CHAPTER 5

THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

In the seventeenth century Europe suffered through the Thirty Years War, its bloodiest conflict between the Second Punic War and World War I; yet the first decade of that century was one of the most peaceful in Europe in the early modern era. To be sure, sporadic fighting continued in Hungary between Austria and the Ottoman Empire, and the years 1601–04 saw the bloody siege of Ostend in the ongoing Dutch Revolt, but there was no major new war until 1618. After the brutal wars of the sixteenth century it seemed clear enough that chivalry and the traditional religious theory of the just war had failed to mitigate the belligerence and violence of the European states. Even the Catholic kings, for whom the Council of Trent had enshrined Thomas Aquinas's theological views as the final word, no longer pretended to adhere to the scholastic understanding of just war. Perceptive thinkers began to develop approaches to war that were far less dependent on medieval categories, while paying closer attention to actual practice of the monarchs.

The most radical thinker of the era was Eméric Crucé, who was born in 1590 and died in 1648. He was a monk whose only claim to fame is *Le Nouveau Cynée (The New Cineas)*, first published in 1623. The title comes from the Greek statesman, Cineas, noted for his peacemaking at King Pyrrhus’s court. The book’s purpose is clear in its subtitle: *Discourse of State on the occasions and means of establishing a general peace and the freedom of commerce*. In an age of wars over conflicts in theology and church ritual, Crucé puts forward a vision of universal peace and justice. He states in his preface, “I know that heresies must be refuted, but I see none greater than the error made by those who place injustice above all else and who value only arms.” When a neighbor’s house is burning or falling down, he declares, one should feel fear and compassion. Human society is one body in which all the members are in sympathy, so it is impossible for sickness in one part not to be communicated to the others. It would decidedly
benefit the human race if the world’s nations would engage in commerce and enrich one another rather than trying to destroy each other by war.

Crucé names four main causes of war—honor, profit, righting some wrong, and exercise. Religion, he avows, rarely serves as anything more than a pretext. He criticizes the common opinion that the exercise of arms is noble and glorious: ordinary valor is brute force, but magnanimity and steadfast courage make for true valor, which is to reject all wrongs. Princes ought to be ashamed of warmongering and should control their ambition. Most often war is tremendously expensive, even for the victors. Crucé suggests offering clemency, and even farmland, to pirates who give up piracy, because it is cheaper than suppressing them by force, which he nonetheless requires for those who refuse to cooperate. The avenging of past wrongs is precarious, because sovereigns rule by the grace of God. Too often, fighting for what they think they have a right to does not meet with God’s will, and many kingdoms have been lost by rulers who tried to destroy some other power they believed to be unjust. Crucé proclaims that establishing peace is in the public interest, and he begs rulers to have pity on the human race and stop the horrible wars. Instead of resorting to arms to settle disputes, rivals ought to submit their cases to arbitration by sovereign rulers not involved in the particular case.

Crucé proposes, therefore, that an assembly be created of ambassadors from every nation in the world, including the Ottoman Empire, Persia, China, Ethiopia, and the East and West Indies. He recommends Venice as the meeting place, because it is neutral, central, and accessible, and the Turks would more likely accept Venice than any other Christian place. (He does not consider the possibility of meeting in a non-Christian locale.) Complaints would be presented to the assembly, which would decide whether they merit action. Decisions would be made by the whole assembly, which could easily bring violators “back to the path of reason.” Princes must be required to remain within their established boundaries and not go beyond them for any reason. Crucé asserts the peace would be extremely valuable to all the monarchs, because once the borders between states are kept the same, the enormous expenses and horrors of war—innocent people massacred, women violated, temples profaned, famine and pestilence rampant—will no longer be inflicted on nations. The money and manpower used for war can be put to work in agriculture, trade, and building canals.

Only savages, Crucé says, would oppose such a program that so clearly would benefit everyone, princes as well as paupers. Yet, he recognizes that some will continue to use war and violence. For example, he has little hope that the corsairs of North Africa could be persuaded to give up their piracy except through the intervention of powerful ships of war.