. (...) In the AMIR project, we started with the idea that the people involved were able to participate, have their own point of view on the work, and talk about it. Of course, for this to happen, the museum has to perform its mediating function, that is, to enable people to enter into communication with the artwork, but after that, they do it themselves.
>
> (D)

4. Discussion

Three principal elements emerged with notable clarity from the performance analysis and interviews. The first pertains to the transformation of the interpretive framework of religious identity, both one's own and that of others, facilitated by the symbolic field activated by artworks. When supported by an open approach to dialogue, engagement with the artwork can foster a shift in the perception of oneself and others. The artwork is reinterpreted from diverse perspectives, leading participants to redefine the boundaries of their identity representation. This process is particularly significant when it occurs within a relational context that can be termed interreligious conversation, where engagement with differing viewpoints challenges habitual interpretive patterns and brings out hitherto taken-for-granted distinctions.

The narrative provided by the Egyptian Muslim performer effectively exemplifies this dynamic. Confronted by the enquiry of another ("What is this for you?"), she was compelled to examine her own cultural and religious origins ("Because then, I had to go and study my traditions, where I come from"), demonstrating how such disorientation can initiate an unexpected space for personal reflection. This performative and dialogic

dimension underscores the non-static, processual, and context-dependent nature of the identities. During and after performances, religious identities manifest as structured articulations, but remain susceptible to change, influenced by the specific circumstances of the encounter and ensuing symbolic negotiation.

The second relevant aspect is that this transformation not only invests in the individual or cognitive sphere, but also in the restructuring of social ties. The frame through which shared experience is read has profound implications for the configuration of "us" and "them": the artwork acts as a symbolic device that allows participants to discover similarities where previously only differences were taken for granted. This is emblematic in reference to the theme of motherhood and annunciation, which becomes a site for the emergence of common humanity. Far from undoing identity boundaries, rearticulations were observed, generating forms of mutual recognition based on previously unconsidered shared elements. Otherness is now redistributed; there is no centre of normality around which irregular otherness marginally revolves. Everyone is other to the other; the artwork can be placed in different contexts and illuminated by different lights. Beyond the original intentions of the participants, the relationships between these othernesses often multiply and people meet in unexpected territories. In this way, performances show their empirical value; in them, redefinitions of the other's identity are initiated, and from the relationship and performativity of the encounter, an unprecedented sense of belonging and sharing can emerge. The resulting "we" is not given at the outset but is produced situationally through shared discursive and interpretive practices.

Third, empirical observations suggest that certain theoretical assumptions concerning the democratisation of religion through interreligious dialogue should be reconsidered. Consistent with the Habermasian framework of communicative action, these theories often advocate for linear transformations of religious identities towards increasingly universalistic forms, positing that rational and shared recognition of common rights is essential for peaceful coexistence among diverse religious identities. However, empirical evidence reveals a more complex and less linear reality: religious identities are constructed and transformed within specific relational contexts, where structures of relevance (Schutz, Berger) and definitions of the situation (Goffman) are subject to ongoing negotiations. Tying identity transformation to universalist rationalism fails to adequately account for the situated and performative nature of identification processes.

5. Conclusions

The analysis carried out does not radically deny the value of these theories; rather, it shows their partiality and the need for reformulation. While the universalist vision does not find full confirmation, we see the generation of common symbolic spaces, places of intersection, and mutual recognition that do not coincide with "universal rights" but nevertheless represent new forms of commonality.

It is this situated and relational creation of a shared space—as in the case of the readings of the Annunciation—that constitutes the most relevant fact. It generates not only a relational and performative "we", but also new possibilities for interaction with otherness. The transformative significance of such practices lies not so much in the homogenisation of religious identities as in the production of forms of contact and recognition that rearticulate them. Ultimately, it is a contingent, non-universalist experience that profoundly alters the sense of social ties between participants and the perception of self in relation to others.

When examined from the necessary analytical distance, the contingent experience of the performance can be interpreted as an interactional space in which freedom of and from religion is acted out as a situated practice. Within this context, the universalistic rationality underpinning the principle of tolerance is not explicitly addressed by performers or the

audience. However, the dynamics observed—bewilderment, redefinition of boundaries, openness, but also resistance and rejection—indicate the activation of framing and re-framing processes that are significant for the transformation of religious identities.

The narratives that emerged, along with the observed forms of identification and distinction, are made possible by the principle of tolerance that governs the relations between religious differences. At the same time, these expressions appear to go beyond the notion of tolerance, indicating a shift toward a normative and cultural framework more explicitly shaped by the paradigm of religious freedom—conceived here both as an individual right and as a resource in face-to-face interactions.

Universal rights and reasonable arguments, while constituting a necessary condition for the exercise of religious freedom, are insufficient to generate a concrete and lived transformation of identities. Indeed, it is in the situated space of face-to-face interaction that religious freedom acquires its empirically relevant form, shaping the construction and redefinition of participants' social and religious identities (Breskaya et al. 2024).

Funding: This research was funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research as a Research Projects of Significant National Interest—PRIN 2022 referred to in Directorial Decree No. 104 of 02-02-2022 "URBAN GOVERNANCE OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY—GovREL" under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, Mission 4—Component 2. From Research to Enterprise—Investment 1.1 National Research Program Fund (NRP) and Research Projects of Significant National Interest (PRIN), funded by the European Union—NextGenerationEU—Project Code: 2022NPTNEZ—CUP: B53D23019620006.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Approval by the Ethics Committee of the University of Padua: Ref. no. 1288 dated 22 March 2024.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent for participation was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors on request https://www.mdpi.com/ethics.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

1 Implemented by the Musei di Tutti Thematic Museum Network composed of 7 museums in Fiesole and Florence and the Stazione Utopia Cooperative, funded by the Regione Toscana and the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze, in 2019 it won the first MUSACCES—Universidad Complutense de Madrid award in the section: "Protection and enhancement of cultural heritage for all people" as an innovative initiative in the area of social inclusion and broadening of audiences. The museums participating in the project are: Museo Civico-Archeologico e Area Archeologica di Fiesole, Museo Bandini, Museo Primo Conti, Museo di Palazzo Vecchio, Museo Novecento, Complesso di Santa Maria Novella, Museo degli Innocenti, (https://www.amirproject.com/) (accessed on 14 September 2025).

2 *Annunciation* by Taddeo Gaddi, 1340–1345 (a); *Madonna of Childbirth* by Nardo di Cione, 1355 (b); *Nativity* by the Master of the predella at the Ashmolean Museum active in Florence in the third quarter of the 14th century (c); *Crucifixion*, by a Sienese painter active in the second quarter of the 14th century (d); *Incoronation of the Virgin Mary* by Giovanni del Biondo, 1373 (e); *Madonna with Child* attributed to Filippo Brunelleschi, 1400–1410 (f). Also included in the performance is *La Virgen del Cerro*, an anonymous painting from 1725, a copy of a 1520 original, now in Buenos Aires.

3 In the text, the performers are designated as follows: P1 (a woman of Muslim faith from Egypt); P2 (a woman of Protestant faith from Cameroon); P3 (woman of Candomblé-Catholic faith from Brazil).

4 «I am here making two important propositions. The first is that cognitive contamination relativizes; the second is that pluralism produces cognitive contamination as an ongoing condition. (. . .) A plausibility structure is the social context in which any cognitive or normative definition of reality is plausible (. . .) Pluralism, by its very nature, multiplies the number of plausibility structures in an individual's social environment» (Peter Berger 2014, pp. 2, 31, 32).

5 The performers interviewees are identified as follows: a man without religious affiliation from Angola (P); a Catholic man from Angola (E); a Muslim man from Egypt (R); and a Muslim woman from Egypt (S).

References

Ammerman, Nancy Tatom. 2021. *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices*. New York: New York University Press.

Barthes, Roland. 1983. *Elements of Semiology*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Berger, Peter L. 2014. *The Many Altars of Modernity. Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age*. Boston and Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, Inc.

Breskaya, Olga, Giuseppe Giordan, and James T. Richardson. 2024. *A Sociology of Religious Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Emmerich, Arndt. 2018. Negotiating Germany's first Muslim–Christian kindergarten: Temporalities, multiplicities, and processes in interreligious dialogue. *Social Compass* 65: 578–95. [CrossRef]

Emmerich, Arndt. 2023. Post-secular Governance Networks and the Brokerage of Religious Diversity in a North German Town. In *Interreligious Encounters in Europe: Sites, Materialities and Practices*. Edited by Jan Winkler, Laura Haddad, Julia Martínez-Ariño and Giulia Mezzetti. London: Routledge, pp. 71–87.

Everett, Samuel Sami. 2018. Interfaith Dialogue and Faith-Based Social Activism in a State of Emergency: Laïcité and the Crisis of Religion in France. *International Journal of Political and Cultural Sociology* 31: 437–54. [CrossRef]

Ferry, Jean-Marc. 2015. Conviction religieuse et responsabilité politique La question d'une implication des religions dans nos espaces publics. *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 169: 105–22. [CrossRef]

Gidley, Ben, Samuel Sami Everett, Elodie Druez, Alyaa Ebbiary, Arndt Emmerich, Dekel Peretz, and Daniella Shaw. 2018. Off and on-stage interactions: Muslim-Jewish encounter in urban Europe. *Social Compass* 65: 235–54. [CrossRef]

Goffman, Erving. 1983. The Interaction Order: American Sociological Association, 1982 Presidential Address. *American Sociological Review* 48: 1–17. [CrossRef]

Griera, Mar. 2020. Governing Religious Diversity Through Interreligious Initiatives: Affinities, Ambiguities and Tensions. In *Religious Diversity and Interreligious Dialogue*. Edited by Anna Körs, Wolfram Weisse and Jean-Paul Willaime. Cham: Springer, pp. 89–101.

Griera, Mar, and Alexander-Kenneth Nagel. 2018. Interreligious relations and governance of religion in Europe: Introduction. *Social Compass* 65: 303–4. [CrossRef]

Griera, Mar, Maria Chiara Giorda, and Valeria Fabretti. 2018. Initiatives interreligieuses et gouvernance locale: Les cas de Barcelone et de Turin. *Social Compass* 65: 312–28. [CrossRef]

Habermas, Jurgen. 2003. De la tolérance religieuse aux droits culturels. *Cités* 13: 151–70. [CrossRef]

Habermas, Jurgen. 2006. Religion in the public sphere. *European Journal of Philosophy* 14: 1–25. [CrossRef]

Hervieu-Léger, Danièle. 1999. *Le Pèlerin et le Converti. La Religion en Mouvement*. Paris: Flammarion.

Hervieu-Léger, Danièle. 2000. *Religion as a Chain of Memory*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Körs, Anna, and Alexander-Kenneth Nagel. 2018. Local 'formulas of peace': Religious diversity and state-interfaith governance in Germany. *Social Compass* 65: 346–62. [CrossRef]

Larouche, Jean-Marc. 2006. De la religion dans l'espace public. *Vers une société postséculière. Éthique Publique* 8. [CrossRef]

Nagel, Alexander-Kenneth. 2019. Enacting Diversity: Performative Dynamics in Interreligious Activties. In *Volume 10: Interreligious Dialogue. From Religion to Geopolitics*. Edited by Giuseppe Giordan and Andrew P. Lynch. Leiden: Brill, pp. 111–27.

Nagel, Alexander-Kenneth, and Mehmet Kalender. 2014. The Many Faces of Dialogue: Driving Forces for Participating in Interreligious Activities. In *Religions and Dialogue*. Edited by Wolfram Weiße, Katajun Amirpur, Anna Körs and Dörthe Vieregge. Münster: Waxmann, pp. 85–98.

Prideaux, Mel, and Andrew Dawson. 2018. Interfaith Activity and the Governance of Religious Diversity in the United Kingdom. *Social Compass* 65: 363–77. [CrossRef]

Simmel, Georg. 1971. The stranger. In *On Individuality and Social Forms*. Edited by Donald N. Levine. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 143–49. First published 1908.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.