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Religious Values and Norms and Foreign Policy

Jeffrey Haynes

Religion may affect states' foreign policies in various ways. For example, Islam is often identified as an organizing principle for some Muslim-majority countries, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Away from Islam, which is covered in another paper in this book, other religious traditions also influence some states' foreign policies, including those of the U.S., India, and Israel. On the other hand, a majority of states do not have foreign policies significantly affected by religion. Many are officially or de facto secular states, with clear separation of religion and state. Such countries include France, the United Kingdom, China, and Russia.

Many governments officially disregard religion when making foreign policy, even when a majority of a country's citizens claim to be religious believers, such as, for example, Brazil. There is a paradox to be explained here: more religion in general, but little religion in foreign policy. Why is this the case? How can this be the case when the world is undergoing what some contend is a near-global religious resurgence? Part of the answer is that international relations developed since the end of World War I in a decidedly secular environment. Recently, however, religion is said to have "returned" to international relations, although this does not mean that most governments "take religion seriously" when making foreign policy.¹ What

¹ Jeffrey Haynes, *An Introduction to International Relations and Religion*, 2nd. edition (London: Pearson, 2013).



the “return” of religion to international relations entails is a recognition of numerous actors in international relations, which might collectively be described as “religion oriented.”

For example, there are numerous nonstate religious actors in international relations, including the Holy See,² the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Qaeda, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. However, their concerns are variable. Some pursue international cooperation in relation to “interreligious dialogue and greater religious engagement around questions of international development and conflict resolution.”³ Others, such as al-Qaeda, compete for the hearts and minds of religious believers, not eschewing sometimes extreme violence to achieve their goals.

How and under what circumstances might religion⁴ significantly influence a state’s foreign policy? To answer this question, it is useful to bear in mind that as “religion plays an important role in politics in certain parts of the world,” then it is likely that there will be “greater prominence of religious organizations in society and politics” in some countries and not others.⁵ Second, the ability of religious actors to translate *potential* ability into *actual* influence on state foreign policies depends on whether they can access and potentially influence foreign policy decision makers. Third, religious actors’ ability to influence foreign policy is also linked to their wider ability to influence policy more generally. For example, the U.S. has a democratic system with accessible decision-making structures and processes, potentially offering actors — both religious and secular — clear opportunities to influence both domestic and foreign policy. Walt and Mearsheimer note that various kinds of “interest groups,” including those overtly motivated by religion, “can lobby elected representatives and members of the executive branch, make campaign contributions,

vote in elections, try to mold public opinion etc.”⁶ This indicates that interest groups, including those motivated by religion, need sustained access to sympathetic policy makers in order to influence policy, including foreign policy. To do so, they exhibit what I call “religious soft power.”

The idea of “religious soft power” involves encouraging both followers and decision makers to change behavior because they are convinced of the appropriateness of a religious organization’s goals. International relations is characterized by a recent shift to “postsecular” concerns, and religious soft power ideas are significant in that change.⁷ Some religious transnational actors — for example, the Roman Catholic Church (in relation to democratization during the “third wave of democracy” [mid-1970s to early 2000s]) and al-Qaeda (in relation to terrorism and extremism before and after 9/11, including in 2021 in Afghanistan) — significantly affect both domestic and international agendas and outcomes. On the other hand, using conventional measures (such as economic resources, diplomatic leverage, and threat or actual use of force — in short, “hard” power), states overall, especially the most powerful countries, such as the U.S. and China, still clearly dominate international relations.

On the other hand, not all religious political power is “soft.” In the U.S., for example, some Christian conservative groups donate money to presidential and/or congressional candidates. In India, Hindu nationalists use “hard” power methods to organize anti-Muslim riots and on occasion lynchings, most infamously in 2004 when Narendra Modi was governor of Gujarat. In Israel, Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated in 1995 by an “ultranationalist” linked to Israel’s religious right. The overall point is that, rather than soft power alone, in reach of the three countries, religious groups

2 The Holy See is both a nonstate and a state actor, with a seat at the United Nations and with formal diplomatic relations with many countries.

3 Thomas Banchoff, “Thematic Paper, August 5, 2005,” prepared as background material for Conference on the New Religious Pluralism in World Politics, March 16–17, 2006, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, Georgetown University. For details, see <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/events/conference-on-the-new-religious-pluralism-in-world-politics>.

4 In this paper, “religion” refers to religious actors, which may be either individuals or groups, overtly motivated by religious concerns and which seek to influence state foreign policies.

5 Shibley Telhami, “Between Faith and Ethics,” in Brian Hehir, Michael Walzer, Louise Richardson, Shibley Telhami, Charles Krauthammer, and James M. Lindsay, *Liberty and Power: A Dialogue on Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy in an Unjust World* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 71–84, at 71.

6 Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, “The Israeli Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy,” *The London Review of Books* 28, no. 6, March 23, 2006, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v28/n06/john-mearsheimer/the-israel-lobby>.

7 Jeffrey Haynes, *Religious Transnational Actors and Soft Power* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2012).



A Muslim man carries jugs used in ritual purification before Friday prayers in Gurgaon, India. Some prayer sites were closed by Indian authorities in 2021. (Getty Images)

may provide elements of “hard” power to sympathetic politicians and their parties.

Few governments are unequivocally or consistently ideological purveyors of religious ideas in international relations. The brief case studies that follow review three countries where foreign policies are not always thought of as being significantly influenced by religion. We shall see that contrary to expectations, each

exhibits evidence regarding the influence of religion on foreign policy.

United States, India, and Israel

The U.S., India, and Israel are countries whose foreign policies are significantly influenced by religion. Compared to many other officially secular countries, the U.S. is an aberration: a “modern” society with a high proportion of apparently highly religious people, with a sustained influence of Christianity in foreign policy. America’s governments consistently seek to justify foreign policy in often-implicit references to a “Christian” morality, whose substance varies from administration to administration, yet consistently highlights the desirability of democracy, liberty, and prosperity. In recent years, that is, during the presidencies of George W. Bush (2001–9) and Donald Trump (2017–21), white conservative Christians have significantly affected American foreign policy in relation to religious freedom, democracy, and human rights.⁸

Like the U.S., India is an officially secular state. Nevertheless, the country’s government is dominated by religious Hindus, encouraged by the current Modi administration to pursue nationalist foreign policy goals, notably in relation to India’s key rival, Muslim-majority Pakistan. In India, two competing religious influences periodically influence foreign policy, paralleling the division between conservative and liberal Christian tendencies in the U.S. First, there is a tradition emanating from Gandhian pacifism. Second, *Hindutva* (“Hindu-ness”) informs a forceful version of Indian nationalism currently associated with the Narendra Modi government.

Israel is also officially secular. It has a Jewish-majority population, albeit with a significant non-Jewish minority, including Muslim Arabs of Palestinian descent. Israel’s foreign policy, especially in recent years, reflects growing Jewish nationalism, for example, in relation to the country’s sometimes hostile Muslim-majority neighbors, such as Egypt, Jordan, and Syria.

8 Jeffrey Haynes, “Religion and a Human Rights Culture in America,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 6, no. 2 (2008): 73–82.



We look at the influence of religion in the foreign policies of the U.S., India, and Israel in the next sections.

The U.S.

Christianity is prominent in U.S. foreign policy. This is surprising given that the U.S. Constitution states that there should be no institutionalized links between religion and the state. This instruction is found in the first amendment of the Constitution, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” thereby permanently restricting the state and religion to separate realms.

Yet, as Reichley (1986) notes, Christianity has traditionally played an important role in American politics, including the country’s foreign policy.⁹ The republic’s founders drew on their Christian values and rhetoric in forming the new nation, and Christian churches were involved in various moral issues throughout the nation’s history, notably the abolition of slavery in the 1860s. Today, white conservative Christian groups are politically and electorally highly important. Their support led to George W. Bush and Donald Trump being elected president in recent years. Bush’s foreign policy was supported by many Christian Americans, for example in helping to end Sudan’s civil war, and in protecting Christians in what is now South Sudan.

What explains white conservative Christians’ strong support for the recent president, Donald Trump? What did he offer them — politically, culturally, religiously — to vote for him in 2016 and 2020, and how did their political support impact U.S. foreign policy during the Trump presidency? Domestically, Trump’s victory reflected many conservative Christians’ strong distaste for the status quo and a belief that America has taken a wrong turn. This includes the idea that the country has departed from its foundational Christian values.

A key issue is abortion and the right of women to give birth when they choose.

During Trump’s presidency, foreign policy was heavily influenced by the concerns of white conservative Christians. International religious freedom is an issue of particular importance for many white conservative Christians, and the Trump administration pursued this issue with gusto, consistently prioritizing what it labeled “Judeo-Christian” values. This contrasted with previous administrations, which did not pursue this approach. The Trump administration drew on Judeo-Christian ideology to prioritize religious freedom above other human rights, such as equality for women and sexual minorities. The Trump administration’s religious freedom policy, both at home and abroad, was informed by three initiatives: the Commission on Unalienable Rights, the annual Ministerial to Advance International Religious Freedom, and the International Religious Freedom Alliance.¹⁰ The overall aim was to promote the paramouncy of Judeo-Christian ideology, which led the Trump administration to cease financial aid to countries that freely allow abortion, as this was seen to contravene the norms and values of Judeo-Christian ideology.¹¹

India

Hindu nationalism stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from Gandhian pacific universalism. As a nonmissionary “ethnic” religion, Hinduism does not exhibit the global ambitions of Christianity or Islam, although Hindu nationalists’ civilizational compass today extends far beyond the borders of India across the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and the worldwide Indian diaspora. Hindu nationalism is strongly cultivated by an influential social movement, the Sangh Parivar (Hindu nationalist umbrella organization), influential with the current Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government.¹²

The rise to prominence of *Hindutva* (“Hindu-ness”) is manifested in India’s foreign policy. For three decades

9 James A. Reichley, “Religion and the Future of American Politics,” *Political Science Quarterly* 101, no. 1 (1986): 23–47.

10 Jeffrey Haynes, *Trump and the Politics of Neo-Nationalism: The Christian Right and Secular Nationalism in America* (London: Routledge, 2021). For details on the Commission on Unalienable Rights, the annual Ministerial to Advance International Religious Freedom, and the International Religious Freedom Alliance, see Jeffrey Haynes, “Trump and the Politics of International Religious Freedom,” *Religions* 11, no. 8 (2020): 385, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11080385>.

11 Ibid.

12 Giorgio Shani, “Towards a Hindu Rashtra: Hindutva, Religion, and Nationalism in India,” *Religion, State & Society* 49, no. 3 (2021): 264–80.



after independence in 1947, India's foreign policy was dominated by a secular vision of nonalignment and "Third-Worldism." During this time, 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; and was instrumental in the creation of a regional organization, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.¹³

Over time, these emphases changed, reflecting four developments. Domestically, there was the political rise of *Hindutva* and the BJP. Internationally, the Cold War ended, globalization became more prominent, and, after 9/11, the U.S.-led "War on Terror" began. Reflecting these developments, BJP foreign policy shifted focus. Now, the aim was to build closer relations with the U.S. and Israel on the basis of a shared "Islamophobia" and anti-Arabism, isolate Pakistan internationally, and develop a more aggressive and dynamic Indian nationalism, ideologically informed by *Hindutva*.¹⁴

These goals were reflected in, first, a more abrasive stance toward India's Muslim minority as well as toward Muslim-majority Pakistan. The Modi government claimed that Pakistan's government was the main sponsor of "anti-Indian," "Muslim" terror groups seeking to wrest Muslim-majority Kashmir from Indian control. In an "anti-Muslim" move, India's government enacted in 2019 the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). As a result, people from six religious faiths — that is, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians — from three countries — Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan — would be granted citizenship, while Muslims would be excluded. Second, the Modi government openly criticized nonalignment and promoted more energetic use of India's power to defend national interests from erosion by rivals, including Pakistan and China. Third, the Modi government actively pursued a policy of nuclear deterrence with Pakistan. Fourth, the new foreign policy focus included a desire to "help create an



Activists and citizens demonstrate against the Citizenship Amendment Act in Sivasagar, India in December 2020. (Getty Images)

'Axis of Virtue' against 'global terrorism,'" closely linking India with the U.S. and Israel.¹⁵

In conclusion, India's foreign policy under BJP governments reflects the influence of *Hindutva*. This is manifested in various ways: at home, in relation to the country's Muslim minority, and in foreign policy, a pronounced "anti-Muslim" focus, notably reflected in relation to India's relationship with Pakistan, which has seen rising tension in recent times.

Israel

The State of Israel was founded in 1948 as a national homeland for Jews. Israel's creation, strongly

¹³ Mira Kamdar, "India and the New American Hegemony," *Connecticut Journal of International Law* 19, no. 3 (2004), <https://www.mirakamdar.com/hegemony.html>.

¹⁴ Shani, *op cit*.

¹⁵ Sadanand Dhume, "Revealed: The India-Israel Axis. Ordinary Indians Instinctively Grasp the Natural Confluence of Interests with Israel," *WSJ Opinion*, July 23, 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/revealed-the-india-israel-axis-1406133666>.



supported by the international community, followed the horrific, genocidal policy of attempted national extermination of Germany's Jews by the Nazis.

From the country's founding over seven decades ago, Israel's sense of identity has been based on a generic "Jewishness."¹⁶ As Smith notes, however, within Israel "factions have always differed on what lands were essential to constitute the state of Israel."¹⁷ The issue of the extent of the geographical area of Israel is at the center of the country's foreign policy dispute with the Palestinians and neighboring Muslim-majority countries, a conflict that became internationalized over the years, leading to involvement of numerous states, including the U.S., and international organizations, especially the United Nations. Conflict with the Palestinians, which began as a "conventional" secular security issue, evolved into an unresolved political battle with significant national *and* religious dimensions. For religious Zionists, it is imperative to maintain Israel's hard-line approach to maintaining control of the West Bank, as they believe that God gave the land to the Jews and it is therefore nonnegotiable.

Many Israelis appreciate the political clout of white Christian conservatives in the U.S., which became pronounced during the recent presidency of Donald Trump. Especially important in this regard is the support of Christian Zionists, who believe that strong support for Israel is essential.¹⁸ It is not the case, however, that Israel's foreign policy is directed from outside by American Christian Zionists. Instead, as Chazan explains, Israel's foreign policy and, more generally, the country's international relations are also strongly influenced by three domestic factors with significant religious elements: (1) the "structure and composition of political institutions," (2) "social differentiation and the concern of specific groups," and (3) "substance of political debates and their relations to fundamental ideological concerns." In addition, Chazan notes a key implication of these factors: Israeli reactions to stimuli from outside the

country are "filtered through a domestic political lens which operates according to its own distinctive rules." Religious political parties and social movements have long been highly influential in relation to Israel's domestic and foreign policies.¹⁹

Religious Jews' political significance derives from three main factors: (1) the nature of the country's political system: proportional representation, giving an influential voice to an array of small parties, notably religious ones, (2) Israeli society's ethnic and religious fragmentation, and (3) the country's conflict-ridden, ideologically diverse political party system, with an array of secular and religious parties. Add to the mix the fact that Israel's public life also reflects the consistently influential voice of public opinion, and it becomes clear why Israel's foreign policy is strongly influenced by religious Jews, notably in relation to Israel's relationship with the Palestinians. This influence is significantly augmented by support from the "Israel Lobby" in the United States, which brings together both Jewish American organizations and Christian Zionists.²⁰ Finally, there is the significant role of religious Zionists in motivating the Israeli state's hard line on maintaining control of the West Bank. They have a powerful card to play in claiming that God gave the land to the Jews, and it is therefore inalienable.

Conclusion

This brief paper does not claim to be a systematic survey of the influence of religious actors in the foreign policies of the U.S., India, and Israel. The purpose of the paper was to survey in as much detail as possible in a necessarily brief treatment the influence of religion on foreign policy in relation to these three countries.

Working from the premise that what I call "religious soft power" is an important factor in the recent foreign policies of the U.S., India, and Israel, the paper sought a modest conceptual innovation. The aim was to extend the use of the term "soft power" from Nye's²¹

16 Bhagat Korany, in *International Relations of the Middle East*, 5th edition, ed. Louise Fawcett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 80–104, at 87.

17 Anthony M. Smith, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 220.

18 Christian Zionism is a belief held by some Christians that the Jews' return to the "Holy Land" and the establishment of the State of Israel were in accord with biblical prophecy.

19 Naomi Chazan, "The Domestic Foundations of Israeli Foreign Policy," in *The Middle East in Global Perspective*, eds. Judith Kipper and Harold H. Saunders (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1991), 82–126, at 83.

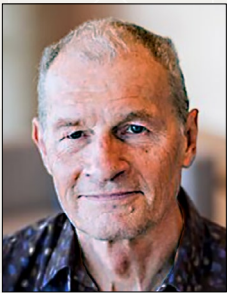
20 John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (London: Penguin Books, 2008).

21 Joseph S. Nye, "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (1990): 153–71.



original usage — that is, government A encourages government B to agree with and adopt the former's (typically secular) objectives — to help explain how religious actors may influence foreign policy by the use of "religious soft power," that is, encouraging foreign policy makers to incorporate religious beliefs, norms, and values into both domestic and foreign policies, in relation to specific issues and objectives. To achieve and maintain such influence, religious actors must in a general sense "get the ear of government," that is, pursue, establish, and develop close relationships with key individuals who, presumably, share their religious convictions, including national leaders: in the U.S., presidents George W. Bush and Donald Trump; in India,

the prime minister, Narendra Modi; and in Israel, former Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. But this is not all: religious actors must also be able to consistently influence foreign policy makers, not only national leaders, by their persistent efforts. This includes cultivation of personal relationships between religious leaders and key officials in foreign policy-making institutions. Finally, despite the existence of what often appears to be a secularizing world, the paper has demonstrated that in some countries that claim to be secular, religious soft power can be influential in encouraging governments to pursue what are, essentially, religious goals in foreign policy. □



Jeffrey Haynes is emeritus professor of politics at London Metropolitan University, UK. His areas of expertise are religion and international relations, religion and politics, democracy and democratization, development studies, and comparative politics and globalization. He is the

author or editor of fifty-five books. The most recent are: *Trump and the Politics of Neo-Nationalism: The Christian Right and Secular Nationalism in America*

(2021); *Peace, Politics, and Religion* (ed.) (2020); *Religion, Conflict and Post-Secular Politics* (2020); and *Routledge Handbook to Religion & Political Parties* (ed.) (2020). Haynes received the International Studies Association's Religion and International Relations Section's Distinguished Scholar award in 2016. He is coeditor in chief of *Democratization*, editor in chief of the *International Journal of Religion*, and series editor of two book series, *Routledge Studies in Religion and Politics* (Routledge) and *Religion and International Relations* (Transnational Press London).