When, in 1935, Joseph Stalin asked: “How many divisions?” to gauge the relevance of the Vatican on the international scene, he pretty much encapsulated the disdain of state rulers of the time regarding religion as a significant component of world affairs. Neither good nor bad, religion did not matter. There were several reasons for this neglect, such as the building of the international community after the Westphalian treaty of 1648 as a club of rational state actors acting primarily on material and security interests — although reality may not always have complied with this dominant perception.

Nevertheless, the end of the cold war and the emergence of political groups which are religiously motivated, most notoriously Al Qaeda and now ISIS, has dramatically changed this perception. It has been the work of Samuel Huntington, first presented in a 1993 article in Foreign Affairs and subsequently elaborated in a 1996 book, which has dominated the discourse on culture as an element in international conflicts. Huntington argues that Islam is uniquely incompatible with and antagonistic to the core values of the West (such as equality and modernity). This argument resurfaces in most current analyses of international affairs and globalization, notably in terrorist studies since 9/11. However, as abundantly proven by the social sciences, civilizations are not homogenous, monolithic players in world politics with an inclination to ‘clash’, but rather consist of pluralistic, divergent and convergent actors and practices that are constantly evolving. Thus, the ‘clash of civilizations’ fails to address not only conflict between civilizations but also conflict and differences within civilizations. In particular, evidence does not exist to substantiate Huntington’s prediction that countries with similar cultures are coming together, while countries with different cultures are coming apart.

In all these analyses, the answer provided to the question, “Why do they hate us?” rarely takes the wider context of competition for political influence, regional dynamics and historical sequences into account. Rather, it is almost always based on discussion of textual and ideological use of religious references by Muslim actors.

The cultural divide is thus envisaged as the primary cause of international crises. Admittedly, the ‘Huntingtonian’ position is based on a premise that cannot be simply dismissed: that identity and culture play a decisive role in international relations. But what culture and what Islam are being spoken of here? The idea of a monolithic Islam leads to a reductionism in which the conflicts in Sudan, Lebanon, Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan are imagined to stem collectively and wholly from the domain of religion. It is, moreover, ironic that the role of religion, so long ignored or neglected in terms of international politics, is now exaggerated and decontextualized in an ahistorical perspective, which has elicited its fair share of criticism from scholars of Islamic cultures.

Seen in this light, the clash of civilizations is an attempt, albeit a consistently inadequate one, to shift international politics away from an exclusively nation-state-centric approach, only to immediately recreate and legitimate the view of a fixed world of cultural agents participating in predetermined conflicts of interest. This is to say that any attempt at an analysis of culture and global cultural conflict.
is an admirable one, but it must not be done through a reification of both culture and civilization.

This ahistorical approach to Islam’s global role affects all other religions and their role in international relations. Most of the time, religious manifestations are seen as ideological phenomena — that is, as ideas or beliefs. Such an approach reduces religion to a rhetoric that is used in political mobilization and hence gives the illusion that the knowledge of concepts and symbols of religious traditions is the major way to understand their role in politics.

To overcome this essentialization, it is important not to reduce religion to beliefs or texts. Doing so, does not allow an understanding of how and when it can be positive and a tool for rapprochement. For example, young Muslim activists in South Africa fought against apartheid alongside other religious communities and justified their fight through an interpretation of the Ummah (community of believers) as synonymous with a more inclusive South African nation. Today, the same references are used by radicals like ISIS to divide and fight. So the religious texts do not explain political conditions, unless we take into account the contexts: the cultural and historical conditions that inform the behaviours and interpretations of the believers.

More generally, it is imperative to include religious actors and groups in any attempt at conflict resolution. Since the mid twentieth century, several global movements for interreligious peace have broken barriers between the world’s leading religions and among governmental, civic and religious leaders. For example, Religions for Peace (established in 1970) has played a significant role in hosting peacebuilding conventions among religious leaders, United Nations delegates and representatives of state governments; and the Christian Community of Sant’Egidio (established in 1968) has, in addition to its services for the poor, played a noteworthy role in mediating peace negotiations in Mozambique, Algeria and elsewhere. Encouraged by such movements, a number of religious leaders have, increasingly over the past five to ten years, called for direct cooperation among the world’s religions to renounce interreligious violence and nurture interreligious peace. Recent statements by the emergent Global Covenant of Religions serve as a prototype for these calls.

In April 2014, His Majesty King Abdullah invited religious scholars, faith leaders and diplomats to Amman to respond to calls for a ‘Global Covenant’ and to form a steering group — the ‘Ring of Faiths’ — to work together...
Religion can be a source for civility, especially at the level of local communities, too often neglected by policy makers.

However it is easier said than done for the reasons enumerated above: since the Westphalian treaty, states actions are defined on secular principles in the international arena. There is therefore a strong secular culture that prevents or inhibits governmental and international agencies to take into account the religious dimension of peace building, conflict resolution and any form of positive development. The main reason for this inhibition is related to the dominant but false perception that religious groups and actors are not as rational, nor inclined to compromise, as non-religious ones. This perception is reinforced by a primary focus on religious texts and ideologies to apprehend religion and politics which disregards the empirical reality of the ‘belonging’ and ‘behaving’ of religious individuals and groups. It also neglects the crucial influence of political and cultural contexts that fashion and shape the readings and interpretations of religious texts. In other words, the understanding of the context in which religious actors are operating is key to identifying the ones that could support international initiatives in favour of peace or rapprochement. It also means that such international policies inclusive of religion will require specific information and understanding that cannot be gathered in the high peak of crisis or conflict but rather through a prior understanding of religion across nations and regions. In this regard, the very rich and diverse information on and from religious groups in different national and regional contexts is an important resource that should be gathered by an international agency such as UNESCO in order to be available to international organizations and state actors during times of crisis. It would also be critical to create a global network of religious groups and actors of all denominations and traditions who work locally in favour of peace, economic development and social justice. The key word here is ‘local’.

Too often, the action of religion at the international level consists of high profile religious figures signing a document enunciating the broad principles of peace and tolerance. In most of the cases, these documents do not have any impact on the ground. For example, the Amman Message, initiated by the King of Jordan in 2004 is a remarkable document bringing prominent Muslim figures to assert or re-assert the tolerance of the Islamic message. Regrettfully, this document is not known or referenced by religious actors in different localities. In contrast, a more positive action led by an international organization would create a continuously updated repository of resources and information on religious groups and actors who are not automatically religious scholars and authorities but who act positively in the name of religion. Such an international observatory and database does not have to be built from scratch. It can take advantage of the existing information and data from the national levels and international religious organizations.

When world leaders met in the year 2000 at the United Nations, to identify major challenges for the new millennium, they did not include religion as a tool of economic and political development. Introducing religious actors and organizations into policymaking is certainly sorely needed to overcome the one-sided perception of religion as the problem for national and international peace.