

ONWARD CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS! CHRISTIANS IN THE ARMY

A. van de Beek¹

ABSTRACT

On the topic of Christians in the army, the author compares two traditions in Christian theology, one of which being Eusebius. In this tradition, soldiers are praised as warriors for the sake of God. A recent sermon from the USA and one from nineteenth-century Germany are analysed, compared and positioned within the tradition of Eusebius. The second tradition, characterised as pacifist, was dominant in the early church. Texts of Tertullian and Origen are analysed. It is argued in the third section that war can only be justified within a religious framework. A memorial ceremony in the Netherlands serves as the eye opener. The conclusion is drawn that both traditions dealing with holiness in respect of soldiers in the army exclude each other. This implies that much homework will be required from theologians in order to clarify the Christian theological position.

DEDICATION

This article is dedicated to Professor Sybrand Strauss on the occasion of his retirement. Many professors of theology retire at a time when they have reached their professional summit, and their departure is much regretted. Professor Strauss is one such professor. In one of his classes, I noticed his excellent, didactic capabilities. He aimed for a free and erudite theology. It is a pity that he is retiring. I hope he will enjoy his farm!

1. INTRODUCTION

On 29 May 2005 I attended a service at the Ward Presbyterian Church in Northville, Michigan (near Detroit) in the United States. As it was Memorial Day, the sermon was directed to soldiers in the army. It was a classic example of Eusebian Christianity. I thought it would be interesting to analyse and compare it with similar Christian texts and with texts from a different tradition in Christian thought, namely pacifism. In addition to this specific sermon, I have selected a nineteenth-century German sermon and some texts from Eusebius for the one tradition, and texts from Tertullian and Origen to illustrate early Christian paci-

1 Prof. A. van de Beek, Professor of Symbolics and Director of the International Reformed Theological Institute at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, and Extraordinary Professor of Theology at the University of Stellenbosch.

fism before the time of Eusebius. With respect to a more profound analysis of the topic, I shall subsequently deal with a text from a ceremony that took place at a memorial cemetery in the Netherlands on 4 May 2003.

The theme of Christian soldiers in the army is currently a burning issue as many soldiers fight with the idea that they are defending Christian values. Christian theology must reflect on this. It is hoped that this article will contribute towards such reflection.

2. GOD'S SOLDIERS

2.1 A Sunday morning in Ward Church

The readings during the service at Ward Church were chosen from 1 Chronicles 11 and 1 Corinthians 13 which deal with David's heroes and the song of love, respectively. Rev. Mark Jumper started his sermon from the perspective of Memorial Day. "We are not the first to honour our warriors."² We have done so in a long tradition and participate in what Israel did. "Ancient Israel took care to record, in God's Word, the exploits of its greatest heroes." Honouring our soldiers is not an option; it is a holy duty. We honour them "as we should". A comparison of Memorial Day in the United States with ancient Israel puts the activities of the American army in the perspective of a canonical tradition. This is confirmed with reference to "God's Word", according to which such memorial celebrations are appropriate. "Scripture therefore gives us the example, the model, the need of praising our military heroes."

Scripture not only gives us the example of and the need for celebration but also the model. It is a model for *praising*. The concepts used tell us about the attitude of the preacher towards the soldiers. The focal point is not compassion for the mourning relatives of the fallen soldiers, but praise of the soldiers. They are also called "our military heroes." A soldier in the army is not merely a person in an organisation; he is a hero. Soldiers are *our* heroes. They are fighting on our behalf. They are normal persons who are dedicated to their task.

2 The quotations are from the abstract which Rev. Jumper willingly sent to me.

The focus of our attention is directed to “those who demonstrated a special anointing, dedication, skill, success, in serving God’s people.” First, it is a special anointing. Anointment not only implies a special vocation, but also a special divine empowerment. Priests and kings were anointed in ancient Israel. This special anointment takes place in a special dedication. There are people who are devoted to their holy task with the skills to fulfil this task as a divine gift. They thus succeed in what they are called for: “serving God’s people”.

Their task is a holy one and they are elected to “defend God’s people”. The sermon adds “and accomplish God’s will”. Defending God’s people and accomplishing God’s will are a *bendiadyds*. The soldiers fulfil the will of God. In an interview on Dutch television, a chaplain of the US army in Afghanistan spoke in a similar way. He considered it his task to assure soldiers that they are fighting for a good cause. It is the task of a Christian pastor in the army to retain the motivation of soldiers for doing their task as warriors. Jumper’s sermon addresses the men and women in the army to regard themselves as sent by God and to be praised in the worship.

Unfortunately, people do not always have this attitude towards their warriors. Uriah, the Hittite, is on David’s list of mighty men. David sent him to death in order to cover his own sexual sins. David was wrong. “Sadly, we don’t always treat our heroes well ... also since ancient times.” The Word of God reveals to us how we must deal with this. The sin must be revealed, it will have its consequences, and it is forgiven. Sin should not go on. After sin, we should do the right thing. “It is always right to do the best right possible, after a wrong is committed.” This right thing is that Israel, according to God’s Word,

publicly recognized Uriah’s service, publicly reminded themselves of King David’s sin, publicly apologized by permanently enshrining Uriah’s memory as an exemplary soldier.

Leaders may fail and abuse the servants of the Lord, but the public must restore that. They must keep the memory of the heroes and the sin of the supreme commander of the army vivid.³ “It is even better to do right

3 The reference to David’s sin may implicitly refer to Clinton’s sexual aberrancies. These must be remembered, and restoration is enshrining the memory of the soldiers who fought the right fight.

by our warriors now, and to do right by those who have died for us.” Our memory should not focus on the past, but on the right war which the American soldiers led against terrorism.

Rev. Jumper interprets present events in the light of this biblical foundation. He refers to the posthumous ceremony during which the Medal of Honour was conferred on Sergeant First Class Paul Ray Smith, who died in Iraq. Pictures of this ceremony were projected on the wall of the church. He was a hero like David's heroes, and his acts are memorialised. His family receives his medal and they are not bitter. Their mourning is not even mentioned, only their pride. Smith's wife Brigit, a German citizen, was so inspired by Paul's sacrifice and the nation's recognition that she declared her intention to become a U.S. citizen. Obviously, she was aware of the high calling of her husband and she wanted to share his vocation by serving his country. She relinquished her former identity just as he did. This section of the sermon entails an unexpressed similarity to people who come to Israel for the sake of the people, their glorious king and their Lord, such as Ruth and the Queen of Sheba. Mahlon's foreign wife Ruth said: "Your people will be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). Likewise, Smith's German wife gave up her identity in order to become an American citizen.

“What inspires someone to give his all? Some studies say that they die for the love of their buddies.” As important as this may be, it cannot explain why they went in order to fulfil their calling. “There is a deeper reason, founded on the deepest truths of God's Word, as we heard in 1 Corinthians 13: Faith, Hope, Love.”

The abstract explains the three foundations of Christian life:

To give your life, you are showing *faith*

That you are serving in a higher cause

That your nation is worthy of your service and your sacrifice.

That your service and sacrifice will be remembered

That God will take care of you, no matter what

You are showing *hope* that

Your service and sacrifice will be used well

That your cause will be helped

That the future you lost will be built by others

That God in His Providence will make all things work together for good

You are showing *love*
For people you don't even know
For your nation
For your buddies
For your family
For God who holds your life in His hands.

While the interpretation of the song of love was given, pictures of American army tanks in Iraq were projected on the wall. The service of the nation in a battle for freedom is love, strengthened by hope and founded in faith. Their surrender to death is ultimate love. It is the love of God who, by their service in His providence, will make all things work together for good. "We have reason every day to thank God for those who are, even now, giving their all for us."

Service in the army is a service of love unto death. The soldiers are willing to give their lives for us. This is not only human service but also a service of anointed people. It is neither a human invention, nor a human calling:

Their gift is founded on the deepest, greatest, most enduring principles of God's Word and the order of God's Creation.

The task which American warriors fulfil in Iraq is not only similar to the calling of the people of Israel, but it is also the fulfilment of the fundamental intentions of creation. They do not mind losing their lives, because they serve a higher aim: the fulfilment of creation according to God's Word. The congregation should not only praise them. They should join them in the service of the Lord, *i.e.* "blessing the world with God's gifts of faith, hope, and love". This blessing is interpreted in the sermon as serving the nation; even unto death if it is deemed necessary. Those who sacrifice their lives are the highest heroes, not only of the country, but also of the creation and the Creator. The deaths of soldiers do cause pain. But this pain is not merely a fate. It is a holy sacrifice which should not be regretted but praised. For "the purpose of the pain is to make our lives and our world a better place." "The purpose of pain" was the title of the sermon. The purpose is clear: to make our world a better place. The American nation is fighting for that purpose and Americans are willing to follow their calling. Even foreigners such as Smith's wife will join them in this holy perspective. Every Christian should be a soldier in this war.

2.2 On the battlefields of Leipzig

On the occasion of the 50th memorial of the battle of Leipzig in 1863, the German court chaplain, C. Schwarz, gave a sermon entitled “Our German nation has rightly fought, therefore it is crowned.”⁴ The text was 2 Timothy 2:5: “He does not receive the victor’s crown unless he competes according to the rules” (p. 70). The sermon is strikingly similar to but also differs from that of Jumper. These differences lie in the context of the sermons rather than in the basic structure of thought.

Schwarz’s sermon focuses on people. A war is not considered to be neutral, but a people’s dedication to their calling. This calling is not so much a human call than the calling of God himself. Thus, entering the army is a holy task. The battlefields of Leipzig were a sanctuary. “They entered the war as they entered a divine worship” (p. 76). German soldiers entered the battle as they enter the church. You come before God’s face.

It was a *holy* enthusiasm ... Anything idle and futile melted in this holy fire; ... their hearts were wholly directed to Him, the Only One, the Eternal One in this change of the fates, who alone could *save*, who alone could give the right power and the courage to succeed (p. 77; italics in the original).

The verse in 2 Timothy mentions *right* fighting, that is competing according to the rules. For Schwarz there is no doubt that this battle was the right war because it was preceded by moral renewal; it was a sacrifice given with enthusiasm, and it was on behalf of the fatherland. Therefore, it was a sacrifice that can never be too precious (p. 72).

Schwarz also refers to Israel. People were called to this battle just as the prophets called the people to the holy war (p. 74). They are the people of God, called to fulfil his will. Therefore their relatives should not be troubled but proud. Schwarz refers to a sermon by his predecessor Schleiermacher who was court chaplain in Berlin in 1813.

At the end of this sermon he speaks to the mothers of the young warriors and praised them blessed to have brought forward such sons. They wept and sobbed, but they were happy (p. 77).

4 C. Schwarz, *Predigten aus der Gegenwart*, 3. Samml., 2. Aufl., Brockhaus, Leipzig 1869, S. 69-81. “Unser deutsches Volk hat recht gekämpft, darum ward es gekrönt.”

The soldiers of that time understood this very well. When the king asked an old officer of the army, who had four sons as soldiers, how his sons were doing, the officer answered: "We are doing well. All my sons died on behalf of his Majesty" (p. 79).

As in Jumper's sermon, being a soldier is conceived as a holy task — a divine calling. Like the German army, the American army is compared with the people of Israel. It is an honour when they fight not only for the soldiers themselves but also for their relatives. It is even more honourable when they die.

They died the most beautiful death. Their head is crowned with the wreath of glory forever ... They died as victors! They were crowned!
(p. 71)

Schwarz holds a similar view in his interpretation of the attitude of the soldiers as faith. He does not use the triplet, faith-hope-love, explicitly, but it is the primary thought of the second part of his sermon. The key concept is "faith" (p. 74). For a Lutheran minister, this is obvious. "Faith" implies Christian faith, just as faith, hope and love do for American Presbyterians. Thus, Schwarz can easily shift to hope and the atmosphere of his sermon is mere love for the fatherland. True faith turns away from "the selfishness that destroys everything to self-sacrifice that can restore and save everything" (p. 75).

Schwarz concludes his sermon with a calling on the audience. They should be grateful to the people who sacrificed their lives by keeping to their ideals. They should keep to their divine calling and be willing to sacrifice themselves on behalf of the nation (pp. 79-81). "This faith in the future of the nation was a godly faith" (p. 77).

The basic thoughts are similar but the differences are more obvious: difference of language and different manner of expression. The language of Schwarz is more dramatic. It is still tinged by Romanticism and by pictures: the blood, dead bodies, and the rising sun in the morning as well as the innumerable dead bodies at sunset. This is the manner in which he touches his audience, just as Jumper touches his twentieth-century Americans. Schwarz hardly refers to his Bible text, whereas Jumper takes it into account. This was simply the character of preaching in Germany at that time.

The more remarkable differences concern the content. First, Schwarz deals more explicitly with the moral attitude of the Germans before the war. They were combatting not only the French but also their own failures. The enemy inside them was the most dangerous (p. 72). It was because of their own guilt that they entered this contest. Only after conversion could their fate turn. This is the way in which Schwarz introduces biblical notions, not by referring directly to the readings, but by taking into account what the prophets of Israel reported about Israel's own failure which brought disaster to them. We can also trace the deeply rooted Lutheran pair of sin and grace in this awareness of the Germans' own mistakes. There is thus a deeper consciousness of sin in Schwarz's sermon.

As soon as he substantiates his view on sin, his sermon no longer has much in common with Luther. The mistake of the Germans before and during the French occupation was their lack of unity (p. 73). They only considered their own interests and not the nation. Consequently, the French could easily overtake their power. Cities and towns were not prepared to sacrifice their wealth and life in order to defend the country. The wealthy were not interested in the poor, and the poor enjoyed the turn of fate of the powerful after the French conquest of the country. Such people do not deserve God's help. But after repentance, they appreciated the meaning of being one German nation (p. 75). That was not an easy way. Many lives were sacrificed. The Germans no longer asked for their own well-being, but for that of the nation. This resulted in victory. Only those who fight rightly will be crowned.

There is a sense of guilt in Schwarz' sermon. It concerns not so much the sexual abuse by a king and its consequences, but the lack of unity in society. Although voices in the USA carefully try to make a connection between the power of money and economic interests, these tones are lacking in Jumper's sermon. The social differences, the selfishness of the wealthy and the resentment of the poor mentioned by Schwarz are not expressed. Jumper does not call for repentance in society as his German colleague did.

However, Schwarz has his own interests. He was writing at the time of the unification of Germany in 1863. He belonged to the circles that strove for that unity. He argued that a lack of unity was a high risk for the Germans. They should forget their differences and, like the men

in Leipzig, be strong in order to defend their land, their culture, their poetry and thought (“Dichten und Denken”) (p. 78). The reference to the failures of the past is in the interest of the unity of the nation in the present. The Germans should complete the ideal for which the soldiers in Leipzig died.

The cathedral of German freedom and unity is erected at least in its invisible walls, that is in the intentions of the people, and it is our task to fight in order to crown this building with the melons, pinnacles and towers (p. 80).

The Germans succeeded in founding their own united nation. The way to this unity was paved with revenge on the French in the war of 1870-1, when Germany occupied and annexed large parts of France. The reference to the sin of the past has to do with the settling of power in the present and the future. In view of this the difference with Jumper does not exist.

The other difference is that Schwarz deals far more with the suffering of the German people and that of the soldiers who died. Jumper also mentions pain as the way to glory, but he does not deal with it extensively. Schwarz not only mentions the dying soldiers (p. 70f.) and grieving mothers, but also describes the suffering after the battle. Schwarz mentions

the burning of towns, of which the inhabitants wandered homeless, shabby, hungry; about the devastated fields, about the wounded and ill people in hospitals and churches, who were highly piled up in the bloody clothes in which they were carried from the battle, without food, without a bed, without care, who did not die due to their wounds but by weakness, hunger and helplessness. (p. 71)

Behind these sufferings is the suffering of the German people before the war. “You ended the defamation that was upon us,” he says in his prayer (p. 69).

Again, there is a consciousness of suffering in the USA before the war against terrorism. It is the suffering of 9/11. This is not present in Jumper’s sermon and cannot be compared with the way in which Schwarz deals with the dark fate of the past. I think this dissimilarity is a marked difference in both sermons. The USA’s war is mainly a war in order to maintain and strengthen what they have. The war of Germany was a war of liberation. “We are free” (p. 72). After occupation and oppression

the war entailed deep wounds and long-lasting scars. This creates a different mood just as most continental European thought on war differs from the feelings on war in the USA and even the United Kingdom.

Despite these differences, the similarities are far more basic. The cultural context and the historic circumstances may differ, but the theological message is identical: the war of the nation is a right war and it is a divine calling to contribute to it. This calling is higher than any value. It is even higher than human life.

2.3 A Christian who changes the world

Both sermons belong to a long, theological tradition in Christianity, in which Christians support the army of the state. This can be traced to the beginning of the fourth century when Constantine gave freedom to the church. Eusebius, one of the leading theologians of that time, was the initiator of this tradition.

In his *History of the Church*, Eusebius tells about Christianity from its beginnings till the reign of Constantine. In the last chapter of his tenth book, he mentions the decisive battle. The tenth chapter is the apex of history, “the seal of the whole work.”⁵ Constantine marks the beginning of the new era. Constantine and his son defeat the co-ruler Licinius whom Eusebius portrays in the darkest colours.⁶ He continues:

[T]he protector of the virtuous, mingling hatred for evil with love for good, went forth with his son Crispus, a most beneficent prince, and extended a saving right hand to all that were perishing. Both of them, father and son, under the protection, as it were, of God, the universal King, with the Son of God, the Saviour of all, as their leader and ally, drew up their forces on all sides against the enemies of the Deity and won an easy victory; God having prospered them in the battle in all respects according to their wish.⁷

5 *Historia Ecclesiae* X.1. The quotations are taken from: *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace), *Series Two, Volume 1*, translated by Rev. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, 1890. Online Edition www.newadvent/fathers 2004 by K. Knight.

6 Eusebius deals with this period more extensively in his *Vita Constantini* II, 1-18. Quotations are from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace), *Series Two, Volume 1*, 1890. Online edition www.newadvent/fathers 2004 by K. Knight.

7 Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiae* X.9.

This passage conveys the full-fledged theology of the Christian soldiers fighting for the sake of God. It is not their own war, it is God's case. Constantine and his son are compared with God and his Son.

Constantine won the battle by "calling on the Name of God the Supreme Saviour", and "giving this as the watchword to his soldiers."⁸ Constantine went to war after praying in the sanctuary.⁹

And then, as if moved by a divine impulse, he would rush from the tabernacle, and suddenly give orders to his army to move at once without delay, and on the instant to draw their swords.¹⁰

The soldiers who were the servants of Constantine were also servants of the Lord. The sign of the cross was on their shields. They prayed as soldiers of the Lord on behalf of their emperor. Soldiers had to pray when they "offered themselves up to God":

We acknowledge thee the only God: we own thee, as our King and implore thy succor. By thy favor have we gotten the victory; through thee are we mightier than our enemies. We render thanks for thy past benefits, and trust thee for future blessings. Together we pray to thee, and beseech thee long to preserve to us, safe and triumphant, our emperor Constantine and his pious sons.¹²

For Eusebius, the kingdom of God and the rule of Constantine are intertwined.¹³ He supports the emperor unconditionally.¹⁴ The soldiers in his army are the soldiers of God who, after the final victory of Constantine, offer their power for a further war: to destroy the pagan temples.¹⁵

8 *Vita Constantini* II.6.

9 *Vita Constantini* II.12 and 14.

10 *Vita Constantini* II.12.

11 *Vita Constantini* IV.21.

12 *Vita Constantini* IV.20.

13 See H. Berkhof, *Die Theologie des Eusebius von Caesarea*, Amsterdam 1939; *De kerk en de keizer. Een studie over het ontstaan van de Byzantinistische en de theocratische staatsgedachte in de vierde eeuw*, Amsterdam 1946.

14 He does not report that Constantine kills his son Crispus two years after the glorious victory of the father and the son against Licinius (see C. Fahner, *Eusebius' Kerkgeschiedenis*, Zoetermeer 2000, p. 442). His name is not even mentioned in the *Vita Constantini*.

15 Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* III.56.

The theology of Eusebius has been dominant in the church since his time. Both in the East and the West, rulers called their subjects to the army for the sake of God. They were fighting the good fight.

3. CHRISTIAN PACIFISM

Regardless of how dominant this tradition may have been since the time of Eusebius, there is a different tradition in the church. Just as Christian soldiers are praised as soldiers of God, there is a tradition of Christian pacifism. This tradition prevails in early Christianity.

3.1 The useless crown

Tertullian begins his book *On the Chaplet* with a story (it may be fictive but this is immaterial for the argument):

Very lately it happened thus: while the bounty of our most excellent emperors was dispensed in the camp, the soldiers, laurel-crowned, were approaching. One of them, more a soldier of God, more steadfast than the rest of his brethren, who had imagined that they could serve two masters, his head alone uncovered, the useless crown in his hand — already even by that peculiarity known to every one as a Christian — was nobly conspicuous.

Accordingly, all began to mark him out, jeering him at a distance, gnashing on him near at hand. The murmur is wafted to the tribune, when the person had just left the ranks. The tribune at once puts the question to him, Why are you so different in your attire? He declared that he had no liberty to wear the crown with the rest. Being urgently asked for his reasons, he answered, I am a Christian. O soldier! boasting thyself in God. Then the case was considered and voted on; the matter was remitted to a higher tribunal; the offender was conducted to the prefects. At once he put away the heavy cloak, his disburdening commenced; he loosed from his foot the military shoe, beginning to stand upon holy ground; he gave up the sword, which was not necessary either for the protection of our Lord; from his hand likewise dropped the laurel crown; and now, purple-clad with the hope of his own blood, shod with the preparation of the gospel, girt with the sharper Word of God, completely equipped in the apostles' armour, and crowned more worthily with the white crown of martyrdom, he awaits in prison the largess of Christ. Thereafter adverse judgments began to be passed upon his conduct — whether on the part of Christians I do not know, for those of the heathen are not different — as if he were headstrong and rash, and too eager to die, because, in being taken to task about a mere matter of dress, he brought

trouble on the bearers of the Name, — he, forsooth, alone brave among so many soldier-brethren, he alone a Christian.¹⁶

The story focuses on the crown given to soldiers after they won the battle. A Christian soldier refuses to accept it. Tertullian realises that not all Christians behaved in this way. He was more steadfast than his brethren. Other soldiers who were Christians obviously accepted the crown and were honoured as good warriors for the sake of the empire. This soldier refuses. This is an insult to “the bounty of our most excellent emperors.” The soldiers should be impressed and proud to be called to serve them and be honoured to receive the crown. This Christian refuses. The consequence of this insult is punishment to death, “now, purple-clad with the hope of his own blood.”

What is wrong in the opinion of the other soldiers? They think that they can serve two lords. Later in the book Tertullian interprets this as God and Mammon, “Christ for pieces of gold” (ch. 12): Christ or earthly success. According to Tertullian, it is not possible to receive the chaplet, the Roman Medal of Honour, and to be a Christian. Those Christians who think otherwise are not steadfast. They are already moving away from the Word of God (ch. 1). Tertullian realises that this kind of Christian perseverance is an exception. Most Christians will compromise and try to excuse themselves by saying that it is only a disguise. What is a chaplet after all? Should you endanger your life by refusing it — and even worse — the life of other Christian soldiers? (ch. 1).

The story makes it obvious that the crown is not as innocent as the compromising people argue. It belongs to the dress of the soldier. After refusing to wear the chaplet, he takes off his cloak, his shoes and then his sword. His crown is then useless and falls from his hand. It is the crowning of his being a soldier, and, after taking off his uniform, he is no longer a soldier. On the day when the Medal of Honour is given to the heroes, he ostentatiously refuses — in the face of all other soldiers and the elite of the army and state — to be a soldier. This is a true Christian, according to Tertullian.

16 Tertullian, *De Corona*, excerpted from *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson), *Volume 3*, 1885, Online Edition www.newadvent.org/fathers 2004 by K. Knight.

It may be argued that this concerns the pagan context of the Roman army of that time. Receiving the crown meant that a soldier devoted himself to Jupiter (ch. 12). And the emperor was conceived as a divine person. So it may be wrong in that context, but not after Constantine's victory. On the one hand, Tertullian frequently refers in his book to the pagan character of the Roman army. At present it is clear that Christians cannot be soldiers. But does that not depend on the context?

What is the nature of his references to pagan rituals in the army? Does it imply that if the army were to stand in the sign of the true God, that is the sign of the cross, as Constantine commanded, he could accept the army as such? Or is it only the contextual form of a deeper refutation of the army? Of course, if you, as a Christian, were to argue against the army in the beginning of the third century you would use arguments against paganism, but such arguments could not be used after 311 AD. Therefore, we must consider the other arguments he used. Are there arguments that do not depend on the pagan context? There are. In his book Tertullian uses two arguments that are not dependent on the context. The first argument is from Scripture:

Shall it be held lawful to make an occupation of the sword, when the Lord proclaims that he who uses the sword shall perish by the sword? (ch. 11).

This argument is valid for all Christians. We cannot negotiate with it, not even on behalf of our life or that of other Christians. We cannot use the context we live in as an excuse not to be faithful to God's Word. Nowadays Christianity compromises with all kinds of seemingly solid arguments and Tertullian did not like that.

The second argument has to do with the phenomenon of war. Why did you receive a crown? Because you won. But winning a battle implies killing other people.

Is the laurel of the triumph made of leaves, or of corpses? Is it adorned with ribbons, or with tombs? (ch. 12).

What about the soldiers of Rome's enemies? What about the French soldiers in 1813? What about the soldiers in Iraq? Mothers and wives in the cities and farmhouses of the enemy are grieving for their dead sons and husbands. Is the laurel "bedewed with ointments, or with the

tears of wives and mothers?” (ch. 12). How can you be proud of a medal that is based on a person’s death?

There is one more argument. Christians are not limited to the Roman Empire. You do not know the soldiers you killed. “It may be of some Christians too; for Christ is also among the barbarians” (ch. 12). It may be compared with the battles of the Anglo-African war. Sincere Christians on both sides were praying for victory. Tertullian would ask: “Can you be a sincere Christian when you do so?” And his answer is clear.

Thus the arguments about pagan rituals and backdrops are *additional* arguments. In the present context he would use other arguments. But the aim would not change: “No Christians in the army.”

3.2 We are peacemakers

It is evident from Tertullian’s text that there were Christian soldiers in the Roman army. They had to refuse the crown and take off their cloak and shoes when they took the consequences of their faith. You could not be a faithful soldier and a faithful servant of the Lord.

A pagan writer in the second century provides evidence of the way in which Christians behaved in the army. The emperor Marcus Aurelius tells a story of the time when he was still a general in the army in Germany. There were also Christians among his troops. When the morning call sounded, the soldiers prepared their weapons. The Christian soldiers did not. They began the day with prayer. Of course, the other soldiers were angry with them. That lasted until one day when they were so thirsty that they feared dying due to lack of water. The Christian soldiers now prayed for water. When rain fell on the thirsty army, they were suddenly the heroes.¹⁷

Prayer is the weapon of a Christian. Origen argues from a theological perspective what the soldiers of Marcus Aurelius practised. At the end of his book, *Against Celsus*, he refutes the idea that Christians do not contribute to the well-being of society. They serve the emperor more than other people do. They do not serve him with weapons.

17 Epistle of Marcus Aurelius to the Senate, translated in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* I.

Celsus 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.

Our answer is that when the occasion arises we help kings, in other words, 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 any one 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 as we by our prayers vanquish all demons who stir up war, and lead to the violation of oaths, 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.¹⁸

Weapons and prayer are two ways of life which, according to Origen, cannot be reconciled. This is not an alternative invented by him. It dates back to the beginnings of Christianity. In the Gospels, both are highlighted by the authors in the story of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus is praying. That is the way to encounter the enemy. He asks his disciples to join him in prayer. They do not. They are not faithful. The prayer is the test case as to whether one is an authentic disciple of the Lord. The alternative is the sword. When one is not awake in prayer, one will take the sword. When the soldiers arrive, according to Matthew 26 (and also Mark 14 and John 18), Peter takes his sword, but Jesus forbids the use of the sword. That is the wrong choice. A sword is useless. In the end it will consume one. Jesus even restores the damage caused by Peter and his sword.

In Luke 22 there is a discussion on swords before the prayer of Jesus. Jesus asks his disciples for swords. They answer that they have two swords. “That is enough.” It is clear that the battle will not be won by means of two swords; one cannot even defend oneself against the soldiers who come to arrest Jesus. Two swords suffice to show how to use the sword. If one does not have a sword, one cannot be shown how to use it. Buy a sword, Jesus says. Two is enough. For Christians it suffices that the useless sword drops from their hand, like the useless crown

18 Origen, *Contra Celsum* VIII.73.

of the soldier of Tertullian. That is the only meaningful use of a sword: dropping it from your hand. The text of Luke does not differ from that of Matthew. It may even be stronger by making it clear that you should not use a sword, even if you have one.

Jesus himself explains to the Roman soldier Pontius Pilate why He does not make use of the sword. It is because his kingdom is not of this world. "If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews" (John 18:36). Because Jesus is King of the Kingdom of heaven, He does not have a worldly army and the heavenly army that He does have, He does not use (Matt. 26:53).

This is the decisive alternative: the kingdom of God or the kingdom of the world. Those who think in terms of earthly power and defence of earthly life must take up the sword. Those who know about the kingdom of God join their Lord in prayer. Origen ends his reaction to Celsus by refusing Celsus' offer to Christians to participate in the administration by answering that Christians serve another Lord. They are capable of working in the church.¹⁹

They follow their Lord who brings peace, not the peace of the world, but the peace of God. This is reflected by the way in which Christians behave in the world: they do not trust in weapons. Christians are peace-makers (*pacifici*), according to Origen's commentary on Matthew 26:52f: "If we must be peaceful (*pacifici*) with those who hate peace, we may not use the sword to anybody."²⁰ Origen is very clear on this issue:

[The Lord] nowhere teaches that it is right for His own disciples to offer violence to any one, however wicked.²¹

The apex of one's service is the crown. The conferring of the Medal of Honour implies that one is crowned. It is the affirmation that one's dedication was right. Both Tertullian and Origen will ask: "To whom are you ultimately dedicated?" And this kind of dedication is comprehensive: it is just as much about the crown on one's head as it is about the shoes on one's feet and the sword in one's hand. A battlefield is a holy place for a nation. One enters it as one would enter a sanctuary.

19 Origen, *Contra Celsum* VIII.75.

20 *In Mattheum* 102 (own translation from Migne, PG 13, 1752).

21 Origen, *Contra Celsum* III.7.

Tertullian's soldier enters holy ground. He does so when he takes off his shoes. Now he encounters the King of kings. This is His battlefield, where one deserves the everlasting crown.

And now, purple-clad with the hope of his own blood, shod with the preparation of the gospel, girt with the sharper word of God, completely equipped in the apostles armour, and crowned more worthily with the white crown of martyrdom, he awaits in prison the largess of Christ.

What is holy: to put on one's uniform or to take it off?

Eusebius and Tertullian give two different answers to this question. I believe they exclude each other. That means a lot of homework for Christian theology, because both belong to the Christian tradition as it has developed.

4. ON THE TOP OF THE GREBBEBERG

Tertullian argues that participation in the army is comprehensive. The award for dedication cannot be relativised. It has to do with one's being. To whom is one dedicated? It is not a partial dedication for it is the dedication of one's life. This even applies to a mercenary: he dedicates his life to the money. Consequently, the army has a religious foundation. Only religion can exceed human life.

People can sacrifice their lives on behalf of others. But in the army it is not about giving one's life freely, but because one is called to war. What kind of argument will be valid in order to convince a mother that she must give her son to death? One cannot tell her that it is necessary for oil, and even less that it is needed for the income of the shareholders of the oil company. One cannot even argue that it is needed for democracy, for is the way a government is elected more valuable than one's son's life? One cannot argue that it is needed for one's land, for is a piece of land more important than my son? It cannot even be argued that it is on behalf of the life of many other people in the future who will otherwise suffer from oppression or poverty. One cannot speak of human life in terms of quantity. One can only do so if it is about neutral statistic numbers of soldiers or victims of a disaster. But one cannot do so if it is about this single unique life of a human being who is a person whom one loves.

Schwarz tells about the old officer whose four sons died “for the sake of his majesty.” Then the king reacts emotionally.

“Not for me” he exclaimed upset “not for me, who could bear that; but for the Fatherland.” For the Fatherland, indeed. Which individual person could bear this, that rivers of blood streamed for his sake, that for his house these human sacrifices would be given?²²

Soldiers enter a battlefield as a sanctuary and a war memorial cemetery is thus holy ground.

The religious character of war became very clear to me on Memorial Day in the Netherlands on 4 May 2003. There was a solemn ceremony on the Grebbeberg, a hill in the vicinity of the town of Rhenen. This hill overlooks a valley east of it, with a range of hills on the other side of the valley. During the first days of World War II, when the Germans attacked the Netherlands on 10 May 1940, the Germans were on the opposite hills while the Dutch soldiers defended the Grebbeberg under heavy hostile fire. The Netherlands surrendered on 15 May. Many of them died. They were buried in a cemetery on the hilltop and the names of those who were never found are engraved in stone. They were mostly young boys or officers.

The celebration was organised by the government. The municipality of Rhenen and the army were involved. The Dutch constitution has a strict rule in respect of the separation of church and state. Dutch society is secular. How do you fill in such a memorial solemnity in a secular context?

In the silence of the evening, hymns were sung. The military band played choral music. A humanist counsellor of the army gave a speech, focusing not on the nation but on freedom. “Freedom costs human lives.”²³ “Freedom costs pain.”²⁴ Freedom took on a religious form. The music, however, was religious. One of the chorals was taken from Matthew’s Passion by Bach; another one was on “Holy Faith.” The hymns were taken from the churches’ hymnbook. Christian Choral Societies solemnly sang sections of sixteenth-century church hymns while the sun was setting. On an evening of the secular twenty-first century, they sang “Praise to the Holiest of the Height”, “The Lord is my Shepherd”

22 Schwarz, *Predigten aus der Gegenwart*, p. 79.

23 Speech by the counselor, N. Wijngaard, on the Memorial Ceremony.

24 Poem by Mrs. A. Poolman at the Memorial Ceremony.

and “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” The chorus ended with sections from Easter hymns.

It is impossible, even in a secular context, to remember the soldiers who died without incorporating religion into the remembrance. Only something that is more valuable than human life is worthy to ask for that life. Ultimately, this can only be the one who creates life and is able to restore it after death. As Jumper says:

Their gift is founded on the deepest, greatest, most enduring principles of God’s Word and the order of God’s Creation.

Without some kind of transcendence war is impossible.

Such a war . . . in which a human being gives up everything, his whole earthly identity joyfully surrenders to death is: religion.²⁵

Therefore a battlefield and a memorial cemetery are holy ground. Every war is a holy war. Even a secular state cannot escape from this.

The question to Christian theology is whether the nation that calls one and the Lord to whom one as a Christian belongs can be one and the same holiness. There cannot be something partial here, for one is called without any restriction, with one’s whole life, prepared to surrender it to death. Eusebius, Jumper and Schwarz state: “Yes.” Tertullian, Origen and the soldiers of Marcus Aurelius state: “No.” It is a challenge for the present day, Christian, theological community to give their own answer. It is not arbitrary what we answer, because it is a matter of life and death, even of the meaning and dedication of one’s whole being. We cannot escape from the dilemma.²⁶ I will not give my own answer here explicitly. For it is not about a personal opinion. I merely wish to introduce it in the debate as a task for the entire community not to escape from the question of earthly power in relation to the gospel.

25 Schwarz, *Predigten aus der Gegenwart*, p. 77.

26 Many authors see a third way: the doctrine of a just war. In my opinion, this is merely a variation on the Eusebian position for two reasons:

- If it is about life and death it is absolute. There is no way in between of them.
- It is impossible to define what “just” means in this context. Every leader who wants to begin a war will defend it as a just war. Finally it depends on a subjective interest of a person or a group. For Palestinians and Jews, Americans and Sunnite Muslims, Germans and Englishmen, African adherents of apartheid and the PAC the war was justified with a call on this or similar concepts.

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