

The Vatican's Role in Global Politics

Robert B. Shelledy

The Vatican is the head of the largest and most centralized religious organization in the world. It is also a sovereign state with diplomatic representatives across the globe. The Vatican, as a religious authority, often challenges secular authorities in areas of international economics, human rights, and security. Consistent with neosecularization theory, the Vatican has greater influence when its efforts resonate with secular justifications for particular policies. The Vatican's efforts in international debt relief, international religious freedom, and against the recent wars in Iraq demonstrate this finding. This has important implications in that we can expect religion to continue to play a significant role in international issues. The Vatican, in particular, provides an intellectually interesting and practically important interlocutor with global Islam.

Pope John Paul II is in declining health, and this has led to speculation as to who the next pope will be, who are the *papabili*, as the Italians say.¹ Of course, the personality and talent of the individual who occupies the Chair of Peter affects the direction of the Roman Catholic Church, but even so, the foreign policy of the Vatican² will continue in certain directions because of John Paul II's efforts and because of the change in direction that came about as a result of Vatican II.

The Catholic Church is not a political organization, but the pope is one of the few international figures who has a global platform from which to communicate his message. The pope's position makes him a moral authority in global politics and an important participant in the dialogue over the role of religion in international relations.

Religion is part of a larger crisis over authority in the international system. Religions present a transnational challenge to the traditional state claim of sovereignty in the Westphalian sense.³ Religion is especially threatening in situations where religious identity is a facet of state identity or is a motivating factor in political violence.⁴ As religions continue to force themselves into international relations, the question for scholars is whether these efforts represent a return to religious authority in global politics, whether they are epiphenomenal to other causes, or whether, as I assert, these efforts demonstrate competition among rival authorities.⁵

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This article has three sections. The first describes the idea of neo-secularization and its implications for international relations. The second provides a brief history of the Vatican's involvement in issues of international economics, conflict, and human rights. Finally, I draw some conclusions regarding the influence of the Vatican in global politics.

Religious Authority and Neo-secularization

The Vatican is the head of the world's largest and most centralized religious organization, and it is arguably the single most important religious actor in the world. Its unique position in global politics as a sovereign state allows it to exchange diplomatic representatives with 173 states and participate in 48 international and regional organizations.⁶ In addition, the Vatican has permanent observer status at the United Nations.⁷

The Vatican's position as the hierarchical head of the Roman Catholic Church has no counterpart in Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Protestantism, or Judaism. Over one billion people, 17 percent of the people in the world, are under the spiritual jurisdiction of the pope. As such, the Vatican provides a useful lens through which to study religious authority in world politics.

Beginning most notably with the 1979 Iranian revolution, religion and religious groups have forced themselves onto the international political agenda by challenging secular authorities.⁸ The fact that religion is part and parcel of the struggle over authority in the post-Cold War world should come as no surprise, because religion has historically been the most prevalent form of legitimation for both obedience to and critique of political authorities.⁹ This continuing role of religion has surprised many international relations scholars who tend to describe the influence of religious organizations in terms of secularization.¹⁰

Secularization theory's primary thesis is the differentiation and privatization of religion. *Differentiation* is the social process whereby different aspects of human activity develop their own internal logics and specialized institutions play a greater role in these separate spheres. Secularization theorists predicted that as differentiation proceeded with the separation of religion from other activities, the importance of religion in social life would diminish and gradually disappear from the public square. If religion survived at all, it would be only as a private matter.

Despite its broad influence, secularization theory has not panned out empirically. Many scholars, especially sociologists in the United States, now question the whole concept. However, neosecularists argue that despite religion's ability to resist privatization, religion continues to separate from other spheres of human activity leading to the diminishing, but not disappearing, significance of religion at a societal level.¹¹ In a thoroughly differentiated world, religion is now just one of many different sectors and can no longer claim the primacy it once did; in other words, the societal scope of religious authority is narrowing. Neosecularization theory predicts that religious elites' capacity to exercise authority over other institutional

spheres will decline and religion's influence will be limited to issues within its own sphere.

Neo-secularization's insight on the continuing role for religious authority in the modern world is a key one; however, neosecularization's focus on the differences across issue areas is misplaced. Within the highly differentiated global structure, instead of differences *across* issue areas, I would argue the relationship *within* issue areas between religious and non-religious ideas is more important in determining the influence of religious authority. International actors will not defer to religious authority, but religious authority combined with a secular idea may be influential. In other words, when the religious message of a particular organization resonates with a compatible secular belief, then that religious organization will be influential.¹²

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The Vatican's Issues

The Vatican spends most of its time on internal Church matters such as appointment of bishops, debates over theological points, and participation in religious rituals. Even so, the Vatican also actively participates in world politics. The global reach of the Roman Catholic Church exposes it to a wide array of political issues, but like other international actors, the Vatican focuses on a few key matters. John Paul II has focused his papacy on numerous issues, including the culture of life, marriage, and the family, but in international politics three stand out: human rights, economics, and war and peace issues. One can expect his successor to do the same. The Vatican sees itself as a voice for human dignity, the poor, and for peace.

International Debt Relief

The most recent influential activity of the Vatican in international economic issues was its promotion of international debt relief. The Vatican called for debt forgiveness as part of the scripturally based Jubilee Year in 2000. It put substantial effort into debt relief consistent with its post-Vatican II solidarity with the poor and with the ideas of the Jubilee Year.¹³

Beginning in 1985, the Vatican took several significant steps to highlight its concern over the Latin American debt crisis of the 1980s and the international debt crisis of the 1990s. These included a papal speech before the United Nations General Assembly and the issuance of *At the Service of the Human Community* (1987). This publication initiated a campaign by the Vatican to seek debt forgiveness and led to the Vatican working with states, international financial institutions (IFIs), and global civil society in

² The “Holy See” is the official name of the Vatican and includes both the pope and the Roman Curia, but I will use the more common nickname to refer to the Holy See in this article. The Roman Curia itself includes nine congregations, eleven councils, three tribunals, the Secretariat of State and several other offices. For an interesting overview see Thomas Reese, *Inside the Vatican: The Politics and Organization of the Catholic Church* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

³ Susanne Hoerber Rudolph and James Piscatori, eds., *Transnational Religion and Fading States* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997) and Timothy A. Byrnes, *Transnational Catholicism in Postcommunist Europe* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

⁴ R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000); Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); and Jeff Haynes, “Transnational Religious Actors and International Politics,” *Third World Quarterly* 22 (April 2001): 143–158.

⁵ John Ruggie, “Territoriality and Beyond: Problematizing Modernity in International Relations,” *International Organization* 47, no. 1 (1983): 139–174, and David A. Lake, “The New Sovereignty in International Relations,” *International Studies Review* 5, no.3 (September 2003): 303–323.

⁶ In comparison, the United States maintains diplomatic relations with about 180 countries and maintains relations with more than 70 international organizations; Canada maintains diplomatic relations with over 100 countries.

⁷ Several groups, including Catholics for Free Choice, started the cleverly named See Change campaign to revoke the Vatican’s status at the U.N.

⁸ To its credit, the *SAIS Review* (Volume 18, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 1998)) was one of the first academic journals to begin the small, but growing literature on religion and international relations. For other examples, see Daniel Philpott, “The Challenge Of September 11 To Secularism In International Relations,” *World Politics* 55 (October 2002): 66–95; Jonathan Fox, “Religion as an Overlooked Element of International Relations,” *International Studies Review* 3, no. 3 (2001): 53–74; Scott Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations* (New York: Palgrave, forthcoming); Douglas Johnston, *Faith-based Diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); John L. Esposito and Michael Watson eds., *Religion and Global Order* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000); Susanne Hoerber Rudolph and James Piscatori, eds., *Transnational Religion and Fading States* (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1997); and Peter L. Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington, D.C. : Ethics and Public Policy Center ; Grand Rapids, Mich. : W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1999).

⁹ For an excellent book on the role of religion in the construction of the modern world see Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

¹⁰ Daniel Philpott points out that in a period of nineteen years from 1980–1999, four of the major journals in international relations only contained six articles that featured religion. See Daniel Philpott, *Revolutions in Sovereignty: How Ideas Shaped Modern International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹¹ Mark Chaves, “Secularization as Declining Religious Authority,” *Social Forces* 72 no. 3 (1994): 749–774; Mark Chaves, “Religious Authority in the Modern World,” *Society* 40 (March/April 2003): 38; and David Yamane, “Secularization on Trial: In Defense of a Neosecularization Paradigm,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36 no.3 (1997): 109–122.

¹² For a general discussion of the resonance of frames, see Roger Payne, “Persuasion, Frames and Norm Construction,” *European Journal of International Relations* 7, no. 1 (2001): 37–61 and Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

¹³ J. Bryan Hehir, “Papal Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy* 78 (1990): 26–48. The religious idea of a Jubilee Year is a time dedicated to God during which one acts in a different way, including forgiving debts, and the Vatican advocated debt forgiveness as part of its general