

Article

Interreligious Dialogue and Local Governance in Europe: A Political Science Perspective

Luca Ozzano 

Department of Cultures, Politics and Society, University of Turin, 10153 Turin, Italy; luca.ozzano@unito.it

Abstract

In the first quarter of the 21st Century, Western Europe witnessed a proliferation of various types of interreligious initiatives. In the meantime, a new paradigm of local management of religious diversity has become increasingly popular in many parts of the continent. This new approach focuses on the involvement of religious actors in policy making, in a bottom-up “governance” perspective, rather than on old-style directive and top-down “government”. As a consequence, interreligious bodies and initiatives have started playing not only a social but also a political role, in some cases even formally sanctioned at the institutional level. However, considering that most part of the existing literature on the local management of religious diversity adopts a sociology or religious studies perspective, a thorough assessment of the political meaning of this phenomenon is still lacking. The present article tries to contribute to fill this gap by assessing the main points of the existing literature, sketching a typology of interreligious initiatives and their political/institutional roles, and, finally, drafting a new research agenda in order to improve our comprehension of the role of interreligious bodies in local governance and how to enhance their democratic and participative nature.

Keywords: religious diversity; governance; cities; political science; institutions; interreligious dialogue

1. Introduction

In the first quarter of the 21st century, Europe witnessed a proliferation of local interreligious (but sometimes, especially in relation to Islam, also intra-religious) dialogue initiatives, ranging from actual interreligious bodies, to occasional dialogue events, intercultural festivals, and educational programs. In some cases set up by local political institutions, in others springing up from bottom up efforts, such initiatives have become increasingly important in local administration, sometimes even acquiring a recognized institutional role—at least at an advisory level—in the formation of public policies.

Although these phenomena have recently become the subject of an increasingly rich literature—especially in relation to countries such as France, Germany, Italy and Spain—the theoretical reflection on them is (in the opinion of the author of this article) still lacking. One of the main problems at stake is the fact that the participants in most research (Giordan and Lynch 2019; Grier et al. 2018; Giorgi and Itçaina 2016; Duemmler and Nagel 2013; Melloni 2002; Pacillo 2012; Giordan and Pace 2014; Naso 2015; Becci et al. 2017) are mainly sociology and religious studies specialists, who have sometimes failed to fully appreciate the actual political dimension of the phenomenon, to focus instead on the social and religious sides of it. This is well shown by the ambiguous use of the term “governance”, which is sometimes



Academic Editors: Giuseppe Giordan and Olga Breskaya

Received: 4 December 2025

Revised: 2 February 2026

Accepted: 11 February 2026

Published: 13 February 2026

Copyright: © 2026 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 \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.

utilized in “technical” terms, to refer to actual public choice processes involving some degree of institutionalized participation of non-state actors; sometimes in wider and more general terms, involving both bottom up and participative styles of administration, but also top down and directive ones; sometimes even in unclear terms, without a precise definition. Such confusion is particularly harmful in relation to the subject of this paper, considering the relevance of detecting the actual inclusion of religious actors in (but also, more frequently, their exclusion from) decision-making procedures. Therefore, in the following sections the term “governance” will be used only in reference to actual (at least partly) participated decision-making procedures and institutions, while “management” or “government” will be adopted when dealing, in broader terms, with decision-making procedures that can also involve top-down, directive styles.

This contribution, unlike most of the previously mentioned literature, adopts a political science approach, and looks at the phenomena of religious diversity and interreligious dialogue mainly in relation to democratic procedures, and, more specifically, the municipal decision-making process. Its aim is to look at the involvement of religious actors (and, more particularly, interreligious initiatives and councils) in relation to two dimensions: the level of formal inclusion of the latter in the policy-making process, and the degree of actual “democratic” representation of the religious communities in the initiatives. Indeed, it argues that, in order to understand the actual relevance and salience of dialogue initiatives (defined here as the meetings among representatives of three or more different faiths) in Europe’s local contexts, we need an approach more focused on the power and decision-making dimensions, and, more specifically, on the actual role played (or not played) by (inter)religious actors in policy making, and their formal (or informal) inclusion in the decision-making procedures. This is especially important to avoid their use in terms of “vanity” or “instrumental” tools for the local administrations, without any real political and decision-making weight, and to enhance their actual participation in local policy making, with real responsibilities and clear, transparent, and democratic procedures for the selection of the leaders who are part of them, inspired by an “actual”, bottom up and participative, governance approach. Of course, this does not mean downplaying the relevance of interreligious initiatives which are focused on the social and religious levels, without playing any political role, but only acknowledging their non-political nature (for example by avoiding the use of the term “governance” in relation to these cases).

To do so, this paper will first shortly review the theoretical literature on the concept of governance, highlighting the defining points of a governance-inspired decision-making process, in order to make clear in which cases it is legitimate to use this concept in relation to interreligious initiatives, and in which cases it is not. The second section will then review in detail the growing literature on interreligious initiatives and the roles they play in local governance (in both technical and wider terms). On this basis, the following section will try to sketch a typology of initiatives of interreligious dialogue, in relation to their different levels of involvement in local decision-making processes. Finally, the fifth section will highlight the main critical points to analyze and assess, putting forward a new research agenda that can improve our understanding of the roles played (or playable) by interreligious bodies in local policy making and help making them as participative, inclusive, and responsive as possible.

2. The Governance Approach

When used in technical terms, the concept of “governance” refers to a new style of decision-making which has become increasingly popular since the 1980–1990s. Its emergence took place in the context of the new wave of “minimum state” and “neo-liberal” policies adopted by administrations such as those of Margaret Thatcher in the United

Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States; this has given rise to a number of critical contributions, looking at the governance approach as a tool to portray as more “people-friendly” the neoliberal economic policies and, especially, the extraction of resources from neo-colonial and post-colonial contexts (Harmes 2006; Deneault 2013). Although the author of this paper is aware of such literature and ideas, they will not be dealt with in depth here since this paper has a different focus.

According to Mark Bevir, the governance approach refers to

All processes of governing, whether undertaken by a government, market, or network, whether over a family, tribe, formal or informal organization, or territory, and whether through laws, norms, power, or language. Governance differs from government in that it focuses less on the state and its institutions and more on social practices and activities. (Bevir 2012)

In the field of international organizations and NGOs, many of whom have more or less enthusiastically adopted the governance approach since the 1990s, the best-known definition is the one provided by the United Nations Development Program, which defines governance as

The exercise of political, economic and administrative authority in the management of a country’s affairs at all levels. Governance comprises the complex mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, mediate their differences and exercise their legal rights and obligations. (UNDP 1997, pp. 2–3)

This approach is however best understood in comparison to the concept of “government”, and the “traditional”, top-down and authoritative, approaches to policy making. In this context, we can highlight a number of coordinates which can help us to better define and understand what governance means.

Governance refers to decision-making processes which involve not only top-down, directive activities, but also bottom-up, participative ones.

It does not only relate to public administration, but also to different organizational models and logics, such as markets and social networks; as a consequence, the actors’ behavior is bound not only by legal rules but also by different types of mechanisms of action and coordination, formal and informal, including co- and self-regulation.

It refers to decision-making processes where not only elected decision-makers and bureaucrats, but also other types of actors (groups and networks of citizens, NGOs and other types of organizations, enterprises, etc.) can play a key role.

It is supposed to imply more efficient and street-level decision-making mechanisms, which are positively compared to “traditional” top-down decision-making styles, portrayed as allegedly inefficient, slower, less responsive towards the citizenship and chocked by too much bureaucracy. This is often referred to, by the supporters of the governance approach, as “good governance” vs. “bad government”.

It develops within a political and public context marked by a plurality of decision-making levels (e.g., municipality, region, state, EU institutions, etc.) and a plurality of relevant arenas, for example with different types of national and supranational courts playing an increasingly important decision-making role beside the traditional political institutions and the public bureaucracy. This is usually referred to with the concept of “multilevel governance” (Martikainen 2013).

In relation to religion, this latter point has become increasingly relevant in the past two decades, with the multiplication of religion-related debates and disputes at different levels and in different arenas within increasingly multireligious societies around the world. In Europe—where multiculturalism is a particularly hot issue in urban contexts, where

religious change has intensified as a consequence of migration processes—the attention of scholars and observers has mainly focused on the cities, with the development of a specific branch of the literature on the urban management of religious diversity.

In this context, a seminal contribution is provided by Julia Martínez-Ariño, who, in her work about the governance of religious diversity in three French cities (see Section 3 of this paper for more details) defines local governance of religious diversity as

Complex assemblages where the political interests and claims of various unequally socially positioned actors over a number of domains and objects of the public expression of religiosity are subjected to a variety of municipal interventions, which are shaped by the interplay of supranational legal frameworks, national legislation, policies, institutional arrangements and local contextual factors. (Martínez-Ariño 2018, p. 814)

According to Martínez-Ariño's perspective, cities should “no longer be seen as simply implementing national policies”, with a mainly passive and bureaucratic role, but rather as “policy entrepreneurs”, which are embedded in complex systems of political and social relations (Martínez-Ariño 2018, pp. 814–15). Therefore, we cannot correctly understand the local governance of religious diversity without considering this plurality of levels and actors involved.

To sum up, the new governance approach developed since the 1990s implies a shift from the top-down and directive approach to public decision-making to a more bottom-up and participative one, where social actors (including religious ones) can play a more active role. But what roles are they actually allowed to play? The next section will focus on this point, by reviewing the existing literature on the subject, with particular attention for theoretical and comparative contributions. Section 4 of the article will then build on the insights drawn from this review to draft a new typology of interreligious initiatives focused on their degrees of inclusion in the political process.

3. Religion and Local Governance: The State of the Art

Although some early contributions on interreligious dialogue and local governance can be traced back to the late 1990s (see for example Bouma 1999), it is only at the beginning of the 21st century that the exclusive focus on the national dimension is abandoned and a proper literature on the local public management of religious diversity starts to develop in western countries, and especially in western Europe. There are several reasons for this turn: the increased religious diversity in western countries, which often makes the cities the focal point of new demands and new conflicts related to the relation between public administrations and religious organizations, and the coexistence of a plurality of old and new faiths (Ozzano and Giorgi 2016; Roy 2004); the proliferation of interfaith platforms and bodies in western countries starting from the 1990s and the 2000s (Griera and Forteza 2011); the institutional developments followed to the creation of the European Union, and the devolution processes in several European countries, with the creation of actual multilevel governance scenarios (Hooghe and Marks 2001); the evolution of the academic reflection with the development and legitimization of fields of research such as religion and politics (Kratochvíl 2023) and sociology of religion (Beckford and Demerath 2007); and the development of new research perspectives centered on the local level and the cities, and often hybridized by different disciplines, such as the “spatial turn” in the social research on religion (Knott 2010).

While the development of the empirical side of this new literature is slower, already in the early 2000s some significant theoretical contributions are proposed. Among the pioneering authors of the field, a place of honor is occupied by Veit Bader, whose contributions play a relevant role in circumscribing the subject of analysis. First of all, he is the first author framing the issue of religious diversity in a governance perspective, and making a

clear distinction between the new governance approach and the “traditional” government of religious diversity, pointing out that

The concept of governance is [...] much broader than that of *government*, which focuses on one specific (internally highly diversified) actor—the state—and on action coordination by the public hierarchy and by rules, particularly law and law-like regulations. (Bader 2009, p. 31)

Bader points out that the governance approach adds a “bottom-up”, or “democratic” axis of regulation of religion to the traditional “top-down”, “hierarchical” one. Moreover, he highlights the relevance of another axis, involving the distinction between “external” and “internal” governance: the former implying a regulation from outside; the latter involving mechanisms of self-regulation and co-regulation “through religious laws and customs” (Bader 2009, p. 31). Quite interestingly, Bader points out that internal regulation is not necessarily more bottom-up and democratic than an external one, considering that, also *within* religious communities

The rules and their interpretations and applications can be either more autocratic and hierarchical (e.g., ordained by formally organized, autocratic church hierarchy and religious elites) or more democratic and bottom up (e.g., interpreted by religious congregations and democratically elected religious organizations/leaders or, indeed, by more informal networks and associations of believers; by religious counter-elites like dissenting theologians; by religious movements in opposition to church hierarchy; by leaders of religious political parties; and by communal business elites). (Bader 2009, p. 31)

Bader also highlights another theoretical point which is particularly relevant for the subject of this paper, when he states that external regulation can be carried out by public authorities, but also by other types of actors outside a religious community, such as interfaith networks, movements and associations. This is probably the first clear recognition of the potential role that can be played by interreligious networks and bodies in the local governance of religion.

This point is the focus of another contribution by Mar Grier, who, based on her research on the Spanish case, highlights “the growing presence of interfaith groups, councils and initiatives all around the country, which have gained considerable prominence in a few years”. Moreover, her contribution, which analyzes a shift towards a policy paradigm marked by a new idea of religious pluralism, finds out that such interfaith bodies have been successful “in becoming both ‘mediators’ of the policy paradigm and key actors in the implementation of new policies”, by providing “recipe repertoires” to the decision-makers, by “helping policymakers to define the highly contested borders regarding which religions should be taken into consideration and what demands have to be seriously addressed”, and by “bridging faith communities and local governments” (Grier 2012, p. 584). Thus, according to the author, religious actors are not only to be seen as passive subjects of the public policies, but as active participants in their formation, at least with a consultative role. Grier (in another work written with Maria Forteza) also provides a definition of “interfaith bodies or platforms”, defined as “those initiatives that regularly bring together and unite members of at least three religious traditions existing in a city with the aim of promoting the ‘common good’” (Grier and Forteza 2011, p. 114), and sketches a typology of interfaith bodies, according to five dimensions: scope (international, national, regional/local); promoters (public institutions, activists); composition (lay members, religious leaders, mix); aims (inner transformation, pragmatic objectives); and relationship with political authorities (formal link, informal link, no link). This last point is particularly useful for the analysis carried out by this paper, and for the model sketched in Section 4.

Another interesting theoretical point is made by Julia Martínez-Ariño, who, following Scott and Storper's (2015) model, maintains that we can single out two types of policies regulating religion at the local level: one based on places, the other on people. In the first category, we find regulations about issues such as religion and religious symbols in public places, places of worship, cemeteries, and religious tours of the city. In the second, she includes regulations about issues such as clothes, food, school activities, public events involving religion, behavior of public employees, access to public subsidies, and local registration of religious groups. The author also provides a classification of four types of public intervention in relation to religions: regulatory documents, events promoting the recognition of religious diversity, provision of material resources, and "policy tools designed to enhance the political participation of religious organisations" (Martínez-Ariño 2018, p. 819).

Although the theoretical ground for a locally-based research was set, many social scientists looked quite reluctant to operate a shift from the national to the local level in their analyses of the regulation of religion. This is exactly the point made by Alberta Giorgi and Xabier Itçaina, who, in their introduction to a groundbreaking collection of papers published between 2015 and 2016, urged the scholarly community to adopt a "multiscalar perspective" and, particularly, to focus on the local level, since it "is where the different regimes and regulations intervene and where social order is produced and reproduced". According to the authors, the local dimension is becoming increasingly relevant and it is "a potential place of innovation", especially considering that "on the one hand, many policies are being relocated at the local level; on the other hand, the local has gained relevance in symbolic terms" (Giorgi and Itçaina 2016, p. 277). Moreover, some existing contributions were only available in languages other than English (see for example Lamine 2004; Griera et al. 2018).

The mid-2010s are exactly the time when a sizeable international comparative empirical literature on the local governance of religious diversity develops. As a consequence, a number of new theoretical insights heavily put into question the traditional idea that national policies (and the broad cultural attitude of a country towards religion and religious diversity in the public sphere) are the main defining factor for local policies. Indeed, new contributions show on the one hand interesting similarities between local cases belonging to different countries (in some cases with diverging national policies towards religions); and, on the other, cases located in the same country which are marked by interesting peculiarities that can enhance or curb the role of religion in the local public sphere. Moreover, this new literature shows the wide range of factors that can affect the local management of religious diversity and the possibility for religious organizations and communities (and their interfaith platforms) to play an active role in it: from the local style of governance and traditions, to the personality of specific decision-makers, to the structure of the local religious networks, to, even, factors related to international relations.

Among the analyses comparing different cities in a single country, at least three works stand out. The first is the research by Julia Martínez-Ariño on three French cities: Bordeaux, Rennes, and Toulouse. Quite interestingly, despite the official French secularist stance, all three cities are marked by some type of involvement of interreligious networks or platforms in the local administration. The findings of the research show indeed that we can find a peculiar role of interreligious networks in local governance in all three cases, with significant differences among them. First, we can find different degrees of public interventionism in the religious domain; moreover, in two cases (Rennes and Toulouse) local consultative interreligious bodies have been set up, while in Bordeaux we can find a yearly interreligious event (which has been the subject of other contributions: see for example (Malogne-Fer 2019)). How can we explain these differences? According to the author, they are the result of the complex interplay of several factors such as economic development, social stratification, "prevailing cultural norms

and traditions [...] or a strong tradition of interreligious dialogue”, local charismatic political and/or religious leaders, presence of local infrastructures and mechanisms that can facilitate communication with policy-makers, and presence of mediatized local conflicts involving religion (Martínez-Ariño 2018, pp. 819–20). According to this contribution, the creation of a fully-fledged interreligious body with a formal connection to the local municipality is thus the consequence of both factors related to the decision-making style adopted by the public authorities, and the orientation towards dialogue of the local religious communities.

Another single-country groundbreaking contribution is an article by Avi Astor, Mar Griera, and Monica Cornejo comparing the cases of Barcelona and Madrid. Although both cities are subject to the same regulations set up by the Spanish state, according to the authors they differ greatly in their approach to religions, since

In Madrid, religious affairs have not been treated as an autonomous policy sector, but rather as a dimension of immigration and cultural diversity more broadly conceived. There are no personnel dedicated exclusively to religious matters [...]. Madrid’s approach to religious governance has also been largely ad hoc and impromptu [...], and the city’s engagement with religious communities has revolved, to a great extent, around personal and political connections.

Barcelona, by contrast, has an Office of Religious Affairs (Oficina d’Afers Religiosos, OAR) that includes full-time staff and provides funding to support the activities of religious communities. It assists religious communities in obtaining licences and funding for places of worship [...]. It has also developed didactic materials and programmes on religious diversity for schools, hospitals, and other public institutions. (Astor et al. 2019, pp. 394–95)

As in Martínez-Ariño’s work, also in this case the authors highlight a broad range of factors that can explain such diversity of approaches: from the political affiliation of the local political leadership (with the left-leaning Barcelona administrations more inclined towards religious diversity than the mostly conservative and Catholic politicians administering Madrid); to the association between the local religious policies in Barcelona and the Catalan autonomy project; to the impact of diplomatic matters in Madrid, where the presence of foreign embassies is more likely to make international issues out of local controversies. In this case, therefore, there is a particular emphasis on the priorities and strategies of the local political authorities as a crucial factor towards the adoption of a governance approach towards religion.

A third contribution about cases from a single country, by Körs and Nagel (2018), is particularly interesting since it provides a number of theoretical insights and, also, highlights some critical points that can be involved in the participation of interfaith bodies in local governance. Their research, carried out in Germany, analyzes two different areas: the city-state of Hamburg and two cities located in the Rhine-Ruhr area, Hamm and Duisburg. As in the previous cases, although belonging to the same national context and culture, the three cities exhibit different styles of local management of religious diversity, and different structures at play. Even between the two Rhine-Ruhr cases, where also the regional regulations are the same, we can find significant differences: while in Hamm we can find a lively interreligious scene, with both an annual interreligious prayer and local groups at the neighborhoods level, both involving many different religious traditions and even minorities within minorities, in Duisburg—mainly as a consequence of centre-left-led local administrations, more focused on a secular approach—we can find a management of religious diversity inspired by principles of neutrality of the public administration. Finally, Hamburg is marked by the presence of a bottom-up interfaith group, the Interreligious Forum Hamburg, which has later gained public recognition. Despite this diversity, how-

ever, the authors contend that in all the cases interfaith participation in local governance shows some common points, and critical downsides: first of all, a centrality of traditional churches and their role of gate-keepers, which translates into a dialogue model focused on historical and world religions. This is very clearly shown, according to the authors, by art installations which celebrate “the so called big five (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism)” (Körs and Nagel 2018, p. 355). This attitude can lead to dynamics of exclusion based on the following criteria: “seniority (in contrast to new religious movements), a global spread and institutional coherence (in contrast to religious phenomena which are localized or encultured), and the possession of some kind of ‘sacred scripture’ (in contrast to oral traditions)” (Körs and Nagel 2018, p. 357). Moreover, the potential for dialogue can be hampered by the role of public institutions, with the risk of imposing to religious groups an “external policy-driven agenda” (Körs and Nagel 2018, p. 359). As a consequence, it seems that according to this contribution not only public authorities enjoy a wide degree of discretionality in choosing who can be part of an interreligious board, but even the religious institutions which are particularly entrenched in the local context do. This paper is particularly interesting because it raises significant issues in relation to the representativeness and inclusivity of interreligious initiatives, which will be addressed in Section 4 of this paper, while building the model, and, particularly, in the research agenda drafted in Section 5.

While the previous contributions highlighted differences among cities which are part of the same state, and subjected to the same general laws and rules, other works point out instead interesting similarities among cities from different countries. This is the case for example of the paper by Mar Griera, Maria Chiara Giorda, and Valeria Fabretti, which compares the cases of Barcelona and Turin, considered as “pioneers of the new forms of governance of religion in Southern Europe, as well as a source of inspiration for other cities”¹ (Griera et al. 2018, p. 313). The authors find significant similarities between the two cases, with several interreligious dialogue events and initiatives, and, particularly, the creation in both cities of consultative interfaith bodies (the Interreligious Center, later Office of Religious Affairs, in Barcelona; and the Interfaith Committee in Turin). The authors identify the factor of “big events” (in both cases, the Olympic games), creating a need to welcome huge numbers of people from different religious and cultural contexts, as the crucial factor for this flourishing of dialogue activities and, particularly, for the creation of permanent interfaith bodies. However, they also point out negative factors which, paradoxically, have been engendered by this process. According to the authors,

The institutionalization of a local policy on the issue of religious diversity and the securitization of the religious domain have weakened the potential of inter-religious dialogue in terms of change and innovation, and have paradoxically transformed the active inclusion of interreligious groups in the local governance, through a process of domestication of the religious field. The political need to portray an ‘interreligious harmony’, compatible with (and useful for) the promotion of public values (an abstract idea of tolerance as well as a fight against radicalization) is witnessed by the public ‘use’ of interreligious organizations in the two cities. (Griera et al. 2018, p. 324)

This is particularly interesting for our analysis, because it suggests the risk that the inclusion of religious actors in the decision-making process, and more broadly, in the strategies of the local political authorities, can paradoxically harm the quality of interreligious dialogue, by limiting the issues discussed to those acceptable for the political agenda.

Other comparative works, moreover, put into question the autonomy of local administrations, pointing out the significant differences among cases from different countries. It is the case of Kerstin Duemmler and Alexander Nagel who, in their comparison of the cases

of the German Ruhr Area and the Swiss Canton Lucerne find out that the first is marked by a bottom-up approach to interreligious initiatives, while the second “exhibits a model of top-down governance based on state interventions” (Duemmler and Nagel 2013, p. 265). Although the interreligious initiatives considered in the two cases are quite inhomogeneous, this is surely a point which deserves attention. Moreover, the authors contribute to the debate on interfaith bodies and local governance by drawing two principles to be adopted in interreligious initiatives, drawn from the experiences of their cases: the first is the principle of “intra-religious diversity” (which points out that interreligious programs should distinguish between different orientations also *within* a religious tradition: for example “liberal, conservative and orthodox Jews, as well as [...] Sunnis and Shiites”); the other is the principle of “avoidance of moral judgement” (Duemmler and Nagel 2013, p. 278). As the authors point out, when establishing interfaith initiatives there is often a prejudice from majority and monotheistic representatives towards the other faiths, especially if these latter are perceived as new and not established religious movements, or, worse, “sects”. This can lead to the exclusion of the representatives of these faiths (not to mention nonbelievers) from the initiatives. This point is particularly important for our analysis, particularly in relation to the representativeness and inclusivity of interreligious bodies, and will be considered in the following sections.

In addition to these comparative works, the latest years have witnessed the flourishing of single-case analyses on religious dialogue and local governance. Although a complete review of this literature is out of the scope—and the length—of this work, some contributions stand out for their theoretical insights, especially in terms of critical points. This is the case, for example, of the analysis carried out by Ali Konyali, Laura Haddad, and Andreas Pott on the German city of Osnabrück. The research reveals that the city (also famous for the signing of the Westphalia Peace Treaty in 1648) is a particularly fertile environment for interreligious dialogue, with many interreligious bodies, among whom stands out the Round Table of Religions. This latter, which gathers representatives of the three monotheistic religions and public officials, is however marked, according to the authors, by a “rather closed circle” style, considering that other faiths, as well as some Muslim groups considered as not enough “orthodox”, were excluded (according to the authors, to favor “harmony over conflict, with the consequence of limiting diversity”). Some issues, such as the presence of Salafi groups in the city, were also reportedly excluded from dialogue issues, not to jeopardize the “harmonic” image of the city. Aside from this, the participant observation carried out for the research revealed that some of the Turkish Muslim members of the institution were marked by “language deficiencies coupled with a lack of interest”. On the contrary, while official dialogue institutions seem to be still marked, according to the authors, by “the figure of the classical Turkish (male) guest worker”, the research reveals the presence in the city of other, less official, places and actors of dialogue, such as a fast-food restaurant, or the social media where second- and third-generation (both male and female) youth meet in the attempt to foster dialogue and curb radicalization (Konyali et al. 2020, pp. 83–85). This paper is particularly relevant for our analysis, since it highlights the role played in interreligious dialogue by informal places and leaders, beside “formal” and “official” ones: a point that must surely be considered when planning the composition of interreligious bodies with a role in public decision-making—also in order to properly address issues related to possible age and gender imbalances.

4. Interreligious Dialogue and Local Governance: Towards a Model

The literature analyzed in Section 3 of this paper, and its heterogeneousness, make it clear the need for a systematization of the matter, through the establishment of clear categories of interreligious dialogue initiatives/bodies. This is particularly necessary from a political science perspective, aiming at investigating the role played by interreligious

initiatives in local governance, in order to understand if in relation to a case we can talk about an *actual* and *democratic* participation of faith actors and interfaith initiatives in the elaboration of public policies at the local level; or, rather, about “simple” interreligious initiatives which do not have an impact on the policy formation processes. As mentioned in the introduction, the variables to be considered in relation to this point are two: one is the actual formal inclusion of interreligious initiatives in the policy-making process and their degree of institutionalization; the other is the degree of democratic representativity of interreligious initiatives in relation to the general population of religious and spiritual groups active in a city.

For this reason, this section will first of all make a classification of the different types of interreligious initiatives, from the most institutionalized and stable ones to the least ones, and will do so by considering the critical points highlighted by the contributions reviewed in Section 3. It will analyze the different arrangements that can be adopted in the relations between local political institutions and interreligious bodies, by highlighting the different options available in terms of actual involvement of the initiatives in the public policies formation, origins of the initiatives, dependence/independence of the initiatives from the public administration, and selection of participants.

Among the different types of interreligious dialogue initiatives, the most stable (and also the most likely involved in some kind of public governance) are the interfaith bodies, usually (but not always) set up originally by the local public administration. Among them, we can mention the Office of Religious Affairs in Barcelona, the Interfaith Committee in Turin, and the Consultative Committee on Secularism in Rennes. They are permanent bodies with permanent representatives (although some of them might rotate to respect the internal diversity of some faiths), and they meet on a regular basis to engage not only in dialogue on theological issues aiming at fostering harmony among faiths, but also to discuss issues related to the coexistence of different religious traditions in their cities, and to religious/interreligious events. Quite often, especially if they were created originally by the public administration itself, they can be permanently included in the decision-making process as consultative bodies (in the literature, so far, there are no recorded cases of bodies whose opinion is mandatory to carry out a public policy), to advise the local administration on religious issues, facilitate dialogue among communities, and set common positions and initiatives in relation to specific events and crises.

A second category of initiatives includes institutionalized (and publicly acknowledged) initiatives, which however do not take the shape of permanent bodies, but rather of recurring events which enjoy funds and recognition from the local administrations. This is the case particularly of recurring interfaith conferences, often held on a yearly basis, such as Bordeaux Partage or Torino Spiritualità. In these cases, the pool of participants is not necessarily stable: on the contrary, it usually changes significantly in the different editions, especially in cases when (as in Turin) each edition is marked by a different main theme. Although they are not intended as consultative bodies, and tend to aim at promoting dialogue and harmony at the social level, and displaying images of peaceful intercultural cities, in some cases (when there are strong ties with the public administration) they can work as a think tank, discussing the most urgent and relevant religion-related issues, and providing ideas and solutions to the local governing bodies; and, thus, enjoying a degree of participation in the decision-making process (although less structured and stable than in the previous category).

A third category includes publicly sanctioned and funded interreligious programs focused on specific sectors, very frequently interfaith education programs (for a review of the issues more specifically connected to the role of interreligious dialogue in education, see (Salvarani 2011; Cornejo Valle 2025)). In this case, the focus is not necessarily gathering

leaders from different faiths, but rather fostering dialogue among students with different religious (and, possibly, non-religious) backgrounds. In this case—although contacts between representatives of the interfaith school communities and the public institutions and/or the provision of points of view to the legislators are not excluded—the relevance of these initiatives in terms of governance (in the technical terms of policy formation) is not significant, although the fact that they are often conceived to foster inclusion and democratic awareness among the youth must not be underestimated.

Finally, a fourth category is represented by bottom-up interreligious groups (such as for example the Tavolo Interreligioso in Rome)² and neighborhood initiatives which mainly aim at promoting dialogue and peaceful coexistence among members of the different faith communities, but very rarely enjoy some type of participation in the city governance (although in some cases they can be officially recognized by the public institutions and/or be attended by public representatives, even in official terms). Duemmler and Nagel (2013) single out five types of such initiatives: neighborhood initiatives, dialogue, prayers for peace, school services, and interfaith festivals.

As mentioned in the introduction, the second factor to be considered when doing research with a political science perspective on interreligious dialogue and governance of religious diversity, besides the inclusion of interreligious bodies in policy-making, is the degree of democratic representativity of the interreligious initiatives or bodies in relation to the general population of religious groups.

This is particularly relevant in relation to interreligious dialogue, considering the heterogeneousness and “the non-linear paths of its origin, being a result of ecumenical endeavors within religious traditions and between religions, and of multilevel processes that encompass state and non-state participants, religious leaders, institutions, and non-religious actors” (Giordan and Lynch 2019, p. 2). Generally, however, according to the literature reviewed in the previous sections, we can broadly single out two cases: the ones (for example Hamburg) where they are bottom-up in nature, springing up from the activity of grassroots religious leaders aiming at giving a more structured form to their interfaith networks, and the ones (like Rennes, Barcelona, Turin) where they are the result of a top-down initiative, aiming at facilitating the management of local religious diversity and enhancing interfaith coexistence.

The issue of the origins of an interfaith initiative is relevant also because it is closely related to two other variables which are essential for our analysis because they determine the actual degree of representativity of a body: the composition of the interfaith initiative/body and the procedures through which its members are chosen. As for the first point, when the initiative is the result of a grassroots endeavor, in the cases reviewed by the literature we mostly find a more restricted membership, often only focused on “historical” or “big” faiths, Abrahamic/monotheistic faiths, or “just” Christian–Muslim dialogue. When it is instead the result of a political decision, we more often see a more various membership, aiming at including the most representative religious groups in the local context, and in some cases (for example in some French local councils) also representatives of the civil society and non-believer/rationalist groups. However, as mentioned above, a number of concerns can limit the width and the scope of this inclusionary attitude, with the exclusion of the representatives of faiths and spiritualities which are considered as not institutionalized enough, not “historical”, too extremist, harming the spirit of harmony among members, incompatible with each other, etc. Moreover, several contributions highlight that the choice of participants, for example in some German cases, is often led by an idea of “religion” modeled after the western “Church” pattern. In most cases, this implies the exclusion of less institutionalized groups and traditions, particularly those who are part of new religious movements.

In terms of appointment procedures, we can find very different cases. Sometimes, the representatives who are part of multifaith bodies are selected through democratic or semi-democratic procedures by the members of their communities, or at least by a gathering of religious leaders belonging to the same faith; in other cases, especially when centralized and hierarchical institutions (such as the Catholic Church) are at stake, they can be appointed by the institution itself; finally, there are cases marked by more arbitrary approaches, where participants are chosen according to personal acquaintances of the political leadership, to pre-existing interreligious networks, or else (in some cases, “immigrant” faiths can be represented by local converts that know well local languages and customs, notwithstanding the actual role they play in their faith community). Although this variance often depends on the attitudes and the internal organization of the specific faiths, it can also be the result of choices made by the public administration; indeed, this latter can play a crucial role in enhancing democratic procedures rather than personalistic approaches. Of course, this issue becomes particularly thorny in the cases of faiths without a central authority, and a high degree of pluralism and fragmentation, such as Islam and Protestantism, which not rarely are an arena of fierce competition among competing factions and theological orientations. While rather arbitrary choices can be the result of this stalemate, it can at times be solved by intra-faith networks, which (as in the case of Turin with the creation of an intra-religious table of Muslim leaders) can “democratically” choose their representatives in the interfaith bodies. Notwithstanding the actual choice procedures, in most cases the choice will anyway fall on “formal” religious leaders, often minimizing, or neglecting at all, intra-religious differences, and gender and age balances.

5. Concluding Remarks: Towards a New Research Agenda

After reviewing the literature on the local governance of religious diversity and sketching a new typology based primarily on interreligious bodies’ inclusion in decision-making processes and their degree of democratic representativity, this concluding section will sum up the information, trying to provide a research agenda for scholars addressing the subject under a political science perspective.

First, the results of the analysis carried out in this paper suggest that political science research on the governance of urban religious diversity should consider the role of religious actors, and more particularly interreligious initiatives, according to these variables:

- (1) Are religious actors actually included to some degree in the decision-making process on religion-related issues through some kind of interreligious bodies? If they are, is their opinion mandatory before a policy is approved, do they only enjoy a consultative role, or do they just provide ideas for the public administration with a “think tank” role? Are they free to propose their opinion on a matter, even if it is not solicited by the public administration?
- (2) How stable and institutionalized are the interreligious bodies? Are they included in the municipality charter or any other official bylaw or regulatory document, which can prevent subsequent administrations from easily erasing or significantly altering the design and functions of the bodies?
- (3) What are the procedures regulating the choice and the appointment of their members? Are they in some way designed in accordance to democratic, or, at least, representative and participative principles, or to other, more personalistic and arbitrary, factors? Particularly, in relation to faiths lacking a central organization, such as Protestantism or Islam, is there a—formal or informal—umbrella organization or council charged with the representatives’ choice? Does the choice only involve the representatives of “traditional” religions or also new religions and spiritualities and non-believers? Are any groups deliberately excluded because they are considered as “controversial” or

too extremist? Are there phenomena of self-exclusion? More broadly, what are the criteria which determine what groups and traditions are considered as “legitimate” or “acceptable”? Are minorities and sub-groups within religious traditions, both in terms of theological orientation and gender/age, as well as phenomena of informal leadership, appropriately considered?

- (4) Are interreligious bodies free to pursue their own agenda and discuss the matters they consider more relevant and urgent, or are they bound to the municipality’s agenda (or even prevented, as suggested by some case analyses reviewed above, from discussing “uncomfortable” or “divisive” issues in the name of the promotion of an image of harmony and peaceful coexistence)? What is the influence of the composition of the body (see point three) on the agenda, and its width (or, more precisely, is there a trade-off between the degree of representativity of the body and the width of its agenda)?
- (5) Are there decision-making and vote procedures in place within the bodies when it is necessary for them to make a decision? If this is the case, is unanimity mandatory or is there a majority vote? Or is there in place another, more informal, procedure to reach consensus?
- (6) Is any type of political party leading a local public administration more likely to promote a participative religious governance decision-making style? Most specifically, considering that, according to the literature reviewed, some kind of participative approach towards religious diversity is mostly promoted by leftist (be they inspired by secular or multicultural ideas) or Christian democratic administrations—while right-wing and conservative administrations, considering their absence from the review, apparently prefer old-style, directive approaches—which among these political families is more inclined towards an actual governance model?

The above questions are crucial, in the first place, to understand if we can actually talk about a shift towards governance in the urban management of religious diversity in Europe; indeed, as far as we can see in the literature reviewed, in most cases we are still in a top-down, directive paradigm, where interreligious bodies can provide at best only counsel. Then, in the cases where a governance-based and participative paradigm is really detected, it would be very important to analyze if the latter is productive of better, more effective policies, in comparison to top-down approaches, in relation to the management of religious diversity, the recognition of the communities’ needs and rights, and the enhancement of peaceful coexistence among faiths.

Funding: This research was funded by [European Union—Next Generation EU] grant number [2022NPTNEZ].

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Dataset available on request from the author.

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

Notes

¹ This and the following translations from the original French text were carried out by the author of this paper.

² Available online: <https://tavolointerreligioso.org/> (accessed on 10 February 2026).

References

- Astor, Avi, Mar Griera, and Mónica Cornejo. 2019. Religious Governance in the Spanish City: Hands-on versus Hands-off Approaches to Accommodating Religious Diversity in Barcelona and Madrid. *Religion, State and Society* 47: 390–404. [CrossRef]
- Bader, Veit. 2009. The Governance of Religious Diversity: Theory, Research and Practice. In *International Migration and the Governance of Religious Diversity*. Edited by Paul Bramadat and Matthias Koenig. Kingston: Queen’s University, pp. 29–58.

- Becci, Irene, Marian Burchardt, and Mariachiara Giorda. 2017. Religious Super-Diversity and Spatial Strategies in two European Cities. *Current Sociology* 65: 73–91. [CrossRef]
- Beckford, James A., and Nicholas Jay Demerath. 2007. *The SAGE Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Bevir, Mark. 2012. *Governance: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bouma, Gary D. 1999. Social Justice Issues in the Management of Religious Diversity in Australia. *Social Justice Research* 12: 283–95. [CrossRef]
- Cornejo Valle, Mónica. 2025. La Diversidad Religiosa, Espiritual y Secular en la Universidad: Una Asignatura Pendiente. Cuestiones de Pluralismo 5. Available online: https://www.observatorioreligion.es/revista/articulo/la_diversidad_religiosa_espiritual_y_secular_en_la_universidad_una_asignatura_pendiente/index.html (accessed on 23 January 2026).
- Deneault, Alain. 2013. *Gouvernance: Le Management Totalitaire*. Montréal: Lux Editeur.
- Duemmler, Kerstin, and Alexander-Kenneth Nagel. 2013. Governing Religious Diversity: Top-down and Bottom-up Initiatives in Germany and Switzerland. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science* 47: 265–83. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Giordan, Giuseppe, and Andrew P. Lynch. 2019. Interreligious Dialogue: From Religion to Geopolitics. In *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion*. Leiden: Brill, vol. 10, pp. 1–9.
- Giordan, Giuseppe, and Enzo Pace, eds. 2014. *Religious Pluralism: Framing Religious Diversity in the Contemporary World*. Cham: Springer.
- Giorgi, Alberta, and Xabier Itçaina. 2016. Religion and Local Politics in Southern Europe: A Research Agenda. *Religion, State and Society* 44: 276–95. [CrossRef]
- Griera, Mar. 2012. Public Policies, Interfaith Associations and Religious Minorities: A New Policy Paradigm? Evidence from the Case of Barcelona. *Social Compass* 59: 570–87. [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]
- Griera, Maria del Mar, and Maria Forteza. 2011. New Actors in the Governance of Religious Diversity in European Cities. The Role of Interfaith Platforms. In *Religious Actors in the Public Sphere*. Edited by Jeff Haynes and Anja Hennig. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 113–31.
- Harmes, Adam. 2006. Neoliberalism and Multilevel Governance. *Review of International Political Economy* 13: 725–49. [CrossRef]
- Hooghe, Liesbet, and Gary Marks. 2001. *Multi-Level Governance and European Integration*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Knott, Kim. 2010. Religion, Space, and Place: The Spatial Turn in Research on Religion. *Religion and Society* 1: 29–43. [CrossRef]
- Konyali, Ali, Laura Haddad, and Andreas Pott. 2020. Pacifying Muslims in Germany's 'City of Peace': Interreligious Dialogue as a Tool of Governance in Osnabrück. In *Governing Religious Diversity in Cities*. Edited by Julia Martínez-Ariño. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 77–92.
- 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]
- Kratochvíl, Petr. 2023. Religion and (Global) Politics: The State of the Art and Beyond. *International Studies Review* 25: viad014. [CrossRef]
- Lamine, Anne-Sophie. 2004. Quand les villes font appel aux religions: Laïcité et nouvelles prises en compte de la pluralité religieuse. *Les Annales de la Recherche Urbaine* 96: 149–56. [CrossRef]
- Malogne-Fer, Gwendoline. 2019. Municipal Interreligious Dialogue in Bordeaux: Between the 'Politics of Diversity' and a Catholicentric Laïcité. In *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion*. Edited by Giuseppe Giordan and Andrew P. Lynch. Leiden: Brill, vol. 10, pp. 146–64.
- Martikainen, Tuomas. 2013. Multilevel and Pluricentric Network Governance of Religion. In *Religion in the Neoliberal Age: Political Economy and Modes of Governance*. Edited by Tuomas Martikainen and François Gauthier. Surrey: Ashgate, pp. 129–42.
- Martínez-Ariño, Julia. 2018. Conceptualising the Role of Cities in the Governance of Religious Diversity in Europe. *Current Sociology* 66: 810–27. [CrossRef]
- Melloni, Alberto. 2002. L'Europa delle religioni. *Il Mulino* 6: 1057–67.
- Naso, Paolo. 2015. *L'incognita Post-Secolare: Pluralismo Religioso, Fundamentalismi, Laicità*. Napoli: Guida.
- Ozzano, Luca, and Alberta Giorgi. 2016. *European Culture Wars and the Italian Case. Which Side Are You on?* Abingdon: Routledge.
- Pacillo, Vincenzo. 2012. 'Stopp Minarett'? The Controversy over the Building of Minarets in Switzerland: Religious Freedom versus Collective Identity. In *Religion in Public Spaces*. Edited by Silvio Ferrari and Sabrina Pastorelli. Farnham: Ashgate, pp. 337–52.
- Roy, Olivier. 2004. *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Salvarani, Brunello. 2011. La scuola deve fare i conti con il pluralismo religioso. *Confronti* 38: 42.
- Scott, Allen J., and Michael Storper. 2015. The Nature of Cities: The Scope and Limits of Urban Theory. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 39: 1–15. [CrossRef]
- UNDP. 1997. Governance for Sustainable Human Development. United Nations Development Programme. Available online: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/492551?v=pdf> (accessed on 2 December 2025).

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.