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## UNDERSTANDING THE BODY OF CHRIST: A REVIEW ARTICLE ON ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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### Abstrak

*Tulisan ini mengulas literatur Ilmu Hubungan Internasional, terutama terkait pandangan modern terhadap Gereja Katolik Roma. Secara lebih khusus, artikel ini meninjau bagaimana “peran” Gereja terwakili dalam literatur HI yang ditulis pada masa pasca-Perang Dingin. Kerangka waktu tersebut dipilih karena perhatian terhadap transnasionalisme dan aktor terkait hanya muncul sejak periode tersebut, sehingga memungkinkan diskusi ilmiah mengenai aktor keagamaan. Bagian pertama artikel ini akan melacak penyebutan awal tentang Katolik dan Hubungan Internasional. Kemudian, artikel ini akan menjelaskan bagaimana akademisi IR saat ini menganalisis Gereja. Temuan kajian literatur menggambarkan mayoritas diskusi saat ini didasari oleh asumsi akan Negara Kota Vatikan, Takhta Suci, jaringan gereja dan LSM Katolik sebagai representasi badan yang berbeda. Selanjutnya, artikel ini akan menyoroti perkembangan terakhir yang mencoba menyarankan Gereja sebagai –mungkin– aktor tunggal, bertentangan dengan apa yang saat ini dipercayai. Dengan menggunakan logika yang dipinjam dari khazanah teologis Katolik, tulisan ini menawarkan sebuah sintesis Gereja sebagai Tubuh Kristus yang terdiri atas berbagai anggota, seperti halnya dengan negara kesatuan yang dipahami oleh paradigma realisme klasik. Dengan demikian, tulisan ini juga dapat dilihat sebagai tantangan terhadap pemahaman kolektif mengenai salah satu aktor politik global tertua yang masih ada hingga kini, Gereja Katolik Roma..*

### Kata Kunci

*Keyakinan katolik, Gereja Katolik Roma, Tubuh Kristus, Aktor Non-Negara, Negara Kota Vatikan, Tahta Suci Vatikan, Kepausan Roma*

### Abstrak

*The paper reviews on how recent International Relations (“IR”) literature perceives the Roman Catholic Church. It attempts to show how the actorness of the Church is being represented on IR literatures written especially at post-Cold War era. The time frame is chosen because attention towards transnationalism and its corresponding actors has only emerged from that period of time, thus enabling scholarly discussion on religious actors. Firstly, this article is going to trace early mention of the Catholicism and IR. Then, it is going to explain how current IR scholars analyse the Church. It is found that majority of current discussions are based upon the underlying assumption that Vatican City State, the Holy See, church network and Catholic NGOs exist as different entities. Next, the article is going to highlight recent developments which attempted to suggest the Church as – perhaps – a multi-layer being, contrary to what is currently believed. Using the logic borrowed from Catholic theology, I am offering a synthesis of the Church as a multifaceted actor, not unlike the unitary state as understood by classical realism. Therefore, this review article can also be seen as a challenge towards the collective understanding, or lack thereof, about one of the oldest surviving global political actors, the Roman Catholic Church.*

### Keywords

*Catholicism, Roman Catholic Church, Body of Christ, non-state actor, Vatican City State, The Holy See, Pope*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Within the discipline of IR, discussion on how religions may affect international relations has been abysmal at least up to early 2000s. Some scholars feel the discipline may have inadvertently avoided the discussion on the issue, largely perhaps due to the deep-seated perception that religion should remain at private domain (Fox, 2001). Some others reject, even dismiss, the concept of religion altogether.<sup>1</sup> It is not surprising then that some scholars have come to a conclusion that as a discipline IR is indeed, secularised (Philpott, 2002).

However, recent surge of transnational studies in IR has allowed soft politics issues to emerge as a topic in IR discipline. One issue that has been put in the particular spotlight is religion, especially in the post-9/11 world. It has been argued that there is a “turn to religion” in IR, highlighting how religion has become a significant issue that may affect how policies are made (Kubálková, 2009). Nevertheless, despite increasing amount of interest pertaining to religion in IR, discussion on religious actors still remains inadequate

Catholicism is one of the most prominent religions in the world. Catholicism has shaped the world politics since the late antiquity era and remains influential in the present moment (Küng, 2001). Boasting more than 1.2 billion followers, the Roman Catholic Church<sup>2</sup> (“the Church”) is often touted as a powerful non-state actor representing Catholicism (Holy See Press Office, 2016). It spreads its influence in global discourses through many channels such as through churches’ pulpits, the initiatives of various Catholic NGOs, and individual activities of the Pope as the head of the Church. Moreover, it remains to be the only religious faction represented in the United Nations (“the UN”) through accreditation of the Holy See to UN bodies (Abdullah, 1996).

Bearing the abovementioned, it is deeply disconcerting to learn that there exists only limited body of literature on the Church’s unique brand of agency, or “actorness”.<sup>3</sup> IR literature shows very little attempt to understand who or what exactly brought Catholic influences in global political atmosphere. From the scant number of works that have been produced so far, it can be gleaned that there is a lack of common collective understanding about the Church. Some treat the Church as a state actor, focusing solely on Vatican.<sup>4</sup> A problem with their body of work concerns how they seldom problematise the disproportionality of the Church’s massive influence to the size of Vatican, both in geographic and economic sense, not to mention in terms of military capability. Others treat the Church simply as a religious institution that has influenced global discourse

through advocacy, similar to a non-governmental organisation (“NGO”). I opine that the latter view is flawed as well, as it begs another question: How would then it be possible for an NGO to maintain diplomatic relations with various states?

This difference on how IR scholars treat the Church would be further explored in later parts of this paper but at this point we can safely conclude that the Church is an anomaly in the global political scene. The lack of clarity in understanding this actor needs to be addressed, if not resolved. It is important to do so because the Church is an transnational actor in IR and a proper understanding of the actorness would help to explain its stance and policies in global political issues.

This article is an effort to provide a mapping of how IR literature has so far perceived the Church. Drawing a synthesis from the cumulative body of work in the discipline to construct summative understanding of the actorness of the Church, the modest aim is to start a preliminary discussion of the unique brand agency of one of the oldest IR actors, whose existence even predates the Westphalian system. To achieve this objective, I am going to use the conceptual framework of Body of Christ, which is borrowed directly from Catholic theology.

## ***DISCUSSIONS***

### **The Body of Christ and Global Politics**

Within Catholic religion system, the Body of Christ is a metaphor which describes the Church as an entity that inherits Christ’s ministry and authority on Earth. This concept originated from the biblical passage in I Corinthians 12:12-17 and Ephesians 4:1-16.<sup>5</sup> It was further cemented as part of Catholic dogmatic teaching through various Church documents, primarily through the encyclical letter *Mystici Corporis Christi*, promulgated by Pope Pius XII in 1943. According to this letter, the Church is a body with Christ as its Head (Catholic Church, 1943, article 25). It further asserted that the Church is an “unbroken unity” (Catholic Church, 1943, article 14). The Catechism further explains that the unity refers to the fact that all Catholic faithful are one under the universal Church. That means various local churches, seminaries, monasteries, and any other Catholic institutions are different body parts of the one universal Body of Christ (Catholic Church, 1992, article 790-795).

I argue that understanding this concept is imperative in any attempts to analyse the Church. The Church often presents itself as the Body of Christ, and even bases its approaches to global issues on this concept. For example, Pope John Paul II conducted a series of 130 sermons on various social issues such as marriage, reproductive health, and

family life, all based on this concept. The entire exposition, which later on known as the Theology of the Body, has become the foundation of the Church's stance on those issues (McManus, 2012). In other words, it is the identity constructed and embraced by the Church. Thus, I assert that any attempts to understand the Church would be futile without at least bearing the Body of Christ in mind.<sup>6</sup>

While in a glance it is difficult to directly link this concept to traditional IR frameworks, body politics of the Church is not exactly an alien concept to IR. For example, a work of feminism from Neale has attempted to use the framework of body politics in analysing the Church's involvement in global discourse on women's sexuality. Neale (1998) argues that the Church as the Body of Christ has been marginalising women in international politics. She identifies three parts of the body, namely: "the Catholic Church, the Holy See and the Pope". While one part of the paper is dedicated for narration of papal power, subsequently her paper goes into the discourse of women and sexuality in international forum, rendering the discussion on the actorness of the Church somewhat incomplete.

Using the framework of Body of Christ, this review paper in essence would map how International Relations literature perceives the actorness of Roman Catholic Church. In order to do so, first this paper shall comb through early IR literature to establish when and how Catholicism was first perceived as a significant ideology that shapes global political discourse in order to give a historical throwback. Then, the main bulk of this article is going to scan current IR works in order to understand how scholars analyse the Church. Lastly, the article is going to highlight recent developments to show there is a shift in the understanding of the Church towards the unitary Body of Christ.

### **Early understanding of Roman Catholic Church: Vatican-centric approach**

There have been some mentions of the Church as early as 1840s in the literature, portraying the Church as playing a role as an international political actor. An entry on *The Advocate of Peace* (currently known as *World Affairs*) written by William Allen (1840) contrast policies of Vatican which virtually "fomented every war that harassed Europe" and the biblical teaching of peace. In a journal article published in 1924, Woodward compares Vatican's diplomacy under two different papacies, Popes Pius IX and Leo XIII. A year later, Cecil (1925) discusses then newly-elected Pope Pius X and how his appointment would steer Vatican's foreign policy. The latter two papers were

published in the *Journal of the British Institute of International Affairs*, the predecessor of current leading IR journal, *International Affairs*.

While the examples show there have been highest-level academic interests on Vatican since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it should be noted that such mentions were rare and sporadic. The dearth of IR literature on the Church in this era resulted in a very limited understanding about the actorness of the Church. For example, the literature of the era largely did not address important questions such as how Vatican relates to the small parishes and monasteries or how it translates its multimillion memberships to global influence. In retrospect, this is understandable as IR as a discipline has not cemented itself yet in that era. As such, the notion of IR actorness has not yet existed to draw the attention of leading political scholars of that time.

After the Second World War, the growth of IR as a discipline has spurred the discussion on the Roman Catholic Church. In 1946, *International Affairs* published an article written by D.A. Binchy titled *The Vatican and International Diplomacy*. Through this article, Binchy (1946) argues that there are two faces of Vatican, “the Vatican as a political Power and the Vatican as a religious Power”. Perhaps, this was the very first instance whereby the Vatican is acknowledged as being capable to draw from its religious influence to establish itself as a legitimate international political actor.

### **Contemporary Understanding of Roman Catholic Church:**

#### **Multiple Bodies of Christ**

The rise of transnational studies has opened the path towards a wider understanding of the Church. With the shift away from state-centric approach in global politics, IR has become more cognisant of the roles that other actors have to play in a more globalised world. This fresher approach of IR has enabled the discussion of non-state actors to flourish, allowing the widespread acceptance of the Church, not simply Vatican, as an IR actor.

In order to analyse collective understanding of the Church at the moment, I used three criteria while deciding on the articles presented in this segment. Firstly, to reflect the currency, the articles reviewed should be published after 1991. The time frame is chosen because the attention towards transnationalism and its corresponding actors has only emerged after the Cold War, enabling academic discussion on religious actors. Secondly, the articles should be published in respectable political/IR international journals. This introduces limitation to this review article as it does not include books in

the survey. However, this decision is justifiable as most ideas appear in books are either foreshadowed by journal articles or incorporated later into journal entries. Thirdly, due to the limitation of the researcher, the articles reviews only include those published in English. Although this is defensible as most significant works are usually written in English, future iteration of this study can be expanded by working with more sources from international journals published in various languages.

This study finds that most of the current literature can be classified into three broad categories depending on the underlying assumption made about the relationship of actors within the entire Catholic religious system. The first category encompasses the ones that understand Catholicism actorness as mainly manifested through the Vatican, that is, the actorness of the Holy See. The second category includes the articles which contend that Catholicism influence spreading through its worldwide grassroots network of churches and faith-based organisations. Lastly, the third category focuses upon the Pope as the influential world leader capable of influencing discourse, not unlike the Secretary General of the UN. In other words, contemporary IR literature perceives the Church as at least three separate bodies, each acting and exercising their powers liberally, one body being dominant over the others.

The first group of literature mainly comes from authors who subscribe to realist or liberalist point of view. Emphasising centrality of state actor, this group of authors cast the spotlight on Vatican's soft power, which is derived from its perceived moral superiority among nations. The message that this group of literature conveys is that Catholicism great political power is due to the establishment and recognition of the Holy See as an equivalent to a state in international politics.<sup>7</sup>

Evans (1992) for example, identifies Vatican as the head of the Roman Catholic Church. He believes that after the collapse of Soviet Union, Vatican as an influential state, needed to confront the world in four issues namely post-war disarmament global democratisation, social democracy, and North-South Conflict. As a state, Vatican may participate in international political arena through its representation (Holy See) in the UN. Through the article, Evans proposed that in that era the Holy See should take a more active role in the UN.

Another writer, Abdullah also noted that Catholicism's power comes from other states recognition of Vatican as an equal, proven by the Holy See's status in the UN as Permanent Observer. According to Abdullah (1996), although the Holy See is not entitled to vote, it has used the UN system "to advance the theological positions of the Roman

Catholic Church”. She resents the Holy See—being and acting as a religious body, it should not have the more privilege than other world religions.

Similar acknowledgement on Vatican’s significant position in the field of diplomacy is found in Ueno’s work. Ueno (2012) believes that diplomacy with the Holy See remains relevant to any states, regardless whether the state is predominantly Catholic or not. Reflecting on his own country Japan’s relations to the Vatican, he considers it intriguing that a state with less than 0.5% Catholic population, has to send an Ambassador – himself – accredited to the Holy See. From his experience being posted in Vatican, he notes that the Holy See possesses huge soft power manifested in moral power,<sup>8</sup> intellectual power, and information power to name a few. As such, it is to the great interest of most states in the world to maintain a cordial diplomatic relationship with the Holy See.

The second group of literature focuses instead on the grassroots level of interaction. According to this group, the Church has imparted its values through an extensive network of churches, schools, charity organisations and other institutions.<sup>9</sup> The process of socialisation diffuses Catholic values through many layers of society, both through public and private spheres. This process enables said values to the world society, surfacing at times in politics as deep-seated value of general mass.

For example, Haynes (2001) believes that Roman Catholic Church has been influential in undermining hegemony of authoritarian governments in Poland in late 1980s. He coined the term Transnational Religious Actor to describe the way the Church exerted influence. Haynes asserts that Polish Catholicism has built “a counter-culture and an alternative social space” through local churches. This religious counter-culture was tangential to the official ideology of communism which was rampant in the region, culminating in the Polish Revolution 1989. Not only in Poland, elsewhere Haynes (2009) argues that the Church has used the same method in order to encourage democratisation of states in Latin America, Central/Eastern Europe, and parts of Asia.

Clarke and Ware (2015) similarly argue that the nature of churches is different from NGOs, which has been argued as potent transnational actors. They argue for a conception of FBO, which is an intersection between NGOs and religious organisations, one of which is “churches”. In pointing out to “churches”, although Clarke and Ware do not specifically refer to the Catholic Church, “the faith and the links between their beliefs and ... work” which characterise an FBO can be used to describe the qualities/features of



prominent Catholic FBOs such as Caritas International and Missionaries of Charity. Thus, I argue that their work can be regarded as belonging as the second group of literature.

The third group of literature highlights the Pope as an influential individual actor. Acting as the head of the Church, the Pope is seen as the supreme authority within the Catholic World. It means that the Pope's statesmanship represents the ultimate point of view of the Church. This echoes the old maxim on Catholic hierarchy "*Roma locuta est, causa finite est*"; when (the Bishop of) Rome has spoken, the cause is finished.<sup>10</sup> The maxim can be understood as the modern Vatican dogma which summarises the absoluteness of Papal authority. In sum, articles that belong to this group argue that the Pope is the greatest manifestation of the Body of the Christ, greater than the combined weight of the rest of the Church.<sup>11</sup> For instance, the Pope himself has been described to be very influential in the collapse of Communism. As noted by Appleby (2000), Pope John Paul II was the "sufficient cause" that led to the Polish revolution, which was then followed suit by the rest of the East Bloc. Appleby argues that the Papal visit to Warsaw in 1979 delivered the message which catalysed the popular revolt against the communist government. The Pope in his messages stated that solidarity should manifest as sharing of burden in communities, instead of through class struggle. This statement resonated well with the Poles and subsequently gave birth to Solidarity movement.

Discussion on papal individual actorness is not limited to John Paul II. Existing analyses have been attributed to other individuals who have held the very position. Hockenos's work (2010) has highlighted the role of Pope Benedict, weighing judgment on his capacity to govern over the entire Church. According to Hockenos, Pope Benedict has introduced his brand of papacy, marking a "Benedictine turn" in the history of the Church which refers to the way the Church under Pope Benedict's reform has steered the entire Catholic World to be more conservative.

More recently, Flamini (2014) argues that the latest Pope has again redirected the policy of Catholicism. For example, he notes how Pope Francis symbolic gesture of praying at Israeli security wall and Israel's Victim of Terrorism monument at the same visit, has changed the discourse in the Catholic World about Israel-Palestine issue. In Flamini's opinion, Pope Francis has established himself "as a major player on the international stage". His Holiness is thus perceived to have power over entire Church's worldview.

### **The Alternative Model of the Church: Single Body of Christ**

From the previous section, it can be concluded that there has been a shift in approach from the early stage to current stage of understanding of the Church's actorness in IR. Earlier IR discussions revolved around Vatican as the sole embodiment of the Church. Over the years, the development of IR scholarship in general introduced new entities as Catholic actors. It can be established that contemporary IR understands that there are multiple Bodies of Christ in the international political stage, namely: the Holy See, the grassroots network, and lastly, the Pope.

Some of the most recent development in IR literature however shows there is an alternative understanding of Catholicism actorness as something more complex. The interlinkage between the elements of Catholicism has been suggested to create an intricate web which cannot be explained by multi-actor approach. There is a blurred entity division among the Catholic actors. For example, it is unclear up to which point a speech delivered by the Pope in the UN functions as a part of Holy See's diplomacy or represents his way to exercise his moral power. Therefore, for some scholars, Catholicism is actually a single entity comprising of many layers. This is in contrast of how majority of current discussions are based upon, that is having an underlying assumption that Vatican City State, the Holy See, church network, Catholic NGOs, and even the Pope exist as different entities.

One of the most ardent proponents of this alternative view would be Mariano Barbato. Recently, Barbato (2013) argues that Catholicism influence on global politics stems from the existence of the Holy See, that is, the Pope as a subject seen from the eyes of international law. However, he further argues that the concept of Holy See's multi-layered actorness is necessary in order to understand its influence as a political actor. According to Barbato, there are three layers of actorness within the Holy See, namely "the Church", "the State", and "the Diplomat". This triumvirate very much corresponds with the three Bodies identified in contemporary literature.

### **Synthesis and Further Research: A Biblical Body of Christ**

In general, it can be observed that there is a general consensus that the Roman Catholic Church is undeniably political, both in its nature and its participation in global politics. Through participation in political processes, the Church aims to advance its religious intention. However, it has not been established yet what exactly the embodiment

of the Catholic actor is. What remains as a gap in IR literature is how Catholicism actorness should be represented in IR.

The main area of disagreement in the literature concerns manifestation of the Body of Christ manifests itself in world politics. As laid out above, most of current literature contends that there are multiple Bodies of Christ. In this model, one of the Bodies is more dominant than others and most of Church's power is concentrated in that Body. However, there has been an alternative view that there is only one single Body of Christ possessing multiple layers within itself.<sup>12</sup>

In my opinion, the latter understanding of the Church would be more of a compelling argument. Catholicism has a very strong adherence to biblical authority. The Bible to Catholic actors can be likened to what constitution is to a state. Thus, its involvement in secular world would primarily be based upon biblical interpretation. All in all, I think it is best to understand the Church as a unitary body with many sub-bodies each catering to different masses, not unlike how realists understand the state. I would like to argue any research attempting to understand the actorness of the Church would require incorporation of elements of Catholic theology. I recommend that future studies consider cross-disciplinary approach in order to further analyse this notion.

### ***CONCLUSION***

There are three points I would like to make in this section. Firstly, concluding the literature review, the specific brand of agency of the Roman Catholic Church is indeed unique. It is a religious institution, yet it controls a state. It is a state, yet its massive influence is disproportional to its size. Current understanding of the actorness of the Church has identified three main actors within the Church namely the Holy See, the grassroots network, and the Pope. However, for some, myself included, it does not reflect the Church accurately.

Secondly, from the afore-mentioned point, I suggest for future studies, collectively as a discipline, IR might have to take a step back and borrow a leaf from Catholic theology. This is necessary in order to crosscheck and re-examine its collective understanding on the actorness of the Church. I argue that current IR literature has failed to capture the multi-layered actorness of the Church because it has done little cross-discipline study, in particular with regard to Catholic theology. Understanding the Church theological concept of the Body of Christ would be necessary in order to shed a light on this multi-layered actorness. It enables IR scholars to treat the universal Church as a single entity with many constituents, each having its own function and purpose.

Thirdly, on a side note yet somewhat relevant to the discussion, coming from the point of view of an Indonesian IR scholar, I am concerned with the lack of academic discussion on the Church in IR field in Indonesia. Understandably there perhaps exists a personal preference in Indonesia not to talk about religious matters even in academic context. However, recent surge of Islamic IR scholarship should probably empower fellow Indonesian academicians, especially those adhere to or simply inspired by Catholic teachings to start contributing to global understanding, or lack thereof, on Catholicism and IR.

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## **ENDNOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> Early IR scholars drew their inspirations from thinkers such as Comte, Durkheim, Weber, and Marx. It is well-established fact that religion does not sit well with the afore-mentioned names. For more complete and compelling argument, see Fox (2001).

<sup>2</sup> I am following the definition of Fr. Richard McBrien about what the Roman Catholic Church is. In his somewhat dissenting yet authoritative book, he structurally defines the Roman Catholic Church as the Latin Church and 23 Eastern Catholic Churches, which are in full communion with the Pope as Bishop of Rome. See McBrien, Richard. (1981). *Catholicism*, Minneapolis: Winston Press: 19-20.

<sup>3</sup> I borrow the conceptualisation of “actorness” as referring to the unique brand of agency from the work of Alan Chong. Chong introduces the term in “The Catholic Church in International Politics”.

<sup>4</sup> In this case, Vatican refers to Vatican City State, an enclave state within Rome. It is regarded as the smallest state in the world due to its size. However, the sovereignty is not attached to Vatican City State, but to an entity called the Holy See, headed by the Pope. Therefore, the capacity of conducting diplomacy lies with the Holy See, not Vatican City State. In extant literature, the usage of “Vatican” may also refer to either the state the sovereign entity (i.e. the Holy See), or figuratively the governance (not unlike usage of “White House” or “Kremlin”).

<sup>5</sup> Cor 12:12-17 speaks of how the Church is likened to a single body. Similar to the human body, the Church is made of many different body parts, each having its own characteristics and function. The same concept is further explored in Eph 4:1-16 by comparing the maturity of the Church with the growth of human body.

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps not unlike trying to make sense Trump’s policies by entirely discarding his pompous slogan “Make America Great Again”.

<sup>7</sup> Chong and Troy (2011) also put forth similar argument.

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, Ueno wrote that the Pope played a role to look out for the world or act as “guardian of the international society”. Thus, it is implied that Pope’s power is a part of Holy See’s aggregate power, contrary to what the third group of literature would assert.

<sup>9</sup> For readings with similar tone, see Ryall (2001) and Cox (2010).

<sup>10</sup> Earliest version of this maxim is often credited to Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430). This exact wording of the maxim itself has entered academic field lexicon at least as early as 1857. See Prophetical Office of the Church, “The Church III”, *The Catholic Layman*, Vol. 6, No. 69 (Sep., 1857): 100-102.

<sup>11</sup> Other works which convey this message are for example Araujo (2010) and Huff (2008).

<sup>12</sup> I refer to Barbato’s model here. However, I do not reject other possibilities. To start off, I am intrigued by the plausibility to define the intricate actorness as Catholic Civilisation. In his magnum opus “The Clash of Civilizations”, Huntington (1993) defined civilisation as “the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity”. I believe that Catholicism qualifies for this definition.