PART ONE

THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF WAR AND PEACE
Introduction
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The current era of global and local restructurings, as well as the development of what Saskia Sassen terms ‘new geographies of centrality’, presents complex challenges for today’s scholar of religion. New entanglements of religious ideas and political action, and changing formations and locations of religion require new interpretive perspectives. The rise of global media, and new discourses of difference, merit particular attention.

For those who specialise in the analysis of religiously-related violence and conflict, the global scenario is even more challenging. The new trope and phenomenon of terrorism represents innovative forms of asymmetrical warfare, as well as of mass mediation. Extremist factions and new movements can capture public attention in next to no time. The scholar of religion, still regrettably overlooked in many cases as informed resource, can provide the historical roots, comparative angle, content and contextual knowledge needed to analyse these new religious voices in the public sphere. Specialists in new religions, for example, have shed helpful light on processes of conversion, and radicalisation.

Of particular import is the ability to assess the claims and the potency of religious rhetoric as resource for violent social transformation. In addition to discourse, the twenty-first century scholar of religion must be attuned to the power of images, and their strategic manipulation, in what Manuel Castells calls our ‘global network society’. Images of persecution, suffering, and demonisation can suffuse a group’s self-understanding.

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