

Invisible Legions: The Pope and International Relations

Written by Jodok Troy

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/04/10/invisible-legions-the-pope-and-international-relations/>

JODOK TROY, APR 10 2013

On 13 March 2013, just a bit more than one month after the announcement of Pope Benedict XVI's resignation, the College of Cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church elected the former Argentinian Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio as the new pope; he named himself Francis. While the election of a new pope is obviously significant for millions of Roman Catholics all over the world, its importance for international relations is not immediately apparent.

Many know the following anecdote: "The Pope! How many divisions has *he*?" That was the famous response of Joseph Stalin to a question from the French secretary of state concerning the situation of Catholics in Russia in 1935. This anecdote, passed on by Winston Churchill, illustrates the mainstream opinion regarding religion in politics. Not that well-known is Churchill's own annex to this sentence: "Laval's answer was not reported to me but he might certainly have mentioned a number of legions not always visible on parade"[1] – the faithful believers. This article does not focus on the domestic (i.e. theological) matters of the Catholic Church (hereafter "the Church"), but rather, it provides a brief evaluation of its "power" in international relations. Thus, in this article I take a brief look at those "legions," and the leadership of the first (pope) and second (officials in higher positions such as Cardinals, Bishops, and Nuncios) levels of the Church's hierarchy.

Almost five decades ago Samuel Huntington observed that bureaucratic monarchies are capable of assimilating individuals.[2] Nothing less is true for the organizational structure of the Church. At least in terms of foreign policy attitudes the Holy See illustrates a relative homogenous consistency in promoting peace and security since the 20th century. The otherwise highly fragmented theological angles seem to have been assimilated in foreign policy towards a considerable integrative and stabilization power in world politics.

Naturally, this "power" is not one in terms of hard, measurable capabilities. Although I do not prefer to use the overstretched term "soft power" for the Catholic Church, it probably fits best to explain its source of power. In the following lines I sketch out some basic (legal) contexts of the Church in international relations. Following that, I summarize examples of how the Church, and the pope, as her chief agent of foreign policy conduct, participates in international relations. The article concludes with a brief assessment of the recent reign of Pope Benedict XVI and a look into the future regarding the Church's role in world politics, led by Pope Francis.

The Catholic Church, the Holy See, and the Vatican

In terms of international law, the Vatican ("State of the Vatican City") and the Holy See are two different entities, each with international legal personality. The connection between these two is the personal-union of the pope who is, at the same time, supreme head of the Roman Catholic Church as well as head of state of the physical territory of the Vatican City. The foreign relations of the Vatican City state are managed by the Holy See, which, in operational terms, means the latter's Secretary of State.[3] The Holy See has observer status at the United Nations and maintains an extensive diplomatic service which operates embassies (nunciatures) in almost all the states of the world. It therefore is a recognized member of, and participates in, international society. Within the first two weeks of his regency, Pope Francis made an attempt to pronounce this participation in calling, first, for a more intense dialogue with Islam and, second, "calling on church leaders to renew diplomatic discourse with countries that do not have official ties with the Holy See, like China." [4]

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There are at least three problems when dealing with the foreign policy of the Holy See. First, there is a lack of data. Although many documents are freely accessible via the Vatican's website they provide too little of an insight into structural issues. Second, a great deal of time is dedicated to internal issues of faith and not to international relations conduct. And, third, most of the achievements and failures of its foreign policy conduct are hard to measure.[5] This is caused by the fact that it is always the pope himself who is the chief agent of the Holy See's diplomacy—and foreign policy—regardless of how enormous the diplomatic apparatus of the Holy See actually may be. No pope besides John Paul II could illustrate this more vividly.

The Holy See as an International Actor

Although there are many others, three themes frequently arise when looking closely at the Holy See's international presence: encyclicals, human rights, and social affairs. Encyclicals always have been serious and sensitive instruments in analysing world politics. Two examples illustrate this argument: *Divini Redemptoris* (1937) was addressing the challenges of communism before George Kennan did, and *Mit brennender Sorge* (*Ardenti cura/With burning concern*, 1937) addressed the evil of Nazism though it was still an era of appeasement.[6]

Although the political structure of the Vatican itself cannot be characterized as a democracy, the Church developed herself into a respectable promoter of human rights and freedom as a result of her foremost approach to the preservation of life. John Paul II stressed the importance of religious freedom as the first freedom, because it is rooted in the God-given dignity of human free will.[7] Samuel Huntington observed that the "third wave" of democratization was "overwhelmingly a 'Catholic wave.'"[8] Out of the 30 countries that made a transition to democracy during the "third wave" (1974-1990), roughly three-fourths were predominantly Catholic.[9] This is not to mention Pope John Paul II's personal engagement in the effort to bring down communism or his opposition to the Iraq War of 2003.

One may therefore rightly argue that the Church is a force for good, but opponents still bring forward the domestic policy arguments (the absolute monarchy as a strictly hierarchical organization principle, sexual abuse, etc.) as well as historical ones (crusades, witch hunts, etc.) Those are legitimate objections. However, they remain proxy variables regarding the view of the Church on the international stage. Even more, the historical arguments are often overstretched and the domestic ones often only reflect regional specifics and not trends that shape or revolutionize the Church as a whole.[10]

Some might ask "what is the pope without his followers?" The easy answer is: nothing more than the bishop of Rome. The more complex issue is, however, that this question does not arise for three reasons: First, history proves that religious leaders of any denomination and thus individual agency are, more often than not, influential over time. Second, what, say, is the President of the United States if American citizens fail to obey his orders? Third, the pope is not the Catholic Church, he represents her – in theological as well as in political terms; just like any other Statesmen. He certainly is her chief policy maker (and face) but he is nothing more than an agent.

The Future Ahead: The Next Pope and Glocalization

Pope Benedict XVI probably will not be remembered for his theological or political engagements but rather for his resignation. Although the Church and the organizational apparatus of the Holy See does not "think" in short time spans (the last papal resignation took place centuries ago), Benedict XVI's resignation is a step likely to change papal leadership. Think, for example, of what will happen if his successor gives reason for his critics to call for his resignation. "Revolutions" such as papal resignation may happen within periods of centuries but the Holy See is nevertheless also a bureaucracy with rather short lived human political interests. Nothing illustrates this more than the way popes seek to bring potential successors into position as the filling of posts through John Paul II with conservative Cardinals for the Curia, who continued the election of conservative Cardinals.[11] The same seems to be the case of Benedict XVI's legacy.

One of the most challenging trends of world politics today is the struggle of what Benjamin Barber has termed *Jihad vs. McWorld* – the conflict between a homogeneous global culture and the resurgence of local forces.[12] Indeed,

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there is an often overlooked gap in the trends of the democratic dogma of egalitarianism and the growing counter currents, as, for example, Second-World nationalism. The “rise of the rest,” as Farred Zakaria has termed it, is heavily characterized by nationalism. And this is in spite of the process of globalization, particularly regarding the growing of economic wealth,[13] which, on the other side is unequally distributed.

The Church has always been part of this very struggle, that of *Jihad vs. McWorld*, or, in other words, the struggle between universalization and localization: “glocalization.” The first missionaries to arrive in India, China and other countries experienced that there is an ideal way to preach and apply a universal message such as the gospel and Catholic dogmas in different cultures. The body of the Church therefore is certainly geared up for the pluralistic challenges that lie ahead. That does not mean that the structure of the Church is. But it does mean that the inner core of the earthly body—the Church’s members—are. This is also notwithstanding that the future Church will forever keep its “European” face and spirit. A case in point is the regular confusion in the northern hemisphere of terms such as “conservative” and “liberal” when approaching the Holy See’s secular and theological policy.[14] The Church, particularly its southern denominations, may follow a conservative theological agenda but it is often a critic of economic liberalism, US hegemonic aspirations, etc.

The paradox of Pope Benedict XVI’s conservative theological behaviour and his liberal political attitude were always hard to grasp for his critics. This will likely also be the case with Francis. The (theoretical) universalization of human rights and the problems of the lack of practice offer space for Catholic international relations to step in. It is the religious conviction of the dignity of the individual which promotes the universalization of human rights and gives it a theoretical basis and not just one which is a concession of the state. Despite the nice sign of a Latin American pope or his name, it is unlikely that Pope Francis will initiate major changes within the Church. Rather, it seems that he will continue along the path of Benedict XVI’s “new evangelism,” promoting a conservative theological agenda and pursuing a rather progressive political agenda. Accordingly, the Vatican emphasised on Good Friday the need for the Church to turn towards the fringes of society.[15] It is the “rest” which the Church indeed is supposed to care for. Importantly enough, the “rest” is likely to become one of the most important driving forces in world politics.

So, should we care about the pope in international relations? The answer, as this article suggests, is yes. There are two main reasons for this: first, the sheer size and scope of the Church as the “first multinational cooperation” (Peter L. Berger) and, second, Catholicism’s new centres are not any longer within Europe or even Rome but are congruent with the new centres of the world where “the rest rise.” The challenge for Pope Francis is to deal with the paradoxical trends of growing (economic and social) homogenization and counter currents on the other side – apart from the Western hemisphere. The Church was always sceptical regarding some of the basic patterns of the Enlightenment. Perhaps the most prominent of these basic Enlightenment patterns is the “belief in the self-improvement of man” and therefore, the resulting belief in the “perfectibility of social order.”[16] The Church may not draw the same conclusion from this thesis as secular or agnostic critics but she certainly shares the dangers that come with the separation of culture and religion on the one side and politics on the other side.[17]

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Acknowledgements: Austrian Science Fund (FWF) project P 25198-G16.

[1] Winston Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, The Second World War (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985, 1948), 121.

[2] Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1968), 167.

[3] Alan Chong and Jodok Troy, “A Universal Sacred Mission and the Universal Secular Organisation: The Holy See

Invisible Legions: The Pope and International Relations

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and the United Nations." *Politics, Religion, and Ideology* 12, no. 3 (2011): 335–354 (338).

[4] Elisabetta Povoledo, "Pope Appeals for More Interreligious Dialogue," *The New York Times*, March 22, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/23/world/europe/pope-francis-urges-more-interreligious-dialogue.html?ref=world&_r=0.

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[11] Forrest Maltzman, Melissa Schwartzberg, and Lee Sigelman, "Vox Populi, Vox Dei, Vox Sagittae," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 39, no. 02 (2006): 297–301.

[12] Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld* (New York NY: Times Books, 1995).

[13] Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World: Release 2.0* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 35.

[14] Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[15] Laura Smith-Spark, and Greg Botelho, "Pope on Good Friday: 'Christians must respond to evil with good'." <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/03/29/world/europe/vatican-pope-good-friday>.

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[17] Tariq Modood, "Moderate Secularism, Religion as Identity and Respect for Religion," *The Political Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (2010); Michael Walzer, *Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), Selected, edited, and with an introduction by D. Miller, 147–67.

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