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TERTULLIAN AND WAR—VOICES FROM THE  
EARLY CHURCH

O, shame to men! Devil with devil damn'd  
Firm concord holds; men only disagree  
Of creatures rational, though under hope  
Of heavenly grace, and God proclaiming peace,  
Yet live in hatred, enmity and strife  
Among themselves, and levy cruel wars,  
Wasting the earth each other to destroy;  
As if (which might induce us to accord)  
Man had no hellish foes enough besides,  
That day and night for his destruction wait.

—JOHN MILTON (1608–1674)

The bursting shell, the gateway wrench'd asunder,  
The rattling musketry, the clashing blade,  
And ever and anon, in tones of thunder,  
The diapason of the cannonade.  
Is it, O man, with such discordant noises,  
With such accursèd instruments as these,  
Thou drownest Nature's sweet and kindly voices  
And jarrest the celestial harmonies?  
Were half the power that fills the world with terror,  
Were half the wealth bestow'd on camp and courts,  
Given to redeem the human mind from error,  
There were no need of arsenals nor forts.  
The warrior's name would be a name abhorrèd!  
And every nation that should lift again  
Its hand against a brother, on its forehead  
Would wear for evermore the curse of Cain!

—LONGFELLOW (1807–1882)

War must be  
While men are what they are; while they have bad  
Passions to be roused up; while ruled by men;  
While injuries can be inflicted, or

Insults be offer'd; yea, while rights are worth  
 Maintaining, freedom keeping, or life having,  
 So long the sword shall shine; so long shall war  
 Continue and the need of war remain.

—JOANNA BAILLIE (1762-1851)

But, as I mused, there crowded on my spirit  
 The lofty virtues nursed in strife; the will  
 That breaks but bends not; goodness even in death  
 Abhorring evil; right defying wrong;  
 The stern self-sacrifice of souls afire  
 For perill'd altars, and for hearths profaned;  
 The generous chivalry, which shields the weak,  
 And dares the oppressor's worst; love guarding love  
 From rapine, or, as God's executors,  
 Dealing forth vengeance on the stubborn foe,  
 And mercy to the vanquished; all along  
 The ages, names the noblest and the best,  
 From Israel's chief to those brave men whose swords  
 Have been the bulwark of my native isle.

—EDWARD BICKERSTETH (1786-1850)

## I

"It had been an ancient maxim of the Greeks," writes Lecky, (*History of European Morals*, vol. ii, p. 248) "that no more acceptable gifts can be offered in the temples of the gods than the trophies won from an enemy in battle. Of this military religion Christianity had been at first the extreme negation." In a period of wars and troubles—during the ninety-two years from the death of Commodus (A.D. 161-192) onwards, for instance, thirty-two emperors and twenty-seven pretenders, says Sismondi, alternately hurled each other from the throne by incessant civil war—the oldest writers of the Church consistently tried to dissuade Christians from the profession of arms. War they stigmatised as a violation of the law of God which forbids bloodshed, as also of that which commands love even to an adversary. JUSTIN MARTYR (c. 100-165) and TATIAN (obit c. A.D. 180) speak of soldiers and Christians as distinct characters, and Tatian (*ad Graecos* p. xi) declines "military commands". CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA (d. 220)

calls Christians "followers of peace", and says they use no implements of war. In *Adv. Gentes* (I, 2 §), p. xi, he writes: "Were you a soldier on service when the knowledge of God laid hold of you? Then listen to the Commander who signals righteousness." LACTANTIUS, a converted philosopher, who died about A.D. 325, is insistent that "a righteous man cannot engage in warfare . . . It is always unlawful to put to death a man whom God has willed to be a sacred animal" (*Divine Institutes*, VI, 20). IRENAEUS (140-202 ?) declares that "the prophecy of Isaiah (as to universal peace) is fulfilled; for we who in days gone by killed one another, do not now fight with our enemies"; phraseology destined to find an echo in ATHANASIUS (296-373): "When the barbarians become the disciples of Christ immediately . . . instead of arming their hands with swords, they stretch them forth in prayer" (*De Incarnatione*, p. 2). CYPRIAN (c. 200-258), Bishop of Carthage, observes that "the soldiers of Christ cannot be conquered . . . they can die; they do not in turn attack their assailants since it is not lawful for the innocent even to kill the guilty; but they readily surrender both their lives and their blood" (*Ep.* 56 §, p. 2, To Cornelius in Exile). The great ORIGEN (185-254), in arguing with Celsus who urged the inevitable consequences to the State should Christians refuse service, takes the ground that all Christians being priests are exempted, *ipso facto*, from military obligations. "They will, however, form an army of piety and fight by offering prayers." He definitely states that Christians "will not fight, even should the Emperor call upon them so to do" (*Against Celsus*, viii, 73). Notwithstanding, Origen admits that there are just and unavoidable wars such as those requisite to defend an attacked country (*Contra Celsum*, iv, 82). In the next century JOHN CHRYSOSTOM (347-407), while not forbidding the military career, warns against its attendant moral dangers (*Homily 61 in Matt.*, p. 2); but BASIL THE GREAT (329-379) maintained that no Christian can lawfully take up arms.

Of the Church books in use in the third or succeeding centuries, the 'APOSTOLICAL CONSTITUTIONS' direct, "If a soldier comes, let him be taught to do no injustice, to accuse no man falsely, and to be content with his allotted wages" (bk. viii, 32); merely repeating the counsel of John the Baptist. The 'CANONS OF THE CHURCH OF ALEXANDRIA'

(erroneously ascribed to Hippolytus) declare that "A Nazarene (i.e. a Christian) may not become a soldier unless by order." Another edition of the same Canons used by the Ethiopian Christians observes that "It is not seemly for Christians to bear arms" (Canon 14 of Abulides (i.e. Hippolytus). Vide Ante-Nicene Library, Hippolytus: appendix to part ii, pp. 135, 139). Du Pin notes the existence of a Canon of Pope Innocent I (died 417) refusing admission to the priesthood of those who had enlisted as soldiers subsequently to baptism (*Du Pin*, III, p. 68).

## II

TERTULLIAN comes before us as a particularly unpromising opponent of military service, and it is in his writings that some of the most famous of the early testimonies against war are found. The texture of his polemic is best gauged by adducing instances of his impassioned rhetoric. Even in his pre-Montanist days he was strongly antagonistic. There is the illuminating passage in *de Idololatria* (p. xix): Possit in isto capitulo etiam de militia definitum videri, quae inter dignitatem et potestatem est. At nunc de isto quaeritur, an fidelis ad militiam converti possit, et an militia ad fidem admitti etiam caligata vel inferior quaeque, cui non sit necessitas immolationum vel capitalium iudiciorum. Non convenit sacramento divino et humano, signo Christi et signo diaboli, castris lucis et castris tenebrarum; non potest una anima duobus deberi, deo et Caesari. Et virgam portavit Moyses, fibulam et Aaron, cingitur loro et Iohannes, agmen agit et Iesus Nave, bellavit et populus, si placet ludere. Quomodo autem bellabit immo quomodo etiam in pace militabit sine gladio, quem dominus abstulit? Nam etsi ad ierant milites ad Iohannem et formam observationis acceperant, si etiam centurio crediderat, omnem postea militem dominus in Petro exarmando discinxit. Nullus habitus est apud nos illicito actui adscriptus.

" . . . But now the question to be considered is whether a believer may take up military service, and whether the military can be admitted to the Faith, even the rank and file, or each inferior grade which is under no obligation to take part in sacrifices or capital punishments. There is no agreement between the divine and the human military oath, the standard of Christ and the standard of the devil, the camp of light and the camp

of darkness. One soul cannot be owing to two (lords)—God and Cæsar. And yet Moses carried a rod, (*virga vitea centurionum fuit*—*Oehler*, vol. i, p. 107), and Aaron wore a buckle, (i.e. to fasten the ephod. The soldier's belt buckle is probably meant), and John (Baptist) has a leather girdle, (i.e. as the soldiers' belts), and Joshua the son of Nun leads a line of march; and the People waged war: if you deem a little humour appropriate. But how will (a Christian) war, indeed how will he serve even in time of peace without a sword, which the Lord has taken away? (cf. Matt. xxvi. 52, John xviii. 36, 2 Cor. x. 4). For although the soldiers had come to John and had received the formula for their conduct; (Luke iii. 12, 13) although, too, a centurion had believed; (Matt. viii. 5, Luke vii. 1, etc.) (still) afterwards the Lord, in disarming Peter, unbelted every soldier without exception."

An equally important and significant passage meets us in the treatise *de Corona*, written in 211 in defence of a Christian soldier who had refused to wear a chaplet on the Emperor's birthday. The tone is, if anything, more inflexibly adamant, in harmony with Tertullian's new allegiance to the Montanists, who, it must be granted, more faithfully than others, upheld pure New Testament teaching on this point. Chapter XI reads: "And, in fact, to get down to the real issue of the military garland, I think we must inquire first whether warfare is proper at all for Christians. Besides, what sort of procedure is it, to deal with accidentals when the real fault lies with what has preceded them? Do we believe that a human oath may lawfully be superadded to a divine, and that a Christian may give a promise to another master besides Christ, and abjure father and mother and all nearest kinsfolk, whom even the Law commanded to be honoured and loved next to God, and whom the Gospel also thus honoured, putting them above all save Christ only? Will it be lawful for him to occupy himself with the sword, when the Lord declares that he who uses the sword shall perish by the sword? And shall the son of peace, for whom it is unfitting even to go to law, be engaged in a battle? And shall he who is not the avenger even of his own wrongs administer chains and imprisonment and tortures and executions? Shall he now go on guard for others more than for Christ, or shall he do it on the Lord's Day, when he does not do it even for Christ Himself? And shall he stand guard in front of temples which he has

renounced? And take a meal there where the Apostle has forbidden it? And those whom he has put to flight by exorcisms in the daytime, shall he defend them at night, leaning and resting on the pilum with which Christ's side was pierced? And shall he carry a flag, too, that is a rival for Christ? And shall he ask for a watchword from his Emperor when he has already received one from God? And when he is dead, shall he be disturbed by the bugler's trumpet, he who expects to be roused by the angel's trump? And shall the Christian, who is not allowed to burn incense, to whom Christ has remitted the punishment of fire, be burned,<sup>1</sup> as prescribed by the discipline of the camp? How many other offences can be seen to belong to the performance of duties in camp?—sins which must be explained as a transgression of God's law. The very transference of one's name from the camp of light to the camp of darkness is a violation of it. Of course, the case (is) different if faith comes subsequently to any who are already engaged in military service, as was, e.g., the case with those whom John admitted to Baptism, and with those most faithful centurions whom Christ approves and whom Peter instructs. All the same, when a man has become a believer, and faith has been sealed, either the service must be left at once, the course which has been adopted by many, or else all sorts of cavilling will have to be resorted to to avoid committing any sin against God—any, that is, of the things which are not allowed to Christians outside the army;<sup>2</sup> or last of all, the same fate must be endured for Him which non-combatant citizens are ready to accept, for military service will not promise impunity from martyrdom. The Christian is nowhere anything else than a Christian. . . . With Him (i.e. Christ) the civilian believer is as much a soldier as the believing soldier is a civilian. The state of faith admits no plea of necessity. No necessity of sinning have they whose one necessity is that they do not sin. . . . For otherwise even inclination can be pleaded as a necessity,

<sup>1</sup> Cremation was obnoxious to early Christian feeling, fire being regarded as symbolic of divine judgment. For the effect of Christianity on national usages of *sepulture* cf. the following words of Bishop Wordsworth " . . . before the reception of the Gospel, the bodies of the dead were *burnt*, and their ashes only received in funeral urns. But after a few Emperors had received Baptism there was not a body burnt in the Roman Empire. . . . So great a social change was wrought by Christianity." (Chr. Wordsworth, D.D., *Greek Test.* Vol. II on Acts viii. 2).

<sup>2</sup> There is an important V.L. here. Rigaltius would replace *extra Militiam* of the Codex Agobard. by *ex militia*. Influenced by this, Gibbon wrote, " Tertullian (de Corona Militis c. xi) suggests to them the expedient of deserting; a counsel which, if it had been generally known, was not very proper to conciliate the favour of the Emperors towards the Christian sect." (*Decline and Fall*, Vol. II, XV. 1845 Ed., p. 113 n.) "Agobardini enim libri scriptura 'extra militiam' unice vera"—*Oehler*, Vol. I, p. 444.

having, of course, an element of compulsion in it. . . . Etenim ut ipsam causam coronae militaris aggrediar, puto prius conquirendum, an in totum Christianis, militia conveniat. Quale est alioquin de accidentibus retractare, cum a praecedentibus culpa sit? Credimusne humanum sacramentum divino superduci licere, et in alium dominum respondere post Christum, et cierare patrem et matrem et omnem proximum, quos et lex honorari et post deum diligi praecepit, quos et evangelium, solo Christo pluris non faciens, sic quoque honoravit? Licebit in gladio conversari, domino pronuntiante gladio periturum qui gladio fuerit usus? Et proelio operabitur filius pacis, cui nec litigare conveniet? Et vincula et carcerem et tormenta et supplicia administrabit, nec suarum ultor iniuriarum? Iam et stationes aut alii magis faciet quam Christo, aut et dominico die, quando nec Christo? Et excubabit pro templis quibus renuntiavit? Et coenabit illic, ubi apostolo non placet? Et quos interdum exorcismis fugavit, noctibus defensabit, incumbens et requiescens super pilum, quo perfossum latus est Christi? Vexillum quoque portabit aemulum Christi? Et signum postulabit a principe, qui iam a deo accepit? Mortuus etiam tuba inquietabitur aeneatoris, qui excitari a tuba angeli expectat? Et cremabitur ex disciplina castrensi Christianus, cui cremari non licuit, cui Christus merita ignis indulsit? Quanta alia inde delicta circumspici possunt castrensiun munium transgressioni interpretanda! Ipsum de castris lucio in castra tenebrarum nomen deferre transgressionis est. Plane, si quos militia praeventos fides posterior invenit, alia conditio est, ut illorum, quos Iohannes admittebat ad lavacrum, ut centurionum fidelissimorum, quem Christus probat et quem Petrus catechizat, dum tamen suscepta fide atque signata aut deserendum statim sit ut a multis actum, aut omnibus modis cavillandum, nequid adversus deum committatur, quae nec extra militiam permittuntur, aut novissime perpetiendum pro deo, quod acque fides pagana condixit. Nec enim delictorum impunitatem aut martyriorum militia promittit. Nusquam Christianus aliud est. . . . Non admittit status fidei necessitates. Nulla est necessitas delinquendi, quibus una est necessitas non delinquendi".<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>In connection with this call to 'total separation', a distinguished writer says: "But the ordinary Christians, the tradesmen and shopkeepers and skilled artisans, who had to face the practical difficulties of life, could not act on this principle; and the Church justified them, and held that they ought not to force their religion on the notice of others, and might even employ legal forms to give a show of legality to their position, and help inactive or well-disposed officials to keep their eyes shut."—W. M. Ramsay, *The Church in the Roman Empire*, p. 436.



He asks, in the following chapter: "Is the laurel of triumph made up of leaves, or of corpses? Is it decorated with ribbons or tombs? Is it besmeared with ointments, or with the tears of wives and mothers, perhaps those of some men even who are Christians?—for Christ is among the barbarians as well." "Triumphus laurea foliis struitur, an cadaveribus? lemniscis ornatur, an bustis? unguentis delibuitur, an lacrimis coniugum et matrum? fortasse quorundam et Christianorum; et apud barbaros enim Christus." "Non milito"—"I do not engage in military service"—is the abrupt dictum which greets us in *De Pallio*, p. 5. In the apology, a Pre-Montanist work, he says: "We pray for protection to the Imperial house, for brave armies"—p. xxx. . . . "Precantes sumus semper pro omnibus imperatoribus vitam illis prolixam . . . exercitus fortes . . ."; and in his treatise *On Patience*, generally regarded as falling in the same category, he describes it as "the business of the heathen to hire themselves to the camp"—p. vii. "Gentilium est omnibus detrimentis impatientiam adhibere qui rem pecuniariam fortasse animae anteponant. Nam et faciunt cum . . . denique . . . castris sese locant." Tertullian tells us elsewhere that desertions of Christians were frequent ("ut a multis actum"), but Gibbon (*Decline and Fall*, p. xv) is unfair in implying that he deliberately instigated such defections.<sup>1</sup>

According to Le Blant (*Inscriptions Chrétiennes de la Gaule*, p. 81) out of every hundred epitaphs in Gaul pagan soldiers are mentioned in 5.42 per cent, Christian in .57 per cent; but Harnack holds that in North Africa the Christians in the army were fairly numerous. (*Expansion of the Church*, Vol. i, p. 461.) Dymond, quoted by Brace, (*Gesta Christi*, p. 91) says it was only in the third century, when Christianity was more corrupted, that Christians began to enrol. His assertion has been challenged, however, as exaggerated. The *Acts of the Martyrs* relate several instances of Christians choosing degradation and execution rather than violate conscience. Maximilian, who was martyred at Teveste in Numidia in 295 for refusing to enrol as a soldier, has often been cited as a Montanist conscientious objector. There is no indubitable evidence that he was a Montanist; in fact, in view of the stern attitude ultimately adopted by the Church towards the hated sectaries, his canonisation might be interpreted as fairly conclusive evidence to the contrary.

<sup>1</sup> Vide the note on page preceding.

But he lived in a Montanist region and there is no doubt that his attitude towards war strongly reflects that of Tertullian.

### III

It seems appropriate to note at this juncture various factors which, if they cannot be held completely to rationalise, at any rate render Tertullian's position more intelligible. Thus at the time when Tertullian (and Origen<sup>1</sup>) wrote, the army was a stronghold of the cult of Mithras. The "Invincible Saviour" was the special deity of the soldiers. All this added complication to a situation difficult enough already. To enter the army and remain in it after conversion involved a Christian profession in the midst of a specially organised, and intensely aggressive, heathenism. The question of sacrifice under idolatrous auspices, too, raised very real issues, hardly applicable, however, to the rank and file. A Christian in the army, if holding rank, e.g. a centurion, had to perform, or at least witness in silence, certain sacrifices or else be prepared to resign simultaneously office and life. Tertullian makes express reference to the problem (*de Idololatria*, p. xix), but objects almost as much to the infliction of capital punishment which might fall to the lot of a Christian officer. A third ground, calculated to commend a "purist" solution of the problem, is found in a military metaphor which exerted a powerful influence on the reasonings and actions of many of the early Christians—the conception of the Church as the "Militia Christi", the army of Christ. Christians were "soldiers" in a "holy war", commissioned to bring in "with violence" the Kingdom of heaven. Jesus was their "Imperator"—their Generalissimo—to Whom they were bound in allegiance by no common "sacramentum" or military oath. Under His standard, the Cross,—the "Vexillum Christi"—they were enrolled, in absolute antagonism to the Empire as a diabolic state,<sup>2</sup> and in Christ's words, "Be of good cheer: I have overcome the world", they found an earnest of victory. The idea is present, of course, in Paul. It is especially developed by Origen and Clement of Alexandria, but occurs also in Clement of Rome (1 *Clem. ad Corin.*, p. 37, c. A.D. 95); The Shepherd of Hermas (*Similitude V*, p. 1); Justin Martyr (1 *Apol.*, p. 39);

<sup>1</sup> See earlier, p. 204.

<sup>2</sup> N.B.—"The notion of a Christian state is utterly foreign to Tertullian; he knows only of the heathen state."—Adolf Wuttke, *Christian Ethics*, (T. & T. Clark), p. 189.

Tertullian (*Apology*, 37, 39, 50; *de Corona*, I, II, 15; *Ad Martyres*, "To the Martyrs", p. 3, etc.), while much stress is laid on it by Cyprian.

It must be admitted that the unconscious drift of the teaching of the early Church was against war or participation therein. Under the influence of circumstances, however, the "Quakerism" of the early period was not long in becoming modified. Even at the outset there are sundry indications that there were members of the Christian community who held a different view and regarded military service as a duty towards the state, the preservation of which they regarded as the supreme law overriding every other consideration. The story of the "Thundering Legion" proves that the army never lacked Christians, true heroes of God, who were prepared, if need arose, to lay down their lives rather than deny Christ. Tertullian alludes to it in *ad Scapulam*, c. iv. "Marcus quoque Aurelius in Germanica expeditione Christianorum militum orationibus ad deum factis imbres in siti illa impetravit,"; as also in *Apology*, p. 5 ". . . si litterac M. Aurelii gravissimi precationibus impetrato imbri discussam contestatur". Bishop Lightfoot has shown<sup>1</sup> that the narrative will not bear critical scrutiny; but that it does contain a substratum of fact, whatever its real value, is a legitimate inference from its being depicted on the column of Marcus Aurelius. And Tertullian himself in an oft-quoted passage wrung from him by the needs of his *Apology*, stresses the number of Christians in the fighting forces. "We have filled your very camps", "implevimus castra ipsa" (p. 37); "We fight shoulder to shoulder with you," etc. "Navigamus et nos vobiscum et *militamus* et rusticamur et mercamur" (p. 42). Allowing for the rhetorical note in these extracts, we conclude that even in Tertullian's day the position of extreme aloofness was not acceptable to many. We may add that under Diocletian (245-313) so rapid had this influx become that this Emperor inaugurated his persecution of the Church by summoning the many Christian officers in his legions and requiring them to choose between paganism and degradation. Most, Eusebius tells us (*Hist. Eccles.* viii. 4), immediately sacrificed their rank.

<sup>1</sup> *Ignatius*, Vol. I, pp. 485ff.

## IV

We may be permitted to append a few observations on the general issue in the light of the emergency of the "Christianised" State, and the progressive deterioration of imperial stability. In the days of Jerome (c. 340-420) and Augustine (353-430) the fate of the Western Empire was in the balance. Anxiety hung everywhere like a dark, impenetrable cloud. Kingdoms were melting away like snow. The presage of disaster was in the air, and the puzzlement of life weighed heavily on all reflective minds. The Roman world was in its death agony. Civilisation itself and Christian society were gravely imperilled by the barbarian invasions. These Fathers never cease to deplore the evils which civil and foreign wars have let loose upon the world. They speak with intense sorrow of conflicts which they were powerless to arrest. So Jerome (*Epistles* 60 and 77). "As to killing others in order to defend one's own life," writes Augustine, "I do not approve of this unless one happens to be a soldier or public functionary, acting, not for himself, but in defence of others or of the city in which he resides." (*Ep.* 47, p. 5). His mature view is that "It is wrong to shed the blood of our fellowmen in defence of those things which ought to be despised by us". (*De Libero Arbitrio*—"On Free Will"—1.5.13). "The precept 'Resist not evil'", he comments, "was given to prevent our taking pleasure in revenge, but not to make us neglect the duty of restraining men from wrongdoing." "If the Christian religion condemned wars of every kind," we find him writing to Marcellinus in A.D. 412, "the command given in the Gospel to soldiers . . . would rather be to throw away their arms and quit the service." (*Letter* 138, p. 15). In A.D. 429, not long before his death, "amid bodily weakness and the chill of age", he congratulates Darius, "a member of Christ", on his success in obtaining a truce with the Vandals. "But it is a higher glory still to stay war itself with a word than to stay men with the sword. For those who fight, if they are good men, doubtless seek for peace; still, it is through blood . . ." (*Ep.* 229). Augustine would have the Christian state enter into no unjust war and restrict its military activities to defence against attacking foes (*Ep.* 138, p. 14). "These defensive wars," he says, "are the only just

and lawful ones; it is in these alone that the soldier may be allowed to kill when he cannot otherwise protect his city and his kith and kin" (*Eps.* 47, 153). Elsewhere he censures that aggressive policy of pagan Rome which had extended the Empire "by making foreigners so unjust that they became people with whom 'just' wars might be fought." (*De Civitate*—Bk. 4. 15). Still, like all the Fathers, at heart Augustine was a man of peace. "What shall I say of peace or of the praise of peace till we arrive at that country of peace? There we shall be able to praise it, where we more fully possess it. Jerusalem is the vision of peace, and all who possess and love peace are blessed there for evermore." (Tract in Ps. cx. 57, quoted in Brace, *Gesta Christi*, p. 91 n.).

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