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## Pacifists, Patriots, or Both?

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### Second Thoughts on Pre-Constantinian Early-Christian Attitudes toward Soldiering and War

#### *I. Introductory Heretical Thoughts on Early-Christian History*

IN HIS INFLUENTIAL BOOK *Christian Attitudes toward War and Peace*, Roland Bainton begins the chapter titled “The Pacifism of the Early Church” with the following assertion: “The three Christian positions with regard to war . . . matured in chronological sequence, moving from pacifism to the just war to the Crusade. The age of persecution down to the time of Constantine was the age of pacifism to the degree that during this period no Christian author to our knowledge approved of Christian participation in battle.”<sup>1</sup> And because, according to Bainton, “the history of the [early] Church is viewed by many as a progressive fall from a state of primitive purity,” the conclusion would seem unavoidable that “if the early Church was pacifist then pacifism is the Christian position.”<sup>2</sup> Bainton’s position, which for decades has had broad ecumenical acceptance, would seem to take on a prescriptive and not merely historical cast; that is, a proper theological understanding of the earliest Christian history *requires* a pacifist reading of the Fathers.

In the writings of the enormously influential Anabaptist theologian John Howard Yoder, one finds fundamental agreement with this

viewpoint: the early church was pacifist, and this precommitment is rooted in Jesus's teaching on nonviolent love. Proof of this model is the fact that Jesus offers himself as a sacrificial lamb rather than resisting those in power. Yoder reasons in the following manner:

If it is granted that nonresistant love is the way of the disciple . . . can the Christian be the policeman? In the past, every party to this discussion has rapidly concluded that the answer is negative. . . . That such a conclusion is the most normal one can hardly be contested. . . . The answer of the pre-Constantinian church was negative; the Christian as an agent of God for reconciliation has other things to do than to be in police service. . . . Christians saw their task as one of patient suffering, not taking over themselves the work of the police. . . . The post-Constantinian church obviously accepted government service by Christians, but for reasons which cannot be deemed adequate.<sup>3</sup>

As with Bainton, Yoder's position, clarified and reinforced in sundry writings, is meant to be prescriptive: the early church was pacifist, an orientation embodied once more by Anabaptists of the "radical Reformation" who, in contrast to the church of the previous ten centuries, properly discerned the radical demands of obedience to Christ that are incumbent upon all.<sup>4</sup> Yoder is adamant that Christians of any era, following the normative pacifism of the pre-Constantinian church, are not to participate in the affairs of the state. For to do so is to collaborate with evil, to be "co-opted" by the powers, and thereby to "compromise" the Church's witness.

In his magisterial work on New Testament ethics published in 1996, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, esteemed New Testament scholar Richard Hays observes that "Christian theology, at least since the time of Augustine's *City of God*, has usually countenanced the participation of believers in police forces and armies deemed necessary for the preservation of order and a relative approximation of justice."<sup>5</sup> The straightforward implication for Hays is that before the

early fifth century Christians would *not* have countenanced—much less, participated in—social structures “deemed necessary for the preservation of order and a relative approximation of justice.” Later in his assessment of early-Christian attitudes, Hays states explicitly what had been implicit in previous commentary: “Although the tradition of the first three centuries was decidedly pacifist in orientation, Christian tradition from the time of Constantine to the present has predominantly endorsed war.”<sup>6</sup> Throughout his exegetical and theological commentary, Hays’s position assumes a prescriptive cast. In posing the question “Is it ever God’s will for Christians to employ violence in defense of justice?” he instructs us: “The New Testament contains important texts that seem to suggest that this question must be answered in the negative.”<sup>7</sup>

More recently, in an essay titled “The Christian Church and Peace through the Centuries,” historian Robert Clouse, a founder of the Conference on Faith and History, argues that “during the early fourth century, the church fell away from its teaching with regard to warfare.”<sup>8</sup> This “falling away,” according to Clouse, stood in diametric opposition to “the quality of love found in the life and ministry of Christ”—a quality that “was not lost on the early church.”<sup>9</sup> “The early church,” observes Clouse, “saw an incompatibility between love and killing. Consequently, the early Christians would not serve in the Roman army. There is no evidence of a single Christian soldier after New Testament times until about A.D. 170.”<sup>10</sup> In accounting for the relative silence among the Church Fathers up to 170, Clouse writes: “Thoughtful Christians were not pleased with the blurring of distinctions between the church and the world. These people condemned participation in warfare and urged believers to wage a spiritual conflict rather than a carnal one.”<sup>11</sup>

Bainton, Yoder, Hays, and Clouse are by no means the only scholars to weigh in on the patristic evidence of early Christian attitudes toward soldiering and war. Rather, they are merely representative of what has become—and what remains—the standard and dominant strand of interpretation of earliest Christian

history. All share a common historical assumption, namely, that Constantine ushered in a new era. In the pre-Constantinian period, the Church is thought universally and uniformly to mirror pacifist conviction and a commitment to absolute nonviolence. From Constantine onward, the proximity of the Church to the state resulted in the Church's compromise and loss of moral purity as she accommodated herself to the secular needs of the Empire. On this standard reading of the early patristic era, history tends to be pressed into the service of Christian social ethics: the portrait of the early church as pacifistic *by conviction* is meant to be prescriptive. Thus, for example, Clouse can write: "The same scruples that kept Christians out of the army led them to decline to serve in other governmental positions."<sup>12</sup>

The standard account of the early church's attitudes toward soldiering and war is grounded in and molded by several commonly shared presuppositions—among these:

1. that the Sermon on the Mount—at least, a particular reading thereof—undergirds Christian attitudes toward military service and war;
2. that military service and warfare were condemned from the beginning because of early Christians' aversion to violence and bloodshed;
3. that the silence of patristic voices on the subject until the mid-to-late second century is evidence that Christians were not participating in the military;
4. that the Fathers in general—and the two principal pacifist Fathers, Tertullian and Origen, in particular—offer us uniformly *negative* testimony of Christian participation in the military and attitudes toward war;
5. that by the late fourth century, the Church's progressive decline in moral purity was advanced to the point at which we may speak of her "fall" or her being "co-opted" by the empire; hence, the requisite language of a "radical critique of Constantinianism."

While some details of this account vary, the wider story remains consistent, informed by the aforementioned assumptions.<sup>13</sup> So pervasive has been the force of these assumptions that even *nonpacifists*, who in principle would acknowledge the necessity of morally guided force to help order a fallen world (as well as Christian participation therein), accept the viewpoint that just-war principles are *only first* a product of the age of Constantine, with a purported merger of church and state interests, and not the cumulative wisdom of Judeo-Christian and natural-law ethical reflection.

Let us, for the moment, return to Robert Clouse's commentary on pre-Constantinian Christian attitudes toward war and soldiering. Summarizing early Christian thinking, he writes:

Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Cyprian, and Lactantius all caution their fellow Christians to remember their spiritual calling and that they owe their allegiance to a spiritual kingdom. . . . They refused to take part in the civil state because of the participation in sacrifices, oath taking, and torture that Rome demanded of civil servants. Just as there is no evidence for the presence of Christians in the Roman army before the end of the second century, so there is no record of believers in positions of authority under the Roman government until about A.D. 250. The early followers of Christ also thought of themselves as a new community . . . that replaced the old imperial ties.<sup>14</sup>

In his commentary, Clouse does hint that Christians indeed began appearing in the Roman army in the late second century. However, neither is this development salutary nor is it to serve as a model for other Christians. It is, rather, evidence of the Church's spiritual compromise and decline. "Despite the arguments of the church fathers such as Origen, there was increasing pressure on Christians to serve in the government and the army. When Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion during the early fourth century, *the church fell away from its teaching with regard to warfare*. About

half a century later, Augustine wrote as a product of the merger between church and state.”<sup>15</sup>

As a historian, Clouse helpfully frames the questions that require further probing. Was there “increasing pressure” for Christians to serve both in civil and military service? If this observation is accurate, what factors were to account for such pressure? Can we speak of the Church “falling away,” a position requiring a reading of the New Testament that expressly *forbids* Christians from serving as magistrates or soldiers? And is it accurate to view the post-Constantinian Church as having “fallen away from its teaching with regard to warfare”?<sup>16</sup> To do so presumes that the Church in fact did have an authoritative teaching on warfare. But what precisely *was* its teaching? To what authoritative source might we look? Can we accept Clouse’s contention that “thoughtful Christians” were confined essentially to the first century and a half and then extrapolate that thereafter the Church was characterized by unthinking and spiritually dull Christians, for whom compromise and conflation was the necessary order of the day? These are claims and assumptions that will need adjudication. For our present purposes, they are claims that require the univocal support of patristic evidence.

Much of the standard inquiry into early-Christian attitudes toward the military has been motivated, if not dominated, by *theological and ethical* rather than historical concern. For this reason, what follows in this article is a reexamination of pre-Constantinian patristic sources—with a particular focus on Tertullian and Origen, given their place as key patristic witnesses for what is thought to be normative ideological pacifism in the early church—as well as New Testament teaching that might bear on the Christian’s orientation toward soldiering and war. Herewith we wish to probe those assumptions that have contributed to the dominant portrait of the early church as universally and uniformly pacifist—a portrait that for Bainton, Yoder, Hays, and Clouse is not merely descriptive but, as we have observed, prescriptive.

As a rule, any contemporary treatment of early Christian atti-

tudes toward war and military service is bound to the interpreter's own confessional viewpoint.<sup>17</sup> This is as we might expect; no interpreter of the historical record—Roman Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant—remains theologically or confessionally neutral in the interpretation and presentation of his or her findings. Following a reassessment of relevant biblical and patristic evidence, the argument that unfolds in this article is that a somewhat more diverse portrait of the Church of the first three centuries begins to emerge than we heretofore have been led to believe. And although this adjusted portrait is intended to be descriptive, it should inform the thinking of theologians, philosophers, Christian ethicists, and historians all, since the standard reading of early Christian history seems to function prescriptively for virtually all who adduce it.

## *II. Reassessing Patristic Attitudes toward War, Soldiering, and the Use of Force*

What is conspicuous about early patristic literature is how little the subject of Christians and military service surfaces. The earliest sources contain no allusions per se to Christian participation in the army. Characteristically, they reinforce what one might expect: Christians as a social subset are known for their peaceable, contented, and conciliatory nature.

Thus, for example, Justin Martyr notes, "We who formerly murdered one another now refrain from making war even upon our enemies, but for the sake of not telling lies or deceiving those examining us we gladly die confessing Christ."<sup>18</sup> Tatian wishes to emphasize that the Christian life is one of simplicity: "I do not wish to be a king. I am not anxious to be rich. I decline military command . . . I am free from a mad thirst for fame."<sup>19</sup> Athenagoras mirrors Jesus's teaching on nonretaliation: "We have learned not to return blow for blow," he writes, "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.”<sup>20</sup> And Irenaeus stresses the same: “Therefore . . . we have no need of the law as pedagogue. . . . Nor an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, to him who counts no man his enemy, but all his neighbours, and therefore cannot even put forth his hand to revenge.”<sup>21</sup>

What unites the early Fathers in their writings is their depiction of a distinctly *Christian lifestyle*—a lifestyle that mirrors a clear and unmistakable bias toward peaceableness as well as a vigilance that is heightened by the fear of idolatry. This orientation, however, as we shall observe, is not to be equated with a broad-based or universal rejection of soldiering or war per se. For example, at about the end of the first century one finds in the first letter of Clement supplications that would seem to fall short of pacifism in the narrowest ideological sense. “It is you, Heavenly Master, Ruler of the Ages, who give to the sons of men glory, honour and power over earthly things. Guide their decision yourself, O Lord, according to what is good and acceptable in your eyes, so that by dutifully wielding in peace and gentleness the authority you gave them, they may gain your favour.”<sup>22</sup>

In addition, Clement notes that the state has been entrusted by God with sovereignty, power, and honor and that for this reason Christians should be subject to it.<sup>23</sup> Such petitions for civil rulers are commonplace in the second and third centuries, even to be found in Tertullian, who arguably demonstrates the greatest reserve toward the state among the early Fathers.<sup>24</sup> In the earlier Tertullian, we find no explicit prohibitions against Christians serving in the military; rather, he prays for emperors to have a “long life,” a “secure rule,” a “safe home,” and “brave armies.”<sup>25</sup> Fifteen years later, however, a shift has occurred in Tertullian’s thinking—a shift that most plausibly is due to social developments and not a precommitment to ideological pacifism per se. Because standard accounts of the early Fathers proceed on the assumption that Tertullian and Origen, the chief pacifist Fathers, are representative of the pre-Constantinian church, our reassessment of this period must begin with them.

## A. TERTULLIAN

With the passage of time, Tertullian seems to display an increasing hostility toward the powers. One historian notes, "It is difficult to believe that the man who wrote the *Apology* is the same man who wrote *On the Military Crown* about fourteen years later, though the later document is a product of his Montanist [and thus, extremely sectarian] point of view."<sup>26</sup> In the *Apology*, for example, Tertullian had acknowledged the necessity of war and claimed that Christians even contributed by praying for brave armies, for a faithful Senate, for the peace of the world, and for peace within the Empire, acknowledging the need to defend territorial borders against invading barbarians.<sup>27</sup>

Tertullian, furthermore, wishes to emphasize in his earlier writings that Christians participate responsibly in society. He can write unabashedly that like normal people throughout the empire, they frequent the marketplace, the inns, and the public baths; they eat the same food, wear the same attire, and have the same customs.<sup>28</sup> What's more, "We sail with you and fight [in the military] with you and till the ground with you, [and] we conduct business with you. We blend our skills with yours, [and] our efforts are at your service."<sup>29</sup> In the *Apology*, Tertullian attempts to refute the late-second century accusation of Christians' social detachment. Thus, he offers a list of assorted activities and vocations in which Christians can be found and gladly participate.

At the same time that Tertullian concedes Christians' presence in the Roman legions, he nevertheless wishes to underscore the peaceful character that governs Christian believers' relationships to others, even when he misinterprets Jesus's teaching on the *lex talionis*, assuming its elimination by Christ:

Who else, therefore, are understood [by Isa 2:3-4] but *we*, who, fully taught by the new law, observe these practices. . . . For the wont of the old law was to avenge itself by the vengeance of the glaive [sword], and to pluck out "eye for eye," and to inflict retaliatory revenge for injury. But the new law's

wont was to point to clemency . . . [and] to convert to tranquility . . . and to remodel the pristine execution of “war” . . . into the pacific actions of “ploughing” and “tilling” the land.<sup>30</sup>

In Tertullian’s later writing, however, warfare and military service are inappropriate for the Christian, despite the fact that he acknowledges the presence in the Roman army of Christians and is aware of John the Baptist and Jesus not calling believers away from military service.<sup>31</sup> But it is less bloodshed and violence than the possibility of idolatry that Tertullian fears. “I think,” he writes, “we must first inquire whether warfare is proper at all for Christians. What sense is there in discussing the merely accidental, when that on which it rests is to be condemned? Do we believe it is lawful for a human oath to be superadded to one [that is] divine, for a man to come under promise [i.e., to be pledged to another master] after Christ [has become his Master]?”<sup>32</sup> Here, in *De Corona* (“On the [Military] Crown”), we observe the conflict in Tertullian’s mind over idolatry. The arguments that he proffers against Christian participation in the army concern military observances and ceremonies that are religious or quasi-religious in nature. “Is the [military] laurel of the triumph made of leaves, or of corpses?” he asks. “Is it adorned with ribbons, or with tombs? Is it bedewed with ointments, or with the tears of wives and mothers? It may be made of some Christians too.”<sup>33</sup>

Elsewhere, Tertullian reflects on Christian participation in military service and concludes that the meting out of punishment, tainted even further by “sacrifices” to another authority outside of Christ, disqualifies the Christian. “There is no agreement between the divine and the human sacrament,” he insists while invoking Exodus 23:13, “[between] the standard of Christ and the standard of the devil, the camp of light and the camp of darkness. One cannot be due to two masters, God and Caesar.”<sup>34</sup>

The fear of idolatry, for Tertullian, was rooted not only in the cult of Mithraism, popular among the soldiers, but specifically in

rituals of the Roman army that bore religious significance under the rubric of abstract deities such as Honor (*Honos*), Courage (*Virtus*), and Reverence (*Pietas*). Two quasi-sacred aspects of military life are particularly problematic for Tertullian, as evidenced in *De Corona*: the *sacramentum*, the military oath, and the military standards. The oath was taken upon enlistment and renewed twice each year by each soldier, by which he was bound unconditionally to the emperor as commander-in-chief.<sup>35</sup> Further, soldiers are said by Tertullian to venerate and swear by the standards, at the center of which cult the eagle, symbolizing Jupiter, stands. The standards were typically enshrined at the center of the military encampment and possessed religious overtones because of the belief that they transmitted divine enablement from the gods to the emperor and the army.<sup>36</sup> Further, we do know from military history that those of higher rank in the Roman Legions sacrificed to the emperor and wore badges that bore the emperor's effigy.<sup>37</sup> Adopting a literal application of Jesus's words, Tertullian insists, as we already noted, that one soul cannot swear absolute allegiance to two masters, Christ and Caesar.<sup>38</sup>

In all of early Christian literature, the only work devoted specifically and exclusively to the subject of the military is Tertullian's *De Corona*. The inspiration for this work derives from the martyrdom of a Christian soldier who refused during celebration to wear the military crown bestowed upon soldiers for combat. Because of the danger of idolatry, Tertullian reasons, one should eschew military service, since one's ultimate loyalties will inevitably be divided.

But, as Tertullian sees it, the danger of idolatry is ubiquitous; one cannot be too careful. His list of forbidden occupations noted in *On Idolatry* that are thought to imperil one's faith also includes civil service to the state, not simply military service, since both, he believed, entailed a form of pagan sacrifice. The danger of idolatry, however, is not limited to the state; it should also prevent Christians from becoming teachers and students, for both require studying the classics of Greek and Roman literature. In addition, trades such as gold- and silversmithing as well as woodcarving are to be avoid-

ed by Christians, since these vocations so frequently entail making idols for clients. Even the signing of contracts is condemned, given the potential for idolatrous associations. And not only vocations but our lifestyles as well are potentially idolatrous. So, for example, fancy hairstyles, certain attire, and outer adornments are to be eschewed.<sup>39</sup> And because of the widespread superstition that pervades society around us, even house entrances, lamps, and doorposts become potential pitfalls to the believer. Tertullian cautions that “there are among the Romans even gods of entrances . . . [such as] Cardea (Hinge-goddess), called after hinges, and Forculus (Door-god) after doors, and Limentinus (Threshold-god) after the threshold, and Janus himself (Gate-god) after the gates. . . . Among the Greeks likewise we read of Apollo Thyraeus, i.e., of the door, and the Antelii . . . or demons, as presiders over entrances.”<sup>40</sup>

Because this world is filled with demons, and because idolatry lurks at every corner, Tertullian calls the believer to watchfulness, in the conviction that Christians all too often—and all too unwittingly—accept friendship with the world.

Bearing on our discussion is a noteworthy event reported by both Roman<sup>41</sup> and Christian<sup>42</sup> sources and mentioned twice by Tertullian—in his *Apology* and in his letter *To Scapula*—that occurred in the early 170s.<sup>43</sup> It concerns the famed “Thundering Legion” (*Legio Fulminata*) of the Roman army during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, the “most grave of emperors,” according to Tertullian.<sup>44</sup> The incident occurred along the Danube in the Balkans, where the noted 12th legion was defending against the invasion of Germanic hordes.<sup>45</sup> Placed under the personal command of Marcus Aurelius, the 12th legion was fighting in conditions that severely depleted their water supplies due to a drought in the region. According to the account of Eusebius, upon seeing the enemy approaching, soldiers knelt on the ground in prayer. Their supplication was followed by a thunderbolt from heaven that both put to flight enemy troops and sent rain to refresh the parched 12th legion. Tertullian, writing two decades later, says that Marcus Aurelius himself gave the Christians credit for this

miracle,<sup>46</sup> as does Eusebius,<sup>47</sup> although pagan accounts attribute it variously. What is of interest in this story, regardless of its embellishments and varied accounts, is the information that Christians were already serving in the army as well as the fact that Tertullian mentions this incident on two separate occasions, without a hint of suggestion that these believers were wrong in joining the Roman legion.<sup>48</sup>

In the end, how is Tertullian to be interpreted? We have noted the willingness in his earlier writing to refute the accusation that Christians were indifferent to—or enemies of—the state. His response is that “we fight alongside you and serve in your army.” In his later response he waxes increasingly resistant to the idea of Christians serving in the Roman army: there exists a fundamental incompatibility between the two masters of Christ and military service. We might reasonably conclude that his later argument against soldiering and warfare is set forth precisely because not all Christians agreed with him.<sup>49</sup> And indeed this response is understandable since by this time baptized Christians were joining the army.<sup>50</sup> Tertullian’s increasingly rigorist stance, however, is neither a necessary outcome of the position of the apostolic Church nor a reflection of the New Testament’s ethical teaching.<sup>51</sup> And because of his wholesale condemnation of civil service (including serving as a ruler), literature, art, forms of dress, and signing of contracts, his opposition to military service is properly understood as part of the logic of apostasy.

#### B. ORIGEN

Despite the sheer number of his writings, Origen says very little about war or military service, and he does not address the ethics of war *per se*. He does, like the other early Fathers, emphasize the peaceable nature of Christians’ relationships:

And to those who inquire of us whence we come, or who is our founder, we reply that we are come agreeably to the counsels of Jesus, to “cut down our hostile and insolent swords

into plowshares, and to convert into pruning-hooks the spears formerly employed in war.” For we no longer take up “sword against nation,” nor do we “learn war any more,” having become children of peace, for the sake of Jesus, who is our leader.<sup>52</sup>

Accordingly, Origen believes that Christians differ very much from their Jewish ancestors, who “were permitted to take up arms in defense of the members of their families and to slay their enemies.”<sup>53</sup> Indeed,

if the Christians truly owed their origin to a rebellion [as their Zealot counterparts], they would not have adopted laws of so exceedingly mild a character. For their laws do not allow them on any occasion to resist their persecutors, even when it was their fate to be slain as sheep. . . . Christians were taught not to avenge themselves upon their enemies. . . . For they have obtained this reward from God. . . . On certain occasions, he has restrained those who rose up against them and desired to destroy them. . . . On special occasions, some have endured death for the sake of Christianity. . . . However, God has not permitted the whole nation [of Christians] to be exterminated.<sup>54</sup>

At the same time he is not opposed to pointing out the fact of Christians’ presence in the Roman army in response to the criticisms of the pagan philosopher Celsus. Celsus had pressed the argument that Christians who did not serve in the Roman legions would contribute to Rome’s collapse at the hands of the barbarian hordes. Celsus, according to Origen, “urges us ‘to help the king with all our might, and to labour with him in the maintenance of justice, to fight for him; and if he requires it, to fight under him, or lead an army along with him.’”<sup>55</sup> Origen’s response is noteworthy and deserves to be quoted at length:

To this our answer is, that we do, when occasion requires, give help to kings, and that, so to say, a divine help, “putting on the

whole armour of God.” And this we do in obedience to the injunction of the apostle, “I exhort, therefore, that first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority”; and the more anyone excels in piety, the more effective help does he render to kings, even more than is given by soldiers, who go forth to fight and slay as many of the enemy as they can. And to those enemies of our faith who require us to bear arms for the commonwealth, and to slay men, we can reply: “Do not those who are priests at certain shrines . . . keep their hands free from blood, that they may with hands unstained and free from human blood offer the appointed sacrifices to your gods; and even when war is upon you, you never enlist the priests in the army. If that, then, is a laudable custom, how much more so, that while others are engaged in battle, these too should engage as the priests and ministers of God, keeping their hands pure, and wrestling in prayers to God on behalf of those who are fighting in a righteous cause, and for the king who reigns righteously, that whatever is opposed to those who act righteously may be destroyed!” And as we by our prayers vanquish all demons who stir up war . . . and disturb the peace, we in this way are much more helpful to the kings than those who go into the field to fight for them.<sup>56</sup>

What is present in Origen’s response needs emphasis. He believes that Christians have an appropriate place, namely, that of a “priestly” function through their prayers. This service is far more effective than military service, but it is service to the empire and to the civil order nonetheless. In this way, Origen maintains, Christians fully support the work of justice without going into battle; they do this, however, on their knees. Lest he be mistaken as to Christian’s involvement in public affairs, Origen reiterates:

And we do take our part in public affairs when along with righteous prayers we join self-denying exercises and meditations. . . . And none fight better for the king than we do. We

do not indeed fight under him, although he require it; but we fight on his behalf, forming a special army—an army of piety—by offering our prayers to God. And if Celsus would have us to lead armies in defence of our country, let him know that we do this too.<sup>57</sup>

What's more, insists Origen, "Christians are benefactors of their country more than others. For they train up citizens, and inculcate piety to the Supreme Being; and they promote those whose lives in the smallest cities have been good and worthy."<sup>58</sup>

What is noteworthy in Origen's argument is that Christians *do* participate responsibly in civil affairs, and they *do* support the governing authorities, since Scripture requires as much.<sup>59</sup> Thus, unlike contemporary pacifist interpretations of early Christian history, Origen not only does not deny that Christians are serving in the military (a matter which Tertullian also concedes, even when both are opposed), but more importantly, he sees the need for Christians to support the authorities and contribute to a just and civil society even when he believes that Christians should not be soldiers. Thus, it should be noted that even when Tertullian and Origen, as the two chief pacifist Fathers, prohibit Christians from bearing the sword, neither denied to government the moral duty of self-defense nor denied that Christians actually served in the military.<sup>60</sup>

### C. CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

Clement of Alexandria offers statements that might be interpreted in differing ways. In contrast to Tertullian and Origen, he does not proscribe military service from the standpoint of faith. Moreover, in an intriguing bit of commentary on the beatitudes, and on peacemaking in particular, he speaks of war and peace in the context of our battle against the flesh, against carnal dispositions of the mind. "Peacemakers," Clement notes, are those who teach "faith and peace" and who "war against sin."<sup>61</sup> Elsewhere, Clement observes, "But for a man, bare feet are quite in keeping—except when he is on military service."<sup>62</sup> Hereby he intimates that military service is

part of normal civic life, and therefore, a valid profession. In his writings, Clement does not offer any commentary on the ethics of war or soldiering per se.

Clement's advice to soldiers who convert to Christ stands in notable contrast to that of Tertullian, even when both acknowledge that John the Baptist did not call soldiers away from their vocation. Whereas Tertullian admonishes soldiers who convert to leave the military, Clement exhorts Christians, regardless of their station, to manifest Christian witness in their vocation. So, for example, farmers are to acknowledge in the field the God who gives yield, while sailors who navigate call upon their heavenly Pilot and soldiers honor their Commander in performing justice.

#### D. HIPPOLYTUS

A leading presbyter in the Church at Rome at the beginning of the third century, Hippolytus was persecuted, exiled, and died a martyr. His *Apostolic Tradition*, wherein appear statements regarding the military, is written in order to enunciate requirements of Church membership. In this context, it is said that a soldier who possesses authority must not execute people, and if commanded to do so he must disobey the order.<sup>63</sup> Whether Hippolytus is addressing prisoners of war or Christians being persecuted is unclear. Furthermore, no baptized believer, he believes, can enter military service without denying God. Like Tertullian, Hippolytus understands certain lifestyles and types of work to automatically negate any membership in the Church—for example, acting, prostitution, participating in the games, and teaching pagan classics.<sup>64</sup> Of Christians and military service he writes:

A soldier of the civil authority must be taught not to kill men and to refuse to do so if he is commanded, and to refuse to take an oath. If he is unwilling to comply, he must be rejected for baptism. A military commander or civic magistrate who wears the purple must resign or be rejected. If an applicant

or a believer seeks to become a soldier, he must be rejected, for he has despised God.<sup>65</sup>

#### E. CYPRIAN

A pagan rhetorician at the time of his conversion in A.D. 246, Cyprian soon became bishop of Carthage in North Africa. He fled and worked underground during the persecution of Diocletian in the mid-third century and was martyred in 258. Cyprian writes of his own day that “roads are blocked by robbers, the seas are beset with pirates,” and that wars are “scattered all over the earth with the bloody horror of camps. The whole world is wet with mutual blood, and murder, which is admitted to be a crime in the case of an individual, is called a virtue when it is committed wholesale. Impunity is claimed for the wicked deeds, not on the plea that they are guiltless, but because the cruelty is perpetrated on a grand scale.”<sup>66</sup>

Cyprian points to the restraint of Christian virtue: believers do not hate, they do not retaliate; they repay with kindness; they depart from rage, discord, and carnal contention because of Christ.<sup>67</sup> In contrast, he does not hesitate to criticize the excesses of military life. At the same time, despite his lament of the degree of savagery of his own day, he stops short of condemning Christian participation in the military and acknowledges Christian acquaintances who are serving in the Roman army. In fact, he prays for the success of the emperor’s armies, he views the decline of the military as a sign of divine judgment, and on occasion he employs military metaphors in a seemingly approving manner.<sup>68</sup>

#### F. DIONYSIUS OF ALEXANDRIA

Dionysius, a disciple of Origen who became bishop of Alexandria in A.D. 247, informs us that the martyrs of his day include “men and women, both young men and old, both maidens and aged matrons, both soldiers and private citizens.”<sup>69</sup> Moreover, he offers a noteworthy account of a certain group of soldiers. “These men,” he notes, “had taken up their position in a mass in front of the [military] tri-

bunal. A certain person was on trial as a Christian, and he was about to deny [the faith]." As a result, these soldiers "ran quickly up to the bench of judgment and declared themselves to be Christians" too.<sup>70</sup> Dionysius's account of this incident takes on a descriptive rather than prescriptive cast.

#### G. LACTANTIUS

Though not addressing Christians in the military *per se*, Lactantius is usually cited as an unremitting pacifist who opposes warfare on the grounds of both bloodshed, which he believes to be wholly inconsistent with Christian virtue, and idolatry. "Why would the righteous person carry on war and mix himself with the passions of others when his mind is engaged in perpetual peace with others?" he asks. The Christian, by contrast, "considers it unlawful not only himself to commit slaughter, but [also] to be present with those who do it."<sup>71</sup> In fact, Lactantius's pacifism is such that he believes "it makes no difference whether you put a man to death by word . . . or . . . by the sword."<sup>72</sup> Lactantius believes that if human passions are restrained then no one will use violence militarily "by land or by sea." Indeed, no one will lead an army to carry off and lay waste the property of others. For what does it say of the interests of any nation if it acts to the detriment of another state or nation? To extend one's borders violently, to increase the power of the state, to improve the revenues of one's nation—all of these things, insists Lactantius, are not virtues; rather, they are "the overthrowing of virtues."<sup>73</sup>

In the aftermath of the mid-third-century Diocletian persecution, Lactantius recounts the treatment of soldiers who refused to sacrifice to the emperor. Diocletian "ordered not only all who were assisting at the holy ceremonies, but also all who resided within the palace, to sacrifice. And further, by letters to the commanding officers, he ordered that all soldiers should be forced to the same impiety, under pain of being dismissed from the service."<sup>74</sup> According to Lactantius, Diocletian's simple wish was to exclude Christians from the imperial court and from the army.<sup>75</sup>

Given his very pointed opposition to soldiering and war in *Divine Institutes*, Lactantius seems to undergo a change of mind. Notwithstanding his opposition to violence, he acknowledges that killing might be of necessity if a man were compelled to go to war.<sup>76</sup> In addition, he issues a near-unqualified support for Constantine's battles, which he believed to be divinely inspired.<sup>77</sup>

### *III. Reassessing New Testament Teaching on War, Soldiering and the Use of Force*

#### A. APOSTOLIC TEACHING ON THE MAGISTRATE'S AUTHORITY

To struggle with the ethics of war and force is to reveal our assumptions about political power. While this does not mean that all Christians need to study political theory, it does mean that we must take seriously scriptural injunctions regarding authority. This task is not as easy as it might seem, for even within the Protestant camp differing views emerge. For example, mainstream Reformers such as Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and Bullinger held a relatively high view of political authorities, believing that all vocations—including the soldier and the magistrate—were honorable. Radical Reformers such as the Swiss Brethren and Menno Simons, by contrast, viewed the powers with greater suspicion, and understandably so, since they were persecuted by both Catholics and Protestants, and thus, to this day, tend to be radically separatist.<sup>78</sup>

But even beyond these divisions, approaching New Testament texts such as Romans 13 requires much qualification, given the Church's at times conflicted history. Anabaptists and other pacifists are keenly aware, with good reason, of ways in which this text has been misused. But the variegated interpretive history of Romans 13 is not our focus. The fact that the text can be misinterpreted says nothing about its meaning and its potential faithful application. What *may* be said, and what frequently goes unnoticed, is the contrast in Pauline thought between the personal sphere and political authority, that is, between the context of Romans 12 and Romans

13. Following Pauline admonitions on Christians relating to Christians, Romans 12 ends with a list of exhortations aimed at Christian interaction with the world. A telling barometer of how believers relate to the world is how they handle persecution and personal abuse. In this vein, the apostle's exhortations are straightforward: avoid a retaliatory mode. As far as possible, strive for peace, seeking to do good to those who mistreat you. Believers are not to take justice into their own hands, for justice has a proper context in which it is displayed.

That proper context is illuminated in chapter 13. Whereas force and vengeance are prohibited in 12:17–21, they are both permitted and sanctioned in 13:1–10. Paul's argument is not that force and retribution, represented in chapter 13 by the *ius gladii*, are inherently immoral. In the realm of the private relationships, justice is illegitimate and *proscribed*; in the hand of the governing magistrate, however, it is *prescribed*. And because the powers derive their authority from the Sovereign Lord, they are to be *respected*—a watchword in 1 Peter (cf. 2:13–17)—fully irrespective of whether the office is inhabited by honorable individuals. It is the clear and unambiguous teaching of the New Testament that the authorities exist for one purpose, and that is to preserve the moral-social order. The use of power—and by extension, force—is thus the essence of politics and governing. Governing is not governing without power. And because all authority inheres in and is on loan from the Sovereign Creator, the necessity of a moral and just application of force should be beyond controversy.<sup>79</sup>

Not only Romans and 1 Peter but the Pastorals as well suggest a proper view of the powers. Observe the tenor of Paul's admonition to Timothy. Among the first duties of the Body of Christ when it is assembled is to intercede on behalf of "all those who are in authority" (1 Tim 2:1–2). The purpose of this intercession is observed to be civil or domestic tranquility, which, by Paul's reasoning, helps to preserve human dignity and further the spread of the gospel (2:2–4). When we consider who may have been on the Imperial throne,

who presided in the Roman Senate, or who the local political authorities were at the time of Paul's writing, Paul's instructions are nothing short of scandalous.

That politics and government require power to operate, however, is not an assumption shared by all. The more separatist Tertullians among us in every age believe that because politics and governing do not save us, they are therefore unimportant at best and inherently evil at worst. Christians, hence, should invest themselves in pursuits that are spiritual, otherworldly and radically Christ-centered. The point to be made here is this: if we as Christians are convinced that politics and power are inherently corrupt, as separatists of any age tend to do, we will surely not involve ourselves in the political process or in social institutions that need our leavening influence.

In his important work *The Politics of Jesus*, published in 1972 and reissued in 1994, Yoder argued that Revelation 13, not Romans 13, represents the normative New Testament teaching on the state. For this reason, the Christian is not to participate with the powers, since they are inherently evil and intractably hostile toward God. Yoder's assumptions about the political powers are extended to the early church. The reason for Christians' acquiescence to the state in the fourth century and their increasing involvement in the affairs of the state from Constantine onwards, including the military, is readily explained: the Church was co-opted by the empire and with the end of formal persecution lost its prophetic witness. Subsequently, gone was the pristine beauty and purity that had characterized early generations of believers. This account of the first four centuries, as we noted at the outset, has been popularized by Roland Bainton and others and is broadly assumed by wider Christendom.

Additional New Testament information about the early church is not easily dispelled. The conversions of Cornelius (Acts 10) as well as the jail-keeper in Philippi (Acts 16) raise questions, even when they elude neat answers. In both cases there is no trace of condemnation of the military profession, which would be foundational to the claims of those who equate Christian faith and ideological pacifism.<sup>80</sup>

## B. THE TEACHING OF JESUS

Standard accounts of the early church's pacifism are not without biblical justification. They typically proceed on the assumption that the ethics of Jesus was one of love and nonviolence. Beginning with the admonition to be "peacemakers" (Mt 5:9), this view anchors itself in a reading of the Sermon of the Mount that understands Jesus's call as a call to nonretaliation and nonviolence. The resultant interpretation of Matthew 5:38–42 is that Jesus renders obsolete the *lex talionis* or "eye for eye" principle set forth in the Old Testament and that he intends the imperatives "do not resist an evil person" and "turn the other cheek" as flat prohibitions of force.

Certainly the matter of retaliation challenges Christian ethics as do few other issues, then and now. This exhortation is placed among six case illustrations by which Jesus is reinterpreting the law. To begin, note what introduces this body of teaching. A common misperception about ethical living and the basis for ethics seems to persist. "Do not think that I have come," he warns the audience, "to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Mt 5:17; cf. also 7:12). This warning is framed in a clearly ethical context: the disciples' good deeds are to be concrete and visible to others, not hidden, in this way glorifying to God (5:13–16). Furthermore, the righteousness of the disciples must exceed Pharisaical measures (5:20). The six case illustrations (5:21–48) that follow, then, serve to drive home Jesus's teaching in a concrete manner. Significantly, each of the six is introduced with the rabbinic *kelal* or formulaic key, "You have heard it said but I tell you," suggesting that certain popular misunderstandings need to be exposed and rectified.

As in each of the other case illustrations, Jesus's teaching on retaliation (5:38–43) does not set aside the ethical core of the commandment; rather, Jesus shows how the violation of the commandment begins in the heart with an improper attitude. Contrary to much existing commentary, the *lex talionis* as a measure of just retribution is not being set aside by Jesus, since its intended purpose

was to limit retribution based on proportionality; justice demands that no more than what is proportionate to the offense be required. Moreover, private citizens could not extract retribution; rather, this was the responsibility of the judges (Dt 19:15–21; cf. Rom 12:17–21 and 13:1–10). By Jesus’s day, as historians verify, rabbinic reinterpretation of just rewards for personal injury had become illegitimate, and thus, a misuse of the *lex talionis* appears to lie behind Jesus’s teaching and not a negation or abolition of the “law of the tooth” *per se*.

Just as important is the framing of the commands that follow. Not resisting evil and turning the other cheek (5:39) are contextualized among several instances of personal injury. Consider the nature of the other three: the loss of an article of clothing, being conscripted to walk a second mile (in all likelihood, applying to soldiers forcing civilians to carry their gear), and loaning to the person who wishes to borrow. Each of these situations of daily life is personal; all of them mirror issues of discipleship, not statecraft or policy. In terms of emphasis, then, Matthew 5–7 finds a parallel in the latter part of Romans 12, which addresses Christian’s relationship to the world, and specifically, handling personal injury or insult. To conflate the Sermon on the Mount and its parallel, Romans 12 (vv. 17–21, in particular), with Romans 13—that is, to fail to distinguish the context and the qualification of justice properly and improperly applied—is to confuse the personal and the political. Indeed, it is to do violence to the New Testament text and to Christian social ethics.<sup>81</sup>

Neither Christ’s injunction to render to Caesar those things that are Caesar’s (Mt 22:15–22; Mk 12:13–17; Lk 20:20–26), nor his rebuke of Peter in using the sword (Mt 26:50–54; Lk 22:47–53), nor his explicit teaching on Christian discipleship provide us with any resolute, universal, and apodictic acceptance or rejection of soldiering and warfare.

## C. JOHN THE BAPTIST

In underscoring the nature of political authority, Calvin observes that it is the mandate of the ruler, and the nature of his office, “not only to restrain crimes of private individuals by judicial punishments, but also to defend territories committed to their charge by going to war against any hostile aggression.”<sup>82</sup> Calvin anticipates the objection. He reasons that if we object that the New Testament contains nothing permitting Christian participation in soldiering or war, then John the Baptist presents for us an obstacle. Why? If Christian participation in all warring is illegitimate, then the soldiers who sought out the Baptist (Lk 3:14), insists Calvin, would have been directed *of necessity* to throw away their arms and leave their profession. But, to the contrary, they were admonished to do two things: act justly and be content with their wages. Military life was not at all prohibited.<sup>83</sup>

Hugo Grotius, the seventeenth-century Dutch legal theorist who is considered the father of international law, reasons in much the same way. A committed Christian and author of the magisterial work *The Law of War and Peace* who wrote in the wake of the Thirty Years War that decimated much of Europe, Grotius ponders, like Calvin, why the soldiers coming to John the Baptist did not renounce their military calling as inconsistent with the will of God. Grotius is struck by the fact that right motives, rather, were enjoined by the greatest prophet who ever lived, whose message was repentance and preparation for the kingdom of God.<sup>84</sup>

What is significant about the Baptist’s encounter with soldiers is that all of the Synoptic accounts frame John’s work and message in terms of repentance (Mt 3:1–13; Mk 1:4–8; Lk 3:1–20). The demands of the Baptist are unflinchingly ethical: “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance!” When some soldiers ask, “And what should we do?” John replies, “Do not extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay” (Lk 3:14).

Beyond John the Baptist, however, it is surely not insignificant that neither Jesus nor the apostles call soldiers away from their

vocation as an expression of repentance and authentic faith. Even when Jesus forbids the sword as a means to advance the kingdom, the New Testament cannot be said to teach absolute pacifism, nor does it forbid the Christian from “bearing the sword” in the service of society and the greater good of others, even when this was the practice of some in the early church.<sup>85</sup> In the end, no express teaching of the New Testament suggests that military service is incompatible with Christian faith.

#### *IV. Concluding (Second) Thoughts on the Pacifist Interpretation of the Early Church*

Our reexamination of early Christian witnesses leads us in the direction of certain observations. One, as noted previously, is the relatively scant attention that the early Fathers devoted to the subject of war and the military in their writings. Were the ethics of soldiering and going to war of considerable magnitude or clearly proscribed in the early church, one would certainly expect far greater attention. At the very least, soldiers qua soldiers would be excommunicated or denied the sacraments (which, on religious grounds, was not the case).

Possible explanations for this patristic inattention are multiple. Perhaps the issue was so vexing that it defied neat categorization. Or perhaps it was so vexing that even the Fathers of the Church themselves hesitated to speak definitively on the subject. Or perhaps the issue exposed the fact that the early Christians were less prone to ethical or theological reflection than later generations of Christians. On the other hand, it may be the case that soldiering and warfare were taken for granted as necessary functions of the state, and as such, required no extensive ethical-theological reflection other than the need to be good citizens. It is possible that the issue may not have perplexed the ancients as it does us moderns; perhaps the issue for many was so crystal clear that it warranted no commentary.

The likelihood, as we consider the possibilities in historical

and theological contexts, is that the answer lies somewhere in the middle. Following their penetration into the surrounding culture, Christians took seriously and entered virtually every vocation and lifestyle, including military life, civil service to the state, and governing, each of which Tertullian and Origen flatly proscribe for believers. Where participation was diminished, this may have been due chiefly to the fear of idolatry *inter alia*. Such is the clear impression we get upon reading the early Fathers collectively. This impression, it needs emphasizing, accords with the general tenor of apostolic teaching, wherein idolatry and sexual immorality constitute chief forms of unfaithfulness that exclude one both from fellowship with a holy God and with the Christian community.<sup>86</sup> While some in the early church were opposed to soldiering and war on the basis of ideological pacifism, this was not universally the case.<sup>87</sup> In fact, as James Turner Johnson has shown, attitudes toward soldiering differed greatly according to geography. Depending on where one was one was located in the empire, military service was of lesser or greater attraction to individuals professing Christian faith.<sup>88</sup>

Ultimately, a host of reasons for nonparticipation in the military on the part of many early Christians might be cited. These reasons, quite familiar to us, include—but are not limited to—the bias of the Christian gospel toward peace over against violence; the expectation of an imminent parousia; the spiritualizing of Old Testament accounts of warfare; aversion to killing and bloodshed; the emperor cult; Mithraism; the military culture with its attendant oaths, ceremonies, and festivals; social diversity among Christians; geographical location; as well as the fear of idolatry. Together, these obstacles, notwithstanding the very real difficulties they presented for early believers, suggest both complexity and ambiguity regarding the issue of Christian faith and the military.

Even when some of the early Fathers saw particular sayings of Jesus—notably drawn from the Sermon on the Mount—as prohibiting Christians from engaging in warfare or military service, mainstream patristic interpretation of the New Testament disal-

lows these passages from being interpreted as universal prohibitions against the use of force or warfare that Christians are ethically bound to honor. For if flat prohibition of violence is the teaching of Christ, then everyone—and not merely the religiously inclined—has the same duty at all times and in all situations.<sup>89</sup> While the New Testament indeed teaches charity and forbearance, it does not prohibit the use of force as a means of advancing justice, retarding evil, and maintaining communal order. It is, rather, the vengeful spirit that is denounced. In fact, Ambrose, Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther join other mainstream voices in the Christian tradition to argue that moral application of force, even going to war, may be a legitimate, when reluctant, expression of charity.<sup>90</sup>

A further difficulty with a purely pacifist interpretation of the early Christian centuries is hermeneutical. Such an interpretation logically requires the view that the Old Testament and New Testament have different moral standards. The problem of presupposed ethical discontinuity might well be illustrated in the *lex talionis* passage from Matthew 5:38–42, in which Jesus's supposed nonviolence is thought to be grounded.<sup>91</sup> If we presuppose that the *lex talionis*, explicated in Exodus 21:12ff (cf. Dt 19:21), is an expression of illicit human revenge, then there does indeed exist ethical discontinuity. If, on the other hand, the “law of the tooth,” as it is applied in the Scriptures, serves both to permit and limit retributive justice, it can be understood as part of natural moral law. Indeed, the measure of justice developed in the Old Testament is based on the principles of proportionality and restitution, which are hallmarks of justice in any age or culture and thus are abiding in nature. Jesus's intent in the Sermon on the Mount is to adjust contemporary application of the law, not to abrogate the law as an abiding ethical foundation.<sup>92</sup>

Yet an additional problem with the pacifist interpretation—a problem that might be viewed as a subset of the previous hermeneutical criticism—is the manner in which the early church's relationship to the state is construed. While an extended treatment of this relationship brings us too far afield of the present discus-

sion, important questions press to the fore that are simultaneously historical and theological. Yoder has framed the issue perhaps most starkly and helpfully, drawing attention to two erroneous though related ways in which Romans 13 has been interpreted as the basis for church-state relations.<sup>93</sup> One error is observed to be “positivistic,” by which Yoder means “European” and Lutheran-Reformed construals of Romans 13. Accordingly, the Christian equates the will of the nation-state with the will of God. The Christian is thus understood to offer uncritical obedience to the political authorities. The second error identified by Yoder is “legitimistic,” by which he means that the state is to be viewed as legitimate and worthy of obedience insofar as it is instituted by God. What troubles Yoder is that *any* form of “obedience” might be rendered to political authorities. For this reason, Yoder prefers to view Revelation 13 and not Romans 13 as normative.<sup>94</sup>

But there is another perspective on church-state relations that requires our consideration. Kurt Aland has framed this oft-neglected perspective in a manner that sensitizes us to the all-too-frequent tendency to read back into the early church our own contemporary concerns. Emphasizing the attitude of loyalty that would have characterized the early Christians, Aland writes:

For the Christians of the early period, the Roman State is their State; that which Damages the State . . . also damages them; that which is beneficial to the State . . . is beneficial to them also. . . . From the beginning, the Church turns toward the State. She is ready to give to the State, God’s divine institution, all except one thing: that is the requested worship of the emperor as representative of the State’s power. The Christians pray with all their hearts *for* the emperor, but not *to* him. . . . The totalitarian claim of the State . . . exceeds the limits of the Church’s loyalty, but does not destroy this loyalty. Conflicts occur again and again, because the State does not want to recognize the limit set by the Church. But the Church does not see the nature of the State as the cause of the conflict.<sup>95</sup>

Historian Louis Swift stands in fundamental agreement with this view of early Christians, noting that the Church draws the line at idolizing or deifying the state in any form. In drawing the line, however, the Church does not refuse its loyalty or its fundamental respect, as apostolic teaching suggests.<sup>96</sup> In fact, much against the grain of contemporary scholarship, Swift argues that we should view the post-Constantinian period as “an outgrowth in many ways of an earlier thrust rather than a departure from the past.”<sup>97</sup> Regardless of whether one accepts Swift’s interpretation, what needs emphasizing is that the division between the pre-Constantinian and post-Constantinian fathers does *not* imply an ethical *volte-face* in the Christian community on the issue of war and military service after A.D. 313. Rather, it is more appropriate to speak of “a significant shift in emphases, a change in the dominant thrust of Christian thinking within the constant tension that exists between Christian ideals and the created world,” an adjustment in Christians’ assessment of the role of temporal power vis-à-vis the kingdom of God.<sup>98</sup>

In the present article we have sought to argue that evidence from both patristic literature of the first three centuries and the New Testament—a period that is typically thought to be mono-vocal in terms of Christian attitudes toward war and soldiering—indicates the presence of both pacifist and nonpacifist thinking in the early church. Failure to acknowledge the presence of divergent strands of thinking breeds a one-dimensional interpretation of early Christian history—and of Christian ethics—that is deficient. The fact that patristic literature up to the mid-to-late second century is silent on the subject of Christians and soldiering does not require an interpretation that views it as evidence of universal or uniform convictions among Christians, as is broadly assumed. Historical and sociological considerations are sufficient to indicate that military service would not have been a pressing matter for the first four generations of Christians.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, the early silence does not explain why, by the late second century, things had already begun to change.<sup>100</sup> Clearly, based on opposition of the “later Tertullian” and Origen’s

response to Celsus, the situation was very different and in large measure provoked by the fact of increasing numbers of Christians in the army.<sup>101</sup> From the mid-to-late second century, then, we find evidence of a divergence in Christian opinion and practice. Furthermore, that patristic witnesses from the third century onward mirror strikingly diverse viewpoints is significant.

An important implication of our findings is that the presumption of a compromise with the empire by the fourth- and fifth-century Church—a view that has been broadly accepted by most of Christendom—is needing a measure of adjustment. The notion that the empire, or the Roman army itself, was “Christianized” overnight or that the Fathers of the Church from the fourth century onward somehow became the unwitting and uncritical handmaiden of the empire is simplistic, predicated on a highly selective, strongly Protestant, and somewhat discolored reading (when not a nonreading) of patristic sources. Moreover, it mirrors a failure, historically, to appreciate the vicissitudes characterizing relations between the Church and the state throughout the first four centuries.<sup>102</sup> Additionally, that the New Testament, from the standpoint of Christian ethics, neither proscribes nor devalues military service or the use of force lends support to our interpretation, and therefore, should inform our reading of the pre-Constantinian fathers.

Thus, we must urge a reevaluation of conventional thinking about the early Christians that heretofore has governed our thinking. Rather than approach the early Fathers with an ideological bias that mirrors contemporary theological and ethical concerns, we might acknowledge the full weight of patristic evidence, simultaneously considering patristic witnesses that are not as one-sided as we may have thought while at the same time rereading the “pacifist” fathers with a view to appreciate the complexity and ambiguity that may be mirrored in their arguments. And because most contemporary accounts of the first three centuries attempt to make this period an example to—and thus prescriptive for—the present, scholarly and theological integrity requires an accurate accounting of the com-

plexity and diversity of pre-Constantinian Christian attitudes toward the military. Surely, it is worth noting that dissenting attitudes toward Christian enlistment in the Roman army during this period are individual and not collective or ecclesial. No controversy involving the entire Church or even between churches erupted concerning Christian participation in the military. And we are justified in asking whether those individuals who did dissent were in fact representative of the Church at large and conciliar teaching.<sup>103</sup>

Indeed, we should not be overly surprised to find ambivalence or disagreement among early Christians on such controversial matters. In truth, diversity is more likely than uniformity to approximate the full range of Christian thinking—then and now—about soldiering and war.<sup>104</sup>

### Notes

1. Roland H. Bainton, *Christian Attitudes toward War and Peace* (New York/Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), 66.
2. *Ibid.*
3. John Howard Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, Institute of Mennonite Studies 3 (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1964), 56.
4. Representative are John Howard Yoder, *When War Is Unjust: Being Honest in Just-War Thinking* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996); *The Politics of Jesus* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids, MI/Carlisle, UK: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1994); *What Would You Do? A Serious Answer to a Standard Question* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983); *Nevertheless: The Varieties of Religious Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971); and *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1971).
5. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament—Community, Cross New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1996), 318.
6. *Ibid.*, 341.
7. *Ibid.*, 317.
8. Robert G. Clouse, “The Christian Church and Peace through the Centuries,” in E. Morris Sider and Luke Keefer, Jr., ed., *A Peace Reader* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel, 2002), 73.
9. *Ibid.*, 71.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, 71–72.

12. Ibid., 72.
13. Bainton's account, perhaps more than any over the last forty years, has shaped the conventional view of the early church. What is remarkable is the degree to which this portrait of early-Christian attitudes toward military service and war has achieved currency across wider Christendom—Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant (and I write as one who grew up in a Mennonite, and thus Anabaptist, context). A telling illustration of the dominant interpretation of the early church is that one is hard-pressed to identify more than several monographs published during the last one hundred years that have sought to present evidence from the Fathers that the early church was *not* universally and uniformly pacifist. Exceptions are Adolf von Harnack's *Militia Christi: The Christian Religion and the Military in the First Three Centuries*, trans. D. M. Gracie (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981; originally published in 1905 by J. C. B. Mohr under the title *Militia Christi: Die christliche Religion und der Soldatenstand in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*); Louis J. Swift's *The Early Fathers on War and Military Service* (Messages of Fathers of the Church 19; Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1983); and John Helge-land, Robert J. Daly, and J. Patout Burns, *Christians and the Military: The Early Experience* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985).
14. Clouse, "The Christian Church and Peace," 72.
15. Ibid., 73 (emphasis added).
16. Correlatively, is Augustine to be construed as the "product" of the merger of church and state, as Clouse asserts? Is such an accurate reading of *De civitate dei* as well as assorted Augustinian letters? And is in fact *De civitate dei* a mirror of church-state conflation? The limitations of the present study, which focuses on pre-Constantinian Fathers, prevent us from reexamining the basis of such claims.
17. Thus, for example, Roland Bainton's account of the early church as pacifist should not surprise us, given the fact of his Quaker affiliation. Similarly, Yoder's Mennonite Anabaptist convictions require of him such an interpretation. And the same might be said of Robert Clouse's confessional commitments as a leader in the Brethren Church. It is fair to say that their interpretations of early Christian history approximate what one might anticipate.
18. *Apol.* 39 (*Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1.176).
19. *Tat.* 11. (*ANF* 2.69).
20. *Plea for Christians* 1 (*ANF* 2.129).
21. *Apostolic Preaching* 96 (*Ancient Christian Writers* 16.106).
22. *1 Clement* 61.1–2. Swift is surely correct to note that Clement's attitude toward the empire, following the extensive persecutions of Domitian, are nothing short of remarkable ("War and the Christian Conscience I: The Early Years," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.23.2:843, n. 34).
23. Ibid. 60.4.
24. E.g., Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 17.3; Athenagoras, *Plea for Christians* 37; Tertullian, *Apol.* 30; Cyprian, *Ad Demetr.* 20; Arnob. *Adv. nat.* 4.
25. *Apol.* 39.2.

26. John Helgeland, "Christians and the Roman Army A.D. 173–337," *Church History* 43 (1974): 150.
27. *Apol.* 30 and 32.
28. *Ibid.*, 42.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Adv. Jud.* 3 (*ANF* 3.154). In several of his writings, Tertullian will apply future, eschatological promise concerning "swords into plowshares," foretold by Old Testament prophets, to the present age in Christ.
31. *On Idol.* 19. As to the latter, Tertullian almost seems conflicted, unable to process the New Testament data and reconcile it with his beliefs. "Of course," he muses  
     if faith comes later and finds any preoccupied with military service, their case is different, as in the instance of those whom John [the Baptist] used to receive for baptism, and of those most faithful centurions, I mean the centurion whom Christ approves, and the centurion whom Peter instructs [Cornelius]; yet, at the same time, when a man has become a believer, and faith has been sealed, there must be either an immediate abandonment of it [i.e., the military office], which has been the course with many—or all sorts of quibbling will have to be resorted to in order to avoid offending God. (*De Corona* 11 [*ANF* 3.100])
32. *De Cor.* 11 (*ANF* 3.99, emphasis added).
33. *Ibid.* 12 (*ANF* 3.101).
34. *On Idol.* 19.
35. Hereon see Friedrich Klingmüller, "Sacramentum," in *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* 2.1667–74 (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1980).
36. Important discussions of the military cult of the early Christian centuries are to be found in John Helgeland, "Christians and the Roman Army from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine," *ANRW* II, 149–63; Helgeland, Daly, and Burns, *Christians and the Military*; and Frances Young, "The Early Church: Military Service, War and Peace," *Theology* 92 (1989): 491–503.
37. A useful resource in this regard is the volume by military historian Paul Christopher, *The Ethics of War and Peace* (rev. ed.; Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999), esp. chap. 1 and 2.
38. *De Cor.* 12; cf. also *On Idol.* 16 and 19.
39. *On Idol.* 18 and *De cult. fem.* 1.1; 2.1–13.
40. *On Idol.* 15.
41. The event is depicted on the column (arch of triumph) of Marcus Aurelius in Rome; cf. also *M. Aurelius* 24.4 and *Dio* 71.8–10. On coins minted by Marcus Aurelius, Jupiter is depicted hurling thunderbolts at Germanic hordes.
42. Tertullian, *Apol.* 5 and *Ad Scap.* 2, and Eusebius, *H.E.* 4.3–5.7.
43. Historians differ as to the exact date; the range is from A.D. 171 (so, e.g., Philip Carrington, *The Early Christian Church, Vol. 2: The Second Christian Century* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957], 224–25) to 174 (Robert M. Grant, *Augustus*

to *Constantine: The Rise and Triumph of Christianity in the Roman World* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1970], 91).

44. *Apol.* 5.
45. The 12th legion had been stationed in Cappadocia (present-day eastern Turkey) before the war where there were known to be many Christian recruits.
46. *Apol.* 5. Pagan accounts give credit variously to the emperor himself, an Egyptian magician, and pagan gods.
47. *H.E.* 5.5. Writing shortly after the Edict of Milan (A.D. 313), Eusebius uses the words "Report has it" to describe the incident involving the 12th legion.
48. Helgeland, "Christians and the Roman Army," *ANRW* II.23.2: 771–72, is correct to infer that it is implausible to imagine Christians appearing all of a sudden here in the Balkans; thus, Christian participation in the army must have occurred long before the early 170s. Interpreters as divergent as Stephen Gero, "*Miles Gloriosus*: The Christian and Military Service according to Tertullian," *Church History* 39 (1970): 285–98, and James Turner Johnson, Johnson, *The Quest for Peace: Three Moral Traditions in Western Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 3–66, point to social factors that in plausible ways account for this shift in the second century.
49. The degree to which Tertullian's increasingly sectarian attitudes were attributable to Montanism remains speculative, even when it is worth noting and certainly plausible. The greater factor in Tertullian's change of attitude may well have been the influx of Christians into the military profession, which aroused Tertullian to the potential dangers therein, as Gero, "*Miles Gloriosus*," 289–91, posits.
50. So, for example, *De Cor.* 11.4: *Ipsium de castris lucis in castra tenebrarum nomen deferre transgressionis est.*
51. On the evolution of Tertullian's views, see also Hans von Campenhausen, *Tradition and Life in the Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 160–70 ("Military Service in the Early Church"), and Stephen Gero, "*Miles Gloriosus*." Gero's essay is a highly nuanced examination of Tertullian's increasingly rigorist position.
52. *Cont. Cels.* 5.33 (*ANF* 4.558).
53. *Ibid.* 3.7 (*ANF* 4.467).
54. *Ibid.* (*ANF* 4.467–68).
55. *Ibid.* 8.73 (*ANF* 4.667).
56. *Ibid.* (*ANF* 4.668).
57. *Ibid.*
58. *Ibid.*
59. *Ibid.*
60. *On Idol.* 17. With Origen, Tertullian acknowledges that a considerable number of Christians were already serving in the Roman legions, but unlike Origen he concedes certain conditions under which he believes a Christian *might* possibly serve as a magistrate, provided one avoid certain idolatrous contexts, as did Joseph and Daniel in the Old Testament (*On Idol.* 17).

61. *Strom.* 4.7.
62. *Paed.* 12 (ANF 2.267).
63. Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 16.17.
64. *Ibid.* 16.10–22.
65. *Ibid.* 16.17–19.
66. *Ep.* 1.6 (ANF 5.277).
67. *Treatise* 9.16 (ANF 5.488).
68. *Ad Demtr.* 20; *Ad Demtr.* 17; *Ad Fort.* 13. Swift's commentary on Cyprian is refreshingly nuanced ("War and the Christian Conscience," 850–51).
69. Dionysius of Alexandria, *Fragments* 2.1 (ANF 6.96).
70. *Ibid.* 2.8 (ANF 6.100).
71. Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 18 (ANF 7.153).
72. *Ibid.* 20 (ANF 7.187).
73. *Ibid.* 7 (ANF 7.169).
74. Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 10 (ANF 7.304–5).
75. *Ibid.* 11 (ANF 7.305).
76. Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 5.18.
77. This is vividly on display in chapters 37–52 of Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*. See especially chapter 44.
78. Sixteenth-century Anabaptism rejected the views of Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli regarding Christian participation in the affairs of the state. An important difference, however, between Anabaptists of today, at least Anabaptist academics, and their ancestors must be pointed out. As evidenced by the sixth of seven articles of the Schleithem Confession, penned in 1527 by the Swiss Brethren as a brief summary of Anabaptist beliefs, historic Anabaptism affirmed that the sword in the hand of the authorities is ordained by God for the twin purposes of punishment and protection. Anabaptist theologians and ethicists today, joined by other religious pacifists, are characterized by an exceedingly apocalyptic view of the powers—far more negative than that of their forebears. So, for example, Yoder, the most influential Anabaptist theologian of the last fifty years, argues in *The Politics of Jesus* and other works that not Romans 13 but Revelation 13 is the New Testament's normative teaching on the powers. Notwithstanding the early Anabaptists' radical separation from society, and while the Schleithem Confession expressly forbids the Christian believer to use violent force, it does *not* reject violence *per se* in the hand of the magistrate.
79. That political authority can be abused is beyond controversy and thus immaterial to the apostolic argument.
80. At the bare minimum, these episodes amount to an implicit legitimizing of the military calling. See Gero, "*Miles Gloriosus*," 286.
81. It is significant that Ambrose, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Grotius all cite popular misinterpretation in their day of the Sermon on the Mount, and Matthew 5:38–42 in particular, among the religious. All make the distinction between personal and public grievances, between matters of the heart and matters of state. All agree that

- the Christian must resist evil to protect others, even when the form of this resistance will vary and depend on the particular situation. And all are concerned about the common weal, which is invigorated by Christians' civic responsibility.
82. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.20.10.
  83. Ibid. Luther stands in fundamental agreement with Calvin in this regard, as evidenced in his treatise *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved*.
  84. Hugo Grotius, *The Law of War and Peace* 2.6–7.
  85. Matthew 26:51–52 and Luke 22:49–51.
  86. So, for example, 1 Corinthians 5:11; 6:9; 10:8, 14; Galatians 5:19–20; Colossians 3:5; Ephesians 5:5; 1 Peter 4:3; and Revelation 2:14.
  87. Edward A. Ryan, "The Rejection of Military Service by the Early Christians," *Theological Studies* 12 (1952): 1–32, is one of a few to have argued that the early church was not pacifist. While there is some merit to his observation that those in the early church who were strongly pacifistic tended toward theologically heterodox views (e.g., Tatian, Montanists such as Tertullian, and in some respects Origen) or heresy (e.g., Marcion), this explanation is too simplistic, failing to offer a more nuanced account of diversity among Christians.
  88. For example, in the regions specified by early-Christian maps as Bithynia, Pontus, and Cappadocia (i.e., present-day northern and central Turkey; cf. 1 Pet. 1:1), there were known to be many Christian recruits into the Roman army. For a sociological accounting of this phenomenon, see James Turner Johnson, *The Quest for Peace: Three Moral Traditions in Western Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), chapter 1.
  89. The contemporary implication of this presumption against coercive force is that none may legitimately serve as policemen, law-enforcement officers, security guards, soldiers, National Guardsmen, judges, legal theorists, politicians, or policy analysts in our day.
  90. Hereon see, more recently, J. Daryl Charles, "Between Pacifism and Jihad: Justice and Neighbor-Love in the Just-War Tradition," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 8, no. 4 (2005): 86–123. Relatedly, the suggestion by both Roland Bainton (*Christian Attitudes toward War and Peace*, 78–80) and John Cadoux (*The Early Christian Attitude toward War* [London: Headley Brothers, 1919], 15–16) that Christians enlisted in the army for only "peaceful" duties (presupposing that such a choice were possible) collapses under the weight of lacking evidence. As Helgeland ("Christians and the Roman Army," 161–62) has noted, this distinction is a figment of modern imagination and not ancient realities.
  91. On this issue, Paul Christopher, *The Ethics of War and Peace* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998), 20–22, see n. 39, has demonstrated the hermeneutical problems quite lucidly. For a more extensive discussion of the *lex talionis* in the context of Matthew 5:38–42, see J. Daryl Charles, "'Do Not Suppose That I Have Come . . .': The Ethic of the 'Sermon on the Mount' Reconsidered," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 46, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 47–72.

92. Cf. Matthew 5:17: "Do not suppose that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets." Biblical commentary is generally agreed that by Jesus's day, rabbinic interpretation as well as common practice mirrored a distorted interpretation of the *lex talionis*, based on financial calculations.
93. While this constitutes a subtheme in many of Yoder's writings, it receives concentrated treatment in chapter 8 of *The Christian Witness to the State*.
94. A proper perspective on Romans 13 and Revelation 13 is that the two are not mutually exclusive—a perspective that acknowledges a certain tension. Political power is not inherently evil even when it can be used for evil purposes.
95. Kurt Aland, "The Relation between Church and State in Early Times: A Reinterpretation," *Journal of Theological Studies* 19 (1968): 124.
96. Thus, for example, the apostolic admonition: "Show proper respect to everyone, love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king" (1 Pt 2:17).
97. Louis Swift, "War and the Christian Conscience," 836, n. 2.
98. *Ibid.*, 836–37.
99. See Gero, "*Miles Gloriosus*," 289–91; Helgeland, Daly, and Burns, *Christians and the Military*; Swift, "War and the Christian Conscience," 835–68; and Swift, *The Early Fathers on War and Military Service*.
100. On the silence of the Church for a century and three-quarters, Hans von Campenhausen's prescient remarks are worth noting: "For little enclaves of a fairly humble status in the peaceful interior of a well-ordered empire, where there was practically no conscription, it was easy to avoid anything to do with the army. . . . Christians were still outside the field of political responsibility. . . . But this state of affairs could not last" ("Christians and Military Service in the Early Church," in *Tradition and Life in the Church: Essays and Lectures in Church History* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960], 161–62).
101. Relatedly, one might make a strong case for the increased attractiveness of the military profession during the period of the early Severan emperors (late second and early third century), as Ramsay MacMullen, *Soldier and Civilian in the Later Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 152–77, and Gero, "*Miles Gloriosus*," 289–91, seek to do. Following MacMullen, Gero notes several immensely important practical developments occurring during the reign of Severus that would have had far-reaching effects in terms of soldier enlistment. For example, in addition to higher pay, soldiers were permitted to form *collegia*, marriages of soldiers were normalized, with families of soldiers being granted permission to live within the camp precincts, while frontier troops were given land of their own to develop.
102. James Turner Johnson rightly notes: "The social transformation that brought Christianity into a relation of acceptance and support of the state was . . . not simply a result of changes within the Church itself; it was also a result of changes in the larger society. Nor was it the expression of a growing moral laxity, as has often been asserted" (*The Quest for Peace*, 40–41). Even a representative of the Eastern Orthodox

tradition, theologian Stanley Harakas, is willing to concede that Eusebius's exuberance for the new situation in the empire, as it influenced peace and war perspectives of the Church, while it may seem foreign to the modern mind, nonetheless contained "enough benefits for the Church so as to outweigh some of the concerns which the earlier Church found so ready to promote in a radically different social, religious and moral climate." These benefits included "the end of persecution, the establishment of the Church, the support for the spread of the Gospel, the eradication of heresies, and the incorporation of Christian values into the legal and social system of the Empire" ("The Teaching on Peace in the Fathers," available at [www.incommunion.org/articles/essays/peace-in-the-fathers](http://www.incommunion.org/articles/essays/peace-in-the-fathers)).

103. Few have pressed this particular point more lucidly than Helgeland, "Christians and the Roman Army from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine," 733–34.
104. In addition to the volumes by Swift as well as Helgeland, Daly, and Burns (on both, see n. 12), for a reasonably balanced assessment of patristic witnesses, see also David G. Hunter, "A Decade of Research on Early Christians and Military Service," *Religious Studies Review* 18, no. 2 (1992): 87–94, and Frances Young, "The Early Church: Military Service, War and Peace," *Theology* 92 (1989): 491–503.