

The Francis Paradox: Papal Diplomacy in a Multipolar World

Written by John A. Rees

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

The Francis Paradox: Papal Diplomacy in a Multipolar World

<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/11/11/the-francis-paradox-papal-diplomacy-in-a-multipolar-world/>

JOHN A. REES, NOV 11 2015

The Religion Gap returns after a hiatus of several months. While we've been offline, world affairs have featured some high profile international activity by religious leaders, none more so than Pope Francis' recent diplomatic mission to Cuba and the United States. The reinvigoration of Vatican diplomacy since Francis became Pontiff in March 2013 has generated a variety of interpretations from 'radical authenticity' to spiritual overreach into the political realm. How can we add to the discussion from an IR perspective?

The Pope is the head of state of Vatican City, an internationally recognised micro-state. Diplomacy, understood as the preserve of states in the exercise of foreign policy agendas, is one way to analyse the Papacy as it defends and develops its transnational interests worldwide. Vatican diplomacy under Francis has thus far been defined by 'paradox'. In the context of world politics, paradox occurs when a political action leads to unexpected, even contradictory, outcomes in the international sphere. Before turning to Francis, we can note several ways that paradox has been used to analyse foreign policy in recent international history.

Cora Bell's idea of 'the Reagan paradox' (1989) was an attempt to explain how US President Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) could publicly condemn the Soviet Union as the 'evil empire', oppose arms accords and support an escalation of US defence spending, yet could also broker a peaceful, non-cataclysmic, resolution to the Cold War conflict. Employing Bell's framework, Michael Wesley later proposed 'the Howard paradox' to explain why Australian foreign policy under Prime Minister John Howard (1996-2007) could embrace pro-Western rhetoric and emphasise Australian cultural variance from Asia, and yet successfully progress relations with Asian states.

The paradox in both examples is that a diplomatic policy strongly emphasising *difference from* particular states – for Reagan, US ideological difference from the Soviets; for Howard, Australian civilizational difference from Asia – facilitated *engagement with* those same states.

In a similar way, Vatican diplomacy of recent years reflects what could arguably be known as 'the Francis paradox': on the one hand, Papal missions under Francis represent a religious difference to secular norms and interests, yet on the other hand, this same agenda has engaged secular publics and policy makers to a surprising degree.

Three excerpts from articles published in *The New Yorker* at the time of the Pope's visit to The Big Apple illustrate stages of the Francis paradox playing out in Western politics and beyond.

James Carroll writes:

No rock star, no President, no Secretary-General of the United Nations could do what the Pope is doing—and there's the point. Despite the broad secular assumption that the sun has set on the age of the papacy, the Vatican remains deeply integrated into the DNA of Western culture itself.

Where can the power to influence be found? It is the perennial political question. Not Bono, Barack or Ban, apparently, but Jorge Mario Bergoglio, former Archbishop of Buenos Aires and current Pontiff. For Carroll, even in

The Francis Paradox: Papal Diplomacy in a Multipolar World

Written by John A. Rees

this most secular of cities such as NYC, a visible sacral politics is indispensable. Francis as international statesman satisfies this requisite public yearning in ways that other leaders presently cannot.

However this engagement is occurring in the full knowledge of the challenges that a sacral agenda poses to secular political norms. In the context of observing Francis' popularity, Adam Gopnik writes:

And yet this Pope is no more a 'liberal' Pope than he is a secret Muslim Pope—he's the Pope. His historic role, which he is playing, is to be a very well-dressed critic of the liberal state in all its forms.

So how does the paradox hold? We turn first to our previous examples. Forecasting his election in Australia, Howard once declared that 'the times will suit me'. The Howard paradox arguably held because Australia's policy emphasis on difference with Asia (something that caused diplomatic offense on many occasions) occurred at a time when bilateralism was returning as a palatable (and culturally compatible) strategy for engaging with Asian states. Likewise, the Reagan paradox was sustained not because the zero-sum risks of Cold War security were any less, but because the world economy was revolutionizing thereby motivating the US to engage a pervasively inefficient and politically weak Soviet Union on a win-win reform agenda.

So it is that the times now suit Francis, the world's first Argentinian Pope, and in ways that make surprising sense to a secular West. Forged in the Cold War conflicts of the Western Hemisphere, where the pastoral was always political, Francis' diplomatic strategy seems intentionally aimed at the hope of a multipolar world where difference and engagement coexist, where 'left' and 'right' both matter yet neither is dominant. Francis, even as a traditional leader, seems to embody this and thus, at least for now, the paradox holds.

Consider the paradoxical texture of *Laudato Si'*, the papal encyclical on the global environment that attracted equally global attention from the moment it was released. The encyclical is addressed not only to the faithful but to 'every person living on this planet', and yet via a call to moral change that is rooted in 'the Church's social teaching'. Why does the latter (a religious moral tradition) not nullify the political appeal of the former (universal engagement)?

Katy Lederer's *New Yorker* post asks the same: 'Why Do We Need Pope Francis to Tell Us What We Know About the Climate?' Her answer provides insight into the individual impact that trusted religious leaders can still have in the diplomatic sphere:

What is hard but imperative, if we are to have any chance of changing course, is to become, as Francis describes it, 'painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening in the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it.'

About the author:

John A. Rees is Professor of Politics and International Relations at The University of Notre Dame Australia. His research interests are related to themes of religion and international development, religion and foreign policy and the IR discourse on post-secularism.