Dynasty, Constitution, and Confession: The Role of Religion in the Thirty Years War

One root of the resurgence of interest in the place of religion in human affairs lies in the postmodernist critique of materialist explanations, combined with the heightened sense of living in a new, possibly ‘post-secular’, age distinct from classical modernity. Secular ideologies such as Marxism have lost ground since the end of the cold war saw the resurgence of ethnic and religious violence in some of the successor states to Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. The theocratic character of the Iranian revolution and the rise of the religious right in the United States also help to explain why religion is the defining characteristic of the new order which Samuel Huntington portrays as the ‘clash of civilizations’. The events following 11 September 2001 have done little to distract from the preoccupation with religious fundamentalism.1

The current debate about the role of religion turns to history to supply depth and context. The period that preceded the nineteenth- and twentieth-century liberal ideal of the constitutional separation of church from state, the so-called ‘age of religious wars’, is customarily regarded as having begun with the Protestant Reformation in 1517 and grown more violent and destructive until its culmination in the Thirty Years War (1618-48).2 Histories of international relations traditionally portray the treaties of Westphalia that concluded the war as the birth of the modern secular states system made up of sovereign states;3 the significance of the birth of the

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2 Examples of this perspective include E. Luard, War in International Society (London, 1986); M. Konnert, Early Modern Europe: The Age of Religious War, 1559-1715 (Peterborough, ON, 2006).
3 The peace of Westphalia consisted of three treaties negotiated at Münster and Osnabrück. The first treaty of Münster in January 1648 made peace between Spain and the Dutch Republic, ending the war that began around 1568 and resumed after a twelve-year truce in 1621. The second treaty of Münster in October 1648 ended the war between the Holy Roman Empire and its ruling Habsburg dynasty against France that had begun in 1635, while the treaty of Osnabrück, signed the same day, settled the differences between the emperor and the imperial estates (Reichsstände) and between both of them and
states system is acknowledged even by scholars who stress continuity across 1648. The view that religion caused the Thirty Years War, while secularization helped to end it, is deeply embedded in the orthodox chronology of Western political development. This article questions both whether the Thirty Years War was a religious war, and whether the peace was secular in the modern sense.

Anglophone scholarship since 1945 tends to place the central European struggle between 1618 and 1648 within a wider, more prolonged, international struggle against Spanish Habsburg pretensions to universal monarchy. In the most extreme case, the Thirty Years War disappears into an almost seamless three-hundred-year contest between the Habsburgs and France. This international perspective does injustice to what contemporaries saw as a distinct struggle beginning in 1618 and lasting thirty years. Only a militant minority believed that all of Europe's wars had been fused together. Each belligerent was eager to enlist foreign support, but not at the expense of being dragged into the quarrels of potential allies. This article interprets the Thirty Years War as a conflict over the political and religious order in the Holy Roman Empire and the Austrian Habsburg monarchy. The war, which began as a relatively localized contest within the Habsburg lands, shifted into the German-speaking lands of the empire where it was pursued with varying intensity until 1648. The constitutional issues that caused it remained central throughout: their intractability helped to prolong the war, and every foreign intervention was justified as upholding one of the opposing interpretations of the points in dispute. The inability of any belligerent to achieve a decisive military preponderance both prolonged the fighting and obliged all parties to accept a compromise based on options that had been available at the outset.


3 N. Sutherland, 'The Origins of the Thirty Years War and the Structure of European Politics', English Historical Review, cxi (1996), 587-605.


5 These arguments are elaborated further in P. H. Wilson, 'The Causes of the Thirty Years War',
The conventional definition of a religious war is one fought about religious truth and/or possession of church property. Scholars who apply this definition to the Thirty Years War generally treat religious issues as paramount only until 1635, when secular concerns took precedence after Catholic France intervened on the side of Protestant Sweden against the Catholic Habsburg emperor and his Lutheran Saxon allies. The conventional definition is too vague, however, to be of use as a historical category. War was made in the name of religion both before the Reformation and, one could argue, long after the Thirty Years War. Even the Second World War was, in part, an attempt by the Third Reich, in which the Nazi party opposed organized Christianity, to exterminate European Jewry.

Some scholars distinguish religious wars from confessional wars. They reserve the former term for conflicts between Christians and non-Christians along the lines of Huntington's clash of civilizations. In early modern Europe, the term applies primarily to wars against the Ottoman empire. The general verdict is that, in this case, the laws of war, as understood by Christian Europe, did not apply, thus both increasing the brutality and ruling out a permanent peace that would normalize relations with unbelievers. The absence of this form of religious war is an important, yet neglected, aspect of the Thirty Years War. The Ottoman conquest of much of Hungary during the 1520s had influenced the course of the German Reformation and the political development of the Holy Roman Empire by dampening inter-confessional strife. Whereas few Protestants accepted the militants' call to bargain military assistance against the Ottomans for religious concessions from the emperor, the need to repel the Ottomans compelled the emperor and the constituent imperial estates (Reichsstände) to modify the imperial constitution, strengthening it by increasing its flexibility. Protestants and Catholics alike paid financial and military contributions at a high rate during the later sixteenth century.

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1 E.g., A. Gotthard, 'Der deutsche Konfessionskrieg seit 1619. Ein Resultat gestörter politischer Kommunikation', Historisches Jahrbuch, cxii (2002), 168 n. 78.
Despite the unprecedented support, Emperor Rudolf II (r. 1576-1612) failed to defeat the Ottoman empire in the ‘Long Turkish War’ of 1592-1606, the most prolonged and extensive conflict with the Ottomans to that date. The material and political consequences contributed to the empire’s constitutional crisis when the Habsburg dynasty, its prestige among the German princes badly tarnished, turned on itself in 1608 in a violent dispute over the succession to its hereditary lands.\(^1\)

The absence of open war with the Ottoman empire for more than fifty years after 1606 may well have encouraged the Calvinist Elector Palatine, Frederick V (r. 1610-32), to pursue more confrontational policies within the empire. Similarly, the relative peace in Hungary helped the Habsburgs to survive after 1618, although fear of the sultan obliged them to maintain at least 15 per cent of their forces in Hungary despite the demands on them in Germany. Even if the Ottomans were distracted by internal problems and war with Persia, their decision to renew the truce of 1606 throughout the Thirty Years War was attributable to skilful Habsburg and Hungarian diplomacy:\(^2\) Istanbul was one of the few capital cities outside the empire in which the emperor maintained a resident ambassador.\(^3\) Not only elements of ‘normal’ diplomatic relations but also elements of secular war characterized this form of ‘religious’ war. The Christian populations under Ottoman suzerainty remained loyal, notably the Transylvanians who attacked the emperor in 1619-23, 1626-7, and 1644-5. The image of the Ottomans as ‘the hereditary enemy of Christendom’ was as much a product of intra-Christian conflict as of implacable hostility to Muslims. The ultimate insult to one’s confessional opponents was to brand them as behaving like Turks.\(^4\)

The term ‘confessional war’ was coined by scholars of the sixteenth-

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century Protestant and Catholic reform movements who sought to set religious change in early modern Europe in its political, social, and cultural context.1 Despite doctrinal differences, adherents of all confessions used similar methods to foster conformity with official belief and to stamp out dissent. The process of ‘confessionalization’ began in the 1520s as the evangelical reformers were compelled to define and to defend their faith, and intensified around 1550 with the second wave of reform associated with Calvinism and the Catholic renewal launched at the council of Trent. Some scholars list these developments under the conventional heading of religious war to argue that the Thirty Years War was the inevitable result of escalating tension between two mutually hostile confessional cultures. By 1618, according to Axel Gotthard, the world views of the two groups were so entrenched that they could no longer communicate with one another. By paralysing the imperial constitution, their miscommunication led directly to violence.2

According to Heinz Schilling, the confessional world view was the defining characteristic of early modern European international relations.3 He seeks expressly to harmonize the religious developments stressed by Gotthard with Johannes Burkhardt’s thesis that early modern wars were about ‘state-building’.4 For Schilling, religious schism coincided with political fragmentation following the failure by 1558 of the Habsburgs’ bid for universal monarchy. The growing identification of particular states with particular confessions helped to distinguish early modern wars from earlier wars that had involved religion, including the medieval campaigns against heretics, for example the Cathars. Confessionalization structured international relations: it filled the gap between the collapse of medieval Christendom and the rise of national sentiment by providing a guide to distinguishing friend from foe. Religion fused with politics because ‘the Reformations became part of the process of state-building, with sovereigns

and city magistrates arising as patrons and defenders of the new teachings.\(^1\) The ability of common faith to forge bonds across great distances was also helped by the sixteenth-century ‘media revolution’ that saw an explosion of print culture and other new forms of communication.\(^2\) Finally, the transitional stage of state formation enabled non-state actors to exercise influence, such as international religious orders like the Jesuits, or confessional networks based on shared experience of education at Protestant universities. Influence was not yet determined solely by the material criteria favoured later by Realpolitik. Conventionally ‘weak’ states – the papacy or Calvinist Geneva – were considered to be important actors alongside richer, larger monarchies.\(^3\)

Schilling, who incorporates much of the standard interpretation within his framework, presents events as tensions escalating inexorably towards general war after 1618. He places particular weight on the confessionalized generation that, having grown up in the post-Reformation world, obtained positions of influence between 1580 and 1600, and displaced the older moderates who still hoped to reconcile the confessions.\(^4\) What nineteenth-century historians labelled the ‘disintegration of the imperial constitution’, here becomes the consequence of the empire’s ‘partial modernization’. The constitutional changes of the first half of the sixteenth century left the empire passive in an international system increasingly geared to aggression and expansion. Confessional tension, by paralysing the mechanisms both for resolving internal problems and repelling external threats, led to implosion after 1608 and triggered general war a decade later.\(^5\)

The war thus becomes the inevitable consequence of the ‘failure’ of the peace of Augsburg to defuse in 1555 the initial impact of the Reformation. The peace is widely interpreted, especially in anglophone scholarship, as an ‘armed truce’.\(^6\) Polarization, allegedly accompanied by militarization, culminated in 1608 in the formation of the Protestant Union of German princes and cities, countered a year later by the Catholic League: both

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5 Ibid., pp. 352-8. The term ‘disintegration of the imperial constitution’ is the title of the section covering 1586-1608 in M. Ritter’s three-volume history: Deutsche Geschichte im Zeitalter der Gegenreformation und des Dreißigjährigen Krieges (Stuttgart, 1889-1908).
6 E.g., Thirty Years War, ed. Parker, p. 18.
parties 'stood armed and ready for the decisive battle'.

Though Schilling, too, regards the subsequent conflict as international, he differs from British and US historians such as Geoffrey Parker and David Maland who present it as a political struggle against potential Spanish hegemony.

Confession, not politics, divided Europe into rival blocks locked in a titanic struggle across the continent. In an argument that pre-echoes Huntington's, Schilling endorses Josef Polisensky's concept of a Catholic-Habsburg civilization based on proto-absolute monarchy and feudal agriculture pitted against a Protestant civilization associated with representative government and mercantile economics exemplified by the Dutch and Bohemians.

Thus, the Thirty Years War becomes the 'developmental and modernization crisis of European civilization': the 'inferno' that forged the modern system of sovereign states.

The concept of 'confessional war' focuses attention on structures to the detriment of actual belief. It is helpful to review how historians who are themselves committed Christians have defined religious war.

They distinguish between religious war and holy war in which belligerents believe that God summons them directly to fight and promises them victory despite seemingly impossible odds. A conflict in which one defends or propagates the faith becomes one in which God guides events.

The elements of this belief present before the sixteenth century came into focus more clearly thanks to the intensification of religious debate after the Reformation. The Catholic equation of Protestantism with heresy, combined with the menace from the Ottomans, both gave added impetus to the medieval crusading legacy and turned it inwards against European foes. The sense of being summoned as God's elect was reinforced by the humanist articulation of distinct national histories. Protestants were especially prominent in instrumentalizing the past to present particular peoples

1 Schilling, Konfessionalisierung und Staatsinteressen, p. 399.
2 Thirty Years War, ed. Parker; Maland, Europe at War.
4 Schilling, Konfessionalisierung und Staatsinteressen, pp. 415, 417, 419.
5 The main contributions come from Catholics: Bireley, 'Thirty Years War'; H. Waldenfels, 'Religionskriege im Blickwinkel der Weltreligionen', in Erfahrung und Deutung von Krieg und Frieden, ed. K. Garber et al. (Munich, 2001), pp. 83-95. Both authors are members of the Society of Jesus. Nineteenth-century historiography was dominated by Protestants who were also practising Christians, but did not articulate any theories of religious war.
as ‘chosen’: Catholics generally favoured recharged versions of universalism. The concept of the ‘imperial translation’ presented the Holy Roman Empire as the direct continuation of the ancient Roman one and so as the last world monarchy prophesied in the Book of Daniel. Such ideas lent support to secular projects such as the glorification of the Habsburg dynasty as the defenders of Christendom.

Believers assumed that they had a mandate to do God’s work; a sense of mission often accompanied by an apocalyptic belief that holy war would facilitate Christ’s return. Protestants embraced this view whenever they felt embattled, like the Bohemian Hussites in 1419-20 and the Münster Anabaptists in 1535. The view was reinforced by eschatological beliefs in the continuous unfolding of sacred history, to be understood through Scripture, that offered a guide to God’s will. Biblical references were correlated with current events through typology, which promoted the search for signs as indicators of what individuals should do next. Wolfgang Behringer argues that the increased incidence of natural phenomena like storms, floods, and the other climatic events associated with the ‘Little Ice Age’, may have encouraged the practice. During the late sixteenth century, Calvinism, largely subsuming the millennial elements from Lutheranism, developed a Providentialist strain that attached symbolic significance to contemporary figures as the embodiment of hopes for divine guidance and even the dawn of a new age. Frederick V was hailed as a new King David who would re-establish Jerusalem in Prague. Similar expectations were held of Christian IV of Denmark around 1625, and of Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden around 1630.

Such beliefs did not automatically increase the likelihood of war: the constant presence of doubt acted as a powerful constraint. Every con-
fession stressed the subordination of human affairs to divine omnipotence, and even the most devout questioned whether they comprehended the divine will. As signs were open to multiple interpretations, many were quick to criticize their over-enthusiastic brethren for using religion to disguise self-interest. At best, apocalypticism and Providentialism fostered both a brittle confidence in believers who might underestimate the risks they took and paralysis from fear of being punished for taking the wrong step.1

The difficulty in defining religious war points to the methodological problem of distinguishing motive from justification. Marxist historiography, which treats expressions of sectarian hatred as justifications, subsumes religion within the ideology of the ruling elite that used it to disguise the competition for material resources.2 While some, equally crude, attempts are made to dismiss religion as a device used to inflame hatred and mask naked ambition,3 others, less crude, nonetheless despair of identifying motives, and argue that scholars can only assess how war is justified.4 Justification, however, implies belief. Even if the decision-makers are dismissed as cynics, their use of certain arguments in preference to others implies confidence in the likelihood that they could convince others of the legitimacy of their actions.

The difficulty arises from the attempt to attach a single, defining, label to a phenomenon like the Thirty Years War that had multiple causes. Scholars often differ less than they claim. Schilling incorporates political causes (state-building) within a religious explanation (confessional war). Although accused by Gotthard of misleading a generation of students by focusing on state-building, Burkhardt includes religion as one of the ‘structural deficits’ of the early modern state, owing to the inability of rulers to neutralize confessional strife.5 Given the contradictory evidence, we need a framework that not only allows us to relate religious motivation to other causes, but also allows scope for contingency and agency in an event too easily seen as inevitable and structurally determined. The role of religion becomes intelligible when we recognize that confessionalization failed either to homogenize belief or to marshal adherents into disciplined,

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motivated parties. Members of the same church disagreed violently over the proper relationship between belief and action. Even if, for some, the war was a holy war in which eternal salvation was at stake, most were less willing to believe that God had called them to arms. They remained more pragmatic. The distinction was not one between the religious and the secular outlook: for both, faith, inseparable from daily life, helped to determine attitudes to law and politics.

Militant and moderate perspectives should be understood as opposite ends of a continuum, rather than as mutually exclusive. An individual might take a militant stance on some issues, while remaining moderate on others, and his degree of militancy might wax or wane according to circumstances. The two perspectives shared the goal of advancing the faith. While confessionalization sharpened distinctions, theologians of all hues still hoped to restore unity. Militants were distinguishable from moderates by their methods: the former were more willing to use force, while the latter hoped to persuade dissenters to recognize their errors. For the majority, advancement of the faith remained the primary, if distant, objective. More immediate objectives, justified as preparatory steps, often became of greater practical significance, at the expense, apparently, of the primary one. For example, after 1622, Philip IV of Spain’s minister, the count-duke of Olivares, urged Ferdinand II to offer concessions to Protestants to secure peace in the empire and enable him to offer help in Italy and the Netherlands. Such choices, justified by the doctrine of the ‘lesser evil’, were seen as tactical concessions designed to anticipate more serious obstacles in the way of reaching the primary objective. The doctrine, which derived from the writings of Thomas Aquinas, was buttressed by the horrors of the civil wars in France and the Netherlands. It underpinned the papacy’s tacit acceptance of the peace of Augsburg, and was restated on the four-hundredth anniversary of the peace by Pius XII.1

Militants, uncompromising and impatient, believed victory to be within their grasp. More receptive of Providential and apocalyptic beliefs, they were more likely to feel summoned to holy war, and their relative isolation as the minority, even within their own confession, reinforced the sense of being embattled. Their impatience with the moderate majority led them to use invective to inflame local disputes and confessionalize politics. Rather than representing the use of religion for political ends, their actions arose from their belief: they sought to reveal what they saw as the true character of seemingly secular disputes and to convince doubters that the faith was at

The Thirty Years War

An example of militancy was not invariably, however, a call to arms. The Saxon court preacher and Lutheran fundamentalist Matthias Hoë von Hoënegg (1580-1645) rejected claims that the Bohemians had revolted in defence of religion and seconded the elector, Johann Georg's (r. 1611-56), support for the emperor. Notwithstanding the increasing Habsburg influence throughout the empire during the 1620s, Hoë stated that the correct response for Lutherans was to suffer in silence.

Divine judgment remained ever-present for moderates, but they were less prepared to see God as directly involved in human affairs. The best example is Cardinal Melchior Klesl (1552-1630), a Catholic convert from Lutheranism who became the Emperor Matthias's chief adviser. While promoting the re-Catholicization of Habsburg Austria, he stressed the role of reason and law in politics. Agreements, including those made with Protestants, were legally binding and to be revised only by mutual consent. Gustavus Adolphus's chancellor, Axel Oxenstierna (1583-1654), despite belonging to the allegedly fully confessionalized generation, represents a Protestant equivalent. In a reflection on Gustavus Adolphus's policies in a speech to the Swedish council of state in 1637, he stated that defence of religion must contribute to the general public good. Sweden had intervened in the Thirty Years War in 1630 for this reason, not solely to defend the Protestant faith: the crown would not pursue religious goals to the detriment of the country.

The next three sections of the article analyse the role of religion at three levels. The first shows that the process of confessionalization neither divided the empire along sectarian lines, nor necessarily intensified religious persecution. The second shows that religion played only a subordinate role in mobilizing the people and stirring them to violence. The third shows that confession did not underpin alliances, either within the empire, or between its constituent elements and outside powers. The final section of the article presents an alternative to the concept of the Thirty Years War as a religious war by showing that confessional issues were subsumed within a wider dispute over the imperial constitution.

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The extensive literature on confessionalization modifies the assumption that it was primarily a sixteenth-century phenomenon. The different devotional cultures emerging around 1550 were distinguished by their varied use of symbol, ritual, and communal practices like singing.\(^1\) Confession also influenced the choice of first names, and literary and artistic styles, and it showed in the Protestants' refusal, between 1582 and 1700, to adopt the Gregorian calendar.\(^2\) These distinctions were neither uniform, nor fully accepted prior to 1700. Confessionalization may have been more marked in the century after 1650 than in the previous one.\(^3\)

The alliance between throne and altar was far from firm during the sixteenth century, despite the provisions of the peace of Augsburg that allowed powerful princes to change the faith of their subjects. The Elector Palatine practised Lutheranism between 1544 and 1559, Calvinism until 1576, Lutheranism again until 1583, then Calvinism again. The last triggered a revolt in the Upper Palatinate in 1592. The majority of the elector of Brandenburg’s subjects refused to follow his conversion from Lutheranism to Calvinism in 1613, while the landgrave of Hesse-Kassel and the count of Lippe also faced serious unrest when they embraced the Reformed faith. Some opposition came from those who had firmly embraced the previous official religion, but many subjects rejected every effort to dictate what they should believe. The faith of Hessian villagers was ethical rather than doctrinal, with a local focus; it guided daily life and resolved difficulties according to communal norms. Although it incorporated officially sanctioned practices and beliefs when they met local needs, the substance of communal religious life altered little.\(^4\)

Official efforts were also hampered by the lack of qualified, dedicated clergy and local officials. The outbreak of war in 1618 and lack of funds compounded the problem.\(^5\) Bishops of Bamberg spent more in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries on representational culture than on

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4 D. Mayes, Communal Christianity: The Life and Loss of a Peasant Vision in Early Modern Germany (Boston, 2004). For similar findings for East Frisia, see N. Grochowina, Indifferenz und Dissens in der Grafschaft Ostfriesland im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert (Frankfurt am Main, 2003).
confessionalizing, and even the militant Julius Echter, bishop of Würzburg 1573-1617, spent as much on beer each year as he gave to the Jesuit college. The result was not indifference to religion: faith remained a vital element of daily life. Identification with one of the officially sanctioned creeds was, however, only one of the elements that gave people their sense of place and belonging. They were also bound within a web of corporate rights, feudal jurisdictions, and local customs, which sometimes straddled confessions and conflicted with official teachings. For example, the citizens of Lutheran Magdeburg, despite their church’s official repudiation of relics, protested loudly when the Catholics, in 1627, removed the bones of the local saint, Norbert (c.1080-1134), to Prague.

One test of a religious war is what happens when the forces associated with one confession overrun populations associated with another. The Catholic Habsburg victory over the Bohemian confederates in 1620 provides the clearest example, because it was not reversed despite the Habsburgs’ subsequent defeats elsewhere in the empire. The spread of Protestantism throughout the Habsburg hereditary lands in the later sixteenth century had contributed to the dynasty’s instability. Protestantism became entrenched in the Austrian provinces from the early 1570s when the dynasty conceded limited freedom of worship to nobles and towns in return for the amortization of its debt and the payment of taxes for the military frontier. Dynastic infighting after 1606 led to further concessions, including the Letter of Majesty granted to the Bohemian Protestants in 1608. These concessions were not universally popular among Protestants, who divided along sectarian lines and some of whom had fewer rights than others. The concessions also divided the provincial estates, because they satisfied sectarian religious interests rather than the concerns of the corporate groups that constituted society.

Further divisions followed a concerted effort to re-establish the dynasty’s authority by insisting after 1579 on Catholicism as a criterion for social advancement and crown employment. In this case, the motives were undoubtedly religious, and are traceable to individuals who can be labelled militants, at least for certain periods, notably the archduke of Styria, Ferdinand II, who became emperor in 1619. However, the decision also had a political goal: to define loyalty and facilitate identification with the ruling dynasty. But not all Catholics welcomed it, nor did Catholic families necessarily find favour. By 1620, many of the most important figures in the

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Habsburg government were converts, or resembled the future generalissimo, Albrecht Wenzel Eusebius Wallenstein, who had been baptized a Protestant but educated by Catholics. Habsburg Catholicism was geared to centralization, as the dynasty sought to reassert itself by limiting the opportunities for the estates to obstruct policy. However, Protestantism was not automatically the faith of resistance, as many Protestants, too, distrusted the institutions established by the Letter of Majesty that had no place in the established estates constitution. Re-Catholicization was pursued within the limits of the moderate position represented by Klesl: existing agreements were not revoked, but interpreted through a minimalist view of the concessions.1

The policy was continued after the revolt broke out in 1618. Lutheran nobles who remained loyal were allowed to retain their faith and their possessions,2 and, despite the execution of twenty-seven prominent rebels in Prague in 1621, many others were pardoned and some had their property returned. The widespread confiscation of rebel estates in 1622 was driven by the need for money and predated by three years the measures of re-Catholicization.3 A second wave of confiscations, after 1633, targeted collaborators with the Saxon invasion of 1631-2. More lands were seized in 1634-5, mainly from those implicated in Wallenstein’s alleged plots, some of them the chief beneficiaries of the earlier confiscations. In total, about half of noble-owned land changed hands, thus transforming not only Bohemia and Moravia, but also Austria, by creating a new land-holding elite throughout the monarchy. Uniformly Catholic, it was also characterized by the habit of administrative, court, and military service. The formerly closed world of intra-Bohemian kinship came to an end as noble families confirmed the pattern made by the transfers of land by intermarrying across the monarchy.4

The same test for loyalty was applied in Bohemia to the remainder of the population, who were ordered to embrace Catholicism or leave. Around 150,000 people fled in the 1620s, followed by a smaller group at the end of


the war. Most of them went to Saxony, where the elector, Johann Georg, refused to treat them as religious refugees and helped Ferdinand II to confiscate their property.1 Like Ferdinand, Johann Georg, although a Lutheran, regarded the exiles as defeated rebels; few objected to the emperor’s use of imperial law to brand his opponents ‘notorious rebels’ who could be punished without trial on the grounds they had condemned themselves by taking up arms.2 Even those affected did not dispute the legality of the seizures on confessional grounds, but claimed that they had not supported the revolt.3 Many placed under the imperial ban were subsequently pardoned, like Prince Christian of Anhalt (1568-1630) and Count Georg Friedrich of Hohenlohe (1569-1645), who had commanded armies defeated in 1620. The punishment proved less controversial than Ferdinand’s distribution of seized lands and titles among his supporters, notably those of Frederick V of the Palatinate to Maximilian I, duke of Bavaria, in 1623.

As the rebels, in Ferdinand II’s view, had forfeited their rights, in 1627 he revoked the Letter of Majesty extorted under threat of violence from Rudolf II. The estates of Bohemia and Moravia received revised constitutions that restored the clerical representation discontinued in the fifteenth century and asserted the Habsburgs’ interpretation of the monarchy as hereditary rather than elective. Otherwise, re-Catholicization proceeded slowly, with mixed results.

The same pattern can be detected in the Palatinate when occupied by Bavarian troops after 1620. As in the Habsburg lands, Protestant clergy and teachers were expelled, but the newly minted Elector Maximilian hesitated to ban worship until his possession of the territory had been legalized through enfeoffment by the emperor. Both Maximilian and Ferdinand based their actions on imperial law, citing the ‘right of Reformation’ (ius reformandi) granted to most of the imperial estates by the peace of Augsburg.4 The right of Reformation, defined as secular advocacy of the church, was invoked by Catholics as well as Protestants in the confession-alization process. As in the Habsburg lands, conformity with the new religious order lagged behind the formal measures:5 legal and constitutional

arguments took precedence over religion except with clergy who saw an opportunity to recover, or to enlarge, church lands and influence.

Protestant policies are more difficult to assess, because the only systematic effort to dispossess Catholics ended after three years with the defeat of Sweden at the battle of Nördlingen in 1634. The Swedish government’s intentions, however unclear, involved the usurpation of imperial overlordship in conquered areas and either their incorporation within the Swedish empire, or membership in a Swedish-led alliance.1 The practice corresponded with Habsburg and Bavarian policy. Catholic clergy and teachers were expelled or fined, but their congregations were allowed to retain the use of some of their churches. Rather than suppress Catholicism in the conquered ecclesiastical territories, the Swedes granted equal rights to the Lutheran minorities in the hope, in time, of converting the rest of the population. As in the Habsburg lands, confession became the test for political loyalty, while church property and the estates of Catholic nobles who had fled were redistributed to Swedish and German officers in lieu of pay. Even though confessionalization was inhibited by Sweden’s alliance with France, which obliged Sweden to respect the rights of Catholics in Germany, there seems to have been little enthusiasm for religious reform. The goal remained the entrenchment of Sweden’s authority and the successful prosecution of the war.2 Even Sweden’s Protestant allies distrusted its claim to be the champion of Protestants’ rights: they suspected a ruse to gain control of their internal affairs.3

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People had access to an unprecedented range of media during the Thirty Years War. Improvements to the physical infrastructure of communication facilitated traditional sources of news, such as the spread of rumours by travellers, soldiers, and refugees. More significant, print media, already expanding, grew exponentially upon the outbreak of the Bohemian revolt. Religion made little impact on these sources of information, as it was relatively easy to publish confessional polemics in the decentralized, territorially fragmented empire in which censorship was difficult. Yet news

1 S. Goetze, Die Politik des schwedischen Reichskanzlers Axel Oxenstierna gegenüber Kaiser und Reich (Kiel, 1971).
3 A. Rieck, Frankfurt am Main unter schwedischer Besatzung, 1631-5 (Frankfurt am Main, 2005).
tended to recount military events and speculate on developments rather than give partisan explanations. Bias was further reduced by the widespread practice of reprinting text verbatim from other publications; even partisan publications such as the Viennese **Ordentliche Postzeitung** occasionally printed stories complimentary to the enemy, as well as subtle criticism of imperial troops.¹

Such publications do not convey the sense of two confessional parties locked in combat across the continent. The various armies are referred to by their nationalities or commanders, not as ‘Catholics’ but as ‘imperialists’ or ‘Bavarians’. In more partisan writing, the opposing side is simply ‘the enemy’. The same is true for correspondence between rulers and their commanders, for personal diaries, and for local chronicles. Many personal accounts fail to distinguish between different forces, simply recording the names of regiments, or their officers, who passed through or demanded provisions: the labels ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’ are largely convenient inventions by later historians. Religious images are more common in visual sources like broadsheet prints, but they focused on personalities, as more accessible, and rarely commented directly on political issues.²

Religion was more pronounced in explicit propaganda, as this sought to justify official policy, comment on events, or rally support for more vigorous action. The massacre of around six hundred Protestants by the Catholic inhabitants of the Valtellina in 1620, which attracted considerable public attention, provides a good example. Protestant publications focused on the gory details to demonstrate the victims’ martyrdom and highlighted the role of Catholic clergy as the alleged instigators of the violence. Catholics passed over the events to discuss the political background – the valley was controlled by the Protestant Rhetian free state (Grisons), which had suppressed local rights – and portrayed the victims as heretics, beneath notice as fellow humans.

Nonetheless, there were limits. Protestant publications noted that some Catholics had refused to participate, while Catholic ones agonized over the legitimacy of such violence and wondered whether the perpetrators, in using religion as an excuse to seize property, had sinned.³ Moreover, some voices urged compromise. By 1620, prints appeared advocating peace and almost invariably invoking the imperial constitution as the ideal framework. Germany appeared in female form as ‘Germania’, either as innocent


victim or embodying peace, as in the celebration of the peace of Prague in 1635 in which she is flanked by Ferdinand II and Elector Johann Georg.¹

War was also experienced directly through contact with soldiers, primarily in transit or billets, but also as marauders, plunderers, and, less commonly but often more violently, through proximity to the fighting. Military occupation occasionally lasted years, but usually brief periods of acute pressure and devastation were interspersed with longer periods of relative tranquility. Direct contact was often avoided; when soldiers approached, civilians fled to the woods, marshes, or fortified towns. Undoubtedly, the war was brutal, but our perceptions of it have been distorted by undue emphasis on exceptional events. The most notable was the destruction of Magdeburg, which caught fire when stormed by imperial and Bavarian forces in May 1631, killing four-fifths of the 25,000 inhabitants.² There were other massacres. Around one thousand inhabitants and most of the eight-hundred-strong garrison of Münden were killed when the town was stormed by Catholic League troops in 1626, and Wallenstein executed the defenders of Breitenburg (in Holstein) in September 1628 to frighten other towns into surrendering.³ Other examples could be cited. Nonetheless, such unusual events arose from specific circumstances rather than confessional antagonism. In all cases, the slaughter followed the refusal of the defenders to surrender once the walls had been breached; just what happened later during sieges in the Peninsular war.⁴ During the Thirty Years War, most deaths were the result of plague and other diseases exacerbated by malnutrition and population displacement.⁵

Brutality, present from the start, may even have diminished rather than increased in the later stages of the war, as soldiers and civilians learned the rules governing protection and extortion.⁶ The brutality has undoubtedly

¹ Burkhardt, ‘Reichskriege’, pp. 72-80.
³ There is a highly inaccurate account of this in the famous Protestant history by Robert Monro, Monro: His Expedition with the Worthy Scots Regiment Called Mac-Keys, ed. by W. S. Brockington, Jr (Westport, CT, 1999), pp. 50-3. For the event, see Wallenstein, ed. Polisensky and Kollmann, p. 138. For the sack of Münden, see B. Rill, Tilly. Feldherr fur Kaiser und Reich (Munich, 1984), pp. 176-7.
⁴ Numerous examples, with graphic contemporary quotations, in C. Esdaile, The Peninsular War (London, 2002).
been magnified by subsequent literary depictions; the cruelty noted in eyewitness accounts, which was rarely directly witnessed, is evidence of fear, rather than of incidence of violence. For instance, the Saxon city of Naumburg, with a pre-war population of 8,900, recorded only eighteen citizens murdered by soldiers during the entire war.

Religion certainly featured. There are numerous examples of iconoclasm, ranging from the inhabitants of Donauworth who shredded the banners of a Catholic procession in 1605, to Protestant troops stabling their horses in Catholic churches during the war. Such incidents received prominent attention in contemporary propaganda and were assiduously noted by clerical observers in their diaries. However, it remains questionable how far violence was directly motivated by religion. Confessional animosity could be fanned by militants, as in pre-war Augsburg, designated a bi-confessional city in 1555, where Georg Müller prophesied divine wrath unless his fellow Lutherans resisted the Gregorian calendar. Sermons like his, however, were effective only when they set general claims in the local context: Müller cited as evidence for his claim of an international Jesuit conspiracy, the recent conversion of prominent local families, and he blamed the city’s economic problems on an alleged Catholic boycott of Lutheran shops. Such evidence can explain rioting but not warfare, which requires a political infrastructure to organize and direct it. Political leaders, averse to mob violence, sought by the disciplined application of force to achieve political objectives. They saw war as the extension of a legal battle, not as a means of settling a religious dispute.

None of the armies was fully confessionalized. Although most soldiers shared the ruler’s faith, each army contained large numbers of dissenters, and these often held senior positions. Sir James Hepburn (1598-1636), a Scots Catholic, commanded a brigade under Gustavus Adolphus. Numerous Lutherans also held commands in the imperial army, and its senior

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2. G. Mortimer, Eyewitness Accounts of the Thirty Years War, 1618-48 (Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 164-78.
general in 1647-8 was Peter Melander von Holzapfel (1589-1648), a Calvinist.1 Prisoners of war were already being pressed into the victors’ forces by 1620, further diluting the confessional homogeneity. The violence towards civilians had many causes other than religious differences; in addition to searching for food and loot, soldiers tried to assert a claim to superiority over a society that generally despised them, especially when they came from different ethnic and linguistic groups. Scots, Finns, and Croats, all of them strangers, acquired particularly fearsome reputations.2

Far from invariably targeting clergy, sometimes soldiers deliberately spared them and their churches.3 As female communities of women often living in isolated locations, nuns felt especially vulnerable. Yet Sister Maria Anna Junius of the Dominican convent outside Bamberg records with some embarrassment the gentlemanly behaviour of the Protestant Swedish officers who occupied the area in the early 1630s. The nuns even entertained Bernhard of Weimar (1604-39) by singing during a banquet at the convent, gave a present to a grateful Swedish sentry when his regiment moved away, and were so well treated that the local population became resentful. Having described the imperialists as ‘our’ side when recounting their operations at a distance, Junius becomes more ambivalent after they arrive: her diary records examples of ill-treatment at the hands of Catholic soldiers.4 Most eyewitness accounts are reticent about religion, leaving their loyalties implicit; little distinguishes Christian from Jewish accounts of the conflict.5 Almost every diarist records overwhelming fear, helplessness, and sense of personal misfortune: none portrays himself as an enthusiastic participant in a religious struggle.

Kasper von Greyerz and Bernd Roeck assert that religion offered contemporaries a way to make sense of their feelings and cope with the violence.6 However, the variety of responses suggests that faith proved an

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The Thirty Years War

unreliable guide. The official interpretation attributed the war to divine wrath: established practice decreed periodic days of prayer and fasting, and exhortations to the populace to lead morally upright, thrifty lives, to keep the war at bay or ensure it would not return. As the foreign forces withdrew around 1650, these arguments characterized the official celebrations of peace throughout Lutheran Germany. Their portrayal of peace as a gift of divine grace suited the agenda of the territorial state as it tried to ensure discipline to promote social order and economic recovery. War was tailored to the official explanation for fires in cities and natural disasters like the flood that destroyed Nordstrand island off the coast of Holstein in 1634. Fire and flood were stock metaphors for war in sermons.

It is easier to analyse official accounts of the war as religious texts than to find evidence that they brought comfort. On the contrary, one can find cases of permanent psychological damage along the lines of what would now be diagnosed as post-traumatic stress syndrome, including the repression of memories and their resurfacing in later life. Other than fear, few emotions are expressed in contemporary diaries, and religious references are confined to stock thanks to God for deliverance from personal danger. Studies of Lutheran funeral orations show that all of them mentioned the war. Some echoed the official interpretation, presenting the deceased as a good Christian who had patiently endured hardship; others, more matter of fact, refer to the war to explain widowhood, remarriage, or other stages in life.


6 B. Hoffmann, ‘Krieges noth und grosse theuerung. Strategien von Frauen in Leipzig 1631-50’, in
Evidence from Catholic communities presents an equally diverse picture. Participants at an all-night prayer vigil in Rottweil, besieged by French troops in November 1643, reported that a statue of the Virgin had changed colour and rolled its eyes towards heaven. However, an official investigation found widely diverging views of the alleged miracle. Some with poor eyesight, or who had been standing at the back of the church, insisted that the miracle had occurred, as did some Lutherans from the city. To some Catholics, the alleged miracle brought consolation – though soldiers who believed in it still surrendered the city nine days later – others had been terrified, seeing it as an ill omen. These initial reactions were swiftly suppressed in official accounts, especially one propagated by the Jesuits who related the miracle to the battle of Tuttlingen that enabled the imperialists to recapture the city two weeks later.1

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The assertion that confession structured alliances underpins the concept of a religious war that routinely cites as evidence the formation of the Protestant Union and the Catholic League and their integration with international coalitions. In fact, neither group managed to recruit the majority of its co-religionists among the imperial estates, who regarded sectarian alliances as inimical to the imperial constitution and feared that membership would suck them into conflicts not of their concern. Neither alliance created effective institutions, though the league was the more coherent, thanks to its reliance on Bavaria, which had a relatively well-developed and efficient territorial administration. Perhaps most significant, the two organizations never came to blows. They negotiated a truce in 1610 over the first Jülich crisis and another in 1620 during the Bohemian revolt.2 The union collapsed two years later and the subsequent league of Heilbronn, formed in 1653 to fall apart two years later, was primarily a vehicle for Swedish interests.3

The Catholic League, too, was an instrument of particular interests. Established by Maximilian of Bavaria to protect his lands and give him greater influence in imperial politics, he never dictated to the league, though he held the initiative throughout. The other members joined to enhance their security and weight in negotiations with the Protestants.

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3 J. Kretzschmar, Der Heilbronner Bund 1632-5 (3 vols., Lübeck, 1922).
Many Catholic territories, however, pursued confessionalization within their borders, but remained outside the league: the city of Cologne, for instance, made Catholicism a requirement for citizenship in 1617, but consistently refused invitations to join, as did the archbishop of Salzburg, who regarded Bavaria as a threat.  

Both organizations presented themselves as supporting the constitutional order at a time when the existing institutions were failing to defuse tension. The ‘Catholic League’ was never the organization’s title, but a pejorative label attached to it by Protestants hoping to tar it by association with the infamous Ligue in the French wars of religion. Many of its members wished to offer an alliance to Saxony and other Lutherans, to which Maximilian consistently objected because he understood that their inclusion would enable the Habsburgs to seize control. Thus, the strictly Catholic composition of the league had political, not religious, roots. After Klesl managed to disband it in 1617, it was re-established two years later only as a concession in return for Bavaria’s help against the Bohemian rebels.  

Klesl’s success indicates that we should not underestimate the potential of his parallel efforts to broker a compromise over the confessional elements of the imperial constitution.  

Catholic militancy helped to prolong the war after 1620 rather than to cause it, though confessional arguments did not necessarily determine the key decisions. Adam Contzen (1571-1635), Jesuit adviser to Maximilian, was convinced that God showed his support ‘in an ordinary fashion’, not just through miracles. Other leading clerics shared his opinion, including William Lamormaini (1570-1648), Jesuit confessor to Ferdinand II from 1624. Events appeared to confirm such faith in Providentialism. The


Madonna had allegedly unfurled her cloak to save the three Catholic officials defenestrated in Prague in May 1618. God answered Ferdinand’s prayers to save Vienna during the siege in June 1619. Father Dominicus (1559-1630), a Carmelite monk, claimed to have had a vision prophesying victory and had helped to persuade the doubting imperial commander to attack at White Mountain where Frederick V’s forces were routed in 1620. The explosion of a powder wagon that disconcerted the Protestant troops at Wimpfen in 1622 gave rise to the myth of a white woman urging the Spanish and Catholic League forces to victory. The battle of Stadtlohn was fought on the feast of Transfiguration in 1623, while a shooting star before the battle of Lutter in 1626 was interpreted as a fiery sword pointing towards the Danish forces who were routed the following day. Such incidents could be fitted into a pattern established by the naval victory over the Ottomans at Lepanto in 1571, and seemed to suggest that God had summoned the faithful to holy war against infidels and heretics.¹

These opinions were voiced primarily by clerics, not by soldiers or rulers. Even so, many clergy distanced themselves from them, including Pope Urban VIII, and they found little favour in France. Lamormaini’s views were far from popular in Vienna, even at the height of the emperor’s success. Anton Wolfradt (1581-1639), abbot of Kremsmünster and later (1631) bishop of Vienna, opposed harsh terms for defeated Protestants. Most of the emperor’s key political and military advisers were at best lukewarm towards the edict of Restitution, which required Protestants to return all church property taken since 1555. Issued in 1629, the edict was a political miscalculation of the first order: it alienated Saxony in the critical months prior to Sweden’s intervention. Though Lamormaini influenced the decision to issue the edict, it also reflected Ferdinand II’s legalist interpretation of the imperial constitution and was intended to lower, not heighten, the tension.²

Bavaria pursued goals independent of the emperor’s throughout the 1620s, as Maximilian collaborated with Brandenburg and Saxony in resisting what appeared to be the unwarranted increase in imperial power. The most obvious consequence was the dismissal of Wallenstein in 1630. Later, in 1635, Maximilian agreed to dissolve the Catholic League, in return for concessions from Ferdinand II who allowed Bavaria to retain its own army as an autonomous corps within the imperial army. Maximilian was bidding for a voice in the direction of the war and the terms of peace.³ His appeal to

³ C. Kapser, Die bayerische Kriegsorganisation in der zweiten Hälfte des Dreißigjährigen Krieges 1635-
the pope and Spain for subsidies to buttress Bavaria's autonomy owed nothing to Catholic solidarity. However momentarily important, the subsidies paid only a fraction of Bavaria’s and the league’s costs, which were met largely by members and occupied territories. Moreover, Maximilian opposed any action likely to extend the war into Italy or the Netherlands, because he considered Spain’s interests in these regions to be separate from the war in the empire.

Dynastic rather than confessional solidarity underpinned the Austro-Spanish co-operation. This, too, had limits. Ferdinand II and his successor from 1637, Ferdinand III, were reluctant to support Spain, rightly fearing French retaliation. France’s declaration of war against Spain in 1635 left the Austrian Habsburgs no choice, but they scaled back their commitment once it became obvious that France could not be defeated quickly. The two wars remained distinct: Austria’s decision not to negotiate separately from Spain at Westphalia was motivated by fear of losing its most important ally, not because Ferdinand III regarded his cousin, Philip IV’s, war as his own. Each of them had long wished the other to compromise to be free to assist him against his own enemies. Spain’s chief minister from 1622 to 1643, Olivares, who ignored all arguments for a holy war and even, briefly in 1625, supported the French Huguenots, was willing to ally with Saxony, criticized the edict of Restitution, and tried to persuade Ferdinand II to dismiss Lamormaini. Spain allied in 1637 with the Rhetian free state and, two years later, returned to it the Catholic Valtellina. Nor did concern for Spain’s Catholic credentials prevent the Spanish Habsburgs from allying in 1652 with the Protestant regicide Oliver Cromwell.

French policy conformed even less to the model of confessional war. France had backed German Protestant princes since 1530 and negotiated with the Protestant Union in 1610. Its actions arose from its ambition to act as the international arbiter, a standard response to the underlying move throughout Europe away from the medieval ideal of Christendom. While historians disagree about France’s motives in edging towards war by 1635,
none argue that religion predominated: the intervention in the war was justified on legal and constitutional grounds, primarily the illegality of Spain’s seizure in March 1635 of the elector of Trier.

Similarly, Catholic Savoy fails to fit Schilling’s model: it supported the Protestant Union because the duke hoped to become king of Bohemia. The difficulties Savoy, and also Stuart England, encountered in trying to pursue a consistent foreign policy cannot be reduced to the alleged incompatibility of cross-confessional allies. Savoy was a weak state precariously perched along the Alpine valleys between France and Spanish Milan; internal opposition to the duke was largely the product of external interference in support of rival factions within the ruling dynasty. The Stuarts, however, faced more serious domestic discontent, but geography and lack of money also prevented them from intervening on the Continent. Above all, the Franco-Swedish alliance from 1631, the cross-confessional partnership par excellence, was strikingly successful. Both parties made substantial gains from their involvement in Germany.

Protestant alliances rested on even shakier foundations than combinations of Catholic powers. The standard argument that the lack of a common church compelled Protestants to seek alliances as a political framework to substitute for an ecclesiastical one, is advanced to explain irenicist efforts to establish common ground between what had become by the later sixteenth century a bewildering array of competing confessions. Such efforts failed miserably. Calvinists dubbed the Saxon statement of Lutheran orthodoxy issued in 1580 as the ‘Book of Discord’. Subsequent attempts to find common ground ended in acrimony. Cultural organizations like the famous ‘Fruitful Society’ of 1617 that propagated the German


4 Schilling, Konfessionalisierung und Staatsinteressen, pp. 395-7.

language made only a limited impact. Palatine court culture, which was orientated at least in part towards France and England, thanks to Frederick V’s education at Sedan and marriage to James I’s daughter, contrasted with the beer-drinking, German-speaking Saxon Lutherans who made their educational trips to Italy.\(^1\) The Saxon-organized jubilee to mark the centenary of the Reformation in 1617 was signalled by a decree issued in Württemberg (a member of the Protestant Union) that lumped Calvinists and Zwinglians along with Jesuits, the pope, tyrants, and Turks as common threats to the faith.\(^2\) Similarly, Lutheran fundamentalists sparked riots in Berlin, in the belief that the troops James had sent to assist the Bohemians in 1620 had been sent to impose Calvinism on Brandenburgers.

The existence of sectarian hatred offers one explanation for the failure to establish a viable Protestant alliance. Lutherans generally followed the Saxon line that the emergence of Calvinists as an illegal sect endangered the gains made in 1555 and that confessionally based alliances had no place in the imperial constitution. Saxony’s refusal to lead such a group left the Palatinate as the only alternative. The Protestant Union emerged as a regional alliance between the Elector Palatine and the neighbouring Calvinist counts. Others joined through dissatisfaction with Saxony’s representation of their interests in the Reichstag, or because pursuit of their own territorial ambitions had left them vulnerable to pressure from their neighbours. In each case, local and regional issues were paramount. For example, the imperial cities of Nuremberg and Ulm joined because their neighbours, both of them important principalities, had done so: they were alarmed at Bavaria’s annexation of Donauwörth in 1607, more for the suppression of civic autonomy than for the gradual erosion of Lutheran rights that followed. Membership did not undercut civic solidarity with Catholic cities; for instance, Nuremberg protested to the Protestant Union in 1614 when two of its leading princes built a fort on land belonging to the Catholic city of Cologne.\(^3\)

Even though some western and southern Lutherans joined the Protestant Union, the majority, including the larger north German territories, refused. Failure to rally the German Protestants left the union an unattractive partner to potential foreign allies. Frederick V’s marriage boosted his prestige in 1613, but James I, who at first refused to back his son-in-law’s

\(^1\) Die Fruchtbringer - eine teutschherzige Gesellschaft, ed. K. Manger (Heidelberg, 2001); H. Watanabe-O’Kelly, Court Culture in Dresden from Renaissance to Baroque (Basingstoke, 2001).
political ambitions, only reluctantly supported them after 1619 because the Stuart dynasty’s own reputation was at stake.¹ Treaties with the Dutch, Venice, Savoy, and France all proved insubstantial; even Schilling is forced to admit that by 1617 the union had become ‘essentially an instrument of Palatine policy’.²

The Protestant Union’s institutional weakness increased the relative weight of non-state actors, the supposed ‘Calvinist international’ for one. The shared experience of exile or of fighting in the Dutch and Huguenot forces, as well as education in Protestant universities and fund-raising trips for churches, forged personal bonds that reinforced faith. However, one doubts whether this network acted like a ‘general staff’, co-ordinating policy across the continent.³ Militancy became more influential in specific, local circumstances, especially where the leadership became detached from the subject population. The frequent changes of official faith, along with the centralizing pretensions of the elector’s government, alienated many of the men who had traditionally served the Palatinate. The elector now relied increasingly on exiled veterans from the French and Dutch wars and educated commoners like Dr Ludwig Camerarius (1571-1651) from Nuremberg, who was convinced of the existence of a Catholic conspiracy to extirpate Protestantism.⁴

A similar situation prevailed in Brandenburg where the majority of councillors were nobles and burghers who converted with the elector in 1613, or their sons. For the chancellor, Friedrich Pruckmann (1562-1630), ‘this is a religious war’.⁵ Yet, in Brandenburg, the militants faced significant local opposition from the Lutheran old guard grouped around the elector, Georg Wilhelm’s, mother and uncle, as well as the chief minister, Count Adam von Schwarzenberg (1583-1641), a Catholic who placed Hohenzollern dynastic interests ahead of Protestant solidarity. Dr Wolfgang Gunther (1578-1628), a Protestant exile from Catholic Paderborn, faced

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² Schilling, Konfessionalisierung und Staatsinteressen, p. 362.
³ A. A. van Schelven, ‘Der Generalstab des politischen Calvinismus in Zentraleuropa zu Beginn des Dreißigjährigen Krieges’, Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte, xxxvi (1939), 117-41. For a succinct summary of the recent research, see G. Murdoch, Beyond Calvin: The Intellectual, Political, and Cultural World of Europe’s Reformed Churches (Basingstoke, 2004), pp. 31-75.
similar opposition during his tenure as chief minister in Hesse-Kassel.\(^1\) As a result, neither territory played an active role in the war until foreign occupation forced its hand.

No such constraints existed in the hothouse atmosphere of the Palatine court, where the fateful decision was taken to accept the offer of the Bohemian crown from the rebels in 1619. Even there, however, dynastic and political factors were significant, with Providentialist beliefs fostering false confidence and screening out evidence that contradicted preconceived opinions. The leaders of the Protestant Union had rebuffed the Bohemian and Austrian Protestants when they appealed for help in 1608, and only turned to them in 1619 when their own prospects looked less promising. Confession certainly suggested potential allies, but in practice they never lived up to expectations. The Palatine leadership, in taking the prince of Transylvania, the Calvinist Bethlen Gabor, to be a natural ally, failed to appreciate that his power rested on a compromise with three other confessions, as well as the blessing of the sultan, Osman II.\(^2\) All three — including the radical Austrian leader Georg Erasmus Tschernembl (1567-1626) — refused to endorse calls to rally ordinary people to arms. Even an Ottoman alliance appeared preferable to inciting popular insurrection. During the negotiations for an Ottoman alliance against the emperor held throughout 1620, Tschernembl assuaged his conscience by claiming that Osman might be persuaded to give official recognition to Christianity. Even though the Ottoman envoy, Mehmet Aga, was greatly impressed with Prague, Osman postponed a decision until it became obvious that Frederick had been defeated, when the negotiations were broken off.\(^3\) The Bohemian confederates, who had to wage their war with mercenaries, were bitterly disappointed with the insubstantial English and Dutch support.\(^4\)

Denmark’s and Sweden’s interventions also owed little to religion. Denmark only intervened when its victory over Sweden in 1613 and Sweden’s distraction in Poland made it safe for Christian IV to try to secure his dynastic interests and political influence in northern Germany. From 1625, Danish propaganda and private publications made the standard Lutheran

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argument that, as war was divine punishment, the populace should pray and live a better life to avoid defeat. Even publications directed at an international audience, which did emphasize Protestant solidarity, treated it as subordinate to political considerations; ones for a local audience were even more cautious, owing to the substantial opposition within the government to royal policy. Official documents separated practical questions, like raising money and soldiers, from religious activities such as prayer and penitence. Private opinion might blur the distinction, but nevertheless regarded the war as a purely Danish affair. The peace of 1629 was interpreted as the result of divine intervention because it surpassed all reasonable expectations: the emperor returned all of Denmark's lost provinces without charge, in return for Denmark's abandonment of its Protestant German allies.¹

Having noted the significance of religion in the civil war in Sweden in the 1590s, Schilling concedes that Sweden subsequently lacked a crusading impulse and focused on building a Baltic empire. It failed to answer militants' prayers during the 1620s, and even negotiated secretly with Wallenstein in 1627-8 for an alliance that would allow it to seize Norway from Denmark.² While religion did feature in the discussions prior to intervention and in official justifications for it, it was always subordinate to other considerations. There is evidence that Gustavus Adolphus may have shared some militant Providentialist beliefs, but as many of his statements are cryptic, Erik Ringmar is right to argue that the Swedish monarchy suited the presentation of itself to the audience it was addressing.³ The manifesto issued to justify the landing in Pomerania in 1630 stressed Sweden's defence of German constitutional rights and its determination to avenge perceived slights at the hands of imperial diplomats.⁴ Thereafter, religion remained subordinate to political considerations.

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¹ P. D. Lockhart, Denmark in the Thirty Years War, 1618-48 (Selinsgrove, 1996); G. Lind, 'Interpreting a Lost War: Danish Experience 1625 to 1629', in Religionskriege, ed. Brendle and Schindling, pp. 487-510.
The role of religion becomes comprehensible when we examine its place in the dispute over the imperial constitution. The peace of Augsburg of 1555 was a hybrid, simultaneously a political and a religious document in which the two elements were not fused. The secular elements sat alongside new forms of confessionalized law within a common framework that looked back to pre-Reformation Christian unity. The peace proved remarkably successful. In stark contrast to France and the Netherlands, it gave the empire sixty-three years of freedom from major conflict, the longest period of peace in modern German history. It was not matched until 2008, by the absence of hostilities since 1945. The peace remained formally in force after 1618, and was not revised by the edict of Restitution, which restated the Catholic interpretation of the issues in dispute. In 1635, the peace of Prague suspended the edict for forty years and endorsed the peace of Augsburg. It was not modified until the peace of Westphalia.

The controversy surrounding the peace of Augsburg needs to be set into the proper, constitutional, context. The religious terms took up only eight out of 141 paragraphs in a document that was itself part of a raft of constitutional reforms of justice, defence, police, and monetary policy. The reforms consolidated a process underway since the 1480s that gave the early modern empire its character as a mixed monarchy governed by the emperor, and composed of the imperial estates, the territories whose rulers were represented in the Reichstag. Its structure was hierarchical: it left considerable, unspecified powers to the emperor as sovereign overlord, while grouping the imperial estates in a complex pattern of unequal status and rights. The arrangement remained fluid, open to modification in individual cases, as well as, potentially, either greater central authority or greater princely autonomy.

While strengthening the empire as a whole, the peace of Augsburg represented a severe blow to the Habsburgs’ bid to enhance imperial authority. Charles V’s attempts to settle the religious controversy and to reorganize the empire along more dynastic lines were both unsuccessful. His abdication was followed by tighter restrictions imposed by the electors.


2 For the debate on these developments, see P. H. Wilson, ‘Still a Monstrosity? Some Reflections on Early Modern German Statehood’, Historical Journal, xlix (2006), 565-76.
on his successor, Ferdinand I, in 1558. Meanwhile, the partition of the Habsburg possessions deprived the formally senior Austrian branch of the dynasty of Spain’s resources at a time when the emperor faced renewed Ottoman attacks. The structural problems were compounded by the partition in 1564 of the Austrian lands, which lasted until 1619, with the Tyrol remaining separate until 1665. Personal incapacity aggravated the structural weaknesses after the accession of the mentally unstable Rudolf II in 1576, whose increasingly erratic behaviour contributed substantially to the loss of imperial authority around 1600. The loss was serious, because all parties looked to the emperor as supreme judge in disputes over the interpretation of the imperial constitution. Ferdinand and his successor in 1564, Maximilian II, had maintained good personal relations with key princes. Rudolf, however, aloof and haughty, and after 1600 a virtual recluse, created a vacuum that gave the Elector Palatine and the duke of Bavaria greater opportunity to advance their personal agendas.1

The flaws in the peace of Augsburg, obvious at the time, only became of political consequence with the emperor’s incapacity. The root problem was the de facto acceptance of religious schism at a time when people preferred a universal faith: plurality was theologically unacceptable because there could be only one true religion. What began as a religious issue, then, had legal and political consequences that assumed a life of their own. Any form of religious peace threatened, by privatizing religion, to divide the private persona from the public one embedded within a political collective. The militants accused anyone who favoured such arrangements of being politiques, who treated politics as more important than religion.2 The peace of Augsburg ignored the issue by omitting theological statements and giving equal rights to Catholic and Lutheran imperial estates to exercise the right of Reformation, or supervision of the church, in their own territories. The terms were acceptable to moderates because they implied the possibility of reconciling the confessions through theological compromise, which is what contemporaries understood by religious toleration.3

Militants insisted on sharper distinctions, but few questioned the legality

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of the settlement. Instead, disputes focused on the interpretation and implementation of three terms: the exercise of the right of Reformation by the elected rulers of the Catholic ecclesiastical principalities; the status of church property within Lutheran territories that had escaped secularization; and religious freedom for imperial cities, imperial knights, and dissenting minorities. While involving matters of faith, the disputes were primarily about constitutional rights. Catholics turned to the imperial judicial system to repel what they regarded as infringements of the peace, but these so-called ‘religious cases’ did not judge doctrine: they decided claims to exercise constitutional and property rights.¹

The Protestant princes who ruled most of the larger, more populous lands were outnumbered in imperial institutions by the rulers of the smaller, but more numerous, Catholic lands. The imbalance did not cause controversy immediately because the Reichskammergericht, the supreme court with primary responsibility for upholding the peace of Augsburg, was composed when deciding religious cases of equal numbers of judges from both confessions. However, the supervision of the court was the responsibility of the Reichstag that, like all imperial institutions, used majority voting. The system was not necessarily defective, but remained open to charges of bias from those who felt they had been denied justice, or wished to mobilize support for a particular agenda.

Constitutional issues also dominated the debate among Protestants about their right to challenge the Catholic majority. Unlike Polish or Hungarian nobles, German princes lacked fully articulated rights of resistance; they merely asserted their right to freedom of association.² The balance of power between emperor and imperial estates was still evolving when the Reformation raised the question of religious liberty. For Catholics, true freedom, which came only from grace, was achievable only within their own universal church. As both the political and, at this point, demographic minority, Protestants initially invoked God and Scripture as higher authorities than emperor and pope, a claim that threatened to place them outside the established political order. The likely consequence swiftly became obvious when imperial knights and then, far more serious, peasants and burghers made the same claim in the early 1520s to justify plans for the radical reorganization of society and the redistribution of wealth.³ The


² Further discussion of these alliance rights in H. Carl, Der Schwäbische Bund, 1488-1534 (Leinfelden-Echterdingen, 2000).

ensuing controversy helped to fragment the evangelical movement, with the mainstream emerging by 1530 as Lutheranism, which reconciled resistance with Christian obedience by placing it within the established definition of a just war. To be just, a war had to meet three criteria: to be waged according to accepted norms (right intent) and on sufficient legal grounds (just cause), and to be directed by a proper authority.1

The second and third criteria proved the most contentious. Just cause was defined as opposition to tyranny, which included attempts by established authorities to interfere with 'true religion', while proper authority was restricted to the imperial estates, which made the first 'Protest' in 1529 against the Catholic majority in the Reichstag that gave the wider movement its name. Several important Lutheran princes then formed in 1531 a defensive association, known as the Schmalkaldic League, which encountered the problems that were to bedevil the Protestant Union: its failure contributed to the weakness of subsequent Protestant alliances. Martin Luther and other theologians endorsed the league with great reluctance, while the Protestant imperial cities regretted their decision to join when they found themselves footing the bill for the leadership's private interests, such as restoring in 1534 the outlawed duke of Württemberg, or invading the duchy of Brunswick in 1545. Such actions allowed Charles V to challenge the league on the grounds that it had disturbed the peace of the empire. His victory in 1546-7 discredited the league, even among its own members.2

Defeat broke the fragile consensus on the right of resistance. A minority adhered to a more theocratic, apocalyptic vision represented by the Magdeburg confession of 1550, issued while that city was still defying the emperor. This extended the definition of proper authority to include 'lesser magistrates', such as city councils, among those entitled to lead resistance, joined by clergy who assumed the right to admonish secular leaders if they failed in their duty towards true religion. The confession voiced the views of those backed into a corner: tyrants were beyond redemption and resistance meant a fight to the finish.3 Although elements

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3 T. Kaufmann, ‘Das Ende der Reformations: Magdeburgs „herrgotts kansler“ (1548-1551)’ (Tübingen, 2003); J. Finucane, “To Remain Unaltered in the Courage You Have Inherited from Your Ancestors”: Magdeburg under Siege, 1547-1563' (Ph.D. dissertation, Trinity College Dublin, 2008); D. M. Whitford, Tyranny and Resistance: The Magdeburg Confession and the Lutheran Tradition (St Louis,
from the confession were incorporated into Calvinist theories of resistance, they were rejected by mainstream Protestant thought, which restricted leadership to princes and left open the possibility of compromise by defining resistance as a form of persuasion designed to make wayward rulers see the error of their ways and repent. There was no linear path towards militancy during the remainder of the sixteenth century. Moderate, more secular views generally prevailed, even though militant ideas took hold whenever Protestant interests seemed to be threatened directly.¹

None of the disputes that occurred in the last two decades of the sixteenth century was serious, with the exception of the attempted secularization of the electorate of Cologne in 1583, when the involvement of Spain briefly threatened to entangle the empire with the Dutch war. Other cases involved the disputed election of the bishop of Strasbourg and attempts by Protestants to exclude Catholics from imperial cities like Aachen and Donauwörth. The most important case was the ‘four monasteries dispute’ of 1597-9, in which the Reichskammergericht upheld Catholic protests against secularization. The verdicts applied constitutional and property law, and Protestant judges joined their Catholic colleagues to provide the necessary majority. Most Protestant estates accepted the verdicts, albeit reluctantly, but the Palatinate led a minority in protest in an attempt to rally support for a new Protestant alliance. Such a group, which had no foundation in imperial law, also challenged the hierarchical character of the empire by combining estates of varying status within the same body. Though presented as upholding the constitution, the Palatinate’s programme after 1604 for a corpus evangelicorum posed a serious threat to the existing order and was consistently rejected by Saxony as well as by the Catholics.² The rejection not only explains the delay in forming the Protestant Union and its structural weaknesses, but also why confessional issues had to be pushed to the fore to rally support for it. Only through fostering a climate of fear and suspicion were the Palatinate’s leaders able to convince some of their co-religionists to join the alliance.

The weakness of confessional bonds was revealed in the Protestants’ response to the Bohemian revolt and Frederick V’s acceptance of the crown of Bohemia in 1619. As the first Protestants openly to defy the

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emperor since 1552, the Bohemians published their *Apologia* on 25 May 1618, two days after the Defenestration of Prague. If there was ever a moment for a confessional appeal, this was it. Yet, in the *Apologia*, religious arguments justifying rebellion take second place behind the claim that the Habsburg government had infringed the imperial constitution and contravened the Letter of Majesty. Even here, defiance is expressed in the stock form of criticism of ‘evil advisers’, to enable the rebels to claim to be loyal to the emperor.¹ Significantly, the elector of Saxony, Johann Georg, not only rejected the constitutional claims, but also a subsequent appeal on religious grounds.²

Foreign involvement did not change the underlying character of the war. The widespread, and mistaken, assumption that the war became internationalized upon Sweden and France’s intervention derives from nineteenth-century German historians’ depiction of their country as the victim of plundering foreign hordes.³ Spain’s intervention was limited to two attempts in 1633 and 1634 to send an army across the Alps and down the Rhine to the Netherlands. The presence of Swedish troops in southern Germany obliged the Spanish to fight their way through, contributing in the process to the imperial victory at Nordlingen.⁴ Sweden and France justified their intervention as the defence of ‘German liberties’ against ‘Habsburg tyranny’: the claim was more than mere rhetoric, as both powers saw increased security from a change to the imperial constitution that lowered the emperor’s status to *primus inter pares*. Officially, the emperor insisted that the original dispute had been settled by 1630 by the (unratified) treaty of Regensburg with France (which ended the dispute over the Mantuan succession), the peace of Lübeck with Denmark in 1629, and the edict of Restitution. His aim was to preserve the gains the Habsburgs had made during the first half of the war and to exclude them from negotiations with Sweden or France. Ferdinand III, who regarded Frederick V’s bid for the Bohemian crown as ‘the cause of the war’, saw the wars with Sweden and France as the continuation of the struggle that began in 1618.⁵


² Phelps, ‘Reich, Religion, and Dynasty’, pp. 214-64; F. Müller, Kursachsen und der Böhmische Aufstand, 1618-22 (Münster, 1997), pp. 149-201.

³ K. Cramer, The Thirty Years War and German Memory in the Nineteenth Century (Lincoln, NE, 2007).


⁵ Ferdinand’s instructions to his chief plenipotentiary, Count Trautmannsdorff, 16 Oct. 1645, printed
Religion remained subordinate to constitutional questions during the peace negotiations at Westphalia. Religion supplied the moral high ground, as it had in wartime propaganda. The instructions given to the Spanish and French envoys contained almost identical phrases about the necessity of peace for the *reposo de la christiandad/repos de la Chrestienté*. There was some reason for this, given the outbreak of the Ottoman-Venetian war in 1645, but in practice the desire to fight the hereditary enemy of Christendom did little to hasten a settlement. Confessional antagonism was not, however, the major cause of delay. The original ‘Protestant Cause’ championed by the Palatinate and the Bohemian confederates had been lost by 1623 when Ferdinand II transferred Frederick V’s lands and titles to Maximilian of Bavaria. The conditions of the grant remained to be settled, but were mostly settled by the time Frederick’s death in 1632 removed the main obstacle. England, by the 1640s, was in no position to object, while the other powers used the fate of the Palatinate and the Bohemian exiles merely as a bargaining chip.

If the fate of Catholics living in the northern Netherlands affected Spain’s *reputación*, colonial issues affected it more. Whereas Spain could not make colonial concessions without alienating the Portuguese, in rebellion from 1640, the Dutch representatives who resisted peace were heavy investors in their West India Company, which faced ruin if Brazil was restored to Portugal. These issues postponed agreement to a peace that had been on the table since 1632, but was not signed until January 1648. Though Spain and France accused the other of harming Christian interests by continuing the war, religion did not prevent peace between them in 1648: the negotiations failed because Louis XIV’s chief minister, Cardinal Mazarin, tended to raise his demands whenever Spain gave ground. The Franco-Austrian negotiations were prolonged by his demand for Alsace and his refusal to negotiate with envoys who represented both branches of

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the Habsburgs. Ferdinand II had offered Alsace to Spain in 1617 as part of the bargain over the Habsburg succession, while both branches of the dynasty considered joint representation essential to safeguard their dynastic interests. Religion played only a minor role. Bavaria and the German Catholic estates urged Ferdinand III to cede Alsace in order, by making peace with France, to break up the Franco-Swedish alliance. While the effect might have been to lessen what might have to be conceded to the Protestants, Bavaria's goal was to win French backing for its retention of the Palatine lands and electoral title transferred to Maximilian by Ferdinand II in 1623.1

Whereas these talks in Münster were between Catholics, confession seemed superficially more prominent in the negotiations at Osnabrück between Protestant Sweden and the Catholic emperor. When France backed Sweden's demands to ensure a common front against the emperor, the confessional issues formed part of a package of constitutional reforms designed to emasculate the emperor and prevent him either from helping Spain against France, or threatening the territorial acquisitions Sweden hoped to make. In addition to 5 million talers to pay off the army, Sweden received half of Pomerania and the former ecclesiastical lands of Bremen and Verden. Other ecclesiastical principalities were secularized to compensate Brandenburg, which also laid claim to Pomerania. Ferdinand III supported Brandenburg's territorial demands to create a more effective buffer against Sweden in the Baltic,2 and agreed, in September 1645, to the Franco-Swedish demand that the imperial estates should join the talks.

Although the concession represented the abandonment of the Habsburgs' goal since 1630 of trying to rally all Germans to resistance to foreign invaders, it proved an astute move: once the imperial estates' right to participate had been recognized, they lost interest in the Franco-Swedish bid to undermine the emperor's status within the empire. Most issues had been settled by May 1646. Peace was postponed only by France and Sweden's objections to the constitutional compromise hammered out by the imperial diplomats, and by Ferdinand III's refusal to abandon Spain. The compromise, which entailed the revision of the right of Reformation, fixed the confessional composition of the empire as it had been on 1 January 1624.

1 These twists and turns are detailed in D. Croxton, Peacemaking in Early Modern Europe: Cardinal Mazarin and the Congress of Westphalia, 1643-8 (Selinsgrove, 1999); A. Tischer, Französische Diplomatie und Diplomaten auf dem Westfälischen Friedenskongress (Münster, 1999); G. Immler, Kurfürst Maximilian I. und der Westfälische Friedenskongreß. Die bayerische auswärtige Politik von 1644 bis zum Ulmer Waffenstillstand (Münster, 1998).

The compromise represented a reduction in princely autonomy, as rulers who had converted after that date were not allowed to oblige their subjects to follow their example. Minorities who could prove legal rights of worship dating from 1624 had to be tolerated; even other minorities could be expelled only after three years’ notice, and nobody could be refused medical treatment, education, or burial on religious grounds. The emperor was granted an exemption, enabling him to continue the Habsburgs’ pre-war policy of stabilizing their authority by promoting confessional conformity throughout their lands, with the partial exception of Silesia. After Viennese theologians had approved these terms, and France and Sweden accepted them in June 1647, peace was signed in October 1648 after Ferdinand III gave up hope of including Spain.1

The emperor’s tactics enabled moderate voices to gain the ascendancy among the imperial estates. The leading Catholic representative was Johann Philipp von Schönborn, who became bishop of Würzburg in 1642, then elector of Mainz in 1647. Maximilian of Bavaria also criticized zealots for delaying the peace, while his brother, Ferdinand, elector of Cologne, removed the militant Franz von Wartenberg from his delegation.2 Protestants, too, made concessions – allowing the archbishop of Salzburg to chair the princes’ meeting, for instance – and criticized Hesse-Kassel for using religion as a device to try to postpone giving back lands it had seized during the war.3 Some militants even recognized the incompatibility between confessional demands and constitutional claims: Jacob Lampadius, who represented Brunswick-Grubenhagen, conceded that restricting freedom of conscience to Protestants conflicted with the notion of liberty that underpinned political and corporate privilege within the empire.4

The peace of Westphalia was not a solely secular settlement: it modified the hybrid arrangements made at Augsburg in 1555. The empire remained hierarchical, as the right of Reformation remained restricted to princes,

1 R. v. Kietzell, ‘Der Frankfurter Deputationstag von 1642-5’, Nassauische Annalen, lxxxiii (1972), 99-119; K. Ruppert, Die kaiserliche Politik auf dem Westfälischen Friedenskongress (1643-8) (Münster, 1979), esp. pp. 259-66. These changes were far more important than the practice of itio in partes, or voting as two confessional groups on religious issues, which was used only five times after 1648.
with limited privileges granted to the cities and knights.\(^1\) Calvinists, despite opposition from Saxony, received rights comparable to the rights of Lutherans and Catholics, but freedom of conscience was not formally recognized. In addition, the empire remained holy, in the sense of being exclusively Christian. Jewish minorities remained dependent on special imperial or princely dispensations for toleration.\(^2\)

At the heart of the original dispute, the imperial constitution also provided the solution to it. Precisely because the imperial constitution incorporated religion without defining doctrine, all parties could appeal to it to legitimate their actions. The constitution was able to sustain the sixteenth-century humanist ideal of a ‘common fatherland’ standing above sectarianism.\(^3\) A decisive shift had occurred, nonetheless: the peace of Augsburg had incorporated Lutherans within a political framework closely identified with pre-Reformation universal Catholicism. Thirty years of violence had placed them on a more equal footing and encouraged them to identify with a political framework that guaranteed their freedoms. Sectarian hatred could be defused by shifting disputes away from abstract concepts like ultimate truth to the precise interpretation of local and particular rights able to be settled by judicial arbitration or bureaucratic review. Thus, in the eighteenth century, though the majority of imperial estates were still ruled by Catholics, Protestant writers became the imperial constitution’s most prolific and ardent defenders.

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As none of the existing definitions of religious war apply in their entirety to the Thirty Years War, their use has distorted our understanding of it. The conventional definition is too vague. The war was a religious war in the sense that all parties included faith and church in the common good they sought to defend. However, this general objective had little bearing on decisions for war or peace. The war was not a confessional war. The population did not divide neatly along sectarian lines, nor did faith dictate the choice of allies. The so-called age of religious wars was, in fact,


characterized by more cross-confessional alliances than cross-ideological ones during the cold war. The stress on confessionalization blurs the distinction between militants and moderates, and treats everyone as militant. Confessional antagonism was not necessary for mutual suspicion, as the relations between Spain and France clearly demonstrate. Nor did the war arise from a clash of civilizations: it was fought about the meaning of the imperial constitution, of which religious rights were an integral part. These rights were subsequently built into a peace that did not impose a fully secular order.

The Thirty Years War was a holy war only for a minority of militants who did not necessarily hold this view throughout it. Militancy sharpened the polemical edge of debate, and fostered the conviction that, with fundamentals at stake, compromise was impossible. But such a conviction was difficult to sustain, given the scale and duration of a war fought with mercenaries and conscripted peasant militias. Rulers consulted theologians on particular issues, as Frederick V did before accepting the crown of Bohemia, and Ferdinand II did while drafting the edict of Restitution. Rulers were also cognizant of the theological debate; their faith influenced certain of their decisions. However, no party claimed to be waging a holy war, and religion played a small role in justifications for hostilities that focused on legal and political rights. Militancy featured most prominently among clerical observers and groups like the Bohemian exiles who suffered personally from defeat.

Religion and politics remained distinct throughout the war. Theological controversies had been disguised since the peace of Augsburg, which deliberately avoided the use of sectarian language in favour of neutral or ambiguous terms acceptable to both sides. Clergy might dispute the implications for belief and ritual, but by 1555 religious freedom had become one of the political and legal rights guaranteed under the imperial constitution. Disputes over doctrine took second place to the dispute over the exercise of constitutional rights. As most contemporaries understood, a more sectarian approach to the war would have narrowed their political options, restricted their choice of allies, and lessened the chances of victory or peace.

In explaining the Thirty Years War, we should pay more attention to contingency and agency. Neither the outbreak nor the duration of the war was inevitable. Throughout it, numerous voices urged reason, or at least caution, including those who genuinely believed that war was contrary to the true interests of their faith. None of the problems that led to the war was unsolvable, but militants presented them as such and deliberately inflamed them, especially at the beginning. When a dispute about power and influence within the empire was viewed through a confessional lens,
complex legal and constitutional issues were transformed into a cosmic showdown between good and evil. Even if such beliefs affected decision-makers only momentarily, the outcome could be disastrous for hundreds of thousands, as in the case of the Defenestration of Prague and the Elector Palatine’s acceptance of the crown of Bohemia. The contemporary political and constitutional structures could not constrain rulers from going to war, even if the underdeveloped fiscal-military infrastructure of seventeenth-century states made success uncertain.

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