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On the cover: Untitled (1988). © Fouad Bellamine

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The Silence of Diplomacy about Religion

Jack Miles

How is religion's current eruption within the public space changing the mental map of international diplomacy? The question is of such importance that we can scarcely avoid it, but of such delicacy that we often fear to speak of it. In the discussion that follows, I shall attempt to address just one aspect of it.

I submit for your consideration that silence on the subject of religion may no longer always provide the help to diplomacy in a global context that it so crucially provided to intra-European and intra-American diplomacy in their shared past within their once much more limited geographical sphere. To that end, I shall first indicate a current instance in which such silence is arguably unhelpful. Second, I shall try to explain why the same silence that was once so very helpful first in Western Europe and then in North America lingers to this day as a deep and unexamined habit of mind in international diplomacy wherever assumptions rooted in European history have become international assumptions. Third, I shall evoke a quite different history that may point toward a way to break the silence.

As I turn to the mentioned current situation of concern, let me underscore that diplomatic silence about it is a studied silence, the kind of silence that is maintained when one could speak but chooses not to speak because the subject at hand is one about which one has decided in advance to express no opinion. The usual silence, the default silence, of diplomacy about religion is that kind of silence. It is a silence that rests on a prior, standing decision to refrain from comment on a given range of topics.

Thus, Western European and U.S. diplomacy pointedly refrained from comment when in the aftermath of the catastrophic loss of life that occurred during the 2015 hajj, Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, excoriated Saudi Arabia's rulers as "puny Satans' who have reduced hajj to a 'religious tourist trip'" and when he went on to say "The world of Islam must fundamentally reconsider the management of the two holy places and the issue of hajj." Euro-U.S. diplomats declined to speculate about what the Iranian leader might have implied by the pregnant phrase "the issue of hajj." Did he envision some revision of one of the traditional five pillars of Islam? The diplomats similarly rendered no opinion on the question of whether Saudi Arabia's rulers are "puny Satans" or not.

But lest there should seem to be in these abstentions some tilt toward Shia Islam, I note that by the same habitual abstention, the same large corps of diplomats and policymakers predictably passed over in silence the reply to Ali Khamenei from Saudi Arabia's top cleric, Abdul Aziz al Sheik: "We must understand those people are not Muslims. They are sons of the magi, and their hostility to the Muslims is an ancient affair, and especially to the [Sunnis]." ¹ In their diplomacy, the European Union and the United States neither affirm nor deny the assertion that Saudi Arabia's Iranian critics "are not Muslims," nor do they venture an opinion about whether the Iranians are "sons of the magi." Such matters,

¹ Nabih Bulos, "Iranian leaders criticize Saudi Arabia over last year's deadly hajj crush and stampede," *The New York Times*, September 7, 2016.

by long-established consensus, are not the proper subject of international diplomacy and, accordingly, are to be passed over in diplomatic silence.

Here, very clearly, is an example of a religion – namely, Islam in its two principal forms – engaging in open verbal combat in that part of the public space where religion lives, while diplomats representing countries powerfully, if indirectly, affected by this combat decline to enter that space. I offer this example of abstention from engagement with religion because it so well illustrates the very familiarity and plausibility of such abstention. It seems familiar, plausible, and eminently defensible because it is part of the common sense of diplomacy. There is a long agreed upon mental map, in other words, and on that map there are certain regions that are not to be entered under any circumstances. This Saudi-Iranian hajj controversy is located well within that forbidden region.

I thus concede at the outset the great difficulty that Western European or U.S. diplomacy would encounter if and when it saw fit to violate this common-sense abstention. How warmly would the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia welcome an offer from Germany, for instance, to mediate their dispute over the loss of Iranian life during the 2015 hajj? That question may seem to answer itself loudly and clearly, and yet, difficult as it is to address the inflamed religious dispute between Sunni and Shia Islam, can Western European or U.S. diplomacy pass over it in silence when it feeds a proxy war in Syria in which one side is backed by Shia Iran and the other by Sunni Saudi Arabia, and the prolongation of the war is having so powerful an affect on Western Europe and the United States? Is it not self-defeating to decide in advance that no effort at Sunni-Shia reconciliation will ever be welcomed when, in fact, there were several significant intra-Islamic attempts at reconciliation in the 20th century?² Those efforts failed, but it is not beyond imagining that a Western power might propose that they be revived in the interest of halting the ongoing slaughter to which this religious rivalry is so powerful a contrib-uting factor. One of the most horrific, most traumatic episodes in World War II was the terror-bombing of Dresden. On September 23, 2016, a headline in *The New York Times* spoke of “‘Dresden-esque’ scenes”³ in Aleppo under the ruthless terror-bombing of Sunni rebels by the Syrian air force of Bashar al-Assad with its Russian allies. Meanwhile, quieter headlines in the same newspaper on the same day described major casualties from air attacks by the U.S.-armed Saudi air force on Shia rebels in Yemen.⁴

International conflict must, of course, be addressed under many headings simultaneously. Religion is not to be regarded as somehow the root of all strife. Moreover, while it is true that Iran and Saudi Arabia both engage in international missionary activity promoting, respectively, Shia or Sunni Islam as the normative form of the religion, conflict between

²See Sabrina Mervin, “On Sunnite-Shiite Doctrinal and Contemporary Geopolitical Tensions” in Brigitte Maréchal and Sami Zemni, eds., *The Dynamics of Sunni-Shia Relationships, Doctrine, Transnationalism, Intellectuals and the Media* (London: Hurst and Company, 2013).

³ Ben Hubbard, “Doomsday Today in Aleppo: Assad and Russian Forces Bombard City,” *The New York Times*, September 23, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/24/world/middleeast/aleppo-syria-airstrikes.html>.

⁴Nick Cumming-Bruce, “Rising Toll on Civilians in Yemen Raises Alarm,” *The New York Times*, September 23, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/24/world/middleeast/over-300-civilians-have-been-killed-in-yemen-since-august-un-says.html?_r=1.

the two does not rise to the level of civil war outside the Middle East, where demographically the two contenders are roughly equal in population. What is *casus belli* (or, a reason for war) in one Muslim-majority region may indeed be relatively inconsequential in another, and ethnic, environmental, and economic factors are always simultaneously operative. In planning the 2016 Atlantic Dialogues, The German Marshall Fund of the United States and OCP Policy Center listed a dozen potential discussion topics, of which “Religion in the Public Space” was only one. This was as it should be, but I do draw your attention to a revealing detail of phrasing on that list. When mentioning “Energy and Climate Diplomacy,” for example, the organizers did not find it necessary to say “Energy and Climate Diplomacy in the Public Space.” Energy and climate diplomacy already have acknowledged admission to the public space that religion generally lacks. If religion is to win admission, or readmission, to the public space, the case for its admission evidently needs to be argued, and a part of any argument for its admission must be attentive to the historical roots of its default exclusion.

Pope Francis’s second encyclical, “*Laudato Si’*: On Care for Our Common Home,”⁵ was an effort to claim a role for Roman Catholicism, and by extension for all religion, in the world effort to address the climate change crisis. Some welcomed this effort. Some even claim that it contributed to the measured success of the 2015 COP 21 United Nations Climate Change Conference. Others, however, quietly dismissed the encyclical as superfluous at best. So it is, I would maintain, on every corner of diplomacy’s mental map: the initial assumption is that religion should have no role in diplomacy and diplomacy none in religion. If some such engagement is proposed – if, for example, it is proposed that organized religion should be involved in mitigating global warming – the kind of case that must be made for its involvement is the kind of case that is made for an exception to the rule. The rule itself is massively in place.

If you will entertain, for the sake of the argument, my thesis that systematic, ongoing, *a priori* diplomatic abstention from engagement with the religious dimension of the Sunni-Shia conflict may not be serving world peace, then we may proceed to a brief review of the history and past utility of religious abstention as a way of explaining why, to this day, abstention remains diplomacy’s default position wherever the legacy of this history has shaped the mental map of diplomacy.

The story begins in Germany, specifically in Westphalia, where in 1648 the Peace of Westphalia brought an end to the Thirty Years War that had torn Christian Western Europe apart just as violently as warfare is tearing the Muslim Middle East apart today. Until that epoch-making treaty was concluded, it had been an open question whether all of Western Europe might return to Roman Catholicism or whether, instead, it might all convert to Protestantism. But after the two sides had fought each other to a bloody and exhausting draw, the two concluded that neither could win and that peace could only be restored by

⁵ *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si’ of the Holy Father Francis on Care for our Common Home* (Rome, The Vatican: Vatican Press, May 24, 2015), http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si_en.pdf.

allowing the government of each state to determine what its state religion would be. This solution was epitomized in the famous principle stated in Latin, *Cuius regio, eius religio*, or in English, “Whose the government, his the religion.” The sovereign power ruling any state would determine the religion of that state but, crucially, only of that state.

The Peace of Westphalia thus did not by any means introduce *individual* religious freedom. The signatory states were all free to impose state religions upon their subjects or citizens, and all did so. What the signatory states were no longer free to do or, more accurately, what they collectively agreed to *abstain* from doing was imposing their state religion upon any other state. There would be no single pan-European religion. That dream, the dream of a religiously seamless European Christendom, was over.

I hasten to add that the signatories to the Peace of Westphalia did not agree to abstain from war for other-than-religious reasons. They did not agree to abstain from police action within their borders against whoever might attempt to practice another religion than the state religion. But they did agree to abstain from inter-state warfare for religious reasons and, remarkably enough, that one species of war did almost entirely disappear from Western Europe after the middle of the 17th century, paying an enormous dividend perhaps above all to Germany, the birthplace of the Protestant Reformation, which had lost one third of its population during the previous 30 years.

It is commonly understood that the 17th-century wars conventionally referred to as the European Wars of Religion, including the Thirty Years War, were not about religion alone. Nascent national identity, rampant monarchical ambition, emergent forms of wealth-creation – these and others often all but eclipsed Protestant-Catholic conflict as the wars raged on. Nonetheless, the conventional designation is not a misnomer, for religion was undeniably among the factors feeding the conflict, and peace would not have been restored had the religious factor not been effectively addressed.

More than most Americans realize, the U.S. Constitution is profoundly influenced by the Peace of Westphalia. The 13 English colonies in North America all came into existence during the 17th century. All of the colonists were marked by the fresh memory of the 17th-century religious civil war that tore Britain and Ireland apart – ironically in the years immediately following the Peace of Westphalia – with casualties that proportionately exceeded British World War I casualties. Though a few of the American colonies, notably Rhode Island and Pennsylvania, practiced religious tolerance, most had state religions on the Westphalian model, imposing them rigorously within their borders, refraining only from attempting to export or impose them beyond their borders.

Late in the 18th century, the Constitution that the 13 erstwhile English colonies adopted to bring the United States of America into existence as a federal state preserved the right for each constituent state within the federation to impose a state religion within its borders, while the Constitution made no provision for a federal religion and stipulated that there would be no religious test for federal office-holders. The United States as a whole, in other words, corresponding to Europe as a whole in the Peace of Westphalia, would have

no single national religion, for indeed, had the attempt been made to impose one, the result would have been religious civil war of just the sort that the Peace of Westphalia was designed to prevent.

Although the initial and central effect of the Peace of Westphalia was the establishment of state control over European religious life, its impact would eventually be felt in every aspect of European life. In a 1975 discussion titled “The Logic of Westphalia” within his massive *A Study of Future Worlds*, Richard Falk wrote:

The basic coordinates of the present world order system are contained in the Peace of Westphalia which brought the Thirty Years War to an end in 1648. According to Westphalia logic, the world order system is constituted *exclusively* by the govern-ments of sovereign states. These governments have complete discretion to rule *national space* (or territory), and can also enter into voluntary arrangements (e.g., treaties) to regulate external relations and interconnections of various sorts. But these governments are *sovereign* and *equal* by juridical fiat, rather than by virtue of some higher authority within the world order system. No one government is entitled to greater formal status than another by reasons of wealth or power or size. In such circumstances, “law and order” rests upon the volition of governments and upon their perception of common interests.⁶

It is thanks to that “complete discretion to rule *national space*” to which Falk refers that the nation-states of Europe developed such crucial cultural components of national identity as a national language, a nationally administered education system teaching an established version of national history, a national calendar with holidays established by the government rather than by the church, and so forth.

As national identity strengthened, religious identity weakened. Until the mid-17th century, it had been a common assumption that religious unanimity was required for domestic tranquility and basic national security. Starting then, a few thinkers, among whom John Locke was notable, began to argue the very opposite—namely, that domestic tranquility and national security might be better guaranteed if a large degree of religious variance and theological disagreement were benignly tolerated. Thomas Jefferson and James Madison were among the American Founders who read Locke, and the newborn United States proved a hospitable social environment for the slow but steady expansion of religious tolerance as one by one the constituent U.S. states disestablished their state religions and allowed religion to be a matter of individual choice. In effect, having already agreed to abstain from interference in the religious affairs of other states, the states now agreed to abstain from interference in the religious affairs even of their own citizens. In Europe, the states that together had created what we still call the Westphalian System proceeded more slowly, each in its own distinct way, on a path toward a destination that would render Jews, Muslims, Christians, and all others equal in the religiously indifferent eyes of the law.

⁶ Richard Falk, *A Study of Future Worlds* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 59.

As this happened, something else of a more spiritual character happened as well. Patriotism, devotion to one's nation, arose to claim some or much of the spiritual space that piety, devotion to one's church or one's God, had claimed in earlier centuries. With the wars of religion left behind, religious martyrdom, dying for one's faith, became increasingly a thing of the past. The new martyrdom was patriotic martyrdom, dying for one's country. Patriots who loved their country more than they loved life itself progressively turned nationalism into Europe's new religion and the United States' as well. The new religion, reaching a kind of pinnacle in the French Revolution, rarely sought directly to suppress the old, but by degrees, as patriotic songs like the *Marseillaise* began to crowd out religious hymns, nationalism began to crowd out religion. Through the French Revolution and the spread of its influence to Spain through the Peninsular War, the Westphalian System spread to Central and South America in the 19th century as it had spread to North America in the late 18th. Roman Catholicism remained dominant in the erstwhile Iberian colonies, as Protestantism did in North America, but nationalism arose there as well, sometimes abetted by the anti-clericalism of the French Enlightenment. Nationalism, anti-clerical or not, was a public, collective commitment, while precisely because individual discretion was increasingly allowed to determine religious preference, religion itself, religion in any form, came increasingly to seem a private, individual matter.

And yet, over time and climaxing in the 20th century, this very transference to the individual of sacred responsibilities once regarded as of supreme national and even cosmic importance had the effect of elevating the importance of the individual as such over the importance of the state. As the individual's responsibilities were now so enlarged, so also by a gradual inference were the individual's rights. Thus was set in motion a new Euro-U.S. quasi-religion, as the "Church of Patriotism" was supplanted for millions of post-patriotic political liberals by what we might loosely call the "Church of Human Rights." As is characteristic of religions in their youth and at their strongest, popular devotion to the Church of Human Rights, especially among the young, is both all but universal in much of Europe and the United States and all but entirely unexamined. As the Church of Human Rights has waxed, the traditional Christian churches of the United States and Europe have further waned alongside the waning of the Church of Patriotism.

But something else has happened at the same time. The social space occupied by private life in all forms has grown, greatly abetted over the past two generations by the rise of the Internet. But because ubiquitous social media now so powerfully enable the like-minded to huddle together, what really faces us, rather than a map of sealed one-person citizen-states, is a map of divergent, self-reinforcing, online quasi-states as fervent in their ideology, and as loosely bound by empirical reality, as any religion. A website is a site: it is a place situated in cyberspace, to use the usual term. But where is this site located relative to the once all-encompassing national space?

I do not mean to belittle the progressively more complete government abstention from religious engagement that in general has fostered peace, harmony, and prosperity in the West for nearly 400 years. On the contrary, I mean to concede this generally beneficial

effect as the reason why it is only to be expected that in dealing with other-than-Western cultures, Western diplomacy will expect its own habitual religious abstention to be received as a kind of deference or respect rather than merely with skepticism or baffled bemusement. If we are to move past this impasse, what we need to recall is that the West did not come at all quickly to its beneficent agreement-to-disagree. Reaching that point required protracted discussion of and active engagement with religion. Accordingly, if some such agreement-to-disagree is in any way a possible or desirable outcome outside the West – whether defined geographically, culturally, or philosophically – it is an outcome that can only follow a comparably protracted discussion of and engagement with religion, particularly now that religion has begun in some of its manifestations so strikingly and effectively to escape or transcend national space.

Statistically, the world has no majority religion. Christianity and Islam, the world's two largest religions, are both minority religions when reckoned against the world's entire population. But each of these two is a part large enough that violent disruption within it can violently disrupt the whole. If Islam, with its spiritual center in the Middle East, is now torn apart by a religious civil war in that region, the quest for world peace must somehow entail not just talking about the religious roots of the war, to the extent that they are religious, but also talking to the warriors themselves through whatever degree of mediation is necessary. In practical terms, this would seem to entail enlarging the diplomatic conversation to include now marginal religious leaders, actors who would have been thought best avoided even in the quite recent past.

More exactly, what is called for is a departure from Westphalian diplomatic protocol. That protocol would generally require the chief executive of any one state to engage the religious leadership of any other state only through that state's chief executive. What Westphalian logic rules out is not interfaith discussion among willing religious leaders across political borders but only asymmetrical engagement by political leadership on one side with religious leadership on the other side. For example, it would be a violation of this protocol for U.S. diplomacy to seek to go around Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi of Iraq to consult Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani regarding the conduct of Shia militias fighting to re-take Mosul from the self-proclaimed Islamic State group (ISIS).

The Westphalian System, by the set of abstentions that I have tried briefly to indicate, generally has little or no room in its diplomatic space for such an asymmetrical religious overture. Its very brilliance in its day consisted precisely of ruling out such asymmetrical engagement as potentially malicious meddling. The question is whether we can recognize the extent to which the statist Westphalian mental map of the world no longer describes the world in which we are actually living. This is a question that includes but actually is broader than the question of whether and how religion might be accommodated in the public space. The already quoted Richard Falk – a scholar who would later achieve notoriety as an American Jew seeking justice for the Palestinians and arguing for U.S. openness to revolutionary Iran – wrote presciently of the various ways in which the actual world map had evolved away from the mental map presumed by the Westphalian System. In the

following quote from his *A Study of Future Worlds*, Falk does not mention religion, but I have inserted in italics words of my own to indicate the changing place of religion in the world order.

New nongovernmental actors – transnational corporations evolving from the organizational tendencies of international business operations, and supranational agencies formed to cope with some of the effects of technological change, *as well as non-governmental religious syndicates like al-Qa'eda and ISIS* – are transforming the present system of world order by evolving new types of nonstatist diplomacy, such as *Internet recruitment, education, and organization*, during a period marked by the simultaneous erosion of traditional national boundaries which had formerly delimited subject matter. In particular, the basic boundary between internal and external, *secular and religious* (or domestic and international) politics seems much less sufficient for descriptive and explanatory purposes than it did in an earlier world of less complex and pervasive interactions and perceptions. Indeed, the rise of these new actors is closely connected with the inability of governments to operate effectively themselves within many relevant fields of action, *the religious field of action certainly included.*⁷

Falk was writing before the rise of the Internet, before the smart phone, email, and even the personal computer. If he were writing that paragraph today, he certainly would include among emergent non-statist forms of diplomacy the online networking that knits together militant and would-be militant Salafis all around the world. As for “the inability of governments to operate effectively” within the religious field of action, is it not the case that Western governments virtually never address young Muslim men and women as Muslims, although for these young people Islam may be the single most important component of their identity and their dignity? The occasionally poignant awkwardness of this silence in domestic relations is paralleled only too evidently by a comparable awkwardness in foreign relations.

Allow me to illustrate with another U.S. example. After Al-Qaeda attacked the United States on September 11, 2001, U.S. commentators repeatedly compared the attack to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii 60 years earlier on December 7, 1941. But Japan was a state attacking another state. When then-U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt declared war on Japan, he was declaring war on a state. The War in the Pacific was a war squarely within the statist Westphalian System. After the 9/11/01 attack, the overwhelming U.S. impulse was to find the state that had launched the attack so as then to launch a massive counter-attack. But there was no such state. Although the Afghan government of the time permitted Al-Qaeda to operate out of its territory, Afghanistan had not attacked the United States in 2001 as Japan had done in 1941. This war had erupted awkwardly outside the Westphalian System, and to this day most Americans cannot fathom why their military is still bogged down in Afghanistan while subsequent, more threatening acts of terrorism are erupting all over the world. Surely at least a part of the problem is that the

⁷ Ibid., 58.

space where these acts originate is simply not a territorial state at all. It does not show up on a map of the world drawn with only state borders.

It is a painful but revealing irony that by frequently declaring their implacable opposition to terrorism while less frequently addressing the Islam that the terrorists invoke as loudly and as publicly as they can, Western leaders seem to have persuaded much of the Muslim world that their true target is Islam rather than terrorism. Neither side sees the other as the other sees itself, and in this misperception we encounter the limitation of the Westphalian System. For the West, the Peace of Westphalia was initially a way to contain intra-Christian violence. Over time, as the Westphalian System evolved, it began to leave Christian identity substantially behind and substitute national identity in its place. Pre-modern Europe is dotted with shrines to heroic martyrs for the faith. Modern Europe is dotted with war memorials, shrines to martyrs for the state. In their own eyes, Europeans who once confronted Muslims as Christians now confront them as secular citizens of Germany, France, Britain, and so forth. But many of the Muslims they confront, having never so massively substituted national for confessional identity, still see the Europeans as so many Christians, however lapsed.

I offer by way of further anecdotal confirmation the foiled and now forgotten but still revealing Bojinka Plot. This was a three-phase terrorist attack planned a generation ago by Ramzi Yousef and Khalid Sheikh Muhammad and only accidentally foiled. The original plan was to assassinate Pope John Paul II, then blow up 11 airplanes en route from different parts of Asia to the United States, killing thousands and shutting down world air travel, and finally to crash a hijacked plane into CIA headquarters outside Washington, DC. Apparently, for these two educated, talented, well-funded, and murderously angry Muslims, Pope John Paul II and CIA headquarters were one and the same enemy, the one as insidious as the other, the one as Christian as the other, and the two understood to be in league against Islam. Clearly, on the mental map in the minds of these two plotters, religion does not disappear; religion is easy to locate; it is everywhere. What disappears from this map is the post-religious, secular nationalism that defined the spiritual as well as the mental map of the Westphalian System as it existed at the turn of the 20th century. Just how greatly the incompatibility of these maps can still matter may finally become clear if a plot to assassinate Pope Francis succeeds, or a car bomb like one of those lately intercepted in Paris explodes at the entrance to the Cathedral of Notre Dame.

Can these two mental maps be brought by some kind of gradual arbitrage into a global accommodation with each other? A way must be found, for neither map has any chance at all of simply replacing the other, and the status quo is becoming literally, physically unendurable. I readily concede the strength of the objection that may already be forming in some minds that religious leaders in a given theater of conflict may turn out to be even more implacably and immovably hostile to one another than are political leaders in the same theater. So it may be, but let this conclusion not be reached before political media-tors seeking to resolve the conflict have made a serious effort to involve religious as well as political leadership in the resolution. Call this, if you will, a counsel of desperation.

As the situation in the Middle East theater of conflict from Turkey to Iran is now indeed desperate, even such counsel ought to be seriously entertained, the more seriously as neo-fascist, anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant elements in Europe and the United States threaten to make religion *causa belli* in their home regions for the first time since the 17th century. There is no guarantee that engaging religious leadership and speaking more openly and willingly of religion can help to resolve the conflict. In the very best case, a measure of help is indeed the most that can be hoped in a conflict with many causes and many overlapping motives. Diplomacy, finally, is all talk, but as diplomacy would not exclude military leadership because military conflict is not the whole story, or business leadership because business is not the whole story, so diplomacy should not exclude religious leadership on the grounds that religion is not the whole story.

Within the Sunni-Shia world conflict, if no accommodation is reached, then, we should anticipate only a progressive worsening as each side solicits narrowly military or political assistance from the West in the hope of attaining a final victory over its religious opponent. Thus, Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran's foreign minister, exhorted in an opinion piece featured prominently in the September 13, 2016, *The New York Times*, "Let Us Rid the World of Wahhabism."⁸ And thus in 2008, much more aggressively, then-King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia urged then-U.S. General David Petraeus to attack Iran and put a violent end to its nuclear program, according to diplomatic cables leaked by WikiLeaks in 2010. "He told you [Americans] to cut off the head of the snake," the Saudi ambassador to Washington, Adel al-Jubeir said, according to a report on Abdullah's 2008 meeting."⁹ The United States, by overthrowing the de facto Sunni regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and replacing it with the de facto Shia regime currently headed by Haider al-Abbadi, established Shia authority over a major population of Sunni Arabs for the first time since the Fatimid caliphate ended in the 12th century. This enlargement of the political foundation for Shia Islam in the Middle East came about by blundering accident rather than by geopolitical or theo-political intent, but all the same the result has been an exacerbation of Sunni-Shia tension almost as great as that occasioned by the Islamic Revolution of 1979 or even the ensuing Iran-Iraq, Sunni-Shia proxy war of 1980-88. U.S. President Barack Obama, by concluding a major treaty with Iran and by refraining from military action against the Bashar al-Assad Shia-allied, Alawite regime in Syria, has further consolidated a

8 Mohammad Javad Zarif, "Let Us Rid the World of Wahhabism," *The New York Times*, September 13, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/14/opinion/mohammad-javad-zarif-let-us-rid-the-world-of-wahhabism.html>.

9 Ian Black and Simon Tisdall, "Saudi Arabia Urges U.S. Attack on Iran to Stop Nuclear Programme," *The Guardian*, November 28, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/nov/28/us-embassy-cables-saudis-iran>.

net shift of power in the region from Sunni to Shia, notwithstanding a recent major arms sale to Saudi Arabia.¹⁰

Although the two presidents certainly pursued significantly different military policies during their respective eight-year tenures, their diplomatic policies have had in common that each in his own way abstained from explicit engagement with the raging religious differences within the region. Their only common religious commitment has been to the tacit promotion abroad of the same neutrality in religion, the same Westphalian abstention, that the U.S. federal government practices at home. And yet each president, in his turn, has had an exacerbating effect upon religiously fueled conflict in the region – a conflict whose intensification has now begun to engulf Europe, the Maghreb, and Atlantic Africa as far south as Nigeria. Against this background, we certainly have the right to ask whether prior, conscious engagement with religious difference might have served international diplomacy and world peace better than such studied silence about it amidst actions that have so intensified it. The question that this contention then obviously invites is: what would such prior, conscious engagement with religious difference look like at the governmental level?

In his recently published *Holy Lands: Reviving Pluralism in the Middle East*,¹¹ Nicolas Pelham, currently Jerusalem correspondent for *The Economist*, suggests that it might look something like the “milletocracy” of the Ottoman Empire. Milletocracy is Pelham’s term for the Ottoman way of relating to subject people within the empire not as individuals but as members of relatively self-governing ethnic and/or religious groups (millets, in Turkish). What most impresses Pelham about milletocracy is that it very clearly fostered the extensive and generally peaceful mingling of religiously and ethnically different populations. Milletocracy fostered this mingling, above all, because it did not entail drawing a territorial border around those of a given ethnicity or a given religion. One could be a

¹⁰Syrian Sunnis, having seen the United States overthrow Iraq’s Sunni dictator, Saddam Hussein, are frustrated that the Americans now decline to overthrow Syria’s Alawite (derivatively Shia and Iran-backed) dictator, Bashar al-Assad. In a leaked conversation evidently including Syrian rebels whom the United States has sought to enlist in its campaign against ISIS, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry was candid to admit why his country has no comparable campaign against Hezbollah. As *The New York Times* reported the conversation, “The United States wants the rebels to help it fight the Islamic State and Al Qaeda because, as he put it, ‘both have basically declared war on us.’” But Washington will not join the same rebels in fighting Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite militia allied with Mr. Assad, even though the United States lists Hezbollah as a terrorist group like the others.

“Hezbollah,” Mr. Kerry explained, “is not plotting against us.”

Earlier in the same report, the *Times* quoted a disillusioned, clearly Sunni rebel who “said Mr. Kerry had effectively told the Syrian opposition,

‘You have to fight for us, but we will not fight for you.’

‘How can this be accepted by anyone?’ Mr. [Mustafa] Alsyofi asked. ‘It’s unbelievable.’”

The U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq and the ensuing Iraq War have been all but universally excoriated in the Middle East, but Mr. Alsyofi and some, at least, of the Syrians in conversation with Secretary Kerry barely stop short of calling for a comparable U.S. intervention in Syria. Such are the dimensions of the religious conflict that the West declines to address as religious. See, Anne Barnard, “Audio Reveals What John Kerry Told Syrians Behind Closed Doors,” *The New York Times*, September 30, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/09/30/world/middleeast/john-kerry-syria-audio.html?_r=0.

¹¹Nicholas Pelham, *Holy Lands: Reviving Pluralism in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016). Pelham, who has also written for the BBC, the *New York Review of Books*, and the *Financial Times*, is the author as well of *A New Muslim Order* (2008) and co-author of *A History of the Middle East* (2010).

Greek Catholic, governed as such, in Damascus and a Muslim Turk, governed as such, in Belgrade.

What has happened since the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment in erstwhile Ottoman territory of European colonies that then became independent states on the European model, Pelham argues, has been the replacement of milletocracy by a Middle Eastern semblance of the Westphalian system. In the latter system, the cultural ideal is the maximum possible fusion of ethnicity, religion, and territory. Thus, the ideal or “real” Frenchman is the white, ancestrally Roman Catholic Frenchman, the “real” Englishman, the white, ancestrally Anglican Englishman, and the “real” German, the white, ancestrally Lutheran German, each a fervently patriotic nationalist within his or her own sacred territory. The same ideal of a religious/national/territorial fusion took hold in the post-colonial Middle East, Pelham claims. But this ideal, he laments, never a perfect fit even in Europe, has been a disastrously bad fit in the Middle East.

Under the Ottoman system, millet status, for those subject peoples or subordinate religions that enjoyed it, conferred a legitimacy, a right “to be here and be who we are,” that in turn enabled a pluralism and cosmopolitanism that seem enviable in retrospect. I would underscore, going a step beyond Pelham, that to the extent that a religious community was allowed to be self-governing, its leadership enjoyed a distinct legitimacy of its own – a form of voice and agency scarcely to be found among religious or ethnic minorities in the contemporary Middle East.

Over time, the Christian states that had contained their most violent differences through the 17th century Peace of Westphalia would find, each in its own way, a measure of pluralism and cosmopolitanism, but in many ways homogeneity remained the European ideal until quite recently, and it has scarcely disappeared. As recently as 1951, it was illegal in Sweden for a Roman Catholic to be employed as a doctor, a nurse, or a teacher.¹² It is easy to accept the religious or ethnic other as both other and elsewhere. The challenge is to accept him or her as both other and here. The Westphalian System, by and large, created an acceptance of the other as elsewhere, and only by painful degrees and over centuries of time has accommodated the other as also here.

As there is no reviving the Ottoman Empire, so there is no reviving milletocracy quite as it existed under the sultans. Yet if the genius of milletocracy, so to call it, was its grant of voice and agency to religious leadership within a structure of regional governance, then Nicolas Pelham does well to recall it to our minds. He notes only in passing, however, the fact – very telling in my opinion – that milletocracy recognized no millet for Shia Islam. In today’s Iraq, if there were a millet-equivalent for Iraq’s Shia, would Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani not be its leader? Under Ottoman rule, there was no millet for Sunni Islam either, for Sunni Islam was the host religion in a system within which Christians, Jews, Serbs, and so forth – but not Shia – were relatively empowered guests. In contemporary Middle Eastern Muslim-majority countries where Sunni Islam occupies a comparable host-position, is millet-status for the Shia – not to speak of other religious or ethnic groups – politically imaginable as a culturally and historically compatible path toward peace and regional recovery?

Let me underscore how great a change this would be. The Westphalian System is concerned at all points to prevent the unwarranted intrusion of religious authority on

national sovereignty. Milletocracy, by contrast, actually warrants just such intrusion, incorporating it into a very different system of distributed sovereignty. Arbitrage between these two mental maps of diplomacy, as already noted, is no simple matter, and I certainly do not attempt it here. My only claim is the far more modest one that we cannot achieve religious peace – including intra-Islamic peace – by systematically avoiding the topic of religion.

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¹² Christina Anderson, "Pope Francis, in Sweden, Urges Catholic-Lutheran Reconciliation," *The New York Times*, October 31, 2016.



