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# Introduction

Nicole M. Hartwell and Henrik Syse

## Does Religion Cause War? Or Does Religion Promote Peace and Restrain War?

Within the pages of this book the reader will discover a rich array of texts that, in their different ways, throw light on a range of religious attitudes toward violence and war. The challenge inherent in such a collection of texts lies in their divergence – both the divergence between texts from different religions on the one hand, and the different, partly conflicting views found within the same religion or branches of a religion on the other. To draw a single overarching conclusion about the relationship between religion, war, and ethics is well-nigh impossible. Does religion cause war? Yes. Does religion promote peace and restrain war? Yes. Both – and more – are true. Much depends on the conflict in question, the historical situation, the people and beliefs involved, and – not least important for this book – the interpretation of texts. Yet in spite of this diversity there do exist common tensions and questions that can be found throughout the materials gathered herein. In highlighting these, our purpose in this Introduction is to facilitate the reading of the texts on war, violence, and religion found in this book.

## What Is Our Subject Matter?

Before we go any further, let us start with a very basic question: What is religion? In other words, what is the basic point of departure for this book? This is not easy to answer, since there are so many nuances and differences within and between religions, such as the following:

- between monotheism and polytheism;
- between belief in a god who reveals him- or herself through history and belief in karma or other more impersonal forces that influence our lives;
- between the belief that earthly life is lived only once and the belief that any one human life is part of a long cycle of lives lived;
- between belief in an overarching, omnipotent power or principle and belief in several competing powers or principles who (or which) can challenge and potentially defeat each other;

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- between belief in a strict dividing line between earthly and heavenly existence and beliefs that do not as clearly distinguish between the two; and
- between belief in a set of canonical texts that express divine truth and belief in less text-oriented and less canonical approaches to the tenets of a religion.

For these very reasons – and several others – it is difficult to draw *one* conclusion about religion and participation in violence and war. We must, in short, be aware of the basic differences confronting us. Furthermore, religions change over time, in their expressions of their beliefs, and sometimes in their basic creeds. There is not *one* Christianity or *one* Hinduism. By saying this, we are not implying that there cannot be truth in a real, metaphysical sense in one or more religions; it is fully possible to champion this critical-analytical stance toward religions as we find them in this world and still maintain religious belief. In addition, we are not taking any stand here on what *common* truths different religions may express or whether there is possibly a basic equivalence of symbolization between religious systems and beliefs, in the sense that several religions, on a deeper level, may be carriers (partly or wholly) of the same truth, with different levels of differentiation.[1] In an academic work such as this, it is not our task to evaluate the truth claims of religious beliefs but rather to remind the reader of the complexity of religious traditions and to understand better what they say. For this reason we have not sought to formulate a single or unifying definition of religion for the purposes of this book. The traditions covered are ones that are standardly included under the heading of "religion," as implying some *relation to the transcendent*. We are aware, however, that even this very broad designation may not fit all traditions, as witnessed by, for instance, Confucianism or even Zen Buddhism.

## Ethics, War, and Violence

Religion, as a tradition or communal activity or set of beliefs, has often had (and still has) a significant influence on many communities' ways of conceptualizing right and wrong in interpersonal affairs – that is, on ethics. It follows that religion will naturally play a role in shaping the views of any given community as it grapples with one of the most challenging of all ethical questions: when and how it is right to employ violence against other human beings. There exist long-standing traditions around the world for judging when it may be right to do so, and many of these have their roots in religious belief.

Following from this, the basic questions we should ask as we read these texts are: *How is the nature of a religious tradition's set of beliefs and practices related to the views within that religion about war and peace?* And: *Can differences between the different religions and confessions on the question of war be related to the underlying philosophies and/or theologies that shape the religious beliefs and practices in question?*

These questions cannot be answered in one sentence, not least since the answers will be different for each of the religious traditions in this book. However, by framing the basic problem in this way, we are led to a number of related questions, which we will now mention in turn, and which attempt to sum up the challenges we face in the study of these texts.

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## Permission, Encouragement, or Restraint

First, we have the question of whether the religious beliefs and practices we are dealing with serve *to permit* and maybe even *to encourage* the use of armed force or whether they rather and primarily function as a *restraint on* or even *prohibition against* such force – or whether they do both, depending on the time, problem at hand, and context.[2] This question, and the underlying tension between the religious approval and the religious abhorrence of war, is one that runs through a number of the texts gathered herein; and it is one where different texts can pull in different directions even within one and the same tradition. We have those texts that identify a sacred ground for – or hallowed examples of – use of armed force and from which we can draw, more or less directly, the conclusion that such use of armed force is not only to be sanctioned, but probably even looked up to and used as an example. And then there are those texts where violence is condemned, more or less directly, and where ideals strongly in tension with violence and war-fighting are extolled as the true virtues of a right believer.

## Multiple Interpretations

Second, we are confronted with the challenge that one and the same text may be, and often has been, susceptible to multiple interpretations, pertaining not only to the reasons that can be put forward in order to justify the use of armed force, but also to the question of how and against whom such force can be used. This hermeneutical challenge takes on a grave character when parts of a text are selectively utilized in order to endorse the use of armed force for reasons that seem contrary to its whole, or possibly even contrary to the nature of the religious tradition that it is said to represent.

A number of chapters in this volume show that in some cases religious texts have been reinterpreted or, arguably, taken out of their literary and historical context by both religious and secular authorities in order to exercise control over populations or to provide religious justification for political ends, such as military expansion and conquest. It is imperative to consider how we as readers, from both within and outside these traditions, can navigate through such hermeneutical challenges. Can we self-assuredly say that there is an "essence" to each religious tradition, against which interpretations of canonical or other texts can be measured (and condemned) if they seem to serve particularly intolerant or violent purposes? Are there, in the words of the French philosopher Pierre Bayle, "clear and distinct notions of natural light" that can guide us when we are confronted with diverging interpretations? Or will the work of interpretation never be finished and always be colored by the context in which the interpreter finds him- or herself?

## Who Interprets?

This leads us to our third challenging point: *Who* is to participate in and contribute to the endeavor of interpreting religious texts? Should this be the exclusive domain of members of a particular religious faith, maybe even of just a few select members of that

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faith? Or should such a discussion take place between insiders and outsiders, possibly constituting a precursor toward greater religious tolerance and dialogue between individuals of diverging faiths? If we embrace the latter approach – for instance, with a view to utilizing classical texts to address our present-day political realities – it is important to bear in mind the need to be attentive to and respectful of the conventions of interpretation embedded within the religious traditions themselves, especially when we approach them as outsiders.

## Examples or Injunctions

Fourth, reflecting on the nature and purpose of each text found in this volume, we are led to see the tension between texts that relate narratives that are supposed to work as *examples* of what we should do (or not do), on the one hand, and those that contain *direct injunctions* to act in a certain way (and not in others), on the other. The former will tell us (mythically or historically) what certain people in certain situations thought was the right or wrong thing to do, or were led or forced to do, whereas the second will, through some authority, give us principled guidance or commandments related to war or violence. In the terms of moral philosophy, the first kind of text will often be closer to a "virtue" ethics, whereas the second will more rightly be called a "duty" or "deontological" ethics. By the first we mean texts that tell us something about what sort of persons we ought to be; with the second, the concern is with norms or rules that should guide our behavior.

## All or Some

Fifth, we should be aware as we read these texts that sometimes they hold forth examples and principles that are meant to apply to *all* human beings, regardless of their religious belief or belonging, while others draw a sharper line between those within a religious community and those outside it. In the latter case, this may lead to the creation of different rules for how to treat human beings in the respective spheres. Is an insider meant to be treated differently from and better than an outsider? In some cases, the answer to this question will be clearly specified; in other cases, one has to infer from the context what is meant, or whether any such distinction is implied at all.

There are also cases in which a text has to be understood in terms of which sector(s) of society it is addressing. For instance, if a text is directed to a group of monks, we can assume that the ethical ideals espoused are meant to apply primarily to the life of the monks and not to everyone equally. This also shows the danger of quoting a text out of context: it may be that what is held forth is not meant to apply as generally as an out-of-context quote may imply.

## Ideal or Directly Action-Guiding

Sixth, there is the difference between religion representing an ideal, referred to and talked about as something to be strived for and aspired to, but hardly shaping concrete

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events, and religion informing political life and the vicissitudes of history much more directly. This is related to the difference between virtue-ethical ideals and duty-ethical rules mentioned above. A general ideal of peacefulness will often fall into the first category, whereas political injunctions from a religious authority at some specific moment concerning some specific action will, at least at the moment in question, fall into the second category.

Regarding the first – the ideal that is strived for – we can sometimes see a tension developing between what the religious tradition would see as the best way to live in this world, on the one hand, and what actually happens in society, on the other; as, for instance, in the case of a religion preaching peacefulness and good will toward all yet engaging in, recommending, or at least accepting some acts of violence.

Arguably, to the extent that a religious tradition sees itself as *not* having much to say about the concrete dealings of politics – that is, its ideals are of another world or primarily meant as aspirations for the religious individual or community, not for political life – it may come to advance religious and ethical ideals sharply different from those that it directly or indirectly supports or accepts, politically speaking, faced with the exigencies of everyday life (including war). At one and the same time, then, a religion can be seen as extolling ideals that are in strong tension with political practices, while actually endorsing those very same political practices, if nothing else, because it has little to say about them yet seems willing to live with them. In some such cases, religion can function as a general motivator for the use of armed force – for instance, through the promotion of patriotism – even if what it says about violence and war is actually quite abstract or even in strong tension with the conduct of martial affairs.

On the other hand, we have instances where religion and religious texts clearly guide action directly, as when they express very concrete norms or laws about social and political life. In this case, there will normally be less of a tension between the religion's ultimate aims and ideals on the one hand and the practices it endorses with reference to its sacred texts on the other, the two presumably being in line with each other. If such a struggle nonetheless occurs (say, between seemingly pacific rules or texts on the one hand and injunctions to fight violently on the other), most likely one will either end up prioritizing texts that sanction the practices actually going on or come to criticize those practices and seek to change them in the light of other texts. In such cases, we are, of course, led back to the problem of interpretation.

## Political Insider or Outsider

This leads to a related challenge – number seven on our list – namely, the tension between religion as tied to a political agenda and religion as not playing any official role in shaping politics. Here again, one and the same religious tradition may exhibit different traits at different times. Indeed, in traditions that are marked by a plurality of branches or confessions, history has sometimes shown that representatives of the differing branches have found themselves in competition with one another to attain recognition and support from the state or the people. Sometimes, one branch or confession may have political power and the other not, leading to strong tensions that become tied to or interpreted in light

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of religious differences. We should note that the meaning of the text(s) we are reading will often be better understood once we know what this particular relationship consists in – that is, whether the text came from a religious tradition (or a religious denomination or branch) that saw itself as political or apolitical – and also what the role of the author or editor of the text was vis-à-vis the political authorities of his or her time.

## Atrocities

Finally, we come to one of the most perplexing questions that we confront in this volume: the ambivalent relationship between religion and the undertaking of what we would normally call atrocities. In some cases we find that in order for soldiers to commit manifestly brutal acts, the values of a religious faith are called upon and even used as a motivation, sometimes in a way that seems to overpower and set aside the actual moral guidelines espoused by the religion itself. In other cases, a political system may draw upon religious elements in order to "sacralize" its ideological cause, through attempts to justify all actions of extremity for the good of the nation or some other, higher cause. The "*Gott mit uns*" of German National Socialism chillingly comes to mind.

Yet as we struggle to comprehend historical events such as the Rape of Nanking and the Holocaust, events that have been analyzed by scholars in light of their complex relationships with Buddhist and Christian culture, respectively, we must endeavor to draw a line between the historical representation of a religious faith and the ideals that it espouses from within. Admitting that persons who identify themselves as religious have committed acts of great brutality, even believing that they have been so commanded by the tenets of their religion, is not the same as saying that these acts truly represent the tradition to which they appeal. Indeed, many such atrocities have been perpetrated by people and parties with no inner concern for religion or religious faith but who see great utility in aligning themselves with a religious tradition.

## Conclusion

By bringing to light the tensions and challenges that we confront when reading and interpreting the religious texts found in this volume, it has been our ambition in this introduction to assist the reader in comprehending the complex inter-relationship between religion, war, and ethics. As we have seen, religions can be both defenders of peace and promoters of war, noble protectors of the weak and innocent, and motivators for brutal attacks in the name of God or gods, even against human beings who could not possibly know that they had done anything wrong or believed anything erroneously. By learning from these contrasting sides of religion, one may also learn to practice one's faith in ways that incline more toward peacefulness and legitimate, measured defense than brutality.

We have, on purpose, not given references to or examples from particular texts in this introduction. That would have brought us into the field of concrete interpretation and would have presented us with a great problem of fair representation. Furthermore, it could have constrained the reader in his or her reading of the texts. Nevertheless,

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the introduction has of course been written with the texts of this book clearly in mind. Hence, it will not be hard for the reader to recognize the challenges and questions we have identified above in the individual chapters and texts of the book.

We began this introduction from a cautionary perspective, emphasizing that the religious traditions and texts gathered within this volume are marked by their diversity. Yet if we delve more deeply into each religious tradition, we can arguably find at least one common thread between the mainstreams of these traditions: namely, that they profess a strong presumption against injustice and the accompanying understanding that, in some circumstances, action must be taken to defend human dignity. What constitutes injustice and how action should be taken are defined and understood differently, of course, yet these are common assumptions found across the traditions.

In the philosophy of religion, some scholars have professed that acknowledgment of a plurality of religious traditions has the potential to foster greater *in*tolerance. According to this argument, when plurality is openly embraced by some, it will seem to others that their own deeply held truths are by the same token diminished. Following such a line of reasoning,[3] it is inferred that competing sets of believers will press their exclusivist claims against each other. By contrast, it is hoped that, with a volume such as this, by opening ourselves to a greater understanding of other religious faiths, we will be more inclined to express not only humility with regard to articulating our own beliefs, even when they are steadfastly held, but also a greater appreciation and respect for the human dignity of those whose belief systems are unfamiliar to and different from our own.

## NOTES

1 See Eric Voegelin, "Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History," in *Published Essays, 1966–1985*, Ellis Sandoz (ed.), vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), pp. 115–133.

2 See Paul Gordon Lauren, Gordon A. Craig, and Alexander L. George, *Force and Statecraft: Diplomatic Challenges for Our Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 252–255, for a succinct and heartfelt formulation of this very problem.

3 The contours of this argument are explored by Alvin Plantinga in "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, Philip Quinn and Kevin Meeker (eds.) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 172–192.

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# 1

# Judaism

Adam Afterman and Gedaliah Afterman

*Judaism, the oldest surviving monotheistic religion, traces its origins to the cultic practices and rites of ancient Israel. According to its scripture, the Tanakh, or Hebrew Bible, the nation of Israel consisted of descendants of the patriarch Abraham the Hebrew and was then led from bondage in Egypt to the land of Canaan by the prophet Moses to whom the Torah (Pentateuch), the Law, was revealed by God at Mount Sinai. Although relatively little is known about the development of its practices until 70 CE when the Second Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by Rome, Ancient Judaism subsequently evolved into what is now known as Rabbinic Judaism whose oral and written traditions were eventually composed and redacted in the Mishnah (ca. 220 CE) and the Talmud (ca. 500 CE). The Tanakh, Mishnah, and Talmud remain the three core canonical texts of Jewish law, or halakhah, although they have been supplemented and enriched through the centuries by a wealth of later commentaries, codes, and legal compilations.*

## Introduction

The debate within Judaism regarding the ethics and conduct of war has always been a marginal one. Jewish attitudes toward issues of war in general and the ethics of war in particular were almost completely theoretical. The Jewish people, certainly since the second-century rebellion of Bar Kochba, were victims of war rather than agents of war. Without a state and an army, Jews, with a diaspora mentality, did not have the privilege or the need to articulate views on the ethics of war.[1] Indeed, discussions of this issue throughout the centuries have been almost purely theoretical and not prescriptive, usually introduced as part of rabbinical interpretation of Biblical law.

That normative reflection on war has taken the form of a theoretical typology rather than a practical effort can be deduced from the fact that, up until modern times, one can hardly find an attempt to develop a category of banned or forbidden war within the framework of Judaism.[2] The omission of a forbidden war category, however, should not lead one to conclude that the Rabbis denied the soundness of such a category, that is, that they were permitted all forms of warfare; this omission seems to result from the fact that Jews were unable to initiate wars, hence the ad hoc approach to this topic.[3]

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Indeed, even the more theoretical discussions of war-related matters were not systematic, centering on one or two chapters from the *Book of Deuteronomy*. The Rabbis, with the exception of the medieval rabbinical authority Maimonides, did not attempt to reflect systematically on the subject in order to create a system of norms, but rather touched on this topic as part of their interest in the biblical laws.

As we will see, another motivation that led rabbinical authorities to debate matters related to war was their interest in the hypothetical (but politically important) question of relations between the monarch and the rabbinical institutions such as the Sanhedrin, the rabbinical Supreme Court that functioned also as a "Parliament." It is in this context that an effort was made to distinguish between a war commanded directly by God and executed by the king as a "holy war" and a political war initiated by the king to advance his own earthly interests. Rabbinical discussions were focused mainly on the circumstances under which a war could be considered a religious duty and much less on the actual conduct of such (or another kind of) war.

This state of affairs changed somewhat with the advent of Jewish nationalism and the establishment of the modern State of Israel. The emergence of Zionism, and with it the possibility of a Jewish state becoming more tangible, led some religious scholars to draw on the sporadic, theoretical, and hermeneutical debates of the previous two millennia of Jewish thought, in an attempt to establish more practical guidelines regarding war and its conduct. Other scholars, meanwhile, attempted to provide practical answers to concrete and specific dilemmas as they arose. Such efforts intensified with the founding of the State of Israel (1948) and the establishment of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). These contemporary attempts to create a "Jewish" code, however, while interesting, are in no way complete nor are they authoritative. Some of these attempts should be seen as part of the traditional halakhic discourse, namely as an effort to provide an adequate response to the emerging circumstances. Other contemporary attempts undertaken by secular institutions, such as the IDF, while drawing on rabbinical sources, should not however be categorized as "Jewish halakhic texts" or as an integrated part of the Jewish halakhic tradition. In other words, a clear distinction should be made between the traditional Rabbinic halakhic discourses and the modern attempts by institutions of the State of Israel to create a code of ethics of war. While a multifaceted relationship exists in modern Israel between religion and state, it must be said that the state has an inherently secular character, as does its army.[4]

Some examples of the aforementioned contemporary attempts to establish a Jewish practical ethical code for the conduct of war are presented later in this chapter. However, in order to adequately understand the background as well as the issues faced by these contemporary thinkers in their ongoing efforts to transform a theoretical and limited debate into a practical ethical code, we first discuss some of the main and most influential traditional sources regarding these matters.

Discussions within Judaism regarding the conduct of war can be broadly divided into two categories. The first aspect of the debate focuses on the reasons or justifications for going to war, that is, the circumstances that allow, indeed at times compel, one to launch war (*jus ad bellum*). The second aspect of the debate outlines proper conduct of a war once it has commenced (*jus in bello*). As we will see, discussions regarding the more practical questions of *jus in bello* were first introduced in one section of the Book

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of Deuteronomy and revisited much later in modern times in response to new circumstances demanding a more practical approach to issues arising apropos of the conduct of war. The rabbinical discussions, meanwhile, have focused primarily on the *jus ad bellum*, differentiating between a religious or holy war commanded directly by God, and a "regular" political war.

This chapter is not intended to provide an analysis of war in Jewish apocalyptic texts or of metaphorical speech about war.[5] The aim is rather to survey only those debates focused on the normative dimensions of war. Conceptual discussions on the nature and interrelationship of war and peace, on Jewish discourses that employ "war" as a metaphor for internal or spiritual struggles, or commentaries regarding the subject of purity and war, as in Deuteronomy (23:10–15) accordingly fall outside the scope of this chapter.

The development of the conceptual debate regarding the ethics of war in Judaism has several defining stages: from the introduction of basic ethical guidelines for the conduct of war and the concept of divinely decreed wars in the Bible to the more complex discussions by the Rabbis in the first centuries CE, as well as debates in noncanonical texts such as the Temple Scroll and the exegesis of Philo. Discussions among medieval rabbinic authorities such as Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, 1040–1105), Maimonides (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, 1138–1204), and Nachmanides (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, 1194–1270), and their varying perceptions of norms of war, introduce yet another layer of interpretation. Modernity, the emergence of Jewish nationalism, and the establishment of the State of Israel instituted, for the first time, the need for a more practical debate.

When approaching the literature on this topic, one should remain cognizant of the fact that the discussions in question all refer to wars that either have occurred in the past (or mythical past) or will occur in some theoretical future.[6] These debates, therefore, as Michael Walzer has argued,[7] should be seen not as prescriptive or as outlining actual policy for conducting warfare nor, indeed, as an accurate description of the historical events in question, but rather as having an academic or hermeneutical role. It should be understood that at least part of the rabbinic enterprise was in the realm of rabbinic imagination, including detailed discussions of institutions and procedures that either no longer existed or never existed at all.

Likewise, discussions regarding the legal procedures of conducting war can be considered part of an imagined and perhaps utopian world. The rabbinical interpretations are focused mainly on the institution of monarchy and its functions, which included the initiation and conduct of war. This led the Rabbis to reflect on the procedures that might govern participation in war. Given that these rabbinical reflections were introduced after the destruction of the Second Temple and the shattering of Jewish sovereignty in the Holy Land, thus a time when no king or Sanhedrin existed, this discourse regarding war was part and parcel of the much wider phenomenon of rabbinical fantasy that characterizes many of their writings.

The lack of practical relevance of Jewish debates on the issue of war is even more striking when it comes to the debates that engaged Maimonides, the foremost twelfth-century rabbinical halakhic authority. Maimonides fled Andalusia as a child, seeking refuge in the Middle East and North Africa, and finally settling in Egypt where he became a leader of the community. Powerless in political terms, he experienced not only the

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