

The Sociology of Interfaith Infrastructure: Moving Beyond Dialogue Events to Durable Institutions

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Date of submission: 03.02.2026

Date of acceptance: 23.04.2026

Abstract

Interfaith relations are most often approached through the language of dialogue—through encounters, conversations, and communicative practices intended to bridge religious difference. These perspectives have been productive. They illuminate interactional dynamics and moments of symbolic recognition. Yet they offer limited tools for explaining how interreligious cooperation endures once the encounter ends, participants change, or initial goodwill fades. This article begins from a neglected sociological problem: how interfaith relations become institutionalized as stable forms of social order rather than remaining episodic moral performances.

Drawing on classical sociology of religion, the article introduces the concept of *interfaith infrastructure*. The concept captures the ensemble of organizational, symbolic, and regulatory arrangements through which interreligious cooperation is routinized, authorized, and rendered legitimate over time. Building on insights from Durkheim, Weber, and Berger, the analysis deliberately shifts attention from interaction to institutionalization, from goodwill to authority, and from encounter to reproduction.

The article develops a purely theoretical framework and employs ideal-typical reasoning to differentiate between distinct forms of interfaith infrastructure. These ideal types highlight alternative mechanisms through which plural moral communities are coordinated

without erasing difference. Azerbaijan is referenced solely as a theoretical laboratory rather than an empirical model, allowing the analysis to remain analytically general and non-normative.

By reframing interfaith relations as infrastructure rather than dialogue, the article contributes to debates in the sociology of religion on pluralism, legitimacy, and social order, offering a conceptual lens for understanding how interreligious coexistence becomes institutionally durable under conditions of religious diversity.

Keywords: *Sociology of Religion, Religious Pluralism, Interfaith Relations, Institutionalization, Social Order, Authority and Legitimacy, Interfaith Infrastructure*

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Социология межрелигиозной инфраструктуры: от диалоговых мероприятий к устойчивым институциональным формам

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Дата подачи статьи в редакцию: 03.02.2026

Дата подтверждения статьи к публикации: 23.04.2026

Резюме

Межрелигиозные отношения чаще всего рассматриваются через призму диалога — через встречи, беседы и коммуникативные практики, направленные на преодоление религиозных различий. Эти подходы оказались продуктивными: они позволяют выявить динамику взаимодействия и моменты символического признания. Однако они предлагают ограниченные аналитические ресурсы для объяснения того, каким образом межрелигиозное сотрудничество сохраняется после завершения взаимодействия, смены участников или ослабления первоначального доверия и доброй воли. Отправной точкой данной статьи становится недостаточно разработанная социологическая проблема: каким образом межрелигиозные отношения институционализируются как устойчивые формы социального порядка, а не остаются эпизодическими моральными практиками.

Опираясь на классическую социологию религии, статья вводит понятие межрелигиозной инфраструктуры. Данное понятие охватывает совокупность организационных, символических и нормативно-регулятивных механизмов, посредством которых межрелигиозное сотрудничество рутинизируется, получает институциональное признание и легитимацию во времени. Развивая идеи Дюркгейма, Вебера и Бергера, анализ целенаправленно смещает фокус внимания от взаимодействия к институционализации, от доброй воли — к авторитету, от единичного события — к процессам воспроизводства.

В статье разрабатывается строго теоретическая концептуальная основа с использованием идеально-типического метода, позволяющего дифференцировать различные формы межрелигиозной инфраструктуры. Эти идеальные типы выявляют альтернативные механизмы координации плюралистических моральных сообществ без нивелирования различий между ними. Азербайджан рассматривается исключительно как теоретическая лаборатория, а не как эмпирическая модель, что позволяет сохранить аналитическую обобщённость и ненормативный характер исследования.

Переосмысливая межрелигиозные отношения как инфраструктуру, а не как диалог, статья вносит вклад в дискуссии социологии религии о плюрализме, легитимности и социальном порядке, предлагая концептуальный взгляд на понимание того, каким образом межрелигиозное сосуществование приобретает институциональную устойчивость в условиях религиозного многообразия.

Ключевые слова: *Социология религии, Религиозный плюрализм, Межрелигиозные отношения, Институционализация, Социальный порядок, Авторитет и легитимность, Межрелигиозная инфраструктура*

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Dinlərarası infrastrukturun sosiologiyası: dialoq tədbirlərindən dayanıqlı institusional formalaradək

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Daxilolma tarixi: 03.02.2026

Nəşrə təsdiq tarixi: 23.04.2026

Xülasə

Dinlərarası münasibətlər ən çox dialoq prizmasından — dini fərqlərin aradan qaldırılmasına yönəlmiş görüşlər, müzakirələr və kommunikativ praktikalar vasitəsilə — təhlil olunur. Bu yanaşmalar məhsuldar olmuşdur: onlar qarşılıqlı təsirin dinamikasını və simvolik tanınma məqamlarını üzə çıxarmağa imkan verir. Lakin bu yanaşmalar, dinlərarası əməkdaşlığın qarşılıqlı əlaqə başa çatdıqdan, iştirakçılar dəyişdikdən və ya ilkin etimad və xoş niyyət zəiflədikdən sonra necə davam etdiyini izah etmək baxımından məhdud analitik resurslar təqdim edir. Məqalənin çıxış nöqtəsi kifayət qədər işlənməmiş bir sosioloji problemdir: dinlərarası münasibətlərin epizodik mənəvi praktikalar olaraq qalmaq əvəzinə, necə dayanıqlı sosial nizam formaları kimi institusionallaşması.

Klassik din sosiologiyasına əsaslanaraq, məqalədə dinlərarası infrastruktur anlayışı təqdim olunur. Bu anlayış dinlərarası əməkdaşlığın zamanla rutinizasiyasını, institusional tanınmasını və legitimləşdirilməsini təmin edən təşkilati, simvolik və normativ-tənzimləyici mexanizmlərin məcmusunu əhatə edir. Dyurkheim, Veber və Bergerin ideyalarına istinad edən təhlil diqqəti məqsədyönlü şəkildə qarşılıqlı əlaqədən institusionallaşmaya, xoş niyyətdən avtoritetə, tək-tək hadisələrdən isə təkrar istehsal proseslərinə yönəldir.

Məqalədə ideal-tipik metoddan istifadə etməklə ciddi şəkildə nəzəri analitik çərçivə formalaşdırılır və dinlərarası infrastrukturun müxtəlif formalarının differensiasiyası aparılır. Bu ideal tiplər fərqlərin aradan qaldırılması olmadan, plüralist mənəvi icmaların koordinasiyasının al-

ternativ mexanizmlərini üzə çıxarır. Azərbaycan empirik model kimi deyil, yalnız nəzəri laboratoriya kimi nəzərdən keçirilir ki, bu da tədqiqatın analitik ümumiliyini və normativ xarakter daşımamasını qorumağa imkan verir.

Dinlərarası münasibətləri dialoq kimi deyil, infrastruktur kimi yenedən düşünməklə, məqalə din sosiologiyasında plüralizm, legitimlik və sosial nizam mövzusunda aparılan müzakirələrə töhfə verir və dini müxtəliflik şəraitində dinlərarası birgəyaşayışın necə institusional dayanıqlıq qazandığını anlamaq üçün konseptual baxış bucağı təqdim edir.

Açar sözlər: *Din sosiologiyası, Dini plüralizm, Dinlərarası münasibətlər, İnstitusionallaşma, Sosial nizam, Avtoritet və legitimlik, Dinlərarası infrastruktur*

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Introduction

Interfaith relations have become a recurring point of reference in contemporary discussions of religion and pluralism. Conferences, dialogue initiatives, and symbolic encounters between religious representatives are frequently treated as indicators of interreligious coexistence in diverse societies. From a sociological perspective, however, this emphasis carries a risk. It tends to obscure a more basic question—one that is easy to overlook precisely because dialogue feels so intuitively valuable: how interreligious cooperation becomes socially durable. Encounters may be meaningful, even transformative, but on their own they do not generate stable forms of order. Without organizational anchoring, they remain episodic, dependent on context, intention, and goodwill.

Classical sociology of religion has long been preoccupied with this very problem. From Durkheim's analysis of religion as a source of collective order, through Weber's work on authority and legitimation, to Berger's theory of institutionalization and plausibility, religion has rarely been approached as belief alone. It has been treated, instead, as a social fact—sustained through practices, structures, and forms of recognition that outlast individual moments. What is striking, then, is how much contemporary scholarship on interfaith relations seems to drift away from this insight. Dialogue is frequently treated as an end in itself, rather than as one possible moment within broader processes of social organization.

This article argues that the sociological analysis of interfaith relations requires a shift in analytical scale: from events to infrastructures. It introduces the concept of *interfaith infrastructure* to capture the ensemble of organizational, symbolic, and regulatory arrangements through which interreligious cooperation becomes routinized, authorized, and socially consequential. The concept is deliberately non-normative. It does not evaluate political systems or theological traditions. Its purpose is more modest, and more demanding: to provide a lens for understanding how pluralism is translated into durable forms of social order.

To develop this argument, the article draws on classical sociological theory and employs ideal-typical reasoning to differentiate forms of interfaith infrastructure. The aim is analytical: to specify mechanisms of institutionalization, authority, and legitimacy that stabilize interreligious coordination across contexts.

The contribution of the article is twofold. First, it advances a conceptual framework that addresses a persistent gap in the sociology of religion: the lack of tools for analyzing how interfaith cooperation acquires durability, authority, and legitimacy. Second, it repositions interfaith relations within core debates on social order, institutionalization, and the public role of religion. In doing so, it moves beyond dialogue as a descriptive category and toward a sociological understanding of interfaith as infrastructure. Methodologically, the article develops an analytical framework through ideal-typical reasoning rather than empirical case study, positioning interfaith infrastructure as a conceptual tool for comparative institutional analysis.

Background / Problematisation — Why Dialogue Is Not Enough

In both academic literature and public discourse, interfaith relations are most often framed through the language of dialogue (Cornille, 2013; Igrave, 2016; Patel & Meyer, 2019). Conferences, workshops, and symbolic encounters are treated as privileged arenas where religious difference is negotiated and mutual recognition is expected to emerge. This orientation has undeniably been productive. It has generated careful analyses of communicative practices, narrative exchange, and the lived experience of encounter. Yet, from a sociological standpoint, it also introduces a limitation that is easy to overlook. Dialogue is frequently approached as if it were a self-sufficient solution, rather than a socially fragile form of interaction whose effects depend on broader institutional conditions.

Dialogue, after all, is episodic by nature. It presupposes presence, intention, and a willingness to engage. What it does not explain is how cooperation persists when participants change, political circumstances shift, or symbolic consensus begins to erode. Much of the interfaith literature seems to assume—often implicitly—that repeated encounters will somehow accumulate into social stability. Durability does not arise from interaction per se, but from the institutionalization of shared meanings, stabilization of authority, and routinization of cooperation within governance structures (Lawrence et al., 2011; Powell & Bromley, 2015; Scott, 2014). Interfaith infrastructure thus denotes the structured reproduction of coordination beyond episodic dialogue.

This reliance on dialogue reflects a broader affinity with deliberative and liberal pluralist traditions, where communication is granted near-causal efficacy. Mutual understanding is assumed to precede, or even replace, institutional coordination. Sociology has long

been more cautious. Interaction may generate recognition, but recognition alone does not produce binding arrangements. Without institutional anchoring, dialogue remains exposed-vulnerable to disruption, dependent on favorable conditions, and poorly insulated against conflict or political change.

The analytical consequences of this orientation are significant. Dialogue-centered approaches tend to privilege micro-level interaction at the expense of structural analysis (Patel & Meyer, 2019; Cornille, 2013). Questions of authority, representation, and legitimacy are often bracketed or deferred. Who is authorized to speak on behalf of a religious tradition? Through what procedures are representatives selected, recognized, or contested? And how are interfaith arrangements stabilized beyond the immediate context of encounter? These questions are central to sociology, yet they remain marginal in much of the dialogue-focused literature.

Classical sociology offers resources for diagnosing this blind spot. For Durkheim, social cohesion depends not merely on shared sentiments, but on collective forms that endure beyond individual interactions (Durkheim, 1912/1995, 429–432). Ritual moments of solidarity matter precisely because they are embedded in institutions capable of reproducing moral order. Detached from such forms, moments of effervescence dissipate without leaving durable traces. Applied to interfaith contexts, this suggests that dialogical encounters, however meaningful, remain sociologically thin unless supported by arrangements that stabilize cooperation.

A similar concern appears in Berger's theory of institutionalization. Meaning becomes socially real only when it is objectivated and legitimated through shared structures that acquire an appearance of inevitability (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, 54–61). In plural settings, where multiple symbolic universes coexist, this problem becomes particularly acute. Interfaith dialogue may acknowledge difference, but it does not, by itself, resolve how plural meanings are rendered socially plausible within a shared reality. Without institutionalization, recognition remains reversible and coordination precarious.

Finally, the moral framing of dialogue often obscures the role of power. Dialogue is frequently presented as symmetrical, voluntary, and inclusive. In practice, it unfolds within fields marked by unequal resources, differential recognition, and asymmetrical access to public authority. Treating dialogue primarily as an ethical ideal risks depoliticizing these dynamics. An institutional perspective brings them

back into view. Durability, it reminds us, always involves regulated access, authorized representation, and legitimate procedures.

What emerges, then, is a persistent conceptual divide between interaction and order. Interfaith dialogue is richly described as practice, but weakly theorized as structure. Addressing this divide requires shifting analytical attention away from communicative moments alone and toward the infrastructural conditions under which interreligious cooperation becomes durable. It is this shift-from dialogue to infrastructure-that motivates the theoretical intervention developed in the sections that follow.

Research Questions

The purpose of this article is not to assess particular interfaith initiatives or to measure the outcomes of dialogue practices. That kind of evaluation, while often useful, is not the task here. Instead, the article seeks to clarify a more basic theoretical problem within the sociology of religion: how interreligious coexistence is transformed from episodic interaction into durable social order. To approach this problem, the analysis is guided by a set of analytically oriented research questions that foreground institutionalization, legitimacy, and reproduction rather than attitudes, intentions, or moral commitments.

At the center of the article lies a simple but demanding question:

How are interfaith relations institutionalized in ways that render interreligious cooperation durable, legitimate, and socially consequential beyond episodic dialogue?

This question deliberately shifts attention away from interactional success and toward structural stabilization. Durability is not treated as a moral achievement, nor as evidence of goodwill, but as a sociological outcome that calls for explanation. Rather than assuming that repeated encounters gradually generate order, the question asks by what mechanisms such order is produced, maintained, and made resilient over time.

From this primary concern follow three closely related questions.

First, through what organizational and symbolic arrangements is "interfaith" constituted as a legitimate public category? Interfaith cooperation presupposes more than participation; it presupposes recognition. Certain actors must be accepted as speaking not merely as individuals, but as representatives of religious traditions. How such recognition is socially produced, authorized, and stabilized becomes a central analytical issue.

Second, how are boundaries between religious traditions maintained and coordinated within interfaith arrangements without collapsing into either homogenization or conflict? Durable coexistence requires mechanisms that allow cooperation while preserving distinction. The question directs attention to institutional forms of boundary-work, and to how difference is managed rather than dissolved.

Third, what mechanisms translate episodic interaction into routinized cooperation over time? Here the focus shifts to institutional reproduction. How do interfaith relations persist when participants change, political contexts shift, or initial symbolic consensus weakens? The emphasis lies on continuity, routinization, and legitimacy, rather than on intention or goodwill.

Taken together, these questions situate interfaith relations within core sociological concerns: the production of social order, the stabilization of meaning, and the institutional conditions under which pluralism becomes governable. They provide the analytical foundation for introducing *interfaith infrastructure* as a conceptual tool capable of integrating interaction, organization, and authority within a single sociological framework.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of *interfaith infrastructure* is grounded in classical sociology of religion, not as an eclectic compilation of references, but as a selective reactivation of analytical tools originally developed to explain how religion generates social order, authority, and legitimacy. The ambition here is deliberately modest. Rather than introducing new normative frameworks or policy-oriented theories, this section returns to canonical theorists to extract what still matters-what remains analytically indispensable for understanding institutionalized pluralism. The aim is not exhaustive exegesis, but theoretical use: to see what these traditions allow us to think more clearly.

Religion, Ritual, and Social Order: Émile Durkheim

Durkheim's sociology of religion begins from a simple but demanding premise: religion is a social fact, irreducible to individual belief or theological content. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, religion appears as a system of collective representations through which moral cohesion is produced and individuals are bound into a shared social order (Durkheim, 1912/1995). Crucially, this cohesion is not sustained by sentiment alone. It is generated and renewed through

ritual practices embedded in enduring social forms. Moments of collective effervescence matter precisely because they are anchored in institutions that outlast the experience itself.

This insight is central for theorizing interfaith relations. Dialogical encounters may generate temporary solidarity or symbolic recognition, but without institutional embedding they remain sociologically fragile. From a Durkheimian perspective, the problem of interfaith coexistence is therefore not primarily one of attitude or tolerance, but of form. What kinds of collective arrangements allow plural moral communities to coordinate without undermining the conditions of social integration? Interfaith infrastructure can be understood, in this sense, as a higher-order institutional form through which multiple religious moral orders are coordinated-without being merged-within a shared social framework.

Authority, Legitimation, and Organization: Max Weber

Where Durkheim foregrounded integration, Weber focused on authority and legitimacy. His typology of authority-traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational-provides a framework for understanding how social arrangements become binding rather than merely symbolic (Weber, 1978, pp. 215–301; Scott, 2014, pp. 59–63). For Weber, durability depends on the routinization of authority through organizational forms capable of stabilizing expectations and regulating conduct over time.

Applied to interfaith contexts, Weber's insights shift attention to questions that dialogue-centered approaches often leave implicit. Who authorizes interfaith representatives? On what grounds are interfaith bodies recognized as legitimate interlocutors by religious communities, the state, or civil society? And what happens when charismatic individuals withdraw, or when political conditions change? These questions underscore that interfaith relations are not sustained by moral commitment alone. They rely on organizational structures that translate recognition into authority.

Seen from this angle, interfaith infrastructure consists not merely of spaces for encounter, but of institutionalized forms of representation and coordination that acquire legitimacy across social fields. Weber's emphasis on rationalization also helps clarify how interfaith cooperation may become routinized without becoming purely instrumental-how formal organization and symbolic meaning can remain in tension, rather than cancel each other out.

Institutionalization and Plausibility: Peter L. Berger

Berger's contribution centers on the processes through which meaning becomes socially objective and taken for granted. In collaboration with Thomas Luckmann, he conceptualized institutionalization as the sedimentation of human activity into patterns that confront individuals as external and authoritative realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Religion, in this account, functions as a powerful plausibility structure—one that renders social order meaningful and legitimate (Berger, 1967).

This framework is particularly useful for understanding interfaith arrangements. Pluralism multiplies symbolic universes, thereby destabilizing plausibility. Interfaith dialogue may acknowledge difference, but it does not, by itself, resolve how plural meanings are stabilized within a shared social reality. Interfaith infrastructure can be understood instead as a mechanism for producing shared plausibility without requiring theological consensus. Through routinized cooperation, recognized representation, and symbolic coordination, interfaith institutions render coexistence socially intelligible and predictable.

Integrating the Framework

Taken together, these classical perspectives illuminate different dimensions of the same sociological problem. Durkheim draws attention to the institutional conditions of moral coordination; Weber clarifies how authority and legitimacy stabilize cooperation; Berger explains how institutionalization renders plural arrangements socially plausible. The concept of *interfaith infrastructure* synthesizes these insights by focusing on the organizational and symbolic conditions under which interreligious cooperation becomes durable.

This framework deliberately avoids reducing interfaith relations to either moral virtue or political instrument. Instead, it situates them within the core concerns of the sociology of religion: how collective meaning, authority, and order are produced under conditions of diversity. On this foundation, the following section moves from theory to analysis, developing the concept of interfaith infrastructure in greater detail.

Analytical Discussion

The concept of *interfaith infrastructure* is introduced to address a persistent gap in the sociology of religion: the absence of a framework capable of explaining how interreligious cooperation becomes socially durable. Dialogue-centered approaches are valuable in what they

reveal about interactional dynamics, but they offer limited resources for analyzing reproduction, authority, and institutional continuity. The concept proposed here shifts attention away from episodic encounters and toward the arrangements that allow cooperation to persist across time, actors, and changing contexts.

Interfaith infrastructure refers to an ensemble of organizational, symbolic, and regulatory arrangements through which interreligious relations are routinized and rendered socially consequential. It is not reducible to formal organizations alone, nor does it presuppose a unified theological project. Rather, it denotes a capacity for coordination—often uneven, sometimes fragile—that enables religious plurality to operate within an ordered social framework. Framing interfaith in terms of infrastructure foregrounds durability, legitimacy, and repeatability as core sociological concerns, rather than secondary outcomes.

One defining feature of interfaith infrastructure is routinization, understood as the stabilization of social action beyond individual intentions (Weber, 1978, 246–254; Scott, 2014, 56–63). Routinization enables interaction to persist independently of particular actors by embedding cooperation within institutionalized roles and rule-bound procedures (Lawrence et al., 2011). Dialogical encounters may generate recognition or trust (Buber, 1958; Mayrl & Mooney, 2009), yet they remain dependent on personal engagement and situational goodwill. Infrastructure operates differently: it organizes coordination through formalized practices, schedules, and governance mechanisms that endure beyond individual participation (Powell & Bromley, 2015). While contingency is never eliminated, institutionalization reduces reliance on charisma or moral enthusiasm as primary conditions of coexistence (Weber, 1978, 1111–1130).

A second feature concerns authorized representation. Interfaith cooperation presupposes that certain actors are recognized as legitimate representatives of religious traditions, a process grounded in socially constructed authority and institutional legitimation (Weber, 1978, 212–215; Bourdieu, 1991, 107–116; Mayrl & Mooney, 2009). Such recognition is neither automatic nor neutral. It is produced through organizational procedures, symbolic capital, and often through sustained interaction with state or civic institutions. Interfaith infrastructure stabilizes these processes by establishing criteria for participation and routinizing the interface between religious

communities and external actors. In this way, interfaith relations are transformed from informal goodwill into structured public engagement.

A third feature involves boundary-work. Cooperation across religious difference requires mechanisms that maintain distinction while enabling coordination. Dialogue alone often relies on the temporary suspension of difference in the name of harmony, a strategy that risks either superficial consensus or latent conflict. Infrastructure, by contrast, institutionalizes difference. By clarifying roles, domains, and limits of cooperation, it allows religious traditions to remain distinct while participating in shared arrangements. Boundary-work thus becomes a condition of durability rather than an obstacle to it (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Wimmer, 2013).

Finally, interfaith infrastructure is characterized by processes of legitimacy production. Durable cooperation depends on recognition not only within religious communities, but also across broader social fields, including the state and civil society. Interfaith arrangements must be perceived as authoritative, predictable, and procedurally fair if they are to function over time (Suchman, 1995). Infrastructure provides the means through which such legitimacy is produced and reproduced, transforming interfaith from a moral aspiration into an institutionalized social reality.

To clarify the analytical scope of the concept, it is useful to distinguish interfaith infrastructure from related phenomena. It is not synonymous with interfaith events, which are episodic and interactional. Nor is it equivalent to networks, which may facilitate communication without stabilizing authority or reproduction. Infrastructure implies a higher level of institutional density—one in which cooperation acquires continuity, predictability, and public recognition.

This conceptualization also opens the possibility of ideal-typical differentiation. Interfaith infrastructure can take different forms, depending on how the problem of durability is addressed. These forms should not be read as empirical cases, nor as normative models. They function instead as analytical types that illuminate distinct institutional logics through which interreligious cooperation is stabilized.

Varieties of Interfaith Infrastructure: An Ideal-Typical Differentiation

A first ideal type may be described as coordinative infrastructure, following Weber's use of ideal types as analytical constructs rather than empirical descriptions (Weber, 1978, 19-22). Here, the primary function

of interfaith arrangements is to facilitate regularized coordination between religious communities without asserting strong representative authority (Powell & Bromley, 2015; Scott, 2014). Such infrastructure typically operates through scheduled meetings, shared calendars, and routinized channels of communication, mechanisms associated with institutional stabilization and the reduction of uncertainty (Lawrence et al., 2011; Scott, 2014). Its sociological significance lies less in command than in repetition: by stabilizing interaction temporally and procedurally, coordinative infrastructure enables predictability without exercising hierarchical control (Weber, 1978, 956-958). Its authority remains relatively thin-it coordinates rather than governs-achieving durability through routinization rather than binding decision-making (Lawrence et al., 2011).

A second ideal type is *representational infrastructure*. In this configuration, interfaith arrangements are explicitly organized around the problem of representation. Specific actors or bodies are authorized to speak on behalf of religious traditions in public or institutional contexts. The central mechanism here is legitimation. Recognition must be granted both internally, within religious communities, and externally, by state or civic institutions. Representational infrastructure transforms interfaith from voluntary encounter into an authorized interface. Its durability depends on stabilized criteria for inclusion, voice, and recognition, while simultaneously making power relations more visible and contested.

A third ideal type can be termed *consultative infrastructure*. This form functions as an institutionalized intermediary between religious communities and other social fields, particularly the state. Rather than coordinating religions directly with one another, consultative infrastructure stabilizes channels through which religious perspectives are translated into broader decision-making processes. Its sociological significance lies in boundary management. Religious difference is neither privatized nor absorbed into political authority, but rendered relevant through consultative procedures. Durability here rests on procedural regularity rather than substantive consensus.

A fourth ideal type may be described as *symbolic-regulatory infrastructure*. In this configuration, interfaith cooperation is stabilized through shared symbolic frameworks and publicly recognized norms that regulate interaction across religious boundaries. This does not require theological convergence, but it does presuppose a degree of symbolic alignment around coexistence itself. Through recurring

symbols, rituals, or public narratives, interfaith relations acquire an appearance of normality and inevitability. Durability is achieved through symbolic reinforcement rather than organizational density alone.

These ideal types are analytically distinct, but they are not mutually exclusive. In practice, interfaith infrastructure often combines elements of several types. What matters sociologically is not their purity, but the mechanisms they foreground. Each type represents a different solution to the same underlying problem: how to stabilize cooperation among plural moral communities without erasing difference or relying solely on goodwill.

By introducing this ideal-typical differentiation, the concept of interfaith infrastructure gains analytical precision. Durability appears not as a singular achievement, but as a variable outcome produced through different institutional logics. Specifying these logics allows interfaith relations to be analyzed comparatively while remaining grounded in classical sociological concerns with authority, order, and institutionalization.

Conceptual Contribution

The concept of *interfaith infrastructure* contributes to the sociology of religion by reframing how interfaith relations are analytically understood. Instead of treating interfaith as a normative project, a moral disposition, or a loose collection of dialogical practices, the concept approaches interfaith as a form of institutionalized social coordination. It allows interfaith relations to be analyzed with the same sociological tools used to study religion more broadly: institutionalization, authority, legitimacy, and reproduction.

One contribution lies in addressing a persistent micro–macro divide in the literature. This orientation has been influential within interreligious studies (Cornille, 2013; Ippgrave, 2016), yet its sociological implications remain undertheorized. Dialogue-centered approaches tend to privilege interaction, experience, and meaning-making at the micro level, while macro-level analyses focus on governance, law, or state–religion relations. Interfaith infrastructure provides a conceptual bridge between these levels. It makes visible how interactional moments are translated into organizational arrangements—and how those arrangements, in turn, shape future interactions. In this sense, infrastructure functions as a mediating layer through which meaning gradually becomes order.

A second contribution concerns the integration of symbolic and organizational dimensions that are often treated separately. Interfaith initiatives are frequently analyzed either as cultural-symbolic practices or as administrative instruments. Interfaith infrastructure resists this division. It insists that symbolic recognition requires organizational carriers, and that organizational forms depend on symbolic legitimacy to endure. By foregrounding this mutual dependence, the concept aligns interfaith analysis more closely with classical sociological understandings of religion as both a meaning system and a social institution.

The concept also clarifies the role of power and authority without reducing interfaith relations to domination or control. Dialogue-focused accounts often obscure questions of representation by assuming symmetrical participation and shared moral intent. An infrastructural perspective brings these questions back into view: who is recognized as a representative, which traditions gain institutional voice, and how procedures of inclusion and exclusion are stabilized. This does not imply that interfaith infrastructure is inherently coercive, but it does underscore a basic sociological point—durability always involves regulated access and legitimate authority.

A further contribution concerns pluralism itself. Much sociological writing treats pluralism either as a demographic condition or as a cultural ethos. Interfaith infrastructure reframes pluralism as an institutional problem: the challenge of coordinating multiple moral communities within a shared social order. From this perspective, pluralism is not sustained by tolerance alone, but by arrangements that make coexistence predictable, intelligible, and repeatable.

Finally, the concept is designed to travel across contexts without becoming empirically or normatively fixed. It does not prescribe specific organizational forms, nor does it assume liberal-democratic or authoritarian settings. Its analytical strength lies in abstraction. By capturing a set of sociological mechanisms rather than concrete models, interfaith infrastructure remains suitable for comparative analysis without collapsing into case-specific generalization.

By repositioning interfaith relations as infrastructure rather than encounter, the article intervenes in ongoing debates within the sociology of religion on institutionalization under conditions of diversity. It shows that classical concerns—social order, legitimacy, authority—remain central for understanding contemporary pluralism. In doing so, it offers a way of analyzing interfaith relations not as exceptional moral

achievements, but as ordinary sociological phenomena shaped by enduring structures.

Metatheoretical Positioning

It is worth pausing to clarify the metatheoretical position of *interfaith infrastructure*, particularly in relation to neighboring fields that also engage questions of religious pluralism. Interfaith relations are frequently examined within policy studies, governance research, political theology, or normative theories of pluralism. The present contribution, however, is anchored explicitly within the sociology of religion. This choice is not merely disciplinary. It is analytical, and it carries consequences for the kinds of questions that can be asked.

Policy-oriented approaches tend to evaluate interfaith arrangements in terms of effectiveness, best practice, or measurable social outcomes. Governance perspectives often focus on regulatory design, institutional performance, or the management of diversity by the state. Normative theories, in turn, are primarily concerned with ethical ideals—tolerance, recognition, deliberation. Each of these perspectives offers valuable insights. Yet they operate with evaluative criteria that differ fundamentally from sociological explanation. They ask whether interfaith works, whether it is just, or whether it ought to be promoted. Sociology asks something else: how interfaith relations are socially produced, stabilized, and rendered authoritative.

The concept of interfaith infrastructure deliberately suspends normative judgment in order to foreground mechanisms of institutionalization, following a Weberian distinction between analytical and evaluative inquiry (Weber, 1949, 49–52). It does not assume that interfaith arrangements are inherently progressive or emancipatory, nor does it reduce them to instruments of governance or control (Foucault, 1991; Bourdieu, 1991). Instead, it treats interfaith as a form of social organization subject to institutional analysis (Scott, 2014). As such, it raises classical sociological questions concerning how authority is constituted, how legitimacy is reproduced, and how collective coordination is stabilized over time (Weber, 1978; Lawrence et al., 2011).

This stance also distinguishes the present approach from political theology, which often centers on the theological implications of religion's public role. Interfaith infrastructure brackets theological content and focuses instead on religion's sociological function. The

concern is not what religions claim, but how those claims are organized, recognized, and coordinated within plural social orders.

By maintaining this analytical distance, the concept remains compatible with classical sociological theory while speaking directly to contemporary conditions of diversity. It allows interfaith relations to be examined as ordinary sociological phenomena rather than exceptional moral projects. This positioning is not incidental. It is essential for preserving the explanatory autonomy of the sociology of religion—and for ensuring that interfaith infrastructure functions as a theoretical tool rather than a prescriptive framework.

Conclusion

This article has argued for a shift in how interfaith relations are approached sociologically: away from dialogue as event and toward interfaith infrastructure as institution. By institutional form, I refer to durable organizational and procedural arrangements—such as representative councils, formalized consultation mechanisms, and routinized coordination platforms—that structure interaction across religious communities (Scott, 2014; Powell & Bromley, 2015). Dialogical encounters remain important as sites of interaction and symbolic recognition. Yet without institutional anchoring in governance structures, recognized authority, and rule-bound procedures, dialogue tends to remain episodic-fragile, contingent, and dependent on individual commitment or favorable circumstances that may not endure (Lawrence et al., 2011).

By introducing the concept of interfaith infrastructure, the article addresses a persistent gap in the sociology of religion. Drawing on classical theoretical resources, it has shown that durability, legitimacy, and authority are not secondary features of interfaith relations, but constitutive conditions of their social effectiveness. Interfaith infrastructure captures the ensemble of arrangements through which cooperation is routinized, representation authorized, boundaries managed, and legitimacy reproduced. In doing so, it repositions interfaith relations within core sociological debates on institutionalization and social order, rather than treating them as exceptional or peripheral phenomena.

The contribution has been deliberately theoretical and non-normative. Rather than evaluating political systems or theological positions, the analysis has focused on sociological mechanisms that operate across contexts. Interfaith infrastructure is thus presented as

an analytical framework for examining how religious coordination becomes institutionalized without presuming either empirical validation or normative endorsement. As such, it functions as a portable concept-one that invites comparison without collapsing into contextual determinism or ideological celebration.

More broadly, the article conceptualizes pluralism as an institutional coordination problem rather than a moral disposition. From this perspective, pluralism is sustained through routinized authority, recognized representation, and stabilized procedures that render cooperation predictable across contexts. This reframing reconnects interfaith analysis with long-standing sociological concerns about how diverse moral communities are coordinated within shared social frameworks, and it underscores the continued relevance of classical sociology for understanding contemporary religious diversity.

Future research may extend this framework by examining how coordinative, representative, and regulatory forms of interfaith infrastructure emerge and operate under different social and political conditions. Rather than treating interfaith relations as episodic dialogue or moral achievement, the analytical shift proposed here conceptualizes them as institutionalized arrangements structured by routinization, authorized representation, and governance mechanisms. This reframing specifies the mechanisms through which durability is achieved and authority reproduced, thereby situating interfaith relations within established sociological theories of institutionalization and legitimacy. By foregrounding institutional form over event-based interaction, the article clarifies the analytical distinction between symbolic encounter and durable social organization.

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