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Chapter One

Introduction: Religion and War - a Recurring Historical Nexus

Irene Polinskaya, Alan James, and Yannis Papadogiannakis

Religion and War: Why it Matters

We tend to conceive of modernity as a world that has left behind the religious obsessions of earlier times. Yet, there are reminders everywhere of religion's enormous, continued influence. Indeed, within war, and all the related challenges that it raises for humanity today, the role of religious beliefs is, arguably, as strong as ever.¹ American politics and foreign policy are still often described in openly religious terms,² for example, and the West's War on Terror and other conflicts in the Middle East and Africa have shown, in the most dramatic and dangerous way possible, that the mutual influences between religion and war remain essential to understanding the world we currently live in. Alarming, the first two decades of the twenty-first century witnessed the rise of radical Islam and the militant ideology of the Islamic State, new waves of religious violence yoked to nationalist movements in India, and the painfully divisive impact of Russian imperial wars on the Orthodox church in Ukraine, among many other developments. Naturally, any ideological or simplistic assumptions about the relationship between religion and war risk caricaturizing these trends, just as academic interest in the future of war, with the transformative potential of rapid technological change or even the possibility of the renewed threat of inter-state, or great power, conflict, might obscure them.³ The aim of this volume, therefore, is to offer an extended interrogation of the nexus between religion and war from a long historical perspective in order to gain a better understanding of its persistence as a systemic feature of societies throughout human history and into the present day.

¹ Hassner 2016; and see Gutkowski 2014, on modern secular assumptions about religion in war. The editors would like to thank Dr Gutkowski for her input at an early stage of this project.

² Marsden 2013.

³ Ryan 2022; Freedman 2017.

In a sweeping historical excursus that stretches over the last forty-five thousand years, Ian Morris (Chapter 24) postulates the nexus between religion and war, in the shape of the ‘military-religious complex’, as a universal mechanism for ‘scaling up’ societies. The concept links a ruler’s claim to political power, including a licence to wage war, with a claim to special or exclusive divine favour that ensures military success. ‘It is never easier’, Morris claims, ‘to persuade subjects to want what their leaders want than when what their leaders want also appears to be what the gods, spirits, and ancestors want.’

This notion of a ‘military-religious complex’ provides an important perspective on today’s world. It raises questions about a possible, current shift in the ‘balance between economic-political and ideological-military power’ (Chapter 24, Morris). In turn, the threat posed by the ‘religion and war’ nexus to democracy, in the twenty-first century, is a theme taken up by Ned Lebow in the Afterword. Morris’s striking model of societal development invites rigorous debate, and responses to it come both in a wide-ranging essay by Hans van Wees (Chapter 25) and in a variety of case studies gathered in this volume that feature rulers claiming divine support for their military endeavours. Whether these studies agree or disagree with Morris’s model, they share an acknowledgement of the defining role of religion in war. Indeed, even visions of peace in the ancient world, according to recent comparative studies of the concept of peace and the practice of peace-making, are nearly never found in secular literature; they are intrinsically theological, as far as we can judge from written records. Some but not all of these theologies and more rarely, natural philosophies, also envision war as a natural or necessary state of social order.⁴ Peace is envisioned as the end-result of war, and war as a regrettable but inevitable means of achieving peace.⁵

Similarly, the way that war has been framed, or justified, in religious terms has always been a very prominent theme in historical scholarship. In many ways, religion has been presented as defining war, in the sense that it set the standards of an acceptable peace. Many a conflict was extended by the need to pursue a lasting and universal peace that was not merely a military compromise but considered ‘just’ in the eyes of God. Currently, with what might even be termed

⁴ Compare this with the evolutionary, biological perspective of Gat 2006.

⁵ Raaflaub’s edited volumes *War and Peace in the Ancient World* (2007) and *Peace in the Ancient World* (2016) present a wide-ranging survey covering China, India, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Middle East, Western Asia, Israel, Greece and Rome, the Americas, and the religions of the Book - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in their early stages.

a ‘cultural turn’ in military history, the prominence of religion in shaping the conduct of war itself is greater than ever.⁶ There is, too, a rich and growing literature on the influence of religion in the experience of European imperial expansion and in the historical emergence of the global international order.⁷ It should come as no surprise that for the analysis of modern and contemporary wars, religion is also an important theme.⁸

Traditionally, however, for historians of early modern war, in particular, religion has been treated as a fading influence, largely framing the debate about modernity itself.⁹ As a result, today, much very good work is still centred upon the extent to which early modern wars were or were not still motivated by religion or upon how long certain religious influences remained in other aspects of the rising nation state.¹⁰ Yet to the extent that religion continues to be conceived as the past out of which political modernity emerged and against which it is defined, religion and war will continue to be addressed broadly in terms of continuity and change. One feature of this volume is that the remarkable escalation of war from the sixteenth century to the middle of the seventeenth and what is commonly referred to as a military revolution in early modern Europe¹¹ is situated, not at the start of the story of the emergence of modern war, but at the end, reinforcing that these changes were an integral part of the millennia-long history of the interplay between religion and war. This serves as a reminder that religion and war were mutually-defining aspects of the same phenomenon. They were not locked in a zero-sum struggle from which modern war somehow emerged free of the limiting or distorting influences of religion.

On the contrary, as the essays in this volume make clear, the distant history of the nexus between religion and war provides necessary context for understanding modern war. Many of the themes in the studies of early periods are echoed or even amplified in the later ones. Broadly, the focus of attention is on the way religion relates to motivations (Chapter 2, Richardson; 8 Zucconi; 10 Polinskaya), conduct (Chapter 7 Zaia; 11 McAuley; 12 Berthelet; 14 Papadogiannakis), or the effects of war on theology or the practice of religion (Chapter 14, Papadogiannakis; 13 Lennon; 15 Kolbeck).

⁶ Lee 2001; see also, Antony, Carroll, and Dodds Pennock 2020.

⁷ As examples, see Pestana 2009 and Philips 2010 respectively.

⁸ Meral 2018.

⁹ As an important exception see, Buc 2015, for a treatment of the interplay between religion and war over a long historical period.

¹⁰ Wilson 2008; Onnekink 2009.

¹¹ Parker 1996.

From the medieval period onward, the evidence for the pervasiveness of religion and its many effects becomes particularly abundant. Religion not only defined the authority upon which wars were fought and underpinned the legitimacy of the belligerents (Chapter 17, Albarrán; 18 Neggaz; 20 Fernández-Santos), it shaped the identities of the warring communities and armies themselves (Chapter 21, Roberts; 22 Björklund; 23 James). Its effects ranged considerably. At a time of schism and division within the Christian world, religion could provide increased motivation and drive for violence and conflict, at the same time as it continued to set the ethical, cultural, and legal parameters within which wars were fought. Indeed, just as the direct hand of God on the battlefield itself might seem to have been in retreat, it could be said that the ubiquity of religion in the whole political and material apparatus of war was increasing. Religion even shaped the way that war itself was conceived and the reasons for how it was conducted (Chapter 19, Honig). This contrast potentially puts the very concept of modernity, based as it so often is upon a presumed secularization of war and politics, into a different light.

A reconsideration such as this requires the strengthening of the bridge between the historical study of war and the study of religion. It also necessarily involves insights from anthropology and sociology, and it demands a range of specific academic expertise to be found across multiple centres of regional and area studies. This raises a number of challenges, as described elsewhere by Philippe Buc, but it is within the same spirit of cooperative effort that the essays collected here offer a large variety of perspectives with wide historical and geographical coverage.¹² Whilst each contribution here focuses on a specific culture, geographic unit or society, the aim is for this scholarship to inform a wider debate about the nature of the nexus between religion and war along with its changes and effects over time. Keeping large-scale patterns and the explanatory value of overarching models in mind, the impetus is to query, through a comparative lens, the diversity and complexity of multiple historical cultures, appreciating both ‘thick descriptions’ as well as ‘thin coherence’ within them.¹³

¹² Buc 2023, 1-19, provides an insightful summary of many of the challenges and opportunities along with the initial outcomes of a similar project in which he suggests the important idea that religion provides war with a Kantian ‘condition of possibility’.

¹³ We understand ‘thick description’ in the sense it was used by Clifford Geertz 1973 (Chapter 1 of *The Interpretation of Cultures*) and ‘thin coherence’ as defined by Josiah Ober 2003, 2005. Our comparative approach broadly aligns with that of the Wiley Blackwell series edited by Kurt Raaflaub, *The Ancient World: Comparative Histories*, but takes it beyond the ancient world to the Middle Ages and Early Modernity, even if inevitably losing to some extent the geographic reach.

A more comprehensive, global perspective than the one that this volume can offer would, of course, be valuable,¹⁴ but this must remain an aspiration for a future project. Several encyclopaedias have attempted this in recent years, although, constrained by their format (however useful), they are not able to offer the same in-depth historical analysis as found in the case studies gathered here.¹⁵ Thus, whilst there is no pretension to fully global coverage, together the essays in the present volume do address a geographically and historically connected part of the world. The *longue-durée* and comparative perspective on religion and war and the curated juxtaposition of the essays allow us to observe certain patterns, continuities, and changes that are outlined below as a possible guide to the collection as a whole, although individual readers and area or subject specialists will no doubt see additional or different patterns and draw their own conclusions.

Part I of the collection reaches back to the third millennium BCE. It ranges over wide geographic areas and changing territorial-political formations that emerged and then often disappeared or transformed into some other in Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Western Asia, Northern Africa, and the Mediterranean basin.¹⁶ From the historical record in these regions over the period roughly 3000-30 BCE, several themes that illuminate the relationship between religion and war emerge. In Part II, we see how these continue through Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, while several new developments arise. Part III contains several papers that suggest that religion did not disappear as a structuring force in the political history of Early Modernity by the time of the Peace of Westphalia of 1648. On the contrary, many forms of the relationship between religion and war, already observable in pre-historic times, continued to play a key part. Part IV offers a *longue durée* perspective, looking back beyond the third millennium BCE to even deeper human prehistory, and forward to the near and distant future, to yield further insights on the way the nexus of religion and war continues and is likely to continue shaping our lives.

Rulers as Warriors Blessed by the Gods

¹⁴ See, for example, the work of Caroline Dodds Pennock on Aztec history, and for an important statement on the importance of different perspectives on globalization, Dodds Pennock and Power 2018.

¹⁵ For example: Palmer-Fernandez 2004; Shaw and Demy 2017.

¹⁶ Several recent collections of studies on the Near East, Greece and Rome should be noted: Ulanowski 2018, Dillon, Matthew and Schmitz 2020, Dillon and Matthew 2020, Dillon and Matthew 2022.

Visions of war as a route to peace are usually attested in societies that developed large-scale hierarchical state systems where order and tight administration were needed to control productivity. Since monarchy was the dominant form of political organization in most regions of the ancient world, rulers were seen as responsible for keeping order within large-scale polities (Chapter 24, Morris). Religious and kingship ideologies of such polities present the responsibility for order in this world as something delegated by gods to mortal rulers, with several possible variations: a ruler could claim divine favour as an explanation/justification for military success; a ruler could be positioned as a servant of a deity who fulfils divine commands, including conquest of new lands or protection of home territory; or a ruler might pose as a representative of divine power on earth charged with maintaining divinely approved world order (Chapters 3, Wang; 4 Gilan; 5 Bachvarova; 6 Spalinger; 7 Zaia).

As city-states began to take shape in the Near East, Greece and Italy in the first millennium BCE, with their broader allocation of political power than in monarchies *strictu sensu*, an expectation of a direct interdependence between military success and divine support of rulers weakened, yet it did not disappear altogether. From the Hellenistic period into the Roman era, the regained prominence of a solitary ruler, king or emperor, was once again conjoined with the notion of divine blessing. By the fourth century CE, Constantine's conversion and military victory as a result of an alliance with the divine gave that ancient paradigm a new life in the Christian context (Chapter 14, Papadogiannakis). Then, the link between divine favour and military success that had given rise to the theology of victory during Constantine's reign led to the gradual adoption of Christian elements in warfare,¹⁷ and it brought about rethinking of the power of the cross and, according to some scholars, the sacralisation of war. Battle standards that incorporated the Christian *labarum*, starting with the first Christian emperor Constantine, became the physical representation of the heavenly military alliance between emperors and the Christian God, while in the East, particularly during the Avar Wars (568-626), the Virgin Mary came to be invested with characteristics of a tutelary divine figure actively involved in the defence of the capital of the eastern Roman empire, Constantinople; her role there readily slotted into the background of pre-Christian patron goddesses of ancient cities.

¹⁷ Wheeler 2009; Stephenson 2018, 28-55; Malone 2022

Justifying War in the ‘World Full of Gods’

The notion that rulers are divinely sanctioned to wage and win wars has been closely linked, from antiquity to early modernity, with a notion that humans need to justify war in the eyes of the gods. Already in the earliest textual records from the Near East, we have testimonies of the notion that war somehow needs to be justified and that the best justification is the kind where divinity is involved: by giving a direct command to wage war; by sending an omen of divine approval of human intent to wage war; or by being an object of offence, which humans cite as grounds for retribution by means of war. Notions of human justice, and of divine oversight or endorsement of what is just, and even more importantly, notions that see dispensation of justice as the prerogative of divinity, are deeply ingrained with the pursuit of war and responses to military aggression in the ancient world (Chapters 8, Zucconi; 10 Polinskaya; 13 Lennon).

The peculiar condition of human civilization since hoary antiquity has been a sort of religious plurality where societies that live side by side, whether peacefully or not, worship different gods. In addition, our earliest textual records testify that most religions of the time were polytheistic, and most territorial states were products of agglomeration of smaller territorial units which were each home to numerous deities. While at home, the challenge to rulers’ ability to mobilize power was only based on claims of local rulers to have a greater rapport with local deities than their rivals. In times of interstate war, however, rulers faced the challenge of defeating, appeasing, or negotiating with, and in any case, acknowledging the existence and power of the ‘gods of others’. Building multi-city or multi-ethnic states or empires involved the question of breaking or allowing the ties of loyalty between the conquered people and their gods. Conversely, the defeated rulers and their people faced the challenge of coping with defeat and retaining faith in divine favour of their own gods (Chapters 8, Zucconi; 9 Wazana). Ways of coping did not always prove successful. Ancient Near Eastern literature, for example, demonstrates that valorisation of divinely-sanctioned war, whilst widespread, was not universal. It was often genre-specific: while dominating royal literature, it was more ambiguously presented or even criticized in city laments and household proverbs in the Near East. Seth Richardson (Chapter 2) warns ‘against any broad presumption of the celebration of divinely-ordained war as a normative cultural value of deep antiquity’. In the Ancient Greek world, with its numerous micro-states, clashes between military-religious complexes activated in inter-*polis* wars created awkward situations without commonly accepted pan-Greek solutions and with

largely inadequate ad hoc measures, while in wars between Greeks and non-Greeks, they led to cultural-religious impasses, theoretically wars without end, where a foreign assault on divine honours of Greek deities could never be quite compensated for by wars of revenge (Chapter 10, Polinskaya). Several essays in this volume foreground and deconstruct other common assumptions with long-ranging modern consequences such as the endorsement of genocidal wars in both Egyptian sources and in the Hebrew Bible. In this vein, Zucconi (Chapter 8) shows the intimate entanglement of political motifs with religious prescriptions in the deployment of genocidal rhetoric, as rulers occasionally defy divine will in pursuit of political expediency. How political and religious conceptions of war sometimes clashed within state ideologies (e.g. First Temple Judaism) is on stark display in the Maccabean revolt as discussed by McAuley (Chapter 11). In addition, Wazana (Chapter 9) illuminates the negative reception of war as reflected in a view from the side of the vanquished, which finds unique codification in several Torah laws: in Biblical Judaism, religious law mediates between kings' ambitions and war's ruinous effects on societies and individuals.

With the rise of Christianity, the Bible, with its mix of theological strands that can support both war and peace, provided the rationale for Roman imperial attitudes to war but also offered ways of dealing with defeat and boosting resilience. As Christianity became embattled in the sixth and seventh centuries, the Old Testament that shaped imperial ideals in Byzantium, gave rise to the Byzantine self-definition as the 'nation elect' or the 'New Israel'.¹⁸ At the same time, during the wars against the Sasanians and the Muslims, apocalypticism and eschatology were harnessed to provide a framework for the interpretation of these wars, their legitimization and a means of galvanizing the army in the war effort (Chapter 16, Stoyanov).¹⁹

Christianity, it should be noted, did not have the same formative impact across all the societies in which it spread. Due to different historical, social and religious developments and faced by different challenges, Western and Eastern parts of the Roman empire produced

¹⁸ Magdalino 2010; Eshel 2018; Stoyanov, Chapter 16 in this volume.

¹⁹ Overview in Stoyanov 2014.

significantly different versions of Christianity,²⁰ especially concerning distinct ideas of ‘just war’ and ‘holy war’ (a loaded term that has been invested with a dizzying array of understandings).²¹

In a parallel development, the emergence of Islam and its rapid expansion starting from the seventh century CE created the need for the justification and conduct of war in the early period of Muslim self-definition. The concept of *jihād*, roughly equivalent but not synonymous with ‘just war’, became an aspect of the foundational narrative of Islam.²² Since its more technical formulation by Muslim jurists between the ninth and eleventh centuries, the term has been variously understood and applied in different historical contexts.²³ Already by the mid-ninth century, Byzantine polemicists such as Niketas Byzantios attacked Islamic religion for demanding its followers wage war against unbelievers (expansionist *jihād*).²⁴ This enables us to understand better the adaptation and use of *jihād* language as a focus for identity and struggle against European colonial presence and influence, and subsequently its adaptation and use by contemporary radical Islamists.

Fighting Alongside and on Behalf of the Gods

Although doubts about war and gods’ attitude to war continued and took on new forms from antiquity to early modernity, the theme of rulers’ belief in a special relationship with the gods remained prominent. In particular, the ideas of divinely justified war and of ‘just war’ were important well into the modern period. Related notions of divine favour or even of divine presence on the battlefield as both desirable and in fact needed in order to achieve military success also continued. Seeing war as justified by direct divine approval, or by an understanding of what divinely approved causes and forms of war could be, produced notions of gods, usually tutelary city or national gods, as literally fighting side by side as allies (in the form of cult statues or as visible manifestations – epiphanies) of human warriors. We see this, for example, in Hittite traditions (Chapter 4, Gilan), in the Hebrew Bible (Chapter 5, Bachvarova), and in ancient Greek

²⁰ Differences between development of Christianity in the Western and Eastern parts of the Roman Empire usually receive short shrift but see Stoyanov 2009.

²¹ Johnson 2012, 402-16. On the use of the idea of ‘holy war’ in Byzantium see Kaegi 2012. In the light of recent discussions of the problems in the use of the term in across religious traditions and times its particularly for eastern Christianity merits more careful handling involving a more careful definition in order to continue to have any analytical usefulness. For a critique of the term holy war in Byzantium see Cheynet 2006.

²² Kelsay 2009, 97.

²³ Hashmi and Turner 2012.

²⁴ Krausmüller 2004. For the term see Hashmi and Turner 2012, 10.

sources (Chapter 10, Polinskaya). In the Roman period, public rhetoric surrounding civil wars demonstrates the perception that gods turn away from the Roman people when they engage in fratricidal wars because such wars cause pollution, are abominable and cannot yield victors. The aftermath of such wars required multiple forms of purification and pacification of the gods (Chapter 13, Lennon).

During the Late Roman period, a gradual transformation of the relationship between religion and war took place, catalysed by the rise of Christianity, which introduced a pacifist strand in Roman culture and in turn generated dilemmas and debates among Christians about their attitudes to military service and war (Chapter 15, Kolbeck). In scholarship, a distinction is made between pre-Constantinian pacifist Christianity and later Christianity more aligned with traditional Roman attitudes to war. Attempts to draw this distinction are, however, determined by ‘competing Radical Protestant and Roman Catholic hermeneutics of peace and war, respectively’,²⁵ and also by the critique of the Protestant Reformation, including its claim to have ‘rediscovered the authentic, exclusively pacifist core of Christianity’.²⁶

In all textual traditions of Ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean religions, humans fight on gods’ behalf, but Christianity inspired a new idea that such religious violence was spiritually beneficial for the individual, beneficial for the Christian community, and directed against the perceived enemies of Christ.²⁷ Increasingly, warrior saints became symbols of martyrdom, and their cults were variously entwined with the cult of archangel Michael who, as attested in Byzantine imperial iconography and ideology, was co-opted as military leader of the heavenly hosts in the fifth and sixth centuries alongside the rise of cult of the Virgin Mary.²⁸ From the tenth century onwards, warrior saints in Byzantium were recast as active supernatural aides in the defence of the empire.²⁹ Military martyrdom and heavenly rewards for self-sacrifice in war became the concrete manifestations of this notion which appears sporadically in the Eastern Roman empire³⁰ during the war of the emperor Heraclius against the

²⁵ Kyrou and Prodromou 2018, 219-20.

²⁶ Kyrou and Prodromou 2018, 220.

²⁷ Bachrach 2003; Smith 2011; Throop 2020.

²⁸ Rohland 1977, 50-74, 105-144; Arnold 2013, 37-65.

²⁹ Webster 1980; White 2013; Walter 2016; Garland 2022.

³⁰ Stephenson 2012.

Persians in the 620s, but was neither adopted by the church nor fully embraced and advocated for except by very few Byzantine emperors.³¹

In the Western Roman empire, ideas of Christ's army, *militia Christi*, *imitatio Christi*, martyrdom and penitence were taken to a whole new level with the Crusades (a well-researched topic, referred to but not separately treated in this volume),³² putting a great emphasis on the spiritual benefits of crusading. The ways in which the Crusades tapped into and took in a new direction established ideas about religion and war provide a counterpoint to the developments in the Eastern Roman empire. Military imagery and terminology that had developed from the patristic period to describe monastic vocation were drawn upon and developed further in the eleventh and twelfth centuries to underpin and enhance the spiritual status of those who fought against Muslims in the Holy Land. Christ's suffering, sacrifices and death but also his victory over sin and death on the cross became a template for the penitential warfare of the crusaders lending a religious aura to military triumph. A corollary was the perceived need to purge the Christian polity of pollution, a development that is actually seen across Christian and Muslim polities.³³ In Western Christianity, the purge was directed at Jews, Muslims, pagans, heretics and other coreligionists (e.g. Byzantine Christians) whereas Nur al-Din who undertook to purify Islamic practice in his war against the Crusaders has been regarded by scholars as offering a precedent for the themes that surface later in Muslim anticolonial warfare and in present-day radical Islamist militancy.³⁴

From Justifying War to 'Just War': Religion's Impact on the Conduct of War

The same impulses behind the Crusades and the sacral, penitential, or spiritually beneficial function of war remained arguably the most important influence on late medieval and early modern politics. The difficult balance between this and the Christian injunction against killing led to a desperate and almost ritualized currying of divine favour and the need to justify war. This shaped the very conduct of war itself which became a means of demonstrating the legality of the fighting and thereby building the political legitimacy of those who did it. This is a

³¹ Cheynet 2006, 17-19 discussing Nikephorus Phokas and Leo VI. Heilo 2012.

³² But see Housley 2008; Throop 2020; Buc 2015; 2021.

³³ Buc 2023; Johnson 2012. For the ways in which these ideas are thought to have extended to the late medieval French civil wars and the violent purges that ensued Buc 2023.

³⁴ Johnson 2012.

particular feature of Western Christendom from the fourth century (with the foundational teachings of St Augustine) continuing with the evolution of 'just war' theory, by which acts of war would be judged against a set of criteria to be acceptable, or indeed necessary, in the eyes of the Christian God. Since a ruler needed to demonstrate a fitness to rule through war, and it was a duty to defend religion and to act in accordance with God's will, 'just war' became the key to the legally recognized pursuit of political influence and authority.

A similar development can be observed in the Islamic world at the time. As Albarrán's study of the medieval Islamic west shows, for example, casting one's human enemies as enemies of God in a 'holy war' was a necessary means of justifying violence against fellow Muslims and establishing one's personal legitimacy in domestic and foreign eyes (Chapter 17). Fernández-Santos shows that, for Queen Isabella of Castile, in the late fifteenth century, it was crucial to be presented as a crusading warrior or a conqueror of the last stronghold of Islam in Europe, in order to overcome her particular political handicap of being a female ruler and to proclaim and secure her divinely sanctioned authority (Chapter 20).

Even the most spectacularly successful, direct and brutal imposition of imperial power by military means, the expansion of the Mongol Empire by Ghengis Khan and his descendants in the thirteenth century, had to be presented as conforming to religious codes. Religion was still necessary as a 'legitimizing instrument' to give meaning and a lasting legality to the conquest (Chapter 18, Neggaz). Elsewhere, though, the interdependence of religion and war was much more directly and obviously the platform upon which political standing was built. As Jan Willem Honig demonstrates with respect to the Hundred Years War from the fourteenth century, the openly political purpose of war did not mean that monarchs or generals felt any less strongly about religion, nor did religion stop affecting their actions on the battlefield (Chapter 19). That is to say, it did not reduce warfare to a series of practical calculations to ensure victory through the concentration of forces only to hold up God's evident approval afterwards like a trophy for all to see, as a casual modern observer might assume. For Christian monarchs of the time, such an approach was impossible given God's unfathomable will, which was a key part of any military calculation. This meant that having God's favour in a war did not necessarily guarantee victory and, therefore, seeking decisive battle carried tremendous risks. Instead, the political effect of religion permeated all aspects of the fighting. The very strategies adopted in war, the preparations, the aims, everything, had to be devised, not simply with the aim of deploying

maximum military force but of establishing and demonstrating the legality and justness of one's cause in the eyes of the God. In a sense, the military outcome of any war, in the way in which we normally think of victory and defeat, was less significant than the integration of religion into the act of fighting.

Modernity and the Staying Power of Religion

The function of religion and war as essential, defining features of the legality of political rule provides an important perspective on the idea of early modernity. This period is often conceived through the lens of two parallel transformations from the sixteenth century which, in the long run, seemed to have led to the isolation of religion as an influence with respect to politics and war. To begin with, the Lutheran Reformation from 1517 began the sustained challenge of the universal authority of the Catholic church. Two years later, in 1519, the fateful arrival of Cortez on the shores of America violently heralded an age of European imperialism globally. This coincided with a marked increase in the scale of warfare in Europe based upon developments in gunpowder weapons and fortifications and the increase in the size of armies along with the sudden appearance of organized navies.³⁵ Both trends converged in the unparalleled devastation of the Thirty Years War from 1618. As rival Protestant and Catholic powers battled for the soul of Europe, the Thirty Years War has been presented as the final climax of wars said to be 'of religion'. Accordingly, generations of social scientists and historians have imagined in the terms of the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 the blueprint of a new, modern age of mutual recognition of sovereignty between newly centralized states motivated, not by religious ideas, but by their own pragmatic interests alone. According to Ian Morris, increasingly the generation of wealth from global empire and maritime trade undermined the ability of monarchies to reinforce their authority through the monopolization of access to resources leading to new, more participatory or modern-looking forms of government. Thus, by ca. 1750, he says, 'modernity [had] broken the spell' cast by religion over the conduct of war, marking the end of what he refers to as the military-religious complex that had driven the development of complex, hierarchical societies until then (Chapter 24, Morris).

From this point of view, modernity is shaped by the continued escalation of modern warfare and by the secularization of international politics and the pursuit of trade and commerce.

³⁵ Black 2023.

Yet it is not the intention of the editors to reinforce the myth of Westphalia and to push religion into the background with the decision to end the coverage of this volume around 1648. After all, one might well ask whether the Christian God had really stepped back from direct intervention on the battlefield by the sixteenth century. One only has to cast a glance, for example, at the visual celebrations of the victory of the Holy League against the Ottoman navy at Lepanto in 1571, such as the one that adorns the cover of this volume, to dispel any such thought. Representations of the Armada campaign of 1588 are similar. *Flavit Jehovah et Dissipati Sunt*, ‘Jehovah blew and they were scattered’, thus famously declared a celebratory Dutch medallion struck after the Spanish ships were dispersed by the breath of God. Of course, above all, what was being celebrated there and in the famous Armada portrait of Queen Elizabeth was the survival of Protestantism in the face of wicked Catholic aggression. More specifically, in England, it was the survival of the heretical queen whose monarchy had received a clear sign of divine approval in this way. This was essential for securing political stability and prosperity, and the defeat of the Armada remains to this day a part of the national mythology of the British state.³⁶

More importantly, the essays in Part III draw attention to this defining place that religion still held in the competitive pursuit of legitimacy and stability through war. Far from a waning influence, on both a strategic and on a tactical level, religion was becoming a matter of political life or death. Indeed, in this divided age of Reformation and Counter Reformation, the timeless search for divine favour was complicated by more difficult questions about God’s will and providence and arguably given even greater urgency. Open challenges to spiritual authority, intractable theological debate, and entrenched confessional identity all increased the political tensions and competition for divine favour and legitimacy. Jaakko Björklund sheds some important light by taking up a popular theme in modern Reformation historiography with his study of the Swedish army of the early seventeenth century, showing how the confessional divisions in Europe sharpened community identity and even provided greater military cohesion (Chapter 22). Going further, Penny Roberts confirms that confessional divisions intensified rival political identities in the sixteenth-century French Wars of Religion. This was not just politics emerging from behind a religious mask. The complications that religious divisions brought intensified the civil wars. Confessional identity, she shows, reflected genuine religious belief and

³⁶ Rodger 2004.

conviction, and the effect of providence for both sides of the confessional divide meant that victory still arguably had less to do with the physical outcome of battles and more to do with the now vastly more difficult challenge of ‘reconciling political interest and religious conviction’ (Chapter 21, Roberts).

This greater integration of political violence and religion raises the tantalising prospect that the general escalation of modern war in Europe has its origins in the changing religious landscape of the Reformation. Typically, military historians have tended to concentrate instead on the invention of new weapons, new tactics, or the financial imperatives of naturally growing states as the dynamic forces behind the emergence of modern warfare. Yet, in a divided Europe, the introduction of the existential danger of heresy raised the political stakes enormously, and war, therefore, became much more than a competition for relative standing between monarchies or communities. The most fundamental constitutional and theological issues were also contested. If the introduction of Calvinist ideas, for example, sharpened rather than dulled the political dangers and fuelled the peculiarly violent and protracted Wars of Religion in France, it could also easily have fed into the contemporaneous Dutch struggle for independence from Catholic Spain and the wider Thirty Years War with which it was entangled. As the essays in this volume show, there is nothing remotely modern or novel about the thirst for power or riches alone. Modern warfare, indeed modernity itself, must have other origins and other features, and we would do well to consider the nexus between religion and war as the most fruitful direction for future research.

War, Religion and Empire

An obvious starting point for any such reconsideration would be to address the Eurocentrism of many explanations of change with the simple observation that the general escalation of war by the seventeenth century was not actually a western, Christian phenomenon at all, but primarily a Muslim one.³⁷ The dramatic rise of the Ottoman Empire from the fifteenth century or the Safavid Empire from the early sixteenth, centred on what is modern Iran, both provide evidence of this. Most spectacular, perhaps, was the expansion of the Mughal Empire which covered most of the

³⁷ This eurocentrism is being addressed on a number of fronts. See, as a good example, Charters, Houlemare and Wilson 2020.

sub-continent by the end of the seventeenth century.³⁸ Emperor Aurangzeb's armies and his military reforms, not to mention his successes and the scale of his wars, all surpassed those of his direct contemporary, Louis XIV of France, the first of the post-Westphalian hegemonies in Europe to exemplify the so-called revolutionary changes there.³⁹ Both rulers are noted for transforming their polities and concentrating authority in their hands, for their aggressive military conquests and, domestically, for their determination to impose confessional conformity as a foundation upon which to build their successes. Clearly, the function of religion as a political instrument through war was neither a uniquely Christian phenomenon nor one that was losing any relevance.

Despite receiving more historical attention recently, China continues to be relatively overlooked as a site of important military transformation.⁴⁰ Yet, the warfare on the greatest scale in the early modern period, and by a wide margin, resulted from the Japanese invasions of Korea in the 1590s that challenged the regional imperial status of Ming China.⁴¹ By 1644, when the armies of the Thirty Years War were bogged down in stalemate on the battlefields of Europe, the Qing dynasty had taken control of Beijing and confirmed their victory over the Ming. This was a dynastic transition that caused the deaths of several million people and began a period of military expansionism abroad and suppression of internal rebellion that culminated in the celebrated reign of the Kangxi Emperor and the consolidation of modern China. Dying in 1722, the Kangxi Emperor was another direct contemporary of Louis XIV (1638-1715), and we see the same combination of military growth and political consolidation of authority through an appeal to religion, in this case in the form of the Mandate from Heaven which marked nature's approval of one's military valour and right to rule. If we add to the picture the imperial ambitions of Peter the Great's Russia (1672-1725) and the suppression of religious dissent and persecution of the so-called Old Believers, it is abundantly clear that by the eighteenth century, globally, the scale and intensity of warfare had been transformed by the competitive pursuit of, specifically, imperial status which was created by war and confirmed by appeals to religion.

In many ways, these developments tower over the relatively tentative early overseas, mercantile efforts of western European powers by the early eighteenth century. Yet even here

³⁸ Streusland 2011.

³⁹ Gommans 2002.

⁴⁰ Di Cosmo 2009; Waley-Cohen 2006.

⁴¹ Swope 2020.

religion had a defining role. Notably, for example, there is important work on the essential place of Protestantism and anti-Catholic feeling in the political cohesion and ambitions of the British Empire even as it developed into a sophisticated, global, money-making machine in the eighteenth century.⁴² Thus, the rise of maritime trade as the main source of wealth against the traditional agrarian economy and the shift of political power into the hands of trading elites may well represent a significant change, but it might not be helpful to think of it as a fundamental departure that encapsulates modernity. As the essays collected here make clear, there had always been a variety of experiences, and there had always been change. More significantly, religion consistently plays a critical role in the formation of identity, on personal and communal levels, and it is this that links it so closely to war and to political organization.

The ‘Morris Model’ and the Longue Durée of the ‘Religion and War’ Nexus

Part IV of this collection features the essay by Ian Morris, which is informed by his civilizational approach to history, and includes responses to it by Hans van Wees and Ned Lebow. In his contribution, Morris introduces the concept of the ‘military-religious complex’ that represents a functional link between a ruler’s claim to political power, including a licence to wage war, and a claim to special or exclusive divine favour that ensures their military success. Morris argues that this ‘alliance between throne and altar’ helps explain the success (where a military-religious complex was present) or failure (where it was absent) behind the development of societies throughout history.

Bold, illuminating and sweeping in its claims, Morris’s model also raises many questions. Does his idea of the military-religious complex explain all, or only some, aspects of the relationship between religion and war over time? Does it deal adequately with the clash between different military-religious complexes? Also, not only are there, as Morris admits, exceptions to his global model, but the geographic region in focus in this volume (Near East, North Africa, the Mediterranean basin, Europe) presents issues of continuity, competition, influences and tensions that reveal specific common themes and recurring patterns that form a distinctive layer of ‘glocal’ regularities that need to be seen in conjunction and sometimes in contrast to proposed global models.

⁴² Colley 1992.

In addition, Morris's model, and most case studies in this volume, envision the main agents of warfare in antiquity and up to the Early Modern period to be rulers, with people under their rule as mobilized or motivated to follow those rulers. Yet ancient city-states of Greece and Italy, and perhaps Phoenicia, for example, where legislative and executive authority were less centralized and more distributed, present other mechanisms of social control, as Morris acknowledges, but religion still plays a central, instrumental role in the conduct of war in those societies. Another exception might be ancient Israel where Torah Law in some ways bypasses the mediating role of kings and institutes a covenant directly between Children of Israel and their God, setting up an expectation of divine favour and protection that depends on adherence of each and every Israelite, not only that of rulers of Israel, to the prescribed God-given code of behaviour.

It must be acknowledged that the focus in this volume, which is mostly on rulers, leaves the agency of the ruled – of individuals, soldiers, lower-rank field commanders, and others – largely out of the equation. One is left wondering about the extent to which combatants relied on belief in a special bond between their kings and gods, in the divinity of their rulers, or in divine endorsement of military action, to relieve them of fear of death or injury in battle and whether those same beliefs did anything to assuage anxieties of civilians faced with the aftermath of defeat (often slaughter, enslavement or displacement) suffered by their rulers. The picture is uneven and quite contrasting across ancient cultures, but it is clear that, in some, there is evidence of individuals resorting to personal strategies of ensuring divine help and/or magical protection in military contexts while in others there is not.⁴³

In addition to a focus on elite political power in Morris's model, the historical patterns of the emergence, disappearance, or absence of different military-religious complexes in the past are inevitably linked to the accessibility and potential central control exerted over the production of food and economic resources. The 'great exception', he claims, is the almost universal and complete collapse of military-religious complexes in the modern world from about 1750 when the benefits of violence and imperialism flowed to other groups than just monarchies and

⁴³ Evidence of personal religiosity in ancient wars is often difficult to measure due to a number of factors: material evidence from battlefields is often lacking because of a widespread custom of collecting bodies of the dead for burial after battles or due to despoliation of defeated enemies by victors. Some literary accounts, however, do give us an insight: e.g. 2 Macc. 12:39 refers to Jewish soldiers in the Maccabean army, during the revolt of the 160s BCE, wearing amulets in battle, despite the Torah's prohibition. At the same time and by contrast, evidence for the use of amulets in Greek antiquity where no prohibition on their use is known is completely absent.

traditional elites. Morris points out that there had been antecedents in the mid-first-millennium BCE to these maritime and commercial societies. Yet as Hans van Wees argues, it is possible to go further and to ‘adopt a non-functionalist perspective on the role of the supernatural in the religious-military complex’ (Chapter 25). He sees a different cost and benefit dynamics in the relations of rulers and subjects where religion does not necessarily or always function as a means to political ends in the hands of a ruler but rather as a source of moral imperatives that dictate either engagement in or abstention from military action.

We, therefore, need not think of the military-religious complex as an independent force in history with a distinct ‘rise’ and ‘fall’ or as one that served only to ‘scale up’ society in a material sense. Nor did it necessarily only serve to concentrate power into the hands of a ruler or a narrow elite. Indeed, the real value of this concept may well be as a reminder of the powerful political effect of beliefs more generally and of how easily violence and war are recruited by them to shape society at all times. The ideological dimensions of modern industrial warfare in the twentieth century or the Cold War and other conflicts in modern history suggest as much. Indeed, Morris himself warns that there is no guarantee, from the patterns he observes, that a military-religious complex of sorts could not re-emerge.

Taken together, religion and war provide a lens on the past through which we can view global interactions and recognize shared experiences as well as explore genuinely alternative strategic environments and cultural distinctions.⁴⁴ Yet whether through an organized priesthood or in the hands of monarchs who claim divinity, or indeed through science or technological innovation, some kind of ownership or control of the natural or supernatural world appears to be a consistent feature of war and the societies we erect across time. Certainly, one lesson to come from the essays that follow is that we need to continue to take religion seriously and to consider how it affects perceptions of violence and political legitimacy. More broadly, the nexus of religion and war reminds us that war is ultimately a cultural activity conducted by people with often powerful beliefs about the nature of the world, and this is as valuable to an understanding of the ancient world as it is of the world we inhabit today.

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⁴⁴ Spruyt 2020.

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