

“Holy Wars” in History: A Preamble to the Crusades

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The use of the words “Holy Wars” sounds to us today shocking and scandalous. Can people call war “Holy”? If “Holy” refers to anything touching God, doing His will, fulfilling His purpose, can we really speak of “Holy War”?

The terrorist attacks of September 11 (2001)¹ brought to our minds a terrible reminder of what people call “Holy War.” For those who planned and perpetrated the action, it was something holy. They sacrificed their lives, in their view, in the service of God. Their supporters and sympathizers call them *Martyrs*. As martyrs, they are now in the company of the blessed, in God’s kingdom.

For those who received the deathly blow and their supporters and sympathizers, it was the greatest terrorist attack in the history of mankind. The Holy Father, John Paul II, called it a dark moment in the history of mankind.

How can it be that in today’s world, in the global world in which we live, we have such a different interpretation of the same event? How can people use religion, for something so evil and satanic? Can religion and God be brought together to justify the action? If truly the attack was done for His sake and glory, and God demands it and is pleased with it, then that God is blood thirsty, brutal, ferocious. Many people in the world, especially in the West, advocate the suppression of all religion, due precisely to these violent actions in the name of religion.

¹ It is already part of the common language of the people to use simply 9-11.

This study of mine carries the title “*Holy Wars*” in *History: A Preamble to the Crusades*.” The Crusades were military expeditions by the western people with the religious purpose of liberating the Holy Land, the Holy Places – places made holy by Jesus, Mary and Jesus’ disciples – from the hands of the Moslems. The crusades were mainly promoted and partly financed by the popes and they were indeed international organized movements. The name *Crusader* is derived from the cross of cloth worn on the garments and inscribed on the pennants of those who participated. They were preached by the popes and once proclaimed they became a holy enterprise.

This movement of the Crusades, that started in 1095 and lasted for almost 200 years, is very wide and had many roots. Its vitality and durability is a sign of its depth. And like movements of this nature, finds its explanation back into history.

Holy War in the Old Testament

When we read the Old Testament, especially the Book of Joshua, we find already the basis for “Holy War.” The Jews, in their effort to conquer the land promised them by Yahweh, put to the sword, *anathema*, all living people, men, women, children, and, sometimes, even the animals. Scripture texts tell us that the command was the command of Yahweh to Moses, who in turn gave the command to Joshua. Joshua, in the view of the sacred writer, was fulfilling Yahweh’s command and will.²

The war for the Jews was holy. They had to make all things *anathema*. When we read these passages we are shocked at the cruelty and inhumanity of the events. If the inhumanity of these acts were to find their explanation in the classical principle, *homo homini lupus*, man is a wolf to man, it would seem less scandalous, but to justify those massacres as commands coming from God, this is difficult to understand.

For the Jews these were Holy Wars. The land of Yahweh must be purified of its pagan inhabitants. Israel is holy and therefore a

² “What Yahweh had ordered his servant Moses, Moses in turn had ordered Joshua and Joshua carried it out, leaving nothing unaccomplished that Yahweh had ordered Moses”, Joshua, 11:15.

people set apart. It must not use half measures or its faith will be compromised.³

Most of my readers know that the Church has approved and sanctioned wars and violence as a matter of fact through the centuries. We are convinced that Christian believers can participate in wars sanctioned by the ruling governments.

When people are told that in the past, the Church might have condemned wars and even military service, they seem to think that this is a revolutionary discovery. A journey into the past, a reading of the great Fathers of the Church, will convince them that there is nothing revolutionary. It was the "common" doctrine among most of them. Pacifism, opposition to war, opposition to military service were radical views of the early Christians and the Church.

Christian Pacifism

What, then, was the attitude of the Christians to war? The Bible, especially the Old Testament, described many battles and used here and there martial language.

The Christians spoke of Jesus Christ as the Prince of Peace. How did the early Christians answer the martial narratives of the Old Testament? The Marcionite Christians, heretics and gnostics that they were, simply answered by contraposing the god of the Old Testament, an angry, ferocious, warlike god, to the merciful, loving God of the New Testament, Jesus Christ.

Orthodox Christians denied this dualism. They knew of the one and unique God, author of the Old Testament and of the New Testament. To the descriptions of battles ordered by God they answered that

"what had been permissible and necessary under the law had become unthinkable under grace."⁴

³ Dt. 7:6 & ff.

⁴ Cfr. Jean-Michel Hornus, *It Is Not Lawful For Me To Fight. Early Christian Attitudes Toward War, Violence and the State*. Herald Press, Scottdale, Pennsylvania, Kitchener, Ontario, 1980, p. 52.

Many of the Fathers, to avoid the great difficulty of explaining the massacres narrated in the Old Testament, gave an allegorical interpretation. Others spoke of God's intervening in history according to the stage of intellectual development of the people. Thus we read in an ancient author:

"...In the same way, God has given laws to men according to the stage of their intellectual development... In similar manner, the law which he has given in the Gospel is different from others, and is in accord with the new development of the world. How therefore can we accuse God of inconsistency? ... For each of these stages of development God has assigned laws which are appropriate to them and through which he might lead his children..."⁵

It is not difficult to prove that the New Testament is totally pacifist. Jesus' disciples, faithful interpreters of His teaching, were pacifists. In the Acts of the Apostles and the epistles of Paul and Catholic epistles, there is not a hint whatsoever of any violent reaction, when faced with unjust persecutions, imprisonments and even martyrdom.

Christ said to those who crucified Him: "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." In perfect imitation of Christ, the divine Master, Stephen, the very first martyr of Christianity said: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." (Acts 7:60)

As we go over the first Christian writers, the apostolic Fathers and the Apologists, we do not find any of the Fathers justifying war, even against the persecutors. They remembered well the teaching of Christ, when He said: "If they strike you in one cheek present also the other", and "Do not resist those who insult you." "Do not return evil for evil."

Christianity was born in the bosom of the Roman Empire. The Roman army was, at the time of the birth of Christianity, a marvel, a military machine. The early Christians thought of themselves as a fighting force, resembling, in many ways, the Roman Army. But their struggle was not with material, but with spiritual enemies. They were involved in a continuous battle with the forces of Satan

⁵ Adamantius, *Dialogus de recta in Deum Fidem*, as quoted by Jean-Michel Hormes, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

and his legions. Thus the Church had to organize herself like an army. The Church and the Christians burrowed many words and examples from the Roman Army, but the weapons the Church used were the weapons of the spirit, the only ones that are of any use against the enemies, who are the spirits. Even the great apostle Paul speaks and describes the equipment of the Christian in military terms, when he writes: "...Let us put on the breastplate of faith and love, and let the hope of salvation be our helmet" (I Thess 5: 8-9). And again: "...Finally, use the helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit, that is, the Word of God" (Eph. 6:17).

This language became more and more popular as the Christian authors burrowed words from the military establishment of the Romans, but the words were used metaphorically, to signify the perpetual warfare of the Christian against Satan. They use martial language to describe the Christian vocation. We cannot conclude from this rich and varied use of military metaphors, used by the early Christians, that they supported war in itself. They speak, thus, of *militia mundi*, but always in the context of *militia Christi* and in mutual contraposition. The dedication of the Roman soldier, inspires the Christian to greater dedication. Oftentimes the discipline and organization of the Roman Army are admired by Christian writers.

But we read in an author:

"The important thing to remember, however, is that however much the Christian burrowed military language, they were always *opposing* their type of warfare to the warfare of the legions. Material war was one thing, but spiritual war was another – and much more serious."⁶

The early Christians had a vision. And unless we capture that vision through their writings we cannot understand them. We have been overwhelmed by militarism, war, technology. We are fascinated by the capacity of man to create weapons of destruction. Thus when we go to the Fathers and read them, we discover that pacifism, that opposition to war, was radically an evangelical teaching and stands at the core of Christ's teaching. The Sermon of the Mountain,

⁶ Stanley Windass, *Christianity versus Violence*, Sheed and Word, London, 1964, p. 5.

Christ's revolutionary command, love one another as I have loved you, are not recommendations or advises, they are commands.

No Military Service

Much can be said about the early Christians' view on war and military service. Most of the Fathers, and they truly represent the belief of the Church, were opposed to military service. Some scholars point out that it was mainly two of them, to wit, Tertullian (died ca. 225) and Origen (185-253), who prohibited the *militia mundi*. For them a Christian had to serve only the *militia Christi*. A wide reading of the Fathers convinces us that all of them consistently and continuously opposed military service.

They opposed this for two reasons: first, because of the cruelty the military profession implied. The Christians looked at the military profession as dehumanized, brutal, violent. There are many examples in the writings of the Fathers referring to the cruelty and avarice of the soldiers and officers.⁷ This seemed to be contrary to the Christian call of peace and love, even for the enemies.⁸ Thus we can say that the brutality and the violence prevalent in the military profession led the Christians to refuse and condemn military service.⁹

The Christian authors were anti-militaristic. And that idea had an important place in Christian thinking. The writings of the Fathers are filled with the Christian theme of peaceableness. They knew of the beautiful prophecy of Isaiah¹⁰ and Micah, but based on the Gospel, they spoke already of the Kingdom of peace.

⁷ Cfr. drawing of lots for the Lord's cloths; His scourging; His crowning with thorns; the play and spitting with Him; the repeated hitting with the cane; the slapping and finally the terrible crucifixion.

⁸ We though have a good example to the contrary about the extreme kindness of soldiers and officers, in the case of Paul. Julius, the Roman centurion who took Paul from Palestine to Rome (Acts 27:3 ff.), allowed Paul and his companions special privileges, like going to their friends' house and being taken care by them. Luke brings to relevance the extreme kindness of Julius.

⁹ Cfr. Jean Michel Hornus, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

¹⁰ "He will rule ove the nations and settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not raise sword against nation. They will train for war no more (Isaiah 2,4).

A clear proof of this is Clement of Alexandria's sentence in his *Paedagogus*, "We Christians are a peaceful race... bred not for war but for peace." And he offers a dual analogy taken from the field of music. In the first part, man must play an irenic tune; and of all the instruments that humanity can play, says Clement, the Christian used one: "The one instrument, peace, the word alone by which we honor God, is what we employ."¹¹

The Christians believed in the systematic opposition between the *militia mundi* and the *militia Christi*. They knew that the battle was real, but it took place on a different plane and with quite different weapons from the battles of the world. We have this very beautiful quote in Lactantius:

"It is not lawful for a just man to serve as a soldier, for justice itself is his military service."¹²

In the Old Testament, as we have seen, there are many bellicose and martial passages. The Christians were conscious of them and they could not sympathize with those bellicose methods. Thus they interpreted them allegorically. We too seem to be unhappy as we go over the book of Joshua especially, and other books in the Old Testament.

"It is not lawful for me to fight." This pacifistic and beautiful and meaningful phrase comes from a professional soldier who, in the long run, could not blend together his Christian faith and his military profession. It comes from the mouth of St. Martin of Tours, a saint of the IV Century and very influential through his life in the history of the Church. The Roman emperor distributed a *donativum* to the soldiers, something they were accustomed to do, to keep the army faithful and loyal. Martin rejected it. He said he had no right to accept the money, for he did not want to continue in the imperial service. He wanted to become a soldier of Christ. "I am the soldier of Christ; it is not lawful for me to fight."¹³

¹¹ Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, I, 12, 98; II, 2, 32; II, 4, 42, as quoted by J.M. Hornus, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

¹² In Latin: *neque militare iusti licebit cuius militia est ipsa iustitia*, in *Divinae Institutiones*, VI, 20, 4, 11, as quoted by Hornus, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

¹³ Sulpicius Severus, *Vita Mart.*, 4, 3; SCH, CXXXIII, 260, as quoted by Hornus, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

Christ rebuked Peter when he drew his sword in the Garden of Gethsemany and cut the ear of Malchus. Jesus said: "He who takes the sword shall perish by the sword." This came closest to an actual ruling by Jesus of how his disciples should behave when confronted with aggression. Origen, one of the greatest scholars of Christianity, commented that Christ wanted us to put away the warlike sword and take the sword of the spirit. He gives a warning, lest:

"for warfare, or for the vindication of our rights or for any occasion, we should take out the sword, for no such occasion 'is allowed by this evangelical teaching.'"¹⁴

Some students of early Christianity, and scholars of the Fathers, tend to say that this were extreme opinions and do not represent the main opinion of the Church. A journey over the writings of these Fathers, we repeat again, show that this was the prevalent view of the Fathers and the Church.

Thus we read in a scholar:

"These opinions [of the Fathers] are quite clear-cut, and there is no evidence at all that they represent only one stream of thought – still less that they are eccentric to the main tradition of the Church – all the evidence suggests, on the contrary, that this was the *only* stream of *thought* though not the only stream of practice."¹⁵

We have some canons about military service, some regulations of this early period of the Church. They are the *Canons of St. Hippolytus*. Hippolytus wrote them to "defend the traditional practices of the Church against the recent error and apostasy of ignorant men."¹⁶

Two canons speak directly of military service and the Christian call. One said that a man could not be accepted as a Christian if he was a soldier of the army of the Emperor. The other said that a

¹⁴ Origen, *Works*, Berlin Corpus Ed., vol. 11, pp. 221-222, as quoted by S. Windass, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁵ Cfr. S. Windass, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12-13.

catechumen who aspired to military honors and showed military ambitions had to be rejected because "[this] is the Lord's command."¹⁷

All this truly shows that even after centuries of coexistence with the Roman State, and with many Christians already in the Roman Army, the pacifist call and moral protest against military service was active and in true consonance with the evangelical call of Christ.

No Participation in Public Affairs

Another very important reason why military service was rejected by Christians was because of its connection with paganism, with idolatrous worship. Soldiers, but especially officers of the Roman Army, had to take a sacrilegious oath of fidelity to the "divine" emperor. The emperor had been divinized and there were so many reasons and occasions where the army had to show, through religious and idolatrous rites, the fidelity and loyalty to the emperor. The Christians only worshipped Christ, not a man, the Roman emperor, *not even the genius of the emperor*.

This reason is also then valid for magistrates and civil servants. All of them had to take the oath and participate very often in pagan worship, to the pagan state. Christian faith and pagan state were irreconcilable. For the first two hundred years of Christian history we have no problem yet, as we had neither Christian soldiers nor Christian magistrates at the service of the pagan state. But as soldiers became Christians and magistrates became Christians, the friction was immediately there. In later centuries, of course, as the empire was becoming more and more Christian, the temptation was for Christians to become soldiers and for Christians to become magistrates.

The reason why the Christians kept away from courts and from politics is not the same as for the army, but there was a like withdrawal from public life, an escaping from public responsibility, a general protest against the established order. The pagans accused

¹⁷ Cfr. Ed Gregory Dix in *The Apostolic Tradition*, London, S.P.C.K. (1937) as quoted by S. Windass, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

the Christians of not participating in the tasks of the State and Society.

Initially the Christians, as we see in the Letter to Diognetus, did not think of themselves as distinct. Their distinction and difference was only their lives, for in comparison to the pagans, the Christians were shining stars in the darkness of the pagan sky. But as they grew in numbers, and the world they encountered run counter to their essential view, they started to call themselves the *Tertium Genus*. They wanted to emphasize the distinction with the First World, the Greco-Roman or Hellenistic World. And also their distinction with the world of Judaism, or the other world. Eusebius of Caesarea, the greatest historian of Primitive Christianity, said that Christianity is more than Hellenism. Christianity is more rational than their own system. And in relation to Judaism, this is also true. Although Christianity stems from Judaism, it is more than Judaism, it is the fulfillment of Judaism and its rightful heir. Thus Christianity cannot be reduced to the two. Christianity, said Eusebius,

"is neither a form of Hellenism, nor of Judaism, but is a religion of its own characteristic stamp.... This is not anything novel or original, but something of greatest antiquity, something natural and familiar to the godly men before the times of Moses."¹⁸

The Romans, understanding as Romans the heirs of Hellenism, resented this and together with the popular suspicion against the Christians, started to speak in relation to the Christians, of *gens latebrosa* and *lucifugax natio*, a new people, a new nation, living in darkness, avoiding the light, a people without tradition or country, all joined to destroy the religious and civil institutions.¹⁹ Origen made himself echo of the pagans' comment and accusation, when he wrote against the Christians as "a new race of men without country or tradition in league against the religious and civil institutions."²⁰

¹⁸ *Demonstratio Evangelica*, I, 2, 8, as quoted by Hornus, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

¹⁹ Cfr. Minutius Felix, *Octavius*, 8.

²⁰ *Contra Celsum*, VIII, 2.

Sacredness of Human Life

One aspect that is forgotten in the study of the Christians' attitude to war is the utter affirmation of the sacredness of human life. Athenagoras wrote: "We [Christians] cannot endure to see a man put to death, even justly."²¹ And in the same trend of thought, we have St. Athanasius:

"How does it come about that each one of us has turned away from his brother and has transgressed against the covenant of life, despising the peace which we have been given? Yet your brother, your neighbour, is not only a man, but is God himself. And if your brother is God, he is also son of God, one whom God has redeemed by the blood of his only Son."²²

This revulsion against blood and the defense of life is found in a writer in the time of Emperor Constantine, when he said:

"Man is so sacrosanct a creature that it is always wrong to kill him – no exception can be made to this commandment of God."²³

Here the Fathers expressed the universal brotherhood and love to all men everywhere. All men were friends, everywhere, anywhere. God had commanded, wrote Basil,

"to love strangers, not only as friends and relatives, but as oneself, in respect of both body and soul."²⁴

Thus it is very clear that Christianity before Constantine, for almost three hundred years, was pacifist, anti-militaristic and a defender at all costs of human life and its sacredness. Christianity was the greatest enemy of violence.

The Christians, we say, did not resist the persecutors and civil authorities. They went joyfully and even singing, to their deaths. In

²¹ *Legatio*, 35, 4, as quoted by Hornus, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

²² St. Athanasius, *Letter on Love and Temperance*, 282, as quoted by Hornus, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

²³ Lactantius, *Institutes*, 6, 6, 22, as quoted by Windass, *op. cit.*, p. 8-9.

²⁴ Cfr. St. Basil, *Epist.* 199 and 217, in Hornus, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

fact, this pacifism, this no-resistance to violence and persecution, this joyful attitude in front of death, was, for many pagans, a cause of conversion. As they asked themselves what could be the cause for such a happy attitude of the Christians, the pagans discovered that it was their faith in Jesus and the hope, and full conviction, of life everlasting.

The Accommodation. Increasing Tensions

Before Constantine, as we have seen, Christian pacifism reign supreme. But as more and more people become Christians, and the accusations against Christians of escaping public responsibilities grew in intensity, the Christians wanted to prove that they were "loyal" citizens of the empire.

Now the thought that the government has its authority from God grew also in intensity. Christian writers started to say that if government emanates from God, then this government is willed by God. The government, consequently, must have the authority to defend itself and its citizens. Essential to this duty is the capacity to punish the criminals and the right of policing and defending the frontiers against marauders and invaders. Christian writers defended that the State could punish judicially and criminally, although they still defended that Christians themselves should have nothing to do with punishment. Some Christians even defended the right of the State to use capital punishment while otherwise holding, though this may sound contradictory, to the Christian abhorrence of bloodshed of all kinds.²⁵

This contradictory attitude could be maintained while the Christians were still a minority in the State and the tasks of the State were supposed to be done by others.²⁶ As Christianity grew by leaps and bounds, and as Christians belonged to all segments of society, this state of affairs could not continue. Integration of Christianity into society, the Roman imperial society, demanded a change of attitude.

²⁵ Cfr. Lactantius, as mentioned in Cadoux, p. 203; S. Windpass, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

²⁶ It was the case of the religious celibate orders of later centuries, who never had to concern themselves with the problem, "What if everyone did as we do?"

"There was increasing pressure on magistrates to become Christians and on Christians to become magistrates, on soldiers to become Christians, and on Christians to become soldiers."²⁷

The necessity of reconciling the way of Christ with the way of the world became more and more central. As the empire became more and more Christian, the Church and the State shared many common interests. Many times now the enemies of the State were the enemies of the Church and vice versa. Scholars say that the Church and the State entered into a marriage, and although the marriage did not work to perfection, it had a great influence on the whole subsequent development of Western religious thought.

No other man is so important for the change of attitude of the Christians as St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430). No one can deny that we are face to face with a genius. Augustine is the intellectual giant who shaped Christian thought as no other man has ever done. He is truly a Roman, but he is a shaper and a maker of the Middle Ages. Later Christian writers drank generously from the fresh fountain of Augustine and drew from the inexhaustible quarry of Augustine the stones to build the great building of Christian European civilization. When Augustine was writing his masterful and creative writings, source of inspiration for less brilliant writers, the marriage of Church and State had been going on for almost a century. He was the mind to which Church and State looked for light and guidance. The Roman Army had had in its ranks Christian soldiers for almost two hundred years. Augustine had the welfare of the Church and State at heart and the two of them were practically co-extensive.

Furthermore, and these are real existential questions, St. Augustine was faced, like all his contemporaries, with the barbarian invasions. The Roman Empire was besieged both in Europe and in his native Africa. The Vandals, crossing from Spain to Northern Africa were creating a kingdom for themselves. They were knocking precisely at the gates of Hippo, as Augustine was agonizing, on August 28, 430. People asked Augustine what his opinion was about military service. He was asked, not by students of theology in a class, but by people who were experiencing the devastation caused by the invaders. A word, whether exact or not we do not know,

²⁷ Cfr. S. Windass, *op. cit.*, p. 21-22.

defines them: "vandalism." And precisely their "vandalism" was directed into the very life of the Roman State and the Christian Church.

We know how terribly affected Augustine was by the accusation leveled against Christianity, of being disloyal to the state and of being responsible for the fall and the sack of Rome by Alaric and his Visigoths in 410. The result was Augustine's the *De Civitate Dei*, *The City of God*, probably the greatest work of the mind ever written, a theology of history and a philosophy of history unequalled in the Christian world and even, we dare to say, in the world of ideas and political science.

Thus from his creative mind, and his busy pen, came the response that man can serve in the army and also serve God. Coming from Augustine, it is not surprising that his thought influenced tremendously the political theories of the Middle Ages.

It is remarkable that as late as St. Augustine, the pacifist tradition of Christianity had persisted, and he precisely was called to say whether a man could serve in the army and be a Christian, and to answer charges of disloyalty, as we have seen with his *De Civitate Dei*.²⁸ It shows the intellectual tension and persistence in the mind of St. Augustine of the early Christian pacifist tradition.

Today most people would say that war can be justified on the principle of self-defense. A person has a right to live. From here it follows that he has a right to self-defense against whomever tries to attack him. He can defend himself with his fists or a gun or a weapon. If this is true of an individual, this can be extended to a state or a nation. Why could not the state use the army, and a well-equipped army at that, to defend itself against its own enemies? If a man has a right to defend himself in a lawless situation, a state has the right to defend itself in a lawless world. In case of necessity self-defense might imply the killing of the aggressor. And this would be valid both for the individual and for the nation.

To Saint Augustine is attributed, then, the doctrine of the *just war* in Christian thought. But some scholars say that he did not base his argument of the justification of killing in the theory of self-

²⁸ When the State and the Church had been united "in marriage", still to use this metaphore, for almost a hundred years.

defense, because St. Augustine says that a Christian has no right to kill anyone in self-defense.²⁹ He allows the state to kill in self-defense. Because from the point of view of the State, what is permitted is the less of two evils, that is the death of the aggressor, the evil man, rather than the death of the good man, the victim of the attack. In this situation, the state might act, but the Christian could never be excused if he were to kill in self-defense, for that would be an obviously sinful act.³⁰

St. Augustine was conscious of the scriptural injunction "resist no evil" and thus half his mind is in accordance with the pacificism of the early Church. In fact, it is a recurrent theme in his sermons that the love of the enemies cannot be exempted.

"We may be exempt from almsgiving, because we have no money to give, but no Christian could claim to be exempt from loving his enemies, because he had no love to give."³¹

The new circumstances of the empire and the world "compelled" him to search for an accommodation, but it seems that it was, as if it were, a "sinful" one, just a concession to human weakness and history. St. Augustine was very close to the early Christian writers and had a high admiration for the martyrs and their fortitude, the true imitators of Christ himself, who suffered death of his own free will to bring home to men the great reality of the spiritual kingdom.

Intellectually and theologically he was close to the early Christians and denounced the horrors of war and all its evils as a terrible human tragedy. He thinks, as the early Christians also thought, that war is diabolical, for the devil works for man's destruction. It is to St. Augustine that we owe the comparison of kingdoms without international justice to organized bands of

²⁹ Cfr. Windass, *op. cit.*, p. 24. It does not always belong to this place to give in-depth St. Augustine's arguments, but he says what makes something sinful is the *libido*. He defines the *libido* as the excessive attachment to terrestrial transitory things. Transitory things are those that can be taken away violently from us, like freedom, honor and life. To kill in order to defend transitory things is to show too much attachment to the *libido*, and thus to commit a great sin.

³⁰ Cfr. S. Windass, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

³¹ *Ibidem*; St. Augustine, Sermon 225, PL, 39, 2161.

robbers, and the suggestion that Alexander the Great was nothing other than a large-scale international "crook."³²

St. Augustine is considered the one responsible for the just-war doctrine. That is what we call "accommodation" to the new historical and political realities, but a tension between the world and the Scriptures is central in St. Augustine's thought. He "justifies" war, if we may say, but towards the end of his life, he writes:

"Let everyone who thinks with pain on all these great evils, so horrible, so ruthless, acknowledge that this is misery; and if anyone either endures or thinks of them without mental pain, he is a mere wretched plight still, for he thinks himself happy because he has lost all human feeling."

And these other words:

"Those who fight, if they are good men, doubtless seek for peace; nevertheless, it is through blood.... It is a higher glory to slay war with the Word, than men by the sword, and to maintain peace by peace, rather than by war."³³

Since St. Augustine cannot accept the idea of shedding of blood in self-defense, he says that when a man acts in obedience to the authority, it changes totally the picture. He, the man, acts without *libido*. He acts under obedience and the prince maybe without *libido* because he may be following the will of God.

It seems that to come out from the moral dilemma St. Augustine strongly felt, because of his sympathy with the early Church and its pacificism, he leans on the obedience to the prince and obedience to God.

³² Cfr. Windass, *op. cit.*, p. 27; St. Augustine, *The City of God*, 4.4. It is clear that St. Augustine taught that one could be a Christian and a soldier. How did he reconcile in his mind and in his writings his high admiration for the pacificism of the early Christians and his defense of military service for a Christian is not that clear. His thought was in tension, the tension of sliding totally with the scripture teaching "turn the other cheek", and the justification to kill for the worldly kingdom that is to be scorned.

³³ Cfr. S. Windass, *op. cit.*, p. 32. In view of his difficulties to explain the problem and the justification of war, he has recourse sometimes to God. If God can start war, it must be a just one, as seen in the Old Testament. God as the author of war, *bellum deo auctore*. If He did it before, why not again?

"But by an odd irony of circumstance, he thus foreshadowed in his doctrine the notion of a "holy war", the direct antithesis to the teaching of Christ, which was to erupt as a terrible historical reality seven hundred years later at the dawn of the Middles Ages."³⁴

The Consecration of Violence. The Religion of War and the Religion of Peace

What we have written this far serves as a background to the understanding of "Holy Wars" and the Crusades. All I said was a preamble to the main topic. I have dealt extensively with the Fathers of the Church and their views on war because the Church truly made a great departure from the pacificism of the first centuries of Christianity. It seems there was a huge gulf dividing early Christianity and Medieval history. And yet the process is slow and difficult to trace. And this pacificism and trend against war never disappeared from Christian consciousness.

In 1095, at the end of the Council of Clermont-Ferrand, Pope Urban II (1088-1099) made a dramatic appeal to the nations of the whole Christian West to join forces in a holy war against the civilization of Islam.

One needs to give the background for this massive movement, unequal in the history of Christian Europe. This movement lasted for almost 200 years with great passion and intensity, and for well over 600 years, until the Turks threatened Europe as late as 1662 and laid siege to Vienna, the imperial capital of the Holy Roman Empire.

The Crusades, it cannot be denied, have a religious core which was the effect of a Christian awareness in the West as an effect of the Gregorian Reformation. There are elements of lay piety, but the crusades have a great measure of knightly energy. This energy, without control and out of bounds, manifested itself in a bloody and un-Christian frenzy which turned the Crusades into the most cruel phenomenon of the Middle Ages. Both elements must be viewed

³⁴ Cfr. Windass, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

soberly side by side, without an attempt to reconcile them at all times.³⁵

In order to understand the Crusades we have precisely to see that they lasted for hundreds of years and the motives varied as the history of the Crusades unfolded in time and space.

Initially, "western knighthood" viewed the reconquest of the Holy Land and a war against Islam in a deeply Christian and missionary fashion. The conquest of Jerusalem by the Turks (1071) and the moving complaints of the pilgrims about the manifold restrictions put upon them by the new lords of the Holy Land affected an appeal to the general Christian conscience. When in addition Constantinople was threatened and Emperor Alexius I (1081-1118) sent an urgent call for help to the western Church in Rome, Pope Urban II (1088-1099) directed that appeal to the Latin Christendom in 1095.³⁶ The appeal captured the imagination of the masses and awoke in them an energy that defies the imagination. The thought and desire to help their Christian brothers in the East and the hope of recapture from the Moslems the land which Christ had walked and brought us salvation was able to unite the whole west. At the cry of "God wills it", the Pope led the masses and started a movement that baffles historians of religion and social studies. The leadership and responsibility devolved on the Papacy. It was the Church and its leader, the Pope, that were the focal points. We are then face to face with a Holy War.

But before this happened, a big change had taken place in the West. The tension between the theory of pacificism and the theory of just war had been solved by Augustine. The real tension was between the religion of peace, the religion preached by Christianity for centuries, and the religion of war, brought about in the process of time by the Germanic people who settled down over the ruins of the Roman Empire. These Germanic people accepted the Christian faith and the Roman culture, but they brought in their own lasting influences that changed, in the process, the Church. The Germans were Christianized, but the church was germanized. One of these

³⁵ Cfr. August. Franzen/John P. Nolan, *A History of the Church*, Herder Freiburg, 1965, p. 193.

³⁶ Cfr. *Ibidem*, p. 193-194.

elements was war and its role in life. For the Germanic peoples war held first place. The heroes were the soldiers fallen in the battlefield. They were their martyrs. The great virtues were the virtues of the warriors. Their gods were gods of war and violence. This influence was felt through the centuries, but in the 10th century the eruption of the Normans, and their establishment in Britain, Southern Italy, Sicily and Northern France, brought in a new martial, bellicose spirit into the Church and the state. Heirs of the Vikings, theirs was, basically, a culture of war. A kind of fusion of the religion of war and the religion of peace had taken place since Charlemagne (768-814) and the Franks. The Church had looked at them as saviours of Christianity and Europe. Still this was not the militarism which was to come later. As late as the 11th century "Christians who killed in war, whether it was a just war or not, still had to do long long periods of penance, officially at least."³⁷ These wars had the support of the state and the Church, but they were not exactly holy wars. Until this time, there was unresolved conflict between the pacifist tradition of the Church and any tradition which could glorify an act of killing.³⁸

The Crusades make war holy. The ideological conflict is broken. Now the religion of war wins. The religion of peace loses.

The Church through the centuries had tried to control the bellicism of the Germans. She established the "Truce of God." This Truce of God protected certain holy days, certain places, certain peoples from war, from acts of violence. The disease – the disease of war – was too radical; it was not enough a first-aid healing. Violence was hard to suppress, so the Church tried to *divert* the energy of the bellicose people and channel it to a "good" cause, the liberation of the Holy Land from the hands of the Moslems. Urban II offered the quarrelsome leaders

"the prospect of unlimited conquest in new lands, conquest sanctioned by the highest moral authority. Let them cease to tear each other to pieces... And march side by side in the name of Christ against the pagans."³⁹

³⁷ Cfr. S. Windass, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

³⁸ Cfr. here the call of St. Gerald of Aurillac.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

Those who died during the Crusade obtained a plenary indulgence. The doors of the heaven were widely opened.

Holy Violence

With the crusades the Christian protest against violence is finally overwhelmed. The just-war theory was a deviation from that pacificism, but what totally shattered that view of pacificism is this fanatical war.

During Roman times the *militia Christi*, the soldiers of Christ, was a counterpoint to the *militia mundi*, the soldiers of the world. The soldiers of Christ fought for a spiritual kingdom. Now the *militia Christi*, the soldiers of Christ, are real soldiers whose task is to fight Moslems.

The Church seems to be overwhelmed. There is a union of violence and holiness. Rather, violence is made holy. In the popular imagination, the symbol of this holiness of violence is the terrible symbol of the Holy Lance.⁴⁰ The Holy Lance was the spear used by the Roman soldier, known in Christian legend as Longinus, to pierce the side of the Lord Jesus as he hung upon the cross after the crucifixion. For the early Christians this was a symbol of ultimate human cruelty and, at the same time a symbol of the sacrificial love of Christ. He suffered willingly this cruelty for our redemption.

When the armies of the crusaders were pressed in Antioch, they discovered in the Church of St. Peter, the Holy Lance. Carried triumphantly, they led the armies into Jerusalem where they conquered the city in 1099, sacked it ferociously and passed through the sword the whole population: men, women, children. According to chronicles "the horses were up to their knees in blood."

War now was made holy. The Liturgy of the Church was filled with ceremonies – the blessings of standards, the blessings of weapons, the consecration of knights – ceremonies which very often are a continuation of past pagan ceremonies.

We have a prayer, from the eleventh century, for the blessing of a newly girded sword, which says:

⁴⁰ For the full story of the Holy Lance see Alphantery, *La Chrétienté et l'Idee de Croisade*, pp. 99 ff.

"Bless, O Lord, almighty Father, by the invocation of thy holy name and by the coming of thy son Jesus Christ, and by the gift of the Holy Spirit, this sword, that he who girds it today in piety may crush all his enemies underfoot, and in all things should forever be prosperous and victorious."⁴¹

War now became a holy way of life for the laity. What monastic life was for "religious", holy war was for laity. This was an effect of the religious fervor and ferment of the eleventh century.

A contemporary of the time wrote:

"God has established in our time the Holy War so that the knights and lay folk who spill their blood in battle against the heathen can have a new way to salvation. They need not go into a monastery nor renounce the world by vows, but they can win God's grace in their laymen's clothes and in their accustomed freedom."⁴²

The peak moment of this consecration of war and violence comes with the establishment of the military orders after the creation of the Latin Christian Kingdom of Jerusalem in 1099. The new religious order, the *Knights Templars*, was born first to take care and custody of the temple of Solomon and defend the pilgrims. The Knights had the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Some years later a fourth vow was added, the *vow* to fight against the enemies of the Christian faith and of God.

This consecration of the Christian Knight, with the fourth vow, apart from the three ordinary ones of poverty, chastity and obedience, though it may sound scandalous and shocking, was an extension of the monastic/canonical call: the Knights were monks, because they had the vows. They were consecrated people. Their duty was to seek God and love the neighbour. This was manifested by helping the poor, the orphan, the travelers, and the oppressed.

As the Moslems attacked Christians in Palestine and many of them were killed, what started as a vocation – monastic/canonical –

⁴¹ Cfr. S. Windass, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

⁴² Erdman, *Die Entstehung des Kreuzzugs-Gedankes*, Stuttgart (1935), p. 31.

became a military profession too. The monks became knights and the knights became monks.⁴³

For a while, the way of monastic perfection and the way of violence were united and was a manifestation of the religious aspirations of the Middle Ages.

Strange vocation, we seem to think.

In the light of the

"inherent pacificism of Christianity, the prevalence of contemporary peace movements, and the canonical prohibitions against the shedding of blood, or even the carrying of weapons by the clergy, the genesis of this variety of the religious life is a fascinating subject."⁴⁴

Let me close my study with this poem of Clement of Alexandria written in the second century which captures, no doubt, the vision of Christianity and its radical pacificism:

"Now the trumpet sounds with a mighty voice,
calling the soldiers of the world to arms, announcing war.
And shall not Christ, who has uttered his summons to peace
even to the ends of the earth, summon together his own
soldiers of peace?
Indeed, O man, he has called to arms
with his blood and his word
an army that sheds no blood;
to these soldiers he has handed over the Kingdom of Heaven.
The trumpet of Christ is his Gospel.
He has sounded it in our ears and we have heard it."
Let us be armed for peace,
putting on the armour of justice seizing the shield of faith.
The helmet of salvation,
And sharpening the sword of the spirit which is the
Word of God
This is how the Apostle prepares us peacefully for battle.
Such are the arms that make us invulnerable

⁴³ Cfr. James W. Brodman, "Rule and Identity: The Case of the Military Orders", in *The Catholic Historical Review*, July 2001, Vol. LXXXVIII, n° 3, p. 383.

⁴⁴ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

So armed, let us prepare to fight the Evil one.
 Let us cut through his flaming attack with the
 blade, which the Logos himself has tempered
 in the waters of baptism.
 Let us reply to his goodness by praise and thanksgiving.
 Let us honor God with His divine word:
 "While thou art yet speaking", he says
 "Here I am."⁴⁵ □

⁴⁵ Quoted by Thomas Meston in Clement of Alexandria, selections from the *Protreptikos*, New Directions, 1962.