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of Byzantium and the Muslim World*

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Defenders of the Christian People: Holy War in Byzantium

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For most civilized people the term *holy war* is a contradiction in terms. What religious motive could possibly transform the widespread destruction and the slaughter of thousands of human beings into a holy and meritorious act? But, as we know, religion has all too often served as a pretext for violence. Before going any further, however, we should agree upon a definition of holy war. Three criteria, I think, are essential. A holy war has to be declared by a competent religious authority, the obvious examples being a Christian pope or a Muslim caliph. The objective must be religious; again, two obvious examples are the protection or recovery of sacred shrines or the forced conversion or subjection of others to your religion. There could, of course, be other goals. Finally, those who participate in the holy war are to be promised a spiritual reward, such as remission of their sins or assurance of a place in paradise.¹

In the world around the Mediterranean, two forms of holy war did emerge. First, the Muslim *jihād*. Much has been written about this, and I wish only to point out its salient features.² *Jihād* is a religious duty for the Muslim community to propagate Islam, employing coercion of various sorts as needed, until the whole world professes Islam or is subject to its laws. At times, especially when the caliph, or other religious authority, proclaims it, this obligation takes the form of armed conflict. Those who die in the struggle are acclaimed as martyrs and are believed to go straight to paradise. The doctrine of *jihād* may be traced to the earliest days of Islam, although maybe not directly to Muhammad himself. The *jihād* did not become one of the five “pillars” of Islam, but it was kept alive by preaching and the attractiveness of the ideal of martyrdom and paradise and the more tangible rewards of booty and plunder. In essence, it was aggressive and bent on conquest. Of course, not every war waged by Muslim powers, including those against

¹ See M. Canard, “La guerre sainte dans le monde islamique et dans le monde chrétien,” *RAfr* 79 (1936): 605–23, repr. in *Byzance et les musulmans du Proche Orient* (London, 1973), no. viii; V. Laurent, “L’idée de guerre sainte et la tradition byzantine,” *RHSEE* 23 (1946): 71–98; N. Oikonomides, “The Concept of ‘Holy War’ and Two Tenth-Century Byzantine Ivories,” in *Peace and War in Byzantium: Essays in Honor of George T. Dennis*, S.J., ed. T. Miller and J. Nesbitt (Washington, D.C., 1995), 62–86; T. P. Murphy, ed., *The Holy War* (Columbus, Ohio, 1976).

² See Canard, “Guerre sainte”; E. Tyan, “Djihād,” *EP* (Leiden, 1961), 2:551b–553a; J. Kelsay and J. T. Johnson, *Just War and Jihad: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on War and Peace in Western and Islamic Traditions* (New York, 1991).

nonbelievers, was a holy war. Many were simply tribal, ethnic, or even national conflicts whose roots often went back to pre-Islamic times.

In Western Europe the idea of a holy war developed later and for different reasons. So much has been written about this that there is no need to enter into detail.³ First, we must remember that what we call a crusade was, especially during the first century or so, a pilgrimage, and those who took part in it were pilgrims; it was a holy journey (*iter, passagium*), not a holy war. It was regarded primarily as defensive, that is, armed escorts were to protect pilgrims on their way to the sacred shrines of Christendom and were to recover or defend the holy sites in Palestine. This defensive character differentiated it from *jihād*, as did the fact that it did not advocate the forceful imposition of Christianity upon others. In subsequent centuries, admittedly, and for some participants it did take on a more belligerent character. One need only recall the so-called Albigensian crusades or the one that sacked Constantinople in 1204. Still, the notion of using force to convert the infidel was, with few exceptions, foreign to Christianity, East and West. But the Crusades were proclaimed by the highest religious authority in the West, the pope; they were directed toward a religious end, the protection of fellow Christians in the East and the recovery and defense of the holy places; and those who took part were promised religious rewards, particularly the remission of sin.

For the Byzantines, it must be said at the outset, both ideas and forms of holy war—*jihād* and crusade—were abhorrent.⁴ They absolutely rejected both. First, the *jihād*. They did not understand it. What motivated the armies of Islam, as the Byzantines saw it, was the hope of booty and a barbaric love of fighting. According to Leo VI, “The Saracens do not campaign out of a sense of military service and discipline, but rather out of a love of gain and license or, more exactly, in order to plunder on behalf of their faith.”⁵ Leo dismisses them as “barbarians and infidels” concerned only with plunder.⁶ Immense multitudes of them come from Syria and Palestine, “oblivious to the dangers of war, intent only on looting.”⁷ Byzantine authors, from the seventh to the fourteenth century,

³ See J. Riley-Smith, *The First Crusade and the Idea of Crusading* (London, 1993), and, in general, S. Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1951–54); K. M. Setton, *A History of the Crusades*, 2d ed., 6 vols. (Madison, Wisc., 1969–89); A. S. Atiya, *The Crusade: Historiography and Bibliography* (Bloomington, 1962); H. E. Mayer, *Bibliographie zur Geschichte der Kreuzzüge* (Hannover, 1960); this comprises 5,362 titles, and the number of works on the Crusades has surely doubled since then. For continuing study of the Crusades, consult the annual *Society for the Study of the Crusades and the Latin East: Bulletin* (1981–97).

⁴ Canard, “Guerre sainte”; Laurent, “L’idée de guerre sainte”; A. Laiou, “On Just War in Byzantium,” in *To Hellenikon: Studies in Honor of Speros Vryonis Jr.*, ed. S. Reinert et al. (New Rochelle, N.Y., 1993), 1:156–77; G. Dagron, “Byzance et le modèle islamique au Xe siècle à propos des ‘Constitutions tactiques’ de l’empereur Léon VI,” *CRAI* (Paris, 1983): 219–43.

Byzantine rhetoric about holy war, though, has led some modern scholars to refer to the luckless campaign of Manuel I against the Turks in 1176 as a sort of crusade: R.-J. Lilie, *Byzantium and the Crusader States, 1096–1204*, trans. J. C. Morris and J. E. Ridings (Oxford, 1993), 211–14; P. Magdalino, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143–1180* (Cambridge, 1993), 95–98.

⁵ *Leonis VI Tacticae constitutiones* 18.24, PG 107:952 (hereafter *Taktika*). Book 18 is also edited by R. Vári, “Bölcs Leo Hadi Taktikájának XVIII Fejezete,” in G. Pauler and S. Szilágyi, *A Magyar Honfoglalás Kutfői* (Budapest, 1900), 11–89.

⁶ *Taktika* 18.128; PG 107:976.

⁷ *Taktika* 18.132; PG 107:977.

repeat these accusations, as they profess their utter repugnance for the doctrine of *jihād*. In their polemics against Islam they vehemently criticize the *jihād* as little more than a license for unjustified murder and a pretext for pillaging.⁸ And, while the Byzantines, when the opportunity arose, may have indulged in their share of massacre and looting, they did not excuse it in the name of religion.

As far as the Crusades are concerned, it suffices to listen to Anna Komnene, who abhorred both the movement and many of its participants.⁹ Still, some Byzantines welcomed the Westerners at first. They were, after all, fellow Christians, although perhaps somewhat careless in their teachings and practices. Emperor Alexios treated them in a civil, almost cordial manner, although he was always nervous about what they might do, and he provided them with military assistance through Asia Minor. But, in general, the Byzantines never seemed to understand why all those Western knights and their followers were marching through their land. Restoring Jerusalem to Christian rule was perhaps a laudable objective, but was it worth such an immense effort, fraught with so many perils and uncertainties and carried out with such brutality? Constantinople, after all, was the New Jerusalem, the true holy city. The Byzantines, always practical, were far more interested in possessing Antioch because of its important strategic position than in holding Jerusalem with all its sentimental value. Pilgrimage they understood and warfare they understood, but the conjoining of the two they did not understand. They would have been utterly appalled at the preaching of St. Bernard and his call for the extermination of the infidel (*delenda penitus*), as well as his assertion that killing an enemy of Christ was not homicide, but maleicide.¹⁰ And what would they have thought of the rule he drew up for the Templars, monks who wielded lethal weapons in battle?¹¹ The Byzantines soon came to believe that the warriors from the West had nothing less in mind than the conquest of the empire, and the events of 1204 proved they were right. Ultimately, they came to hate the Latins as much or even more than the Muslims. If the Latins ever referred to their eastern expeditions as “holy war,” that term, it is clear, would not have been appreciated by the Byzantines.

Now, to the main point. I have already indicated that the Byzantines did not have any concept of a true holy war, although this will be qualified below. Byzantine writers did use the term *holy war* (*hieros polemos*), but only in reference to one of the three “sacred wars” waged over the possession of the oracle of Apollo at Delphi; these occurred in 590, 449, 355–347, all B.C. Most Byzantine references, such as the *Souda* (I.191), allude

⁸ A. T. Khoury, *Polémique byzantine contre l’Islam, VIII–XIII s.* (Leiden, 1972), 243–59; W. Eichner, “Die Nachrichten über den Islam bei den Byzantinern,” *Der Islam* 2 (1936): 131–62, 197–244.

⁹ Anne Comnène, *Alexiade*, ed. and trans. B. Leib, 3 vols. (Paris, 1937–43), book 10, 5–11: vol. 2:205–36.

¹⁰ *De laude novae militiae*, in *S. Bernardi opera*, vol. 3, ed. J. Leclercq and H. M. Rochais (Rome, 1963), 204–39, esp. chap. 3, p. 217; *epistola* 457, *opera*, vol. 8 (Rome, 1977), p. 433; et al.

¹¹ See *De laude*, passim; *Alexiade* 10.8.8; vol. 2:218. Constantine Stilbes strongly criticized the Latin clergy for engaging in combat and killing the enemy, including other Christians, and for teaching that those who died in war went directly to heaven: J. Darrouzès, “Le mémoire de Constantin Stilbès contre les Latins,” *REB* 21 (1963): 50–100, esp. 69–77. In 1250 Emperor John Vatatzes told Frederick II that it was scandalous for priests to carry weapons and fight in battle: F. Miklosich and J. Müller, *Acta et Diplomata graeca medii aevi sacra et profana*, 6 vols. (Vienna, 1860–90), 3:72–73, no. 18.

to the second one, apparently following Thucydides (1.112) and Aristophanes (*Aves* 556). The term *holy war* is used, as far as I can determine, by ancient and Byzantine writers only in connection with those wars.

In one sense, however, all Byzantine wars were holy because the emperor was holy, and it was by his authority and sometimes under his leadership that wars were waged. They were declared by the emperor and fought on behalf of the empire. They were imperial wars, fully in the Roman tradition. Their essential character did not change because the legions now entered battle under the sign of the cross. Their prayers for God's blessing and other religious practices did not make their wars specifically holy or religious, as has sometimes been maintained.¹²

From time immemorial, religion has played a role in warfare. One people offers sacrifice to its gods before going into battle and, upon emerging victorious, will topple the statues of the other people's gods and set up its own. Are these religious wars, or are they simply tribal conflicts motivated by revenge, plunder, or the acquisition of land or slaves? The invocation of deities is basically an additional means of assuring victory, of enlisting the aid of powerful allies and shifting the balance in your favor. Consider the Trojan War. Not only were gods and goddesses called upon with prayer and sacrifice, but they participated directly in the fighting. Yet nobody calls the Trojan War a holy war. Consider, too, those conflicts that have often been cited as precedents and inspirational models for Christian holy wars, I mean those waged by the people of Israel, as related in the books of Joshua, Judges, Kings, and elsewhere. Do they really qualify as religious wars? Were they not primarily armed conflicts between seminomadic tribes struggling to acquire land? Their god may grant them victory or deny it, but, in the final analysis, the fundamental motivation and objective of most of those wars were not primarily religious, those of the Maccabees perhaps being an exception. How many wars, then, waged later by Christians and Muslims were truly religious wars, not to mention holy wars? Were they not, to a large extent, tribal or feudal conflicts with a lot of religious trappings?

In trying to categorize a conflict as religious or holy, we might ask: Are they fighting this war primarily for religious reasons? If little or no religious motivation were present, would they still be fighting? The Crusaders provide a good example. Nobody in his right mind, even in the Middle Ages, would leave the comforts of home, pack up all his belongings, and march off for two thousand kilometers, endure incredible hardships, and face the very real threat of death unless he were religiously motivated. While there were some, like Bohemond, who may have had less lofty motives, the majority of the Crusaders gained no strategic, economic, or political advantage, especially during the first hundred years. They marched off to the East for what they regarded as a religious act, if not a duty. For them, this was surely a holy war.

On the other hand, the long campaigns of Herakleios against the Persians, sometimes depicted as a prototypical crusade, abounded in religious elements.¹³ The Persians had

¹² See the detailed study by A. Kolia-Dermizakes, *Ho Byzantinos "hieros polemos"* (Athens, 1991); also the review by W. Kaegi, *Speculum* 69 (1994): 518–20.

¹³ William of Tyre begins his account of the Crusades with the reign of Herakleios: *Willelmi Tyrensis Chronicon*, CC *continuatio medievalis* 63–63A, ed. R. Huygens (Turnhout, 1986), 1.1:105; trans. E. A. Babcock and A. C. Krey, *A History of Deeds Done beyond the Sea, by William Archbishop of Tyre*, 2 vols. (New York, 1943), 1:60.

destroyed churches, massacred Christians, and taken away the holy cross from Jerusalem; they must be punished and the cross restored. The patriarch prayed for victory and blessed the troops as they marched out under the standard of the cross. Religion played a major role throughout the conflict. But, even if these religious motivations had not been present or had not been so prominent, Herakleios would almost certainly have still gone to war. His wars were waged as much for strategic advantage and territory as for religion. The wars of Herakleios were but one phase of the geopolitical conflict between the Romans and the Persians that had been going on for six hundred years. These were imperial wars, not holy wars. Although religious rhetoric and ritual were prominent and pervasive, subsequent Byzantine wars, those of Nikephoros Phokas in the tenth century, for example, or those of the Komnenian emperors in the twelfth, were first and foremost imperial wars. That their objectives sometimes coincided with religious ones did not alter that basic characteristic. Finally, it should be noted that the same religious practices were observed by the Byzantine armed forces whether they were facing a non-Christian or a Christian enemy.

War cries, such as “God help the Romans,” “The Cross is victorious,” do not transform the nature of a particular war. Religious shouts and symbols are used to instill confidence in the individual soldier and to raise the morale of the army. Religious services, especially the eucharistic liturgy, are meant to comfort the soldier and to prepare him to risk his life.¹⁴ Chaplains still conduct religious services for modern armies, but that does not sanctify their conflicts. Athletes often join in prayer before a game, but we do not talk of a holy football game or a holy soccer match. The church certainly prayed for victory, but it rejected the request of Nikephoros Phokas to have fallen soldiers honored as martyrs.¹⁵ The cross was displayed on the standards, or used in place of a standard, to remind the troops of God’s protection and that they were fighting for a Christian nation.¹⁶ Through the centuries, the cross, it may be noted, has been depicted on many banners in wars that have been far from holy. The cross displayed on the flags of several modern nations does not tell us anything about the religious sensibilities of its citizens; Great Britain has three crosses on its flag.

The Byzantine attitude toward war can best be understood in the context of the way in which they viewed the world and life in general. This world and the life it bore were fragile and transitory. The only permanent reality was to be found in another world, the kingdom of heaven. The empire on earth was a mere reflection of that in heaven, and

¹⁴ See G. Dennis, “Religious Services in the Byzantine Army,” *Eulogema: Studies in Honor of Robert Taft S.J.*, *Studia Anselmiana* 110 (Rome, 1993): 107–17.

¹⁵ *Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis historiarum*, ed. I. Thurn (Berlin, 1973), 274.62–67; see P. Viscuso, “Christian Participation in Warfare: A Byzantine View,” in *Peace and War in Byzantium* (as in note 1), 33–40. Some soldiers were honored as martyrs, such as the Forty-two of Amorion, but that was because they chose to die rather than deny their faith. Three liturgical offices (*akolouthiai*) that have come down to us do not provide evidence for a Byzantine holy war; rather, they are prayers that God may look kindly on the faithful soldiers who have died in war, that he may forgive their sins and receive them into Paradise: L. Petit, “Office inédit en l’honneur de Nicéphore Phocas,” *BZ* 13 (1904): 398–419; A. Pertusi, “Una acolouthia militare inedita del X secolo,” *Aevum* 22 (1948): 145–68; T. Détorakes and J. Mossay, “Un office byzantin inédit pour ceux qui sont morts à la guerre, dans le Cod. Sin. Gr. 734–735,” *Le Muséon* 101 (1988): 183–211.

¹⁶ See G. Dennis, “Byzantine Battle Flags,” *ByzF* 8 (1982): 51–63.

the emperor was called to imitate the Lord of heaven. Under God, he was to assure the well-being of his subjects and protect them from all dangers, within and without. The church had a different role. Jesus had told his followers that he could call upon legions of angels to save himself from death,¹⁷ but he did not do so, and neither would his church. Unlike its Latin sister, the Byzantine church left the call to arms and the waging of war, even against the most pernicious and destructive heretics and infidels, to the imperial government. But it took the lead in another kind of struggle, one for the souls of the faithful, a struggle not against human enemies but against cosmic powers and superhuman forces of evil.¹⁸ For Byzantine Christians this was a form of warfare that could be called holy, although I have not found explicit use of that term. The concept of the Christian being involved in a war against the forces of evil goes back, of course, to St. Paul, if not before.¹⁹

While every Christian had to withstand the onslaughts of the devil, the monks were the frontline troops in the war against the legions of Satan. Night and day, according to Gregory of Nazianzos, the monk must fight the spiritual war (*pneumatikos polemos*).²⁰ Chrysostom tells his audience that the war against demons is difficult and never ending.²¹ Spiritual combat is a regular theme in the *vitae* of the saints.²² Demons in a variety of shapes, from hyenas to dragons, viciously attacked saints Theodore of Edessa, Gregory of Dekapolis, Joseph the Hymnographer, John Psychaites, Isidore, abbess Sarah, and many others.²³ Story after story is told of their incessant struggles against the forces of sin and darkness.

The demons, for their part, took warfare seriously. They appear in full battle array, in phalanxes of cavalry and infantry that wheeled about in formation. They wore iron breastplates and carried bows and arrows and other missiles.²⁴ They began their advance against St. Ioannikios in proper order, although making a tremendous racket; they drew up in formation, shouted their war cry, and shot a steady stream of arrows at him. All of this he repelled by the sign of the cross. Under their commander (*strategos*) Satan, the demons arrayed themselves in their phalanxes in a proper battle line (*parataxis*), just as the armed forces of the emperor do, and charged against Constantine the Jew.²⁵ As the military manuals prescribe, they feigned retreat, shouted insults from afar, regrouped,

¹⁷ Matt. 26:53.

¹⁸ Eph. 6:12.

¹⁹ E.g., Rom. 7:23; Eph. 6:16–20; 1 Thess. 5:6–8; 1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 2:4.

²⁰ *Oratio* 2, 91; PG 35:495B.

²¹ *In s. Eustathium*, PG 50:599B.

²² See P. Bourguignon and P. Wenner, “Combat spirituel,” *DSP*; T. Špidlík, *Spirituality of the Christian East* (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1986), 233–66.

²³ F. Dvornik, *Vie de s. Grégoire le Décapolite et les Slaves macédoniens au IXe siècle* (Paris, 1926), 47, 31; cf. *Vita of Joseph the Hymnographer by Theophanes*, ed. A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, *Sbornik grečeskikh i latinskikh pamjatnikov kasajuščikhsja Fotija patriarkha*, vol. 2 (St. Petersburg, 1901), 41; *Žitie ize vo sv. oca našego Feodora arkhiepiskopa Edesskogo*, ed. I. Pomjalovskij (St. Petersburg, 1892), 67, 1–31; P. Van den Ven, “Vie de s. Jean le Psichaïte,” *Le Muséon* 21, n.s., 3 (1909): 103; (Isidore) *Apophthegmata Patrum*, PG 65:97; (Sarah) *ibid.*, 229.

Research in this area was greatly facilitated by the Dumbarton Oaks Hagiographical Database; for her assistance in its use the author is especially grateful to Dr. Stamatina McGrath.

²⁴ *AASS*, Nov. 2.1:395c–396a.

²⁵ *AASS*, Nov. 4:640.

and attacked again. The saint beat them off with a wooden cross made on the spot, but the effort left him exhausted. A monk in Skete heard a battle trumpet sound as the demons prepared to attack him and force him to quit his prayers.²⁶

To confront such adversaries, the monk had to be a soldier. Symeon reminds his monks that they have been called to fight against invisible foes. They have enlisted and taken their place in the ranks of Christ's soldiers.²⁷ The monks did not wait to be attacked; they did not simply hold the fort, but took the war into the devil's territory and fought him on his own turf, in the desert and in other wild, abandoned locations. Many made a point of settling in the desert where the demons lived.²⁸ Daniel the Stylite learned that demons were hiding in an old church. He immediately went in to fight them "as a brave soldier strips himself for battle against a host of barbarians," holding the invincible weapon of the cross.²⁹

What, then, about the visible, tangible wars waged by the Byzantines with armor and weapons made of solid iron and steel, and against other human foes? No Byzantine treatise on the ideology of war, whether a holy or a just war, has come down to us, and it is unlikely that any was ever written. One must glean what one can from the military manuals and the histories. Although there were occasional rhetorical flourishes in admiration of valor and bravery on the field of battle, and although they were dependent on military means for their survival, the Byzantines, in the words of a retired combat engineer in the sixth century, regarded war "as a great evil and the worst of all evils."³⁰ "We must always prefer peace above all else," wrote Leo VI, "and refrain from war."³¹ For them war was not the "politics by other means" of Clausewitz, but was the last resort. The threat of overwhelming force was preferable to the actual use of such force, and in this, it may be noted, they displayed a striking continuity with the ancient Romans. They sought to obtain their objectives by diplomacy, bribery, covert action, paying tribute, or hiring other tribes to do the fighting. Only when all else had failed were they to take up arms. And even then they tried to avoid a frontal assault and concentrated on wearing out the foe by light skirmishing, clever strategy, and adroit maneuvering. They were reluctant to wage war on both moral and practical grounds. Killing, even when deemed justifiable, was evil—one need only recall the famous, if rarely observed, canon of St. Basil which declared that soldiers who had killed in battle were to be refused communion for three years.³² On the practical side, war was both hazardous and expensive.

All this is consistent with the remarkable centrality of defense in Byzantine strategic theory and practice. One American military scholar wrote of a sixth-century tactician:

²⁶ *Pratum spirituale*, PG 87:3017; M. J. Rouet de Journel, *Le Pré spirituel*, SC 12 (Paris, 1946), 152, p. 204.

²⁷ Syméon le nouveau théologien, *Catéchèses*, ed. B. Krivocheine, SC 96.1 (Paris, 1963), 3, 129–34, p. 290. *Stratiotes Christou* and the Latin *miles Christi* are very commonly used to designate a monk, but they can also be used for professional soldiers: see, e.g., Kolia-Dermitzakes, *Hieros polemos*, 257.

²⁸ See, e.g., Evagrius, *Praktikos*, *Traité pratique ou le moine*, ed. A. and C. Guillaumont, SC 171 (Paris, 1971), 505; A.-J. Festugière, *Les moines d'Orient*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1961–65), 2:101 ff.

²⁹ H. Delehaye, *Les saints stylites* (Brussels, 1923), chap. 15, p. 15.

³⁰ G. Dennis, *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, CFHB 25 (Washington, D.C., 1985), 20–21.

³¹ *Taktika* 2, 45; ed. R. Vári, *Leonis imperatoris Taktika*, 2 vols. (Budapest, 1917–22), libri I–XIV, 43 (hereafter Vári); entire work in PG 107:669–1120; Vári, 1:40; PG 107:696.

³² Saint Basile, *Lettres*, ed. Y. Courtonne, vol. 2 (Paris, 1961), ep. 188, 13, p. 130.

“He has a distinctly defensive mind, and sees so clearly what the enemy may do to him that he has no time to think of what he may do to the enemy.”³³ The Byzantines were not a warlike people and, in fact, this led the Crusaders to accuse them of cowardice. Their entire attitude toward war was colored by their emphasis on defense and, in this respect, certainly differed from the crusade and the *jihād*, both of which were aggressive by nature. Even the offensive campaigns into enemy territory of Herakleios, Nikephoros Phokas, John Tzimiskes, and Basil II were aimed at recovering and protecting regions that rightfully belonged to the Roman Empire.

In the Byzantine world, war was not, as sometimes in the West, a lethal playing field on which so-called noblemen displayed their prowess and sought glory. In itself, war was not a good or meritorious act, and it was certainly not “holy.” How, then, did they justify war? “The purpose of all wars is peace.” So wrote Aristotle long ago, and in the eleventh century Anna Komnene quoted him in explaining why her father Alexios had to devote so much time and energy to warfare.³⁴ She also makes it clear that, as with an individual, so a nation was entitled to use force in defending itself. Alexios was also, in her mind, justified in taking military action to recover lost territory, to force compliance with a sworn treaty, or to avert a greater evil.³⁵ Other writers, when they do advert to the causes of war, seek to justify it much as Anna.

Perhaps the clearest and most deliberate explanation of the Byzantine view of war is that put forth by Leo VI in the beginning of his *Tactical Constitutions*, very early in the tenth century. While the emperor’s highest priority was to see to the peace and prosperity of his subjects, he realizes that, to assure this, he must maintain the armed forces in good order and promote the study of tactics and strategy. Why must war take up so much of the emperor’s energies? “Out of reverence for the image and the word of God, all men ought to have embraced peace and fostered love for one another instead of taking up murderous weapons in their hands to be used against their own people. But since the devil, the original killer of men, the enemy of our race, has made use of sin to bring men around to waging war, contrary to their basic nature, it is absolutely necessary for men to wage war in return against those whom the devil maneuvers and to take their stand with unflinching resolve against nations who want war.” Eventually, he hopes, “peace will be observed by all and become a way of life.”³⁶

The Byzantines were not to wage war against other peoples, Leo wrote, unless those others should initiate hostilities and invade our territory. “Then,” he addressed the commander, “you do indeed have a just cause, inasmuch as the enemy has started an unjust war. With confidence and enthusiasm take up arms against them. It is they who have provided the cause and who have unjustly raised their hands against those subject to us. Take courage then. You will have the God of justice on your side. Taking up the struggle on behalf of your brothers, you and your whole force will be victorious. . . . Always make sure that the causes of war are just.”³⁷

³³ Dennis, *Three Treatises*, 83 n. 1.

³⁴ *Alexiade* 12.5.4; vol. 3:68. The reference is to Aristotle, *Politics* 7.13.8.

³⁵ Cf. Laiou, “Just War,” 156–65.

³⁶ *Taktika*, prooemium, 3; *Vári*, 1:4; PG 107:673.

³⁷ *Taktika* 2.46; *Vári*, 1:40; PG 107:696.

The Byzantine wars were not “holy” wars, but just wars, imperial wars. They were waged to defend the empire or to recover land that rightfully belonged to it. The soldiers put their lives on the line for the emperor and the people subject to him, the Christian people. They were to “struggle on behalf of relatives, friends, fatherland, and the entire Christian people.”³⁸ Toward the end of the tenth century another military author spoke up on behalf of the men on the eastern frontier who “choose to brave dangers on behalf of our holy emperors and all the Christian people. They are the defenders and, after God, the saviors of the Christians.”³⁹

In conclusion, then, Muslims believed force might be used to bring all people under the sway of Islam; Western knights believed that they were called not only to defend but to “exalt” Christianity and that attacks on its enemies could be holy and meritorious. The Byzantines believed that war was neither good nor holy, but was evil and could be justified only in certain conditions that centered on the defense of the empire and its faith. They were convinced that they were defending Christianity itself and the Christian people, as indeed they were.

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³⁸ *Taktika* 18.19; *Vári*, 1:21; PG 107:949. Late in the 12th century, archbishop Euthymios Malakes of Patras, in a court oration, has the soldiers of Manuel I echo these same sentiments: “We labor on behalf of religion and campaign on behalf of God; we do no injustice to foreigners but do battle for what belongs to us.” He has the emperor take the lead in the struggle and profess his readiness to die on behalf of the Christian people. *Euthymiou Malake ta sozomena*, ed. K. G. Mpones, 2 vols. (Athens, 1937–49), 2:31.5–8; 52.10–13.

³⁹ Dennis, *Three Treatises*, chap. 19, pp. 216–17.

