

Christianity Against Itself: Antagonism Between Russian Orthodoxy and British Anglicanism in the Crimean War

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The Crimean war was fought between Russia and an alliance of Turkey, Britain and France. It started when the Russian Tsar, Nicholas I, entered Turkish territory in 1853, ostensibly to ensure the religious freedom of Orthodox Christians living under Turkish suzerainty. Traditional scholarship has mainly analysed the war's military and economic aspects but in more recent times, the importance of the Tsar's strong Orthodox Christian belief, in both the war's causation and its prosecution has been recognised. This essay describes the fundamental cause of the theological divisions between Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism and gives evidence that there was strong support from within the Anglican Church for using military action to oppose the spread of Orthodoxy. It then uses two artefacts to illustrate the character of each belligerent's religious perspective. The first is a letter sent by Nicholas I to the King of Prussia in 1854 and the second is an engraving of the heroic death in battle of a British soldier at Sevastopol in 1855. The letter, as this essay argues, posits a strong, persistent self-belief and a determination in Nicholas not to seek personal glory, but to re-establish Christian Orthodoxy as the true faith; in contrast, the engraving reflects the 'glorious death' in battle legitimised by Anglican churchmen to oppose Orthodoxy. By so doing, the essay provides a new stance from which to assess the weighting that should probably be given to Anglicanism in the British war effort as it challenged its doctrinal differences with Orthodoxy.

Introduction

The Crimean War (5 October 1853 – 30 March 1856) was a sad affair fought to exhaustion between Russia and a coalition of Britain, France and Turkey. Traditional scholarship has concentrated on military aspects and given its principle causations as concerns with international territorial hegemony and trade.¹ More modern scholarship has recognised the lack of attention given to the religious aspects of the conflict, but this has focussed

predominantly on the Tsar's commitment to Christian Orthodoxy against Islam.² Although these latter accounts give weight to religiosity, they do not drill down to the basic reason why an Orthodox Christian Tsar, Nicholas I (1796-1855), should be so fundamentally antagonistic to British Anglicans and French Roman Catholics, nor they to him. This essay explores the origins of this incongruity and illustrates the conflicting Christian mindsets of the belligerents through two artefacts; a private communication by the Tsar to the King of

¹ See for instance, W. Baring Pemberton, *Battles of the Crimean War*, (London, Macmillan, 1968), Olive Anderson, *A Liberal State at War: English Politics and Economics during the Crimean War*, (London, Macmillan, 1967) and A.J.P. Taylor, 'Crimea: The war that would not boil', in *From Napoleon to the Second International: Essays on Nineteenth Century Europe*, (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1993) 216-228; orig. in *History Today*, Feb. 1951.

² See discussion in Orlando Figes, *Crimea*, (London, Penguin Books, 2011), xx – xxiii, and Alan Palmer, *The Banner of Battle*, (London, Wiedenfield and Nicholson, 1987), 11-23.

Prussia in 1854 demonstrating his deep religious commitment to the expansion of Orthodoxy and a contemporary 1855 engraving in a popular British Victorian magazine glorifying death in the cause of Anglicanism.

The Cause of Divisions within Christianity

Christianity is based on a belief in the teaching of Jesus, who differs from all other prophets, soothsayers and oracles in that he claimed he was 'The God-man', i.e. that he was actually the progeny of God.³ He spoke in riddles, metaphors and parables, created no institution, had no contemporaneous scribes, and there are no contemporary accounts of his life.⁴ It was only after his death that the unique tenets of Christianity were set down. What he actually stood for is only known through the interpretations of others. This allows anagogical sectarian divisions.

In an effort to manage the early divergence of Christian faith groups, the Roman Emperor Constantine pressed for a fundamental statement of beliefs to be drawn up which emerged as the Nicene Creed (325 and 381 CE). However, arguments about whether or not Jesus was 'homo-ousian', (i.e., if he shared the essence of divinity with The Father), were unresolved.⁵

Doctrinal differences came to a head over half a millennium later when the so called '*filioque clause*' (meaning 'the son') was introduced into a further revised version of the Nicene Creed in 1014 CE and adopted by the See of Rome ('the

West'), but not by the See of Constantinople ('the East').⁶ As originally crafted in 381 CE, the Creed states:

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and Son together is worshipped and glorified.

i.e., the *Holy Spirit* emanates only from the *Father*. The *filioque clause* is a small addition to make it read:

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father **and the Son**, who with the Father and Son together is worshipped and glorified... (author's bolding)*

thereby allowing Jesus to also emanate the *Holy Spirit*.

Jesus' extended power was never accepted by the Eastern Christian Church. In 1054 the Bishops of Rome and Constantinople mutually excommunicated each other and the Church split along doctrinal, theological, linguistic, political, and geographic lines.⁷ Three short words had become the critical reason (or perhaps equally likely the excuse to satisfy competing theologians), to fracture the Christian world in 'the Great Schism'. Orthodox (Eastern or Greek) Christianity and Roman (Western) Catholicism had been born. After the fall of Constantinople to Islam in 1453, Moscow claimed to be the 'Third Rome' – the crucible of true Christianity.⁸ This aspiration became a reality in 1547 when Ivan IV was 'crowned' by

³ Linda Woodhead, *Christianity: A Very Short Introduction*. 2nd edn., (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014), 16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3. The first written evidence is a letter of Paul to the Corinthians in about 55 CE, 25 years after Jesus' death. Paul only knew Jesus through a vision, he never knew Jesus in Jesus' lifetime. The other gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke & John have been timed from 60-120 CE.

⁵ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, (London, Penguin Books, 2010), p. 189. Woodhead, 44-5, and 219.

⁶ John Young, *Christianity – An Introduction* 5th edn., (London, Hodder Education, 2010), 306-307.

⁷ This was not revoked for 900yrs. See MacCulloch, 374.

⁸ Neil Kent, *A Concise History of the Russian Orthodox Church*, (London, Academia Press, 2022), 21.

the Head of the Moscow Church and anointed the 'God crowned Tsar and autocrat of all Russia' - the fusion of church and state had occurred.⁹ Nicholas I inherited this mantle.

Roman Catholicism was to receive a further fracture in the sixteenth century with the Protestant reformation. In England the reformation resulted in the creation of several Protestant movements, (who accepted the *filioque clause*) and the Anglican Church of England evolved from the fusion of Church and State in 1559.¹⁰ At the time of the Crimean war, Russia was mainly Orthodox, England was mainly Anglican and France was mainly Roman Catholic.

Christianity in the Holy Land and the Outbreak of War

The spark of war was ignited when, on 6 December 1852, French diplomats were successful in transferring the custodianship of the keys to 'Holy Places' in Bethlehem from the 'Greeks' (i.e., the Orthodox Christians) to the 'Latins' (i.e., the Roman Catholics).¹¹ Nicholas I was incandescent. His sentiments in relation to protecting *his* Christianity were clear - 'I cannot recede from a sacred duty - Our religion [i.e. Orthodoxy] came to us from [the Holy Land] [...] and these obligations [...] must never be lost sight of'.¹²

With the failure to negotiate a reversal of the custody of the keys, in June 1853, Nicholas gave

the order for Russian forces to occupy Moldavia and Wallacia on Russia's south western boundary which were under Turkish suzerainty. This was to 'guarantee the inviolable rights of the Orthodox Church' against Islam and to put pressure on the Turks.¹³ The first step to war had been taken.

After diplomatic efforts had failed to achieve a withdrawal, Turkey formally declared war on Russia on 5th October, 1853.¹⁴ Whilst the Tsar's stated motivation had been the protection of Orthodox Christianity, following the unprovoked Russian Navy's decimation of Turkey's Black Sea fleet at Sinope on 30th November of the same year, international reaction was anything but theological. On hearing the news, Palmerston wrote to the Foreign Secretary Clarendon that 'something must be done to wipe away the stain'.¹⁵ A Leader in *The Times* stated:

*The English people are resolved that Russia shall not dictate conditions to Europe, or convert the Black Sea, with all the various interests encompassing its shores, into a Russian lake.*¹⁶

Palmerston's political aims from then on were the break-up of the Russian Empire and repatriation of the lands it had conquered over the last century and a half.¹⁷ Britain declared war on 31st March 1854 supported by 'the pressure of the press and public opinion' who saw Russia as a predatory aggressor.¹⁸ At an international level, any religious issues had been obscured by

⁹ Orlando Figes, *The Story of Russia*, (London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), 57-61.

¹⁰ MacCulloch, 630, and Legislation.Gov.UK. *Act of Supremacy 1558*. National Archives.

¹¹ Palmer, 12.

¹² Figes (2011), 105.

¹³ Palmer, 12 & 21. Nicholas I, quoted in Figes (2011), 116.

¹⁴ Palmer, 23.

¹⁵ Palmerston to Clarendon, 13th December 1853, quoted in Palmer, 32.

¹⁶ Anon. Editorial in *The Times*: Tuesday Dec 13, 1853, London; column 3, p. 6.

¹⁷ Figes, (2022), 152.

¹⁸ Figes, (2011), 147.

secular rhetoric. However, as demonstrated below, Orthodoxy and Anglicanism saw military action in the Crimea as a religious Holy War, despite the fact that the belligerents both held Christian beliefs.

Religious Motivations of the Tsar and the Anglicans

The Tsar's 'Christian' motivation is evidenced in his personal correspondence with his sister Anna in 1854 when he said that to wage war for the protection of Orthodoxy was 'a holy vocation to which Russia is once more called'.¹⁹ As if in confirmation, the wife of James Finn, the British Consul in Jerusalem during the Crimean war, writing in the introduction to her husband's book, *Stirring Times*, commented:

*We had in the Crimean war one more crusade waged for the rescue of Holy Places only this time the crusade was being fought by the champion of the Eastern Church [the Tsar].*²⁰

This desire to be a 'crusading' leader freeing the Holy Land was exemplified in the Tsar's recruitment of volunteers to fight a 'Holy War'. They became known as 'cross-carriers' because like the crusaders of old, their tunics had a red cross on a white background – paradoxically a direct link with the third crusade led by Western Christianity.²¹

Perhaps the most forthright statement of the Tsar's commitment to restore Orthodoxy to the Holy Land is in the first artefact to be considered. This is a private communication from Nicholas to the King of Prussia in early

March 1854, before Britain and France entered the war. He was discussing his position if the Western powers sided with the Turks, which they did after the declaration of war. Nicholas said:

*Waging war neither for worldly advantages nor for conquests, but for a solely [Orthodox] Christian purpose, must I be left alone to fight under the banner of the Holy Cross and to see others, who call themselves Christians, all unite around the Crescent [the Holy Land] to combat Christendom? [...] Nothing is left to me but to fight, to win, or to perish with honour, as a martyr of our holy faith, and when I say this, I declare it in the name of all Russia.*²²

This letter has a serious and sincere air about it and exudes the sense of a personal commitment to a greater purpose, that of duty to the Orthodox faith. 'Fight[ing] under the banner of the holy cross' gives it the direct stigmata of a crusade believed by Nicholas to be his duty. He is to eschew material gains, and to wage war for his form of Christianity. The 3rd to 5th lines clearly identify his view of those 'who call themselves Christians' i.e., predominantly the French Roman Catholics and the English Anglicans, as not being real Christians. Indeed, he sees them as forswearing true 'Christendom', i.e., the Orthodox faith. In the 7th to 11th lines, he self-identifies as a man who will give his life for the establishment of the Orthodox faith to replace other branches of Christianity in the Holy Land and, what's more, his autocratic powers allow him to commit his whole country to the same purpose. He *and* Russia will fight on alone whatever the outcome – personal and

¹⁹ S. W. Jackman, *Romanov Relations: the private correspondence of Tsars Alexander I, Nicholas I, and the Grand Dukes Constantine and Michael with their sister Queen Anna Pavlovna, 1817-1855*. (London, Macmillan, 1969), 341.

²⁰ James Finn, *Stirring Times*. Vol. 1. (London, C Kegan Paul & Co., 1878), xxii.

²¹ Figes, (2011), 137-8.

²² Nicholas I to Frederick William, March 1854. Translation from: Theodor Schiemann, *Geschichte Russlands unter Kaiser Nicholas I*, 4 vols., (Berlin, Walter de Gruyter 1904-1919), Vol.4, 430. Quoted from Figes (2011), 157.

national martyrdom beckons. This paragraph has no flourishes - it is a simple statement of his faith, a personal commitment to *his* personal God. No ostentatious glory, no adoration of the fighter, no self-aggrandisement, no chauvinism. He was not seeking earthly approbation, but simply a just reward from His God for himself and Russia through dogged fighting and persistence.

Simultaneously, and separate to the British Government's secular reasons for checking Russian expansion, ardent Anglicans in Britain were horrified by the Tsar's religious ambitions and went public with their apprehensions. Anglican church leaders preached and published sermons to influence public opinion, declaring the fallacious nature of the Orthodox faith. Even before Britain declared war, in February 1854, in the City of London, the Reverend George Croly spoke his mind:

*It is impossible to doubt, that the present object of Russia is the possession of Constantinople [but] she would not stop there [...] The Emperor declares it to be a religious war [but] that church [i.e., the Orthodox] fell into the extremes of error [centuries ago].*²³

He further thought that Islam had survived only because the Muslims saw the errors of Orthodox Christianity but that conversion to Anglican Christianity would occur when they saw England as being 'appointed for the refuge of the principles of religion'.²⁴ So for Croly the principal objectives of war were not only to stem

the spread of Orthodox Christianity, but also to increase the conversion of Muslims.

After the declaration of war on 31st March 1854, in Covent Garden the Reverend John Cumming preached two sermons against Russian Orthodoxy entitled 'The Last War' and the 'The Endless Peace'. In the former he preached that, 'Russia is wrong [...] Our cause is right [...] God approves, and our consciences acquit us' and in the latter that to wage war 'is our national duty; and when I see it is duty in God's sight [...] his blessing will fall on our banners'.²⁵

These two examples are given as exemplars of the *esprit de corps* generated from the pulpit encouraging military engagement. Once the war had started, the Anglican church was active in supporting the men and justifying their actions, again for religious reasons. In January 1855 *The Colonial Church Chronicle and Missionary Journal* carried an article unequivocally entitled 'The New Crusade'. This was unambiguous on two key points. Firstly:

*The hand of God Himself has led us [...] to the blessed opportunities of war. This [war] is for the Truth and Glory of God. There is a heavy burden of sin lying at the door of Christendom. The reproach of twelve centuries has to be wiped out (i.e. Orthodoxy) [...] we have a Mission [...] let the Church of Christ remember that she is called to a New Crusade. A new and a real Crusade!*²⁶

And, to emphasise their view:

²³ George Croly, *England, Turkey, And Russia; A Sermon, Preached On The Embarkation Of The Guards For The East in the Church Of St. Stephen Walbrook, London, February 26, 1854.* (London, Seeleys, 1854). 14 & 26.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 30

²⁵ John Cumming, *The war and its issues: Two Sermons.* 2nd edn., (London, Arthur Hall, Virtue & Co., 1854), 14 & 57.

²⁶ Anon. 'The New Crusade' in *The Colonial Church Chronicle and Missionary Journal*, No. XCI, (January, 1855), 241-247, 241 & 242.

*God [...] has united almost the whole British race at home and in our colonies as one man, to set their seal of solemn unanimous approval upon the great and sacred struggle [on] behalf of violated justice and offended truth (i.e., Orthodoxy). Surely [...] this war opens a great, a wonderful opportunity.*²⁷

It is during the Siege of Sevastopol that we see the second artefact, the artistic interpretation of the heroic Anglican soldier. Captain Hedley Vicars would have been unremembered today had he not been killed there. A friend, the Reverend Marsh said of him, '(h)e was permitted to die [so that] a soldier of the Cross should be the best soldier of his Queen and country'.²⁸ Marsh's Evangelical daughter wrote a book - *Memorials of Captain Hedley Vicars, 97th Regiment*.²⁹ This details Vicars' life, his conversion, his teaching and his exploits. One of his men, Private John Cotterall, described Vicars' death as he was leading the hand-to-hand combat.

*[Vicars] got a bayonet wound first [...] he used his sword bravely, and cut down two men, and had his sword raised to serve another the same, when a bullet struck him in the breast [...] alas, poor fellow, he fell and died soon after.*³⁰

Vicars' story was picked up in an article on the 'Siege of Sebastopol' in *Cassell's Illustrated Family Paper* (which had a circulation of half a million copies) and carried an engraving by T.H. Nicholson, as shown in Figure 1.³¹ The image of

the Victorian Anglican Christian soldier, and perhaps his myth, had been created. In contrast to Nicholas I's written personal commitment, the depiction of the 'Death of Captain Vicars' is anything but a portrayal of quiet, composed, firmness of purpose.

The print depicts Captain Vicars as a hero and has much in common with other crusading paintings such as representations of Richard the Lionheart by Louthenberg and Giller, both painted decades before the Crimean war.³² As usual, the crusading warrior is the central figure, elevated over other combatants. Carnage is all around him but he continues single-mindedly. He is painted in a semi-crucifix position and, typically for a crusader, has his weapon elevated above all else. Vicars, like Nelson 50 years before, is fatally hit at the moment of victory. Perhaps the person on the right with the outstretched hand is symbolic of a blessing from Jesus. The tragic hero is surrounded by a white cloud which defines him more clearly and almost gives him a halo, the white sash adding to his purity. Sunlight from heaven is beaming down upon him. On the moment of death, he is looking up to his saviour, and perhaps knowing he is going to die is offering up a final prayer. He is a leader, head above his men, trailblazing from the front, drawn flamboyantly, representative of death or personal glory. Immortality is the objective of this artefact; the reward for martyrdom in a justified Anglican war against Orthodoxy.

²⁷ Ibid., 244 & 246.

²⁸ Petros Spanou, 'Soldiership, Christianity, and the Crimean War: The Reception of Catherine Marsh's "Memorials of Captain Hedley Vicars"', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Vol. 27, No. 1, (2022), 46–62, 49.

²⁹ Catherine Marsh (listed as 'Author of *The Victory Won*') *Memorials of Captain Hedley Vicars, 97th Regiment*, (London, James Nisbet & Co., 1855).

³⁰ John Cotterall to his wife, March 23rd, 1855. Letter reproduced in Marsh (1855), 305–6.

³¹ Anon. 'Siege of Sebastopol-The Bombardment' in *Cassell's Illustrated Family Paper*, II. 75, Saturday, 2nd June, (1855), 173–4, 73.

³² Philip James de Louthenberg, *The Battle between Richard Coeur de Lion and Saladin in Palestine*. Date of painting uncertain but Louthenberg lived from 1740 to 1812; Leicester Art Gallery.

William Giller, *Richard Coeur de Lion and Saladin*. 1831; British Museum archive.

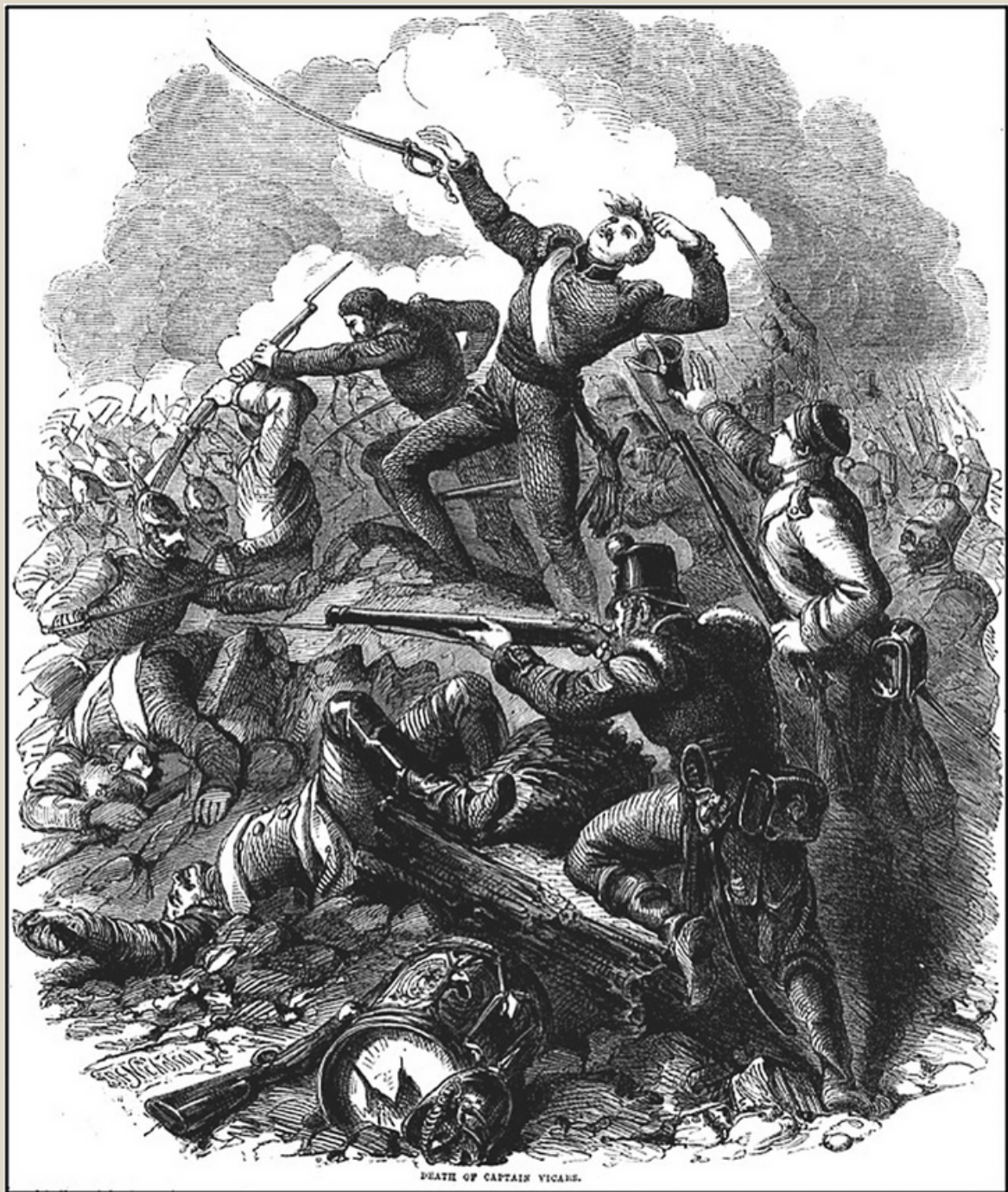


Figure 1: Engraving by T.H.Nicholson,
The Death of Captain Vicars from *Cassell's Illustrated Family Paper*, II,
75, Saturday, 2nd June (1855).
Author's photograph from original document (23,0 cm. x 19,0 cm).

The Peace and Concluding Comments

For over a decade before the Crimean conflict, Britain had harboured concerns concerning Russian intentions in Palestine which were more concerned with Russian territorial expansion rather than any religious drivers. In 1840, Young, the British Consul sent reports to the Foreign Office about the increasing presence of Russians in Jerusalem with their aim of preparing a 'Russian conquest of the Holy Lands', saying they 'speak openly about the period [...] when this country will be under the Russian government'.³³ Such sentiments undoubtedly underpinned the British Government's response to the Russian incursion into Turkish Lands whereas the Anglicans sought religious hegemony over Orthodoxy and Islam. Indeed, in the Congress of Paris (February to March 1856), which negotiated the peace, the main objective of the allies was to check the power and territory of Russia. Palmerston even wanted to set up autonomous principalities on its borders.³⁴ Although eventually the treaty 'did not make any major territorial changes to the map of Europe [...] it marked a crucial watershed for international relations and politics, effectively ending the old balance of power'.³⁵

As to religion, one of the clauses in the treaty guaranteed that religious freedoms would be enjoyed for perpetuity which Tsar Alexander II, who had succeeded Nicholas I (following his unexpected death), in deference to his predecessor said, '(f)rom now on, the future destiny and rights of all Christians in the Orient

are assured [...] Russians, your efforts and your sacrifices were not in vain'.³⁶ But this boastful statement belied the *realpolitik* that the allies had fought for secular reasons and the 'crusades' of Nicholas and the Anglicans had come to nought. Within a decade, riots returned to Jerusalem and Abrahamic communities were once again engaged in mutual aggression and reprisals.³⁷ Whilst the Orthodox religious ambitions of Nicholas have been recognised, the wish of Anglicanism to overcome and replace Orthodoxy in the Holy Land has had little exposure in the literature. Also, there has been little examination of the fundamental differences in religious dogma separating the divisions within Christianity.

There is no doubt that Nicholas I trod a consistent path on behalf of Orthodox Christianity. He may have misread his allies, had poor judgement and been foolhardy, but he knew what he was fighting for; he loathed Western Christianity's superiority in the Holy Land. The letter from Nicholas to the King of Prussia (artefact 1) identifies his visceral drive from within. The writing is personal, economical, unambiguous and direct, with his (and Russia's) reward coming from the service to Orthodoxy. In contrast, the engraving (artefact 2) says nothing about the rightness or wrongness of the conflict or the justification of the Anglican position; also, it is unlikely that the Anglican soldiers will have understood the minutiae of the sectarian dogma they were fighting for. Instead of demonstrating a nationally just war, the engraving characterises selfless bravery and death in battle as personally

³³ Young to Palmerston, 14th March and 21st October (1839) and 29th January and 28th April (1840). *National Archives*, FO-78/368 and FO-78/413 respectively.

³⁴ Palmer. See discussion 236-41.

³⁵ Figes, (2011), 432-3.

³⁶ Nicholas I died on 2nd March 1855, which allowed his successor to negotiate an end to the conflict. For the quotation see Winfried Baumgart, *The Peace of Paris, 1856: studies in war, diplomacy and peacemaking*, (Oxford, Clío Press, 1981), 130.

³⁷ Palmer, 240.

glorious. Sadly, in 1014, those three short words 'and the son' created an un-repairable credal difference within Christianity, which led Russia to occupy Turkish lands and initiate the Crimean war. One can speculate that had the *filoque clause* never arisen as a doctrinal problem, the Crimean war may never have happened in the way it did.

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