How does religion shape the modern battlefield? In the following pages, I will argue that religion acts as a force multiplier, both enabling and constraining military operations. This is true not only for insurgents and terrorists motivated by radical religious ideas but also for professional soldiers, including contemporary American soldiers, who have to contend with religion as a constant feature of their landscape. Like other exogenous factors, such as topography or climate, religion relentlessly affects the calculus of war. In the last century, religion has influenced the timing of attacks, the selection of targets for assault, the zeal with which units execute their mission, and the ability of individual soldiers to face the challenge of war. Religious ideas have not provided the reasons why conventional militaries fight. But religious practices have influenced their ability to do so effectively. The religion of our soldiers has inhibited or motivated combat whereas the religion of our opponents has created opportunities for exploitation and temptation for over-exploitation, prompting backlash.

This is not a book about fanatic insurgents or Islamic suicide bombers. Unlike much of the recent literature on religion and war, I am not interested in how extreme religious ideas propel individual into battle. My interests lie in everyday religious practices: the prayers, rituals, fasts and feasts of the common religious practitioners who make up the bulk of the adversaries, bystanders and observers of 20th century war. To show that religious practices have influenced battlefield decision making, even in the absence of fundamentalism and radicalism, I draw most of the examples in this book from major wars between Western militaries. We do not need to fall back on ethnic or sectarian conflicts, wars of religion or wars for religious ends, in order to show that religion influences war. Instead, I focus on hard cases, modern, rational and bureaucratized military organizations, conducting conventional
warfare, to show that even under condition that favor efficient combat, religion has to be taken into account.

My goal in this introductory chapter is fourfold. First, I briefly review the existing literature on religion and war to show that it has privileged the question of motivation, the “why” question about religion as a cause of war, at the expense of a wide range of alternative questions one might ask about religion and the shape of war, questions such as “where”, “when”, “who” or “how”. It is questions like these that I wish to begin addressing in this text. Next, I outline my approach to religion, which centers on ideas and practices relating to the sacred. I exemplify this practice-centered approach by exploring the puzzling pattern of combat deaths among British chaplains in World War One.

In the third part of this chapter, I introduce the core argument of this book in greater detail, exploring the four primary effects that a particular religious setting, either constraining or enabling, can have on a military organization or its target. Two of these effects, which I call motivation and exploitation, are force multipliers. The other two, inhibition and provocation, are force dividers. I illustrate several of these effects at work in a brief case study of the Allied bombing of the Monte Cassino Abbey in the Second World War.

I conclude this chapter by explaining my choice of cases and by providing an outline of the book. The ensuing chapters in this book explore the four force-multiplying and force-dividing effects of religion in different religious issue areas: sacred time, sacred space, sacred authority and sacred rituals, corresponding to the questions “when”, “where”, “who” and “how” respectively. In the concluding chapters, I turn to contemporary counterinsurgency campaigns in the Middle East to show that religious practices continue play their force multiplying role, with yet greater force, in that more familiar setting.