Religion, ‘soft power’ and international relations by Jeffrey Haynes

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Abstract

This paper focuses on religious soft power in international relations with a focus on the foreign policies of the USA, India, and Iran. The main argument is that if religious organisations and constituencies manage to ‘get the ear of government’ they may be able to influence foreign policy. On the other hand, while it is obviously important for such religious actors directly to get the ear of government through both formal and informal means, this is not the whole story. They also have other means at their disposal, including trying to influence public opinion through the media, demonstrations, or via think tanks. Overall, in relation to the USA, India, and Iran, religious actors seek to influence foreign policy and international relations by encouraging governments to adopt policies and programmes most in tune with their values, norms and beliefs.
How do religious actors affect outcomes in international relations? Many seek to achieve goals through expansion of transnational networks, a development that has received much attention in the last two decades, during which the Cold War ended and globalisation deepened. According to Voll, ‘the structure of world affairs and global interactions is in the middle of a major change. Both in terms of actual operations and the ways that those operations are conceived and understood by analysts, the old systems of relationships are passing rapidly’ (Voll 2006: 12). This is notable ‘across many political, economic, and military areas, [where] international “soft power” is taking precedence over traditional, material “hard power”’ (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 1999: ix).

Many analysts of international relations would agree that it is now impossible to ignore the international influence of religion. There is said to be a religious resurgence in many parts of the world and a budding literature devoted to this theme is appearing (Thomas 2005; Fox and Sandler 2004; Norris and Ingelhart 2004). In relation to the Muslim world, there is much interest in various militant transnational Islamic movements, including al-Qaeda. According to Voll, ‘the growing importance of soft power enhances’ such organisations’ strength (Voll 2006: 15). Less often noted are attempts by religion to influence foreign policy through wielding soft power, encouraging governments to apply religious principles, values and ideals. For Fox and Sandler, ‘religion’s greatest influence on the international system is through its significant influence on domestic politics. It is a motivating force that guides many policy makers’ … (Fox and Sandler 2004: 168).
Yet few discussions of soft power in international relations focus on religion. Joseph Nye (1990), who originally coined the term ‘soft power’ over 15 years ago, only briefly refers to religion, noting that ‘for centuries, organized religious movements have possessed soft power’ (Nye 2004a: 98). He focuses most attention on secular sources of soft power. Generally, ‘soft power’ refers to the capability of an entity, not necessarily a state, to influence what others do through direct or indirect influence and encouragement.

Nye has employed the term especially in relation to the waxing and waning of US soft power. For Nye,

The basic concept of power is the ability to influence others to get them to do what you want. There are three major ways to do that: one is to threaten them with sticks; the second is to pay them with carrots; the third is to attract them or co-opt them, so that they want what you want. If you can get others to be attracted, to want what you want, it costs you much less in carrots and sticks (Nye 2004b).

Soft power co-opts people rather than coerces them. Certain attributes – such as, culture, values and ideas – represent different, not necessarily lesser, forms of influence compared to ‘hard’ power: more direct, more forceful measures typically involving (the threat or use) of armed force and/or economic coercion. In international relations, a country’s power is often regarded as a quantitative measure derived from various material attributes, including: gross national product (GNP), military capability, and natural resources. However, seeking to measure a country’s potential
hard power assets is not necessarily a good guide to understanding whether it will be able to achieve its foreign policy goals. The problem is that even when a country seems to have sufficient relevant material assets ‘to get the job done’ and the will to use them, this does not always translate into success. For example, the United States was not able to achieve its main goal in the Vietnam War (1954-75) – to prevent a communist regime taking power – nor, so far, in relation to Afghanistan and Iraq: secular, pro-Western regimes, built on democratic foundations. In each case, US foreign policy sought unsuccessfully to apply its hard power.

Not ‘sticks or carrots’, soft power is a ‘third way’ of achieving foreign policy objectives. Soft power is more than influence, since influence can also rest on the hard power of (military or diplomatic) threats or (financial) payments. On the other hand, while soft power is not entirely synonymous with cultural power, it is the case that ‘exporting cultural goods that hold attraction for other countries can communicate values and influence those societies’ (Nye 2004c) – for example, US efforts during the ‘third wave of democracy’ in the 1980s and 1990s to undermine authoritarian governments in many parts of the world (Haynes 2001).

Economic strength is usually not soft power. This is because responding to an economic incentive or sanction is not the same as aligning politically with a cause that is admired or respected. We can see this in relation to the influence of foreign aid donors, collectively of great importance in encouraging some economically poor authoritarian regimes to democratise in the 1980s and 1990s. This followed significant oil price rises in the 1970s and associated international indebtedness, when the ability of many such regimes to maintain adequate programmes of political and
economic development dropped sharply in the 1980s and 1990s. The result was that it became increasingly difficult – especially for many developing countries without oil – to balance their budgets. Many became increasingly dependent on loans and aid from the west. Aid donors argued that the situation would be remedied by democratisation, part of a general process of improving governance. Increasingly, the continuity of foreign aid was made dependent on aid-hungry regimes agreeing to democratise. In this way, many economically poor, authoritarian regimes were encouraged to shift to democracy via the use of arrange of inducements, including both sticks and carrots. In addition, in a linked move, several western governments – including those of the USA and Britain – encouraged the installation of market-based economic programmes to the extent that they were ‘intrinsic’ to democratic openings in economically impoverished Africa and Central America (Haynes 2001). In short, recent external encouragement to democratise – linked to the supply of aid and loans – was often of major significance for poor countries – but it was not soft power because normally overt economic leverage was used.

_Soft power is not necessarily humane._ For example, the soft-power activisms of various significant political figures, including the Indian nationalist, Mohandas ‘Mahatma’ Gandhi, the US civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, and South Africa’s anti-apartheid activist _par excellence_, Nelson Mandela, were uniformly informed by universal humanist ideas, while those of others, including the German Nazi leader, Adolph Hitler (1889-1945), the Russian Communist head, Josef Stalin (1879-1953), and the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, Osama bin Laden (b. 1957), were said to be reliant on twisting people’s minds (Nye 2004c). This suggests that the exercise of soft power does not only rely on persuasion or the capacity to convince people by
argument but also is a sign of an ability to attract, and attraction often leads to acceptance of associated ideas. As Nye puts it,

If I am persuaded to go along with your purposes without any explicit threat or exchange taking place – in short, if my behavior is determined by an observable but intangible attraction – soft power is at work. *Soft power uses a different type of currency—not force, not money—to engender cooperation. It uses an attraction to shared values, and the justness and duty of contributing to the achievement of those values.* (emphasis added; Nye 2004c)

*Religion may be a form of soft power.* We can see this in relation to the post-9/11 ‘war on terror’, when competing conceptions of soft power have vied for supremacy, and religious values are often central to this competition. Lacking an influential soft power, hearts-and-minds policy that would demonstrably persuade all Muslims not to follow extremist groups who encourage violence, US foreign policy has found it very difficult to convince most Muslims that its objectives in both Afghanistan and Iraq are not simply self-serving (Shlapentokh, Woods and Shirav 2005). In addition, both ‘extremist’ and ‘moderate’ Islamic ideas and movements have competed post-9/11 for the support of ordinary Muslims by offering differing soft power visions. Casanova (2005), Voll (2006) and Appleby (2006) have recently discussed the international impact of various Muslim transnational networks. Some – al-Qaeda is an obvious example because of the events of September 11, 2001 – can have a greater impact on the world stage and receive more foreign policy attention from the great powers than many ‘weak’ states in the international system.
The literature does however note a variety of religious phenomena – such as the Roman Catholic Church, Protestant evangelical churches (often conservative and American-based), and various Islamic transnational entities – when examining the significance of cross-border religious networks for outcomes in international relations (Voll 2006; Casanova 2006). However, it took September 11, 2001, (9/11) to put transnational religious actors into the foreground of concern – where they have remained. Before 9/11 international relations interest in transnational phenomena was often linked to questions of ‘conventional’ – that is, political and economic – security. Religious actors were often regarded as interesting phenomena, although remote from central questions affecting states and state power in international politics. Now, however, it is widely accepted not only that various religious actors can directly affect the internal politics of states and thus qualify state power, as conventionally understood, but also have significant ramifications for outcomes in international relations.

**Religious actors and foreign policy in the USA, India, and Iran**

We have seen that hard power is the ability to force people do things, quite irrespective of whether or not they want to do them. Soft power, on the other hand, builds on the ability to mold the preferences of others, to get them to *want* to do things that you want them to do. When religious actors seek to project soft power they do not necessarily restrict their efforts to attempt to influence how ‘ordinary’ people think and act. Many also try to influence state foreign policies, albeit with varying degrees of success. In this section, we look at the efforts of three sets of religious actors – the Religious Right in the USA, *Hindutva* (‘Hindu-ness’) proponents in India, and
‘messianic fundamentalists’ and other religious militants in Iran – to try to influence state foreign policies through wielding soft power.

The United States of America

The Constitution of the United States makes it clear that there should be no institutionalised links between religion and politics. This is explicitly stated in the first amendment of the Constitution – ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof’ – and restricts politics and religion to separate realms. In addition, unlike several European countries – including, Germany, Italy and Sweden, where Christian Democratic parties have been influential for decades – the United States does not have a tradition of political parties with a religious focus. On the other hand, as Reichley, notes, ‘religion has always played an important part in American politics’ (Reichley 1986: 23). The republic’s founders drew on religious values and rhetoric in forming the new nation, and churches were involved in the controversy about slavery and the resulting civil war in the middle of the nineteenth century. During the twentieth century, religious groups were participants in various campaigns, including: prohibition of the sale of alcohol, enactment of women’s right to vote, New Deal measures to increase social welfare in the 1930s, and the passage of laws covering civil rights in the 1960s (Wald 2003).

As Table 1 indicates, the current influence of religion on US foreign policy is not novel. As Judis indicates, historically there have often been links between US foreign policy and domestic religious concerns and principles. This continuing liaison
demonstrates the longevity of religious soft power in the USA in relation to foreign policy aims and aspirations.

[Table 1 here]

The United States is frequently noted as an exception to the secularising trend so evident in most Western countries, with accounts stressing the societal and political importance of religion (Norris and Inglehart 2004). This fits in with Telhami’s claim that as ‘religion plays an important role in politics in certain parts of the world’ – including the USA – then it is likely that there will be ‘greater prominence of religious organizations in society and politics’ (Telhami 2004: 71). In a democratic political system, like that of the USA, the influence a religious actor has is likely to be linked in part to the extent that it can gain and retain the ear of government. In other words, a religious actor’s ability to translate potential into actual influence in US foreign policy is linked to whether or not it can access relevant decision-making structures and processes (Hudson 2005: 295-7). If a religious actor gets access to formal decision-making structures and processes it still does not guarantee ability to influence policy formation or execution. To have a profound policy impact, it is crucial to build and develop close personal relations with key players, as well as to foster good relations with influential print and electronic media which, in turn, can help encourage policy makers to make certain decisions and not others. In other words, religious actors’ ability to influence foreign policy is not only a result of ‘getting the ear of government’ directly; this a very limited and traditional understanding of influence. As Walt and Mearsheimer note in relation to the ‘Israel lobby’ in the USA, individuals and groups attempt to acquire and wield influence by lobbying ‘elected representatives and members of the executive branch, mak[ing]
campaign contributions, vot[ing] in elections, [and] try[ing] to mould public opinion etc’ (Walt and Mearsheimer 2006: 6) In sum, to have a policy impact, it is necessary both to build and develop relations with key players in both society and politics, as well as to foster good relations with influential print and electronic media.

This suggests that religions are not just run of the mill lobby groups. They may have a form of influence that while indirect is nevertheless instrumental in helping construct the mindset of those that have responsibility for making foreign policy. It will however depend on a number of factors as to what questions are raised? What are the issues of concern? What terms are used when discussing foreign policy? How they are thought about and applied by foreign policy makers? This suggests that we need to take into account the importance of religious norms, values and ideology on foreign policy makers. As Finnemore and Sikkink note, ‘the ways in which norms themselves change and the ways in which they change other features of the political landscape … [make] static approaches to International Relations … particularly unsatisfying during the current era of global transformation when questions about change motivate much of the empirical research we do’ (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 888). This highlights the importance of paying analytical attention to the relationship between ideational and material issues to account for the significance of religion on US foreign policy since the 1980s. During the presidency of Ronald Reagan (1981-89), a man who shared many of their ideals and goals, the Religious Right began to consolidate itself as a significant lobby group (Haynes 1998: 28-33; Halper and Clarke 2004; 182-200; Judis 2005). Later, during the Clinton era (1993-2001), ‘left-leaning [religious] activists’ had access ‘to top administration officials’. But after George W. Bush took office in 2001, conservative ‘evangelical Christian leaders were the ones able to
arrange sessions with senior White House aides’ (Page 2005). LaFranchi (2006) refers to a shift from predominantly secular to primarily religious foreign policy goals, a process he calls an ‘evangelisation’ of US foreign policy (LaFranchi 2006). It is important to note that 9/11 was not the only factor of prominence here. There was, first, a related but conceptually distinct concern with loss of US soft power in the Muslim world which, it was hoped, would be rectified by a thoroughgoing regional democratisation. Second, there was pronounced ideological empathy between, on the one hand, key religious individuals and groups and, on the other, government policy makers, including the president. The influence of the Religious Right was particularly important in two areas: state building and democratisation in Afghanistan and Iraq and the promotion of religious freedom and human rights in countries where they were especially limited, including North Korea and Sudan (Seipel and Hoover 2004).

Certain individuals linked to the Religious Right were influential. They included: Gary Bauer, head of an advocacy group, American Values, and Republican presidential contender in 2000; Jerry Falwell, prominent Southern Baptist and televangelist; Ralph Reed, former executive director of the Christian Coalition and candidate in 2006 for the Lieutenant Governorship of Georgia; Pat Robertson, former Republican presidential candidate and televangelist; Dick Armey, former Republican congressman and co-chair of Freedom Works;¹ and Tom DeLay, a prominent member of the Republican Party. All of these men enjoyed close personal relationships with President George W. Bush and key confidantes, including John Bolton, Robert Bartley, William Bennett, Jeane Kirkpatrick and George Will (Walt and Mearsheimer 2006: 6; Mazarr 2003; Bacevich and Prodromou 2004). Some
individuals, in addition, including former journalist Michael Gerson, who resigned in June 2006 as a key Bush policy adviser and speechwriter (Gerson coined the phrase, ‘axis of evil’) had links to both groups. Gerson was not only ‘a member of an evangelical Episcopal church in suburban Virginia’ but was also a driving force behind President Bush’s ‘emphasis on a global spread of what the president sees as God-given rights’ (LaFranchi 2006).

Influential groups within the Religious Right, include the National Association of Evangelicals, ² Empower America, and the Foundation for the Defense of Democracy. According to Halper and Clarke, such organisations interpreted 9/11 as ‘an apocalyptic contest between good and evil’, an interpretation shared by at least some neoconservatives (Halper and Clarke 2004: 196). In addition, a leading member of the Religious Right, Pat Robertson, claimed after 9/11 that Islam ‘is not a peaceful religion’ (Halper and Clarke 2004: 196). This concern dovetailed with a key foreign policy goal of the Religious Right: to spread religious freedom to parts of the world that were said to lack it, notably many Communist and Muslim countries, including Sudan. Such people were able to build influence because of their affinity with significant secular neoconservatives. Both groups shared common ground and beliefs and the alliance between them deepened following 9/11 (Oldfield 2004). Lieven (2004) notes five key developments in the 1990s that led to a deepening association between the Religious Right and secular neoconservatives: (1) narrowing of Christian beliefs; (2) sense of being under threat from globalisation; (3) growing desire to resist

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¹ Freedom Works was founded in 2004, following merger between Citizens for a Sound Economy and Empower America.
² The NAE, led by Pastor Tom Haggard, represents 53 denominations with 45,000 churches and 30 million members across the USA (http://www.nae.net/).
The development of an ‘evangelized foreign policy’ (LaFranchi 2006) from the mid-1990s was focused in the following US foreign policy concerns:

- **The International Religious Freedom Act (1998).** This made freedom of religion and conscience a ‘core objective’ of US foreign policy. It also established an office and an annual ‘international religious freedom’ report that grades countries on their regime governing religious rights. The measure was lobbied for by ‘a coalition of conservative Christians, Jews, Catholics, mainline Protestants, Tibetan Buddhists and others’ (Page 2005).

- **The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (2000).** This law seeks to do away with the international crime syndicates that dispatch children and women from the developing world into prostitution and sweatshops.

- **The Sudan Peace Act (2002).** Conservative evangelicals promoted this law, along with others outraged by the Khartoum government’s attacks on Christians and animists in southern Sudan. The law and its accompanying sanctions are credited with helping create the road map for the 2003 ceasefire and the peace treaty the following year (source).

- **The North Korea Human Rights Act (2004).** Korean Americans and conservative Christians lobbied for this bill. It aimed not only to focus US
attempts to help defectors from North Korea but also to focus attention on the country’s egregious human rights violations and nuclear weapons programme.

- Conservative evangelical Christians’ influence is also seen in the Bush administration’s continuing focus both on AIDS in Africa and in attacks on international family-planning activities (MacAskill 2006)

Since the mid-1990s conservative evangelicals have provided the most important influence in a new, highly significant, human rights movements which has helped create ‘a new architecture for human rights in American foreign policy’ which has developed under the auspices of both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. ‘Without a determined constituency pressuring for engagement in international affairs, it would be likely that – given the difficulties in Iraq – you would have had the administration hunkering down a bit, and the American people with them … But instead, you have these substantial forces pushing on human rights causes and demanding intervention’ (Alan Hertzke, author of Freeing God’s Children: The Unlikely Alliance for Global Human Rights (2004), quoted in Page 2005). This indicates the soft power of American evangelical Christians in relation to human rights concerns in US foreign policy which was instrumental in helping broaden the foreign policy agenda to include international human rights issues, both religious and secular. To achieve influence in this regard it was useful to develop broad alliances both with religious entities – including the US Jewish community and mainline Christian organisations – and secular organisations – including student bodies on college campuses and traditional secular human rights organisations (Green, Rozell, and Wilcox 2003). As a result, according to LaFranchi, in ‘just a few years, conservative Christian churches
and organizations have broadened their political activism from a near-exclusive domestic focus to an emphasis on foreign issues … Even as many in Washington trumpet the return of realism to US foreign policy and the decline of the neoconservative hawks, the staying power of the evangelicals is likely to blunt what might otherwise have been a steep decline in Wilsonian ideals’ (LaFranchi 2006).

In conclusion, this focus on human rights in US foreign policy under the presidencies of Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush in the USA reflects the power of religious soft power. Ever since the Cold War struggle against the Soviet Union, the Religious Right has believed that the USA is involved in an international struggle between ‘good’ and ‘evil’. During the 1980s this was a ‘secular’ evil (the USSR). In the 1990s and early 2000s ‘evil’ was Janus-faced: Islamist terrorism and human rights denials; both in their different ways were opposed to core US values: democracy and individualistic human rights. Successive American presidents were expected to exhibit a high level of moral courage and character. Such attributes were said to be rooted in core ‘American values’, necessary requirements in order to speak out and act in defence of the claims of ‘good’ over ‘evil’ (Green, Rozell and Wilcox, 2003).

As noted earlier, the power of soft power lies in its ability to co-opt people – not to have to coerce them into doing what you want them to do. If you can get others to be attracted, to want what you want, then achieving your objectives might be easier than having to rely on sticks or carrots. President George W. Bush is a president who wears his religious credentials on his sleeve. When Bush waxes lyrical about how the US ‘won’ the Cold War was and the ‘war on terror’ would be won in the future, he is focusing upon what he regards as two of America’s key virtues: moral courage and
character. For Bush, these virtues are explicitly derived from the country’s commitment to Christian values. This belief was made clear in May 2001 when he spoke in Warsaw. Bush claimed that Communism had been brought to his knees by ‘the iron purpose and moral vision of a single man: Pope John Paul II’ (‘Remarks by the President in Address to Faculty and Students of Warsaw University’ 2001). A year later, in Prague, he expanded on this theme, stating that ‘in Central and Eastern Europe the courage and moral vision of prisoners and exiles and priests and playwrights caused tyrants to fall’ (‘President Bush Previews Historic NATO Summit in Prague’ 2002).

Such claims give a religious connotation to current US foreign policy aims to seek to establish ‘freedom and democracy’ not only in Afghanistan and Iraq but also in other ‘unfree’ places, like North Korea and Sudan. This is not to claim that Bush necessarily privileges religious over secular values, but it does suggest the power of religious soft power to help influence the president’s foreign policy agenda (source). This may help explain why Hurd (2004) refers to Bush as a ‘Christian secularist’. The justification for the use of this seemingly contradictory – even oxymoronic – juxtaposition of terms is to be found in the fact that in the USA secularism is a deep-rooted political tradition that has not developed over a long period. On the other hand, secularism in the USA is also importantly linked to Judeo-Christian religious traditions and beliefs. They are focused in the concept of civil religion, with a fusing of ideas and values that provides US secularism with identifiably ‘religious’ values.
Bush can appear to be *simultaneously* both secular *and* religious in his public statements. Wolterstorff notes that secularism can come in different forms, with potentially inconsistent effects. He suggests that Bush relies on what he (Wolterstorff) calls a ‘theistic account of political authority’ (‘Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life’ 2003). According to Wolterstorff, ‘among the ways a theistic account of political authority is distinct from all others is that it regards the authority of the State to do certain things as transmitted to it from someone or something which already has that very same authority’ (*ibid.*). Thus God is believed to be transmitting directly to the political power holder, in this case Bush. Through Bush’s articulation of what he believes are God’s imperatives, the state gains theistically-derived power and the right to provide judgement in legislative and/or judicial forms. These concerns were also apparent when Bush mused in November 2002 that: ‘Dwight Eisenhower said this of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty – “The simplest and clearest charter in the world is what you have, which is to tell the truth.” And for more than 50 years, the charter has been faithfully executed, and it’s the truth that sets this continent free’ (‘What World Leaders Say About RFE/RL’ 2002). It seems highly unlikely that Bush’s choice of words *unwittingly* plagiarised those of the evangelist John. Instead, it is much more likely that they were a *deliberate* restatement of words that clearly link what are to him two sets of ‘truths’: the ‘truth’ of liberal democracy and divinely-revealed ‘truth’.
In conclusion, religion’s currently pronounced soft power in relation to US foreign policy is facilitated by two factors. First, President Bush believes, apparently sincerely, that God is acting through him. Second, the soft power of American conservative evangelical Christians is an important source theological, ideological and ideational support current US foreign policy in relation to both religious and secular freedoms and human rights.

India

India’s foreign policy in recent years has reflected ideological and ideational empathy between the government and proponents of Hindutva (‘Hinduness’), a form of Hindu nationalism. Since the 1980s, Hindutva has risen to prominence finding political expression in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP, the ruling party in India between 1996 and 2004, is closely linked with a variety of organisations and movements that promote Hindutva. Their collective name is the Sangh Parivar (‘family of associations’). Leading organisations in the Sangh Parivar include the Rashtriya Swayamsevak (RSS), Bajrang Dal and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). Such organisations provide key sources of religious soft power in India, focused in recent years on three key issues: Pakistan, Kashmir, and the post 9/11 ‘war on terror’.

The rise to prominence of Hindu nationalism in India is manifested in both domestic and foreign policy contexts. Hindu nationalists regard both Christianity and Islam as both ‘foreign’ religions and a serious social threat to India’s dominant Hindu culture. Under BJP rule, the government not only sought to restrict these minority religious groups’ international contacts but also to reduce their domestic rights to build places
of worship (Chiriyankandath 2006). The BJP government also passed anti-conversion laws, as well as changing personal laws governing marriages, adoptions, and inheritance. It also practised legal discrimination against Christian and Muslim Dalits (the so-called ‘Untouchables’), but not against those among the latter who classified themselves as Hindus. ‘With BJP support, laws were adopted in Tamil Nadu and Gujarat states restricting the ability of Hindus to change their religion, and proposals for national restrictions’ were made (Marshall 2004).

Inter-communal relations between Hindus and Muslims took a serious turn for the worse in December 1992 when Hindu extremists destroyed a historic mosque at Ayodhya. Widespread communal riots followed, with huge loss of human life and destruction of property. A decade later, in February 2002, Muslims in Gujarat experienced serious violence when between one and two thousand Muslims were massacred after Muslims reportedly set fire to a train carrying Hindu nationalists, killing several dozen people. Many of the victims were burned alive or dismembered while police and BJP state government authorities were said to have stood by or joined in the violence (Marshall 2004). The mobs are said to have had with them lists of homes and businesses owned by Muslims, lists that they could have acquired only from government sources. After the massacre, state BJP officials were accused of impeding the investigation into the events (Amnesty International 2003).

Following the violence, Bal Thackeray, leader of the Shiv Sena, a Hindu extremist political party based in Mumbai and allied to the BJP, stated that, ‘Muslims are cancer to this country … Cancer is an incurable disease. Its only cure is operation. O Hindus, take weapons in your hands and remove this cancer from the roots’ (MacFarquhar
2003: 51). Also referring to Muslims, Gujarat’s Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, a BJP member, called upon his supporters to ‘teach a lesson’ to those who ‘believe in multiplying the population’. Some Sangh Parivar officials were also explicitly threatening towards India’s Muslims. VHP International President Ashok Singhal described the Gujarat carnage as a ‘successful experiment’ and warned that it would be repeated all over India. Following a December 2002 BJP election victory in Gujarat, VHP General Secretary Pravin Togadia declared, ‘All Hindutva opponents will get the death sentence, and we will leave this to the people to carry out. The process of forming a Hindu rule in the country has begun with Gujarat, and VHP will take the Gujarat experiment to every nook and corner of the country’ (Vyas 2002).

Hindu extremists also targeted Christians. They were responsible for violent attacks in the late 1990s on Christian minorities in various states, including, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Orissa. The BBC reported that
India’s Home Ministry (internal security) and its National Commission for Minorities officially list over a hundred religiously motivated attacks against Christians per year, but the real number is certainly higher, as Indian journalists estimate that only some ten percent of incidents are ever reported. These attacks include murders of missionaries and priests, sexual assault on nuns, ransacking of churches, convents, and other Christian institutions, desecration of cemeteries, and Bible burnings.

(http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/244653.stm)

Many such examples of Hindu extremism were said to be supported by ‘allies in the Indian government, which until mid-2004 was led by the BJP’. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom proposed in 2004 that India be included on the State Department’s official shortlist of the worst religious persecutors for its ‘egregious, systematic, and ongoing’ violations of religious rights. In addition, the late pope, John Paul II, described the persecution of Christians in India as “unjust” and said they prohibited “free exercise of the natural right to religious freedom” (Marshall 2004).

The recent prominence of Hindu nationalism within India also had an impact on foreign policy. After independence in 1947, India’s foreign policy was focued upon non-alignment, a strategy that for the following decades moulded its relationship with the two superpowers, the USA and the USSR. India also sought to project itself as a defender of the world’s poor and powerless. These policies were not only core values of the Congress Party that ruled for three decades after independence in 1947 but were
also supported by most Indians (Kamdar 2004). During Congress rule, India’s government sought:

- dialogue with Pakistan
- expansion of trade and investment relations with China
- strengthening of ties with Russia, Japan, Western Europe, and the United States,
- attempts to help construct a regional organisation, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Katalya 2004).

Later, these emphases changed, reflecting four developments. Domestically, there was the political rise of Hindutva and the BJP. Internationally, the Cold War ended, globalisation became more prominent and after 9/11 the ‘war on terror’ began. Reflecting these developments, under BJP foreign policy focused on:

- building closer relations with the USA and Israel on the basis of a shared ‘Islamophobia’ and anti-Arabism
- isolating Pakistan
- developing a more aggressive and dynamic Indian nationalism (Bidwai 2003)

These goals were reflected in, first, a more abrasive stance towards India’s Muslim minority as well as towards Pakistan. The Indian government claimed that it was the main sponsor of ‘anti-Indian’, Muslim terror groups fighting to wrest Muslim-majority Kashmir from Indian control. Second, the BJP government openly ‘criticized nonalignment and advocated a more vigorous use of India’s power to defend national interests from erosion at the hands of Pakistan and China’. Third, the BJP government
‘favored the overt acquisition of nuclear weapons’ (Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress 1995). Fourth, the new foreign policy focus also included a desire to ‘help create an “Axis of Virtue” against “global terrorism”‘, linking India’s government with those of the USA and Israel (Bidwai 2003). To pursue this goal, India’s then National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra advanced the ‘Axis of Virtue’ proposal on May 8, 2003, in Washington. Addressing the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and a number of US Congressmen and women, Mishra emphasised his desire to help fashion an ‘alliance of free societies involved in combating’ the scourge of terrorism. Apart from the fact that the US, Israel and India were all ‘advanced democracies’, each had also ‘been a significant target of terrorism. They have to jointly face the same ugly face of modern-day terrorism’. The aim of the ‘Axis of Virtue’ would be to seek to ‘take on international terrorism in a holistic and focused manner… to ensure that the global campaign … is pursued to its logical conclusion, and does not run out of steam because of other preoccupations. We owe this commitment to our future generations’ (Mishra quoted in Embassy of India 2003). A month later, also in Washington, Lal Krishna Advani, then India’s deputy prime minister, also spoke in glowing terms about the ‘Axis of Virtue’ proposal. Stressing democratic ‘similarities’ between India and the US, he praised the relationship developing between India and the USA. Obliquely referring to Pakistan, he stated that this relationship was not ‘an alliance of convenience. It is a principled relationship …’ (Advani quoted in Bidwai 2003).

The closer relationship with Israel was according to Biswai reflective of ‘the BJP’s ideology [which] admires people like [the then Israeli prime minister, Ariel] Sharon

9 Advani was President of the BJP until the end of 2005. He is now (mid-2006) leader of the opposition
for their machismo and ferocious jingoism. It sees Hindus and Jews (plus Christians) as “strategic allies” against Islam and Confucianism…. [T]his “clash-of-civilisations” idea has many takers on India’s Hindu Right’ (Biswai 2003). But before the BJP government could cement its new triangular relationship with the USA and Israel, it lost power. 10 The new Congress Party prime minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, was urged by Hindutva supporters ‘to follow a foreign policy as pragmatic as his past economic policies, that would better inline India with the US policy in the war on terror. We wish him good sense and good luck in his new role’ (http://hindutva.org/).

During an earlier period in power in the 1980s, Congress had embraced what Gatade calls ‘the path of soft Hinduism’, a policy that facilitated the subsequent rise of ‘hard Hindutva’ forces. In various ways, including the ‘Meenakshipuram conversions in the early 80s or the genocide of Sikhs in 1984 or the opening of the gates of Babri Mosque supposedly to ‘free’ Ramlalla one could see the growing commonalities of views between the ‘secular’ Congress and the Hindutva brigade’ (Gatade 2006).

In conclusion, India’s foreign policy under BJP reflected the soft power of Hindu nationalism, emanating from the likes of the Sangh Paravar. It also facilitated a process that had begun earlier under Congress rule, a move away from core Indian principles – moderation, pragmatism, non-alignment and ‘defence of the poor – to increasingly overt acceptance of Hindutva ideology and principles. Such concerns, including a focus on ‘Islamic terrorism’ and ‘clash of civilisations’, were not expunged from India’s foreign policy after the fall from power of the BJP on May

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*in the Indian parliament, the Lok Sabha.*

10 The Congress Party and allies gained the largest number of seats in parliament (216, compared to the BJP’s 186), although it did not gain enough seats to rule with an overall majority (273 seats would be needed).
2004. Instead, the new Congress government opted to continue with the BJP’s foreign policy, a decision that reflected not only the prominence of soft power of Hindutva but also changing international circumstances after 9/11.

*Iran*

The overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979 was both significant and unexpected for the same reason: the pivotal role of Islam in his downfall and its centrality in Iran’s revolution. Unlike earlier revolutions in other Muslim majority countries, such as Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Libya, Iran’s was not a secular, leftist revolution from above, but a populist uprising from below that led to an Islamic theocracy, a state dominated by Muslim clerics under the initial leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The Iranian revolution was the first modern revolution where the dominant ideology, forms of organisation, leading personnel, and proclaimed goals were all religious in appearance and inspiration. Its guiding principles were derived from the Qu’ran and the *Sunnah* (the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, comprising what he said, did, and of what he approved). Economic and political factors certainly played a major part in the growth of the anti-Shah movement, but religious leaders saw the revolution’s goals primarily in terms of building an Islamic state, publicly rejecting ‘Western’ liberal democracy. Western governments expressed well-founded fears that Iran’s revolutionary regime would attempt to ‘export’ its revolution to radicalise already restive Muslims in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Religious figures within the government lost ground following the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in June 1989. Their loss of significance seemed to be consolidated when a
self-proclaimed reformer, Mohammad Khatami, was elected president in a landslide electoral victory in 1997. Khatami was however caught between two forces. On the one hand, there were those in government who wanted increased social and political liberalisation. On the other hand, there were religious figures in the regime who did not. The result was stalemate between the reformers and conservatives. Following a landslide electoral victory in July 2005, Mahmud Ahmadinejad replaced Khatami as president. Following Ahmadinejad’s election, Iran’s foreign policy was focused on two main issues: (1) Iran’s regional interests, especially Iraq (2) relations with the Muslim world, and (3) its relationship with the United States and Europe, especially in relation to Iran’s civil nuclear power programme (Barnes and Bignam 2006: 33).

What was the role of religious soft power in relation to these issues? The first point is that even though Iran is not a ‘standard’ democracy, it is by no means a closed society, with little or no ability for citizens to discuss matters of state. Foreign policy debates fill the Iranian press and there are frequent deliberations on this topic in the Iranian parliament, the Majlis (Sarioghalam 2001). According to Afrasiabi and Maleki, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is generally the main promoter of Iran’s secular state interests, while ‘religious hardliners in Iran’ are key advocates of Islamic causes and expressions of Muslim solidarity with coreligionists beyond Iran’s borders. Such people frequently attack Foreign Ministry policies, especially in the pages of a daily newspaper, Jomhuri-ye Islami (Afrasiabi and Maleki 2003).

Following Ahmadinejad’s election, Khatami publicly criticised what he called ‘the “powerful organization” behind the “shallow-thinking traditionalists with their Stone-Age backwardness” currently running the country’ (‘Shi’ite supremacists emerge
from Iran’s shadows’ 2005). Khatami was here referring to three prominent sets of Ahmadinejad supporters: (1) the Hojjatieh, a radically anti-Bahai and anti-Sunni semi-clandestine society, with a growing presence ‘in the corridors of power in Tehran’ (2) the Revolutionary Guards, including a two-million strong Islamic militia, the Basijis, and (3) ‘messianic fundamentalists inspired by the teachings’ of a Shi’ite cleric, Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi, a key Ahmadinejad supporter and the chief ideologue of Hojjatieh (Barnes and Bigham 2006: 2; McFaul and Milani 2006). Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, a deeply conservative cleric with close ties to the Haqqani theological school in Qom, is said to have issued a fatwa urging all members of the Basijis to vote for Ahmadinejad in the 2005 presidential elections (‘Iran president paves the way for arabs’ imam return’ 2005). In the other camp was both Iran’s ‘embattled democratic movement’ and ‘an array of forces that had benefited from the status quo before Ahmadinejad came to power, including Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, head of the Expediency Council and former president (McFaul and Milani 2006). 13

Since the revolution, Iran’s foreign policy has been ‘shaped, not mainly by international forces, but by a series of intense post-revolutionary debates inside Iran regarding religion, ideology, and the necessity of engagement with the West and specifically the United States’ (Sarioghalam 2001: 1; also see Sohrabi 2006). When Iran’s material interests conflicted with proclaimed commitments to ‘Islamic

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11 Bahia was founded in 1863 in Persia that emphasises the spiritual unity of all humankind.
12 The Basijis is a paramilitary force founded by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979. It supplied volunteers for shock troop units during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). The Basijis are now a branch of the Revolutionary Guards, loyal to the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.
13 The Expediency Council has the authority to mediate disputes between Parliament and the Council of Guardians. The latter comprises 12 jurists including six appointed by the Supreme Leader. The Council of Guardians serves as an advisory body to the latter, making it one of the most powerful governing bodies in the country.
solidarity’ and Islamic revolution’, under both Rafsanjani and Khatami preference would normally be given to security and economic considerations. In addition, when appropriate, Iran would employ religion as part of a strategy to contend with neighbouring regimes or trying to force changes in their policies. For example, Iran’s government has long promoted Islamic radicals and anti-regime movements when official relations with a Muslim country are poor, such as with Uzbekistan or Azerbaijan, although it normally does not work to undermine secular Muslim regimes, such as that of Turkmenistan, if relations with Tehran are good (Tisdall 2006).

Second, Ahmadinejad’s accession to power led to a significant change in the power balance in Iran. Supportive organisations and individuals, including the Basijis and Hojjatieh, as well as Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, with close ties to the Haqqani theological school in Qom, collectively represented an important focus of religious soft power which, influential with Ahmadinejad and some of his key advisers, had an impact on Iran’s foreign policy (‘Iran president paves the way for arabs’ imam return’ 2005). The influence of religious soft power can be seen both in relation to Iraq and Iran’s nuclear programme.

In relation to Iraq, it is important to note that Iran is 90 per cent Shiite and Iraq is between 60-65% Shiite, while about one-third of Iraqis are Sunnis, including both Kurds and Arabs. Religious ties between Shi’ites in Iraq and Iran have galvanised Iran’s bid for more influence in Iraq following the fall of Saddam Hussein in March 2003, a development encouraged by, among others, Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi (Kemp 2005). In pursuit of this policy, Iran actively supported the position of the United
States in advocating elections in Iraq. Iran hoped to see a Shi’ite dominated
government in power with which Iran could build a strong relationship based on a
shared religious affiliation.

This strategy contrasts with that adopted by Iran in the immediate aftermath of the
1979 revolution. Then the government focused efforts on hard power strategies
through, for example, seeking to export the revolution via ‘funding of Shiite
resistance groups’. Now, however, ‘current circumstances encourage Iran to use soft
power to help create some sort of Islamic government in Iraq’ (Kemp 2005: 6). On the
other hand, the use of Iranian soft power to appeal to coreligionists comes up against a
bid from Saudi Arabia to extend its influence in Iraq. Both sides use a mix of hard and
soft power, including religion. Iran is said to have a better organised military
capability in Iraq, while Saudi Arabia seeks both to use its financial largesse and to
exploit the dissatisfaction of Iran’s Sunni minorities. Iran’s Sunni minorities live in
some of the least-developed provinces and are under-represented in parliament, the
army and the civil service. Iran’s Kurds, who are Sunni, have rioted in the north,
while the ethnic Arab south is another location that suffered both riots and a bombing
campaign in 2005-6 (Barnes and Bigham 2006).

Iran is fighting in Iraq to win the hearts and minds of ordinary Iraqis, the majority of
whom are Shi’ites. While Iran is believed to have a better intelligence presence in the
country, Saudis are said to account for the majority of suicide bombers active in Iraq.
Writing in Newsweek in August 2005, a former Central Intelligence Agency agent,
Robert Baer, quoted an unnamed senior Syrian official who told Baer that more than
80% of the 1,200 suspected suicide bombers arrested by the Syrians in the two years
following the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 were Saudis. Baer then quoted an
Iranian, Grand Ayatollah Saanei, who responded by describing the Saudi Wahhabi
suicide bombers as ‘wolves without pity’ that Iran would ‘sooner rather than later …
have to put them down’. Saudi Arabia is also reported to be active in Iran in other
ways, especially in the ethnically Arab, oil-rich south of the country. The Saudi
government is said to have offered financial incentives for local people to convert
from Shi’ite to Sunni Islam (Baer 2005). In sum, it is probable that Iran will continue
to promote democratic structures and processes in Iraq – as a strategy to help
consolidate a strong Iranian and Shiite voice in Iraq’s government and help Iran to
build influence. Iran is also likely to seek to continue to use its soft power as the main
method to deliver its objectives in Iraq: political stability and an accretion of Iran’s
influence. Overall, as Kemp notes, ‘Iran’s capacity, capability, and will to influence
events in Iraq are high in terms of both hard power and soft power’ (Kemp 2005: 7). It
is not however the case that Iran wants to see Western-style liberal democracy in Iraq.
According to Hamidreza Taraghi, head of Iran’s conservative Islamic Coalition
Society, ‘What Ahmadinejad believes is that we have to create a model state based on
... Islamic democracy - to be given to the world … The ... government accepts this
role for themselves’ (Taraghi quoted in Peterson 2005)

It might however be suggested that Iran’s policy in relation to Iraq is not unusual: it is
what any state, secular or religious, would do when a near neighbour and rival
undergoes considerable political instability. In other words, there may be nothing
particularly ‘religious’ in Iran seeking to encourage closer ties with Shi’ites in Iraq, as
it also makes sense from a secular, strategic point of view. There is however a second
key foreign policy issue – that of Iran’s nuclear programme – which has a clearer religious component.

The United States has tried hard to isolate Iran, branding it a rogue state. US officials have described the Iranian president as a threat to world peace and claim that he faces a popular insurrection at home (MacAskill and Tisdall 2006). But in mid-2006, Ahmadinejad was said to enjoy a 70% approval rating at home, as well as growing support abroad, both among Muslim countries (including Indonesia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Syria) and non-Muslim countries, such as China (Tisdall 2006).

Some contend that there is a strong religious reason underpinning the drive for Iran’s nuclear programme. It is said to be fuelled by an apocalyptic vision: Ahmadinejad and a host of religious figures believe that Shiite Islam’s long-hidden 12th Imam, or *Mahdi*, will soon emerge – perhaps at the mosque of Jamkaran 14— to put in place the end of the world. The president spoke of an aura that wreathed him throughout his controversial UN speech in September, 2005: ‘O mighty Lord, I pray to you to hasten the emergence of your last repository, the promised one, that perfect and pure human being, the one that will fill this world with justice and peace’ (Peterson 2005)

Ahmadinejad provided $US20 million of state funds to prepare the shrine for that moment. The Iranian president is said to have told his cabinet that he expects the *Mahdi* to arrive within the next two years, that is, by mid-2008. In addition, according to Diehl, ‘Mehdi Karrubi, a rival cleric, has reported that Ahmadinejad ordered that

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14 Shi’ite tradition holds that the Jamkaran mosque was ordered built by the Mahdi himself.
his government’s platform be deposited in a well at Jamkaran where the faithful leave messages for the hidden imam’ (Diehl 2006). The overall point is that religious soft power may well be influential in encouraging President Ahmadinejad to pursue a determined line on Iran’s nuclear programme, despite the pressure from the USA and others to desist. According to Peterson (2005), ‘From redressing the gulf between rich and poor in Iran, to challenging the United States and Israel and enhancing Iran’s power with nuclear programs, every issue is designed to lay the foundation for the Mahdi’s return’.

**Overall Conclusion**

To understand and account for the soft power of religious actors in relation to the foreign policies of the USA, India, and Iran, we saw that it was crucial for religious organisations and constituencies to ‘get the ear of government’, especially to establish a close relationship with key individuals: in the USA, President Bush, in Iran, President Ahmadinejad, and in India, Lal Krishna Advani. Through such relationships religious actors can seek to influence foreign policy. On the other hand, while it is obviously important for such religious actors directly to get the ear of government through both formal and informal means, this is not the whole story. They also have other means at their disposal, including trying to influence public opinion through the media, demonstrations, or via think tanks. Overall, in relation to the USA, India, and Iran, religious actors seek to influence foreign policy and international relations by encouraging governments to adopt policies and programmes most in tune with their values, norms and beliefs.
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Table 1: Religion and foreign policy in the United States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Mission</th>
<th>Adversary</th>
<th>Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-revolutionary colonial America (1600-1776)</td>
<td>Millennium</td>
<td>Papal antichrist</td>
<td>Example as ‘city on the hill’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revolutionary and founding era (1776-1815)</td>
<td>Empire of liberty</td>
<td>Old world tyranny, ‘hellish fiends’ (Native Americans)</td>
<td>Example, continental expansion, without entangling alliances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manifest Destiny (1815-1848)</td>
<td>Christian civilisation</td>
<td>Savages or ‘children’ (Native Americans)</td>
<td>Examples, continental expansion, without entangling alliances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperial America (1898-1913)</td>
<td>Christian civilisation</td>
<td>Barbarians and savages (Filipinos)</td>
<td>Overseas expansion, without entangling alliances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilsonian Internationalism (1914-1919)</td>
<td>Global democracy</td>
<td>Autocracy and imperialism</td>
<td>International organisations and alliances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cold War liberalism (1946-89)</td>
<td>Free world</td>
<td>Communism</td>
<td>International organisations and alliances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush and neoconservatism (2001-)</td>
<td>Spread of religious freedom and human rights</td>
<td>‘International terrorism’, often linked to extremist Islam; Totalitarian states, such as North Korea</td>
<td>Unilateral action with ad hoc alliances</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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