

THE REJECTION OF MILITARY SERVICE BY THE EARLY CHRISTIANS

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Late in the winter of 295 a veteran of the legions named Fabius Victor appeared before Dion, proconsul at Theveste, North Africa. He came, according to his obligation, to present his twenty-one-year-old son, Maximilianus, for military service. In the course of the physical examination the young draftee astonished Dion by a vigorous refusal to serve: "Mihi non licet militare quia Christianus sum." For the moment the remark was ignored; they went ahead measuring him. He was tall enough: five ten. But when an attempt was made to apply the hot brand which would have marked him as a soldier he struggled so strongly that the proconsul was forced to attend. He pointed out to the recusant that there were plenty of Christians already in the army and a protest on religious grounds was unjustified. Men of that sort could look to themselves, Maximilianus replied; for his part he rejected such evil. When he could in no wise be moved the irritated official condemned him to the sword, "as an example to others." Maximilianus was in high spirits, *hilari vultu*, and as he was led away he asked that the executioner be given the new clothes Fabius Victor had prepared for his son's army life.¹

Now the proconsul could well have been puzzled. Not only were there Christians in the ranks but Christian apologists had not hesitated to emphasize their presence. "Nos vobiscum militamus," Tertullian had intoned, "castra ipsa implevimus."² But Maximilianus might have replied that with even greater force the same Tertullian later taught that no Christian ought to be in the army, no follower of the

¹ T. Ruinart, *Acta martyrum sincera* (Ratisbon, 1859), p. 340 ff. Maximilianus was asked who had put such ideas into his head. He answered: "Animus meus et is qui me vocavit."

² Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, 37, 4, and 42, 3 (CSEL, LXIX, 88 and 101); *De idololatria*, 19 (CSEL, XX, 53). The Roman armed forces consisted of legions, auxiliary troops, scouts, and (despite the dictum that every true Roman feared the sea) an efficient navy. The main problem concerns the army and we shall speak of the latter without distinguishing its parts. We shall also follow the usual practice of using legions as a synonym of the army.

camp of light ought to enter the camp of darkness. There was, however strong or weak, a current of doctrinal pacifism. Even today the pacifist persuasion is not wholly without adherents in the Church. When the shadow of war lies along the land certain questions cannot but trouble souls. Not long ago, Dorothy Day wrote to rebuke the editors of the *Commonweal* for implying the acceptability of war as the ultimate defense of the non-Communist world.³ In reply the editors rejected the notion that the pacifist is the ideal Christian in time of war, for they observed: "If we believed that pure Christianity and pacifism were identical, then we should be forced by logic to take the position the *Catholic Worker* has held so long and bravely." Leafing through the volumes of Catholic periodicals for 1914-19 and again for 1939-45 one finds several discussions of the subject.

The *Catholic Worker* for more than a decade has argued the brief that a just war is not now possible, since indefensible violence is its inevitable concomitant. The chief spokesman for the group on this point, Mr. Robert Ludlow, hinted that "while the Pope, for reasons known to himself, will make diplomatic statements that leave leeway," actually responsible moralists admit that the conditions of a just war cannot, in practice, be verified today. But, like not a few others he does not confine his appeal to contemporary opinion, either in or out of the Church, for his strongest backing, but summons early Christianity in witness:

I wish to establish that pacifism is not an alien doctrine in the Church, that it was the ordinary outlook of the primitive Christians, that councils and popes and saints shared that viewpoint, that it has indeed fallen into obscurity but that the conditions of the day demand that we resurrect it, that the early Christians objected, not merely to the idolatry prevalent in the army, but to the killing of men.⁴

This statement implies more than the rejection of unjust wars surely. Mr. E. I. Watkin, writing to approve the position, frames the particular point more precisely:

The official roll of the Church's saints contains not only soldiers but also three conscientious objectors to military service, namely SS. Martin, Victricius and Maximilianus. The undeniable fact that the Church has accorded the honors of sanctity to soldiers and conscientious objectors, and has even accounted death for

³ *Commonweal*, December 29, 1950, p. 293. ⁴ *Catholic Worker*, November, 1944.

refusal to serve martyrdom proves that she regards the question as morally an open question left to the private judgment of the individual. Any attempt to condemn the pacifist as disobedient virtually condemns the Church for enrolling pacifists among her saints.⁵

All this might suggest that, while the present-day position of the Church is fairly clear, the question of the mind of the early Church still has some actuality. When, however, the attitude of the early Christians is studied with due regard for the circumstances of the time, it becomes clear that their reaction to the soldier problem was conditioned by factors which made imperative a different solution than that dictated by present conditions. Constantine did not cause the Church to abandon its principles in the matter. His conversion so changed the concomitants of military service that the former more or less general disapprobation could safely be altered.

THE JUDAEO-CHRISTIANS AND MILITARY SERVICE

The origins of our problem are to be sought in the relations between Judaism and military service, and especially in the attitude of Jesus to those relations. The Jews throughout their career as God's chosen people engaged in battles with the neighboring nations. The Israelites appeared on the stage of history at a time when warfare was recognized as a legitimate instrument of tribal and national policy. They had made a covenant with Yahweh and the struggles by which they dispossessed the older inhabitants of Canaan were regarded as His wars. He Himself was looked upon as mighty in battle, the Lord of hosts, the God of armies. He fought with Israel against enemies who as idolators and moral degenerates merited eviction if not destruction.⁶

The Jews did not, however, form a militaristic nation according to the Spartan model. No undue prominence was given to military training or to military glory. Large standing armies for the purpose of conquest were not maintained. But Israel realistically recognized the urgency of resistance to force. When the prophets exalted the

⁵ *Ibid.*, March, 1950. Mr. Watkin's examples are somewhat misleading. Martin and Victricius had long careers as bishops after their withdrawal from the army; they are not honored as conscientious objectors. The name of Maximilianus does not appear in the martyrology.

⁶ A. Bigelmair, *Die Beteiligung der Christen am öffentlichen Leben in vorconstantinischer Zeit* (Munich, 1902), p. 165.

ideal of peace based on justice and international cooperation, they portrayed it as a goal of the future. The chosen people were not pacifists.⁷ Jews would, of course, have experienced difficulties had they been called upon to serve in non-Jewish armies. Their strict monotheism and the observance of the prescriptions of the Torah would have made obedience to Gentile commanders very difficult. This is one of the reasons why the Jews were exempted from service in the Roman forces.⁸

The attitude of Jesus toward the military history of His people is not clear. Although Stephen and Paul looked back with pride on the martial exploits of the Israelites, there is no indication that He did. The founder of Christianity rejected war and the shedding of blood as a means of advancing religion. "Put back thy sword into its place; for all those who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matt. 26:52) is as vigorous a condemnation of war as has ever been formulated. But it is equally true that Jesus did not demand complete non-resistance. He Himself resorted to forceful measures in driving the buyers and sellers from the temple. And He made it clear, when giving the apostles some last-minute instructions before the passion,

⁷ Cf. Samuel S. Cohon, "War," *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, X, 449 f. James Moffatt, "War," *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church* (Edinburgh, 1918), II, 646: "Judaism, before Christianity, abhorred aggressiveness and discouraged military rapacity. The Hebrews warred in later days for the defence of their religion and country rather than for aggrandizement." Josephus, appealing to his fellow countrymen to surrender to the Romans, took a pacifist position: "Our fathers won no success by war and never failed to succeed when they abjured war and committed all to God" (quoted by Moffatt, *loc. cit.*). In times of peace Rome had about 5,000 soldiers in Judea (cf. U. Holzmeister, *Historia aetatis Novi Testamenti* [2nd ed.; Rome, 1938], pp. 87-98).

⁸ *Jewish Antiquities*, XIV, 10, 6 (Loeb Classical Library, *Josephus*, VII, 557); A. Harnack, *Militia Christi: Die christliche Religion und der Soldatenstand in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten* (Tübingen, 1905), p. 49. J. Juster questions the general exemption of Jews from military service. He admits the exception by Lentulus in 49 B.C., but thinks that it was suppressed by Augustus or Tiberius. He does prove that the Romans used Jewish military formations at times (*Les Juifs dans l'empire romain* [Paris, 1914], II, 268 ff.). In his *Les droits politiques des Juifs dans l'empire romain* (Paris, 1912) M. Juster disputes Mommsen's assertion that the Jewish nation disappeared after 70 and that the Jews were thenceforth a confession, not a nation. He also attempts to prove that the Jews obtained citizenship under Caracalla. Non-citizens, of course, were limited to service in the auxiliaries.

that on occasion they should have to employ force: "Let him who has no sword sell his coat and buy one" (Luke 22:36).⁹

From Marcion to Jehovah's Witnesses pacifists have maintained that the counsels of Christ on turning the other cheek, loving one's enemies, leaving vengeance to God, and not resisting evil should be applied literally, and not only to individuals and religious groups but also to states. They wish to make Christ out to have been a strict doctrinal pacifist. This is an assumption which contradicts the facts. What is clear is that the religion of Jesus was not, in the mind of its founder, to be propagated by force of arms. Jesus never aimed at heading a Jewish revolt against Rome. He foresaw the rebellion of 66-70 and deplored the reckless expenditure of Jewish life it occasioned. But He steadily refused to allow His teaching and influence to be exploited for nationalistic ends.¹⁰

It could not have escaped Jesus that the Roman Empire of His day was the guarantor of a high culture with a long development behind it. Rome's authority had been created by military prowess and was maintained by the exercise of ruthless force, but it was employed in general in a manner to merit the gratitude of the inhabitants of the vast Empire. Peace was enforced, ordered government according to the principles of Roman law was assured, and a liberal attitude toward the subject peoples, more and more of whom were admitted to citizenship, was never lacking. But despite wide differences in local custom and a large measure of local autonomy, there was inevitably in the

⁹ Doubtless Jesus was not by this counsel retracting His teaching that the Gospel was not to be propagated by force. Rather He was pointing out that the disciples were entering a period of stress when they would have to defend themselves. His words are not the words of a pacifist; cf. J. Lebreton, *La vie et l'enseignement de Jésus Christ* (Paris, 1931), II, 295. Cf. also F. von Hügel, *The German Soul and Its Attitude towards Ethics and Christianity, the State and War* (London, 1916), p. 35 f.

¹⁰ Even pacifists limit at times the force of the scriptural arguments for their position; cf. C. J. Cadoux, *Christian Pacifism Reexamined* (Oxford, 1940), p. 78: "It is admittedly impossible to ascribe to Jesus a considered, objective disapproval of all coercive government in the manner of Tolstoy and the anarchists." Cf. J. Wedgwood: "It was not that our Lord preached submission to Rome, though no doubt the decision as to the tribute money was capable of being represented in that light—it was that He raised a spirit which moved in another plane than that of resistance or submission to imperial power. He created a weapon and withheld it from the service of the nation. It will be found that no other treason is felt so deadly as this" (quoted by Moffatt, *art. cit.*, p. 647).

Empire a steady march toward uniformity. Especially in the East emperor worship was promoted as an instrument of this policy. In Palestine this tendency ran into problems of unusual force, stemming primarily from the lofty monotheism of the Jewish religion but also, to a degree, from the intensely nationalistic feeling of the people. Even the higher social classes cannot be said to have welcomed the Augustan settlement. The priestly families as the hereditary leaders of their people profited by it, since Rome was always ready to rule through local grandees. The mass of the people, however, refused even a superficial loyalty to Rome and Greco-Roman civilization. Not only did they not serve in the military formations of their conquerors; they also refused to conceal in any way their conviction that the gods of Rome were demons. They would die rather than compromise in any way with emperor worship.¹¹

When Jesus, therefore, coined His principal political aphorism, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21), He was both in accord with, and against, popular Jewish sentiment. He was at one with His fellow Israelites in rejecting emperor worship and the gods of Rome. And here He was on safe ground because the exemption of the Jews from the modicum of religious conformism required of others was recognized by the authorities. But Jesus was against Jewish feeling when he maintained that what was Caesar's should be rendered to Caesar. This certainly included civil obedience. Did it exclude military service? Obviously it did. As one who came to fulfill the Law, Jesus could not advocate the enrollment of Jews under the Roman eagles where there was danger of religious contamination and where the Law could not be observed. Since He was sent only to the house of Israel, Jesus did not have to pronounce on the liceity of service in the imperial army by non-Jews. It might seem at first glance as if "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" points to an approval of such service. The "thing" of Caesar above all others was the army. Moreover, there are several scenes in the New Testament in which Roman soldiers figure to advantage. Jesus praised the faith of one centurion (Luke

¹¹ Harold Mattingly points to the tendency in later paganism to center all religion in the imperial cult and imperial loyalty ("The Later Paganism," *Harvard Theological Review*, XXX [1942], 171-79).

7:9). Another was moved beneath the Cross to praise the crucified (Luke 23:47). Moreover, there was in the time of Christ a pacifist party, the Essenes, in Judea; now it is clear that Jesus had nothing to do with them. On the other hand, the most potent argument against service by Jews—the danger of compromise with polytheism—would also, as we shall see more in detail later on, militate against service by Christians of Gentile origin. It seems probable, therefore, that had He been called upon to pronounce, Jesus would not have favored military service even for His Gentile followers. What should be stressed, however, is that this attitude cannot be traced to theoretical pacifism. It would have been a concrete response to a concrete situation. As a matter of fact Jesus was, as far as we know, never called upon to solve the problem.¹²

During the earlier decades of the Church's first century, the majority of Christians were converts from Judaism. Indeed, many looked upon Christianity as a Jewish sect. During this brief period Christians naturally benefited by the exemption of the Jews from military service. Furthermore the Christians of Judea, forewarned by Jesus, looked forward to, and eventually saw, the fatal rebellion of 66–70 which Vespasian and Titus crushed. In the time of Eusebius there was a tradition that the Christian community fled across the Jordan and settled in Pella during the troubles. This would mean that no considerable number of Christians took up arms in the defense of Jerusalem. The tradition of loyalty to established authority kept the main body of the faithful out of the rebellion. Jesus had preached and practised loyalism. St. Peter urged it on more than one occasion (I Pet. 2:13 ff.; II Pet. 2:17). St. Paul had insisted on it with like clarity (Rom. 13:1–7). Loyalty also characterized the Judaeo-Christian community during the Jewish revolt of 132–35. Justin relates that Bar Kochba, the leader of this uprising, instituted a persecution of the Christians.¹³ No doubt he did so because they refused to support his policies. Jewish hatred of things Christian was, however, so virulent at this time that there was little chance of the Judaeo-Christians being partners in any enterprise of their Jewish fellow countrymen.¹⁴

¹² Von Hügel, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

¹³ Justin, *Apologia I*, 31 (PG, VI, 376); cf. H. J. Schoeps, *Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums* (Tübingen, 1949), p. 264 ff.

¹⁴ Cf. K. Pieper, *Die Kirche Palästinas bis zum Jahre 135* (Cologne, 1938), p. 49 ff.

Consideration of the facts indicates how Jesus, His apostles, and later the Church in Palestine looked upon the problem of service in the Roman formations. Jesus would probably have frowned upon such service. At most, convert soldiers would have been allowed to continue in the military profession. For the early Christians the problem was minimal. They were not required to serve. Sharper were the difficulties caused by the desperate struggles between the Jewish community and the Empire which resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the Jewish people. The Judaeo-Christians were naturally as anti-Roman as anyone. They felt the rigors of foreign rule and Christianity owed no debt of gratitude to the authorities who had executed its founder.¹⁵ The Christians were indebted even less, however, to the leaders and masses of the Jewish people who had extorted that condemnation from a reluctant Pilate and had on the whole proved themselves consistent enemies of the Christian movement. The Judaeo-Christians were caught between hostile forces. In this situation the example of Jesus was decisive. Their founder, although He loved His nation, had resisted all efforts to draw Him into the political arena against Rome. His "Render to Caesar" had founded a loyalism which saved the Judaeo-Christians from entering into the fatal rebellions. We surely have enough light on those distant times to know what concrete reasons (and not pacifism) led the Judaeo-Christians to reject the leadership of Judah of Galilee and Bar Kochba in their foolhardy undertakings.

CHRISTIANS IN THE LEGIONS BEFORE 170

Outside of Palestine on the larger stage of the Greco-Roman world the Church had not been called upon to face the soldier problem in all its implications up to 170. A good deal has been made in pacifist circles of the fact that "apart from Cornelius and one or two soldiers who may have been baptized with him at Caesarea and the gaoler baptized at Philippi we have no direct or reliable evidence of a single

¹⁵ Dom H. Leclercq forces the note somewhat when he writes: "A la nation juive rongeannt son frein, toujours prête à la révolte et à la violence s'oppose la secte chrétienne déterminée à la soumission et à la obéissance, résolue à tout souffrir plutôt que prendre les armes et de provoquer la guerre civile" ("Militarisme," *DAEL*, XI, 1121). The Apocalypse of St. John is quite bitterly anti-Roman, but even there vengeance is left to God; cf. E. B. Allo, *Saint Jean: L'Apocalypse* (Paris, 1933), p. cxli ff., 264 ff., 300.

Christian soldier until after 170 A.D." To this line of thought it might not unreasonably be urged that apart from Luke and Paul we have little evidence for the existence of Christian medical men and tent-makers during the same period. Christians were not numerous and our information about them is meager. Despite the lack of explicit evidence, no one denies that there were Christian soldiers in the army during the period. Converts would at times follow St. Paul's dictum, "Let every man remain in the calling in which he was called" (I Cor. 7:21). Harnack is right, however, when he maintains that the baptized Christian did not become a soldier if he could avoid it. Converts and sons of converts formed almost exclusively the slender Christian contingent following the Roman eagles at this time.¹⁶

That Christian non-participation in the military services did not create a problem before 170 is readily understandable if we consider the condition of the Empire up to that time. Rome had in the centuries preceding the rise of Christianity subjected to its control the centers of culture and wealth in the Mediterranean basin and for considerable distances beyond to the East and Northwest. During the first two centuries of our era, the emperors worked to stabilize their boundaries on the Firth of Forth, the Rhine and the Danube, the Caucasus and the Euphrates, the uplands of Ethiopia, the Sahara and the Atlas mountains. Roman generals may at times have marched beyond these limits but when they did so they were intent on breaking up dangerous concentrations of hostile forces. The Roman military machine was

¹⁶ Note the remark of Professor R. H. Bainton: "From the end of the New Testament period to the decade 170-181 there is no evidence whatever of Christians in the army. The subject of military service obviously was not at that time controverted. The reason may be either that participation was assumed or that abstention was taken for granted. The latter is more probable" ("The Early Church and War," *Harvard Theological Review*, XXXIX [1946], 190 f.). Harnack reasons as follows: "Welche Stellung das Christentum bis etwa zum J. 170 zum Soldatenstand faktisch eingenommen hat, ist so gut wie ausschliesslich aus Rückschlüssen zu bestimmen. Erst von der Zeit des Marc Aurel an besitzen wir direkte Quellen, die uns über die tatsächlichen Verhältnisse und ihre Beurteilung aufklären; die christlichen Urkunden der älteren Zeit schweigen fast vollständig." Harnack holds that they would have touched on the problem, had it existed (*Militia Christi*, p. 48). Note that this book (*Militia Christi*) should be read in conjunction with the fourth edition (Leipzig, 1924) of *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, II, 571-84, and I, 378. Harnack is here treating the subject twenty years after the *Militia*: he has new information and has attained a more comprehensive view of the question.

massed along the frontiers, particularly along the Rhine and the Danube. After Vespasian (69-79) real military formations were rarely stationed in the interior of the Empire. Frontier defense was the main function of the troops. "The *exercitus Romanus* once the levy of Rome and Italy for the protection of their possessions in the world was now the imperial army along the imperial frontiers."¹⁷ The legions became sedentary on the frontier and the legionaries looked upon the country of their camp as their own country. Of course the emperors also had at their disposition within the Empire enough soldiers to coerce recalcitrants. These bore the sword which as early as St. Paul was explicitly recognized as a God-given attribute of the imperial authority. None of the Fathers ever denied its use to the emperors.¹⁸

Thanks to the power of the frontier legions, Rome had little difficulty in maintaining the status quo until late in the second century. Peace prevailed within the Empire except for occasional civil wars and rebellions. What little fighting was done on the frontiers did not put a strain on the manpower of the Empire, which during this period was steadily increasing its population. Rome was not, and never became, a military state in the modern sense. Total war was unknown and the percentage of the population in the armed forces was never great. Little wonder, then, that in times of relative peace and high prestige the Roman military formations could be filled without recourse to the Christian minority.

On the contrary, the reasons which operated against acceptance of military service by a Christian were really formidable. Emperor worship was especially strong in the army. Officers had to sacrifice to the

¹⁷ *Cambridge Ancient History*, XI, 311; cf. Alvin Johnson, "War," *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, XV, 332. It is estimated that the Roman army at its greatest strength numbered between 400,000 and 450,000 men—not an immense standing army for the day but the largest met with until modern times. "It was as large a professional army as the Roman state could support permanently in the economic conditions of the time; it is the largest permanent professional army the world has ever known—the largest organized force that was ever at the disposal of any civilized state up to the nineteenth century." Compared with the frontiers it had to defend it was not large (S. N. Miller, "The Roman Empire in the First Three Centuries," in *European Civilization*, II [London, 1935], 371).

¹⁸ Cf. Harnack: "Zur Aufrechthaltung der *pax terrena* hat der Kaiser aber Soldaten nötig. Sie gehören zu dem 'Schwerte,' welches schon in Röm. 13, 4, als ein göttliches Attribut der Obrigkeit anerkannt ist, und welches kein Kirchenvater dem Kaiser rund abzuspochen gewagt hat" (*Mission und Ausbreitung*, II, 579, n. 2).

gods and soldiers were required to assist at the ceremony. The *signa* of the legions were venerated as divinities, *propria legionum numina*. Moreover, the reputation of the Roman soldiery for violence, extortion, and intemperance made the prospect of serving very unpalatable for the Christian conscience. Since soldiers were not allowed to live in marriage or to marry, they had to choose between continence and fornication. Above all, there was the fact that from Nero (54–68) to Constantine (306–37) the practice of Christianity was a misdemeanor punishable by death. It is true that the threat of death was for long periods dormant but Christian civilians could more easily escape molestation than the Christian soldier. In the army it was harder to conceal religious non-conformism. The number of soldier martyrs was large when compared with the small number of Christian soldiers. The perilous condition of the Christian under arms is also proved by the fact that soldiers were martyred at times when there is no record of civilians suffering the extreme penalty. Again the Christian soldier might find himself called upon to take part in the execution of his fellow Christians.¹⁹

In view of all this it is hard to see how a sincere Christian could freely choose the military career or how the clergy could be anything but opposed to Christians serving. Catholic bishops had every reason for discouraging their young men who might be thinking of joining up. Even apart from the danger to the faith, morals, and life of the individuals concerned, there was some likelihood that the eventual discovery of their adherence to Christianity would bring persecution on the Christian community of the place. It is also probable that before the middle of the second century soldier converts would have been encouraged to leave the army if it was possible for them to do so. Since this was not easy, some at least remained. But few, if any, baptized Christians entered the services if they could avoid it.

At the same time orthodox Christians made it sufficiently clear during this period that they were not opposed to the Roman armed

¹⁹ K. Prüm, *Religionsgeschichtliches Handbuch für den Raum der altchristlichen Umwelt* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1943), p. 748 ff., studies pagan religion in the army. Cf. Harnack, *Mission und Ausbreitung*, II, 578, and *Militia Christi*, p. 48. Harnack notes that soldiers in ancient times were even more outside civilian life than now and that consequently the Christian soldier could not be controlled by the community (cf. *Militia*, p. 51).

forces as such. The loyalism of Jesus, Peter, and Paul was, despite sporadic, local persecution, strictly maintained. Military metaphors abound in Christian writings from the time of Paul. Clement of Rome shows admiration for the Roman armies.²⁰ In the pages of Justin, who stresses the pacific nature of Christianity, "there is nothing to betray the least consciousness that war as a function of the state presented a serious problem to the conscience of the Church."²¹ Justin asserts that Christians more than other men are helpers and allies of the Empire in promoting peace, that they pay their taxes more readily than their fellow citizens, and that, while they worship God alone, they gladly serve the emperors in other things. It was Marcion, arch-enemy of the Catholic Church in the second century, who was a pacifist, the first to appear in Christian circles.²²

CHRISTIANS IN THE SERVICES, 170-260

By 180 relatively large numbers of the inhabitants of the Empire had become Christians and the movement to the Church was increasing in strength. Our meager information makes it clear that there was and had been for some time a considerable number of Christians in the Roman army. There were enough in the *Legio XII fulminata* to obtain credence in Christian circles for the report that they had by their prayers obtained a providential rainfall which saved the legion when surrounded by the Quadi.²³ Christianity had, too, so impressed a pagan critic that he wrote a tract in which the problem of the Christian soldier is stated from the pagan viewpoint. Celsus knew of Christians in the army but he was also aware that they did not serve if they could avoid it. This loyal pagan desired that the Christians should not be satisfied with not revolting against the Empire. They should, he thought, help the emperor with all their might and labor with him in

²⁰ Clement speaks of "our commanders" when referring to the generals of the Roman army (*Epistle to the Corinthians*, 37 [Funk-Bihlmeyer, I, 55]).

²¹ Moffatt, *art. cit.*, p. 662.

²² Cf. Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott* (Leipzig, 1924), p. 117. See also H. Leclercq, *art. cit.*, col. 1122.

²³ Cf. Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, 5, 6 (CSEL, LXIX, 15); *Ad Scapulam*, 4, 8 (PL, I, 782). Moffatt notes that the presence of these Christian soldiers in the army "did not raise the slightest sense of embarrassment or disapproval in the Church" (*art. cit.*, p. 663). Harnack observes that no Christian then or later blamed these soldiers (*Mission und Ausbreitung*, II, 581).

the maintenance of justice and, if he should require it, they should fight with him or lead an army along with his.²⁴

By 180 the Christians also had been facing the soldier problem for some years. It presented itself in two forms: (a) Should soldier converts remain in the army? (b) Could the baptized Christian volunteer for service or, if he were conscripted, could he serve? The alternatives were to pay for a substitute or risk death by refusal to join up. The problem of the soldier convert was one to which some sort of an answer had been given. The other was new in the sense that it was entering a more acute phase.

In order to see the situation in perspective some observations are in order. The situation of the Empire was changing rapidly. From the third quarter of the second century and almost continuously thereafter the imperial forces were engaged in operations on a large scale. In the East the Parthians opposed the legions in a war of attrition which weakened both parties. When in 227 the Persians overthrew the Parthians, the danger was increased rather than lessened. The Persians showed themselves haughty and determined foes. They were to be a thorn in the side of the Empire for generations. In 260 the Emperor Valerian was treacherously seized by Schapur and harshly treated by the king of kings. In the West the Marcomanni overran the Roman lines in 166 and penetrated as far as Italy. They were eventually ejected from the Empire but thereafter the war in the North never died down. Moreover the military prowess of the Germans was great. The Goth Kniva in 251 cleverly led the Emperor Decius and his army into a trap and then cut the legions to pieces and slew the sovereign. For many decades Rome was fated to wage war on two fronts. In addition, from the third quarter of the second century onward the population of the Empire declined with increasing rapidity.²⁵

²⁴ Cf. *Contra Celsum*, VIII, 68 f. (GCS, Origenes II, 284 ff.). There is nothing in these early references to Christian soldiers to indicate that it was something new or recent. We can conclude, then, that at least as early as 160 the movement of Christians into the armed forces of Rome had begun. Celsus knew of missionaries to the armies (*ibid.*, VII, 9 [GCS, Origenes II, 160-61]).

²⁵ Cf. J. Vogt, *Constantin der Grosse und sein Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1949), pp. 17-26; L. Hertling, "Die Zahl der Christen zu Beginn des vierten Jahrhunderts," *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie*, LVIII (1934), 243-53; Pauly-Wissowa-Kroll, IX (Stuttgart, 1903), 624.

It is clear that the wars of the period we are studying were in no sense offensive action for the acquisition of new territories or the subjection of free peoples. Rome was strictly on the defensive and the very existence of the Empire was at stake. This fact could not but influence the outlook of the Christians. Few, if any, among them could disapprove of the military effort required to keep the enemies of Rome from making incursions into the Empire. Tertullian attests that the Christians ask "long life, undisturbed power, security at home, brave armies, a faithful senate, an upright people, a peaceful world" for the emperors.²⁶ Cyprian reckons among the calamities of his times the fact that the army is decreasing in numbers and efficiency.²⁷ Origen teaches that God has providentially prepared the nations for the Gospel by the *pax Romana*:

Jesus was born in the reign of Augustus who, so to speak, fused together into one monarchy the many populations of the earth. Now the existence of many kingdoms would have been a hindrance to the spread of the doctrine of Jesus throughout the entire world; not only for the reasons mentioned, but also on account of the necessity of men everywhere engaging in war, and fighting on behalf of their native country.

Origen, moreover, maintains that none fight better for the emperor than the Christians who form an army of piety and offer their prayers for him.²⁸ We should not, of course, interpret this statement as implying that war and killing are licit provided pagans alone are involved in them. Doubtless Origen had been too deeply affected by the counsels recommending meekness, as he had been by some other counsels. But his attitude in this instance seems to reflect the general opinion of the Church at the time. Christians would have been willing to serve in the Roman armed forces if they could have done so without further endangering their already precarious status and without the constant risk of being drawn into heathenish practices. Certainly when extremists like Tertullian and Origen pray for the success of the imperial arms it would be folly to hold that the Catholics of the time were opposed to the imperial wars. If the main body of Christians was

²⁶ Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, 30, 4 (CSEL, LXIX, 79).

²⁷ Cyprian, *Ad Demetrianum*, 3 and 17 (PL, IV, 564-66, 576-77).

²⁸ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, II, 30, and VIII, 73 (GCS, Origenes I, 158; II, 291).

hesitant about sanctioning military service it was principally because military life was full of pagan practices.²⁹

These considerations make it possible to offer adequate explanation of the increase of Christian soldiers in the third quarter of the third century and thereafter. It took place despite the unfavorable attitude of the authorities of the Church and of the body of the Christian people and in the face of the avowed hostility of the Roman state to the Christian name. Writers who have not recovered from the mirage that the primitive Church was a society of spotless saints which by papal and diabolic machination was transformed into a hospital for the spiritually infirm, descant on the contamination of Christ's little flock by the spirit of the world. Others point out that soldiers had other occupations besides fighting in the ranks. They also performed the duties of firefighters, policemen, mailmen, and guards. Doubtless the latter point is well made.³⁰ But the military situation of the Empire offers a more important clue. In some discussions of the problem it is supposed that Rome had no difficulty in finding suitable recruits for the forces. This was true, perhaps, in the days of Augustus (+14 A.D.), since he as well as his rivals had expanded the military forces. After Actium the number of legions was excessive and some were disbanded. Before many decades had passed, however, the scarcity of qualified men made itself felt. The term of service had to be lengthened. Children of the camps and of the regions adjacent to the permanent stations of the legions were pressed into service. Octavian Augustus himself formulated the principle that the defense of the Empire was a task in which provincials were expected to take a considerable part. Hadrian (117-38) laid down as basic procedure that the forces should be recruited from among the inhabitants of the provinces in which the several units were quartered. Under Septimius Severus (193-211) the Romano-

²⁹ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, VI, 8, 2 (*GCS*, Eusebius II/2, 534). Moffatt writes: "The early Christian writers drew upon agriculture, architecture, slavery, law, marriage, sea-faring, and even the games, to illustrate their faith, but scarcely any one of these departments of life furnished such a number of apt and favorite metaphors for the heroic aspect of the new religion as the Roman army. When we consider that these Christians had as yet no rank or standing in the Roman world, and also that they inherited traditions of a resolutely pacific nature from their Lord, this becomes all the more remarkable. In one aspect it was part of the deorientalizing of Christianity" (*art. cit.*, p. 653).

³⁰ Cf. Bainton, *art. cit.*, p. 198.

Italic elements in the services lost whatever privileges they still retained. Under the early emperors Spain had furnished more soldiers proportionally than other areas of recruitment. Later the most valiant and warlike soldiers were found among the Illyrians and to a lesser degree among the Galatians and Isaurians of Asia Minor. Septimius Severus regularized to a degree the unions between soldiers and the women of the camp. The sons of these marriages were obliged to follow the military career. Nevertheless, throughout the third century and especially in the reign of Philip the Arab (244–49), recruits were notably scarce.³¹

Clearly, then, the Church's soldier problem at the end of the second and during the third century was not an accident. The legions and other formations were recruited, as we have just mentioned, in the regions where they were stationed. When, as in the case of *Legio XII fulminata*, large numbers of Christians inhabited the area of recruitment (in this case Melitene in Southern Armenia), it was inevitable that Christians should be found among the legionaries.³² And these Christian soldiers would be not only converts or descendants of convert soldiers, but also Christians who had joined up after their baptism. Many of these latter doubtless did not have the funds required for furnishing a substitute. Even if they did, the penury of good material made it by no means certain that they could escape serving. Hence despite the religious difficulties which Christians encountered in the Roman armed forces, more and more Christians were enrolled. This was true especially in the East where converts were more numerous by far than in the West.

That the problem did not become more acute than it did was due in part to the fact that Christianity had more adherents in the cities and in the interior of the Empire than along the frontiers where the legions were as a rule established. The regions which at one time or another more than filled their military quotas—Spain, Illyria, and

³¹ Cf. *Cambridge Ancient History*, X, 222; XI, 133, 311; XII, 31, 219.

³² Cf. Harnack: "Die 12. hatte ihren Standort in Melitene, rekrutierte sich also hauptsächlich aus den Gebieten am oberen Lauf des Euphrats, in denen Edessa lag und die am Ende des 2. Jahrhunderts ein Zentrum der Christenheit bildeten" (*Militia Christi*, p. 57). The best archer regiments of the third century were from the Osrhoëne in which Edessa was situated. They were armed with the most dreaded weapon of antiquity, the composite bow (*Cambridge Ancient History*, XII, 216).

Isauria—were not places in which Christian propaganda had been particularly successful. Furthermore the success of the third century emperors in guiding large numbers of Germans into the ranks lessened pressure for Christian levies.³³

DOCTRINAL PACIFISM

There was also a pacifist current among Christians which may have held up enlistments. Although our information about this movement is based on late second-century and third-century writings, there is little doubt that pacifism early won Christian adherents. We have seen that Marcion was a confirmed foe of all war and bloodshed. Tatian, who lapsed into heresy in 172, declared somewhat pompously: "I have no desire to rule. I crave not riches. I decline military command."³⁴ The tendencies of the Montanists and Novatianists were in the same direction, although there seems to be no explicit information on their teaching in this regard. In the case of Tertullian, who was a kind of Montanist, we possess sufficient material to formulate his position clearly.³⁵ It was one of outspoken hostility to military service, and that for reasons which derive in part from what he considered to be the nature of Christianity rather than from the difficulties in which life in the Roman camps involved a Christian soldier. It is true that in his *Apologeticum* (197) the fiery African points out to the pagans, as we have had occasion to mention above, that Christians serve in the army and that the courage of the martyrs proves that Christians would be good soldierly material, were it not that their rule of life requires them to be killed rather than to kill.³⁶ There is no doubt that in his apologetical zeal this able writer is using all kinds of arguments to show that the Christian is a useful and indeed indispensable member of the state. He only apparently condones military service.

In the *De idololatria* (202) Tertullian is decisively against all military service by Christians.³⁷ It makes no difference to him that the

³³ There seems to be no evidence that baptism was deferred by those embracing the military career at this time.

³⁴ Tatian, *Adversus Graecos oratio*, 11 (PG, VI, 829).

³⁵ For a careful study of Tertullian's attitude to war, cf. T. Brandt, *Tertullians Ethik* (Gütersloh, 1928), p. 112 f.

³⁶ Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, 42, 3 (CSEL, LXIX, 101).

³⁷ Tertullian, *De idololatria*, 19 (CSEL, XX, 53). The date of this treatise is disputed; we have adopted the dating of Harnack.

rank and file of the armed forces do not have to take part in sacrifices and capital punishments, as officers do. There are peremptory reasons against any Christian serving. The military oath cannot be reconciled with loyalty to God, the banner of Christ is unfurled against the banner of Satan, the camp of light is opposed to the camp of darkness. The Christian cannot serve two masters, God and Satan. Tertullian scorns the arguments of his Christian opponents. They are jesting when they argue from the wars of the chosen people under Moses and Josue, or from St. John the Baptist's advice to soldiers, or from the faith of the centurions mentioned in the New Testament. A soldier must have a sword and Christ has taken away the Christian's sword when he disarmed Peter. In the *De idololatria* Tertullian shows his true hand: he is a confirmed pacifist.

In the *De corona* (211) Tertullian develops about the same position as in the *De idololatria*, but the treatment is fuller and more pointed and the additions are of importance. The tract was written apropos of an incident involving Christian soldiers. Caracalla and Geta had signalized their accession to the imperial dignity by granting the troops at Lambesa a bonus. Each legionary came forward to receive the money with a crown of laurel on his head, a ceremonial badge of respect for the army and the Empire. The Christian soldiers in the legion conformed to this usage with one exception. He came up carrying his crown in his hand and explained that he could not wear it because he was a Christian. Indeed he abjured military service and was imprisoned to await execution. Tertullian published his *De corona* to show his approbation of this *gloriosus miles*. In chapter 11 of this work the acute controversialist takes up the question of the liceity of military service.³⁸ Again he looks for arms in the pacifist arsenal. The Christian who has taken the oath to Christ in baptism cannot take a second one. The prohibition of the Lord to take the sword (Matt. 26:52) is interpreted universally again: "And shall the son of peace take part in battle when it does not become him even to sue at law? And shall he apply the chain, and the prison, and the torture, and the punishment, who is not the avenger even of his own wrongs?"

But what impresses Tertullian even more is the impossibility of

³⁸ Tertullian, *De corona*, 11 (CSEL, LXX, 175-78).

avoiding the contamination of paganism in the army. After pointing out that the Christian soldier may be required to bear arms on the Lord's Day, to mount guard before pagan temples, the dwelling places of the evil spirits, to eat of food sacrificed to idols, to bear the flag which as a *res sacra* is the competitor of Christ, Tertullian adds: "How many other offences there are involved in the performances of camp offices, which we must hold to involve transgressions of God's law!" We see, then, that even with the pacifists the danger of idolatry and the near impossibility of observing the commandments of God and the Church weighed as heavily at least as purely pacifist considerations. Why invoke these reasons at all if, as some would have us believe, Christians on principle rejected all participation in warfare and only lax Christians would serve? The argumentative temper of the African polemist explains no doubt his readiness to employ any kind of argument to make a point. The *Apologeticum* proves that. But there must have been Christians in North Africa who required other persuasion beside that based on the rigorist view.³⁹

In the *De corona*, too, Tertullian gives proof of a certain amount of moderation. This is in regard to the soldier convert. True, it were better that he risk his life and desert, because all sorts of quibbling will have to be resorted to in order to avoid offending God in the ranks. Tertullian might well hesitate to impose this on the converts in the ranks. We have seen that traditionally not all deserted—often the only way of getting out of the services before the enlistment period of twenty-five years had expired. Now the penalty of desertion was death and the soldier, even if he escaped with his life, would have to sacrifice his career and renounce the handsome bonus in money or land which was bestowed on veterans who were honorably discharged.⁴⁰

³⁹ C. J. Cadoux ventures the remark that soldiers for the most part were "men of a somewhat uncultured and unreflective type" (*The Early Church and the World* [Edinburgh, 1925]). Cadoux, in addition to this work and *Christian Pacifism Re-examined* (Oxford, 1940), also published *The Early Christian Attitude to War* (London, 1919). This last work was reissued in a cheap edition with a new preface in 1940. In *The Early Church and the World* Cadoux states that it goes beyond *The Early Christian Attitude to War* and contains new material on the subject. Harnack remarks that Christianity exerted little attraction on the average soldier and did not become a religion of the camps (*Militia Christi*, p. 54).

⁴⁰ Cf. H. M. D. Palmer, *The Roman Legions* (Oxford, 1928), p. 235: "The offenses which were punished by death were desertion, mutiny and insubordination."

Even Tertullian thought all this involved quite a sacrifice for a neophyte. It is certain that he did not impose desertion.

Another explicit pacifist—although we have seen that like Tertullian he was willing to pray for the imperial armies—was Origen. Christians must, in his opinion, keep their hands free from blood so that they may be able to wrestle with God in prayer “on behalf of those who are fighting in a righteous cause, and for the king who reigns righteously, that whatever is opposed to those who act righteously may be destroyed.”⁴¹ Origen also had other reasons in addition to his pacifist tenets for not wanting Christians in the army. In his explanation of I Corinthians, which was written long before the *Contra Celsum*, he shows that he was well aware that there were Christian soldiers and that he did not like the way they comported themselves. “Idolatry is the sin of the army. ‘I am forced into it,’ they say. ‘The army demands it. I risk my life if I do not sacrifice or if I do not put on the white robe and offer incense according to the customs of the army.’ And yet such a person calls himself a Christian!” A little further along he ventures the remark that all soldiers are thieves.⁴² It is clear, therefore, that Origen’s outspoken hostility to the Christian soldier is also rooted in his horror of idolatry and licentiousness.

The *Apostolic Tradition* likewise betrays the pacifism of its author: “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. If a catechumen or a baptized Christian wishes to become a soldier (i.e., a volunteer), let him be cast out. For he has despised God.”⁴³ The headsmen referred to was a soldier assigned to courts of justice which might call on him to execute criminals. According to this rigorist he could become a Christian convert without giving up his post but he must not shed blood. And no baptized Christian could join the police or the soldiery.

Efforts have been made to show that other Christian writers of this

⁴¹ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, VIII, 73 (GCS, Origenes II, 290–91). Origen even risks the statement: “We do not fight under the emperor even though he require it” (*ibid.*, p. 291).

⁴² For the Commentary on I Corinthians, cf. *Journal of Theological Studies*, IX (1907–8), 366–69; the translation is the writer’s.

⁴³ Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition*, ed. Gregory Dix (London, 1937), p. 26; cf. H. Elfers, *Die Kirchenordnung Hippolyts von Rom* (Paderborn, 1938), p. 62.

period were rigorists in regard to military service. Often this is alleged on scanty evidence. Athenagoras states that Christians love their enemies, do not strike back, do not go to law when robbed, that they give to them that ask and love their neighbors as themselves—and he is labeled a pacifist.⁴⁴ Minucius Felix, in repudiating homicide, mentions abortion, the exposing of infants, and ritual murders.⁴⁵ These and other formulations of the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount do not derive from a consideration of the complicated factors involved in a determination of the liceity of military service. Speaking as Bishop of Carthage, Cyprian raises a vigorous voice against war, though his vehemence is no more than should be allowed to his office: “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.”⁴⁶ We have already mentioned that Cyprian desired an efficient and numerous army. He also mentions in one of his letters that there were soldier martyrs in the persecution of Decius. To what wars is he referring, then, and are we justified in making him out a pacifist? Doubtless he and many other Fathers would have been reluctant to authorize military service in the Roman formations at that time, but that does not prove that they were pacifists.⁴⁷

One well-known scene from the period we are considering brings up the question of the military oath and other oaths which soldiers might be called upon to take. We have already heard Tertullian insisting that the baptismal vows of the Christian exclude the possibility of taking the military oath, while the *Apostolic Tradition* warned the soldier not to take it. The question came up at Alexandria at the beginning of the third century. Basilides, an officer, was commanded to lead Potamiaena, a Christian virgin, to her death. Although she had already been

⁴⁴ Athenagoras, *Legatio pro christianis*, 11 (PG, VI, 912–13).

⁴⁵ Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, 30 (PL, III, 333–35; ed. G. Quispel [Leiden, 1949], pp. 66–68).

⁴⁶ Cyprian, *Ad Donatum*, 6 (PL, IV, 208; ed. J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink [The Hague, 1946], p. 13); cf. *Ad Demetrianum*, 3; 17; 20 (PL, IV, 564–66; 576–77; 578–79).

⁴⁷ Cf. Bainton: “Thus all of the outstanding writers of the East and the West repudiated participation in warfare for Christians” (*art. cit.*, p. 197). Moffatt writes: “It would have been indeed strange if the early Christians had not lifted up their testimony against warfare as distinguished pagans had done before them” (*art. cit.*, p. 662). For Lactantius cf. Bainton, *art. cit.*, p. 211; Moffatt, *art. cit.*, p. 662; Cadoux, *The Early Church and the World*, p. 416; and D. Petavius, *Theologica dogmata*, IV (Venice, 1745), 183 f.

tortured and maltreated by the gladiators, the mob tried to shake her constancy by insults as she was led away. Basilides showed the martyr every consideration and shielded her as far as possible from the inhumanity of the mob. Potamiaena noticed the kindness and promised that by prayer she would obtain a reward for him. Thereupon boiling pitch was poured over her entire body and she bore witness to Christ. This experience seems to have converted Basilides. Later on, when he was required by his fellow soldiers "to swear for a certain reason, Basilides declared that it was not lawful for him to swear at all, for he was a Christian." This declaration led to his arrest and incarceration. Before he was executed Basilides told the Christians who visited him that three days after her martyrdom St. Potamiaena had appeared to him and "placed a crown upon his head and said that she had besought the Lord for him and had obtained what she asked and soon he would be with her." Basilides was baptized and executed.⁴⁸

The oath which caused Basilides to confess the faith was probably not the military oath. No doubt he had taken that previously. In the forms which have come down to us this oath of service seems harmless enough. According to Vegetius, "jurant autem milites omnia se strenue facturos quae praeceperit imperator, nunquam deserturos nec mortem recusaturos pro Romana republica." In another form: "omnino se facturos pro republica, nec recessuros nisi praecepto consulis post completa stipendia."⁴⁹ A promise of obedience to the commander was included: "omniaque facturos quae is praeciperet." The soldiers also swore to prefer the interest of the emperor to all others: "se imperatoris salutem omnibus potiore esse habituros." At the accession of a new emperor the soldiers had to "jurare in nomen imperatoris." Annually on the anniversary of this event and on January first the oath was renewed. The invocation of gods during the ceremony of its administration could, of course, turn the oath into an act of pagan cult. The same might have been true of the oath which Basilides was expected to take. We have no means of determining just how compromising were the demands made on him, but he may well have been asked to take an oath which would have involved the profession of paganism.

⁴⁸ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, VI, 6 (GCS, Eusebius II/2, 534). Eusebius makes Basilides a disciple of Origen.

⁴⁹ Bigelmair, *op. cit.*, p. 178, quotes Vegetius; Leclercq gives the other version (*art. cit.*, cols. 1110, 1114).

Apparently the Christian soldiers considered the ordinary military oath acceptable or were able to avoid taking it.⁵⁰

During the period 170–260 the Christian tradition of loyalty which had distinguished preceding generations was maintained. Marcus Aurelius (161–80) knew of the courage of the martyrs and attributed it to mere obstinacy. He had no complaint about their loyalty.⁵¹ Tertullian noted in his day that the Christians were denounced as enemies of the emperor.⁵² And yet the Christians were not involved in any conspiracy. When Cassius, Niger, and Albinus revolted, no Christians supported them. The Christians saw in the elevation of the princes the hand of God. “Noster est magis Caesar ut a Deo nostro constitutus.” “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” was still a norm for the Christian conscience.⁵³

The scanty evidence which has survived from the period shows that military service became a problem of some moment during the third quarter of the second century and persisted as such. During these years the ecclesiastical authorities were unostentatiously against enlistment and it was understood among Christians that they were to avoid conscription if possible. The principal reason for this line of conduct is to be sought in the dangers to faith and morals which could not but be met with in the services. There were, too, some pacifists in the Christian community. The most notable of these, and the only one whose explanation of his stand has come down to us, was Tertullian. His works indeed are the main source for students of the problem during our period. We have seen that he was, apart from the rhetoric of the *Apologeticum*, a consistent rigorist in this matter. His only concession was to permit the convert soldier to remain in the army on condition that he avoid contamination. Even in this case he counselled desertion.

The ecclesiastical authorities, while they expected what Christian soldiers there were to avoid compromise with paganism, were equally anxious that they should do nothing which would precipitate a persecution. Their precautions were not successful. In the last decade of this

⁵⁰ Cf. Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁵¹ Marcus Aurelius, quoted in C. Kirch, *Enchiridion fontium historiae ecclesiasticae antiquae* (4th ed.; Freiburg im Breisgau, 1923), n. 77.

⁵² Tertullian, *Ad Scapulam*, 2 (*PL*, I, 777–79).

⁵³ Cf. Charles Plater, *A Primer of Peace and War* (London, 1915), p. 190.

period the bloody persecutions of Decius (249–51) and Valerian (252–60) struck terror into Christian hearts. Soldiers were among the victims. In Alexandria, Besas, a soldier, was put to death for rebuking those who insulted the martyrs. In the same city,

. . . as a certain person who was being tried as a Christian seemed inclined to recant, a maniple of soldiers, Ammon and Zeno and Ptolemy and Ingenes, and with them an old man, Theophilus, were standing close together before the tribunal. They gnashed their teeth, and made signs with their bodies. And when the attention of all was turned to them, before anyone else could seize them, they rushed up to the tribunal saying they were Christians.⁵⁴

Harnack is right when he says that this little episode casts much light on the situation in Egypt, one of the most Christian parts of the world at the time.⁵⁵ It proves that the percentage of Christian soldiers was not small in that region.

FROM GALLIENUS (260–68) TO CONSTANTINE (306–37)

Gallienus, son of the persecutor Valerian, reversed his father's policy toward the Christians. His decree of tolerance has not come down to us but we have the Greek translation of a rescript to the bishops of Egypt. This imperial decree, which gave freedom and security to the Christians, was of considerable importance despite the fact that it was not long in force. When Gallienus acceded to the petition of the bishops, he admitted that the Church possessed a legal status, and in giving back Church property he confirmed the legality of its possessions. The Emperor, of course, was not acting out of sympathy for Christianity: he thought that the new religion could be more easily stopped by a revival of paganism than by the sword.⁵⁶

The incident from this reign which throws light on our problem belongs in spirit to the preceding period. It took place at Caesarea in Palestine at a time when the authority of Gallienus was not yet recognized there. Marinus, a Christian, had a distinguished military career behind him and was on the eve of being made a centurion. A disap-

⁵⁴ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, VI, 41, 22 f. (GCS, Eusebius II/2, 608 f.).

⁵⁵ Harnack, *Militia Christi*, p. 77: "Die kleine Episode ersetzt ganze Bände: wenn es so in ägyptischen Regimentern bereits im Jahre 250 aussah, wie kann man sich über das wundern, was Konstantinus sechzig Jahre später getan hat?"

⁵⁶ Cf. *Cambridge Ancient History*, XII, 658. Cf. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, VII, 13 (GCS, Eusebius II/2, 666); Vogt, *op. cit.*, p. 37 ff.

pointed rival complained that the promotion was illegal because Marinus was a Christian. The charge was admitted and the judge gave only three hours for deliberation.

When Marinus came out of the tribunal, Theotecnus, the bishop of the place, took him aside and conversed with him, and taking his hand led him into the Church. And standing with him within, in the sanctuary, he raised his cloak a little, and pointed to the sword that hung by his side; and at the same time placed before him the Scripture of the divine Gospels, and told him to choose which of the two he wished. And without hesitation he reached forth his right hand and took the divine Scripture.

Marinus was condemned to death and executed forthwith.⁵⁷

The assassination of Gallienus was followed by an anti-Christian reaction, especially in Italy. Claudius II (268-70) and Aurelian (270-75) dropped the policy of tolerance without resorting to open persecution. They preferred to ignore Christianity in a hostile spirit and with the threat of active opposition. It was, indeed, only the assassination of Aurelian that prevented him from trying to force Christians to accept the solution of the religious problem he had decided to impose.⁵⁸

From the death of this potential persecutor until the great persecution, the Church enjoyed peace for over a quarter of a century. During most of the reign of Diocletian and his colleagues of the Tetrarchy the tolerance seemed to be turning into actual favor. The Church never had known such tranquillity. Christians were even entrusted with the government of provinces and, that their consciences might be at peace, they were dispensed from offering sacrifice. Moreover the Empress Prisca, wife of Diocletian, and their daughter Valeria, were catechumens if not actually Christians. "Why need I speak," writes Eusebius, "of those in the royal palaces, and of the rulers over all, who allowed the members of their households, wives, children, and servants to speak openly before them for the divine word and life, and suffered them almost to boast of the freedom of their faith? Indeed they esteemed them highly and preferred them to their fellow servants."⁵⁹

The army, although more intransigent than the court, leaned in the

⁵⁷ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, VII, 15 (GCS, Eusebius II/2, 668-70).

⁵⁸ When Aurelian conquered Zenobia in 272 he left the decision between the claims of Paul of Samosata and Domnus to the bishops of Rome and Italy; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, VII, 30, 19 (GCS, Eusebius II/2, 714).

⁵⁹ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, VIII, 1 (GCS, Eusebius II/2, 736-40).

same direction. No dispensation from sacrifice was granted Christian officers, but they were tacitly exempted or they were permitted to soothe their consciences by making the sign of the cross before the pagan ritual began. The pagan commanders connived in this strange procedure. Many of them thought, no doubt, that the Christian movement could not be stopped. Apparently Diocletian thought so. The tide of conversions which had long since set in toward Christianity increased in force. Christians looked forward hopefully to the day of complete emancipation. More and more of the faithful were in the armies, and that not only as a result of the conversion of soldiers. The Church authorities accepted the situation in silence.⁶⁰

But Galerius, Caesar of Diocletian and a convinced pagan, resolved to oppose the surrender to Christianity. His prestige had risen as a result of his victory over the Persians in 298; he felt himself strong enough to defend the gods. Galerius spent the winter of 302-3 with Diocletian at Nicomedia, urging his aging chief to purge the court and the army of Christians. During his visit to the West in 303, Diocletian fell desperately ill. On his return to Nicomedia he was a nervous wreck; the report spread that he was dying or dead. Galerius seized the opportunity to change the modified persecution already launched into a life-or-death struggle. The pagan reaction entered its most acute phase.⁶¹

The army, and particularly the officers' corps, was to be purged of Christians. Eusebius writes: "The devil did not wage war against all of us at once, but made trial at first only of those in the army. For he supposed that the others could be taken easily if he should first attack and subdue these."⁶² This statement not only indicates that there were

⁶⁰ Cf. Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum*, 10 (*PL*, VII, 210-11). A number of soldiers, among them Maximilianus whom we studied at the beginning of this article, were tried after 295; cf. Leclercq, *art. cit.*, cols. 1133-47. One of the martyrs, Marcellus, was a centurion; another, Julius, had spent twenty-seven years in the service.

⁶¹ Cf. *Cambridge Ancient History*, XII, 667. Some attribute the decision launching the persecution to Diocletian; but Galerius seems to have been the decisive force at the moment. When Diocletian and Maximian resigned, Galerius' men (Maximinus Daia, Severus) became Caesars to the exclusion of Constantine. Later Licinius, another henchman of Galerius, received the purple; cf. Vogt, *op. cit.*, pp. 134, 149.

⁶² Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, VIII, 4 (*GCS*, Eusebius II/2, 744-46): "Thereupon many of the soldiers were seen most cheerfully embracing private life, so that they might not deny their piety toward the creator of the universe." For a list of the soldier martyrs cf. Harnack, *Mission und Ausbreitung*, II, 584.

numbers of Christians in the army but also shows that they were far from being considered lax in their religion. Lactantius agrees substantially with this view. Galerius, he reports, feared the anger of the gods and thought that the armies would be defeated if Christians were tolerated in them. In addition, the military *haruspices* attributed the unfavorable outcome of certain auguries to the presence of Christian soldiers. Galerius was determined to break with all compromise. The contest in the army was really the heart of the great persecution. The question was, in a sense, a military one: Was the army to remain true to its pagan traditions or was it to abandon them and tolerate the Christian soldier? Galerius saw to it that tolerance was not achieved without much bloodshed. Soldiers were martyred. There were some denials of the faith. The harshness of the measures produced mutinies in Syria and Melitene. Maximinus II, relative and henchman of Galerius, had to forbid Christian soldiers to leave the service lest the military formations be decimated. Blood flowed from 303 to 311.

It was Galerius, the superstitious supporter of the gods, who eventually gave up the struggle. Victim of a strange disease, he issued in 311 a decree which, while berating the Christians, grudgingly granted them toleration.⁶³ The Empire was on the verge of a decisive change. Within a few months Constantine the Great was (if we may believe a contemporary witness) to put the sign of the cross on the shields of the Roman soldiery. It is certain that it was being engraved on his coins before many years had passed. Constantine inaugurated a policy of support for Christianity which was only temporarily disturbed by the abortive pagan reactions under Licinius and Julian the Apostate. From this time danger to the Christian faith of the soldiers did not exist. In 416 Theodosius II was to exclude pagans from the armed services of the Empire.⁶⁴

The Church, for its part, spoke its mind on the liceity of military service as soon as the handicaps against Christian soldiers had been removed. There is—a fact of considerable moment when we consider the importance of councils in the government of the Church at the time—no record of any conciliar decree against military service for the entire pre-Constantinian era; not even at Elvira, where intran-

⁶³ Cf. Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum*, 34 (*PL*, VII, 249–51).

⁶⁴ *Codex Theodosianus*, XVI, 10, 21: "Qui profano pagani ritus errore seu crimine pollutantur, hoc est gentiles, nec ad militiam admittantur."

sigence was so pronounced, was there any legislation on this point. Harnack is obviously right in interpreting this silence as an evidence of a watchful-waiting policy on the part of the episcopate. As soon, at any rate, as Constantine had granted true tolerance, we find the Council of Arles (314) rallying to the support of the government by excommunicating deserters even in times of peace. From that time on there can be no doubt as to the attitude of the Church.⁶⁵

Before concluding this survey, some further points should be mentioned. Not infrequently in discussions of our problem it is assumed that true Christians were in principle against the shedding of human blood—and that to such a degree that they ruled out capital punishment as well as military service. Professor Bainton sums up the argument for this position. He appeals to the doubtful Western text of the apostolic decree of Acts 15; to certain statements of Tertullian, Minucius Felix, Cyprian, Arnobius, Lactantius, and Victricius in the West; and to Athenagoras, Origen, the *Canons of Hippolytus*, and Basil in the East, with mention of Marcion at the end.⁶⁶ The evidence suffers not only from scantiness but also from vagueness. Many people are revolted by bloodshed who are not against military service or capital punishment. Even today in the Catholic Church there is a penalty excluding from the reception or exercise of holy orders those who have killed or mutilated a man.⁶⁷ The early Church, like the Church of our day, had “a strong aversion to bloodshed and saw an incompatibility

⁶⁵ This decree should be taken as it reads; cf. Harnack, *Militia Christi*, p. 87, and note his remarks on p. 79, n. 2: “Dennoch ist seitens der Kirche eine generelle oder spezialisierte Anweisung für die christlichen Soldaten in Bezug auf ihr Verhalten niemals erfolgt; die Materie zu regeln war unmöglich. Sehr bezeichnend sind in dieser Hinsicht die Kanones der Synode von Elvira in Spanien. Sie beschäftigen sich hauptsächlich mit der Regelung des christlichen Lebens innerhalb der heidnischen Umgebung; aber in Bezug auf den Soldatenstand beobachten sie ein beredtes Schweigen.” H. Achelis proposes the theory that in the fourth century the Church removed soldier martyrs from the calendar to avoid an unfavorable effect on the army (*Das Christentum in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, II, 442 f.). This hypothesis lacks proof. For the attitude of the Church to war after the Constantinian revolution, cf. P. Batiffol, “Les premiers chrétiens et la guerre,” *L’Eglise et le droit de guerre* (2nd ed.; Paris, 1920).

⁶⁶ Cf. Bainton, *art. cit.*, p. 208 ff.

⁶⁷ Cf. P. Gasparri, *Tractatus canonicus de sacra ordinatione* (Paris, 1893), I, 255: “Cum non deceat eum qui hominem interfecit aut mutilavit, etiam sine culpa, esse ministrum illius qui fuit mitis et humilis corde, Ecclesia eum removet a clero.”

between love and killing," but the assumption that the early Church rejected any shedding of human blood lacks solid foundation.

An argument against the liceity of military service in Christian circles cannot be drawn from the testimony of inscriptions. The principal reason is that no adequate study of ancient inscriptions from this viewpoint exists. Dom Leclercq's article, published in 1933, is admittedly provisional.⁶⁸ We may note in passing that this erudite author disputes the view that the small number of inscriptions of Christian soldiers which has been found up to the present proves that the number of such soldiers was negligible. "Qui pourra évaluer jamais le nombre d'épithames dépourvues de toute formule et de tout symbole chrétiens et qui furent placées par des survivants païens sur la tombe d'un fidèle?"

CONCLUSION

The Church fosters peace and is unalterably opposed to war. St. Augustine, who was in his day to formulate the doctrine of the Church on the conditions for a just war, expressed this attitude forcibly when he wrote: "He who can bear the thought of war without great pain has lost human feeling."⁶⁹ Christians, then, desire peace but they have often to endure war and they have learned to see in it a just chastisement for sin and to appreciate its expiatory value. They also hold that God can draw good even from this supreme temporal evil.

At the time of the foundation of the Church the Savior was careful to make it clear that warfare was not a means to be used for the advancement of His religion. In a true though not pacifist sense He disarmed Peter when He said: "Put back thy sword into its place; for all those who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matt. 26:52). Christ had to make it clear that the kingdom of God is not of this world and not to be advanced by earthly weapons. The novelty of this position made it necessary to state it with vigor. Little wonder, perhaps, that some have been prone to extend the prohibition even to just warfare.

But such an extension cannot be shown to derive from the principles

⁶⁸ Leclercq, *art. cit.*, cols. 1155-81.

⁶⁹ Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, XIX, 7 (CSEL, XL/2, 384). Cf. John K. Ryan, *Modern War and Basic Ethics* (Milwaukee, 1940).

of Christianity. For a considerable period there was no soldier problem. Soldier converts were not numerous and they were not required to leave the army. The account of the friendly centurions in the Gospel helped, perhaps, to win this favorable solution for the convert. Even the rigorists did not dare demand desertion without reservation.

As the Christian religion appealed but little to the average soldier, and as the areas of recruitment were not in places where Christians were especially numerous, the Christian contingent fighting under the eagles of Rome was small before 170. After that date, with the rapid influx of pagans into the Church, it was inevitable that the soldier problem should arise. We find it posed from the pagan viewpoint by Celsus about 180, from the Christian viewpoint by Tertullian in the early years of the third century. Celsus is shocked because the Christians do not rally to the defense of the Empire, Tertullian because so many do. We learn from the latter that some soldier converts did remain in the army. But, in addition, Christian conscripts and even volunteers were, for reasons we have examined, joining up in appreciable numbers. The Church definitely faced a soldier problem. Still no ecclesiastical instruction on the Christian attitude to military life was forthcoming. It was nearly impossible that there should be such instruction. On the one hand, the ecclesiastical authorities wished the Empire well in its struggle with the Germans and Persians; they even prayed regularly for its success. On the other hand, the compromises which the military life exacted from Christians made it impossible for bishops to sanction enlistment. The solution of the Church was a practical one: silence and hope for better days. Outside the Catholic Church pacifist solutions were current, while even non-pacifists denounced the evils of warfare.

With the proclamation of tolerance under Gallienus, and especially in the early days of the Tetrarchy, the long-awaited better days seemed to have dawned at last. More and more Christians joined up because, following the concessions made in civil life, a peaceful solution of the Christian problem in the army seemed likely. If Galerius had not tried to overcome Christianity by force, it is probable that an arrangement would have been reached in due time. The violence of the pagan reaction served only to show the strength of Christianity in the army and out of it. Galerius recanted, and when Constantine not only tolerated

the Christian religion but showed himself a friend and supporter, he removed the last reasons that Christians had for rejecting military service. Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, writing about 313, serenely asserts that Christians serve in just wars.⁷⁰

Both Professor Bainton and Dom Leclercq explain the attitude of the pre-Constantinian Church in somewhat different ways. The former holds that the practical attitude of the Christian leaders who desired the survival of the Empire and prayed for brave soldiers prevented a well-grounded (radical?) solution of the problem. For Dr. Bainton this means that the Church was beginning to recognize different ethical levels. The ultimate solution for him was the acceptance by the Church of two grades of Christian conduct. Dom Leclercq asserts that the texts seem to show that, while there was undoubtedly an imposing number of Christian soldiers in the third century, the ecclesiastical authorities vacillated between hostility and favor to Christians serving. He finds the solution for these "contradictions" in the fact that usually the authorities winked at the Christian quality of soldiers and officials, while it was quite easy for the Christian in the services to avoid any compromise with paganism. No one will deny that Professor Bainton and Dom Leclercq have in these statements touched an aspect of our problem. But they seem to have been unduly impressed by the denunciations of bloodshed and warfare to be found in certain Christian writers, while they pass over the fact that no conciliar decree against service had appeared. At a time when councils had such power in shaping Church policy this absence explains whatever vacillation there was among Christian spokesmen. A certain amount of hesitancy can also be explained by the complexity of the problems involved. Circumstances were not favorable for dispassionate thought on the subject. Harnack, an exponent of liberal Christianity, assumes that Christ and His early followers were against warfare and the shedding of blood for any reason whatsoever. But he recognizes that the documents show that the ancient Church held no such a position in the third century. For him this would be but another example of the Hellenization of the Gospel.

The problems created for the Church by the participation of Christians in just wars have, of course, been very serious. The pacifist theory

⁷⁰ Eusebius, *Demonstratio evangelica*, I, 8 (GCS, Eusebius VI, 39).

is but an aberration of a genuine element of Christian ethics. The Church has within its wall a place for the Christian soldier. It has always offered prayers for victory in just war. Nevertheless there are other prayers which express more profound aspirations of the Christian soul. In August 1939, when the world was about to enter upon the greatest of all wars up to the present time, Pope Pius XII interpreted these feelings in the following words: "Nothing is lost by peace; everything can be lost by war. The Vicar of Christ knows no duty more sacred, no mission more gratifying, than that of being the unwearyed advocate of peace."