

# TERTULLIAN AND THE CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF PEACE

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## Abstract

*As an important representative of the emerging Christian Theology, Tertulian is famous for his particular way of dealing with some specific themes of the Christian kerygma: Trinity, Salvation, Church, Scriptures. In this paper I'm underlining his opinion on violence and warfare as one of the most Bible-minded perspective on the issue. His disagreement with the political supported violence in the form of warfare is very important from the perspective of the future developments of the issue in the post-constantinian Fathers. This means that finally, the interpretation of the Church concerning the theology of peace cannot be simply identified with Tertulian's perspective as the situation of the Church itself changed during the ages to follow.*

**Keywords:** Tertulian, peace, war, violence, military service

*"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." (Romans 12, 18)*

## Introduction

It is said that is not so hard to speak about ideas. The problem appears when we intend to incarnate them. And the cruel reality says that we have to incarnate them.

The period of the primitive Church – from the post-apostolic generation to the accession of the emperor Constantine – is a critical one in the formation of the Christian Tradition. The features common to most Christian Churches (the canon of the Scriptures, credal formulations, and hierarchical structures) took shape in this formative period. The evidence of early Christian thought on peace, therefore, may provide some guidance on the question of how the biblical Tradition was appropriated and interpreted in the life of the Church.

The attitude of the early Christians on the subject of war and peace is a question of unusual complexity. There are, of course, the usual historical difficulties that beset any study of antiquity, such as the paucity of sources and the problem of interpreting materials from a distant culture. In this instance, however, the difficulties are compounded by several other factors. First, there is the fact that Christianity in the first three centuries underwent profound change as it developed from an insignificant sect within Judaism to become a major religious force in the Roman Empire. This change in the nature of Christianity brought with it a fundamental re-evaluation of the relationship between Christians and the surrounding political and social world, including the question of participation in the Roman state and its wars. Secondly, nearly all scholars agree that there was some degree of diversity of opinion and practice among Christians throughout the period under consideration here. In other words, it will often be difficult to isolate and define one Christian position on the issue of war and peace even within a single period. This is why the title of the present paper suggests that the Christian theology of peace can't simply be identified with Tertullian's theology of peace.

Although we can't ignore the pluralism of the Christian movement concerning the problem of war and peace, a brief analysis of the theology of peace as it's found in the main writings of Tertullian could help us to better understand the reactions of Early Christianity towards these uncomfortable issues, and why not, to better understand our own reactions in a society which is not one of the most peaceful, and this, after 2000 years of Christianity.

## 1. Biographical Sketch

Most of the traditional elements in the biography of Quintus Septimius Tertullianus having fallen victim to historical doubt - he was the son of a Roman centurion; he was born in the middle of the second century; he was a lawyer<sup>1</sup>; he later became a priest<sup>2</sup> - we are left with little definite biographical detail. What remains is what is

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<sup>1</sup> Berthold Altaner, *Patrology*, Herder and Herder, Freiburg, 1960, p. 166.

<sup>2</sup> Jerome, *De viribus illustribus*, 53, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2708.htm> (accessed pe 15 mai 2014).

evident from his writing. A resident of Cartage, a married man, he was a master of rhetorical style and intellectual debate, who, when his Church was touched by a movement of charismatic rigorism – the new prophecy he called it, but it is known to us as Montanism – took sides with it against the predominant mood of his church, and became increasingly alienated from what he saw as the compromising and self-protective stance of the catholic majority<sup>3</sup>. Despite this fact, his extensive writings, belonging to a period of less than twenty years between about AD 195 and 215, had an enormous effect upon subsequent Latin theology, a tribute to a literary and intellectual force which had no antecedents in the earlier decades of the Church. And also to their comprehensive range, for he handled a wide variety of subjects: the doctrines of Trinity, Incarnation, resurrection of the dead, inspiration of the Holy Spirit; the relation of Christians to a hostile and pagan society; Christian ethics; the heresies of Gnosticism and Marcionism. His personality is one of the strongest in the patristic age: “dialectically aggressive, mordantly witty, passionately disapproving, rigorous in his demands upon himself and the others, loyally credulous of claims to visions and revelatory experiences, yet at the same time fiercely loyal to the orthodox tradition of teaching, profoundly moved by martyrdom”<sup>4</sup>.

According to Jerome he lived to an extreme old age<sup>5</sup>.

## 2. General overview on the issue

“The God revealed by Jesus, and the rule of God revealed by Jesus – do not respond to violence with violence”<sup>6</sup>. This is a statement very often used as an ethical dogma: Jesus was not a violent person, Christians are expected not to be violent people: they respond to violence with its opposite and the Resurrection showed

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<sup>3</sup>Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. II, col. „Christians Classics”, Westminster, Maryland, 1990, p. 247.

<sup>4</sup>Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, *From Irenaeus to Grotius, A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought*, Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 1999, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup>*De vir. ill.* 53, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2708.htm> (accesat pe 15 mai 2014).

<sup>6</sup>J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, Eerdmans Publishing, Eaton Rapids, Michigan, 2001, p. 74.

the power of God to overcome even the annihilation of death that comes from the exercise of power with violence. But a New Testament analysis on the problem of peace and war leads to the explicit feeling that there should be some exceptions from this rule as long as we find many indications that in the political context of the Roman Empire this generous idea was not strictly applied.

Dogmatic statements of the complete acceptance of war by the early Church are equally easy to find in modern histories and we cannot deny that they were wrong<sup>7</sup>. In Acts we read of the conversion of the centurion Cornelius (Acts, 10) and of the gaoler at Philippi (Acts, 16,33), there is no evidence at all whether they found their profession incompatible with their Christian faith<sup>8</sup>. It is significant, though not conclusive, that after this there is no undoubted reference to a Christian soldier for a hundred and twenty years. C.J. Cadoux writes: "we shall probably not be far from the truth in concluding that for the majority of Christians nothing had occurred to bring the military problem before their minds; there was no conscription hence the few cases of soldiers being converted raised little difficulty. No Christian, on the other hand, would voluntarily become a soldier after conversion"<sup>9</sup>. The earliest evidence of Christian soldiers dates from the late second century inscriptions<sup>10</sup>. Some scholars have suggested that a universal prohibition against military service must have been in effect during this period<sup>11</sup>, while more recent scholars have emphasized that the question of military

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<sup>7</sup> John Ferguson, *The Enthronement of love, Fellowship of reconciliation*, London, 1961, p. 37.

<sup>8</sup> It is also often quoted the answer of St John the Baptist to the soldiers that wanted to be baptized (Luke 3, 14) or Jesus' full of admiration saying that he found to a roman soldier more faith than in Israel (Mt. 8, 10). It is noticeable that Jesus attitude (comp. Mt. 21, 12-13) and sayings (Mt. 10, 34 and Mt. 26, 52) are not always leading to a strict pacifism.

<sup>9</sup> *The early Church and the World, A History of the Christian Attitude to Pagan Society and the State down to the Time of Constantius*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1925, p. 190.

<sup>10</sup> See H. Leclercq, *Dictionnaire d'archeologie chretienne et de liturgie*, XI/1, 1933, pp. 1108-1181.

<sup>11</sup> J.M. Hornus, *It is not lawful for Me to Fight: early Christian Attitudes toward war, Violence and the State*, Scottsdale, Herald, 1980, pp. 14-15.

service simply may not have existed for Christians during the first two centuries<sup>12</sup>.

The views that politics and religion should be kept entirely separate from one another is a relatively recent one in world history. The attempt, when it is made, is not undertaken because the two have absolutely nothing in common, but for precisely the opposite reason. Politics and religion “not only overlap but compete in their various functions”<sup>13</sup>. And the first Christians knew that at a moment they have to face the reality that the Church of Christ has to coexist somehow within the Roman empire and this a reality which is neither black neither white but rather grey.

### 3. A changing reality

A significant change is apparent in the later years of the second century and the opening years of the third century. Here we find for the first time several explicit discussions of Christian participation in the Roman army, and we have to say, in relation with this appeared the first attempt to articulate a theology of peace. In the most extended of these, that of the North African writer Tertullian, it is clear that there are some Christian soldiers who see no incompatibility between being Christians and being soldiers. The very fact that there is now some discussion on the subject indicates that some significant new developments have occurred.

The first change seems to have been a shift in the social composition of Christianity itself. By the early years of the third century, Christianity had spread widely in the Roman Empire and had begun to make deep inroads into the higher levels of Greco-Roman society. The very presence of learned exponents of Christianity, such as Tertullian and Cyprian in North Africa or Clement and Origen in Alexandria suggests that Christianity was gaining adherents who had a new level of respectability and responsibility in society<sup>14</sup>.

At the same time, corresponding changes were occurring within the Roman army itself. From the time of Emperor Septimius Severus (193-211), the power and prestige of the Roman military increased.

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<sup>12</sup>Louis J. Swift, *The Early Fathers on war and Military service. Message of the Fathers of the Church*, Wilmington, Michael Glazier, 1983, p. 19.

<sup>13</sup>Alistair Kee, *Constantine versus Christ*, SCM Press LTD, London, 1982, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup>W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1984, pp. 285-297.

Severus began a policy of tying military service more closely to local, rural communities. Soldiers also tended to take a greater role in civic offices. As the social historian Ramsay MacMuleen has noted, “many, for their full twenty-five years, did nothing but write; many attended magistrates as messengers, ushers, confidential agents and accountants, measuring their promotion from chair to chair, from office to office”<sup>15</sup>. These parallel developments in the Church and in the Roman army appear to have given encouragement to Christians to enlist. The prohibition against former slaves joining the army was also being relaxed at this time, and many Christians as a path of upward mobility would have viewed military service<sup>16</sup>. Because avoiding bloodshed was a real possibility, the Roman army began to attract increasing numbers of soldiers, even from among the Christians.

#### **4. How did this influence Tertullian’s statements on peace?**

Tertullian is now used by every Christian pacifist organization as one of the first theologians to synthesize and to express in a very powerful way some basic Christian convictions concerning the attitude towards the military service, war and peace. His final conclusion, as we shall see, is that no Christian can compromise when it comes to serve Christ by following his nonviolent way of witnessing to the world.

Christian documents of the early third century that begin to treat the question clearly reflect the fact that there were Christians in the army, and the army is not a peaceful corporation or institution. Tertullian, who later became a vociferous opponent of Christian military service, in his early Apology for Christianity (ca 197) notes that Christians serve in the army alongside non-Christians<sup>17</sup>, though he adds that “according to our doctrine is more permissible to be

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<sup>15</sup> *Soldier and civilian in the Later Roman Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1963, p. 157.

<sup>16</sup> James Turner Johnson, *The Quest for Peace: Three moral Traditions in Western Cultural History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1987, pp. 38-41.

<sup>17</sup> “We sail with you, and fight with you, and till the ground with you”, *Apology*, 42, p.49. I used the editions of *The Ante Nicene Fathers. Translations of Tertullian*, vol. III, Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1954.

killed than to kill”<sup>18</sup>. Tertullian is also the first writer to refer to the incident of the legio XII Fulminata (Thundering Legion), when the armies of the emperor Marcus Aurelius were saved from a military defeat allegedly through the prayers of Christian soldiers<sup>19</sup>. In this early apology Tertullian seems indifferent, if not positively disposed, toward a Christian presence in the army.

In later works Tertullian appears much more intransigent on the issue. In his treatise “On idolatry” he raises the twofold question: “Whether a member of the faithful can become a soldier of whether a soldier can be admitted to the faith, even if he is a member of the rank and file who are not required to offer sacrifice or decide capital cases”<sup>20</sup>. Tertullian’s answer to this question is famous and uncompromising: “there can be no compatibility between an oath made to God and one made to man, between the standard of Christ and that of the devil, between the camp of light and the camp of darkness. The soul cannot be beholden to two masters, God and Caesar”<sup>21</sup>.

Tertullian is opposed both to baptized Christians joining the army and to enlisted soldiers being received into the Church, unless they have abandoned the military profession. His primary concern seems to be the inherently idolatrous character of military service. In a series of publications on this theme, John Helgeland has demonstrated that membership in the Roman army entailed entry into a religious structure that shaped the entire life of the soldier: “It created a sacred cosmos in which the soldier lived from the day he entered until he died”<sup>22</sup>. The military oath the cult of the legionary standards, the calendar of frequent military festivals timed to coincide with similar services at Rome, all combined to form the Roman army as “a religious world, a microcosm of Rome itself”<sup>23</sup>. But also, it is not only that the officer, who actually conducts the pagan sacrifices or capital punishment, is implicated in idolatry,

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<sup>18</sup> *Apology...*, 37, p. 45.

<sup>19</sup> *Apology...*, 5, pp. 21-22.

<sup>20</sup> *On idolatry...*, 19, p. 73.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> John Helgeland, Robert J. Daly & J. Patout Burns, *Christians and the military, the early experience*, SCM Press LTD, London, 1987, p. 48.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 54.

Tertullian argues<sup>24</sup>. Rather, the very presence of the Christian in the army camp is a sign of his participation in the cult of demons.

It is important to see, however, that Tertullian's rejection of military service is not based solely on the problem of idolatry or rival religious loyalties. He goes on in the passage just cited to speak specifically about the immorality of violence and bloodshed: "but how will a Christian man war, nay, how will he serve even in peace, without a sword, which the Lord has taken away"<sup>25</sup>. Tertullian doesn't seem to distinguish clearly the strictly religious problem of idolatrous conduct from the more directly ethical question of the morality of killing. Both of these in his mind are incompatible with true Christianity; Jesus forbade both idolatry and killing. Therefore, as Tertullian sees it, military service itself is forbidden to Christians because it violates their primary allegiance to the ethical and religious mandates of Christ<sup>26</sup>.

It is worth noting that Tertullian's position was not the only one taken by Christians at this time. The very argument he presents in the treatise "On idolatry" suggests that there were Christians who defended their presence in the army by appealing to examples from the Old and New Testament.

A later work by Tertullian, "On the military Crown", confirms the fact that many Christians in the army were untroubled either by the danger of idolatry or by the possibility of using violence. In fact "On Military Crown" is the pre-Nicene Church's fullest and strongest statement of opposition to Christians accepting military office; and for all its rhetorical severity, it betrays all the ambiguities which surround that opposition. By concentrating on the particular issue of whether a Christian soldier should wear the military

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<sup>24</sup> *On idolatry...*, 17, pp. 71-72.

<sup>25</sup> *On idolatry...*, 19, p. 73.

<sup>26</sup> Although "Post-Nicene", St Basil the Great reaffirms the call for the Christians to non-violence but in a very different manner: 'homicide in war is not reckoned by our fathers as homicide; I presume from their wish to make concession to men fighting on behalf of chastity and true religion. Perhaps, however, it is well to counsel that those whose hands are not clean only abstain from communion for three years. St Basil the Great, *Letter 188*, 13, in col. "Post Nicene Fathers", Vol. 8, p. 228. This famous canon admits the reality of the war but as a necessary evil and not as a lawful activity for a Christian, and theoretically this became the "official" attitude of Eastern Christianity towards war.

chaplet or crown on ceremonial occasions, it manages to take for granted the more fundamental case against military service.

Yet, what was the case? Was it to do with the impossibility of shedding blood, even in the service of the magistrates whom God had authorized to bear the sword?<sup>27</sup> At the very moment that Tertullian seems about to tell us, he turns aside. We never actually hear the case Tertullian's Church might have made in answer to the post-Nicene view that a Christian may shed blood in the moderate exercise of lawful authority<sup>28</sup>. The truth is that "the association of civil society and its institutions with idolatry was so much the fundamental reality for the pre-Nicene Church, that it swallowed up all other reasons"<sup>29</sup>.

## Conclusion

In its preaching, the Christian community was turning the world upside-down; in its practice, it was led towards constant compromise or should we say peace with the world as it is: "These early centuries of the Church thus provide examples of two attitudes towards the state, which have been repeated throughout history. One is the rejection of state claims to worship, the ultimate sacralizing of the state. The other is the compromise of success when the church lives in the palace, and thereafter sits at ease with the powerful. That is too easy a contrast"<sup>30</sup>. Many Christians must have been caught between these positions and many lived out their devotion without any sense of a critical stance towards the state. As Samuel Laeuchli

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<sup>27</sup> Romans 13, 1-5.

<sup>28</sup> "For in other matters also which go to make up life, we shall find differences according to circumstances. For example, it is not right to kill, yet in war it is lawful and praiseworthy to destroy the enemy; accordingly not only are they who have distinguished themselves in the field held worthy of great honors, but monuments are put up proclaiming their achievements. So that the same act is at one time and under some circumstances unlawful, while under others, and at the right time, it is lawful and permissible." St Athanasios of Alexandria, *Letter to Amun*, in col. "Post Nicene Fathers", vol. 4, p. 557.

<sup>29</sup> Jean Michel Hornus, *Evangile et Labarum*, in "Labor et Fides", Geneve, 1960, p. 36.

<sup>30</sup> Bernard Thorogood, *The Flag and the Cross*, in "National Limits and Church Universal", SCM Press LTD, London, 1988, p. 22.

rightfully observed, “the possibilities for a Christian life in the world stood between the two extreme alternatives that faced the ancient Church, one being the total rejection of the world in order to live in consistent and unbending conflict, and the other being the unquestioned identification with the world. While radical conflict would have made both life and proclamation impossible, as in the Manichaeen case, identification lost all Christian substance, as in the consolation of Boethius”<sup>31</sup>. Peace was the bridge over which the gospel could expand if it expanded at all; it was the middle ground between denial and self surrender that makes possible the speech and life of the early Church. However, these alternatives as such were both fallacious: “traces of the Constantinian peace can be found throughout the early church, and Constantinian Christians have existed from the beginning”<sup>32</sup>.

The same attitudes are to be observed in Tertullian’s writings. It must be noted that the same documents that stress the nonviolent character of the Christian community also assert strongly that Christians are loyal citizens and devoted to the well-being of the Roman Empire. These apparently contradictory statements serve the apologetic purpose of the author. Christians in the second century were faced with Roman suspicions about their secret activities. There is also evidence that the Romans viewed Christians as a possible threat to the political stability of the empire. The Christian apologists responded by affirming both the peaceable nature of the community and the patriotic loyalty of the Christians to the Roman State. We must therefore, be cautious about taking the statements of the apologists as absolute moral imperatives for all Christians: “the apologetic stance of Tertullian led him to give ideal descriptions of the Christians and their activities; they were not necessarily offering absolute ethical prescriptions for all time”<sup>33</sup>. Nonetheless, it seems reasonable to assume that the view of Christians as a peaceable

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<sup>31</sup> Samuel Laeuchli, *The Serpent and the Dove*, Abingdon Press, Oxford, 1967, p. 30.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 31.

<sup>33</sup> David G. Hunter, *The Christian Church and the Roman Army in the First Three Centuries*, in *The Churches Peace witness*, ed. by Marlin E. Miller and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1994, p. 166.

and nonviolent community was widespread enough to make the assertions of the apologists persuasive both to those inside and to those outside the Christian movement.

Tertullian doesn't offer a proper answer to a lot of questions: If the roman standard becomes a Christian Labarum, are Christians allowed to fight under this sign? If Christian "Diaspora" becomes "Home", are Christians allowed fighting for this home? And finally: is it allowed to kill in order to protect others, especially when these "others" are your family, your community, your Church?

One could object: this was not yet his context. But, if his context was different why should we apply his contextualised decisions in a different context? Tertullian offers some answers but Tertullian doesn't offer all the answers. In other words, while it cannot be argued that pacifism was a moral absolute in the early Church, Tertullian's witness does provide the contemporary Church with a model of how a degree of legitimate pluralism might be coupled with a common vision of peacemaking. Perhaps the task of the Churches ought to be less one of determining what precise ethical position should be taken on the issue of participation in or abstention from warfare and more one of fostering the conditions that make peace possible in the world. A more positive agenda may prove to be a more reliable basis for Christian unity than a simple prohibition against violence.