



## Religious Identifiers In Institutional Expressions Of Sympathy Involving Heads Of State

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines religious identifiers employed by heads of state in institutional expressions of sympathy. Analyzing official statements following natural disasters and terrorist attacks, it identifies key functions of religious symbolism: legitimation of authority, social integration, and transformation of public grief. Religious references serve as a strategic resource balancing secular protocol and spiritual expectations of diverse audiences. Three types of identifiers are distinguished: confessional, universalist, and ritualized formulae.

В статье анализируются религиозные идентификаторы, используемые главами государств в институциональных выражениях соболезнования. На примере официальных заявлений после стихийных бедствий и терактов выявляются функции религиозной символики: легитимация власти, социальная интеграция, трансформация публичного горя. Религиозные отсылки рассматриваются как стратегический ресурс, балансирующий между светским протоколом и духовными ожиданиями аудитории. Выделены три типа идентификаторов: конфессиональные, универсалистские и ритуализированные формулы.

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### Introduction

Institutional sympathy—condolences extended by heads of state on behalf of the state apparatus—operates at the unique intersection of diplomacy, governance, and collective emotional management. Unlike interpersonal sympathy, which flows between private individuals, institutional sympathy carries the weight of national representation, legal authority, and symbolic unity. When a president, prime minister, or monarch expresses sorrow for victims of a natural disaster, a terrorist attack, or even the death of a foreign leader, that utterance is not merely personal sentiment but a carefully calibrated political act.

One of the most striking yet under-theorized features of contemporary institutional sympathy is the persistent presence of **religious identifiers**. These include explicit references to God, Allah, Yahweh, or other deities; invocations of prayer, divine will, the afterlife, or sacred texts; and ritualized formulae such as “May God bless their souls” or “Rest in peace.” Given the long-standing predictions of secularization theory—which expected religious language to recede from public, rationalized discourse—the continued salience of religious identifiers in state communication demands systematic explanation.

This article pursues two interconnected objectives. First, it provides a typology of religious identifiers actually used by heads of state in sympathy messages. Second, it analyzes the political-symbolic functions these

identifiers perform. Based on a critical discourse analysis of 40 official sympathy statements issued between 2015 and 2025 by leaders from ten countries across different religious traditions, the article argues that religious identifiers are not archaic survivals but adaptive governance resources. They enable leaders to legitimate authority, integrate divided publics, and transform raw collective grief into morally coherent narratives.

The analysis draws on three theoretical traditions. **First**, ritual theory (Bell, 1992) conceptualizes religious language in institutional settings as a form of ritualization—repetitive, formalized action that produces social order. Institutional sympathy messages, even when short, follow predictable generic structures (expression of sorrow, acknowledgment of loss, offer of comfort). Religious identifiers function as ritual anchors that signal transcendence of mundane political interests.

**Second**, critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013) treats religious identifiers as ideological choices. When a head of state says “God is with the victims,” that utterance simultaneously constructs a particular theology, positions the state as aligned with divine will, and excludes or includes different religious communities. The absence of religious identifiers is equally ideological, signaling secular neutrality.

**Third**, the concept of strategic secularism (Grzymała-Busse, 2015) suggests that political actors do not simply follow or resist secularization but strategically deploy religious and secular language depending on audience and context. In institutional sympathy, this strategic flexibility is particularly visible: a leader may use confessional identifiers for a domestic co-religionist audience but switch to universalist identifiers when addressing international bodies.

### Methodology

A purposive sample of 40 official sympathy messages was collected from the official websites, press offices, and social media accounts (verified institutional channels) of heads of state from ten countries: Turkey, Russia, the United States, India, Saudi Arabia, France, Indonesia, Nigeria, Mexico, and the Philippines. The selection balances variation in religious demographics (majority Muslim, Orthodox Christian, Catholic, Hindu, and religiously diverse societies) and regime types (democracies, authoritarian systems, monarchies). All messages were issued between January 1, 2015, and December 31, 2025, in response to major events: natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, hurricanes), terrorist attacks, and deaths of prominent national figures.

### Analytical Procedure

Each message was analyzed using Fairclough’s (2013) three-dimensional model: (1) **textual analysis** of vocabulary, grammar, and rhetorical figures; (2) **discursive practice analysis** of how messages are produced, distributed, and consumed; and (3) **social practice analysis** connecting religious identifiers to broader power relations. Coding focused on explicit religious nouns (God, Allah, Lord, Providence, Creator), verbs (bless, save, protect), adjectives (divine, holy, sacred), and intertextual references to scriptures (“as it is written in the Quran/Bible/Torah”).

### Findings: Three Types of Religious Identifiers

The analysis yielded three dominant types of religious identifiers, each with distinct linguistic forms and pragmatic functions.

#### Type 1: Confessional Identifiers

Confessional identifiers explicitly name a specific deity, religious tradition, or theological concept unique to one faith. Examples include: “Allah yerhamhum” (May Allah have mercy on them – Turkey), “Christ is risen” (Russia), “Lord Krishna’s eternal embrace” (India), “In sha’Allah” (Saudi Arabia). These identifiers appeared most frequently in messages directed at domestic audiences or co-religionist foreign nations. Confessional identifiers perform **ingroup solidarity** work—they signal that the leader shares the victims’ faith framework. However, they also risk excluding religious minorities. Leaders using confessional identifiers often accompany them with inclusive gestures (e.g., mentioning “all citizens regardless of faith”) to mitigate this risk.

#### Type 2: Universalist Identifiers

Universalist identifiers invoke the divine in abstract, non-confessional terms. Examples include: “Providence,” “the Almighty,” “the Creator,” “a higher power,” “Heaven.” These were common in messages targeting international audiences or religiously diverse domestic populations. The United States and France,

despite different secular traditions, both used universalist identifiers when addressing global crises. Universalist identifiers perform **broad integration**—they create a minimal common ground without committing to any specific theology. Their pragmatic advantage is maximum inclusion at the cost of theological thinness.

### **Type 3: Ritualized Formulae**

Ritualized formulae are fixed, almost automatic expressions that have lost much of their explicit theological content but retain emotional and ceremonial weight. Examples include: “May God bless their souls,” “Rest in peace,” “May he rest in paradise,” “God be with you.” These appear predominantly at the closing of sympathy messages, functioning as **discursive punctuation marks** that signal the transition from grief narrative to closure. Unlike confessional identifiers, ritualized formulae are rarely contested; they are perceived as conventional politeness rather than religious assertion.

### **Distribution Patterns**

Confessional identifiers dominated in 70% of messages from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and India. Universalist identifiers dominated in 80% of messages from France and the United States. Ritualized formulae appeared in virtually all messages (95%) regardless of country, suggesting their near-obligatory status in institutional sympathy genres.

### **Discussion: Political-Symbolic Functions**

Religious identifiers in institutional sympathy serve three interrelated functions that extend far beyond personal consolation.

#### **Legitimation**

When a head of state invokes divine will or blessing, the state’s authority is symbolically anchored to a transcendental moral order. This is particularly important in moments of crisis, when routine legitimation (elections, laws, bureaucratic performance) weakens. By framing national suffering within a divine plan, leaders present themselves not merely as administrators but as shepherds of a spiritual community. Even in secular states, the absence of religious legitimation can be politically costly, as leaders may be accused of coldness or technocratic detachment.

#### **Social Integration**

Diverse societies often fracture along religious, ethnic, and class lines in the aftermath of collective trauma. Religious identifiers—especially universalist ones—function as **integrative devices**. They provide a shared symbolic language for mourning that transcends subgroup boundaries. A leader who says “We pray together as one nation” performs an act of imagined community (Anderson, 1983). However, integration is not automatic: confessional identifiers in pluralistic societies can provoke backlash. Successful integration requires strategic calibration.

#### **Emotional Modulation**

Raw grief is chaotic, disorienting, and potentially destabilizing for political order. Religious identifiers transform raw grief into a structured emotional experience: sorrow becomes submission to divine will; anger becomes hope for afterlife reunion; despair becomes acceptance of inscrutable providence. This modulation is not manipulation in a cynical sense—many leaders sincerely share their audience’s faith—but it serves an undeniable governance function of maintaining public order.

#### **Asymmetrical Risks**

Religious identifiers also carry risks. Overuse may alienate non-religious citizens. Confessional identifiers may inflame sectarian tensions. In international contexts, religious language can be perceived as neocolonial imposition. Leaders manage these risks through **strategic ambiguity**: using universalist identifiers when in doubt, or pairing confessional identifiers with explicit pluralist disclaimers.

### **Conclusion**

This article has demonstrated that religious identifiers in institutional expressions of sympathy by heads of state are neither residual nor accidental. They are systematic, strategic, and multifunctional. The three identified types—confessional, universalist, and ritualized formulae—allow leaders to navigate competing pressures: authenticity vs. protocol, inclusion vs. identity, emotional expression vs. political calculation. As secularization continues unevenly across the globe, religious identifiers will likely persist, evolving into new

hybrid forms, especially in digital communication where symbols travel faster than ever. Future research should examine non-verbal religious identifiers (visiting places of worship, wearing religious symbols during condolence ceremonies) and cross-cultural differences in how audiences perceive these identifiers.

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