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War in Early Christian Ethics
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All Christians before the mass apostasy of AD 249-251 who wrote on Christian participation in war opposed it on ethical grounds. Some lukewarm Christians were in the army, but their exceptions prove the rule.

The earliest sources are mid-second century: Justin Martyr, Christian interpolations into the *Sibylline Oracles*, and the *Acts of John*. Among the transformations in character and behaviour noticed upon conversion to Christianity, Justin detailed that people who used to murder each other now refrain from making war on their enemies¹. Although not stating so explicitly, Justin spoke of the Roman army as consisting wholly of pagans without any Christians being soldiers. In its Christian redaction, the Sibyl is represented as classing people who make wars in the same category of sinner as those who dishonour their mothers, plot against their brothers, and betray their friends.² The *Acts of John* 36 consigns warmongers to hell, along with tyrants, murderers, robbers and poisoners.

Shortly afterwards, the pagan philosopher Celsus criticised Christians for shirking their civic duties by not participating in the armed forces, which he feared would lead to barbarian conquest and therefore the end of civilisation and the *pax romana* if too many Roman men became Christians, and ironically destroy the Christian religion itself³. Thus, even pagans of the period recognised non-involvement in wars as an official Christian characteristic.

Bishop Hippolytus of Ostia in central Italy and onetime rival bishop of Rome ranked war as a sin with murder, revenge, idolatry, selling a free brother into slavery, and separating oneself from God⁴. This statement cannot be dated other than before Hippolytus' death in AD 235 or 236. However, his *The Apostolic Tradition* is generally dated as AD 217. In setting out the livelihoods disqualifying acceptance of applicants for church membership, it excludes idol-makers, prostitutes, pimps, gladiators and pagan priests along with military commanders⁵. Soldiers desiring to become Christians must be taught not to kill and even to disobey if ordered to do so.⁶ Candidates for baptism and people already in the church who try to enlist in the army were to be rejected and expelled, as despisers of God. In the oral tradition preserved in this book, even joining up and taking the military oath were forbidden, in addition to killing in war.⁷

Another church manual dating from the first third of the third century likewise condemned government officials who were 'defiled with wars' in the same passage as idol-makers, murderers, oppressors of the poor, false accusers, idolaters and extortionists.⁸

Tertullian's *De Corona* 11 addresses the topic 'whether warfare is proper at all for Christians.'⁹ A Carthaginian, Tertullian was a convert to Christianity who became an elder and the founder of Latin Christian literature. His writings mentioned in this article date between AD 197 and 220. He asked rhetorically, implying negative answers:

‘Shall it be held lawful to make an occupation of the sword, when the Lord proclaims that he who uses the sword shall perish by the sword? And shall the son of peace take part in the battle when it does not become him even to sue at law? And shall he apply the chain, and the prison, and the torture, and the punishment, who is not the avenger even of his own wrongs?’¹⁰

and:

‘How will a *Christian man* war, nay, how will he serve even in peace, without a sword, which the Lord has taken away?’¹¹

Tertullian declared outright that Christ ‘in disarming Peter unbelted every soldier’.¹² But what of a man who is converted when already in the army? In reply to his opponents who cited Scripture in support of the proposition that Christians in good conscience can fight in wars, Tertullian stated:

Of course, if faith comes later, and finds any preoccupied with military service, their case is different, as in the instance of those whom John used to receive for baptism, and of those most faithful centurions, I mean the centurion whom Christ approves, and the centurion whom Peter instructs; yet, at the same time, when a man has become a believer, and faith has been sealed, there must be either an immediate abandonment of it, which has been the course with many; or all sorts of quibbling will have to be resorted to in order to avoid offending God, and that is not allowed even outside of military service¹³

Moreover, in my own mind, one must remember that the New Testament does not state that the two centurions were told to continue in the army in good faith. The Bible is silent on the point, such elaboration being irrelevant to the thrust of the pericopes.

In his reply to Celsus’s attacks, Origen in the late 240s conceded that Christians did not serve in the armed forces, which Origen sought to justify and explain. The greatest Bible scholar, exegete and teacher of his own time and for centuries afterwards, Origen was professor at the foremost Christian educational institution of the day (at Alexandria, Egypt) and later founded his own in Palestine. He was best placed to represent the consensus of Christian teaching in his time because he travelled throughout the eastern Mediterranean as a theological consultant at the invitation of local bishops.

Origen asserted forthrightly that Christians have been taught ‘not to avenge themselves on their enemies’ and ‘they would not, although able, have made war even if they had received authority to do so’¹⁴ and: ‘we no longer take up “sword against nation,” nor do we “learn war any more,” having become children of peace, for the sake of Jesus, who is our leader, instead of those whom our fathers followed’.¹⁵

The proper defence against barbarian hordes, Origen wrote, is prayer. If all Roman men became Christians, as Celsus had feared and Origen hoped, there would be no such military or civil calamity, because Christian prayer would prevent invasion by foreign conquerors or, if not, they would themselves become Christians and therefore non-combatants and civilised.¹⁶ To quote Origen succinctly:

‘none fight better for the king than we do. We do not indeed fight under him, although he require it; but we fight on his behalf, forming a special army—an army of piety—by offering our prayers to God.’¹⁷

And

‘if all the Romans, according to the supposition of Celsus, embrace the Christian faith, they will, when they pray, overcome their enemies; or rather, they will not war at all, being guarded by that divine power which promised to save five entire cities for the sake of fifty persons.’¹⁸

As for God in the Old Testament commanding the Israelites to engage in war and their frequently doing so, Origen drew a distinction between the Jewish constitution received from Moses, and the Christian constitution received from Christ and which God and Christians now seek to implement. Their political

sovereignty gone in the Christian era, Roman Jews no longer possessed a land or government of their own and no right to war on their enemies. The gospel of Jesus Christ was instituted to end war and bloodshed by God's people, and Christians therefore abstain from them. For Christians to fight in any war, wrote Origen, would fundamentally overturn their very constitution itself.¹⁹ Put another way, if a revolt had led to the formation of the Christian commonwealth, so that it derived its existence in this way from that of the Jews, who were permitted to take up arms in defence of the members of their families, and to slay their enemies, the Christian lawgiver would not have altogether forbidden the putting of men to death; and yet He nowhere teaches that it is right for His own disciples to offer violence to any one, however wicked. For He did not deem it in keeping with such laws as His, which were derived from a divine source, to allow the killing of any individual whatever.²⁰ In two Biblical commentaries Origen wrote that Christians do not, or ought not to, do anything 'factious and warlike'.²¹ He also preached: 'If, therefore, you wish to be made worthy to pursue the inheritance from Jesus and if you wish to claim a portion from him, you must first end all wars and abide in peace'.²²

There was a discrepancy between official church teaching and the actual practice of some individuals, just as there is today among 'cafeteria Catholics' on matters such as birth control,²³ abortion and divorce,²⁴ as also is the case of alcohol among members of abstinence-stressing Protestant denominations—not to mention fornication and adultery by members of every faith. Except for the New Testament examples cited above, all but one instance from our period are from Tertullian.²⁵ One such was 'The Thundering Legion'. Details of the incident remain under scholarly debate, but what matters for our purposes is that Christians for a few generations afterwards believed it to be true. Sometime in the AD 170s the Imperial XIIth Legion was in distress due to a drought and a surrounding enemy. The Christian Legionnaires prayed for rain, with the result that a downpour relieved the Romans' dehydration and frightened off its enemy. Christians of the era touted this as proof that Christianity is the true religion and that God answers Christians' prayers. Besides Tertullian, the only near-contemporary attestation is the pseudonymous report attributed to the Legion's commander, the Roman Emperor himself.

Tertullian dismissed Christians who participated in the military as quibblers,²⁶ inferior exegetes, servants of two masters²⁷, rejecters of the prophecies, those who 'turn their backs on the Scriptures' and who 'murmur that a peace so good and long is endangered for them.'²⁸ 'Christ', he wrote, gave a new law in which all people are commanded to beat their swords into ploughshares and their lances into sickles, and nation not to take up the sword against nation and 'no more learn to fight' nor to avenge oneself by a sword nor 'to inflict retaliatory revenge for injury'.²⁹

The pseudonymous report of the Emperor actually fortifies the proposition that Christians in our era of study were in conscience non-violent, pacifists and non-combatants. It mentions that the Christians Legionnaires 'began the battle, not by preparing weapons, nor arms, nor bugles; for such preparation is hateful to them, on account of the God they bear about in their conscience.'³⁰ Church fathers, a New Testament apocryphon, and at least one pagan during the first quarter-millennium AD and in such diverse localities as Italy, Carthage, Palestine, Syria, Egypt and elsewhere in the Roman Empire, were unanimous that no Christian could participate in war while none wrote to the contrary.

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¹ *I Apology* 39.

² *Sibylline Oracles* 1.75-78.

³ As preserved in Origen *Against Celsus* 8.68-70.

⁴ *Sermo de David et Goliath* 10.4.

⁵ *Apostolic Tradition* 16.10-18; 16.20

⁶ *Apostolic Tradition* 16.17.

⁷ *Apostolic Tradition* 16.19.

⁸ *Didascalica Apostolorum* 18 trans. R. Hugh Connolly (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929) 158

⁹ *De Corona* 11 ANF 3.99.

¹⁰ *De Corona* 11 ANF 3.99.

¹¹ *De Idolatria* 19 ANF 3.73

¹² *De Idolatria* 19 ANF 3.73

¹³ *De Corona* 8 ANF 3.100.

¹⁴ Origen *Against Celsus* 3.8 ANF 4.467

¹⁵ *Against Celsus* 5.33 ANF 4.558

¹⁶ *Against Celsus* 8.68-70.

¹⁷ *Against Celsus* 8.73 ANF 4.668.

¹⁸ *Against Celsus* 8.70 ANF 4.666.

¹⁹ *Against Celsus* 7.26.

²⁰ *Against Celsus* 3.7 ANF 4.467.

²¹ *Commentary on Ephesians* 6.11; *Commentary on John* 19.156.

²² *Homilies on Joshua* 19.1 trans. Bruce-White Fathers of the Church Series vol. 105 © 2002 Catholic University of America Press, 168.

²³ Archbishop John R. Quinn of San Francisco as noted in Charles E. Curran *Moral Theology: A Continuing Journey* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982) 143f.

²⁴ John H. Yoder 'War as a Moral Problem in the Early Church: The Historian's Hermeneutical Assumptions' in Harvey L. Dyck (editor) *The Pacifist Impulse in Historical Perspective* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, © 1996) 92.

²⁵ *Apologeticum* 5; *Ad Scapulam* 4.

²⁶ *De Corona* 11.

²⁷ *De Idolatria* 19.

²⁸ *De Corona* 1 ANF 3.[93].

²⁹ *Answer to the Jews* 3 ANF 3.154.

³⁰ *Epistle of Marcus Aurelius to the Senate* ANF 1.187

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