

The Pope's Prominent Involvement in World Politics Even Today

Duygu Bayram

Religion is held in high regard and is a touchy topic in the eyes of many people. Over the course of history, many wars have been waged in its name, many empires built, and many destroyed. While religion is a personal and individual experience for some people, religion in history has not been that way for a long time. Even though it may no longer hold power over the entire educational, political, economic, judiciary systems like it had for some periods, organized religion still has powerful influences in our world, even with significantly increased secularism all around the globe. Outright theocracies like the Vatican or countries ruled by Islamic Law are more in-your-face examples for this statement. Still, the active involvement of the Pope even in secular or non-Christian political spaces is slightly more subtle.

The most recent example of this is Pope Francis' visit to Iraq's Christian communities in March. Multiple popes have tried to pay the same visit before, but something always seemed to get in the way. (1) Luckily, it seems the Pope was reluctant to let a global pandemic stop him. He asked people to pray it goes well, "I ask that you accompany this apostolic trip with prayer so that it can occur in the best way possible, bear the hoped-for fruit. The Iraqi people await us." (2) I suppose it would go well since he is vaccinated, unlike the Iraqi people he wants to support.

The Pope's visit to the region is hardly apolitical. The first thing he was planned to do there was to meet the political officials. This is also not an uncommon occurrence for the Pope to visit other countries. He is recognized as a global political figure. Later, he met the clergy and seminarians at the Syrian Catholic Church, which witnessed an attack in 2010. The next day, he visited the holiest city for the Shiites, a Muslim group. During his time in Najaf, he made time to see Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, an old Muslim who rarely meets people, especially from other religions. After this meeting, he moved onto the Plain of Ur, an interreligious location for Abraham, the patriarch of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, to give a talk. Following this, he went back to Baghdad to celebrate Mass before making his journey to Erbil on his last day, an autonomous region that had faced rocket attacks in the days before the visit. After visiting Erbil, he flew to Mosul to pray for the people that were lost during the Islamic State's occupation. Before returning to Erbil to celebrate Mass again, he paid a final visit to a Christian town that had faced violence and migration in the last 10 years (3).

As evident from the choices in his tour plan, his visit to Iraq carries political reasons. Iraq is an essential region for Christianity due to its history. The Pope was invited there by the President of Iraq in the first place to verify the stability established in the country after the wars. He then met the ayatollah, who had significant power over politics in Iraq. Although the meeting itself was not open to the public, the officials have expressed that there likely would not be a signed agreement between the two (4).

This is not the only instance where the Pope is recognized as an influential political figure and can have significant influence over the narrative. We see similar occurrences in his sharing of opinions on LGBTQI+ issues. However, his power is not limited only to social impact. He is the only religious leader that holds the authority to sign international treaties and send ambassadors (5). This is arguably the continuing residues of the reign Christianity once had over Europe. The interesting thing is that even back in the earlier centuries, the source of this authority was in question. The Donation of the Constantine, the document that handed over the control of the western part of the Roman Empire and Rome to the Pope, is claimed to have been forged. These claims go as far back as 1001 (6).

Overall, it is clear that the Pope continues to have authority over world politics as religion itself is not locked down to one region. It could be argued that this is more powerful than any political figure we currently have, as the Pope holds influence over some powerful countries' political standings as well. Of course, how negative or necessary this influence is up to debate and personal values. Regardless, it is undoubtedly worth questioning how fitting this is to the century we live in.