MADELEINE ALBRIGHT

Madeleine Albright is the Mortara Distinguished Professor of Diplomacy at Georgetown University, but she is more widely known for being the first woman to serve as U.S. secretary of state, a position she held under President Bill Clinton from 1997 to 2001 and a role for which she was confirmed unanimously by the Senate. She has also served as the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and as a member of the board of directors for the Council on Foreign Relations, a nonpartisan foreign policy think tank. Albright attended Wellesley College and Johns Hopkins University, and earned a Ph.D. in public law in government from Columbia University. She has written a number of books, including The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God, and World Affairs (2006), from which the following chapter is taken; Read My Pins: Stories from a Diplomat’s Jewel Box (2009); and, most recently, Prague Winter: A Personal Story of Remembrance and War, 1937–1948 (2012).

The Mighty and the Almighty explores the role of religion in government affairs. As a former government official and a person whose identity was shaped dramatically by religion (she was raised Catholic but discovered her Jewish heritage when she was an adult), Albright is able to offer a unique perspective on the power and place of religion in politics.

In “Faith and Diplomacy,” Albright suggests that religion’s influence on world events is inherent and persistent. Our government, she argues, must recognize this reality and adjust its diplomatic strategy accordingly. Albright proposes concrete steps the government can take to prepare itself for the religious dimensions of inter- and intranational disputes, but she also advises that religiously informed diplomacy will not always solve the complicated problems of a complicated world.

Albright’s aim, then, is to remind us that while dividing the religious from the political has fostered peace and stability here at home, we must keep in mind that religion often plays a much more central role in the affairs of nations abroad. Attending to that fact, Albright shows us, should be central to U.S. foreign policy.

TAGS: religion, faith, conflict, community, diplomacy, diversity

Questions for Critical Reading

1. Does religion help or hinder diplomacy? As you read Albright’s text, search for quotations that support your interpretation.

2. Create a definition for the term faith-based diplomacy. What might such a term mean? How do you imagine it working, if at all? Compare your thoughts to Albright’s arguments as you read the text.

3. Is faith-based diplomacy best pursued through the government or through private organizations? Read Albright’s text, looking for passages that support your position.
Faith and Diplomacy

“This would be the best of all possible worlds if there were no religion in it!!” So wrote John Adams to Thomas Jefferson. The quotation, well known to proselytizing atheists, appears differently when placed in context. The full passage reads:

Twenty times in the course of my late reading have I been on the point of breaking out, “This would be the best of all possible worlds if there were no religion in it!!” But in this exclamation I would have been . . . fanatical . . . Without religion this world would be something not fit to be mentioned in polite company, I mean hell.

In his song “Imagine,” John Lennon urged us to dream of a world free of religious doctrines. For many nonbelievers, religion is not the solution to anything. For centuries, they argue, people have been making each other miserable in the name of God. Studies indicate that wars with a religious component last longer and are fought more savagely than other conflicts. As the acerbic liberal columnist I. F. Stone observed, “Too many throats have been cut in God’s name through the ages, and God has enlisted in too many wars. War for sport or plunder has never been as bad as war waged because one man’s belief was theoretically ‘irreconcilable’ with another.”

The fault in such logic is that, although we know what a globe plagued by religious strife is like, we do not know what it would be like to live in a world where religious faith is absent. We have, however, had clues from Lenin, Stalin, Mao Zedong,* and, I would also argue, the Nazis, who conjured up a soulless Christianity that denied and defamed the Jewish roots of that faith. It is easy to blame religion—or, more fairly, what some people do in the name of religion—for all our troubles, but that is too simple. Religion is a powerful force, but its impact depends entirely on what it inspires people to do. The challenge for policy-makers is to harness the unifying potential of faith, while containing its capacity to divide. This requires, at a minimum, that we see spiritual matters as a subject worth studying. Too often, as the Catholic theologian Bryan Hehir notes, “there is an assumption that you do not have to understand religion in order to understand the world. You need to understand politics, strategy, economics, and law, but you do not need to understand religion. If you look at standard textbooks of international relations or the way we organize our foreign ministry, there’s no place where a sophisticated understanding of religion as a public force in the world is dealt with.”

To anticipate events rather than merely respond to them, American diplomats will need to take Hehir’s advice and think more expansively about the role of religion in

*Lenin, Stalin, Mao Zedong: Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) was a leading figure in the Russian revolution of 1917 (which led to the communist takeover); Lenin was the first head of the USSR. Joseph Stalin (1879–1953) was dictator of the Soviet Union after the death of Lenin and was responsible for the murder and enslavement of millions. Mao Zedong (1893–1976) was a communist leader and the founder of the People’s Republic of China. All three promoted atheism as official government policy [Ed.].
foreign policy and about their own need for expertise. They should develop the ability to recognize where and how religious beliefs contribute to conflicts and when religious principles might be invoked to ease strife. They should also reorient our foreign policy institutions to take fully into account the immense power of religion to influence how people think, feel, and act. The signs of such influence are all around us in the lives of people of many different faiths. By way of illustration, I offer three stories.

In 1981, I visited Poland; it was during the second year of the uprising by the Solidarity movement against the communist government. I had long studied central and eastern Europe, where, for decades, very little had changed. Now the entire region was awakening, as from a deep slumber. A large part of the reason was that Pope John Paul II had earlier returned for the first time to Poland, his native land. Formerly Karol Wojtyla, a teacher, priest, and bishop of Kraków, the pope exemplified the pervasive role that religion had played in the history of Poland. While communist leaders in Warsaw dictated what Poles could do, parish priests in every corner of the country still spoke to what Poles believed. The government, alarmed by the prospect of the pope’s pilgrimage, sent a memorandum to schoolteachers identifying John Paul II as “our enemy” and warning of the dangers posed by “his uncommon skills and great sense of humor.” The authorities nevertheless made a tactical mistake by allowing church officials to organize the visit, giving them a chance to schedule a series of direct contacts between the “people’s pope” and the pope’s people.

One of the titles of the bishop of Rome is pontifex maximus, or “greatest bridge-builder.” In Poland, John Paul II helped construct a bridge that would ultimately restore the connection between Europe’s East and West. For bricks, he used words carefully chosen to expose the void at the heart of the communist system, arguing that if people were to fulfill their responsibility to live according to moral principles, they must first have the right to do so. He made plain his conviction that the totalitarian regime could not survive if Poles had the courage to withhold their cooperation. Above all, he urged his countrymen not to be afraid—a simple request with enormous impact. Slowly at first, but with gathering momentum, the pope’s listeners drew strength from one another. No longer were they separated into small, controllable groups; the communists’ obsession with isolating dangerous ideas had met its match. Standing amid huge crowds, the listeners recognized in each other once again the qualities that made them proud to be Polish—faith in God and a willingness to run risks for freedom. The pope’s visits—for he made more than one—sparked a revolution of the spirit that liberated Poland, brought down the Berlin Wall, reunited Europe, and transformed the face of the world.

The pope helped the people of Poland to overcome their fear. Bob Seiple, who served with me in the State Department as the first American ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, tells a second story, this one about overcoming hate. It concerns Mary, a young Lebanese woman he encountered while working as the head of World Vision, a Christian relief and development agency. In the 1980s, Lebanon had been the scene of a destructive and multisided civil war. Mary lived in a mostly Christian village; and when a Muslim militia invaded it, everyone fled. Mary tripped on a root, plunging face-first to the ground. As she scrambled to her knees, a young man
of no more than twenty pressed the barrel of a pistol into the side of her head and demanded, "Renounce the cross or die." Mary did not flinch. "I was born a Christian," she said. "I will die a Christian." The pistol fired, propelling a bullet through Mary's neck and spine. Remorselessly, the militiaman carved a cross on her chest with his bayonet, then left her to die.

The following day, the militia returned and prepared to occupy the village. As they carted off the dead, a few of them came across Mary, still alive but unable to move; she was paralyzed. Instead of finishing her off, the militiamen improvised a stretcher out of wood and cloth and took her to a hospital. Seiple continues:

And I'm talking to Mary, sitting across from her, and I said, "Mary, this makes absolutely no sense. These are people who tried to kill you. Why in the world would they take you to the hospital the next day?"

She says, "You know, sometimes bad people are taught to do good things."

And I said, "Mary, how do you feel about the person who pulled the trigger? Here you are, an Arab woman in a land twice occupied at that time—the Israelis in the south, the Syrians every place else—strapped to a wheelchair, held hostage by your own body, a ward of the state for the rest of your life. How do you feel about the guy who pulled the trigger?"

She said, "I have forgiven him."

"Mary, how in the world could you forgive him?"

"Well, I forgave him because my God forgave me. It's as simple as that."

In Seiple's view, there are two lessons in this story. The first is that there are people who are willing to die—and kill—for their faith. This was true thousands of years ago and is no less true today. The second lesson is that religion at its best teaches forgiveness and reconciliation, not only when those acts are relatively easy but also when they are almost unbelievably difficult. (Mary, I need hardly add, is a more forgiving person than most—including me.)

The third story involves a boy with haunted eyes whom I met on a blisteringly hot afternoon in December 1997 during my first trip to Africa as secretary of state. The youngster looked about five years old and spoke softly, in a voice drained of emotion. He told me that, two weeks earlier, the small village where his family lived had been attacked. His mother had thrown him to the ground, shielding him with her body. When it was quiet, he wriggled his way out from under her and looked. His mother was dead. The bodies of other women were nearby, more than a dozen, drenched in blood. The boy then heard an infant crying; it was his sister, lying among the corpses. He gathered the baby into his arms and started walking. For hours, as the youngster stumbled along over hills and rocks, the infant wailed. Eventually they came to a place where the boy knew from experience that they would be welcomed and kept safe.

That place was Gulu, a town in a remote part of northern Uganda. World Vision ran the camp and hospital there—a haven for local villagers, who were being terrorized by an outlaw militia group. During the previous decade, an estimated 8,000 children had been kidnapped; most were presumed dead. Boys who survived and did not escape were impressed into rebel units; girls were taken as servants or "wives."
Camp officials blamed rebel leaders who had twisted religion into something grotesque. The tragedy had begun in 1986, when a change in government threatened the privileges of a previously dominant tribe, the Acholi. Fear is a powerful motivator, and the Acholi feared retribution for the many abuses they had committed while in power. A potential savior arrived in the unlikely form of a thirty-year-old woman, Alice Auma, who said that she was able to commune with spirits—a rare but by no means unique claim in her culture. She told her companions that she had been possessed by a deceased Italian military officer who had instructed her to organize an army and retake Kampala, the Ugandan capital. Once victory was achieved, commanded the spirit, the Acholi should cleanse themselves by seeking forgiveness. Auma's sacred campaign was launched but lacked the military clout to match its supernatural inspiration. After some initial successes, the movement—armed only with sticks, stones, and voodoo dolls—was crushed. Auma, her mind no longer host to the Italian officer, found refuge across the border in Kenya.

That would have ended the story had not Joseph Kony, Auma's nephew, decided to take up the cause of holy war. Piecing together a small force from various rebel groups, he assembled what came to be known as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). From 1987 on, the LRA has attacked villagers throughout the region, also targeting local governments and aid workers. Because Kony finds adults hard to control and reluctant to enlist, he kidnaps children as a means of procuring troops. Once captured, the children are forced to obey or be put to death; and obedience demands a willingness to kill anyone, including one another. Discipline is administered in the form of beatings, lashings, and amputations predicated on their leader’s reading of the Old Testament. The LRA’s professed goal is to overthrow the Ugandan government and replace it with one based on the Ten Commandments—or actually ten plus one. The eleventh, added by Kony to restrict the movements of adversaries, is “Thou shalt not ride a bicycle.”

Itself a product of fear, the LRA has survived twenty years by instilling fear in others. The Ugandan government has veered between efforts to make peace with the LRA and efforts to destroy it, but officials lack the resources to protect those living in the vicinity of the rebel force. That task has been left to World Vision and similar groups whose resources are also limited, as I saw during my tour of the camp in Gulu. The surroundings reminded me of pictures I had seen of the Crimean War. The camp hospital smelled of disinfectant and human waste. Ancient IVs dripped. Mosquitoes were buzzing everywhere. There were hundreds of patients, most of them children, many covered with welts and scars, some missing a limb. I met a group of teenage girls sitting on mattresses, braiding each other’s hair. They looked as if they belonged in junior high school, yet several were already mothers, their babies sired by LRA rapists. “Even if you are a very young girl,” said one, who was wearing a Mickey Mouse T-shirt, “you would be given to a man who was the age of my father.”

As I started to leave, a young man came up to me holding an infant. “This is the girl that little boy brought to us, his little sister. Her name is Charity.” As I cradled the tiny orphan, I was told that the girl had been named for one of the volunteers at the mission. There were many such volunteers. It was a place filled with terrible suffering but also a resilient joy. Patients and volunteers laughed, sang, played games, and cared
for each other. The Italian doctor who ran the facility had been in Gulu for more than twenty years. What a contrast between the faith that manifests itself in such love and the twisted fantasies pursued by the LRA.*

One insight that is present in these stories and often in religious faith more generally is that we share a kinship with one another, however distant it may sometimes seem: we are all created in the image of God. This in turn places upon us a responsibility to our neighbors. That principle provides both a solid foundation for religion and a respectable basis for organizing the affairs of secular society. What complicates matters is that religion can be interpreted in ways that exclude large numbers of people from any claim to kinship. Those truly imbued with religious faith—such as Pope John Paul II, Bob Seiple’s Mary, and the volunteers in Gulu—may affirm “We are all God’s children”; but others may follow their convictions to a more argumentative conclusion—“I am right, you are wrong, go to hell!”

When I appeared on a panel with the Jewish writer and thinker Elie Wiesel, a survivor of the Holocaust, he recalled how a group of scholars had once been asked to name the unhappiest character in the Bible. Some said Job, because of the trials he endured. Some said Moses, because he was denied entry to the promised land. Some said the Virgin Mary, because she witnessed the death of her son. The best answer, Wiesel suggested, might in fact be God, because of the sorrow caused by people fighting, killing, and abusing each other in His name.

This is why so many practitioners of foreign policy—including me—have sought to separate religion from world politics, to liberate logic from beliefs that transcend logic. It is, after all, hard enough to divide land between two groups on the basis of legal or economic equity; it is far harder if one or both claim that the land in question was given to them by God. But religious motivations do not disappear simply because they are not mentioned; more often they lie dormant only to rise up again at the least convenient moment. As our experience in Iran reflected, the United States has not always understood this well enough. To lead internationally, American policy-makers must learn as much as possible about religion, and then incorporate that knowledge in their strategies. Bryan Hehir has compared this challenge to brain surgery—a necessary task, but fatal if not done well.

In any conflict, reconciliation becomes possible when the antagonists cease dehumanizing each other and begin instead to see a bit of themselves in their enemy. That is why it is a standard negotiating technique to ask each side to stand in the shoes of the other. Often this is not as difficult as it might seem. The very fact that adversaries have been fighting over the same issue or prize can furnish a common ground. For centuries, Protestants and Catholics competed for religious ascendancy in Europe. That was a point of similarity: wanting to be number one. For even longer, Christians, Muslims, and Jews have pursued rival claims in Jerusalem; that, too, is a point of similarity—wanting to occupy the same space. In parts of Asia and Africa, Christians and Muslims are fighting.

*In October 2005, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Joseph Kony and four other LRA leaders on the charge of crimes against humanity. The court does not, however, have any independent capacity to enforce those warrants.
but they share a desire to worship freely and without fear. When people are pursuing
the same goal, each side should be able to understand what motivates the other. To settle
their differences, they need only find a formula for sharing what both want—a tricky
task, but one that can at least be addressed through an appeal to reason.

Not all conflicts lend themselves to this sort of negotiation. During World War II,
the Axis and the Allies* were fighting for two entirely different visions of the future.
Today, Al Qaeda’s lust for a war of vengeance fought with the tools of terror cannot
be accommodated. Some differences are too great to be reconciled. In most situations,
however, reconciliation will be eminently preferable to continued stalemate or war. But
how is reconciliation achieved?

When participants in a conflict claim to be people of faith, a negotiator who has the
credentials and the credibility to do so might wish to call their bluff. If the combatants
argue the morality of their cause, how is that morality reflected in their actions? Are
they allowing their religion to guide them or using it as a debating point to advance their
interests? Has their faith instilled in them a sense of responsibility toward others or a
sense of entitlement causing them to disregard the rights and views of everyone else?

If I were secretary of state today, I would not seek to mediate disputes on the basis
of religious principles any more than I would try to negotiate alone the more intricate
details of a trade agreement or a pact on arms control. In each case, I would ask people
more expert than I to begin the process of identifying key issues, exploring the poss-
sibilities, and suggesting a course of action. It might well be that my involvement, or
the president’s, would be necessary to close a deal, but the outlines would be drawn
by those who know every nuance of the issues at hand. When I was secretary of state,
I had an entire bureau of economic experts I could turn to, and a cadre of experts on
nonproliferation and arms control whose mastery of technical jargon earned them a
nickname, “the priesthood.” With the notable exception of Ambassador Seiple, I did not
have similar expertise available for integrating religious principles into our efforts at
diplomacy. Given the nature of today’s world, knowledge of this type is essential.

If diplomacy is the art of persuading others to act as we would wish, effective for-
eign policy requires that we comprehend why others act as they do. Fortunately, the
constitutional requirement that separates state from church in the United States does
not also insist that the state be ignorant of the church, mosque, synagogue, pagoda,
and temple. In the future, no American ambassador should be assigned to a country
where religious feelings are strong unless he or she has a deep understanding of the
faiths commonly practiced there. Ambassadors and their representatives, wherever
they are assigned, should establish relationships with local religious leaders. The State
Department should hire or train a core of specialists in religion to be deployed both in
Washington and in key embassies overseas.

* Axis and the Allies: The Axis powers consisted primarily of Germany, Italy, and Japan. They were opposed
by the Allied forces of France, Poland, the United Kingdom, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and
South Africa and, after 1941, the Soviet Union and the United States [Ed.].

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In 1994, the Center for Strategic and International Studies published *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*. The book makes a compelling case for recognizing the role of religion in affecting political behavior and for using spiritual tools to help resolve conflicts. Douglas Johnston, the book's coauthor, subsequently formed the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD), which has continued to study what it calls "faith-based diplomacy" while also playing an important mediating role in Sudan and establishing useful relationships in Kashmir, Pakistan, and Iran. Johnston, a former naval officer and senior official in the Defense Department, believes that, ordinarily, everyone of influence in a given situation is not necessarily bad, and those who are bad aren't bad all the time. He argues that a faith-based mediator has means that a conventional diplomat lacks, including prayers, fasting, forgiveness, repentance, and the inspiration of scripture.

The ICRD is not alone in its efforts. After leaving the State Department, Bob Seiple founded the Institute for Global Engagement, which is working to improve the climate for religious liberty in such volatile nations as Uzbekistan and Laos. The institute's mantra is, "Know your faith at its deepest and richest best, and enough about your neighbor's faith to respect it."

While in office, I had occasion to work closely with the Community of Sant'Egidio, a lay movement that began in Rome in the 1960s, inspired by the Second Vatican Council of Pope John XXIII. Over a period of years, Sant'Egidio successfully brokered negotiations ending a long and bloody civil war in Mozambique. It has also played a constructive role in, among other places, Kosovo, Algeria, Burundi, and Congo. The community sees prayer, service to the poor, ecumenism, and dialogue as the building blocks of interreligious cooperation and problem solving.

Numerous other faith-based organizations, representing every major religion, are in operation. They are most effective when they function cooperatively, pooling their resources and finding areas in which to specialize. Some are most skilled at mediation; others are best at helping former combatants readjust to civilian life. Still others emphasize prevention, addressing a problem before it can explode into violence. Many are experts in economic development or building democracy, both insurance policies against war. Together, these activists have more resources, more skilled personnel, a longer attention span, more experience, more dedication, and more success in fostering reconciliation than any government.

The most famous example of faith-based peacemaking was orchestrated by President Jimmy Carter at Camp David in 1978. Most observers acknowledge that the peace agreement between Egypt and Israel would never have come about if not for Carter's ability to understand and appeal to the deep religious convictions of President Sadat and Prime Minister Begin. I recently asked the former president how policy-makers should think about religion as part of the foreign policy puzzle. He told me that it is not possible to separate what people feel and believe in the spiritual realm from what they will do as a matter of public policy. "This is an opportunity," he argued, "because the basic elements of the major religious faiths are so similar — humility, justice, and peace." He said that in the unofficial diplomacy he is often asked to conduct through the Carter Center, one of the first aspects he investigates is whether the parties to a dispute represent the same faith. He said it is often simpler to deal with people of completely different faiths than with those who share a religion but disagree about how it should
be interpreted. As a moderate Baptist, Carter said he found it less complicated to have a conversation with a Catholic than with a Baptist fundamentalist; with the Catholic it was easier simply to accept the differences and not feel obliged to argue about them.

When I broached this same subject with Bill Clinton, he stressed two points. First, religious leaders can help to validate a peace process before, during, and after negotiations; through dialogue and public statements, they can make peace easier to achieve and sustain. Second, persuading people of different faiths to work cooperatively requires separating what is debatable in scripture from what is not. "If you're dealing with people who profess faith," he said, "they must believe there is a Creator; if they believe that, they should agree that God created everyone. This takes them from the specific to the universal. Once they acknowledge their common humanity, it becomes harder to kill each other; then compromise becomes easier because they've admitted that they are dealing with people like themselves, not some kind of Satan or subhuman species."

Faith-based diplomacy can be a useful tool of foreign policy. I am not arguing, however, that it can replace traditional diplomacy. Often the protagonists in a political drama are immune to, or deeply suspicious of, appeals made on religious or moral grounds. But if we do not expect miracles, little is lost in making the attempt. The resurgence of religious feeling will continue to influence world events. American policymakers cannot afford to ignore this; on balance they should welcome it. Religion at its best can reinforce the core values necessary for people from different cultures to live in some degree of harmony; we should make the most of that possibility.

Exploring Context

1. Using Flickr (flickr.com), search for images that illustrate Albright's argument. Paste these images into a document to create a visual montage of this essay.

2. Visit the website for the U.S. Department of State at state.gov. Explore the site, reading it critically to determine the role that religion currently plays in U.S. foreign policy. Does this website support your response to Question 3 of Questions for Critical Reading?

3. The International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (icrd.org) is an organization that seems to pursue Albright's goals of considering religion in diplomacy. Search through the center's website for evidence that would support Albright's arguments. Does it reflect your vision of faith-inflected diplomacy from Question 2 of Questions for Critical Reading?

Questions for Connecting

1. How would the primacy of practice, as described by Kwame Anthony Appiah in "Making Conversation" and "The Primacy of Practice" (p. 67), complicate Albright's vision of diplomacy? Would Appiah's understanding of cosmopolitanism enhance a faith-based diplomacy, or do political practices resist the kinds of changes Albright suggests? How can you synthesize their positions to argue for an effective diplomacy?