
Introduction

Of all the animosities which have existed among mankind, those which are caused by a difference of sentiments in religion appear to be the most inveterate and distressing, and ought most to be deprecated.

—George Washington

The goal of religious wars is the purification of the city through the elimination of the ideas that pollute it.

—Élie Barnavi

On October 28, 312, on a river overpass outside Rome, in the midst of a violent battle for supremacy in the Roman Empire, the emperor Constantine I experienced a spiritual epiphany.¹ Or so legend has it. Whether the epiphany actually took place at that particular moment or was injected into the narrative later by the emperor and his hagiographers we'll never know. In any case, Constantine's victory that autumnal day at the Milvian Bridge was epoch-making. For subsequently, having eliminated his rivals, the now uncontested monarch declared Christianity to be the official religion of the empire, thus changing the course of history.

Fast forward thirteen hundred years, to 1648. We are now in Münster and Osnabrück, where the sound of cannons, which had deafened the greater part of Europe for several decades, has suddenly given way to the buzzing of negotiation: whether on foot, horse, or carriage, diplomats from all over the continent are scurrying to the German province of Westphalia, where they will formalize the treaties marking the end of the Thirty Years' War, a religious conflict that has ravaged much of Europe. In doing so, the plenipotentiaries will rewrite the rules and norms of international relations, in the process

creating a new European order that will effectively flush out religion from politics.

During those thirteen centuries between the battle of the Milvian Bridge and the Peace of Westphalia, the many wars that rocked and shaped Europe, the Mediterranean, and the greater Middle East were in one way or another driven or influenced by religion, thus forming a continuum that lasted roughly until the turn of the eighteenth century. This book proposes to retrace the origins of this long history, from its timid beginnings around the first century CE, with the advent of the great new monotheistic religion, Christianity, to the accords of Westphalia, followed by the various manifestations of religious violence that came to define the international political order from 1650 until today. The events described in these pages thus form a single narrative, which essentially revolves around the regions where the Abrahamic religions took hold, though on occasion these events take us beyond Europe and the Mediterranean to America, for example, where the Spaniards, after rolling back the Muslims from the Iberian peninsula, pursued their global crusade.

For centuries, religion and war seem to have cohabited without necessarily feeding on each other. Two developments, however, were to change all that: the emergence first of Christianity and then of Islam and the political empowerment of their religious institutions. Both religions began as small, marginal sects, which eventually spread around the Mediterranean. By the seventh century, all of the area that had formerly comprised the empires of Alexander the Great and Rome was either Christian or Muslim. By then, Judaism, which had courageously fought the Roman onslaught in the first century and laid the foundations from which Christianity and then Islam sprang, was politically all but powerless—one reason, paradoxically, that it was able to survive. Two other monotheistic religions, Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism (which has also survived), which had taken root in Persia, were equally pushed to the sidelines. Manichaeism failed in its attempt to supplant Zoroastrianism as the state religion of Persia, and Zoroastrianism itself was driven out of the equation when the Sassanian dynasty that ruled Persia was annihilated by the Muslim armies that overran the empire between 636 and 642.

The provocative historian, Yuval Noah Harari, summarizes best the singular dynamics of monotheism and its impact on global history:

Monotheists have tended to be far more fanatical and missionary than polytheists. A religion that recognizes the legitimacy of other faiths implies either that its god is not the supreme power of the universe, or that it received from God just part of

the universal truth. Since monotheists have usually believed that they are in possession of the entire message of the one and only God, they have been compelled to discredit all other religions. Over the last two millennia, monotheists repeatedly tried to strengthen their hands by violently exterminating all competition. It worked. [...] Henceforth, the monotheist idea played a central role in world history.²

People who want to compel others to adhere to their beliefs and adopt their myths are naturally drawn to acquire the practical means to do so, which brings us to the second part of the equation: the political empowerment of religious institutions. Politics is primarily concerned with power: how to win it, how to keep it, how to manage it, how to project it, how to protect it, how to increase it, and how to pass it on. The use of force is a tool of power, and war is one of the principal ways of wielding it. As the Prussian thinker Carl von Clausewitz famously stated two centuries ago, war, in the end, is nothing but “an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.”³

In a nutshell, then, the belief in a universal truth fosters a compelling desire to share this truth with others, which naturally attracts those with this desire to power and prompts them, once in the saddle, to use the traditional instruments at the disposal of those who wield power, including force. “If you have discovered the truth will you not want to live in a world governed by that truth?” James Laine asks. “Which, in turn, begs another question: ‘Is not the story of religion inseparable from political and military history?’”⁴

ARE RELIGIONS INHERENTLY VIOLENT?

Recent events linked to the radicalization of religion and its central role in the latest waves of terrorism have largely altered our perception of the violent nature of religion. Today, it is not uncommon to hear that religion as such is inherently violent and the source of most conflicts in history. Is this true?

The first thing one should point out is that the history of war is long, varied, and, so to speak, very rich. If one looks at the most violent conflicts in history, or rather, those that caused the greatest destruction, many were not exclusively, or even remotely, religious in nature. Among the most violent wars to date, the American Civil War and World Wars I and II were essentially political affairs. The Thirty Years’ War, on the other hand, started as a religious conflict before becoming a political one, and although there was a strong religious element to the Taiping Rebellion in China (1850–64), with its twenty

to seventy million casualties, it exacerbated tensions that were not completely religious in nature.

This quick assessment illustrates an important point: while religion may have been a significant factor in a number of armed conflicts throughout history, it has not been an exclusive one.⁵ To this we may add that its role in fueling or fostering war has largely been dictated by historical circumstances, rather than by an inherent propensity on the part of religious leaders or believers to generate violence. Religion has in some instances merely contributed—in varying degrees—to a political conflict: “Religious participation,” says Ara Norenzayan, “cements social ties and builds group solidarity. But when groups are in conflict, this solidarity translates into the willingness to sacrifice to defend the group against perceived enemies.”⁶ In other instances, religion has been at the root of a conflict or its principal driver, as will be amply demonstrated in this volume. More often than not, religion also helped contain or avoid violence or provided moral restraints on the use of force. Finally, from a global perspective, religions taken as a whole have in many instances had little or no impact on the decisions that were made to go to war or on how it was waged.

Another key point is that religions evolve. Christianity, for example, started with a strong pacifist message and an intransigent attitude toward war and even military service. Circumstances, however, pushed the church to adopt an increasingly flexible attitude, leading first to the development of the doctrine of just war and later to the call for holy war. Over the past century or more, the Catholic Church has gone back to its pacifist roots and shifted away from holy war, albeit without abandoning its acceptance of just war ethics.

The elements that pushed for this change in attitude can be traced to the evolution of Christian doctrine, to the development of an institutionalized church that became a player in power politics, to pressure from an exogenous religious force, Islam, and finally to the emergence of the modern secular state. Thus, in the thousand-plus years that separate Jesus Christ and Pope Urban II, Christians saw themselves transformed from a small, fringe pacifist sect that shunned anything remotely linked to military activity to the church that gave rise to the powerful religious-military orders created in the twelfth century to wage and support holy war. However, this evolution left room for differing, sometimes directly opposed, attitudes to cohabit. Jesus’s pacifist message and example remained the core of Christian thought and practice, but just war and holy war nevertheless became integral to Christian doctrine and practice.

In a way, the contradiction paved the way for both the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. Within Protestantism, movements like the Quakers, in particular, revived and proclaimed Jesus's original message of uncompromising peace, but the doctrine of just war was later given a new lease on life by Protestant theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr. Though holy war has ceased to be an effective element of Western policy since the seventeenth century, it has survived to this day as a symbolic instrument, regularly brandished through the discourse on war, as exemplified by the tone of the debates that surrounded the reaction, most notably in the United States, to the events of 9/11. The path taken by Anabaptists, a Protestant group, was more radical still: after supremely violent beginnings and much soul-searching, they made an about-turn and adopted pacifism as their creed.⁷

Although it also has a pacifist strand that cohabits with its traditions of just war and holy war, these being more intimately related for Muslims, Islam has been much more consistent in its attitude to war. Its general approach to organized violence is similar to what has come to be adopted in the West, in China, India, and elsewhere, namely, a dual attitude that reflects the violent nature of international politics, on the one hand, and the hopefully peaceful internal workings of society, on the other. Much like Western political philosophy, Islamic thought on the matter understands the inherent distinction between the need to keep and promote social peace within one's political entity and the need to prepare for war against other, competing entities.

Both in the Islamic world and the Western world, the dual nature of politics came to a head when the real nature of competitive politics was pitted against the desire by many to create or recreate a political space that would encompass all the religious brethren under one political roof. For Muslims, that roof came to be known as the Grand Caliphate, and its proponents included such powerful and respectable figures as Saladin and Suleiman the Magnificent. Closer to us, the likes of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, among others, have publicly stated their desire to recreate the caliphate, in defiance of all probability. For Western Christians, the desire to unify Western Christianity manifested itself through the dream of recreating a new, Christian, Roman empire, embodied in Charlemagne in the eighth century and the Spanish and Holy Roman emperor Charles V in the sixteenth. That dream did briefly come about in the Holy Roman Empire, but it became the focal point of religious conflicts that destroyed half of Europe in the seventeenth century and enabled the rise of the modern secular state and,

with it, the demise of the dream of unifying the Christian world under one banner.

Although the most violent conflicts in history are not exclusively religious, there is one element that seems to be omnipresent in the most gruesome wars: ideas, or, if one prefers, ideology, or, to use the older terminology, opinion. When wars involve more than political, territorial, or personal elements, the violence often escalates uncontrollably, causing mayhem and, more often than not, indiscriminate civilian deaths. The great Swiss strategist of the early nineteenth century Antoine-Henri de Jomini pinpointed the major characteristics of these wars, underlining the fact that religious and political dogma are both conducive to formidable bursts of violence, and that religion can both be a cause and a pretext for war: "Although originating in religious or political dogmas, these wars [of opinion] are most deplorable; for, like national wars, they enlist the worst passions, and become vindictive, cruel, and terrible. The wars of Islamism, the Crusades, the Thirty Years' War, the wars of the League, present nearly the same characteristics. Often religion is the pretext for obtaining political power and the war is not really one of dogmas. The successors of Muhammad cared more about extending their empire than about preaching the Quran, and Philip II, bigot as he was, did not sustain the League in France for the purpose of advancing the Roman Church. [. . .] The dogma sometimes is not only a pretext, but is a powerful ally; for it excites the ardor of the people, and also creates a party. [. . .] It may, however, happen, as in the Crusades and the wars of Islamism, that the dogma for which the war is waged, instead of friends, finds only bitter enemies in the country invaded; and then the contest become fearful."⁸

All in all, the pacific dimension of religion, which at times seems to dominate its outlook on human affairs (one thinks of Jesus's message) has not prevented religions, including Christianity, from generating conflicts. Nor has religious conflict arisen solely from fringe fanaticism fueled by radicalized or isolated individuals or groups. In many instances, church authorities have instigated wars and even taken part in them. The religious-military orders of the Middle Ages embodied the bellicose attitude that characterized the church at the time. In some instances, as with the Teutonic Knights, the orders devoted all their energies to waging imperialistic wars against nations that for the most part, like Poland in this case, shared their religious beliefs.

In the medieval Western world, the understanding and practice of war essentially combined Germanic military culture with Christian morals and theology. The Christian dimension affected not only society's approach to war

but strategies and tactics as well. Hence, the classic pitched battle whose outcome is decided by the judgment of God, understood to be the culminating point of a war. It must therefore take place in an open field where all sides fight on equal ground so that God's decision is untainted by extraneous elements. In many ways, this conception ran counter to all strategic principles, and in practical terms, generals had to compromise between strategic expediency and moral constraints. But generally, the rules were clear. The fight was straightforward, one force against another, and might the worthiest men win, with this worthiness defined in both military and moral terms.

During the Hundred Years' War, for example, the English believed in the biblical injunction that any divided people will perish. Since France, at the time, was divided, it should perish. For the English King Henry V, his resounding victory at Agincourt (1415) thus signaled that God recognized the legitimacy of his claim to the French throne. But interpretations can suit one's desires, and for the hapless French knights who survived the day, the religious interpretation of the crushing loss meant something else: that God had punished the soldiers for their sins. Of course, the war found its denouement in the most religious manner when a young shepherd, Joan of Arc, claiming to act upon God's direct guidance, proceeded to roll the English back out of France.

Wars between Christians conformed to a set of norms that was more or less adhered to by most states and armies, but wars against extraneous non-Christian elements evidently loosened these moral constraints—God, regardless, was on the side of the Christians—thus expanding one's strategic and tactical outlook. Richard Lionheart, for one, fought as “unchristian” a war as any when he attempted to reconquer Jerusalem in the name of Christ, all the while showing himself the most pugnacious and ruthless of all the Crusader commanders. A little later, when Crusader armies rampaged through Constantinople and all but destroyed the city in 1204, they showed little restraint toward their Christian Orthodox brethren. Wars fought before God and awaiting His judgment were less violent, it seems, than those that were fought in His name.

ARE SOME RELIGIONS MORE BELLICOSE THAN OTHERS?

The question of the bellicosity of religion can be tackled from an analytical perspective—with one central question: *what causes a religion to foster violence and war?*—or a historical one, which looks at the various manifestations of

religious wars in all their conjectural complexities and their changing nature, without disregarding the effects that religion may have had on mitigating violence and preventing or limiting armed conflicts. The second approach, which is concerned as much with effects as with causes, is, on the surface at least, more approachable, though it is largely conditioned by the fact that wars, even wars of religion, do not occur in a religious vacuum, since many elements independent of religion come into play. In sheer magnitude and frequency, it will come as no surprise to the reader that, historically, two religions in particular have been at the root of a majority of significant conflicts: Islam and Christianity. Discussing violence in African religions, Nathalie Włodarczyk underlines an important point in this regard:

Unlike some of the other world religions, however, African Traditional Religion has rarely been the cause (real or proclaimed) of wars. Because of the lack of central doctrine and, therefore, hierarchy and institutions, it has never become the powerful tool for state conquest that Christianity or Islam have become. Although traditional religious explanations for misfortune have helped legitimize the cause of many insurgent groups, and aided their recruitment, this has tended to be on a smaller-scale than state-sponsored warfare.⁹

Islam was committed to violence almost from the very beginning, and violence has remained a part of its makeup, including its message. Of course, as we are often reminded, Islam is not only about violence, and a significant part—indeed, the great majority—of its teachings have little or nothing to do with violence. Some, as with Christianity, are chiefly concerned with peace. By separating the world (in tune with the political and geopolitical realities) between the inner society and the outside world, Islam attempts to reconcile the contradictions between the world of peace and the world of violence, contradictions with which Christian theologians also grappled.

Islam, much like Christianity, also developed a strand of pacifism, and its central message is one of peace. However, its universal character permits and even encourages violence in order to suppress those who fall outside its realm. The term “jihad” is open to interpretation, but the claim that it does not encourage physical violence toward non-Muslims, particularly nonbelievers, is altogether misleading. The fact that the prophet Muhammad and his immediate successors founded not only a religion but also a state has meant that, from the beginning, Islam has been enmeshed with politics. Contrary to Christianity, where internal conflicts within the religion, some very violent,

have been due to theological or dogmatic disputes, internal conflicts in Islam typically stem from the bitter disagreement over the succession of Muhammad that has ripped Muslim followers into two principal, bitterly rival camps, the Sunnis and Shiites (a third camp, of lesser importance today, being the Kharidjites).

In the West, historically, the institutions of the state predate Christianity by several centuries, and Christianity was first proclaimed a state religion three centuries after Jesus Christ. This chronological and institutional hiatus at the inception has defined the relationship between politics and religion in the Christian West that continues to this day. The increasingly violent misunderstandings that prevail today between secularized Christian majorities and Muslim minorities, most notably in western Europe, find their source in the respective historical developments of Christianity and Islam in their relationship to political power. And while Christianity has on various occasions and for long periods of time been associated with political and state power, it has followed a path of its own. In Islam, the paths have been traced by the double helix of the Shiite and Sunni traditions, but on a singular track, where religion and political governance have been intermeshed with each other. This fact in and of itself is at the heart of the difficulties that Muslim countries, particularly Arab ones, have had with political modernization.

In essence, there are three mechanisms through which religion interacts with political power. At one extreme, a theocracy exercises absolute political power. At the other end, in what is sometimes referred to as "caesaropapism," the secular ruler claims to have absolute authority over religious matters. In between, we find secular and religious authorities overlapping in their exercise of political power.¹⁰ The Western world has essentially exercised religious-political power in the second and third realms. Islam has exercised it over the whole spectrum, with religious and political authority often in the hands of the same individual. The fact, supported by any historical survey of conflicts, that Islam and Christianity are the champions of bellicose behavior among religious practitioners does not imply that other religions are not, or are less, violent, or less conducive to violent conflict. All it says is that either Muslims or Christians (or parties claiming to be such), or both, have been the principal belligerents in the vast majority of the wars in recorded history of which religion was one of the main causes. This points to the main determinants of religious bellicosity.

These determinants are the ones that James W. Laine identifies in his analysis of religion and power, and are concerned with the fundamental

character of a religion as inclusive or exclusive, as rooted in and limited to a particular group or universal in vocation. *Inclusivism* implies that the overarching religion accepts other religions under its umbrella. *Exclusivism* implies that a religion holds to an exclusive Truth or God and thus excludes the existence of another Truth or God. That this Truth is valid for all people, independent of their position in space and time, is what leads to universalism, the opposite, then, of particularism, for which different people may have different belief systems.¹¹

Judaism, for example, is exclusivistic but not universalistic. At the other end of the spectrum, Buddhism is inclusivistic and, through the Four Noble Truths, universalistic, much like Greek religion during the age of Alexander or Hinduism in the age of Ashoka, which, in the latter two cases, fostered a religious pluralism that went beyond mere tolerance of varying religious creeds. Zoroastrianism, the first of the monotheistic religions, was exclusivist but not quite universalistic, though it was less particularistic than Judaism, since it remained rooted in Iranian culture, unlike Manichaeism, which, like Christianity and Islam, was both exclusivist and universalistic (incidentally, the Latin word *catholicus*, “Catholic,” which surfaced in the second century CE and came to designate the Roman church, is derived from the Greek word for “universal”: *katholikos*.)

Universalism is one of those concepts that are complicated to define but easy to understand. Garth Fowden’s simple definition is as good as any and sufficiently clear for our purposes: “A universalist culture or religion is one that is accessible to all human beings and tends to be accepted by them eventually, whether or not it actively proselytizes or has yet penetrated the geographical area they inhabit.”¹²

Tolerance, then, is not really the issue here and exclusivist-universal monotheistic religions may be tolerant of other religions. The caliphates of the Golden Age of Andalusia or the Ottoman Empire were famously tolerant of other religions . . . as long as they did not challenge the political order. That said, Muslim Spain was without a doubt much more tolerant than Catholic Europe at the same time, and when Ferdinand and Isabella took control of all of Spain in 1492, they promptly showed all non-Catholics the door if they refused to convert, starting with the Jewish communities of Spain, which had until then been an integral part of the society.

Christendom, for the most part, did tolerate Jewish communities, though often grudgingly, even if these became regular targets of popular resentments

or political maneuvering when scapegoats were sought. But tolerance of minorities, which often have secondary social and legal status, is one thing and recognition of other exclusivist-universal religions is quite another, a fact that we tend to forget in our pluralistic and somewhat tolerant societies (though the challenges to our secular culture by radical Islamists are changing our outlook, as was evident during the 2016 U.S presidential campaign, among other examples).

In essence, then, as pointed out earlier, it is basically impossible for one group that is convinced it holds the universal truth to cohabit equally with another group that holds another truth to be universal. Such religions might cohabit with one another in a political environment where religion and politics were almost totally disconnected, and thus under the umbrella of a suprapolitical structure that supersedes them, as evidenced in contemporary liberal democracies, or, for that matter, in secular dictatorships (though when these crumble, religion tends to come back in full force in the resulting political struggles, as it did in the former Yugoslavia, Egypt, Iraq, Tunisia, and Libya). Such cohabitation is both ideologically and practically impossible, however, in societies where the frontier between religion and politics is less clear-cut. And in fact, they pose serious problems in a society such as France, where secularity (*laïcité*) functions as a meta-religion of sorts,¹³ and attacks to it by radical religious groups are seen as a challenge.

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

Identity is an important element of this story. The modern world, which revolves around the primacy of the individual and liberty, has highlighted the difficulties inherent in defining one's identity when our attachments to a particular community have become increasingly tenuous, creating many of the problems that contemporary societies are facing today. Today's religious conflicts are in many ways related to this crisis of identity, with extremists forcefully rejecting the very core of the individualistic creed that defines modernity, which entire regions are at odds with and reject more or less openly.

Obviously, we are talking here mainly about the modernity emerging from the West, a movement that took hold in the fifteenth-century Italian city-states and was to steer history in a new direction by defining what it is to be an unshackled individual.¹⁴ Indeed, today, modernized or modernizing Confucian societies—Japan, China, or Vietnam—continue to privilege the

community over the individual, the latter having little purpose outside a social setting. In the past, though, an individual's identity was irremediably tied to a linguistic, ethnic, and religious community, including in Europe.

During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Europe was equated with Christendom. For Muslim outsiders, however, Europeans were either Romans (Byzantines) or Franks (Westerners). For most, the world was divided into one's own world, namely, the world inhabited by co-religionists, and the "outside world" where few dared go, an accepted fact that explains the success of Marco Polo's account of his life at the court of Kublai Khan. Likewise, when Ibn Battuta, the great Moroccan traveler of the fourteenth century, undertook his long journey, his intention was to visit all the "known world," specifically the Muslim world (though he did venture to southern Russia and Constantinople). When, at about the same time, the Tunisian historian Ibn Khaldūn made the first attempt to write a global political history, his scope was strictly limited to the Muslim world, his vision of the "Frankish world" being essentially ahistorical. Outside of what seemed to be two planets whose tips touched ever so slightly in southern Spain and Portugal, the rest of the world was perceived by both Christians and Muslims as a hodgepodge of heathens of various kinds, whose souls, at least from the Christian standpoint, could potentially be saved through more or less forceful conversions (Islam, on the other hand, does not advocate forced conversion). Indeed, when lone Christian ambassadors such as John Plano Carpini (1245–47) or William of Rubrouck (1253–55) were sent, the one by Pope Innocent IV, the other by the French king Louis IX (Saint Louis), to the courts of the Mongol rulers who reigned over half of the Eurasian continent, they naïvely endeavored to convert their hosts and were genuinely surprised at being politely rebuffed.¹⁵ Evidently, these emissaries were misled by the wishful thinking of a time when, owing to the popular and enduring legend of Prester John, the Mongols were thought ready to embrace Christianity and eagerly defend it with their bows and arrows against the Turks.

The point here is that for the greater part of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and even modern times, the world was essentially compartmentalized, with communication between different worlds left to a few merchants, even fewer embassies, and, at various times, armed conflicts, invasions, and wars. Although recently historians have attempted to show that the world may then have been less compartmentalized than once thought, most notably by Henri Pirenne, it still remained very much so.¹⁶ Therefore, the "other" or "others"

were perceived with great suspicion, often justified in an environment that was altogether violent, so that when two worlds met, they often clashed. For the most part, both Islam and Christianity fed on this suspicion, whether because they felt either threatened or empowered to expand their influence, or both. Religion and power being intermeshed in the Christian and the Muslim worlds, it was only logical that religious and political authorities concluded to instigate wars with what was essentially considered to be the arch-enemy. King François I of France committed the ultimate political crime in the eyes of his European peers when he allied himself with the Ottomans in the sixteenth century to curtail Habsburg hegemony in continental Europe. And although (southern) Christian Europe presented a united front against the Ottomans at Lepanto in 1571, François had broken the mold. With him, international politics became increasingly guided by political exigency rather than by religious considerations. During the 'Thirty Years' War, which began less than half a century later, Protestant Sweden allied with Catholic France formed the winning coalition, even though the conflict was a struggle between Protestants and Catholics.

RECONCILING THE WORLD OF GOD AND THE WORLD OF MEN

War is omnipresent in some of the earliest writings we have, including the Victory Stele of the Akkadian king Naram-Sin (ca. 2250 BCE); what is perhaps the earliest work of fiction, the epic *Gilgamesh* (2100 BCE), which pairs man's heroic deeds in war with his search for eternal life (treating the two main themes of this book); and the epic poem "The Battle of Kadesh" (ca. 1295 BCE), with the first written international agreement. These early writings treat war as a spiritual journey in which man overcomes his own shortcomings by defeating his enemies. Though war is depicted as a positive outlet for man to display such qualities as courage, loyalty, and heroism, one can already find in these emotional texts the tension between man's quest for social peace and his recourse to violence, even if committed in order to achieve and protect peace.

From the earliest times, it seems, religion served as the go-between connecting the ideals of a peaceful social environment with the realities of violent conflicts that pervaded an anarchical geopolitical environment. By distinguishing between the world of God and the world of men, religion similarly

placed at the forefront of its concerns the contradictions that pit our ideals and aspirations against our instincts and desires. One of the principal attributes of religion is to demarcate the profane from the sacred, inasmuch as war, like feasts, straddles the two domains. War is both a catalyst of progress and a scourge capable of annihilating the greatest human accomplishments. As such, it transcends humankind, and its irrationality is better elucidated by divine explanations than by rational interpretations. Its impact is almost too formidable to bear.

This fact is exemplified by the difficulties we encounter in rationalizing war in the secular age. The literary production that followed World War I and World War II points almost unanimously to the absurdity of war. But even then one finds poignant depictions of trench warfare, most notably those of Ernst Jünger, that redirect us to the epic of Gilgamesh by underlining the dual nature of war. Our rational minds are confused by, and even incapable of comprehending, the simultaneous abomination and exhilaration of war:

What was that about? War had shown its claws, and stripped off its mask of coziness. It was all so strange, so impersonal. We had barely begun to think about the enemy, that mysterious, treacherous being somewhere. This event, so far beyond anything we had experienced, made such a powerful impression on us that it was difficult to understand what had happened. It was like a ghostly manifestation in broad daylight.¹⁷

Along with love, war is the great theme of fiction writing. From the *Iliad* to *War and Peace* to *Catch-22*, war has been the central character in masterpieces of world literature. While fiction exalts the emotional, and at times passionate and irrational dimension of war, historians have traditionally considered it to be an integral part of foreign policy and one of the guiding threads of history. Thus war embodies at the highest level the perpetual conflict between passion and reason, between individual emotions and political expediency, between good and evil, between the civilized and the barbarian. It is only recently, in the past century and a half or so, that other factors, such as economics, social change, or climate, have been considered to be greater drivers of history, taking precedence over military conflicts, now often considered an effect of these stronger forces rather than independent of them.

Just as war has occupied center stage in fictional and historical texts, it has also permeated religious writings. From the beginning, theologians and students of religion also had to grapple with the significance of war, its role in the

global scheme of things, its relationship to individuals and religious communities, its moral ramifications. In essence, theologians had to explain what such a horrific event might signify in a world created by God, who presumably desired peace and stability for His (or Her) children.

For this reason, war is omnipresent in the foundational texts of the great religions. For those religions that are revealed, the issue of war has a significance that goes beyond the symbolic and historical context within which the religion appeared. This significance is not only strong, it is long-lasting and has very practical effects. In the classical Jewish tradition, for example, war is justified as a preemptive tool to fend off adversaries bent on destroying the Jewish people. Far from being a symbolic interpretation of events concerning only the inhabitants of Judea twenty-five hundred years ago, this view of war and the use of force have persisted through the centuries. Today, in the twenty-first century, preemption has been a cornerstone of Israel's strategy to fend off hostile nations like Iran and Pakistan (or, previously, Iraq) that might launch, or threaten to launch, nuclear weapons against its territory.¹⁸

Generally speaking, war holds a significant place in religious writings of various traditions. As a consequence, it is an issue that has been discussed at much greater length, and one might even argue, more thoroughly, by theologians than by philosophers. If one looks at the Christian tradition, war has been a constant source of interest and an issue that in many ways has defined Christianity and what it means to be a Christian. From Jesus to Saint Augustine, from Thomas Aquinas to Reinhold Niebuhr, the question has never ceased to be debated. If one goes back to the Old Testament, war is ever-present, as is its justification. Indeed, nowhere perhaps are the Old Testament and New Testament more at odds than on the topic of war, a contradiction one also finds in other religious traditions. Both war and its absolute rejection have always been present in the religious debate, with each side able to justify its position, often with the aid and support of scripture. In essence then, what do the foundational religious writings say, or not say, about war? And is this important, or not so important?

One of the most common arguments advanced today to "explain" violent jihadist activity rests on the supposedly bellicose nature of the Quran. More generally, this type of argument raises the fundamental problem of the role of sacred texts in instigating or justifying physical violence. The type of answers one might provide evidently rests on one's idea, belief, or opinion about the nature of violence and how it is related to religious beliefs. In essence, at the

two ends of the spectrum, one finds those who believe that the violence found in scripture can be a genuine trigger of real violence and, at the other end, those who feel that scripture is but a pretext used by those who, regardless of what is written, are bent on violence. Michael Walzer famously showed how one passage of the Bible, Exodus 32, which grapples with holy war, was interpreted and used in very different ways by Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and John Calvin.¹⁹

Generally, given the complexity and inherently contradictory nature of the attitude of religion to war, it is important to remember the context in which the texts appeared. With the exception of the Quran, the foundational religious texts all surface at around the same time. Though the evolution of religion was a long process, the third century BCE was a watershed that saw several empires gradually abandon sacrificial religious practices to adopt the religions of salvation and enlightenment that have endured to this day. Among these religions of salvation and enlightenment that emerged through the centuries, some of which have come to be known as “universal religions,” and some as “religions of the book,” we find Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, Manichaeism, Christianity, and later Islam.

These religions of salvation and enlightenment often overlapped with the earlier sacrificial religions, from which they also sometimes evolved. The new religions also developed into several branches, with varying degrees of longevity. Although the new religions sometimes retained certain sacrificial elements of the earlier religions, for example, in their cuisine or festive practices, they almost always abandoned one of the centerpieces of the traditional sacrificial religions: the sacrificial dimension of violence. In this respect, the break between traditional and modern religions, though the latter may have retained a symbolic element of earlier practices, was an important one indeed. In practice, when armies that belonged to different religious cultures clashed, one traditional-sacrificial, one not, the gap between them was nowhere so profound as in their differing attitudes to violence. A striking example of this cultural clash occurred between the Spaniards and the Mexicans during the conquest of Mexico in the sixteenth century. Though the Spaniards may have invoked the Virgin Mary before each battle, they were appalled by the sacrificial dimension of the Aztecs’ fighting strategies and general attitude to war. The Aztecs, in turn, were shocked and repulsed by the Spaniards’ strategy of annihilation.

The purging of sacrificial violence from war and, more generally, from society, was thus one of the characteristics that distinguished the earlier forms

of religious life from the religions of salvation and enlightenment that gradually—and with varying speed—came to replace them in the West, East, Middle East, and the Indian subcontinent. Within the new religions, then, violence was understood first and foremost as the manifestation of power through the collective use of force, the principal question being whether this use of force—or sanctioned violence—was morally acceptable or not, and under what circumstances.

From the beginning, this moral attitude to sanctioned violence posed a challenge to the philosophers, historians, and theorists who expounded the first theories of politics and policy at the very same time that these religions were emerging. Thus, we find Kautilya, Sun Tzu, Liu Ja, Su Ma Tsien, and the Greek and Latin philosophers and historians all developing principles of governance that sought to resolve the tension between political expediency and moral demands. At the same time, theologians grappled with the moral justification or condemnation of war as understood within a strict theological framework. In both cases, though, the use of force was essentially understood as a means to resolve problems with other peoples, be they—those people—defined in terms of denomination, ethnicity, or nationality, and not as a tool for religious or political governance. Liu Ja, the third-century (BCE) Confucian counselor to the first Han emperor, Gaozu (Liu Bang), summed up this fundamental attitude: “If the Tang and Wu kings conquered the throne through violence, they kept it through gentleness: only the judicious usage of military and civilian means can ensure the sustainability of dynasties.”²⁰ In the West, the durable underlying tension between theologians and political theorists on the issue of war broke open with Machiavelli at the turn of the sixteenth century, when the Florentine thinker forcefully disengaged political thought from moral and theological considerations, thereby opening the gates to the formal divorce of church and state in the seventeenth century. At around the same time, Spanish theologians sought to resolve the complex humanitarian questions that arose with the conquests of entire continents and the subjugation of millions of people. As a result of this introspective reflection on the moral consequences of imperialism, they revived the old Christian just war theory and used it as the foundational pillar of the *jus gentium*, or law of nations, now called international law, a process that came to fruition in the mid-seventeenth century with the Dutch theologian and diplomat Hugo Grotius, who had been witness to the most horrendous religious conflicts.

For jurists and political theorists, then, war can only be comprehended as an element of political action, one that can or must be controlled, because it can be best exploited if it is controlled, or because only by controlling it can one mitigate its effects on nations and peoples. Religion, on the other hand, has no such limits, and war forms an integral part of its discourse, at least until Jesus of Nazareth, whose uncompromising attitude to any kind of violence, as well as his refusal to be implicated in any manner in politics, broke the mold for good. Jesus's attitude not only determined his own destiny, it also created an insoluble dilemma for Christianity, which theologians have been struggling with to this day.

Most religious writings from the formative period of the great universal religions bear similar attitudes to war and peace. As with the epic texts mentioned earlier, the foundational religious texts of the first millennium BCE, all of which precede the first political writings, produced beginning in the fifth century BCE, deal extensively with the issue of war and peace. This fact has often been used by those who argue that religion is inherently violent, even though this argument tends to confuse the treatment of violence with the condoning of violence. While religions unanimously condemn the killing of other human beings—this interdiction forming one of their basic precepts—all make room for the morally acceptable fact of collective violence committed for some higher good. In this respect, the ethics of the individual is clearly distinguished from the ethics of a community, a people, or a state. Only in Islam is such a distinction not as clear-cut, hence the whole debate about the meaning of jihad as a personal or collective act. Even in Hinduism and Buddhism, where the ethics of noncruelty and nonviolence rank especially high, there is space for ethically justified war, as in the Bhagavad Gita, for example, in which the climactic segment of the text, the Battle of Kurukshetra, is accompanied by a penetrating discussion on the ethics of war.²¹ Within the Sino-cultural realm, religious identity has been much less robust than in other parts of the world. For this reason, one expert suggests, "Their religious identity unclear, the Chinese have been less prone than their Western counterparts to religious warfare."²²

WAR, RELIGION, AND THE SACRED

Attitudes to war create three camps: those who seek to end it once and for all; those who accept it as a fact of life and seek to work with it or around it; and,

finally, those who exalt it. The first two camps view war as a rational phenomenon and focus principally on the intrinsic nature of the individual (whether fundamentally aggressive or malleable) or the nature of politics (whether fundamentally rooted in an endless struggle for power, or susceptible to being reformed). Followers of Immanuel Kant envisage a global transformation to general peace based on reform of the system. Machiavelli, Clausewitz, and the so-called realists stress the perennially unchanging nature of international power politics. Both camps view war as essentially political in nature, and thus as predominantly rational. Neither perceives how much war throughout history has often been much more than a rational endeavor, how much it has been intertwined with the sacred. This aspect of it, grossly underscored by political thinkers as well as historians, ultimately shows war and religion to have more in common than is generally assumed.

Although viscerally allergic to all things religious for the most part, writers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Ernst Jünger who have romanticized and exalted war have resurrected the sacred dimension that characterized it at various times in the past. Hitler himself, though not known to have had much sympathy for religion, used a variety of religious symbols, beginning with the infamous reversed swastika (a common Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain symbol) to instill a sacred character into his violent enterprise.²³

In what circumstances does war take on the characteristics of the sacred? Roger Caillois pointed to the fascinating similarities between war and religious celebrations. For Caillois, both are parentheses in which one transcends the realities of daily life to project oneself into another world, a world of transgressions where the fundamental rules of life are turned upside down, and where one will not suffer punishment, whether by the state or by God, for having transgressed these rules. War, Caillois says, “possesses to a significant degree the character of the sacred: she seems to forbid that we examine her objectively. She paralyzes critical examination. She is formidable and overbearing. We damn her, we exalt her. We hardly study her.”²⁴

In war, as in religious ritual, individuals are extracted from their social setting and thrown into a communal environment. Everyone’s place is blurred, and other rules apply, which often erase those one usually plays by. Extracted from their quiet—and often tedious—daily lives and thrown together with others like them, individuals can transgress their daily norms, in what is often an act of religious proportions. One lives for such daunting, exhilarating moments that push one to discover who one really is, and which one

cherishes—or sometimes abhors—for the rest of one’s life. These are times of “excess, violence, and outrage,” Caillois observes. However, both religion and war can in certain circumstances lead to unpunished destruction, including, in war, destruction of what is most precious: life. They are both a time of waste; indeed, of absolute waste, of food, of resources, of people. Wars are like festivals and religious celebrations, which “open the doors to the world of the Gods, and man is transformed into a God and attains superhuman existence.”²⁵

In these moments, the individual is ejected from society and thus comes face to face with the only element that is above society: God. In war, individuals fight and risk their own lives—and often those of their families—for a higher purpose that makes one’s self seem irrelevant, aside from one’s contribution to victory. War is often absurd in its purpose, and tragic beyond what is acceptable; its justification is found above political interests. We see this even today in our secular societies when the so-called national interest proves insufficient to justify the use of force in certain instances, politicians having to juggle with religious concepts such as just war to get public opinion to support what it is they want to do. This state of mind is authentically religious in the sense that

War, no less than the festival, seems like the time of the sacred, the period of divine epiphany. It introduces man to an intoxicating world in which the presence of death makes him shiver and confers a superior value upon his various actions. He believes that he will acquire a psychic vigor—just as through the descent to the inferno in ancient initiations—out of proportion to mundane experiences. He feels invincible and as if marked by the sign that protected Cain after the murder of Abel.²⁶

War thus bestows on the combatant an aura that gives him or her a sense of superiority to those who did not fight and did not kill. In a sense, he (or she) is graced with a divine mandate to transgress the basic rules of life in society, for only God, in a sense, can allow, tolerate, and reward what the laws of all nations prohibit. For this reason, war is generally regarded with much uneasiness in secular societies—with a few exceptions, like Nazi Germany, though one might argue that that was not a secular regime. It is much more acceptable and accepted in societies where religion has more traction, even where religious teaching promotes a message of peace.

The sense of communion with God that comes through a violent act sanctioned by war is something we have become reaccustomed to in the new age of radical terrorism. Although we see this as an attribute that concerns a tiny

minority of marginal religious fanatics who have been “brainwashed,” this type of attitude—which appears foreign to us—has characterized many soldiers and combatants through the ages, across many cultures and regions. It is an attitude that is not necessarily linked to the teachings of a particular religion, which may or may not justify violence in certain instances, but rather one that sees war as the paroxysmal link between man and the sacred.

In this sense, war is effectively the ultimate, paroxysmal transgression of modern societies, whereas paroxysmal religious celebrations were the transgressions of primitive societies: “taking into account the nature and development of modern society, only one phenomenon manifests comparable importance, intensity, and explosiveness, of the same order of grandeur—war.”²⁷ The fact that it is war, and not violence per se, that makes this link possible is fundamental, because only war can give the individual this sense of acting as part of a community of souls. When “self-radicalized” individuals or small groups of individuals perpetrate terrorist acts, they always see their action as part of a grander scheme, indeed, of a “war.” This explains why terrorism is a phenomenon so different from serial or mass killings perpetrated out of a grudge or by reason of mental illness; even if both may act in similar fashion, terrorists always have more in common with traditional soldiers.

THE SCOPE AND FOCUS OF THE BOOK

Although the history of war and religion crystallized around the Mediterranean at a time when the great monotheistic universalistic religions emerged, its scope extends beyond this realm. Still, the greater Mediterranean region (extending to northern and central Europe) has for centuries been the central pivot of religious warfare, and it is with this that the bulk of this book will be concerned. Although our journey will also briefly take us beyond the greater Mediterranean, it is essentially in the Middle East and Europe that the story unfolds. This is where the conditions came together that transformed what might otherwise have been constrained religious violence into all-out wars, and where power struggles became inextricably linked to religious conflicts. In essence, this volume will focus almost exclusively on the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, while touching on the religions of Iran, Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism, which may have influenced them in one way or other or interacted with them at some point in history. Since history does not occur in a vacuum, the religious conflicts that involved one or

several of these religions did extend to geographical areas beyond their traditional theater, and we will follow such extraneous manifestations wherever they occurred. Thus, I will only make passing references to religious conflicts involving other faiths, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and traditional African religions. In this respect, this book does not purport to be an authoritative volume on all wars of religion throughout history. Nor, within the already broad topic it proposes to address, is this book a mere catalog or survey of unrelated or loosely related events. Rather, this volume presents an uninterrupted historical narrative of events, peoples, and individuals that begins in antiquity, leads right up to the turn of the eighteenth century, and, in a diluted form, runs through to the twenty-first century.

Before delving into the topic, which to my knowledge has not yet lent itself to academic expertise, I should perhaps say a word about my intellectual background. My academic interests in religion probably date back to my freshman year at Georgetown University, a Jesuit institution that offered classes in theology in its core curriculum. Although I eventually veered toward history and political science, the interest remained vivid, and, while pursuing my graduate studies in these areas, I decided to enroll in a master's program on religion. At the time, the early 1990s, this choice baffled my friends, few of whom then saw any link between international politics and religion, something that would quickly change in the following decade. Despite the excellent grounding in theological matters I may have gained during this formal exposure to the study of religion, it would be a stretch to claim that I am an expert in this matter. I am, and have become during the past quarter century, a historian of war (which I prefer to the restrictive term "military historian"), with a subexpertise in the history of terror and terrorism, an area that touches upon the theme of religious violence.

The consequence, of course, is that my approach, my intellectual references, and perhaps my style and my vocabulary may contrast with those of a scholar of religion or a theologian. The basic engineering of this text is that of a historian of war, politics, and diplomacy, and my outlook on the history of war and religion is predicated on my understanding of conflicts, inclusive of their causes, their manifestations, and their consequences. Thus, I perceive religious war, not as a distortion of religion or religious values, but as a particular manifestation of warfare, albeit with its root causes in spiritual experiences, religious institutions, and interaction with politics.

Thus we arrive at the central idea that serves as the guiding thread to this historical narrative, which is that religion, between the fourth and the late seventeenth centuries, was an inescapable factor in the wars that took place along the fault lines where the great monotheistic universalistic religions repeatedly and durably clashed. As a corollary, I argue that religion, during that period and in that part of the world, not only caused and shaped a great number of conflicts but essentially determined how these conflicts were fought. As such, religion defined the art of war, or arts of war, for a millennium, and by doing so, it exerted great influence in molding the societies that took part in these conflicts or were affected by them. In essence, religion was, during this period, the major driver of the wars that took place in Europe and in the greater Middle East. Although religion had an impact on war before and after that time, and, although religious wars also occurred outside that geographic area, religion and war were powerfully intertwined during this historical period.