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The Church and the Duties of the Christian Soldier

John F. Shean

Early in the fourth century a major change occurred in the position of the Christian church and its relationship with the Roman government. Starting with the reign of Constantine, the status of the church went from that of an outlawed sect to the most favored cult in a world-wide empire. The church now found that it had to address issues which it previously could ignore. One of these issues was the relationship of the military to the Christian faith and the problem of reconciling a warlike institution with its message of peace. In response, Christian writers developed a theology in which the mission of the Christian faith was closely identified with that of the Roman empire, the empire, in turn, becoming the means by which God would bring the whole world to the true faith. The unity of church and state also forced the church to confront the issue of Christians serving in the Roman army and began to elaborate a series of doctrines and rules by which it would try to define the proper role of a Christian soldier. Overall, Christian soldiers were to be embraced and not placed in an inferior position within the church. In addition, the church expected Christian soldiers to defend the Christian state and its church from its enemies, both pagan and heterodox, to be true to their faith and disassociate themselves from all forms of pagan worship, and to conduct themselves in an ethical manner when dealing with the civilian population. By recognizing the need for military defense as a matter of national survival, Christianity actually became a strong ideological bolster for imperial patriotism and developed a theology which justified and delineated the role of a Christian soldier within a military institution.

The morality of war and its place in Christian belief was a problem Christian apologists wrestled with long before the fourth century. In fact, Christian soldiers appear in the Roman army almost from the very beginning of the faith, but by performing military service were these men violating the Church's teachings? The New Testament itself provides very little advice on this issue. Christ did warn his followers that "all who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Mt 26.52), but did not require the soldiers he met to leave the army and even held up a Roman centurion as a model of faith (Lk 7.9). John the Baptist admonished the soldiers who came to him for baptism not to extort from civilians but to be content with their pay, however, he did not demand that they leave the army (Lk 3.14).[1] Christian apologists were also divided on the issue of war and military service for Christians. In the *Apology* Tertullian said that good Christians were loyal to the empire and did not shirk any of their civic responsibilities, including military service, although later in his career he opposed Christians serving in the Roman army.[2] Hippolytus also believed that military service was incompatible with church membership.[3] On the other hand Clement of Alexandria did not object to military service for Christians, nor did his follower Origen. That there was disagreement among the church fathers on the issues of war and military service should not be surprising as throughout its history the adherents of Christianity have disagreed over a wide variety of doctrinal issues. Yet the problems of war and military service did not cause the same level of controversy as the Christological disputes. The fact that individual Christian apologists were opposed to Christians serving in the Roman army is less significant than the official position taken by the organized bodies of the church on this matter. However scholars search in vain for canons or teachings specifically prohibiting Christians from serving in the Roman army. On the contrary, we find explicit canons from synods such as Canon III from Arles in 314 CE, which specifically forbids Christians from 'throwing away their arms' in times of peace. Some commentators have tried to interpret this canon as a prohibition against military service, but their arguments are not convincing.[4] While it is clear that many within the church were uncomfortable with the idea of Christians shedding blood, they were nevertheless willing to accept its use under some circumstances. Canon 13 of St. Basil notes that, although "...Our Fathers did not reckon killings in wars to be among murders ... giving pardon to those who defended on behalf of chastity and piety, but perhaps it is to be well advised that those

whose hands are not clean, be prohibited from Communion for three years."[5] Thus, even the anchorite position had to make a grudging concession to reality. Statements from other Christian writers, such as St. Augustine, indicate that it was not sinful for Christians to kill in battle. Augustine accepted the concept of justifiable war, which he defined as one waged to restore peace.[6] In fact, in one of his letters to Boniface, the Count of Africa, Augustine justified the use of force against dissident Christians.[7] Many Christians recognized the need for imperial forces to defend them against barbarian, non-Christian invaders from outside the empire. The whole issue of the necessity of imperial defense against these dangerous enemies is one area where modern day religious writers may have misunderstood the outlook of people of earlier centuries. It is not at all clear that during the fourth century Christians within the empire regarded themselves as having a duty to carry the faith to all mankind and some scholars, such as E.A. Thompson, have noted that, before the time of Ulfila, there was actually very little missionary work being carried out among the barbarians.[8] Indeed there is much polemical material from Christian writers which indicates that Christianity was seen as the religion of civilized Romans and that the barbarians were essentially a threat not only to the Roman state but also to the Christian church. The Christian church was so focused on its mission within the Roman empire that there was even little contact with fellow Christians in the more urban societies outside the empire. At the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, a Persian bishop attended and attracted a lot of attention simply because he was considered such a novelty.[9] Christianity came to be identified with *Romanitas* and, even before the Roman state officially adopted Christianity, the Roman emperor took on the role of chief defender of God's people, i.e., the empire's inhabitants, against the benighted forces of evil without, namely the barbarians. The fortunes of both the Roman state and the Christian church became so closely intertwined that ecclesiastical authors, such as Eusebius, produced writings which literally demonized the empire's enemies. The barbarians came to represent the forces of Satan and Christians had not only the inclination but the duty to resist them.[10] Eusebius believed in the providential nature of history and that the grafting of Christianity onto the Roman empire was part of God's plan for mankind. Eusebius tells us that Constantine regarded himself as the defender of Christians everywhere, including a divine mission to evangelize, and, following his victories over barbarians, would usually insist on

conversion. Constantine sent a letter to the Persian king stating not only his patronage over the Persian king's Christian subjects, but also announced his intention to wage a religious war against Persia.[11]

The unification of church and state had beneficial consequences for both parties. The Christian church possessed a sophisticated organization which could complement that of the imperial government and provided a more direct way of tying the populace to the emperor through the organization of their spiritual lives within the church. Throughout Late Antiquity, the roles of bishop and magistrate often overlapped, with the church increasingly taking on many of the functions of government. In fact, we have famous examples where local religious leaders were forced to organize the defense of their localities, such as Cynesius of Cyrene, when he used the resources of his see to defend it against marauding tribes or St. Germanus of Auxerre, who helped the inhabitants of Britain beat off a barbarian attack. In many cases, the bishop had a more significant impact on official policy than did the local magistrate. Christian political leaders, including emperors, increasingly relied upon ecclesiastical authorities for guidance and advice, especially in matters of religious policy. The state, in turn, could assist the church by not only providing funds to support the establishment and maintenance of churches and monasteries, but also by supplying the means of coercion in its war against its spiritual competitors, both non-Christian and dissident. In these latter cases, such as the enforcement of Constantine's decrees against pagan cults,[12] troops were sent around to confiscate treasures from the pagan sanctuaries and to close down some selected cult sites altogether. The soldiers assigned to this duty must have been Christian since it is hard to imagine that any pagan soldier would willingly participate in such desecrations and may be seen as part of the role Christian soldiers were expected to carry out. Thus the duties of a Christian soldier could include campaigns against enemies of the faith both outside and within the empire.

Even before the end of the fourth century, Christian prayers and rituals were working their way into regular Roman military practice. The recruit's vow which Vegetius reports is a Christian oath and is worthwhile quoting in full:

"They swear...in the name of God and Christ and the Holy Spirit and in the name of His Majesty, the Emperor, who after God must be loved and served by the human race. For since the Emperor has taken the name of Augustus, faithful devotion must be displayed and constant service

must be offered, as if to God bodily present. For a man, either in private life or military service, serves God when he faithfully loves him who reigns by the authority of God. The soldiers swear that they will do all things zealously which the emperor commands, that they never will desert the military service, nor will they refuse death for the Roman republic."[13]

The writings of Vegetius are usually dated to between 383 and 450 CE which means that this oath was probably adopted at some time during the fourth century or the early fifth at the very latest. The close linkage of the Christian faith with the imperial ideology is now reflected in the military recruit oath. The emperor assumes the role of intermediary between God and man. The true Christian, therefore, serves God by also serving the emperor, even when participating in military conflict. The representation of the emperor as the essential link between God and the faithful is reflected in some Christian writers of the time and is reminiscent of the opening of St. Ambrose's famous letter to the Emperor Valentinian concerning the dispute over the Altar of Victory in the senate house in Rome. Here Ambrose reminds Valentinian that " Just as all men under Roman rule serve you as emperor and lord of the world, so you too are a servant of the omnipotent God and his holy faith."[14]

The church started to address the role of Christians within the Roman army during the very first ecumenical council at Nicaea in 325 CE. One of the canons, No. 12, deals with the problem of soldiers who apostatized during the conflict between Constantine and Licinius in 324 CE. Licinius required his soldiers to prove their loyalty to the pagan cults by performing sacrifice. Christians who refused to obey were dismissed from the service. Apparently, a significant number of men regretted their loyalty to the Christian faith and, later, through bribery or favors, had themselves reinstated into the army. The number of men in this situation was so great that the church felt the need to address this issue during its first ecumenical council. The penalties for these Christian apostates were as follows: such men were to remain among the prostrators for ten years, after a period of three years as hearers. The local bishop was permitted to make the final judgment as to which men may be required to serve the entire period of penance. In any case, "...those who endure their penance with indifference and judge that the procedure set out for being readmitted into the Church is sufficient for expiation, those persons are to be required to do penance for the full time required."[15] What is significant to note from this canon is that the Church does not require its military apostates

to give up their careers but are permitted to remain in the service. In addition, even the less enthusiastic converts are to be accommodated, namely those who are not contrite but will be readmitted into the church after the appropriate penance is performed. It seems clear that the Church was trying to be inclusive in its attitude towards the military and did not want to make church membership an impossible burden for these men. There were strong social reasons for wanting to include Roman soldiers within the Christian church. In addition to their primary role as defenders of the empire against its foreign enemies, the Roman soldier performed a wide variety of roles within the empire and, especially during the Late Antique period, was in almost daily contact with the civilian population. Roman soldiers enjoyed a wide variety of rights and privileges, as well as broad discretionary powers, such as the standing right to make military requisitions upon the civilian populace. We are familiar with Juvenal's famous observation that the first of all benefits accruing to a soldier is that no civilian would dare to strike him, but the civilian who is beaten by a soldier, in turn, "...must hold his tongue, and not venture to exhibit to the praetor the teeth that have been knocked out, or the black and blue lumps upon his face, or the one eye left which the doctor holds out no hope of saving."[16] Soldiers enjoyed unique legal privileges which effectively made them immune from law suits. As a result the best advice both laity and church men could offer to civilians when dealing with the military was to cooperate since there was no viable legal redress for abuses committed by soldiers. Given the reality that soldiers would continue to play a prominent role in Roman society the Church probably felt that the only way to root-out the abusive behavior of Roman soldiers was to mollify them through Christian ethics. Roman soldiers, more than any other group in Roman society, needed this moderating influence on their actions since there was no other institution capable of regulating the conduct of individual soldiers. In fact, the famous story of the soldier saint Martin, who cuts his cloak in half to share with a poor man, may have been intended as a example for Christian soldiers to follow when dealing with civilians. Therefore, it was probably for these reasons that the church was willing to accommodate lapsed soldiers. The best way to moderate the abuses of malignant soldiery was by bringing them within the fold where they could be trained in ethical behavior. The importance the church attached to evangelizing the army may seen in the fact that Christian military chaplains appear in the Roman army even during the time of Constantine.[17]

Another area of literature where the church tried to impart moral lessons to Christian soldiers was in the dissemination of saints' *vitae*, particularly those which discuss the ordeals of martyrs who were also Roman soldiers. The *vitae* are interesting in that they provide many useful details which illuminate Christian penetration of the Roman army at this time. In one particular account, a Roman official is bewildered by the refusal of a Christian conscript to serve in the military, pointing out to him that there were already many Christians in the Roman army.[18] This incident is believed to date from the late third century. The martyrologies also show us what were the particular circumstances which led to a Roman soldier being martyred. In most cases, it was not out of any refusal to carry out the normal duties of a soldier, but because they did not wish to venerate the Roman military standards or worship in the official army cults. These stories also tend to be a bit odd, since they lead one to ask why would anyone voluntarily join an organization which required him to perform religious rites which were counter to his own beliefs. Many of the soldiers in these stories hold the rank of centurion, which would suggest that these men were not drafted into the army against their will but were enthusiastic careerists. It is probable that some of these accounts are fictitious (not surprising in light of the close similarity many of them bear to one another), however this does not make them valueless to the historian as the issues which they address reflect the concerns of the time. From these stories we can deduce that Christian polemicists were less concerned with the moral issue of killing one's fellow man for a living than they were with the participation of Christian soldiers in pagan rituals. This concern is also reflected in Tertullian's pamphlet on idolatry where he rails against Christian soldiers who participate in the pagan cults of the Roman army.[19] One of these cults was Mithraism which had its greatest following in the Roman army and many Christians may have participated in its rites to maintain solidarity with their comrades. There is archaeological evidence to suggest that the two cults often operated in close proximity to one another, such as in the church of Santa Prisca in Rome, where Mithraic and Christian congregations co-existed peacefully in adjoining rooms.[20] The simultaneous participation in both Christian and Mithraic cultic practices may have been a commonplace among Christian soldiers in the Roman army. Such a practice would account for many of the similarities between the two creeds. In fact, interest in this cult continued even into the late fourth/early fifth century as evidenced by the coins issued by

Honorius (395-423 CE) and Arcadius (395-408 CE) which Vermaseren found inside some Mithraea located near the military encampments, and this during a time when the empire, and its army, was officially Christian.[21] The infiltration of pagan practices into Christian ritual was a grave concern for the church and is reflected in the writings of several patristic authors of the fourth century.[22] The ambivalence and carelessness of some Christian Roman soldiers in their religious habits was probably a very real concern for the church fathers, who were fearful lest their converts continue to be contaminated by contact with competing cults. These concerns are reflected in the body of soldier martyr's *vitae,* which make their appearance towards the end of the third and early fourth centuries. The tales of Christian soldiers who remained faithful and true to the Christian religion even onto death were probably intended as moral examples for Christian soldiers to follow.

From everything we have seen here it is clear that the church recognized the crucial role played by the Roman army in imperial society, both as a buttress for imperial defense and in the dramatic impact Roman soldiers had in their everyday dealings with the citizens of the empire. As a result, the church decided to bring this important institution within the fold of Christian belief and develop a code of ethics for the Christian warrior to live by.

Notes

1 St. Augustine, *Ep.* 189.
2 Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, 42.1-3.
3 *Apostolic Tradition*, 16.17, 19.
4 R. Bainton, "The Early Church and War," *HTR* 39 (1946) 189-212.
5 St. Basil, *Ep.* 188.13. See also Patrick Viscuso, "Christian Participation in Warfare" in Timothy S. Miller, John Nesbitt eds., *Peace and War in Byzantium* (Washington DC, 1995) 33-34.
6 St. Augustine, *De civitate dei* 19.12-13.
7 St. Augustine, *Ep.* 185.
8 E.A.Thompson "Christianity and the Northern Barbarians," in A.Momigliano ed. *The Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (Oxford, 1963) 56-78. See also Peter Heather, *The Goths* (Oxford, 1996) 60-1.
9 Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA, 1981) 214.
10 Eusebius, *Triac.* 7.1-10.1; Origen *C.Cels.* 8.73; J.N. Hilgarth ed. *Christianity and Paganism, 350-750* (Philadelphia, 1986) 65-71.
11 Barnes, *Constantine*, 258.
12 Eusebius *Triac.* 8.1-8.7.
13 Vegetius 2.5 (Leo F. Stelten tr.).
14 St. Ambrose, *Ep.* 13.1 (Brian Croke, Jill Harries trs.).
15 Archbishop Peter L'Huillier, *The Church of the Ancient Councils* (Crestwood, NY, 1996) 67-68. See also W. Bright, *The Canons of the First Four General Councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon* (Oxford, 1892) xii-xiii, 46-50.
16 Juvenal 16. 7-12 (G.G. Ramsay tr.). See also Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 9.39-40; J.B. Campbell, *The Emperor and the Roman Army, 31 BC-AD 235* (Oxford, 1984) 236-253.
17 Eusebius, *Triac.* 9.9-10; A.H.M. Jones, "Military Chaplains in the Roman Army," *HTR* 46 (1953) 239-40.
18 *Acta Maximiliani* in H. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*

(Oxford, 1972) 244-49.

19 Tertullian, *De idol.* 19.2. See also *De cor.* 15.3-4.

20 M.J. Vermaseren and C.C. Van Essen, *The Excavations in the Mithraeum of the Church of Santa Prisca in Rome* (Leiden, 1965) 73, 83 and 114.

21 M.J. Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae* 2 (Hague, 1960) 155-6, no.1414; 266, no.1899.5; 373, no.2324.5.

22 Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire A.D. 100-400* (New Haven, 1984) 74-85.