

Religious Soft Power: Definition(s), Limits and Usage

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The following questions can be asked about the role of religion in global politics and discussions of its power position: (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 Special Issue tries to explain the concept of religious soft power, which is widely used in both academia and policy making processes, and seeks to answer these 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 secularization 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). Scholars also stated that the outcome would be to contribute to the secularization 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; on the contrary, it continuously exerted influence on outcomes in many parts of the world (Haynes 2005; Petite and Hatzopoulos 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 (Ozturk 2021a) and finally the 11 September 2001 al Qaeda attack on the USA underlined that religion is a 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 and immigration policy (Warner 1998). This relatively new yet diversified field of study also tried 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). 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), leading to varied outcomes.

There is one indisputable fact: religion has re-emerged on the world stage, not only playing a decisive role in different ways in many contexts but also 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, as culture, history and other normative structures are. 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 analysis, 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, the chapter focuses on various countries, religious groups and events as examples, while unpacking the 'ambivalent' nature of religious soft power.

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 seemed to be in phase of 'calm'. So, what exactly is soft power? Soft power was first described



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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 (Ozturk 2021b) and Qatar’s global penetration via lucrative sports sponsorships. These are all examples that 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 and Sweden’s soft power is bolstered by its human rights discourse. 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.

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, 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.

As mentioned above, 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. 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. Nor do Sandal and Fox 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, pp. 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 United States of America during the presidency of Donald Trump (2017–2021); and various non-state actors, including American Evangelists, Roman Catholics and Sunni radical groups, such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State (Haynes 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 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' (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, increases in both global conflict and cooperation suggest that 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 implies that we are focusing on something new.

Following Mandaville and Hamid's project, Peter Henne's 2019 study, which focuses on the use of religion in the foreign policies of the United States and Russia, argues that religious soft power is often a factor in some of today's foreign policy struggles, and is a tool that 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, despite the fact that 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, Gregorio 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. However, 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.

Contributions of the Special Issue

In his contribution, Jeffrey Haynes assesses Turkey's various forms of influence in Ghana and considers what Turkey hopes to achieve in foreign policy terms. The paper is divided into four sections. The first examines religious soft power and Turkey–Ghana relations, noting that they have recently become closer and more cordial in both religious and non-religious dimensions. The second section examines Muslims' traditionally marginal

political position in Ghana and explains that, over time, Muslims have become more politically assertive, open to external religious influences, including from Turkey, a country well known to use religious soft power to try to expand its foreign policy influence. The third section assesses recent Ghana–Turkey relations, including the expansion of Turkey’s economic soft power, with three examples: the national mosque, encouraging Islamic education, and a mutual desire to quell the activities of what the government of Turkey refers to as the ‘Fethullah Terrorist Organisation’. This section also considers the role of Turkey’s economic soft power in increasing the country’s presence in Ghana. The concluding section argues that the government of Turkey uses several techniques to increase its influence in Ghana, including both religious soft power and economic soft power. The government of Ghana broadly welcomes Turkey’s influence from both religious and economic perspectives: from a religious point of view, Turkey’s Sunni orthodoxy is seen as very unlikely to stimulate radicalization among Ghana’s Muslims, while Turkey’s economic presence is welcomed as an important means to help further build Ghana’s economy.

Secondly, in their contribution, Luca Ozzano and Sara Fenoglio underline the community organising approach. They, first describe the main tenets of this approach, formalised between the 1930s and the 1940s in Chicago by Saul Alinsky, and its history and evolution to the present day. The following sections describe the role played by religious values and religious communities, often representing key institutions in rundown social and urban contexts, in this approach. In the last section, the authors finally discuss the conception of power implied in the version of community organising proposed by the Industrial Areas Foundation (an organisation created by Alinsky) and its affiliates and the role of religion in it. With this work, the authors argue that the relational and bottom-up idea of power proposed by the IAF and its affiliates, although often focused on the development of a local power base able to place political pressure on the authorities from below and even economic boycott campaigns, has increasingly also relied on soft power after Alinsky’s death, especially because of the development of the ‘relational’ side of community organising, a process where the involvement of religious congregations (with the weight of their moral authority) has played a major role.

Thirdly, in their contribution, Hamdullah Baycan and Mehmet Rakipoglu scrutinise the case of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). According to them, the UAE has attempted to present itself as promoting a moderate form of Islam to counter political Islam. This study is based on data from religious verdicts (*fatwās*), speeches, and conference records of these scholars and institutions. The main purpose of the research is to show to what extent providing additional support to recently established religious institutions and emerging scholars is used as soft power to promote the UAE’s version of Islam and present the UAE as a moderate and tolerant country. Applying critical discourse analysis, the study aims to uncover the existing connection between emerging religiopolitical discourse and UAE-based legal verdicts of scholars (*ulamā*) and the organizations that they initiated. This study further argues that ‘moderate Islam’ and ‘tolerance’, used as religious soft power, are other tools that the UAE has applied in line with expectations for influence and power-seeking based on small state theory.

At last, Ariel Zellman and Jonathan Fox seek to quantitatively evaluate the extent to which American soft power, measured via levels of popular approval for the United States in countries surveyed by various polling agencies from 2002 to 2014, has correlated with shifts in governmental religious discrimination (GRD) since 1998. We find that not only do higher levels of approval of the United States correlate with greater increases in GRD, but this effect is particularly robust in more democratic states, in which American soft power should presumably have a greater influence. These findings should be deeply troubling for IRF advocates, empirically validating prevalent concerns regarding the efficacy, priority, and viability of IRF as a foreign policy instrument.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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