

## SEMINAR ON PATRISTICS

### MILITARY FORCE AND THE CHRISTIAN CONSCIENCE IN THE EARLY CHURCH: A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH<sup>1</sup>

Historical-critical exegesis and, more recently, sociological analysis, have broadened the context and improved the objectivity of biblical interpretation. This is of particular significance for themes related to nonviolence. One can no longer conclude to a Christian commitment to nonviolence from a simplistic reading of the NT. And when inquiry is extended from the NT to the patristic age, the situation becomes even more complex, for the material to be studied is much more vast, and few scholars are giving serious attention to the primary data. The task of this seminar was to take stock of this situation both from the point of view of the issue itself and the methodology needed to approach it. Three scholars agreed to do this by touching down at three key areas in the development of the early Church's attitudes towards military service. Robert Daly, S.J. provided a general introduction and some remarks on the teaching of Origen; John Helgeland outlined the teaching of Eusebius; Patout Burns, S.J. sketched two key moments in the teaching of Ambrose and Augustine. Thus, Christian positions from the pre-Constantinian, the Constantinian, and the post-Constantinian Church were considered.

Since the modern history of scholarship on this theme reveals an embarrassing correlation between almost any given scholar's confessional allegiance and the way that scholar interprets the data, the most careful possible attention to the following series of questions seems to be needed: (1) What were, in fact, the attitudes, the teaching and the practice of the early Church, and how does one gain access to this data? (2) How is this data to be interpreted in its various (historical, theological, political, sociological, etc.) contexts? (3) What is its significance for Christian doctrine and practice today? (4) How does one's bias, presuppositions, theology or confessional position affect one's perception of and interpretation of the data? In addition, it is most helpful to be able to make a nuanced distinction between the teaching and practice of the early Church and that position which a Christian today must hold in order to be faithful to the Bible and church tradition. Without such a distinction, we are not likely to advance much beyond proof-texting.

Sound patristic study of this theme necessarily presupposes familiarity with the relevant biblical data and the history of its reception in the early Church. Summarized most briefly, the evidence is overwhelming that the basic

<sup>1</sup>The coordinators of the seminar were Patout Burns, S.J., Robert Daly, S.J., and John Helgeland (of North Dakota State, invited to participate because of his special expertise) in consultation with Joanne M. Dewart. The preliminary assigned readings were: Roland Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Towards War and Peace* (New York/Nashville: Abingdon, 1960); Adolf Harnack, *Militia Christi: The Christian and the Military in the First Three Centuries*, trans. David McInnes Gracie (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981); Luise Schottroff, "Non-Violence and the Love of One's Enemies" in *Essays on the Love Commandment*, ed. and trans. Reginald H. and Ilse Fuller (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), pp. 9-38. About twelve persons attended each of the two sessions.

thrust of the dominical teaching is in the direction of nonviolence.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, this evidence is not univocal, nor was it interpreted univocally by the early Church. This situation suggests the need for methodological principles such as the following in approaching the patristic data: (1) use of the best possible critical knowledge of the biblical data; (2) recognition that patristic data should be analyzed with the same methodological thoroughness with which biblical data is analyzed, even though the complexity of even the primary data and the paucity of scholars attending to it make this goal largely unattainable at present; (3) recognition of the particular importance of sociological analysis.

Thus, questions like the following need to be asked: (a) What, precisely, is being said, taught, handed on, reported, etc.? (b) Why is this being said, taught, handed on, reported, etc.? (c) What kind of authority or normativity does the author or the situation attribute to what is being said, taught, handed on, reported, etc.? (d) What are the theological, religious, historical, political and sociological situations of the text, of the situations in which it arose, of those who received and handed it on? (e) Is the text typical or characteristic of what may be described as a central Christian stance . . . for its own time . . . for later times?

After some discussion of these methodological points, largely of a clarifying and supportive nature, Daly proceeded to present the teaching of Origen, particularly by analyzing *Contra Celsum* VIII, 70 and 73 as representative of Origen's position. Origen is answering Celsus' objection that Christians are derelict in their civic responsibilities because they refuse to fight for the emperor when he is rightly defending the empire against unjust attack. Origen's defense admits the fact that Christians do not serve, but justifies this by claiming that they do fight for the emperor in his just cause, not however with physical weapons but with the spiritual weapons (cf. esp. Eph 6) with which they combat the spiritual powers and demons which are the causes of dissension and wars. In this they are like the pagan priests who are also exempt for similar reasons. Thus Origen saw war as a pre-Christian (Jewish or OT), or a sub-Christian phenomenon. He envisioned a world in which wars and the need for armies would diminish and disappear as more and more people became Christian.

Origen's vision has gone unrealized, but many of the consequences and ramifications of his position have exerted a profound influence on later developments. (1) A fundamental premise of the just-war theory, that a cause can be just and defended by arms, is conceded. (2) However, the use of such force is not proper or allowable, or necessary, to those who have already accepted Christ. (3) Still, the civil responsibility of Christians to contribute to peace and order is admitted. (4) This responsibility is located entirely in the internal and spiritual realm. Thus Origen contributed mightily to the concept of the ideal Christian state of life as something distinct and separate from worldly pursuits. This left two sets of tensions unresolved for later Christianity: a practical tension between Christian ideals and life in the world, and a theoretical tension between creational-incarnational faith and an anti-material, anti-worldly bias.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Robert Daly, "Love and Non-Violence in the New Testament and Early Church" in *Non-Violence—Central to Christian Spirituality: Perspectives from Scripture to the Present*, ed. Joseph Culliton (Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1982).

Helgeland began his presentation of Eusebius by noting the need to locate him in the context of the religious and political thought of the later Roman empire. This helps counteract the widespread erroneous impression that Christianity rather suddenly shifted from a pacifist to a just-war (or pro-war) stance at the triumph of Constantine.<sup>3</sup> The *first* thing to keep in mind, Helgeland noted, is the intensely apologetic stance of Eusebius toward the Roman Empire. This colored his whole view of things. *Second*, when one examines Eusebius' attitudes toward the military in relevant passages such as that of the famous Thundering Legion in 173, the following picture emerges: Christians are loyal to the empire; their loyalty has positive consequences for the empire; good emperors favor and bad emperors cause grief to the Church; there is no criticism of Christians serving in the legions. A great deal of evidence supports Eusebius' position over against the kind of pacifist interpretation that has been dominant in recent North American scholarship. The evidence from the popular apocryphal gospels, for example, suggests that violence was not at all strange to the thinking and feeling of the popular masses of early Christians. There is, in fact, considerable evidence, which has not yet been given its proper due, that the real problem of Christians entering the Roman army was not pacifism but Roman army religion. The *third* major element in Eusebius' teaching is the theme of the Divine King who makes the connection between heaven and earth and brings material and social blessings into the empire. Eusebius is constantly fitting Constantine into this framework, viewing him as the ensoulment of the cosmic order. Thus Constantine's victories over Maxentius and Licinius are viewed as the victories of the Christian god over that of the Romans. The idea of the Christian apocalyptic crusade had been born.

Included in Helgeland's comments was a review of the earliest authentic acts of the military martyrs from AD 295 to 303. It seems quite clear that they suffered not because of pacifism but because of their objections to Roman army religion. If anything, the evidence suggests that pacifism may not even have been known among Christian laymen. Nor does there seem to be any solid evidence to support the theory that Christians served in the police but not in the army.

Burns sketched two events from the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth century to illustrate the situation when Christianity had moved from toleration to establishment. The first was the victory of Theodosius I over the Western usurper Eugenius in September 394. Eugenius, who had identified himself with a pagan religious revival, was winning the battle until, on the second day, a fierce gale suddenly blew in the face of his forces, turning the tide in favor of the Christian emperor, Theodosius. Christian authors, including Ambrose and Augustine, emphasized the divine interventionary aspects of this event, portraying it as a victory of Christ and the Christian religion over pagan religion. The biblical imagery has also changed: where Eusebius had drawn from the Apocalypse, Ambrose uses the military victories of Israel as his interpretative framework.

The second event was the career of Boniface, the Count of Africa, who

<sup>3</sup>Cf. John Helgeland, "Christians and the Roman Army A.D. 173-337," *Church History* 43 (1974), 149-61. This is a summary of *Christians and Military Service, A.D. 173-337* (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1973).

opposed the Vandal invasion in the last years of Augustine's life. His twin exhortations to Boniface provide a model of the Christian soldier who is needed in the actual world to maintain internal peace and keep the external barbarians in check. But the objective must always be peace, violence used only as needed, mercy shown whatever possible, and all desire for temporal goods put aside. Some of these ideals and hopes fed into what later became the medieval military orders.

One can make the following comments: (1) The social situation of the Christians had changed; they were the ones now responsible for government, order and peace. (2) The anti-Manichean polemic drove Ambrose and Augustine to defend the God of the OT and the divine commands to wage war. (3) The religion of the emperor was not a private matter; the conflict between Eugenius and Theodosius was a conflict between religious systems. (4) Augustine's theology of the two cities defined by two different loves forced him to develop a theory of temporal peace to deal with the empire as a social institution. (5) Both Ambrose and Augustine tended to view the barbarians as somewhat less than fully human, and even associated with the demonic. In sum, perhaps a theory of a divinely granted temporal peace which is sought and shared by both Christians and non-Christians provides the basis for a more adequate Christian understanding of the role of the military than the biblical passages quoted by Ambrose and Augustine.

The seminar discussion of these brief presentations elicited a strong positive response to the efforts to articulate adequate methodological approaches to data that has often been used only selectively, polemically, or in a biased manner. The seminar readily achieved a consensus that a methodologically and hermeneutically sound survey of early Christian attitudes towards war and the military is badly needed today. This should include a more extensive discussion of Tertullian and the phenomenon of Roman army religion than was possible in this seminar. The three presenters of this seminar have agreed to write such a survey which would be suitable for publication, and are currently working at it. It is expected initially to have the size of a long article with the following contents: (1) general introduction, (2) methodological issues and the NT background, (3) Tertullian, (4) Origen, (5) Eusebius, (6) the military martyrs, (7) Roman army religion, (8) Ambrose and Augustine, (9) Conclusion.

ROBERT J. DALY, S.J.  
*Boston College*