

I. Abstract

In this paper I would like to analyse the diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China from a theological point of view, placing two terms – inculturation and sinicization – into the spotlight, framing the understanding within the context of the so-called secular religions and political theology. My hypothesis is that the nature of the dialogue between the two parties could be better interpreted via this concept, rather than using the analogy of “Ostpolitik” – the official ecclesiastical policy of the Holy See towards the Soviet bloc during the Cold War.

This text is a result of the CREATE TX Programme at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas, within which I had the opportunity to spend a whole semester in Rome, studying the social teaching of the Catholic Church and related disciplines. Besides, the various weekly visits to different dicasteries of the Holy See enriched my experience and helped me to build a deeper understanding of Church-related diplomatic activities. Another element of the programme was that it created personal relationships – not only in academic terms – between all the participants. I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude towards the University for providing this opportunity for us.

II. Introduction

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s.”¹ According to the Gospel, this was Jesus Christ’s response to the Pharisees when questioned about paying taxes to the emperor. This passage laid the foundation for the Western political-theoretical discourse that led to the separation of temporal (political) and transcendent (religious) powers—a feature characteristic of the Western Christian world.² Of course, this relationship has not been conflict-free throughout history, but today the issue is generally seen as settled.³

However, in the non-Western, non-Christian parts of the world, it remains highly contested. This includes

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God...?” Limits and Opportunities of the Diplomatic Relations between the Holy See and the People’s Republic of China

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the People's Republic of China, where the conflict between the state-unrecognized, persecuted “underground Church” and official “Catholicism” is a focal issue of the Holy See’s diplomacy—particularly regarding the appointment of bishops. In Catholicism this right belongs to the pope for theological reasons, but China sees it as an infringement on its own sovereignty.

During my research I analysed how the two entities engage in international relations—within the context of global politics—and traced the development of Chinese Christianity and China–Holy See relations in the 20th century, culminating in the 2018 provisional agreement addressing the appointment of bishops.

In this essay, however, I focus primarily on my theoretical hypothesis and its justification.

III. The Hypothesis

A common analogy for this topic is the so-called Ostpolitik⁴, or the Holy See’s Eastern policy towards socialist states during the Cold War. My hypothesis posits that the limitations and opportunities in the diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China could be better understood not through a political lens but through a pre-political, political-theological approach. (By political theology, I mean that concepts appearing purely political at first glance often mirror theological systems and are thus comparable.⁵)

This is especially pertinent because of the stark differences between the two regions and time periods, casting doubt on the effectiveness of the Ostpolitik analogy. For instance, Christianity in China lacks the political weight it had in the socialist bloc; the Chinese state treats religion as a security issue, not a political one. Moreover, communism in China functions more like a sinicized “secular religion”, increasingly aligned with millennia-old traditions and thought systems—many of which conflict with the Church’s universalist worldview.⁶ The

notion of a secular religion here implies that a supposedly worldly, temporal phenomenon exhibits religious traits.

Thus, while the Ostpolitik analogy cannot be ignored, I propose that the tension between inculturation and sinicization better defines the relationship. In this view, the dispute is not primarily political (as Ostpolitik would suggest) but pre-political, centered on the theological-cultural terms of inculturation and sinicization – terms which are then overlaid, and partly obscured, by political concerns.⁷

This would suggest that the relationship involves an atypical interreligious dialogue, with Catholicism being a traditional religion and the Chinese state representing, in theory, a secular religion.

IV. The Tension Between Relativized Concepts

Given the centrality of inculturation and sinicization, both deserve brief explanation.

Inculturation means that the Christian mission speaks to all cultures—not to impose uniformity but to preserve and foster elements of each culture that do not contradict Christ’s teachings, within the framework of the Gospel and unity with the universal Church. This is a slow, bottom-up, organic process that ties together human nature, culture, and grace. While present since the early Church and deeply rooted in Chinese Church-history as well (notably through Jesuit Matteo Ricci), the term was only clearly formulated in 1962 by Jesuit theologian Joseph Masson and later officially used by Pope John Paul II in his 1979 apostolic exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae*.

Sinicization⁸, literally “to make Chinese,” has several meanings depending on context.⁹ Historically, it referred to the cultural dominance of the Han ethnicity or the assimilation of foreign dynasties like the Mongol Yuan or Manchu Qing. In modern usage, especially in Chinese

government policy, it refers to the systematic alignment of foreign cultural and religious groups with the state's political objectives.¹⁰ President Xi Jinping explicitly discussed religious sinicization in a 2016 speech, stressing the leadership of the Communist Party and the importance of religions contributing to Chinese society—within the bounds of the official atheist ideology. (China officially recognizes five religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism).

Though similar in form, the two concepts are fundamentally different. Inculturation is a grassroots, tolerant, inclusive process; sinicization is top-down and politically mandated, often creating tensions.

Nevertheless, for the sake of dialogue, both concepts are being relativized. Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Holy See's Secretary of State, remarked in an interview under Pope Francis:

"These two concepts, 'inculturation' and 'sinicization,' refer to each other without being confused and without opposing one another: in some ways, they can complement each other and open the way to dialogue on religious and cultural levels."¹¹

This supports the aforementioned pre-political approach, treating these concepts as elements of a dialogue between a traditional religion and a secular religion.¹²

V. Constraints and Opportunities

While both John Paul II and Benedict XVI prioritized the issue of Chinese Catholicism, formal progress came only under Pope Francis. The 2018 Provisional Agreement signed in Beijing is hard to assess, as its text remains secret due to diplomatic discretion.

Still, official press releases confirm its existence and two-year term. Notably, the Holy See's statement is much longer than China's, suggesting greater significance for the Vatican. The titles also differ: the Holy See speaks of an agreement "regarding the appointment of bishops"¹³, while China calls it an agreement "on relevant issues," a vaguer formulation.¹⁴

The agreement has been renewed three times—most recently in 2024 for four years—indicating both ongoing constraints and mutual interest.

Reportedly, both sides consult on episcopal appointments, aiming for mutual-

ly acceptable candidates. However, bishops have been ordained without papal mandate even after the agreement, and some diocesan leadership changes have raised contradictions.

Thus, interpretations of the agreement vary. From the Holy See's perspective, China has violated it repeatedly; from China's view, it is merely exercising sovereignty. Nevertheless, the Holy See continues to relativize sinicization in hopes of maintaining dialogue and unity.

The official Chinese ideology, based in syncretic but now dogmatized Confucianism, permits inculturation only if sinicization is relativized—something the Holy See does to preserve Church unity, despite criticism from figures like former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo¹⁵ and Cardinal Joseph Zen¹⁶ of Hong Kong.

Paradoxically, the very constraint that limits relations may also be what allows for cautious cooperation. Still, it's uncertain how this policy will affect Chinese Catholicism in the long run. Underground believers often feel alienated. In this sense, the Ostpolitik analogy may offer useful historical insight.

Another major constraint is China's dominant position. Its classical view of the state conflicts with the Holy See's "foreign" sovereignty, which it seeks to minimize—even demanding that the Vatican sever ties with Taiwan, unlike with the U.S. in the 1970s.¹⁷ While China does not question the papacy's sovereignty, it wishes to limit its influence as much as possible.

Looking ahead, the most likely scenario is that the current provisional agreement becomes permanent, though it remains uncertain whether open conflict can be avoided – especially given the Church's limited and distinct diplomatic tools in the region.

Answering the paraphrased question of the Pharisees, posed in the essay title is therefore difficult: for China, the separation of religion and politics – of Church and state – remains uninterpretable in the Western sense. Ultimately, this explains the practical disputes over bishop appointments and the provisional agreement. Finally, it is important to mention, that my research was mainly a theoretical investigation of the topic, therefore it may be still be relevant under the new pope, Leo XIV, although it is too early to evaluate how he may address the question.

NOTES

1. See Mt 22,15-22 and Mk 12,13-17
2. Rezi, Elek: Fazekas, Sándor – Kovács, Krisztián (ed.): Vallás és politika. Teológiai reflexiók egy komplex kapcsolatot múltjáról és jelenéről. In: Református Szemle 113.1 (2020), 73-75.
3. Schanda, Balázs: Keresztény kultúra – állam és egyház – vallásszabadság. Tanulmányok a vallásszabadság és az állami egyházjog köréből, Pázmány Press, Budapest, 2022, 25-33.
4. Cf.: Caprio, Stefano: The Old and New Ostpolitik of the Holy See, Herald Malaysia Online, 2018, February 20. <https://www.heraldmalaysia.com/news/the-old-and-new-ostpolitik-of-the-holy-see-i/41027/1> Downloaded: 15th May 2025. Ezen kívül lásd még: Bascom, James Pope Francis's New Ostpolitik with Communist China Is Just Like the Old One, The American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property, 2020. október 21. <https://www.tfp.org/pope-francis-new-ostpolitik-with-communist-china-is-just-like-the-old-one/> Downloaded: 17th June 2025. Sisci, Francesco – Strazzari, Francesco: Holy See and the New "Ostpolitik" with China, Settimana News, 2018. February 28. <https://www.settimana-news.it/italia-europa-mondo/holy-see-and-the-new-ostpolitik-with-china/> Downloaded: 13th April 2025. Fenyves, Krisztián: Vatikáni Ostpolitik? – A Szentszék és a Kínai Népköztársaság „baráti egyezségének” kérdései, Corvinák, 2023. január. 2. <https://corvinak.hu/velemen/2023/01/02/vatikani-ostpolitik-a-szentszek-es-a-kina-i-nepkoztarsasag-barati-egyezse-genek-kerdesei> Downloaded: 17th January 2025
5. On the problematic nature of the concept of political theology, see Jancsó, András: A vita lehetetlenségéről: Megjegyzések a politikai teológia fogalmához. In: Csurgai-Horváth Gergely et al.: *Bonus intra melior exi : Az MCC PhD-programjának zárótanulmányai - 2021/2022-es évfolyam*. Budapest: MCC Press, 2023, 61-80.
6. The contradictory notion of secular religion would mean that what is classically considered "secular", "temporal", and "secular", actually has "religious" characteristics. For details, see Nyirkos, Tamás: *Secular Religions. The Key Concepts*, Routledge, 2024
7. A similar paradigm is argued in this dissertation: Yongjia, Fu: *A Discourse Analysis of Sino-Vatican Relations, 1949-1958: The Evolution of a Long-Standing Stalemate*, Thesis

- for PhD Religious Studies, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, King's College London, 2017. https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/73828336/2017_Fu_Yongjia_1234282_ethesis.pdf Downloaded: 13th February 2025
8. Sinicization – Oxford English Dictionary. https://www.oed.com/dictionary/sinicization_n?tab=meaning_and_use&tl=true Downloaded: 13th April 2025
 9. For the different interpretations see: Fangyi, Cheng: The Evolution of Sinicisation in Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Series 3, 31, 2 (2021), 321-342.
 10. Batke, Jessica: PRC Religious Policy: Serving the Gods of the CCP in China Leadership Monitor, no. 52 <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/clm52jb.pdf> Downloaded: 13th April 2025
 11. Parolin, Pietro: «Con la Cina stiamo inaugurando un metodo positivo» - Vatican News, 12th May 2019. <https://www.vaticannews.va/it/vaticano/news/2019-05/parolin-con-la-cina-stiamo-inaugurando-un-metodo-positivo.html> Downloaded: 17th April 2025
 12. It is important to note that it is merely a theoretical approach that helps the better understanding of the dynamics, it does not mean that the relationships should be „officially” placed within the context of interreligious dialogue.
 13. Communiqué concerning the signing of a Provisional Agreement between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China on the appointment of Bishops, 2018.09.22. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2018/09/22/180922d.html>
 14. China and the Vatican Sign a Provisional Agreement on the Relevant Issue, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People's Republic of China, 2018.19.26. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/wjbxw/202405/t20240530_11339933.html Downloaded: 18th January 2025
 15. Pompeo, Mike: China's Catholics and the Church's Moral Witness, 2020.09.18 <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2020/09/chinas-catholics-and-the-churchs-moral-witness> Downloaded: 19th January 2025
 16. The Archbishop, retired since 2009, had serious reservations about rapprochement with the Chinese party-state, both on moral and practical grounds. For an interview with him, see: Blackman, Daniel: Cardinal Zen: I Fear the Vatican's Ostpolitik With Communist China, National Catholic Register, 2017. február 17. <https://www.ncregister.com/news/cardinal-zen-i-fear-the-vatican-s-ostpolitik-with-communist-china> Downloaded: 27th January 2025
 17. Luehrmann, Laura M.: The Red Flag and the Ring: The Dances Surrounding Sino-Vatican Tie in Asian Politics & Policy—Volume 1, Number 3, 497.
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