

International Conference

University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, UK

25-26 June 2026

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)

Call for papers

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, & Driessens 2021)?

In the current context of international turmoil and ‘polycrisis’, the political ambivalence of the sacred appears to have intensified and radicalized. On the one hand, religiously expressed political violence, in the form of religious extremism, religious sectarianism and religious nationalism, and the instrumentalization of faith in domestic identity politics and in foreign policy (Cremer 2024; Mandaville 2023) is today at the centre of a new global scenario of insecurity. On the other hand, against this sometimes gloomy background, seeds of hope for unity can be seen to grow through the process of a new era of interreligious solidarity which has been developing in the 21st century at an unprecedented scale both locally and globally with religious leaders across the world unmasking abusive interpretation, mobilizing non-violent civil society action, facilitating conflict mediation, challenging social injustices, promoting human rights and accompanying post-conflict reconciliation processes (Driessen 2023; Petito, 2025).

Religious nationalism, the politics of the clash of civilizations, polarization, and discrimination associated with all major religious traditions are unfortunately on the rise in many parts of the world, making it more difficult to live together peacefully in diversity (Dieckhoff 2025; USCIRF 2025). One might say that the global geopolitical crisis in the 21st century is a crisis of dis-unity and, as such, it also includes a global religious crisis of some kind manifesting itself within all religious traditions. The return of the language of holy wars in the conflicts in Ukraine and in the Middle East is, however, opposed by the powerful and unprecedented interreligious language for peace and living together of the historical Document on Human Fraternity, co-signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Ahmed al-Tayeb, in 2019.

While many far-right movements have ‘hijacked religion’ (Marzouki et al. 2016) and supported religious nationalist ideas, practices and aesthetics (such as in India, Myanmar, the U.S., Turkey and Israel), one emerging trend is the translation of such exclusionary discourse beyond the borders of nation-states to embrace a broader civilizational dimension (Cannon 2025). In this regard, the notion of ‘civilizational populism’ (Yilmaz, Morieson 2023) was coined to capture how the ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ in global politics are no longer defined in terms of states, but of civilizations whose identity is determined essentially by their religion and culture. This pattern seems to confirm the argument about an imminent civilizational antagonism theorised (and widely criticised) more than thirty years ago by Samuel Huntington (1993), leaving instead little room for the politics of civilizational dialogue advocated at the beginning of the 21st century (Dallmayr 2003). Moreover, religious minorities are increasingly targeted and often constructed as threats to national security by a growing number of authoritarian regimes (USCIRF 2025).

This conference seeks to 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.

We invite paper proposals that engage with (but are not limited to) the following questions:

- In which ways is *religion politicized* and are *profane symbols sacralized*, especially but not only by right-wing movements and parties?
- Are ‘civilizational populism’, ‘civilizationalism’ and ‘civilizational states’ good concepts to explain current shifts from a national to a supranational dimension in post-liberal religiously-expressed politics?
- To what extent are the boundaries between secular and religious changing? Is it still timely to talk about ‘post-secularism’ (Mavelli, Petito 2014)?
- What is the role of religious institutions, leaders and organisations in supporting and/or resisting religious nationalism and discrimination?
- What are the theological and political challenges for religious traditions to navigate this era of geopolitical crisis of dis-unity?
- Under which socio-economic conditions and which type of religious identity explain today the emergence of nonviolent religious militancy for peace rather than violent religious extremism?
- Are religious narratives of interreligious solidarity and human fraternity carrying global hopes for unity and universalism more than other secular political discourses today?
- Can interreligious engagement be a realistic tool for diplomacy and peacebuilding?

And the following themes:

1. Conceptual contributions on topics like the ambivalence of the sacred, religious nationalism and civilizationism, civilizational populism, secularism, post-secularism, post-liberalism and culture wars.
2. Politicization and securitization of religions by different actors.
3. Case studies and comparative analysis from different regions and traditions, especially non-Western ones.
4. Civil society, interfaith movements, and international organizations addressing religious discrimination and promoting civilizational dialogue

Among the confirmed speakers: R. Scott Appleby (Keough-Hesburgh Professor of Global Affairs, University of Notre Dame); Jocelyne Cesari (Professor of Religion and Politics, University of Birmingham); Stacey Gutkowski (Reader in Peace and Conflict Studies, King’s College London); Luca Mavelli (Reader in Politics and International Relations, University of Kent); Adrian Pabst (Professor of Politics, University of Kent, and Deputy Director, National Institute of Economic and Social Research); Fabio Petito (Professor of Religion and International Affairs, University of Sussex); Sara Silvestri (City St George’s, University of London); Scott Thomas (Research Associate, Las Casas Institute for Social Justice, Blackfriars Hall, University of Oxford).

Selected papers may be considered for publication in a special journal issue or an edited volume to be published in 2027. Hence, accepted authors are required to send a draft paper of about 4,000 words two weeks before the conference.

Submission Guidelines

- Abstracts of up to 300 words should be submitted by **February 15th, 2026**
- Please include a short biographical note (max. 150 words) with your submission.
- Notifications of acceptance will be sent by **March 15th, 2026**
- Draft papers (4,000 words) are due by **June 12th, 2026**

A limited number of travel bursaries are available to support participation. These bursaries provide up to **£250** to cover travel costs and accommodation for one night in Brighton. Priority will be given to early-career scholars and participants without institutional funding.

Submission & Contact

Please send abstracts and inquiries to the conference co-organiser, Dr Ugo Gaudino (u.gaudino@sussex.ac.uk)