

# Faith and International Relations

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## Abstract

Religion has returned from its relative 'exile' as a significant factor in the rhetoric, practice and theory of present day international relations. The last time in the West that issues of faith and religion were interconnected with a comparable intensity was during early modern European history. Subsequently, this essay aims at deducing a series of lessons with contemporary resonance by examining the foreign policy of Cardinal Richelieu, perhaps the era's most successful statesman. More specifically, we will examine the Cardinal's actions in the Valtelline crisis and France's historic 1635 entry into the Thirty Years War and explain that they were imbued by a moderate *raison d'etat* philosophy. It will be concluded that the world's decision-makers should never underestimate or ignore issues of faith. However, while respecting modern democratic, constitutional and human rights principles, they would probably benefit substantially by studying and perhaps emulating Richelieu's articulation of a clear hierarchy of goals, his emphasis on constant and wide-ranging negotiations, as well as his general unwillingness to mix personal faith and theology with foreign policy.

**Keywords:** Cardinal Richelieu, Early Modern Europe, Faith, International Relations, *Raison D'Etat*, Religion, Thirty Years War, Valtelline Crisis.

## A. Introduction: The 'Distant Mirror' of Early Modern France

Contemporary international politics are at a crucial juncture. The international community is frantically trying to confront considerable economic, political and environmental challenges, while the new Obama

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Administration is contemplating the 'resetting' and altering of key policies.

The pursuit of any changes in foreign policy and diplomacy must seriously take into account that global politics in the twenty first century have been witnessing the resurgence of faith and religion as significant factors in a series of events that have included 9/11, sectarian clashes in the Middle East and elsewhere around the world, as well as the deadly agenda of several terrorist organisations. Religion is thus slowly returning in both violent and peaceful manifestations from its relative 'exile' from the rhetoric, practice (and subsequently theory) of international relations.

From the standpoint of statecraft, significant questions are inexorably raised by this development, perhaps none more pressing than the one concerning the proper rôle of personal religious convictions in the pursuit of the national interest. In other words, to what extent should faith influence or even determine foreign policy-making?

The last time in the West that issues of faith and religion were interconnected with a comparable intensity was during early modern European history. In a sense, that period represents a 'distant mirror' of sorts, although obviously significant differences exist and there is no attempt to suggest that the twenty-first century simply represents its repetition.

France, in particular, experienced from 1562 onwards a series of eight wars in which French Roman Catholics fought against the minority French Protestant Huguenots (They came to be known as the Wars of Religion). Involvement of foreign actors on the basis of sectarian affiliations prolonged and complicated these wars. For example, Protestant England often aided the Huguenots, while Spain supported the French Roman Catholics.

Henry Kissinger sees important contemporary parallels:

'The Middle East conflicts are most analogous to those of seventeenth-century Europe. Their roots are not economic, as in the Atlantic region and the Western Hemisphere, or strategic, as in Asia, but ideological and religious. The maxims of the Westphalian peace diplomacy do not apply. Compromise is elusive when the issue is not a specific grievance but the legitimacy—indeed the existence—of the other side'.<sup>2</sup>

According to Mark Lilla, 'today we have progressed to the point where we are again fighting the battles of the sixteenth century—over revelation and reason, dogmatic purity and toleration, inspiration and consent, divine duty and common decency'.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, by focusing on early modern France and Europe, the opportunity arises to contemplate international politics and statesmanship in an era when religion mattered to an extent and in ways that, until very recently, had been largely absent for centuries. We will thus argue that a series of lessons with contemporary resonance can be deduced from the career of the period's perhaps most successful statesman, Armand Jean du Plessis, Cardinal de Richelieu, who was France's First Minister (1624-1642) during the reign of Louis XIII (1610-1643).

Cardinal Richelieu was a sincerely pious individual and not a cynical atheist or agnostic. No modern paragon, he clearly represents the *ancien régime's* prevailing conservative, reactionary and anti-egalitarian spirit. For example, he considered most women incapable of governing, advocated the establishment of fewer schools and infamously compared the people to 'mules.' However, Richelieu also articulated an admirable hierarchy of goals whose accomplishment was required in order to increase France's power in the international arena. As he stated in his *Political Testament* (a document addressed to Louis XIII), his time

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<sup>2</sup> Kissinger, H. (2001). *Does America Need a Foreign Policy? Toward a Diplomacy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. New York: Simon and Schuster, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Lilla, M. (2007). *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics and the Modern West*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p. 3.

in office aimed:

‘to ruin the Huguenot party, to abase the pride of the nobles, to bring all your subjects back to their duty, and to restore your reputation among foreign nations to the station it ought to occupy’.<sup>4</sup>

In the pursuit of these goals he was deeply influenced by reason of state thinking and ultimately proved successful. We will thus next turn to an examination of some of the cardinal’s major foreign policy decisions.

### **B. The Primacy of Reason of State: The Valtelline Crisis and France’s Entry into the ‘Thirty Years’ War.**

In the early 1600’s, the Habsburg Houses of Austria and Spain remained the leading powers of the European Continent. Furthermore, and as regards France, the location of the Habsburg possessions effectively raised the possibility of encirclement by potentially unfriendly, antagonistic and more powerful states. France was in danger of being relegated to the status of a second-rate European power, subservient to Habsburg (especially Spanish) interests and initiatives—a fate that would have almost certainly led to her long-term and perhaps irreversible decline.

Given such grim geopolitical prospects, it could have reasonably been expected that successive French monarchs and administrations would have adopted a consistent and all-encompassing anti-Habsburg stance. This proved not to be the case, primarily because the Habsburgs were also the leading military and political force behind the Counter-Reformation. To a considerable extent, combatting the challenge of Protestantism was the *raison d’être* of Habsburg rulers, the paramount organising principle in the pursuit of their foreign policy goals, as well as the legitimising principle behind their bid for European hegemony.

Solidarity with international Catholicism was the preferred royal

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<sup>4</sup> Hill, B. H. (1961). *The Political Testament of Cardinal Richelieu*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin, p. 11.

policy option of the French 'party' of the *dévots*. Richelieu was not willing to entertain such an outcome, despite the rhetorical opprobrium to which he was subjected by his rivals. The cardinal probably understood that the combination of the slow rise of modern state structures and Christendom's deep split meant that the return to a more unified Europe under the Habsburgs was far from certain. More importantly, Richelieu realised that, if successful, such a prospect would be highly detrimental to long-term French interests.

The Valtelline crisis took place at the very beginning of the cardinal's administration and represents an early but clear illustration of French foreign policy actions aimed at minimising Habsburg power. The Valtelline was an area in south-east Switzerland that allowed for crucial communication between the Habsburg Houses of Austria and Spain and also provided France with access to her Italian ally of Venice. The Valtelline's population was predominantly Catholic, but it was governed by the Protestant Grisons. Possibly sensing danger from potential French actions in this vital valley, Spain supported an uprising, succeeded in ousting the Grisons and sent troops to occupy the valley's major fortifications. These deeds were in harmony with Counter-Reformation thinking and furthermore aimed to ensure unhindered control of a place of undisputed geostrategic importance.

Given intense diplomatic reactions over these developments in the Valtelline from France, Venice and Savoy, the Spanish yielded control of the valley to the military forces of Pope Urban VIII, pending the issue's final resolution. However, the Pope (who viewed the Catholic Habsburgs of Spain with some sympathy), permitted the safe use by Spanish forces of the Valtelline valley, essentially providing them with all the military and strategic advantages that they could have required.

This situation was unacceptable to Richelieu. Despite the pronounced French domestic weaknesses and divisions, he advocated an aggressive and confrontational policy over the Valtelline. Thus, in 1624, French troops fought next to the Protestant Grisons, attacking the Pope's forces and over a period of a few months managed to take control of the entire area. Eventually, a compromise was reached

between Spain and France with the 1626 Treaty of Monzon , which restored the Grisons to power but guaranteed the Catholic rights of the native population.

In supporting the Protestant Grisons and attacking the Pope's forces, Richelieu provided an early indication that his preferred foreign policy was to be based on pragmatic national interest considerations that did not place the highest importance upon the welfare of Catholicism. In other words, it is possible to argue that the Valtelline affair reveals the ideological and strategic considerations that would eventually also lead to France's declaration of war against Spain.

Nevertheless, the French entry into the era's most momentous military conflagration should not be considered as a predetermined or automatic outcome. The beginning in 1618 of what turned out to be the Thirty Years' War found France in a perilous state of affairs. In addition to the relatively weak central royal authority and the serious domestic challenge posed by the Huguenots, the *dévots* were expressing sympathy for the Habsburg leadership of international Catholicism, and the French army and navy were rather weak. As a result, it was originally impossible to seriously contemplate entering the war.

Cardinal Richelieu pursued a specific strategy aiming to minimise these difficulties and create the necessary circumstances that would manage to check the Habsburg ascendancy. In the *Political Testament* the cardinal lucidly summarises his strategy:

If it is a sign of singular prudence to have held down the forces opposed to your state for a period of ten years with the forces of your allies, by putting your hand in your pocket and not on your sword, then to engage in open warfare when your allies can no longer exist without you is a sign of courage and great wisdom; which shows that, in husbanding the peace of your kingdom, you have behaved like the economists who, having taken great care to amass money, also know how to spend it in order to safeguard themselves against greater loss.<sup>5</sup>

Direct French participation in the Thirty Years' War was preceded

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Burckhardt, J. C. (1970). *Richelieu and His Age: Power Politics and the Cardinal's Death*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, p. 61.

by years of careful and meticulous diplomacy. Richelieu's aim was to prolong the war and thus exhaust the forces of the royal Houses of Austria and, especially, Spain. The cornerstone of this policy involved the support of Habsburg foes and, eventually, the pursuit and successful conclusion of a series of anti-Habsburg alliances. They included the spectacular diplomatic move to sign a pact with the Protestant (Lutheran) King of Sweden, Gustavus Adolphus (reigned 1611-1632).

By 1635, conditions for war with Spain were ripe. Military developments in the Thirty Years' War had created a situation that possibly necessitated military action. Furthermore, the French army had reached an adequate level of preparedness and efficiency. It can perhaps also be argued that the declaration of war amounted to a preemptive strike against Spain, which was itself determined to attack. Inevitably, an adequate justification was found, and war was declared against Spain on 19 May 1635.

France's entry into the Thirty Years' War is a turning point in European history. Partly as a result of this development by the time of his physical demise in 1642, the cardinal had effectively succeeded in minimising the Habsburg threat of France being encircled. The war's conclusion six years later found France as probably the most prosperous and powerful Continental European power, while Spain had entered a process of decline into secondary importance in European affairs from which it would never really recover. In other words, despite the significant human, social and economic costs of France's declaration of war on Spain, Cardinal Richelieu proved successful in realising his strategic goals.

In the pursuit of these policy goals, Richelieu was effectively guided by a moderate reason of state (or *raison d'état*—the terms are used interchangeably) approach, especially as proscribed by philosophers such as Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), Francesco Guicciardini (1483-1540) and, above all, Justus Lipsius (1547-1606).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> These connections, as well as the development of reason of state thinking are examined in detail in my forthcoming study *Faith and Reason of State*.

Following one of the most basic tenets of reason of state thinking, Richelieu subscribed to rationalism. Despite his personal faith, under the cardinal's administrations, France's international relations were pursued exclusively on the basis of human reasoning and agency. Metaphysical considerations do not seem to have affected crucial decisions such as the French attacks against the Pope's forces during the Valtelline crisis or the historic entry into the Thirty Years' War in 1635. Furthermore, the Cardinal did not rely upon theodicy. Richelieu never simply waited idly for God's intervention in human affairs. Rather, he concentrated on the timing and specific ways in which specific human (French) actions and decisions could affect foreign policy outcomes.

Another aspect of French foreign policy that unites Richelieu with all major reason of state thinkers was his emphasis on prudence. Richelieu seemed to minimise rash or emotional reactions, waiting for the most favourable circumstances before making significant decisions. Perhaps the most significant illustration of the cardinal's approach can be viewed in his strategy before entering the Thirty Years' War. Considerations of prudence dictated years of subsidising Habsburg foes, strengthening the French military and avoiding the costs of direct military confrontation until the timing was opportune.

The emphasis on necessity should also not be underestimated, since it represents a major *raison d'état* concept. Richelieu's pursuit of alliances with Protestant forces and declaration of war against Catholic Habsburg Spain was required by various developments and circumstances. It was the realistic probability that France would be relegated to a secondary, peripheral European rôle, subservient and encircled by Habsburg dominions that in effect necessitated Richelieu's strategy.

In addition to the cardinal's deep appreciation for the concepts of prudence, rationalism and necessity as proscribed by *raison d'état* doctrines, a further key to understanding Richelieu's statesmanship lies in his constant attempts to make decisions almost exclusively on the basis of what he thought would have benefited France's power.



Richelieu's primary considerations did not include the reversal of the gains of Protestantism nor the welfare of international Catholicism. As the Cardinal explained in no uncertain terms, following (almost *verbatim*) the teachings of Justus Lipsius and the like: 'the good of the state is the supreme law.'<sup>7</sup>

It can thus be concluded that matters of religion were never supreme in the conduct of France's international relations, but secondary to those that the cardinal considered paramount to the state's welfare. Richelieu's adoption of a moderate reason of state approach resulted ultimately in issues of faith becoming subservient to the interests of France. In this sense, Richelieu was first and foremost a *French* statesman.

### **C. The Statesmanship of Cardinal Richelieu: Lessons for Iraq and the Greater Middle East.**

The anti-democratic, sexist and élitist tendencies in Richelieu's thought are clearly (and fortunately) not in tune with the prevailing beliefs and demands of statesmanship in the twenty-first century. On the other hand, the Cardinal's moderate reason of state approach to international politics may be of much greater relevance, especially given the truly impressive nature of his foreign policy accomplishments.

When the cardinal came to power, France was perhaps the weakest of Europe's Great Powers, a situation substantially reversed by the end of his tenure in office. (In this respect, the similarities to Otto von Bismarck's career in the nineteenth century are significant.) The cardinal managed to solidify Louis XIII's power within France, produce an administratively and culturally more cohesive nation-state and preclude Habsburg hegemony in Europe. It is thus worth considering briefly, *mutatis mutandis*, how the basic tenets of Richelieu's

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<sup>7</sup> Cited in Church, F. W. (1972). *Richelieu and Reason of State*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 108.

statesmanship might have been applied to the recent Iraq imbroglio and to contemporary developments in the Greater Middle East.

Most significantly, the Cardinal always maintained a hierarchy of priorities, pursuing in a consistent and single-minded manner (often with opportune timing) clearly defined and articulated strategic goals, to which both issues of faith and tactics had to conform. On the other hand, the 2003 United States invasion was first publicly justified as an attempt to destroy (non-existent as it turned out) Weapons of Mass Destruction and then as an effort to produce a vibrant democratic regime. Subsequently, the goals seem to have focused more on achieving relative stability, while it now appears that the aims of a once bombastic (if not hubristic) American campaign in Iraq will be focusing on gradual withdrawal. In other words, unlike France's foreign policy under the guidance of Richelieu, the United States during the Presidency of George W. Bush does not appear to have adopted a clear or consistent hierarchy of goals as regards Iraq.

Significant lessons can potentially also be deduced from Richelieu's attitude towards the conduct of negotiations. As the cardinal argued in his *Political Testament*:

'States receive so much benefit from the uninterrupted foreign negotiations, that it is unbelievable unless it is known from experience. I confess that I realized this truth only five or six years after I had been employed in the direction of your affairs. But I am now so convinced of its validity that I dare say emphatically that it is absolutely necessary to the well-being of the state to *negotiate ceaselessly, either openly or secretly, and in all places*, even in those from which no present fruits are reaped and still more in those for which no future prospects as yet seem likely [...] He who negotiates continuously will find the right instant to attain his ends, and even if this does not come about, at least it can be said he has lost nothing while keeping abreast of events in the world, which is not of little consequence in the lives of states'.<sup>8</sup>

Intriguingly, (roughly) six years into George W. Bush's tenure in office, the Iraq Study Group recommended negotiations with Iran and

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<sup>8</sup> Hill, *op.cit.*, pp. 94-95; emphasis added.

Syria. Subsequently, a few meetings between American officials and diplomats from these two states actually did take place. Early indications suggest that the Barack Obama Administration will pursue policy options in the Greater Middle East that will include efforts to engage, in various degrees, states such as Syria and Iran, and even elements of the Taliban in Afghanistan. With little doubt, it can be argued that Richelieu's career teaches the value of continuous negotiations, thus suggesting that more active contacts with various states and actors might help to produce regional stability and lasting settlements.

Of further importance to contemporary decision-makers should be the fact that Cardinal Richelieu was characterised by omniscience:

He was a master of both Italian and German politics, he had a complete grasp of internal conditions in the Scandinavian countries, he was conversant with the workings of the Stockholm parliament and was as well informed about events in Poland and Russia as he was about those in Constantinople. His knowledge of English internal affairs enabled him to take daring initiatives in that sphere, and he reacted to any shift in the balance of power in the Netherlands like a seismograph.<sup>9</sup>

An example of Richelieu's meticulous preparation and knowledge can be glimpsed in a memorandum that he wrote about the Valtelline. The cardinal explains:

To march with an army from France to the Valtelline, starting from Bresse, you have to go to Geneva, from Geneva to Lausanne, from Lausanne to Sion. From Sion [... to] Bellinzona, from Bellinzona via Mesocco [...] to Chiavenna [...] Following the same route from Valais to Bellinzona you also gain access to the Grisons, approaching via the Urseren and Mt Climoult [Oberalp Pass] before descending into the valley of Disentis. On the other route starting from Dijon you proceed via Dôle, Neuchâtel, Soleure, Schwyz, Uri, the Urseren, Bellinzona, etc. But on this route you have to fight'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Burckhardt, *op.cit.*, p. 322.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, p. 40.

This level of information should be compared with the serious intelligence failure in Iraq to correctly assess the absence of Weapons of Mass Destruction. A relevant anecdote (admittedly of lesser historical significance but nevertheless indicative of the US' lack of preparation) involves the hapless American members of the Coalition Provision Authority, who tried to create a list of sites in Baghdad that merited protection after the conclusion of what was expected to be the successful invasion of Iraq. Their efforts were based exclusively on a copy of a Lonely Planet guidebook (almost none of the buildings on the list were eventually guarded).

It thus becomes evident that had degrees of preparation similar to those employed by Richelieu been exhibited by the US's political and military upper hierarchy before and during the aftermath of the Iraq invasion, many of the subsequent mistakes might have not occurred. As regards the future, it is necessary that any policy changes decided by the US and the international community concerning the Greater Middle East should be pursued on the basis of a deep understanding and appreciation of the region's complex historical and political realities.

Despite his many talents, Richelieu never possessed unlimited or unchecked power. Rather, his position always depended on the will and whims of Louis XIII. He was thus obliged to persuade a monarch who was at times demanding, difficult, obstinate and proud. This situation is not unlike the one that politicians face in contemporary liberal democracies (the sovereignty of the monarch having of course been transferred to the people).

Given Richelieu's lucid hierarchy of goals in accordance with reason of state necessities, it was eventually possible to trust and endorse his proposals, excuse mistakes and justify often onerous costs. A lack of consistent, persuasive or urgent aims related directly to the national interest inevitably leads to a loss in popular support, as was eventually the case with Americans in favour of the Iraq invasion. The formulation of any new approaches to the challenges of the Greater Middle East should be truthful, realistic and embedded within a framework of priorities integrally connected to real threats and

capabilities. Only such an approach can best guarantee long-term popular confidence and endorsement.

Richelieu's attitude towards matters of faith and religion is also particularly instructive. Although the cardinal was a man of deep Christian convictions, he did not see the triumph of his personal creed of Catholicism as a primary goal. He was only interested in the triumph of France. Unlike many contemporary American evangelicals, Richelieu never attempted to pursue 'God's foreign policy.' He only pursued France's foreign policy. Apparently, Richelieu was well aware of the precarious existence and perils that confront a state, and differentiated this situation from issues of personal faith. In his own words: 'Man is immortal, his salvation is hereafter [...] The state has no immortality, its salvation is now or never.'<sup>11</sup>

Richelieu's international politics were thus primarily based on secular, rational and moderate *raison d'état* considerations. He always advised and relied upon human rationalism: 'It is necessary to have the masculine virtue of *making decisions rationally*, rather to slide down the easy slope of inclination, which often leads princes over great precipices.'<sup>12</sup>

Unlike former US President George W. Bush, Richelieu generally did not allow religious and universalistic convictions to substantially influence his strategy or push France towards participating in risky foreign policy adventures. For example, Cardinal Richelieu never supported crusades against the Ottoman infidels. Universal or millennial attitudes were absent from his decision-making process; and even though his endorsement of absolute monarchy was faith-inspired, Richelieu did not consider the establishment of centralising, divinely anointed Catholic absolute monarchies in every single state as a worthy military goal. The conclusion is inescapable: Richelieu would have almost certainly been extremely suspicious of any world-wide effort to promote democracy partially inspired by religious faith and largely

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<sup>11</sup> Cited in Kissinger, H. (1994). *Diplomacy*. New York: Simon and Schuster, p. 61.

<sup>12</sup> Hill, *op. cit.*, p. 45; emphasis added.

devoid of other national interest considerations; and it now appears probable that US President Barack Obama, like Cardinal Richelieu, will also not pursue policies among such lines.

The international relations of the twenty-first century will have to confront the global resurgence of religion, and thus dilemmas similar to the ones faced by Richelieu. Clearly, the world's decision-makers should never underestimate or ignore issues of faith. However, while respecting modern democratic, constitutional and human rights principles, they would probably benefit substantially by studying and perhaps emulating Richelieu's articulation of a clear hierarchy of goals, his emphasis on constant and wide-ranging negotiations, as well as his general unwillingness to mix personal faith and theology with foreign policy.