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**Organized Religion and Contestations of the Liberal Script. The Catholic Church, Body Politics, and Anti-Gender Mobilizations**

SCRIPTS Working Paper No. 07



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Series-Editing and Production: Dr. Anke Draude, Dr. Gregor Walter-Drop, Cordula Hamschmidt, Paul Geiling, and Carol Switzer

Please cite this issue as: Reuterswärd, Camilla 2021: Organized Religion and Contestations of the Liberal Script. The Catholic Church, Body Politics, and Anti-Gender Mobilizations, SCRIPTS Working Paper No. 7, Berlin: Cluster of Excellence 2055 “Contestations of the Liberal Script – SCRIPTS”.

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# Organized Religion and Contestations of the Liberal Script

## The Catholic Church, Body Politics, and Anti-Gender Mobilizations

Camilla Reuterswärd

### ABSTRACT

Policies that expand reproductive health and sexual minority rights have met increasing resistance around the world over the past decade. Movements opposing so-called “gender ideology” have mobilized against a perceived threat to conservative values concerning life, the family, identity, and sexuality. The Catholic Church first coined the term “gender ideology” and has in its role as a global NGO instigated transnational and domestic anti-gender movements that seek to slow down or reverse progressive policy. These Church-orchestrated contestations challenge fundamental aspects of the liberal script, and in particular, the right to self-determination as it pertains to body autonomy rights. This paper focuses on the Catholic Church’s complex relationship with liberal thought and the various ways in which it influences global policy. It highlights religious institutions’ role in validating and challenging the liberal script and in so doing, addresses both the causes and implications of intensified contestations in contemporary times.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, movements resisting so-called “gender ideology” have emerged around the world. In Europe, Latin America, and the US, conservative actors have taken to the streets to demonstrate their opposition to gender equality, and in particular, issues such as abortion, sexual diversity, and gender identity rights (Butler 2019). These transnational movements oppose “gender ideology” in their strategy to push back against

the advances of feminist and LGBTQ+ movements and related policy agendas (Corredor 2019: 614; Garbagnoli 2016: 187). In places as different as Brazil and Poland, movement participants have marched in support for policies that reflect conservative values concerning life, sexuality, and the family that primarily target body autonomy rights (e.g. Paternotte/Kuhar 2017; Faur / Viveros Vigoya 2020). Religious actors whose beliefs and objectives oppose what they consider the “gender agenda” – the dismantling of gender roles, acceptance of homosexuality and family diversity, as well as reproductive rights – often spearhead anti-gender mobilizations (Case 2016: 166). Catholic and Evangelical clergy have publicly voiced their support for anti-gender movements and encouraged parishioners to participate in street demonstrations to show their discontent with liberal policy (e.g. Smith 2019).<sup>1</sup>

Religious institutions’ participation in anti-gender manifestations can determine not only the number of people who take to the streets but also the political effects of mobilizations. One of the most fervent supporters of anti-gender movements, the Roman Catholic Church, coined the term “gender ideology” and plays a crucial role

<sup>1</sup> Although the Catholic Church is one of the leading anti-gender proponents, a wide range of actors utilize this rhetoric (Corredor 2019: 617).

in triggering anti-gender mobilizations (Bracke/Paternotte 2016: 146). Known for its powerful political influence in many parts of the world, the Church's anti-gender rhetoric has fueled numerous mobilizations in Europe and elsewhere from 2010 onwards (see e.g. Kuhar/Paternotte 2017). By supporting anti-gender movements, the Catholic Church challenges core aspects of the liberal script, for example the right to bodily autonomy, full citizenship, and a life free from discrimination.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the Church's emphasis on values that embrace self-determination, such as democracy, individual freedoms – including freedom of religion –, and human rights, makes it a leading proponent and legitimizer of the liberal script. How do we understand religious institutions' relationship with the liberal script and their role in challenging its core tenets?

This working paper poses two overarching questions: 1) What is the relationship between the Catholic Church and the liberal script? 2) What role does the Catholic Church play in challenging the liberal script? In asking these questions, it addresses two central components of the Cluster's overarching research aims – the causes behind challenges to the liberal script and the implications of intensified contestations for politics and societies around the world in the 21st Century (Börzel/Zürn 2020). The paper examines the role that religious institutions play in challenging a key aspect of the liberal script – the right to self-determination – through a focus on body autonomy rights. Self-determination is understood as an individual's right to self-realization, that is, to determine their own economic, social, and cultural development, and it represents a form of inner freedom in which individuals live their lives

2 While the Catholic Church is not a monolithic entity but rather comprises a multitude of actors at different organizational levels, it is largely homogenic when it comes to issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage. Thus, while there is variation in church activity and engagement globally, it is possible to speak of "a Church" that challenges this aspect of the liberal script.

according to their own convictions (compare Börzel/Zürn 2020; see also Oftestad 2019: 3). As such, the concept includes rights to make choices that concern bodies, sexuality, and gender identity – for example, the right to freely choose the number and spacing of one's children. Body autonomy rights are thus an inherent aspect of the principle of self-determination and central to the liberal script. Yet despite its centrality, body politics remain undertheorized relative to liberal thought.

This paper aims to begin filling this gap by focusing on a subset of actors that contest the liberal script through anti-gender mobilizations – religious institutions. It zooms in on the Catholic Church, one of the main opponents of gender ideology around the world (Vaggione 2014; Bracke/Paternotte 2016). As leaders of one of the dominant world religions, Catholic hierarchies enjoy close relations to many states across the globe (see Htun/Weldon 2010). By focusing on the Church's role in anti-gender mobilizations, the paper aims to shed light on the role of religious institutions in challenging the liberal script. Rather than focusing on Islam, it turns to other rising religious-conservative forces – Christian churches that consistently oppose policies that advance the liberal script as it pertains to body autonomy rights. This includes issues related to gender, sexuality, and the foundations of the societal organization of reproduction and the family. The broader significance of understanding the role religious institutions play in challenging the liberal script should not be underestimated. The Catholic Church has millions of followers around the world and substantively impacts global and domestic politics. Most recently, Catholic clergy have sided with right-wing populists in limiting women and sexual minorities' rights in Poland and elsewhere in Europe – a development that can help legitimize parties and boost their electoral success.

The Catholic Church, one of the world's dominant religious institutions, is part of the liberal script.

It supports the idea of self-determination, broadly conceived of as individuals' right to determine their own economic, social, and cultural development – including life path and profession – and has since the end of World War II worked towards a global society that embraces, respects, and provides possibilities for individual self-determination. At the same time, Church support for liberal values clashes with its advocacy for limited body autonomy rights. By opposing reproductive health and sexual minority rights, Catholic clergy challenge ideas at the very center of liberalism. Thus, while the Church forms part of the liberal script, it is simultaneously a core contestator.

As the leader of global anti-gender movements, the Catholic Church plays a key role in challenging the liberal script. As a global Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), the Church influences international organizations including the United Nations (UN). It also wields substantive influence through the Holy See that acts as a sovereign entity with direct access to heads of state. Moreover, considered a pillar of society in many parts of the world, the Church's legitimizing and mobilizing functions combined with its significant resources and wide-reaching networks provide clergy with political leverage in many domestic settings. Where liberal values relative to gender, sexuality, and the family have advanced, the Church's attempts to intervene in political life have intensified, fueled not only by perceptions of a threatening "gender agenda" but also growing levels of secularization and religious competition. The Church therefore uses all of its channels of influence to stimulate and support anti-gender mobilizations, including allying with other conservative forces such as right-wing populists. This argument sheds light on the complexity of religious actors and their influence as well as the utility of using the lens of body politics in understanding how challenges to the liberal script are constructed in discourse and practice as well as the implications of intensified contestations in current times.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part addresses the Catholic Church's position vis-à-vis liberal thought. It begins by sketching the Church's shifting relationship with liberalism over time before detailing its stance on body politics and the teachings that promote its current anti-gender ideology stance. The second part of the paper turns to the Church's role in challenging the liberal script, focusing on its various channels of influence at both global and domestic levels. In a subsequent discussion section, the paper briefly draws on empirical research to more specifically outline how the Church's capacities render clergy influential players in anti-gender mobilizations. The concluding section summarizes the main findings.

## 2 CATHOLIC DOCTRINE, LIBERALISM, AND BODY POLITICS

In 2004, the Pontifical Council on the Family through a letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church indicated that the idea of gender might "destroy feminine values important to the Church; foster conflict between the sexes; and contest the natural, hierarchical distinction between male and female upon which family values and social life are based" (Butler 2019). Twelve years later, an alarmed Pope Francis intensified the rhetoric by declaring to Catholics all over the world that God's creation of man and woman and the natural order was in grave danger due to the rapidly spreading gender ideology. To understand what underpins the Church's stance on body politics and its connection to the liberal script, the next sections outline the relationship between Catholic doctrine and liberalism, focusing on the principle of self-determination in the postwar era.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> As Oftestad (2019) notes, the Church's relationship with liberal democracy has been complicated since the French Revolution. The purpose of this section is not to engage deeply with the foundations of the Church's moral-philosophical teachings, but rather, provide a brief understanding of how its relationship with liberal thought has evolved. To outline its full stance requires historical research that goes well beyond the scope of this study. For a detailed account, see Oftestad 2019.

## 2.1 THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND LIBERALISM: MAPPING THE POLITICAL THEOLOGY

As a religious institution that historically relied on notions of hierarchy and obedience, the Catholic Church's relationship with liberalism has been complicated. From the 1800s onwards, the Church was caught in a struggle over modernity that led to a rejection of liberal thought. Over time however, cultural change forced Church hierarchies to reconsider their position and slowly embrace liberal democracy as well as values related to self-determination – in particular human rights. The Church's shifting relationship with liberalism must be understood in phases, defined by socio-political, economic, and cultural change, and the positions of individual popes and their interpretations of key scriptures (Laurent 2007).

During the 1800s, the Church faced modern ideas that advanced liberal democratic thought and threatened its status. Secular state authorities had challenged the Church since the 1600s, and with the onset of modernity, the challenge sharpened both in terms of ideology and actual politics (Oftestad 2019: 58). Despite the emergence of a liberal Catholicism that sought to reconcile the Church's political ethics and liberalism, Pope Gregory XVI (1831–1846) went on a crusade against liberalism both within and outside the Church. His rejection of liberal democracy and its idea of freedom lay in the notion that subjects must abide God-given authorities. To rise up against political authority – clergy and nobility – was perceived to defy God's order since rulers' powers derive from above. His successor, Pope Pius IX (1846–1848), confronted modern culture and politics that threatened not only papal authority but also the Church and Christianity at large by asserting its sovereignty vis-à-vis the modern state. Anti-liberal ideas fed into the preparations for the first Vatican Council in 1869 that specifically addressed the effects of modernity.

The confrontation between Church and the modern secular state revolved around the dogma of papal primacy and the Council declared the pope infallible, thereby pushing the Church in a more conservative direction (Wilde 2007: 3, 13). In response to liberal demands for religious freedom, the pope upheld the distinction between natural secular authority and supernatural spiritual authority (Oftestad 2019: 60).

Pius IX's successor, Leo XIII (1878–1903), wanted to move beyond the Church's confrontation with modernity after decades of opposition. Rather than guarding the institution from external attacks, he aimed to openly engage with the world (Laurent 2007). The Church should contribute to solving global crises by joining forces with state authorities to “defend peace and secure states against destructive forces and anti-Christian ideology” (Oftestad 2019: 64). In modern industrial society, Pope Leo set out to solve the “worker's question” – the main political and ecclesial topic of the time. He illustrated the dilemma through the confrontation between capitalism and socialism – both equally undesirable. Leo considered liberalism's capitalism and market economy immoral and unable to provide a solution. Socialism was an over-reaction to capitalism: it abolished private property and demonstrated only state absolutism and must therefore be rejected. The state, rather than limiting individuals and families' autonomy, must secure their rights (Oftestad 2019: 65).

The Pope's critique of capitalism and free-market liberalism also shaped ideas of freedom. In liberal democracy, freedom meant autonomy, yet the idea of individual, self-legislating citizens that embrace a rational political discourse was incompatible with Church doctrine. According to Catholicism, man is subject to natural law that “prescribes good and prohibits evil” and not absolutely self-legislating (Oftestad 2019: 67). The Church's view of human nature further clashed



with the modern liberal view. For the Church, man is created by God and the purpose of human life is communion with God in time and eternity. The right use of freedom is thus to obey God and comply with his will (Carr 2012: 251). The modern man also has the goal of self-realization by breaking free from nature and socio-political structures, but he does so by creating his own history through the various freedoms that liberal democratic states and societies offer. Such denial of God's authority is according to Catholic beliefs a perversion that results from liberalism's freedom (Oftestad 2019: 69).

## 2.2 SELF-DETERMINATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE AFTERMATH OF WORLD WAR II

Facing the challenge of constructing a new Europe following the end of World War II, Church hierarchies saw the opportunity to renew Western ideals of humanity, enshrined in liberal democratic values, and inculcate them with the Catholic spirit (Laurent 2007).<sup>4</sup> This opportunity coincided with a modernization project. The Church's anti-liberal and anti-democratic past made it unable to respond to contemporary political developments. The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) sought to bring the Church into dialogue with the modern world and its fundamentally progressive outcome demonstrated a new openness toward democracy and human rights (Wilde 2007: 4). The encounter with totalitarian politics as well as the establishment of the United Nations that gave democracy and human rights an international breakthrough prompted the Church's new stance (Oftestad 2019: 203). The Council's political theology emphasized individual freedom and considered securing modern freedoms a basic cultural and political concern. Ideas that a liberal democratic state founded on human rights in which

individual self-determination – including the right to life and to be part of the common good – was fundamental came to substitute visions of a Catholic state. The Church based its new embrace of modern liberal democracy on its respect for individual rights (Laurent 2007: 830; see also Oftestad 2019: 203).<sup>5</sup>

The idea of human rights radically embraced liberalism's freedom and equality principles and the rights of the person became a central concept in Catholic philosophy and theology following the Second Vatican Council (Oftestad 2019: 169). Vatican II initiated a process of *aggiornamento* (updating) in which the Church renounced its claim as the only universal church, accepted religious freedom, and affirmed the separation of religion and politics (Vaggione 2018a: 24). Principles of human dignity, freedom and tolerance provided the terrain for many Council discussions and continued in the post-conciliar period (Carr 2012: 245). The case for a perspective based on universal human rights and stated in terms of emancipation came to the fore with Pope John Paul II, who led the Church through another era of political upheaval. By the time the communist block under Soviet leadership disintegrated, the Church had moved beyond its skepticism to identify positively with liberal democracy. The papacy of John Paul II was characterized by a commitment to human dignity that required human rights above all political and religious freedom and the Pope strongly voiced his perspective that totalitarian regimes threatened the guarantee of human freedom and integrity (Oftestad 2019: 143–4). John Paul II emphasized the human person and repeatedly demanded respect for human rights, the protection of religious freedom, and securing individual rights vis-à-vis powerful states. He shared respect

<sup>4</sup> There were however many struggles and inner conflicts within the Church during this time period. See Wilde 2007 and Oftestad 2019 for details.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note here that although the Church adopted a general stance on human rights following Vatican II, national churches took vastly different approaches to the human rights violations in Eastern Europe and Latin America in the decades that followed (see e.g. Gill 1998; Loveman 1998; Grzymala-Busse 2016).

for individual freedom and integrity founded in the idea that every society must guarantee individual rights – otherwise a person’s life and development would become impossible – and sought to guide those tasked with building new democratic regimes in this direction (Oftestad 2019: 153; see also Carr 2012: 251).

The Church’s critique of totalitarian states was testament to its engagement with liberal ideas and in particular, the principle of self-determination as the foundation for universal human rights. In the decades that followed, however, it became evident that the Church remained in conflict with liberalism. While Pope John Paul II strongly defended the notion of individual freedom and rights, he also continued the Church’s natural law tradition. Central points of contention came to revolve around issues related to sexuality, marriage, and the family. Thus, by the time that the Church embraced core aspects of the liberal script, issues such as abortion and homosexuality signified a major conflict between Catholicism and liberalism’s principle of self-determination.

### 2.3 CATHOLIC DOCTRINE AND BODY POLITICS

Although the Second Vatican Council ushered in a new era of Church doctrine aligned with liberalism’s self-determination principle, sex and procreation remained taboo. The Holy See remained true to natural law and its prescribed order in terms of sexuality, marriage, and family, and reacted strongly against the postwar cultural shift in the Western world – in particular the sexual revolution that began in the 1960s (Oftestad 2019: 139). The Church’s view on sexual matters largely remained the same post Vatican II, whose broad teachings on human rights emphasized that abortion, just as euthanasia and murder, are shameful acts that dishonor God. The Church maintained a rigid moralism relative to sexual matters and despite pressure from bishops in many parts of the

world, Vatican II ultimately failed to liberalize its doctrine on birth control (Wilde 2007: 6, 124). In 1968, Pope Paul VI published *Humanae Vitae* – at times referred to as the birth control encyclical – that restated the Church’s rejection of artificial birth control and upheld its traditional view of marriage as strictly heterosexual. According to Catholic doctrine, “the union of man and woman in marriage is a way of imitating in the flesh the Creator’s generosity and fecundity” (Corredor 2019: 621, citing Holy See 1995: 620). Abortion, sterilization and artificial birth control thwart the fundamental purpose of marriage – reproduction – and must be rejected (Oftestad 2019: 1). In 1975, the Church published *Persona Humana*, a declaration on sexual ethics that strongly condemned homosexuality and reiterated the idea that only a man and woman can join together in marriage to establish a family in God’s name.

Little changed under Pope John Paul II, whose traditional stance condemned abortion and maintained a strict position against same-sex marriage. Just as Paul VI, John Paul II believed that the first and most fundamental right of the human person is the right to life, which begins at conception, and must be legally protected from that point. Prompted by John Paul II, who adopted a far more aggressive tone, the Church defended the right to life from conception to natural death as a fundamental and inalienable human right (Oftestad 2019; Laurent 2007: 833). The Pope maintained that abortion violates the principle of a human person’s dignity, abolishes man’s God-given purpose, and thus promotes intrinsic evil (Oftestad 2019: 196). The posture that certain acts related to sexual morals are intrinsically wrong and cannot be justified by cultural or historical circumstances pertained in particular to the issue of abortion. John Paul II argued that “no circumstance, no purpose, no law whatsoever can ever make licit an act which is intrinsically illicit, since it is contrary to the Law of God which is written in every human heart, knowable by reason itself,

and proclaimed by the Church” (Vaggione 2018: 24, citing John Paul II 1995). To oppose what John Paul II referred to as the “culture of death” became increasingly important for the Church as legal abortion rights spread across the Western world from the 1970s onward. The Pope’s 1995 *Evangelium Vitae* highlighted the new policies as attacks on human dignity and values that threaten life and the Christian message (Oftestad 2019: 155).

In the post-war era, the main confrontation between the Church and liberalism revolved around the right to life and human dignity. John Paul II, while admitting that the notion of human rights and democracy had improved human dignity in ways that embrace life, also argued that liberal thought, via its promotion of the principle of self-determination, had legitimized the “culture of death” (Oftestad 2005: 156). In the years that followed, resistance to the so-called “culture of death” that aimed to legalize abortion, contraception, and same-sex marriage turned into anti-gender ideology.

#### 2.4 FROM HUMAN DIGNITY TO ANTI-GENDER IDEOLOGY

As the global human rights agenda turned towards reproductive and sexual rights in the mid-1990s onwards, Catholic ideology became increasingly threatened. Feminist and LGBTQ+ movements mobilized for abortion liberalization, gender mainstreaming, and sexual diversity, and their gains, concretized in the agendas of the series of United Nations World Conferences in the first half of the 1990s, presented a growing challenge to the Catholic Church’s natural law-based doctrine. In the midst of intensified ecclesiastical opposition, anti-gender ideology rhetoric emerged for the first time (Case 2016: 157). At the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, the Vatican joined similarly conservative actors in organizing vocal opposition to “issues challenging the structure of gender relations,

particularly as they are manifest in family arrangements and control over women’s sexuality and role in reproduction” (Friedman 2003: 314). The Church labelled feminist and sexual diversity movements, which demanded the dismantling of regulations that “oppress sexual practices and behaviors and enhance people’s autonomy and freedom in relation to sexual and reproductive practices and identities”, mobilizers and promoters of a “culture of death” – a gender ideology that destroys life and the family (Vaggione 2018b: 37).

From the mid-1990s onwards, the Vatican strengthened its role as guardian of rigid sexual morality in defense of the “culture of life” and increasingly began to use anti-gender ideology as a rhetorical device to counter “the denaturalization of the family and the degendering of social relationships” (Corredor 2019: 620). In the early 2000s, Pope John Paul II stated that “misleading concepts concerning sexuality and the dignity and mission of the woman” were driven by specific gender ideologies (Corredor 2019: 615). The Pontifical Council for the Family further declared that a “feminist ideology [...] known as ‘gender’” had produced misunderstandings of the complementary difference between man and woman and “a growing confusion about sexual identity” that “complicates the assumption of roles and the sharing of tasks in the home” (Corredor 2019: 615). Church hierarchies portrayed movements seeking to advance gender and sexual equality policy as promoters of gender ideology since the basis of their claims suggested that gender identities are cultural and social products deriving from interactions between individuals and society at large “without any reference to the true meaning of sexuality” (Vaggione 2018b: 18, citing Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004: 224). Gender ideology sought “to redefine, not only secular laws governing the sexes, sexuality, reproduction, and the family, but human nature itself” (Case 2016: 156). As such, “it poses a threat to Divine Creation

that might potentially destroy it, which renders gender ideology diabolic” (Bracke/Paternotte 2016: 147).

Benedict XVI continued John Paul II’s legacy of rigid positions on sexual morality and was the first pope to articulate opposition to gender. He emphasized the destructive effects of moving beyond a God-given natural order in which sex was no longer a set binary that defined the individual. Already prior to his papacy, Benedict voiced his concerns about feminism, new reproductive technologies, and LGBTQ rights in the 1985 Ratzinger Report and over time adopted an apocalyptic vision of how gender ideology threatens the “order of creation” and the stability of social reproduction (Garbagnoli 2016: 188). In the 2004 *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Man and Woman in the Church*, Benedict XVI condemned “the obscuring of the difference or duality of the sexes” (Case 2016: 157, citing Ratzinger 2004). In the Pope’s view, the term “gender” risked destroying human ecology by eroding “the nature of the human being as man and woman” (Case 2016: 167; see also Garbagnoli 2016: 189).

His successor, Francis I, has hitherto maintained the Church’s rigid moral views on sexuality and continued the crusade against gender ideology.<sup>6</sup> Similar to Benedict XVI, Francis I has explicitly labelled gender ideology a main threat due to its erosion of the (heterosexual) family and has compared it to nuclear war in terms of its challenge to nature itself (Vaggione 2018b: 37). Although opposing gender ideology has not been at the center of Francis’s papacy and is unlikely to figure at the forefront in coming years, his tenure has not signaled fundamental change in doctrine, only in pastoral approach (Case 2016: 168).

<sup>6</sup> Although Francis I has assumed a slightly more liberal position relative to issues such as civil unions, his views on gender and sexuality remain grounded in natural law and follows that of his predecessors (Case 2016).

From embracing liberalism’s self-determination principle in the form of human rights at large, the Catholic Church actively opposed social movement-driven advances in reproductive health and sexual diversity rights from the mid-1990s onwards. John Paul II articulated arguments to counteract the “culture of death” that soon gave way to the anti-gender rhetoric currently used to undermine efforts to improve gender equality globally. In so doing, the Church abandoned its support for human rights as they pertain to freedoms in the reproductive and sexual sphere and complicated the relationship between Catholic doctrine and the principle of self-determination. Thus, the Church exhibits a dual relationship with the liberal script – support for human rights and freedoms at large but advocacy for severe restrictions in areas where its natural-law doctrine clashes with contemporary ideas of body autonomy.

The Church’s crusade against gender ideology and calls for lay mobilization to defend the “culture of life” since the mid-1990s has aimed to ensure that positive law conforms to natural law and its reliance on a binary conception of sexual identity as the foundation for marriage and procreation. Influencing laws and policies is a prioritized strategy as “civil laws are structuring principles of man’s life in society, for good or for ill. [They] play a very important and sometimes decisive role in influencing patterns of thought and behavior” (Vaggione 2018a: 24, citing Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2003). Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has reaffirmed its responsibility to oppose secular laws when states fail to respect natural law’s “objective moral order” and claims a right to intervene in policies it considers relevant – in particular those related to sexual politics (Vaggione 2014: 143). At times, it has succeeded in countering progressive gender and sexuality equality policy. To understand its influence in policymaking processes, the next sections turn to the Catholic Church’s sources of political power and the various ways in which the institution impacts

global and domestic arenas in its pursuit to align secular policy with its moral vision.

### 3 CHURCH INFLUENCE, CONTESTATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

#### 3.1 CHANNELS, TOOLS, AND STRATEGIES

The Catholic Church is both a transnational and national actor. Its influence as a global non-state NGO as well as sovereign state (through the Holy See) with millions of followers around the world gives it a prominent role in challenging the liberal script. This hybrid role has developed over the past few decades. The Church re-invented itself as a civil society organization following the Second Vatican Council, which has intensified its interventions – especially at the international level. From John XXIII (1958–63) onward, popes have increasingly viewed the Church as an international actor uniquely situated to work for global unity. While the Church prior to Vatican II primarily saw itself as a state among states, its self-conceptualization has shifted towards a “non-governmental force for global social and political transformation” notable in its transnational activism (Appleby 2012: 319).

#### 3.2 THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AS A GLOBAL NON-STATE ACTOR

The Catholic Church is one of the oldest religious and political actors at the global level with a unique identity in the international system. The Church is a political machine that wields substantive influence over billions of followers, including heads of governments, and retains access to international forums (Troy 2008: 68). On the one hand, the Catholic Church is a global NGO that forms part of a transnational civil society and influences international affairs through the UN and other arenas (Vaggione 2018b: 11). Yet it is also part of a sovereign state, the Vatican, that maintains

formal diplomatic relations with states through the Holy See. The Holy See “allows the papacy to act as a legal subject in international law” (McLarren/Stahl 2020: 190), and is the Church’s ecclesial center, headed by the pope and staffed with the curia, administrators, and bureaucrats who oversee the Church’s work worldwide (Ferrari 2006: 34). The Church’s transnational organization emanates from the Holy See that communicates its moral principles and exercises influence and social control (Vallier 1971: 483). The Pope thus serves as both the leader of the Church as well as head of state and coordinates the Church’s transnational efforts (Bradley 2009: 118).

The Church’s dual role as both sovereign entity and global Catholic NGO helps promote its transnational program and broaden its sphere of influence. The Church’s global network starts with the Pope, the Vatican, and its diplomatic machinery, and trickles down to episcopal conferences, individual dioceses, and parishes (Bradley 2010: 120). As a result of its ties with states through diplomatic missions, the Holy See has regular access to high-ranking state authorities such as foreign ministries and diplomatic delegations and has long held observer status in several Inter-Governmental Organizations, for example, the United Nations. The size of the Holy See’s Church membership renders global leaders reluctant to alienate Catholics, who make up a significant portion of constituents, and they rarely respond as harshly to the Holy See as they might others (Ferrari 2006: 41, 44). Moreover, the Church’s hybrid character allows the pope to address audiences and issues unconstrained by territorial borders and the Holy See to cooperate with various actors (McLarren/Stahl 2020: 198).

In addition to privileged access to state authorities and ability to address issues that transcend state borders, the Church maintains a global network of formal and informal transnational ties that range from the Vatican’s administrative structures

to domestic grassroots movements (Ryall 2001: 41). The Church's access to a world-spanning network of clergy and lay people is unique – no other NGO can claim such historical depth to its ties, or such breadth of membership – and these transnational ties help generate international support for its causes (Ferrari 2006: 44; McLarren/Stahl 2020: 198). These diverse transnational Catholic movements have grown over the past fifty years, prompted by the crisis of territorial state sovereignty and the expansion of transnational civil society from the 1970s onwards. The crisis provided the Church with an opportunity to revitalize an already existing global Catholic civil society, and it developed an extensive network of activists that make up semi-autonomous, mobile transnational movements (Haynes 2001: 157; Appleby 2012: 319).

The Church's transnational advocacy movements and access to heads of state have given it a significant presence and impact in international organizations and forums. As Corredor (2019: 621) notes, the "Holy See is the authoritative leader and most vocal Catholic actor at the international level". It seeks to diffuse its moral doctrine into international affairs. As a result of its commitment to the preservation of life, the Church has "developed itself into a respectable promoter of human rights and freedom" and a wide range of Catholic actors support its efforts to influence transnational norms at the UN (Troy 2008: 69; Vaggione 2018b: 23). For example, during the Cairo Conference on Population and Development in 1994, the US sought a final document with pro-choice language relative to abortion and a clear link between population and development. Since many other wealthy industrialized states supported its position, the US was certain its policy objective would be realized – especially given that most member states approved of almost ninety percent of the draft language. Yet the Holy See did not, and together with its Latin American and Muslim allies, succeeded in derailing negotiations by focusing solely on abortion and birth control. The

final document did not utilize pro-choice language (Ferrari 2006: 33).

In addition to participating in UN conferences, the Church has created a global space for articulating its anti-sexual and reproductive rights agenda. Since 1994, it has organized a series of periodic gatherings entitled *World Congress of Families* (WCF). These meetings serve as "spaces for stakeholders from different regions to express distinct discourses in defense of the family" (Vaggione 2018a: 26). The WCF gathers organizations that promote conservative Christian values globally and brings together anti-gay, anti-feminist and anti-abortion activists, religious leaders, politicians and scholars who work on "pro-family" issues in defense against a global liberal agenda that promotes gender theory (Kalm/Meeuwisse 2020: 1–2). At the 2019 meeting in Verona, Kalm and Meeuwisse observe that congress participants identified gender ideology as the greatest threat against children – it destroys their souls, deprives them of love, takes away their right to a heterosexual nuclear family, and muddies their conceptions of a "natural" sexual identity (Oftestad 2020: 9).

The Catholic Church's global position as a hybrid actor provides it with significant influence in the international realm. But beyond its global impact, the Church also has domestic influence that derives from its center that "coordinates and shapes subsidiary field units' actions by supplying norms, symbolic leadership, and authoritative decisions" (Vallier 1971: 479). As Vaggione notes (2018: 11), the Vatican is a "powerful axis of regressive politics" because it provides the guidelines that the Church and its associated actors implement in diverse national contexts. Indeed, the presence and influence of Catholic bishops, activists, lawyers and scholars complement the Church's transnational activities in each country (Troy 2008: 68; Vaggione 2018: 24). The next sections turn to the Church's various domestic channels of influence.

### 3.3 THE DOMESTIC CHURCH: CLERGY-STATE RELATIONS, LEGITIMACY, AND MOBILIZATION

With around one billion Catholics worldwide and a presence in nearly every state, the Church remains a major power and pillar of society in many countries (Ryall 2001: 41). In contrast to other NGOs, the Church carries a moral authority that has shaped much of its relations with states and constitutes a major tool of influence (see e.g. Ferrari 2006).

In many Catholic countries, including in most of Latin America as well as Poland, Spain, and Ireland, state and Church historically enjoyed close relations. In places where the Catholic Church dominated the religious sphere, these relations provided high-ranking clergy with significant political influence that derives from the Church's legitimizing support of governments and above all, its moral authority. Support from religious institutions can legitimize rulers and their policies – especially among the faithful who confide in religious authorities – an ability that translates into substantial political capital (Gill 1998). As trusted moral authorities, religious institutions commonly have high credibility among citizens. When political institutions go through public trust crises, the legitimizing support of religious leaders – who are often considered to be above politics – “may be particularly effective because their motivations are seen as more altruistic and less corrupt than regime representatives” (Koesel 2014: 18).  
publisher: "Cambridge University Press"; publisher-place: "New York"; title: "Religion and Authoritarianism: Cooperation, Conflict, and the Consequences"; author: [{"family": "Koesel", "given": "Karrie"}]; issued: [{"date-parts": [{"2014"}]}]; schema: "https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json". Religious leaders' support for incumbents, their policies, or endorsement of certain candidates for government positions can therefore enhance the trustworthiness of

governors or opposition leaders in the eyes of citizens, who are potential voters. Ecclesiastic authorities are especially well suited to bolster the legitimacy of political actors because they are often considered “trustworthy pillars of society and above politics” – in particular among the faithful who are more likely to confide in religious authorities (Vaggione 2014: 23). Religious notions of hierarchy, authority and obedience have historically operated to reinforce existing sociopolitical arrangements (Levine 2014: 29). A positive association with the Church and, in particular, religious authorities' endorsement of political leaders has helped reduce the costs of rule and enhanced governments' legitimacy. For example, in Latin America, party leaders have relied on the dominant Catholic Church's legitimizing support to bolster public trust and popularity (see e.g. Gill 1998; Loaeza 2013). The benefits of allying with the Church have provided incumbents with incentives to adopt policies that conform to Catholic doctrine, limiting the possibility of liberalizing gender policy (Htun 2003).

Church-state relations continue to be close in many countries. Although laws and regulations commonly hinder clergy from direct, overt participation in legislative processes, which citizens generally dislike (see e.g. Pew Research Center 2014), the Catholic Church has succeeded in influencing domestic policy via indirect institutional access. Such access includes for example the ability to jointly formulate legislative bills, participate in parliamentary committees and in some countries, provide health care and education services. This type of informal, largely clandestine influence is never publicly partisan and negotiations between clergy and authorities generally occur behind closed doors allowing the Church to become part of the state's fabric (Grzymala-Busse 2016: 10). Not all churches succeed in establishing this type of influence, however. Only those with high moral authority – that is, who are perceived as “impartial, trusted, and credible

representatives of the national interest” and the common good – succeed in establishing institutional access (Grzymala-Busse 2016: 3). In such contexts, national and religious identities have fused. The Church can historically claim to have defended the nation, politicians show it respect, and the public displays confidence in the institution. If incumbents become threatened, churches with high moral authority can ensure survival by appealing to the nation and thereby stifle social unrest. In return, the Church gains institutional access. Churches with little moral authority may seek other forms of institutional access to influence policy – for example form partisan coalitions – but risk losing it through its overt political involvement (Grzymala-Busse 2016: 4).

Yet pursuing alliances with party actors likely to translate its preferences into policy has been a notable Church strategy. Parties, in turn, pursue such alliances depending on their need for electoral support, their ideological self-conception, and the structure of the churches in question (Grzymala-Busse 2016: 8). Elsewhere, particularly in Latin America, Church-state relations have over time grown indebted and governments align their politics with Church doctrine to pay back for the years in which clergy protected state authorities rhetorically and physically (Htun 2003). This pertains in particular to countries such as Chile and other Latin American states that experienced periods of authoritarianism during which the Catholic Church protected democratic dissidents and their political party homes. Once elected to office, the party might reward the Church with policy concessions (Gill 1998; see also Loveman 1998).

Beyond influencing state and party authorities, clergy can also mobilize other actors. This capacity in turn explains why authorities might want to remain on good terms with the Catholic Church. Clergy can mobilize people as well as affiliated organizations broadly via protests and may also collect signatures for various causes (see e.g. Fink

2009). Religious institutions in many parts of the world continue to be powerful allies to “pro-life” movements that oppose gender ideology despite efforts to disguise their affiliation through secular or civil ecumenic strategies. In Latin America, much research points to the Catholic Church’s ability to incite collective action (see e.g. Yashar 2005; Trejo 2012). The wealthy, highly organized Church has facilitated anti-abortion organization and bolstered conservative movements’ political influence vis-à-vis feminist activists (Blofield 2006, 2008).

The Church also calls upon politicians to consider their religious beliefs when casting votes on proposed legislation pertaining to family, sexuality and reproduction. The Church instructs legislators, judges and public officials on how to behave regarding provisions that oppose the Church’s official doctrine. In respect to topics such as the decriminalization of abortion or the recognition of same-sex rights, the Church has produced documents that guide public officials on what positions to assume when these issues emerge on legislative agendas. In regard to bills that advance same-sex rights, “the Catholic lawmaker has a moral duty to express his opposition clearly and publicly and to vote against it” (Vaggione 2018b: 29, citing Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2003: 10). In cases where legislation is already approved, legislators must limit the harm done by such a law and diminish its effect on culture and public morality (Vaggione 2018a: 26).

Citizens are also called upon to mobilize domestically in defense of “natural” order relative to the family and sexuality. In *Evangelium Vitae*, the Pope stated that “Catholic intellectuals [...] are called to be present and active in the leading centers where culture is formed, in schools and universities, in places of scientific and technological research, of artistic creativity and of the study of man. Allowing their talents and activity to be nourished by the living force of the Gospel, they



ought to place themselves at the service of a new culture of life by offering serious and well documented contributions, capable of commanding general respect and interest by reason of their merit” (Vaggione 2014: 147).

### 3.4 DISCUSSION: CATHOLIC CHURCH CONTESTATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LIBERAL SCRIPT

The Catholic Church’s activities at global venues such as the UN but also its own gatherings, such as the World Congress of Families, serve to mobilize a wide range of conservative actors from around the world that impact policy on both global and domestic levels. These forums provide venues at which the Church and its allies strategize and develop new ways to challenge the principle of self-determination that are later disseminated across the globe to contest progressive body autonomy rights. While the Church and its allies do not always succeed in obstructing international initiatives for gender equality, the Church as a global actor can disseminate its messages that its affiliated members subsequently reproduce at the domestic level. The Church’s anti-gender rhetoric has spread from these international arenas that provide opportunities for conservative actors to meet in their own countries and promote these policies. As Corredor (2019: 613) notes, the anti-gender mobilizations that started in France in 2011 and later spurred similar campaigns across Europe – including in Italy, Croatia, Spain, Hungary, Poland, Ukraine, and Germany – were all grounded in the Church’s anti-gender ideology rhetoric. Moreover, the Catholic Church’s hybrid identity as both transnational NGO and sovereign entity with privileged access to important heads of state provides it with an ability to ally with elites that can mobilize in their respective home countries. For example, participants in the WCF were religious community leaders, government ministers, or European Parliament members and were linked to movements such as *Hazte Oír*

and *La Manif Pour Tous* that carry out large-scale anti-gender manifestations in France and Spain (Kalm/Meeuwisse 2020). Agenda Europe, one of the umbrella organizations represented within the WCF consists of over one hundred anti-women’s rights and anti-LGBTQ organizations in over thirty European countries. A Vatican-inspired professional network, it seeks to roll back reproductive health and sexual diversity rights in the region and is responsible for Poland’s 2016 abortion ban and policies to outlaw same-sex marriage in several countries in Central Europe (Datta 2018: 2).

The Catholic Church not only influences politics at the global level, its dominant status in many countries also allows it to impact domestic policy. In regions such as Latin America, the Church’s legitimizing and mobilizing capacity provides it with significant political leverage. In addition to this already impactful position, a new Catholic Church strategy has been to join forces with other religious actors, such as leaders of the Evangelical churches that have made significant inroads across the region in recent years (Pew Research Center 2014). Commonly depicted as rivals over faithful in the pews, Catholics and Evangelicals have increasingly collaborated to obtain common goals. Strategies that downplay religious identity have indeed facilitated broad anti-abortion mobilization in Latin America, where it has not only built networks among the non-religious but also facilitated mobilization across religious divides. By setting differences aside, the civil ecumenic strategy brings Catholics and Evangelicals together in the pursuit of a joint “pro-life” agenda (Morán Faundes 2018). In Argentina, for example, some activist groups appeal to Catholic or Evangelical audiences, whereas others present themselves as secular, which has at times succeeded in stalling debates on reproductive health and sexual diversity rights (Pecheny et al. 2016).

Strengthening conservative actors who jointly mobilize against gender equality is therefore not

only a threat at the global level, but also at regional and domestic levels. As these movements, who often enjoy a vast array of resources that facilitate their organization, seek to influence domestic policy, feminist and LGBTQ movements can do little to counter their impact. Often fractionalized and resource-scarce, progressive movements have difficulty to lobby for their demands, especially when they come up against unified Church-led movements joined by other conservative actors (see Reuterswärd 2019).

Closeness between state and ecclesiastic authorities have also contributed to strengthening conservative agendas. In Mexico, where each of its thirty-two subnational entities have jurisdiction over the laws that govern abortion, Mexico City's decriminalization of abortion in 2008 ushered in a wave of reforms seeking to protect the "right to life" from the moment of conception. Out of seventeen states that passed reforms, the dominant Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) governed nine. Despite the party's non-programmatic agenda and historical resistance to Church intervention in politics, PRI incumbents in states that needed Church support to win elections introduced and passed "right-to-life" amendments that limit reproductive rights (Reuterswärd 2019).

Overlapping gender agendas may also lead to strategic collaborations between unexpected actors. In countries in Central Europe, the Catholic Church's anti-gender ideology agenda has coincided with right-wing populist attempts to roll back or impede reproductive health and sexual diversity rights. In Germany, leaders of the *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) are close to conservative Catholic Church sectors that oppose abortion and sexual minority rights (Kemper 2016). In Poland, right-wing populists applaud elderly activist women affiliated with the Catholic Church who harbor far-right views, and in Macedonia, they support religious education and the construction of mega-churches (Novikova 2017; DeHanas

Nilsson / Shterin 2018). If a Church with high moral authority, such as the Polish Church, allies with right-wing populist forces to organize anti-gender campaigns, clergy may also serve to legitimize these political parties, which represents a clear contestation to the liberal script – yet one that some churches in Europe already appear to be treading.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

The gradual acceptance of liberal policy agendas that embrace reproductive health and sexual diversity rights within a broader framework of human rights and gender equality has been far from uncontested. Religious institutions as well as grassroots movements that join forces in the attempt to counter so-called gender ideology have increasingly challenged progressive reforms. These challenges to body autonomy rights threaten the principle of self-determination and in so doing, the core of the liberal script.

This paper first highlights the Catholic Church's relationship with the liberal script and briefly sketches their complicated history. The Church was long averse to liberal thought and refused to reconcile with principles that threatened its authority. Following the Second World War however, and especially after Vatican II, the Church generally embraced liberalism's principle of self-determination as part of liberal democracies' human rights-based agendas. The Church encouraged ideas of individual liberty with the caveat that God is the authority and natural law must be followed. Vatican II ushered in major change, however the following decades made it evident that the Church remained in conflict with certain themes within liberalism. Although it embraced fundamental aspects such as democracy, human rights, and individual freedoms, Church positions on sexuality remained rigid. As reproductive rights and family diversity emerged on global and domestic

agendas, the Church turned into a fierce opponent, focusing its efforts on obstructing changes that advance individual self-determination as it pertains to body autonomy and has sought to limit individual freedoms and liberties. Thus, while the Church over time came to embrace core liberal values such as democracy and human rights, it has also been highly implicated in anti-gender mobilizations. The Church has only supported individual freedoms and rights as long as core Catholic beliefs remain unchallenged and its relationship with the liberal script remains conflicted.

This paper also gives a brief overview of the ways in which the Catholic Church influences international and domestic politics. It discusses how Church channels of influence have impacted body politics and in particular, anti-gender mobilizations. The Catholic Church is a transnational NGO and an integrated, international organization with over a billion members – the world’s largest Christian denomination – that maintains multiple transnational channels. The Holy See is a critical component of its structure that provides privileged access to state authorities through its substantial network of diplomatic missions. This hybrid identity allows the Church to influence politics in a variety of ways and sets it apart from other religious institutions and NGOs that face more difficulty in accessing state authorities. The Church’s success in forging a global anti-gender network derives from its unique status in the international system and allows it to play a significant role in challenging the liberal script.

The contestations highlighted in this paper are not novel. The Catholic Church has tried to stall the advancement of reproductive rights since the 1970s when women’s movements first began to demand abortion rights. These contestations have however intensified as liberal values have spread, and religious hierarchies have been accompanied by right-wing populists in their quest to protect the heteronormative family and binary

gender ideals. Several indicators suggest that the Church will continue to contest the liberal script and its principle of self-determination in the future. While Pope Francis has shown some liberal tendencies, in particular regarding civil unions, his views remain anchored in the same principles as his predecessors (Case 2016). Even though opposing gender ideology does not appear central to the Pope’s agenda, the Church’s anti-gender rhetoric and call for action is already deeply entrenched in both domestic and transnational spheres and many conservative actors have joined its opposition to gender ideology (Vagione 2018). Thus, while the Church under Pope Francis is unlikely to push the anti-gender agenda to the same extent as previously, its doctrine has spread, and a wide range of actors currently use its rhetoric around the globe. In the future, it is likely that attempts to limit liberalism’s principle of self-determination as it pertains to body politics will continue and intensify with possible detrimental effects on global gender equality.

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