



ANSARI INSTITUTE
FOR GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT WITH RELIGION
KEOUGH SCHOOL OF GLOBAL AFFAIRS

US
UNIVERSITY
OF SUSSEX

International Conference

Bramber House, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

25 June 2026, 1-6pm; 26 June 2026, 9-5pm

The Ambivalence of the Sacred in the Age of Polarization: From Religious Nationalism & Civilizationism to Interreligious Solidarity

Organised by The Religion & Foreign Policy Initiative, University of Sussex, The Ansari Institute for Global Engagement with Religion, University of Notre Dame, & co-sponsored by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC Postdoctoral Research Fellowship, UKRI Grant APP81795) and the British Academy (Seed Fund ESF2526\260309)

Call for participants

We are pleased to announce that registration is now open for general participants at the international conference *The Ambivalence of the Sacred in the Age of Polarization: From Religious Nationalism & Civilizationism to Interreligious Solidarity*.

While speaker slots are full, we are looking for engaged attendees to join the dialogue and contribute to our vibrant sessions. To support our community, all registration fees are completely waived for accepted participants. Additionally, all meals during conference hours will be provided at no cost. We invite you to join us for this unique opportunity to learn and network without financial barriers.

Please send your registration request with an explanation of why you want to attend, by sending an email to the conference co-organiser, Dr Ugo Gaudino (u.gaudino@sussex.ac.uk), by June 21.



Conference synopsis

In his pioneering book written a quarter of a century ago *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (2000), Scott Appleby argued that religion is politically ambivalent, since it can cause or aggravate conflict dynamics, strengthen tribal or sectarian antagonisms, and even justify forms of terrorism and thus increase international instability. On the other hand, Scott Appleby also recognized that religion could contribute to processes of reconciliation and peacebuilding, to the advancement of human rights and a culture of non-violence. Therefore, religion can also strengthen inclusive democratic processes and international stability. Challenging the deeply rooted view in the theory and practice of international relations that sees the role of religion by definition (or quintessentially) as a factor of instability and a potential source of pernicious political violence, Appleby argued that religious militancy could be for peace and justice. He went even further by hypothesizing that actually ‘the nonviolent “warrior for peace” could be more influential in the long run than the religious extremist’ (2000, 13).

How can we make sense of this political ambivalence of religion today in our post-liberal and post-Western age (Pabst 2021) of polarisation and global culture wars (Stoeckl & Uzlaner 2022)? How is the politicisation of religion intertwined with the emergence of assertive nationalisms and the new great power politics of civilizational states (Cesari 2022)? Are today’s ‘nonviolent warriors for peace’ still relevant? Are their religious narratives of interreligious solidarity and human fraternity carrying today realistic hopes for peace, global unity and universalism (Petito, Daou, & Driessen 2021)?

This conference will bring together scholars from across disciplines in order to shed some light on these processes of hyper-politicisation of the sacred and intensification of its political ambivalence, as well as critically examine the role of religion in contemporary nationalist and civilizational populist projects.

The programme can be accessed [here](#)