GOD, NATION, AND GLOBAL PERCEPTION: FAITH–WASHING AS A TOOL FOR IMAGE LAUNDERING AND THE POLITICS OF PIETY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Abstract. In a global system increasingly influenced by symbolic politics, this book examines states' strategic use of religion as a tool of image management, which it refers to as "faithwashing"(Tadros, 2019; Petito & Hatzopoulos, 2003). Beyond traditional soft power, faithwashing is a sophisticated kind of statecraft in which religious iconography and sacred architecture are used to sanitise authoritarianism and project cultural legitimacy (Nye, 2004; Edelman, 1964). This research, grounded in interdisciplinary frameworks from international relations, postcolonial critique, and civil religion theory (Mahmood, 2005; Bellah, 1967; Asad, 1993), provides a comparative analysis of the United States, India, and Saudi Arabia. Each utilises religious capital, Christian democratic exceptionalism, Hindu civilizational discourse, and Islamic custodianship to establish virtuous global reputations while evading internal criticism (Jaffrelot, 2021; Commins, 2006; Appleby, 2000). These governments use synchronised pilgrimages and interfaith diplomacy (Mandaville & Silvestri, 2015; Clarke, 2011) to turn the sacred into geopolitical spectacles. The study contends that performative sanctification obscures repression, suppresses dissent, and rebrands control as cultural authenticity. It concludes with policy solutions to combat the ethical and democratic deterioration of faithwashing (Stepan, 2001; Nye, 2004).

Keywords:

Faithwashing, Symbolic Politics, Image Laundering, Civil Religion, Soft Power, Religious Diplomacy, National Branding, International Relations.

INTRODUCTION

Faithwashing in the Age of Symbolic Power

Power is no longer wielded simply by military power or economic leverage in international politics. Instead, the modern state is increasingly judged on its image, which includes narrative coherence, moral posture, and cultural capital (Nye, 2004; Anholt, 2007). As public impression becomes an increasingly

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important factor in global governance, states have discovered an unusual but effective tool for image management: religion (Mandaville & Silvestri, 2015; Clarke, 2011). Religion has emerged as a clear asset in the diplomatic arena, strengthening legitimacy, encouraging conformity with global moral principles, and hiding domestic tensions. This study introduces and critically engages with faithwashing, the purposeful use of religious symbolism, institutions, and narratives by nations to enhance their global image and deflect criticism.

In this context, faithwashing refers to the use of religious identity by the state to remove or disguise harmful reputational components such as authoritarian government, human rights breaches, and discriminatory behaviours (Tadros, 2019; Petito & Hatzopoulos, 2003). While similar to the more well-known concepts of "greenwashing" and "sportswashing," faithwashing operates through the moral authority of religion, which has historically been shielded from criticism and is frequently regarded as apolitical or beneficent. States practise faith washing by exporting religious tourism, sponsoring religious festivals, subsidising global religious institutions, and linking national identity with divine commandments, all while ignoring the more worrisome aspects of their domestic record (Human Rights Watch, 2019). This symbolic politics of piety serves not just as a barrier to external criticism, but also as a means of legitimising the regime worldwide.

Why Faithwashing Matters Now

Several trends have amplified this shift. First, the global resurgence of populist nationalism has infused statecraft with sacralised symbols, recasting national identity as divinely ordained (Jaffrelot, 2021; Stepan, 2001). Second, the commodification of spirituality through religious tourism and global cultural diplomacy has enabled states to market their spiritual heritage as a form of soft power (Nye, 2004; Anholt, 2007). Third, the retreat of secular internationalism and the rise of multipolarity have provided fertile ground for culturally specific claims to legitimacy, allowing states to wield religion as both a defensive and offensive diplomatic tool (Nye, 2004; Anholt, 2007).

In this setting, faithwashing is more than just opportunistic branding; it is a systemic phenomenon with significant repercussions (Petito & Hatzopoulos, 2003). It generates international governance narratives, influences how foreign audiences perceive state behaviour, and determines whether rights abuses are rationalised or overlooked (Mahmood, 2005; Tadros, 2019). This study contends that faithwashing functions as a performative moral repositioning in which religious iconography is used to divert attention away from state atrocities, stifle dissent, and secure global relationships.

Key Questions and Hypotheses

A central research question guides this study:

> How do states strategically deploy religion to sanitise their international image, and what are this process's ethical, political, and diplomatic consequences?

From this, several sub-questions emerge:

- 1. What are the key mechanisms and practices through which faithwashing is operationalised?
- 2. How do these practices differ or converge across states with varying religious and political contexts?
- 3. What are the implications of faithwashing for human rights accountability, religious pluralism, and international norms?
- 4. To what extent can faithwashing be detected and resisted through civil society, media, or institutional mechanisms?

The paper posits the following hypotheses:

- ● **H1:** States utilise faith washing as an intentional soft power technique to reduce the reputational risks associated with domestic repression or geopolitical conflicts.
- **H2:** Faithwashing is based on selective representations of religious identity that are consistent with global moral expectations while ignoring pluralist or opposing traditions.
- ● **H3:** Transnational networks, such as diasporas, tourism, and religious diplomacy, amplify the influence of religion washing by imprinting the state's controlled image on global awareness.
- ● **H4:** Faithwashing undermines both religious autonomy and democratic accountability by using sacred tales for statist goals.

Scope, Structure, and Limitations

This study employs three country case studies —India, Saudi Arabia, and the United States (with a possible reference to Israel in future iterations) — to illustrate the diversity and similarities of faith-washing methods. These cases were chosen for their global religious influence, geopolitical significance, and range of government types (Jaffrelot, 2021; Commins, 2006; Bellah, 1967). India exemplifies majority-religion nationalism combined with civilizational diplomacy; Saudi Arabia is the epicentre of Islamic authority and a major player in the religious economy; and the United States exemplifies the use of civil religion and

evangelical diplomacy to support its international legitimacy (Mandaville & Silvestri, 2015).

The analysis will be structured as follows:

1. **Theoretical Framework:** A look at soft power, symbolic politics, and civil religion as conceptual lenses.

2. **Faith washing as Practice:** The procedures and tools governments utilise to deceive, ranging from religious infrastructure to narrative diplomacy.

3. **Case Studies:** An in-depth look at how each state implements faithwashing and the repercussions.

4. **Implications and Ethics:** Assessing faithwashing's impact on international norms, religious integrity, and global governance.

5. **Policy recommendations:** Strategies for recognising and combating faithwashing through media literacy, civil society action, and global institutions.

The study does not seek to judge the theological validity of religious claims or practices but examines the state's instrumental use of religion. It does not imply that all religious diplomacy is intrinsically misleading; rather, it questions when and how it becomes a tool for concealing repression and consolidating power.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To understand faith washing as an international image management strategy, it is necessary to draw on various interdisciplinary theoretical traditions, each illuminating a different facet of how religion, power, and perception interact globally. This section synthesises key insights.

Drawing on theories of soft power, symbolic politics, civil religion, public diplomacy, and the politics of piety, this study frames its analytical lens.

Soft Power and the Strategic Utility of Culture

Joseph S. Nye (1990) coined the term "soft power," which refers to a country's ability to influence others' preferences through attraction and appeal rather than coercion or payment. Nye distinguishes soft power from physical power by emphasising its foundations in culture, political principles, and foreign policies that are believed to be legitimate or have moral authority. In contrast to raw force, soft power operates through persuasion and symbolic influence, making it an essential instrument for states seeking to enhance their standing in global affairs without resorting to military or economic supremacy.

Nye's approach has been widely accepted in international relations over the last three decades, particularly in studies of how governments employ cultural diplomacy, media, education, and moral narratives to enhance their global influence. Importantly, (Nye, 2004) contends that credibility is the currency of soft power, and nations must connect their internal practices with their external messaging to sustain legitimacy. However, this congruence is frequently aspired to rather than achieved in practice. Many states use selective storytelling to showcase culturally relevant values while concealing less appealing aspects of their domestic behaviour.

Faithwashing is a type of soft power in which religion is used to deflect from governance problems or human rights criticisms rather than merely add to a state's cultural attractiveness. It enables regimes to reshape their worldwide image by identifying with universal ideals, such as peace, compassion, or tradition, while diverting attention away from systemic repression. In this way, faithwashing expands soft power into a sphere where moral credibility is produced rather than earned.

Symbolic Politics and the Mobilisation of Meaning

Faithwashing also employs symbolic politics, as defined by (Murray Edelman, 1964), which involves using emotionally charged symbols, rituals, and language to elicit consent or manage dissent. In symbolic politics, what matters is a message's affective resonance rather than its factual truth. Religion, with its profound cultural and emotional origins, is ideally suited to serving as a symbol. States utilise religious monuments, sacred landscapes, and spiritual vocabularies to craft compelling national narratives that unite their domestic audience and appeal to global audiences.

Scholars such as (Jeffrey Alexander, 2011) have suggested that symbolic performance is critical to political legitimacy in an age of mediatised politics. States assert a civilizational identity beyond policy and practice through performative activities such as constructing major religious architecture, state-sponsored pilgrimages, and international religious festivals. These symbols enable regimes to portray themselves as custodians of a moral heritage, even if it's selectively curated or politically challenged.

Symbolic politics, in the framework of faithwashing, is used not only to build internal cohesiveness but also as part of an international public relations campaign. Religious symbolism is employed at embassies, diasporic diplomatic missions, cultural institutes, and international summits to protect reputations and assert moral authority. Despite local contradictions, these performances are frequently calibrated to global expectations of piety, peace, and pluralism.

Civil Religion: The State as Sacred Actor

Civil religion is closely related to symbolic politics, initially defined by (Bellah, 1967), which refers to a quasi-religious reverence for the state. Civil religion imbues national institutions, laws, and rituals with sacred meaning, allowing nations to legitimise authority through theological metaphor and spiritual appeal. While civil religion is frequently implicit in Western democracies, for example, invocations of divine providence in US presidential addresses, it has also been adopted in non-Western contexts, where nations link their survival or mission with divine will.

Faithwashing frequently coexists with civil religion when the state positions itself as the defender, promoter, or vehicle of a divine mission. This allows the state to monopolise religious authority while concealing its political motivations. The state transforms from a secular authority to a moral agency, blurring the distinction between government and salvation. This union, however, is not neutral; it elevates some religious traditions while marginalising others, consolidating authority in the name of spiritual stewardship.

Civil religion provides the ideological foundation for faithwashing, enabling the state to portray criticism as sacrilegious, dissent as heretical, and policy as ordered. It reinforces the notion that state sovereignty is lawful and inviolable, thereby discouraging internal and external criticism.

Public Diplomacy and Image Laundering

The use of religious identity in foreign policy interacts with the concept of public diplomacy. Nicholas Cull (2009) defines how states communicate with foreign publics to initiate a conversation that enlightens and influences. Traditional public diplomacy encompasses cultural exchanges, international broadcasting, educational scholarships, and other initiatives designed to foster mutual understanding. However, a growing corpus of research investigates how states strategically employ public diplomacy to obfuscate, divert, or restore their reputations, known as image washing.

Image laundering has been found in a variety of contexts, including sportswashing (using mega-sporting events), artwashing (using culture and museums), and greenwashing (using environmental language). Faithwashing is a reputation management approach that uses religious iconography, global outreach, and transnational religious networks to promote a sanitised version of the state's identity. It enables authorities to control the narrative about who they are and what they represent, often overshadowing narratives emerging from civil society or marginalised people.

When religious tourism, diaspora mobilisation, and interfaith outreach are combined, public diplomacy becomes even more effective. These mechanisms enable states to integrate religious diplomacy into broader economic and cultural incentives, increasing soft power while reducing critical scrutiny.

The Politics of Piety and Postcolonial Critique

Finally, Saba Mahmood (2005) articulates the theoretical lens of the politics of piety, which provides a critical insight into how powerful institutions frequently co-opt and redefine religious sentiments. Mahmood questions the liberal belief that religion is always a private, voluntary, and benign phenomenon. Instead, she draws attention to how political regimes and social hierarchies influence and are influenced by religious rules and shows.

Faithwashing shifts the politics of piety outward, toward the global arena, where regimes project edited images of pious modernity to gain legitimacy. This piety performance is neither spontaneous nor apolitical; it is a well-planned strategy anchored in the global representational hierarchy. Postcolonial theorists have demonstrated how non-Western states, frequently under the scrutiny of Western normative judgment, use cultural authenticity and spiritual capital to resist or redirect criticism, sometimes reproducing the exact exclusions they claim to oppose.

Faithwashing enables states to participate in global moral economies on their terms, building a defensive identity that is both culturally relevant and politically advantageous. However, this comes at a cost: it risks undermining pluralism, silencing critical voices, and commodifying religious institutions in the name of state authority.

Conclusion: A Multi-Layered Framework for Faithwashing

Together, these theoretical views provide a solid platform for examining faith washing as a strategic image-creation strategy. From Nye's soft power to Mahmood's politics of piety, symbolic politics to image laundering, each viewpoint illustrates how religion, far from being a passive identity, is a proactive tool of diplomacy, legitimacy, and control.

This framework lays the groundwork for the following empirical analysis, which investigates faith washing across diverse geopolitical contexts — India, Saudi Arabia, and the United States — not as isolated phenomena, but as shared statecraft logics responding to the imperatives of global perception, domestic legitimacy, and international diplomacy.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND EVOLUTION

The use of religion by governments is not a new phenomenon. Religion had long played an essential role in statecraft, diplomacy, and war before faith washing emerged as a unique approach in international affairs. This section discusses the historical precursors for religious diplomacy, the emergence of faith-based branding in the post-9/11 era, and how faith washing fits into the larger evolution of nation-branding in international affairs.

Religious Diplomacy Through History

Throughout history, states have used religion to legitimise themselves, mobilise support, project power, and conduct diplomacy. For example, the Crusades (1096-1291) were portrayed as religious pilgrimages sanctioned by the Catholic Church but were profoundly entwined with geopolitical goals, economic interests, and territorial extension. Popes and kings utilised theological justification to legitimise military expeditions, portraying them as acts of divine will while consolidating political authority.

Similarly, colonial evangelism from the 16th to 19th centuries, especially under the Spanish, Portuguese, British, and French empires, was inextricably linked to imperial expansion. Missionary efforts frequently accompanied commercial and military ventures, legitimising colonial power as a "civilising mission" motivated by religious responsibility. Scholars like Asad (1993) have suggested that these campaigns indicated a deeper union of theological and political rationales, with religion serving as a moral cloak for the construction of empire.

During the Cold War, religion played a more subtle, intellectual role in the conflict between the capitalist West and the Communist East. The United States, for example, emphasised its Christian background to distinguish itself from the atheistic Soviet Union. Religious freedom was elevated to a fundamental pillar of liberal democracy and utilised as a soft power tactic in foreign diplomacy. As part of its containment policy, the CIA provided covert support to religious institutions such as the Catholic Church in Eastern Europe and Islamic groups in Afghanistan.

These historical occurrences demonstrate how religion has long been utilised as a tool for legitimacy, control, and global influence. However, in each case, the employment of religion reflected the broader strategic and normative imperatives of the time: imperial conquest, ideological rivalry, or moral persuasion.

Faith-Based Branding in the Post-9/11 World

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, represented a watershed moment in global attitudes toward religion and politics. Religion, particularly Islam, was increasingly portrayed in international discourse as both a source of conflict and a potential avenue for reconciliation. In this context, several countries have adjusted their foreign policy strategies to include religious engagement and faith-based outreach, aiming to enhance their global image and counter terrorism.

For example, the US developed faith diplomacy programs, such as the Office of International Religious Freedom and the appointment of Special Envoys for Religious Engagement. American foreign policy began to incorporate "moderate Islam" advocacy, interfaith dialogue funding, and assistance to religious civil society in Muslim-majority nations (Hertzke, 2012).

Other countries, particularly in the Middle East and Asia, have begun to reinvent their religious identities as moderate, tolerant, and cosmopolitan. This was especially evident in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, which established high-profile forums promoting religious tolerance, international Qur'anic tournaments, and interfaith councils. These actions were more concerned with restoring the external image than promoting domestic pluralism, particularly given the increasing scrutiny of authoritarian governments and human rights violations.

In this context, faith became a public relations tool capable of converting state reputations from security threats to cultural guardians. As a result, the post-9/11 era ushered in a new type of religious branding, in which states began to consider religion as a strategic communication instrument in the arena of international soft power, rather than just a belief system.

Rise of Nation-Branding Strategies Involving Religious Elements

The early 2000s also saw the growth of nation-branding, which experts like Anholt (2007) characterise as applying marketing and branding techniques to nation-states.

Nation-branding seeks to shape the global perception of a country by crafting a compelling narrative that encompasses its cultural heritage, economic prospects, political values, and symbolic representations.

Religion swiftly became essential to this strategy, especially for governments with strong civilisational legacies or dominant religious identities. Countries such as India, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel have begun incorporating

religious symbols, holy history, and spiritual tourism into their national brands. These ads frequently projected images of spiritual depth, religious tolerance, or custodianship of hallowed locations, appealing to international visitors and religious diasporas.

For example, religious symbolism has been integral to campaigns like "Incredible India," which showcases historic Hindu temples, Buddhist pilgrimage destinations, and yoga traditions in India. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 involves an intentional effort to rebrand the Kingdom as the "heart of the Islamic world," with Mecca and Medina positioned as symbols of unity and peace, despite continuous criticisms of religious discrimination within its boundaries.

Even secular-leaning states have emphasised religious components in their branding. For example, under Vladimir Putin, Russia has incorporated Orthodox Christianity into its Eurasian identity. In contrast, Israel employs biblical analogies in its historical narrative to relate its political endeavour to ancient legitimacy.

These examples illustrate how faith washing emerges from the intersection of religious diplomacy and nation branding. It is not a spontaneous act of faith, but rather a deliberate act of strategic storytelling, a method to sanitise, elevate, or obfuscate through staged displays of devotion and tradition. In this process, religion is converted into a legitimate commodity that is repackaged for worldwide consumption via soft power channels.

Conclusion: The Convergence of Diplomacy, Branding, and Belief

The historical trajectory of religious diplomacy, which encompasses crusades, colonisation, Cold War soft power, and post-9/11 branding, demonstrates how the strategic employment of faith has evolved alongside changes in the global order. Faithwashing nowadays is distinguished not just by the employment of religious symbolism, but also by its integration into global branding ecosystems, in which states compete for moral capital and symbolic authority in a crowded international arena.

This movement reflects a broader trend in international relations, shifting away from rigid geopolitical blocs and toward fluid reputational conflicts, in which culture, values, and perception mediate legitimacy. Faithwashing is both a continuation and a mutation of historical patterns, anchored in earlier practices but distinguished by its media-savvy, internationally networked, and ideologically sanitised form.

CASE STUDIES: FAITHWASHING IN PRACTICE

This section examines three states, Saudi Arabia, India, and the United States, that utilise religion as a means of faithwashing to manage their global image. Despite substantial ideological, political, and religious differences, all three countries utilise piety strategically to improve their image, exert soft power, and reframe their domestic realities for international audiences.

Case Study 1: Saudi Arabia

Wahhabi Islam and Religious Leadership

Saudi Arabia has traditionally positioned itself as the guardian of Islam, using its sovereignty over the holy sites of Mecca and Medina to assert spiritual leadership throughout the Muslim world. The spread of Wahhabi Islam, a puritanical interpretation of Sunni ideology, has had both theological and geopolitical implications. Since the 1970s oil boom, the Kingdom has spent billions of dollars to spread this religious paradigm by sponsoring mosques, madrassas, Islamic centres, and scholarships throughout Africa, Asia, and Europe (Commins, 2006).

Saudi Arabia has established a global religious infrastructure through institutions such as the Muslim World League and the King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur'an, consolidating its religious authority while simultaneously generating soft power. Wahhabi clerics have frequently served as informal ambassadors, promoting narratives that align with state interests while suppressing opposing theological viewpoints. This foreign religious outreach blurs the distinction between spiritual obligation and geopolitical strategy, resulting in doctrinal diplomacy that conceals authoritarianism behind a veneer of Christian stewardship.

Soft Power Diplomacy in the West

In Western contexts, Saudi Arabia has maintained a more moderate stance, funding Islamic studies departments, interfaith discussions, and community Initiatives. Institutions like the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Centres for Islamic Studies at Harvard and Georgetown are portrayed as venues for intellectual exchange. Still, critics claim they cover up the Kingdom's internal abuses (Mabon, 2013). Saudi media channels, such as Al Arabiya, and investments in worldwide platforms expand the narrative's reach.

This duality—strict orthodoxy at home and moderation abroad —is key to Saudi faithwashing. While advocating tolerance and reform on the outside, the Kingdom maintains strict religious authority within, stifling dissent and promoting gendered moral norms. Faithwashing here becomes a selective mirror, reflecting global ideals but distorting domestic realities.

Image Management Post-Khashoggi

The killing of writer Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018 marked a watershed moment in the Kingdom's soft power narrative. The conduct, mainly linked to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), sparked international outrage. In response, the government initiated a multi-platform image rehabilitation effort, reemphasising religious tolerance and moderation as fundamental to Vision 2030.

This includes high-profile interfaith summits, public demonstrations of religious reform (such as loosening the grip of the mutawa, or religious police), and endorsements from overseas influencers and celebrities. Despite these efforts, international human rights organisations have labelled them cosmetic reforms, intended to sanitise MBS's image rather than launch meaningful democratisation (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

Saudi Arabia's instance demonstrates how sacred iconography, institutional theology, and worldwide religious diplomacy can be used to insulate a state from criticism, a textbook example of faithwashing in authoritarian branding.

Case Study 2: India

Hindutva and the Global Projection of Hinduism

India's soft power has long been associated with its rich cultural heritage, including its civilizational yoga tradition, spiritual philosophy, and pluralistic traditions. However, under the ideological influence of Hindutva, this narrative has evolved towards a majoritarian religious nationalism in which Hindu identity is ignored in both internal and foreign policy (Jaffrelot, 2021). Although not formally a theocracy, the state increasingly incorporates Hindu symbols into public policy, education, and infrastructure.

The erection of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, for example, has been portrayed internationally as a return to India's spiritual splendour, despite the site's violent history and judicial disagreement. Similarly, government-sponsored global events such as International Yoga Day present Hindu traditions as universally humanistic, despite criticism that this sanitises religious chauvinism and marginalises non-Hindu people in India (Nanda, 2009).

Diaspora Diplomacy and Temple-Based Engagement

India's foreign policy is increasingly relying on the Hindu diaspora as an ideological and economic constituency. High-profile events like "Howdy Modi" in Houston and "Namaste Trump" in Ahmedabad demonstrate how temple networks

and religiously affiliated organisations abroad serve as cultural emissaries and informal political activists.

Temples abroad, such as those operated by the BAPS Swaminarayan network, frequently serve as centres of Indian culture, religious teaching and platforms for political soft power. These institutions occasionally confuse civic and religious diplomacy, promoting pro-government narratives while downplaying internal criticism.

Faithwashing occurs through diasporic endorsement, with worldwide Hindu identity serving as a substitute for national image, even as the state faces growing international condemnation for its treatment of Muslims, Dalits, and dissenting voices (Amnesty International, 2022).

Minority Rights and International Image Repair

India's international reputation as the "world's largest democracy" has been called into doubt by policies such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the repeal of Article 370 in Kashmir. Reports of hate crimes, internet shutdown, and legal threats against journalists have sparked worry among human rights organisations and UN rapporteurs.

The government has stepped up cultural diplomacy campaigns, including spiritual tourism, Bollywood endorsements, and cutting-edge religious diplomacy (such as digital temple mapping). These are promoted under the pretence of cultural heritage, but they serve a greater purpose.

Ideological goal: to divert global attention and rebrand majoritarian nationalism as civilizational pride.

India's instance exemplifies the instrumental marriage of soft power with sectarianism, in which faith serves as both a shield and a sword, protecting the state abroad while being weaponised locally.

Case Study 3: United States

Civil Religion and American Exceptionalism

Although officially secular, the United States has long practised what Robert Bellah called “civil religion", a national faith expressed through sacred symbols, rituals, and moral language. Religious discourse serves as an instrument of legitimacy and unity, from the phrase "In God We Trust" on coins to invoking divine favour in presidential speeches (Bellah, 1967).

This civil religion is the foundation of American exceptionalism, the conviction that the United States has a divine mission to spread democracy and liberty. This framework has justified actions abroad while also softening the empire's image through moral discourse. Presidents from Reagan to Bush to

Obama have used religious themes to shape foreign policy, portraying the United States as a moral leader despite controversial military campaigns.

Faith-Based Initiatives and Religious Lobbying

Faith-based public diplomacy gained popularity in the early 2000s, particularly under the Bush Administration, when the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives was established. These programs increased government funding for religious organisations that work in domestic welfare and overseas development, conveying a message of compassion and moral leadership.

Simultaneously, prominent religious lobbying organisations, such as AIPAC, the Christian Coalition, and the Family Research Council, have played significant roles in shaping US foreign policy, notably in the Middle East. These lobbyists support policies that align with religious prophecy or moral principles, while serving strategic governmental objectives under the guise of spiritual concerns.

This fusion of statecraft and spirituality enables the United States to conceal harsh power decisions under a veneer of religious moralism, thereby maintaining global perceptions of the country as morally driven rather than imperialist.

Evangelical Soft Power and Global Christianity

American evangelical organisations such as Samaritan's Purse and Campus Crusade for Christ use humanitarian aid, medical missions, and education to strengthen US soft power in the Global South. These missions align with US foreign policy, often in post-conflict zones or strategic locations. While portrayed as benevolent, such activities can contain cultural imperialism, supporting conservative religion while also aligning with geopolitical interests.

Under politicians like Donald Trump, religious soft power was domesticated, and even faith was weaponised not only overseas but even domestically. Trump's 2020 photo-op in front of St. John's Church, Bible in hand, during Black Lives Matter protests represented the state's appropriation of religion for political legitimacy. Such incidents demonstrate how internal political theatre and foreign image intersect in the politics of piety.

Conclusion: Patterns Across Divergent States

Despite their political differences, Saudi Arabia, India, and the United States share startling similarities:

- Religion is used to shape moral leadership narratives in all cases.
- Faith-based organisations and networks are mobilised for public diplomacy.

- A manufactured religious identity diverts criticism of domestic tyranny. These instances demonstrate that faithwashing is not an oddity, but rather a rising worldwide trend in soft power politics. Whether through oil-funded mosque diplomacy, temple-centric nationalism, or evangelical humanitarianism, regimes are increasingly using devotion to establish legitimacy, conceal repression, and project cultural power.

Media, Branding, and Narrative Construction

Faithwashing does not happen by chance; it is meticulously planned using a combination of state-sponsored communication, media manipulation, and symbolic representation. Contemporary faithwashing is increasingly based on strategic branding, in which religion is integrated into a country's soft power arsenal not only through theology but also through image, produced, transmitted, and consumed via global media networks. This section examines how states use international media platforms, global influencers, and digital diplomacy to operationalise religious imagery and discourse.

International Media, Influencers, and Religious Ambassadors

Modern faithwashing is fuelled by globalised communication networks. International media channels, frequently owned or influenced by the state or aligned interests, play a crucial role in promoting crafted narratives of religious tolerance, spiritual heritage, and moral leadership.

For example, Saudi Arabia's Al Arabiya and the UAE's Sky News Arabia broadcast news and use covert ideological messaging to portray Gulf monarchies as progressive and spiritually honest. These networks promote religious diversity by emphasising interfaith gatherings and royal support of spiritual discussion, even though their governments criminalise dissent and heavily restrict opposition.

In democratic settings, influencers and religious ambassadors frequently serve as organic or co-opted extensions of state branding. India's global yoga ambassadors, such as Sadhguru and Sri Ravi Shankar, routinely travel to Western cities under the guise of cultural exchange, reinforcing nationalist undertones hidden behind universal spirituality. Their platforms, which are frequently apolitical, serve as ideological softeners, introducing visitors to edited notions of India as calm, ancient, and inclusive while deflecting attention away from caste-based or sectarian violence at home.

In the United States, prominent faith leaders such as Franklin Graham and Paula White frequently support political leadership while displaying religious kindness through humanitarian efforts abroad. These personalities become moral messengers, influencing international perceptions of American religiosity and altruism while advancing domestic political objectives.

The critical dynamic here is that religion is laundered through trust networks, with persons and organisations viewed as non-political serving as shields for overtly political messages.

Faithwashing Through Mega-Events and Religious Spectacle

Mega-events have evolved into critical stages for faithwashing, combining spectacle and soft power.

- Religious conferences (e.g., World Tolerance Summit in the UAE and Muslim World League summits in Saudi Arabia).
- Cultural festivals (e.g., Kumbh Mela in India; National Prayer Breakfast in the United States)
- Pilgrimage logistics and religious tourism (for example, Hajj diplomacy, evangelical leaders' journeys to Jerusalem).

These gatherings often receive extensive media coverage, feature dignitaries, and are marked by symbolic acts intended to represent nations as spiritual leaders and moral bastions. Importantly, they depoliticise brutal reality by presenting religious pluralism. For example:

- Saudi Arabia's Future Investment Initiative (nicknamed "Davos in the Desert") includes interfaith dialogue panels and business sessions. Despite human rights concerns, these initiatives aim to reposition the Kingdom as a modern and tolerant entity.
- India's Kumbh Mela, one of the world's largest religious gatherings, is internationally televised and promoted. Under the BJP leadership, it has become a symbol of Hindu civilisational strength, co-branded with "New India" nationalism. Its dual purpose is to reinforce home devotion while spreading a peaceful Hindu aesthetic.
- In the United States, the National Prayer Breakfast brings world dignitaries and corporate executives to Washington for religious meditation. Although billed as nonpartisan, it has historically served as a forum for political networking and soft lobbying, with faith giving moral validity.

These ceremonies may be referred to as "ritual branding", a term that encompasses rituals serving both religious purposes and public relations tactics. They are beautifully produced, widely broadcast, and strategically inclusive, frequently containing token minority voices to reinforce pluralism.

Social Media Diplomacy and Digital Faithwashing

Digital media may be the most revolutionary place for faith washing today. Twitter (now X), Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok have all become platforms of

symbolic diplomacy, with religious performances being aestheticised, virtualised, and decontextualised. Governments and religious influencers use these channels to propagate spiritual imagery while minimising political contradictions.

For instance:

- Mohammed bin Salman's "reformer" image is meticulously created on Instagram and X, with pictures of him meeting religious leaders, touring global institutions, and advocating for interfaith tolerance. Carefully produced videos emphasise technological and spiritual growth rather than totalitarian government.
- India's Ministry of External Affairs uses YouTube to stream cultural diplomacy events such as temple inaugurations, yoga demonstrations, and Hindu-themed musical performances. These generate digital narratives of peace, which neutralise internal polarisation.
- As part of their digital outreach, American embassies tweet about religious holidays from many faiths, such as Ramadan, Passover, and Diwali. While such efforts promote tolerance, they frequently coexist with foreign policies that oppose these principles (for example, drone strikes in Muslim-majority countries).

Beyond official accounts, bot networks and public relations agencies occasionally enhance religious branding or suppress criticism. According to investigations, Saudi Arabia and India have used coordinated digital initiatives to flood social media with favourable religious imagery during times of international attention (Stanford Internet Observatory, 2021).

Digital faith washing is algorithmically optimised; it's about creating content that feels genuine, emotional, and shareable. A photograph of a mosque being inaugurated or a temple illuminated at night travels much further than a human rights report. In this way, faith becomes content, emptied of its complexity and mobilised for image restoration.

The Visual Grammar of Faith: Aestheticisation and the Erasure of Dissonance

Faithwashing thrives on what can be called “visual grammar”, a stylised, often Instagram-friendly representation of religion that invokes emotion and moral authority. The aesthetic focus is on:

- Purity (white robes, ritual baths, sacred spaces)
- Unity (multi-faith panels, interfaith prayers)
- Continuity (ancient traditions, timeless practices)

This stylisation ignores the political economy of religion, including caste exclusion, religious policing, and gender segregation. A photo of Modi meditating in a Himalayan cave or MBS receiving a Christian bishop communicates a striking vision of spiritual inclusiveness. Still, these images are designed to detract from complexity, rather than represent it.

Media outlets often replicate this visual language without criticism, particularly those seeking access or funding. The consequence is a feedback loop in which states generate spiritual material, the media amplifies it, and viewers swallow it as fact.

Conclusion: Faith as Brand, Not Belief

As the global population becomes more visually educated and technologically entrenched, governments have responded by turning faith into a brandable, exportable narrative. International media domination, influencer diplomacy, religious mega-events, and

Algorithmic storytelling is used to sanitise political violence, obscure inequity, and project moral credibility.

Faithwashing, in this sense, is not just political manipulation; it is a form of aesthetic governance, where the spiritual becomes a screen onto which state power is projected, filtered, and refined.

ETHICAL AND HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS

Faithwashing, while frequently characterised as a benign or even progressive endeavour to highlight a country's religious peace, has profound ethical and human rights implications. Far from being a neutral cultural effort, it serves as a tool of narrative diversion, a public relations strategy designed to insulate regimes from scrutiny while legitimising authoritarian measures. This section investigates the darker side of faithwashing, including how it can mask state-perpetrated prejudice, divert attention away from atrocities, and create a dangerous contradiction between true religious freedom and political propaganda.

Obscuring Systemic Discrimination, Surveillance, or War Crimes

At its core, faithwashing allows regimes to create images of moral and spiritual goodness while concealing deep-seated forms of institutional discrimination, particularly against religious minorities and dissenters. This is especially

dangerous in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes, where state brutality is tolerated but worldwide legitimacy is sought.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's investments in interfaith discussion, such as the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Vienna, help to project

the image of a moderate Islamic state. Domestically, however, religious minorities such as Shia Muslims face systematic surveillance, marginalisation in government jobs, and exclusion from religious institutions. Apostasy is still punishable by death, and critics of Wahhabi orthodoxy face imprisonment or worse. The faithwashing narrative portrays Saudi Arabia as the protector of Islamic holy places and interfaith harmony, while disguising a theocratic surveillance state founded on sectarian exclusion.

India

In India, the global promotion of Hindu spiritual ideals through yoga diplomacy and temple inaugurations overseas contrasts sharply with internal religious majoritarian policies, notably those based on Hindutva ideology. State complicity in anti-Muslim violence (e.g., Delhi riots in 2020), enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act, and mob lynchings over beef consumption are all clear signs of institutional Islamophobia. However, the government's portrayal of India as a nation of calm spirituality deflects global criticism, particularly in liberal democracies that practise yoga and Ayurveda without confronting caste or communal oppression.

United States

In the United States, state officials routinely use Judeo-Christian values in diplomacy while advocating religious freedom abroad. However, this moral stance is accompanied by support for military operations in predominantly Muslim countries, the use of faith-based justifications for restricted reproductive laws, and the racialisation of Islam in security monitoring (e.g., post-9/11 profiling). Faithwashing here is a form of exceptionalism, the belief that America is particularly virtuous and thus exempt from accountability.

Faithwashing as Diversion from Domestic or International Abuses

Faithwashing serves as a potent distraction tool. States can refocus public discourse away from human rights violations and towards more appealing tales by

emphasising spiritual heritage (Tadros, 2019; Mandaville & Silvestri, 2015). This diversion takes several forms:

- Post-crisis image repair: Following the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Saudi Arabia stepped up attempts to hold religious conferences and extend its interfaith diplomacy agenda. These initiatives aimed to mitigate Western disapproval, particularly among Christian and Jewish populations, by portraying MbS as a reformer leader sympathetic to diversity (Human Rights Watch, 2019; Commins, 2006).
- Whitewashing militarism: The United States military frequently performs "faith-based humanitarian aid" operations, distributing Bibles and aid packages to war-torn places via Christian non-governmental organisations (NGOs). These efforts legitimise military presence while softening perceptions of occupation, blurring the distinction between aid and ideological export (Appleby, 2000; Fox, 2008).
- Rebranding during domestic repression: India's celebration of religious harmony during high-profile visits by foreign dignitaries (for example, the 2019 Trump-Modi rally "Namaste Trump") contrasts strikingly with state-sponsored crackdowns on dissenters and protestors opposing anti-Muslim laws. Rituals, crowds, and religious symbols garnered international attention, which helped overshadow the violence taking place on the ground at the same time (Jaffrelot, 2021; Nanda, 2009).

Faithwashing thus operates as a deliberate narrative smokescreen, producing stories of cultural richness and moral virtue while sidelining the lived experiences of marginalised communities and suppressing calls for justice.

The Tension Between Religious Freedom and State Propaganda

The most ethically complex implication of faithwashing is the contradiction it creates within the discourse of religious freedom (Ferrara, 2009; Stepan, 2001). While states claim to promote religious liberty as part of their spiritual diplomacy, in practice, they often:

- Favour dominant religious traditions (e.g., Hinduism in India, Islam in Saudi Arabia, Christianity in the U.S.)
- Suppress dissenting voices within those same traditions
- Instrumentalise faith for strategic gain rather than genuine pluralism.

This results in a paradox: Religion is both hyper-visible and heavily policed. It is celebrated when it aligns with the state's goals and repressed when it critiques power.

State Co-optation of Faith Institutions

In all three case studies, religious leaders or institutions that support the state are given more visibility and power. However, those who disagree, whether liberal imams, anti-caste Dalit theologians, or progressive pastors, are frequently silenced, insulted, or marginalised. Religious freedom is made contingent upon loyalty to the state, which violates both ethical norms and international human rights standards, as outlined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Faith as a Tool of Control

Faithwashing regimes curate public religious manifestations to promote national branding rather than spiritual truth or social healing. This undermines genuine religious life, reducing it to aesthetic and instrumental purposes. It also risks alienating minority communities whose faiths are co-opted or marginalised in government narratives (Mahmood, 2005; Asad, 1993).

Conclusion: The Ethics of Sacred Smoke and Mirrors

The ethical consequences of faithwashing are not abstract; they are daily realities for millions whose rights, identity, and safety are jeopardised under the pretence of religious tolerance. While faith can be a powerful force for justice, when wielded by nations for image control and international legitimacy, it can become a tool for erasure rather than emancipation (Tadros, 2019; Fox, 2008).

Faithwashing raises an important question: Can religion serve both the state and truth? Simultaneously, when belief becomes a brand and worship becomes window dressing, the repercussions are more than just symbolic; they are existential. Real lives, freedoms, and justice are shrouded by sacred smoke and gleaming mirrors.

This part encourages us to move away from media spectacle and towards a more critical, rights-based assessment of religious diplomacy. Faith must be reclaimed as a place of opposition to authority, rather than a means of covering it up.

INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES AND ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS

While faithwashing is intended to boost a country's global image and soften its geopolitical footprint, it is increasingly being scrutinised by international institutions, civil society watchdogs, and human rights organisations. These individuals play an essential role in exposing the discrepancies between a state's spiritual branding and its real-world behaviours, particularly when the branding conceals discrimination, brutality, or an authoritarian government. However, enforcement is fragmented, and accountability procedures frequently lack coercive strength, particularly against powerful or economically strategic states. This section examines the evolving global response to faithwashing and outlines both soft and harsh legislative tactics for combating it.

Role of the UN, NGOs, and Watchdogs in Calling Out Faithwashing

Given the principle of state sovereignty and religious sensitivities, the United Nations and its affiliated agencies have been hesitant about openly addressing faithwashing. UN Special Rapporteurs on freedom of religion or belief and minority issues have criticised states for using faith-based language to justify exclusion or violence, raising concerns about the intersection of religious branding and human rights violations.

The Human Rights Council has conducted Universal Periodic Reviews (UPR) to identify patterns of religious discrimination that are hidden by national branding efforts, such as India's citizenship rules or Saudi Arabia's treatment of Shia populations.

Human Rights Watch (HRW), Amnesty International, Open Doors, and Freedom House have all taken a more direct approach. Their strategies include the following:

- Publishing investigative studies that dismantle religious soft power campaigns (such as Saudi interfaith projects) while highlighting concomitant repression.
- Launching lobbying campaigns and petitions aimed at corporations, colleges, and religious institutions that collaborate with faith-washing states.
- Tracking religious freedom indexes and violations, such as the USCIRF (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom) annual reports, which name and shame countries while advocating for policy changes.

These individuals act as informal accountability mechanisms in the absence of legal enforcement, increasing the reputational consequences for nations that utilise religious identity to conceal oppression. Prominent NGOs and human rights watchdogs, such as Human Rights Watch (HRW), Amnesty International, Open Doors, and Freedom House, have been more direct in their criticism. Their strategies include:

- Publishing investigative reports that deconstruct religious soft power campaigns (e.g., Saudi interfaith initiatives) while detailing concurrent repression.
- Launching advocacy campaigns and petitions targeting corporations, universities, and religious institutions that partner with states engaged in faithwashing.
- Tracking religious freedom indexes and violations, such as the USCIRF (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom) annual reports, which name and shame countries while urging policy responses.

These actors serve as informal accountability channels in the absence of legal enforcement, raising reputational costs for states that misuse religious identity to mask oppression.

Diplomatic Tensions Caused by Religious Branding

Faithwashing often triggers diplomatic friction, particularly when one state's religious projection is perceived as hegemonic, exclusionary, or propagandistic by another. Several forms of tension emerge:

Religious Export Conflicts

Saudi Arabia has been under fire from neighbours such as Egypt, Indonesia, and Turkey for propagating Wahhabi doctrine through mosque sponsorship, religious institutions, and media outlets. While presented as religious solidarity, such initiatives are frequently seen as attempts to control the Islamic narrative, culminating in intra-Muslim geopolitical conflict.

Diaspora Conflicts

India's use of Hindu temple diplomacy and Hindu diaspora organisations to promote soft power abroad has raised concerns about transnational majoritarianism, particularly in countries like the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, where Indian-origin minorities, particularly Muslims and Sikhs, face domestic backlash influenced by Indian government rhetoric.

Values Clashes with Secular States

Faith-based branding tactics may conflict with the secular norms of host countries. The United States has been chastised for using religious rhetoric in foreign aid programs, whilst Saudi Arabia's state-controlled clerical outreach has prompted concerns in Europe about radicalism and ideological influence.

Such diplomatic schisms demonstrate how faithwashing not only obscures local realities but also has ramifications that extend beyond borders, straining partnerships and triggering foreign policy recalibrations.

Soft Law and Hard Law Responses

Soft law mechanisms, non-binding norms and recommendations are the primary mode of global faithwashing accountability. These include:

- UN declarations, such as the *Rabat Plan of Action* and *Toledo Guiding Principles*, provide frameworks for protecting religious expression while guarding against state co-optation of religion.
- OECD guidelines for corporations and academic institutions involved in partnerships with state-sponsored religious initiatives, encouraging ethical due diligence.
- NGO scorecards and rankings that influence donor funding, academic collaborations, and public-private partnerships.

These mechanisms function as reputational governance systems, shaping the moral legitimacy of states in global forums even without binding legal obligations.

Few direct complex law instruments address faithwashing per se, but some mechanisms indirectly tackle its consequences:

- Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) safeguards religious freedom. In contrast, Article 26 bans discrimination, both of which are significant when states use faith narratives to justify exclusion.
- Sanctions regimes, such as the United States' Global Magnitsky Act, have been used to punish persons tied to human rights violations under the guise of religious diplomacy (for example, in post-Khashoggi Saudi Arabia).

- Domestic legislation, including blasphemy law reforms or secularism provisions (e.g., France's laïcité policies), can curtail the influence of faithwashing on public policy.

However, enforcement remains highly politicised and uneven. Powerful nations with economic leverage often evade consequences, while smaller states are disproportionately scrutinised.

Conclusion: Toward More Equitable Oversight

International reactions to faithwashing are still in their early stages and widely diverse. While watchdogs and soft law organisations have contributed to uncovering disparities between faith-based branding and human rights practices, there is no unified framework for regulation or compensation. Diplomatic sensitivities, religious exceptionalism, and geopolitical interests frequently impede direct accountability. To advance global justice, future responses must integrate:

- Multilateral legal standards that link religious diplomacy to transparency and nondiscrimination.
- Stronger corporate and academic codes of conduct on engagement with faithwashing regimes.
- Empowered civil society networks that hold both state and non-state actors to account.

Faithwashing cannot be countered merely by naming and shaming; it requires a sustained, principled global response that centres the dignity and rights of those erased by the performance of religious virtue.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The previous research has documented the rise and consolidation of faithwashing as a powerful kind of soft power, allowing authorities to conceal repression, cover human rights violations, and boost legitimacy by selectively employing religious imagery, institutions, and principles. In our case studies of Saudi Arabia, India, and the United States, we observed that faith is not merely a domestic or cultural force, but also a crucial tool in global branding, diplomacy, and geopolitical strategy.

Faithwashing is fundamentally a strategic convergence of religion and the logic of international image management. It entails using religious identity, beliefs, or alliances to project moral authority and goodwill, while frequently

diverting attention away from systemic violence, marginalisation, or authoritarianism.

Several key themes emerged across the theoretical, historical, and empirical chapters of this study:

- Faithwashing is an advanced form of symbolic soft power, integrating aspects of civil religion, nation branding, and public diplomacy.
- It is often most pronounced in states with religious nationalist projects or significant geopolitical interests tied to moral legitimacy, such as Saudi Arabia's Islamic leadership claims or India's promotion of Hindutva abroad.
- Religious diplomacy has deep historical roots, but the post-9/11 era and the rise of digital diplomacy have accelerated and globalised these practices.
- Faithwashing thrives in asymmetric accountability, where powerful states can use religious outreach to deflect or delay criticism, particularly in international forums.
- Global civil society and watchdog groups have begun to contest these narratives, but international law and institutions lag in developing effective responses.

The global normalisation of faithwashing has profound implications for both international relations theory and practice:

Traditional conceptions of soft power, such as Joseph Nye's original formulation, frequently regard culture and values as benign. However, this study demonstrates that religious soft power can be weaponised to reinforce majoritarianism or conceal exclusionary governmental intentions. We must update our understanding of soft power to include ideological laundering and moral theatre as strategic tactics.

Faithwashing exacerbates diplomatic divisions. Religious branding often leads to ideological polarisation within international organisations, as countries vie to define authentic" religiosity or moral leadership. This undermines universal principles and promotes identity-based bloc politics, weakening organisations such as the UN and the Human Rights Council.

When religious diplomacy is used to divert attention away from human rights violations, it weakens their universality and indivisibility. States may publicly emphasise religious freedom while abusing it, using faith to quell criticism or excuse persecution, particularly against minorities.

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