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OPINIESTUK

WAR AND RELIGION: HOW PREMODERN CONFIGURATIONS EXPLAIN SOME ASPECTS OF RECENT AND CURRENT WARFARE

Philippe Buc

Knowledge of the pre-modern religious past allows one to understand facets of modern war that do not seem to have their place in Modernity. Three contemporary examples, the Islamist terror group Daesh, America's George Walker Bush at war in 2001–2003, and the Russian Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow, will illustrate this point.

I have been researching for the past twenty years the relationships between religion and war, first with a focus on the deep past of Catholic and Protestant Christianities, later comparatively.[1] Religion and war is not a topic only for the scholars of the so-called dark ages. Nor is the knowledge that scholars of the Middle Ages and Early Modernity acquire in their studies of this topic irrelevant to the present. There are dimensions of mass armed violence that are best understood when examined through the pre-modern looking glass. Three examples will illustrate this.

Daesh (ISIS) is an accident within Islam, both in the sense that there is no continuous tradition linking its views and deeds to the deeper Muslim past and in the sense that there is a potential within Islam for similar views and deeds to emerge. Past centuries show indeed that Islamic polities and political groupings did not constantly wage jihad, let alone of the kind represented by Daesh. But in past centuries there were movements claiming to be Islamic (and thus for the historian to be evaluated as such) with views and deeds comparable to those of Daesh. The readiness to deny to other Muslims a Muslim identity; the focus on this alleged false Muslim as the main enemy over and above polytheists and Christians (or Jews); a sense to be close to the end of times and the arrival of the Mahdi or in a typological relationship to this eschatological moment: One finds this with the twelfth century Almohads and with the short-lived West African caliphates of Uthman dan Fodio (1754–1817)

and El-Hajj Omar Tal (1794–1864). Arrayed against them, then as now, reluctant scholars who condemned this radicalism, suspecting that war for God masked the desire for royal-style rulership.[2]

The US reaction to Al-Quaeda's attack on American soil in September of 2001 also brought out pre-existent cultural traits. While this cultural potential did not have to actualize itself, it was exactly this— a potential. It was a half-secularized, half still religious byproduct of old religious forms indebted to the neo-puritanism that the English colonists had brought to their New World refuge.[3] In his speeches, the born-again George Bush invoked ´liberty´, the ´world´, and themes of ´mission´ to the world. As if the war he meant to take to Afghanistan (and already in late 2001) to Iraq had been a war that should concern ´the world´ and ´liberty´. He did likely believe it, but it is not obvious to an outside observer that the US there combatted for liberty and the world. At times President Bush spoke in stark binaries, as when he imagined an axis of evil (meaning that the good was with America and its allies) or when he proclaimed that ´you are either with us or against us in the fight against terror´, recycling the words of Jesus Christ, ´He that is not with Me is against Me´ (Luke 11.23, Matt. 12.30). The early eighteenth-century Calvinist Bible commentator Matthew Henry, read by generations of New World fundamentalists, elaborated this stark Gospel binary:

> [T]his holy war, which Christ was carrying on with vigour against the devil and his kingdom, was such as would not admit of a neutrality (v. 30), ´He that is not with me is against me´. (…) in the great quarrel between Christ and the devil, no peace is to be sought, nor any such favourable construction to be made of any indifference in the matter; he that is not hearty for Christ, will be reckoned with as really against Him: he that is cold in the cause, is looked upon as an enemy.[4]

The medievalist's understanding of religious discourse serves to recover what Bush may have meant in invoking Matthew 12, and how it would have been received by the American citizens, avid readers of the Bible and of its more famous commentaries.[5] The Bible in its neo-Puritan, fundamentalist understanding provided Bush with a script for action, and a mode of communication with his most faithful (*sic*) electorate, the evangelical Protestant fundamentalists.[6]

Apocalyptic jihadis and fundamentalist Protestant America at war are not the only realms that a medievalist can, stepping out of his era into the near past or present, help understand. The recent invasion of Ukraine has also featured a religious discourse and its secularized byproducts. To simplify, Orthodoxy has provided components to Russia's civic religion to Russia (civic religion being defined as a set of practices and conceptions that refer more or less hazily to God, and that sacralize a state and a nation).[7] Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholics shared in the ancient Christian commitment to unity as to religion (the contents of belief) and to ecclesiastical unity (the space within which believers live and are administered by the Church). This extreme predilection was transferred to the respective political shells of these Christian denominations— the empires. Right now, Moscow Patriarch Kyrill preaches for peace while arguing for war, a normal if paradoxical combination in the Christian tradition, where war is for the sake of justice and ultimately of a just peace creating right order, and where war has to be waged without animus and cruelty. For the Catholic Middle Ages, Jonathan Riley-Smith famously explained ´crusading as an act of love´.[8] Patriarch Kirill thus calls for peace, but explains that evil is at

work, not only in having created a schism within Orthodoxy (the Kyivian Patriarch declared his independence in 2018) but also in splitting the two Orthodox twinned nations, Ukraine and Russia, both baptized in the same river with the conversion of Rus under the medieval Prince Vladimir (d. 1015) to Christianity. Kirill prayed that the Lord Jesus Christ would ´preserve the Russian, Ukrainian, and other peoples who are spiritually united by our Church´.[9] He developed this theme:

> May the Lord preserve our Church in unity. May the Lord protect from fratricidal battle the peoples comprising the one space of the Russian Orthodox Church. It must not be allowed to give the dark and hostile external forces an occasion to laugh at us; we should do everything to preserve peace between our peoples while protecting our common historical Motherland against every outside action that can destroy this unity.[10]

Satan was at play, mobilizing the ´evil forces that have always fought against the unity of Russia and the Russian Church´. And what was Russia? It was ´the land which now includes Russia and Ukraine and Belarus and other tribes and peoples´, threatened internally and externally by ´diabolical attacks´.[11]

None of these phenomena are necessary. They were and are potentialities within three cultures with a religious past and present. Furthermore, a religion does not so much cause war as shape its waging, conception, and commemoration, and give it a meaning and intelligibility to participants. The exploration of this fact is an asset for policy-makers.[12]

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Noten

1. Philippe Buc, *Holy War, Martyrdom, and Terror. Christianity, Violence, and the West* (Philadelphia: 2015); see for comparative work idem, ´Civil war and religion in medieval Japan and medieval Europe´, *The Indian Economic and Social Hisory Review* 57:2 (2020): 261–287; ´Eschatologies of the Sword, Comopared: Christianity, Islam(s), and Japanese Buddhism´, in Veronika Wieser et al., *Cultures of Eschatology* (Berlin: 2021), 277–293.
2. See Philippe Buc, ´Religion, war, and peace in premodern Islamicate polities and the Christian West´, *Violence: an international journal* 1 (2001): 1–23.
3. Hugh B. Urban, ´Bush, the Neoconservatives, and Evangelical Christian Fiction´, *Journal of Religion and Society* 8 (2006): 1–15. My point here is that US Neo-Conservatism contains ideas that have come from fundamentalism, and been secularized, while neo-conservatives are not necessarily religious. See as well Andrew J. Bacevich and Elizabeth H. Prodromou, ´God Is Not Neutral: Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy after 9/11´, *Orbis* 48:1 (2004): 42–54.
4. *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vol. in 1 t. (Grand Rapids: 1961), 1266.
5. See Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors. Thinking about Religion after September 11* (Chicago: 2003), 19–32.
6. The second point made by Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*.
7. The concept was developed by Robert N. Bellah, ´Civil Religion in America´, *Daedalus* 96:1 (1968): 97–118.
8. Jonathan Riley-Smith, ´Crusading as an Act of Love´, *History* 65 (1980): 177–192.
9. See the official website of the Patriarchate, http://www.patriarchia.ru/en/db/text/5903803.html (24 February 2022).
10. http://www.patriarchia.ru/en/db/text/5904398.html (27 February 2022).
11. Ibidem.
12. For a preliminary synthesis, see Philippe Buc, ´Introduction to premodern war and religions: Comparison, Issues and Results´, *History and Anthropology*, forthcoming 2022.