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# The Catholic Church in International Politics

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ALAN CHONG, NOV 14 2013

It is axiomatic in the study of International Relations (IR) to treat the emergence of the Westphalian roots of the present pattern of international society as the simultaneous beginnings of a secular system of sovereign states that acknowledge no authority higher than their own. Power rules relations between states, as realists would have one believe, by imposing fear or attaining goals by overcoming the resistance of the weak. Liberals would seek instead to recast international interaction in terms of an enlightened embrace of win-win logics and belief in the pacific compatibility of differing national interests, if reason were allowed to run its course against the logic of force. The role of the Catholic Church in international politics challenges these assumptions—the dominant pillars of ‘IR theory’—by positing itself as a universal association of governmental and nongovernmental believers in a Christian God. But this does not necessarily mean that the Catholic Church is or has been an entity of spiritual and political perfection since the beginning of the historical time signified by the prefix ‘Anno Domini’. In fact, both the Old and New Testaments that comprise the Holy Bible, the founding text of all Christianity, record a worldwide institution constantly struggling under the multiple overlapping jurisdictions of prophets, their disciples, enlightened lay persons, and even among the rival religious adherents challenging Christianity in a quest for the meaning of the Good. The latter was applicable not only on a personal level, but also amongst the universal adherents of Catholicism, as well as the non-Catholic world of states and their populations.

These ideological struggles *within* the universal Church mirrored, perhaps, Platonic political thought, Hobbesian perambulations, as well as the reflective precepts of Confucianism. Religion in its principled nature is about one’s relationship with God. Therein lay the meaning of politics within the Church: how should one go about practicing this belief? Should one meditate all of the time in search of inner peace with the Creator? Or should one serve the Lord by ministering unto the Poor? Or does one best serve fellow Catholics and non-Catholics by implementing equity to all members of the public in the daily administration of secular tasks? The election of Pope Francis in 2013 has not radically revised politics within the Church, as the pontiff has mostly imparted momentum to a pre-existing vision of the Church as a humble servant of the Christian God and the beneficent interlocutor between the world’s 1.1 billion Catholics and spiritual Heaven. As an observer of the Vatican described it in an editorial in October 2013, Pope Francis takes after his spiritual namesake, the thirteenth century saint, Francis of Assisi, who responded to the calling to rebuild the Church after a period of neglect (Vallely 2013). Francis of Assisi subsequently established a reputation for serving as a peacemaker and friend of the poor. Likewise, the current Pope Francis reminded Catholics and non-Catholics alike that the Church’s mission in international politics transcended Westphalian-style sovereignty. In his own words, evocative of Scripture, Pope Francis commented that ‘Heads of the Church have often been narcissists, flattered and thrilled by their courtiers. The court is the leprosy of the papacy...This Vatican-centric vision neglects the world around it and I will do everything to change it’ (Vallely 2013).

Therefore, when one appraises the *roles* of the Catholic Church in international politics, it has to be regarded in terms of producing pluralist, ideological impacts. The Catholic Church’s power is soft power – that which produces outcomes through argumentative, spiritual persuasion and co-optation through ideas (Nye Jr. 2004). The ideological concerns the need to reform the current world order towards the image of the biblical injunction to become a channel of world peace and to deliver the meek and materially destitute from want. The guiding orientation is always to be in accord with the favor of the biblical God, instead of earthly sovereignty’s obeisance to the national interest and the secular constitution. We can then turn to estimate the roles of the Catholic Church in terms of it serving as a model of managing centripetal versus centrifugal tensions; enlarging the normative spaces in IR; and the deployment of Faith

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and Hope as values in international interactions and global society. The Catholic Church's "actor-ness" (its unique brand of agency) fits the mould of a *globalizing* world rather than a strictly *international* order. While the Holy See occupies the internationally recognized seat of sovereignty in the Vatican City State, the Catholic Church is a collective actor that transcends the minuscule territory of the Vatican. This must be made clear from the start.

## Centripetal versus Centrifugal Forces: Church Consistency across Time and Space

The history of the Catholic Church is synonymously the story of displacing local beliefs in transcendental deities, and refocusing those very spiritual beliefs in the direction of a singular Christian God. Alternatively, converting the heathen could also mean reconciling pre-existing local beliefs in God with an updated Christian consensus. This historical trajectory is represented by the Catholic Church's recurring refrain in calling upon its adherents to preach 'the Good News' of spiritual salvation across the generations and societies. On paper, this is easier stated than practiced. A check with the history of the Catholic Church reveals an endless series of struggles to constitute meaning between prophets and their rivals; masters of interpretation and their apostles; communities of new converts and the apostles who carried on the work of Jesus Christ after his Ascension. Indeed, the entire series of Chapters and Letters that comprise the Acts of the Apostles within the New Testament section of the Holy Bible offers a precursor of the ideological struggles of the Cold War, and perhaps, of global governance today. Just as the Church struggled to communicate a consistent interpretation of the rites of the Celebration of the Mass, and the praxis of performing acts of self-abnegation, global governance in the areas of carbon emissions, reforestation and human rights protections require strenuous efforts at persuading *local* governments and citizens to change local practices that injure *global* standards, and then to conform to externally-negotiated best practices. In this regard, it is not surprising that Pope Benedict XVI has inveighed against deviations from core Catholic values and rites, while Francis, the current pope, has called for a return to compassion for the less materially endowed and physically disadvantaged (Allen 2005, 174-191).

## Enlarging Normative Spaces in IR

The foreign policy of the Vatican—or more appropriately, the Holy See—is in fact the ideal vehicle—especially one that is recognized within secular intergovernmental organizations as deserving of representation and voice like other sovereign states—for the Catholic Church's mission of enlarging the normative spaces in international relations. Where secular states often shield their actions behind a sectional cause under the label of 'national interest', the Holy See is more than willing to declare its position in the reverse, for it represents the moral position of the Catholic Church's one billion faithful lay persons and clerics. The 1965 statement of the Second Vatican Council, 'The Church in the Modern World', is worth quoting to illustrate this self-appointed mission:

Though mankind is often stricken with wonder at its own discoveries and its power, it often raises anxious questions about the current trend of the world, about the place and role of man in the universe, about the meaning of its individual and collective strivings, and about the ultimate, destiny of reality and of humanity. Hence, giving witness and voice to the faith of the whole people of God gathered together by Christ, this council can provide no more eloquent proof of its solidarity with, as well as its respect and love for the entire human family with which it is bound up, than by engaging with it in conversation about these various problems....To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel (Vatican City State 1965, 2-3).

In light of this, the Vatican has offered itself as an intermediary for various interstate disputes, and has vociferously participated at United Nations (UN) organized conventions on population policy, women's roles in development and disarmament. On virtually all the issues concerning family planning, women's rights and contraception, the Vatican has even found common cause with many Arab governments (Chong and Troy, Holy See and the United Nations 2011)! On the occasion of attending Benedict XVI's inaugural mass in 2005 on behalf of the United States of America, Governor Jeb Bush commented that his brother, President George W. Bush, met with Pope John Paul II thrice, and hence 'this is more than symbolism. It reflects the importance of the Holy See as a moral voice in world affairs. The president looks forward to the same relationship with Benedict XVI, in advancing social justice, freedom, and democracy around the world' (Allen 2005, 192). This bilateral friendship did not stop Benedict XVI from

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consistently criticizing Operation Iraqi Freedom as lacking in the popular legitimacy that should only have been derived through the UN though. In Benedict's own words, 'the concept of preemptive war does not appear in the [Catholic] Catechism' (Allen 2005, 193). Of course, Benedict has also riled some Islamic leaders by criticizing the use of violence in resolving inter-faith differences. The Jewish Diaspora and the Israeli government have also accused the Vatican of not being sufficiently forthcoming about the Church's complicity in the Nazi-engineered Holocaust of World War II and other forms of ingrained anti-Semitism (Chong 2010, 395). On the other hand, Pope Benedict XVI has openly endorsed the need to create a separate Palestinian state, and he received Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority, at the Vatican (Independent Catholic News 2011). In striving to be even handed, Benedict had called on armed Palestinian factions to resist the use of violence even as he denounced Israeli curbs on the transit of Palestinians across their common border. Wading into ethical issues will always be a political minefield and it is not unexpected that the Vatican, as a sovereign entity, and the person of the pope, as head of the world's Catholics, have both borne the brunt of criticisms for making incorrect political statements on various international problems. Even on the sensitive issues of homosexuality and priest abuse of minors in certain parishes in North America, Europe, and South America, both Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI have been variously criticized for being tardy in 'cleaning house' and over delegating authority to national and local bishops in managing the investigations into the personal improprieties of certain clergy. Though some politicians in North America and Europe have pointed out that tectonic shifts on gay rights have actually been pioneered in the legislatures and courts of secular states, way ahead of the Vatican, Pope Francis has publicly declared his compassion for homosexual persons and much is awaited of his future pronouncements on updating Church doctrine on this particular dimension of universal human rights.

## **Faith and the Construction of Hope for the Neglected**

The position of the Catholic Church on poverty and development speaks directly to a globalizing world where permeable borders seem to have benefitted some populations more than others. In many Catholic homilies, the passages from the Book of Ecclesiasticus are widely cited since they offer a direct injunction to the Faithful to alleviate the material suffering of one's fellow humankind:

My son, do not cheat a poor man of the alms he asks, nor pass him by, with averted look, in his need. Wouldst thou despise his hungry glance, and add to the burden of his distress?...Nay, spurn thou never the plea of the afflicted; look thy suppliant in the face, and of his poverty take good heed; shall his baffled rage curse thee behind thy back? The curse of an embittered man does not go unheard; his Maker is listening...

To the common sort of men give friendly welcome; before an elder abate thy pride; and to a man of eminence bow meekly thy head. If a poor man would speak to thee, lend him thy ear without grudging; give him his due, and let him have patient and friendly answer (Holy Bible 1956, ch.4:1-8, 591-592).

All the preceding popes have consistently railed against the excesses of globalized capitalism; but it is the current pope, Francis, who has gone furthest in setting an example of embracing the materially marginalized. Francis has eschewed the trappings of high officialdom that normally accompany the status of being the sovereign of Vatican City; he has instead preferred to live outside of the official residence assigned to the pope, consumed simpler meals at the refectory table in his hostel and insisted on carrying his own bags—even to the point of making his own travel arrangements for movements within Italy. In July 2013, Francis created a furor amongst Vatican and Italian media by visiting a refugee camp in Lampedusa, Italy, simply to personally inquire after the plight of African refugees whose flimsy boats landed them there and into legal limbo. This event left Vatican officials embarrassed by the fact that Francis had failed to inform even his Prime Minister-equivalent, the Secretary of State of the Vatican, of his whereabouts and intent (Vallely, Pope Francis 2013b). Moreover, during his celebration of the Catholic World Youth Day in Brazil that same month, Francis proceeded to break protocol by randomly stopping to greet Catholics along his route of travel and visited a Rio de Janeiro slum known for its kidnappings and gang violence (Barchfield and Brooks 2013). Taking after his adopted Catholic saint, Francis of Assisi, who is known for his charity towards the poor, Francis has startled conservative Catholics by calling for a re-engagement with Liberation Theology, a philosophy of Catholicism that urges radical and practical solutions for improving the conditions of the destitute. He has even asked to re-read the tracts authored by some of the very Latin American theologians criticized by his

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predecessors (Vallely, Pope Francis 2013b). Moreover, in his various sermons at mass, Francis has called upon the Faithful to redouble their care for all who are severely disadvantaged by the pursuit of materialism. Turning to the Vatican officialdom to set an example, he has cut the stipends of the Cardinals serving in the Curia (the Vatican's equivalent of formal state bureaucracy) and asked that they reconsider themselves as servants of the Church of lay people instead of being controllers of a far flung super-state (Vallely, Pope Francis 2013b). Francis' ultimate gesture of humility to date is perhaps the practice of calling individual Catholics and non-Catholics around the world who have personally written to him to seek counsel amidst situations of distress. It is also evident that this is a pope who is savvy with social media and Web tools: he has attracted legions of followers on Twitter and has instructed his officials to extensively update the Vatican's official website ([www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)) with his latest pronouncements, along with video clips of recent masses he has conducted, including some from the World Youth Day.

The current focus on the breathtaking changes instituted by the present pope should not however detract from the consistent charity work carried out by Caritas Internationalis, Catholic Relief Services, Franciscans International, and the Communities of Sant' Egidio in delivering both long term and emergency aid to the poor and victims of natural disasters. These efforts are often less dramatic than interventions by the Red Cross, Oxfam, Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch, but no less vital for providing food parcels, basic medicine and 'peace education' amongst the young people living in conflict-stricken parts of Africa and Latin America. Often, these organizations rely on both the political support of the Vatican and the appeal of the pope to the Faithful to generously open their wallets year after year as a commitment to helping the downtrodden regardless of race, language and religion. Further afield, Catholic bishops working under right-wing authoritarian regimes have derived significant support from the Vatican for their work in the areas of speaking out against human rights abuses. The story of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador was perhaps the most tragic. Romero's association with Liberation Theology arose from his concern for the poor and politically persecuted, but he ultimately incurred the wrath of El Salvador's notorious right-wing assassination squads in 1980. Bishops Moswengo in the Congo and Carlos Felipe Ximenes Belo of then-East Timor also demonstrate the soft power of Catholic persistence in conciliating present and former enemies within their respective national societies (Chong and Troy, Holy See and the United Nations 2011, 352-353).

It is therefore appropriate for this short article to conclude that the role of the Catholic Church in international politics is actually one of transcendence. True to its Latin-derived name, to be *Catholic* is to aspire to become universal. To be Catholic in a practical sense in the era of globalization, is to demonstrate a political concern for those neglected sections of the population whose governments willfully or haplessly ignore. This particular role of the Catholic Church usefully invites those of us who are scholars of international politics to inquire of the substantive meaning of a 'globalizing' world with diminished borders. Are these to be borders of exclusion, or borders to be expanded to incorporate those who are left behind by a cosmopolitan materialism that inflicts violence upon humanity by delegitimizing the downtrodden? Of course, the Catholic Church as a body of Faithful followers and an institution of principles embodying a vision of the spiritual good life is not perfect, especially when the Vatican City State embodies Catholicism in a sovereign, neo-Westphalian paradigm. It suffers, like its fellow worldly sovereignties, the fallibilities of institutional double standards, but unlike the worldly states, this one unabashedly enjoys the privilege of consulting a Scriptural compass that hails from a normative idea of 'God'.

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**Alan Chong** is Associate Professor of International Relations at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. The author of *Foreign Policy in Global Information Space: Actualizing Soft Power* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), he specializes in the sociological study of international communication and the aspects of soft power that pertain to small states and middle powers in international politics. He can be contacted at [iscschong@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:iscschong@ntu.edu.sg).

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## About the author:

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