# The Realism of Holy See Foreign Policy

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There is a disconnect between what the Church says and how the Holy See acts. Theologically the Church views man as sinful. Yet, the latter is only able to resolve this disconnect by ignoring its own theology of the sinfulness of man. This article will argue that the Holy See does not transfer this theology of sin to its foreign policy. Instead it sees states, and their leaders, as value neutral. This division between individuals and states, between sinful and value neutral, enables the Holy See to conduct its foreign policy. Three inter-related points will be argued. Firstly, the Holy See broadly conforms to realism. Secondly, this realism allows it to have diplomatic relations with states whose actions and beliefs are fundamentally different to those espoused by the Church. Lastly, this realism facilities Holy See neutrality, which in turn allows it to act as a mediator.

This paper will be divided into five sections. The first section will explore the international status and principles of Holy See foreign policy. The second section will discuss how realism is contained within Holy See foreign policy. The third section, the main argument, will propose that sin, a major concept in the Church's understanding of man, is absent from how the Holy See conducts its diplomacy. This is despite the links between the Holy See and the Catholic Church. The fourth section will examine the Holy See as a neutral actor. The fifth section will conclude by claiming that the neutrality of the Holy See rests on the Holy See avoiding the issue of the sinful state in its foreign policy.

## Background

*Legality and principles of Holy See foreign policy*

The Holy See is the international legal personality of the Catholic Church. Sovereignty is vested in the Holy See and should not be confused with the Vatican City State, which was only created in 1929. This allows the Holy See to operate as if it were a state. The Holy See is not a state in the traditional sense, lacking territoriality but retaining sovereignty. Thus, its foreign policy is not exactly comparable to a state. Yet similarities do exist. It can send ambassadors, formally called apostolic nuncios, and it can enter into treaties with other states. It can receive ambassadors, but these are accredited to the Holy See, not the Vatican City State. Accordingly, the Catholic Church, through the Holy See, can act as if it were a state. Indeed, legal scholars have noted the separation between the Vatican City and the Holy See (Ireland, 1933). The Church acts within nations while the Holy See acts diplomatically. This distinction allows the Church to overcome theological differences, as will be explored later, in how the two entities act. It is the only religion with this ability in international relations.

As the Holy See is not a normal state its guiding principles are different and require brief explanation. Firstly, following catholic theology it believes in the unity of mankind. However, it accepts the division of states, and their sovereignty (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 2004). It is a firm supporter of international law and international institutions (Chong and Troy, 2011). Thus, it has great respect for the United Nations, which it sees as mirroring the theological unity of mankind. Thirdly, crucial to how the Holy See operates, is Catholic social teaching. This stresses the need for a more just world. It calls for a more holistic development of individuals and society through concepts like the universal common good and respect for property. The 1929 Lateran Treaty between Italy and the Holy See legally reaffirmed the existing Holy See policy of neutrality. Due to the different context of this article the distinction between the Church and the Holy See is relevant. The former views man as sinful and the latter views

States, led by men, as value neutral.

**Realism**

*Holy See foreign policy as realism*

Realism can be crudely summarised as being concerned with power and interests. This article posits that the Holy See, when using the lens of interests, is as realist as any other state. However, this realism is not a power politics realism but rather allows the Holy See to, in spite of its teachings, have diplomatic relations with states that fail to attempt to live by the Church's values.

Its realism can sharply conflict with the values the Church affirmed at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). This meeting of bishops sought to reconnect the Church to the world by formally accepting and promoting ideas of free speech, freedom of religion and support for democracy. Examples of the Holy See's relations with Cuba will be used to explore the tension between supporting these values and not condemning their non-implementation. This article contends that the realism practiced by the Holy See took precedence over the Church's expressed values. Often a disconnect between a state's foreign policy and its values would not be significant but due to its unique status and theology, this is noteworthy.

Holy See realism can be seen in its relations with Cuba. Schools and seminaries were either restricted or closed after 1959. Had the concept of sin been present in Holy See foreign policy thinking it would have been more likely to condemn the regime, or even break relations. Yet the Holy See has maintained diplomatic relations throughout the Castro government. Greater religious freedom began in the 1990s. However, the consequences of decades of repression has resulted in decimated numbers of priests and greatly diminished Mass attendance rates (Berry, 2015). Far from criticising the regime for its detention of political prisoners, lack of free speech and the right to vote, the Holy See has in some ways buttressed the regime. Some have argued the Holy See sought to 'avoid any political confrontation with the Castro regime, collaborate with Havana to combat the U.S.-led embargo, and support the Cuban government's incremental economic reforms' (Gaetan, 2012). In return for Holy See co-operation, the Church has been given greater freedom allowing it to restore its presence in anticipation of 'the possible post-Castro economic boom times to come' (Gaetan, 2012). Yet, this promise of a future where the Church can work could be accused of being nebulous and there are still restrictions on how the Church can act in schools and hospitals (Watts, 2015). Instead of challenging the government, the Holy See has followed a pattern of sustaining contact despite the Church's treatment by the regime. It has made compromises in order to both maintain relations with the regime and hope that by co-operating this will yield greater freedom for the Church. When Pope Francis visited Cuba in 2015 he failed to meet opponents of the regime. He followed the path laid out by his predecessors in the Holy See's relations with Communist regimes (Rodriguez and Michael, 2015). This long term strategy appears to have been successful (BBC, 2012). It has resulted in enhanced, if not total, freedom for the Church to operate (Gaetan, 2012). Yet this approach has resulted in tensions among Cuban Catholics (Sedensky, 2014). As happened in Poland, there is a 'risk the Church runs in a post-Castro future is that it will be castigated for having made a pact with the devil' (Gaetan, 2012). While discounting sin in states and consequently disregarding its own beliefs, the Holy See improved relations with Cuba. If only one of these have been practiced better relations may have been harder to achieve. Yet as discounting sin and disregarding its own beliefs are inseparable this was not possible. Only with both together could relations improve.

**Where Have All the Sinners Gone?**

The central contention of this article is that the Holy See has separated its theological view of individuals from states. A modus vivendi has been constructed which allows the Holy See to engage in foreign policy without traditional Catholic theology. It is as if the state is inanimate and not a territory comprising a government of individuals. The sinfulness of individuals is consistent in Church teaching. Nonetheless, in practice the Holy See has apparently ignored this from its interactions with states. Two examples will be used to illustrate this point, the Holy See's position on Syria and its position on the Russian invasion of Crimea.

Although small numbers of Catholics exist in Syria,, the Holy See is eager to maintain and support a Christian presence in the Middle East. Due to the threats faced by Christians in the region some senior prelates have warned of the region becoming a 'spiritual Disneyland' (Allen, 2011). Thus, the resolution of the crisis in Syria is important for the Holy See. In spite of this it appears reluctant to challenge states by using the moral authority that is often attributed to it to pressure them to end the war. In the case of Syria, the Holy See's aim is to bring about a peaceful resolution to the conflict through dialogue (Renaud-Komiya, 2013). In addition to this, the Holy See has condemned the use of force but 'without pointing the finger' (LaStampa.it, 2013).

Further evidence of this could be seen when Pope Francis announced the names of new cardinals in October 2016. In a highly unusual move, first on the list was the apostolic nuncio to Syria, Archbishop Mario Zenari. Historically nuncios serving in important embassies have been made cardinals either on retirement or recalled to take a position in Rome and then made a cardinal. His October 2016 announcement specifically stated that Zenari, would remain in his post. Typical of the symbolism of Holy See diplomacy, Pope Francis described Syria as 'beloved and martyred' (Francis, 2016). It cannot be stated definitively, but the gesture of Pope Francis may be to draw attention to the war in Syria. The pontiff did not apportion blame to who was causing Syria to be 'martyred'. Nor did he suggest specifically how to resolve the war. If sin existed in Holy See foreign policy with individuals and states treated in the same manner, it should have been more willing to condemn. As this was not the case it enabled the Holy See to maintain its neutrality by speaking in generalities. Holy See diplomacy disregarded its individual theology of sin and broke from its doctrine.

Holy See relations with Russia are equally complicated over the matter of Russian invasion of Crimea. Outside constrains were placed on the Holy See from the outset. Among the most prominent of these was the presence of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, who like the other 22 Eastern Catholic Churches, owe their allegiance to the pope. Concurrently the pope and his officials desire better relations with the Russian Orthodox Church.

A central contention of this article is that the Church has not mandated its theology onto Holy See foreign policy. As this article is a work of international relations the potentially significant theological implications will not be discussed. Despite this disconnect the subsequent section will posit that this divide is not only helpful but necessary for the Holy See's position as a neutral actor. Had a theology of sin been present in this case the Holy See would have had very different policies, yet as will be shown below, in doing so it would have jeopardised its neutrality.

**Holy See as Neutral Actor**

Mediation by the Holy See has a long history. Leo XIII, in 1885, resolved a dispute over the Caroline Islands between Spain and Germany (Araujo and Lucal, 2004, pp. 66–68). The Beagle Channel dispute is illustrative of Holy See success at least partly due to its foreign policy. Chile and Argentina had conflicting claims to islands around the Beagle Channel which would in turn give ownership of one of the few navigable routes into the Pacific Ocean. The row was long running with many attempts at resolution made. At the time of the papal mediation Chile was ruled by Augusto Pinochet, while Argentina was governed by a succession of military leaders and elected presidents. Amid growing tensions Pope John Paul II sent letters to the presidents of both nations, in keeping with Holy See neutrality, urging resolution to the conflict (Garrett, 1985). The pope's representative, Cardinal Samorè arrived in December 1978 and by January 1979 both sides agreed to reduce their military postures and seek peaceful resolution. In December 1980 the pope proposed a solution that was accepted by both parties and, though never made public, commanded widespread support, presumably because the pope was seen as a just and honest broker (Garrett, 1985). January 1984 brought a breakthrough with both parties agreeing to amended 1980 papal proposals with the accord signed in May 1985 in Rome. As scholars have concluded in other instances the Holy See was effective in its mediation efforts due to its perceived neutral status (Rooney, 2013, p. 209).

Without the absence of sin, the Holy See's ability to be seen as a neutral actor on the world stage would be sharply diminished. Furthermore, that the Holy See views states as value neutral is particularly useful in cases such as this. Chile was not a democracy at the time, it could be seen as imperative for the Holy See to be flexible in this regard. Furthermore, specific conditions existed in the Beagle case that made mediation easier, although not necessarily more likely. John Paul II had been elected in 1978, he took the initiative by writing to both leaders pressing for an end

to the dispute.

Some Catholic prelates have called for papal mediation to end the conflict in Syria ("Eastern Catholic Church head calls for Pope's mediation in Syria," 2012). Although the Holy See has called for an end to the violence it has not publicly offered its services. Part of the reason for its lack of involvement is that it has not been invited or offered. The Beagle example was relatively simply with only two parties. By contrast in Syria there are a host of state and non-state actors not just from the region but globally involved in the conflict. Such a task may be beyond the limited resources of Holy See diplomats. It wishes for peace but it might not be in the Holy See's interests to mediate. To do so might mean alienating a host of countries with whom it has good relations, or seeks better relations, with Iran in the former category and Russia in the latter.

Equally, this may be the reason for its similar absence of mediation in Crimea. Geopolitically it is not as complex, but the Holy See is eager to continue to improve its relations with both the Russian government and the Russian Orthodox Church. At the same time the existence of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, which is part of the Catholic Church, may place the Holy See in a difficult place. Together these might militate against any active Holy See mediation.

**Conclusion**

This article has argued three inter-related points. The first is that the Holy See adheres to realism. However, the realism of the Holy See differs from classical realism in that it succeeds in disconnecting the Church's theology to its foreign policy practice. Secondly, this allows it to have, in some cases, close relations with states that in many ways practice values that are fundamentally contradictory to what the Church wishes. In these states the Holy See has chosen to remain engaged with these regimes despite varying levels of restrictions placed on Catholicism. Finally, the article has contended that the Holy See's realism has enabled its neutral status. This status has enabled it to operate as a mediator in certain circumstances, notably between Chile and Argentina in the 1980s. It has been posited that this realism partly explains why it is not active in attempting to end the conflicts in Syria and Crimea.

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