26
THE AMBIVALENCE OF RELIGIOUS SOFT POWER

Ahmet Erdi Öztürk

Introduction

On 24 February 2022, President Vladimir Putin began attacking Russia’s eastern neighbour, Ukraine. This attempt, which Russia described as a ‘special military operation’, was a dangerous invasion attempt. Although many aspects of the war had been discussed beforehand, the religion-based separation behind the war and how it was used as a legitimacy tool by Russia was realised relatively late. In this context, this conflict can be considered as the first religion-based war of the twenty-first century, as Lucian N. Leustean (2022) states, since it contains the policy-based division of the Orthodox Christian Church behind it. One of the most fundamental reasons for this assumption is that, as Peter Mandaville (2022) stated about two weeks before the war, Russia stopped using religion as a soft power propaganda tool against Ukraine and started using it as a sharp power shield, employing both authoritarianism and aggression. Using this example, and regarding the role of religion in global politics and discussions of its power position, one can ask the following questions: (1) If religion is used as a soft power resource, how can we define it? (2) What are the sources of religious soft power? (3) What are the tools of religious soft power? (4) What are the limits of religious soft power?

This chapter tries to explain the concept of religious soft power, widely used in both academia and policy-making processes, and seeks to answer these four questions.

Religion’s use of soft power followed a widespread understanding that its role in political and social life had never disappeared. At the beginning of the twentieth century, many scholars, adhering to the secularisation thesis, claimed that religion’s influence would be erased from the public and political sphere and confined to the private domain (Haynes, 1997, p. 711; Wilson, 2012, p. 19). Scholars also stated that the outcome would be to contribute to the secularisation of both politics and international relations, which had been ongoing since the Westphalia Peace Treaties in 1648 (Hurd, 2009). However, the last quarter of the twentieth century witnessed the fact that religion did not disappear from public view; contrarily, it continuously exerted influence on outcomes in many parts of the world (Haynes, 2005; Hatzopoulos and Petito, 2003; Fox, 2001). The most striking of these events was undoubtedly the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. Subsequently, the strengthening of Christian parties in Europe (Kalyvas, 2018), the emergence of religion-based conflicts and cooperation in the Balkans, and finally the 11 September 2001 al-Qaeda attack on the USA underlined that religion is a
Ahmet Erdi Öztürk

significant factor in world politics. This led to the study of religion in both domestic and foreign policy, as well as in economics (McCleary and Barro, 2006), conflict resolution (Gurses, 2015), terrorism (Henne, 2019) and immigration policy (Warner, 1998). This relatively new yet diverse field of study also sought to explain where and how religion was positioned in politics, becoming an important issue in the world’s changing and transforming issues (Sandal and Fox, 2013; Haynes, 2014; Warner and Walker, 2011). To arrive at an understanding of what has happened, it is useful to start by accepting that religion’s role in politics is ‘ambivalent’ (Philpott, 2007; Appleby, 1999), leading to varied outcomes.

There is one indisputable fact: religion has re-emerged on the world stage, playing a decisive role in different ways in many contexts, while acting as an important tool for many actors, both state and non-state. For some, religion is power. Religion is not however an example of potential ‘hard’ power, such as military resources or financial instruments. On the contrary, religion is soft power, like culture, history and other normative structures. The concept of soft power does not remain static but undergoes changes and transformations. The concept of religious soft power, which emerged from a merger of religion and (secular) soft power, is a concept that is difficult to define and has led to much discussion. It is however widely agreed that ‘soft power’ was a concept first identified with the American foreign policy analyst, Joseph S. Nye, at the beginning of the 1990s. However, as Yang and Li (2021) note, it is still difficult to theorise authoritatively, as there are clearly varying definitions, tools and limits to its analytical use. To examine this, this chapter focuses on various countries, religious groups and events as examples, while unpacking the ‘ambivalent’ nature of religious soft power.

Combining the soft power concept with religion

Soft power is one of the most widely used concepts in politics and international relations. The concept is widely used, especially in the early 2000s, when the world seems to be in phase of ‘calm’. So, what exactly is soft power? Soft power was first described by Nye as follows: ‘When one country gets other countries to want what it wants’ (Nye, 1990, p. 167). In this context, what Nye means is that countries have an influence on the politicians and public opinions of other countries by using their culture, education, language and similar normative powers without resorting to ‘hard’ power. Although Nye himself revised the concept over the years, scholars who followed him often sought to expand its meaning. Many scholars, including Nye, use the concepts of soft power and public diplomacy synonymously. In addition, the analytical use of soft power is used widely, and its definition expands with the use of different examples. Before moving on from Nye’s use of the term, we can note that the founder of the concept of soft power barely mentions the word ‘religion’ in his numerous writings on the topic, briefly noting that religion can be an example of soft power which can create both normatively positive and negative effects. In other words, while today the concept of religious soft power is shaped by Nye’s concept, he himself did not play a decisive role in its analytical development.

Henne (2022), focusing on the examples of Saudi Arabia and Russia, claims that from time to time the concept of soft power, combined with material – that is, hard – power, becomes ‘smart’ power. Examples include China’s access to the interior of Africa using its economic power (Kurlantzick, 2009), Turkey’s dominance in the Balkans with its historical and cultural influence and Qatar’s global penetration via lucrative sports sponsorships. These are all examples which expand the definition by going beyond Western-centred approaches to soft power. In addition, Great Britain still maintains its influence in the world by using the power of language (Rose, 2005), and Sweden’s soft power is bolstered by its human rights discourse (Villanueva, 2007). However, apart from some exceptions, mainstream
theory in political science and international relations generally treats soft power as a state-centred approach via a neo-realist perspective, or in an identity-based way, such as its use by the so-called ‘English school’ of international relations and, more widely, the social constructivist perspective (Rudolph, 2005; Barbato, 2010).

In today’s world, characterised for many by its multidimensional complexity, religion is widely accepted as one of humanity’s oldest identities, serving both to keep societies together and to separate them (Ben-Porat, 2013, p. 6), and is widely accepted as containing significant elements of soft power. Both religious and secular countries, as well as non-state religious groups, may act as soft power practitioners. In addition, global actors, such as the Vatican, as well as some other religious and cultural structures, employ soft power (Chong, 2009).

As mentioned earlier, the notion of perceiving soft power and religion together entered the literature relatively recently. The main reason for this was the coexistence of religion with other normative power elements, and the definition of soft power itself being somewhat unclear. In this context, Thomas indirectly mentioned religious soft power for the first time with the following sentences: ‘popular beliefs, perceptions and attitudes of particular constituencies and it – directly and indirectly – influences the behaviour of states in world politics’. We can say that Thomas implicitly refers to religious soft power in this definition, without expressing the notion explicitly. He avoided using the word religion by saying ‘popular beliefs’ and talked about a normative concept – just like his own definition of soft power. This leaves the definition rather abstract. Expressing how the concept can be evaluated without defining it fully, Steiner (2011) claims that interfaith summits contain within themselves religious soft power and that the participants of such meetings somehow maintain their presence in foreign policy through religion. However, this explanation still does not tell us exactly what religious soft power is. Neither do Sandal and Fox explain this in their 2013 discussion of religion in foreign policy. Sandal and Fox contend that (secular) soft power that uses religion is not a substitute for other ‘hard’ power elements. Finally, they also argue that religion has the capacity to try to establish international unity, via a common purpose and a network of solidarity (Sandal and Fox, 2013: 96–98).

Jeffrey Haynes was the first scholar to take religious soft power out of an abstract definition and put flesh on its bones. Focusing on the subject with various examples in several studies since the early 2000s, Haynes states that actors in foreign policy, whether they are secular or religious, seek to use religion as a force to pursue certain goals. Haynes (2008, p. 143) said that: ‘If religious actors “get the ear” of key foreign policy-makers because of their shared religious beliefs, the former may be able to influence foreign policy outcomes through the exercise of religious soft power’. In later studies, Haynes argues that not only states but also some non-state religious actors use religion as a multidimensional and different power resource, providing examples of some entities that seek to apply religious soft power. Haynes refers to the use of religious soft power by various actors, including the pope and the Holy See; the governments of Iran, Iraq, Turkey and the USA during the presidency of Donald Trump (2017–2021); as well as various non-state actors, including American evangelists, Roman Catholics and Sunni radical groups, such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (Haynes, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2016). Overall, Haynes claims that no matter how and for what purposes the soft power of religion is used, the party that seeks to use religion in this way tries to be visible first by bringing religious arguments to the fore, then by trying to apply their wishes in relation to the groups and other actors they target.

A second group of thinkers has sought to improve the concepts developed by the first group. Such scholars are led by Peter Mandaville, who, in 2018 carried out a project called The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power under the umbrella of the Brookings Institute and Georgetown
Ahmet Erdi Öztürk

University Berkley Center. Mandaville, together with Shadi Hamid, tried to explain how religious soft power is used by different actors for geopolitical purposes in their study ‘Islam as statecraft: How use religion in foreign policy’ (Mandaville and Hamid, 2018). However, before this explanation, they tried to define what religious soft power is. I say they tried to define it because they, just like Haynes, accepted that the concept is indefinite in itself and that it somehow has limits. In this context, according to them, religious soft power is a type of power that countries use together with sharp power from time to time in the new world order, and they use it towards structures that they can affect geographically first and then in groups. In this context, structures that use the same religion as a soft power element in different geographies may enter into a struggle with each other, a common occurrence in the new world order. Thus, according to Mandaville and Hamid (2018), increases in both global conflict and cooperation suggest religious soft power can appear in various forms. When viewed from this perspective, the return of religion to world politics and the discussion since the 1990s about religious soft power imply that we are focusing on something new.

Following Mandaville and Hamid’s project, Peter Henne’s study (Henne, 2019), which focuses on the use of religion in the foreign policies of the US and Russia, argues that religious soft power is often a factor in some of today’s foreign policy struggles, and is a tool which some governments and non-state groups use to compete with each other. In this context, Henne contends that classical foreign policy readings are incomplete because they exclude religion, even though religious soft power is sometimes a tool of ‘conventional’ – that is, secular – foreign policy. In addition, and also among the second generation of religious soft power writers, perhaps the most radical change in discourse, or in other words, the use of religious soft power, Gregoria Bettiza (2020) states that religion is a power factor in foreign policy on its own, a concept that he calls ‘sacred capital’, which can be an effective foreign policy tool in some contexts. In addition, Bettiza contends that certain states use religion very effectively in foreign policy, thanks to some of their characteristics, and this falls within the definition of soft power.

Following our brief discussion of some of the ways that religious soft power is understood, we can note that we are currently informed by a second generation of scholars interested in religious soft power. Yet, it is not possible to say that this generation is very different from the first generation, except to diversify the examples and make the concept more popular. Although they make very valuable contributions and definitions, we are not far beyond what Haynes said in the definition of soft religious power two decades ago. However, talking about religious soft power on a global scale today, we can also say that it has turned into a resource in the hands of different regimes, including both democracies and non-democracies, similarly trying to spread their influence.

Before moving on, it is necessary to underline one final point, related to the definition of soft religious power. As already mentioned, for nearly 20 years it has not been clearly stated what religious soft power is, or rather there has been no full agreement on any of the different definitions put forward. The main reason for this is that a concept that is difficult to measure, whether by normative or positivist methods, emerged as a new concept. It should be noted that religious soft power is ‘ambiguous’ in nature, and this uncertainty is reflected in both the resources and limits of religious soft power, as discussed later.

Sources of religious soft power, and those who use it

Of course, the most indisputable and fundamental source of religious soft power is religion. However, the fact that a country, an organisation or a non-state group is linked to a religious faith does not necessarily indicate that it has the capacity to use religious soft power productively.
The ambivalence of religious soft power

In addition, additional and very strong support is needed, including historical connections. What we mean by historical connections is that the government or non-state actor that seeks to use religious soft power must have an organic-historical connection with a certain religion in some ways, and must have led or pioneered this religion at some point in history, either on a regional or a global scale. Bettiza (2020) calls this historical bond event ‘Historical Entanglements’, and states that symbolically it is very important. Yet, if one can use a religious reference historically, this can go far beyond being symbolic in foreign policy. What I mean here can be explained by the following example. The main centre of Bektashism, an Islamic Sufistic movement, is located in Tirana, the capital of Albania. This organisation does not have great financial or network-based activity. However, the Bektashi leader, Baba Mondi, based in Tirana, is able to influence Bektashi and Alevi groups in many countries, not only in Albania or the Balkans, but also in Turkey and the rest of the world (Doja, 2006). A larger-scale example is the Vatican, which is also a state but does not as a state wield conventional great power. Yet, both the pope and the Vatican more generally can be important voices in debates about conflicts and pandemics around the world, thanks to their historical importance and because the spiritual leader of the Roman Catholic church, the pope, is also a head of state, the Vatican. Of course, we do not compare the influence of the two, Baba Mondi and Pope Francis, but we can say that they both have religious soft power stemming from their history, and other factors.

Religious soft power that comes from historical foundations is so important that even if the ideology of a country with a certain majority religion changes, then it may still seek to use religion as a soft power in foreign policy. One example is Turkey. Anatolia, which hosted the caliph as the leader of the Islamic world during the Ottoman period, became officially a secular state with the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. This restructuring transformed Turkish society, and compared to many other Muslim-majority countries, Turkey has a looser social structure in terms of its religious affiliations. However, especially since 2010, the Turkish government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has sought to use Islam as a religious soft power tool in both domestic and foreign policy, angling for the ‘leadership of the Muslim world’, similar to many other governments, including those of Iran and Saudi Arabia (Ozturk, 2021). In this context, Turkey seeks to change the dimensions of its relations with different countries with the claim of serving Muslims and defending their rights in various parts of the world, including the Balkans, North Africa and the Turkic populations and states in both Asia and parts of continental Europe. In this context, religion does not remain ‘just’ religion, nor does history remain ‘only’ history. This is to note that culture and language are common yet highly important values which often augment the use of religion as soft power. For example, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran have different sects and different readings of Islam. Therefore, they cannot be at equal distance to every Muslim group in terms of culture, religion and understanding, and they cannot approach them in the same way. In fact, this shows us that history on its own is not always enough for foreign policy to succeed when using religious soft power.

In order to use religious soft power effectively, history, culture and teaching are required. In this context, the dissemination of the doctrine by an institutional or semi-institutional structure is beneficial for the use of religion as more effective soft power. At this point, three different examples will be illuminating. One of them is the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, trying to spread Shiism via the teachings of the leader of the Islamic revolution, Ayatollah Sayyid Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini (Wastnidge, 2015). Another example is the Egyptian university of Al-Azhar, trying to ‘guide’ Muslims throughout the world via its own imams and Islamic scholars, along with the Egyptian government that controls Al-Azhar university (Barraclogin, 1998). A final example is China and India’s use of the Dalai Lama and Buddhism for their political interests, especially in South Asia (Ranade, 2017). As can be understood from these different
examples, different structures, different religions and different interests use religion as a soft power in different ways, albeit based on similar historical teachings.

These entities and/or structures are actors that seek to use religious soft power and, as a result, they need institutions to spread it, along with cadres to produce discourse for those institutions, as well as political will. For these institutions to use religion as a soft power resource, they require financial capital and tools to spread their discourse. For example, Iran has supported the spread of the Islamic Revolution and its activities around the world for 40 years (Haynes, 2021, p. 328), Turkey’s religious communities are followers of Sunni Islam, which has organic ties with the state, and an important state structure, the Diyanet (that is, Presidency of Religious Affairs); both are important institutions and structures (Ozturk, 2016). Similarly, Russia’s use of the Orthodox church as a means of legitimacy during its 2022 invasion of Ukraine and its dissemination through the Sputnik news agency are further examples of how religion can be employed as a soft power.

At this point, the question can be asked: how does religion arise as a soft power and who uses it? Three different actors use it, and while they are in cooperation from time to time, each can also use religion as a soft power tool on its own. As we have said from the very beginning, states can use religion as a soft power resource in foreign policy via religious organisations, national and transnational state apparatuses, and religious communities that seek to control. In addition, national and transnational religious organisations that are not directly related to the state but are in close contact with it can also operate internationally via religious soft power. For example, the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation or the International Christian Association seek to be influential in the field of foreign policy by carrying out global activities, including foreign aid and health care initiatives. A third group comprises religious organisations or communities. While some may have direct or indirect relations with certain states, others may be opposed to them. For example, the Gülen Movement, originating in Turkey, has carried out dialogue and educational activities but is also a para-political organisation (Watmough and Ozturk, 2018). It was cited as a terrorist organisation by the Turkish state after a 2016 coup attempt. Despite this, in the 2000s, the Gülen Movement has been very active, together with the Turkish state, in the international arena, exemplifying attempted use of religious soft power.

However, whether it is a state, an international organisation or a national religious community, the use of religious soft power depends on having a regional, national and/or international network, as well as sufficient financial capital for its activities. The task of providing capital is dependent on countries and their legal systems. For example, American evangelists, or Mormons based in Salt Lake City, Utah, influential supporters of former president, Donald Trump, were also effective in identifying supporters outside the USA by forming transnational associations and soliciting donations (Haynes, 2021). In other countries, things work differently. For example, India’s nationalist and populist prime minister, Narendra Modi, uses his party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, as a religious tool inside India (McDonnell and Cabrera, 2019) and in the international Hindu diaspora outside of the country. In doing this, Modi shows himself to be a leader who seeks to use Hindu nationalism both in India and outside among diasporic Hindus. Another example is Turkey’s President Erdoğan, who uses the power of the state and affiliated religious communities, but not the power of his party, in a similar manner to Modi. In this context, by building the largest local mosques in the history of the Balkans, America and continental Europe, Erdoğan presents himself as the protector of Muslims, and uses this in Turkey’s foreign policy.

Terrorist organisations that use religion are other actors that Haynes (2012) shows in his studies as an example of entities that use religious soft power. Although we mention this subject once again in the section on the limits of religious soft power, it is necessary to underline a
The ambivalence of religious soft power

couple of points here. If religious soft power is to influence the masses solely through religious ideas, we can note that terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria find supporters not only in the Muslim world but also in the West, via effective use of religious soft power. This shows us that religion is not always a means of influencing in a positive way and reflects religion’s ambiguity as noted earlier.

As a result, religious soft power can also be used by the smallest-scale religious organisation, as well as states. However, it is not easy to use it. Because there is a need for both normative and material resources. History, partnership, human resources, culture, language unity, organisational capability and structure, a specific plan and purpose are the most important requirements. However, some ‘sharp’ power – that is, a mix of hard and soft power – attributes may be necessary for effective use of religious soft power, including, most importantly, financial capital. Although social media and internet are very important tools today, there is still a need for financial capital in order to have an impact on the world and to convey messages. When all this is combined, the question of how effective religious soft power is on its own arises, and this once again reveals its ambiguous side.

Limits of religious soft power

Religious soft power is one of the most effective policy tools in today’s world, but it is not suitable for use by all policy actors. One of the main reasons for this is that religious soft power is very narrow, although this has not stopped people, states and organisations from trying to utilise it in various ways. For example, Putin, who could not reach his goals in the first month of Russia’s occupation of Ukraine and was in a relatively difficult situation, began to use a lot of religious discourse, trying to convince the Orthodox Christian world that the invasion – or ‘special military operation’ as he called it – was necessary. In addition, leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church were making statements supporting Putin, and this can be seen as the use of religion in politics.

At this point, although even this can be seen as a religious soft power application at first glance, it is very difficult to define it as soft power when we consider the connection of the subject with authoritarianism and aggression.

However, the use of religious soft power at one point does not have a very wide area of influence. Religion undoubtedly has a unity and a unifying power between individuals, societies and countries. Religion also has a distinctive power. However, one of the big question marks is how much individuals, groups and countries try to stay together because of religious partnerships or religion. Here, I am not saying that religion has re-entered the private sphere or that it is not so important in international relations; on the contrary, I am trying to emphasise that it is still very important but still cannot be used as the only explanatory concept. At this point, one of the most important issues is that religious soft power has a limited scope and effect. In short, this tool cannot directly or indirectly lead to solving problems or gaining goals in foreign policy. Yet, it can be a co-actor for certain policies.

In both politics and international relations, states are the main actors. In this context, of course, states are not the only and main decision maker, but their existence is still an undeniable fact, an expression of power. Here, too, other power resources may merge, including military capacity, energy resources, geopolitical position and capacity to impose economic sanctions, to augment influence and power. At some point, these combined powers may have a decisive influence on the extent to which religious soft power is used or not used, as well as on its limits. In this case, religious soft power becomes a kind of supporting actor rather than a dominant actor on its own. The main reason for this is that it may be dependent on sharp power resources.
Another reason why religious soft power is limited, quickly crosses these limits and finds itself in the field of ‘sharp power’ is that religious soft power depends on the user. Who the user is or the user’s other activities determine how the religious soft power will be perceived by other parties. For example, Egypt’s recent transition to a dictatorship, especially after the Arab Spring and a brief democratic interregnum, leads to doubts among many Western Muslims, where it is influential. Similarly, there is the use of religion by the Erdoğan administration, which is getting tougher by the day in domestic politics. Although it may seem like religious soft power at first glance, it is viewed with suspicion by many Muslims, some social groups and among Balkan countries and, in addition, in other parts of the world. Here, of course, there are situations such as bringing internal problems to the outside by instrumentalising religious soft power, cross-border authoritarianism, or meddling in the internal affairs of other countries. A final point is that soft religious power practices are somehow intertwined with public diplomacy and diaspora groups, as we noted earlier in the work of Joseph Nye. Here, too, it is difficult to determine what the religion-oriented policies of many countries are.

Conclusion

When we look at general studies on religious soft power, we note that most such studies are either commentary, journalism or policy papers, not scholarly treatments. The main reason for this is that although religious soft power is used very frequently and visibly, it is also very difficult to define; there is no consensus as to what it means. On the other hand, the fact that religion is increasing in importance in both national and international politics heightens interest in the subject, which makes defining the concept authoritatively very important. This adds even more ambiguity to the already ambiguous nature of religion. In this regard, the phenomenon known as religious soft power does not always remain soft to the extent necessary or is intended to be presented when states enter the purview of the issue, because state configuration employs economic and other sanctions in the name of power through instruments that utilise religion. This situation suggests that states cannot use religion as a unidimensional soft power. Second, religion or the extremist instrumentalisation of religion as a means of oppression at the hands of a political regime can prompt changes in the state identity. These changes can spread rapidly and alter the behaviour formation of states due to their consideration for foreign policy. This is inarguably influential on topics such as the leader, state system, institutional capacity and areas of influence. Finally, we see once again that the changing identities of states do not relate merely to domestic policy.

References


The ambivalence of religious soft power


Haynes, Jeffrey. “Religion and international relations: what do we know and how do we know it?, against.” Religions 12, no. 5 (2021): 328.


Steiner, Sherrie. “Religious soft power as accountability mechanism for power in world politics: The interfaction leaders’ summit(s).” Sage Open 1, no. 3 (2011): 2158244011428085.


