

# Religio ad Bellum

## The role of Religion in Causing War

"All great civilizations, in their early stages, are based on success in warfare."

--Kenneth Clark, *Civilization*

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War has been seen through the ages as a means to an end, a way for mankind to achieve certain goals. It has been criticized, glorified, condemned and condoned. To say the least, it is a controversial subject with many aspects. Social, economic, political, and religious institutions all have had their view on war. Religion, in particular, has a tough role to play. War is about killing; religions, for the most part, deal with what happens when people die. Religion must be both on the war front--in the minds of the soldiers who are fighting in the war (William Thomas Cummings said in a sermon in 1942 that, "There are no atheists in the foxholes")--and on the home front--comforting the families of those killed in the war. Little wonder, then, that most religions advocate peace and acceptance; it makes it easier for everyone involved. Religion is also one of the largest social divisions of humankind; opposing religions are often out to convert each other because each views itself as the "true" religion. Religion, then can be viewed as one of the main causes of wars, because they are out to convert other religions. How can this dichotomy--religion as the cause of wars and as the advocate of peace--exist? Is religion two-faced, advocating peace only among its members and forcibly converting non-believers? This does not seem correct; most religions preach tolerance for non-believers. Therefore, the answer must be that religion's role in causing wars is overrated. Wars must be caused by something else, with religious differences there only to aggravate the issue. Indeed, a close examining of both religious principles and the various wars that humans have fought show that religious differences are not the main factor involved in a state's decision to go to war, but are at most a secondary issue, or even an excuse for the war.

Wars are fought along lines of "us" and "them;" that is, it takes two sides to fight a war. Even when more than two participants are involved, the "thems" generally become one large "not us," again reducing to the two, "us" and "them." Many things can contribute to forming the lines between "us" and "them:" economic factors, political factors, and geographic factors, to name a few. Very rarely, however, are religious

factors alone sufficient to form the boundaries that create "us" and "them;" there is almost always another factor involved, and the religious differences, when called into play, serve merely to strengthen the boundaries.

## I. WAR IN THE FAR EAST

Wars in the Far East are often a vague issue for Western scholars. Most of the major wars happened in ancient times, with little or no records surviving to this day. The wars that we do have record of are, for the most part, wars that were fought between the Orient and the Occident, such as the Opium War and the conflicts between Europe and Japan that led to Japan sealing itself off for two hundred years. However, much can be garnered from the information that we do have about the ancient Chinese. The wars that they fought were often very violent, and several religions existed in China. By looking at these wars and religions, one can see more clearly the role that religion plays in warfare.

From the very beginning, wars were fought in China over land. The period for which we have the earliest evidence of, the Chou Dynasty, began in approximately 1051 B.C. (Nourse, 45). At that time, China was composed of several small states, each of which with their own chieftain. The Chou Dynasty was more like feudal Europe than the modern conception of a single country, with the individual states warring with each other. In fact, the symbol of the Chous was a battle axe (Nourse 45); wars were common. Tradition reads that at the beginning of the Chou Dynasty, seventeen hundred seventy three of these states existed; by the time things had settled down, there were seven. In 851 B.C. the Chou ruler was toppled, and for a period of time the rulers of the seven states had control to themselves. Then, the prince of Ch'in conquered the other six states and set himself up as Emperor, thus uniting the Chinese into a single Empire (Nourse, 75). This lasted until 206 B.C., when

the prince of Han overthrew the dynasty and set up his own, the Han. The first Han Emperors governed by the *laissez-faire* method advocated by Lao-tzu, the founder of Taoism (Nourse, 84).

The entire history of China is beyond the scope of this essay; however, this should give the reader some background into the nature of the Chinese religion/war interactions. With the exception of the mention of Lao-tzu, religion never entered into the Chinese concept of wars. Even with the early Han emperors and the Taoist tendencies, there was no conflict over religious beliefs; it was merely a difference in how to govern. Taoism is mostly a religion on how to govern people; the chief tenet of the religion is that of *wu-wei*, action without action. True, Lao-tzu preached the path of peace, but his teachings were not generally accepted until much later. For the moment, Taoism dropped into the background.

Confucianism was a much more pervasive school at the time it was founded. Unlike Taoism, Confucius believed that the ruler should be like a father and note everything that happened, no matter how small (Nourse, 65). This is in opposition to the Taoist concept of how to govern, but yet there is no indication that there was any wars that were fought over differences between the two. Most of the Chinese wars were fought over acquisition of land and, in the case of the Han Dynasty, differences in political opinion.

By looking at the way in which wars and religion interacted in ancient China, we get a pretty good idea about the same interactions in the Far East in general. In ancient times, there was next to no interactions. Chinese popular religion was shared by most of the people involved, with only the Confucianists and Taoists presenting differing opinions. However, their influences were actually only minor and did not account for much (later Han emperors abandoned the Taoist philosophy). There were therefore few ways for the religion to actually influence the state of warfare, and there wars were quite definitely not fought along religious lines.

The next thing to happen to China was the introduction of Buddhism from India. This was not met with military action or force of any kind; Buddhism just came to China. Again, though, this new religion did little to change the face of warfare in China. It was introduced somewhere between 123 B.C. and A.D. 67--different accounts give different dates (Nourse, 91). This was at the height of the Han Dynasty; the Hans did not fall until A.D. 220 (Nourse, 100). Buddhism was not responsible for the fall of the dynasty; weak rulers were. Again, religion did not play a role in the warfare of the state.

In the West, as shall be seen, religion helps to play a role in defining people as "outsiders." In the East, this does not seem to be the case. Wars are fought between the "uses" and the "thems" of the world; why, then, do Eastern religions not create a feeling of "us" and "them?"

The answer to this question can be found in many places, and they all say the same thing: eastern religions are not exclusive. Take for example the following passage:

The Chinese today worship at many altars. Even the scholar, who is primarily a Confucianist, is also a Buddhist, and he calls in both Buddhist and Taoist priests to perform the funeral rites, which are in turn part of ancestor worship.  
(Nourse, 93)

This is just an example of a the face of the culture: Eastern religions simply do not provide lines along which people can draw the lines the denote "us" and "them." There is nothing stopping one from being a Confucianist *and* a Buddhist *and* a Taoist, and each of these fits seamlessly into the Chinese popular religion. Likewise, Figure 1 in the appendix shows the situation in Japan: in 1978, there were approximately 100 million people living in Japan. The number of people that claimed to belong to a

certain religion, when all the religions were totaled, came close to 200 million. Again, this shows that people can belong to more than one of these religions.

In India, Hinduism runs along the same lines. While more exclusive than any of the other Eastern religions, Hinduism is internally inclusive. There is almost no cohesive tenet that applies to all Hindus; however, the religion is cohesive simply because one Hindu will accept another Hindu as a Hindu, regardless of the exact nature of his beliefs. This acceptance has helped unite the Indian subcontinent, and has left few wars that can be analyzed (Hinnells, 192).

## II. War in the West

As we have seen, Eastern religions have had little or no impact on Eastern warfare. Wars were fought merely to expand political influence and not to impose one doctrine on another people. In the West, this, too, is generally the case; however, in the West it is easier to fight wars because Western religions do demarcate differences between "us" and "them." This makes wars easier to happen.

When dealing with Western religions, the three that need to be considered are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Again, wars can be fought over many factors; religion is almost never the prime factor in warfare. Looking at the wars that these traditions have fought, and there have been many, one sees that religion is not the prime factor in forming the all-important "us/them" boundaries. However, looking at the scriptures of the various faiths, one can easily see that these boundaries are clearly laid out. By first looking at the Israelite tradition, and then the Christian and finally the Muslim tradition, one can get a sense of the overall picture of the nature of warfare in traditional Western culture.

The first war that is mentioned in the Judeo-Christian tradition is the war that Joshua fought to conquer the Promised Land. That, however, was just that--a war

fought to conquer land. The Hittites, the Canaanites, the Amorites--all of these were chased off the land, not primarily because they were a different religion, but because they were inhabiting the land. Had these groups not been on the land, the Israelites would not have paid them any attention and the wars would never have been fought. The Israelites wanted the land; they fought outsiders for the land.

The tenets of the Israelite religion obviously endorsed war against outsiders. The traditional translation of the Sixth Commandment is "Thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13). However, a recent translation done by the Jewish Publication Society renders the verse "Do not commit murder." There is a difference between committing murder and killing. "Thou shalt not kill" rules out any kind of killing whatsoever, be it though murder, war, execution, or any other means. "Do not commit murder," however, limits the killing to murder. Wars and executions and the like are still permissible; in fact, some wars and executions turn out to be ordered by God! Religion, therefore, did not do anything to make wars less likely; however, in reading the books of Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, one discovers that there are many passages relating to the booty taken in warfare and how it is to be divided (Numbers 31 is one such example), yet there are no passages that relate to commandments that read along the lines of converting the people to the Israelite religion. The wars that were fought were fought for the sake of physical, not spiritual, gains.

Throughout the course of the Hebrew scriptures, Israel fought against many invaders, not always successfully. However, the invaders were not interested in religious conversion; again, the land was the issue at stake. Israel was taken into captivity and slavery by the Assyrians and the Babylonians, but were still permitted to practice their religion. When Darius conquered the Babylonians, he permitted the Israelites to return to Israel and gave them permission to rebuild their temple; again, Darius was interested in the land, not the religion of the peoples. These wars were not fought over differences in religion; however, since state and religion were almost

synonymous in ancient times, religion did provide the same "us" and "them" mentality that states provided. In other words, religion did divide the people and made war more likely, but the wars were not based primarily on conflict over religion.

Christianity is the next major player in world affairs. Most of the major wars fought in the world since Christianity started have involved Christians in some manner. Christianity has evolved a large and detailed tradition over when wars can be fought and when they can not be fought. Christianity has fought wars for many reasons. Christians have fought against Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, pagans, Taoists, and many other traditions. Judaism has been persecuted under Christianity. In short, Christian warfare has a long and often bloody history. The reasons for warfare have been as varied as the opponents; however, religious differences still are not the primary factor in Christian wars.

Christianity did not achieve any position of power until the year A.D. 312, when the Roman Emperor Constantine had a vision. In the vision, he was told that, by putting the chi-rho symbol of Christ on his soldiers' shields, he would find victory. He followed the vision and won the battle, thus converting him to Christianity and making the Christian religion the official religion of the Empire. Christians then went to become the dominant religion of Europe. However, even with a common religion, wars still happened. At this time the Christian Just War theory began to take root.

Just War theory stated much about when it was right to fight a war, and it stated things about how one should act in war. The theory does list as one of its criteria that the opposing state has turned away from Christianity (Smock, xiii); however, that has been called into question as being too flimsy an excuse. The other criteria for going to war are not at all religious in the missionistic sense; that is, war to spread religion is not condoned. Other factors must be present before the war can be waged.

At this time in Europe, kingdoms were being formed and then dismantled at rapid rates. John France, in an essay about the causes of the First Crusade, write that

"Europe at the end of the eleventh century was a place of great mobility..." (Phillips, 15). In an apparent attempt to stop Europe from fighting amongst itself, Pope Urban II, in 1095, called the First Crusade.

The First Crusade is perhaps epitome of holy wars. It had one goal: to return the City of Jerusalem to Christian hands. Muslims were inhabiting it; Christians wanted it. Again, the "us/them" lines appear to be drawn along the lines of religion.

Underneath the surface, however, there is a much more complex reason for the First Crusade. It is not a Holy War in the sense that the Christians were out to convert the Muslims. Instead, the Christians were as likely to slaughter the Muslims as they were to convert them. The Crusade was fought over land--specifically, Jerusalem. Once the Christians captured the city, the First Crusade was essentially over. Religion was the primary factor in demarcating the "us/them" distinction, however, the primary cause of the war was land. After the Crusades were over (and there were more, unsuccessful crusades), Europe went back to fighting itself again, with wars such as the Hundred Year's War and the War of the Roses. Christianity as a religion has had little impact on the wars that Christians have fought as a people; that is, wars were not fought for the sake of the religion but rather for the sake of the booty involved, be it land or other material gains. France quotes an anonymous source as saying about the First Crusade: "Stand fast all together, trusting in Christ and in the victory of the Holy Cross. Today, please God, you will all gain much booty" (Phillips, 17).

Islam presents a problem to the theory that religion in its own right is not a primary cause of war. After all, is it not by *jyhad* that Islam spread? It would seem that Islam is a religion based on the sword. Indeed, it is reported by Muslims that the most common stereotype that they face is that of a man brandishing a sword followed by a train of wives (Smith, 254). While this is not an entirely true picture, there must be something to give rise to this stereotype. Indeed, the Koran does not preach pacifism as a virtue (Smith, 254). Jyhads have been fought. Harems did exist. While harems

are not entirely relevant to war, these facts do show that there is something to the stereotype that Muslims so often encounter. However, these facts are often all that other Westerners know about Islam, and it remains to be seen in what context these wars were fought.

The non-pacifism of the Muslims is not a war-for-war's-sake attitude; rather, it is much like the Christian concept of Just War. This non-pacifism is one that manifests itself through self-defense and rightings of wrongs, not arbitrary warfare. If a state, Muslim or otherwise, commits a wrong against a Muslim state, the concept is the same as the Christian Just War Theory. The difference, however, lies in the treatment of the residents after the conquest.

As much as the non-pacifistic nature of Islam led to its success, still another factor was the decline of the great Middle Eastern empires. Islam rose to power at the same time that Byzantine and Persia were falling (Mugambi, 219). Across North Africa, the Berber tribes joined Islam through their own accord, not through force. Spain fell under force to the Muslims; their spread into Europe was stopped at the battle of Tours in A.D. 732. These military exploits, however, were not ones that were primarily interested in differences of religion; they were meant to establish a Muslim Empire in the vacuum left by the ancient ones. However, religion is synonymous with the state in this situation, so the "us/them" boundaries can indeed be drawn along the lines of religion, since it is very difficult to form boundaries between religious factors and any other factors involved in Muslim expansion.

All of this points toward the view that the primary factor in Muslim expansion was religion. However, while it is difficult to form boundaries between religious factors and any other factors involved in Muslim expansion, it is not impossible. By analyzing what happened during and in the aftermath of the wars, we can see that the primary factor in this case was territorial in nature, with religion being a secondary factor. This statement can be drawn from the fact that religious conversion, when it happened, did

not happen during the wars but rather after the land had been conquered.

In North Africa, the Berbers were converted by their own accord. Other places, however, were forcibly taken and the residents converted to Islam. However, they were not converted during the war, and neither were they converted by physical force; in fact, the conquered people were still permitted to practice their own religions. The *Koran* states: "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (2:257), that is, do not force Islam on non-Muslims. However, it is true that a different form of force was used. The residents of the conquered lands became "second class citizens in their own countries and quite often opted to become Muslims" (Mugambi, 220). Perhaps, more accurately, they became third class citizens, for Jews, Christians, and Zoroasterians were permitted special religious privileges within the community, provided they paid a special tax. In this manner, Islam was concerned with spreading its religion, but not through the sword. Instead, Muslim political influence was spread by the sword, and the religion merely followed in the wake.

In conclusion, the spread of Islam was through self defense. In much the same way Rome rose to power, countries kept attacking Islamic states and losing. After the original period of this type of building of power, Islam went on the offensive and took most of the non-European parts of the former Roman Empire. Through all of this, though, political influence was the primary motivating force behind the war, with the religious divisions a close secondary cause.

### III. MODERN WARS

The world in which we live today is heavy with conflicts. In Ireland, for example, the Catholics and Protestants are fighting. In the Middle East, Jews and Arabs are fighting. Everybody, it seems, is fighting in the Balkans. Two World Wars have come and gone, and numerous other conflicts have happened. However, while at first it

appears that the conflicts are over religion, that is only the groupings that are used. To say that Protestants and Catholics are fighting does not say what they are fighting over; likewise with the Arabs and the Jews. Not surprisingly, from what has been seen of past conflicts, the wars are being fought over land, with religion merely being a grouping to demarcate the "uses" from the "thems."

Tensions in Ireland are perhaps one of the best examples that religion plays only a secondary role in the causes of war. In this case, it is only to name the combatants. In *Peacemaking Strategies in Northern Ireland*, David Bloomfield point out that, "...Northern Ireland's Catholics and Protestants are not engaged in a bloody conflict over the correct way to worship a Christian God" (Bloomfield, 11). Again, it is said that "Only for the small numbers of religious fundamentalists in both communities, however, could the conflict be said to be in any primary sense a religious conflict" (Bloomfield, 10). The conflict in Northern Ireland instead boils down to nationalism--the Catholics living there cannot feel secure unless Ireland is united, and the Protestants living there can not feel secure unless Ireland remains divided. There is therefore much conflict between the two, and little hope for resolution in the near future without extensive concessions on both sides.

Likewise, in the Middle East, there are problems that seem to split along religious lines. It is convenient to label the groups involved as Jews and Arabs. In an essay on Middle East peace, Mostafa Khalil mentions several contributing factors to the instability: Palestinian peoples without a home, internal instability in the Middle Eastern nations, the fact that usage of force leads to greater usage of force. Not once are religious differences mentioned; in fact, the primary cause (that of the Palestinians) stems, again, from land issues. Israel inhabits the West Bank; Palestine feels that that is where they should be. Thus, the conflict rises not primarily from religious differences but rather from land.

In the Balkans, the dissolution of Yugoslavia has led to a catastrophic series of events, which stem from a variety of sources. It is difficult to follow who the players are in the region, since the situation is extremely volatile. There are Muslims, Catholic Christians, and Orthodox Christians all living in the area. However, the main conflicts are over nationalism; again, land is the central issue. The two main combatants are Serbia and Slovenia (Zimmerman, 29). Slovenia was a fairly rich area of Yugoslavia; however, when they were under one nation, all of the money was sent to the poorer regions--Serbia. Then Serbia began a push to reclaim its independence, which it has had periodically throughout history. Under the control of Slobodan Milosevic, a communist leader, the Serbs began a push toward independence, not only of Serbia but also of all the regions where Serbs lived. While there were no Serbs in Slovenia, Slovenia opposed this action because of the aforementioned economic reasons and because of the communist tendencies of Milosevic. Croatia, mainly because of the large Serbian population, sided with Slovenia. As a result, Yugoslavia fell apart, due not to the religious problems but rather the ethnic/nationalistic debates. In fact, one major dividing point between Serbia and Croatia are their alphabets. The people speak the same language--Serbo-Croatian; however, the Serbs use the Cyrillic alphabet due to their eastern Orthodox heritage and the Croats use the Roman alphabet because of their Catholic heritage (Sarah Piatt, personal communication, Fall 1997).

Looking back at some of the other wars of the modern era, one can see that there is actually very little religion involved in any of them. Most of the wars since 1700 have been fought over political, economic, or territorial reasons. There was nothing religious about the American Revolution, save for the statement that "...all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights..."(Jefferson). This hardly counts as a difference in religion, and certainly was not the reason that the Revolution happened.

The French Revolution was fought over the political situation of France at the time. The War of 1812 was fought over the economic problem arising from the pressing of American sailors into servitude. The Civil War was political in nature, as were the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, and World War I.

World War II was also non-religious in nature. To be sure, there was a minor religious theme to it: the Holocaust. This is not to say that the Holocaust was a minor event; rather, the role it played in the War was very minor. It was the eventual goal of Hitler, to form a perfect human race. However, the War was fought primarily over the right to control Europe--that is, land. Most of the wars that have been fought throughout mankind's history boil down not to religion, but rather to territorial disputes.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

By looking at the various wars that have been fought over time, one can see just how religion has influenced them. While religion is not generally the primary reason that people go to war, it can provide social divisions that will help begin a war. From the Muslim wars that come nearest to Crusades to the Crusades that aren't really, from the wars that Rome fought to expand her empire to the wars the Chinese fought to do the same, the primary motivation for war tends to be land. In the west, religion helps to determine who has the land and who doesn't. In the east, religion does not generate barriers, but still there are wars fought over land. Thus is the role of religion in war.

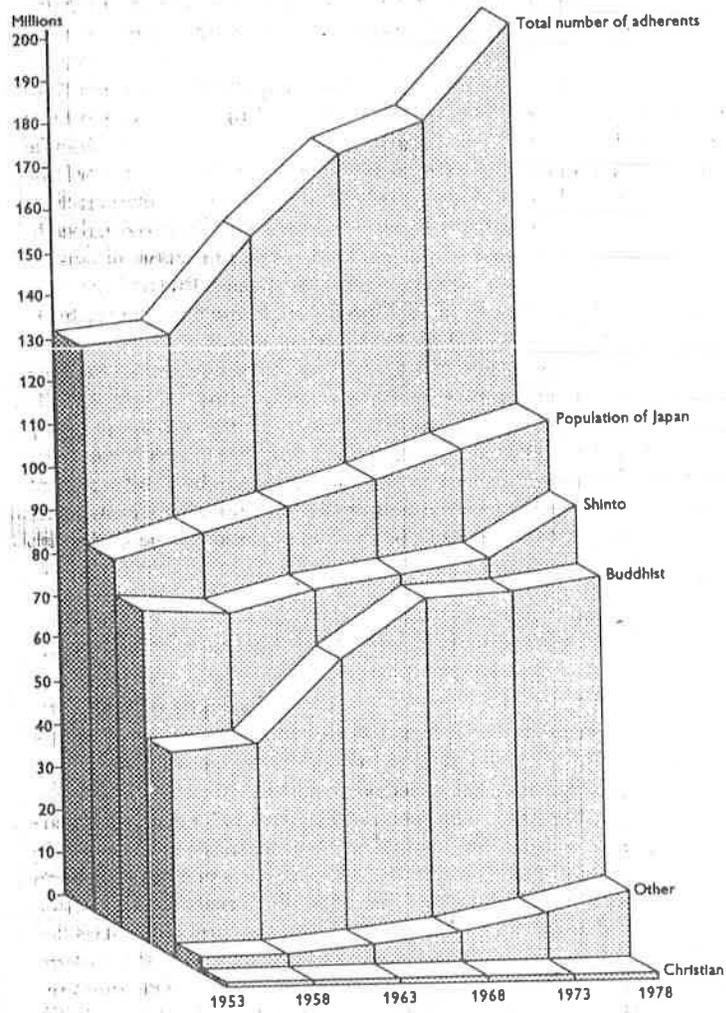


Figure 10.3 Adherents to major classes of religious tradition in Japan between 1953 and 1978 (see also Table 10.2)

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