
Reviewed by Joseph Aieta, III

War and Religion consists of an introduction, nine chapters and an epilogue. Arnaud Blin opens by stating that from early in the fourth century BCE to Westphalia, wars that shaped Europe were driven or at least highly influenced by religion. He discusses truth, yet fails to note what can be a helpful distinction between “Truth” (in the religious sense) and “truth” (the generally accepted lexicographical meaning). The author is a historian, not a theologian, but a glance at Montgomery Watt, Karen Armstrong, or any from among many other scholars, might have offered an alternative to Blin’s take on matters of truth and holy war.

As one reads through his work, there are several underexplored questions. For example, are religious wars also political? Is the political religious? Are religions static or dynamic? If the latter, might such evolution explain shifts from peace to violence and back again? How are language and its usage ideological? What is political religion? While Blin’s intent is to look at war in relation to the major monotheistic faiths, one might have hoped for a measure of dispassion in his overall approach, yet on page 8 we read the following: “Islam was committed to violence almost from the very beginning, and violence has remained a part of its makeup, including its message.” A few lines further on we read that “Islam … developed a strand of pacifism, and its central message is one of peace.” There does seem to be a decided bias present in the first quote with no context offered for such a statement. A few pages later, he suggests that Ibn Khaldun’s vision of the West was essentially ahistorical, yet he does not consider that Westerners at the time were likely at least as ahistorical.

Though Blin’s stated purpose is to explore war and religion in the monotheistic traditions, he does very little with his topic in Judaism, and what little there is can be found mostly in the first chapter. He repeats Matthew’s story of the killing of children in Bethlehem by Herod and acknowledges that there is no corroboration anywhere else of this alleged atrocity. If there is no corroborating evidence, a reliance on a single source raises the question of historical authenticity. Blin also states that a clash between Roman authorities and Jewish people was “inevitable,” a conclusion essentially ahistorical.

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Turning to Christianity, on page 41 he raises two “what if” points, perhaps fun, but essentially ahistorical. Blin is sufficiently impressed with Roland Bainton’s stand that once the Church had enough power to enter politics fully (eleventh century), the Crusade came to be fought in God’s name, not the idea of a just war. Blin suggests that if one turned to scripture, it would be possible to justify either violence or peace, depending on how one reads the text. He then provides analysis of the influence of Cicero on Ambrose who in turn inspired Augustine in just war theory. Blin claims Augustine’s philosophy of history provided the West with the idea of progress that persists to the present, but offers no evidence in support of this claim, other than notions expressed in Ernest Fortin’s 1987 essay “Saint Augustine.” It can be problematic to base one’s assessment on that of a single author. Further, the idea of progress was primarily a notion at the end of nineteenth century in Western Europe, one now largely out of favor in many quarters.

When addressing the beginnings of Islam, Blin presents Muhammad primarily as a warrior, yet offers no justification for such a portrayal, i.e., choice or necessity for survival. The final ten pages of this chapter offer a reasonable summary of early Islamic history. He then turns to the Pirenne Thesis, though unfortunately as presented by Nicholas Morton rather than his own analysis. Blin defends titling his fourth chapter “Toward a Clash of Civilizations” by suggesting that Samuel Huntington’s approach is at the very least overstated and perhaps inaccurately applied to the medieval world. Blin points out that Muslim writers from the Fertile Crescent and Western Christian writers wrote diatribes against each other’s religious beliefs and practices. He notes that by the mid-eleventh century it was thought that pagans could be “civilized,” i.e., “converted.” He wonders if Islam and Christianity were logically headed toward an inevitable collision or might circumstances have played a role. He argues that with the collapse of the USSR, Marxist approaches to history receded. What he fails to consider is that while Marxist orthodoxy faded, not all Marxist analyses were proven useless. Finally, Blin refers to Raymond Aron’s perspective that historical objectivity may be a goal, but one that remains rarely if ever attained.

Blin’s chapter on Middle Eastern crusades begins with the Assassins. He argues the Arabic term Hashashins could be translated as Assassins or as users of hashish. He notes that Christians killed Jews, including women and children, whom they encountered in the Holy Land, actions certainly reflecting intolerance. He concludes by referring to, of all scholars, Francis Fukuyama. In 2011, Fukuyama suggested that in the battle of Ayn Jalut, in early September 1260, the success of the Mamluk sultan Baibars may have saved Islam from collapse. This conclusion likely is an overstatement by Fukuyama. In Chapter 6, Blin argues the Cluniacs kept the crusading spirit alive. He then turns to northwest North Africans and says their approach to
Islam was fundamentalist, a problematic term. In the Holy Land, he examines Templars, Hospitallers and Teutonic Knights and ends his comments with brief reference to Aquinas whose approach to just war was that Augustine got it right.

In Chapter 7, Blin refers to the Ottoman Empire as the “Sick Man of Europe.” Most historians have moved beyond this derogatory terminology. Also, he might have made reference to the Ottoman practice of fighting one year in southeastern Europe, the next in Iran and then continued alternating yearly action. He makes brief mention of the Great Schism, then moves on to Spain’s actions in the New World. In his penultimate chapter, he acknowledges the impact of the printing press—changing social relationships, as well as spreading religious beliefs and general knowledge in the West. He offers a reasonable account of the Catholic/Protestant wars of religion. Here he may be somewhat sanguine about the effect of the Protestant ethic on the conduct of war. Muslims receive more of a lick and a promise than any in-depth analysis.

In his final chapter, the author argues for secularism rather than religion being a motivating factor for war from the eighteenth century onward. By the second half of the twentieth century, he notes religion returned by way of liberation theology in Latin America, but does not mention Pope John Paul II’s antipathy to political involvement by priests. Blin leaves out details that might have clarified some of his arguments, especially in terms of the Crimean War. Still, the final two pages of the text offer a clear summary of the author’s position. The Epilogue adds nothing to the text.

*War and Religion* has its interesting moments. It is a decent read, yet it left me with a nagging question: was it really necessary, i.e., did it offer any new perspective? Ideas and interpretations are as reliable as the secondary sources on which they appear to be primarily based. One also wonders why no mention was made of authors, such as Gilles Kepel or Olivier Roy, who have explored similar matters. Perhaps instead of trying to cover so much ground it would have been better to reduce the number of eras and/or events covered. Still, read with a skeptical eye, the book can offer a neophyte an entry point to a rather complex topic.