1 | *Wrestling with God in the Modern West*

Christianity, like "religion" in general, evokes passionate responses, positive and negative. Yet many of these reactions, on the part of scholars and broader publics alike, indicate that at least two problems continue to pervade thinking about religion, including Christianity. First, observers too often think of given religions as single entities defined by rigid dogma, an oversimplification that ignores the fluidity, contestation, and multiple manifestations within all religious traditions. Religions simultaneously encompass sets of practices, ethical guidelines, doctrines and sacred texts or text analogs, imagined ideas, and historical legacies. Second, oversimplifying religion lends itself to emphasizing and caricaturizing extremist interpretations of religious traditions, especially by those who use religious teachings to justify violence, terror, and coerced conformity on the part of others. It also risks representing such interpretations as an easily definable core of complex religious traditions themselves.[1]

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[1] I do not argue that focusing on what is labeled religious extremes is unimportant. A great deal of influential work has done so from a variety of disciplines (religious studies, history, sociology, and law, among others), using a variety of methodological approaches and focusing on a wide range of causal and constitutive factors. See, for example, Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby's massive undertaking, *The Fundamentalism Project,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press (*Accounting for Fundamentalisms,* 1994; *Fundamentalisms Observed,* 1994; *Fundamentalisms and the State,* 1996; *Fundamentalisms Comprehended,* 1995; *Fundamentalisms and Society,* 1997); Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000; and *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State, from Christian Militias to Al Qaeda,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008; and Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts, and Michael Jerryson, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013; Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003; and Paul W. Kahn, *Sacred Violence: Torture, Terror, and Sovereignty,* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011. In political science, see, among others, Jonathan Fox, *Religion, Civilization, and Civil War:*

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Focusing on dogma and extremes, however, leaves out important debates and issues that drive a great deal of religious actors' political work. In order to overcome these problems and address a critical gap in our understanding of religion's ongoing influence in western modernity, I turn the lens "inward" (that is, from a self-described western perspective) to examine tensions and problems in Christian ethics regarding violence, otherness, and social justice. Christians make up the largest percentage of religious adherents in the world – 2.1 billion people or 33 percent of the world's population – and the development of Christianity is intimately tied to the development of modernity.[2] Yet analysts in international relations do not sufficiently examine the political implications of the wide range of Christian ethics at stake in international politics.[3]

Of course, there is no firm line between the extremes and the center of religious traditions, including Christianity. Indeed, that is part of the point. Those who defend their religious traditions as "pure," whether from the margins or from the center of religious thought, each miss the messiness and problems entailed in articulating religious ethics. Looking introspectively into the modern west to examine Christian ethics that are not easily labeled extreme for their times, I argue, puts the focus directly on actual tensions regarding otherness, social justice, and the legitimacy of violence, rather than equating religion with those

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1945 through the New Millenium, Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 2005; Fred Halliday, *Two Hours That Shook the World,* London: Saqi Books, 2002; Mona Kanwal Sheikh, *Guardians of God: Inside the Religious Mind of the Pakistani Taliban,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017; MaryAnn Tetreault and Robert Allen Denemark, eds., *Gods, Guns, and Globalization: Religious Radicalism and International Political Economy*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Reinner, 2004; Barrington Moore, Jr., *Moral Purity and Persecution in History,* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000; Ron Hassner, *War on Sacred Grounds,* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009.

[2] See www.adherents.com, accessed January 12, 2011. I refer to modernity, following many other scholars of religion and secularism, as the temporal era in the west that succeeded the medieval period.

[3] There are, of course, exceptions, notably including Erin K. Wilson, *After Secularism*, New York: Palgrave, 2012. See also Scott M. Thomas, 2005. *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: The Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, and J. Daniel Philpott, *Just and Unjust Peace: An Ethic of Political Reconciliation,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Scholars across a range of fields are paying increasing attention to Christian groups on issues such as humanitarianism, which I address in Chapter 6.

who see these issues as settled. These are, moreover, manifestly ethical and political issues. Examining them and the tensions surrounding them does not ignore the problem of whether religious guidelines justify or condemn violence, but instead allows a more comprehensive understanding of how ethical struggles are shaped by both religious tradition and political and historical contexts.

These struggles recur, albeit not always in the same form, and permeate the ethical landscape of modernity. The premise of this book is that Christian wrestling over the ethical purposes of modernity is rich in productive tensions that provide important insights into major debates in both international politics and international relations,[4] even in what Charles Taylor has famously called our "secular age."[5] The book's central conclusion is that such wrestling is also painfully repetitious in its failures to bridge ethical divides of two specific kinds: between Christians and less powerful or non-Christian "others"; and, relatedly, between violent and non-violent legitimations of intervention and attempts to achieve peace and social justice. Christians have frequently gotten it wrong on these issues, but the consequences are particularly serious when they stop wrestling with God and their own consciences and think they have gotten it right. Focusing on tensions in Christian ethics does not mean that Christians can or will resolve the problems of injustice and violence in the world. Conversely, the lesson is also not that forms of secularism are superior or that self-avowed secularists do not wrestle. Instead, because of their intertwined histories, which include the horrors of colonialism and slavery as well as the controversial promise of humanitarianism and human rights, these consequences are similar for both Christian and secular actors in western modernity and international politics writ large. These intertwined legacies are part of ongoing modalities of power that continue to shape Christian ethical struggles. The lesson, therefore, is to think through what kinds of issues repeat themselves or appear in new guises and what kinds of responses are more problematic than others in this intertwined history of Christianity and modernity.

The iconic account of wrestling with God comes from the story of Jacob, which for Christians is part of the Old Testament

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[4] I use international politics to refer to the political on a global scale, and international relations or IR to refer to the academic discipline that studies international politics.

[5] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.

(Genesis 32:22–32).[6] But Jacob was not the only biblical wrestler with divinity. Paul, formerly Saul, wrestled with God in the story of the Acts of the Apostles when he was struck by lightning and called to stop persecuting Christians. Martha and the apostles verbally sparred with Jesus about how to enact responsibility toward self, other, and God. Most famously for Christians, Jesus himself wrestled with God in his moments of despair at the Mount of Olives, praying either to avoid the suffering and death before him or to have the strength to carry it through as a redemptive sign and even a gift to others.[7] With these examples as backdrops, ordinary Christians and church leaders throughout the past two millennia have wrestled with God – not always, but frequently – over their individual and social triumphs and failings, actions and inactions, grief and suffering. Numerous Christian mystics have written of their struggles with prayer and pain, while Christian activists and theologians wrestled with whether and how to implement "the kingdom" on earth or compromise with the powers that be. The doubt and the uncertainty, as well as the angst and the anger, that such wrestling represents are integral parts of the ongoing history of Christian ethics in action. And people – religious and nonreligious, from the top to the bottom of social hierarchies in the modern west – have also continually wrestled with whether – and, if so, how – God matters in their politics. Wrestling with God has helped to shape the course and meaning of western modernity for its participants,[8] with repercussions for the field of international relations.

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[6] Jacob, who had conspired to defraud his brother Esau out of his inheritance, went away to become rich and married two sisters, Rebekah and Leah. Years later, he left his father-in-law to return home with his wives and accumulated wealth. He wrestled one night on the way home with a man who turned out to be either God or a messenger from God. The man injured Jacob's hip but did not prevail over him. Before the man left, Jacob demanded that he bless him, while also sending word to his brother Esau that he came bearing gifts of his best livestock to make amends. God's messenger told Jacob that he had "striven with God and with humans, and ... prevailed" (Gen: 32:28). Jacob's morally dubious yet prosperous life, as well as his acknowledgment of his own ethical shortcomings, foretell subsequent ethical struggles over power, wealth and otherness in both Judaism and Christianity.

[7] These stories are in Acts 9:1–9, Luke 10:38–42, and Luke 22:39–46, respectively.

[8] I do not capitalize "west" or "western," as a gesture toward rejecting their superiority in global ethical hierarchies. While the sources on debates about "modernity" are too numerous to list here, I note that I use the term here in the broad, temporal, and geographic sense, as well as the more specific situatedness of those who struggle within it.

Obvious examples abound. Augustinian formulations shaped modern definitions of *jus ad bellum* and *just in bello,* the laws of war and laws in war, respectively, which are still debated today.[9] Christian ethical debates, divisions, and actions influenced the creation of the nation-state system and capitalism during and after the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and the ideas of the United States' "Founding Fathers."[10] Again, the boundaries of religion vis-à-vis the state and economy are still matters of debate. Christians provided both religious cover for and religious arguments against slavery and colonialism from the fifteenth through the twentieth centuries and argue about the extent to which racism and neocolonialism exist today.[11] Scholars are also excavating more recent examples of Christian wrestling, while still others remain hidden. More attention is being paid to Christian academics and diplomats such as Herbert Butterfield, Reinhold Niebuhr, John Foster Dulles, and Jacques Maritain, who shaped debates about important international political institutions from before World War I through the creation of the post–World War II order, while others – including Simone Weil, Dorothy Day, and the religious thinkers of the Harlem Renaissance – articulated strong critiques of institutional power that are less studied outside of theological and activist circles. Christian diplomats also played key roles in institutionalizing modern forms of multilateralism – as seen, for example, in the foundational role of prominent Christian Democrats such as Robert Schumann, Alcide de Gasperi, Paul van Zeeland, and Konrad Adenauer in crafting the European Union.[12]

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9 Terry Nardin, ed., *The Ethics of War and Peace,* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.

10 Daniel H. Nexon, *The Struggle for Power in Early Modern Europe,* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009; Daniel J. Philpott, *Revolutions in Sovereignty,* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.

11 Critiques come from Christian theological circles as well as social theory. See, for example, Gil Anidjar, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity,* New York: Columbia University Press, 2014; Gary Dorrien, *Economy, Difference, Empire: Social Ethics for Social Justice,* New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, for a fascinating discussion of contemporary theological interpretation of these issues; and the ongoing work of the Transatlantic Roundtable on Religion and Race, described in William Ackah, "Ethics from the Underside," in Brent J. Steele and Eric A. Heinze, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Ethics and International Relations,* London: Routledge, 2018, pp. 543–553.

12 Timothy A. Byrnes and Peter J. Katzenstein, eds., *Religion in an Expanding Europe,* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Of course, they

Christian thinkers and activists articulated theological arguments and actions in favor of liberation (through both nonviolent and sometimes violent means), as well as justifications for oppression. Today, some Christians still want to evangelize the world, while others vehemently oppose proselytism of all kinds.[13]

Yet both Christian practitioners and their detractors often forget the wrestling part of Christianity. Practitioners frequently become at ease in theological offshoots like the "prosperity gospel" or find religious certainty in exclusionary passages of biblical texts to justify religious crusades or social conformity.[14] Detractors focus on these exclusionary passages and the practitioners who promote them to dismiss all of Christianity as rigidly dogmatic, historically misguided, and ethically suspect. These practitioners and their detractors assume that Christians wrestle no more, and are instead imbued with a certainty that gives them a warranted, or dangerous, sense of superiority, depending on the source. They further assume that the ethical tensions within Christianity and modern international politics can be seen as fundamentally separate.

But these assumptions miss much of the lifeblood of Christian ethics and their symbiotic relationship with international politics. They also miss their implications for international relations.

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worked hand in hand with non-Christians and those with only nominal Christian affiliations, including Jean Monnet and Altiero Spinelli.

[13] Some of this literature is reviewed in Cecelia Lynch, "Acting on Belief: Christian Perspectives on Suffering and Violence," *Ethics & International Affairs*, 14 (2000), 83–8; Cecelia Lynch and Tanya B. Schwarz, "Humanitarianism's Proselytism Problem," *International Studies Quarterly*, 60 (4), 2016, pp. 636–646,

[14] The "prosperity gospel" connects faith, and usually the act of giving money to a church, to gains in material prosperity. As Kate Bowler says, "The prosperity gospel is a wildly popular Christian message of spiritual, physical, and financial mastery that dominates not only much of the American religious scene but some of the largest churches around the globe." She points out that, unlike some observers' attempts to fit it exclusively into Pentecostalism or Evangelicalism, the prosperity gospel draws both its precepts and adherents from across the Christian religious landscape. Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 3 and passim. See also David Martin's corpus of work on "neo-Pentecostalism," in which, he observes, "The Protestant Ethic has switched from the currency of virtue to a conspicuously financial currency and, ... the proper service of others has become a form of helping oneself." Martin, *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002, p. 17.

I am here making a potentially problematic assumption of a collective, first-person plural that is western, modern, and marked by the symbiotic history of Christian/secular formations. I do so not to assert that all who live in the west are Christian or secular, or to deny the richness of religious and secular pluralisms and syncretisms, or to ignore the enormous growth of Christianity in areas outside of the west (which I address in Chapter 6). Rather, I wish to highlight the struggles within Christian ethics in the context of the development of secularisms that are an essential component of the history of the west and to drop the assumption that we have exited out of these struggles in contemporary times. There is an increasing and much-needed attention to histories, legacies, and ethics emanating from other parts of the world, but there are also unresolved debates about western Christianity's fraught legacies, inflected with ongoing assumptions that connect ethical struggles in modern Christianity and international relations.

In addressing these struggles, I open an analytical space for revealing Christian ethical tensions in modern international relations, not to counter their absence by promoting Christianity as the be-all and end-all of modern ethics but to understand it as formative and yet fluid; influential and yet frequently beset by contradictions; and, most of all, reflective of ethical debates in international politics and the field of IR itself. The former Pope Benedict XVI insisted on giving a prominent place to the Christian origins of the European Union, and the Religious Right in the United States frequently asserts that exclusivist interpretations of Christian doctrines should drive social and foreign policy regarding sexuality, reproductive rights, and religious freedom around the world, while committed secularists too often represent Christianity as a dogmatic "other" that must be ignored, dismissed, feared, or even ridiculed. Each of these poles lends itself to stereotypes, avoiding the question of how the broader range of Christian practices intersects with ethical concerns about peace, justice, non-Christian others, and violence in international politics.

The range of Christian ethics, not to mention how practitioners wrestle with them, is actually quite complex. Christian texts and teachings regarding peace, justice, conflict, and violence are not only contradictory themselves but also open to differing interpretations among adherents. One of the major fault lines among Christians in their relationship to secularism, the nation-state, and universalism, of course, is that between Catholics and Protestants Catholics and Protestants. The

sociologist David Martin's work on their different trajectories is espe-
cially instructive on the differences between "Anglo-American
voluntarism" and "the Catholic mode of entry into the modern
world."[15] However, differences exist not only between Catholics and
Protestants, conservatives and liberals, mainline denominations and
Pentecostals, but also among Catholics, Protestants, Anabaptists, Non-
conformists, Evangelicals, and Pentecostals themselves.[16]

One way in which intra- as well as interdenominational differences
are exposed concerns "realist" versus "prophetic" interpretations of
Christian ethics. Realists tend to agree that Christians have to live in an
imperfect world and make the best of it, which means understanding
that choices often become the lesser of two evils. For those who insist
on prophetic interpretations, realist acknowledgement of the existence
of sin in the world too often means accommodating such sin in ways
that fall into active complicity with evil.[17] Recognizing as well as
complicating these and other binaries allows us to see that Christian
ethics are often in tension, not only in early modern debates about
sovereignty, the Papacy, and colonialism but also in debates taking

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[15] "The Catholic mode of entry into the modern world has been very different from
the Protestant mode and, above all, different from the mode of Anglo-American
voluntarism. For a long time it endeavored to conserve within a single and
universal system the mutualities of an organic society *locked* together with the
symmetries of ecclesiastic and political power, against the corrosions of
individualism, including moral choice, and of capitalism, including consumer
choice in religion." By the nineteenth century, however, Catholicism was
developing some of the same "liberal" forms of Christianity as what is now
considered mainline Protestantism. Martin, *Pentecostalism*: 18–19. David
Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory,* Aldershot, UK:
Ashgate Publishing, 2005.

[16] Martin, of course, acknowledges many of these differences, focusing in
particular on the difference between Calvinism and Wesleyanism among
Protestants, and later among Methodism and Pentecostalism. Martin,
Pentecostalism.

[17] I thank Tanya Schwarz for pointing out that "evil" is a fraught term, especially
given the strong connotations that Christians of different sociopolitical
persuasions associate with it. At this point, I refer primarily to the role of
prophetic voices in damning political oppression and economic injustice as
evil. (However, political and Christian realists also famously discuss the
necessity of choosing the "lesser evil," as in Chapter 4). David L. Clough and
Brian Stiltner provide a very helpful discussion of these poles and how they are
complicated in practice in debates about Just War versus pacifism in their book,
Faith and Force: Christian Debate about War, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown
University Press, 2007. See also Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic
Imagination*, 2nd edn., Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001.

place at the height of allegedly "secular" modernity – such as during the pacifist–Just War debates of the 1930s, the disputes about liberationism in the 1970s and 1980s, and arguments about how to construct humanitarian ethics today. In each of these debates, the crux of critical issues of violence, justice, and alterity provoked intense reactions among Christians, exposing ethical fault lines regarding the perennial problem of how to live in the world.

These Christian ethical debates have inspired deeply felt actions, disagreements, and proposals for political change, often in close relationship with the development of various forms of secularism. Analyzing these ethical tensions turns the lens inward and requires a hard look at many assumptions familiar to students of politics in the west, increasingly known as the Global North. Thus, a related question concerns religion's assumed "other," secularism, and its connection to Christianity. Charles Taylor has argued that, in the modern era, the "default option" for commitment and belief is secularism; i.e., that unlike in the medieval era, to be "religious" is now a choice, and one that people must make proactively, given our "secular age."[18] Yet we should still ask how, why, and by whom is secularism considered the default option in the modern era? Certainly, there are Christians, including in the modern west, who see Christianity as an integral and unquestioned component of their lives – just as there are others who reject Christianity in favor of nonbelief or nonadherence, or convert to other religions altogether. What are the parameters, then, of our "secular age" within what Peter Berger has called the current "desecularization of the world"?[19]

I pose these questions in the midst of ongoing, vociferous debates about not only the religious and the secular but also Christianity's relationship to the secular. To what degree does secularism merely represent a historically or conceptually conditioned offshoot of Christian (especially Protestant) norms, practices, and governmentality, following the work of Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, or Gil Anidjar?[20]

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[18] Taylor explicitly focuses on the modern west in his seminal work, *A Secular Age*, 2007.

[19] Peter L, Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999.

[20] Gil Anidjar's *Blood* eschews historicism in favor of a metaphorically powerful emphasis on what might be called Christianity's circulatory violence; Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood are two of the most famous expositors of this thesis,

While Berger's thesis about desecularization emphasizes the religiosity of non-European societies, he, as well as others, is also recovering the religio-secular character of western societies that were thought to be almost exclusively secular, including many of those in Europe.[21] Asad and especially Mahmood focus on the disciplinary techniques that the allegedly secular but ultimately "Christian" state brings to contemporary liberal modernity, particularly vis-à-vis the multiple forms of exclusion constantly reasserted against Muslims and Islam.[22] Lively debates in the sometimes-intersecting, sometimes-oppositional fields of theology, religious studies, and philosophy also address the relationship between the religious/Christian vis-à-vis the secular, but in very different ways. Jeffrey Stout, for example, argues in favor of a democratic (American) tradition that is both morally and spiritually rich, arguing against both secularists who want to deny the importance of Christian contributions and the school of "religious orthodoxy" that wants to privilege what it sees as essentially Christian virtues.[23] My examination of Christian ethical debates has a different purpose: I seek to provide new insights into the meaning and complexity of existing religious/secular categories while emphasizing the need to keep these categories in tension with each other and with changing political contexts.

Christianity's Place in Debates about Religion

Scholars in international relations announced religion's "return from exile" in 2000 and continue to note its growing relevance in both popular and academic discourse.[24] Those who proclaimed the

   especially for Christian/secular/Muslim historical relations. See Asad,
   *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and
   Islam,* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, and *Formations of
   the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity,* Stanford, CA: Stanford University
   Press, 2003; and Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority
   Report,* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016.

21 Grace Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates,* Oxford: Oxford
   University Press, 2005.

22 Asad, *Genealogies*; Mahmood, *Religious Difference.*

23 Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition,* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University
   Press, 2004.

24 *Millenium* special issue on religion, December 2000. This special issue was
   revised and reprinted, with additional contributions, as a book in 2003. Pavlos
   Hatzopoulos and Fabio Petito, eds., *Religion in International Relations:*