

VATICAN-CHINA UPDATE

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1.

The Holy See, China and the question of moral authority.

12th October 2020

UCA News - www.ucanews.com

The Holy See, China and the question of moral authority

Portraying the papacy uniquely through its moralistic features is not only partial but dangerous

By: Michel Chambon

While the 2018 provisional agreement between China and the Vatican should soon be renewed, numerous voices are raising concerns and critiques against it.

In light of the situation in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, many do not understand how the pope can be so vocal about social issues around the world and say nothing

about injustices perpetrated in the Middle Kingdom. In their view, if Rome simultaneously turns blind eyes to the violations of human rights and religious freedom occurring in China and extends its provisional agreement with Beijing, then it loses its moral authority.

Clearly, what is happening in China is concerning. Much evidence confirms that Catholic clergy are intensely pressured to join the state-controlled Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. Over the past few months, Beijing has severely denied the autonomy of the Hong Kong region and force has been used to silence its pro-democracy activists. On the other side of the country, the Chinese government is deploying various programs to sterilize and abort a vast number of Muslims living in Xinjiang. These facts cannot be treated lightly.

Nonetheless, I want to reflect on the argument of moral authority per se. Although no one would deny that the significance of the Holy See precisely lays in its moral authority, I want to highlight the risks of reducing the Holy Father to a universal moral witness. Surely, the Christian faith is about aspiring toward ethical conduct and the common good. Yet portraying the papacy uniquely through its moralistic features is not only partial but dangerous. I argue that it reinforces a series of problematic assumptions and distorts the actual function of the Holy See. Thus, I offer to look at the question of moral authority from four different angles, each of them highlighting one layer of assumptions that Christians should carefully question.

First, arguments on papal moral authority must be evaluated from the angle of political science. Historians have claimed that since the loss of the papal state, the pope lacks what constitutes the main source of state power: a territory and its related revenues. In their view, the Holy See is not a conventional sovereign state; its legitimacy and capacity to intervene in world affairs rests primarily on its moral authority.

The underlying political theory is problematic in many ways. By opposing the specificities of the Vatican City to most nation states, this discourse implies that state power finds its strength in two primordial origins: material values (natural resources, population, means of production) and immaterial values (political ideology, history). But how does this theory fit in the separation of powers formulated by Montesquieu? Are the legislative, judicial and executive powers material or immaterial?

If we turn to Marshall Sahlins' anthropological analysis of "big man" and chief, or to Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of education, we also see that the size of a society, its kinship system and its legitimized forms of violence determine the type of political structures it establishes. Through the creation of permanent offices, the accumulation of individual prestige or the establishment of lineages, human societies use a wide range of cultural tools to shape authority and control their members. Therefore, state power is neither monolithic nor binary.

Surely, the Holy Father, like the Dalai Lama and the Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayed, holds moral authority. But he is also the head of state of a sovereign entity, the Holy See, exchanging ambassadors with more than 180 countries. He is at the center of a network of 1.3 billion faithful and holds significant authority over the worldwide Catholic clergy. Benefiting from centuries of historical continuity, he protects priceless historical archives and masterpieces. In other words, the pope is far more than a moral figure. Those who present him through this feature only are no more subtle — or wise — than Joseph Stalin, who reduced the Vatican to its military divisions.

Second, the emphasis on moral authority must be questioned from the perspective of religious studies. In fact, a significant part of Western modernity is based on a secular tendency reducing religion to a moral quest. For secular social scientists, humans are religious beings because they want to encourage good behavior. Thus, religions are man-made products to reinforce and absolutize the code of conduct of a society.

But this approach reduces the richness of religious phenomena. Nowadays, a wide range of scholarship points out how the modern moralization of religions fails to address the tremendous diversity of religious traditions and their deities. For instance, the role played by Jesus Christ in what has been called Christianity is not the same as the one of the Bodhisattva within Buddhism, the Quran within Islam, or Taishan within the Chinese popular religion.

Furthermore, this secular discourse refuses to take into consideration deities that are not necessarily good or bad. In the case of the Chinese traditional pantheon, for example, we see deities located in heaven or hell who are not necessarily good or bad by nature. Rather, they are ambiguous and versatile because morality is not the core issue. It is efficacy and capacity to act upon things that matter.

In other words, religions should not be reduced to a mere question of morality. Of

course, they all engage with ethical dilemmas. But they do more than that. And so does the Holy See! Its mission is broader than what secular discourses claim. Let us not forget that the more we talk about abstract and universal morality, the less we look at the example of Jesus dealing with the complexity of concrete situations.

This brings me to my third point, our underlying understanding of morality. When we constantly present the Vatican as a moral witness, what do we mean — and imply — by morality? Clearly, the risk is to refer to ethics as a self-explanatory reality. Morality is assumed as something about good behavior, a universal truth that everyone knows.

These assumptions are once again problematic. If we reduce morality to a set of assumed rules and principles that theoretically define what good conduct is, who gets to formulate and hierarchize them? Can the Holy See maintain diplomatic relationships with a state applying the death penalty and possessing nuclear weapons? We cannot ignore that the formulation of moral principles is always related to those who articulate them. In other words, ethical norms are rooted in the anthropological and theological worldviews of their formulators. Some universal norms may still exist, but their exact number, nature, and mutual hierarchy remain under question.

So, we need to be clear. Moral conduct is about the implementation of ethical judgements and principles into concrete circumstances and individuals' existence. In the Gospel, Jesus constantly engages with the tensions that lay between universal laws and particular situations. Without denying the significance of moral principles that partially reflect the universal calling of the Father, Jesus reveals how moral judgments and behaviors can never be reduced to a “one size fits all” model. This legalism does not meet a Christian moral ideal.

Therefore, when concerns about papal moral authority are repeated ad nauseam, they do not only push the Holy See into some ivory tower — or golden prison — but depart from the Gospel. The moral authority of the pope is not a moral superiority. In a church filled with the Spirit of Christ, the letter of law is not enough.

This leads me to my fourth and last point. It relates to the kind of ecclesiology implied by an overemphasis on the moral authority of the Vatican. When we present the Holy Father as a universal moral witness, telling everyone what the good is, which kind of church are we advocating for? Indeed, those who insist on

the universal scope of the pope's moral authority take the risk of turning him into a ubiquitous pastor. With this approach, the Holy Father stands as a universal priest leading every local community no matter its specific reality and dynamics. Then, the Supreme Pontiff is not first and foremost the bishop of Rome serving the communion of the Church, he incarnates the truth.

The problem with this 19th century ecclesiology overemphasizing the universal jurisdiction of the pope is that it sidelines the responsibilities of local bishops and priests who are in charge of their flocks. Also, this pyramidal vision of the Church, appealing to certain Catholics and non-Catholics, has been challenged and pondered by the teaching of Vatican II. The bishop of Rome does not replace the college of bishops. Rather, he is the servant of the servants of God. His ministry is to serve the bishops of the Church and to protect their communion. In this ecclesial model, the supreme authority of the Church is in the hand of the college of bishops who work in communion with the bishop of Rome and who collectively succeed the college of the apostles.

Of course, the Vatican can still step in on many local issues of the Church and world politics. The pope constantly denounces particular injustices and worldwide structures of sin. Yet Vatican II has been clear about the fundamental duty of the Holy See. It does not replace local pastors but supports and exhorts them. Its primary responsibility is to sustain the communion of bishops.

Having identified the political, religious, moral and ecclesiological ambiguities surrounding discourses on papal moral authority, we can now return to the Sino-Vatican agreement. Is the Vatican losing its moral authority by renewing an agreement with Xi Jinping's China?

Once again, we must admit that in front of the political repression surrounding religious activities in China, no one can truly be enthusiastic about the Sino-Vatican agreement. Threats on Chinese believers and civil society are not going to disappear overnight. But if we refuse dialogue with Beijing and trash small steps like the provisional agreement, what are the alternatives? Are we letting Chinese Catholicism be represented by those who decide to live their faith underground only? Considering how the state is treating underground sectarian movements, would this move be wise and moral? And what about those who are truly patriotic, faithful to the Catholic Church and the pope, and proud of the socioeconomic progress of their country?

The Sino-Vatican agreement shows that in the complex politico-religious reality of China, the Holy See focuses on what Vatican II has defined as its core mission. With this agreement, the Holy Father seeks to build communion among bishops and to restore the unity of the Church. Despite complaints from those who apply either a 19th century ecclesiology or a secular and politicized approach, the pope and his curia are focusing on Chinese bishops. It is a difficult choice but in perfect coherence with the council. Yet many problems and ethical dilemmas remain but the Holy See has no magical solution. The pope is not a magician.

In conclusion, while well-intended warnings on papal moral authority deserve attention, we cannot let them define the action of the Holy See. Once again, what is at stake with the Sino-Vatican dialogue is the sovereignty of the Church. Behind the renewal of the agreement per se, the core issue still is to find a way to express and enact the subtle autonomy of the Church — the body of Christ the only Lord — in Asia and elsewhere. This is what the bishop of Rome in line with Vatican II seeks to defend. And this search of sovereignty — with its economic, political, theological and ecclesiological ramifications — is a never-ending task.

* Michel Chambon is a French Catholic theologian and anthropologist. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official editorial position of UCA News.

2.

Parolin: ‘The agreement with China sought by all recent popes’

3rd October 2020

Vatican News www.vaticannews.va Parolin: ‘The agreement with China sought by all recent popes’ The Vatican Secretary of State is in Milan for the 150th anniversary of PIME’s presence in China. “It is necessary to continue the dialogue so it can bear greater fruit,” the Cardinal says. “In these two years, I have noticed signs of growing closeness among Chinese Catholics who have long been divided on many issues.” By Vatican News The Provisional Agreement the Holy See signed with the People’s Republic of China, concerning the appointment of bishops, “is only a starting point,” which already has brought some results. “It is necessary to continue the dialogue so it can bear more substantial fruit,” said Cardinal Pietro

Parolin, the Vatican's Secretary of State, in the opening speech at a conference on "Another China: Time of Crisis, Time of Change." The conference, organized by the PIME Missionary Centre in Milan, celebrates 150 years of presence of the missionaries of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME) in China.

Overcoming misunderstandings In his address, Cardinal Parolin describes the history of the Church in China, and shows that since the time of Pius XII, the Holy See has "felt the need for dialogue, even if the circumstances of the time made it very difficult." The Cardinal explained that all the Popes from St Paul VI to Pope Francis have sought what Benedict XVI described as the overcoming of a difficult situation, "of misunderstandings and incomprehension" that did not benefit "either the Chinese Authorities nor the Catholic Church in China." Pope Benedict XVI himself, Parolin said, approved "the draft agreement on the appointment of bishops in China," which was only signed in 2018. A genuinely pastoral agreement Cardinal Parolin clarified the Holy See's position by once again rejecting political readings of a genuinely pastoral agreement. "Some misunderstandings have arisen," he said. Some of these, he explained, come from attributing objectives to the Provisional Agreement that simply do not apply to it; others, from linking the Agreement to events in the life of the Church in China that are foreign to it, or to political issues that have nothing to do with the Agreement. "I remind you once again that the Agreement of 22 September 2018 concerns exclusively the appointment of bishops," Cardinal Parolin said.

Chinese Bishops in communion with Bishop of Rome The Secretary of State acknowledged "the existence of many other problems concerning the life of the Catholic Church in China. But it has not been possible to deal with them all together," he said. "We know that the road to full normalization will still be a long one, as Benedict XVI foresaw in 2007. The question of the appointment of bishops, however, is of particular importance. It is, in fact, the problem that has caused the Catholic Church in China the most suffering in the last sixty years." "For the first time in many decades," said Parolin, "today all the Bishops in China are in communion with the Bishop of Rome." Those who know the history of the Church in China, he continued, "know how important it is that all Chinese bishops are in full communion with the universal Church." Until two years ago, the possibility of new illegitimate ordinations had always remained open. For this reason, the Secretary of State emphasized, it was necessary "to face and resolve this delicate problem definitively" with an agreement whose aim is to "help the local Churches enjoy greater freedom, autonomy and organization, so that they can dedicate themselves to the mission of proclaiming the Gospel and contributing to the integral development of the person and society." Only a starting point Emphasizing that the Provisional Agreement is only "a starting point," Cardinal

Parolin noted that nonetheless, “in these two years,” he has seen “signs of growing closeness among Chinese Catholics, who have long been divided on many issues.” This is important, he said, precisely because the Pope has, in a special way, entrusted to the Catholic community in China “the commitment to living an authentic spirit of reconciliation among brothers and sisters, making concrete gestures that help to overcome the misunderstandings of the past, even of the recent past. In this way the faithful, the Catholics in China, will be able to bear witness to their faith, a genuine love, and also open themselves to dialogue between all peoples and to the promotion of peace.”

In Traditional Chinese:<https://www.vaticannews.va/zht/vatican-city/news/2020-10/parolin-the-agreement-with-china-sought-by-all-recent-popes.html>

In Simplified Chinese:<https://www.vaticannews.va/zh/vatican-city/news/2020-10/parolin-the-agreement-with-china-sought-by-all-recent-popes.html>

3.

Why is the US upset with the Vatican's deal with China?

25th September 2020

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Why is the US upset with the Vatican's deal with China?

Washington says the Holy See is endangering its moral authority with its Beijing pact

By: Ben Joseph

What the Vatican and Beijing started as an experiment has turned out to be successful by their own standards.

Officials in Rome and Beijing are now confidently doing their homework for an extension of the 2018 Vatican-China deal on the appointment of bishops. The extension is expected to be signed next month.

Caught in the new bonhomie between the Catholic Church and communist China are the US presidential election and Taiwan, which China claims as its own and vows to use force, if necessary, to annex it.

Since the deal, the Vatican has been noticeably silent on Taiwan, an island lying across the Taiwan Strait. Experts say the Church is working towards one unified Catholic Church in China in line with Beijing's "one China" policy.

The Donald Trump administration has strengthened engagement with Taiwan before the US presidential election in November.

High-profile US officials are visiting Taiwan and the latest entrant to the Republic of China, as Taiwan is formally known, is undersecretary for economic affairs Keith Krach, who is expected to clinch a US\$7 billion arms deal during his visit this week.

Under the Taiwan Relations Act, the US supplies arms to Taiwan. In the past 10 years, the US has announced more than \$23 billion in arms sales to Taiwan, according to a 2019 Department of Defense report.

The Vatican's new-found love for China has angered Washington, with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo going on the offensive last week in an article in First Things, a US-based religious publication. He decried "horrific" persecution of believers of all faiths in China. He wrote that many nations have expressed "revulsion" at "accelerating violations of human rights."

"The Vatican endangers its moral authority, should it renew the deal", he added on his Twitter account.

Thousands of conservative Catholics in the US, who are unhappy with Pope Francis' policies, are also upset about the China deal. Could Trump be aiming to get their votes in the presidential election?

The Vatican was taken aback by the comments of Pompeo, who is due to visit the Holy See next week.

Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Brisbane, Australia, said Pompeo's comments were an "attempt to press-gang the Holy See into a questionable domestic/electoral agenda playing itself out on the international stage."

The Vatican is no mood to relinquish its hard-earned breakthrough with Beijing, though church officials acknowledge that the pact on bishops has not put an end to religious persecution in China.

The Vatican just cannot abandon a deal that came after three decades of lackluster talks. The Holy See inked the historical "provisional" pact with Beijing on Sept. 22, 2018, but its details have not been made public.

The key attraction of the agreement was the role set aside for the Vatican to have a say in appointing Catholic bishops in China with a papal mandate.

China's roughly 12 million Catholics are split between a government-run association, whose clergy are selected by the atheist Communist Party, and an unofficial underground church loyal to the Holy See.

One year after the deal was struck, Chinese and Vatican foreign ministers met publicly for the first time in seven decades at an international event, indicating the "experimental deal" was on the right track.

Beijing welcomed the extension of the deal as it was facing criticism from all corners for its human rights violations against the Tibetans and Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang province and a sweeping security law in Hong Kong.

A spokesman for China's foreign ministry claimed last week that the interim deal with the Vatican was "implemented successfully" and "mutual trust and consensus" between the two parties have increased.

Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican's secretary of state, admitted that Pope Francis' aim is to "normalize the life of the Church as much as possible" in China. The cardinal, however, said the results "have not been particularly striking" so far.

Diplomatic ties between Beijing and the Holy See ceased in 1951, two years after the communists seized power in China. Their efforts to patch things up were hampered by the Vatican's diplomatic ties with Taiwan, considered by Beijing a breakaway province awaiting reunification.

No wonder the Vatican was tightlipped when there was a call by international leaders to include Taiwan at World Health Organization assembly meetings after it successfully kept the coronavirus at bay at the beginning of this year.

It is obvious that the Trump administration has domestic political interests in criticizing the Vatican-China deal.

* The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official editorial position of UCA News.

4.

Vatican-China pact has made Church healthier, says official

23rd September 2020

UCA News - www.ucanews.com

Vatican-China pact has made Church healthier, says official

China asserts that Taiwan is part of its territory but says it is positive about advancing Sino-Vatican relations

UCA News reporter, Hong Kong

China is poised to renew its agreement with the Vatican on bishops' appointments that has helped the Church grow healthier in the communist country, a Chinese official has claimed.

"Thanks to the joint efforts of both sides, the agreement has been implemented smoothly, and the Catholic cause in China has developed healthier," said Wang Wenbin, a spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

He was responding to a question at a press conference in Beijing on Sept. 22. A

reporter from Japan's Kyodo news agency asked if the Vatican's relations with the Republic of China (Taiwan) would affect future China-Vatican relations.

Wang responded by reiterating that Taiwan is part of China and should not be considered an independent country.

"First of all, I would like to emphasize that Taiwan is an inseparable part of China's territory, so please use the expression 'Taiwan Region of China,'" he said.

The Vatican and China will continue to maintain close communication and consultation while promoting the process of improving relations, he added.

"There is good communication between China and the Vatican, and the Chinese side is sincere and positive about advancing Sino-Vatican relations and open and welcoming to the two sides to carry out exchanges," Wang said.

The press conference came on the second anniversary of the signing of the pact. It expires in October, two years after being implemented, said Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin last week.

History of issues

The pact came after three decades of negotiations and is seen as the first diplomatic document signed by the Vatican and China since 1951 when they severed ties.

The Vatican's relations with China became complicated after the Holy See became the only European state to have ties with the Republic of China in 1942.

The Holy See recognized the Republic of China as the representative of China in 1942 and appointed Archbishop Antonio Riberi as its representative in 1946.

But in 1949, the Republic of China's government moved to Taipei on the island of Taiwan. The Holy See mission remained on the mainland, aiming to continue relations with the communist regime of the People's Republic of China.

However, following political developments, Archbishop Riberi was expelled in 1951. In the following year, the Holy See ended relations with Beijing and resumed ties with the government in Taiwan, considering it as China.

In 1971, Taiwan ceased to be a member of the United Nations. Though the Holy

See still recognizes Taiwan, it has no nuncio — Vatican ambassador — in Taipei. Only a chargé d'affaires heads the mission. Taipei, however, maintains an embassy in Rome.

Only 15 countries, including the Vatican, maintain diplomatic ties with Taiwan.

Observers say the thawing Vatican-China relations could lead to the Vatican re-establishing its embassy in Beijing, resulting in the Vatican derecognizing Taiwan as an independent nation.

Archbishop Thomas Chung An-zu of Taipei in July said such a development could happen soon if the mainland Chinese government is more open-minded and receptive toward the Church.

Taiwan rules out such a possibility, saying the Vatican-China pact is religious and has no diplomatic connotations.

Taiwan "has continued to receive assurances from the Vatican that the agreement on bishops with China is religious, not about diplomatic relations, and asked us not to worry," Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Joanne Ou told media last week.

The Vatican continued to downplay the pact's diplomatic fallout, asserting its concern was only to normalize church life in the communist nation.

The Vatican's interest in China "is to normalize the life of the Church as much as possible, to ensure that the Church can live a normal life, which for the Catholic Church is also to have relations with the Holy See and with the pope," Cardinal Parolin told media on Sept. 14.

5.

**No easy solutions: a response to Weigel's critique of the
Vatican-China deal.**

17th September 2020

National Catholic Reporter
COMMENTARY

No easy solutions: a response to Weigel's critique of the Vatican-China deal

By: Massimo Faggioli

Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin confirmed Sept. 14 that it is the intention of the Holy See to renew its two-year agreement with the Chinese government over the appointment of Catholic bishops in the communist country.

Parolin was speaking to journalists at the margins of a commemorative event for the late Cardinal Achille Silvestrini, an architect of the Vatican's strategy during the later Cold War-era of Ostpolitik, or engaging in dialogue with Eastern European communist authorities.

The Vatican-China agreement of September 2018 is the most important diplomatic success of Pope Francis' pontificate and of Parolin's tenure as secretary of state. The bilateral talks for its renewal are underway; their repercussions and the interest they spark are much higher than from other secret diplomatic talks involving the Holy See, given the danger of a new kind of cold war between China and the United States.

And, of course, in certain parts of the U.S. church, the prospect of the renewal of the agreement has caused consternation among proponents of a U.S.-centered worldview and a U.S.-centered Catholicism.

Among the most prominent critics is George Weigel, who wrote an Aug. 31 op-ed for The Washington Post — just the latest in a series of his articles in the last few years against the Holy See's opening to China. This article is important, in its own way, because it shows the faulty historical and theological assumptions guiding Weigel.

The first faulty assumption is that the historical precedent for the Vatican-China agreement, the Ostpolitik, was a failure. Weigel writes: "The failed Vatican Ostpolitik in Central and Eastern Europe during the 1960s and 1970s succeeded only in disabling and demoralizing local Catholic communities, while the Vatican itself was deeply penetrated by communist intelligence services."

This is a regularly recurring theme for Weigel, and it has become common in conservative leaning Catholic intellectual circles in the U.S. and recently also in Eastern Europe — part of the rejection of the post-Cold War world now being favored by anti-liberals in that part of the continent. (This was described recently

by Anne Applebaum in her book *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*.)

What Weigel's ideological interpretation of recent church history fails to recognize are the successes of the Ostpolitik. For example, communist authorities giving permission for Polish cardinals to participate at the two conclaves of 1978, with the second electing Polish Cardinal Karol Wojtyła as John Paul II.

The Helsinki Accords of 1975 were another major achievement of the Vatican Ostpolitik. They helped to provide a solid basis of legitimacy for the diplomatic service of the Holy See, which had been sometimes perceived as something leftover from the time of the Papal States.

Principle VII of the Helsinki Accords affirms the "respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief" and states that "the participating States recognize the universal meaning of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for which is an essential factor of the peace, justice and well-being."

The accords proved useful to protect forms of dissent in Eastern Europe, and they laid the foundations for the consequential diplomatic activity of John Paul II's pontificate: a major boon of that Vatican Ostpolitik which Weigel considers a failure.

The second faulty assumption is that Francis and Parolin's policy towards China can be compared with other diplomatic openings by the Vatican towards communist countries in the 20th century. There are a series of distinctions that need to be made here.

The contemporary Chinese regime is more about hegemony in the world than about communism: it's more about an idea of China reemerging as its former dynastic, imperial self (as it was centuries before the birth of Christ) than about Chairman Mao.

The goal of Ostpolitik was the survival of the Catholic Church in Europe, the historical cradle of Christianity, while the Vatican-China agreement takes place in a new global scenario where Christianity is in most countries a minority in a world of religious, cultural and political differences.

It's not about Europe and the Western hemisphere, but the global Catholic Church in the global world. In this sense, Wojtyla's post-World War II Poland is a totally misleading comparison. A more apt comparison is, for example, the position of the Catholic Church in India or Indonesia today or, even better, in China in the 17th and 18th centuries.

It is interesting to draw a parallel between religion and the economy. As Italian China expert Francesco Sisci wrote recently in *Asia Times*: "The previous Cold War was easy. The issue was business or no business: the West and its front were pro-business. The USSR and its allies believed business was the mother of all evils. Politics followed. [...] The present Cold War is subtler, and it's not about business or no business. It's about what kind of business with what politics."

The same can be said for religion. Xi Jinping's China is not about the official atheistic ideology of post-WWII Eastern European communist regimes. In Xi's China today, religion can thrive, but only as long as it doesn't challenge politics and helps politics.

The third faulty assumption concerns what we mean by the Vatican and the papacy. Weigel wrote that "the only power the Vatican has in 21st-century global politics is the moral authority that comes with the forthright defense of human rights for all."

This is only partially true. This month Catholics mark the 150th anniversary of that dramatic September 1870: the declaration of papal primacy and infallibility at Vatican Council I, the taking of Rome by the Italians and the collapse of the Papal States, and the eventual interruption of the council.

One of the hard lessons learned by the Holy See since 1870 is that papal diplomacy has to rely on the exercise of papal moral authority more than on the usual tangible instruments of state power.

On the other hand, the uncharted territory of the current disruption of the international order and the consequences this disruption causes on the landscape of global religions today makes more visible the uniqueness of the Holy See in dealing with international issues.

In other words, the moral authority of the papacy is different from other churches also because some instruments of state power are a key aspect of the activity of the

Holy See. (Think of the Holy See's diplomatic missions in almost every country in the world, the diplomatic missions accredited to the Holy See, its status as a permanent observer at the U.N., and its signature of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.)

As China expert Michel Chambon wrote in February 2018, before the Vatican-China agreement was announced: "when journalists and other activists frame this encounter [between the Vatican and China] as an issue about morality only, they indeed belittle the legal aspect of such dialogue. More or less consciously, they insidiously deny rights to the Holy See, and therefore to the Holy Father himself, to stand as a sovereign entity. In their eyes, the pope should only be a moral leader telling the world what 'the good' is about. This approach is highly problematic, and those who are Catholic should carefully question it."

For a brief period of time in 2014 I taught in Hong Kong, where I still have friends. It is distressing to see what is happening and could happen to that city and the church there, as well as to know what is happening to ethnic and religious minorities in other parts of China.

But as I wrote in the Chinese newspaper Global Times in February 2018, what must be considered is the long-term historical framework of the international activity of the Holy See and the pastoral goal of its diplomatic activity.

Being a Catholic Church in the global world today means difficult choices. What the Holy See and the papacy can do is limited, and acting responsibly means that there are no easy or simple solutions.

[Massimo Faggioli is professor of theology and religious studies at Villanova University. His most recent book is *The Liminal Papacy of Pope Francis: Moving toward Global Catholicity* (Orbis):

<https://www.orbisbooks.com/the-liminal-papacy-of-pope-francis.html>

Follow him on Twitter: @MassimoFaggioli.]

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6.

Pope signs with China

_____ *Please see below column*