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Christian Pacifism before Constantine

By David B. Kopel

Abstract: Much recent scholarship on early Christianity has emphasized the diversity of early Christian thought. This Paper presents evidence of diversity on early Christian belief and practice on the issue of pacifism. Notably, the diversity is found within orthodox Christianity itself. The claims of some modern writers that pre-Constantian orthodox Christians were virtually unanimously pacifist are not correct. In fact, some but not all of the early Patristic writers were pacifists. A significant number of Christians, including saints, served in the Roman army. The Paper discusses the following writers: Justin Martyr, Marcion, Irenaeus, Athenagoras, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Julius Africanus, Origen, Cyprian, Arnobius, and Lactantius, and also examines other sources of information about the early church.

Introduction

Some modern Christian pacifists tell a story in which pacifism is the philosophy of the “true” early church. Supposedly, Christian recognition of Just War and the abandonment of pacifism occurred only when the church was several centuries old.¹ Only after the Roman Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity did Christians decide that wars could be just.

The pacifist version of church history is inconsistent with what early Christians actually did, and with what the Church Fathers wrote. The early church was far from unanimous in its attitudes towards violence.

It is understandable that pacifists work so hard on building a case about the early church. There is no dispute that from the year 312 A.D. onward, the year that Emperor Constantine proclaimed Christianity to be the state religion of the Roman Empire, the mainstream of Christianity has not been pacifist. From the fourth century through the twenty-first, the pacifists have been at most a tolerated minority in the Christian world, and have sometimes been considered heretics.

Accordingly, many pacifists seek to prove that in the “pristine” era of the original church, pacifism reigned. Modern pacifists seek to repristinize the church, returning to the church to its original, allegedly pacifist roots.² This Paper suggests the modern myth of pristinely pacifist early church is incorrect.

Modern pacifist authors have poured enormous effort into portraying the early church as pacifist. Of these authors, the most influential has probably been Yale professor

¹ The Christians who did acknowledge Just War did not invent the idea. The Romans had rules for just warfare. So did the Jews, although the Jews did not have a formal doctrine of “Just War.”

² Just because the early Christians were unanimous about something does not mean they were theologically correct. For at least the first century after the crucifixion of Jesus, Christians were unanimous—as far as every available record shows—in expecting the imminent Apocalypse and the Second Coming of Christ. Nearly 2,000 years later, the Second Coming has still not taken place. Some modern Christian thinkers argue for some kind of metaphorical Second Coming. But the Second Coming as the early Christians expected it—the bodily return of Jesus of Nazareth to become king of the earth—has not happened.

If almost all early Christians could be unanimously and radically wrong about the Second Coming, then it is possible that some early Christians could be wrong about other important issues.

Ronald Bainton, a Quaker whose *Christian Attitudes Towards War and Peace* includes a long and frequently-cited chapter on the early Christians. The best book, however, is C. John Cadoux's *The Early Christian Attitude to War*.³ Published in 1919, the book was part of the leading edge of the pacifist backlash against World War One. More so than Bainton or other pacifist authors, Cadoux quoted his sources directly, rather than merely offering summaries; some of Bainton's summaries overstate the summarized author's pacifism. Moreover, Cadoux, far more so than other pacifist authors, directly confronted and analyzed contradictory passages from the ancient sources. Accordingly, this Paper frequently addresses Cadoux's arguments, because those arguments are the most intellectually serious ones made in support of the theory of the pristinely pacifist early church.

Part One of this Paper examines the conduct of the early Christian laity, as exemplified by Christian service in the Roman military. Part Two details the diverse and complex views of early Christian writers.

I. Christian Soldiers

A. The New Testament

The early church spawned many great writers and many inspiring martyrs. The Patristic writers (also known as the Fathers of the Church) are the writers through the first six centuries A.D. in the West, and the first seven-and-a-half centuries in the East, who set forth many Christians doctrines and theories which are still followed today. The Patristic writings, however, are not scripture. Christian scripture is the Bible, including the New Testament. Even Cadoux, with his immense knowledge of ancient writers, and his clever analysis of so many topics, ran into a New Testament problem he could not overcome.

Cadoux argued assiduously for the lowest possible numerical estimate of Christian soldiers in the early church period. (Cadoux's arguments are addressed *infra*.) But still he was faced with the New Testament evidence of several Christian soldiers, none of whom were told by their baptizers to leave military service.

1. The soldier baptized by John the Baptist

Jesus' slightly older cousin John the Baptist was, of course, famous for popularizing the idea of baptism, and using water for the baptism.⁴ John baptized Jesus, and preached in support of Jesus' ministry.

One day, some tax collectors ("publicans") came to John, asked to be baptized, and said "Master, what shall we do?" Tax-collectors were feared and despised by the public, since they tended to extort as much as possible from every taxpayer, send a share

³ C. John Cadoux, *The Early Christian Attitude to War* (N.Y.: Seabury Pr., 1982)(1st pub. 1919). For readers seeking a balanced treatment, the best source is Louis J. Swift, *The Early Christians on War and Military Service* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1983). Because Swift provides lengthy block quotes of almost all early Christian writings on the subject of violence, his book is the best single resource for readers interested in reading the original material themselves. A vast amount writings by the early church fathers can be found online at www.ccel.org.

⁴ John's mother Elisabeth was the cousin of Jesus' mother Mary. Luke 1:36. Thus, John and Jesus were second cousins.

to the government, and keep the surplus for themselves. John replied to the tax collectors “Exact no more than that which is appointed to you.”⁵

The story suggests that tax collection is (unlike prostitution) not an inherently immoral profession. A person can be a righteous tax collector, as long as he collects only what is properly due, and does not extort extra for himself.

Then, “the soldiers likewise demanded of him [John], saying, And what shall we do? And he said unto them, Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages.”⁶

Alternate translations of the King James Bible’s phrase “Do violence to no man” include “Rob no one by violence” (Revised Standard Version); “No bullying” (New English Bible); “Don’t use threats or blackmail” (William Beck’s *The New Testament in the Language of Today*); “Molest ye no one” (The Emphasized New Testament), “Do not extort money by intimidating” (Berkeley Version); “Put no man in fear” (American Version); or “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation” (English Standard Version).

The King James translation of “Do violence to no man” might, as an isolated phrase, be considered to prohibit soldiering. But the context of the passage—which is made clearer in the modern translations—is that soldiers (like tax collectors) tend to enrich themselves by abusing the civilian population. Soldiers extorted money by threatening violence, and by making false accusations. The presumption of John’s instruction to the soldiers to “be content with your wages,” was that the soldiers would continue being soldiers—and that they should be content with the military salary, and should not try to make extra income by bullying civilians.

Thus, John the Baptist gave the soldiers the same advice that he gave the tax collectors; in effect, “thou shalt not steal.” Tax collecting and soldiering could be legitimate professions. “Be content with your wages” would not be advice that could be given to a person whose job was inherently immoral—such as prostitution, manufacturing idols, or highway robbery. Rather, the advice to someone in a necessarily immoral line of work would be to leave that line of work. That is what Jesus told the prostitute Mary Magdalene, after he saved her from being stoned: “go, and sin no more.”⁷

John Calvin’s commentary on this passage explained that Jesus (via John) would not tell the soldiers to give up their power, because surrendering the power would be to destroy “what his heavenly Father sanctioned.” Calvin insisted that a Christian soldier must choose his profession out of a desire to serve the public good, rather than a desire for personal gain (such as plundering a defeated foe).⁸

Cadoux suggested that the baptized soldier could not really be called a disciple of Christ.⁹ However, since Jesus himself was baptized by John the Baptist, Cadoux’s argument is weak.¹⁰

⁵ Luke 3:12-13.

⁶ Luke 3:14.

⁷ John 8:11. The text claims only that Mary Magdalene was an adulterer. The tradition that she was a prostitute is extra-scriptural.

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on Luke*, 3:14.

⁹ Cadoux, p. 228.

¹⁰ Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-22.

2. The Righteous Centurion

One of the themes of the New Testament is how the message of Jesus, at first delivered only to the Jews, came to be seen as meant for Gentiles too. One of the early stories of this transformation is told in the *Gospel According to St. Luke*. Not long after Jesus began his ministry and called his Apostles, a Roman military commander, a centurion, asked for Jesus to come and heal one of the centurion's servants, saying that he "neither thought I myself worthy to come unto thee: but say in a word, and my servant shall be healed."¹¹ Slightly rephrased, the centurion's humble request for healing is repeated by Roman Catholic Priests at every mass, during the consecration of the host (the bread and wine).¹²

"When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him [the centurion], and turned him about, and said unto the people that followed him, I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel."¹³ The Roman centurion is presented as a marvelous example of Christian faith. There is no suggestion that his faith required him to stop soldiering, or that Jesus had any criticism of the centurion's profession.¹⁴ In contrast, Jesus told the adulteress Mary Magdalene "go, and sin no more."¹⁵

Notably, after Jesus died, it was a Roman centurion who is the first person to acclaim Jesus as the "son of God," even while Jesus' dead body was hanging on the cross.¹⁶

A "centurion" was a commander of approximately sixty men. The equivalent rank in the U.S. Army would be Battalion Sergeant Major. Centurions were esteemed, so the stories about the Christian centurions show that Jesus was respected by high-ranking Roman military officials.

Cadoux argued that the soldier received a compliment, but was not necessarily a disciple of Christ.¹⁷ Although Cadoux's reading seems strained, it is fair to say that *Luke* does not explicitly state that the soldier became a Christian.

3. Sergius Paulus

After Jesus had died and been resurrected, the Apostles began preaching the good news about Jesus. Their early ministry is recorded in *Acts of the Apostles*. According to *Acts*, Paul preached to Sergius Paulus, the deputy governor ("proconsul") of the Roman-governed island of Cyprus. While Sergius Paulus was watching, Paul confronted "a certain sorcerer, a false prophet" who was named Bar-jesus. Paul rebuked the sorcerer, and announced "thou shalt be blind, not seeing the sun for a season. And immediately there fell on him a mist and a darkness: and he went about seeking some to lead him by the hand." Proconsul Sergius Paulus, "when he saw what was done, believed, being astonished at the doctrine of the Lord."¹⁸

¹¹ Luke 7:2-10. Jesus was also impressed that the Centurion had built a synagogue for the Jews.

¹² "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you. But only say the word, and I shall be healed."

¹³ Luke 7:9.

¹⁴ The same story also appears in Matthew 8.

¹⁵ John 8:11.

¹⁶ Mark 15:39 ("Truly this man was the Son of God."); Matthew 27:54 ("Truly this was the Song of God."). *Luke* presents a milder version, "Certainly this was a righteous man." Luke 23:47.

¹⁷ Cadoux, p. 228.

¹⁸ Acts 13:6-12.

A proconsul was a civil and a military officer. Accordingly, Sergius Paulus was a very high-ranking military and political commander. The conversion of Sergius Paulus is inconsistent with theories that Christians should not exercise political power or engage in military violence.

Cadoux argued that the statement that Sergius Paulus “believed” probably meant only that Sergius Paulus “listened sympathetically to what the apostles said and expressed agreement with some of their most earnest utterances.”¹⁹ Cadoux’s theory is implausible. Sergius Paulus witnessed a miracle.²⁰ There is no reason to believe that the use of “believe” in the Sergius Paulus story did not mean “believe”, but instead meant “listened sympathetically.”

4. Cornelius and Paul’s jailer

One of the most important debates among the apostles was whether they should preach only to Jews, or also to Gentiles. One of the key turning points came when Cornelius, a Roman centurion, dreamt that a man in bright clothing told Cornelius to send for Peter (the leader of the Apostles).

Peter came, even though “it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company or come unto one of another nation.” Peter explained that “God hath shewed me that I should not call any man clean or unclean.” After hearing Cornelius speak, Peter observed that God accepts righteous people “in every nation.” Cornelius was converted along with two household servants, and “a devout soldier” who “waited on him continually.”²¹

While imprisoned in Philippi, St. Paul baptized one of his jailers.²² Since the Roman Army also functioned as the police, Paul therefore baptized a soldier.

So even if we grant Cadoux’s arguments on the first three soldiers, then we still have three soldiers left: Cornelius the Centurion and the “devout soldier” who accompanied him, plus Paul’s jailer at Philippi. Cadoux did not deny that Cornelius and the soldier were disciples of Christ. And Cadoux did not deny that Cornelius the Roman military officer and the other soldier were brought into Christ’s church *without* being told to leave the army. Indeed, Cornelius was brought in by the highest possible Christian authority on earth, Peter himself. Likewise, the jailer (who was also a soldier) at Philippi was baptized by Paul, the greatest Christian evangelist ever.

According to Cadoux’s analysis, the three soldiers are the only Christian soldiers of whom we have definite evidence before 170 A.D.²³ Even if Cadoux is right that there are only three, only one is needed. The *Book of Acts* plainly sanctions Christian soldiers.

¹⁹ Cadoux, pp. 97-98.

²⁰ Throughout this Paper, I presume that the various events described in the Bible, such as the physical resurrection of Jesus, and the miracles described in *Acts*, really took place. This Paper focuses on the ethical beliefs of Christians, so there would be no point in littering the Paper with clauses such as “according to what Christians believe, Paul was miraculously rescued...” This Paper does not argue for or against the proposition that a person *should* believe in any particular miracle; rather, since the vast majority of modern Christians (like virtually all Christians in the early Christian era) *do* believe in those miracles, it would be a waste of words to keep inserting disclaimers about the factual validity of events described in Christian scripture.

²¹ Acts 10; 11:1-18.

²² Acts 16:24-34. Paul was the leading Christian missionary in the New Testament and a prolific author of letters which were later included in the New Testament.

²³ Cadoux, pp. 228-29.

If the New Testament shows that something is allowed, then no quantity of extra-Biblical history about early Christian practices can prove it is forbidden to modern Christians.

The stories of the three soldiers in *Acts* do not solve every issue involving Christian violence. It is possible to concede the force of the soldiers' example, and still to argue that only soldiers may engage in violence, not civilians. Or that any person may engage in violence to protect others (as good soldiers are supposed to), but a person may not engage in self-defense. Indeed, several important Christian writers took similar positions. However, when we analyze the parameters of *who* may use force or *why* they may use force, then we have gone far beyond the simplistic view that Christianity mandates absolute pacifism.

B. Christian Soldiers in the Early Church

Before analyzing early Christian authors, it is important to examine whether Cadoux's claim that there is no evidence of Christian soldiers (other than the three in *Acts*) before 170 A.D. Studying the behavior of the laity, rather than only studying early Christian theorists, is important because church writers and official theoreticians are sometimes what economists would call "a lagging indicator." Some of the doctrines that Christians follow today did not start in the mind of the great scholar, but in the practices of the less educated laity.

Consider, for example, the Catholic and Orthodox doctrine that the Virgin Mary is the "Mother of God" (*Theotokas*). The doctrine was officially declared by the Council of Ephesus (in modern-day Turkey) in the year 431. But the Council was responding to a mass movement of veneration for the Virgin Mary—ecstatic crowds paraded through the streets when the Council's decision was announced—which had been building for many decades.²⁴

Many of the people who are now recognized as Saints of the Catholic or Orthodox churches were officially given the title by the church long after the laity had begun to venerate them, and to pray for their intercession.²⁵

Suppose that about one thousand eight hundred years in the future, in the year 3800, someone were trying to write a history of American Catholic attitudes towards the Iraq War in 2003. Also suppose that in the years 2400-3000, most of the written records of our civilization had been destroyed. If the all the historian had to study were several surviving documents by important Catholic writers, and most of those documents dealt with the Iraq War only in a passing paragraph or two, would the historian get an accurate idea of American Catholicism's attitude towards the Iraq War?

Most of the American Catholic bishops opposed the Iraq War. Most the Catholic laity supported the war, at least initially, according to opinion polling.²⁶ In practice, the

²⁴ Geoffrey Ashe, *The Virgin* (London: Arkana, 1988).

²⁵ Many Christian denominations—including Catholics, Orthodox, and Episcopalians—designate some persons as "saints." When discussing such a person, I identify them at least once by their title of "Saint." This designation helps the reader understand that the person has been given special honor by Christians. The designation is not meant to take a stand one way or another on whether the person deserves to be called a saint, or whether saints exist.

²⁶ Richard Ostling, "Poll Shows Sermons on Iraq Influence Few," *The News Herald* (Associated Press), March 19, 2003 (Pre-war poll by Pew Research Center and Forum on Religion and Public Life found that 62% of Catholics supported the war); "Fifty-five percent of American Roman Catholics favor 'invading Iraq with U.S. ground troops in an attempt to remove Saddam Hussein from power.'" Jennifer Robinson,

American Bishops and the laity agreed to disagree; nobody got excommunicated for supporting the war, nor were there significant protests by the laity against anti-war bishops.

Accordingly, the historian from 3800 who understood 2003 American Catholicism solely through a few elite writers would understand only part of the story. He would be seriously mistaken if he surmised that the Catholic laity mostly agreed with the bishops on the life-or-death issue of war against Saddam Hussein.

Likewise the Mennonite Church has always been opposed to war under all circumstances. Yet during World War II, fifty-four percent of young Mennonite men chose to serve in the United States military—even though they could have legally participated in the church-run program for Civilian Public Service, which was created to give conscientious objectors a lawful way to help their country, without engaging in combat.²⁷ Accordingly, when a historian analyzes “What did Mennonites think about war in 1942?” she must recognize that what the laity believes is not necessarily a reflection of what the church doctrines officially proclaim.

Whatever an early Christian writer might say about early Christian doctrine, the behavior of early Christians tells us about what Christianity actually meant to the people who were practicing Christians. So when we find evidence of Christians in the Roman army, we find evidence that early Christianity was not necessarily a pacifist religion—although some early Christian writers were indeed pacifists.

The record of early Christianity does not support the notion of a pristine pacifist church before Constantine. To the contrary, the record shows diversity. Early Christians never had disagreements about whether adultery was permissible; it was never allowed. They did have disagreements about issues which later became well-settled—such as the theological understanding of the relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Son, or to what extent Jesus could be said to have human nature.

In addition to the Christian soldiers in *Acts*, there is at least one additional example of a first century Christian soldier. The example may have been unknown to American pacifist writers, since the example comes from the Orthodox.²⁸

In the *Gospel According to John*, Jesus met a Samaritan woman at a well. Although Jews and Samaritans normally had nothing to do with each other, Jesus asked her to get him a drink; she talked with him, recognized him as a prophet, and preached the good news to many Samaritans.²⁹ According to Orthodox belief, the woman’s name was Photoni. Her son later served as Roman army officer, but when the Emperor Nero in 64 A.D. ordered the persecution of Christians in the city of Rome, Photoni’s son refused to carry out the orders. The son was imprisoned and tortured in Rome. Photoni and her

“Faith and War: Conflict for Religious Americans?” (Nov. 12, 2002)(The Gallup Organization), www.gallup.com/poll/tb/religvalue/20021112.asp

²⁷ Keith Graber Miller, “Mennonites,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion and War*, ed., Gabriel Palmer-Fernandez (N.Y.: Routledge, 2004), pp. 300-301.

²⁸ When I capitalize “Orthodox”, I am referring to the Eastern Orthodox Churches, which include the Greek Orthodox, the Russian Orthodox, and so on. The formal name of the eastern church is the Orthodox Catholic Church. When “orthodox” is not capitalized, I am referring to non-heretical Christians of all denominations. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches did not split until 1054 A.D.)

²⁹ John 4:5-42.

other children went to Rome to plead the son's case. But Nero had Photoni tortured and executed, along with her five sons and two daughters.³⁰

It is true that there is not evidence of *many* Christians being in the Roman army in the first hundred years of the Christian church. During this period, we have very little evidence of Christians in any way engaged in the world. The first century A.D. gives us almost no records of Christian painters,³¹ Christian sculptors, Christian historians, Christian poets, Christian composers, Christian musicians, Christian playwrights, or Christian astronomers. The absence of records does not prove that Christians thought painting or any of the other listed activities were immoral.

The absence of records does suggest that Christians were expecting the Apocalypse and the Second Coming within their lifetime. Accordingly, they spent their days getting ready for the end of the world—not creating art or literature or scientific knowledge for posterity. Apocalyptic expectations led early Christians to disengage from the world in many ways, and disengagement from military service was one of many examples.

Second, the early Christians (with some notable exceptions such as Sergius Paulus) were drawn from the dregs of society: prostitutes, paupers, criminals, slaves, and the like. They were attracted by the Christian message that God cares for them precisely as much as God cares for an emperor; that the lowliest person (such as the prostitute Mary Magdalene) can rise to exalted favor of the Son of God; and that the whole structure of the current world would soon be overturned, when Jesus returned in power and glory to set up a new kingdom on earth.³² The extremely poor and uneducated early Christian converts were never going to be the kind of people who would write great plays—or who would become famous Roman military leaders. Slaves were forbidden to enter the army.³³

Third, in the first century of Christianity, many Christians were Jews, and the Romans considered Christianity to be a Jewish sect. Roman law forbade Jewish enlistment in the military.³⁴ Even after Christianity became known as something more

³⁰ George Poulos, *Orthodox Saints*, vol. 1 (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Pr., 1991)

³¹ Pious tradition attributes the painting of Black Madonna of Czestochowa (a Polish national icon) to St. Luke, although the painting probably was created several centuries later.

³² The New Testament states that Mary Magdalene was an adultress. The idea that was a prostitute is comes from tradition. Although *The DaVinci Code* asserts that calling Mary Magdalene a prostitute was an attempt by the misogynistic early church to defame her, another explanation is that the tradition may have arisen from early Christians, many of whom were ex-prostitutes or other lowly persons, looking for a Christian hero with whom they could personally identify. Rather than defaming women, the tradition may be seen as re-emphasizing the availability of Christian salvation to the most pathetic people on the fringes of society.

³³ J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, vol. 1 (N.Y.: Dover Pubs., 1958)(1st pub. N.Y., Macmillan & Co., 1923), p. 39. Occasional exceptions were made in times of crisis. *Ibid.*

³⁴ Jean-Michel Hornus, *It is Not Lawful for Me to Fight: Early Christian Attitudes Toward War, Violence, and the State*, transl., Alan Kreider & Oliver Coburn (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Pr., 1980)(1st pub. in France in 1960 as *Evangile et Labrum*), p. 17, citing P. Batiffol, "Les Premiers Chrétiens et la Guerre," *Revue du Clergé français*, vol. 67 (1911), 223; E.A. Ryan, "The Rejection of Military Service by Early Christians," *Theological Studies*, vol. 13 (1952), p. 4. See also Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* in *Josephus: The Complete Works*, transl., William Houston (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), book 14, ch. 10, para. 6 (forbidding recruitment of auxiliaries from within Judea), paras. 11-14 (exempting Jews from military service because they cannot bear arms or travel on the Sabbath), paras. 18-19 (dismissing Jews who are Roman citizens "on account of the superstition they are under").

than a Jewish sect, most Christians were members of the lowest classes; not being Roman citizens, they were not eligible to enlist in the Roman army.³⁵

Fourth, Christianity at first spread most rapidly in peaceful regions where there were few soldiers, and consequently few civilians were recruited for the army.³⁶ The population of the Roman Empire was at least 50,000,000, while only 300,000 were in the Roman army.³⁷ So with about one-half of one percent of the population in the military, and that small percentage drawn almost entirely from non-Christian regions, and entirely from a class of people (citizens) to which most Christians did not belong, the paucity of Christians in the ranks of the early Roman Empire's army was inevitable. The scarcity does not, in itself, offer proof that early Christians were pacifists.

Notably, in 212 A.D., Roman citizenship was extended to all free subjects of the Empire.³⁸ It is in this century that we see more and more evidence of Christian soldiers—especially in frontier regions such as Armenia and Africa. In Armenia, Christianity became so popular that the local king was a Christian who led the people in revolt against the anti-Christian Emperor Maximinus Thrax (235-238).³⁹

Even after Christians became eligible to join the Roman army, there were non-pacifist reasons for Christians to stay away. Roman soldiers, like soldiers in many other armies in history, was notorious for immorality.⁴⁰ So non-pacifist Christians might choose to avoid putting themselves in an environment in which debauchery was the norm.

The pacifist argument is “We see no evidence of Christian soldiers in the first hundred years of Christianity (as long as we do not count the Christian soldiers in the New Testament and we ignore the Orthodox saints). Therefore, the pristine early Christian church was pacifist.”

This argument has the same logical flaw as the following argument: “We see no evidence of homosexual soldiers in George Washington's Continental Army—even though there are many surviving military records from the period. Therefore, American homosexuals in the period of 1775-1783 were pacifists.”

But rather than concluding that all American homosexual men in 1775-83 were pacifist, the more reasonable conclusion is that George Washington's Continental Army

³⁵ Albert Curry Winn, *Ain't Gonna Study War No More: Biblical Ambiguity and the Abolition of War* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Pr., 1993), p. 194. Winn's book is a very thorough and fair-minded survey of the many Old and New Testament texts about war and violence. Winn acknowledges that neither the Old nor the New Testament supports a straight-forward pacifist reading. He argues that the Bible is “ambiguous” because it contains warlike passages, as well as passages looking towards a peaceful future, or encouraging love for one's enemies. He resolves the ambiguity by declaring that the Sermon on the Mount, which contains direct instruction from Jesus, should be decisive. The problem with Winn's argument, though, is that the Sermon on the Mount is itself highly ambiguous. Even so, Winn's book is well worth reading for its comprehensive survey of Biblical texts, and for Winn's forthright approach to passages which challenge his thesis.

Non-citizens could enlist in the Auxiliaries, but these consisted mostly of barbarian tribes on the frontier who allied with Rome.

³⁶ Hornus, pp. 18-19, citing Ryan, pp. 16, 30.

³⁷ Bury, pp. 40, 53.

³⁸ Emperor Caracalla, *Constitutio Antoniniana De Civitate* (212).

³⁹ Eusebius, *The Church History: A New Translation with Commentary*, transl., Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel, 1999), book 9, sect. 8, pp. 327-28.

⁴⁰ Hornus, p. 19, citing Ryan, p. 11.

might well have included some, or perhaps, many homosexual men. But these men kept one important part of their identity secret from the fellow soldiers; the homosexual soldiers hid the part of their identity which the other soldiers would consider a detestable abomination and a very serious crime.

Likewise, it is possible that there were some, or perhaps many, early Christian soldiers in the Roman army. They too would have kept an essential part of their identity secret, not wishing to reveal a part of themselves which was considered a detestable insult to the social order, and a very serious crime meriting torture and execution.

C. More and More Christian Soldiers

By the time of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, in the middle of the second century, Christians had become an important part of one of the great Legions of the Roman Army, the Legio XII, the “Thundering Legion.” In a campaign on the northern frontier, in Czechia in the year 172 A.D., the Legio XII was surrounded by the Quadi tribesmen. Cut off from water supplies, the Romans were on the verge of surrender, when a heavy rainstorm suddenly supplied relief, while a tremendous lightening storm drove away the enemy. Several decades later, the Greek historian Cassius Dio credited an Egyptian magician with producing the rain, but the Christian theologian Tertullian credited the prayers of Christians who served in the Legion.⁴¹ Eusebius, the first historian of Christianity, later amplified the story.⁴²

Sometime between 193 and 235 A.D., a Christian church was built in the large Roman military camp at Dura Europos, in Syria. The existence of the camp shows that, at least in Syria, there were a large number of Christians in the army, and that the military leadership not only tolerated them, but tried to accommodate their religious needs.⁴³

The middle of the third century brings the first stories of Christian military martyrs recorded by the Western Church. Under the Emperor Decius (249-51), a Christian was on trial in Egypt. He was on the verge of renouncing Christianity, when four Christian soldiers and an old man rushed forward to the prisoner’s dock and announced that they too were Christians. The five faced their martyrdom courageously.⁴⁴

In Palestine, under the Emperor Gallienus (260-68), a Christian soldier named Marinus was about to be promoted to centurion. But a rival denounced Marinus as a Christian, who should not receive the honor. Refusing an opportunity to recant, Marinus was executed.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, book 72; Tertullian, *Tertullian: Apology, De Spectaculis; Minucius Felix: Octavius*, transl. T.R. Glover & Gerald H. Rendal (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Pr., 2003)(1st pub. 1931), ch. 5, p.31.

⁴² Eusebius, *The Church History: A New Translation with Commentary*, transl., Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel, 1999), book 5, sect. 5, pp. 180-81. A column in Rome, commemorating the reign of Marcus Aurelius, depicts the event in three panels, although credit is given to the Roman god Jupiter. John Helgeland, Robert J. Daly & J. Patout Burns, *Christians and the Military: The Early Experience* (Philadelphia: Fortress Pr., 1985), p. 33.

⁴³ Timothy S. Miller, Introduction to *Peace and War in Byzantium*, eds., Timothy S. Miller & John Nesbitt (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Univ. of America Pr., 1995), p. 9.

⁴⁴ Eusebius, book 6, sect. 41, p. 238

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, book 7, sect. 15, pp. 262-64.

The Emperor Diocletian (284-305) ordered the most severe persecution of Christians which the Empire had ever seen. According to the Christian historian Eusebius, “the persecution began with our brothers in the army.”⁴⁶

The Great Persecution may have been set off in 302 by an incident which showed that Christians not only served in the army, but even in the Emperor’s personal guard. According to the Christian historian Lactantius, Diocletian ordered human sacrifices so that he might read the victims’ entrails, thereby learning the future. Seeing the rite in progress, the Christians among the Emperor’s guard made the sign of the cross on their heads, which drove away the demons who were assisting Diocletian’s soothsayers, and ruined the entrail-reading. The soothsayers figured out that some Christians must be responsible for interrupting the divination, so Diocletian ordered everyone in his palace to make ritual sacrifices, in order to prove that they were not Christians. Diocletian then sent letters to all the army commanders requiring that all soldiers be forced to make sacrifices. Many Christian soldiers refused to do so, and were martyred.⁴⁷

The historian Alfred Harnack suggested that the story of these soldiers shows us that (before Diocletian) the military had come to an accommodation with its many Christian soldiers: the soldiers would attend the army’s many pagan rites, but they would be allowed to make the sign of the cross, which would protect them from demons. Diocletian’s persecution was reactionary, trying to reverse the tolerance of Christians which had become common in the army.⁴⁸

Cadoux retorted that Diocletian’s persecution indicates that there must not have been very many Christians in the army, since an emperor would not wish to eliminate even five percent of his military force.⁴⁹ Cadoux’s observation is accurate for an emperor who is entirely rational—perhaps an emperor who governed in the spirit of Machiavelli’s prince, and made all his decisions on purely logical and unemotional analysis.

Tyrants, however, are not always rational, and they are often paranoid. They may become obsessed with an alleged threat, and become so fixated on exterminating the threat that they injure their own long-term interest. For example, in 1937-38, Stalin purged about half of the officers in the Red Army. Of the approximately 70,000 officers who were purged, about 30,000 were executed, and the rest were sent to slave labor camps. The purge destroyed the Army’s morale and removed its most competent officers, drastically reducing the effectiveness of the Soviet army. In the 1939-40 Winter War, the Soviet army was so pathetic that it could only fight tiny Finland to a draw. Stalin nearly lost his empire, and his life, when the Nazis invaded. The Germans probably could have won if they had not made some strategic mistakes—such as diverting to the Ukraine the forces which could have captured Moscow in September 1941.

⁴⁶ Eusebius, book 8, sect. 1, pp. 289-90.

⁴⁷ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* (Of the Manner in which the Persecutors Died)(approx. 314-315 A.D.), ch. 10, www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-07/anf07-15.htm#P3969_1586140. See also Eusebius, *The Church History*, book 8, sect. 4, pp. 292-93. Among them was “Julius the Veteran,” a man who had served in seven campaigns over twenty-seven years, “and never hid behind everyone.” He refused, however, to make a pagan sacrifice, even with the understanding that he would not really have to believe it. So he was executed. “The Martyrdom of Julius the Veteran,” reprinted in Helgeland, pp. 63-65.

⁴⁸ Adolf Harnack, *Militia Christi: The Christian Religion and the Military in the First Three Centuries*, transl., David McInnes Gracie (Philadelphia: Fortress Pr., 1981)(1st pub. 1905), pp. 94-95.

⁴⁹ Cadoux, p. 243.

Even by the degraded standards of Roman Emperors, Diocletian was extremely autocratic. He demanded that he be called *Jovius* (a form of the name of the chief Roman god, Jupiter) or *dominus noster* (our Lord). He claimed that he and his co-emperor Maximian were *diis geniti* (born of the gods). Diocletian introduced to Rome many of the servile court customs from Persia and the East, such as requiring that anyone approaching him for an audience must prostrate himself. Even after three centuries of dictatorship, Rome had retained some respect from the customs of its republican past; emperors had been called “first citizen” (*princes*) or “general” (*imperator*). Diocletian made a sharp break with that past. Because Diocletian had debased the coinage, the Empire’s economy was suffering from inflation. The problem could have been solved by not further debasing the coinage; but instead, the Emperor issued The Edict of Diocletian, in 301, imposing wage and price controls. The results were disastrous.⁵⁰

A man who was so supremely arrogant and strong-headed about debasing the coinage and controlling the entire economy might believe that he could remain militarily strong even after killing a significant fraction of his own soldiers.

A man who demanded to be addressed as the king of the gods would not necessarily see any military benefit to be gained from retaining soldiers whose faith made them certain that Diocletian was not even a minor god, let alone worthy of being called king of the gods.

In the first three centuries A.D., while some Christians did join the Roman army, other Christians refused to do so.⁵¹ Scholars continue to debate the motives for refusal. Some conclude that Christians were mainly concerned about being forced to participate in the pagan rituals which often accompanied military life.⁵² Other scholars believe that early Christians, expecting the imminent return of Christ, avoided many forms of temporal involvement, including military service.

Some scholars, notably Ronald Bainton, argue that early avoidance of military service had pacifist motives.⁵³ Further, he notes that soldiers were also the police; accordingly, a pacifist Christians could serve in the army because in the entire course of his career, he might never need to kill anyone.⁵⁴

However, a policeman’s power is based on the implicit threat to use violence. While most policemen never kill anyone, it is a rare policemen who never has to use violence. The police raid houses, arrest people with force when necessary, carry weapons, and engage in close quarters combat with criminals. In the Roman Empire, the police also

⁵⁰ Robert Schuettinger & Eamon Butler, *Forty Centuries of Wage and Price Controls* (Washington, D.C.: Heritage Foundation, 1979), pp. 20-26. The Edict is reprinted in *Ibid*, pp. 155-59.

⁵¹ One of the most notable was Maximilian, in 295. Maximilian’s father, who was a Christian, served in the military, and therefore Maximilian was required to serve. After purchasing military clothing, Maximilian decided he could not serve. At trial, the judge explained that Christians already served in the military, even in the emperor’s bodyguard. Maximilian replied, “They know what is best for them. But I am a Christian and I cannot do wrong.” He was ordered to be executed. Just before death, Maximilian told his elderly father that one day “we shall glory with the Lord together.” The full story is in *Acts of Maximilian*, reprinted in Helgeland, pp. 58-59.

⁵² E.g., Geoffrey Nuttall, *Christian Pacifism in History* (Berkeley, Calif.: World Without War Council, 1971), pp. 9-10.

⁵³ Roland H. Bainton, *Christian Attitudes toward War & Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Re-evaluation* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Pr., 1960).

⁵⁴ Bainton, p. 79.

tortured suspects.⁵⁵ Accordingly, Christians who served in the Roman army were still engaged in the use or threat of violence, even if they served only in a police role.

Some modern pacifists write that Christians must not have participated in the military because pagans wrote anti-Christian tracts denouncing Christians for unpatriotically refusing to serve in the army. One should be careful about making conclusions about Christian behavior based on pagan accusations. Christians were often accused of cannibalism, perhaps by pagans who heard wildly distorted versions of what took place at communion. Tertullian (discussed below) had to devote three full chapters of his *Apology* to rebutting charges that Christians ate babies and engaged in incestuous orgies.⁵⁶ Persecuted Christians were often tried and convicted of cannibalism or incest.⁵⁷

The persistence—and the ludicrousness—of the pagan accusations about Christians shirking military duty can be shown in that Augustine had to rebut the charges in 410 A.D., in his book *The City of God*. By then, Christians were so thoroughly engaged in the military that just a few years later, in 416, non-Christians were forbidden to join the army.⁵⁸

Significantly, there is no known record of any Christian church excommunicating or disciplining a particular member because he was a soldier. It is possible that such records existed and were lost, or were purged after the Church and the Empire became allies, in the fourth century. It is also possible, and perhaps more likely, that the early Christian churches, like the apostles in the *Book of Acts*, did not think that being a soldier was incompatible with being a Christian—although some early Christian writers did think so.

II. Early Christian Writers, including Heretics

A. Justin Martyr

Saint Justin Martyr (approx. 100-165 A.D.) was the first Christian apologist (a writer who defended Christianity from pagan critiques) to carefully examine the relationship between Greek philosophy and Christianity; he argued that the latter was the culmination of the former. In the first of his two *Apologies for the Christians*, he defended Christians against charges that they were seditious. The *First Apology* was formally addressed to Emperor Antonius Pius, although the audience was really the public at large.

Justin told the Emperor, “to God alone we render worship, but in other things we gladly serve you.”⁵⁹ Did this imply that Christians had no objection to being compelled to

⁵⁵ David McInnes Gracie, Introduction to Harnack, p. 14, note 13. It is also pointed out that the Roman soldiers delivered the mail. The mail job had more potential violence than a twenty-first century reader might realize. The reason that the Roman soldiers delivered the mail—that is, carried mail from one city to another—was because the well-armed soldiers could protect themselves from the robber gangs who preyed on travelers in the countryside.

⁵⁶ Tertullian, *Apology*, ch. 2, p. 9; chs. 7-9, pp. 37-55.

⁵⁷ Thomas McGinn, “Law, Roman,” in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed., Everett Ferguson (N.Y.: Garland Pub., 2d ed. 1998), p. 667.

⁵⁸ See ch. 9.

⁵⁹ Justin Martyr, *The First Apology of Justin*, ch 17, transl., Dods & Reith, www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-01/anf01-46.htm#P3593_620967. Justin offered a similar sentiment in another work, arguing that the

perform military service for the Roman army—so long as they were not forced to worship the Emperor as part of military ritual?

Probably not. In the *First Apology*, Justin also wrote, “we who formerly used to murder one another do not only now refrain from making war upon our enemies, but also, that we may not lie nor deceive our examiners, willingly die confessing Christ.”⁶⁰

B. Marcion and Gnosticism

Marcion (approx. 100-160) was excommunicated for heresy, and founded his own sect, the Marcionites. The Marcionites never grew as numerous as orthodox Christians, but for several centuries they were important rivals to the orthodox.

The Marcionites believed that the physical world was created by the angry god of the Old Testament, and that Jesus had been sent by a different god, who had nothing to do with the created world.⁶¹ Marcionites strove to avoid all contact with the created world. They were celibate, and ultra-ascetic. They did not even allow the use of wine at communion, insisting only on bread. Consistent with this highly ascetic view, they rejected war in any form. The Marcionites also denied the authority of the Old Testament, and most of the Gospels. Their only scriptures were portions of *Luke*, and ten epistles from Paul.

According to the great nineteenth-century Catholic theologian John Henry Cardinal Newman, Gnostics such as the Marcionites believed in “the intrinsic malignity of matter.”⁶² The rejection of the Old Testament was necessary because the Old Testament is replete with stories about the wonders of the created world. In the first chapter of the first book of the Bible, God looked at his newly-created natural world, “and God saw that it was good.”⁶³ Then, “God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. . . . And so God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.”⁶⁴ The *Song of Songs* rejoices in a newly-married couple’s sensuous love. *Ecclesiastes* celebrates the natural cycle of life.⁶⁵

peacefulness of Christians fulfilled on the prophecies of Isaiah: “we who were filled with war, and mutual slaughter, and every wickedness, have each through the whole earth changed our warlike weapons, -our swords into ploughshares, and our spears into implements of tillage, -and we cultivate piety, righteousness, philanthropy, faith, and hope, which we have from the Father Himself through Him who was crucified.” Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with the Jew Trypho*, ch. 60, www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-01/anf01-48.htm#P4044_787343

The Didache, also known as *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* is an early set of instructions for gentile converts, perhaps dating from the latter part of the first century or the first half of early second century. It includes near the beginning a restatement of the Sermon on the Mount, including the instruction “when anyone robs you of your property, demand no return. You really cannot do it. Give to anyone that asks you, and demand no return.” “The Didache,” in *Ancient Christian Writers: The Didache, Vol 6*, transl. & annot. James A. Kleist (N.Y.: Newman Pr., 1948), p. 15, sect. 3, lines 11-13..

⁶⁰ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, ch. 39.

⁶¹ The idea of expunging the Old Testament from the Christian Bible was reintroduced by Adolf von Harnack, a very influential late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century liberal Protestant theologian. The Nazis enthusiastically adopted Harnack’s proposal. Richard Steigman-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 2003).

⁶² John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Univ. of Notre Dame Pr. 1989)(1st pub. 1845), p. 34

⁶³ Genesis 1:21.

⁶⁴ Genesis, 1: 27, 31.

⁶⁵ *Ecclesiastes* also states that there is “A time to kill.” See ch. 4.

The New Testament agreed that the God who was the father of Jesus was the same God who had made the material world. In *Acts*, the Apostles prayed “Lord, thou are God, which has made heaven, and earth, and the sea...”⁶⁶

Newman also pointed out that “All the Gnostic sects seem to have condemned marriage for one or another reason.”⁶⁷ This is the opposite of the mainstream Christian view which, while recognizing that celibacy can be a special calling for some people, celebrates “holy matrimony.” The Marcionites acknowledged that Jesus had been born of a woman, but claimed that the fetal Jesus never touched Mary’s body or received any nourishment from her womb.⁶⁸

The Marcionite and other forms of Gnostic pacifism have a reasonable internal logic. If the entire world and every human body is repulsively unclean (if one looks on the whole creation the same way that the Old Testament regarded a leprous corpse), then it makes sense never to lift a finger to defend a human being who is being attacked. Why try to preserve the evil human body from destruction? And how sinful it would seem, in the Gnostic view, to involve oneself in the material world so greatly that one would actually use a physical weapon.

The earliest Christians seem to have foreseen that something like Gnosticism would attempt to substitute itself for Christianity. In the *First Epistle to Timothy*, Paul specifically warned about the false teaching that would arise from “doctrines of devils.” The evil doctrines that would arise in “latter times” would be “Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving.”⁶⁹

This passage suggests that there is nothing unchristian about eating animals, and therefore by implication, nothing unchristian about hunting animals for eating. To the contrary, it is only “devilish” doctrines which forbid eating meat. Refusing meat is an arrogant rejection of the material world which God has created for mankind to appreciate gratefully.

Timothy’s instructions also drew an important parallel between the carnal eating of meat and the carnality of marriage. Both are gifts which God created for humanity.

One obvious implication of *Timothy* is that, contrary to Jewish law, a pig is not an unclean animal, if one treats it with the proper attitude of thanksgiving. Further, because “every creature of God is good,” then women are not evil. In subsequent centuries, some Christian thinkers developed the misogynistic view that women were evil temptresses, who must be feared. *Timothy* rejects the notion that a person could be evil solely on account of her sex—“for every creature of God is good.”⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Acts 4:24.

⁶⁷ Newman, p. 222.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 403.

⁶⁹ 1 Timothy 4:1-4. Many scholars believe that the two epistles to Timothy were not composed by Paul himself, but were written a generation or two after Paul, by an admirer of Paul. The scholars suggest that *Timothy* may have been written a direct rebuttal to Marcion. Some conservative scholars argue that Paul did write *Timothy*, long before Marcion appeared. In either case, *Timothy* is an accepted part of the Christian scriptures and therefore, from an orthodox Christian viewpoint, a dispositive refutation of Marcionism.

⁷⁰ The New Testament does plainly see different roles for men and women: wives should submit to their husband’s leadership, and women should not speak in church. To say that men and women should have different roles, however, and that men should be the leaders, is not to say that women are intrinsically evil.

C. Irenaeus

Irenaeus (approx. 140-202) was a leading Christian missionary, and the Bishop of Lyons, France. His name is Greek for “Peacemaker,” and he helped resolve several doctrinal disagreements in the early church. His best-known work, *Against Heresies*, refuted Gnostic heresies such as Marcionism and Montanism (below), and argued that Jews were wrong in failing to perceive that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies. Like Justin, Irenaeus argued that peaceful Christians fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy about turning swords into ploughshares, because Christians turn the other cheek.⁷¹

Yet in the same book, he also wrote that among the activities which are “laborious, glorious, and skilful, which also are approved universally as being good” are “hunting, military and kingly pursuits.”⁷²

D. Athenagoras

Writing in the latter part of second century, Athenagoras was one of the first Christian writers to blend Christian doctrine with the ideas of the Greek philosopher Plato. He also defended Christians against charges that they were atheists, that they ate human flesh, and that they engaged in ritual orgies featuring Oedipal incest. In the defense, arguing that Christians were harmless, Athenagoras wrote:

we have learned, not only not to return blow for blow, nor to go to law with those who plunder and rob us, but to those who smite us on one side of the face to offer the other side also, and to those who take away our coat to give likewise our cloak.⁷³

Later in his defense, he pointed to Christian respect for life as proof that Christians could not be cannibals:

For when they know that we cannot endure even to see a man put to death, though justly; who of them can accuse us of murder or cannibalism? Who does not reckon among the things of greatest interest the contests of gladiators and wild beasts, especially those which are given by you? But we, deeming that to see a man put to death is much the same as killing him, have abjured such spectacles. How, then, when we do not even look on, lest we should contract guilt and pollution, can we put people to death? And when we say that those women who use drugs to bring on abortion commit murder, and will have to give an account to God for the abortion, on what principle should we commit murder?⁷⁴

Like Justin, but unlike Irenaeus, Athenagoras can be classified as an early orthodox pacifist.

⁷¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (a/k/a *A Refutation and Subversion of Knowledge falsely so called*), book 4, ch. 34, para. 4, www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-01/anf01-62.htm#P7979_2198226.

⁷² *Ibid.*, book 2, ch. 35, para. 2.

⁷³ Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians*, ch. 1, www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-02/anf02-46.htm#P2521_682256.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, ch. 35.

E. Clement of Alexandria

Clement of Alexandria (150-215) was a prolific writer, and the first great scholar to be a Christian apologist.

Clement assumed that soldiering was just as conducive as other occupations towards spiritual development. Clement explained that each person should find God in the circumstances the person's particular life:

Having laid hold of what is personal, special and peculiar in his nature...we counsel him to equip himself with godliness, as a sufficient provision for his journey through eternity. Till the ground, we say, if you are a husbandman; but recognize God in your husbandry. Sail the sea, you who love seafaring; but ever call upon the heavenly pilot. Were you a soldier on campaign when the knowledge of God laid hold of you? Then listen to the commander who signals righteousness.⁷⁵

Like Paul, Clement liked military metaphors, and told Christians to be "soldiers of peace" who would fight with the "invulnerable arms" of faith, righteousness, and salvation "in array against the evil one." This army would use "sword-points" that "have been dipped in water by the Word."⁷⁶ Explaining how a rich man could achieve salvation, Clement told him to "enlist on your behalf an army without weapons, without war, without bloodshed, without anger, without stain." This prayer army of Christians would guard the rich man's soul, and help him reach salvation.⁷⁷

That Clement saw Christians as peaceful soldiers does not mean that he condemned all soldiering, or believed that Christians could not be ordinary soldiers. In *The Instructor (Paedagogus)*, he offered advice for Christian living. To promote humility, he said that Christian men should not wear shoes, except when in the military.⁷⁸

He repeated John the Baptist's instructions to Christian soldiers and tax collectors.⁷⁹

Apparently Clement did not view his approval of Christian soldiering as inconsistent with his vision of Christians as a peaceful army: "For it is not in war, but in

⁷⁵ "Exhortation to the Greeks," ch. 10, in *Clement of Alexandria*, transl., G.W. Butterworth (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Pr., 1999)(1st pub. 1919), p. 219.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, ch. 11, p. 249. See also *Protrepticus* 11:116:

If the loud trumpet summons soldiers to war, shall not Christ with a strain of peace to the ends of the earth gather up his soldiers of peace? A bloodless army he has assembled by blood and by the word, so give to them the Kingdom of Heaven. The trumpet of Christ is his gospel. He has sounded, we have heard. Let us then put on the armor of peace.

⁷⁷ "The Rich Man's Salvation," in *Clement of Alexandria*, p. 343.

⁷⁸ *Paedagogus* (The Instructor) book 2, ch. 12, www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-02/anf02-52.htm#P3288_976824:

Women...ought for the most part to wear shoes; for it is not suitable for the foot to be shown naked: besides, woman is a tender thing, easily hurt. But for a man bare feet are quite in keeping, except when he is on military service.

⁷⁹ *Paedagogus*. book 3, ch. 12, para. 7: "Also to the soldiers, by John, He commands, 'to be content with their wages only;' and to the publicans, 'to exact no more than is appointed.'"

peace, that we are trained. War needs great preparation, and luxury craves profusion; but peace and love, simple and quiet sisters, require no arms nor excessive preparation. The Word is their sustenance.”⁸⁰ He noted that Christians did not listen to loud martial music, only the peaceful word of God.⁸¹

In *Miscellanies (Stromata)*, Clement devoted an entire chapter to “How Moses Discharged the Part of a Military Leader.” Moses was an ideal leader because he worked to serve God and his people, and he was such a brilliant general that the Greeks learned their military science from his example.⁸²

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, book 1, ch. 12, para. 4.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, book 2, ch. 4, paras. 2-3. Bainton cites such passages from *Paedagogus* to argue that Clement was a pacifist, but Bainton ignores the other passages showing approval of Christian military life.

According to Clement, one of the original twelve apostles, James the son of Zebedee, was escorted to his trial by a kindly soldier. At the trial, the soldier announced that he too was a Christian, and was executed with James. Eusebius, *History*, book 2, ch. 9 (discussing Clement’s story). Since Clement writing long after the incident did take place, we cannot be sure that it really happened. Since the soldier was promptly executed, we cannot infer any lesson about whether confessed Christians could be soldiers.

⁸² Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, book 1, ch. 24, www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-02/anf02-57.htm#P5436_1650241:

Our Moses then is a prophet, a legislator, skilled in military tactics and strategy, a politician, a philosopher....Tactics belong to military command, and the ability to command an army is among the attributes of kingly rule.

....

Now, generalship involves three ideas: caution, enterprise, and the union of the two....

Now, the Greeks had the advantage of receiving from Moses all these, and the knowledge of how to make use of each of them....The strategy of Moses, therefore, shows the necessity of discerning what will be of service before the approach of dangers, and so to encounter them. It turned out precisely as he suspected, for the Egyptians pursued with horses and chariots, but were quickly destroyed by the sea breaking on them and overwhelming them with their horses and chariots, so that not a remnant of them was left.... Furthermore, he put to flight and slew the hostile occupants of the land, falling upon them from a desert and rugged line of march (such was the excellence of his generalship). For the taking of the land of those hostile tribes was a work of skill and strategy.

Perceiving this, Miltiades, the Athenian general, who conquered the Persians in battle at Marathon, imitated it in the following fashion. Marching over a trackless desert, he led on the Athenians by night, and eluded the barbarians that were set to watch him. For Hippias, who had deserted from the Athenians, conducted the barbarians into Attica, and seized and held the points of vantage, in consequence of having a knowledge of the ground. The task was then to elude Hippias. Whence rightly Miltiades, traversing the desert and attacking by night the Persians commanded by Darius, led his soldiers to victory

In *Stromata*, Clement also voiced his approval of the old Hebrew system of exempting men who were engaged to be married, men who had built a new house, and men who had planted a new vineyard from military service; “from military reasons in the first place, lest, bent on their desires, they turn out sluggish in war; for it is those who are untrammelled by passion that boldly encounter perils; and from motives of humanity, since, in view of the uncertainties of war, the law reckoned it not right that one should not enjoy his own labours, and another should without bestowing pains, receive what belonged to those who had laboured.” *Ibid.*, book 2, ch. 18.

Clement criticized military training for women:

F. Tertullian

Tertullian (approx. 160-220) was the first major Christian writer in Latin. Tertullian was a very influential and very sarcastic writer. He was the first to express the doctrine of the trinity in Latin, and was one of the creators of doctrine of supercessionism: that all the Old Testament covenants between God and the Israelites no longer applied to actual Israelites; rather, Christians were the replacement Israelites. This doctrine was accepted by most Christians for many centuries, although in recent decades, many Christians, especially evangelical Protestants, have returned to the view that the Old Testament's promises to Jews and Israelites applies to real Jews and Israelites, not symbolic ones.

Early in his career, Tertullian was an orthodox Catholic. His most famous work was the *Apologeticum* (Apology), probably written in 197 A.D., which aimed to prove to pagans that Christians were loyal subjects of the Roman Empire. According to Tertullian, Christians showed their loyalty by praying that Emperors would enjoy “long life, a secure rule, a safe home, brave armies, a faithful senate, an honest people, a quiet world.”⁸³

Tertullian recounted how during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, the prayers of Christians in the Thundering Legion had given the Legion a miraculous victory over German foes.⁸⁴

He gloated that Christians were replacing pagans everywhere in the world, including in the military: “We are but of yesterday, and we have filled everything you have—cities, islands, forts, towns, exchanges, yes! And camps, tribes, decuries [town councils], palace, senate, forum. All we have left you is the [pagan] temples.”⁸⁵ Likewise, “we live with you—in this world. We sail ships, we as well as you, and along with you; we go to the wars, to the country, to market with you.”⁸⁶

Here Tertullian celebrated Christian presence everywhere in public life, including in government and in military service to the government. A few years later, he adopted a

For we do not train our women like Amazons to manliness in war; since we wish the men even to be peaceable. I hear that the Sarmatian women practise war no less than the men; and the women of the Sacae besides, who shoot backwards, feigning flight as well as the men. I am aware, too, that the women near Iberia practise manly work and toil, not refraining from their tasks even though near their delivery; but even in the very struggle of her pains, the woman, on being delivered, taking up the infant, carries it home. Further, the females no less than the males manage the house, and hunt, and keep the flocks

Clement continued by arguing that women were supposed to be submissive to men, not their equals. *Ibid.*, book 4, ch. 8. In light of the rest of *Stromata* and of Clement's other writings, the line “we wish the men even to be peaceable” should not be read as a condemnation of military service.

⁸³ Tertullian, *Apology*, ch. 30, p. 151.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, ch. 5, p. 31. Tertullian's source for the incident is a purported letter from the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, which some historians suggest is forged. *Ibid.*, ch. 5, p. 30, note b. If Tertullian were wrong in believing the document to be authentic, the fact that he cited the document as showing the virtuous power of Christian soldiers still tells us something about Tertullian's favorable attitude towards Christian soldiers. It is reasonable to presume that the forger of the document (if it is a forgery) was a Christian who was trying to create a favorable impression of Christians, by giving them credit for a well-known military victory. The fact Christians were seeking to be identified as soldiers who contributed to Roman military success tells us something about Christian attitudes towards the military.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. 37, p. 169.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, ch. 42, p. 191.

completely different attitude, and denounced Christian participation in government or in the military. But in *Apology*, full Christian engagement with the world, including the world of the military, was a source of pride.

Tertullian's first litany of Christian presence in the world came from chapter 37 of *Apology*, which also contained some passages that have been used to argue that Tertullian, at the time of the *Apology*, was a complete pacifist. The context cannot support this claim, unless we think that Tertullian contradicted himself from one passage to the next, or unless we torture the military celebration sentences into unnatural meanings.

In *Apology*, Tertullian explained that “when a man injures us, we are forbidden to retaliate.”⁸⁷ Further, “what retaliation for injury can you charge us, though a single night and a few torches could work a lavish revenge, if among us wrong might be wiped out with wrong?”⁸⁸ Here Tertullian used “revenge” and “retaliation” interchangeably and there is no doubt that the New Testament forbids these to Christians. However, taking revenge after the fact (such as by torching a town which persecuted Christians) is not equivalent to defending an innocent from an attack in progress.

Tertullian also announced that Christians were already strong enough to overthrow the Roman Empire. If they simply separated themselves from public life, the Empire would collapse. Alternatively, Christians in any province outnumbered the army, and were so fearless they could win even if outnumbered—if they chose: “We can count your troops; the Christians of one province will be more in number. For what war should we not have been fit and ready even if unequal in forces—we who are so glad to be butchered—were it not, of course, that in our doctrine we are given ampler liberty to be killed than to kill!”⁸⁹

From this last passage, it seems clear that Christians are supposed to prefer martyrdom to revolution. There is nothing inconsistent about the view that Christians must not violently resist the government, must accept martyrdom if necessary *and* that Christians may participate in government, and through that participation, be given a limited liberty “to kill” in military service. (And also to impose the death penalty, which was often the duty of public officials such as town councilors.)

Tertullian in *Apology* was no revolutionary, and he did not necessarily imply that Christians who are not in government might engage in self-defense or defense of others. At an irreducible minimum, *Apology* allowed Christians to serve in government, in both a civil and a military capacity, and to engage in the violence that is necessarily attached to such service.

In 202, Tertullian became a Montanist. The Montanists were an ultra-ascetic extremist sect which announced that the second coming was imminent, and that Christians should seek out persecution and martyrdom. The sect was declared heretical, and eventually vanished. After a while, Tertullian broke off from the Montanists, and founded his own, even more radical sect, the Tertullianists. The Tertullianists rejected the human body, sexuality, and bodily pleasures. Tertullian wanted virgins to be veiled, and condemned a second marriage by a widower as fornication. He censured every type of

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, ch. 37, p. 167.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. 37, p. 169.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. 37, pp. 169-70. The first sentence of the quote does not appear in some manuscripts of *Apology*.

painting and sculpture. He denounced Catholics as “Psychici” because of their affection for the natural world.⁹⁰

After *Apology*, Tertullian produced two major books which argued that Christians must be pacifist at all times. The first book, *De Idolotaria* (On Idolatry) is thought by some scholars to date from Tertullian’s Montanist period; other scholars suggest that it was written before 202.⁹¹

Even if we decide that *On Idolatry* precedes the time when Tertullian formally severed his relationship with the orthodox church and became a heretic, the book should not be considered a representation of orthodox thought. Rather, the writings may be considered evidence of his incipient Montanism.

On Idolatry argued that Christians must not teach school or literature, because teachers had to perform pagan rites, or read pagan literature.⁹² He claimed that Christians were forbidden to play any role in government or civil life. In another book from this period, he argued that Christians should not flee from persecutors, even though Jesus had told the disciples to do so.⁹³

Tertullian became a complete pacifist. He acknowledged that Moses, Aaron, Joshua and other Israelites wore military equipment and warred. John the Baptist himself wore leather armor. Tertullian continued: “But how will a *Christian man* war, nay, how will he serve even in peace, without a sword, which the Lord has taken away? For albeit soldiers had come unto John, and had received the formula of their rule; albeit, likewise, a centurion had believed; *still* the Lord afterward, in disarming Peter, unbuckled every soldier. No dress is lawful among us, if assigned to any unlawful action.”⁹⁴

Tertullian here made a chronological argument: since Jesus’ instruction to Peter “Put up thy sword into the sheath”⁹⁵ came after John baptized the soldier (and after the Hebrew wars of the Old Testament), and after Jesus praised the centurion who believed in Jesus, the latest rule (that Peter should sheathe his sword) became the rule binding on later Christians.

What Tertullian omitted, of course, was that in *Acts of the Apostles* at least three soldiers became Christian converts *after* Jesus told Peter to sheathe the sword when Jesus

⁹⁰ It is perhaps not a coincidence that the only early Christian sects which were pacifist were heretical sects which hated the created world. The hostility to Creation is directly opposed to Jewish and Christian doctrine from the first chapter of *Genesis* all the way through the New Testament.

⁹¹ Tertullian, *De Idolotria* (On Idolatry), transl., S. Thelwall, ch. 2, www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-03/anf03-07.htm#P606_265571. Cadoux argues that *Apology* is not inconsistent with *On Idolatry* and *On the Soldier’s Crown*. In the first book, Tertullian was writing for a pagan audience. Since Christians were deeply involved in the world, Tertullian made use of the fact in his argument to pagans, without necessarily approving of the involvement. The latter two books were written for Christians, and reflected Tertullian’s views that involvement was always sinful. Cadoux, pp. 118-19. Cadoux’s theory is not implausible, since Tertullian’s fixation on winning every argument at all costs could have easily led him to use a fact to make a point for one audience, and then adopt a different analysis of the fact for a different audience.

⁹² *On Idolatry*.

⁹³ Tertullian, *De fuga in persecutione* (Concerning Flight in Persecution), transl., S. Thelwall, http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-04/anf04-23.htm#P1929_566668.

⁹⁴ Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, ch. 19.

⁹⁵ Whether this language should be interpreted to mandate disarmament is questionable. To put one’s sword back in its sheath is equivalent to putting one’s handgun back into its holster. The sheath and the holster allow the weapon to be carried on one’s person, ready for use. If you see a person wearing a sword in a sheath, or a handgun in a holster, it would be illogical to conclude, “That person is disarmed and must be a pacifist.”

was arrested. If the latest rule is the proper one, then the rule that should control is the rule demonstrated by Peter baptizing Cornelius the Centurion and another soldier, and in Paul converting Sergius Paulus, the Proconsul of Cyprus.

Tertullian's book *On the Soldier's Crown* took its title from an incident that occurred in 211 (long after Tertullian had become a heretic). When Caracalla and Geta were crowned as joint emperors, a Christian soldier in Numidia (modern Algeria) refused to wear a laurel crown, which all soldiers were supposed to wear as part of the celebration; the soldier refused because the laurel had symbolic connections to the Roman gods Apollo and Bacchus. Other Christian soldiers and civilians criticized the soldier, because nothing in the Bible forbade soldiers to be crowned. The soldier retorted that followers of Mithras were exempted from certain Roman military pagan rites, and Christians were entitled to the same exemption.⁹⁶

On the Soldier's Crown displayed an intimate knowledge of the customs of the Roman military, and the book's main concern, by far, was on the idolatrous rituals and clothing necessary for service in the Roman army. Tertullian did, briefly, also argue that soldiers could not wear swords, because Christians must be non-violent.⁹⁷

Cadoux acknowledged that "The incident shows that there were at that time many Christians in the Roman army in Africa and that some—possibly a majority—of the members of the local church raised no objection to their being there."⁹⁸

Tertullian is the most famous pacifist of early Christian writers, but he cannot be considered representative of mainstream Christian thought. His pacifism was the one of the products of a heresy founded on hatred of the material world, and a longing for human suffering. Tertullian does not speak for Christians and others who view the natural world and the human body as glorious gifts from God, and who therefore reject Tertullian's command that force must never be used to defend those wonderful gifts from torture or destruction.

G. Canons of Hippolytus

In *The Catholic Catechism: A Contemporary Catechism of the Teachings of the Catholic Church*, Father John A. Hardon writes that early Christian pacifists "were never more than isolated cases." The early church, argues Hardon, answered the pacifists by explaining that monastic perfectionism was not something to be imposed on a whole population; such perfectionism would soon lead to the extinction of the human race. The early church reminded would-be pacifists about John the Baptist's instruction to Christian soldiers that they should continue in their posts.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Tertullian, *On the Soldier's Crown*, ch. 1, reprinted in John Helgeland, Robert J. Daly & J. Patout Burns, *Christians and the Military: The Early Experience* (Philadelphia: Fortress Pr., 1985), pp. 25-26.

⁹⁷ Tertullian, *On the Soldier's Crown*, ch 11, pp. 27-28. "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 battle when it does not become him even to sue at law?"

⁹⁸ Cadoux, p. 235. Cadoux also noted accurately, that the incident in Africa does not necessarily prove that Christians elsewhere held the same attitude

⁹⁹ John A. Hardon, *The Catholic Catechism: A Contemporary Catechism of the Teachings of the Catholic Church* (N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981), pp. 347-48.

Hardon suggests that three documents from the early church have been influential in creating the mistaken belief that early Christians were pacifists.¹⁰⁰ One of was Tertullian's *On the Soldier's Crown*, which Hardon dismisses as the product of a heretic.

The second was one of the canons (church laws) from the Council of Nicea, in 325; the twelfth canon required soldiers to undergo penance—but the canon applied only to soldiers who had served in the armies of Licinius, who had been defeated Constantine.¹⁰¹

The third document, says Hardon, was the canons which are attributed to Hippolytus (170-236 A.D.). Hippolytus was a well-educated Christian living in Rome, and a prolific writer. He was well-enough remembered by the Catholic Church that he was later declared a saint. However, Hippolytus for a while was an anti-pope, that is, a false pretender to the title of Bishop of Rome, whose true bishop was Pope Callistos (218-223 A.D.). The schismatic Hippolytus set himself up as an alternative bishop, and was excommunicated by the Catholic Church. As an anti-pope, he never attracted more than a handful of followers.¹⁰² He later reconciled with his rival, and both Hippolytus and his rival died as martyrs.

If Hippolytus really wrote "The Canons of Hippolytus," they would have been written during the period when he was a schismatic wrongly claiming to be Bishop of Rome. Hardon notes that Hippolytus, as an antipope, can scarcely be a source of orthodox law.

There are various versions of the canons which are attributed to Hippolytus, some of them written long after the real Hippolytus died. Although scholars disagree, the earliest version is probably the text known as "The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus." According to canon 16, soldiers who converted to Christianity while in the military were allowed to remain, but Christians were not allowed to join the military. Magistrates or military governors, who had the authority to impose the death penalty, were required to give up their office.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 347-48.

¹⁰¹ John A. Hardon, *The Catholic Catechism: A Contemporary Catechism of the Teachings of the Catholic Church* (N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981), p. 347. The twelfth canon read:

As many as were called by grace, and displayed the first zeal, having cast aside their military girdles, but afterwards returned, like dogs, to their own vomit, (so that some spent money and by means of gifts regained their military stations); let these, after they have passed the space of three years as hearers, be for ten years prostrators. But in all these cases it is necessary to examine well into their purpose and what their repentance appears to be like. For as many as give evidence of their conversions by deeds, and not pretence, with fear, and tears, and perseverance, and good works, when they have fulfilled their appointed time as hearers, may properly communicate in prayers; and after that the bishop may determine yet more favorably concerning them. But those who take [the matter] with indifference, and who think the form of [not] entering the Church is sufficient for their conversion, must fulfill the whole time.

www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF2-14/Npnf2-14-19.htm#TopOfPage.

¹⁰² Gregory Dix, General Introduction to *The Treatise on The Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome*, ed., Gregory Dix (London: Alban Pr., rev. ed. 1992)(1st pub. 1937), pp. xxvi-xxvii.

For what is probably the second-oldest version of the text, see *The Canons of Hippolytus*, ed., Paul F. Bradshaw, transl. Carol Bebawi (Bramcote, England: Grove Books, 1987).

¹⁰³ *The Treatise on The Apostolic Tradition*, canon 16, sentences 17-18, p. 26.

As a minor schismatic, Hippolytus is personally no source of authority for Christian doctrine. However, the main subject of “The Apostolic Tradition” is liturgy; based on other information about the early church, it is clear that, liturgically speaking, Hippolytus was a fervent opponent of innovation in the liturgy he knew, which was derivative of Jewish liturgy. Accordingly, “The Apostolic Tradition” can be considered representative of late second-century orthodox liturgy.¹⁰⁴ Thus, in 1968, Pope Paul VI changed the text for the rite of ordination of Bishops. The new language was based on “The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus.”

Regarding pacifism, the strongest claim that be made, based on “The Apostolic Tradition,” is that Hippolytus was as orthodox on pacifism as he was on liturgy. Accordingly, pacifism would (like the old-fashioned liturgy Hippolytus preferred) be a topic on which Hippolytus felt a need to defend policy of the late second century against innovations in the early third century. Indeed, the story of the “Thundering Legion” in 172 A.D. shows that pacifism was not a well-established orthodox position during the lifetime of Hippolytus. The writings of Hippolytus do suggest that there was at least an important pacifist element in the late second-century church.

H. Julius Africanus

Early in the third century, the Christian writer Julius Africanus produced the first serious book attempting to reconcile Greek, Roman, Jewish, Christian, and other historical chronology. His *Chronicle* (*Chronographai*) became the basis for all Byzantine chronography.

He also wrote a scientific encyclopedia, the *Embroideries*. A former pagan soldier, he did not hesitate to cover topics which Christians found scandalous—such as magic, which Christians thought was real and evil; and aphrodisiacs, which many Christians thought improper. He wrote at length and with considerable knowledge about military tactics. The encyclopedia’s entries on chemistry and explosives may have been used by the Byzantines in the seventh century to invent Greek fire, a sticky, flammable substance used in warfare.¹⁰⁵

I. Minucius Felix

Writing in the early third century, the Roman lawyer Minucius Felix was another Christian apologist. After conversion, he became a bishop in Africa.

His most famous work was *Octavius*, written in the form of a debate between a Christian and a pagan. Like Tertullian, Minucius Felix devoted several chapters to rebutting false charges against Christians: that they worshipped a donkey, that they held incestuous orgy feasts, and that they initiated converts by slaughtering a baby and

¹⁰⁴ Dix, pp. xxxvii-xliv.

¹⁰⁵ Cadoux dismissed Julius Africanus as one-of-a-kind—which he undoubtedly was. Julius was the only Christian of his period to make an important contribution to history or science. He was also the only writer of his time capable of engaging in what today would be called “higher criticism.” He wrote a famous letter to Origen (who is discussed below), using historical analysis and philology to prove that the story of Susannah (an apocryphal addition to the *Book of Daniel*) was a fabrication. Julius Africanus was certainly not representative of the typical Christian of the early third century; nor was Leonardo da Vinci a typical Italian of the sixteenth century. Both Julius and Leonardo are representative of Christian genius

drinking its blood.¹⁰⁶ Regarding the last charge, Felix disparaged pagans who ate “wild beasts from the arena,” since they beasts were “fresh glutted with blood and gorged with the limbs and entrails of men.” In contrast, for Christians:

it is not permissible either for us to see or to hear of human slaughter; we have such a shrinking from human blood that at our meals we avoid the blood of animals used for food.¹⁰⁷

J. Origen

Among the church fathers of the first three centuries, the greatest intellectual was Origen (185-254). He was the eldest son of a devout Christian who was martyred by the Romans, and was later recognized as a saint. It was Origen who first provided the theological explanation for venerating saints.¹⁰⁸ Origen had a belief, which was developed in more detail in later centuries, that souls pre-exist their human bodies. This aspect of Origen’s views has been declared heretical by the Catholic Church, and the Bishop of Alexandria expelled him from the church there.¹⁰⁹ The Bishop disapprovingly noted that as a younger man, Origen had castrated himself because of sexual temptation.¹¹⁰

Modern pacifists who claim that the early church (before Constantine) was pacifist often cite Origen as an authority. But a careful reading of Origen shows that his views are more complex.

Origen’s masterpiece was *Contra Celsum*, a refutation of the anti-Christian book *The True Story* (or *The True Doctrine* or *The True Word*) written around 178 by someone named Celsus. (Celsus’ original, which was the first intellectual refutation of Christianity, has been lost, and is now known only indirectly, though Origen’s reply.) *Contra Celsum* consists of eight short sub-books.¹¹¹

In the very first paragraph of book I, a passage lauds tyrannicide and active resistance to government. Celsus’ first point had been to criticize Christians for forming illegal secret associations. Origen responded by arguing that when one is living under a government whose “laws are contrary to divine law,” it is legitimate to violate those laws

¹⁰⁶ Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, in *Tertullian: Apology, De Spectaculis; Minucius Felix: Octavius*, transl. T.R. Glover & Gerald H. Rendal (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Pr., 2003)(1st pub. 1931), ch. 28-31, pp. 401-13.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, ch. 30, p. 409.

¹⁰⁸ Catholics do not pray *to* saints; rather, Catholics ask saints to pray *for* them, because the prayer of saints is considered particular efficacious.

¹⁰⁹ Lisa Sowle Cahil, *Love Your Enemies: Discipleship, Pacifism, and Just War Theory* (Minneapolis: Fortress Pr., 1994), p. 49. Long after Origen’s death, doctrinal controversies arose which people traced to the misapplication of Origen’s theories. Although the historical record is unclear, the better evidence seems to indicate that the Catholic Church never anathematized Origen or his writings. “Origen and Origenism,” in *New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11306b.htm>

¹¹⁰ Eusebius, book 6, sect. 8, pp. 212-13.

¹¹¹ About the time that Christians began writing books, publishers figured out how to bind sheets of paper together, so that books did not have to be written on scrolls. Binding made it much easier for the reader to skip to a particular section of the book. The technology of the time did not allow for a very large number of pages to be bound together, as modern books are. Accordingly, a single work by an author might consist of several “books.”

“for the sake of the true law” (meaning God’s law). “Therefore it is not wrong to form associations against the laws for the sake of the truth.”¹¹²

To reinforce this point, Origen drew an analogy which assumed (and presumed that his audience agreed) that tyrannicide was legitimate:

For just as it would be right for people to form associations secretly to kill a tyrant who had seized control of their city, so too, since the devil, as Christians call him, and falsehood reign as tyrants, Christians form associations against the devil contrary to his laws, in order to save others whom they might be able to persuade to abandon the law which is like that of the Scythians and of a tyrant.¹¹³

So in paragraph one of page one of the greatest work by the greatest Christian writer in the first three centuries of the church, the reader was told “it would be right for people to form associations secretly to kill a tyrant who had seized control of their city.”

Although Origen thus defended violation of the Roman law against secret societies, Origen argued that the peace imposed by the Roman Empire made possible the propagation of Christianity:

It would have hindered Jesus’ teaching from being spread through the whole world if there had been many kingdoms...also because men everywhere would have been compelled to do military service and fight in defense of their own land. This used to happen before the times of Augustus and even earlier still when a war was necessary, such as that between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, and similarly in the case of other nations which fought one another. Accordingly, how could this teaching, which preaches peace and does not even allow men to take vengeance on their enemies, have had any success until the international situation had everywhere been changed and a milder spirit prevailed at the advent of Jesus?¹¹⁴

So the *Pax Romana* was the necessary pre-condition for the spread of Christianity, which forbids taking “vengeance” on enemies.

In book III, Origen responded to Celsus’ claim that the Christians are Jews who revolted against the Jewish leaders. In making this argument, Origen contrasted the Jews (who were allowed to use violence) with the Christians (who are not):

¹¹² Origen, *Contra Celsum*, transl., Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1953)(1st pub. approx. 248), book 1, sect. 1.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* Cadoux argued that the passage about assassinating tyrants was merely Origen’s appeal to the subchristian morality of the pagan audience for whom he wrote *Contra Celsum*, and did not reflect Origen’s personal approval of tyrannicide. Cadoux noted that elsewhere in *Contra Celsum*, Origen accepted the policy of pagan priests being exempted from military service so they could order sacrifices. But by acknowledging that the policy was wise for pagans, Origen was not implying that Christians could offer pagan sacrifices. Cadoux, pp. 214-15 note 5. That Cadoux even addresses the issue is typical of his own policy of confronting the hardest questions. The style of most pacifist writers after Cadoux has been to collect the “good” quotes while ignoring the difficult ones.

I think that Cadoux’s argument, while clever, fails because it does not account for the extensive language in chapter one, wherein Origen praises tyrannicide as a positive good, without reservation.

¹¹⁴ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, book 2, sect. 30. Origen was making the point that if the Jews had enforced the death penalty against every person who committed what the *Torah* said was a capital offense, the Jews would have killed a huge fraction of the Jewish population.

If a revolt had been the cause of the Christians existing as a separate group (and they originated from the Jews for whom it was lawful to take up arms in defence of their families and to serve in wars), the lawgiver of the Christians would not have forbidden entirely the taking of human life. He taught that it was never right for his disciples to go so far against a man, even if he should be very wicked; for he did not consider it compatible with his inspired legislation to allow the taking of human life in any form at all. Moreover, if Christians had originated from a revolt, they would not have submitted to laws which were so gentle, which caused them to be killed “as sheep”, and made them unable to defend themselves against their persecutors.¹¹⁵ ...

...Concerning the Christians...we say that they have been taught not to defend themselves against their enemies; and because they have kept the laws which command gentleness and love to man, on this account they have received from God that which they could not have succeeded in doing if they had been given the right to make war, even though they may have been quite able to do so. He always fought for them and from time to time stopped the opponents of the Christians and the people who wanted to kill them.¹¹⁶

Another passage further distinguished Christians from Jews:

It was impossible for the Christians to follow the Mosaic law in killing their enemies or those who acted illegally and were judged to be deserving of death by fire or stoning, although, in fact, even the Jews were not able to inflict these punishments on them [since Roman law prevented the Jews from imposing the death penalty. Even when the Jews had political independence, they could not rigorously enforce all the *Torah*'s death penalties because] the inevitable consequence would have been their complete and utter destruction when their enemies attacked the nation, because by their own law they would have been deprived of strength and prevented from resisting their enemies.¹¹⁷

In the above passages, Origen wrote that Christians should never kill. Even so, he offered a primitive form of Just War doctrine, urging that human warriors, like bees, conduct themselves in a well-ordered manner: “Probably also in the so-called wars of the bees there lies teaching that among men wars, if they are ever necessary, are to be just and ordered.”¹¹⁸

Origen further argued that Christians helped the Roman Empire militarily by praying for the success of Roman armies:

And in fact when war comes you [Romans] do not enlist the [pagan] priests. If, then, this is reasonable, how much more reasonable is it that, while others fight,

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, book 3, sect. 7.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, book 3, sect. 8.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, book 7, sect. 26. Philo of Alexandria reported that the Jews in Alexandria were allowed to impose the death penalty on Jews. Philo of Alexandria, *The Works of Philo*, transl., C.D. Yonge (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Pub., 1993). Presumably Origen was referring to Israel, where the Romans did not allow the Jews to do so.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, book 4, sect. 82.

Christians should also be fighting as priests and worshippers of God, keeping their right hands pure and by their prayers to God striving for those who fight in a righteous cause and for the emperor who reigns righteously, in order that everything which is opposed and hostile to those who act rightly may be destroyed?...And although we do not become fellow-soldiers with him [the Emperor], even if he presses for this, yet we are fighting for him and composing a special army of piety through our intercessions to God.¹¹⁹

So according to Origen, Christians would not personally fight, but they would pray for the success of soldiers who fought for a just cause. We may note that Christians would never pray for the success of something inherently evil; they would not pray for a large crowd to attend an auspicious pagan sacrifice, nor would they pray for a prostitute to earn a great deal of money from satisfied customers.

So if fighting was so worthy that Christians prayed for its success, why did Origen say that Christians do not fight personally? The answer is that Christians are a small and unique group specially set aside from some parts normal life.

In the penultimate section of *Contra Celsum*, immediately after Origen explained why Christians prayed for the Roman army's success even though they would not serve in the military, Origen explained why Christian refused to accept public office in their country: they are called to office in "another sort of country," the Christian church. While Christians "do avoid these responsibilities" of public life, their motive was not "shirking the public services of life," but rather keeping "themselves for a more divine and necessary service in the church of God for the sake of the salvation of men."¹²⁰

Here we see the luxury that the early Christians enjoyed in the third century, when they were only a small part of the population. They knew that if they refused to hold public offices, there would be plenty of other people capable of doing so. Likewise, if they refused to serve in the military (for whose success they prayed), the military would hardly suffer a manpower shortage.

Origen expected that as the world become more Christian, wars would be commensurately reduced. This was a plausible hope for Origen, when Christians were a minority in the Roman Empire. The history of Europe in the following centuries would prove Origen wrong. Europe became almost entirely Christian, and also became a place where wars were much from frequent than they had been under the pagan *Pax Romana*.

Thomas Aquinas expounded the duty of Christians to participate in just wars, but also wrote that priests had a special duty not to participate personally in any violence. Priests, according to Aquinas, had a unique and consecrated character which forbade them to engage in violence even though violence was not inherently immoral. Likewise, the modern Catholic Church does not forbid lay Catholics to hold public office. But priests are forbidden from doing so.¹²¹ Similarly, as St. Augustine explicated, Catholics believe that marriage is a sacred and admirable state. But a unique minority of people are called to the higher glory of celibacy as a priest, nun, monk, or other consecrated vocation.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, book 8, sect. 73.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, book 8, sect. 75.

¹²¹ THOMAS AQUINAS, *SUMMA THEOLOGICA*, (Fathers of the English Dominican Province trans., William Benton & Encyclopedia Britannica Inc. 1952).

Origen appears to have applied a similar theory to Christians as a whole. This was a reasonable rule for Origen's time.

Later, Origen's policy would have been impossible for a conscientious Christian nation. In a country such as tenth-century France or seventeenth-century England, wherein almost all the population was Christian, the state would collapse if all Christians refused to hold public office. Likewise, the nation would perish if all Christians rigorously adhered to Origen's ideas about not serving in the army. Such a nation would suffer the same fate that Origen warned would have befallen the Jews if they had fully enforced the Mosaic death penalties: the nation would have been destroyed for want of anyone to defend it.

In sum, Origen did not say that war was inherently wicked; to the contrary, he bragged that Christian prayers help warriors triumph. His view on war was parallel to his view that Christians should not hold public office, and both views became untenable once Christianity changed from being a tiny sect to a majority religion.

Origen did write one major passage which stated the full pacifist position along with the position of full submission to government; yet this passage is tempered by the first section of his book, in which he defended the righteousness of illegal secret societies and of tyrannicide.

As Cadoux pointed out, Origen, like St. Paul, was fond of using military metaphors for "spiritual warfare." St. Cyprian (below) especially enjoyed military metaphor. Military metaphor was so pervasive in Christian life that the Latin word for a soldier's identity plate (similar to "dog tags" for modern soldiers), the *sacrament*, was adopted by Christians for special ceremonies which convey grace.¹²²

An author's use of such metaphors does not necessarily prove that the author approve of literal, rather than metaphorical spiritual use of arms. Tertullian, after all, reveled in military metaphor. But as Cadoux explicated, the frequent use of military metaphors did have a long term effect on the Christian mind. Jesus started the trend; Paul and other New Testament writers amplified it; and many early Christian writers enthusiastically followed Paul's lead. The repeated description of the martial glories of spiritual warfare led the early Christian mind to see actual warfare as glorious.

K. Cyprian

St. Cyprian (approx. 200-258) was a leader of the African church, was deeply influenced by Tertullian's writings, and called Tertullian "my master."¹²³ Cyprian did not, however, personally follow Tertullian's admonition to seek out persecution. When the Emperor Decius persecuted Christians in 248-51, Cyprian fled from his home in Carthage.

¹²² Baptism, a naming ceremony in which a person becomes part of the Christian church, was the first "sacrament." The connection to the Roman name-identification for soldiers is obvious. Later, other grace-conveying ceremonies were also called "sacraments." Hornus, pp. 69-70, citing E. Malone, "Martyrdom and Monastic Perfection as a Second Baptism," in *Von Christlichen Mysteriorum*, eds., A. Mayer, J. Quasten & B. Beunheuser (Düsseldorf, Germany: 1951), p. 115.

Roman Catholics recognize seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation (coming of age ceremony), Penance, the Eucharist, Extreme Unction (for a dying person), Holy Orders (taking special vows to become a priest, nun, etc.), and Matrimony. Most Protestants consider only Baptism and Eucharist to be sacraments.

¹²³ T.R. Glover, Introduction to *Tertullian: Apology, De Spectaculis; Minucius Felix: Octavius*, transl., T.R. Glover, Gerald H. Rendal (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Pr., 2003)(1st pub. 1931), p. x.

Like Tertullian, Cyprian opposed war, writing in 246 that “homicide is a crime when individuals commit it, but is called a virtue when it is carried on publicly. Not the method of innocence, but the magnitude of savagery, procure as impunity for crimes.”¹²⁴

Cyprian also wrote, “it is not granted to the innocent to kill even the aggressor, but promptly to deliver up their souls and blood that, since so much malice and cruelty are rampant in the world, they may more quickly withdraw from the malicious and the cruel.”¹²⁵

On the other hand, Cyprian wrote that Christians prayed for the victory of Roman armies.¹²⁶ Accordingly, Cyprian seems to have taken the same position as Origen: Christians do not personally fight, but they recognize that society requires people who do fight.¹²⁷

L. Arnobius

Around the year 300, the Christian convert Arnobius wrote an anti-pagan book, *The Seven Books of Arnobius Against the Heathen (Adversus Gentes)*. He refuted pagan charges that Christianity caused war; Arnobius said that Christians do not fight back against anyone.¹²⁸ Yet in the same book, Arnobius rejected pagan charges the Christians were responsible for the decline of Rome. He pointed out that in the three centuries of Christianity, “victories innumerable have been gained from the conquered enemy, -that the boundaries of the empire have been extended, and that nations whose names we had not previously heard, have been brought under our power...”¹²⁹ Arnobius appears consistent with Origen and Cyprian, believing that until the whole world became Christian, soldiers would be necessary.

John Cadoux himself shared the bifocal view of Origen, Cyprian, and Arnobius. In 1940, as Britain fought against Hitler, Cadoux wrote that it was possible for a

¹²⁴ *Ad Donatum* (To Donatus), 6:10, quoted in Stanley S. Harakas, *Contemporary Moral Issues Facing the Orthodox Christian* (Minneapolis: Light and Life, 1982), p. 158.

¹²⁵ Cyprian, Letter to Cornelius (252 A.D.), in *St. Cyprian Letters 1-81*, transl., Rose Bernard Donna (Washington: Catholic Univ. of America Pr., 1964), letter 60, p. 194. See also Cyprian, Treatise 9, *On the Advantage of Patience (De Bono Patientiae)*, para. 14, www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-05/anf05-119.htm#P7572_2533209 (“nor, after the Eucharist carried in it, is the hand spotted with the sword and blood”).

¹²⁶ Cyprian, Treatise 5, “An Address to Demetrianus,” para. 20, in Swift, p. 49, and in www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-05/anf05-115.htm#P7273_2388656.

¹²⁷ Swift, pp. 49-50.

¹²⁸ Arnobius, *The Seven Books of Arnobius Against the Heathen (Adversus Gentes)*, book 1, para. 6, http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-06/anf06-134.htm#P6414_1956845:

...we, a numerous band of men as we are, have learned from His teaching and His laws that evil ought not to be requited with evil, that it is better to suffer wrong than to inflict it, that we should rather shed our own blood than stain our hands and our conscience with that of another, an ungrateful world is now for a long period enjoying a benefit from Christ, inasmuch as by His means the rage of savage ferocity has been softened, and has begun to withhold hostile hands from the blood of a fellow-creature. [If everyone were Christian], the whole world, having turned the use of steel into more peaceful occupations, would now be living in the most placid tranquility, and would unite in blessed harmony, maintaining inviolate the sanctity of treaties

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, book 1, para. 14.

Christian to support a war fought for a just cause, without abandoning “his own refusal to participate in any such war himself.”¹³⁰

M. Lactantius

Lactantius of Bithynia (240-320) was a teacher of rhetoric who converted to Christianity. He wrote beautiful, elegant Latin, but the *Catholic Encyclopedia* says that his graceful style “cannot hide the author’s lack of grasp on Christian principles and his almost utter ignorance of Scripture.”¹³¹ Since he was writing during the period when Diocletian was carrying out the worst and most pervasive of all the persecutions of Christians, Lactantius may not have had much opportunity to study doctrine and scripture.

He inveighed against capital punishment in terms which also forbade all other forms of killing. In the early fourth century, he wrote:

For when God forbids us to kill, He not only prohibits us from open violence, which is not even allowed by the public laws, but He warns us against the commission of those things which are esteemed lawful among men. Thus it will be neither lawful for a just man to engage in warfare, since his warfare is justice itself, nor to accuse any one of a capital charge, because it makes no difference whether you put a man to death by word, or rather by the sword, since it is the act of putting to death itself which is prohibited. Therefore, with regard to this precept of God, there ought to be no exception at all but that it is always unlawful to put to death a man, whom God willed to be a sacred animal.¹³²

Here Lactantius was (probably unknowingly) contradicting Paul’s letter to the Romans, which recognized the authority of the government to impose capital punishment.¹³³ Even if Lactantius’ statement was, arguably, heretical, Lactantius himself was never considered a heretic. Later, after Constantine seized power, Lactantius later reversed his position on pacifism.

N. Continuing Revelation?

As Cadoux forthrightly acknowledged, Tertullian was not the only early Christian pacifist who had difficulty dealing with the Old Testament. Marcion took what might be considered the most logical approach, and simply denied the Old Testament was scripture. Some non-heretical early Christian pacifist writers tried to explain away the Old Testament war stories by using exegetical techniques which were not particularly persuasive.

Cadoux explained that those early writers, in a period when Christianity was still in its infancy, lacked the more sophisticated analytical techniques which have been

¹³⁰ C. John Cadoux, *Christian Pacifism Reexamined* (Oxford, 1940), p. 141.

¹³¹ “Lucius Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius” in *New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08736a.htm>.

¹³² Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes (Divinae Institutiones)*, transl., William Fletcher (approx. 305-310 A.D.), book 6, ch. 20, para. 2, www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-07/anf07-09.htm#P2345_968515.

¹³³ Romans 13:4. See also Luke 23:41 (one of the thieves being crucified told the other thief “we receive the due reward of our deeds”).

developed in recent centuries. In particular, there is now the understanding of continuing revelation.

Cadoux drew an analogy to a mother with a new-born infant. At first, she feeds the child breastmilk. Later, she feeds the baby baby food. Still later, she introduces the toddler to solid food. At each stage, the mother is providing her child with the most advanced food that the child can eat—at the child's current state of development. We would not say the mother was being inconsistent because she fed her newborn breast milk and fed her three-year-old an apple.

Cadoux reasoned that God, like the mother, has been giving humanity as much moral instruction as it can handle, based on man's stage of development. Thus, all the holy wars and killing in the Old Testament should be accepted for what they were, wrote Cadoux. There is no point in trying to turn them into metaphors, or trying to pretend that God really had some other obliquely expressed message. At the primitive stage of development of the early Hebrews, waging war according to God's instruction was the revelation that was right for them at the time. But hundreds of years later, mankind was ready for a more advanced revelation. Then, Jesus came, and pacifism was expounded as the new ethic for a new era.

Cadoux's theory is fine as far as it goes. Whether he is right that the New Testament actually told Christians to be pacifists is a separate question, and pacifist authors have not been successful at explaining away all of the New Testament's Christian soldiers.

But the larger problem for Cadoux is the continuing revelation does not necessarily stop in the first century A.D. Perhaps pacifism was the simple spiritual food suited for some primitive Christians. Perhaps after the Christian community had over a century of experience of learning how to live in the world (and had learned to get over the idea that the Apocalypse was just around the corner), then continuing revelation advanced beyond pacifism. Well before Constantine, continuing revelation could be said to have brought the Christian community to a clear understanding that violence, for carefully defined Christian purposes (and not for revenge) would be legitimate.

Conclusion

Careful examination of available historical sources does not support the claims of modern pacifists that the pre-Constantian Christian church was a pacifist church. Of the early Christian writers, there are some who were pacifists, some who were not, and some who took an intermediate view which distinguished their own personal refusal to use violence from their support, as good citizens, of military violence. Evidence regarding the practices of the laity shows that Christians served as Roman soldiers from the very earliest days of the church—as the New Testament itself confirms. The evidence indicates that before Constantine, pacifism was *a* legitimate position for Christians, and that other Christians could and did legitimately take different positions, either in their writings, or in their personal practices.