

Article

One Campus, Many Voices: Religious Socialization Among Palestinian Female Students in a Shared Jewish–Muslim Academic Space

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Abstract

This study examines how religious socialization unfolds within a multi-religious academic campus, focusing on Palestinian–Muslim female students studying in a Jewish-majority institution in Israel. While academic spaces are often framed as secular and neutral, this research investigates how religion continues to shape identity, belonging, and everyday interactions in such contexts. Drawing on an interpretive qualitative approach, the study is based on in-depth interviews with 28 Palestinian–Muslim female graduate students. The findings reveal that the campus functions as a post-secular space characterized by three interconnected dynamics: (1) institutional arrangements that privilege majority religious norms while marginalizing minority practices; (2) the reproduction of power relations and symbolic boundaries between Jewish and Muslim students; and (3) subtle yet significant processes of identity transformation emerging through interreligious encounters. The study shows that religious socialization extends beyond family and community, taking shape within institutional contexts that require ongoing negotiation of visibility, legitimacy, and belonging. It further highlights forms of agency expressed through strategic adaptation, selective participation, and everyday resistance under conditions of constraint. These findings contribute to post-secular theory by demonstrating how religion is reconfigured rather than diminished in contemporary academic institutions, and position higher education as a critical site for understanding religion, gender, and power in divided societies.

Keywords: post-secularism; religious identity; Palestinian–Muslim students; intergroup relations; power and inequality; interreligious dialogue



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1. Introduction

The multi-religious academic campus constitutes a significant social space that has only been partially explored in relation to processes of religious socialization in contemporary societies. Classical secularization theories assumed that processes of modernization, rationalization, and higher education would lead to the gradual weakening of religion and the reduction in its influence in the public sphere (Berger 1967; Weber 1978). However, research indicates that religion has not disappeared; rather, it has undergone processes of transformation, reconfiguration, and ongoing negotiation within new institutional frameworks (Casanova 2019; Gorski 2017; Beaumont et al. 2020; Bender and Klassen 2010). Many contemporary societies are therefore characterized by a post-secular condition, in which religion continues to play a significant social and cultural role even within modern institutions (Habermas 2008; Göle 2021). Academic institutions, often presented as secular

and neutral spaces, are in practice revealed as social arenas in which religious identities are reexamined, challenged, and reshaped through everyday encounters among different groups (Bender and Klassen 2010; Mayrl and Oeur 2009).

This process becomes particularly pronounced in deeply divided societies, where religious belonging is intertwined with national, ethnic, and gender identities. The Israeli context illustrates this dynamic clearly. Encounters between Jewish students and Palestinian–Muslim students on shared campuses take place against the backdrop of a prolonged national conflict, persistent structural inequalities, and asymmetric power relations between the Jewish majority and the Palestinian–Arab minority (Ghanem 2010; Al-Haj 1995). In this context, the campus becomes a space of intergroup contact, boundary marking, belonging, and ongoing negotiation over identity.

For Palestinian–Muslim female students studying in Jewish academic institutions, this encounter is especially complex. It involves navigating institutional norms that are often perceived as secular or Jewish-hegemonic, alongside the continuous management of religious, national, gendered, and intergenerational identities both within and beyond the campus (Arar and Haj-Yehia 2016; Abu Oksa Daoud 2017). Palestinian–Muslim female students move between different social and cultural worlds: family, community, and religion on the one hand, and the academic sphere on the other, which offers opportunities for education, mobility, and professional integration. In this sense, participation in higher education within Jewish institutions represents a practical step toward personal advancement, but it also constitutes a socially charged process in which notions of femininity, religion, belonging, and authority are renegotiated. This transition exposes students to tensions, contradictions, and the reexamination of positions and identities (Agbaria 2023). Within the multi-religious campus, religion continues to function as a significant social force shaping everyday interactions, group boundaries, and processes of belonging (Ranz and Allasad Alhuzail 2021).

Despite this, existing research has devoted limited attention to the ways Palestinian–Muslim female students interpret, manage, and reshape their religious and social identities specifically within the context of a shared Jewish–Palestinian campus in Israel. This article seeks to address this gap by examining the interreligious, social, and cultural encounters experienced by Palestinian–Muslim female students studying at a teacher education college in central Israel. The research question is: How do Palestinian–Muslim female students interpret and shape their religious and social identities within a multi-religious academic environment and how do intergroup encounters on campus influence group boundaries, power relations, and processes of identity transformation?

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Post-Secularism and Religion in the Academic Space*

Classical secularization theories, as formulated by Durkheim (1915), Weber (1978), and Berger (1967), understood religion as a central force in the organization of social life, collective meaning, and public authority. Within this framework, processes of modernization were expected to lead to a gradual decline in religion's public significance and its power to organize collective consciousness and social conduct. However, since the late twentieth century, accumulating empirical evidence has challenged this assumption (Casanova 1994; Asad 2003; Habermas 2008), contributing to the development of the theoretical framework known as "post-secularism". This perspective emphasizes that the relationship between religion and modernity is characterized by ongoing negotiation, reflexivity, and transformation, rather than a linear process culminating in the disappearance of religion.

Casanova (1994, 2019) argued that religion has undergone a process of “de-privatization” re-emerging in the public sphere as a moral and political force. Asad (2003) highlighted the political nature of secularism itself, suggesting that it constitutes a process that produces new hierarchies and power relations. Habermas (2008) proposed conceptualizing contemporary societies as “post-secular”, in which both religious and secular citizens are required to develop the capacity to translate between the language of faith and rational public discourse, thereby enabling mutual understanding and communication.

Recent studies (Tamimi Arab 2020) indicate that academic institutions, often portrayed as neutral spaces, function in practice as arenas in which Jewish and Muslim students engage in ongoing negotiations of identity and belief. Gorski (2017) indicated that exposure to environments where secular norms dominate may lead both to a partial loosening of religious practices and to their reinforcement as a form of identity defense. In some cases, such exposure also fosters internal critique within religious communities, particularly regarding hypocrisy, gender norms, and tensions between tradition and changing social realities.

In the Israeli context, the post-secular framework acquires a distinctive significance. Encounters between Jewish and Palestinian–Muslim individuals take place within a field shaped by national, religious, and political tensions. Israeli academia is perceived as a secular space; however, in practice it operates within cultural and national hierarchies, in which Muslim students and faculty use strategies of adaptation alongside expressions of religious agency, particularly in response to experiences of exclusion or cultural gaps (Beaumont and Baker 2011; Ranz and Allasad Alhuzail 2021). The post-secular approach thus enables an understanding of religion as an active component of identity, continuously shaped through tensions between power relations, belonging, and intergroup encounters.

2.2. Social Identity Theory and Intergroup Relations

The social identity theory developed by Tajfel and Turner in the 1970s (Turner et al. 1979; Tajfel and Turner 2004), offers a framework for understanding the relationship between personal identity and group identity, and in the local context for understanding the relations between Jews and Palestinian–Muslims on campuses in Israel. In relation to this approach, people define themselves, among other things, through belonging to social groups, and strive to maintain a positive group identity by distinguishing between the in-group and the out-group. Processes of classification and social comparison shape feelings of belonging, create stereotypes and sometimes also draw clear boundaries between groups.

People tend to constantly compare their group to other groups, a process that sometimes creates a hierarchical ranking between different groups (Harel et al. 2020). The very need to distinguish between “us” and “them” may provoke tensions between groups even when there is no actual competition for resources. This situation arises from the desire of group members to strengthen the positive image of their group and emphasize its uniqueness (Porat et al. 2016). Studies show that people tend to prefer their own in-group over other groups, a phenomenon known as “in-group bias”, which may be expressed in discriminatory behavior, prejudices, and stereotypical thinking (Hewstone et al. 2002; Reimer et al. 2022; Beugelsdijk and Welzel 2018; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006).

In the Israeli context, where nationalism, religion, and language are intertwined, the border between Jews and Muslim–Palestinians is emerging as a central axis of social and political tension (Khalaily and Ghanem 2023). Studies of Arab students in Jewish institutions (Arar et al. 2015; Amara 2020; Eliyahu-Levi and Gvura 2025a) indicate complex experiences of belonging alongside a sense of alienation, shaped by Jewish hegemony in language, curriculum, and institutional space. For Muslim women studying on campuses

where they are a prominent minority, a sense of identity threat may arise from their daily encounters with a national-religious space centered on Jews (Abu Oksa Daoud 2017; Eliyahu-Levi and Gvura 2025b).

2.3. *The Multi-Religious Campus as a Space for Encounter*

Jewish–Muslim relations take place in a space where the language, curricula, faculty, and symbols primarily reflect the identity of the Jewish majority (Arar 2020; Arar et al. 2015). Studies that deal with encounters between Jews and Arabs on campuses indicate that daily contact between groups does not guarantee the creation of significant social connections or a profound change in attitudes.

The fact of joint presence in the same space does not necessarily lead to the disappearance of boundaries of belonging, suspicion, or distance, and may sometimes even sharpen them (Hammack 2011). More complex and positive relationships generally develop when dialogic spaces are created that are based on the recognition of power gaps and the possibility of openly expressing experiences of harm, exclusion, and religious and national tensions (Bekerman and Zembylas 2011; Abu-Nimer 2020).

Research in the field of interreligious dialogue (Abu-Nimer 2020; Visser et al. 2024) indicates that the success of encounters between groups depends on the willingness of the participants, but also on institutional conditions and living structures that allow for dealing with historical and religious tensions. When such conditions exist, direct conversation about faith, rituals, and religious symbols may undermine stereotypical perceptions and open the possibility of a more complex understanding of identities and belonging.

2.4. *Religious Socialization as an Ongoing Process*

According to Conroy and Emerson (2004), religiosity is characterized by active and regular participation in religious activities, and focuses on behavioral aspects measured through the frequency of visible religious actions. Religiosity includes values, beliefs, and behavioral patterns that profoundly shape the individual's identity, with reference to the sacred or functional dimensions of religious affiliation (Pargament 2001). It is sometimes expressed as an external and institutionalized manifestation of an individual's relationship to the sacred, reflected in beliefs and practices associated with a particular religious worldview (Cotton et al. 2013). Beyond these behavioral and institutional aspects, recent studies suggest that religiosity and spirituality are also linked to subjective dimensions of well-being and personal meaning (Villani et al. 2019).

Religious symbols and religious affiliation serve as markers of identity that contribute to strengthening ethnic identity through rituals and cultural components (Mitchell 2006). Studies on higher-education spaces in Israel show that alongside the image of the campus as a secular space, there are overt and covert exclusionary mechanisms, especially towards Muslim women who wear the hijab or niqab. These religious symbols carry a plurality of meanings that cannot be reduced to a single framework. Within Israeli higher education, the hijab and niqab may indeed function as symbols of resistance, protest, and the assertion of collective identity in a space shaped by dominant secular Jewish norms (Mizel 2020). However, for many Arab/Muslim women, these garments also carry complex social, cultural, religious, familial, and gendered meanings within their own communities. Some women embrace them as expressions of piety, dignity, belonging, or self-definition, while others may experience ambivalence, social pressure, or discomfort in relation to them. A fuller understanding therefore requires attending to the way these symbols are perceived within the dominant academic space, and to the way Arab women negotiate their meanings across both institutional and communal worlds. Against this background, Arab women are documented who had difficulty integrating into the academic space that failed to

respond to specific needs arising from different socio-cultural backgrounds (Husny Arar and Masry-Herzallah 2014).

Current research indicates that religious identity continues to be shaped throughout life, especially in contexts of encountering cultural and religious diversity. Institutions of higher education may serve as significant arenas for these processes, as exposure to different positions and encounters between groups creates conditions for a reexamination of religious practices and the meaning of religious affiliation (Mayrl and Oeur 2009).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach

The study relies on an interpretive qualitative approach that seeks to understand how participants interpret their experiences and how they give meaning to social situations and intergroup encounters in the academic space. This approach is particularly suitable for studying processes of identity, belonging, and experiences of intergroup tension. It allows us to focus on the subjective meanings that participants attribute to their experiences and the social and cultural contexts within which they are shaped (Creswell and Poth 2016). The study was conducted at the College of Education in Central Israel, an institution characterized by religious and ethnic diversity, where Jewish and Arab Palestinian–Muslim students share academic spaces, courses, and campus facilities.

3.2. Research Participants and Sampling Process

The study involved 28 female students studying for a master’s degree at a teacher training college in central Israel. All participants defined themselves as having a Palestinian–Muslim identity. This self-definition was a condition for participation in the study, as its aim was to examine the experiences of Palestinian–Muslim women in an academic environment where the majority is Jewish and the language of instruction is Hebrew. None of the participants defined themselves as secular. All identified with Islam to varying degrees, ranging from strictly observant to moderately religious, reflecting the study’s focus on the religious socialization experiences of Palestinian–Muslim women within the academic space.

The participants study in various tracks within the framework of their master’s degree studies and come from diverse social and religious backgrounds. Some described themselves as having a distinctly religious lifestyle, while others defined their degree of religiosity as moderate or more flexible. This diversity made it possible to examine a wide range of experiences, perceptions of identity, and coping with the encounter between religion, nationalism, and the academic environment.

The students were approached via a personal letter sent by e-mail. The letter presented the objectives of the study, the nature of participation, and the principles of maintaining confidentiality and anonymity. Participation in the study was completely voluntary, and it was explained to the participants that their decision to participate or not to participate was not related to their studies at the institution and had no impact on their academic evaluation or on their teaching relationships with the faculty.

Participants were recruited using stratified purposive sampling (Patton 2014). In the first stage, the study population was defined and divided into strata according to characteristics found to be relevant to the research questions, including years of study, religious affiliation, and different levels of religiosity. In the second stage, participants from each stratum were selected intentionally, with the aim of creating a diverse and balanced sample that would allow for the examination of a wide range of experiences and perceptions of identity in the multi-religious academic space. This sample structure allowed for the identification of common patterns alongside differences between the participants.

3.3. Data Collection Process

The data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in Hebrew between March and June 2024. The interviews were conducted by a female Jewish researcher whose areas of expertise include education and multiculturalism. The interviews were conducted in Hebrew for two primary reasons. First, the interviewer is not an Arabic speaker. Second, all participants demonstrated sufficient proficiency in Hebrew to engage in extended personal interviews, as Hebrew is the language of instruction at the college and their primary academic language. We acknowledge, however, that conducting interviews in a language other than the participants' mother tongue may have limited the nuanced expression of certain emotional or intimate experiences. This is recognized as a methodological limitation of the study.

The interview allows participants to describe their experiences and express perceptions, feelings, and meanings related to the encounter between religious identity and the academic space (Kallio et al. 2016). We asked questions that dealt with their experiences of studying on campus, encounters with Jewish students, perceptions of religious and national identity, and the meanings that the academic space takes on in their lives. Special attention was paid to creating a respectful, nonjudgmental interview environment. These conditions appeared to facilitate open reflection on personal experiences and identity-related dilemmas.

The interviews were conducted in person and lasted between 45 and 60 min on average. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed in full for data analysis. During the interviews, participants were encouraged to expand their answers and provide examples from their personal experiences as much as they wished.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis with an interpretive approach. This approach allows for the identification of recurring patterns, subjective meanings, and social constructions that emerge from the participants' discourse (Schreier 2012; Mayring 2015). The analysis process included several stages. First, a thorough re-reading of all the transcripts was conducted in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the material. This was followed by open coding of central units of meaning. In the next stage, the codes were grouped into broader categories, and from these, central themes were identified that reflect recurring patterns in the participants' discourse. In the final stage, an integrative interpretation of the themes found was conducted, linking them to the research questions and the theoretical framework on which the study is based (Creswell and Poth 2016).

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles accepted in qualitative research. Before the study began, all participants received a full explanation of the study's objectives, the method of data collection, and the expected use of the data. Participation was completely voluntary, and participants were informed that they were free to discontinue their participation at any stage without any consequences. To protect the participants' privacy, the interviews were anonymized, and pseudonyms were assigned to participants during the analysis and writing stages. The data were stored securely and used for research purposes only. The study received approval from the Institutional Ethics Committee of the College (approval no. 18-250126).

4. Findings

This section presents the authentic voice of the Palestinian–Muslim female students and paints a complex picture of the learning experience in a Jewish academic space, which is perceived as open and diverse, but experienced as a space charged with power relations, gaps and tensions of identity. The interviews show that the campus is a social, religious and gendered space in which female students conduct ongoing negotiations about their belonging, faith, visibility and future.

The findings were organized around three central themes: (1) Post-secularization: Interreligious tension in a secular academic space; (2) Power relations and border construction between Jews and Palestinian Muslims; (3) Interreligious encounter as a silent agent of consciousness change.

4.1. Post-Secularization: Tension Between Religiosity in a Secular Academic Space

The data show that female students are required to adapt to the prevailing Jewish mindset on campus, which is expressed in the Jewish calendar, rituals, symbols, and holidays. For example, Nur describes how during Ramadan she experienced a gap between the needs of the Muslim religion and the demands of the Jewish system:

During the Ramadan fast, I experienced a powerful event that I did not expect. There is no consideration for what we need, we are fasting. The lectures, assignments, and submissions continued as usual, as if this day was no different from other days. It was physically difficult for me, and I felt that my needs were not being addressed and that no one was paying attention to me. That the academy sees the entire students as a uniform group, without understanding that fasting is a significant part of our religious identity. I do not understand why, when the Jews fast, their studies are canceled, and as if there is no place for our religion, our customs, as if we need to adapt to the system instead of the system recognizing us. (Nur)

Nur's comparison between Ramadan and the Jewish fast day deserves closer cultural and institutional analysis. These two observances differ significantly in their structure and demands. The Jewish fast day she refers to is a single day on which Israeli academic institutions typically cancel classes. Ramadan, by contrast, is a month-long period of daily fasting from dawn to sunset, during which Muslim students continue to attend classes and meet academic deadlines while fasting. The relevant institutional question is therefore not simply whether Ramadan deserves recognition equivalent to Jewish holidays, but what forms of accommodation would meaningfully respond to the specific demands of extended fasting: sensitivity in scheduling exams and deadlines, provision of prayer spaces, and awareness of the physical burden of fasting across an entire month. Her frustration reflects not merely a demand for symmetrical treatment, but a deeper need for the institution to recognize the specific rhythms of Muslim religious practice on its own terms.

Nur's account indicates that the experience she describes extends beyond a situational difficulty related to fasting during Ramadan and points to a broader pattern of institutional non-recognition of Muslim religious needs. From her perspective, the academic routine is presented as equal and uniform; however, in practice, it primarily reflects the calendar and norms of the Jewish majority.

From a post-secular perspective, Nur's testimony demonstrates that religion continues to operate within an academic space that presents itself as secular and neutral. Islam appears on campus under conditions of partial recognition, constant translation, and repeated justification. In this sense, institutional neutrality functions as a hierarchical mechanism that determines which religious expressions are incorporated into everyday routine as legitimate and taken for granted, and which are pushed to the margins as deviant

or exceptional. Nur's experience thus exposes the politics of neutrality: what is framed as a universal norm is experienced by her as a social order that privileges one way of life over another. In this context, scholars (Casanova 2019; Göle 2021) argue that the modern public sphere is not devoid of religion, but rather saturated with the religious norms of the majority, which have become normalized and taken for granted, while the religious expressions of minority groups are perceived as deviations from neutrality.

Nur articulates a process of intergroup comparison through which she interprets her position in the academic space as part of a Muslim group required to adapt to norms it did not shape. Her question, "I do not understand why, during Jewish fasting, classes are canceled," may be interpreted as an expression of personal grievance; however, more importantly, it reflects a process of social identity construction. Nur speaks as a member of a status group situated within asymmetrical power relations vis-à-vis the majority group. Research (Tajfel and Turner 2004; Rockenbach et al. 2020) on the experiences of Muslim students in multi-religious campuses highlights that social identity is shaped through experiences of "otherness" produced by the institution and through an ongoing need to negotiate recognition. Her account thus reveals a clear distinction between a group whose needs are recognized as a natural part of the system and another whose needs require explicit justification.

Moreover, coping with the lack of adaptation during Ramadan teaches Nur that religion is not only a system of beliefs or private practices, but also a site of negotiation with institutions, rules, and power relations. In this sense, the campus functions as a setting of ongoing religious socialization: the student learns how her religion is interpreted by others, when it is granted legitimacy, when it is perceived as deviant, and which strategies are required to sustain a religious identity within such a context.

Taken together, Nur's account demonstrates that the tension within the campus does not stem from the mere presence of religion, but from the ways in which the institution defines which religious expressions are considered legitimate and which remain invisible. Her testimony is therefore particularly significant, as it illuminates the campus as a space in which religious identity, group belonging, and religious socialization are jointly shaped under unequal conditions of recognition.

A similar dynamic emerges from Susan's account, which describes a situation in which Muslim students' request for adjustments was denied, while a parallel request from Jewish students was accepted:

During the month of Ramadan, I experienced something that affected me deeply. We had a joint course with Arab and Jewish students, and because we were fasting, we asked to replace the exam with a written assignment. The lecturer rejected our request. It hurt me because I expected him to take into account that we are fasting during Ramadan, and that this is important to us. But when the Jewish group asked for a different assignment instead of the exam, he immediately agreed. That hurt us a lot, he did not respect our religious practices. (Susan)

Susan's testimony sharpens the understanding that religious non-recognition is expressed not only through the absence of accommodations, but also through differential mechanisms of legitimacy. It is not the refusal itself that generates the sense of harm, but rather the comparison between requests, which reveals which demands are perceived as reasonable and legitimate and which require additional justification.

This case illustrates how, within the academic space, a latent distinction is maintained between religious expressions and demands framed as "academic" or "practical." This distinction is not neutral, as it is grounded in majority norms that have become transparent and taken for granted, while the religious practices of minorities are framed as deviant or as disrupting academic order (Asad 2003). This dynamic exposes a condition of "hegemonic

secularism,” in which academic institutions effectively reproduce the cultural privileges of the majority group under the guise of administrative uniformity (Modood 2019). In this context, Jewish students are not perceived as requesting a “religious concession,” but as operating within a taken-for-granted institutional routine that reflects the locus of majority power.

Through comparing the lecturer’s responses to the two groups, Susan constructs her social position while intensifying her sense of inequality and sharpening the boundaries between “us” and “them” (Hewstone et al. 2002). In such situations, the implicit legitimacy afforded to the majority group is sufficient to generate a sense of marginality among minority students.

At the level of religious socialization, the described event is not only a moment of disappointment, but also a site of learning regarding the boundaries of religious identity within the academic space. Susan learns that the expression of religious needs is not automatically recognized as part of legitimate discourse, but is contingent upon context, interpretation, and alignment with prevailing norms. This process reflects how students develop forms of religious navigation and active strategies through which they manage their identities in relation to institutional structures (Mayrl and Oeur 2009). In this sense, the experience contributes to the formation of future strategies: when and how to raise requests, which justifications are likely to be perceived as legitimate, and how to articulate religious identity in ways that can be accommodated within an institutional environment that does not fully recognize it (Pargament 2001; Mayrl and Oeur 2009). This process underscores that religious socialization is not confined to community settings, but also unfolds through encounters with institutions that redefine the conditions of visibility and legitimacy of religion.

Another difficulty concerns the very possibility of speaking about religion. Siham describes:

I feel that the campus is presented as a place of openness and diversity, but when it comes to religion, there are clear boundaries that are uncomfortable to cross. It is not possible to talk about religion without fear of criticism or ridicule. It is not possible to engage in open religious dialogue without fearing confrontation, without feeling that we must be careful with every word. (Siham)

Siham’s account shifts the focus from institutional accommodations to the boundaries of discourse itself, indicating that religion on campus is shaped through both formal policies and informal norms that define what can be legitimately expressed. The experience she describes—fear of criticism, concern about confrontation, and careful use of language—suggests that religion remains present in the academic space while being governed by a regime of discursive regulation shaped by the institution (Bender and Klassen 2010). Practices of linguistic caution and avoidance of speech therefore emerge as contextually produced rather than purely individual responses, reflecting an environment in which institutional pluralism is experienced as largely performative. This gap between a declared ideology of inclusion and the implicit limit of acceptable expression highlights the extent to which academic freedom is constrained by hegemonic discursive norms.

From a critical perspective, Siham’s testimony reveals that mechanisms of exclusion operate through both visible non-recognition and the internalization of discursive boundaries by the students themselves. The fear of “saying something wrong” points to the presence of an internalized regulator that pre-emptively narrows the scope of possible action, producing a subtle yet effective form of control grounded in self-regulation. Under these conditions, minority religion becomes present primarily through caution, concealment, and restraint. This process indicates that the encounter with the academic space shapes not only knowledge, but also norms of legitimate speech, defining who is permitted

to bring their identity into the public sphere and under what conditions. Siham's experience therefore suggests that the central challenge lies less in the existence of religious diversity than in the extent to which the institution enables such diversity to be expressed without being marked as deviant (Mayrl and Oeur 2009).

4.2. Power Relations and Boundary Construction Between Jews and Palestinian Muslims

The second theme indicates that encounters between groups do not necessarily lead to integration; rather, they often sharpen boundaries. Amal describes an ongoing sense of estrangement:

I have many thoughts about my place. I am a Muslim woman in a college that supposedly accepts everyone, but we Palestinians are not equal. I constantly have to explain my identity, my life, as if I am a representative of the religion. I also find myself wondering where the line is between the desire to integrate and the need to preserve my values, my religion, my faith, and who I am. It is difficult to maintain my religion within a framework that does not truly recognize it.

Power relations function as the primary mediators of intergroup encounters in the academic space, shaping the student's social positioning. Amal's assertion that "we Palestinians are not equal," alongside her description of the need to "explain [her] identity... as a representative of the religion," exposes a mechanism of enforced hyper-visibility (Frederick 2022). Within this mechanism, minority identity is marked as deviant from the unmarked norm and positioned in a state of continuous representation. This process generates a deep sense of estrangement: as the student becomes more visible, her sense of belonging diminishes, as she is perceived as another under constant scrutiny. This reality reflects processes of social categorization and differentiation in which the majority group enjoys a normative, transparent, and unmarked status, while the minority group is defined through its difference and required to justify its presence (Tajfel and Turner 2004; Shaheen 2024).

Amal's testimony reveals the paradox of the Israeli campus: while the institution presents itself as a pluralistic space, everyday interactions may place minority students in the position of having to explain and represent their religious identity. Rather than experiencing her faith as a private matter, Amal describes a recurring expectation to translate her beliefs, practices, and way of life for others, as though she were a representative of Islam. The tension she articulates lies between her desire to integrate into academic life and her commitment to preserving her values, religion, and sense of self. Her account suggests that inclusion is often accompanied by expectations to negotiate and explain aspects of one's identity in relation to dominant secular norms, creating a persistent tension between belonging and authenticity. While such tensions are not unique to Muslim students and may also be experienced by other religious groups, including religious Jewish students, they are intensified for Arab Muslim women by the intersection of religious, ethnic, gendered, and national minority positions. Consequently, the challenges described in this study should be understood not merely as the result of secular institutional norms, but as the product of the intersection between hegemonic secularism and minority status within a broader context of social and political inequality.

Religious socialization, in this context, unfolds through friction with a secular institutional framework that compels the student to develop forms of strategic religious navigation (Mayrl and Oeur 2009). Amal learns to define the boundaries of her identity in response to an academic space that does not recognize her religion as a legitimate and taken-for-granted component of campus life. The campus thus operates as a site in which religious identity is consolidated and reformulated in response to symbolic marginalization.

Amal speaks at the macro level, stating "we are not equal," whereas Rona illustrates the boundaries at the micro level, during the formation of groups in the classroom:

What I noticed is that the shared language between Muslim and Jewish female students is somewhat distant. There are no social connections. Most of the time, when we are divided into groups, the Muslim students prefer to work on their own. There is sometimes mixing, but only if the lecturer ensures it. I never had the courage to tell a Jewish student that I wanted to work with her, because they had already formed their groups. I did not feel comfortable entering a group. I prefer to be with Jewish students because it strengthens my language, and we come from a different culture. I always want to learn new things because it will benefit me a lot.

Rona's testimony sheds light on how intergroup boundaries are reproduced within everyday academic routines, even in spaces designed for collaboration. Her description suggests that separation between Jewish and Muslim students is not solely the result of exclusion by one group, but emerges through a combination of linguistic differences, limited social familiarity, established friendship networks, and mutual preferences for working within familiar circles. Significantly, Rona notes that Muslim students often choose to work among themselves, while interaction between Jewish and Muslim students tends to occur primarily when actively encouraged by lecturers. These observations suggest that social divisions are reproduced through everyday practices involving students from both groups, rather than through deliberate exclusion alone.

At the same time, Rona's statement that she "never had the courage" to ask to join a Jewish group reveals the emotional challenges associated with crossing existing social boundaries (Wilkins-Laflamme 2022). Rather than describing explicit rejection, she expresses hesitation and discomfort when approaching already established groups. Her experience illustrates how minority students may feel particularly vulnerable when attempting to initiate cross-group interactions, especially in contexts where institutional structures do not actively facilitate meaningful contact.

Rona's desire to improve her Hebrew language skills and learn from a different culture further demonstrates her openness to intergroup engagement. In this sense, interaction with Jewish students is perceived not only as a social opportunity but also as a source of linguistic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1991). However, when opportunities for such interaction remain limited, existing social boundaries may persist, restricting access to valuable resources and contributing to the reproduction of broader social inequalities. Thus, Rona's account points not to a simple dynamic of exclusion, but to a more complex process in which language, comfort, social networks, minority vulnerability, and the absence of institutional mediation collectively shape patterns of separation and belonging on campus.

Asil describes an everyday incident occurring in what appears to be a marginal space. The power of this account lies in its demonstration that power relations between groups operate not only through policy, language, or curriculum, but also through small gestures of priority, recognition, and legitimacy in shared spaces:

I will never forget what happened to me. I found an empty parking spot on campus and waited patiently. I was there first, and it was clear to everyone around. But when she saw that I was with a Muslim religious friend, wearing a headscarf, she simply ignored us and gave the spot to someone who arrived after us. In that moment, I felt a sharp pain in my stomach—we do not belong here. It drove me crazy. I am sure that if we had looked different, or if it had not been possible to identify us as Muslim, her behavior would have been different. I understand how even a small moment can be connected to our religion and identity.

The parking incident is interpreted by Asil as a moment of symbolic and spatial discrimination. Her sense that she was ignored because she was identified as a religious Muslim, wearing a headscarf, indicates that the public space of the campus is not neutral, but rather marks certain identities as having greater entitlement to the institution's physical resources.

The “pain in the stomach” and the feeling that “we do not belong here” illustrate environmental microaggressions—small, often subtle moments in which the institutional environment communicates messages of exclusion, alienation, or otherness to minority groups (Ali 2019). Being denied the parking space, despite her clear priority, was experienced as a concrete indication that institutional norms of fairness and justice do not apply to her in the same way as they do to members of the majority group.

From a power-relations perspective, the headscarf renders Asil a visible target for stereotyping and active exclusion at the very moment she asserts her place in the public space. Her assertion that the outcome would have differed had they “looked different” suggests that Muslim students understand their safety and rights on campus as contingent upon the visibility of their religious identity. This structural inequality turns the academic space into a site of ongoing negotiation, and at times struggle, over access to basic resources. The denied parking space becomes a metaphor for the status of the Palestinian Muslim minority on campus—physically present, yet symbolically marginalized, and subject to the discretionary actions of members of the majority group who perceive a natural entitlement to the space.

4.3. *Interreligious Encounters as a Catalyst for Subtle Consciousness Transformation*

The third theme suggests that interreligious encounters do not necessarily lead to immediate and visible change, but rather generate internal, gradual, and at times subtle processes of re-examining values, identity, and life trajectories. Nivine describes:

I saw Jewish women pursuing master's degrees, traveling, living their lives. I envy them. I come from a religious family, I believe in God, and I got married at 19. I am a mother of two children, and I don't even know when I had them. I am very tired. Today, things have changed a lot. It has influenced how I educate my daughter. Every day I sit with her and insist that she should not fall in love with someone and get married before she has a degree and a job. As a woman and a mother, I have a role in society to educate my daughters. But we, as women, are afraid to speak up. If something is not accepted by someone in my family, it could end in death, even honor killing. But I will make the change I can within my home—my daughter, my sister, my friend. (Nivine)

Nivine's testimony reveals a complex process of identity reflection triggered by encounters with Jewish female students whose life trajectories differ markedly from her own. Observing women who pursue higher education, delay marriage, and enjoy greater personal autonomy prompts her to reassess the expectations that shaped her own life, including early marriage and intensive motherhood. Yet her account extends beyond social comparison. Nivine explicitly describes the fear that women may experience when challenging accepted norms within their immediate social environment, referring to family sanctions and even the possibility of honor-based violence. These statements highlight the constraints under which identity negotiation takes place and underscore that the desire for change may coexist with a profound awareness of potential social consequences.

Against this backdrop, Nivine's account demonstrates a form of agency that operates within conditions of constraint rather than outside them. Rather than openly confronting existing norms, she seeks to create change through everyday educational practices directed toward her daughter and other women in her immediate circle (Lybarger 2020). Her

strategy reflects a gradual and relational form of resistance, grounded in the belief that meaningful transformation can begin within the family even when broader social structures remain difficult to challenge. Importantly, these experiences should not be understood as representative of Arab or Muslim communities as a whole, but rather as part of Nivine's particular lived experience and her interpretation of the social realities she navigates.

Nivine's strategy becomes visible in her efforts to shape the aspirations of the next generation through education and parental guidance. Drawing on experiences gained in the academic environment, she encourages her daughter to pursue higher education and economic independence, thereby transmitting cultural capital as a resource for future opportunities (Bourdieu 1991). Motherhood emerges as a central site of agency and identity construction, through which alternative values and life trajectories are communicated across generations (Verstappen 2024). At the same time, Nivine maintains her religious identity while reinterpreting it through conscious parental choices, reflecting a process of dynamic religious socialization shaped by encounters with alternative possibilities. Yet this transformation unfolds within conditions of social surveillance and perceived risk, which continue to define the limits of expression. From a post-secular perspective, her testimony illustrates how religion remains a meaningful framework while undergoing ongoing reinterpretation in response to changing social realities.

While Nivine focuses on structural and educational change for the next generation, Nadia's testimony reveals how interreligious encounters transform the campus into a liminal space—a social twilight zone that enables direct negotiation over the boundaries of the body and religious visibility:

I define myself as religious; I follow all the practices expected of me in Islam—I wear a headscarf, I believe in God, I pray. But the encounter with Jewish people has affected my life. I do not always want to wear a headscarf; I want to have my hair uncovered. Because men look at women who are not wearing a headscarf. I want to stand out, I want to be seen. On campus, it is safe—there is no husband, no brother, no mother watching me. Girls come to campus, take off their headscarves, and then put them back on when they go home. If God would allow me to choose in the next world—I would be a man. (Nadia)

Nadia's account reveals the campus as a space in which the regulatory norms of the home do not fully apply, allowing for a re-examination of the body and religious visibility. She carefully defines herself as a believing woman who fulfills her religious obligations, yet her experience in the academic environment produces a clear distinction between inner faith and its outward representation through the hijab. For her, the campus is not merely an educational institution, but a safe space precisely because of the relative absence of familial surveillance, enabling experimentation with alternative forms of femininity.

Nadia's testimony also points to a broader social phenomenon extending beyond her individual experience. Her observation that some Muslim women remove their headscarves on campus and replace them before returning home suggests that the campus functions as a relatively protected social space, allowing temporary experimentation with alternative forms of self-presentation. At the same time, this freedom appears fragile and conditional, relying on the maintenance of boundaries between campus life and family life. This arrangement appears to rely on an implicit understanding that practices occurring within the academic space remain separated from family and community scrutiny. In this sense, the campus becomes a space of negotiated autonomy rather than unrestricted freedom.

The hijab functions as a complex symbol charged with religious and political meanings; however, in Nadia's account, it becomes a flexible boundary that is strategically managed (Saimassayeva et al. 2025). Her striking statement that she would choose to be a man in the next world exposes a profound shift in consciousness regarding gendered power relations.

Beyond reflecting a shift in consciousness, this statement conveys the emotional burden associated with gendered expectations and restrictions. Nadia's wish to be a man points to the unequal constraints she experiences as a woman and highlights the personal cost of navigating competing expectations regarding modesty, visibility, autonomy, and belonging.

The agency of Muslim women is shaped within the tension between personal aspirations and community expectations (Karaman and Christian 2022). Nadia's movement between removing the hijab and exposing her hair on campus, and covering it again at home, reflects a form of strategic identity management—a process of identity code-switching. She takes advantage of the relative anonymity of the academic space to fulfill a desire for visibility and recognition, needs that are often suppressed under the critical gaze of her community. This process reflects a reorganization of the self, in which the student explores her femininity beyond patriarchal prescriptions while maintaining her core attachment to Islam (Syahrivar 2021). It represents a rational response that allows her to benefit from the multicultural encounter and experience moments of freedom, while safeguarding her social standing and security at home.

Nadia's narrative illustrates how interreligious encounters on campus generate a "quiet transformation" in the boundaries of the body. This shift in consciousness is evident in her perception of the hijab not as a fixed and immutable obligation, but as a tool for negotiating boundaries across different spaces. The body thus becomes a site of subtle resistance, enabling the creation of "breathing spaces" of freedom within conditions of surveillance. In this sense, the liminality of the campus creates opportunities for limited forms of agency and self-expression, while leaving the broader structures of gendered constraint largely intact.

5. Discussion

The discussion of the findings generates three core insights that move beyond the experiential descriptions of the students and offer a nuanced understanding of the relationship between higher education, religiosity, and gender in a post-secular society. The findings indicate that the multi-religious campus in Israel does not function as a neutral or simply integrative space, but rather as a dynamic arena in which religion, identity, and power relations are continuously reshaped through everyday interactions, institutional practices, and symbolic mechanisms. The three central themes—post-secular tension, power relations and boundary construction, and subtle consciousness transformation—should be understood as interconnected layers of a broader social process, in which encounters between Jewish and Palestinian Muslim women simultaneously produce exclusion, negotiation, and change.

The findings challenge the assumption that the academic space is secular in the sense of neutralizing religion. In line with post-secular theory, religion does not disappear from the public sphere but is reorganized within modern institutional frameworks (Habermas 2008; Casanova 2019). This reorganization operates within a non-neutral framework, as institutional neutrality is grounded in the norms of the majority group. The academic calendar, discursive norms, and criteria of legitimacy enable Jewish religious expressions to integrate seamlessly into routine practices, while Muslim expressions require mediation and justification. This reality reflects hegemonic secularism, in which the secular order functions as a mechanism that hierarchizes religious expressions and structures their visibility and legitimacy (Asad 2003; Göle 2021). Under these conditions, students develop patterns of flexible and strategic religiosity, in which religion serves both as a source of stability and meaning and as a resource for negotiation within a multicultural environment. Practices such as managing religious visibility demonstrate how religion is reconfigured

as a dynamic repertoire of selected practices through which students navigate belonging, survival, and development.

The findings further suggest that religion cannot be understood in isolation from other dimensions of identity. For the participants in this study, religious belonging was closely intertwined with ethnic, national, and civic identities as Palestinian citizens of Israel. Consequently, experiences on campus were shaped not only by religious difference, but also by the intersection of religion, ethnicity, nationality, and minority status within a broader socio-political context.

Building on this, the study contributes to the conceptualization of religious socialization as a dynamic process that extends beyond traditional frameworks of family and community. The campus emerges as an alternative site of socialization, where Muslim students encounter new models of life, gender roles, and education, and develop strategies of identity management under conditions of tension. These processes involve reinterpretations of religion, distinctions between internal belief and external expression, and the ability to move across social contexts (Mayrl and Oeur 2009; Karaman and Christian 2022). Religious socialization in multicultural settings thus involves continuity alongside creativity, adaptation, and agency.

The findings further demonstrate that intergroup boundaries are produced and reproduced through everyday routines and practices of belonging, avoidance, categorization, and representation (Tajfel and Turner 2004). While the campus appears as a space of encounter, it simultaneously operates as a mechanism of ongoing social sorting, in which the majority group maintains an unmarked normative status, whereas minority students are marked through visibility and required to explain or represent their identity. In this context, the sense of otherness emerges through subtle mechanisms of hyper-visibility, hesitation, and implicit boundaries, rather than solely through explicit discrimination. Moreover, shared presence within the same space does not necessarily reduce inequality. In the absence of structural equality, institutional support, and shared goals, intergroup contact tends to reproduce existing power relations (Allport 1954; Maoz 2011).

The findings also highlight how the body becomes a central site through which these dynamics are negotiated. Religious visibility is interpreted and evaluated even before speech occurs, rendering the body a locus of surveillance, vulnerability, and self-regulation. This produces a paradox of visibility: visible identity markers expose students to microaggressions and hyper-visibility, while their concealment may generate temporary relief alongside intensified feelings of estrangement and internal dissonance. The academic space, despite its image as neutral, is therefore structured through asymmetrical coding of religion, nationality, and gender. This requires Palestinian Muslim students to engage in continuous identity work in order to navigate visibility, safety, belonging, and legitimacy, revealing a deep epistemic and spatial inequality embedded within the institutional order.

At the same time, the findings indicate that the campus cannot be understood solely as a site of unequal recognition and institutional constraint. Several participants described the academic environment as a relatively protected space that provided temporary relief from familial, communal, and gendered forms of surveillance. Within this liminal setting, students were able to experiment with alternative forms of self-presentation, reconsider established expectations regarding education, marriage, and gender roles, and imagine different life trajectories. Importantly, these experiences of autonomy were neither complete nor unconditional. Rather, they were often fragile, negotiated, and dependent on maintaining boundaries between campus life and community life. The campus therefore emerges as a paradoxical space that simultaneously reproduces inequality and creates opportunities for agency, reflection, and transformation.

Finally, one of the most significant findings concerns the quiet and cumulative nature of change emerging from interreligious encounters, and its direct connection to transformations within the family sphere. These encounters do not necessarily lead to overt or revolutionary change, but rather to subtle processes of reflection, comparison, and targeted action, particularly in the reshaping of life trajectories through the education of the next generation and the strategic management of religious visibility. These processes unfold under conditions of social surveillance and, at times, threat, and therefore often remain invisible in the public sphere while still producing meaningful transformations in identity and consciousness. In this sense, students' practices can be conceptualized as a form of "subversive agency under the radar," through which patriarchal structures are challenged from within while maintaining affiliation with religious and communal frameworks. The notion of subtle resistance (Bhopal and Henderson 2021) gains empirical grounding here, as the academic space provides access to competing cultural capital that enables the re-definition of norms and expectations within the community. The campus thus functions simultaneously as a site of hegemonic secularism and as a liminal arena (Turner et al. 1979), where Palestinian Muslim women navigate not only their position vis-à-vis a Jewish-secular majority, but also the gendered, familial, religious, and communal expectations operating within their own social worlds. Their experiences reveal a complex form of agency that emerges at the intersection of these multiple systems of power, obligation, and possibility.

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