Introduction: Exploring Religion and War

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The association of religion with war is as old as our earliest writings from China (Yates 2003) and the Near East (Ballentine 2015) and continues to find expression in contemporary discourse. Despite myriad laments about this association, it is indisputable that religious rhetoric has supported military aims across geographies and historical eras. While there is arguably a propagandistic dimension to some of this rhetoric, there is no good reason to suppose that warriors on the ground have been indifferent to it. For instance, it is well-known that some Christian crusaders were inspired by portents, dreams, prophecies (Housely 2008; Gaposchkin 2017) and by devotional songs (Riley-Smith 1997), and that the same have inspired passionate millennial groups in the USA and abroad (Graziano 1999; Filiu 2011; Barkun 2013; Hegghammer 2017). Even for seemingly secular wars, just war principles rooted at least in part in religious thinking (e.g., Gratian, Aquinas) seep into war's justifications, as do inspirational fighting models based on religious legends (e.g., David, Huseyn, Arjuna). However secular the aims of military leaders today, no astute historian can deny that religion has played a role in shaping the way war has been imagined for centuries. It still does so, as we see in today's strident religious nationalisms. In short, the subject matters.

This volume explores the link of religion with war under four rubrics: classical foundations; just war; religious nationalism; and featured conflicts. Part I on classical foundations, consisting of eight chapters, investigates war as conceived at the origins of eight major religious traditions. Part II addresses just war theories as lodged in religious thinking, and Part III treats various expressions of religious nationalism, a subject with special relevance to contemporary times. Part IV features conflicts that illustrate interdisciplinary approaches to religion and war, touching on rituals, poems, piety, fierce goddesses, messianic rebellions and

autonomous fighting groups thriving outside the margins of the Mughal state. This essay introduces the four parts and then summarizes each chapter.

CLASSICAL FOUNDATIONS

While definitions of religion will be endlessly debated, that religion does bear on classical wars and literature about wars may be ascertained in part by art and in part by the attribution of extraordinary passions to warriors. Beyond vivid renderings of military triumph overseen by gods (Bahrani 2008) and poetic visions of gods leading battles (Kitts 2013, 2017), we have ancient reports ascribing a conspicuous religious enthusiasm to the fight, as if to elevate the fighting register. We see this, for instance, in zeal for the holy land, in righteous indignation about perceived wrongs and in devotional performances on the battlefield, all of which conceivably endow battles with the transcendent mantle of "cosmic war," as Mark Juergensmeyer has applied the term to certain terroristic impulses (2016). Rituals, both individual and communal, might confer some of this religious enthusiasm (Kitts 2010, 2018, 2022 and Chapters 19 and 20). On an individual level, bodily purifying, swearing oaths, praying and anointing weapons historically have sanctified warriors before battle, whereas communal rituals, such as marching in formation, singing, waving standards and cursing enemies have been thought to strengthen solidarity (Von Rad 1991 [1958]; Riley-Smith 1997; Hassner 2016; Gaposchkin 2017; Chapter 17). Postwar commemorations, such as passion plays, poetry, dance, art and pilgrimages, can add to the religious fervor, particularly when these celebrate victors or lionize the fallen (Sells 2003; Chapters 6 and 20). A further influence might be legends of betrayal and of the ethical dilemmas of heroes, which surely too disturb and engage audiences (Chapters 4 and 12). It would seem impossible to grasp war in religious imagination without studying these very human experiences.

At the same time, war as conceived in religious imagination can enjoy an obvious freedom from human experiences, or at least be not entirely tethered to them. Some of our earliest Near Eastern narratives, for instance, herald heavenly wars culminating in the imposition of order over chaos: Sky gods subduing riotous waters is a popular theme (Collins 2003, 2007; Fishbane 2004; Wyatt 2005; Schwemer 2007, 2008; Kitts 2013, 2017). While these violent encounters set *in illo tempore* may have signaled a feeling of relief for some audiences, others arguably were thrilled by them, as we can ascertain from reportedly regular oral

performances of the Babylonian Enuma Elish and as we see on Mesopotamian cylinder seals depicting fantastic deicides, raging monsters and god-on-monster combat.[1] A certain glee in myths that violently impose order might be inferred too by the astonishing number of eschatological expectations in world religions, although such expectations are not only triumphal but can be mired in cataclysmic predictions and/or messianic hopes (see Chapters 1, 2 and 15). A diversity of aims for such narratives thus must be acknowledged, including aims to entertain as well as to comfort.

Narratives of religious war can be fantastic but also sentimental. Many religious war tales are set within cosmic schemes that emphasize mysterious forces at work in history and worldly conditions that have gone somehow awry. It is not uncommon for scriptures and classical epics to bemoan a pattern of fallen ages and to express a certain tristesse (e.g., the Heike Monogatari, the Mahabharata), qualities that make them universally appreciable and poetic. On the fantastic side, and especially within the epic genre, an effort to remediate chaos and suppress sinister foes may occasion the harnessing of supernatural weapons and godlike powers (Arjuna and his Gandiva bow come to mind). Despite the glamor to such tales, there is also a restorative theme. For instance, one Buddhist just war doctrine is rooted in the need to redeem an *a-dhammic* world through samsaric militarism until worldly *dhamma* is restored and people begin to behave morally (Frydenlund 2017). This example highlights the intersection of cosmic and human themes.

JUST WAR

As already implied, if there is a religious urge to correct worldly instabilities, it is not only poetic. We see real-time implications in just war theories that strive to clarify the conditions and modes of justified military conduct. Just war theory has roots in the earliest centuries of virtually all the religious traditions treated herein. European just war theory stems actually from pre-Christian times (e.g., Cicero) and is still

[1] For instance, winged monsters devour the heads of bearded men on an Old Babylonian seal (from Ishchali, dated 1800–1700 BCE; see at http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/dbfiles/objects/1321.htm). On another, an open-mouthed, winged dragon rampages (Tell Agrab; ca. 1800–1700 BCE; see at http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/dbfiles/objects/1277.htm). Number 15618, from Tell Asmar (dated 2300–2200 BCE), shows a monster of the hydra variety, with seven heads, four legs and flames shooting from its back, facing two gods who are severing its heads (see at http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/dbfiles/objects/1065.htm). Discussed in Kitts (2017).

compelling in principle. However ancient, concerns for *jus in bello*, or the regulation of how warriors actually fight, are integrated into the Geneva Conventions, and violation of those rules today provokes feelings of outrage based on a presumed fairness whose religious roots are rarely contemplated (but see Chapters 9 and 10).

In fact, there are evolutions and historical contingencies to all just war theories. For instance, in the eleventh century Maimonides reinforced the prescriptions for biblically commanded war (Deuteronomy 20:16–18) and at the same time softened those for optional war (Deuteronomy 20:10–12), at a time when a war led by Jews had become virtually inconceivable. He famously engaged with Greek and Islamic notions as well as biblical ones (see Chapter 9). In Islamic traditions, although ideals of right conduct on the battlefield are laid out in the Qur'an, Islamic thinking on fighting evolved and adapted first when Islam expanded out from the Arabian Peninsula in contact with the multicultural empires surrounding it, and then later when it brushed up against European ideals (see Cook 2012; Chapter 11). Some contemporary dichotomies that we see in extremist thinking, such as the tension between *Dar al Harb* (abode of war) and *Dar al Islam* (abode of peace), appear to be adapted notions (Hashmi and Johnson 2012), and they diverge from the ideals of defensive war advocated in the earliest Quranic verses (Afsaruddin 2012; Chapter 3).

As for Asian traditions, some just war notions are embedded in literary classics. Indian ideals are exceedingly old and vary from text to text, but the epic poem the Mahabharata famously crystallizes religious rationalizations for war and right conduct on the battlefield (see Chapters 4 and 12). *Karmayoga* and *rajadharma* are some of the rubrics under which the ethics of fighting are explored, but there are also deeper themes, such as the imagined conflation of killing in war with killing in ritual sacrifice (Heesterman 1993; Johnson 1998; Brekke 2005; Chapter 4). As for Buddhism, the world's many Buddhist traditions do not universally reject the doctrine of just war, although they have come to terms with war in their own disparate ways (see Chapters 5, 7, 8, 13 and 18). Some just war doctrines, as represented above, are driven by a restorative theme, but others are symbolically ferocious, as we see in Buddhist tantric texts and spectacular rites designed to invoke protective deities and to shield warriors by defensive magic (Sinclair 2014). Even the most pacifistic of Buddhist doctrines is compelled to address the bloody aftermath of war, and consequently theories *jus post bellum* have resonated with some Buddhists (Chapter 13).

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

It may seem strange that as all of us become more globally connected in our economies and social interactions there has emerged a number of fervent religious nationalisms that seem to differ in sensibility from the old allegiances to nation-states. Whereas nation-states were once seen as guaranteeing individual liberties and freedom from constraint (per Hobbes, Hume and others; Gorski 2010), at least in the West, now in many parts of the world religious identities seem to be overwhelming national identities (Lahr 2007; Eisen 2011; Gorski and Perry 2022; Chapters 14–18). Arguably, religious fervor is not a new feature of politics, and nor, for that matter, are reports of theophanic battles led by marching gods and goddesses who rally warriors (Kitts 2013) and cradle their favorites in death (Chapter 21). Yet the merging of national and religious identities has become conspicuous today, in some cases built on foundational religious legends whose contemporary reconstructions are historically dubious. In many cases, religious nationalism is forged by conflict, such as by the flaring of antagonisms over contested religious sites (Sells 2003; Jaffrelot 2007; Hassner 2012). Collective rituals, such as pilgrimages, songs, dramatizations and also riots, tend to anchor these sites in public imagination (Van der Veer 1996; Chapter 17). Of course, many factors – economic, political, situational – can inflame religious nationalism (Juergensmeyer 2008).

FEATURED CONFLICTS

The point of Part IV is to offer a sampling of analyses of historical conflicts that cannot be understood well without consideration of religious imagination. Part IV therefore supports the aim of the entire volume through illustrations. Hence, Chapter 19 addresses the significance of liturgy and ritual for creating the mentality of earliest Christian crusaders. Chapter 20 explores how the pursuit of piety was understood to sanctify warriors before battle, as reconstructed from Islamic military history. Chapter 21 investigates the multilayered worship of Durga and Kali, Indian goddesses associated with destruction and protection, in various guises (also see Chapters 4 and 12). Chapter 22 highlights the messianic hopes of the astonishingly destructive Taiping Rebellion. Chapter 23 focuses on autonomous martial communities, violence and the state in early modern South Asia. All five chapters are authored by stellar scholars who can validate the

premise of the volume, which is that religious imagination has infused and shaped the mentalities of warriors in diverse historical settings.

Following are brief summaries of each chapter.

CLASSICAL FOUNDATIONS

Chapter 1: *Biblical Paradigms of War in History and Eschatology*

John J. Collins

Part I begins with biblical paradigms for war in history and eschatology. From songs of liberation (e.g., Exodus 15) to prescriptions for genocidal violence (e.g., Deuteronomy 7–2), the Bible's views on war are diverse and complicated. John J. Collins outlines disputes about both the historicity and the morality of biblical war tales, situating the notion of covenantal loyalty as well as the most striking biblical reports of cruelty in the context of ancient Near Eastern war rhetoric. Rather than report actual genocidal violence, different biblical war narratives have been argued to serve Israelite identity formation and thus to be ahistorical. But the harnessing of such narratives to serve actual genocidal aims later – by, for instance, the American Puritans into modern times – shows the profound worldly reach of these narratives, whether initially ahistorical or not. As for eschatological violence, one victorious trope in prophetic literature is the divine devouring of Gog and Magog and various animals and birds of prey, who also are summoned to eat the flesh and drink the blood of the worldly princes (Ezekiel 39), a voracious trope that persisted into the Book of Revelation (19:17–18) to describe retribution at the end of time. Fantasies of violent retribution are likened not only to devouring flesh, but also to harvesting grain and grapes, to marketing people and to enslavement. Other apocalyptic fantasies are quietistic, wherein the faithful await divine vengeance in the age to come, although human participation in the final days can be anticipated as well, as it is in the Dead Sea War Scroll. Collins ends by exploring the diverse appeals of violent fantasies, from shaping the terms of anticipated conflicts, to offering a therapeutic repose in the face of oppression, to providing hope for the eventual restoration of righteousness.

Chapter 2: *Early Christianity and War*

Paul Middleton

In popular thinking, early Christianity severed itself from its Jewish progenitor by embracing a crucified messiah who suffered nonviolently and "whose kingdom was not of this world." These Christians reputedly extolled martyrdom, not war, as the ultimate resistance to

imperial violence, at least until the Christianization of the Roman Empire under Constantine. But Paul Middleton points out that, in fact, violence is not at all absent from the New Testament. The gospel traditions about Jesus allow that, alongside the blessings on peacemakers and exhortations to nonviolence, there are threats of eschatological judgment against those who reject Jesus (Lk 10.13–16), pronouncements of vengeance upon this "evil generation" (Lk 11.49–52), as well as graphic depictions of eternal torment (Mk 9.48; Lk 19.23–28; Mt 25.21), quite in addition to representations of Jesus as the eschatological Son of Man who will descend with his army of angels to gather the elect and to unleash apocalyptic judgment on those destined for destruction (Mk 13.24–27; Mt 24.29–31). Some scholars embrace these more militant representations as consistent with a Zealot Jesus aspiring to overthrow the Romans with his heavenly army. Others examine the peace-promoting parables as insinuating that failure to act ethically now results in violent retribution later (e.g., Mt 13.24–30), a picture Paul seems to support, as his encouragement to bless one's persecutors (e.g., Rom 12; 1 Thess 5.1) is balanced by the assurance that eventually the god of peace will "crush Satan underfoot" (Rom 16.20; cf. Rom 12.19). Meanwhile, Paul deploys military metaphors to envision himself and his churches as fellow soldiers in a war against cosmic forces, whose battles, even against arguments, will be fought with divine weapons (e.g., 2 Cor 10.3–5). In the Book of Revelation, God's people engage in end-time battles as soldiers in the armies of heaven. Warrior themes continue into the martyrologies, some of which are figured as cosmic conflicts between Christians and earthly magistrates and some of which replicate the agonistic language from gladiatorial combats in the Roman arena.

Chapter 3: *Fighting and Martial Valor in Islamic Thought*

Asma Afsaruddin begins by separating the term *jihād* in contemporary discourse from its use in the Meccan and Medinan periods of Islamic history (610–622 CE and 622–632 CE, respectively) as represented in the Qur'an. Rather than "war in the path of God," *jihād* there means to struggle, to strive, sometimes to overcome one's desires and to obey God – the standard interpretation – and sometimes to preach the message of Islam, which some later scholars will enfold into military duty. But it is Quranic *qitāl* that refers specifically to "armed combat," and the Arabic word for war in general is *harb*, which is never used with the phrase "in the path of God." Nonetheless, fighting and the conduct of war do receive ample discussion in the Qur'an. In the Meccan period,

Muslims were prohibited from physically retaliating against growing aggression from Meccan polytheists; the Qur'an instead counseled forbearance until God might correct the persecutors' immoral actions. Two years after the Medinan period began, however, permission was granted to fight against those who initiated war, those who wrongfully drove believers from their homes, those who violated oaths with the Messenger and to defend victims who cried out for help. The exhortation to fight *jus ad bellum* – for just cause – with right intention and in self-defense became obligatory for first-generation Muslims, and divine assistance was assured for righteous combat. As for *jus in bello*, a number of passages proscribe aggression, initiating hostilities and fighting with rancor, while others urge proportionality once combat has been initiated and restraint if it has ceased. In contrast, some later pundits construed some passages as promoting Muslim belligerence against non-Muslims, including other Peoples of a Book, until they submitted or paid the poll tax, which contradicts earlier passages requiring that fighting be contingent on prior aggression and is forbidden against non-hostiles. The usual reasoning for this contradiction is that later verses abrogated earlier ones, but this is disputed in the long tradition of exegesis. A further corrective to popular rhetoric is that the word for martyr, *shahīd*, is never used in the Qur'an to connote one who dies in battle. Reference to those who die for a righteous cause is not restricted to a military context, and one is urged not to glorify military deaths. Hadith texts, collected over centuries, complicate this picture.

Chapter 4: *Hinduism and War*

Kaushik Roy takes issue with the popular assumption that "Hinduism," a term of nineteenth-century vintage, is and has always been a religion of peace. Taking Hinduism as a broad category nonetheless, he explores six discourses on classical violence and war. First, a ruler's duties to protect and to conduct defensive war (*rajadharma*) are traceable at least to India's great epic poems, particularly to the Mahabharata (dated between 600 and 300 BCE), where King Yudhisthira, with the counsel of family and peers, creates order in part through ritual sacrifices. Rules of *dharmik* (righteous war) are laid out, and fighting without it can result in eternal punishments. Second is the *kshatradharma*, or the duties of the warrior caste. *Kshatriyas* were to protect Hindu *dharma* (here meaning righteousness) through force, power and strength and to develop martial skills and a heroic code of honor. This apparent militarism is softened somewhat in the Mahabharata by Krishna's exhortation to practice disinterested martial

violence on the battlefield and his justification of war due to cosmic purpose. Third, rituals leading to *moksha*, or freedom from earthly existence, are traceable to 700 BCE–300 CE, when texts such as the Upanishads pondered the nature of the human soul (*atman*), the enduring consequences of action (*karma*), the transmigration of souls through lifetimes (*samsara*), fate (*daiva*), large cycles of time (*kala*) and the necessity of a great annihilating war at the end of an age, when the earthly populations become overcrowded and confused. Fourth, in the Vedic worldview sacrifices maintained the cosmic and natural order, even as victims were imagined as not quite dying, but as going on to a higher plane of existence, an imagination that reveals a profound ambivalence about killing in sacrifice. The Mahabharata war itself has been deemed a symbolic ritual sacrifice, where warriors are rendered sacrificial victims, their blood the ghee running over the chariot, itself rendered as the sacrificial altar, while the cries of the dying and wounded are compared to the war ritual's conches and drums. Fifth, as for women and war, despite some arguments about sexist figurations in Indian texts, Roy points out that Draupadi, wife of the Pandava in the Mahabharata, is not only literate in the language of *dharma*, but also is figured as the goddess Sri, whose presence confers royal power on her consort. She is unabashed in negotiating with her husband, Yudhisthira, and refuses to stay silent in the face of injustice. Lastly, Roy points out how classical texts have been harnessed by nationalist parties as well as by military officers seeking rationales for war, but oddly, with a few exceptions, most have ignored the feminist potential in the Draupadi paradigm, as well as that of the goddess Durga, another powerful figure in Indian imagination.

Chapter 5: *Buddha in the Ring of Fire: The Buddhist Ethics of Warfare*

Stephen Jenkins points out that throughout history Buddhist societies have been as warlike as any other, despite misleading characterizations of Buddhism as strictly a pacifist religion. Historically there have been Buddhist doctrines of just war, wars of conquest, brutal penal codes, messianic revolts and meditative war magic, not to mention the spiritualization of combat under the Buddhist mantle of martial arts. As for its nonviolent doctrines, while it is true that Buddhist traditions unconditionally aspire to avoid harm and to promote happiness for all sentient beings, what constitutes harm must be understood in terms of multiple life perspectives, wherein killing is *not* tantamount to personal annihilation, and also in terms of competing political and religious

concerns, proportionality and what kinds of action are possible without harmful intention. Some scholars privilege the pacifist teachings of canonical texts against the ethos of narrative literature, but Jenkins points out that this choice ignores many illuminating rationales for violence. In the Jataka tales, the past lives of the Buddha show him as, for instance, a weapons master, a warrior king, a warhorse, a war minister defending against a siege, even as the deity Indra at war with demigods. Some tales justify defensive warfare and preemptive strikes against immoral enemies, as may be seen in the tale of an early Buddha as a ship captain who kills a criminal intent on murdering everyone on board. While thus risking his own damnation to save others, the captain saves not only those on board the ship but the criminal himself, who is saved from eons in hell for his would-be murderous acts. Hence there is the matter of intention: The Buddha reputedly distinguished those who killed with murderous intentions, who were hell-bound, from those who killed with compassion and foresight, who were not. Much is determined also by the status of the victim: Criminals presumably have less karmic merit to lose if killed. A good king, or *cakravartin* (wheel-turner), who cares righteously for his subjects should not need armed forces, although complications to this picture are evident in the iconography of Vajrapāni, the Buddha's formidable bodyguard who wields his *vajra* menacingly to protect the Buddha wherever he goes. In the tale of King Aśoka, who is often held up as an icon of Buddhist pacifism, his reputed remorse after a devastating battle and his subsequent conversion to Buddhism are shown to be consistent not with Buddhist pacifism, but with the advice of the Arthaśāstra and other war manuals that encourage public mourning and a show of regret after battle in order to mollify and better govern the conquered. Thus, layers of contextualization counter a simple picture of nonviolence when it comes to Buddhism and war.

Chapter 6: *Sikhism: Exploring the Notion of a Righteous War* (Dharam Yudh)

Pashaura Singh describes two major themes related to war in foundational Sikh texts: the spiritual battle fought in the mind against internal temptations such as lust, greed, anger, attachment and pride; and actual battles fought against external enemies and foreign invaders to defend the community and to promote justice and liberty. Actual battles against oppressive enemies are detailed in the Adi Granth since the time of the first guru, Guru Nanak (1469–1539), who, when reporting an assault by Babur's Mughal army, cried out to the Creator