“Maybe the war is over,” one of the former militants in the Moro separatist movement in the Philippines told me. The hesitancy in his optimism reflected the uncertainties in the peace process between the Philippine government and the main militant movement, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. A peace agreement that had been negotiated in 2015 was finally signed by President Rodrigo Duterte in 2018 after years of stalling that fueled the opposition and led to a major military confrontation in the city of Marawi in 2017. So despite the continuing tension, he now had reason to at least hope that the war was coming to an end.

What he meant by the ending of the war was not just a matter of militants in his movement capitulating to the overwhelming strength of the Philippine government and laying down their arms. He meant a change in attitude towards the conflict. He was talking about the shift in worldviews from a situation of absolute opposition to one where opponents were not foes. They were not yet friends, but there was now the potential for a working arrangement in which they would be able to negotiate differences and build a common future.
That was a big change indeed. If the peace process holds in the Philippines—and it is still a big “if”—it will be an interesting example of how the warfare that characterizes terrorism comes to an end. In this case, it will end relatively peacefully. If the peace process does not hold, however, there might be a revival of Moro separatist militancy.

Outside Mosul in Northern Iraq, a young Sunni Arab with whom I spoke was more confident. Looking back at the years under the rule of the Islamic State, he said, “we were constantly at war.” He described the reign of terror under which Mosul was controlled until the city was liberated by coalition forces early in 2017. “But now,” he added, “it’s over.”

When I interviewed him in a refugee camp near the destroyed village of Hasan Sham at the outskirts of Mosul he was still recounting the terror of the years under the movement’s control and the nightmare of battle in the days leading up to the liberation of the city. Though he professed that the war was over, clearly the memory of it was indelibly on his mind.

He admitted that initially most of his Sunni Arab neighbors bought into the idea of war propounded by the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL. He and his neighbors thought that the movement would empower Sunnis in a post-Saddam Iraq skewed towards Shi’a control. He would not say whether he was a supporter or member of the movement, but his silence on that topic was powerful. As the years wore on and ISIS became even more brutal and indiscriminate in its victims, many former supporters lost faith in the regime, became disillusioned with its war, and began to silently turn against it. When they had the chance they willingly fled from its control. For him, the terror of the imagined
The war of the Islamic State was now a thing of the past, though the reality of it was only slowly beginning to recede.

“The war never really ended,” one of the former militants in India’s Khalistan movement told me when I met with him in his village in the state of Punjab. He added that “it simply went underground.” By “underground,” he meant not a guerilla movement, but the harboring of images of great struggle and conquest among old warriors who still felt that the conflict was not resolved. The actual fighting—the terror and the brutal killing on both sides of the conflict—ended in the 1990s. Other observers and some of the former militants told me that the violence had indeed ended, and that there would never be another bloody uprising like that one that gripped the region during the 1980s. The costs to the local citizenry were just too high. But because many of the issues were unresolved, there were rumblings about the movement being revived.

What interested me about the Khalistan case and the other two cases that I examine in this book—the Muslim movement for a separate Mindanao in the Philippines and the Islamic State regime in Iraq and Syria—is how diverse were the attitudes of the participants in the struggles. The former fighters not only viewed their battles differently, but also saw the endings of the movements from differing perspectives. Sometimes they accepted that the end was marked with military defeat; in other cases they hoped that the resolution would allow them to integrate into society again. But to a large extent they acknowledged that the central ideas undergirding the struggle had collapsed, and the image of an all-or-nothing conflict with an impossible enemy dissipated or was transformed into a non-physical form of conflict. How is it possible that this notion
of absolute warfare, so all-consuming and central to the leitmotif
of a movement, could come to an end?

I think the answers to this question are essential in helping us
understand how participants in violent movements throughout the
world have abandoned their struggles. Negotiation is not possible
until both sides have lost the will to fight. Military conquests work
only if the surviving antagonists in the conflict give up the struggle
and do not choose to continue it in some other way, such as through
guerilla warfare or sporadic acts of terrorism. At the heart of the
transformation from militancy to the cessation of hostilities is the
abandonment of the idea of war, at least at it relates to the conduct
of war.

It might not be easy for combatants to doff this idea. If the strug-
gle has persisted over many years, those fighting may have become
accustomed to war as the normal way of viewing the world. In some
cases their careers may depend on it. Some fighters have known
only war, and their personal achievements and social recognition
may be tied to their roles as soldiers in a great battle. To give up the
idea of war, for many fighters, means a transformation in the way
they think about themselves and their place in the world.

Moreover, when religion is part of the ideology of violent move-
ments, the image of warfare may be fused in some way with a
grand vision of metaphysical struggle. To abandon such images,
then, involves not only a strategic choice about a movement’s
engagement and a personal change in the lives of many of its fight-
ing supporters, but a transformation of faith. Just as a conversion
into a religious war worldview was the occasion for many support-
ers to join a movement, the abandonment of this worldview will
require a conversion out of it, or a dramatic accommodation to a
new sense of nonviolent religious commitment.
This brings up a larger question that is relevant in each of these cases. They all are about violent movements, to be sure, and they all are identified in some way with religion. But the way that the violence is related to religion is not the same in each instance, nor is it the same for all supporters of the movement, nor does it stay the same through the duration of the movement. When we look at each case we will try to identify these differences. For now, however, it is useful to think a bit about what we mean by war and how religion can be related to it.

**Imagined War and Absolute War**

When the young Sunni Arab man I interviewed in a refugee camp near Mosul said that he thought that ISIS was constantly in a state of war, just what did he mean by that? You could say that Sunni Arabs in Iraq have been in conflict with the majority Shi’a ever since the end of the Saddam regime. They have resisted the American military, seen as propping up the Shi’a government. So when the young man in the refugee camp talked about the ISIS view of war, was he just talking about conflicting positions, or did he mean something more than that? Just what did he mean by “war”?

The way that war is conceived is not always the same, and the way that religion relates to it differs as well. In a companion volume to this book, *God at War*, I look at some of these differences. Here, I’ll give you a brief rundown of its most relevant conclusions. The idea of war, I’ve found, is more than a matter of conflicting points of views. It embraces the notion of an absolute conflict with a moral valence, a do-or-die struggle between good and evil. It involves a totally new way of looking at the world, the very opposite of civil society, where differences are mediated by law and negotiation. In
war there are only the good guys and the bad guys, and the bad guys are hell-bent on destroying the good guys. Those at war invariably think that they are the good guys.

This radically upside-down war worldview is, in large part, a reaction to existential fear. When I looked at the way that war springs into the imagination of people at the onset of a military encounter, I discovered that it is in many ways a response to a social anomaly—the feeling that things are deeply awry, and that something sinister must have caused it. This applies to the collapse of the World Trade Center at 9/11, and it also applies to the Sunni Arab fear that in a post-Saddam world their lives and their culture would be forever altered, and they were going to be treated as second-class citizens or worse.

War gives voice to these fears. It provides a conceptual framework in which these social disasters make sense. A devious enemy devised them, the victims think, and unless they engage the enemy in an all-out winner-take-all confrontation, the enemy will make matters even worse. Thus the idea of war gives conceptual clarity to humiliating and destructive events and situations. And it provides a solution—military engagement and the expectation of victory. The victims of these disasters do not need to sit passively by and watch their worst fears realized; they can fight back. They can become soldiers in an awesome war.

So in that sense every war is an imagined war. It is a way of trying to come to grips with an awful situation. To some extent many, if not most, wars are also real, of course, in that there are often identifiable and actual opponents. They may indeed act like enemies, the cause of the problems of the other side, and they may indeed have sinister motives and devious tactics for doing the other side in. But at other times it is not clear who the enemy is
or whether that enemy is aware of how they are perceived. Yet thinking of them as the enemy enables the possibility of war; it helps to clarify things in the mind of those who deem themselves oppressed. It provides a conceptual template of understanding in which one can understand the role of an enemy—either real or fabricated—and what the appropriate response should be. Usually it is to fight like hell. The concept of war magnifies a community’s fears into a worldview of absolute opposition.

In the case of the Sunni Arabs, it was clear that the Shi’a were indeed usurping the Sunnis’ accustomed roles of political leadership in Iraq, and they were correct in thinking that these developments would lead to the marginalization of Sunni Arabs. In the case of 9/11 the enemy was not so clear—some Americans thought it was just the small cadre of jihadists who plotted the attack, while others identified the whole Muslim world as the enemy. In the Philippine struggle, the Mindanao Muslims had a clear enemy: the government that was not giving them separatist identity and power. The enemy in the case of Khalistan in India was less clear, sometimes appearing to be the government and the police, sometimes Hindu and moderate Sikhs who opposed the movement. When the enemy is not obvious, it might have to be conjured up.

As I will explain later in this chapter, there are occasions when dramatic threats and social discord raise in the public mind the idea that war may be afoot, that the chaos is part of some evil plot to undergird society. This may indeed be the case, but even if it is not, this notion of war requires that there be some sort of enemy who might have caused the discord. Hence, in some cases, to sustain the idea of war enemies have to be invented.

Here’s where religion often comes into the picture. Religious culture can be of service to the idea of war by helping to create an
enemy: someone who is not part of the militants’ religious community, for example, or a secular political order that is by its nature non-religious, and behind them perhaps Satan himself. Religious ideas and images can also be of service in helping to legitimize the fight, to imply that this is not just a contest between two equally moral sides, but a battle where one side is favored by God. The invariable implication, from the point of view of those imaging a treacherous enemy, is that God is on their side.

This religious legitimization is especially important in cases where military combat is not just a matter of trying to gain or defend territory, or achieve a specific policy objection, but also when it is a matter of obliterating an enemy thought to be devious by its very nature. This kind of war is what the theorist of warfare, Carl von Clausewitz, called “absolute war.” The nineteenth-century Prussian soldier is famous for one line from his posthumously published manual On War, the-oft quoted sentence that “war is the continuation of politics by other means.” Yet this famous phrase is taken out of context. If you read the whole thing, you will see that the idea that war is politics by other means is simply the way that war tends to be conducted by most states in most cases. It is not war in its essence. For that Clausewitz coined a much more interesting phrase, “absolute war” or “ideal war.” This phrase describes how war is imagined, more than how it is actually conducted. It is the most extreme form of war, one that aims solely at the destruction of the other side, the absolute defeat of the enemy by whatever means.

It is this notion of war that Clausewitz thinks is behind all versions of warfare, including the carefully controlled and targeted versions that are meant for policy purposes as “politics by other means.” Yet occasionally this politically-controlled warfare gets
out of hand, reverting to its true nature of an all-or-nothing combat between enemies each of which is pledged to do the other in, totally and without mercy. In these cases of absolute warfare religion can play a significant role. It can provide the aura of religiosity that makes such savage attacks morally comprehensible. At the extreme end is a form of absolute war that is totally merged with a religious view of the world. It is this form of religious warfare that I’ve called “cosmic war.”

Religion and War

In my book *God at War*, I’ve tried to explain how this fusion of religion and warfare is possible. I have suggested that all war is in a sense imagined war, in that the idea of war is a powerful prerequisite to actual military implementation, and in fact makes it possible. This imagined war can be characterized as an alternative reality, since it describes not just an encounter with an enemy but also a worldview in which the major elements of social reality are located. It is an inversion of ordinary reality where differences are negotiated through civil discourse and a respect for opponents even when you disagree with them. War turns that social reality on its head. In the war worldview there is a stark, dichotomous distinction between us and them, the good guys and the bad ones. The alternative reality of war turns normal civil order upside down as the war worldview allows for a centralized autocratic leadership to totally crush an evil opposition.

What interests me about war’s relation to religion is not only the way that war uses religion, and religion uses war, but how sometimes the two are fused. Religion is also an alternative reality. Like war, it imagines a completely different way of looking at the
world, one in which there are spiritual forces at work and individuals are able to tap into this power by transcending ordinary reality and shifting into a spiritual dimension of life. Just as the worldview of war provides a way of making sense of social chaos, explaining and encountering a world gone awry, the religious worldview does much the same thing. In the case of religion, though, it is not just a social anomaly that is encountered but an intensely personal one, the confrontation with the notion of mortality and the reality of one’s own impending death. Religion, like war, can take the fear of discord and not only mask it but provide a template for action in which one can overcome the forces that lead to the discord, and thus banish the fear.

So religion and war are competing alternative realities, though they can also be compatible. War uses religion to legitimize its worldview, and borrows from religious images of warfare its own attempts to force one side’s moral claims upon the other. After 9/11, in the social disruption and state of conceptual chaos that confused many Americans, it was not just an image of warfare—“the global war on terror”—that was a comforting conceptual response, but also the assurance that God was on America’s side. “God Bless America,” said the banners and bumperstickers in the bellicose spirit of the time.

On the other hand, religion uses war. For the most part it uses war metaphorically, to speak of the conflict between good and evil that is part of the spiritual life. When pious Protestant Christians sing the hymn “Onward Christian Soldiers, Marching as to War,” seldom do they think they are entering into a real military encounter using swords and sub-machine guns. They think of the war within, just as most pious Muslims regard jihad, “struggle,” as an internal and spiritual conflict and not an engagement with a real
political foe. It is true that religious scriptures are saturated with bloodshed. The great Hindu epics, the _Mahabharata_ and the _Ramayana_, are full of gory battles. Some of the most popular television programs in India have been serialized versions of these epic battle stories. But few people in India think that these epic battles are being waged today. Rather these accounts are taken to be testaments to the faith and a lesson about God’s loyalty to those who follow him, much like the warfare and destruction portrayed in the Hebrew Bible, revered by Jews, Muslims, and Christians, where in Exodus and Deuteronomy God is pictured as a military commander who shows no mercy and takes no prisoners. Few readers take this literally.

So war and religion can use each other, as often they do. But what if the alternative realities are fused together, and religion is thought to be war, and war religion? This describes some of the most vicious movements of religious violence in recent years, including the apocalyptic vision that was fundamental to the views of the leaders of ISIS. The ISIS religious/political worldview admittedly was extreme. But this view of religious warfare has been a remarkably common feature of many of the movements of religious violence in recent years.

The Fusion of Alternative Realities: Cosmic War

I have called this merger of the alternative realities of religion and warfare “cosmic war,” an idea that is central to many strident religiously-related movements around the world, including to some extent the three that are the case studies of this book. It is “cosmic” because it imagines the true confrontation behind worldly clashes to be on a transhistorical and metaphysical level. It is
conducted with an uncompromising absolutism similar to the idea of Clausewitz’s notion of “absolute war.” In merging absolute war with religion, cosmic war often appropriates traditional images of *holy war*, imagining that God is guiding military engagements that ultimately are waged on a transcendent spiritual plane. Needless to say, this kind of belief about war is difficult to combat. It gives an illusion of invulnerability to the warriors who ascribe to it, and an uncompromising attitude to leaders who have no patience with negotiation. Those who engage in it imagine themselves as religious soldiers who are fighting for God and who can literally stave off the forces of evil.

The image of cosmic war is a potent force. When the template of spiritual battle is implanted onto worldly oppositions it dramatically alters the way that the struggles are perceived and waged. When a confrontation is deemed to be a cosmic war it is thought to be conducted both on a mortal and a transcendent scale where normal timelines have no meaning. Years ago, when I had the opportunity to interview the political head of the Hamas movement in Gaza, I asked him how he thought Hamas could defeat the Israeli military, one of the most powerful fighting forces in the Middle East, with only car bombs and suicide attacks. He looked at me thoughtfully, and then, as if speaking to a small child, he said, “Maybe not in my lifetime, nor even in my children’s lifetime, or even in my children’s children’s lifetime, but maybe,” he said, pausing for effect, “in my children’s children’s children’s lifetime we might win.” Then he explained, “This is God’s war, not ours. We cannot lose.”

Conceiving of a conflict as God’s war does change the equation for those who are engaged in it. For one thing, they know that whatever they do, ultimately they will not lose. So even if a skirmish with