

BLACKFRIARS

VOL. XX

SEPTEMBER 1939

No. 234

WAR AND THE EARLY CHURCH

WE have seen¹ that the idea of war as the instrument of God's judgment permeates the Bible from Genesis to the Apocalypse. It is the ruling idea which gives unity and consistency to the most 'militarist' as well as to the most 'pacifist' passages of Scripture, diverse historical situations and epochs calling forth diverse applications of that dominant conception. It now remains to suggest that this same idea has dominated the authentic Christian idea of war and attitude towards war throughout the changing circumstances of the situation of the Christian Church in the world. For just as this conception dominates the Scriptures from Genesis to the Apocalypse, so it has ever been uppermost in the authentic mind of the Church from the Apocalypse—which foresees wars as the outcome of the outpouring of the 'vials full of the wrath of God'—to Benedict XV—who, in September, 1914, cried, 'We beg and implore . . . all the sons of the Church . . . to beg that God, mindful of His mercy, may lay aside this scourge of anger with which He inflicts on the people the penalty of their sins.'

But just as, as we have previously said, we must avoid expecting to find in the Scriptures ready-made solutions to our present problems, so, if we would scan the pages of Christian history for light in our present perplexities, we must beware of expecting to find in them exact precedents for our present attitudes and conduct. The argument from historical precedent is a perilous one unless conducted with logical rigour. Because Our Lord praised the faith of the Roman centurion, it does not immediately follow

¹ See *Wars and Rumours of Wars* (BLACKFRIARS, June, 1939).

that He approves of the war-preparations of the British or the Italian High Command. Because He urged His disciples to have nothing to do with the defence of besieged Jerusalem, it does not immediately follow that we may not 'fight for Danzig.' Because there were many early Christians in the Roman legions, it does not immediately follow that a Christian's place to-day is in the British militia or in Goering's air force. Because many other early Christians declined to serve in the Roman legions, it does not immediately follow that every Christian to-day should seek to be registered as a conscientious objector. Because medieval theologians elaborated the conception of the just war, we cannot immediately assume that that conception is likely to be realised to-morrow, and because it may seem to us highly improbable that that conception *will* be realised, we may not jump to the conclusion that we would be justified in contracting out of the whole situation. If we would obtain any light from history for our guidance in our present perplexities, it is not enough to ascertain that this or that great figure of Christian history did this or said that, we must seek the reasons and the circumstances that motivated his words or his actions, and see just how far those reasons and circumstances are applicable to ourselves in our own particular circumstances at the present time.

There is an immense literature on the history of the Christian attitude towards war.² It is not our purpose in these pages to rehearse it, still less to supplement the vast amount of study and research which historians have already devoted to the subject. But it may be permitted, and not

² For the bibliography see that at the end of T. Orotolan's article *Guerre* in *La Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*. This article itself provides an excellent summary. Among the numerous works published subsequently, special mention must be made of *The Catholic Tradition of the Law of Nations* by John Eppstein published for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace by Messrs. Burns, Oates & Washbourne in 1935.

without use, to offer some random reflections on their findings, particularly with a view to suggesting some of their implications for ourselves at the present time.

A study of this work of the historians suggests that the history of the Christian attitude towards war falls into three main periods, corresponding to the three main 'situations' in which the Christian Church has found itself to be confronted by civil society as embodied in the State. The first period is that in which the Christian Church was a small but growing and distinctive minority in a pagan society and under pagan government. The second, which opens with the conversion of Constantine, is that of what Maritain calls the 'sacral' State, in which society and the State were officially Christian and in which the *potestas indirecta* (at least) of the Church in secular affairs was recognised in theory and to varying extents in practice. The third period dates from the gradual break-up of medieval unity, the dissolution of the idea of the unique Empire, and the rise of the independent sovereign 'lay' States.³ None of these three periods will be found to begin and end abruptly. In particular, the transition from the 'medieval' to the 'modern' situation has been a long evolution whose beginnings may be traced back into the heart of the middle ages and whose process is not yet perhaps quite fully accomplished. Moreover, it is not immediately that the Christian consciousness is able to take full stock of the change in the situation in which it finds itself and of all the implications of that change. A long process of adaptation and re-adjustment will be necessary, involving a persistence in one period of the assumptions of the past which, perhaps, are no longer relevant.

The first period, that of the early Church under the

³ 'The general attitude of "the world" towards the Church founded by Christ was at first an attempt of stamping her out; secondly of enslaving her; thirdly of denying her claims.' Dr. H. C. E. Zacharias, *BLACKFRIARS*, August, 1939, p. 568.

pagan Empire, offers many obvious and striking parallels to our own.⁴ Then as now Christians were in a position in which they could or would exercise no influence on the conduct of public affairs. Decisions of State, decisions regarding the waging or the conduct of a war, were made without their being consulted. The question of the justice of a war, therefore, affected them only in so far as their individual participation might be affected. Their attitude to the wars of their times and to the problem of their participation, their acceptance or non-acceptance of military service, the extent to which they conformed or did not conform to current civil law and custom, might well be expected to be full of instruction to ourselves.

And so indeed, within limits, it is. A study of the sources reveals certain evident facts which are highly relevant to our own problem. Following the injunctions of the Gospels and the Apostles, the obligation of obedience to the civil authority was universally recognised among Catholic Christians. So too was the desirability, so far as this was possible, of conforming with current and local custom. There seems no warrant for the idea that the early Christians would retire to the catacombs from choice rather than from necessity, nor is there any evidence that they conceived of 'non-participation' as an ideal to be aimed at rather than as an occasional obligation which could not be avoided. The Apologists went to great pains to protest, not only that the Christian Church was no subversive movement which endangered the State or its existing institutions, but that Christians were of all men the most loyal and patriotic, the most grateful for the achievements of the *Pax Romana* and the most zealous for its maintenance. It was Tertullian himself, the sternest critic of the

⁴ The principal data for the attitude of Christians to war during this period will be found collected in Mgr. Batiffol's *L'Eglise et le Droit de Guerre*, and by Abbot Cabrol in his article *Militarisme* in the *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie Chrétienne*.

alleged compromises of his fellow-Christians with their environment, who protested, 'We are your shipmates, your fellow-soldiers; with you (pagans) we lead the life of the country and the life of trade; indeed, in all the arts we are intermingled' (Apology, 42). Nor was this anxiety to conform a mere temporizing; it was 'for Christ's sake.' We may see in it a realization of the implications of the Incarnation; it was not forgotten either that the Apostle who was *civis sanctorum et domesticus Dei* did not cease thereby to be *civis romanus* (Acts xii, 29), and *homo judæus a Tarso Ciliciæ, non ignotæ civitatis municeps* (Acts xxi, 39).

Yet it was universally recognised also that this obedience and conformity could not, in the existing circumstances, be unrestricted for the faithful Christian. There was a sphere in which the obligation of obedience and conformity was universally recognised among Catholic Christians; there was also a sphere in which obedience and conformity was manifestly impossible. The paying of taxes came clearly in the first category; any implication in idolatrous ceremonies, whether of the Emperor or of the older gods, came clearly in the second. But between these two extremes, concerning which no controversy was possible, there was a sphere concerning which there was considerable dispute. And in this sphere was precisely the question of military service. Tertullian hinted cautiously at the difficulty when he asked, 'For what wars should we not be fit, not eager, even with unequal forces, we who so willingly yield ourselves to the sword, if in our religion it were not counted better to be slain than to slay?' (*ibid.* 37). Yet in the previous sentence he tells us that Christians were everywhere to be found, even in the fortresses and camps, and a few pages before he had prayed for 'brave armies' for the Emperor.

The question of the 'conscientious objection' of the early Christians to military service has received considerable attention from scholars. As a result of their researches it emerges pretty clearly that numerically abstention from

military service on specifically Christian grounds of conscience was the exception, though not an uncommon exception, rather than the rule, and one celebrated case (that of St. Maximilianus) is recorded in which this fact was remarked upon by the pagan magistrate himself. It seems certain that, from the beginning, the number of Christians who served in the Roman legions was greater than the number of Christian 'conscientious objectors.' On the other hand, misgivings on the subject among Christians were widespread and even normal, and, as Mgr. de Mayol de Lupé has recently remarked, it would be untrue to suppose that 'cette horreur de l'armée fût seulement le cas de quelques exaltés.'⁸

The reasons for this 'horror of the army' were serious and manifold, and not all of them had anything to do with Christian beliefs and views about war. Most serious were the idolatrous or semi-idolatrous ceremonial practices in which the Roman legionary was compelled to participate. We know from Tertullian's *De Corona Militis* of the hot controversies which these engendered among Christians; and the fact that many Christians who would not tolerate a Christian's joining the army were content that those soldiers who were converted should remain in it, suggests that the worship of the Emperor which was part of the 'joining up' ritual was a paramount objection in their minds.⁹ But this difficulty was often evaded, with or without the connivance of the authorities, and was eventually to be solved by the formation of distinct Christian legions which did not participate in the State religion. Though we have no explicit record of the fact, the appalling conditions of legalised immorality which prevailed in the Roman army

⁸ *Les actes des martyrs . . . in La Revue des Études Latines* (1939, I).

⁹ For Tertullian himself, however, after his defection from the Catholic Church, there was no alternative for the soldier convert except desertion or martyrdom (*De Corona*, 11).

consequently upon the enforcement of celibacy must also have weighed heavily on the Christian's mind quite independently of his beliefs regarding Christian duties with respect to war.

It is, however, certain that these considerations were not the only ones which caused Christians to hesitate in enrolling. There was a school of thought, represented notably by Lactantius, which was in the strictest sense Christian-pacifist, holding all use of force to be incompatible in any circumstance with the Christian calling and the injunctions of the Gospels.⁷ Many more, who would not go so far as this, were clearly uneasy at the idea of Christian participation in warfare. Origen's exposition in response to the challenge of Celsus is perhaps the most instructive. It is noteworthy that Celsus appears to take it for granted that Christians will not serve in the army, and Origen makes no attempt to disillusion him on that score. He will not have it that Old Testament militarism justifies Christian participation in warfare, for the Kingdom of God has now become dissociated with any earthly kingdom or army. He expounds the new pacific apostolate of the Kingdom of God whose spread is to be accomplished not by force but by submission to force. At the same time he vigorously protests Christian patriotism and loyalty to the Empire. He allows even that 'Soldiers can fight in a just cause'; a just war consists in 'battles for the defence of the fatherland'; and Christians may *pray* 'that whatever is opposed to those who act justly may be destroyed.' He insists that the

⁷ Its attitude was formulated in the *Canons of Hippolytus* (of doubtful date and origin). Canon 13 runs: 'Soldiers may not kill, even if ordered to do so.' And Canon 14: 'No Christian ought to volunteer for military service nor become a soldier unless forced to do so by his ruler. Let him who bears the sword beware lest he shed blood. If he has shed blood let him be excluded from the mysteries until he be purified by making amends with tears and grief.'

prayers of the Christians may be more effective in securing victory than the arms of pagans. But that Christians may themselves fight he will not admit.* Inconsistent this may be; and as Mr. Eppstein says, 'The transition from praying for victory to striving physically for victory was bound to come: it came so soon as the conversion of the Empire first obliged the Christian Church to share responsibility for the public acts of the state.' But Origen's statement of the case is significant for its recognition that the pacific character of the technique of the Kingdom in its propagation among men does not necessarily mean the condemnation of the use of force or even the waging of war on the political plain. Those who would justify their acceptance of military service would doubtless recall, as St. Augustine and the Schoolmen were later to argue, that Christ Himself had employed force (though not inflicted bloodshed) in the Temple, and that so far from suggesting that the military calling was an immoral one, His Precursor had enjoined soldiers to be 'content with their pay' (Lk. iii, 14).

It would seem a fair summing up of the attitude of the early Christians towards the question of their participation in war to say that there was a considerable divergence between theory and practice. In theory and on paper the weight of authority is heavily against participation; in practice the number of 'conscientious objectors,' though not inconsiderable, appears to have been relatively small. And the evidence that the Christian legionaries were by no means all unprincipled temporisers is overwhelming. It does, however, emerge quite clearly that the question was at least an open one; military service was not a thing which the Christian could render in blind obedience and unquestioning subservience on the strength of the command of the civil authority alone.

* The relevant passages of the *Contra Celsum* are quoted by Eppstein, *The Catholic Tradition of the Law of Nations*, pp. 41 sqq.

Further than this it is difficult to draw any definitive conclusions which are immediately relevant to us at the present time. But one fundamental difference between the position of the early Christian and our own must not be overlooked. The Roman Empire during the early days of the Christian era was not one state among many; her army was not one army among many. The Roman Empire was, it was supposed, the whole world—the *orbis romanus*. For the early Christian, even for the pacifist Lactantius, the end of the Empire would be the end of the world. Loyalty to the Empire was not loyalty to one government among many governments, it was loyalty to the *pax romana* which had rendered the spread of Christianity possible. The Christians were deeply persuaded, sometimes one might think obsessed, with this thought of the providential function of the 'Roman world' and the religious obligation of its maintenance. Correspondingly, the Roman army was something essentially different from the army of a modern State. In theory, and to a considerable extent in practice, it was nearer the modern idea of a police-force than that of an army. It was in no sense an instrument of international policy. Its function was to preserve order, to repress sedition, to ensure the security of frontiers which were not the borderlands of other nations but the outposts of 'the world.' In a very real sense, the function of the army was to preserve peace; not in the sense of the modern politician of intimidating others into not making war, but in the very real sense of preserving from disruption the existing unity, the *tranquillitas ordinis*, of the whole world. This idea of the World-Empire was to dominate Christian thought on war long after it had ceased to be a reality. In seeking precedents, therefore, from the thought and conduct of earlier Christians we must be on our guard lest we use such terms as war, army, soldier, even *patria*, in a wholly different sense from that in which they could have understood it.

For the early Christian the question of *international war*

between equal sovereign States simply did not arise, for it did not exist. His horror of war was horror of the use of violence even for the maintenance of internal order and peace. Of the goodness of the *end*, and of its claims upon the collaboration of Christians, he had no doubt. But he questioned the legitimacy and even the value of violence as a *means* for attaining that end. Even when, as with Origen, he would allow that non-Christians might legitimately fight, he would question whether Christians might join them. He was persuaded that the distinctively Christian contribution to the maintenance of the *pax romana* was a distinctively pacific one, a spiritual contribution more potent than that of arms. So Justin Martyr:

More than all other men are we your helpers and allies in promoting peace, seeing we believe that it is impossible for the wicked, the covetous, the conspirator, or yet the virtuous, to escape the attention of God (*Apol.* 16).

Nevertheless:

It is not right to answer fighting with fighting, nor does God wish us to imitate the wicked; for He has exhorted us to lead all men away from the shame and cupidity of wickedness by patience and gentleness (*ibid.* 16).

And he goes on to draw attention to the victories which this pacific method had already achieved in consolidating the peace of the Empire. So likewise Origen assures Celsus:

By our prayers we vanquish the demons who stir up war . . . and disturb the peace; in this way we are more helpful to the kings than those who go into the field to fight for them . . . None fight better for the king than we do. We do not indeed fight under him, even though he may require us to do so; but we fight on his behalf, forming a special army — an army of piety — by offering our prayers to God (*Contra Celsum*, VIII, 73).

All this notwithstanding, we know from the celebrated letter of Marcus Aurelius to the Senate that there were already many Christian legionaires by the time of the *legio*

fulminata (A.D. 174), and that even these manifested their hatred of armed force and their preference for specifically Christian and spiritual weapons.⁹

Individual Christians might indeed enlist, and enlist they did in increasing numbers as the period progressed, as the idea of an imminent *parousia* receded, as the necessity for maintaining the *pax romana* in the interests of Christianity itself became more apparent. But the dissociation of the Church as a whole from warlike methods continued to be proclaimed, and the pacific character of the distinctively Christian contribution to the maintenance of peace and order to be emphasised, even in the ranks of the army itself.

Justin (*Apol.* I, xii, II, xv) and Tertullian (*Apol.* xxi) had deemed it impossible that Cæsar should ever be Christian, and that Christians themselves would have to assume

⁹ The authenticity of the letter is unimportant so long as it witnesses to the current idea of what a Christian legionary should be. Mr. Eppstein translates: 'When therefore I had compared myself and the number of my men with the hordes of the barbarian enemy, I betook myself to pray to the Gods of my fathers. But, since they neglected me and I saw to what straits my forces were reduced, I called out of the ranks those whom we call Christians, and, having questioned them, I perceived what a great multitude of them there were and I raged against them: which indeed I should not have done, because I afterwards perceived their power. For they did not begin with the contemplation of spears or arms or trumpets (which is hateful to them because of the God which they keep in their conscience; for it seems as if these men, whom we suspect of being atheists, have a God residing of his own will in their conscience), but prostrating themselves upon the ground they prayed not only for me but also for the whole army, that they might slake our present hunger and thirst. For we had had not water for five days, because it was utterly lacking; and we were in the midst of Germany and in the enemy's country. But no sooner had they knelt upon the ground and invoked the God whom I knew not, than a most cooling rain fell straight from heaven upon us, but upon the enemies of the Romans lightning and hail.'

command of the Roman army and direct the policy of the Roman *imperium*. Yet to the power of Christian arms of prayer, and to the favour of the Christians' God, Constantine attributed his victory over sedition at the Milevan Bridge and his consequent restoration of Roman unity and order. He believed that, not by force of arms, but 'By the aid of this salutary token of strength [the XP symbol] I have freed my city from the yoke of tyranny and restored to the Roman Senate and People their ancient splendour and glory.' The pacific contribution of the Christians to the *pax romana* had an unlooked-for result; the necessity for the assumption by Christians themselves of the direction of public policy and the maintenance of the unity and peace of the *orbis romanus*. It was a new epoch to which only slowly they adjusted themselves. It meant a thinking-out anew of the whole problem of the Christian attitude to war under the conditions of the new responsibilities which providence had called upon them to assume. Inspired by the fundamental postulate of war as the instrument of divine justice, it was to lead to the elaboration of the lofty medieval conception of the 'just war.'¹⁰

VICTOR WHITE, O.P.

¹⁰ An article will follow on the medieval theory of the 'just war' and its present relevance and irrelevance.