

Nonviolence/Pacifism

For the first three hundred years of the Christian movement, the church was almost unanimously pacifist. Throughout church history numerous discipline-oriented groups, such as Franciscans, Waldensians, Anabaptists, Quakers, Brethren and the original Pentecostals, have also been pacifist. The number of pacifists within mainstream denominations has increased in recent decades due to greater emphasis on the Gospels and the greatly increased destructiveness of war.

A Christian pacifist is committed to making a clear witness to the way of Jesus. In this view, trying to make that witness while advocating killing enemies is wrong not only because it advocates killing people, but also because it disobeys Jesus and distorts Christian witness to his way. The clearest historical example of this distortion is the four centuries of Christian crusades against Muslims during the Middle Ages. Christian soldiers with crosses painted on their breastplates and banners, marching to kill Muslims, made a witness that turned Islam more militantly against Christian faith, with implications to this day.

Stassen, Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*.

The earliest official document indicating the Church's attitude is the third-century *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus of Rome. As I noted earlier in this book, the document records the liturgical practices of the Roman community, which is a representative guide to what Christians thought and did elsewhere. In the section on baptism he lists a number of occupations which are incompatible with Christianity, and which have to be abandoned by candidates for baptism. The list of forbidden occupations begins with brothel keepers, and includes gladiators and their trainers, actors and prostitutes, and also soldiers. The actual wording of the prohibition is instructive and is worth quoting verbatim:

A soldier under authority shall not kill a man. If he is ordered to he shall not carry out the order; nor shall he take the oath. If he is unwilling, let him be rejected. He who has the power of the sword, or is a magistrate of a city who wears the purple, let him cease or be rejected. Catechumens or believers who want to become soldiers should be rejected, because they have despised God.¹⁹

Clearly the underlying principle is the sacredness of life, because the ban also applies to magistrates who can exercise the death penalty. The outlook reflected in Hippolytus was also embraced by the Council of Nicaea in 325. Canon 12 decreed that if a soldier had left the army, become a Christian, and then returned to the army, he was required to do penance for thirteen years before being readmitted to the eucharist.

Winter, *Catholicism Retrieved*.

The union of church and state made secular punishment possible. The Theodosian legislation enthroned Catholic Christianity as the exclusive religion of the empire and punished dissent. Religious intolerance soon became a Christian principle, contrary to the Scriptures. Within fifteen years of 380, imperial edicts deprived all heretics and pagans of the right to worship, banned them from civil offices, and exposed them to heavy fines, confiscation of property, banishment, and in certain cases death. By 435, there were sixty-six laws against Christian heretics plus many others against pagans. The purpose of persecution was to convert the heretics and heathen, thus establishing uniformity.³⁵

The first instance of capital punishment for heresy occurred in 385, when the pious Bishop Priscillian of Spain and six of his followers were tortured and decapitated with the approval of a synod in Trier. Never before had ecclesiastical authorities resorted to the ultimate secular power against a dissident. In Alexandria, Christians under the patriarch Cyrillus engaged in murderous attacks against Novatian schismatics and, in 415, kidnapped the foremost Platonic philosopher of her time, Hypatia, stripped her in a church, and tore her limb from limb. Rome did not approve of lynch law, which lacked the obligatory formalities. The Theodosian code, by contrast, had official sanction, both secular and ecclesiastical.³⁶

Levy, *Blasphemy*, p 44.

The First Missionary War, Chapter 1, Michael Routery, 1997:

"The Christian religion has, so often, spread through violence, force and coercion. Yet, its advocates, who have written the histories most of us learned in school, portray it as having been joyfully embraced by the ancient world, a loving embrace whose only restriction was imposed by the corrupt Roman state like a mean father with an innocent child...In truth, the Roman Church triumphed by marrying the Empire in that most fateful of centuries, the 4th [i.e., Nicea], and for the most part people converted because they were terrorized into doing so or forced to by ferociously repressive new laws...The new religion set itself apart from others, particularly, in its jealousy and extreme intolerance of any other spiritualities [i.e., paganism]."

The Founder's Bible, Romans 13:

"Could Christian rulers prohibit other Christians from following what they believed to be clear scriptural teachings? ...This question was addressed in American pulpits at the time. [Many believed that] God would not bless an offensive war. [Illustrative of this belief] was the famous command to the Lexington Minutemen, "Don't fire unless fired upon!"

John Jay, "Founding Father":

"It's true that even just war is attended with evils and so likewise is the administration of government and of justice; but is that a good reason for abolishing either of them? They are means by which greater evils are averted...To prevent the incursion or continuance of evils, we must submit to the use of those means, whether agreeable or otherwise..."

Greg Boyd, *Gods' Way of War*:

"Yahweh forbade those who served as temple priests to engage in violence [Num. 1-2; 4; 8]. When the NT later refers to the body of Christ as a royal priesthood, this is at least part of what it has in mind. While non-followers of Jesus may consider the use of violence in certain 'justified' circumstances to be necessary, if not praiseworthy, the royal priesthood of Jesus followers are called and empowered to bear witness to God's non-violent ideal by altogether abstaining from it."