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# From pacifism to just war theory : the development of Christian attitudes to war and military service from the late first century to the early fifth century

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FROM PACIFISM TO JUST WAR THEORY:  
THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES TOWARD WAR AND MILITARY  
SERVICE FROM THE LATE FIRST CENTURY TO THE EARLY FIFTH CENTURY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
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BY  
LUKE ARNOLD

PORTLAND, OREGON

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# GEORGE FOX

## EVANGELICAL SEMINARY

### THESIS ACCEPTANCE CERTIFICATE

**Title:** FROM PACIFISM TO JUST WAR THEORY:  
THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES TOWARD  
WAR AND MILITARY SERVICE FROM THE LATE FIRST  
CENTURY TO THE EARLY FIFTH CENTURY

**Presented by:** LUKE ARNOLD

**Date:** December 15, 2011

We, the undersigned, certify that we have read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree of Master of Arts in Theological Studies.

(Daniel L. Brunner)

(Ralph Beebe)

## ABSTRACT

Title: FROM PACIFISM TO JUST WAR THEORY: THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES TOWARD PARTICIPATION IN WAR AND MILITARY SERVICE FROM THE LATE FIRST CENTURY TO THE EARLY FIFTH CENTURY

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This thesis seeks to examine the historical development of Christian attitudes toward war and military service from approximately 95 C.E. to 430 C.E. This involves first finding the nature and extent of the early church's so-called pacifism and understanding the evidence concerning it. Second, this paper sets out to examine how the 'pacifism' of the early church compared to and interacted with the Christian just war concept that first emerged in the fourth century. Special attention will be given to placing authors, texts and events in historical context, and analyzing the interpretation of the evidence by scholars from early 20<sup>th</sup> century to present day. Much research and commentary on this topic has reinterpreted the data to fit confessional perspectives. This work aims to show that simplistic conclusions fail to do justice to the plurality of the Christian church in the early centuries and the varieties of perspectives on war and military service that emerged from it.

An outline of the topic and the key thesis question are presented in chapter 1. A thorough survey of recent scholarship on the subject reveals the confessional biases of many of the key contributors.

The second chapter investigates the evidence of Christians in the military during the period of the early church, with some attention given to the accounts of Christian soldier-martyrs extant from that era.

Chapter 3 summarizes the context and statements of the early church fathers' writings as they pertain to war, nonviolence, and military involvement. The major writers are divided into three phases that correspond to the historical development of increased Christian participation in military service.

Chapter 4 looks at the development of the Christian just war concept from the reign of Constantine through the writings of Augustine. The historical impact of events such as those surrounding the reign of Constantine and the later barbarian invasions of the Roman Empire are examined.

The final chapter addresses methodological considerations including definitions, identifying the overstatements of both confessional sides of scholarship and the hermeneutical mistakes that have been frequently committed by them. The study concludes with critically assessing the state of the ethical debate of pacifism versus just war and attempting to find some common ground between them.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

- ANF Roberts, Alexander, and James Donaldson, eds. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. 10 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994.
- CA Bainton, Roland H. *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Re-evaluation*. New York: Abingdon Press, 1960.
- CAW Yoder, John Howard. *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution: A Companion to Bainton*. Elkhart, IN: Distributed by Co-op Bookstore, 1983.
- CC Hunter, David G. "The Christian Church and the Roman Army in the First Three Centuries." In *The Church's Peace Witness*, 161-81. Eds. Marlin E. Miller and Barbara Nelson Gingerich. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994.
- COD Livingstone, Elizabeth A. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- DR Hunter, David G. "A Decade of Research on Early Christians and Military Service." *Religious Studies Review* 18, no. 2 (April 1992): 87-94.
- EC Bainton, Roland H. "The Early Church and War." *Harvard Theological Review* 39, no. 3 (July 1946): 189-212.
- ECA Cadoux, Cecil J. *The Early Christian Attitude to War: A Contribution to the History of Christian Ethics*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1940.
- ECW Cadoux, Cecil J. *The Early Church and the World*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1955.
- NPNF Schaff, Philip, and Henry Wace, eds. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Series I and II. 14 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994.
- QP Johnson, James Turner. *The Quest for Peace: Three Moral Traditions in Western Cultural History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.
- WMP Yoder, John Howard. "War as a Moral Problem in the Early Church: The Historian's Hermeneutical Assumptions." In *The Pacifist Impulse in Historical Perspective*, 90-110. Ed. Harvey L. Dyck. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1996.

## CHAPTER 1:

### INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, there are perhaps few issues as politically and morally polarizing as the topic of war and peace. Louis J. Swift comments that “one would be hard pressed to find a human activity that is seemingly more at odds with the spirit of the Gospels than violence and war.”<sup>1</sup> Both Jesus’ message in passages like the Sermon on the Mount and his own example through his life and death on earth seemed to underscore this contrast. On the other hand, Peter Brock astutely says that pacifism, the “unconditional renunciation of war by the individual,” is a youngster in the grand scheme of human history and even of religious and moral movements.<sup>2</sup> Christian pacifism is not the only kind of strict pacifism and in the twenty-first century perhaps not even the primary one. However, Brock is basically correct when he asserts that “the first clearcut renunciation of this kind appears among the early Christians.”<sup>3</sup> Many scholars and Christian traditions have given a great deal of weight to what they see as the normative pacifism of pre-Constantinian Christianity. Other scholars and movements have

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<sup>1</sup> Louis J. Swift, *The Early Fathers on War and Military Service*, ed. Thomas Halton (Wilmington, DE: M. Glazier, 1983), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Brock, *Pacifism in Europe to 1914* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

dismissed early Church pacifism as overblown, primitively naïve, or irrelevant. A perceptive observer will accurately deduce that the reality lies somewhere between the two extremes.

John Howard Yoder perceptively notes that “there are diverse assumptions, spoken and unspoken, about why it is important and worthwhile to look at the early church.”<sup>4</sup> Two extreme assumptions have characterized many of the early twentieth century authors who fall on corresponding extremes in support of either pacifism or just war thought. The first, which corresponds with pacifism, sees the early church from the time of the New Testament through as late as the second or mid-third century as the ‘norm’ which the church eventually fell away from or abandoned. The second holds a notion of moral or theological progress “such that it is good that we have left behind the situation of the early church.” In this view, the early church is seen as an infant, which must be left behind on the way to more mature and developed understanding.<sup>5</sup>

During the course of history, three distinct attitudes to war and peace have emerged in the ethic of Christianity: pacifism, just war, and the crusade.<sup>7</sup> These three perspectives materialized chronologically in that order.<sup>8</sup> Christian pacifism surfaced in some form with the writings of the

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<sup>4</sup> John Howard Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution: A Companion to Bainton* (Elkhart, IN: Distributed by Co-op Bookstore, 1983), 23.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> I have chosen to discuss in more depth the definition of the terms ‘pacifism’ and ‘just war’ in the conclusion of this thesis to illustrate the extent to which a scholar’s definition of these terms hinges on their confessional beliefs and biases. Most often, authors define these concepts based upon their own experience and opinions rather than on historical facts or development.

<sup>8</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *Christian Attitudes toward War and Peace* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), 14.

influential fathers Tertullian and Origen in the third century.<sup>9</sup> The just war ethic was primarily formulated by Church fathers Ambrose and Augustine in the fourth.<sup>10</sup> The first Christian crusade was not started until 1095 C.E. under pope Urban II. Virtually all Christian scholars and theologians invalidate the crusade as a legitimate expression of the ethic of love presented in the New Testament.

The topic of this thesis is the historical development of Christian attitudes toward war and military service from the close of the New Testament period (circa 95 C.E.) to Augustine (354-430 C.E.). The basic form of the key question is: Was the early Church pacifist? At first glance, this would seem to be a fairly straightforward question, and in fact many scholars early in the twentieth century simply answered yes.<sup>11</sup> However, this is an interpretation of the available evidence, and requires a number of unspoken assumptions that must also be examined. People who argue in favor of pacifism make at least two primary assumptions when examining the early Church. The first assumption is that the early Church was pacifist for the sake of being pacifist. This would presume some kind of developed moral thinking about pacifism – which also presumes, by matter of course, that pacifism was a moral problem for them – or at least would presume some kind of absolute prohibition against pacifism by appealing to revelation or the like. The second assumption is that pacifism is a generally basic, developed, and easily definable construct, and that pacifism extended back into the early Church as such.

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<sup>9</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, the term “early Church” is used synonymously with “early Christianity” and refers to the period between Jesus’ death and Constantine’s ascension to power, approximately 33 C.E. to 312 C.E.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Just war’ refers to the moral ethic that war, if supported by the Church or participated in by believers, must be just in its intent and the means by which it is waged.

<sup>11</sup> These scholars, such as C.J. Cadoux, Roland Bainton, Adolf Harnack, and James Moffatt, are part of what will be termed the early consensus on pacifism.

On the other hand, people who argue in favor of just war theory also make unspoken assumptions that are in direct opposition to those on the other side of the debate.<sup>12</sup> The first assumption of the just war side is that the early Church was pacifist as a direct result of their noninvolvement with the Roman government and societal structures. The key trait of early Church pacifism, therefore, was sectarianism, not the ethical and moral grounds that pacifist scholars find in the writings of the New Testament and the early Church fathers. The second assumption follows: This sectarian pacifism was a completely untenable position if the Church was to have any kind of positive influence in Roman society. Thus the just war side makes early Christian pacifism out to be so naïve and undeveloped as to be of no practical use whatsoever in the big picture of Christian ethics.

Understanding the social context of the early Church is a key interpretive point in understanding the nature of the early Church's so-called pacifism. The turning point in Christian military involvement brought about by Constantine may have been as influenced by the changing social and political situation of Christians as by a supposed substantial change in Christian ethics concerning war and violence. Rather than being a simple and self-contained ethical issue, the Christian debate about war is inevitably part of a larger debate on Christianity and cultural involvement. At the locus of this debate is the question of how the Church – the body of Christ, the organization of believers – should interact with and relate to the larger world. This larger world includes social and political spheres, popular culture such as entertainment, media, and literature, and people and organizations of all kinds of secular and religious persuasions. Some could probably make the case that the question of the Church's interaction to and relationship

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<sup>12</sup> Notable just war scholars include James Turner Johnson and Louis J. Swift.

with the larger culture around it determines everything from its organizational makeup to the kind of people it attracts to the influence that it brings to bear on the world.

In general, scholars have agreed on the accuracy of the data concerning Christians in the military before Constantine and the essentially pacifist positions of the early Church fathers who commented on the subject. However, because of their assumptions, these scholars have differed widely in their interpretations of it. It is fascinating the extent to which twentieth century scholarship on this subject was affected by the confessional beliefs of the scholars themselves.

Peter Brock summarizes the setting and timeline in which these beliefs arose:

Since the close of the nineteenth century early Christian attitudes to war and military service have continued to intrigue scholars, despite the scarcity of direct sources and the obscurity of much of the documentation. In the next century war and threat of war made ‘the military question’ in early Christianity a problem of current relevance.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, the hermeneutical question is inevitably the starting point for any balanced conversation about it. David M. Gracie, in the introduction to his 1981 English translation of Adolf Harnack’s *Militia Christi*, gives this accurately descriptive summary of the scholarly work done on the subject of pacifism, war and military service in the early Church: “Scholarship [in the earlier part of the twentieth century] on this question can easily be divided between hawks and doves, with excesses committed on both sides.”<sup>14</sup> That is to say, the pacifist ‘doves’ interpreted the facts to support their position, and the ‘hawks,’ who support the just war position, interpreted the same facts in seemingly opposite ways. More recent scholarship has suggested the possibility of a third

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Brock, “Review of *Cristianos y Militares: La Iglesia Antigua Ante el Ejercito y la Guerra*,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 53, no. 2 (April 2002), 335.

<sup>14</sup> David M. Gracie, introduction to his English translation of *Militia Christi*, by Adolf Harnack (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1981), 17.

approach, which James Megivern has vividly termed the ‘owl.’<sup>15</sup> This is what David G. Hunter describes as a “new consensus.”<sup>16</sup>

There are four significant scholarly treatments of the subject before 1950, which make up what has been called the ‘early pacifist consensus.’ This term can be misleading in light of the considerable differences in confessional beliefs among the four authors, and thus a more accurate phrase would be the ‘early consensus on pacifism.’<sup>17</sup> Of these four scholars, German Lutheran Adolf Harnack and Presbyterian James Moffatt had just war leanings, while Congregationalist C. J. Cadoux and Quaker Roland Bainton emphasize pacifism. Harnack, in his book *Militia Christi* (first published in German in 1905), gave considerable attention to the use of military language and metaphors in the New Testament and subsequent literature of the early Church and surveyed the evidence about early Christianity and military service. He concluded that the members of the early Church rejected the world’s militia in favor of ‘Christ’s militia’ in theory but in practice some Christians did serve in the military and this ambiguity paved the way for the changed situation that would come later.<sup>18</sup> Moffatt wrote an article titled “War” in *The Dictionary of the Apostolic Church* (1918), which was a thorough survey that drew attention to the shift in the early Church from using marital metaphors to using military illustrations. He assumes that the early Christians could use military language without being concerned about misrepresentation because their pacifism was so thorough. He also gives the outstanding early example of a soon-

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<sup>15</sup>James Megivern, “Early Christianity and Military Service,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 12, no. 3 (Fall 1985), 175.

<sup>16</sup>David G. Hunter, “A Decade of Research on Early Christians and Military Service,” *Religious Studies Review* 18, no. 2 (April 1992), 87.

<sup>17</sup>For clarity, the term ‘early consensus on pacifism’ will be used throughout this thesis.

<sup>18</sup>Roland H. Bainton, “The Early Church and War,” *Harvard Theological Review* 39, no. 3 (July 1946), 189.

to-become popular interpretation when he claimed that the fathers were extremists or rigorists whose views were not followed by the Christian majority.<sup>19</sup>

Cadoux's *The Early Christian Attitude to War* (first published in 1919, republished in 1940) and parts of his larger work *The Early Church and the World* (first published in 1925, again in 1955) are the most comprehensive works on the subject in this early period and the longest by any English author to date.<sup>20</sup> He thoroughly fixes the problem in reference to the theological and political thinking prevalent during the period, and determinedly defends what he sees as the staunch and unwavering pacifism of the early Church.<sup>21</sup> Bainton first published the journal article "The Early Church and War" (1946), including a helpful summary of the major works that had been published at that time and their attendant biases. He then basically incorporated the same material as part of a larger work called *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace: A Historical and Critical Re-evaluation* (1960). This historical survey of the topic throughout Church history brought new light to the subject through the Yale historian's perspective.

As these earlier scholarly works are at the very least the launching points for all further study, any consensus reached between two or more of these scholars will be treated very seriously, especially when scholars of the two different confessional sides come to the same

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<sup>19</sup> James Moffatt, "War," *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church*, ed. James Hastings (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1918), 667. "...fortunately the views of Tertullian and Origen did not alter the situation...had the extremists succeeded in their policy of tabooing military service, it is very doubtful if the victory of Christianity in the next century would have been possible."

<sup>20</sup> Cecil J. Cadoux, *The Early Christian Attitude to War: A Contribution to the History of Christian Ethics* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1940); Cecil J. Cadoux, *The Early Church and the World* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1955). In the latter work, see the following sections in particular: 51-57; 116-22; 183-90; 269-81; 402-42; 564-96.

<sup>21</sup> Bainton, EC, 189.

conclusion. It is my opinion that Bainton is easily the most balanced of these four authors. His only major weakness was that in his journal article, after identifying the confessional biases of others, he does not list his own, but in any event it is not too difficult to determine at what points Bainton let his pacifism influence his conclusions and those points are generally not as numerous as the other authors listed here. Many of Bainton's conclusions are given as qualified statements, and he frequently notes where other scholars' opinions diverge from his own.

Another significant scholarly work that can probably be considered an extension of the early consensus on pacifism is French author Jean-Michel Hornus' book *It is Not Lawful for Me to Fight: Early Christian Attitudes to War, Violence, and the State* (published in French in 1960, German in 1963, and translated by Alan Kreider and Oliver Coburn into English in 1970). In this book, Hornus sets out to demonstrate that "from the very beginning and throughout the first three centuries of the primitive Church its teaching...was constantly and rigorously opposed to Christian participation in military service," that the opposition was based on the "fundamental decision" of respecting life and rejecting violence, and why such a definite principle was eventually abandoned by the Church.<sup>22</sup> Hornus is every bit as thorough and pacifist in his approach to the subject as Cadoux was before him, but his English edition goes a step beyond Cadoux's scholarship because Hornus took the time to respond to the many critical reviews of his earlier work. Hornus makes it clear exactly what claims or points of the confessional 'just war' side he was rebutting, and he was very straightforward about not only his bias and personal experience which impacted his view, but also his methodology. This discussion about scholarly

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<sup>22</sup> Jean-Michel Hornus, *It is Not Lawful for Me to Fight: Early Christian Attitudes toward War, Violence, and the State*, Translated by Alan Kreider and Oliver Coburn, Rev. ed., (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), 16.

approach and historical interpretation makes his introduction and postscript an absolutely necessary appendix to the early consensus on pacifism.

In the latter half of the twentieth century there was a considerable pushback by just war scholars and others who were critical of what they considered unqualified and uninformed conclusions of the early consensus on pacifism. The most significant development of the scholarly study of the topic during this period was by certain works that attempted to analyze the problem using cultural and social considerations. John Helgeland, Robert J. Daly, and J. Patout Burns, in their book *Christians in the Military: The Early Experience*, share their findings and devote an entire chapter to showing recent research evidencing the Roman army as a religious system.<sup>23</sup> Helgeland and his collaborators are very critical of what they call the “pacifist domination of English-speaking scholarship” and make a significant contribution to the more recent discussion on this subject by recognizing “that membership in the Roman army entailed entry into a religious structure that shaped the entire life of a soldier.”<sup>24</sup>

James Turner Johnson followed Helgeland’s lead in incorporating this new evidence of the cultural and social environment of early Christianity into his work. His book *The Quest for Peace: Three Moral Traditions in Western Cultural History* can be appropriately seen as the ‘just war’ counterpart to Bainton as a comprehensive historical overview of the topic through the centuries. He offers the most significant rebuttal and response to the early consensus on pacifism during the modern era, and is very direct in explaining his bias, historical approach, and

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<sup>23</sup> John Helgeland, Robert J. Daly, and J. Patout Burns, *Christians and the Military: The Early Experience* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

<sup>24</sup> Hunter, DR, 87.

methodology.<sup>25</sup> During the same period is a book by another just war scholar, Louis J. Swift, who wrote *The Early Fathers on War and Military Service* as volume 19 in the *Message of the Fathers of the Church* series. Swift is exhaustive as possible in a short volume in examining all of the fathers' writings pertinent to the subject with lengthy quotations and explanations of context when necessary. In my estimation, Swift is more scholarly and balanced in his approach than either Helgeland or Johnson, and invaluable because he includes the post-Constantinian era with a wealth of quotations particularly from Ambrose and Augustine and therefore provides essential context to the formulation of the just war concept.

Also helpful is the work of patristics scholar Hans von Campenhausen who leans toward the just war side. He did not issue a separate work on the subject, but devotes chapter seven in *Tradition and Life in the Church* to a survey of "Christians and Military Service in the Early Church."<sup>26</sup> Catholic scholar Lisa Sowle Cahill presented a study of discipleship ethics using pacifism and just war theory as a historical case study. Although her broad survey of the topic was not as historically thorough as Bainton's or Johnson's, it is insightful in a different way as it drew out many of the implicit assumptions and biases that scholars bring with them to the discussion. It also places many Catholic and non-Catholic authors on the pacifist to just war continuum and explains if they bring particular nuances or contributions to their confessional approach.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> James T. Johnson, *The Quest for Peace: Three Moral Traditions in Western Cultural History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); see also James T. Johnson, *Just War Tradition and the Restraint of War: A Moral and Historical Inquiry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

<sup>26</sup> Hans von Campenhausen, *Tradition and Life in the Church*, trans. A. V. Littledale (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968).

<sup>27</sup> Lisa S. Cahill, *Love Your Enemies: Discipleship, Pacifism, and Just War Theory* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

During the same period there are also significant articles and shorter works that, perhaps for the first time in the English language since the advent of World War I, do not fall into either categories of doves or hawks. The most thorough of these owls is David G. Hunter, current Patristics and Catholic Studies professor at the University of Kentucky. In the article “A Decade of Research on Early Christians and Military Service,” he gives a thorough summary of the early consensus on pacifism and the just war pushback, and extensive review of the three main authors just mentioned (Helgeland *et al*, Johnson, and Swift) with significant discussion of their strengths and weaknesses. He also contributes his own insightful and balanced examination of the problem with his chapter, “The Christian Church and the Roman Army in the First Three Centuries,” in the multi-author edited book *The Church’s Peace Witness*.<sup>28</sup> Megivern, a current Church history professor emeritus at University of North Carolina-Wilmington, is also among the more recent, less biased contributors to the scholarly discussion. In his article “Early Christianity and Military Service,” he describes his approach by saying, “If one approaches the texts of the early Church without a commitment to pacifism, and without a commitment to the just-war theory, or at least bracketing such commitments for the time being, what kind of interpretation of the body of material emerges?”<sup>29</sup>

Another work that must be mentioned in this category is the book *Cristianos y Militares: La Iglesia Antigua Ante el Ejercito y la Guerra* by Jose Fernandez Ubina.<sup>30</sup> A secular historian at

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<sup>28</sup> David G. Hunter, “The Christian Church and the Roman Army in the First Three Centuries,” in *The Church’s Peace Witness*, eds. Marlin E. Miller and Barbara Nelson Gingerich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 161-81.

<sup>29</sup> Megivern, 178. He is a current Professor Emeritus of History of Early and Medieval Christian Thought and New Testament Studies at UNC-Wilmington.

<sup>30</sup> Jose Fernandez Ubina, *Cristianos y Militares: La Iglesia Antigua Ante el Ejercito y la Guerra* (Granada: Universidad de Granada, 2000). The usefulness of this book for the present study is extremely limited, because it has

the University of Granada in Spain who specializes in the history of the Roman army, Ubina provides a detailed treatment of the socio-political structure of ancient Rome and so illuminates the military question within the early Christian Church. The 730-page tome, called by Peter Brock “the most comprehensive study” of the subject, presented a thorough argument “in favour of the existence during the whole period of a diversity of views on the military question.”<sup>31</sup>

In the last twenty years of the century, there have been several pacifist scholars who have responded in various ways to the just war critique of the early consensus on pacifism. Although these authors are no less staunchly pacifist and confessional than early scholars such as Cadoux and Hornus, their work on the historical study of the subject has been considerably more balanced and nuanced and probably deserve equal consideration in the ‘owls’ category. The first of these authors, Peter Brock, has published a number of books on the subject of pacifism. His book *Pacifism in Europe to 1914* has a brief yet discerning introduction titled “Antimilitarism in the Early Christian Church,” a shorter version of which is contained in his later pamphlet *The Roots of War Resistance: Pacifism from the Early Church to Tolstoy*.<sup>32</sup> He also compiled a selected bibliography on the topic, which covered an entire century of scholarship to that point, and has written a number of journal articles and other shorter works.<sup>33</sup> Another important study

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not yet been translated into English and Brock’s one page review in the *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* is the only readily available summary for English readers.

<sup>31</sup> Brock, “Review of *Cristianos y Militares*,” 335.

<sup>32</sup> Brock, *Pacifism in Europe to 1914*; Peter Brock, *The Roots of War Resistance: Pacifism from the Early Church to Tolstoy* (Nyack, NY: Fellowship of Reconciliation, 1981).

<sup>33</sup> Peter Brock, *The Military Question in the Early Church: A Selected Bibliography of a Century’s Scholarship, 1888-1987* (Toronto, Canada: P. Brock, 1988); see, for example, Peter Brock, “Early Christianity and Antimilitarism,” In *The Oxford International Encyclopedia of Peace*, © Oxford University Press 2010, The Oxford International Encyclopedia of Peace: (e-reference edition) (Oxford University Press), George Fox University, 12 October 2011 <http://0-www.oxford-peace.com.catalog.georgefox.edu/entry?entry=t296.e201>

is early Church historian Everett Ferguson's book *Early Christians Speak: Faith and Life in the First Three Centuries*, in which chapter XVIII addresses Christians and military service.<sup>34</sup>

John Howard Yoder, a Mennonite scholar, was called by Cahill "the most renowned Christian pacifist currently writing in the United States" at the time of her writing. His diversity of interests and his expertise in biblical exegesis brought a versatile approach to his field of social ethics.<sup>35</sup> His most extensive contribution to the historical study of pacifism comes in his dissertation, published in book form as *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution: A Companion to Bainton*, which includes extensive and thorough commentary and discussion on every chapter of Bainton's survey. He authored a number of relevant books on pacifism and nonviolent ethics.<sup>36</sup> However, his most important work for the present topic is the chapter titled "War as a Moral Problem in the Early Church: The Historian's Hermeneutical Assumptions" in *The Pacifist Impulse in Historical Perspective* edited by Harvey L. Dyck.<sup>37</sup> In this chapter, Yoder presents a salient overview of the pertinent hermeneutical issues and writes in some depth on a topic he considered important and neglected: The 'Jewishness' of early Christianity. This

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<sup>34</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak: Faith and Life in the First Three Centuries* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1999).

<sup>35</sup> Cahill, 223-24.

<sup>36</sup> See especially Yoder, CAW; John Howard Yoder, *Nevertheless: A Meditation on the Varieties and Shortcomings of Religious Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971); John Howard Yoder, *When War is Unjust: Being Honest in Just-War Thinking* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984); John Howard Yoder, *Nonviolence – A Brief History: The Warsaw Lectures*, eds. Paul Martens, et al (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

<sup>37</sup> John Howard Yoder, "War as a Moral Problem in the Early Church: The Historian's Hermeneutical Assumptions," in *The Pacifist Impulse in Historical Perspective*, ed. Harvey L. Dyck (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 90-110.

article, along with a chapter in another book, is a necessary and incisive addition to the later 20<sup>th</sup> century works on the so-called pacifism of the early Church.<sup>38</sup>

As the casual observer will conclude, the arc of scholarship on this subject from 1888 to the present day is not a steady flow. It is a series of abrupt, intense bursts from haphazard groups of scholars, followed by years and sometimes decades of silence on the topic supposedly resulting from scholarly consensus. Through most of the century, this corresponded at least roughly with recent historical events such as both world wars that confessional groups felt burdened to respond to. Over the course of a hundred years, the ‘biased’ conclusions of the early ‘hawks’ and ‘doves’ were modified considerably by the later, more moderate ‘hawks’ and ‘doves’ and eventually reconsidered by the less polarized group of ‘owls’ who reacted to what they saw as a premature and simplistic scholarly consensus. Because of the wide diversity of confessional orientations and historical events that influence the authors who have written about this subject, it will be noted when referencing other writers not summarized in this introduction where on the spectrum they are located.

Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis will examine the period after the close of the New Testament up through the eve of Constantine’s rule. Chapter 2 will investigate the evidence of Christians in the military, with some attention given to the accounts of Christian soldier-martyrs extant from that era. Chapter 3 will summarize the context and statements of the early Church fathers’ writings as they pertain to war, nonviolence, and military involvement. Chapter 4 will look at the development of the Christian just war concept from the reign of Constantine through the writings of Augustine. In all three of these chapters, basic biographical information and

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<sup>38</sup> John Howard Yoder, “Chapter 2: The Jewishness of the “Pacifism” of the Early Christians,” in *Chapters in the History of Religiously Rooted Non-Violence* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1994).

historical context will be given to help establish a lens through which to understand certain events and writings. Chapter 5 will conclude this study by addressing some methodological considerations and critically assessing the state of the debate of pacifism versus just war in the history of recent scholarship concerning the early Church.

This paper seeks first to find the nature and extent of the early Church's so-called pacifism, and understand the evidence concerning it. This evidence includes information about early Christians' involvement in military service and early Church fathers' writings concerning the subject. Second, this paper intends to examine how the 'pacifism' of the early Church compared to and interacted with the Christian just war concept that first emerged in the fourth century. Special attention will be given to presenting the data, examining the interpretation of that data by scholars (primarily early 20<sup>th</sup> century to present), and analyzing the historical impact of events such as Constantine's ascent to power. Authors, texts, and events will be placed in the appropriate historical and literary contexts. This work aims to show that simplistic conclusions fail to do justice to the plurality of the Christian church in the early centuries and the varieties of perspectives on war and military service that emerged from it.

## CHAPTER 2:

### CHRISTIANS AND THE MILITARY BEFORE CONSTANTINE

John Howard Yoder conveys one of the key priorities of any balanced historical study about a moral issue when he states, “The question of the moral attitude of early Christians to war should be considered as an historical issue, independently of whether we look to them a priori as models to be emulated or as primitives to be left behind.” Both of these biased assumptions serve to “beset our reading” of history with complexities, rather than simplifying it or helping in the task.<sup>1</sup> When one approaches history with any number of assumptions or even agendas, it only adds layers that others must either accept, or carefully peel off to get at the information that is closest to the truth. This ‘peeling’ is a key part of this study, one that must be borne in mind at every stage.

The first task of this thesis is to examine the data from the period under consideration. In this chapter, a summary of the pertinent data evidencing Christian involvement in the Roman military will be presented. The basic form and content of the limited data are not disputed by scholars. The more difficult question is how to interpret this data. When Christians did not join the military, why did they abstain? Did they avoid it or refuse on moral or ethical grounds? Were there other spiritual or ethical reasons for Christians to avoid the military, besides involvement in

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<sup>1</sup> Yoder, WMP, 95.

war or killing? Or was the Church removed from Roman society to the point where the military did not even recruit Christians? When Christians did join the military, did they somehow reconcile their ‘pacifist’ Christian ethics with the reality of military service? What was the reality of military service? Would soldiers be called upon to kill regularly, or at all? If a soldier converted to Christianity, would he leave the service? There are several accounts in the later third century of Christian soldier-martyrs. Were these soldiers killed for simply refusing to kill, or did they have other reasons for taking a stand?

Not all of these questions can be answered satisfactorily from the limited evidence, but there is enough information to make some inferences and limited, qualified conclusions. These inferences must be based on historical study and relevant facts, not upon confessional bases. The period before the ascension of Constantine to the throne can be divided into two parts: Prior to 170 C.E., and from 170 C.E. to Constantine. In each period, certain questions must be asked on how to interpret the data. Special attention will be given to how scholars have historically interpreted this data, and whether those interpretations will stand up to a careful questioning and examination.

#### Prior to 170 C.E.

After the close of the New Testament period and before 170 C.E., no evidence exists of Christians in the Roman army.<sup>2</sup> Some scholars have assumed that this lack of data, coupled with the later writings of Church fathers such as Origen and Tertullian, indicates a “complete

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<sup>2</sup> Bainton, CA, 67-68. There is a scholarly consensus on this point.

opposition” and even an “emphatic condemnation of war” during this early period.<sup>3</sup> However, as Bainton properly notes, “the reason may have been either that participation was assumed or that abstention was taken for granted.”<sup>4</sup> James Moffatt says that before this time “military service does not seem to have presented itself as a problem at all” to the Church’s conscience.<sup>5</sup> There are a number of reasons why abstention is the more probable explanation. Adolf Harnack explains that a profession in the military was considered “contemptible because of its extortions, brutalities, and its execution of tyrants’ commands.” The relatively small number of troops and the common practice of recruiting soldiers voluntarily made it easy for Christians to avoid military service.<sup>6</sup> Idolatry was a danger to those in the army more than in civilian life.<sup>7</sup> Edward Ryan suggests that the condition of the Empire had something to do with this as well: “Thanks to the power of the frontier legions, Rome had little difficulty in maintaining the status quo [Pax Romana] until late in the second century.” Peace was preserved with some minor exceptions, so the Roman military did not need to draft or pressure any of the Christian minority into military service.<sup>8</sup>

What is also significant in this earliest period of the Church is that there was no hope or expectation of transforming Roman societal structures. In fact, there was “a thorough distrust and

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<sup>3</sup> G. J. Heering, *The Fall of Christianity*, trans. J. W. Thompson (New York: Fellowship Publications, 1943), 24. Heering is a Dutch Protestant who practically begins his book by setting out to defend the pure pacifism of the early Church.

<sup>4</sup> Bainton, CA, 68.

<sup>5</sup> Moffatt, 660.

<sup>6</sup> Harnack, 66-67.

<sup>7</sup> Bainton, CA, 68.

<sup>8</sup> Edward Ryan, “The Rejection of Military Service by the Early Christians,” *Theological Studies* 13, no. 1 (March 1952): 9-10. He tends to lean strongly to the “just war” side in the argument.

dislike of contemporary government.”<sup>9</sup> Reasons for this included the cult of the emperor, and the Christians’ refusal to take part in sacrificing to the emperor. This “mutual distrust” between Christian and Roman citizens was further heightened by periods of persecution.<sup>10</sup> C. J. Cadoux summarizes: “The early Christians entertained no hope that human society as a whole would be redeemed as a result of the indefinite continuation of the gradual growth of the Church.”<sup>11</sup> Lee and others explain that this was largely due to “a widespread expectation of a speedy end of this world.”<sup>12</sup> The practical effect of this eschatological outlook was for Christians “an unshakeable confidence in the reality and importance of spiritual issues” compared to the relative insignificance of “all the usual tasks, enterprises, and interests of human life.”<sup>13</sup>

John Howard Yoder contends that the view that the early Christian “attitude to the Empire was *derived from* or *dependent upon* the certainty of an early end to the world” is a modernization. Rather, the ‘Church versus the world’ dualism of second-century Christianity is derived “from their exclusive monotheism and their faith in the historical calling of the people of God.”<sup>14</sup> This is probably a more accurate view of the situation, since even early in the second century the hope of the speedy return of Christ was waning, and by the early third century Christian authors were tempering this eschatological hope by either pushing the date of Christ’s

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<sup>9</sup> Umphrey Lee, *The Historic Church and Modern Pacifism* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1943), 42-44.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. About the dispute of widespread persecution before the middle of the second century, Lee comments that “there may not have been Empire-wide persecution of the Christian at this early date...but there is no question that there were persecutions and martyrdoms during the first century of the Church’s existence.”

<sup>11</sup> Cadoux, ECW, 84.

<sup>12</sup> Lee, 42.

<sup>13</sup> Cadoux, ECW, 85-86.

<sup>14</sup> Yoder, WMP, 98.

return back significantly or spiritualizing the entire concept.<sup>15</sup> According to Yoder, the very backbone of the early Christians' aversion to idolatry was inherited directly from the Jewish worldview. However, where the Jews had reached something of a livable agreement with the Romans and remained separate from Greco-Roman culture and the emperor religion, the early Christians were more forthcoming in their opposition to idolatry.<sup>16</sup> In other words, over the second and third centuries, the Christians were progressively moving out from underneath the Jewish protective umbrella, as it were, and engaging Greco-Roman culture in more direct and involved ways.

Another important question is whether a soldier who converted to Christianity would continue in the service. Harnack points out that this was a substantially different situation, for "the control over these soldiers by these congregations could only be limited," and also there was the Apostle Paul's maxim "Everyone should remain in the state in which he was called" which "could also be applied to the soldier."<sup>17</sup> That this situation was not addressed in the early Christian writings by a prescription to leave the military (or any account thereof) probably indicates that: (1) Not many soldiers were converted; (2) if and when they were converted, they were encouraged to remain in their profession and so glorify God as much as possible through being a soldier; and (3) it may have been quite difficult for a soldier to leave the service even if he wanted to for religious reasons.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Bainton, CA, 75-76; Hippolytus, writing early third century, placed the date three hundred years ahead, and Lactantius, writing a century later, used the same timeline and still had two hundred years to go; it was the Alexandrians, Clement and Origen, who elected to spiritualize the concept.

<sup>16</sup> Yoder, CAW, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Harnack, 69; I Cor. 7:17, quoted in Harnack, 68; cf. Moffatt, 663-64, and Lee, 52.

<sup>18</sup> Harnack, 70.

Considering all these factors, the best explanation for the presumed lack of military involvement of the early Christians is probably a combination of all of them. There is hardly sufficient evidence to go as far as G. J. Heering has in declaring “this condemnation of the soldier’s calling and of warfare” seemingly unequivocal in the early Church, or on the other side as far as Edward Ryan in saying, “orthodox Christians made it sufficiently clear during this period that they were not opposed to the Roman armed forces as such” and “no one denies that there were Christian soldiers in the army during the period.”<sup>19</sup> With evidence on both sides and none of it absolute or irrefutable, the truth must be somewhere in the middle, neither a strict pacifism in the modern sense nor a total indifference to war. It is aptly noted by Umphrey Lee in summary: “The Christian was not confronted with any problem about the army, because he would hardly enter it voluntarily; he would not likely be drafted; he would not usually leave the army if he were converted as a soldier.” This is a long ways from a “normal” pacifist position.<sup>20</sup>

As Hans von Campenhausen says:

For little enclaves of a fairly humble status in the peaceful interior of a well-ordered Empire, where there was practically no conscription, it was easy to avoid anything to do with the army; no difficulties were encountered from any source, external or internal. Christians were still outside the field of political responsibility, nor were they as yet much affected by the political philosophy of antiquity.<sup>21</sup>

### From 170 C.E. to Constantine

Scholars agree that from at least the last part of the second century there were some Christians who served in the military and this number kept growing throughout the next

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<sup>19</sup> Heering, 24; Ryan, 11-12; 9. Ryan’s latter argument is hardly convincing, for the reason no one denies it is because there is evidence neither supporting such a statement nor refuting it.

<sup>20</sup> Lee, 53.

<sup>21</sup> Campenhausen, 161-62.

century.<sup>22</sup> The first mention of Christian soldiers is of those who served under Marcus Aurelius in the so-called Thundering Legion in 173 C.E. Early Church historian Eusebius of Caesarea describes the whole legion as kneeling in prayer and subsequently receiving their deliverance in the form of lightning driving their enemy away and rain showers providing water to quench their thirst.<sup>23</sup> In 197, Tertullian used the fact of Christians in the army for apologetic purposes, even saying that Christians fight alongside Romans.<sup>24</sup> Apparently the pagan orator Celsus was not yet aware of this fact when he wrote around 178 C.E. that if all Roman citizens were like the Christians, the Empire would fall into barbarian hands.<sup>25</sup> From here on, references are more numerous.<sup>26</sup> The number of Christians in the army seems to have continued to increase up to the turn of the fourth century. Eusebius notes that even prior to the great persecution of 303-04 the emperor Galerius tried to remove Christians from his forces.<sup>27</sup> Definite statistics are not known.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Hunter, DR, 87.

<sup>23</sup> Eusebius, "Church History," bk. V, chap. V, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Series II, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 219, tells this story in some detail. It has such a legendary quality to it that it would hardly be believable if it were not reported by non-Christian sources, also, like the Roman historian Cassius Dio, who ascribes the miracle to an Egyptian magician; summarized by Helgeland, et al, 31-34; cf. Yoder, WMP, 100-101, who argued that the account demonstrates very little outside of the presence of some Christians in a Roman legion.

<sup>24</sup> Tertullian, "Apology," chap. XXXVII, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 3 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 45. Tertullian was writing to dispute the pagan charge of misanthropy and says, "we have filled every place among you – cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum – we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods." Also see chap. XLII, ANF vol. 3, 49: "We sail with you, and fight with you, and till the ground with you..." Megivern, 179, says that Tertullian "is not always consistent...his fiery rhetoric could well mean that he often engages in hyperbole, overstating his case in order to make his points," as it would seem in this case. Cf. Ryan, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Cadoux, ECA, 104, summarizes Origen, "Against Celsus," bk. VIII, chap. LXVIII, ANF vol. 4, 665-66.

<sup>26</sup> See Cadoux, ECA, 228-43, for a summary of these references.

<sup>27</sup> Eusebius, "Church History," bk. VIII, chap. I, sec. 7, NPNF, Series II, vol. 1, 323; noted by Bainton, CA, 68. Bainton also goes on to point out that Cadoux, ECA, 243, conjectured that the number of Christians in the army was relatively few because "No sovereign readily deprives himself of a tenth, or even of a twentieth, part of his military power."

The only accurate statement seems to be that Christians in the military were a minority, but a growing minority, up to the rise of Constantine into power.

### Military Martyrs

From this phase comes the testimony of several military martyrs. Cadoux points out that “regulations had long been in existence which forbade any who would not sacrifice to the Emperors to hold a commission in the army.” Though these regulations had not been enforced consistently, anyone could appeal to them.<sup>29</sup> Cyprian commends two soldier-martyrs, Laurentius and Egnatius, by making multiple references to their spiritual service to God and their refusal to offer sacrifices or engage in idolatry.<sup>30</sup> Elsewhere, he praises more than one unnamed soldier-martyrs for the same reasons.<sup>31</sup> In no way does he mention a refusal to kill or an aversion to war in connection with their motives. Cadoux describes a clearer instance in 260 C.E. of an appeal to these regulations in the case of an officer named Marinus who was ready for a promotion to centurion but was denounced as a Christian by a competitor who wanted the vacancy. Given three hours to consider the decision of whether to renounce, he sought the advice of his bishop

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<sup>28</sup> Some, of course, have attempted to speculate. For example, Johnson, QP, 44, said that Cadoux’s 5-10% (mentioned in n. 27, above) might have been as many as 22,000-45,000 Christians in the army early in the fourth century, “a not at all inconsiderable figure.”

<sup>29</sup> Cadoux, ECA, 151.

<sup>30</sup> Cyprian, “Epistle XXXIII,” ANF vol. 5, 313.

<sup>31</sup> Cyprian, “Treatise III: On the Lapsed,” ANF vol. 5, 437.

and subsequently chose beheading as the price to pay for affirming his Christianity.<sup>32</sup> Here again, aversion to killing did not seem to enter the picture as a motive.<sup>33</sup>

In 295 C.E. comes an account of what in modern times could possibly be called “conscientious objection” by a young man conscripted to serve in the army named Maximilian.<sup>34</sup> Brought by his father, Fabius Victor, before Dion the proconsul, he declared, “It is not right for me to serve in the army since I am a Christian.” Further pressed, he maintained that the soldier oath and insignia were diametrically opposed to his service and oath to God. He made no direct reference to idolatry on the one hand, or killing on the other. When Dion argued that there are numerous Christian soldiers who serve, Maximilian neither attempted to deny the fact, nor discredit their motives. However, he did say, “I cannot do what is wrong.” When Dion responded, “What are they doing that is wrong?” Maximilian responds cryptically: “You know what they do.” Dion then decrees, “Maximilian! Because you have, with a rebellious spirit, refused to bear arms, you shall die by the sword.”<sup>35</sup> Hornus leans toward the pacifist tendency to assume in all ambiguous cases that the primary objection is to war and killing, or at least that war

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<sup>32</sup> Cadoux, ECA, 151-52.

<sup>33</sup> Harnack, 93, 42n, reads between the lines of this account and says, “With some justification we may conclude from this that consideration was sometimes shown to Christians in the army and they were not expected to do that which was offensive to them.”

<sup>34</sup> Swift, 72, with an uncharacteristically blunt and non-qualified statement, calls Maximilian “the first conscientious objector that we know about in the history of Christianity.”

<sup>35</sup> The narrative and quotations are taken from Swift, 71-74, who extensively quotes Herbert Musurillo’s translation of *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972). For an English translation of the French author Thierry Ruinat, *Acta Martyrum* (Ratisbon, France: Manz, 1859) that uses some different vocabulary in key places, such as “I am a Christian, I cannot fight,” see Albert Marrin, *War and the Christian Conscience: From Augustine to Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Chicago, IL: Regnery, 1971), 40-43. Hornus does his own translation of key passages from Ruinat.

and killing is such an integral part of military life that the two are essentially inseparable.<sup>36</sup> Swift is probably more correct when he says that Maximilian “took exception to the whole character of military life and that it was this fact which made it impossible for him to serve.” So Maximilian could hardly be called a conscientious objector in the modern sense, even though war and killing may well have been one component of the military life and oath that he was rejecting.

The martyrdom of another centurion, Marcellus, in 298 C.E., happened after he threw down his soldier’s belt on the occasion of the legions celebrating the emperor’s birthday, while declaring: “I serve in the army of the eternal king Jesus Christ, and from now on I cease to be a soldier of your emperors. And I disdain the worship of your gods made out of wood and stone because they are images that are deaf and dumb.” After defending himself to the prefect, he was sentenced to death. The only explicit reason given had to do with loyalty to God over emperor. Swift summarizes: “From Marcellus’ point of view it was simply a problem that the gulf separating Christianity from paganism was such that it was impossible for him to remain in the army.”<sup>37</sup>

The account of Julius the Veteran, a legionnaire martyred about 303 C.E., is illuminating in a couple respects. When brought before the prefect for refusing to sacrifice to pagan deities under the emperor Diocletian’s edict, the baffled and sympathetic prefect commends Julius for

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<sup>36</sup> Hornus has probably the most thorough discussion of this account, and that of other soldier-martyrs, as well as the ramifications of how one’s interpretation of such a narrative can affect conclusions about the topic in general. He is particularly vigorous in debunking W. Seston’s thesis of a radical change in emperor worship in 291 C.E., and has a number of convincing reasons for a more nuanced view. See 133ff. Cadoux, ECA, 149-51, jumped to the “pacifist” conclusion quickly: “It is fairly clear from the martyr’s own words that his objection was largely, if not solely, to the business of fighting.” Cadoux is also very critical of the perceived treatment of this account by Roman Catholic scholars and editors. See Cadoux, ECA, 150, 1n; a revised comment by Cadoux in ECW, 585, 5n; and Hornus’ comment on Cadoux, 288, 102n.

<sup>37</sup> Swift, 74-75.

his faithful service and attempts to convince him to find some compromise that will allow him to continue in good conscience. The resolute Julius, who actually describes himself as fighting no less bravely than any other soldier, blithely refuses on the sole basis of idolatry. Swift astutely observes that it is easy to get the impression “that in his long career as a soldier Julius had never before found the service at odds with his religious beliefs.”<sup>38</sup>

Among scholars who discuss these accounts of soldier-martyrs, the more nuanced perspective of Swift would seem to be superior to the ultra-pacifist leanings of Hornus and Cadoux. Swift points out that the prevalence of idolatry and the “two oaths – two masters” motive resonates strongly with Tertullian’s writing. On the pacifist side, it is difficult if not impossible to explain why, if aversion to war and killing was in the forefront of these Christian soldiers’ minds: (1) They did not explicitly mention such an aversion as a motive, nor even seem to imply it, despite some fairly detailed questioning from Roman authorities; and (2) They stayed in the army as long as they did, and presumably fought on many occasions. Maximilian is the exception here, but even he does not explicitly mention an aversion to war and killing, and such an implication must be read into the text. Swift is remarkably balanced in his synopsis:

Idolatry, bloodshed, oaths and the vices of military life all entered the picture in determining a man’s position on war and military duty. The only general principle we can deduce from the *Acta* is that no single issue was the source of the difficulty. Circumstances and an individual’s own sensitivity to the precepts of the Gospels were the deciding factors.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 78.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. It should be noted that immediately following this quote Swift seems to let his bias in more strongly when he traces the “ambivalent attitudes toward war and military service” back into “the Christian community from the very beginning and which became more pronounced as time moved on.” Such ambivalence certainly may have been present to some extent in the late third and early fourth century, and perhaps even in trace elements back as far as 170 C.E., but it is nearly impossible to continue to trace it back farther than that as there is no evidence of Christians in the military whatsoever. However, Swift is probably correct that after the time of Tertullian at least “increasing numbers of them were somehow finding it possible to remain in the service without compromising their

These accounts are probably dramatic exceptions to the reality of many Christian soldiers during this period who, whether by differences in conscience or in circumstance, were able to reconcile their faith to the life of a soldier, apparently without a great deal of difficulty. The Church lauded those believers who stood up and were martyred, but did not condemn those soldiers who did not.

### Two Key Questions

Interpreting the data about the early Church and military service hinges on two key questions. The first is: Why were the early Christians discouraged from military service? The early twentieth century consensus on pacifism among scholars such as Bainton and Cadoux minimized the factor of religious concerns in the Roman army and emphasized ethical concepts like love and non-violence. However, by the third century at least the evidence would seem to indicate against such a simple, essentially pacifist motive. Helgeland, *et al*, goes to great lengths to make this point, saying that the “pacifist domination of English-speaking scholarship” has generally presented the evidence as one-sided and made “overly broad and uncritical pacifist assumptions.” Among these, the assumption that “the call to non-violence has the identical meaning and extension as the call to avoid military service...is simply not so.”<sup>40</sup> At the very least, scholars must account for the strong possibility of avoiding idolatry as a motive.

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faith” and that this amounts to “a kind of unarticulated proof that the arguments of the pacifist writers were not universally persuasive.” Cf. 79.

<sup>40</sup> Helgeland, *et al*, 1. See also 48: “It created a sacred cosmos in which the soldier lived from the day he entered until he died.” Hunter, DR, 88, rightly points out that Helgeland in making this point swung the pendulum too far to the other side: “Helgeland’s analysis...neglects other dimensions of the early Christian objections to military service.” Even Tertullian, who, Helgeland claimed, always objected to military service because of idolatry, highlighted the characteristics of love and non-violence in the Christian community in some instances. For example, see Tertullian, “Apology,” ANF vol. 3, 45, says: “If we are enjoined, then, to love our enemies, as I have remarked

On this point, scholars on both sides would like to show that there was only one principle objection of the early Church to military service. It is easy to see why this debate carries a lot of weight on the issue, as Megivern astutely elucidates:

Where the objection is to bloodshed, this is usually seen as inseparable from military service and therefore an absolute obstacle...[whereas] the objection is to idolatry is incidental, a relative obstacle, something that can be corrected while leaving the essential military function intact...there is enough variety in the sources to conclude that neither explanation can be generalized.<sup>41</sup>

Where there is significant mention of two reasons to avoid military service, the best answer may be to account for both as serious objections, with neither carrying the supposed moral exclusivity or supremacy to the other.

The second question is, what were the reasons that there were more Christians in the military during the third and early fourth centuries? Here again, we have a juxtaposition of interpretations by the two groups of authors, both of whom are reacting to the supposed ethical reasons Christians had for joining the military (or conversely, the reasons converted soldiers might have given for not leaving it). The pacifist authors want to show that those Christians in the military are either not indicative of the ethic of the whole Church, or such a minority that the Church allowed them to fellowship in spite of their military status rather than excommunicating them. On the other hand, non-pacifist authors eagerly try to show that more Christians in the military indicated a change in the Christian ethic toward war, such that military service was condoned by the majority of the Church, and only opposed by unrealistically idealist Church fathers like Tertullian and Origen.

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above, whom have we to hate? If injured, we are forbidden to retaliate, lest we become as bad ourselves: who can suffer injury at our hands?"

<sup>41</sup> Megivern, 180.

Here again, it is very possible that to interpret the limited historical data through a modern ethical lens is to divide the debate artificially on confessional lines without getting to a real answer. A better explanation may be social-historical in nature. James Turner Johnson argues convincingly that Christians may have used the possibilities for social advancement given by the Roman army system as a means to more civil and government influence. Coupled with internal changes in the Roman army and a different role by the military in society at large, it represented an attempt by believers to “live responsibly in the world” and create “positive goods” by influencing society around them.<sup>42</sup> This did not necessarily mean ethical compromise, since serving in the military while avoiding bloodshed was a real possibility.<sup>43</sup>

Before Johnson, Stephen Gero provided an even more specific context for this change: The reigns of the Roman emperors Septimius Severus and his son Caracalla (193-217).<sup>44</sup> Hunter summarizes: “Purely local forms of military service developed, closely related to civilian life. The increased prestige given to the army, coupled with greater militarization, strongly attracted many Christians.”<sup>45</sup> By the early part of the third century, “Christianity had spread widely in the Roman Empire and had begun to make deep inroads into the higher levels of Greco-Roman

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<sup>42</sup> Johnson, QP, 41. Hunter, DR, 90, is very critical of several weaknesses in Johnson’s approach, but emphasizes that this point is “a real strength of Johnson’s study.”

<sup>43</sup> Hunter, CC, 170.

<sup>44</sup> Stephen Gero, “*Miles Gloriosus*: The Christian and Military Service According to Tertullian,” *Church History* 39, no. 3 (September 1970), 289ff, 298.

<sup>45</sup> Hunter, DR, 90. For the change in the nature of military service to more civic, local involvement, Hunter quotes social historian Ramsay MacMullen, *Soldier and Civilian in the Later Roman Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 157: “Many, for their full twenty-five years, did nothing but write; many attended magistrates as messengers, ushers, confidential agents, and accountants, measuring their promotion from chair to chair, office to office.”

society.”<sup>46</sup> This provides a plausible context for the Christians’ increased participation in the Roman military during this period.<sup>47</sup>

### Conclusion

At this point it should be evident that scholars on both sides are engaging in massive oversimplifications when they try to make neat, compact arguments in response to situations which may contain finely nuanced social, historical, and ethical considerations. Here is a case in point: To speak of “the” early Church, as if it were a unified and centrally organized religious body, is an oversimplification in several aspects. Even if one assumed that there was only one principle objection to military service, one would also have to assume: (1) That this objection was clearly communicated to all churches in all areas of the Greco-Roman world; (2) that military service presented a moral problem universally significant to the churches; (3) that all churches looked to a common body of teaching or figure(s) of authority for their moral teaching; and (4) that said body of teaching or figure(s) of authority had something specific to say about war in general and military service in particular. Because of the limited evidence, it is probably impossible for a balanced historian to prove any of these assumptions definitively or demonstratively.

A more accurate summary of the situation in the early Church is that there were gradients of the problems of military service, and these issues may have been stronger in some times and places in the Roman Empire than in others. During a time of peace, for instance, a church leader

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<sup>46</sup> Hunter, CC, 170. Cf. William H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 285-97, 308-14.

<sup>47</sup> Hunter, DR, 90.

might object to joining the military on account of the danger of idolatry. In another area of the Empire, the danger of idolatry might be less, and a similarly-minded church leader might permit and even encourage Christians to serve in the military if it would entail civic or police work.<sup>48</sup> In the frontier regions, there may not have been established church communities to object to war or military service, and if Christians did object, it might be less likely to be historically recorded, exactly because they were on the geographic fringes of the Empire.

The early Church included a number of churches, each facing differing local concerns and moral problems. Christians were a minority, and were not until the later period more fully integrated into Roman society. In the early period, there is no definitive evidence of an established hierarchy or inter-regional church leadership. If there was a basic nonviolent ethic derived from Jesus' teachings in the Gospels, it does not appear to have extended past the individual, interpersonal realm.<sup>49</sup> As will be discussed in chapter 3, it is even difficult to conclude whether those in church leadership who argue for nonviolence, such as Origen and Tertullian, are normative for those in church membership in general. In the later period, where there are increasing numbers of Christians serving in the military, there is no mention of excommunication or censure by church leaders. In other words, there seemed to be no primary moral consideration by the early Church on the topic of war. If there was in some places primary

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<sup>48</sup> Hornus, 158, looked to Henri Secretan for this distinction between serving and killing, which was based on two Latin verbs – *bellare* and *militare*. Says Hornus: “The early Church had permitted a believer – when compelled by a worldly pressure of sufficient potency – to submit to the command that he become a member of the military community (*militare*). But in the eyes of the Church it had never been lawful for a believer to make an attempt on another’s man’s life, and therefore to fight (*bellare*). Thus, in the final analysis, all early Christians were agreed upon the rejection of military violence.” Cf. Yoder, WP, 100; Gracie, 14 (n. 13).

<sup>49</sup> Most scholars would agree with the perspective of Gero, 286: “Jesus in the canonical gospels...is not anywhere represented as explicitly dealing with the morality of the military profession...it is generally admitted that the gospel records manifest a certain quietistic indifference to the concrete social questions of the day, though of course they specify a most demanding set of ethical imperatives for the individual.”

moral consideration by a local church on the topic, there is little evidence for that consideration extending to another region. As Megivern says, “The search for *the one* position of the early Church would seem to be a wild goose chase.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Megivern, 180. He goes on to say: “The yen for a single answer must be resisted if justice is to be done to the pluralism found in the texts.” Cf. Knut W. Ruyter, “Pacifism and Military Service in the Early Church,” *Cross Currents* 32, no. 1 (Spring 1982):54-70.

### CHAPTER 3:

#### THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS ON NONVIOLENCE AND MILITARY INVOLVEMENT

The French scholar Jean-Michel Hornus, in his important work *It is Not Lawful for Me to Fight: Early Christian Attitudes Toward War, Violence, and the State*, asserts that there are two common and opposite errors by contemporary believers about Church history concerning the problem of war. The first is the inclination “to assume that the Church has always approved of the participation by believers in governmentally sanctioned violence.”<sup>1</sup> Because of this assumption, some people even fancy that they are making a revolutionary new discovery when they suggest that the commandment to love in the New Testament even extends to the rejection of military service. This discovery can then lead to the opposite error, of concluding that “all of the fathers were ‘conscientious objectors’ in the modern sense of the term.”<sup>2</sup> Both assumptions are incorrect. The former will easily be debunked even by a cursory reading of the early Church fathers. The latter, while more tempting, is a reading back into history what modern Christians would like it to mean. For a good historical understanding of what the early Church fathers’ position(s) may have entailed, we must look to the fathers’ writing themselves, as well as look for historical and cultural context as to what the writing would mean for those in that time.

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<sup>1</sup> Hornus, 11. He noted that this assumption is more common on the European continent than in North America.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

### Prior to 170 C.E.

In this early stage there is “no specific prohibition of military service” by early Christian writers. This fact would appear to directly correspond with the lack of evidence of any Christians serving in the Roman military.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that this means only that there are no surviving documents, but at any rate the fact that the Church did not preserve any such documents (in an era from which it preserved a great number of documents from several early Church fathers) is indicative that the problem of military service did not seem to be on the Church’s radar as a specific ethical or moral issue. Hunter summarizes this period aptly when he says that while the early Christian literature placed an “overwhelming emphasis on the peaceable nature of the Christian community” it did not lead to any general prohibition against serving in the military. Those two observations are the main conclusions that arise from the study of the first 150 years of Christian literature about this subject.<sup>4</sup>

The Christian authors from this period echo the pacific (if not entirely pacifist) themes present in prominent New Testament passages such as Jesus’ beatitudes, and his enjoinders in the Sermon on the Mount to love one’s enemies, turn the other cheek, and so forth. This begins in “The Teachings of the Twelve Apostles,” which quotes such passages in basically the first paragraph of its moral instructions.<sup>5</sup> The second-century apologists, who frequently refer to themselves as peacemakers, continue this theme.<sup>6</sup> Both Irenaeus (c. 130 – c. 200) and Justin (c.

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<sup>3</sup> Bainton, CA, 72.

<sup>4</sup> Hunter, CC, 165-69.

<sup>5</sup> “The Teachings of the Twelve Apostles,” in *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. Cyril C. Richardson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 171. Also called *The Didache*, this is one of the earliest surviving documents from after the New Testament period.

<sup>6</sup> Hunter, CC, 165.

100 – c. 165) directly quoted Isaiah 2:3 – “they shall break down their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks, and they shall no longer learn to fight.”<sup>7</sup> Irenaeus references Jesus’ command to turn the other cheek as direct evidence that Jesus had fulfilled the prophecy and instituted an age of peacemaking.<sup>8</sup> Justin eloquently says that “we who formerly used to murder one another do not only now refrain from making war upon our enemies, but also, that we may not lie nor deceive our examiners, willingly die confessing Christ.”<sup>9</sup> By using arguments like these, Justin is apologetically highlighting the differences in the Christian community from that of the Romans.<sup>10</sup> Whether he is exaggerating reality to prove an apologetic point is up for debate, but at this early date there is no evidence to contradict him.<sup>11</sup> These citations are strong evidence that the early Christian community saw Jesus’ teachings as normative for Christian ethics.<sup>12</sup>

Several other Christian writers make similar points without referencing scripture. Tatian (2<sup>nd</sup> century, converted c. 150-165) speaks semi-poetically about himself as an example of the new Christian nature: “I do not wish to be a king; I am not anxious to be rich; I decline military

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<sup>7</sup> Justin, “Apology,” chap. XXXVIII, ANF vol. 1, 175; all biographical dates are from Livingstone, Elizabeth A., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” bk. IV, chap. XXXIV, ANF vol. 1, 512.

<sup>9</sup> Justin, “Apology,” chap. XXXVIII, ANF vol. 1, 176.

<sup>10</sup> See Justin, “Dialogue with Trypho,” chap. CX, ANF vol. 1, 254, for another passage where he contrasts the way of war and weapons with the way of “piety, righteousness, philanthropy, faith, and hope” which the Christians cultivate.

<sup>11</sup> Justin actually draws a comparison to the Roman military oath – those who “prefer their allegiance to their own life, and parents, and country, and all kindred, though you can offer them nothing incorruptible” – and says that it would be “verily ridiculous” if Christians did not make a similar oath to be peacemakers and endure persecution in expectation of a greater, incorruptible reward.

<sup>12</sup> Hunter, CC, 165.

command; I detest fornication.”<sup>13</sup> Athenagoras (2<sup>nd</sup> century), in a chapter vividly titled “The Vast Difference in Morals Between the Christians and Their Accusers,” draws a sharp contrast between the “feed upon human flesh” violence of the Romans and the Christians who “when defamed not to bless: for it is not enough to be just (and justice is to return like for like), but it is incumbent on us to be good and patient of evil.”<sup>14</sup> He then goes on to say in the next chapter, “But we, deeming that to see a man put to death is much the same as killing him, have abjured such spectacles [gladiator contexts]. How, then, when we do not even look on [death]... can we put people to death?”<sup>15</sup> The palpable tension, morally and spiritually, between Christianity and paganism, helps to explain why the early Church may seem so inconsistent when judging war and military service. As Hans von Campenhausen says, “it is of the very essence of the world to be obliged to shed blood,” but they themselves “would not have anything to do with war service.”<sup>16</sup> The early Christians were grateful for the external peace of Roman society, so they prayed for the army and the positive outcomes of war even if there were no Christians in the military at the time.<sup>17</sup> In other words, they accepted the reality of the outside world but did not

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<sup>13</sup> Tatian, “Address to the Greeks,” chap. XI, ANF vol. 2, 69.

<sup>14</sup> Athenagoras, “A Plea for the Christians,” chap. XXXIV, ANF vol. 2, 147.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., chap. XXXV, ANF vol. 2, 147.

<sup>16</sup> Campenhausen, 161ff.

<sup>17</sup> Campenhausen, 161. See for example Arnobius, “Against the Heathen,” bk. IV, sec. 36, ANF vol. 6, 488: “...peace and pardon are asked for all in authority, for soldiers, kings, friends, enemies...” Also Cyprian, “Treatise V: An Address to Demetrianus,” sec. 20, ANF vol. 5, 463. It should be noted these writers made this point apologetically, and so it is one instance where they were attempting to build a bridge to their Greco-Roman ‘heathen’ recipients.

approve it; they lived in the world but could not change it and make it into the Church.<sup>18</sup> To use the modern phrasing of the apostle John's writing, they were "in the world but not of it."<sup>19</sup>

#### From 170 C.E. to Constantine

At the beginning of this period, evidence for Christians serving in the military started to increase, and along with it several fathers (in both the East and the West) issued treatments on the topic of military service, most resulting in more or less explicit condemnations. Hunter notes that this new discussion on the subject indicates two significant developments had occurred by this period. The first is a substantial change in the social composition and influence of Christianity. By the early part of the third century, Christianity was widespread geographically in the Roman Empire and had a tangible presence in, or at least influence on, the higher social levels of Greco-Society. Many of the Church fathers who spoke out about the topic – notably Tertullian and Cyprian in North Africa, Clement and Origen in Alexandria – were highly educated exponents of Christianity who not only educated and taught Christians, but corresponded at length with "pagan" critics and Roman officials.<sup>20</sup>

Simultaneously, changes were occurring within the Roman military that affected the structure, nature, and responsibilities that accompanied the enlisted soldier. As explained in chapter 2, these developments in the Church and in the army appear to have at least made it easier and more desirable for Christians to enlist, and perhaps in some cases provide motivation

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<sup>18</sup> Campenhausen, 160-61.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, John 17:13-16 and 1 John 2:15-17.

<sup>20</sup> Hunter, CC, 169-70. For further discussion on Christian inroads into Roman society, see Frend, 285-97, 308-14; and Robert M. Grant, *Early Christianity and Society* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977), 1-12.

for joining the army. Emperor Severus tied military service to civic responsibility in local, rural settings, and joining the army was seen as a vehicle for upward social mobility. The treatments on the question of Christians serving in the military seem to clearly reflect this changing reality.<sup>21</sup> For the modern interpreter, it is important to note that what in the recent Western world would be three mostly separate social institutions – civic leadership, police work, and the military – were all essentially combined in the third century Roman army. Therefore, it is difficult to tell for certain when military service would overlap with killing, and this occupational ambivalence helps explain some of the ambiguity of the third century writers toward military service as a whole.

Modern scholars, particularly those who are part of a confessional tradition, have a tendency to lump all the Church fathers together into a unified voice or witness from early Christianity. This tendency is present among Christian historians in general, probably in an effort to appeal to the early Church as a pure and unified guide for church life and doctrine. It is even more prevalent on a particular topic such as war and military service. The lay reader of Christian history might even get the impression that Tertullian, Clement, Origen and others formed an early Church ‘panel’ or theological board that systematically responded to moral, ethical, and doctrinal concerns by giving a developed and theologically defensible position that was clearly communicated to and held by the entirety or at least the majority of early Christians. This portrait, even if unintended, is a gross caricature of the reality of early Christianity. The challenge in reading the Church fathers is to adduce the particular author’s variety of non-military involvement – or pacifism, if that term can be adequately applied at this early period of

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<sup>21</sup> Hunter, CC, 170. Cf. Johnson, QP, 41ff.

Christian history – his context(s) in which he wrote, his motives for opposing military involvement, and how his viewpoint related to his Christian contemporaries.

This chapter will treat the six primary Church fathers who address the topic during this period chronologically as much as possible. There are three phases of this period that will be examined in turn. The first phase, comprising the late second to early third century, includes Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 – c. 215, writing c. 200) and Tertullian of Carthage (c. 160 – c. 225). The second phase, from mid-to-late third century, contains Hippolytus of Rome (c. 170 – c. 236), Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258, writing c. 250), and Origen of Alexandria (c. 185 – c. 254), as well as a number of accounts of Christians who served in the military that should be examined. The third phase, only spanning the first twelve years or so of the fourth century, could probably be seen as an extension of the second phase, except for the political and military accomplishments of Constantine and how his rise to power appeared to affect the one main author from this time period, Lactantius (c. 250 – c. 325).<sup>22</sup>

#### First Phase (Late 2<sup>nd</sup> Century – Early 3<sup>rd</sup> Century)

Clement of Alexandria was a pupil of Pantaenus in Alexandria and took the role of teacher (c. 190) but fled from Alexandria during a persecution (c. 202). Through his writings he strove to defend against the charge that Christianity is a religion for ignorant people. Clement mentions peace several times in different writings. In his “Stromata,” while trying to establish equal conduct rules for women and for men, he counters the argument that women are not

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<sup>22</sup> Lactantius wrote first in Nicomedia in Western Asia Minor, then later in Gaul. Arnobius is included because his thinking seems to be foundational for Lactantius’ early views, but he is not generally considered one of the primary Church fathers who discuss this topic in any length.

trained for war as men are by leaning toward nonviolence.<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere, he exhorts his sisters to follow the example of Christ who represents the Father perfectly: “For it is not in war, but in peace, that we are trained.”<sup>24</sup> Christians employ the instrument of peace, the word of God, not war music, which by “inflaming to lusts...raises their dejected minds” of “those expert in war.”<sup>25</sup> He expounds on the pacific nature of the New Testament’s war imagery further in his

“Exhortation to the Heathen”:

And shall not Christ, breathing a strain of peace to the ends of the earth, gather together His own soldiers, the soldiers of peace? Well, by His blood, and by the word, He has gathered the bloodless host of peace, and assigned to them the kingdom of heaven. The trumpet of Christ is His Gospel. He has blown it, and we have heard. “Let us array ourselves in the armor of peace.”<sup>26</sup>

Earlier in the same book he explains the way of Christianity to the heathen: “If you enroll as one of God’s people, heaven is your country and God your lawgiver. And what are his laws?...Thou shalt not kill...Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. To him that strikes thee on the one cheek, turn also the other.”<sup>27</sup>

The North African writer Tertullian was one of the most prolific and eloquent writers of the early Church, and is also one of the most polarizing figures from the period. A pagan from Carthage who might have practiced as a lawyer, he was converted to Christianity (prior to c. 197)

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<sup>23</sup> Clement, “Stromata,” bk. IV, chap. VIII, ANF vol. 2, 420: “...since we wish that men even to be peaceable.” This book is variably titled “Miscellanies.”

<sup>24</sup> Clement, “The Instructor,” bk I, chap. XII, ANF vol. 2, 235. This book is variably titled “Paedagogus.”

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., bk. II, chap. IV, ANF vol. 2, 248. Cf. bk. II, chap. II, ANF vol. 2, 242-46, where Clement describes drunkenness and licentiousness at some length and are, to him, apparently in the same category as the desires that drive men to war.

<sup>26</sup> Clement, “Exhortation to the Heathen,” chap. XI, ANF vol. 2, 204. This book is variably titled “Protrepticus.”

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., chap. X, ANF vol. 2, 202. This chapter is subtitled “Answer to the Objection of the Heathen, that It Was Not Right to Abandon the Customs of Their Fathers.”

and later became a prominent adherent to Montanism. Because the chronology of his life and works is disputed, it is sometimes difficult to determine where he was in his journey and thought when he wrote a specific work.<sup>28</sup> His works were designed for one of three purposes: Apologetic, theological, or ascetic.

In his early work “Apology” (c. 197) Tertullian apparently does not hesitate to use the fact of Christians serving in the army to make his apologetic point while addressing the Roman authorities about the usefulness of Christians as Roman citizens: “We have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum,—we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods.”<sup>29</sup> At this point he states neither approval nor disapproval of Christians serving in the military, though he does describe Christianity as a religion that considers it “better to be slain than to slay.”<sup>30</sup> Also evident in this passage is a probable instance of his inclination to exaggerate facts and speak in hyperbole when he estimates the “immense number of Christians” who make up “almost all of the inhabitants of [the] various cities.” In a later chapter, he makes a similar apologetic point when

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<sup>28</sup> COD, s.v. “Tertullian.” The chronology of Tertullian’s works especially in reference to his supposed pacifism and eventual Montanism has been much debated, especially by Roman Catholic scholars. See for example Ryan, 17ff. In my estimation, Bainton, EC, 201-02, resolves this controversy sufficiently when he agrees with Harnack’s dating of both “On Idolatry” and “The Chaplet” c. 202 for literary reasons rather than dating one or both during Tertullian’s Montanist period c. 211-12 because of “circuitous reasoning.” See 202, n. 69 for Bainton’s citation of Harnack’s German work.

<sup>29</sup> Tertullian, “Apology,” chap. XXXVII, ANF vol. 3, 45.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. the beginning of chap. XXXVII, where he describes the nonviolent nature of Christians, those who love their enemies and are forbidden to retaliate if injured. Elsewhere, chap. XXV, ANF vol. 3, 40, he claims that Rome attained its greatness not through religion, but through wars which injure religion, including the “taking and destruction of cities” and “indiscriminate slaughter of priests and citizens.” Cf. Bainton, CA, 75.

he answers the accusation of Christians “being useless in the affairs of life” by declaring “We sail with you, and fight with you, and till the ground with you.”<sup>31</sup>

When Tertullian does share his feelings about the matter of Christians serving, he does so primarily in the context of arguments against idolatry. In “The Chaplet” he defends a Christian soldier who refused to wear a crown of laurels in a procession because it was a sign of idolatry, and avers that the soldier’s brothers were deceived because they were actually serving two masters.<sup>32</sup> In the course of his treatise, he looks for scriptural evidence, argues strongly from tradition and nature, but eventually settles on a more fundamental objection. “To begin with the real ground of the military crown, I think we must first inquire whether warfare is proper at all for Christians...shall the son of peace take part in the battle when it does not become him even to sue at law?”<sup>33</sup> He goes on to describe colorfully how particular tasks which a soldier may be required to do are of an idolatrous nature:

Shall he keep guard before the temples which he has renounced?... Shall he be disturbed in death by the trumpet of the trumpeter, who expects to be aroused by the angel’s trump? And shall the Christian be burned according to camp rule, when he was not permitted to burn incense to an idol, when to him Christ remitted the punishment of fire?<sup>34</sup>

He clarifies that it is a different sort of case when a soldier in the army converts, as even the centurion whom Peter instructed in the gospels remained in the army. However, it is better in

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<sup>31</sup> Tertullian, “Apology,” chap. XLII, ANF vol. 3, 49. In chap. V, ANF vol. 3, 22, he attributes the ending of a drought to prayers offered by Christians in Marcus Aurelius’ army.

<sup>32</sup> Ferguson, 218. In this same passage Tertullian feels strongly that there are many so-called Christians who would rather flee from town to town than face persecution or possible martyrdom and that it could even be “Christians” like these who were leveling criticism against the action of the faithful soldier.

<sup>33</sup> Tertullian, “The Chaplet,” chap. XI, ANF vol. 3, 99. This book is variably called “De Corona” or “On the Crown.”

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 99-100.

Tertullian's judgment to immediately abandon the army "which has been the course with many," rather than indulge in numerous compromises to avoid offending God, or resign oneself to punishment and possible martyrdom.<sup>35</sup> Harnack notes that Tertullian is the first to advance this specific argument.<sup>36</sup> By spending so much time in this treatise speaking against idolatry, it appears that while he himself is vehemently opposed to Christians serving in the military, he is resigned that there are Christians who do not share his opposition whether in polemics or in practice. For those Christians, he seems determined to do everything in his power to discourage them from the paramount sin of idolatry, even to the extent that he carries on his argument under the assumption that military service is acceptable: "Suppose, then, that the military service is lawful, as far as the plea for the crown is concerned."<sup>37</sup>

Tertullian is even more direct in his work *On Idolatry*. A believer should not join the army, even if he manages to be of a lower rank for "whom there is no necessity for taking part in sacrifices or capital punishments."<sup>38</sup> There is a fundamental problem:

There is no agreement between the divine and the human sacrament, the standard of Christ and the standard of the devil, the camp of light and the camp of darkness. One soul cannot be due to two masters—God and Caesar...How will a Christian man war, nay, how will he serve even in peace, without a sword, which the Lord has taken away?...the Lord, in disarming Peter, ungirt every soldier.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Harnack, 76: "Because a Christian may not enter the army, neither may he remain in it if he has received the gospel as a soldier – or if he remains, he must bear the consequences, rejecting everything that is contrary to his Christian profession, and so inviting certain death."

<sup>37</sup> Tertullian, "The Chaplet," chap. XI, ANF vol. 3, 100. For modern readers of the eloquent and colorful North African scholar, it is easy to visualize the ever-rigorous Tertullian sighing resignedly while conceding the reality of the situation.

<sup>38</sup> Tertullian, "On Idolatry," chap. XIX, ANF vol. 3, 73.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

For Tertullian, John Helgeland summarizes, “the military life was one set in total opposition to the Christian life, and one had to choose one or the other.” It is unlikely that Tertullian’s thinking on serving in the military could be rightly separated from his objection to the pagan religion practices prevalent in the army, or the taking of the military oath which constantly wars with the believer’s oath to God.<sup>40</sup> In fact, Tertullian was even opposed to serving in a civic capacity during a time of peace because it would require making life and death decisions that could involve capital punishment, which apparently to him was equal with murder and killing in war.<sup>41</sup> He does not deal with the question of military service from the basis of killing or bloodshed alone, and does not appear to even conceive of the hypothetical possibility of such a decision apart from the concern of idolatry.

#### Second Phase (Mid to late 3<sup>rd</sup> century)

*The Apostolic Tradition* is a liturgical treatise, for which authorship has long been debated but is now generally considered to be the work of Hippolytus.<sup>42</sup> It contains a thorough description of allegedly traditional rites and practices during the period. He was bishop of Rome who clashed with a rival bishop, Callistus, whom he considered to be a heretic, and Callistus’ successors. He was exiled to Sardinia during a persecution and apparently never returned.<sup>43</sup> In *The Apostolic Tradition* he gives a lengthy list of occupations and activities that are prohibited for Christians. Some of these, such as the prostitute, astrologer, and charlatan, may not surprise

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<sup>40</sup> Helgeland, 23.

<sup>41</sup> Bainton, CA, 78.

<sup>42</sup> COD, s.v. “Apostolic Tradition, The.”

<sup>43</sup> COD, s.v. “Hippolytus, St.”

the reader. With others, like teacher, sculptor, actor, and painter, the author implies that such occupations in the Roman Empire were inherently worldly and heathen. Teaching is marginal, so if one can teach children while avoiding contamination of polytheistic worldviews, he may continue, and also if he has no other recourse to make a living.

Hippolytus then includes several professions, among them charioteers and gladiators, before addressing the military:

A military man in authority must not execute men. If he is ordered, he must not carry it out. Nor must he take military oath. If he refuses, he shall be rejected. If someone is a military governor, or the ruler of a city who wears the purple, he shall cease or he shall be rejected. The catechumen or faithful who wants to become a soldier is to be rejected, for he has despised God.<sup>44</sup>

Everett Ferguson aptly summarizes the instructions of Hippolytus by pointing out that there are three distinctions present in his writing. The first distinction is between converts from the army and Christians enlisting in the army. Hippolytus sees no reason for the Christian to enlist, echoing Tertullian's concern about idolatry. However, by instructing the soldier convert to refuse to take the military oath and shed blood, he implies that they could remain in the army if they abide by those conditions. Therefore the second distinction is between so-called "police duties" and bloodshed. Here Hippolytus seems willing at least to consider the possibility that one could serve in the army while avoiding idolatry and killing. The third distinction is between magistrates or officers and common soldiers. The official capacities of the former may have rendered it impossible for them to be exempt from the duties inconsistent with Hippolytus' Christian ethic. They were perhaps too responsible for issuing orders leading to executions, and too prominent to avoid the oaths, ceremonies, and sacrifices involved in Roman army life.

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<sup>44</sup> Hippolytus, "The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus," XVI, 9-11, in *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome, Bishop and Martyr*, translated and edited by Gregory Dix (London: SPCK, 1968).

Cyprian was a rhetorician converted to Christianity from paganism (c. 246) and soon thereafter became bishop of Carthage. He was forced to flee when the Decian persecution began (c. 249) but returned about two years later.<sup>45</sup> In an epistle to Donatus, where he “points out the errors of the world” and “exhorts to contempt of it,” he eloquently describes what some might call the kernel of the pacifist spirit:

Consider the roads blocked up by robbers, the seas beset with pirates, wars scattered all over the earth with the bloody horror of camps. The whole world is wet with mutual blood; and murder, which in the case of an individual is admitted to be a crime, is called a virtue when it is committed wholesale. Impunity is claimed for the wicked deeds, not on the plea that they are guiltless, but because the cruelty is perpetrated on a grand scale.<sup>46</sup>

Elsewhere, Cyprian mentions that iron is for tilling, not for killing, as an illustration of the dangers of wealth.<sup>47</sup>

Origen, who like Tertullian was one of the most prolific writers in the third century, was raised as a Christian in Egypt and became primarily a biblical critic and theologian. He had a tumultuous time in Alexandria and a strained relationship with the bishop, Demetrius, who eventually deposed him from the priesthood. Origen then started a school in Caesarea that became well-known. Most of what Origen has to say about war and military service is found in his apologetic work “Against Celsus.” Celsus was a philosopher writing in Greek whose work “True Discourse” (c. 178) is the first literary document attacking Christianity of which portions

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<sup>45</sup> COD, s.v. “Cyprian, St.”

<sup>46</sup> Cyprian, “Epistle I: To Donatus,” sec. 6, ANF vol. 5, 276-77.

<sup>47</sup> Cyprian, “Treatise II: On the Dress of Virgins,” sec. 11, ANF vol. 5, 433. Oddly, this treatise is about virginity, but Cyprian makes the same general point as before: That Christians should be separated from the world in their character and behavior if not their status and location.

have survived.<sup>48</sup> In that work, Celsus presents a pointed argument that pertains to what he perceived as Christian avoidance of military service and non-involvement in civilian life: Christians should either bear all the responsibilities of full Roman citizens or withdraw from the world and cease having children.<sup>49</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 2, Celsus was unaware of the presence of Christians in the army at the time of his writing, saying, “For if all were to do the same as you...the affairs of the earth would fall into the hands of the wildest and most lawless barbarians.”<sup>50</sup>

Origen has been called “the most articulate and eloquent pacifist in the early Church”, but Swift correctly observes that Origen’s stance was a modified pacifism, not a complete anti-war rhetoric. He based this position on a unique line of reasoning.<sup>51</sup> He was not opposed to war itself, believing that it was necessary for the preservation of the Roman Empire, but said that Christians

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<sup>48</sup> Celsus’ provenance is unknown. There are no surviving originals of Celsus’ work, but Origen quotes and summarizes Celsus’ writing to such an extent that scholars have been able to reconstruct nearly the entirety of “True Discourse,” at least the parts that were relevant to Origen’s thought and writing.

<sup>49</sup> Bainton, CA, 83. Origen, “Against Celsus,” bk. VIII, chap. LV, ANF vol. 4, 660, quotes Celsus: “They must make their choice between two alternatives. If they refuse to render due service to the gods, and to respect those who are set over this service, let them not...take any share in the affairs of life; on the other hand, if they...partake of all the blessings of life...then must they discharge the duties of life...and render due honour to those beings who control the affairs of this life, if they would not show themselves ungrateful to them. For it would be unjust in them, after receiving the good things which they dispense, to pay them no tribute in return.” Interestingly, Celsus here seems to be giving the pagan Roman version of Clement and Tertullian’s argument that for a Christian to fully partake in Roman society would be idolatrous.

<sup>50</sup> Origen, “Against Celsus,” bk. VIII, chap. LXVIII-LXIX, ANF vol. 4, 668-69. Origen refutes this argument of Celsus by noting (with more than a tinge of irony) the inconsistency of Celsus’ logic, and by placing the blame for the downfall of the nation of Israel not on God (whom Celsus had said did not come through and made the Jewish strategy of “God will fight for us” look silly) but on the Jews, who had not been faithful and whose many crimes culminated in the crucifixion of God’s son. This is one obvious example of the basic assumptions of the two writers’ religious worldviews being diametrically different.

<sup>51</sup> Swift, 60. Cf. Megivern, 179.

should not participate in it except spiritually.<sup>52</sup> In other words, Christians were to follow a higher standard:

While others go out to war, we, as priests and servants of God, take part in the campaign in that we keep our hands clean and pray for the just cause, the lawful king, and their victory... We form, through our prayers, a true army, an army of piety, which performs a better service to the emperor than all his visible soldiers.<sup>53</sup>

In this, Origen completely agrees with Tertullian that the vocation of Christians in the world is opposite from pagans: “No longer do we draw the sword against any nation whatever; we learn no more to fight, now that we are become children of peace.”<sup>54</sup>

The basis of Origen’s argument is his spiritualistic view of the world, and particularly his belief of Christians as called to a priestly lifestyle. However, while he clearly states his case here, elsewhere he vacillates on whether he believes it is possible for all Christians to live the highest and purest of lifestyles. In response to Celsus’ claim that if Christians do not fulfill the responsibilities of Roman citizens they should cease marrying and having kids, he says:

To this we reply, that there appears to us to be no good reason for our leaving this world, except when piety and virtue require it; as when, for example, those who are set as judges, and think that they have power over our lives, place before us the alternative either to live in violation of the commands of Jesus, or to die if we continue obedient to them. But God has allowed us to marry, because all are not fit for the higher, that is, the perfectly pure life; and God would have us to bring up all our children, and not to destroy any of the offspring given us by His providence. And this does not conflict with our purpose not to obey the demons that are on the earth; for, ‘being armed with the whole armour of God, we stand’ as athletes of piety against the race of demons that plot against us.<sup>55</sup>

Origen seems to be conceding some delineation between the roles that a Christian might have in the world and in God’s kingdom, and perhaps foreshadows the separation of priestly and

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<sup>52</sup> Megivern, 179.

<sup>53</sup> Bainton, CA, 83. Origen, “Against Celsus,” bk. VIII, chap. LXXIII, ANF vol. 4, 667-68.

<sup>54</sup> Origen, “Against Celsus,” bk. V, chap. XXXIII, ANF vol. 4, 557-58. Quoted by Campenhausen, 165.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., bk. VIII, chap. LV, ANF vol. 4, 661-62.

monastic lifestyles that would come later. At any rate, as Campenhausen points out, Origen's treatment of the subject of war and military service "presuppose[d] that [Christians] will always be a distinct group in the world, that is to say a minority."<sup>56</sup> Neither Origen nor Tertullian give a practical solution applicable to the possible situation of the Church aligning more closely with the Roman state that would eventually come about under Constantine.

### Third Phase (Early 4<sup>th</sup> Century)

The apologist Arnobius (died c. 330 C.E.) had a great deal to say about war in general but nothing about Christian involvement in military service specifically.<sup>57</sup> In multiple places in his treatise (c. 304-310) he directly or indirectly rails against war and its effects on the world.<sup>58</sup> Even more specifically, "he rejects with indignation the pagan idea that divine beings could patronize, or take pleasure or interest in, human wars."<sup>59</sup> Referring to the Roman god Mars, he wonders: "...if he is the author" of wars shall we conclude "that a god, for indulgence of his own pleasure...sows causes of dissension and strife among nations...makes blood flow in torrents" and "levels cities with the ground," even rejoicing with the death of brothers and the murderous conflict between fathers and their sons?<sup>60</sup> Positively he reemphasizes the principle that "it is better to suffer an injury than to inflict one and to shed one's own blood rather than pollute one's

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<sup>56</sup> Campenhausen, 166.

<sup>57</sup> Arnobius' provenance is unknown, but more than one scholar refers to Lactantius as his contemporary or pupil.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Arnobius, "Against the Heathen," bk. II, chap. I, ANF vol. 6, 433; chap. XXXVIII, ANF vol. 6, 448; chap. XLV, ANF vol. 6, 451.

<sup>59</sup> Cadoux, ECA, 54.

<sup>60</sup> Arnobius, "Against the Heathen," bk. III, chap. XXVI, ANF vol. 6, 471.

hands and one's conscience with the blood of another" and causally connects this peaceable nature of Christianity with the Pax Romana.<sup>61</sup> Swift surmises that there may be a bit of Origen's "bifocal view" present in Arnobius' writing when he "defends Christians against the charge of bringing calamities on the Empire by arguing along different lines."<sup>62</sup> Christianity has actually benefited the Empire in many ways contributing to "victories over conquered enemies" and the expansion of boundaries.<sup>63</sup> This is hardly a support of Christian participation in war, and in fact Arnobius never seriously grappled with the issue.<sup>64</sup>

Another Christian apologist, Lactantius (c. 250 – 325 C.E.) was a contemporary of Arnobius who was a teacher and rhetorician at Nicomedia. Throughout his main works he speaks harshly against all forms of bloodshed. His condemnation of the gladiator contests extended not only to those who participated in them but also to all those who were watching: "For he who reckons it a pleasure that a man, though justly condemned, should be slain in his sight, pollutes his conscience as much as if he should become a spectator and a sharer of a homicide which is secretly committed."<sup>65</sup> He goes on to speak against Rome's wars, and opposes both military service and capital punishment:

For when God forbids us to kill, he not only prohibits us from open violence, which is not even allowed by the public laws, but he warns us against the commission of those things which are esteemed lawful among men. Thus it will be neither lawful for a just man to engage in warfare, since his [duty] is justice itself, nor to accuse anyone of a capital

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., bk. I, chap. VI, ANF vol. 6, 415; cf. Swift, 60.

<sup>62</sup> Swift, 61. See Arnobius, "Against the Heathen," bk. I, chap. XIV, ANF vol. 6, 417. The bifocal view that Swift is referring to is Origen's claim that though Christians will not fight the Empire's wars, they will participate in just wars through spiritual means, and so benefit the Empire.

<sup>63</sup> Arnobius, "Against the Heathen," bk. I, chap. XIV, ANF vol. 6, 417.

<sup>64</sup> Swift, 61.

<sup>65</sup> Lactantius, "Divine Institutes," bk. VI, chap. XX, ANF vol. 7, 186.

charge, because it makes no difference, whether you put a man to death by word, or rather by sword, since it is the act of putting to death itself which is prohibited. Therefore, with regard to this precept of God, there ought to be no exception at all, but that it is always unlawful to put to death a man, whom God willed to be a sacred animal.<sup>66</sup>

For Lactantius, there were no qualifications or exceptions to his pure form of pacifism. Swift highlights that Lactantius made no distinction between serving in the army during wartime or peacetime. Lactantius also seems to connect the Roman spirit or reverence with basically Christian values found in those who avoid war, make peace with enemies, love everyone as brothers, control their tempers and have tranquil spirits.

Lactantius is an important figure in the historical development of this topic, especially during the pivotal events of the fourth century. All of the works referenced so far were written before the rule of Constantine in 312 C.E. Lactantius' perspective seems to have been considerably modified, or at least tempered, by the changes that happened in the Empire and his close association with Constantine. Many pacifist scholars ignore the later works of Lactantius, no doubt because of the awkwardness of admitting that the staunchest spokesman for pacifism in the first three centuries of the Church may have changed his perspective later in his life. Lactantius may provide the honest student of history with a bridge to understand the shift in perspective that happened in the Church during the fourth century. This perspective will be examined in the next chapter.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 187.

## Conclusion

The early consensus on pacifism realized and accepted the chronological, geographical, and even linguistic distribution of these authors.<sup>67</sup> However, these scholars saw this diversity as evidence of the widespread nature of the early Church's position against war and military service. Johnson correctly observes that without coming to the "evidence with the previous assumption of broad and general Christian opposition to war and military service, it would be difficult to argue this way," for the evidence is "a mile wide but only a foot deep."<sup>68</sup> Aside from being separated by thousands of miles, decades of time in some cases, and writing in two different languages, the authors wrote from very different personal and cultural experiences and had varying relationships to the developing – not static – doctrinal Christian orthodoxy of their different regions and churches.<sup>69</sup> Thus, it is better to see them as individuals rather than as spokesmen for a supposed broad consensus: "The large picture, then, would be one of pluralism on this moral point, not of a pacifist 'purity' that was gradually being whittled away as imperfect Christians more and more compromised their beliefs to participate as citizens or subjects of the Empire."<sup>70</sup>

The unified picture presented by the early consensus on pacifism breaks down further when the Church fathers are examined more closely for their primary motives in opposing Christian involvement in the military. It has already been mentioned in the previous chapter that the debate between the two primary objections to military service, idolatry and bloodshed, is an

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<sup>67</sup> The Alexandrians, Clement and Origen, wrote in Greek, the rest of the church fathers in Latin.

<sup>68</sup> Johnson, QP, 18-19.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 19. Cf. 48: "Early Christianity was far from monolithic, whether in doctrine, social make-up, language, cultural context, political preference, or virtually any other measure one might apply."

important one, if irresolvable. However, just a glance at the titles of the fathers' works in which their comments are found – Tertullian's "On Idolatry," Origen's "Against Celsus," Cyprian's "Address to Demetrianus," Lactantius' "Divine Institutes" – shows a spectrum of different contexts and purposes for their writings. There are, in fact, hundreds of surviving treatises written by the early fathers on all manner of topics, but not one is written specifically in support of pacifism or opposing Christian involvement in military service. This is a circumstantial, but fairly convincing argument that pacifism as such was not a paramount concern for the early Church as the early consensus on pacifism would like to make it.

Indeed, pacifist scholars tend to take the authors' comments out of the context of their larger works and interpret them as if they were all part of treatises on the subject of pacifism.<sup>71</sup> On the other hand, just war scholars are wont to giving special attention to idolatry and Roman army religion while ignoring other possible motives for avoiding military service.<sup>72</sup> As Megivern says: "The truth is that there were many different Christian objections to military service, some stronger, some weaker, some in one part of the Empire, some in other parts, some at one time, some at other times."

Taken as a whole picture, the fathers who spoke about war and military service show a variety of "pacifisms," a plurality of perspectives all basically in support of the peacefulness of Christianity and avoidance of military service but not universally disapproving of war. Clement spiritualized peace and appealed to the higher law of God. Tertullian railed against Christian

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<sup>71</sup> There are, in fact, hundreds of surviving treatises written by the early fathers on all manner of topics, but not one is written either positively in support of pacifism or negatively opposing Christian involvement in military service. This is a circumstantial, but fairly convincing argument that pacifism as such was not a paramount concern for the early Church as the early consensus on pacifism would like to make it.

<sup>72</sup> Megivern, 180.

involvement in military service because of the dangers of idolatry, practically mentioning an aversion to killing only in passing and assuming that his arguments for the latter would fall onto deaf ears. Despite being strict, Hippolytus seemed to allow for some distinctions in the discussion and that some roles in civic and military life were more corrupt than others. Cyprian embodied the pacifist spirit but did not issue any surviving work dealing with military service or war in any depth. Origen crafted a unique stance suited perfectly for a Christian minority with bits of just war thinking sprinkled in, but he could not comprehend the possibility of the near-arriving day when Christian thinking would directly influence the leadership of the Empire. Lactantius was the staunchest pacifist of them all, but he too would have to grapple with the dramatic change overtaking the Roman world. As Stephen Gero suggested, the early fathers' attitudes generally showed a "joyous irresponsibility" and "pervasive idealism" which often characterizes groups not involved with the actual experience of wielding political power and making important decisions.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Gero, 288.

CHAPTER 4:  
FROM CONSTANTINE TO AUGUSTINE –  
THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHRISTIAN JUST WAR CONCEPT

Roland Bainton summarizes the view of the early consensus on pacifism when he says that “the accession of Constantine terminated the pacifist period in Church history.”<sup>1</sup> Harnack is more explicit: “The heathen masses who poured into the Church allowed themselves quickly to become fanatical for the new faith, and soon the holy war was proclaimed.”<sup>2</sup> Heering ventures into the extreme view which characterizes some confessional pacifist scholars:

This radical change in the Christian faith, in regard to so vital a matter as war, we cannot regard as other than a disastrous fall, as a fall into a condition which primitive Christianity would not have hesitated to call a condition of sin. We believe that history justifies our view. Henceforth from this fall into sin we must needs deal with a Christianity degenerate in this respect, a Christianity that is more and more compelled to parade its degeneracy.<sup>3</sup>

C. J. Cadoux is not far behind:

It is generally thought that, with the accession of Constantine to power, the Church as a whole definitively gave up her anti-military leanings, abandoned all her scruples, finally adopted the imperial point of view, and treated the ethical problem involved as a closed question. Allowing for a little exaggeration, this is broadly speaking true... Official Christianity was now committed to the sanction of war – so far as the practical conduct of Christian men as citizens was concerned – whenever the State chose to wage it. Further

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<sup>1</sup> Bainton, CA, 85.

<sup>2</sup> Harnack, 63.

<sup>3</sup> Heering, 35.

than that, the decision not only settled the practical question for the moment and doomed the dissentient voices – many as they still were – to ultimate silence, but it tied up the freedom of Christian thought, and made any unfettered discussion of the problem on its merits next to impossible for centuries to come.<sup>4</sup>

As Jaroslav Pelikan keenly notes, there is a great divergence in historical interpretation between those who look upon “the decline and fall of the Roman Empire” as “the social triumph of the ancient Church” and those who regard it as “the triumph of barbarism and religion.”<sup>5</sup> This divergence is not based on the historical facts at all but rather on “the comparative values attached to the loss and to the gain.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, with regard to the present topic, the Christian Empire ushered in by Constantine was for some a catastrophic loss of the morality and untainted purity of primitive Christianity, and for others heralded a great new era in Church history.<sup>7</sup>

The development of the Christian just war concept occurred primarily between the ascent of Constantine to power in 312 C.E. and the death of Augustine in 430. This development took place over three fairly distinct stages: The first stage, from early-4<sup>th</sup> through mid-4<sup>th</sup> century, includes the writings of the historian Eusebius of Caesarea, the later writings of Lactantius, official Church documents and writings of the Eastern fathers; the second stage, from mid-4<sup>th</sup> through late-4<sup>th</sup> century, contains the writings of Ambrose the bishop of Milan; the third stage (early 5<sup>th</sup> century) comprises the works of Augustine of Hippo. Each stage will be examined in

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<sup>4</sup> Cadoux, ECW , 588, 592.

<sup>5</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire: The Fall of Rome and the Triumph of the Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 104.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> For the preeminent early 20<sup>th</sup> century view on the latter, see Shirley Jackson Case, *The Social Triumph of the Early Church* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1933). See also Moffatt, 667.

turn, with attention given to the historical events occurring in the Empire at that time and the context of the writings with reference to those events.

### First Stage (Early to Mid-4<sup>th</sup> Century)

#### The Rise of Constantine

The rise of Constantine into power took place “after twenty years of civil war in which Christianity was itself an issue.”<sup>8</sup> The latter part of this period is remembered in Church history by the immense persecution (c. 303-312) which was brought on by the emperor Diocletian and his junior emperor, Galerius. When Diocletian abdicated the throne to Galerius in 304, there were as many as seven pretenders to be ruler of the Empire, and each of them had a different policy of toleration or persecution toward the Christians.<sup>9</sup> The church was already significant in population as well as social influence in the Empire. As a result, a synthesis began to develop between the ideals of Christianity and the Roman Empire. This view was juxtaposed against the foreign forces of the barbarian and the pagan.<sup>10</sup> When Galerius became ill and from his deathbed issued an edict ending the persecution, most of the Western Roman Empire was under the control of Constantine and his rival Maxentius, neither of whom enforced the decrees against the Christians. Constantine then began a campaign that would eventually make him master of the Empire, and ensured the ending of the persecution for Christians.<sup>11</sup> Inevitably, as the struggle

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<sup>8</sup> Bainton, CA, 85.

<sup>9</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Vol. 1: From the Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (New York: Harper Collins, 1984), 102ff.

<sup>10</sup> Bainton, CA, 85. Lactantius personifies this outlook when he calls Galerius “a barbarity foreign to Roman blood.” See Lactantius, “Of the Manner in which the Persecutors Died,” chap. IX, ANF vol. 7, 304. This writing is variably called “The Death of the Persecutors.”

<sup>11</sup> Gonzalez, 102.

between the two ensued, “the hopes, prayers, and frequently also the arms of Christians gravitated to their champion,” who was eventually seen as anointed of the Lord.

The occasion for what might be called the appropriation of the Christian religion by Constantine was on the eve of the battle of Milvian Bridge in 312. Constantine and his army were advancing upon Rome, but were facing two to one odds against them as Maxentius’ large army was waiting behind the easily defensible Aurelian Walls. Constantine wondered about his prospects for success. Charles M. Odahl summarizes the ancient accounts:

In this situation, the mind of Constantine turned to religion and the eyes of the emperor looked to the heavens. With the military forces and religious rites arrayed against him, Constantine became convinced that he needed “some more powerful aid” than human troops and pagan deities offered... So, he decided to call upon this “Highest Deity,” and seek his aid and power in this time of trial.<sup>12</sup>

Eusebius describes Constantine as having a vision of a cross coming from the light of the sun carrying the message “By This Sign Conquer.” After consulting with Christians in his entourage, he had his soldiers fix that same message in the shape of the cross to their labarum, and went into battle as a “Christian” army.<sup>13</sup> They won the battle easily, and Constantine became the first emperor to assume the title of “Victor,” placing himself in the succession of the martyrs, completing with his sword what they had begun with their blood. By so doing, Constantine became the first “Christian” emperor, and began the unification of the Empire and the Church through restoring the *Pax Romana*.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Charles M. Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 105.

<sup>13</sup> Eusebius, “Life of Constantine,” bk. I, chap. XXIX-XXXI, NPNF, Series II, vol. 1, 490-91. Labarums are military standards.

<sup>14</sup> Bainton, CA, 86. After this battle, Constantine became senior ruler of the empire, but he did not become sole emperor over East and West until his victory at Chrysopolis in 324.

Elizabeth Livingstone says that legend has added much to the actual historical account of Constantine's life. For example, scholars and historians differ widely on the genuineness and legitimacy of what some term Constantine's "conversion" to the Christian faith. On the factual side, he had a clear commitment to Christianity that can be seen in his policies and legislation, but he was only baptized just before death.<sup>15</sup> Gonzalez says that Constantine reserved the right to determine his own religious practices, and though he was probably a sincere believer in the power of Christ, he only laid claim to that power by serving the cause of Christians. Moreover, Gonzalez argues that Constantine did not submit himself to the leadership of a Christian bishop, and his "meager understanding" of the Christian message did not prevent him from serving or paying homage to other gods.<sup>16</sup> Odahl gives the other perspective: "At this moment, Constantine converted to the Christian God...it was not a momentary act of pure political expediency," but a "revelatory experience" that "altered his beliefs" and resulted in a "changed religious orientation."<sup>17</sup> There is probably some truth in both arguments, as Odahl nearly concedes in his final chapter when he agrees with Timothy Barnes that Constantine "believed sincerely that God had given him a special mission to convert the Roman Empire to Christianity."<sup>18</sup> Regardless of the genuineness of Constantine's "personal conversion" experience, it is without doubt that he helped transform "the Christian Church from a persecuted minority cult into an established

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<sup>15</sup> COD, s.v. "Constantine the Great."

<sup>16</sup> Gonzalez, 120-22. "He seems to have thought the Unconquered Sun, the pagan Supreme Being who his father had worshiped, was compatible with the Christian God, and perhaps two views of the same deity, and that there existed other subordinate, yet still powerful, gods."

<sup>17</sup> Odahl, 106,110.

<sup>18</sup> Timothy Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 275. Quoted in Odahl, 283.

majority religion,” and the pagan Empire into what would eventually be considered a Christian commonwealth.<sup>19</sup>

A common popular notion is that Constantine in his lifetime instituted a Christian Empire by making Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. This is not historically accurate. What is true is that Constantine made Christianity a legalized religion in the Roman Empire and promoted it, so that many people flocked to the Church.<sup>20</sup> Odahl is correct in describing the development of a classical and Christian synthesis during the fourth century, which combined the Christian religion with elements of the pagan tradition.<sup>21</sup> In attributing the impetus for this development primarily to Constantine, Odahl may be understating the extent that this seemed to be in motion prior to Constantine’s ascension to the throne. The growth in population and influence of Christianity in Roman society during the latter third and early fourth centuries has already been documented. The position of Christianity in relation to the state was already a galvanizing question, a burgeoning situation that clearly came to a head during the Diocletian persecution. Constantine provided a resolution to a situation that had been present long before him, and the transformation continued after his death in the form of his successors, who produced many substantial changes in the latter fourth and early fifth centuries.

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<sup>19</sup> Odahl, 280. The phrase “personal conversion” is his, and is put in quotes here because there is some irony in a historian using a term that was probably not used with the current meaning and emphasis before the modern evangelical movement tracing back to Charles Finney in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or perhaps John Wesley in England in the 18<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> Gonzalez, 124-125.

<sup>21</sup> Odahl, 279. For instance, he describes the Christianization of the popular festivals associated with the Olympian gods, resulting in the Christmas holiday in particular.

## Eusebius

Eusebius (c. 260 – c. 340) was the bishop of Caesarea and wrote “Church History,” which gave the history of Christianity from time of the New Testament to his own day. He was also Constantine’s personal and panegyric biographer.<sup>22</sup> The sheer length and incorporation of many other writings into his historical works makes his books invaluable to students of the early Church, but his perspective must be balanced by an understanding of his limitations, particularly the lack of historical objectivity and accountability to which a modern historian might ascribe.<sup>23</sup> In his effusive praise of Constantine and enthusiasm for the new position of Christianity as a beneficiary of the Empire, he can probably be seen as a spokesperson for the attitude of many fourth-century Christians toward the state. In his *Oration on Constantine* he associated “the stoic ideals of harmony and concord” with the partnership between Christianity and the Empire, and saw the fulfillment of the same prophecy that Irenaeus and Justin quoted: “Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”<sup>24</sup> Swift summarizes that Eusebius “reflects the intense spirit of loyalty” to the new emperor that was present in the majority of the Christian community.<sup>25</sup>

Eusebius’ perspective is a dramatic reversal from the earlier “vision of Rome as a devouring beast at war with God’s saints” which was especially prevalent in times of persecution.<sup>26</sup> He saw the hand of God working simultaneously in both temporal and spiritual

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<sup>22</sup> COD, s.v. “Eusebius.”

<sup>23</sup> Odahl, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Bainton, CA, 87; Isaiah 2:4; cf. Micah 4:3. See Eusebius, “The Oration of Eusebius,” chap. XVI, NPNF, Series II, vol. 1, 606-07.

<sup>25</sup> Swift, 82.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 85.

realms with clear purposes. His view of the emperor saw Constantine, like Augustus before him, “the recognizable agent of God in promoting the welfare of God’s kingdom on earth.”<sup>27</sup> War was a primary means that Constantine used to accomplish this purpose: “...the Savior’s friend [Constantine], armed as he is against his foes with the standards given him by the Savior from above, subdues in battle and chastens the visible enemies of truth.”<sup>28</sup> Constantine called “in prayer upon God who is in heaven, and his Word, even Jesus Christ the Savior of all” and God proved to be his “ally in the most wonderful manner.”<sup>29</sup> There seemed to be no moderation to Eusebius’ perspective on war, as Swift notes that whether the emperor or someone else initiated a conflict effectually determined whether it was just or not. For him the Old Testament wars were more a precedent than a problem.<sup>30</sup>

Another excellent contribution that Swift makes to the topic is his suggestion that Eusebius’ thought reflected the development of a new distinction pertaining to Christians and their active involvement in defending the Empire. Eusebius took Origen’s probably hyperbolic apologetic argument that Christians should fight with the emperor through their prayers to the extreme by describing Constantine’s invitation to Christian bishops to march with his army. Now the distinction between clergy and laity that Origen had hinted at theoretically had become a reality, as Swift explains: “For some Christians who are charged with particular responsibilities and who play a particular role in the Church, the principle of pacifism is absolute; for others...it

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Eusebius, “The Oration of Eusebius,” chap. II, NPNF, Series II, vol. 1, 583.

<sup>29</sup> Eusebius, “Church History,” bk. IX, chap. IX, NPNF, Series II, vol. 1, 363. Cf. Hornus, 178.

<sup>30</sup> Swift, 87. Hornus, 178. makes it clear what he thinks about Eusebius when he says that “Eusebius did not dream of censuring” Licinius’ victorious troops (whom the Christians were supporting) for committing all sorts of atrocities – “In these events he saw a just retribution for the sufferings that the believers had had to endure.”

is not.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the terms of the discussion on war and military service had changed dramatically in just a couple decades, with new considerations for the Church that “made it difficult to endorse the simple solutions of the past.”<sup>32</sup>

### The Later Writings of Lactantius

The later writings of Lactantius, who was reportedly personally invited by Constantine to tutor Constantine’s son, Crispus, reflected a similar change in perspective brought on by the recent events.<sup>33</sup> Like Eusebius, he heaps praises on Constantine not only for his military prowess in winning the battle of Milvian Bridge, but also as the vice-regent of the one true God: “When that most happy day dawned all over the world, when the all high God raised you to the heights of power... You brought back justice... and you expiated the horrible crimes of other rulers.”<sup>34</sup> Lactantius does not explicitly issue a statement in support of Christian involvement in military service or war, but he does make a telling statement about virtue and vice:

These things which God in his wisdom has instilled in man are not evil in themselves. They become so through improper use but are by nature good because they have been given to us for preserving life. Just as courage is good if you are fighting for your country but evil if you are rebelling against it, so too, with the emotions. If you use them for good ends, they will be virtues; if for evil ends, they will be called vices.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Swift, 88.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>33</sup> COD, s.v. “Lactantius.”

<sup>34</sup> Lactantius, “Divine Institutes,” bk. I, chap. I, ANF vol. 7, 10; cf. “Of the Manner in which the Persecutors Died,” chap. XVIII, ANF vol. 7, 308; chap. LII, ANF vol. 7, 322-23. “With great rejoicing, then, let us celebrate the triumph of God; let us extol the victory of the Lord... let us pray that he establish forever the peace that has been granted to his people.”

<sup>35</sup> Lactantius, “Epitome of the Divine Institutes,” ch. LVI, ANF vol. 7, 245.

This philosophical point is, on the surface at least, a considerable departure from the moral logic displayed in his earlier pacifist stance. The inference is that some kinds of war or armed conflict are now permissible for the Constantine-led Empire and by extension for the individual Christian. The fact that Lactantius said nothing about participating in war when he dealt with the precept “Thou shalt not kill” in his *Epitome* supports this inference, considering the many places in his earlier *Divine Institutes* where he did condemn those actions.<sup>36</sup>

### Writings of Church Authorities

The official pronouncements that the Church issued during the fourth century show some of the complexities of the problem of war with which the Church now had to deal.<sup>37</sup> Canon 3 of the Synod of Arles (314 C.E.) said, “Those who throw down their arms in time of peace are to be separated from the community.” There has been much scholarly debate on the wording of the Latin text of this canon and its meaning, but either way it is a concession by the Church of the need for Christians to serve in the military and contribute to the wellbeing of the Empire.<sup>38</sup> The

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<sup>36</sup> Swift, 65.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 90-92, has the best summary of the debate and the reasoning behind each viewpoint. The main point of contention is whether the phrase “in time of peace” means a period “in which no military campaigns are under way” or “when there is no persecution” of the church by the state. Pacifist commentators (cf. especially Hornus, 171-78; see also Campenhausen, 167-68) espouse the former option because it holds to the distinction between police work and military service, and because it preserves continuity with the perceived pacifist position of the pre-Constantinian church (in other words, it carries the assumption that Christian soldiers would not have killed in battle either way). Swift argues persuasively for the latter option, especially as evidence that the church was making an effort to deal with existing realities and with the demands placed on Christians by their new position in the empire. Without a more specific context for the canon, it is probably impossible to know for sure which side is correct, but Swift may have the stronger argument for several reasons: (1) It corresponds with the assumption that the perspectives of Eusebius, and especially Lactantius are representative of the majority of the church, at least that part of the church in the Roman West; (2) it is a more realistic position that even in the third century Christian soldiers at least occasionally had to deal with the possibility of combat and killing, rather than Campenhausen’s

“The Canons of the Church of Alexandria” (c. 336-340) seem to be decisively pacifist in saying that a Christian should not become a soldier unless compelled to do so, and should not shed blood even if he has a sword, but then allow provisions by which such a Christian could make penance and be readmitted into the community.<sup>39</sup> As Swift points out, this is basically an admission that the reality of the fourth century was that some Christians were soldiers, some may have been forced to take the life of others in combat, and that a new approach was needed to address this apparently pastoral concern.<sup>40</sup>

Some of the Eastern Church fathers made comments in their writings that reflected this gradual shift that was taking place during this time. The theologian Basil the Great (c. 329-379), one of the Cappadocian fathers, seemed to hold to the requirement for penance that the previous canons had established, opposing violence as a whole but distinguishing murder from war “fought on the side of moderation and piety.”<sup>41</sup> In another letter, this one to a soldier, he speaks positively about the compatibility of the military profession with the Christian faith: “...it is possible even in the military profession to maintain perfect love for God and that a Christian

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perspective (165) that all Christians followed after Origen and “never actually enter[ed] the field of battle, even if the Emperor demand[ed] it;” (3) Swift’s tendency to think “that the distinction between police work and military campaigns was [never] a meaningful one for Christians in the early centuries of the church” and (4) the unlikely scenario of any emperor ever endorsing or tolerating an arrangement where a significant percentage of his army served in peace but deserted at the first sign of war.

<sup>39</sup> “The Canons of the Church of Alexandria,” ANF vol. 5, 257. These works, also known as the canons attributed to Hippolytus, were compiled and published much later, at some undetermined date in the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>40</sup> Swift, 93. Just the fact that this was a pastoral concern indicates decisively that this was an issue for the church in a way that it had not been previously in the third century. Common sense would deduce that one or both of the following were true: (1) There were a greater number of professing Christians serving in the military during this time; and (2) those Christians were more closely involved with the life of their church.

<sup>41</sup> Basil the Great, “Letter CLXXXVIII,” sec. XIII, NPNF, Series II, vol. 8, 228.

ought to be characterized not by the clothes he wears but by the disposition of his soul.”<sup>42</sup>

Athanasius (c. 296-373) drew a clear line between murder and killing in battle, calling the latter both lawful and worthy of praise, and made the point that “at one particular time, and under one set of circumstances, an act is not permitted, but when the time and conditions are right, it is both allowed and condoned.”<sup>43</sup> This subjective and conditional nature of allowing war and Christian involvement in it in particular now becomes the key issue. It is not the Eastern fathers who took it to the next level of development, but the fathers in the West, especially Ambrose and Augustine.<sup>44</sup>

#### Second Stage – Ambrose (Mid to Late 4<sup>th</sup> Century)

Ambrose (c. 339-97) was a provincial Roman governor who was asked to become the bishop of Milan in 373 or 374 even before he had been baptized. He was partially responsible for Augustine’s conversion and exercised a great deal of authority with several emperors.<sup>45</sup> Neil McLynn says that Ambrose’s political influence sets him apart from his contemporaries in the Church and “his name carried weight in a world normally considered” to belong to Roman senators, courtiers and generals.<sup>46</sup> Bainton presumes from this background that Ambrose, who was the first to attempt to formulate a Christian ethic of just war, “never entertained any scruples

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<sup>42</sup> Basil the Great, “Letter CVI,” NPNF, Series II, vol. 8, 186.

<sup>43</sup> Athanasius, “Letter XLVIII: Letter to Amun,” NPNF, Series II, vol. 4, 567.

<sup>44</sup> Swift, 95-96.

<sup>45</sup> COD, s.v. “Ambrose, St.”

<sup>46</sup> Neil B. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: Church and Court in a Christian Capital*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), XIII.

against military service.”<sup>47</sup> Swift expands by saying that Ambrose’s “attitude on war and violence were much influenced by Roman sentiments of justice, loyalty, courage, and public responsibility.”<sup>48</sup> The fact that the barbarian forces beginning to threaten the Empire during the latter part of the fourth century were also considered heathen and pagan meant for him that Christian participation in war was justified because they were protecting the faith as well as the Empire.<sup>49</sup>

Like earlier authors, Ambrose does not issue a treatise on military service or war, but he does show a couple of significant developments that would become foundational for Augustine’s thinking. Ambrose’s concept of just war was not a new formulation, but a borrowing from Stoic philosophy combined with Ambrose’s own reflections on the Old Testament.<sup>50</sup> It is clear that Ambrose considered participation in war of a different nature than fighting for personal gain: “Everyone believes it is much more commendable to protect one’s country from destruction than to protect oneself from danger.”<sup>51</sup> In this, he made a clear division between civil wars and wars against barbarians, putting a priority on keeping orthodoxy and maintaining the Empire’s security.<sup>52</sup> He followed Cicero’s explanation of traditional Roman principles closely when he

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<sup>47</sup> Bainton, CA, 89.

<sup>48</sup> Swift, 97-98.

<sup>49</sup> Bainton, CA, 90. See Ambrose, “On the Duties of the Clergy,” bk. I, chap. XXVII, NPNF, Series II, vol. 10, 22: “For courage, which in war preserves one’s country from the barbarians, or at home defends the weak, or comrades from robbers, is full of justice.”

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ambrose, “On the Duties of the Clergy,” bk. III, chap. III, NPNF, Series II, vol. 10, 71.

<sup>52</sup> Swift, 98-99. Swift cautions against pressing this point about Ambrose too hard because Ambrose “did not endorse the killing of unorthodox believers” and reconsidered his perspective when “he thought he saw the hand of God assisting the imperial armies against barbarian heretics.”

insisted on the clear distinctions between just and unjust conflicts and in identifying the conditions that ought to govern both the justification of entering into war (Latin: *ius belli*) and whether a war is conducted justly (Latin: *ius in bello*).<sup>53</sup>

Ambrose's unique contribution of Christian thinking to the discussion came from his balancing of the Old Testament wars with his understanding of the spirit of the gospel message.<sup>54</sup> He "takes it for granted that that such [Old Testament] conflicts are clear evidence that not all wars are immoral." He moderates this perspective by appealing to the differences between the old and new laws, where the old calls for vengeance but the gospel commands believers to return love for hostility.<sup>55</sup> On a personal level, violent self-defense is completely unacceptable, and Ambrose appeals directly to the gospel of Matthew when he makes the point that "it does not seem to me that a Christian who is both wise and just should try to save his own life at the expense of another's...lest in the act of protecting himself he weaken the virtue of love."<sup>56</sup> Ambrose here seems to be echoing closely the essentially pacific teaching of the earlier fathers. In addition, Ambrose did exactly what Origen had hinted at by relegating Christian pacifism, not just to the private and personal morality of individual Christians, but also to the clerical sphere: "The thought of warlike matters seems to be foreign to the duty of our office, for we have our thoughts fixed more on the duty of the soul than on that of the body, nor is it our business to look to arms but rather to the forces of peace."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ambrose, "On the Duties of the Clergy," bk. I, chap. XXXV, NPNF, Series II, vol. 10, 30. See Swift, 99.

<sup>54</sup> Bainton, 90. See, for example, Ambrose, "On the Duties of the Clergy," bk. III, chap. VIII, NPNF, Series II, vol. 10, 75.

<sup>55</sup> Swift, 100.

<sup>56</sup> Ambrose, "On the Duties of the Clergy," bk. III, chap. IV, NPNF, Series II, vol. 10, 71.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., bk. I, chap. XXXV, NPNF, Series II, vol. 10, 30. See Bainton, 90.

Ambrose goes beyond his earlier predecessors definitively when he issues a statement that becomes a critical point “for all subsequent discussion of the problem of war” in the context of Christian thinking.<sup>58</sup> For him the situation of personal self-defense changes drastically with the introduction of a third party that may need protection:

The glory that courage brings resides not only in strength of arm and body but in the virtue of the soul, and the essence of virtue is not to be found in inflicting injury but in preventing it. For anyone who does not prevent an injury to a companion, if he can do so, is as much at fault as he who inflicts it.<sup>59</sup>

He goes on to cite the example of Moses killing the Egyptian who injured a fellow Jew, making it clear that he is not thinking solely of passive resistance.<sup>60</sup> Ambrose thus maintains that there are some circumstances in which violence and love are not mutually exclusive. Ambrose does not clarify the precise ways “in which the use of force can be reconciled in an individual’s conscience with the Gospel precepts about loving enemies and turning the other cheek.”<sup>61</sup> It is safe to say, however, that Ambrose in dealing with the military question in a different way than the earlier fathers threw the door wide open for Augustine to further develop the Christian idea of a just war.

### Third Stage – Augustine (Early 5th century)

Augustine (c. 354-430) was baptized by Ambrose in 387 and unwillingly ordained first as priest (391) of Hippo, then as bishop (395). His vast number of written works and his proximity to the Western Church during a period of formalizing ecclesiastical rule and orthodox theology

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<sup>58</sup> Swift, 102.

<sup>59</sup> Ambrose, “On the Duties of the Clergy,” bk. I, chap. XXXVI, NPNF, Series II, vol. 10, 30.

<sup>60</sup> Swift, 102.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

makes his influence on subsequent Western theology immense.<sup>62</sup> The formulation of the Christian concept of just war is one such contribution to Western thought, which influenced late medieval ideas of war and peace in profound ways even though it would not become the official doctrine of the Church until at least the twelfth century.<sup>63</sup> Despite being a contemporary of Ambrose, Bainton explained that Augustine's personal background and outlook were quite different:

Augustine was an African with a deep sense of the wrongs of the conquered. He was at the same time a Roman, speaking Latin not Punic. He was the heir of classical antiquity, quoting Cicero even while berating him. Yet Augustine was a Christian...steeped in the writings of the age of persecution...at the same time a member of the Church catholic, coextensive with the Empire and allied with the state.<sup>64</sup>

For Augustine, the relation of Christianity to Roman society, and particularly the question of Christian involvement in war and peace, was a difficult question.

Augustine has contributed more on this topic, in volume and import, than any other author from the early Church. However, despite the fact that the topic of war came up frequently in Augustine's writings, he never composed a treatise about it.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, his opinions about the subject must be extracted from a variety of works, all written in different contexts and some in different genres.<sup>66</sup> Swift accurately says that "there is little in his writing on war which springs

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<sup>62</sup> COD, s.v. "Augustine, St., of Hippo."

<sup>63</sup> Johnson, QP, 57-58.

<sup>64</sup> Bainton, CA, 91.

<sup>65</sup> Swift, 110. Cf. Hugh T. McElwain, *St. Augustine's Doctrine on War in Relation to Earlier Ecclesiastical Writers* (Chicago: 1972), 77.

<sup>66</sup> Augustine's works include sermons, letters, commentaries, theological treatises, and apologetic writings. For a list of "the principal works which contain his ideas on war and the circumstances which occasioned these works," see McElwain, 80ff.

from theoretical musings or from a dispassionate examination of the question.”<sup>67</sup> Augustine’s contribution was something much different than a doctrine or code of war – his approach to the topic was a combination of attitudes about historical events, responses to particular issues, and statements about certain dimensions of the problem. He also brought to the discussion a number of presuppositions that affected his outlook, his philosophy, and his theology. These presuppositions will be examined, followed by an explanation of his six conditions for the waging of a just war that can be gleaned from his various writings.<sup>68</sup>

The first two presuppositions of Augustine are closely related and stem from the notably somber mood of his perspective toward humanity and the world. First, he “had abandoned his belief in the possibility of Christian perfection on earth.”<sup>69</sup> This outlook was coupled with the vanishing of the dream of peace in the world. Augustine was profoundly influenced by both the external reality of the barbarian armies invading the Empire and the internal reality of the original sin of humankind. Both made the realization of any kind of pacifist utopia in the present world completely unattainable. It is probably impossible to overestimate the importance of original sin in Augustine’s perspective on war, peace and the civic order. Even in relation to

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<sup>67</sup> Swift, 111.

<sup>68</sup> It is readily apparent with a thesis of this length that it is impossible to include all or even most of Augustine’s comments on the topic of war. It is also difficult to explain all of the various contexts for Augustine’s views. For that the reader should be referred to Swift, 110-149, in which he includes extensive quotations by Augustine and sufficient explanations of context. For more depth of commentary on the topic, see McElwain, esp. 77-124, or William R. Stevenson, Jr., *Christian Love and Just War: Moral Paradox and Political Life in St. Augustine and His Modern Interpreters* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987).

<sup>69</sup> Bainton, CA, 91. This difference in Augustine’s later mood compared to earlier in his life is reflected in his writings.

Christ's salvation, human appetite for sin and selfishness in attitude and action is irresistible, which Augustine summed up with the memorable phrase "the lust for domination."<sup>70</sup>

Similar to the first two presuppositions is Augustine's emphasis on the inwardness of ethics, which contributed to the justification of outward violence. In theological terms this is called the dichotomy of body and spirit, and it dominated Augustine's view of humankind and salvation. According to the ideal, all people would submit to the natural order of divine providence, in which there is no place for war. However, as Hugh T. McElwain says:

Because of the sinister machinations and crying outrages committed by [humans]... [and the subversion of] the order imposed by the eternal law, [humankind] strikes a dissonant note in the harmonious masterpiece which God intended the world to be... war appears as nothing more or less than a measure taken by the Sovereign Judge to counteract the upheaval of the natural order which [humans] bring about according to the degree of [their] injustice.<sup>71</sup>

Corresponding with the dualism of humankind, which has been called "the pull of nature and the pull of perversion," is the dualism of God's perspective on human beings: The natural order which is the workings of nature as God originally intended, and God's will as active in the world which includes the historical and political order which God ordained as ruler of the affairs of fallen humankind.<sup>72</sup> Thus, God intended for civic order to be the means of punishing evildoers and restraining wickedness in the world.<sup>73</sup>

Augustine described this inward human dualism symbolically by classifying all people "either as citizens of the City of God (i.e. believers following the word of God) or as citizens of

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<sup>70</sup> Swift, 111.

<sup>71</sup> McElwain, 103-04.

<sup>72</sup> Stevenson, Jr., 65.

<sup>73</sup> Swift, 111.

the earthly city (lovers of self).<sup>74</sup>” This distinction, similar to Origen’s basic perspective, nevertheless loses the practical realism characterized by Origen because Augustine had lost hope in the Church remaining separate from the world. The Church on earth is not directly equated to the church in heaven, “for the Church below is the field in which the tares grow together with the wheat until the harvest.”<sup>75</sup> Augustine’s pessimism about the Church contributed to his expectation that it would play a stronger role in shaping society than Origen had ever envisioned. Augustine foresaw a partnership of Church and Empire, but unlike Eusebius who “pointed to the Caesaropapism of the East...Augustine looked toward the papal theocracy of the West” for the key leadership in the arrangement.<sup>76</sup>

With these presuppositions, a clearer picture begins to emerge from Augustine’s comments on war. He is responding to two specific situations: The larger situation is the sack of Rome by Alaric in 411, after which many pagan critics blamed Christianity itself; and the continuing inroads by the barbarians into the Roman Empire, which was approaching Africa and only the Roman legions held them at bay from Augustine’s homeland.<sup>77</sup> It is this personal experience with the cruel realities of war that led Augustine to believe so firmly in the need for war in the quest of peace: “In the very act of fighting every man is pursuing peace; nobody, on the other hand, makes peace in order to have war.”<sup>78</sup> When Boniface, the Roman general in Africa, desired to retire and become a monk, Augustine counseled him against it:

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>75</sup> Bainton, CA, 92.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 92-93.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>78</sup> Augustine, “City of God,” bk. XIX, ch. XII, NPNF, Series I, vol. 2, 407. Cf. Swift, 114.

Peace should be the object of your desire; war should be waged only as a necessity, and waged only that God may by it deliver men from the necessity and preserve them in peace. For peace is not sought in order to the kindling of war, but war is waged in order that peace may be obtained. Therefore, even in waging war, cherish the spirit of a peacemaker, that, by conquering those whom you attack, you may lead them back to the advantages of peace.<sup>79</sup>

Augustine saw the peacemaking soldier as occupying a lower place before God than the monks, but one of equal importance in maintaining God's order in the world.<sup>80</sup> Augustine argued, like Ambrose before him, that the inward spirit of love and outward violence are not mutually exclusive, and this principle is the heart of his just war concept.<sup>81</sup> However, war is a last resort, as a letter to the ambassador Darius spells out: "Preventing war through persuasion and seeking or attaining peace through peaceful means rather than through war are more glorious things than slaying men with the sword."<sup>82</sup>

Augustine's response to the larger question of Christianity's culpability in the sack of Rome led him to conclude that states rise and fall on their virtues and vices and "that Rome was but receiving at the hands of the barbarians the treatment which she had inflicted on others."<sup>83</sup> He did not carry this all the way to the conclusion that the fall of Rome was God's retribution, because he saw Constantine's conversion as a decisive break in the corruption of the Empire. He saw some hope for the realization of justice, and because he saw the Empire as Christian, the Church could give guidance and Christians could fight in the army. In another age or under a different kind of emperor, Augustine's dualistic philosophy might have led him to withdraw

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<sup>79</sup> Augustine, "Letter CLXXXIX," sec. 6, NPNF, Series I, vol. 1, 554.

<sup>80</sup> Bainton, CA, 93.

<sup>81</sup> Swift, 123.

<sup>82</sup> Augustine, "Letter CCXXIX," sec. 2, NPNF, Series I, vol. 1, 582.

<sup>83</sup> Bainton, CA, 94.

from the world.<sup>84</sup> As it happened, even his defense of just wars was tempered considerably by his own sorrow about the situation:

They tell us, however, that the wise man will wage just wars...[but] unless the wars were just, he would not have to wage them...It is the other side's wrongdoing that compels the wise man to wage just wars, and even if that wrongdoing gave rise to no unavoidable conflicts, it should cause man sorrow because man is responsible for it. Let everyone grieve when he thinks about the truly shocking and cruel evils involved here, and let him acknowledge his miserable state.<sup>85</sup>

As Swift summarizes, both the wrongdoing of the other side and the necessity that compels the wise person to take up arms are a result of sin. For Augustine, though there was “a real difference between just and unjust wars, the ultimate truth of the matter is that in an imperfect world the just man...is often forced to choose among evils.”<sup>86</sup> This pessimism led him to conclude that, as Swift says, “Neither history nor man's moral predicament offers hope for a world free of war.”<sup>87</sup>

Understanding Augustine's outlook on the world and humanity in general, and his perspective on violence and peace in particular, gives a framework within which Augustine's six conditions for a just war fit relatively neatly. (1) War must have a just cause, or a right intent, which Augustine said must always be peace; (2) the object must be to vindicate justice, or in other words, to avenge injuries; (3) war must be just in disposition, which is not incompatible with violence and killing because love is an inward disposition; (4) war must be just in its auspices, or under the legitimate authority of the ruler; (5) the conduct of war must be just, i.e. no looting, massacre, or other atrocities may be committed; and (6) only those in public authority

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>85</sup> Augustine, “City of God,” bk. XIX, ch. VII, NPNF, Series I, vol. 2, 405. See Swift, 116.

<sup>86</sup> Swift, 116..

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 119.

may take life, never private citizens acting in their own self-interest.<sup>88</sup> These points were basically taken from the just war concept of classical antiquity, with the exception of the third point, which Augustine added, and the sixth point, which he contrasts to the Roman civil law supporting self-defense. Bainton identifies three distinctives of Augustine's theory: War should only be motivated by love; justice resides on only one side of the war; and that like the judge, the general must have a somber, even mournful mood about his responsibility as part of the coercive activities of the state.<sup>89</sup>

### Conclusion

There are several considerations which seem to be prevalent in the modern conception of the historical development of Christian just war thought. Each of these assumptions or oversimplifications will be addressed in turn. First, in the words of C.J. Cadoux, is "the impression that the Church took a false step when she abandoned her earlier and more rigorous principles," or in other words, that the just war concept was such a radical reversal of the Church's earlier pacifism that they were complete opposites on the moral and philosophical spectrums.<sup>90</sup> This will be discussed further in the final chapter, but suffice to say here Johnson is correct, at least in the most basic sense, when he says that the difference "between Christian just war theory and Christian pacifism" does not have anything to do with a different attitude toward

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<sup>88</sup> See Bainton, CA, 96-98 for a summary of these points. Obviously, not all of the just war theories that have been developed by the various parties since Augustine, Christian or not, use all of Augustine's points, though Christian just war theorists at least usually find "just cause," "legitimate authority," and "right intention" as three of the main criteria for evaluating a just war. For a more thorough discussion, see Stevenson, 1-9.

<sup>89</sup> Bainton, CA, 98.

<sup>90</sup> Cadoux, ECW, 263.

warfare, for “both regard it with suspicion as something less than the ideal to be reached in the kingdom of Christ.”<sup>91</sup> On the contrary, Christian just war thought is an attempt by Christians to deal with the changed reality of the Church’s situation and come up with a workable solution to a complex dilemma that strived to stay true to the essence of the gospel. Then perhaps the Christian just war concept can be evaluated morally and spiritually on its own merits and not just in comparison to the staunch pacifism of the early Church that it allegedly rebelled against.

The second assumption is one that stems from the general conception of Augustine as the father of Christian just war thought. While there is a lot of truth to such a picture, it is inaccurate in that Augustine was not the genesis of the idea. In fact, even Ambrose, who Augustine seemed to borrow directly from in his foundational thinking, was not the first, but traces can be found in Eusebius and the later writings of Lactantius as well. Following closely from this picture of Augustine as father of the concept is the erroneous assumption that it was an original idea. It has been clearly demonstrated that both Ambrose and Augustine borrowed heavily from the just war concept of Roman Stoicism as well as from the wars of the Old Testament. It is inaccurate to suggest that Augustine’s idea of just war was independent of any connection from Rome, or on the other hand that his thought represented “a capitulation to the ideals of secular society.”<sup>92</sup> Johnson continues, “This is not to demean Augustine’s critical thinking about morality and war, but only to suggest that its originality and significance ought not be blown out of proportion.”<sup>93</sup>

Another similar misconception reads back into history the developed doctrine of just war that emerged in the thinking of the Church definitively with the canon lawyer Gratian in the

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<sup>91</sup> Johnson, QP, 52.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 58.

twelfth century and Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth. This perspective naively assumes that for Augustine it was a similarly developed and coherent system. On a basic level, Augustine's work was a genuine synthesis between Roman just war ideas and Christian morality. The enduring precedent of Augustine's thought was that it provided the model for what a synthesis between Christian morality and a secular philosophy might look like on a matter of significant moral and cultural importance for the Church. He also provided the fundamental terms or concepts around which a later synthesis could be formed.<sup>94</sup> In this respect, Augustine is better seen as the person who solidified the terms for the debate for centuries to come, but he did not attempt to settle that debate in a decisive or final way by systematically developing a theory or law.

The last assumption follows closely from the first, and that is the idea that with the emergence of Christian just war thinking pacifist sentiments entirely disappeared from the fourth century Church. Such is not the case. In addition to the prohibition of clerical involvement in war, there were several instances of either refusal to serve in the military or refusal to fight in a battle. Most notable is that of Martin of Tours who refused to fight in a battle despite having served in the army for some time.<sup>95</sup> At this point, there is no qualification needed concerning the risk of idolatry, for such a decision could only have been made with pacifist motives.<sup>96</sup> The monastic traditions continued the nonmilitary ways of the early Christians by withdrawing from society at large and interpreting their pacifism as vocational.<sup>97</sup> Swift observed with fascination "how some of the arguments against militarism which were posed in the earlier period reappear

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Bainton, CA, 88.

<sup>96</sup> Swift, 149ff. He provides the minor exception of the twenty month reign of Julian the Apostate, who persecuted the church during that time.

<sup>97</sup> Bainton, CA, 89.

after Christian participation in war is taken for granted.” Much of this evidence is found in liturgical and hagiographical writings during the latter fourth and early fifth century, and bears witness that the pacific attitude of the early Church did not disappear as thoroughly as some have thought.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Swift, 149ff.

## CHAPTER 5:

### CONCLUSION

When Cambridge graduate student James F. Bethune-Baker wrote his dissertation about *The Influence of Christianity on War* in 1888 it is very unlikely that he could have imagined the scholarly firestorm that would embroil the subject over the next several decades. In fact, one can argue that his essay, the winner of the Burney Prize in 1887, was the only work not written from a confessional perspective or notable bias for nearly a whole century. It is striking that an evaluation of the scholarly work on the topic produces a beneficial case study of historical hermeneutics just as useful to the aspiring historian as a case study of the ethics of pacifism versus just war theory does for the ethicist or moralist. This final chapter will focus first on methodological considerations including a critical analysis of the scholarly debate to this point, the common hermeneutical mistakes and some suggestions for how to avoid them; and finally, this chapter will make some comments toward finding an ethical common ground between Christian pacifism and just war thought in the twenty-first century.

The first methodological concern has primarily to do with terminology. John Howard Yoder points out, with some frustration, that the word ‘pacifism’ has many meanings.<sup>1</sup> Pacifism usually means a refusal to war, but it has occasionally (if not frequently) been used patronizingly

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<sup>1</sup> Yoder, WMP, 91-92.

to label politicians or government leaders “who considered war not immoral or illegal but inopportune.” Pacifism has also been used disparagingly to describe religious sects that have withdrawn “from the world and all its ills.”<sup>2</sup> Some might avoid the label because they do not want ‘peace at any cost.’ Others may claim to be pacifist by thoroughly condemning killing in self-defense, but do not categorically extend this injunction to corporate or government-sanctioned violence, sometimes choosing to evaluate the morality of killing on a case-by-case basis. James T. Johnson gives another possible definition to those who have a “utopian vision of peace as a possible political program under a new world order,” which ironically would need violence and coercion to impose that political order and to police it.<sup>3</sup>

Ronald Musto suggests abandoning the defense of the term, but neither he nor Yoder propose an alternate term that would be more helpful. Other words used as alternates – ‘peace,’ ‘anti-war,’ ‘non-violence’ – are no more specific in common usage. For his own use, Yoder defines ‘pacifism’ as “the moral rejection of war as incompatible with fidelity to Jesus Christ as Lord.”<sup>4</sup> Yoder also contributes to a broader understanding of the spectrum of pacifism when he identified several different kinds in the book *Nevertheless: A Meditation on the Varieties and Shortcomings of Religious Pacifism*. It is rarely helpful to attempt to bring a diversity of perspectives and motivations under the umbrella of one title or phrase. The problem is that hearers who have been exposed to only one type will ascribe the viewpoint and motive of that type to the whole category. What would be helpful is if historians, scholars, and leaders took the extra time to describe carefully a particular perspective rather than labeling it with a catch-all

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, QP, XIII-XV. Summarized by Yoder, WMP, 91-92.

<sup>4</sup> Yoder, WMP, 92.

term. Too many writers use labels without properly defining their meaning and range of usage. Such authors leave behind a mountain of terminology to sift through in order to precisely glean the intended message.

The term 'just war' has been beset by similar difficulties, if less severe in nature. Historically, it is generally understood that 'Christian just war' refers to Augustine's thinking regarding the right to declare war and the waging of it, which was given more concrete definition and application by authorities in the Catholic Church. In the modern era, though, there are many different perspectives on Christian just war. For example, the Methodist understanding of just war is substantively different from the Catholic understanding of it.<sup>5</sup> Pacifist critics incisively question just war thinkers on the many difficult applications of just war thought to the rapidly evolving technology of warfare and the many different reasons for wars that have occurred in recent decades. It is difficult, if not impossible, to take Augustine's 'six conditions for a just war' and faithfully and determinedly apply them to a contemporary situation without considering, for example, nuclear armaments, interrogation strategies, or advantaged espionage tactics.

If one allows that the early Church was not uniformly and staunchly pacifist, there is also the problem of what to call those believers who apparently reconciled their understanding of the gospel of Jesus with service in the Roman military which probably required them to condone and even engage in war and the killing of others. Although Swift is careful to give a fair and nuanced description of the people who held this stance, he probably does not help the discussion by labeling them 'non-pacifist,' a term which has been utilized many times by authors when talking

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<sup>5</sup> See Cahill, 2-8, for an examination of these differences based on twentieth century confessional documents produced by the two church organizations.

about the situation in the early Church.<sup>6</sup> The label, if true in a general sense, is misleading in what it implies: That non-pacifists are opposed to pacifism, or, one might even infer, that they are in support of war and killing and see no problem with it whatsoever. Such an assumption is likely a gross overstatement, and makes no distinction at all between a soldier who sees no contradiction between a personal Christian faith and the killing of an enemy soldier in battle, or a soldier who serves in time of peace and effectually carries out the civic duty of a police officer. Swift is correct when he noted that there is no evidence of how many ‘non-pacifists’ there were or how they managed to resolve “the inherent contradiction” writers like Tertullian and Origen saw “between military service and Christian principles of love.”<sup>7</sup> Some people in this nebulous group could be accurately described as ‘modified pacifists’ or even ‘not-as-staunch pacifists,’ if the point of reference is the stricter pacifism of the Church fathers.

At the beginning of this thesis, I provided basic definitions for Christian pacifism and just war thought as they have emerged throughout history. I have attempted to show that it is possible to engage in a study of historical attitudes without resorting constantly to modern labels. For this reason, I have postponed an in-depth discussion of these definitions until this point. The limitations of language require the use of common terminology such as ‘pacifism’ and ‘just war,’ particularly in reference to the modern confessional debates, but I have tried to nuance these perspectives with appropriate and descriptive alternate terms and elaborative phrases. Even in contemporary usage, ‘pacifism’ and ‘just war’ are not two extremes on one moral axis. Just war thought has much in common with pacifism. It is motivated by a desire for peace and a commitment to avoid war whenever possible. Of course, pacifist critics may object, saying that

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<sup>6</sup> Swift, 28.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 28-29.

some just war theorists sanction war far too frequently or enthusiastically. However, other just war thinkers endeavoring to live out the message of love and peace presented in the New Testament scriptures will say that those who frequently sanction war without careful thought of just war criteria are ‘just war’ in name only. In any event, the outcomes of moral and ethical perspectives cannot be contained or described in simplistic labels.

It may be helpful at this point to attempt to summarize the thrust of this thesis in a couple paragraphs while attempting to avoid ‘pacifism,’ ‘just war,’ and related terms. In the first 150 years or so of the Church’s existence, the problem of war and participation in the military did not present an impending challenge or dilemma for the Church’s constituents. Christianity was considered an offshoot of Judaism and as a minority group held itself aloof from many facets of Roman society and government. Christians were generally not drafted or pressured into the military, and if soldiers became converted, it was rare enough that there is no extant correspondence or instruction about whether they were to proceed in the military. Church writers echoed the pacific themes of both the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament gospels but found no occasion to speak out prohibitively against military service. During the third century, as Christianity distanced itself from Judaism and its members grew in number and in social influence in the Roman Empire, numbers of Christians in the military seemed to increase gradually and steadily. Church fathers such as Origen and Tertullian responded to this by generally condemning Christian participation in the military for at least two major reasons, the prevalence of idolatry in the army and an aversion to killing. They did not, however, issue a treatise on peacemaking or roundly condemn war.

In conjunction with Constantine’s supposed conversion to Christianity, his ascent to the throne over his rivals who had been actively persecuting Christians in the Empire led to the

Christian masses generally seeing him as a savior and crowning him the first Christian emperor. The account of the Christian historian Eusebius and the presence of Lactantius, a former advocate of peace, in Constantine's circle supported this idea. For the first time, the interests of the Church were aligning with those of the state, and it became necessary for the authorities of the Church to attempt to reconcile the message of the gospel with the Roman Empire's need for self-protection and governance. Ambrose originated the idea that the Church would only support a war that was waged justly. Augustine identified six primary criteria for determining whether a war was just and necessary. Even though he was somewhat pessimistic about the hope of God's kingdom being realized under the government of the Roman state, the advance of the barbarian armies in many parts of the Empire made self-preservation a real concern for the newly allied Church. Even if this was the majority view within the Church, there were still groups – particularly monastic orders and churches in the East – that chose more stringently to avoid war and service in the military.

I have previously said that wading through the scholarly study on this topic requires a constant unraveling and uncovering of assumptions and implications in order to discover the reality of the situation. The sometimes egregious overstatements made by certain scholars need to be corrected as a result of this process. I would like to summarize these overstatements in chronological order, as they closely correspond with the particular historical phase of the Church's existence.

During the earliest period of the Church following the close of the New Testament, there is an almost complete lack of evidence regarding Christian involvement in the military. Pacifist scholars have generally assumed without any qualifications that this is indicative of no Christians in the army. Such scholars have also assumed that Christians did not join the military for moral

reasons, specifically an aversion to killing and war. A few ambitious just war theorists have tried to show that the lack of evidence actually indicated an assumed approval of participation in the army. In response to both sides, there are a number of factors why military service did not present a problem for Christians, and these same factors may have little in common with moral considerations. Christians were a minority in the Empire who distrusted the Roman government and did not initially submerge themselves in Roman society. During much of this era, the Roman Empire was at peace and had little need to draft or pressure Christians into military service. Ascribing an essentially pacifist motive is almost certainly an oversimplification which obscures and minimizes other possible motives. In particular, idolatry was prevalent in the army and may have been a significant deterrent to Christians serving in the military, even in times of peace.

For the next 150 years or so up to the time of Constantine, there is evidence of Christians joining the military in progressively greater numbers. The pacifist historians see these Christian soldiers as not representative of the Church's ethic, even outcasts that may not have been members of a congregation or allowed to fellowship with other believers. Pacifists also saw the teachings of Church writers like Tertullian and Origen to be indicative of the Church's overall attitude and teaching about war and killing. However, there is not enough direct or statistical evidence to substantiate either claim about the period in question. In fact, it is probably a more appropriate summation of the situation to say that there were a plurality of stances and attitudes toward war and military service. These may have varied depending on region, local church leadership, individual moral preference or exposure to Christian teaching, or the prevalence of idolatry in a certain part of the army.

Just war thinkers jump on this new evidence in two ways: More Christians in the military showed a change in the Church's stance toward war, and those who avoided military service

were primarily and perhaps solely motivated by a decision to avoid idolatry. In response to the latter implication, the situation was probably more complex. There were at least two significant objections to military service and these objections were not mutually exclusive. Even one individual could conceivably hold both objections, and hold them to be of equal import. As to the former claim, the aforementioned pluralism is a more likely explanation, and there is not enough objective evidence to support an extreme and exclusive opinion. Just war analysts also alight on the fact that there is no extant instruction from church authorities for soldiers to leave the military when they were converted, arguing that this points to a condoning of military service. It is more likely that few soldiers were converted, those that did were separated from congregations while in the service, and it could have been difficult to leave even if they had wanted to.

Pacifist thinkers go to great lengths to show that the Church fathers' teachings were intended to be absolute prohibitions against war and killing and not just opposed to military service. In general, however, the patristics' instructions were more nuanced and subjected to the particular elements to which they were responding in a given document. In particular, Tertullian was probably more staunchly anti-war, but talked about military service in other contexts – such as idolatry – and seemed to concede that there were a number of Christians who had reconciled their understanding of the Christian faith with service in the military. Origen's modified pacifism nevertheless allowed for the Empire to defend itself by engaging in war, suggested that Christians participate in wars spiritually through prayer for the Emperor and his armies, and seemed to allow for a possible separation among Christians between those of more rigorous and idealistic moral and spiritual focus and those who were more immersed in the concerns of daily life in Roman society. To pigeonhole either of these authors into a strict modern pacifism is to

perpetuate a misunderstanding of their teaching and instruction and the contexts in which they wrote.

Just war teachers are quick to respond by asserting that the Church fathers were idealists whose views did not align with the majority of the Church. It is, in fact, difficult to argue that they were spokespeople for the whole Church and that all Christians uniformly recognized or followed their teaching. However, any honest assessment of the situation must recognize that the Church fathers were influential for the Church. Their letters and writings were probably circulated among the churches in many regions, as had been the custom since the time of Paul in the New Testament. It is equally difficult to make the Christians serving in the military to be normative of the Church's teachings about war, as they were probably a minority and produced no writings or documents to speak of. The best explanation, then, is to allow for a pluralism of possible teachings and stances within the Church. There may have been a large number of Christians who took the Church fathers' warnings about military service, killing, and idolatry to heart and acted accordingly. There may also have been a large number of Christians who served in the military without any problem of moral conscience as a result. It does not require historical gymnastics or assumptions to assume the normative element of one group over the other when both groups obviously existed in some form without prohibiting the other's existence.

Another assumption that both pacifist and just war scholars have agreed on somewhat uncritically is the idea that the post-Constantinian Church was universally in support of just war without any significant detractors or exceptions. Some proponents of just war thought – and a few particularly despairing pacifists – have even gone beyond this to say that after Constantine, the Church was universally anti-pacifist and that pacifism virtually disappeared from the Church for over a thousand years. Although just war thought is a considerable modification of pacifism,

and even uses different methodologies and moral principles as a basis for its thinking, they still belong to the same general family of Christian morality that seeks to eliminate the reality of war entirely or at least severely limit its horrific effects on the world. To say that just war is equal or tantamount to anti-pacifism is a gross misrepresentation.

Historically, it bears mentioning again that resolute pacifist witnesses did not vanish from the Church after the time of Constantine or Augustine. For a considerable time they may have been relegated to the fringes of the Empire and the Catholic Church, particularly in the Eastern Church and the monastic movements. However, when staunch confessional pacifism emerged in the late medieval era with the Waldensians and the pacifist branch of the Hussites, it was not a new invention but a reemergence of a thread present throughout Christian history. Enterprising readers of history will also note that for hundreds of years the writers of historical accounts were almost exclusively authorities and those belonging to the upper classes. Obviously, there is significant room to allow for the presence of historically underrepresented minorities, some of whom determinedly spoke out against certain wars and Christian crusades. The accounts of such dissenters are few, and not well-known, but they do exist in small numbers and pockets through much of the 'just war' and 'crusading' periods of Church history.

The best summary of the situation in the first three centuries is that the Church, in theory at least, by and large rejected military service for a number of reasons, though certainly some if not many Christians did not follow the instructions of the Christian moralists.<sup>8</sup> Aside from the basic ethic of love and non-violence in the New Testament, there was hardly a thought out pacifist ethic concerning war and military service, and one of the primary reasons to avoid the military from a Christian perspective, the risk of idolatry, evaporated when Constantine rose to

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<sup>8</sup> Hunter, DR, 92.

power.<sup>9</sup> The development of the just war ethic in the fourth century, then, represented “a major shift rather than a reversal in Christian thinking...made necessary by the altered political circumstances in which Christians now found themselves.”<sup>10</sup>

The primary outcome of this study is not the unearthing of new historical evidence or casting new light on either side of the moral debate. As Yoder says, “there has been no significant new information on the topic” for a long time. He was absolutely correct when he said that the recent need is for a careful review of the “hermeneutical assumptions” that determine how to read the sources and evidence.<sup>11</sup> With this approach, it has become apparent that the real value of this study lies in two confessional camps clearly demonstrating the incorrect way to study Church history. In fact, though the two sides have come to markedly different conclusions, they have made some of the exact same mistakes.

First, both sides have made the mistake of writing and studying the topic with a moral agenda in mind. It is, of course, not unusual for people who examine history to have biases or specific outcomes in mind. However, in the current debate both pacifist and just war scholars have, on multiple occasions and in a myriad of different ways, let their particular ethical commitments and moral priorities determine what they look for in history and how they interpret it. This has manifested itself in a number of weaknesses and flaws of the resulting studies. Specifically, authors have frequently failed either to identify their biases or specify how those perspectives affect their methodology and interpretation. They have also overlooked evidence or testimony that disagreed with their desired conclusions. They sometimes jump to conclusions

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<sup>9</sup> Swift, 28.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>11</sup> Yoder, WMP, 90-91.

without a sequence of proper and logical reasoning, letting their moral views fill in the blanks of history with convenient and neat assumptions. Even worse, some have blown off their critics with vitriol and name-calling, without responding fairly or accurately to those concerns that their detractors have raised.

Second, many authors have arrived at the study with a preconceived idea on how normative a certain group of Christians from a particular historical era was. For pacifists, the Christian Church of the first two or three centuries reigns supreme as the closest representation of the spirit and message of the New Testament and those who were able to live out the ethical and moral values of Jesus Christ. Just war thinkers generally portray the earliest generations of the Church as naïve and underdeveloped in theology and in worldly thinking and relation to society. The latter look to later generations of Church history to provide the authority, structure, wisdom, and developed thinking that lacked in the earliest period of the Church. Both viewpoints are grand, sweeping generalizations that are based not in historical reality but in confessional values. Yoder points out that between these two extremes, there is a more moderate view that the early Church does not serve as a “binding model for all times” but also realizes that the early Christians are unique in their closeness to the times, cultures, and texts of the New Testament.<sup>12</sup> It follows that every era of Christian history has particular strengths and weaknesses that should be identified and learned from, whether positively or negatively. When people blindly praise or viciously put down a certain group, it only serves to incite disagreement and perpetuate ignorance.

Lastly, the most substantive flaw demonstrated by writers in the current debate is the tendency to forget or ignore the historical and literary contexts in which the writings of the early

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<sup>12</sup> Yoder, CAW, 23.

Church are found. This impulse is not new, but mirrors the common practice of ‘proof-texting’ that many confessional traditions have engaged in their study of biblical texts. The urge to cobble together and synthesize the teachings on a certain topic often manifests in an egregious neglect of considerations such as the geographic location of the author, the presuppositions behind his thinking, and even the topic and thrust of the particular document in which a passage is found. There are some writers who do consider these factors carefully, and their work is much more fair, nuanced, and accurate because of it. Understanding context as much as the ancient sources allow forces writers to stay accountable and also possess a scholarly humility when presenting their conclusions.

The study of history is a difficult task, one that is complicated and muddled by agendas, biases, and preconceived ideas. The best authors in the current field of study are not necessarily unbiased or outside of the confessional debate, but they all respect history and let it speak for itself. They let their ethical and moral concerns be secondary to the desire and commitment for fairness and accuracy. They engage in differing viewpoints, respond graciously and thoughtfully to their detractors, and even sometimes try to build common ground with their ‘opponents.’ Most of all, they realize that history is still being written today, morality and ethics are still developing, and no one group or viewpoint has a monopoly on truth or wisdom. As Megivern says, “hawks and doves ought at least to reexamine their ecclesiological assumptions with a view to modifying some of the extreme positions of the past.”<sup>13</sup>

In the twenty-first century, the moral problem of war and participation in the military still weighs heavily on the Church. The best historical analysis of pacifism and just war in the Church should take into account the best and worst results of each tradition. In recent decades, there has

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<sup>13</sup> Megivern, 182.

been a lot of misunderstanding and dissension between Christian pacifists and Christian just war supporters. There is opportunity to encourage dialogue and mutual support between the two camps. However, this will not come about through attempts to strong arm or convert others. Advocates of both ethical positions must circumspectly consider the weaknesses of their position and what they can learn from the other approach.

Historically, the downfall of Christian pacifism has been the extent to which it has been sectarian and withdrawn itself from the world. This is not necessarily a qualitative weakness but is a disadvantage of utility and effectiveness. Some pacifist sects have been so small and cloistered that they and their beliefs faded into irrelevance and obscurity. Others have accommodated too easily to cultural and governmental concerns when they interacted with the larger society, and have failed to communicate or modify their pacifism in such a way as to make a difference in affecting worldly perspectives on war or killing. Pacifists can learn from just war by engaging and interacting with society, culture, or government. Since the middle of the twentieth century there have been a small but growing number of Christian pacifists who endeavor to change the world without giving up their moral values. Some have used the term ‘non-violence’ and others refer to themselves as ‘peacemakers,’ but whatever the title, they are emphasizing moral action, advocacy, and social justice, rather than inactivity or withdrawal. These relatively new types of pacifists are changing the landscape of Christian attitudes to war on the contemporary scene.

Just war thought has at many points in history erred by accommodating too much, too fast. When the Church has allied with the state and taken on the interests and concerns of civil government, politics, and international relations, Christian moral concerns and gospel-centered priorities have too often surrendered or compromised. In some eras of Church history, the

conditions of a just war have been overlooked or sacrificed entirely to other priorities. Just war thinkers can learn from pacifism by holding secure to their moral principles and ethical commitments in the face of outside pressures. Just war supporters must continually grapple with new technological advances and world relations in order to critically evaluate what is and is not a 'just war.' Moreover, they must rediscover their burden to be peacemakers, to reconcile governments, to protect vulnerable people groups and speak out against wrongs such as genocide, oppression, racism, and slavery. In this, the goals and priorities of pacifists and just war advocates find much in common.

Bethune-Baker describes one moderate perspective when he says:

On due occasion the Christian will rightly take the sword, but he will do it remembering well that there is a might which in some cases is infinitely mightier than war – the calm self-sacrifice which...accomplishes by suffering far more than the brandished sword. We thus recognize that war is a means to an end; not a good thing in itself...nor an evil in itself. In itself war is not wrong; any more than human life is necessarily an evil, because [it is] at present inseparable from evil...there are [some diseases of humankind] that only force is able to alleviate and cure. If therefore...we purify war from evil motive and from mere passion and resentment, then in every instance the war will arise not from our own fault or seeking, but be as it were irresistibly forced upon us.<sup>14</sup>

An equally valid perspective is expressed by Martin Luther King, Jr. in one of his sermons: "Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in good conscience obey your unjust laws, because noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good."<sup>15</sup> There are serious considerations that must be carefully reflected on by both sides, and hopefully both traditions can do so in dialogue with each other rather than polemical opposition.

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<sup>14</sup> Bethune-Baker, 138-39.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., sermon delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, at Christmas, 1957; as quoted in Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 58.

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