



UNIVERSITY OF  
CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge  
Interfaith  
Programme

Student symposium | 24 June 2026

# *Religious freedom?*



Register



## Overview

Due to the high temperatures, this event will now run fully online and in a condensed format. There will be four sessions, with a break midway. Session 2 features open discussion, prompted by a lightning talk.

### Venue

An email with Zoom information has been sent to all registered attendees. A reminder will be sent 1 hour before the start.

### Schedule

#### 11:45 Zoom room opens

There will be chance for Session 1 & 2 speakers to check the screen sharing setup is working as needed before we begin.

#### 12:00 Session 1 | chair Serena Worley

##### *Freedom through a philosophical lens*

Popular secularisation and aestheticisation of the absurd: reframing Kierkegaardian faithful freedom through either/or, Elliott Smith, and their interpretations | Caitlin Lucia Dela Cruz

Christomorphic pluralism: a Schleiermacherian approach to religious freedom | Amen Gashaw

Discussant: Avweroswo Akpojaro

#### 13:00 Session 2 | chair Songzan Xu

##### *Discussion: Negotiating religious freedom as a student/academic*

Opening provocation: Negotiating religious freedom in the doctoral journey | Maryam Bham

#### 13:35 Break for lunch (breakout rooms available to chat if wished)

Technical support will be available for those presenting in Sessions 3 & 4 from 14:15

#### 14:30 Session 3 | chair Geneva Blackmer

##### *Freedom and morality*

Chechnya's Black Widows: piety, political struggle and despair in contexts of protracted violence | Artom Banissi

When enemies become friends: unexpected encounters and the disruption of moral hostility | Elise Harboldt

**15:30 Session 4 | chair Hannah Peterson**

*Freedom in space, place and speech*

For God and country: a discourse construction of medemer as a hegemonic project in Ethiopia | Tezera Tazebew

Open discussion

**16:30 Close**

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# Abstracts

Abstracts are alphabetised according to presenters' names.

<p><b>Amen Gashaw</b></p> <p>Faculty of Divinity</p>	<p><b>Christomorphic pluralism: a Schleiermacherian approach to religious freedom</b></p> <p>One threat to the integrity of religious freedom as enshrined in the United States Constitution is American evangelicalism's aversion to pluralism. This aversion often stems from fear that respect for and protection of other faiths de-centers Christ and compromises Christian commitment. Similar assumptions about the incompatibility of christocentrism and pluralism are also common in scholarship.</p> <p>This paper challenges such assumptions with 19th century Reformed theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher's theology of the religions, which offers a distinctly Christian affirmation of religious diversity that both treats pluralism as a historical necessity requiring protection and emphasizes the unique importance of Christ the Redeemer. Through close reading of Schleiermacher's <i>On Religion and The Christian Faith</i>, I demonstrate that Schleiermacher's pluralism is not developed in spite of his christocentrism but because of it. His Christ, at once historical and archetypal, temporal and eternal, person and work, constitutes the ontological and historical conditions through which diverse expressions of religion emerge, relate, and necessarily contribute to creation's ongoing redemption.</p> <p>This "christomorphic" approach – that is, one taking the shape of or embodied by Christ – generates a pluralism defined by epistemic humility, dialectical interrelation, and rejection of Christian religious hegemony. Yet, it maintains an attachment to particular Christian truth. Schleiermacher's model, thus, paves a Christian path forward for resisting majoritarian constitutional erosion and upholding religious freedom by viewing all faiths as participants in the shared, unfinished work of creation's completion in Christ.</p>
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**Artom  
Banissi**

Faculty of  
Divinity

**Chechnya's Black Widows: piety, political struggle and despair in contexts of protracted violence**

This essay examines the case of Chechnya's so-called "Black Widows", who are female suicide bombers active during the Second Chechen War, to interrogate the boundaries between piety, political struggle, and despair in contexts of protracted violence. Challenging reductive explanations that portray such actors as either religious fanatics or coerced victims, it argues that these motivations are not discrete but deeply intertwined, forming a unified moral and emotional framework for action.

Drawing on historical analysis of Chechnya's incorporation into the Russian state and the devastation of the post-Soviet wars, the essay situates female militancy within broader processes of colonial violence, social disintegration, and religious revival. It demonstrates how cycles of trauma, including the loss of family members, displacement, and systemic repression, have contributed to the emergence of suicide militancy, particularly among women experiencing acute personal grief. Within this context, piety functions as a moral language through which suffering is interpreted and justified, while political struggle frames violence as resistance to occupation. Despair, in turn, personalises these grievances, transforming collective conflict into intimate motivation.

The essay advances a conceptual framework that illustrates the dynamic interaction among these elements, showing how religious idioms translate personal loss into collective struggle, while trauma intensifies both political and spiritual commitments. Engaging key theorists of religious violence, such as Juergensmeyer, Asad, Mahmood, and Bloom, it further critiques dominant Russian and Western media portrayals that deny female agency and reproduce orientalist stereotypes. Particular attention is given to Chechnya as an outlier case, where the proportion of female suicide bombers is unusually high despite the overwhelming predominance of male perpetrators.

Ultimately, the essay argues that the "Black Widows" exemplify a "boundary problem" in which piety, politics, and emotion converge into a form of "sacred agency." Their actions are therefore best understood not as irrational aberrations but as morally intelligible responses emerging from fractured social orders shaped by sustained violence.

Caitlin Lucia  
Dela Cruz

Faculty of  
Divinity

**Popular secularisation and aestheticisation of the absurd: reframing Kierkegaardian faithful freedom through either/or, Elliott Smith, and their interpretations**

Søren Kierkegaard conceptualises religious freedom as an existential condition grounded in subjective choice, culminating in the “leap of faith” beyond rational comprehension. In *Either/Or* (1843), he examines this freedom through the tension between aesthetic and ethical modes of life. Both modes are conclusively insufficient in comparison to the religious horizon, in which freedom is absolutely realised through radical commitment to the absurd, understood as a paradoxical trust in God.

This paper examines the afterlives of Kierkegaard’s notion of freedom within contemporary secular culture, focusing on Grammy-nominee Elliott Smith’s 1997 album *Either/Or*, which explicitly draws on Kierkegaard’s work. Smith’s lyrics evoke existential dislocation, uncertainty and yearning, yet notably detach these experiences from any theological framework. In the closing track “Say Yes”, the narrator’s attraction to a figure who appears reconciled with the absurd effectively resonates with modern audiences, perhaps partially due to its detachment from theology.

I argue that this reframing reflects a broader process of “popular secularisation”, in which Kierkegaard’s religious freedom is translated into a culturally accessible, aestheticised engagement with absurdity. This transformation risks flattening the radical demands of Kierkegaardian faith into a secular engagement with the formerly inherently theological idea of absurdity. However, it also opens new opportunities for interpreting freedom as an immanent, lived negotiation with meaninglessness, especially within the frequent, colloquial conflation of existentialism, absurdism and nihilism.

Drawing on contemporary reactions to Smith’s work across online forums and short-form videos, as well as its reinterpretation in artist beabadoobe’s recent cover of “Say Yes” for charity album *Help 2* (2026), this paper explores how digital cultures mediate and reshape religious and existential concepts. It ultimately asks whether such secular appropriations dilute or meaningfully extend Kierkegaard’s vision of freedom, situating this question within wider debates on angst, religion, and freedom in the postmodern era.

**Elise Harboldt**

Faculty of  
Divinity

**When enemies become friends: unexpected encounters and the disruption of moral hostility**

Moral hostility exists in many forms. While sometimes it erupts into religious or ideological violence, often it manifests in more subtle ways—discrimination, avoidance, confirmation bias, and distorted perceptions of “the other.” Moral hostility promotes both in-group cohesion and out-group dehumanization. As Jonathan Haidt writes, moral judgments can both “bind and blind.”

Moral hostility is often deeply entrenched in a person or group’s thinking. Yet multiple examples exist of the disarming power of unexpected interpersonal encounters to shift previously hostile paradigms. This paper will examine lessons from several such encounters.

Daryl Davis was a black American musician who inspired many people to leave the Ku Klux Klan after building relationships with dozens of its members. Although not a religious group per se, the KKK has historically used religion to fuel its racial hostility. Hence, Davis was disarming assumptions partially shaped by religious rhetoric.

Amanda Knox befriended the Italian investigator and prosecutor whose moral hostility, influenced by religious and cultural assumptions, contributed to her wrongful conviction, traumatic imprisonment, and international reputational damage.

Megan Phelps Roper was previously one of the most influential figures in the infamous Westboro Baptist Church (an extreme sect considered to be a hate group in the United States). Roper credits the unexpected curiosity and kindness of strangers on Twitter with disarming her religious hatred. After being disowned by her family, she became an advocate for civil dialogue and depolarization.

This paper will reflect on key insights from these examples (and others like them), arguing that interpersonal kindness and humility can disrupt moral and religious hostility, and that such disruption is essential for protecting ideological and religious freedom.

**Maryam  
Bham**

Faculty of  
Education

### **Negotiating religious freedom in the doctoral journey**

Religious freedom is often framed in legal, political or interfaith contexts, yet it also plays out quietly within academic spaces, particularly during the doctoral journey. This paper reflects on my own experiences as a doctoral student navigating the intersections of faith, scholarship and institutional expectations. Through moments of tension and negotiation, I explore how freedom is enacted, constrained and sometimes creatively reclaimed in the pursuit of rigorous research.

Specific examples include balancing personal religious practices with demanding research schedules, critically engaging with sacred texts and theological questions while respecting scholarly norms, and navigating unspoken boundaries around sensitive topics. These experiences highlight the ways institutional structures such as supervisory guidance, departmental priorities, and disciplinary conventions, shape both the possibilities and limits of religious expression within academic work.

By situating the doctoral experience as a microcosm of broader questions of freedom, this paper emphasises that religious freedom is not only a political or legal matter but also a lived, practical and ethical concern within the spaces of higher education. Reflection on these everyday negotiations offers insight into how academic institutions might enable environments that support both intellectual inquiry and religious expression, allowing doctoral students to pursue their research with integrity and authenticity.

This contribution seeks to expand the conversation about religious freedom by examining its manifestations in scholarly life, showing that even within structured academic systems, freedom is continually performed, contested and reimagined.

**Tezera  
Tazebew**

Politics and  
International  
Studies

### **For God and country: a discourse construction of medemer as a hegemonic project in Ethiopia**

This paper examines the holiday speeches of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to explore how rhetoric communicates and legitimizes political rule. The corpus consists of holiday speeches delivered between 2018 and 2026. Drawing on Albert O Hirschman's *The Rhetoric of Reaction*, framing, and political discourse, the study identifies the themes that recur most frequently in these holiday addresses and assesses the rhetorical forms used.

Holiday speeches, as ceremonial political communication, provide an opportunity for the "change leadership" that came to power in 2018 to reinforce legitimacy, distance from the previous administration, highlight achievements, and mobilize public support through symbolic language, emotional cues, and narrative constructions rather than detailed policy debate.

A closer look at contemporary Ethiopia would reveal the limits of treating rhetorical styles as neatly aligned with ideological camps, à la Hirschman. During this period, the dominant narrative coming from the government reflects what Albert Hirschman called 'the synergy illusion,' with synergy, incidentally, being accepted as the English equivalent of Abiy's hodgepodge right-leaning ideology of medemer.

The study examines patterns in language use, narrative structures, and ideological positioning. It tracks shifts in rhetorical framing over time, shedding light on the rhetorical devices employed in holiday speeches and their reflection and advancement of broader political priorities.

The analysis reveals that these messages frequently employ references to religion, patriotic symbolism, and national identity. Policy priorities are presented through recurring themes of prosperity, as well as moral and emotional appeals to hope, unity, and national renewal. However, by rendering alternative conceptions of the good unthinkable, and shaped by a determination to counter the "rhetoric of reaction" from its critics, such state rhetoric of intransigence both produces and justifies state violence.

## About this event

The 2026 Student Symposium is convened by a team of postgraduate students: Geneva Blackmer (Divinity PhD), Hannah Peterson (Sociology PhD), and Songzan Xu (Divinity PhD). All the student convenors are also members of the Cambridge Interfaith Research Forum, the principal sponsor of this event.

## Cambridge Interfaith Research Forum

The Cambridge Interfaith Research Forum was established in 2022, to increase opportunities for Cambridge researchers of all levels to exchange learning and collaborate around the broad topic of religious studies, including inter-religious topics. The Forum is co-convened by Professor Esra Özyürek (Academic Director of the Cambridge Interfaith Programme) and Dr Iona Hine (Cambridge Interfaith Programme Manager).

For further information about the Research Forum, its work, benefits and membership, please visit [www.interfaith.cam.ac.uk/research-forum](http://www.interfaith.cam.ac.uk/research-forum).

## Find us



The Faculty of Divinity is located on Sidgwick Site, behind the Faculty of Music, next to the History Building, and near the garden entrance to Selwyn College.

Due to works on the History Building (aka, the Stirling Building), access is limited and may occasionally be closed briefly for works traffic.

[View an interactive map at map.cam.ac.uk](http://map.cam.ac.uk).

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