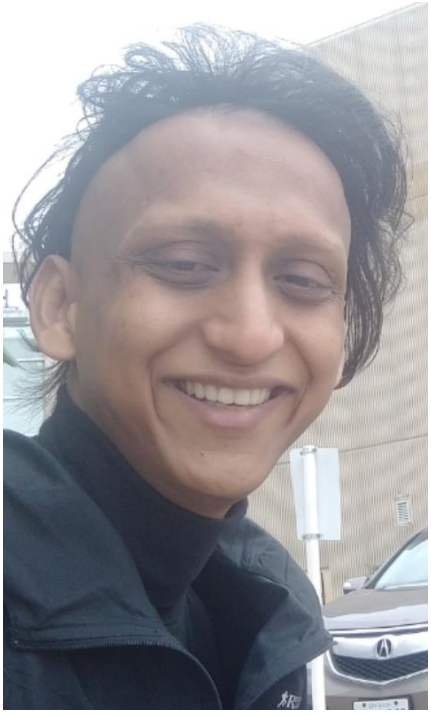
Rome Summer Seminars on Religion and Global Politics

Participant Biographies



Melicia Antonio (USA) is in her fourth year of Notre Dame's Theology PhD program, in the area of Moral Theology and Christian Ethics. Prior to coming to South Bend, Melicia earned an S.T.L. in Moral Theology from the Pontifical Athenaeum Regina Apostolorum in Rome, Italy, and taught theology and philosophy for the Anahuac University of Mexico City. Melicia's research interests include Catholic social and political thought, public morality, and church-state relations, with a particular interest in non-democratic governments. Her dissertation is a case study of how the Spanish Catholic Church's political theology evolved during the transition period from Franco's authoritarian regime to democracy, and what lessons the universal Church can take away from that experience. Melicia is especially grateful for the opportunities she has had at Notre Dame to study with political scientists and historians and looks forward to collaborating with scholars from many fields on interdisciplinary issues.



Rehan Sayeed (Canada/India) is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Anthropology, McGill University. He received a B.A. (Hons.) and an M.A. in Anthropology from the University of Victoria and Memorial University respectively. Ethnographically focused in the Greater Toronto Area, his research explores how madrasa's pedagogy becomes an epistemic conduit for a radically different conception of God. He is also interested in understanding how theo-pedagogical concerns guide revisions to the madrasa's curriculum and how the Canadian context inflects these concerns. His research has been funded and recognized by Fonds de recherche du Québec (FRQSC) and other granting units across McGill.



Mao Cheng (**Hong Kong/UK)** is a Ph.D. student at the Department of Theology and Religion, Durham University. She is currently working on her research project: John C. H. Wu's Natural Law: Perspectives of Thomist, Chinese Culture and Sino-Christian Theology, with professor Karen Kilby and professor Anna Rowlands. Mao is a recipient of the Louis Lafosse PhD Scholarship of the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University.

Mao was originally from China. She received her LLB and LLM from Macau and London, and then based her legal research in Hong Kong. From 2018 to 2021, Mao had her MACS and M.Th. in systematic theology from the Divinity School Of Chung Chi College, The Chinese University Of Hong Kong. She is also a visiting researcher of The Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, Hong Kong from 2021 to 2023. Her current research interests include interreligious and interdisciplinary dialogues on natural law and human rights.



Ana Maria Daou (Lebanon) completed her M.A in Conflict Resolution in Divided Societies at King's College, London as a Chevening scholar. Her thesis, entitled “Know Thy Neighbour: Interfaith Dialogue, Peacebuilding and Reconciliation in the Lebanese Context” explored the role of practical interfaith dialogue in the Lebanese peacebuilding and reconciliation process, and received academic praise. Valedictorian of the Faculty of Humanities, she also graduated with a B.A., Summa Cum Laude, in Communication Arts and a B.A. in Translation and Modern Languages. She is currently the Research and E-Learning Manager at Adyan and the Deputy Coordinator of the International Youth Committee at Religions for Peace. Her scope of work focuses on the organization’s projects on pluralism, dialogue, inclusion, education, and faith-based activism in the MENA region and beyond. Daou has also co-authored book chapters, journal articles and reports on topics of inter-religious dialogue, peace-building, and sustainable development. Last but not least, she participated as a trainer and speaker in several workshops and conferences in Lebanon and abroad.



Ilyas Dekkar (Algeria) is a professor of comparative religions, theology and interreligious dialogue at Bouira University in Algeria and he is a trainer of Religious Freedom and Belief from the Adyan Foundation and a vice president of its international commission network. He was an associate professor of Philosophy, Religious studies, and intercultural dialogue at several universities.

He has more than 15 training and academic certificates in different kinds of fields regarding conflict resolution, capacity-building, peaceful coexistence, interfaith dialogue, social cohesion, and human development. He has been engaging since 2008 in defending human rights and promoting the principle of brotherhood, religious freedom, Belief, pluralism, and citizenship that embraces diversity and equality.

He has taken and participated in many local and international events, conferences, meetings and workshops that serve interreligious and intercultural dialogue, especially with Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Baha'is, Shia, and Yazidis.

He has published several scientific articles in journals and magazines and given lectures and taught courses on how to use interreligious dialogue to strengthen peace, reconciliation, harmony and social cohesion, and how to promote tolerance among followers of religions.

Ilyas was among the finalists of the community solutions program in 2019 organized by the US Department of State regarding enhancing interreligious dialogue in Algeria.



Andrew Dickson (UK) is a PhD student and doctoral tutor at the University of Sussex. His research explores religion and secularism in International Relations, with a particular focus on how religion's social and political role is understood and enacted across 'de-radicalisation' or 'counter-extremism' initiatives, development programming, ethical foreign policy, human rights advocacy (particularly Freedom of Religion or Belief), and religious engagement across policy domains. He previously studied for an M.A. in Conflict, Security and Development from King's College London; and a B.A. in Philosophy, Politics and Economics from Hertford College, Oxford. He has also worked for several years at the Lokahi Foundation – a social impact and research charity working to cultivate harmonious and diverse societies – delivering projects alongside civil society actors, religious organisations, local authorities, state agencies, and governmental organisations. Outside of work, he is also a keen musician (playing the piano, church organ, and singing), a slow but steady runner, and an enthusiastic cook and consumer of vegetarian food.



Giulia Gozzini (Italy/Sweden) is a PhD Candidate in Islamic Studies at the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies at Lund University. Passionately interested in the interrelation between politics and religion, she particularly researched Lebanon and Sunni Islamist groups therein. Notably, her PhD project aims at investigating the recent political activation of traditionally quietist Salafi groups in the context of the Northern city of Tripoli. In her work, she proposes to adopt the concept of populism, considering the overlooked nexus between populism and religion, to investigate how religio-political populism might relate to the ideological and social formation of Salafism. Her project is a continuation of her Master's thesis, where she explored the multiple crises affecting Lebanese Sunnism and the subsequent appeal of Sunni populism and Salafism within the context of Lebanese sectarian politics.

As for her academic and professional background, she holds a Bachelor's Degree in International Relations from the University of Florence and a Master's Degree

in Middle East and North Africa Politics from the University of Turin. She also worked as Junior Research Fellow in the Mediterranean, Middle East and Africa programme at IAI-Istituto Affari Internazionali.



Addison Hollomon (USA) recently received her B.A. in International Affairs from John Cabot University. In her undergraduate degree, she focused her studies on religion and the Middle East and is interested in religious freedom, interfaith dialogue, and eschatology. Her senior capstone project was a case study on the impact of eschatology on foreign policy in Iran. She also studied Christian nationalism and conspiracies in America, and the religious origins of human rights. She was an intern at the Religious Freedom Institute in Washington, D.C, where she published an article entitled, “Iraq’s Future Depends on Achieving Religious Freedom in Mosul Today.” During her time at JCU, she was the founder and president of the university’s Interfaith Alliance, a club that seeks to engage students with the rich religious diversity of Rome through interfaith dialogue and off-campus visits. In September, she will begin a two-year assignment as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Morocco working in the youth development sector. Addison hopes to use her research in the field of religion and politics in a future career as a Foreign Service Officer. Addison will be participating in the seminars as an auditor and working as an Assistant to the Director of the Program.



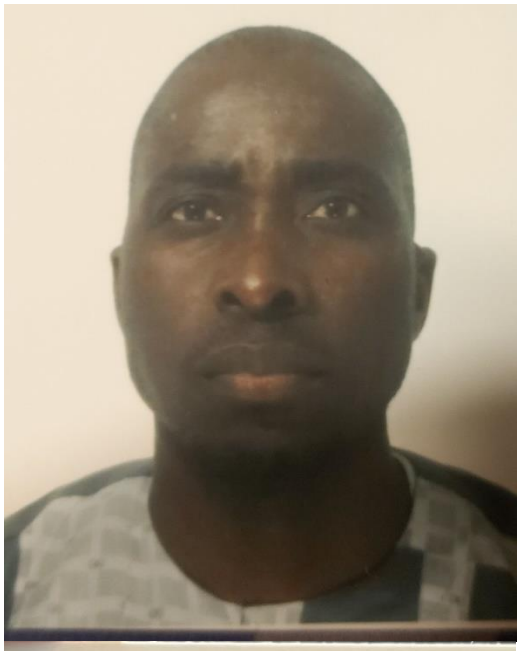
Jacob Katumusiime (Uganda) is a PhD Candidate at the Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR), Makerere University. He is a recipient of the Next Generation Social Sciences in Africa Doctoral Dissertation Research Fellowship. He majors in Cultural Studies and minors in Political Studies. His research interests are in religion and politics, social movements, political violence, decolonization and postcolonial studies. His doctoral research project seeks to reconceptualize the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God (MRTCG) which, after breaking away from the institutionalized Catholic Church in Uganda, descended into violence that climaxed with the 2000 Kanungu inferno. He attempts to place both the separationist religious movement and the violence it orchestrated in the regime of power within which they arose. He hopes to re-emphasize the dimension of history and local context. Invested in decolonization discourses, Jacob's research vision is historicizing and theorizing breakaway religious movements in postcolonial Africa. Jacob holds a Master of Philosophy and a Bachelor of Arts with Education and he has facilitated tutorial classes in Classical and Modern Political Thought.



Chia-Yu Liang (Taiwan/UK) is conducting his doctoral study in International Relations at the University of Sussex under the supervision of Professor Fabio Petito and Professor Louiza Odysseos. His research topic is: The Politics of the Return of Tianxia in Modern China. His research interests include Political Theology, Comparative Political Theory, Global Intellectual History, and Empire in non-western context. He has published a book review and essays on Political Theology, E-International Relations, and the British Journal of Chinese Studies. He is also the translator of Simone Weil's works in Taiwan. Before his doctoral study, he was also an essayist and activist for public philosophy moment and for dialogue between Church and society in Taiwan. His most recent social engagement is the organisation of support group for students from war torn/threatened regions at the University of Sussex.



Kristine Margvelashvili (Georgia/Germany) is a PhD candidate in the field of Political Science at the University of Göttingen (Germany) and Ilia State University (Georgia), she is the recipient of Volkswagen Foundation grant and recently Shota Rustaveli National Scientific Foundation grant for doctoral students. Her PhD thesis focuses on the role of the Georgian and Greek Orthodox Churches in the political processes, the impact it has on stateness, national identity formation and electoral behaviour. In 2018 Kristine conducted research visits funded by Erasmus+ at the Catholic University of Louvain (UCL) and at the Centre for Russian, Central and East European Studies of the University of Glasgow (UK). Kristine acquired her BA degree from the Tbilisi State University (Georgia) in International Relations (2007-2011). Her MA degree was awarded by the International Hellenic University (Greece) in Black Sea Studies (2011-2013) under the Erasmus Mundus Scholarship program. Her article-Role of the Orthodox Church in Georgia' s European Integration Process-was published by Caucasus Social Science Review (CSSR), Vol 4 (2018). She also published a Book Review: Orthodox Christianity and the Politics of Transition: Ukraine, Serbia, and Georgia. By Tornike Metreveli. (The Journal of Church and State, 2022, Oxford University Press) Upcoming article: The role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the EU-Russia-Georgia triangle (Caucasus Survey, 2023, Brill).



John Mendy (Gambia), priest for the diocese of Banjul, the Gambia. John did his elementary schooling at his birth place, Farafenni, and his high and secondary education at St. Augustine in Banjul. He started his formation to the priesthood in 2001 in Accra and Cape Coast in Ghana for his philosophical and theological studies respectively. He was ordained a priest in 2008. He served as an assistant priest in St. Therese parish for two years and then became a parish priest of St. Charles Lwanga for eight years. In 2018 he was sent to Rome to pursue a licentiate in Catholic social teachings at the Gregorian University. And now he is a doctoral student in the same university.



Maliheh Mousanejad (Iran), graduated in the field of cultural policy-making from University of Kharazmi in Iran. Her doctoral thesis was about the genealogy of violence and peace in Iran, in which she discussed the issue of violence in Iranian education. Also, her interest in the topic of peace made her motivated to participate in the summer school at the "Chateau de Bossey" Institute in Geneva on the topic of peace among religions, and she learned lots of new contents from the professors and other participants. In addition to studying, she has done social projects such as designing a model for the prevention of social and cultural problems for the welfare organization and a project about the social problems of students in University of Kharazmi. She also worked as a nature and children facilitator in a nature school and wrote a book about facilitation and children based on my experiences. In general, she is interested in research in the field of education, peace and religion.



Maria Owiredu (Sweden) is a PhD candidate at Linnaeus University in Växjö, Sweden. She is writing her Doctoral thesis on the Topic of "Israel-Palestinian conflict and the Swedish government". The purpose of her research is to examine Swedish foreign policy in the domestic policy debate, with a focus on the Israel-Palestine conflict, and how political parties in parliament dealt with the issue between 2006 and 2021.

The research project she intends to work on during the Rome Summer Seminars on Religion and Global Politics is related to her dissertation and will provide additional research related to religiosity and the Israel-Palestine conflict. Along with her research, she plans to write articles about religion and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in relation to Swedish voters.

In addition to her research, she is married and a mother of three, and devotes much of her free time to providing her children with the love and care they require to grow into strong and independent individuals. She also spends a lot of time with her husband and close friends. She enjoys travelling and discovering new places. She is a believer and attend church on a regular basis. As a political activist, one of her top priorities has been to work to strengthen family politics in my community. Other areas of interest include Christianity, the European Union, and international politics.



Ana Petrache (Romania) holds a Phd from École Pratique des Hautes Etudes (religious sciences). Her work focuses on the relationship between religion and politics in 20th century Western Europe. Her present research interests include political theology, eschatology, interreligious and ecumenical dialogue, political philosophy, philosophy of history. During her postdoctoral studies, she was engaged in several research projects in University of Fribourg, Switzerland and Institut Catholique de la Méditeranée, Marseille. Now is a postdoctoral student at the Ecumenical Institute at the Angelicum in Rome. Her

book *Gaston Fessard, un chrétien de rite dialectique?* was published at Cerf, 2017.



ISAAC PORTILLA, FRAS (Spain/UK) is an author, scholar, and theologian. His research focuses on interfaith dialogue, mystical consciousness, hermeneutics, and phenomenology. His latest publications are "Interfaith Dialogue and Mystical Consciousness" (*Harvard Theological Review*, 2022) and *What Christ Said: Revisiting the Countercultural Sayings of Christ Jesus* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2022).

Isaac's research aims to understand the significance of existential dynamics and mystical narratives to explain human destiny and the evolutionary formation of mystical consciousness within religious diversity. He uses phenomenological approaches, centering his inquiry on mystical experience and existential discussions that are often overlooked. He is especially interested in the Christian dialogue with Asian religions. His present research builds on the work of the post–Vatican II interfaith tradition in India, focusing on domains of intra-Hindu and Hindu-Christian dialogue that have been little explored.

Isaac is a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society and a member of several scholarly organizations and networks, among others: American Academy of Religion, European Academy of Religion, Society for Hindu-Christian Studies, and Scholars at the Peripheries (St Andrews), a research network fostering equality, diversity, and inclusion in academia. He is currently finishing his PhD in the Centre for the Study of Religion and Politics at the University of St Andrews (Scotland). He speaks English, Spanish, and Portuguese.



Khan Shairani (USA) is a doctoral candidate in Peace Studies and History at the University of Notre Dame. Interested in the intersection between religion and peace, his work ranges from historical instantiations of Islam to modern engagements with Islamic tradition. His dissertation examines the intellectual legacy of eighteenth-century Islamic scholars from the Mughal and the Ottoman empires who transformed the epistemologies of classical Islamic thought in response to internal and colonial challenges. In particular, he explores how Muslims can navigate tumultuous times by re-engaging and reviving their tradition. His other research interests include colonialism and post-colonialism, Islamic theosophy and, representations of Muslims in film.

Khan received his undergraduate degree in Arabic and Chinese from Williams College and his Master's degree in Islamic Studies from Harvard Divinity School. While at Notre Dame, he has been a translator and instructor for the Madrasa Discourses program, an initiative funded by the Templeton Foundation that teaches science and philosophy to Islamic seminary graduates. He has also founded the Graduate Film Club (FLIC), which attempts to introduce intersectional and diverse cinema to Notre Dame students.

Khan's research has been supported by the Critical Language Scholarship, the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship, as well as Notre Dame's Nanovic Institute for European Studies, Liu Institute for Asia and Asian Studies, and the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies. He has also received the Qasid Annual Scholarship for the study of Qur'anic Arabic in Amman, Jordan. His professional affiliations include the American Academy of Religion, the American Oriental Society, and the Annual Conference on South Asia.



Valeria Vergani (Italy/Canada) is a PhD candidate in American Religions in the department of Religious Studies at Stanford University, and a PhD minor student in the Department of Anthropology. Her research explores the cultural politics of interreligious dialogue in the contemporary US and Canada with a focus on material culture, settler colonialism, and Indigenous resurgence. Valeria is also a community organizer, with extensive experience in interfaith dialogue in the Canadian context of British Columbia, where she has served as Director of Interfaith Relations for the faith-based non-profit City in Focus Foundation. She currently serves as a Global Council Trustee for the United Religions Initiative, the world's largest grassroots interfaith network. Valeria hails from Verona, Italy but has spent a decade in Canada prior to joining Stanford in 2021. She received her MA in Religious Studies from the University of Toronto. Her doctoral research is supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and by Stanford's American Religions in a Global Context Initiative.