

THE EARLY CHRISTIAN ATTITUDE TO WAR

OUR Lord thought fit to send Christians into the world without a detailed code of moral theology. He had told them to love God and their neighbour, and left them under the guidance of his Holy Spirit to apply these principles to the very complicated details of the Jewish and pagan world around them. It was obvious they could not admit sorcerers and astrologers and the like, unless they renounced their manner of living. It was universally accepted at the beginning that the Roman stage was no life for a Christian. But what about Roman civil and military service? They did not have to decide at once since the members of this service were not thought likely to become Christians immediately. They were merely officers whom Christians were pledged to respect as holding their authority from God. It was to be for long almost unknown for Christians to have any part in an insurrection. Before any decision had been made about these professions soldiers were asking for baptism. At the beginning the only worry of the Church appears to have been as to whether or how long Christians could avoid taking part in the pagan religious rites or other questionable duties associated with the army and civil service. If Christians could avoid compromising themselves in such matters, it seemed that it would be good enough merely to demand of them a pledge to follow the warnings of St John the Baptist: 'Do not use men roughly, do not lay false information against them; be content with your pay'. (Lk. 3, 14.) Jesus Christ had praised the centurion without asking him to change his life. (Mt. 8, 10.) The Holy Ghost had later come down upon the Centurion of Joppe (Acts, 10, 45), even before his baptism.

However, many were worried. How exactly were they to understand some of our Lord's own applications of his two great commandments of love? 'But I tell you that you should not offer resistance to injury; if a man strikes thee on thy right cheek, turn the other cheek also towards him; if he is ready to go to law with thee over thy coat, let him have it and thy cloak with it . . .' (Mt. 5, 39-40). More impressive, when taken alone and given an application beyond what seems warranted by their context, are the words, 'Put thy sword back into its place; all those who take up the sword will perish by the sword'. (Mt. 26, 52.) Tertullian and many pacifists since his time have seen in this God's own application to all circumstances of the Christian duty of being a peace-maker. But the fact that our Lord also said he came not to bring peace but the sword (Mt. 10, 34), and that he told his apostles at the end, if need be,

to sell their cloaks to buy swords (Lk. 22, 31), shows us how difficult it is to be convinced that such statements of our Lord were the sole final rules of conduct.

Peter and Paul both commend the lawful authority of the magistrate (Rom. 13, 4; I Pet. 2, 14) in a way which suggests that they did not understand our Lord to have condemned all use of the sword.

Within a century of Pentecost, to judge by inscriptions, a number of soldiers had been received into the Church, and their relatives were not ashamed to note it on their epitaphs. As in the New Testament, so in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, examples and metaphors are regularly taken from military life. Clearly they did not regard the life as intrinsically ignoble. St Justin, in the middle of the second century, tells the emperor that Christians had no objection to any of their non-religious institutions.

But we know that it was sometimes impossible for a Christian in the army to avoid the choice of communication in pagan religion or martyrdom. This was especially so in the upper ranks. There were two other matters which caused great scruples to Christians. Could a Christian take the oath to a pagan service? Could a Christian execute, or even condemn a man to death?

It was probably for reasons such as these that it became the official custom in Rome in the latter half of the second century to forbid Christians to volunteer for certain positions. This is what we read in the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus: 'A soldier of the government must be told not to execute men; if he should be ordered to do it, he shall not do it. He must be told not to take the military oath. If he will not agree, let him be rejected. A military governor or a magistrate of a city who wears the purple (toga), either let him desist or let him be rejected. If a catechumen or a baptised Christian wishes to become a soldier (i.e. a volunteer), let him be cast out. For he has despised God.'¹

It does not appear clear as to whether the prohibition to execute included killing men in battle. If so, it would be difficult to understand how they could continue in service at all.

It is usually accepted that this document represents Roman tradition of the latter half of the second century. Did the Church adopt a similar policy elsewhere at this time? Tertullian appears to be a witness that there was no prohibition in Africa. He boasts in his *Apologeticum*² that Christians filled the Roman camps, that they fought alongside the Romans, and that once Christian soldiers

¹ Gregory Dix, *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St Hippolytus of Rome*, 1937, p. 26; Ap. Trad. xvi, 17-19.

² *Apologeticum* 5, 37, 40, 42.

by their prayers caused a miracle which helped the Roman forces. He himself gradually becomes more and more a pacifist but he freely admits that many Christians will continue to serve without so much as asking his advice and he suspects that many others will not listen to him.

There does not appear to have been any ruling on the subject in Egypt, although the evidence of Origen suggests that very few Christians entered the army. Clement of Alexandria gives this advice to prospective converts: 'Practise husbandry, we say, if you are a husbandman: but while you till the fields, know God. Sail the sea, you who are devoted to navigation, yet call the whilst on the heavenly Pilot. Has knowledge taken hold of you while engaged in military service? Listen to the commander who orders what is right.'³ Elsewhere, instead of blaming soldiers for remaining in the forces, he rebukes them for wishing to be decked in gold, and quotes Homer against them.⁴ It seems that Christians were not forbidden military service. Yet Origen has to answer the complaints of Celsus that Christians do not play their part in defending their country. He does not deny the fact but is content to maintain that Christians do more good by their prayers than they would be able to do by their material assistance. He also agrees that Christians may not put people to death.

Yet in another passage he assumes the possibility of just war. 'Perhaps . . .', he writes, 'the so-called wars among the bees convey instruction as to the manner in which wars, if ever there arises a necessity for them, should be waged in a just and orderly way among men.'⁵

From Syria the only evidence we possess as to the official attitude is from the fourth century, chapter VIII of the Apostolic Constitutions. Though this is modelled on the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus, it is content to warn soldiers to observe the rules of St John the Baptist. Presumably there was no tradition in this part of the world that the army and Christianity were necessarily incompatible.

From the fourth century, when the empire became officially Christian, Christians are found increasingly in the ranks of the army. Probably there remained in many parts a scruple as to admitting soldiers for baptism.

Both in theory and in practice there are signs of a Christian pacifism during the third and fourth centuries. The moralists who defend this line of action are Tertullian and Lactantius, to whom

³ Clement of Alex., *Protrepticus*, 10.

⁴ Clement of Alex., *Paedagogus*, 2.

⁵ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 5, 33.

perhaps we should add Origen. Lactantius says that it is forbidden for the just man to carry arms or even to bring a capital charge against anyone. Tertullian objects almost more eloquently against the soldier wearing a flower wreath upon his head, where the flowers can neither be seen nor smelt nor tasted, than he does against the military service of which it is a symbol. But he does in more than one place protest that carrying the sword is completely incompatible with the Christian vocation. 'Shall it be held lawful to make an occupation of the sword, when the Lord proclaims that he who uses the sword shall perish by the sword? And shall the son of peace take part in the battle when it does not become him even to sue at law?' (*De Corona*). In practice there are at least five or six well-authenticated cases of soldiers who for various reasons found fighting in the armies of this world unlawful to them as Christians. 'My army', declared Maximilian in Africa in the third century, 'is the army of God, I cannot fight for the world. I repeat it, I am a Christian.' He knows there are Christians in his army who do not share his scruples. 'That is their business', he replied. 'I am a Christian, I will not serve.' They asked him what harm soldiers do. 'You know well enough' was his retort. Then there was the centurion Marcellus in Tangier. He suddenly decided that he could not serve as a soldier in an army which gave religious honour to the gods and emperors. He does not appear to have been asked to sacrifice or act otherwise against his conscience. These two were martyred for their convictions.

More illustrious are the examples of the three western saints of the fourth century, St Martin of Tours, St Victrix, and St Paulinus of Nola. These all refused to serve, alleging their determination to serve in the army of Christ. Were they conscientious objectors? or were they merely asserting their desire and right to leave the vocation of soldier and dedicate their lives more completely to Christ? Or were they objecting to serve in armies inspired by purely worldly ambition? Or, finally, was their action due to the persistence in some districts of the Church's rule against allowing Christians to volunteer for the forces? Clearly it is impossible to give a final answer. We have so little evidence of the official attitude of the Church at the places and times in which they lived that we must be satisfied to praise their constancy in following their conscience but cannot tell how far their views were shared by others.

The theorists of the fourth century in a more or less modified way admit the lawfulness of war in cases of necessity. St Athanasius is quite unhesitating: 'It is forbidden to kill. Nevertheless, in war, it is lawful and praiseworthy to kill one's enemies. Further, great rewards are decreed to those who were distinguished in war.'

. . . So the same act is forbidden under one aspect and circumstance which under another and at its time is lawful and tolerated. The same is true of the union of the sexes.' (*Epist. ad Amunem.*) St Basil is more cautious. He thinks that those who have killed in war should go through a period of penance before being admitted back to communion. (*Epist.* 188, 13.) St Ambrose merely points out that the war must be conducted justly, and praises the virtue of fortitude.

St Augustine established the eventual attitude of the Church as far as its basic principles go. "If one strike thee on thy right cheek, turn to him also the other" (Mt. 5, 39). . . . That these precepts pertain rather to the inward disposition of the heart than to the actions which are done in the sight of men, requiring us to cherish patience along with benevolence in the inmost heart, but in the outward action to do that which seems most likely to benefit those whose good we ought to seek, is manifest from the fact that the Lord Jesus himself, the perfect example of patience, when he was struck in the face answered: "If I have spoken evil, give testimony of the evil: but if well, why strikest thou me?" (John 18, 23). If we look only at the words, he did not in this obey his own precept, for he did not turn another part of his face to him who had struck him, but on the contrary prevented him who had done the wrong from adding thereto. And yet he had come prepared not only to be struck on the face but even to be slain for those very men at whose hands he suffered crucifixion, and for whom, when hanging on the cross, he prayed: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do". (Lk. 23, 34.)⁶

But on this matter as on so many others, St Augustine touched frequently, and his views would justify special treatment. What we have quoted will suffice to represent the judgment of Christendom at the end of the fourth century. It is the inclination of the heart which matters, and through the heart the outward action. It is unchristian to seek revenge, to do violence to the innocent, to buy prosperity or profit at the price of injustice and cruelty. You cannot love the man whose rights you trample on. You cannot love the Lord whose members you wantonly destroy. But love of the sinner can mean his chastisement as has always been admitted between parents and children. Love of peace can involve the chastisement or restraint of the disturbers of the peace. Love of the poor, the weak and the oppressed can demand curbing the power of the mighty, the strong and the despotic.

During the first four centuries, Christianity was unhappy about

⁶ *Epistolae* 138, ii, 12-15, quoted from *An Augustine Synthesis* by Erich Przywara, 1945, pp. 355-6.

servicing in pagan armies and fighting pagan wars. Most men hoped that Christianity would bring an end to bloodshed. But they came eventually to recognise that even the very law of love—which must inspire all our actions—might sometimes demand submission and long suffering and at other times resistance and courage. In the pagan world the excuses for killing men under pagan standards must have seemed non-existent to many. But when that Roman world was beginning to profess Christianity, it was attacked by the uncivilised pagans of the North. Did the love of God and man demand resistance to the pagan or the patient forfeit of that hold upon Western civilisation that it had taken them four centuries to gain? Christianity decided that sometimes it called for brave resistance, and, in doing so, it was not conscious of betraying its beginnings; but was rather convinced that it was sometimes the only course on Christian principles, if only to attain the peace which the Gospel promised.

We are in modern times faced with new problems. Our states are sometimes as unchristian in their ambitions as the pagan Roman empire. The weapons and forces we control are more indiscriminate and often tend to destroy the innocent with the guilty indifferently. Can they be infused with the Christian spirit of love? Can modern war, with its inevitable abominations, be the instrument of the pure love of God and of man for God's sake? If not, it may be we shall have to review the attitude of our Christian conscience. If we are still to defend the position of war today, as in the past it has sometimes seemed our hard and real duty, then at least it must be purified of anything which springs from, or leads to, hatred—even though it be hatred of our enemy.

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