What Iraqis Could Learn from France's Wars of Religion

By Liam M. Brockey

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In recent months, public figures and scholars including Salman Rushdie and Tariq Ramadan have raised the question of whether Islam needs a Reformation, one akin to the great changes in Europe that began in the sixteenth century. The Reformation, for them, clearly evokes the kindling of intellectual fires that would eventually grow into the Enlightenment. Yet like the prescription for democracy, the call for a Reformation is a very tall order. After all, it was as much an era of religious reform as of political upheaval that ushered in decades of sectarian strife. Yet even this aspect of the Reformation may offer a historical lesson of immediate importance for the current chaos in the Middle East, namely in the political and legal compromises that eventually brought peace between warring Christian factions.

Seen from our twenty-first century vantage point, one scenario duplicating events of the Reformation seems recognizable. A strong ruler is suddenly removed from power, unleashing a tide of discontent, and eventually outright conflict between the two major religious groups in his country. At length, the sectarian lines become more clearly drawn as the antagonism between the two groups grows, with each side accusing the other of heresy. The vacuum of central authority, formerly the guarantor of internal peace even if not justice, drives each side to entrust its protection to militias. Sporadic episodes of mutual harassment metastasize into civil war, as firebrands on both sides incite further violence by insisting that the Day of Judgment is at hand.

This was France in the second half of the sixteenth century. Starting in the 1540s, the religious reforms of Jean Calvin had gained a considerable following among all strata of French society, but particularly in cities. Often in forms more aggressive than the denunciations made by Martin Luther, Calvin and his followers vilified Catholic doctrines.
and the institutions of the Roman Church. By the late 1550s, a substantial and growing minority, which included several major political figures, adhered to the Reformed Church. When King Henry II was killed in a jousting accident in 1559, leaving three young sons in the care of his foreign wife, the Calvinists that he had oppressed began to gather their defensive forces.

War between the opposing sides was not necessarily unavoidable, yet compromise or even mere cohabitation grew increasingly difficult in the 1560s. The fact that France’s most important political actors controlled their own military forces meant that provocations on religious grounds might lead to war between those who defended the fledgling Reformed Church and those who rallied in defense of Catholicism. Certain incidents became causes-célèbres, such as the slaughter of unarmed Protestant worshippers during Sunday prayers in the territories of a Catholic lord, or the attempt by Calvinist noblemen to kidnap the boy-king François II, thereby removing him from the influence of his Catholic councilors. Within a few short years, the hapless French monarchs found themselves largely sidelined as their subjects savaged one another in a series of conflicts known as the Wars of Religion.

It is not easy to underestimate the degree of destruction wrought by the sectarian strife. When Calvinist militias stormed towns and cities in southern France, they made churches and monasteries their preferred targets. Catholic clergy were harassed or killed, and the devotional statutes, paintings, and stained glass that filled their sanctuaries were destroyed. For their part, Catholic forces launched raids where they suspected gatherings of psalm-singing Protestants. They also suggested the creation of a French branch of the Inquisition and even urged the king of Spain—France’s archenemy—to send an army in defense of the Catholic cause.

During the lulls in the fighting, the kings of France and their regents attempted to resolve the conflict through political means. The Crown had always sided with the Catholic forces, but it saw the necessity of securing peace if it was to rule effectively. And because of the strength of the Protestant forces, a compromise that guaranteed the protection of the Reformed Church was indispensable. In exchange for a cessation of hostilities, the leaders of the Calvinist party accepted a special legal and religious framework: special courts were set up to administer justice to Protestants without undue bias from Catholic judges, and the Protestant congregations were permitted to worship in public under certain circumstances.

Continued outbreaks of fighting and revised settlements over the course of the late 1560s made the gulf between the two Christian factions ever wider. The primarily Catholic population of France bore the brunt of the taxation for the king’s wars against his rebellious subjects, but failed to see many gains. The Catholics grew increasingly disenchanted with what appeared to be excessive
concessions to the Protestants, such as the granting of four cities as safe havens for their militias and refugees. Then, in the late summer of 1572, the anger of the Catholic mobs exploded during the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre. After an orgy of violence that started in Paris and swiftly spread to the French provinces over a period of several weeks, approximately 10,000 Protestants were killed and many additional thousands found it wise to renounce Calvin’s teachings or flee abroad for safety.

Now that they had gained the upper hand by dint of mob violence, military aggression, and mass apostasy, the most ardent Catholic partisans began to insist that France be completely purged of heresy. But it was at this moment, in the wake of so much death and destruction, that the crucial break occurred. Frustrated by the continued calls for war and disgusted by France’s self-inflicted wounds, a group of moderate Catholics began to register publicly their rejection of their hard-line brethren. Their urge to avoid further violence and to ensure some sort of final compromise in exchange for peace earned them the pejorative nickname *politiques*. Men such as Michel de Montaigne, the philosopher and mayor of Bordeaux, joined the ranks of those who were skeptical about refusal to give quarter to the Calvinists. Eventually, the *politiques* would rally to the royal cause and bring a majority of French Catholics (and Protestants) to fight against the radicals of the Catholic League. Alas, the victory for moderation that came at last in 1598—with the final legal compromise called the Edict of Nantes—was purchased at the cost of many more thousands of lives.

Drawing historical analogies is a tricky business. Rarely do events from the past fit into present molds, and their lessons rarely offer real solutions to current problems. Even those who think it evident that the Islamic world (and the Middle East in particular) need a Reformation surely do not believe that those countries should bear the same cost that France did. After all, the upheaval of the Wars of Religion took over half a century to resolve. Will the sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shi’ites last as long? Or will the lesson of moderation that came from the Reformation only be learned after these wars of religion end?

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