

# Global Religious Pluralities

Understanding interreligious dynamics  
at the intersections of conflict, gender  
and climate change

James Walters, Chris Chaplin, Hanane Benadi and Lindsay Simmonds

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## About us

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LSE Religion and Global Society was founded in 2019 as an interdisciplinary research unit conducting, coordinating and promoting religion-related social science research at the London School of Economics and Political Science. It works with a number of departments, including Anthropology and International Relations, and is hosted in the LSE Faith Centre which has a mission to promote robust religious plurality within the university and beyond.

Since 2021, Global Religious Pluralities, generously funded by the Templeton Religion Trust, has enabled us to explore the critical intersections of religious pluralism with gender, climate change and the role of institutions such as universities. We combine research and practice, working with stakeholders around the world to advance peaceful religiously plural societies.



## Project Team

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**Dr Lindsay Simmonds**, Research Officer, leading on Women of Faith and Peacebuilding

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We are also grateful for input from **Dr Emanuelle Degli Esposti**, **Dr Manmit Bhambra** and **Gabriele Garcia**.

# Summary of key findings

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## Creating plural spaces

- The distinction between sacred and secular spaces is unstable in the context of institutions like universities where we can presume neither unregulated religious norms nor state imposed secular principles.
- Attention to language is crucial in brokering and shaping religious pluralities. Words have different connotations across cultural contexts, particularly as they are deployed by the state.
- Politics increasingly provides the context within which religious pluralities are negotiated. Often interfaith spaces are instrumentalised in response to sectarianism and polarisation.



## Women of faith and peacebuilding

- Friendships formed by women of faith across difference serve as a measure and model of good practice in peacebuilding.
- Faith impacts directly on women's engagement in and commitment to peacebuilding as they find common identity in spiritual principles and purpose.
- Women's leadership in peacebuilding initiatives is often held back by a lack of status and authority within faith communities, yet the spaces they create together in solidarity across differences are sites of potential disruption and expansion of future responsibilities.



## Climate change and interfaith relations

- There is a disjuncture between the language used by the Global North about the climate crisis and the discourses emerging in the Middle East about the lived experience of climate change.
- Climate activists need to expand the role of religion beyond instrumentalised approaches, recognising the significance of the divine in ecological questions within religious societies.
- The moral responsibilities of religious people in the Middle East towards the non-human world are mediated by accountability to God.
- This divine accountability places climate change into a temporal framework that is neither apocalyptic nor progressive, but both worldly and otherworldly.



## Across Global Religious Pluralities

- Interfaith leadership is being reshaped by young participants with a willingness to engage on new shared challenges, and by women who bring differing perspectives from male faith leaders.
- In meeting the challenges of religious conflict, and shared global challenges, we need to recognise the enduring power of religious stories and the persistence of religion in people's lives.
- Building religious pluralities requires a methodology that fosters genuinely inclusive discussions, is sensitive to different religious and political contexts, and allows for the co-production of knowledge among participants.
- The inclusiveness of interfaith spaces and initiatives is an ongoing task, and attention needs to be paid to explicit and implicit hierarchies within interfaith and peacebuilding spaces.

# Introduction

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In many areas of life, the conventional structures for organising society are breaking down. New technologies and social media are reshaping social systems and eroding trust in historic hierarchies. Mass migration is complexifying previously homogenous cultural norms. Artificial intelligence, misinformation and the rise of populist politicians are eroding trust in institutions and in democracy itself.

The same is true of the organisation of religious diversity. The various models of modern secular governance that emerged in the modern era to contain and manage religious difference are no longer effective. In some cases, such as Turkey and India, this is because of the politicisation of an ascendent national religious identity that suppresses minorities. In Western European countries it is due to the diversification of their formerly Christian populations through migration, including groups unwilling to accept secularist insistence that religion is a predominantly private matter.

At the grassroots level, interfaith relations seem increasingly under strain too. The interconnectedness of global religious communities reinforces solidarities with persecuted co-religionists and allows conflicts to travel unexpectedly into communities thousands of miles away. The hottest religious conflicts – in the Indian Sub-Continent and the Middle East – are felt all around the world. In all major

religious traditions, this is fostering a pervasive sense of victimisation, even in contexts where those claiming victimhood are in the majority.

In between governments and the grassroots, the intermediate institutions of society face new pressures in containing this resurgence of religious identity and diffusion of religious conflict. Universities, in particular, have been ill-equipped to manage the strength of feeling these tensions ignite, or to understand the nature of their religious entanglement. This is exemplified by, but not limited to, the Israel-Palestine conflict.

There is, therefore, a need for greater understanding of religious plurality in the different contexts in which it manifests, and for new models of sustaining those pluralities in ways that promote peace and a constructive engagement on shared challenges. This has been the focus of our research and our public engagement over this three year project. Global Religious Pluralities has sought to deepen our understanding of the interreligious realities of different parts of the world, and their intersections with conflict, gender and climate change.

We have found that sustaining the globally interconnected religious plurality we encounter in any local context is not simply a matter of imposing a governmental ideology, be it secularism, toleration, or moderation. This is why we speak of



“pluralities” rather than “pluralism” with its implications of a universal ideology. Nor is it a task that can be achieved by local leaders divorced of wider networks, institutions, culture and law. It is a multifaceted task involving all sections of society, and it needs to be organic and pragmatic, taking different forms as it is brokered in particular places with distinct histories and community relations. As such we have engaged with a wide range of stakeholders: both established religious leaders and an emerging generation, senior diplomats and policy makers, students and educators, women peace activists and interfaith NGOs.

This report gives an overview of the project, documenting our activities and principal research insights. The project was conducted in three strands: an examination of religiously plural spaces in universities, an enquiry into the distinctive contribution that women of faith make to peacebuilding, and an exploration of how non-Western

religious communities are interpreting their experience of climate change and seeing it as a focus of interfaith organisation. The numerous academic outputs of these strands are being published in a range of journals, and the intention of this report is not to replicate or synthesise them. Rather, we weave together these strands to highlight four themes that cut across our work in a less academic format without references. The first of these themes is the redefining and reimagining of leadership that we have seen and fostered in the shaping of religious pluralities. Second is the underexamined power of religious language and stories across the breadth of the issues with which we engaged. Third is the need to re-conceive of religious groupings beyond the dominant (and increasingly challenged) religious institutions. Finally, we consider the redefinition of the categories of sacred and secular in the spaces and encounters we have studied.



# Redefining interfaith leadership

Our pledge in this project was to train 300 interfaith leaders. This is in line with the LSE Faith Centre's Theory of Change which seeks "to build relationships and transform attitudes in order to form leaders for a more peaceful global society." We define interfaith leadership as having three principal components. First it requires a cross-cultural religious literacy that gives participants an empathetic insight into the imaginative frameworks of other religious traditions. This is a lot more than simply providing information about another faith. Fundamentally it needs to be rooted in an encounter that enables the learner to empathise with how other believers conceive of the world and their place and purposes within it. Second, participants need to develop a skillset for leadership across difference. This focuses principally on the ability to lead and participate in dialogue as well as strategies for conflict transformation. Third, this leadership formation cannot be abstract. It needs to engage with the challenges that we all face, such as climate change, and with the geopolitical realities that are shaping contemporary interfaith relations. This can be very challenging and uncomfortable, but interfaith work that fails to address the major political issues will inevitably be derailed when those conflicts flare up.

This focus on the lived geopolitical realities of interfaith leaders sharpened the ethical question that surfaced time and again in this project: What does

this moment in history require of us? We are in a moment of intensifying global conflicts within which religion is almost always entangled, often as a defining factor. We are in a moment when the pervasive use of digital technology is redefining religious belonging and global solidarities in ways that can draw local communities and institutions more directly into those conflicts. We are in a moment of climate emergency when international cooperation and radical behavioural change are required to ensure the sustainability of our ecosystem for future generations, yet both seem elusive. We are in a moment when the call for equality across identities, including race and gender, is louder than ever but is also meeting new forms of resistance and opposition, including from conservative religious forces. This is the nexus of issues that Global Religious Pluralities explored and which the leadership we cultivated sought to address.

The project surpassed its target, taking 211 LSE students through one or more modules of **Beecken Faith and Leadership**, our flagship extracurricular programme designed to form students in the model of interfaith leadership set out above, and engaging 104 participants around the world through our various workshops. None of these programmes have been targeted at the senior faith leaders or the seasoned professional activists who predominantly occupy the global interfaith scene. While it is essential



“The Beecken Faith and Leadership program has profoundly transformed my perspective on religious leadership in today's society. Throughout the programme, I've connected with peers from diverse faith backgrounds and engaged with leaders of religious organisations who generously shared their experiences and insights on life and leadership. The most impactful part of my own experience was the residential retreat where we reflected on the importance of accepting and recognising the value of a diversity of belief systems, engaged in team-building trainings, and collaborated across traditional religious boundaries, envisioning a world shaped by interfaith dialogue, understanding, and respect.”

**James Rice, postgraduate in Philosophy of the Social Sciences**

that these gatherings occur, they can become performative and even disconnected from the communities they are intended to represent. High level interreligious gatherings to address climate change are a case in point. Agreements may be reached and joint statements issued about the need for action on the basis of shared theological principles. But they rarely trickle down to local communities and may even be the subject of some suspicion.

We have sought, therefore, to engage with new constituencies in new ways. In Cairo we ran a workshop on climate change for a new generation of Christian and Muslims leaders. Most were young Coptic priests or religious sisters, young Anglican leaders, and student preachers from Al-Azhar University. In a country troubled by Christian-Muslim tensions in recent years, we found a new willingness

to engage with the shared threat of climate change, aware that this would be a defining issue for their generation of religious leaders. In Indonesia we ran three workshops, one engaging academics and interfaith practitioners on the challenges of pluralism within the university, and two with academics and faith leaders across Indonesia's diverse religious groupings on climate change. Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country, faces considerable climate related challenges, and so these workshops offered an important opportunity to discuss the potential for faith-based solutions.

A central plank of our work on the interfaith leadership needed for our times was the particular role that women play in these efforts. The significance and meaning of gender was considered across all the research strands, but was the primary focus of

“The course perfectly married macro-level insights from diplomatic negotiations with micro-level approaches to grassroots peacebuilding, learning hands-on techniques. Participating in these activities helped us understand their real-world value and prepared us to apply them in our future endeavours. Open discussions with fellow students enriched the experience.



Sharing my experiences became easier, knowing they might benefit others. When a fellow student later told me that something I said had impacted them, it underscored the true value of this course. This experience not only provided essential peacebuilding skills but also inspired me to incorporate such work into my own journey. Additionally, the principles and practices I learned will be applicable to my future leadership, contributing significantly to my personal and professional growth.”

**Razeen Surtee, BSc student in Philosophy, Politics and Economics**

fieldwork in the Israel-Palestine region. Here we sought to deepen understanding of the roles women of faith play in building bridges within civil society. Women are often excluded from high level peacebuilding efforts and the leadership of faith communities also continues to be dominated, particularly in the Middle East, by men. But, by the same token, we found that this gave women a certain freedom to engage in difficult conversations and even build friendships across religious divides. In many cases, these friendships exhibit extraordinary resilience, even through the tragedies of 7th October and the Gaza War that we have seen in the final year of this study. Faith is not irrelevant to this resilience. Commitments to God and virtuous

practices such as peacebuilding manifest in a commitment of friendship to the religious other who shares similar convictions.

In June 2023 we hosted a workshop in London in partnership with the Rose Castle Foundation for twenty women peace activists, predominantly Israeli and Palestinian, ‘Storytelling and Peacebuilding in the Globalised Israel-Palestine Conflict’. The workshop focused on how storytelling might be used as one tool of peacebuilding to cultivate empathy, to centre otherwise marginalised experiences, and to humanise the process of conflict resolution. The workshop brought together a wide range of participants and viewpoints, creating a space for very difficult

“Ever since the Women of Faith and Peacebuilding workshop, I’ve been thinking more about the globalised Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is a dimension I hadn’t put much thought into before. It seems that the global context is borrowing from and mirroring back the polarization and extremism here, amplifying the maximalist binary discourse, rather than demonstrating how to live in a pluralist society, how to respect and engage, and hold hope for those who are losing it here. I’m glad there are centers like yours doing the opposite.”

**An Israeli peace activist**



“The workshop in Cairo was the first time for me to hear about the relationship between religion and climate change although I consider myself to be a climate activist. Through the workshop I came to realise that it is actually the most effective way to spread awareness in the Middle East as religion is an important part of daily conversations, so why not talk to people about climate change in their own language! The spirit at the workshop was amazing and I had the opportunity to share my thoughts and feelings on the subjects with other Christians and Muslims. This has inspired me to do more research on the topic and write a blog as I realised how important religion is to convincing people to pay attention to climate change and its challenges.”

**Sandra Maurice, Anglican Christian from Egypt**

conversations. Participants went away with new insights and new collaborative partnerships.

In short, an interfaith leader can be anyone. But we found that women and young people were redefining the style and role of interfaith engagement. They are making new connections, overcoming political divisions, and creating interfaith collaborations to address challenging contemporary issues.

### Questions for future research:

- On what other global challenges, in addition to climate change, might an emerging generation of interfaith leaders find common cause and meaningful connections?
- How can interfaith groups contribute constructively to the resolution of international conflicts, rather than find themselves derailed by them?

# The power of religious stories

The challenge of building plural societies is not merely a matter of religious difference. Indeed, Western academics and policymakers have tended to focus on other aspects of identity such as ethnicity or race, often euphemistically alluding to religion as an aspect of 'culture'. Secular assumptions persist in the social sciences, viewing religion as intrinsically private rather than public, and subordinate to (or even constructed by) the more "substantive" realms of politics, economics, and other social forces. But time and again, this project has found that religion is a formative part of identity in the regions we have studied and for an enduring proportion in the West. It is entangled with other identities and often asserts agency over them. For many of the people we engaged with in research and workshops, religion provided the organising framework of their lives, connecting them with multiple other people and places around the world, as well as transcendent purpose and meaning.

Failure to grasp the persistent influence of religion for the majority of the world (well over 80% according to most studies) is a profound source of disconnection between the West and non-Western cultures. One does not need to embrace a "clashing civilisations" thesis to understand that we now live in a multipolar world of multiple modernities, not all of which are secularising in the manner that the West has, nor are

they operating on entirely secular assumptions. Despite the prediction of secularisation theorists, religiosity in most cultures was not eradicated by modern societal development; rather it was re-shaped by it and may even be resurgent as late modernity reconfigures through a less uniform globalisation.

The much discussed waning of Western influence and crisis of global liberal order is something we witnessed at the local level, not in the form of widespread hostility to the West (we found great willingness to work in partnership with a Western university), but in the sense that Western discourses did not resonate with people's everyday lives. This includes the reassertion of indigenous knowledge systems, a rejection of unquestioned universals such as a human rights framework defined by the West, and different perspectives on topics like democracy and cultural norms. Most evident to us was the refusal to privatise religious discourse. Instead, we encountered expectations that religion should be central to the discussion of political and social problems. This was true of peace activists in the Middle East who attribute the failure of the Oslo Peace Accords to their unwillingness to engage with the obvious and increasingly prominent religious dimensions of the conflict. It was true among those in Egypt and Indonesia who see a far greater compatibility between religious precepts and the operations of the university

than has become the norm in post-Enlightenment Europe. But nowhere was this more clearly evident than in our work on climate change.

Fieldwork research in Egypt and Jordan among Christian and Muslim communities met an initial reluctance to talk about climate change. This was not because of climate denial, but rather the sense that this issue was low on their list of daily priorities and that it was an essentially Western problem, to be addressed by the West. Yet rising temperatures and increased shortages of water already affect the lived experience of these communities. We found, therefore, that the problem was not disinterest in climate change per se, but rather the framing of the issue and the language used. In the West, climate change is principally viewed (by policymakers

and commentators at least) as a matter of science and politics; these communities saw it as a matter of ethics and religion.

Subsequent research then attended to the climate discourses emerging within these communities that conceive of humanity's relationship with nature as mediated by God. This theological framing sets out the conditions of responsibility and accountability that allow for forms of reciprocity between all of God's creation to emerge and maintain moral as well as socio-ecological stability. It also became clear that faith was playing a key role in a kind of spiritual adaptation to climate change through creating new horizons of possibility. The hope that faith brings is not dependent on the outworking of an inevitable progressive future.





As such, hope can endure, even as the future becomes increasingly uncertain and unknowable.

Crucially, this need not equate to denial of the crisis or lack of urgency in action. Rather we saw how this hope can motivate to action, in contrast to the anxiety and despair that many people (particularly the young) can feel in the face of such enormous challenges.

These discourses were then brought into dialogue at a workshop in Cairo in July 2023 which convened emerging leaders from the Muslim, Coptic Christian and Anglican Christian communities. Co-led by Christian and Muslim team members, the day sought to facilitate the participants' sharing of experiences of climate vulnerability and their own knowledge of spiritual resilience and climate activism. Possible areas of collaboration were identified, and lively interfaith conversation explored how religiously compelling and locally meaningful visions of climate resilience might be formulated. The workshop was held bilingually in English and Arabic, and the idea of "bilingualism" emerged as an important theme: the ability to speak different languages to unite cultures in common understanding, the ability to speak the languages of both science and religion to unite the moral and technical aspects of the climate emergency, and the ability to navigate different religious imaginations to foster solidarity and social cohesion.

This speaks to the power of religious stories (whether scriptural or traditional) to provide an organising

framework within which to interpret contemporary experience and find meaning and hope. In so doing, the life of the believer becomes a religious story itself. This was evident among the women peacebuilders we engaged with, for whom religion was often a primary motivator in taking the courageous stances required by their work. In the Israel-Palestine conflict, religious stories on both sides have been increasingly dominant and divisive, fuelling a vision of the future that excludes the enemy. But we saw how the individual can draw on the same traditions to tell a story in their own lives about openness, justice and peaceful coexistence.

### Questions for future research:

- As the climate emergency and escalating conflicts confront us with uncertainty and instability, how much are societies and geopolitics being shaped by the stories religions tell about the future?
- How might interfaith gatherings draw other "languages" such as science and economics into constructive dialogue with religion?
- How can we further develop new models of interfaith encounter that are more embedded in local religious knowledge systems rather than Western norms?

## Beyond sacred and secular

This whole project explored the intersections of religion with domains that have been largely secularised in Western thought. At best, religion has not conventionally been seen as contributing anything meaningful to the processes of peace making or the challenge of climate change. At worst, it is seen as a malign influence, distorting actors' ability to act rationally in conflict negotiations and undermining public reason in embracing and responding to climate science. These are not ungrounded fears. In the Israel-Palestine region, leaders and activists on both sides increasingly disregard international law and norms of conflict as they assert claims of divine authority. Many religious groups do question the validity of climate change or even interpret the extreme weather events it brings as welcome signs of the End Times. But these damaging manifestations of religion in secularised spheres point to the instability of the sacred/secular divide in our times and the need for a more constructive engagement with religious actors across a range of areas in public. As we might say about either peace making or climate action: if religion is part of the problem, it has to be part of the solution.

In a crucial sense, universities have been central to the negotiation and maintenance of the modern sacred/secular divide. Some universities in the West were founded with an explicit rejection of confessional

allegiance in order to pursue purely secular ideals. But even those that maintain some religious legacy have been engaged in the subtle and gradual disaggregation of the forms of knowledge that are attributed to divine revelation from those grounded in human discovery, whether empirical or rational. This is true even at the stricter Islamic universities we engaged with such as Al-Azhar in Cairo or the State Islamic University in Jakarta. But the very fact that this negotiation is taking place gives lie to the notion that the distinction between sacred and secular space is stable within universities.

We found this to be the case in our research into interfaith activism on university campuses in the UK and in Indonesia. In both contexts, religiously diverse cohorts of students are brought together in a fluid and transformative environment that is neither conventionally religious nor programmatically secular. The final months of this project have seen the strain this can put the university under as events of profound interreligious significance in the Middle East have led to demonstrations and clashes, particularly on American campuses and to a lesser degree in the UK. Globalised religious identities are taking on new and dangerous political meanings, and universities can be on the frontline of this intersection of global conflict, social media and transnational narratives of division and hostility. But our research also



showed the unique potential of universities to facilitate effective interfaith interventions and the generation of new models of religious plurality.

Creative and effective interfaith work in universities requires the successful navigation of various considerations. The first is language. Fostering religious pluralities demands an interrogation of the words used to categorise and organise religion in state regulated institutions. Even the word “pluralism” is not neutral, carrying (in Indonesia and many other countries) connotations for religious conservatives of compromising accommodation to other faiths. Incorporation of religion into equity and diversity agendas can also reinforce assumptions of relativism or an inability to legitimately challenge. Words like “tolerance” and “moderation” too can be used to designate acceptable and unacceptable forms of religion according to questionable political-determined definitions. The labels of “interfaith” and “multifaith” have different meanings in different settings which can attract or repel different groups. We found effective

interfaith gatherings were adaptive, innovative and contextual in their language and use of terminology.

A second consideration is the convening space itself. Some universities have designated “religious spaces” which may or may not be effective in fostering religious plurality. Some reinforce divisions, dominated by majority groups or structured for the needs and purposes of some faith groups over others. Bespoke, curated spaces like the LSE Faith Centre and the UGM Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies, provide bridging spaces between wider religious communities and the shared campus environment. Sensitive administration of space instead of (or at least alongside) government-led regulation enables genuine inclusion and a resilience to sectarian influences. Inhabiting some third space between sacred and secular, these can be spaces that enable the “exception” that opens people up to the religious other. That is to say, people are willing to engage or cooperate with another religious group that they would ordinarily reject because this is an “exceptional space” where the overarching shared purpose

of the university itself demands a commitment to being with the religious other.

The insights from our comparative work with universities in Indonesia have been compiled in a toolkit for researchers who want to deepen their understanding of how religious diversity operates in their institutions. Our hope is that researchers will work alongside university administrators to embed better practices of engagement with faith communities and the convening of inclusive interfaith spaces. Our experience has been that universities want an easy fixed model that they can replicate for engaging with faith communities on campus. Contexts are far too divergent for this to be possible. Instead, we provide a set of considerations to be worked through as the university strives for more honest conversations about religious groups and how they are held together in the institution.

Blurring the divide between sacred and secular has also been characteristic of our work through this project with diplomats of different nationalities. In March 2024, we worked in partnership with the British Embassy to the Holy See and the International Union of Superiors General to run a workshop in Rome for Vatican-based diplomats on how they might use the convening power of their international missions to promote interfaith engagement on climate change. Obviously the cultural tradition of each country shapes the willingness and capacities of its diplomats to engage religious actors. For French representatives present

there was a significant cultural legacy of the exclusion of religion from state business. For the British, with an established church in which the Head of State serves a pivotal function, the divide is less stark. For all participants, learning how a secular university has taken a role in fostering global religious plurality served as a helpful model, demonstrating that engaging with faith groups requires neither the wholesale adoption of any religious perspective offered, nor the imposition of rigid secular norms.

In sum, moving beyond stark binaries of sacred and secular is necessary in the cultivation of plural spaces in universities. But it is perhaps a broader feature of our time as we recognise that religiously-entangled problems will require the involvement of religious groups, even religious reasoning, in finding solutions. The global religious pluralities we need will involve complex interactions of sacred and secular.



### Questions for future research:

- How can universities further develop their capacities for fostering religious plurality and what new networks are needed for sharing best practice?
- In addition to universities, what other institutions might play a role in promoting interreligious engagement at the intermediate level between the grassroots and the state?

## Within and outside established hierarchies

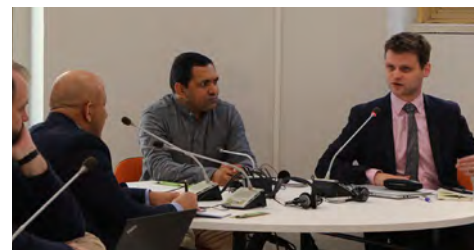
One of the consequences of a sharp divide between sacred and secular is the perception that religious actors are the “professionally religious” who do not hold responsibilities or significant influence in secular domains. To “consult with faith groups” is thought to mean engagement with those employed by religious institutions or organisations in order to gain perspectives we imagine we would not encounter in other quarters. Of course, those holding authority in religious institutions have great influence and there are good reasons for seeing them as key partners in fostering religious pluralities, as we have done in this project. They can be particularly relevant as gatekeepers and as those who sanction the events in which a broader range of participants then engage. We found this in several of our workshops, particularly in the Middle East.

However, religious agency, opinion and motivation are not monopolised by traditional institutions or traditional leaders, and this project highlighted the imperative of engaging with the widest possible range of religious (and non-religious) actors in fostering effective and contextually-relevant religious pluralities. This has long been borne out in our own experience of leading interfaith work in a secular university. Reflecting the “intermediate space” described above, students at LSE do not study religion confessionally. Few are likely to become religious leaders in the

formal sense, and the university is independent from the direct influence or oversight of religious institutions. Nonetheless, it is a place of emerging religious opinion and agency, particularly among faith communities less clerically-led than Christianity.

This “sitting apart” from established religious hierarchies is a growing phenomenon as a new generation of emerging leaders interact as much by online platforms and the religious movements they enable as with traditional institutions. In Indonesia we explored with academic colleagues how social media complexifies religious plurality as new configurations resist existing structures. Online religiosity is a hybrid media space, which overlaps with physical ideals of religious practice and engagement, but which is mediated by digital technologies as much as religious principles. Religious entrepreneurs and micro-preachers benefit from an ability to use multiple platforms, speak to niche religious topics or “hack” the algorithm to go viral. Religious authority is thus being dramatically reconfigured, even commodifying how and when one may wish to engage with one’s faith.

Our project also identified and engaged with groups that are more likely to be excluded from existing interfaith conversations dominated by religious leaders. Women are the most obvious example, as discussed above. But minorities excluded for either doctrinal reasons (e.g.



Top to bottom: workshops in Egypt, Italy and Indonesia

Ahmadiyya Muslims) or socio-cultural reasons (e.g. LGBTQ+ people) are also needed to contribute to a plurality that is robust and fair. In fact, we found that women are often taking the lead in initiatives to include these other minorities. The podcast series within our Woman of Faith strand gave voice to a number of peace activists who might, for various reasons struggle to gain a place in established interreligious dialogues (a Mormon, a Palestinian Christian). The series sought to share the insights of these women and inspire others to have an impact in interreligious peacebuilding in a role that is unlikely to be a formal religious

leader. A common struggle for such activists is balancing the demands both to advocate and represent your religious community while maintaining a critical voice within it, particularly in relation to participation and inclusion.

Challenging existing hierarchies and engaging beyond dominant voices is important to develop religious pluralities capable of withstanding conflict and addressing complex challenges such as climate change. Different voices bring different perspectives and capabilities from which static configurations of religious hierarchy and collaboration become insulated. But this process is not simply a matter of the selection of participants. We sought in this project to pursue a methodology of interreligious convening that decentres discussions and allows for the co-production of knowledge. We were particularly aware of this in light of our position within a global hierarchy as academics at an elite Western institution. At the workshops in Egypt and Indonesia we sought to overcome power imbalances created by language, race, and differing educational experiences, through an elicitive pedagogy that foregrounded the experience and expertise of participants. Empowering participants to engage from their own religious texts and traditions eroded the sense that we were the experts and they were there simply to learn.

At the workshop for Israeli and Palestinian women, a complex range of hierarchies needed to be navigated, not least those between people living under occupation and those who



are citizens of the occupying power. Bringing these women into our centre in London provided, in some sense, neutral ground for these discussions. But inevitably these inequalities were brought with them and raised questions for some participants about our own agendas and assumptions as a team. Beyond the Israel-Palestine conflict itself we were conscious of new hierarchies of learning and power that needed to be named and navigated.

In the challenging of hierarchies and the building of connection across

difference, storytelling has a powerful role to play. When your identity is not defined by institutional status, being given time and space to narrate your experience and describe the world as you see it empowers you as an agent in dialogue. However, an individual story is never disconnected from the broader narrative of a conflict. Personal stories could be dangerous or deceptive if they distract us from the bigger social realities. The individual stories of those impacted by conflict, particularly the stories of women, should deepen our

understanding and humanise the statistics and discourses of war. Stories from those on the margins or those who are usually silenced should shape our interpretation of geopolitical narratives as well as offer entry points for dialogue and peacebuilding. We hope that the insights and experiences we have gathered together in our Women of Faith Resource Handbook will help disseminate best practice in this area.

### Questions for future research:

- What is the infrastructure of interfaith engagement needed in different contexts that gives appropriate recognition to religious leaders but does not stifle minority groups?
- In addition to storytelling, what other approaches, such as engaging the Arts, might aid this religious inclusion?







## Conclusion

This report has given a brief overview of the encounters and insights that have been generated by Global Religious Pluralities. The project has opened up fresh avenues of enquiry. These include the intersection between religious plurality and the search for durable community-driven solutions to environmental challenges, and the significant role women play in fostering ideas of religious leadership that question both the predominance of patriarchal religious institutions, and the assumptions (including about gender) that underpin them. Throughout, we have identified significant opportunities (as well as profound challenges) for universities in furthering this work. The project has also raised many new questions for further research, some of which have been set out in the course of this report.

But overall, the project has confirmed the perception that we are living at a time of multiple global crises and challenges within which religion is entangled as both a generator of problems and of potential solutions.

New ways of thinking about religion and new ways of engaging across religious difference are required as we find ourselves caught between ineffective secular systems on the one hand and rising religious nationalisms and sectarianism on the other. New religious pluralities need to be cultivated that operate contextually and address local issues while taking account of the global forces that exert influence over them.

At the heart of this project has been a wide range of individuals: students, academics, religious leaders, seminarians, activists, diplomats and policy makers. Many have been deeply inspiring and are shaping these new religious pluralities in creative and courageous ways. We hope that the legacy of the project – its toolkits, podcasts, methodologies, academic outputs and the new initiatives it has generated – will resource them and people like them as the need for robust and constructive interreligious engagement becomes ever more pressing.



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