

Global Religious Pluralities: How should we talk about religion today?

The [Global Religious Pluralities](#) research project explored the critical intersections of religious pluralism with gender, climate change and the role of institutions such as universities. In this blog, the project's director, James Walters, explains some of the discourses on religious pluralism, religious conflict, and how we should talk about religion.

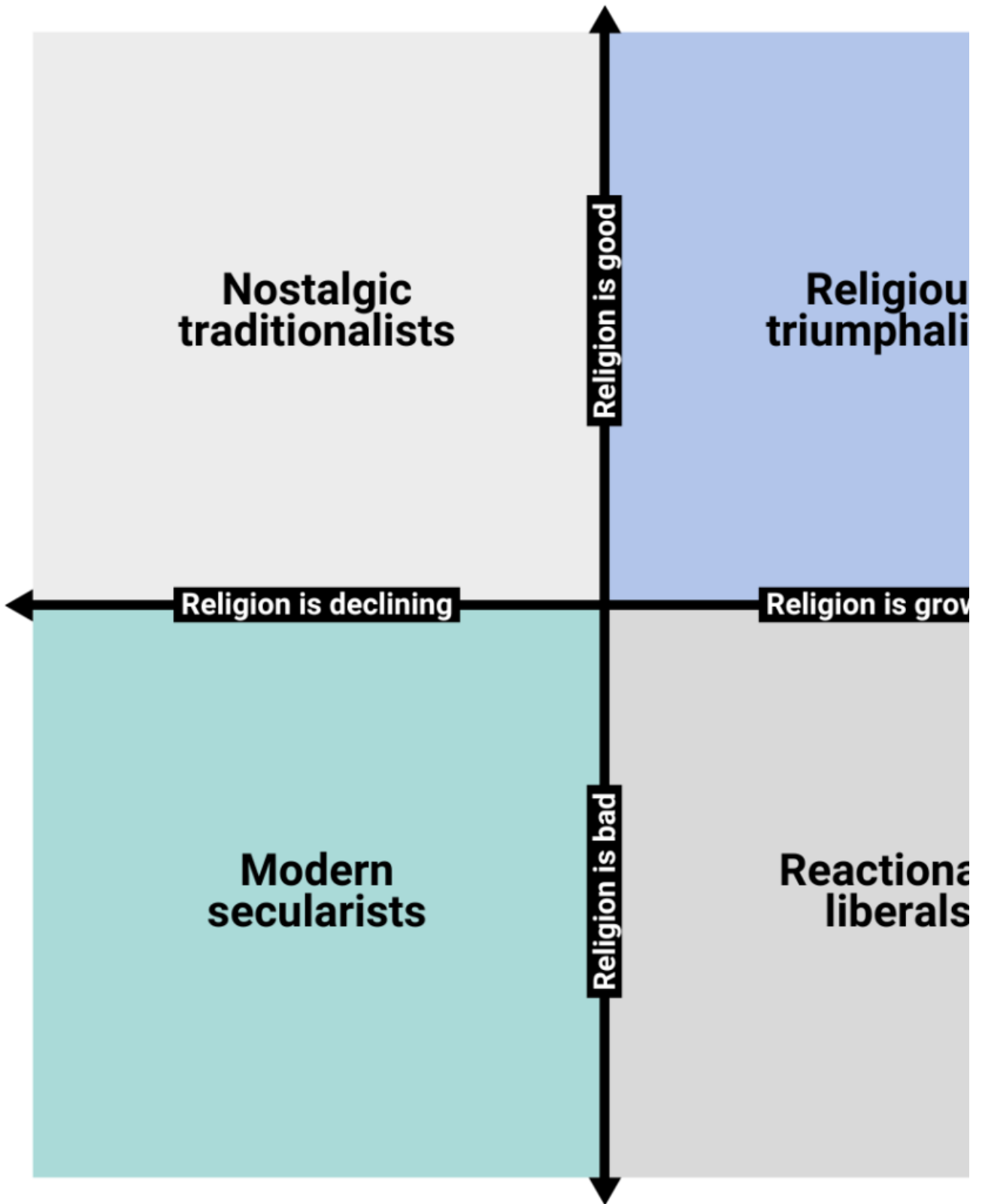


For a long time, Western discourse on religion has revolved around two questions:

- Is religion growing or declining?
- Is religion a good thing or is it a bad thing?

The answers to these questions underpin four dominant positions:

- **Nostalgic traditionalists** think religion is a good thing which, like most good things, is sadly in decline.
- **Modern secularists** think religion is a bad thing, but that's okay because it is steadily going away.
- The return of religion to the public sphere has created panic among **reactionary liberals** that religious superstition and social conservatism is growing.
- Those more optimistic about this post-secular moment have become **religious triumphalists** as they perceive religion to be good and growing.



In reality, neither of these questions yields straightforward answers on which any of these viewpoints can be based. Religious affiliation is growing in some places and declining in others. More than anything, we can say that it persists, and it is constantly adapting to new circumstances and technologies. Whether or not it is good or bad is an even less useful question. Like any aspect of human culture and society, it can take positive forms or negative forms. The sum of one is impossible to weigh against the sum of the other. In other words, religion is ambivalent, and we are stuck with it.

Over the past three years, the team at [LSE Religion and Global Society](#) have been trying to think about better questions we might ask to understand what is happening to religion in today's world. In particular, we have been trying to understand the nature of one of the defining religious phenomena of our age – the encounter with difference. Our questions included: How can we build religiously plural societies that respect diverse belief systems without collapsing into relativism? What role can institutions such as universities play in fostering the encounter with religious difference? What is the distinctive contribution of women to the building of bridges between faith communities? How is climate change impacting on the relations between religious communities, and how might we strengthen interreligious relationships through collaborative action on the environment?

We travelled all around the world to answer these questions and brought together a diverse range of faith leaders, students, academics, policymakers and diplomats. You can read a summary of our research findings [here](#), in which we highlight four themes that emerged from the answers we found.

First, we saw the importance of leadership that can respond to the reality of religious diversity and can foster peaceful bonds across disagreement. We were also struck by a willingness among younger religious leaders to engage with one another on shared challenges such as the climate emergency. This was particularly in evidence in [a workshop we facilitated for young Christian and Muslim leaders in Cairo](#).

Second, whether or not religion is growing or declining, we were struck time and again by the persistent influence of religion in the reasoning and self-understanding of the people we engaged with. Well over 80% of the world population continues to practice a religious faith. Failure to grasp this is a profound source of disconnection between the West and non-Western cultures. We live in a world of multiple modernities and it is far

from the case that all conceptions of modernity are opposed to religion.

Third, we saw how distinctions between sacred and secular are less stable than many imagine. This was the case in our study of universities in the UK and in Indonesia. Many consider universities to be intrinsically secular, yet 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. This makes them particularly conducive to fostering interfaith engagement and new accommodations with religion in wider society.

Fourth, we saw how religious institutions are changing and new voices within them (particularly those of women and the young) are challenging traditional hierarchies. This also needs to be reflected in interfaith convening where the conventional (usually male) voices still dominate. Other hierarchies of power and privilege also need to be acknowledged and addressed, particularly in the discussion of religion-related conflicts such as Israel and Palestine.

Overall, the project 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. In these circumstances, simplistic questions about religion and simplistic positions on religion will no longer do.

[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.

This report gives an overview of the project, documenting our activities and principal research insights 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. [Click here for the full report.](#)

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