

## The European Wars of Religion: An Interdisciplinary Reassessment of Sources, Interpretations, and Myths

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The history of the European Wars of Religion from the Crusades onward has provided fertile ground for study by historians, philosophers, and theologians of all ideological persuasions. The period from the 1520s forward particularly has served as the subject of an astonishing amount of research – with no discernable chronological gap in the historiography. First, contemporaries of these wars felt a unique sense of historical consciousness concerning the importance of the Wars of Religion and therefore published their own reflections on the events.<sup>(1)</sup> Second, historians of the 17th through 19th centuries have frequently continued the confessionally-driven narratives of their predecessors while demonstrating a positive view the religious minorities in each case.<sup>(2)</sup> More recently, historians of the 20th century have offered an alternative narrative that is meant to curb the parochialism of confessional historians; particularly, they have highlighted the violence of the Wars of Religion and proposed that it was only through the rise of the secular state that Europe was able to overcome the bloodshed instigated by religion. Though scholars have consistently demonstrated this thesis as inadequate, its clarity and simplicity have unfortunately continued to win unspecialized adherents. One need not look further than Mark Lilla's *The Stillborn God* for a contemporary example.<sup>(3)</sup> For scholars, this lame attempt to scapegoat religion and champion secularism poorly reflects upon the historical facts as well as the philosophical and theological moorings of the wars themselves. It is only natural for these same scholars to put forward a long-needed volume to answer these questions.

Editors Wolfgang Palaver, Harriet Rudolph, and Dietmar Regensburger have attempted to fill this vacuum by compiling a compendium volume entitled *The European Wars of Religion: An Interdisciplinary Reassessment of Sources, Interpretations, and Myths*. This book was in many ways spurred by a conference at the University of Innsbruck in 2012 discussing the interrelation of politics, religion, and violence (pp. 250–1). Specifically, the contributions in this volume seek to address ‘terms repeatedly used and misused in public debates such as “religious violence”, “religious warfare”’ (p. 8). The overall goal of this book is to contribute a ‘more nuanced understanding of the complexity of violent conflict in the past as well as in present times, in which religions have served only as one stimulating factor among others if at all’ (p. 8). By

singling out key terminology and giving further nuance to the debate, these authors offer their best attempts at an interdisciplinary challenge to the inadequate narrative that has surrounded the Wars of Religion. Moreover, the volume includes reflections on the legacy of religious violence outside of the period typically associated with the European Wars of Religion in order to provide a holistic approach to the subject diachronically.

The editors divide their text into two parts: 'Historical approaches' and 'Approaches from philosophy and theology'. The first contains six chapters, each providing a case study of the interaction between religion and violence during the period traditionally associated with Wars of Religion. The second section is more conceptually broad – so much so that the contributions sometimes threaten the cohesiveness of the work's stated aim. Nevertheless, this section contains chapters that reflect on the influence of theology and philosophy on this subject matter. Overall, section two is meant to pool the resources of philosophy and theology to provide some conceptual categories through which to understand how to best approach the study of the Wars of Religion. Lastly, nearly all of the authors in this volume interact with the prevailing thesis of William Cavanaugh – delineated in full force in his book *The Myth of Religious Violence*.<sup>(4)</sup>

In chapter one, the Czech historian Pavel Soukup seeks to analyze both sides of the violence in the Hussite Wars of the 15th century. Soukup remarks that the royalists and the Hussites used religious language to justify their cause; importantly, both sides classified their campaigns as holy wars – demonstrating aptly the multifaceted nature of the conflicts and the self-perception of each battling camp (p. 19). Soukup's chapter is ultimately a collection of observations meant to encourage further research on this topic. However, he does argue clearly that 'when seen as a conflict of two opposing Christian groups, each with its own theology and fully developed ideology of holy war, the Hussite wars stand much closer to early modern Wars of Religion than any previous religious warfare' (p. 44). The author's plea is simply to consider the Hussite Wars as an initial example of the religious wars to come, rather than lump it in with the period of religious crusades. Additionally, Soukup's work provides concise and well-researched context to the Hussite Wars that is sometimes difficult to find in English historiography. The only shortcoming in this chapter is Soukup's scant detail on the exact 'religious programme' of the Hussites – a concept he mentions with no explanation (p. 35). Certainly this would help the uninitiated reader follow his argument more completely.

Along similar lines, German Professor Thomas Lau endeavors to trace the involvement of religion and violence in the Swiss Confederation through the middle of the 17th century in chapter two. Lau begins his chapter with an illustrative example of a painting from the Bishop of Fribourg's home depicting Switzerland as a peaceful garden; this garden represented peace, piety, and innocence, while enemies turn their battlements against the walls and attempt to enter (pp. 45–6). Such is Lau's overall characterization of the Swiss Confederation at the time of the Wars of Religion in the 16th century – embattled but clinging to unity as 'the body of Helvetia' (p. 47). Ultimately, the country 'did not fall apart and the main reason for this unexpected stability lay in Switzerland's valuable resources that could be exploited only in a coordinated manner' (p. 49). Though wars did break out, peace treaties tended to be respected and honored in contrast to the rest of Europe (p. 55). In the end, Lau's volume gives a unique counter example to many of the narratives on the Wars of Religion. Hopefully another historian will continue developing his idea of Swiss exceptionalism. Though the reasons for Swiss cooperation is likely more complicated than mutual economic interest and fear of the larger dynastic struggles in Europe, this chapter is nonetheless very instructive on its subject.

Chapter three, written by American historian Philip Benedict, asks the question whether the French Wars of Religion were, in fact, about religion. His purposes are to correct perceptions of the French Wars of Religion that historians have 'inadequately' explored up to this point (p. 62). More specifically, Benedict hopes to show that Frenchmen during the wars 'could and did distinguish between religions and non-religious matters' with the goal of demonstrating how much religion influenced these conflicts (p. 62). Benedict's most convincing argument comes from his detailed examination of French sources of the 16th century; namely, he demonstrates that many of the sources 'reveal that the word "religion" was used to designate the two rival ecclesiastical communities' (p. 64). Furthermore, the author effectively argues that the pretense of

religion was surely removed after the radicalization of both sides after the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre and political assassinations by Henri III in 1589 (p. 71). Overall, Benedict demonstrates that the motivations of warfare were complex, religious, institutional, and international. Altogether, each peace edict during the French Wars of Religion discussed religious terms at their centre and therefore the author demonstrates effectively that historians are vindicated when they fix the label of religious war 'most conventionally' with the conflicts in France (p. 86).

Chapters four and six both relate to the role of religion in the wars of the Holy Roman Empire. In chapter four, Harriet Rudolph provides a survey of historiography from the 19th century forward in order to 'evaluate select arguments which have been used either to describe both wars as religious wars or to challenge this notion' (p. 91). She focuses most closely on the Schmalkaldic War and the Thirty Years War. Chapter six, written by Luise Schorn-Schütte, is much more conceptual. In this chapter, the author attempts in her chapter to explore the 'enduring political and theological theme' of justification for conflict in a Christian context – mostly using the Magdeburg Confession as an example (pp. 139–40).

In the first of these chapters, Rudolph introduces seven points of reference by which to judge a religious war and seeks to apply them to the two early religious wars in the Holy Roman Empire. She hopes that these categories can provide a lens through which to evaluate the nature of religion conflict. She concludes, through her own criteria, that 'there is hardly any doubt that both of these wars can be analysed as religious wars, albeit only a certain number of the criteria established in the first section provably apply to them' (p. 116). Though disappointingly qualified, Rudolph's argument demonstrates the applicability of her broadly conceived and helpful criteria for evaluating religious wars. On the other hand, Schorn-Schütte's conclusion is much more concrete. She states that 'the legitimization of the use of force was part of a tradition bound up in differentiating the limitations and divisions of rule. The triggers for such conflicts were always confessional divisions' (pp. 161–2). Though Schorn-Schütte is somewhat sporadic in her argumentation, her thesis is ultimately sound.

The fifth chapter of section one is Charles W. A. Prior's reassessment of England's wars of religion. It focuses, like many of the chapters in this volume, on sketching the 'key historiographical issues that have framed the approach to the religious politics of Britain between 1560 and 1649' and focusing closest on what he calls 'reformation politics' (p. 120). Prior concludes that the driver in these conflicts was 'a fundamental disagreement about the nature, location, and limits of the power of the state over religion' (p. 120). This chapter helpfully maps the revisionist trend in English Reformation scholarship. It also emphasizes what is sometimes considered post-revisionism through Prior's rather diplomatic view of the *long durée* of the Reformation in England. Overall, Prior's chapter is well organized and concise. However, it is altogether unoriginal and offers few ideas that cannot be found elsewhere in early modern English scholarship.

Section two begins with a chapter from preeminent American theologian William Cavanaugh. This chapter is essentially a distillation of the influential and aforementioned book written by Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*. The author's argument in each of these pieces is that 'it is rather misleading to call these wars "of religion" as opposed to wars for "secular" reasons because the religious/secular distinction as we now understand it was not born until after the wars were concluded' (p. 167). His accusation is that intellectuals often take for granted these modern distinctions and that these same intellectuals 'should know better' than to make such a careless assumption (p. 165). In other words, the 'monocausal' explanations of the Wars of Religion from most intellectuals are out of touch with the evidence. He states that it is 'anachronistic and distorting of the historical evidence' to insist upon such an artificial distinction (p. 171). Cavanaugh concludes by proposing that secularization has not removed the notion of 'holy' from culture, but simply placed it in the state rather than the Church (p. 184). His more enduring legacy is the helpfully lucid critique of contemporary intellectuals of the past, though historians, philosophers, and theologians are much more apprehensive about adopting his conclusions; specifically, many intellectuals are not willing to admit that the state has assumed a quasi-sacerdotal role in liberal democratic culture. All in all, Cavanaugh brings a helpful edition to this volume and helpfully frames much of the discussion herein.

Two chapters by Paul Dumouchel and Bruce K. Ward discuss the modern state in light of the Wars of Religion. More specifically, they both hope to address the idea of political violence and its use or misuse by the state. Dumouchel proposes in his chapter that 'the modern state is the holder of the monopoly of legitimate violence' – an important distinction from the normal terminology of 'legitimate use of force' (p. 185). Dumouchel goes on to explain himself through, in this author's opinion, some haphazardly constructed sections that do not follow logically. Although Dumouchel offers some important observations, such as his examination of grand narratives in relation to the Wars of Religion, his thoughts are scattered. Overall, Dumouchel's greatest contribution is his nuance to Cavanaugh's previously mentioned argument: 'the modern state appeared when political powers also succeeded in wresting away from the Churches the ability to define what constitutes legitimate violence' (p. 193). The following chapter by Ward is meant to respond to Dumouchel's collection of thoughts. It is more of an addition rather than a response; Ward notes that 'the modern state arrogates to itself not only the monopoly of violence, but also the *moral authority* to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate violence' (p. 198). This added moral dimension is the key contribution of Ward's chapter. He hopes press Dumouchel on his overreliance on Thomas Hobbes at the expense of modern humanism from thinkers like Hegel (p. 202).

The second contribution by a theologian, found in chapter ten, is Ralf Miggelbrink's essay on confessional warfare and religious violence from a theological viewpoint. Here, Miggelbrink attempts to provide a 'theological' perspective on these wars – one that is centered on Christianity. Despite his noble endeavor, Miggelbrink's effort falls profoundly short. By rooting his perspective in 'personal guilt', Miggelbrink potentially alienates many non-Catholic Christians – a far cry from the 'real Christian perspective' on violence he hopes to describe (p. 206). Furthermore, Miggelbrink fails to interact with other scholars in his field, settling for citing his past research all too frequently (p. 215). His overreliance lack of interaction with those who might dissent from his opinion is disappointing. Lastly, the author claims that 'only the way of dialogue remains' to better understand Christianity and its relationship to violence (p. 218). Such a patently modernistic sentiment must surely fail to satisfy many theologians. Miggelbrink's work is not without merits however. He does creatively describe divine wrath as 'biblical opposition to violence' somewhat convincingly (p. 210).

Janez Juhant offers a contribution in chapter eleven that explores another historical case study. The author attempts to explain the historical and religious context of the former Yugoslavia in order to reflect upon the nature of religious violence that the country has faced since the Cold War. Though somewhat out of place organizationally, Juhant's chapter makes an interesting point; namely, that 'the Marxist violent exclusion of the other ... caused and is still causing an unease, which creates a silent consensus that the religious are necessarily a source of violence' (p. 221). Additionally, Juhant helpfully reminds readers that some intellectuals in this region may not be ready to accept the positives of religion after being indoctrinated for

so long by Marxism's strongly negative stance on religion. This chapter provides a unique counterexample where religion has been removed, though still seen as an antagonist toward violence. The author ultimately argues that 'the lack of religious-spiritual dimension caused wars in post-Communist countries, because the people had no ethical grounds' to come to compromise. Juhant's chapter needs some polishing in order to make a more forceful argument, but his observations are nonetheless interesting.

The final chapter, penned by Wolfgang Palaver, provides an effective ending to this volume. It is less content driven and more hortatory; specifically, Palaver hopes in his chapter to spur on future historians, philosophers, and theologians to work together in order to construct a new metanarrative concerning the European Wars of Religion. In his words, 'I would like to provide a rough sketch how a new master narrative that could replace the old myth about the religious wars could look like' (p. 254). The author proposes that secularization occurred in the Church as early as the Papal Revolution in the 14th century and that intellectuals must 'distinguish between types of religion that are seeking primarily worldly power and are therefore prone to violence and those religious attitudes that are reaching out for a transcendent good' (p. 257). To do this, Palaver attempts to draw a distinction between the 'sacred and the holy' – the former representing religion with worldly ambitions and the latter religious expression that aims at spiritual good. Palaver's formula is well intentioned, though lacks the mechanism to discriminate between worldly and spiritual religious motives. The author's two poles are a positive step toward his general aim, but are far from a finished solution.

In summary, *The European Wars of Religion* provides a helpful introduction to the modern historiographical debate concerning the nature of the early modern Wars of Religion and their effects throughout Europe. The cosmopolitan nature of its contributors gives a helpful international voice to addressing the inadequacies of current scholarship. Furthermore, the various backgrounds of the authors in history, philosophy, and theology bring varied content and concepts in an organized manner to their readers. Specifically, Soukup and Juhant's chapters bring in case studies that are not traditionally included into the overall narrative of the Wars of Religion, but most certainly should be. Most helpfully, the authors are constructive as well as deconstructive; rather than simply critiquing the outdated secularist perspective on the wars, the authors cumulatively build a replacement narrative that deals with all facts and issues responsibly. However, the volume is not without its faults. Unfortunately, the text includes an alarming number of typographical and grammatical errors (pp. 58, 153, 243, 254, and others). Additionally, this book's contributors occasionally offer ideas and organizational models that are uneven and unclear which sometimes obscures the overall thrust of the book. Lastly, a case study on the Spanish Inquisition would be on theme and serve as a welcome addition to enforce the conclusions of the authors. Nevertheless, *The European Wars of Religion* is a useful book that handles a diverse number of ideas and sources faithfully. The editors should be praised for contributing an original volume so in touch with modern debates in early modern history. Each contributor offers future areas for research and this work will ultimately stimulate a greater understanding of its subject matter.

## Notes

1. For an excellent example in English, see Anne Dowriche, *The French Historie* (London, 1589), *Early English Books Online*, September 2013. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Another example in a French context is W. S. Browning, *The History of the Huguenots during the Sixteenth Century*, (London, 1829). Accessed through HathiTrust Digital Library, April 2015. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. This volume is helpfully cited by the authors of the reviewed book; Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York, NY, 2008). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford, 2009). [Back to \(4\)](#)

## **Links**

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/154728>