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# Faith and Diplomacy: The Holy See as a Mediator in Interstate Conflicts

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## Abstract

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The Holy See has long been an overlooked actor in the global arena, especially regarding its mediation efforts. This thesis theorizes a link between the dominating religion in disputing countries and the decision to make a mediation attempt by the Holy See. Specifically, trust is an intervening variable. Disputing nations must have enough trust in an actor as a mediator to request its assistance. Disputing Catholic nations might place more trust in the Holy See than non-Catholic nations would due to the shared religion, which makes the Holy See more attractive than other actors to mediate conflicts. This theory can be applied in a second hypothesis to Christian nations, where significant moral overlap and beliefs exist to the teachings of the Church. This thesis finds quantitative and qualitative evidence that Catholic nations are more likely to request, and thus receive, a Holy See mediation attempt, while insufficient evidence was found for a link between Christian nations and Holy See mediation attempts.

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## Introduction

Researchers of international relations have long placed the Holy See on the backburner as a modern actor of conflict resolution. It first gained significant scholarly attention in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and religion first gained textbook status in 2007.<sup>1</sup> One explanation could be the difficulty in defining it as an actor. The Catholic Church operates as a transnational organization across national borders through their network of churches. The Holy See is the governing body of the Catholic Church, operating around the world but answering to the head of the Holy See, the Pope, in a country called the Vatican City. The Holy See is the government of the Holy See, making decisions on religious, administrative, diplomatic, and judicial matters both in the functioning of the Vatican City and the Catholic Church. This thesis focuses on providing a lens into the strategy of states in conflict when deciding which mediator they should reach out to. The specific question this thesis aims to answer is what factors contribute to the Holy See attempting mediation between disputing parties in conflicts. Mediation is attempted when an outside actor tries to facilitate dialogue between disputing parties. Aspects of attempted mediation include meetings between parties taking place on the property of the Holy See, such as in the Vatican City, officials of the Holy See arranging the meeting, and Holy See involvement as acknowledged in diplomatic communications, news reports, or historical accounts.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Haynes, *An Introduction to International Relations and Religion* (Routledge, 2007).

Considering the role of the Holy See as the leader of the Catholic Church, I propose a relationship between the religious demography of disputing nations and the conflicts the Holy See attempted to mediate. Quantitative data on interstate conflicts are drawn from the extensive International Crisis Behavior dataset. This thesis also presents case studies on the Beagle Conflict, Cuban Missile Crisis, and Dominican Intervention to discern the extent to which the theory contributes to mediation behavior.

The theory uses trust as an intervening variable, where disputing Catholic nations trust the Holy See will be able to facilitate the mediation process by providing a safe environment for discussions and not showing bias to one side or another. By nature of their faith, Catholic nations should be more likely to trust the Holy See enough to request its mediation support. In return, the Holy See will attempt mediation efforts by facilitating meetings. The theory and hypotheses are not inherently fixed to interstate conflict, and further research may examine intrastate conflicts.

The first hypothesis taken from this theory is that the Holy See is more likely to attempt mediation between two disputing Catholic nations, compared to all other dyads, one Catholic or neither Catholic. A dispute with only one Catholic nation is less likely to result in Holy See mediation efforts because the non-Catholic nation will worry the Holy See will be biased towards their Catholic brethren. The second hypothesis is that the Holy See is more likely to attempt mediation between two disputing Christian nations, compared to all other dyads. Following similar logic, Christian nations are likely to see the Holy See as an appropriate mediator because of shared moral values between Catholicism, Protestantism, and Orthodoxy.



The findings demonstrate a strong correlation between a dispute with two Catholic nations and attempted mediation by the Holy See, which provides evidence in favor of the first hypothesis. Comparatively, insufficient evidence was found to determine a conflict involving Christian nations are more likely to experience the Holy See attempting mediation, indicating the the second hypothesis is not supported. This thesis proceeds by first exploring literature on mediation, followed by the theoretical argument. The research design and results follow, using a mixed-methods design, and ends with an analysis of implications and future research.

## The Holy See, the Vatican, and the Papacy

There are multiple terms with similar definitions that are often used interchangeably, namely Holy See, Vatican, Catholic Church, and the Papacy. The term Holy See is the primary term used in this paper, as it is the official name of the government of the Catholic Church that extends beyond the geographic borders of the Vatican, a small territorial area located within the Italian city of Rome. Representative of that, there is a UN observer state explicitly called Holy See that represents both the state of the Vatican City and the broader sovereign Catholic Church. Papacy specifically refers to the authority of the Pope, and while he is often a key part of mediation efforts, the network of the Holy See extends beyond his specific role, namely to local Catholic officials throughout the world. For purposes of international relations, the term Holy See is usually used, and thus is the best choice for a discussion on their interstate conflict mediations.

The many roles of the Holy See make it, perhaps, the most unique country in the world. The Vatican City is a mere 0.17 square miles, and cardinals from around the world form a conclave to elect an absolute monarch, the Pope. Beyond governance of the Vatican City, the Pope leads a religion of around 1.4 billion believers. Government employees of this state, more commonly referred to as priests and bishops, work in almost every country around the world. The influence of this state in foreign affairs does not come from a threatening military or the ability to cripple an economy, but instead the positive perception of the Pope and the global network of believers.

## Holy See Mediation

There has been little significant research on Holy See mediation, with existing research focusing on a few case studies to broadly describe their behavior. Continued research on this topic is vital for a better understanding of global mediation, as even when the Holy See does not successfully mediate a conflict, it consistently advocates for peace. Most recently, the Holy See has been attempted mediation for the Russia-Ukraine conflict and conflict between Israel and some of its neighbors.<sup>2</sup>

Understanding which category of mediation the Holy See is a part of is important for comparing how it mediates to other entities within the same category and in other

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<sup>2</sup> “Vatican Calls for Peace in Holy Land, Offers to Mediate between Hamas and Israel,” *National Catholic Register*, October 13, 2023, <https://www.ncregister.com/cna/vatican-calls-for-peace-in-holy-land-offers-to-mediate-between-hamas-and-israel>.

Rafael Llanes. “Pope Sends Cardinal to Moscow to Continue Mediation over Ukraine War.” *Zenit*, October 21, 2024, <https://zenit.org/2024/10/21/pope-sends-cardinal-to-moscow-to-continue-mediation-over-ukraine-war/>.

categories. Most mediating entities can be defined within a set of categories effectively listed within one of the premier sources on historical interstate conflicts in the past one hundred years, the International Crisis Behavior Project by Michael Brecher, Jonathan Wilkenfeld, Kyle Beardsley, Patrick James and David Quinn.<sup>3</sup> Six key categories are listed as the mediating actors in conflicts, international governmental organizations, regional governmental organizations, private transnational organizations, single state, group of states, and private individuals. As a private transnational organization, the Holy See is placed into a category of its own, as no other mediator within the dataset successfully resolved disputes from that category.

In international relations, a transnational organization is a single entity that spans across national borders; as an example, the Red Cross, or Greenpeace. International organizations, while similar, typically refer to organizations composed of multiple member-states, such as the United Nations and European Union. These organizations are an important part of the mediation process. Often seen as neutral parties, they can act as a trusted platform for dialogue and help warring parties feel more comfortable beginning the peace process. Additionally, they bring a wide range of resources in the form of diplomats, mediators, and, for larger organizations, monetary leverage such as the threat of sanctions or reward of foreign aid.

Functionally, the Holy See has three levels in which to conduct diplomatic relations. As Mariano Barbato writes, the Holy See is “a state, a diplomat, and a transnational

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Brecher and Jonathan Wilkenfeld, *A Study of Crisis* (University of Michigan Press, 1997).

church.”<sup>4</sup> As the head of state of the Vatican City and leader of the Catholic Church, the Pope is one level. During mediation, the Pope acts as a persuading force for Catholics.

The second level is the diplomats that work on behalf of the Pope, like the diplomats of any other country. The Holy See representatives worldwide are known as *apostolic nuncio*, and are part of the *apostolic nunciature*, which is essentially an embassy. The nuncios are provided the same diplomatic protections as any foreign ambassadors. These officials can report on conflict in the region back to the Vatican, where the Pope may choose which further action is appropriate. An additional role beyond a typical ambassador is they also serve as leaders of the Church within the nation.

The third level is the Church network itself, as local priests, bishops, and various Catholic associations can hold considerable influence and legitimacy in their local communities, acquiring the trust required to mediate peace. One example for this was the peace process of the Mozambique Civil War (1977 to 1992). A Catholic association called the Community of Sant 'Egidio, an international association focused mostly on social welfare for issues like HIV/AIDS, successfully helped mediate the end of the civil war.<sup>5</sup> Catholic associations are subject to the authority of the Holy See and carry the same moral authority that might encourage Catholic countries to request Holy See mediation efforts, strengthening their ability to mediate conflict resolution in interstate and intrastate disputes.

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<sup>4</sup> Mariano Barbato, “A State, a Diplomat, and a Transnational Church: The Multi-Layered Actorness of the Holy See,” *Perspectives* 21, no. 2 (2013): 27–48.

<sup>5</sup> Roberto Morozzo Della Rocca, *Mozambique: Achieving Peace in Africa* (Georgetown University, 2003).

An example of current Holy See mediation efforts is in the Russia-Ukraine War, which utilizes multiple levels, including the Pope and his diplomats. The Pope publicly called for negotiations to begin and in March of 2024 he called on Ukraine to have the “courage of the white flag,” indicating the Church could have a mediating role.<sup>6</sup> A year prior in May of 2023 he sent Cardinal Matteo Zuppi as a diplomat to meet with Ukrainian and Russian leaders, and on October 14, 2024, he returned to Moscow to continue discussions in a second attempt to facilitate mediation.

Throughout medieval times, the Holy See focused on mediation solely between two nations of a Catholic state religion.<sup>7</sup> An example was Pope Gregory IX during the 13<sup>th</sup> century, who mediated between the Holy Roman Empire and the Lombard League. In this conflict, each party held deep distrust of the other to begin the peace process. After the Holy Roman Empire sent a delegate to the League to negotiate, this delegate was killed, prompting the Empire to appeal to the Pope for mediation. Each party held more trust in the Pope than they did in each other, allowing a peaceful resolution to occur. Both sides were Catholic, which provided the Pope with legitimacy as the leader of the religion they believed in. The Holy See was biased in favor of resolving Catholic disputes. Now, for this thesis, did the focus on mediation between Catholic states extend into modern times? While few nations continue to have a state religion, an analysis based on demographic

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<sup>6</sup> Philip Pullella, "Pope Says Ukraine Should Have Courage for 'White Flag' Negotiations," *Reuters*, March 9, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/pope-says-ukraine-should-have-courage-white-flag-negotiations-2024-03-09/>.

<sup>7</sup> F. Matthews-Giba, "Religious Dimensions of Mediation," *Fordham Urb. L.J.* 27, no. 5 (2000).

data of the people in the disputing nations allows a determination on which countries may be considered Catholic.

## Literature Review

There is a significant array of previous literature on mediation. While it primarily focuses on mediation success rather than mediation attempts, engaging with broader literature is valuable to understand the mediation process and better understand mediator behavior. One of the most influential works has been Kyle Beardsley's *The Mediation Dilemma*, which argues mediation reduces violence in the short-term, but it can leave certain issues unanswered that result in long-term instability.<sup>8</sup> Mediation can distort perceptions of power by limiting the information that would otherwise emerge in a prolonged conflict, such as a nation's ability to wage war. Furthermore, mediators often prioritize ending conflict as soon as possible, without resolving the deeper reasons for the conflict to occur. Ultimately, he finds mediation is most effective when disputing parties are already inclined toward peace and when mediators have the power to enforce agreements. However, when mediation is used to halt violence without addressing long-term stability, the risk for future conflict increases.

This is relevant for the Holy See because its calls for peace can be perceived as suggesting an immediate end to conflict without fully addressing the reasons for it. For

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<sup>8</sup> Kyle Beardsley, *The Mediation Dilemma* (Cornell University Press, 2011): 1-17.

example, the Pope during his first weekly Angelus address after the invasion of Ukraine began, on February 24<sup>th</sup>, he made an appeal for peace, stating, “Silence all weapons! God is with the peacemakers, not with those who use violence.”<sup>9</sup> “If the war ended at this time, Russia and Ukraine’s ability to wage war would be not fully known, especially relevant considering Ukraine largely surpassed expectations. Russia would continue to underestimate Ukraine’s fighting ability, and overestimate their own, contributing towards beginning another invasion.

Another key part of mediation literature is Scott Gartner and Jacob Bercovitch’s “Overcoming Obstacles to Peace: The Contribution of Mediation to Short-Lived Conflict Settlements.”<sup>10</sup> They argue mediation may signal that a resulting agreement will be short-lived, due to a selection effect where mediators typically handle the most difficult cases, those with the highest likelihood of producing temporary settlements. At the same time, mediation can address the underlying issues of a conflict, resulting in longer-lived agreements. Ultimately, they conclude mediated agreements are more likely to be short-lived than non-mediated agreements, unless non-state actors are involved.

A key implication for research on Holy See mediation efforts is that a failure to achieve long-lasting peace may be partly caused by focusing on difficult disputes to resolve. An example is a focus since the establishment of the state of Israel on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. Six days after the Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7,

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<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, “Angelus Address,” *Holy See*, February 27, 2022, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2022/documents/20220227-angelus.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Scott Sigmund Gartner and Jacob Bercovitch, “Overcoming Obstacles to Peace: The Contribution of Mediation to Short-Lived Conflict Settlements,” *International Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (November 2006): 819–40.

2023, Cardinal Parolin stated dialogue “should be pursued immediately and without delay,” and the Holy See is “ready for any necessary mediation.”<sup>11</sup> “This dispute has not been resolved despite multiple attempts by various mediators, signaling the Holy See’s failure to resolve the dispute is not necessarily indicative of their mediation ability overall.

William Dixon and Paul Senese’s thesis in “Democracy, Disputes, and Negotiated Settlements” presented groundbreaking conclusions on the factors that contribute towards mediation success.<sup>12</sup> It had been previously well-documented that democratic states rarely go to war with each other, known as democratic peace, an understanding that was then expanded for additional implications. Starting with the premise that democracies have greater negotiation and compromise abilities through domestic power sharing than non-democracies, they argue negotiated settlements are more likely between democratic states than other conflicting pairs. The leadership of democratic states is composed of people with experience balancing competing values and interests. Therefore, a dispute between two democracies is more likely to end with a compromise in peaceful reconciliation.

In relation to Holy See mediation efforts, this finding suggests that Holy See mediation attempts could be more successful in conflicts involving two democratic participants. As democracies are more likely to resolve disputes peacefully, they could also be inclined to accept external mediation efforts more frequently than non-

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<sup>11</sup> “Vatican Calls for Peace in Holy Land, Offers to Mediate between Hamas and Israel,” *National Catholic Register*, October 13, 2023, <https://www.ncregister.com/cna/vatican-calls-for-peace-in-holy-land-offers-to-mediate-between-hamas-and-israel>.

<sup>12</sup> William J. Dixon and Paul D. Senese, “Democracy, Disputes, and Negotiated Settlements,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 4 (August 2002): 547–71.



democracies. Alternatively, two democratic states having a strong inclination toward negotiation could negate the need for external mediation, as they can resolve the dispute themselves. These contrasting theories highlight the potential limitations and opportunities for Holy See mediation when a variable for democracy is introduced.

As stated earlier, religion has long been an ignored topic in international relations, while its impacts throughout history have been enormous. While we no longer live in the times when the Spanish Crown colonized to spread Catholicism, and state religions have become obsolete in a majority of the world, religion is nevertheless a tool used by nations and warring parties to persuade populations and legitimize their movements. Zeev Maoz and Errol A. Henderson argue that to understand how, why, and when religious factors affect foreign and domestic policies, we must consider a combination of variables, including social structure, political institutions, and the structure of the state's politically relevant international environment.<sup>13</sup> Specifically, they argue that “the politics of states are affected by religion to the extent that religion becomes an important element in the definition of national identity.” If there is a national identity of a country is dominated by Catholicism, an outside entity such as the Holy See can provide a persuasive voice to legitimize or denigrate actions taken within the country.

Understanding why actors mediate is critical to understanding why the Holy See might do so. There has generally been a lack of attention within the scholarly literature on why actors mediate, while most research has focused on the impact and effectiveness of

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<sup>13</sup> Zeev Maoz and Errol A. Henderson, *Scriptures, Shrines, Scapegoats, and World Politics: Religious Sources of Conflict and Cooperation in the Modern Era* (University of Michigan Press, 2021).

mediation and why it occurs in the way it did. However, some key insights include those from Bercovitch and Schneider, arguing that the residual power of former colonial rulers such as Britain and France make them particularly prone to mediate conflicts involving their former colonies.<sup>14</sup> Even former colonial powers such as Belgium with little to no residual power in their former colonies still make some effort in resolving disputes, as stated by Belgium diplomat Koen Vervaeke: “there is a strong feeling that we owe these countries something.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, some mediators mediate because they feel they have a normative obligation to do so.

Comparatively, neutral mediators, especially small, single states like the Holy See, typically bring few resources to settle the dispute, and instead they promote agreements between disputants by providing fora for discussion and interaction between disputants when dialogue is problematic. Often, they can collaborate with other mediators like the United States by aiding in dialogue while stronger mediators use their larger range of resources to encourage or demand a peace resolution. Neutral mediators might be incentivized to participate to improve relations with the disputing parties, contributing to greater trade and influence on the world stage.

Neutral states have some comparative advantages in the field of mediation. By solving disputes, these nations cement their image as an effective mediator, encouraging other nations to maintain good relations with them to utilize their mediation abilities.

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<sup>14</sup> Jacob Bercovitch and Gerald Schneider, “Who Mediates? The Political Economy of International Conflict Management,” *Journal of Peace Research* 37, no. 2 (March 2000): 145–65.

<sup>15</sup> Koen Vervaeke, “Peace, Mediation and Reconciliation: The Belgian Experience,” (Speech, Belgian–Norwegian Seminar on Peace, Mediation and Reconciliation, Brussels, May 21, 2003).

Qatar, typically seen as a neutral state for a willingness to work with various opposing Middle Eastern actors, is seen as unthreatening and a place where disputing parties can safely attempt mediation. Qatar was influential in mediating peace between the United States and the Taliban, acting as an intermediary due to its contacts with the elusive organization. By having contacts with various disputing states and organizations, they maintain their neutrality. The Doha Agreement that outlined the American withdrawal process from Afghanistan was signed in the neutral country.<sup>16</sup>

Neutral nations also promote their soft power – the ability to convince other nations to do tasks without the threat of violence - through mediation. There is an incentive for other states to retain good relations with Qatar due to its plethora of contacts that few others have, and to maintain contact with an effective mediator in case one is needed. Additionally, Qatar has less obligations in this role; it is not expected to follow the foreign policy of their neighbors, particularly the policies of Saudi Arabia, while it is expected for states like Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates.

Other states of various levels of neutrality have chosen this foreign policy for similar benefits. Norway, while aligned with the West as a member of NATO, has held a neutral mediating role in various conflicts around the world, such as being the site of the Oslo Accords between Israel and the PLO and a guarantor between the Colombian government and the rebel group FARC.<sup>17</sup> In return, Norway receives recognition for its expertise,

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<sup>16</sup> Lindsay Maizland, "U.S.-Taliban Peace Deal: What to Know," *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 2, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-taliban-peace-deal-agreement-afghanistan-war>.

<sup>17</sup> "Colombia FARC: The Norwegian Who Helped Broker Peace," *BBC News*, August 28, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-37206714>.

encouraging parties to have Norwegian contacts to act as an intermediary. The Holy See is similar to these countries as a neutral mediator that focuses on dialogue. It has no ability to threaten a country into mediation, like a more powerful country like the United States might, but rather through soft power it can persuade countries to agree to begin mediation. The Holy See's ability to appeal to shared spiritual values contributes to its ability to attempt conflict mediation.

Looking more broadly, there is a debate among scholars about whether it is more effective to have a biased mediator versus a non-biased mediator. A biased mediator is a third party aligned with one of the conflict actors before the mediation. An unbiased mediator, however, holds no significant alignment to any party. The argument favoring the effectiveness of a biased mediator is that it would be seen as more trustworthy to the actor it is aligned with, because its signals are more likely to be believed. The counsel of an ally is more effective than the counsel of a neutral power, as argued by Andrew Kydd.<sup>18</sup> Parties in conflict must believe the mediator is being honest, and an ally that counsels restraint is more likely to be believed than counsel from a neutral party. A biased mediator wants a favorable result for its preferred side and is more inclined to provide honest information to it. A neutral party is not attempting to support either side, is simply interested in ending the conflict, and is more likely to lie trying to achieve this, thus is less trustworthy and less

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<sup>18</sup> Andrew Kydd, "Which Side Are You on? Bias, Credibility, and Mediation," *American Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 4 (October 2003): 597–611.

effective in ending the conflict. Therefore, information from a biased mediator is more likely to be believed by a belligerent, compared with information from a neutral mediator.

Kydd provides the example of the Serbian invasion of Kosovo in 1999. NATO began a bombing campaign that grew in intensity over three months, but the Russians informed Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic that NATO was preparing to escalate to an invasion. The Russians were biased in favor of Serbia, and as they counseled restraint, their word was believed, leading Serbia to end its attack.

The alternative argument is that an unbiased mediator is most effective because there is no “trust gap” between actors in conflict. While a biased mediator may be more trustworthy towards the actor it supports, it may be seen as less trustworthy by the other actor(s). Resolving a conflict requires a certain level of trustworthiness between all actors and their mediator. If a third party attempted to organize a meeting between two actors but was biased towards one of them, the other actor may fear for their safety and choose not to participate. The Holy See is an unbiased actor; it does not favor one disputant over the other.

## Theoretical Argument

In 1929, the Vatican City and Italy signed the Lateran Treaty to settle the Roman Question - the dispute over the authority of the Catholic Church in the governance of Italy. Alongside Italian recognition of the Vatican City as an independent state led by the Church and several other provisions, the Church agreed to limit its involvement in international relations. Specifically, that it “shall take no part in any temporal rivalries between other States nor in any international congresses called to settle such matters,” unless disputing parties make a pacific appeal to the Holy See for intervention.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, since 1929 the Holy See has only been able to attempt mediation in disputes when invited, and must otherwise remain neutral in foreign affairs.

This thesis proposes that disputing countries are more likely to request mediation from the Holy See when a considerable number of Catholics are involved in the conflict, specifically if Catholicism comprises the majority faith of the nation. This effect occurs in scenarios where both countries are Catholic, and to a lesser extent where one country is Catholic. The comparison is to conflicts without such populations. The causal mechanism to explain why this might be the case is built around trust in the mediation process. The disputing parties must trust the mediator is providing a safe environment for conversation to take place, and they must trust the mediator will not show bias towards one side over the other. If the disputing countries are Catholic, by natural inclination of their faith they

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<sup>19</sup> Joseph Sadow and Thomas Sarro, *The Coins and Medals of the Vatican* (S. J. Durst Numismatic Publications, 1977).

trust the Holy See enough to request their facilitation of the peace process. In return, the Holy See is inclined to attempt mediation between Catholic nations when invited because as leader of the Church, it has a natural obligation to ensure the safety of Catholics around the world. Non-Catholic nations are more likely to see other nations as more trustworthy, in the sense that other nations will value their interests to a greater extent and opt for their mediation efforts instead. Specifically, they are more likely to choose a different mediator who is perceived to be more likely to mediate fairly.

The broader theory that guides this research is that nations provide mediation efforts in other nations with similar demographics at higher rates than in nations with different demographics. This research applies this to the case of Holy See mediation, and due to its role as leader of the Catholic Church, it focuses on religious demography. The scope conditions are fixed to when the Holy See attempted mediation in interstate conflicts during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the unit of analysis is at the conflict level. The accuracy of the theory is measurable by examining correlations between conflicts the Holy See mediated and the national demography. If the conflicts the Holy See mediated were statistically correlated as occurring in higher rates towards Catholic countries, then the theory could be supported.

- Hypothesis 1: The Holy See is more likely to attempt mediation in interstate conflicts when both parties are majority Catholic nations, compared to the other dyads, one Catholic, where it is less likely, or neither Catholic, where it is least likely.

In this hypothesis, trust is an intervening variable and causal mechanism between the independent variable, majority Catholic nations, and the dependent variable, Holy See attempted mediation. Catholic nations in conflict trust the Holy See's moral authority and neutrality to not favor one side over the other, which results in them requesting their mediation more often. Thus, due to the Holy See's role as protector of Catholics and general desire to reduce conflict around the world, it is more inclined to participate in mediation. This effect is not as present when only one nation is Catholic, as the other will not trust the Holy See as much, and both parties must agree on mediation. Similarly, the effect is not present when neither nation is Catholic.

- Hypothesis 2: The Holy See is more likely to attempt mediation in interstate conflicts when both parties are majority Christian nations, compared to the other dyads, one Christian, where it is less likely, or neither Christian, where it is least likely.

In this hypothesis, the previous argument is expanded to consider if the Holy See is seen as trustworthy among nations with a majority Christian population. The logic is that even though the disputant nations might not recognize the authority of the Pope to the same extent as Catholic nations would, there is still significant beliefs and moral overlap between Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant denominations, so that the Holy See is seen as a trustworthy mediator by all Christians. Additionally, with the assumption that the Holy See aims to reduce conflict around the world, it is willing to mediate when requested. The independent variable is the majority Christian nations, while the dependent variable is



maintained as whether the Holy See attempted mediation. Therefore, a dispute between two Christian nations may be more likely to receive attempted mediation by the Holy See, compared to a dispute with one Christian nation where its less likely, and compared to a dispute with no Christian nations where its least likely.

States have a significant amount of agency over whether there is Holy See mediation or not. It requires approval from both countries, and disapproval would prevent mediation from being attempted, as no negotiations will take place. However, persuasion and coercion from external forces could occur that diminish the amount of agency a state has in deciding their mediator. For example, two South American states in dispute could be pressured by the United States to request Holy See mediation. The United States knows the Catholic South American states would trust the Holy See, and in accepting this, they act without full volition.

The independent variables are measured dichotomously - if most of the population is Catholic or Christian - to capture a threshold effect. Once a country is most of a specific faith, it will be reflected in state policies and international relations. For example, the population of a majority Catholic country is likely to be mostly favorable with the Holy See being requested as a mediator due to the shared faith, an important consideration when leaders are deciding who they wish to mediate their dispute. Comparatively, if the exact Catholic or Christian percentages were used for the value of the independent variable, the assumption would be that each percentage point is equally important in affecting the dependent variable, which is not what is expected by mediation behavior. It is expected behavior would change the most around the 50% threshold when a country is mostly of a

specific faith, when a majority of the country trusts and approves of the Holy See attempting mediation, thus making a dichotomic measurement the most appropriate option to capture this theory.

In a scenario where a country is majority Catholic, but the leader is not, the theory predicts the country will have an increased chance of receiving Holy See mediation efforts. This is because there are many individuals involved in the mediation process from each country, and the religious affiliation of the government is likely to correlate with the affiliation of the country, even if the leader is different. Therefore, a majority Catholic country likely contains Catholic ministers that will encourage mediation by the Holy See, even if the Head of State or Head of Government are non-Catholic. Similarly, if a country is majority non-Catholic but the leader is Catholic, the theory predicts there should not be an increased chance of Holy See mediation. The mostly non-Catholic representation in the country and government will discourage Holy See mediation, despite the interests of the leader.

Clearly defining a mediation attempt is vital to ensure it is being consistently applied across all cases. Norwich University has divided international mediation into three stages.<sup>20</sup> The first is the introductory stage, when the parties agree to begin mediation, and are introduced to each other in a closed setting. The second is the problem-solving stage, or the negotiation stage. Here, each side presents its position, including red lines that cannot be passed for a settlement to be made. The mediator may meet with each side in a

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<sup>20</sup> "How Mediation Works in International Conflicts," *Norwich University*, <https://online.norwich.edu/online/about/resource-library/how-mediation-works-international-conflicts>.

private meeting to discuss its position. If successful, the final stage of closure is reached. A compromise has been met that may include the end of hostilities if the conflict was violent. The end of hostilities and withdrawal of forces may be gradual, to ensure one side cannot back down without the other doing the same. For example, in the ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah in early 2025, the agreement stipulated the gradual withdrawal of both sides from Southern Lebanon. It is vital the withdrawal is gradual to ensure one side does not take advantage of the other's withdrawal and remains in the region.

The Holy See is not equally proficient as a mediator for all three stages of the process, which explains its mediation strategy. Typically, it is not the primary mediator, meaning other nations such as a superpower like the United States or an organization like the UN ultimately oversees the negotiation of the peace treaty. The role of the Holy See, instead, is usually focused on the introductory stage, namely establishing a line of communication between disputing parties and facilitating the first meetings. As local church networks exist in the vast majority of countries, officials like priests, bishops, and the ambassadors, *nuncios*, can use their connections and trust with their community to encourage communication between disputing parties.

Integration with the community on the local level is an advantage the Holy See has in the mediation process over other mediators like superpowers or the United Nations. However, the Holy See lacks the leverage of military and economic power vital in

negotiations. In 1995, the Dayton Agreement was signed to end the Bosnian War.<sup>21</sup> One of the primary mediators was the United States, who leveraged their military and economic power to encourage the agreement. It previously bombed positions of the Bosnian Serbs in cities like Pale, and the threat of escalated bombings encouraged the sides to come to an agreement. Furthermore, Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) was under sanctions by the United Nations for its involvement, and the removal of the sanctions was used to encourage peace. The Holy See, by comparison, has a vastly weaker military and little economic power. Its strength as a mediator is not during the negotiation phase, where threats and promises are vital to increase the dangers of conflict and the rewards of peace. Instead, by focusing on the introductory phase, it can begin the process of mediation through its connections with the local community.

The Holy See has unique characteristics that both enhance and limit the effectiveness of its mediation. The network of Church officials across the world is its greatest asset in the facilitation of negotiations, as local Church leaders build trust within their communities that may be channeled towards peaceful resolutions to disputes. However, with little to no leverage, the Holy See cannot pressure negotiations through economic or military threats, tactics commonly used by more powerful nations to achieve conflict resolution. Other organizations like the United Nations have the capability and history of leveraging sanctions to restrict economic resources and power, and has previously intervened in conflicts like the Korean War. For example, the previously

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<sup>21</sup> Ferid Muhic, "What Was Achieved and What to Expect?" *Al Jazeera Centre for Studies*, December 16, 2015, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2015/12/201512161661175248.html>.

mentioned UN sanctions on Serbia and Montenegro during the Yugoslav Wars, specifically Resolution 757, was implemented due to a continued military involvement in Bosnia and a failure to cooperate with the international community to begin peace negotiations. Therefore, the United Nations carried significant leverage that was used when mediation was refused.

By comparison, when the Holy See announces public appeals for peace in conflicts around the world, it has no military to force leaders to the negotiation table and little global exports it could end to cause economic collapse. There is a diplomatic mission to the United Nations, but as a non-member state, giving it the ability to make statements before the Security Council, but not vote or propose amendments, weakening its influence in the organization to credibly leverage demands for peace. There is also the question of whether the Holy See would use leverage if it suddenly had the opportunity to do so, as the humanitarian implications on the civilian population of economic or military pressure is likely inconsistent with their general practices from the 20<sup>th</sup> century onward of an opposition to warfare, even ones with United Nations approval such as the First Gulf War.<sup>22</sup>

As an example, in 1963, a crisis began for the Dominican Republic when its newly elected President Juan Bosch was overthrown by a military junta supported by the United States.<sup>23</sup> In 1965, the junta was overthrown by a counter coup of supporters of the previous

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<sup>22</sup> Pope John Paul II, "Messages of John Paul II to his Excellency George Bush President of the United States of America," *Holy See*, January 14, 1991, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1991/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_let\\_19910115\\_gulf-war-bush.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1991/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_19910115_gulf-war-bush.html).

<sup>23</sup> Lawrence A. Yates, "Power Pack: U.S. Intervention in the Dominican Republic," *Leavenworth Papers* 15, (1988).

President, starting a civil war. The United States intervened with 22,000 troops to evacuate foreign nationals and use their presence as a threatening force to encourage negotiations.

However, the mediation process began through the efforts of Catholic Archbishop Emanuele Clarizio, the nuncio to the Dominican Republic.<sup>24</sup> He acted as a trustworthy individual to both sides to facilitate negotiations between the disputing parties, while the Organization of American States was the primary mediator that oversaw the compromise that was agreeable to the junta, the constitutionalists, and the United States. A new presidential election was held in 1966, where a new President, Joaquin Balaguer, was elected.

This conflict exemplifies the typical role the Holy See holds in mediation efforts. It establishes communication between disputing parties and facilitates negotiations, but the actual agreement is done by an entity with greater military and economic leverage, in this example the Organization of American States and the United States. With the role of the Holy See established, the measure of if it attempted to mediate a conflict for the purposes of this paper is if it facilitated dialogue between disputing parties. This is most clearly established if an official such as a nuncio or a cardinal officiated a meeting between representatives of both sides.

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<sup>24</sup> "Pope Asks Dominican Peace," *The Catholic Transcript*, May 20, 1965.

## Research Design and Data

This paper uses a quantitative analysis of interstate disputes to present findings on the accuracy of the hypotheses. This is an appropriate approach using the large dataset of the International Crisis Behavior Project, consisting of 496 cases spanning 1918-2019. Approximately half of these cases were omitted, down to 244 cases, to focus on the disputes between two countries, as this theory focuses on the religious dynamics of two-country conflicts. While the dataset contains dozens of variables, this paper codes additional binary variables for if both nations are Catholic-majority, if one is Catholic-majority, if both nations are Christian-majority, and if one is Christian-majority, to test the hypotheses.

The source for these demographic data is the World Religion Project dataset by Zeev Maoz and Errol Henderson.<sup>25</sup> These data include the religious percentages of every nation from 1900 onwards, fully covering the time period of International Crisis Behavior. Coding the Catholic and Christian independent variables is done based on the demographic data from the year the conflict ends, to maintain consistency.

The dependent variable of Holy See mediation attempt does not have a clear source and requires a case-by-case investigation. The dependent variable is specifically attempted mediation, and the sources examined include newspapers, UN Security

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<sup>25</sup> Zeev Maoz and Errol A. Henderson, "The World Religion Dataset, 1945–2010: Logic, Estimates, and Trends," *International Interactions* 39, no. 3: 265–91.

Council and General Assembly reports which mention Holy See involvement, non-government organizations such as the International Crisis Group and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and research papers. Specifically, the Peace Agreements Database was used for their extensive 2,055 peace agreements from conflicts since 1990. This database has coded for third parties present at the signing, and mentions of Holy See officials indicates attempted direct mediation.

The deciding factor for the Holy See attempting mediation is if it facilitated negotiations between disputing parties. This criterion was chosen because it targets the specific aspect of the mediation process the Holy See focuses upon – the beginning stages. As described previously, the Holy See is most effective in the introductory stage by starting meetings between the two parties. Facilitating meetings between conflicting parties qualifies as a mediation attempt because it reflects the Holy See's active role in bringing disputing sides into dialogue, even if it does not directly impose solutions. By offering neutral ground, leveraging diplomatic relationships, and encouraging communication, the Holy See is intervening to open channels for negotiation. Even when it does not propose a specific settlement, initiating or hosting dialogue shows an intent to reduce tensions and seek peaceful resolution, fulfilling a fundamental aspect of mediation.

The Holy See must have actively created the conditions necessary for dialogue, and been a vital aspect of the mediation effort, such as providing Church facilities as the setting for negotiations to take place. Serving as an intermediary for messages also qualifies, as the mediation is possible only through their intervention. Simply making public



appeals for peace is not a mediation attempt as there is no active engagement in the negotiation process. While important for moral leadership, they do not create or manage a process of negotiation. Similarly, offering to mediate and being declined is not considered a mediation attempt because no process is being initiated.

Following the coding of variables, the most appropriate test was a regression to evaluate the relationship between religion and a Holy See mediation attempt. Specifically, for the first and second hypotheses, the null hypothesis is there is no relationship between whether the disputing nations are Catholic and the likelihood of the Holy See attempting mediation -  $H_0 : \beta_1 = 0$ . Likewise, the null hypothesis for the second is there is no relationship between whether the disputing nations are Christian and the likelihood of the Holy See attempting mediation -  $H_0 : \beta_2 = 0$ . The alternative hypotheses are there is a relationship between whether nations are Catholic and the likelihood of the Holy See attempting mediation -  $H_a : \beta_1 \neq 0$ , and there is a relationship between whether nations are Christian and the likelihood of the Holy See attempting mediation -  $H_a : \beta_2 \neq 0$ .

The most appropriate form of regression is a logistic regression due to the binary nature of the dependent variable. Control variables have been added to isolate the effects of the independent variables. Violence is included as it has the potential to affect the chance of a mediation attempt if the Holy See focuses attention on heavily violent conflicts. International Crisis Behavior has coded this on a scale of 1 to 4. 1 is no violence, 2 is minor clashes, 3 is serious clashes, and 4 is full-scale war. Another similar variable is the gravity of threat value between both nations, which describes the potential amount of danger faced in the conflict. This is coded from 0 to 6. 0 is an economic threat only, 1 is

limited military damage, 2 is a political threat (i.e., threat of government overthrow), 3 is a territorial threat (annexation), 4 is a threat to influence (threat of declining power in the global system, such as American motivations for Vietnam intervention), 5 is threat of grave damage (i.e., mass bombings), and 6 is a threat to existence (genocide, annexation).

Beyond the quantitative analysis, a qualitative analysis was completed as a deep analysis of three cases, to better assess the possible causal relationship between religion and attempted Holy See mediation. It complements the results of the logistical regression to provide reasoning behind the trends of the data through an in-depth analysis that went beyond the research for coding variables.

The three cases chosen include the Beagle Conflict, a territorial dispute between Argentina and Chile that culminated in the deployment of troops by both sides, minor clashes, and risk of an invasion between 1978 and 1979. The other cases are the Iran Hostage Crisis from 1979 to 1981, and the Dominican Intervention in 1965, where the United States intervened in a conflict between warring factions in the Dominican Republic.

Table 1: Case Studies of Holy See Mediation Attempts

	Number of Catholic Nations	Number of Christian Nations (including Catholic)	Holy See Mediation Attempt
Beagle Conflict (1978-1979)	2	2	Yes
Iran Hostage Crisis (1979-1981)	0	1	No
Dominican Intervention (1965)	1	2	Yes

Table 2: Holy See Mediation Attempts - Summary Table

	Min/Max	Mean	Standard Deviation	Sample Size
2 Catholic Nations	0 / 1	0.134	0.342	246
1 Catholic Nation	0 / 1	0.150	0.358	246
2 Christian Nations	0 / 1	0.197	0.297	246
1 Christian Nation	0 / 1	0.289	0.454	246
Violence	1 / 4	2.400	1.000	246
Gravity of Threat	0 / 6	3.09	1.310	246

Table 3: Cases of Holy See Mediation Attempts

Dispute	Religion	Dispute	Religion
DR-Haiti Dispute (1937-1938)	Both Catholic	Chaco War (Paraguay-Bolivia) (1932-1935)	Both Catholic
Beagle Conflict (1978-1979)	Both Catholic	Chile Border Dispute (1918)	Both Catholic
Iran Hostage Crisis (1979-1981)	One Christian	Iraq Regime Change (2002-2003)	Neither Christian
Ecuador Peru Border Dispute (1991)	Both Catholic	Cuba Relations (2014-2016)	One Catholic
Lebanon Civil War (1976)	Neither Christian	German Reparations (1921)	One Catholic
Dominican Intervention	One Catholic	Ecuador-Peru Border II (1941-1942)	Both Catholic
Central America-Cuba II	Both Catholic	Cuban Missiles (1962)	One Christian
Bay of Pigs (1961)	One Catholic	Cod War II (1975-1976)	Both Christian
Aaland Islands (1920-1921)	Both Christian	Dominican Republic/Haiti II (1963)	Both Catholic
Burundi-Rwanda (1963-1964)	Both Catholic	Ogaden II (1977-1978)	One Christian

## Results and Implications

Five models were created to discern the effects of a dispute between Catholic and Christian nations on Holy See mediation. The first model includes variables for both hypotheses, the second includes Catholic variables, and the third includes Christian variables. To capture the dyads of disputes with no Catholic nations, and no Christian nations, two simplified models were created, one including both Catholic variables and the other including the Christian variables, without control variables. The intercepts are the remaining dyads. In both, conflicts without Catholic nations, and conflicts without Christian nations, the Holy See is far less likely to attempt mediation.

Following the completion of the logistical regression, the results suggest a strong correlation between a dispute of two Catholic nations and the Holy See attempting mediation, with a p-value of approximately 0.001. Combined with a high estimate and z-value, with a standard error low by comparison, there is high confidence in a correlation. This indicates a strong correlation, consistent with the theory that mediation attempts are more common between Catholic nations.

In a dispute with one Catholic nation, the results are similar. The p-value is higher but statistically significant at approximately 0.026, with a lower estimate and z-value than the results for two Catholic nations. For a conflict with two Christian nations, the p-value suggests statistical insignificance correlating to Holy See mediation attempts. A conflict with one Christian nation is similarly not statistically significant. The control variables of violence and the gravity of threat are not statistically significant, indicating the

independent variables, and specifically in relation to Catholic nations contribute to the variance of Holy See mediation attempts.

Table 4: Holy See Mediation Attempts, Logistical Regression – ICB Data

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Intercept	-5.6446 (1.2684) **	-5.5661 (1.2572) **	-3.9348 (0.7322) **	-4.4659 (0.7112) **	-3.3742 (0.4548) **
2 Catholic Nations	3.3125 (1.0065) **	3.3172 (0.8504) **		3.1537 (0.8289) **	
1 Catholic Nation	2.1001 (0.9417) *	2.3052 (0.8961) *		2.3557 (0.8866) *	
2 Christian Nations	0.6582 (0.8423)		1.6108 (0.6166)		1.7647 (0.7119)
1 Christian Nation	0.8201 (0.9498)		0.4872 (0.6956)		0.5558 (0.6869)
Violence	0.1575 (0.3063)	0.1894 (0.3050)	0.0237 (0.2965)		
Gravity of Threat	0.1347 (0.2523)	0.1868 (0.2492)	0.1613 (0.2293)		

Significance Codes:  $p < 0.01$  \*\* |  $p < 0.05$  \*,  $n = 246$

McFadden's Pseudo  $R^2$ : 0.2258, 0.2130, 0.0591, 0.2006, 0.0534

The data present a strong argument for the validity of hypothesis one, but not hypothesis two. A conflict with two Catholic nations is more likely to include a mediation attempt by the Holy See compared to the baseline of neither country being Catholic or Christian. A conflict with only one Catholic nation is also more likely to have Holy See mediation compared to the baseline, though the coefficient is smaller. Comparatively, a

conflict containing some number of Christian nations is not correlated with Holy See mediation attempts due to statistical insignificance. Therefore, a dispute containing Christian nations has no effect on the Holy See attempting mediation, while the correlation appears if one Catholic nation is involved, and it strengthens if two are involved. The data suggests religious characteristics alter the likelihood of a Holy See mediation attempt in varying ways, including no effect, a large negative effect, a modest positive effect and a large positive effect.

A dispute with one Catholic nation is more likely to receive Holy See mediation efforts than a dispute without Catholic nations. A plausible explanation is that a request for Holy See mediation is supported by the non-Catholic nation seeking a peaceful resolution, knowing the Catholic nation will trust the Holy See to be a fair mediator. Therefore, the Holy See is used to ease the Catholic nation into beginning mediation efforts. For example, during the Dominican Intervention of 1965, “the Johnson Administration gave its official support to a ceasefire negotiated by the Papal Nuncio.”<sup>26</sup>

The strong negative correlation between disputes without Catholic participants and mediation attempts — even though no such correlation exists for disputes involving Christian participants — is explained by the fact that most disputes without Catholic participants are between non-Christian nations. Disputes in Asia did not include Christian nations unless a European colonial power was involved. For example, ten separate

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<sup>26</sup> Yale H. Ferguson, “The Dominican Intervention of 1965: Recent Interpretations,” *International Organization* 27, no. 4 (1973): 517–48.

interstate crises occurred between India and Pakistan that were included in the dataset, none of which had a Holy See mediation attempt.

Due to the strong correlations for the Catholic variables, the model is Catholic-driven, not Christian-driven. Only a dispute involving some number of Catholic nations statistically increases the chances of a Holy See mediation attempt, meaning the causal mechanism specifically excludes Christian nations. The theorized causal mechanism can reasonably be applied to the data.

Some mechanism causes more frequent mediation attempts for dyads of Catholic nations, and the behavior of the Holy See suggests this is due to the decision-making of the disputing nations, not itself. The Papacy has long expressed a desire for peaceful solutions in regions like the Middle East, such as solving the Israel-Palestine conflict. As previously mentioned, in October of 2023, the Vatican's secretary of state, Cardinal Parolin, stated "I do not know how much room for dialogue there can be between Israel and the Hamas militia," and that they are "ready for any necessary mediation."<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, in September of 1982, Pope John Paul II expressed support for a Palestinian homeland and indicated the Holy See could be involved in mediation efforts.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, Pope Francis

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<sup>27</sup> "Vatican Calls for Peace in Holy Land, Offers to Mediate between Hamas and Israel," *National Catholic Register*, October 13, 2023, <https://www.ncregister.com/cna/vatican-calls-for-peace-in-holy-land-offers-to-mediate-between-hamas-and-israel>.

<sup>28</sup> Daniela Iacono, "Pope John Paul II Met Privately with PLO Chief," *United Press International*, September 15, 1982, <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1982/09/15/Pope-John-Paul-II-met-privately-with-PLO-chief/5919400910400/>.



sent Cardinal Matteo Zuppi to Moscow to start mediation efforts to end the war in Ukraine.<sup>29</sup>

Ultimately, these efforts did not facilitate dialogue between both sides or result in a more significant peace agreement. It is notable that the Holy See has expressed interest in facilitating mediation between non-Catholic states, which indicates the failure of starting a mediation attempt is more so due to an unwillingness by the disputing parties to accept the Holy See as an appropriate mediator. Therefore, the causal mechanism is not based on the Holy See focusing on Catholic disputes because of a bias of wanting to resolve them over other disputes, but it is rather based on Catholic disputants more applicable to receiving mediation efforts by the Holy See.

Regarding the previously mentioned discussion on the extent to which the Holy See is a neutral actor, the data do not dispute that the Holy See is neutral. While the data could be interpreted as a bias towards resolving Catholic disputes, it is more probable Catholic nations are seeking out Holy See mediation more frequently than non-Catholic nations, and the Holy See is obligated to attempt it by virtue of its humanitarian beliefs. Therefore, the Holy See is not biased towards resolving Catholic disputes, but rather Catholic disputes seek out Holy See mediation efforts. To better discern the legitimacy of this claim, a quantitative investigation into cases where disputing nations requested mediation would be helpful, but ultimately not realistic due to such requests typically not being publicized. However, through logical reasoning and evidence of the Holy See taking steps to attempt

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<sup>29</sup> Rafael Llanes, "Pope Sends Cardinal to Moscow to Continue Mediation over Ukraine War," *Zenit*, October 21, 2024, <https://zenit.org/2024/10/21/pope-sends-cardinal-to-moscow-to-continue-mediation-over-ukraine-war/>.

mediation in conflicts without Catholic actors, there is no clear evidence to suggest it is a biased actor.

The explanation for why a dispute involving some number of Christian nations does not change the likelihood of an attempted Holy See mediation is likely rooted in a poor local Church network in these countries, compared to Catholic nations. Local Church officials have been pivotal in the Holy See's mediation efforts, and a country with a small number of Catholics will have fewer Catholic officials, with less moral authority over the country's population. Additionally, the Vatican's ability to mediate is often contingent on historical relationships with national governments. In predominantly Protestant or Orthodox nations, there has historically been less receptivity to Holy See diplomatic efforts, based on factors like theological differences, political resistance to Catholic influence, or longstanding tensions, like in Anglican Britain, Lutheran Scandinavia, and Orthodox Russia. This ultimately likely overrides some shared religious and moral beliefs that might suggest Christian nations are more likely to request, and then receive Holy See mediation efforts than non-Christian countries.

## Qualitative Analysis

In addition to the quantitative analysis, the qualitative analysis aims to supplement the previous findings with greater contextual understanding of the causal mechanisms and unveil the intricacies of Holy See mediation efforts. The first dispute for a discussion is the Beagle Conflict, a little-known territorial dispute between Argentina and Chile that narrowly avoided war in part because of the mediation efforts of the Holy See. The

sovereignty of the islands of Picton, Lennox, and Nueva at the southern tip of South America were disputed starting in the early 1900s due to differing interpretations on the course of the Beagle Channel. Due to their location, the islands affect sovereignty over a significant amount of territory for fishing grounds and potential oil reserves, as well as portions of Antarctica.<sup>30</sup>

In 1977, an international arbitration tribunal agreed to by both countries, led by the United Kingdom, ruled in favor of Chile. The ruling was rejected by Argentina, which deployed army reservists in the region. Chile did the same, and following a failed 180-day negotiation period, border clashes occurred, and a war was imminent. In November of 1978, further negotiations were attempted, however the distribution of maritime sea zones remained unresolved. On December 11, both parties agreed on a neutral mediator, and Pope John Paul II was chosen. The next day, however, Chile rejected an Argentinian plan for resolution and placed 45,000 border troops on alert five days later. Pope John Paul then announced he would begin a mediation effort and sent Cardinal Sumore to Buenos Aires to begin negotiations, an offer both nations accepted. Ultimately, the Holy See mediated the Declaration of Montevideo in January as a commitment between the countries to not use force, and in 1984 the Treaty of Peace and Friendship was signed to resolve the dispute.<sup>31</sup>

The two nations deciding on Pope John Paul II as a mediator was the key moment that led to a Papal mediation attempt. It is reasonable that this decision occurred because

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<sup>30</sup> “The Beagle Channel Conflict: A History of Disputes and Resolutions,” *Ushuaia Travel*, <https://ushuaiatravel.com/en/the-beagle-channel-conflict-a-history-of-disputes-and-resolutions>.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Brecher, Jonathan Wilkenfeld, Kyle Beardsley, Patrick James and David Quinn, *International Crisis Behavior Data Codebook*, Version 15 (2023), <http://sites.duke.edu/icbdata/data-collections/>.

of the Catholic ties of both nations. In 1980, Chile's population was approximately 89% Catholic and Argentina's population was 90% Catholic. The Church had major influence in persuading public opinion as a result. During talks between both nations, the Argentinian Foreign Minister asserted "the only acceptable mediator was the Pope," and the Chilean minister agreed. Furthermore, it was on December 22, six hours before a planned Argentinian invasion, when the Pope announced he would be sending his envoy to meet with leaders of both countries. "The appearance of the Pope had been effective, and the hardliners within the Argentine government had to back down."<sup>32</sup> The hardliners were devout Catholics, and the Holy See intervention following the previous request for their mediation successfully prevented conflict and led to a peaceful resolution to the crisis.

Holy See diplomacy was decisive in preventing the military confrontation because it combined significant moral influence over the parties with a subtle yet firm and pragmatic diplomacy aimed at bringing both parties closer together.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, this moral influence was especially successful because the officials steering the crisis towards escalation were devout in their Catholic beliefs and the most likely officials to be persuaded by the words of their Holy Father. Additionally, a key figure pressing for Holy See intervention was the Argentine bishop of Córdoba, Cardinal Primatesta, who had personal access to the Pope, highlighting the importance of the local Church network in the facilitation of mediation efforts.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Roberto Russell, *Política Exterior y Toma de Decisiones en América Latina* (Emece Editores, 1990).

<sup>33</sup> Alejandro Luis Corbacho, "Predicting the Probability of War during Brinkmanship Crises: The Beagle and the Malvinas Conflicts," *Serie Documentos de Trabajo*, No. 244, (2003).

<sup>34</sup> Armando Amuchástegui Astrada, *Argentina-chile, Controversia y Mediación* (Ediciones Gheresi, 1980).

The second case for analysis is the Iran Hostage Crisis from 1979 to 1981, notable for dominating American politics and helping prevent a second Carter administration. The Iranian seizure of the US embassy in Teheran was a flagrant violation of international law, the long-standing inviolability of diplomatic premises, and immunity of diplomatic personnel. Initially, the United States attempted to deal with the hostage crisis in a quiet manner, believing that it would be of short duration. After a few days of quiet diplomacy with Iran, President Carter engaged in a range of diplomatic efforts to pressure them, one of which was an appeal to the Pope.<sup>35</sup> An important backdrop to the crisis was a month prior on October 6, a pope was received at the White House for the first time. This came after the Holy See successfully mediated a ceasefire in the Beagle Conflict in January, proving to the Americans its mediation abilities. Both events could have reasonably convinced President Carter to send the appeal.

The Holy See has an unusually strong relationship with Iran. A testament to how Holy See diplomatic relations have sharply changed from the previous centuries when Muslim Nations were the enemies of the Church, Pope Francis in November of 2024 stated, “The life of the Catholic Church in Iran, a ‘little flock,’ is very close to my heart. The Church is not against the government; to say otherwise is a lie.”<sup>36</sup> Despite a poor relationship between Iran and the Western nations, the Church’s neutrality, including maintaining full diplomatic relations with them after the Revolution, as well as shared

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<sup>35</sup> P. Peter Sarros, *U.S.-Vatican Relations, 1975-1980: A Diplomatic Study* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2020).

<sup>36</sup> “Vatican - Pope Francis: ‘The Catholic Church in Iran Is Not against the Government; to Say Otherwise Is a Lie!’” *Fides*, November 20, 2024, [https://www.fides.org/en/news/75693-VATICAN\\_Pope\\_Francis\\_The\\_Catholic\\_Church\\_in\\_Iran\\_is\\_not\\_against\\_the\\_government\\_to\\_say\\_otherwise\\_is\\_a\\_lie](https://www.fides.org/en/news/75693-VATICAN_Pope_Francis_The_Catholic_Church_in_Iran_is_not_against_the_government_to_say_otherwise_is_a_lie).

commitment to a strong religious identity, set the Vatican apart from its Western neighbors.

On November 7, President Carter sent the following appeal to the Pope:

“Your Holiness: I would like to request your most urgent intercession in a matter of great concern to me and to the American people. More than sixty Americans are held as hostages at the American Embassy in Tehran. The release of these innocent people is a matter of the highest importance to the United States. We continue to explore every possible avenue to ensure their safe departure from Iran. I would deeply appreciate your appeal on religious and humanitarian grounds to the Ayatollah Khomeini on behalf of the American hostages.”<sup>37</sup>

On November 8, the Apostolic Nuncio to Iran, Monsignor Annibale Bugnini, formally delivered a request to release the hostages to the Iranian Foreign Ministry, the first prominent member of the international community to make such an appeal. On November 12, Bugnini met with the Iranian leader Khomeini, and Khomeini was defiant that the Americans would remain hostages while the shah received refuge in the United States. Bugnini was allowed to meet with the hostages, which occurred afterwards, and he reported they were “physically well but mentally distressed.” He later visited the hostages on Christmas and Easter, making similar statements. The Vatican offered to act as the intermediary between the United States and Iran, which, if accepted, would have satisfied the variable that the Holy See attempted mediation, but Iran refused. In early April, a different

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<sup>37</sup> P. Peter Sarros, *U.S.-Vatican Relations, 1975-1980: A Diplomatic Study* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2020).

official of the Holy See, Archbishop Hilarion Capucci, went to Iran to secure the release of the hostages, where Khomeini insisted their fate was to be decided by Parliament, which was not expected to assemble until May. On April 12, the Pope wrote another letter to Iran to no avail, and the infamous failed rescue attempt, Operation Eagle Claw, occurred on April 24, which was likely launched in part due to the failure of the Holy See to begin negotiations.

Ultimately, the Holy See did not attempt to mediate the conflict by using the previous established definition of facilitating a meeting between both sides. However, it certainly tried to obtain the release of the hostages, consistent with the observation that the Holy See is limited in its mediation attempts if the disputing parties do not request it. The United States requested it, but Iran did not, because the Iranian leadership was firm on receiving the shah in exchange for the hostages.

Algeria mediated the dispute, despite the Holy See being the third-party that made the most progress in returning the hostages, and the reasoning is based on the greater trust Iran had in Algeria compared to the Holy See. Unlike the Holy See, Algeria was a former colony that gained its independence from a Western power, France. Similarly, the Iranian Government believed the Revolution had secured Iran's independence from being a puppet of the United States. Some of the key assets the Holy See brought to mediation efforts, its neutrality, were also assets of Algeria. Furthermore, Algeria had recently mediated the Algiers Agreement of 1975 between Iraq and Iran to settle territorial disputes, proving themselves as a trustworthy mediator to the Iranians. Therefore, trust as an intervening variable discouraged Iran from requesting Holy See mediation and ultimately a

different option with greater trust was chosen instead, consistent with the theory of this paper.

The final case for analysis is the Dominican Intervention, which occurred in 1965. In December 1962, more than a year after the assassination of its long-time dictator, the first free elections in 38 years were held in the Dominican Republic. Juan Bosch won and was inaugurated as President in February 1963. In September military officers, alleging communist control of the civilian regime, staged a coup. Donald Reid Cabral functioned as a puppet President while real power lay in the hands of a three-man military junta. The United States supported the coup, seeing Bosch as a communist-sympathizer and threat to the sphere of influence the United States had over the Americas.<sup>38</sup> However, the coup developed into a war when supporters of the Bosch Government successfully overthrew Cabral in a counter-coup on April 24, 1965.

As the Bosch Government, also known as the constitutionalists, had the initiative and appeared close to defeating the junta supporters, also known as the loyalists, the United States militarily intervened on April 28 by deploying 400 paratroopers and marines, and evacuating the foreign nationals unable to leave. This created a crisis for both the United States and the Dominican Republic. The involvement increased to 14,000 by May 2<sup>nd</sup> and 22,000 by May 20. Pope Paul VI called for all factions “to strive for national unity and peace,” as the Apostolic Nuncio Archbishop Emanuele Clarizio acted as the principal mediator between the factions and the United States, using his Church as a setting for

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<sup>38</sup> Stephen G. Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America* (Oxford University Press, 2012).



negotiations.<sup>39</sup> This satisfies the variable for Holy See attempted mediation. The main achievement by the archbishop was a ceasefire plan he put forward was adopted on April 30, reducing the scale of conflict. Other bishops in the Dominican Republic refrained from making public statements to not impede the work of Archbishop Clarizio.

Ultimately, the Holy See did not mediate the final conflict resolution, which was done instead by the Organization of American States, an international organization of most countries in the Americas that aims to promote cooperation, democracy, and human rights, and have been involved in the mediation process of various conflicts in the region. Nevertheless, the Holy See was explicitly part of the mediation efforts, and notably in accordance with the terms of the Lateran Treaty, the military junta requested a ceasefire mediated by the Holy See before mediation efforts were attempted. The Act of Dominican Reconciliation was signed on August 31, ending the war, while a compromise moderate President was selected, Héctor García-Godoy. Elections were held in July of next year, with Joaquín Balaguer winning, who was considered a neutral candidate aiming to reconcile differences.<sup>40</sup>

The behavior of the Dominican factions and the United States indicates there was significant trust in the Holy See. The junta requested mediation on April 28, the same day the first troops of the United States were deployed, and the day Archbishop Clarizio returned from a trip to Puerto Rico, and the implementation two days later suggests he held significant moral authority to convince the Americans and opposing constitutionalists

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<sup>39</sup> "Pope Asks Dominican Peace," *The Catholic Transcript*, May 20, 1965.

<sup>40</sup> Lawrence A. Yates, "Power Pack: U.S. Intervention in the Dominican Republic," *Leavenworth Papers* 15 (1988).

to accept.<sup>41</sup> The balance of power at this point was important, because the constitutionalists were on the brink of victory, but the American intervention and the appeals of the Archbishop convinced them to accept a ceasefire. The loyalists could have requested mediation from other sources, such as the United Nations or Organization of American States, but chose the Holy See because they were believed to be most likely to convince the constitutionalists to accept. The Americans were eager for a ceasefire because of a desire to present a perception of neutrality. Therefore, through religious appeals of a shared Catholic faith, (the Dominican Republic was approximately 95% Catholic in 1965) the Holy See received a request to attempt mediation and successfully implemented a ceasefire.

## Conclusion

The quantitative evidence, supplemented by a qualitative analysis, suggests a dispute involving Catholic-majority nations are more likely to request mediation by the Holy See. In turn, the Holy See out of a desire to reduce global conflict will attempt a mediation effort. Conflicts between two Catholic-majority nations are the most likely to involve Holy See mediation, while conflicts with one Catholic-majority nation are more likely than not, compared with conflicts with no Catholic-majority nations. Christian-majority nations by comparison do not request Holy See mediation differently than the baseline, suggesting hypothesis one is supported while hypothesis two is not. The poor local Church networks present in predominantly Protestant or Orthodox countries,

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<sup>41</sup> Homer Bigart, "Nuncio's Mission: Aiding 'Good Guys,'" *The New York Times*, May 10, 1965.

combined with theological differences, political resistance to Catholic influence, or longstanding tensions ultimately prevents greater Holy See mediation efforts in Christian countries compared to non-Christian countries.

The Beagle Conflict is a clear example of two Catholic-majority countries requesting Holy See mediation because the Pope was the most trustworthy option through a shared Catholic faith. The Iran Hostage Crisis highlights the failure of the Holy See of being an effective mediator when another mediator, Algeria, was seen as more trustworthy. Lastly, a ceasefire was requested and implemented by the Holy See during the Dominican Intervention, a testament to the religious authority it held in convincing warring parties to pause.

While the success of Holy See mediation attempts was not discussed in this paper, it could be a topic for future investigations. Does the religion of the disputing nations affect the success rate of mediation attempts in addition to the chance of mediation attempts? It could be theorized that leaders of Catholic nations are more amicable to negotiations involving officials of the Church because of their unwillingness to be perceived by their population as being uncooperative with Holy See negotiators. This unwillingness could be based on a fear of electoral consequences, a trend present in democracies and not dictatorships.

Further research may be done on the role of religion in intrastate conflicts, specifically applying this thesis to civil wars. Since this study focuses on interstate disputes, examining whether similar patterns hold in internal conflicts would offer valuable insights. Some differences would need to be made to how the variables are coded,

specifically what determines if a country is Catholic, non-Catholic, Christian, and non-Christian. This cannot be coded based on the Catholic percentages in the country, as the territorial control of a rebellious force is often disputed and difficult to measure. Instead, it would be more reasonable to examine the religious affiliation of leadership and/or the combatants to determine the affiliation of a rebellion or central government. It is reasonable to theorize Catholic factions would trust the Holy See as a mediator more than non-Catholic factions, due to shared religious identity and moral authority.

One consideration that should be made is that the influence of the Holy See has declined over time. Evidence suggests that the global Catholic proportion has been stable, although their geographical distribution has changed dramatically. In 1910, Catholics comprised 48% of all Christians and 17% of the world's population. In 2010, Catholics comprised 50% of all Christians and 19% of the world's population. Therefore, the strength of the Church as measured by the proportion of believers has remained stable, but Catholic distributions changed; in 1910 65% of the world's Catholics lived in Europe, while in 2010 it was 24%. At the same time, the Catholic proportions in Latin America and Africa have risen substantially.<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, their influence may have shifted to Latin America and Africa, and weakened in Europe, but should not have substantially weakened overall. This implies the Holy See has weakened in their ability to attempt mediation in Europe, but strengthened in the Americas and Africa.

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<sup>42</sup> "The Global Catholic Population," *Pew Research Center*, February 13, 2013, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2013/02/13/the-global-catholic-population/>.

As the world becomes more secular, the question arises whether the Holy See will decline in influence as an international mediator. If a country stops being a majority Catholic country, is it less likely to request Holy See mediation in a dispute? In the coming decades, the Holy See will be faced with this issue, and its mediation strategies could change. It could reject the enforced neutrality of the Lateran Treaty in favor of more proactive mediation, whereby instead of reacting to mediation requests it becomes more involved in resolving early tensions before they develop into a conflict. It could be presently moving in this direction based on Pope Francis sending a cardinal to Russia and Ukraine to begin mediation negotiations, which is atypical to previous behavior during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Another possibility is greater integration with existing international mediation frameworks. While an independent country, the Holy See behaves like an international organization through their network of Church officials present in almost every nation. Eventually, the Papacy may make the determination that organizations like the European Union, United Nations, or African Union would be more successful in their mediation efforts by working closely with the Holy See's Church network, instead of operating separately.

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