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# Chivalric Violence and Religious Valorization

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## CHIVALRIC VIOLENCE AND RELIGIOUS VALORIZATION

Please allow me to express sincere thanks to Professor Kasaya and the entire staff of the International Research Center for the invitation to this conference and for the opportunity to speak to a general audience on the important and sometimes troubling themes of our conference. I hope I may speak for all the guest participants in the conference in saying how much your hospitality is appreciated.

I want to introduce my particular themes of chivalric violence and religious valorization with one manuscript illustration followed by two brief stories.

Last summer I worked in the new British Library in London, reading sermon stories collected for preachers and readers (lay and clerical) in beautiful manuscript books dating from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. Of course I read those I thought most important first. So on the afternoon of the final day, I opened a folio volume that contained only stories I had already read in other manuscripts. My thought was that I would find nothing new. To my great surprise what I discovered as I opened the book at random was the wonderful manuscript illumination reproduced here<sup>1</sup>. It was drawn before 1250. The right-hand page shows a mounted thirteenth-century knight in full armor. At the top of the page, the Latin inscription quotes the Book of Job in the Hebrew Bible: "Militia est vita hominis super terram: the life of humans on earth is militia." This final Latin word can mean hard struggle, or warfare, or knighthood. I became so excited that I went out into the courtyard to pace, and almost grabbed a passing stranger to tell him what I had found. The knight is a symbol of the chivalric struggle presented in the biblical quotation. Each part of his equipment is labeled with a religious meaning. The terms are not those used by St Paul (in a well known passage which exhorts the believer to put on the whole armor of God).<sup>2</sup> Nor could they follow the symbols used by the most popular writer of a manual on chivalry, the Catalan Ramon Llull, who wrote at least several decades later.<sup>3</sup> The symbols have been chosen by the writer or illustrator. The knight is, for example, firmly seated in a saddle labeled the Christian religion. His lance is perseverance. In each corner of his shield is a member of the

Christian Trinity, Father , Son and Holy Spirit, the lines converging in the center of the shield as Deus (God). His sword is the word of God. Even the parts of the horse are assigned religious meanings. Overhead, an angel descends from stylized heaven bearing a crown. It is not, I think, a royal crown, but rather the crown of victory won by the knight in his determined struggle. All doubt is removed by the inscription on the band held in the angel's right hand. It is taken from St Paul and says roughly "Only he who fights the good fight wins a crown." Equally interesting, the angel holds in its left hand a set of scrolls. On these are written, at least in abbreviated form, some of the famous sayings of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount, the so-called "beatitudes:" blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy; blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth; blessed are the peacemakers.<sup>4</sup> We might already at this point sense some tension between the determined, armed knight and these mild, pacific sentiments from the Sermon on the Mount..

The eye of the knight is firmly set on what is coming against him on the left page. This is a composite illumination, uniting the two facing folio pages. The names of these hideous demons cannot be read in the picture as reproduced, because the writing is hidden where the page curves into the binding. But as soon as one counts them, it is obvious that they represent the seven deadly sins. Each grotesque figure is backed by figures representing its supporting sins in a wonderfully medieval hierarchical pattern. Avarice, a chief sin, is for example backed up by a smaller demon labeled usury. The knight does have allies, the seven cardinal virtues pictured as doves and ranked before him on his side of the illustration. But the knight and the devils easily capture our eye.

I submit to you that this illustration, splendid as it is, must be read as a piece of propaganda, one which clerics would surely advance as an ideal for knighthood and which knights might be happy to accept, perhaps even to pay for handsomely. But it is most emphatically not a realistic picture, not a description of what knights actually were or what they actually did. This illustration is prescriptive rather than descriptive. We would, I believe, make a great error if we were to accept as realistic this idealized and wishful view that flattered warrior sensibilities as it tried to direct warrior energies. I will only assert this point of view for now, but will return to it shortly.

For now, let me supplement this manuscript illustration with two simple stories of the sort I found in those books in the British Library. A religious writer, a friar named Thomas of Cantimpre around the mid-thirteenth century wrote a book with the unforgettable title of Bonum universale de apibus (The Common Good



from Bees).<sup>5</sup> He was one of a group of thirteenth century natural philosophers and he thought that bees achieved a harmonious society that humans should emulate. Actually his book is largely a collection of stories told to friars by confessing sinners... He provides my first story, which came to him from a fellow friar to whom the widow of a knight had made a confession. So much for the “seal of the confessional”. This powerful German knight, devoted to tournament, apparently had died in one; at least Thomas says, “he died as miserably as he had lived (mortuus est autem miserabiliter sicut vixit).” His holy and devout widow, with much weeping (absolutely required in confession stories), told her spiritual father of a vision given her of her departed husband. His exact location was not specified, but he was surrounded by a great gathering of demons who performed a devilish version of the arming ceremony. They first outfitted him with caligas, heavy soldier’s shoes--using spikes that penetrated from the soles of his feet to his head. Next came the knightly hauberk, the suit of chain-link armor, secured to his body again with spikes that pierced him through, this time front to back and back to front. His great helmet was then nailed to his head, with spikes tearing through his body all the way to his feet. The shield they hung from his neck had a weight sufficient to shatter all his limbs. Apparently, after the tourney the knight had been accustomed to relax with a soothing bath, followed by recreational sex with some willing young woman. The demons in the vision dunk him in a tub of flames and then stretch him out on an incandescent iron bed where the sexual partner provided was a horrible toad (buffonis illius horribilis). His widow told her confessor that she was never quit of the terrifying vision. I think you will agree beyond question that this story constitutes a severe critique of knighthood and a stern warning to knights.

A second story, written just a bit before Thomas’s book, is of a quite different sort. Caesarius of Heisterbach, a German friar, in his splendid collection of miracle stories tells of a dying lord who hears a commotion in the adjoining room.<sup>6</sup> Asking the cause, he learns that his nephew is trying to rape some woman there, and she is proving difficult. The dying knight is a lover of justice and unhesitatingly pronounces, “Hang him.” The household knights only pretend to obey, fearing consequences after the old man’s imminent death. But as he lingers, he catches a view of his nephew very much alive. Calling the young man close to his bedside he plunges a dagger into him. At the point of his own death, shortly thereafter, he is visited by a bishop come to hear his confession. Noting that the knight has omitted the killing of his nephew in recounting his sins, the bishop refuses to give him the host, the consecrated bread transformed into the saving body of Christ, and walks

to the door. The old knight triumphantly tells the bishop to look within his pyx (the carrying box) for the host. The host is missing there, but lies on the knight's tongue. God has understood the knight's virtue and has given him the saving sacrament, even though the bishop did not.

The range of opinion is stark. Knights are disruptive and dangerous, deserving divine wrath. Knights are valued and understood by God, even when their actions violate religious norms. Clerics loved the Latin word play that pitted militia (chivalry, or hard service) vs. malitia (evildoing).

Granted, medievalists have long known this dichotomy existed. But my current work comes at these issues from a different angle. It asks what religion meant to medieval knights themselves. By what mental route, even by what specific language, could knights bridge the chasm? They subscribed to a religion whose founder had spoken of peace, of non-vengeance, and who had once said that those who lived by the sword would die by the sword. Nonetheless these knights lived by the sword and proudly constructed a self-definition based on enthusiastic and skillful use of edged weaponry in the violent pursuit of honor. That the problem of violence and the sacred is not unique to Christianity, nor to the Middle Ages I take for granted. The problems seem sadly common in world history running right into our daily newspapers. In one sense the generality of the tensions makes an inquiry that much more significant. In another sense, the specific intensity of the problem in the Middle Ages gives an inquiry particular potential. This is a test case worth investigating. In the very age in which chivalry was born the Medieval Church was taking on its most characteristic forms and elaborating its most characteristic ideas. A close and informed comparison between Medieval European chivalry and Japanese bushido seems long overdue. I can only offer what I hope will be some insights on the European side of such a comparison.

Context is surely important if we are not to misunderstand the issues. The European Middle Ages--far from being lost in Monty Python darkness and muck, or bathed in carefree, glowing, pre-Raphaelite colors--represents the birth of Europe, its glories and failures, warts and all. Especially the central period, from (say) the late 11th to the early 14th centuries strikes all who study these centuries closely as an era far from static: these centuries saw dramatic increases in population, urbanization, trade, popular religious enthusiasm, episcopal and papal government, royal administration, systems of lay and ecclesiastical law, the rise of university education, of vernacular literature, Romanesque and Gothic architecture, natural philosophy, romantic love, and even technology. Some dark age!

Yet change on this scale produces problems. So does the persistence of old ideas into a new social and cultural setting. One case of the latter, I believe, is the troublesome heritage of the warrior ethos and practices surviving from the collapse of the Roman world and the Germanic migrations. Medieval Europe, I have argued (against some spirited opposition) had a problem of violence. A society rapidly developing on so many lines of human activity struggled to come to terms with violence; and the problem was intensified because this violence was considered noble and heroic and could be carried out by private right. This is not, that is, simply an issue of crime in a modern sense, but rather privatized violence infused into the upper ranges of the social hierarchy by the collapse of effective large-scale political authority. Medieval states slowly emerged, let it be said, and took preserving public peace as one of their goals. Sadly, they and their descendants into modern times have taken fighting with their neighbors as another of their goals.

In textbook accounts chivalry usually comes into the picture here, without ambiguity, as a force for peace and order. It is usually sketched as an internalization of restraint among the warriors, knocking off the rough edges and making them proto-gentlemen. Violence and war, in this view, would be less likely, or at least more kind and gentler.

After investing a decade in reading the literature knights regularly patronized and read, or heard, (thousands of pages of chanson de geste, romance, chivalric biography, vernacular manuals), I have tried to complicate this common picture in a book called Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe.<sup>7</sup> This book argues that chivalry in fact enters as much into the problem of violence as it provides a solution; that chivalry was deeply, essentially complicit. Moreover, I think contemporaries knew this; the recognition is not merely historical hindsight but can be recovered from medieval texts.

We need to remember that in these medieval texts chivalry could take any of three distinct, if related, meanings. The first was really good work with edged weapons, thrusting with lance, hacking, chopping and eviscerating with sword. Second, it could mean a distinct body of knights on some field or occasion, or indeed, more broadly, the entire body of knights. Third, it could mean the ideal code by which these men guided their thought and practice.

Though we moderns rush past the first meaning in our understandable hurry to focus on more abstract, more appealing qualities, the medievals really did admire good work with lance and sword--men beating other men by this bloody, sweaty, muscular work. What is at issue is less a set of idealized abstractions than what

Malory called “dedys [deeds] full actuall.”<sup>8</sup> Such deeds leave combatants “waggyng, staggerynge, pantyng, blowyng, and bledyng (shaking, staggering, panting, blowing and bleeding).”<sup>9</sup>

A knight who has seen Lancelot perform in a tournament (late in the cyclic prose *Lancelot*), an important thirteenth-century romance) can scarcely find words sufficient to praise his prowess:

“...it takes a lot more to be a worthy man than I thought it did this morning. I’ve learned so much today that I believe there’s only one truly worthy man in the whole world. I saw the one I’m talking about prove himself so well against knights today that I don’t believe any mortal man since chivalry was first established has done such marvelous deeds as he did today.”

He explains explicitly what these marvels were:

“I could recount more than a thousand fine blows, for I followed that knight every step to witness the marvelous deeds he did; I saw him kill five knights and five men-at-arms with five blows so swift that he nearly cut horses and knights in two. As for my own experience, I can tell you he split my shield in two, cleaved my saddle and cut my horse in half at the shoulders, all with a single blow.... I saw him kill four knights with one thrust of his lance....if it were up to me, he’d never leave me. I’d keep him with me always, because I couldn’t hold a richer treasure.”<sup>10</sup>

Such praise is not limited to imaginative literature. Historical accounts laud deeds that even Lancelot would find sufficiently honorable. If the late Medieval Scottish hero Robert Bruce’s most noted feat of prowess was to split the helmeted head of an English lord, Henry de Bohun, at the opening of the battle of Bannockburn (1314), John Barbour (his chronicler/biographer) also shows us Bruce all alone defending a narrow river ford against a large body of English knights who can only come at him singly. “Strang wtrageous curage he had, (his strong courage was astonishing).” Barbour proclaims proudly as the number of bodies in the water mounts; after Bruce has killed six men, the English hesitate, until exhorted by one of their knights who shouts that they must redeem their honor and that Bruce cannot last. But he does. When telling how Bruce’s own men finally appear and count fourteen slain, Barbour breaks into fulsome praise: “Dear God! Whoever had been there and seen how he stoutly set himself against them all, I know well he would call him the best alive in his day.”<sup>11</sup>

Scores of other passages could be quoted, but I trust the point is clear.



Even considered as a code of honor, chivalry is permeated by valorized violence. Prowess produces honor, for as the noted English anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers has said tersely, "the ultimate vindication of honour lies in physical violence."<sup>12</sup> We should note in passing that it worried medieval writers. There is a strong undercurrent of fear and reform working counter to all this praise, and I have tried to analyze such efforts elsewhere, but to follow that line of thought would take us off track.

For our present inquiry we have seen that the praise of heroic prowess was essential to chivalric identity. This could have serious consequences in a rapidly developing society that eagerly sought order in so many dimensions of life--governance, law, philosophy, architecture. It also led to tensions in Medieval Christianity. With this in mind, we can come back to our basic questions: how could the religion of Christ be squared with the veritable worship of prowess in chivalric ideology? Are knights so immune from religion that they do not care, or willfully do not see a contradiction? Or does a more subtle negotiation take place?

The most fruitful line of approach, I am convinced, lies in examining the obsession of medieval Christianity with suffering, especially with sheer bodily asceticism. I believe that Esther Cohen, a scholar at the University of Tel Aviv, has aptly characterized this cultural obsession. She writes of the "philopassionism" of the Medieval West in the centuries that interest us, that is the positive embracing of pain and suffering as good, rather than their avoidance or transcendence (more frequently found historically).<sup>13</sup>

The extreme language of this cultural phenomenon appears in St Bernard of Clairvaux's description of the martyr:

For he does not feel his own wounds when he contemplates those of Christ. The martyr stands rejoicing and triumphant, even though his body is torn to pieces, and when his side is ripped open by the sword, not only with courage but even with joy he sees the blood which he has consecrated to God gush forth from his body. But where now is the soul of the martyr? Truly in a safe place...in the bowels of Christ, where it has entered, indeed, through his open wounds...And this is the fruit of love, not of insensibility.<sup>14</sup>

Even more tersely, St Catherine of Siena urged in one of her letters, "Delight in Christ crucified, delight in suffering. Be a glutton for abuse--for Christ crucified. Let your heart and soul be grafted into the tree of the most holy cross--with Christ crucified. Make his wounds your home."<sup>15</sup>

This is not the language or the sentiment that one associates with the proud

and dominant chivalric layer in Medieval European society. In search of understanding, I want to present some of the best evidence I know for the connection between chivalry and meritorious asceticism, drawn from two mid-fourteenth century treatises actually written by practicing, strenuous knights, Henry of Lancaster, an Englishman, and Geoffroi de Charny, a Frenchman.<sup>16</sup> Each was involved in the constant, hard campaigning of the first phase (1337-1360) of the Hundred Years War between the French and the English crowns. The chivalric standing of each appears in his selection as an original member of his sovereign's knightly order: Lancaster joining the Order of the Garter, Charny the Order of the Star. The piety of each is dramatically registered by a valued possession: Henry cherished a thorn from Christ's crown of thorns; Geoffroi owned what we now know as the Shroud of Turin. Each author, then, is the real thing--a prominent and pious chivalric figure whose book presents more than a narrowly personal statement.

Henry, first duke of Lancaster wrote the Livre de seyntz medicines (The Book of Holy Remedies) in 1354.<sup>17</sup> The book was meant to be read by his friends, and was later owned by other prominent, strenuous knights, underscoring our sense of the work as a statement highly valued in chivalric circles. This is, I believe, an authentic view from a knight considered a model by other knights.

Lancaster's book pictures his ears, eyes, nose, mouth, hands, feet and heart as each afflicted by all the seven deadly sins, which allows for enough combinations and permutations to delight any scholastic. The noted Oxford scholar of Old French M. Dominica Legge suggested that the work may have been produced as a form of penance. I fear some readers who struggle through its turgid prose and allegory gone to seed--244 pages in Anglo-Norman French--may think it penance to read. But it is vastly informative. Any reader who persists would know that it was written by a knight. The text crackles with feudal or chivalric terminology of wounds, war, courts, castles, siege, ransom, treason, safe-conduct, and the like.

Only a few pages into the text Lancaster addresses our issues, in a passage worthy of full quotation: I pray you, Lord for the love in which you took on human form, pardon my sins and watch over me, dearest Lord, that henceforth I be able to resemble you in some ways, if wretched food for worms such as I can resemble so noble a king as the king of heaven, earth, sea, and all that is therein. And if, dearest Lord, I have in this life any persecution for you touching body, possessions, or companions, or of any other sort, I pray, dearest Lord, that I may endure willingly for love of you, and since you, Lord, so willingly suffered such pains for me on earth, I pray,

Lord, that I may resemble you insofar as I can find in my hard heart to suffer willingly for you such afflictions, labors, pains, as you choose and not merely to win a prize [guerdon] nor to offset my sins, but purely for love of you, as you, Lord, have done for love of me (4).

Here we encounter a knight declaring his willingness to suffer in imitatio Christi (following Christ's example). The leitmotif of this text is suffering. At the top of the scale God's suffering through Christ redeems humanity. The descriptions of Christ's torments during his passion, to a modern eye, pass the bounds of propriety and point like a signpost towards late Medieval crucifixes from which we have all perhaps averted our gaze, crosses bearing a twisted, abused, bleeding dead body of Christ. I'll spare you any quotations from Lancaster. The sufferings of Christ's mother, the Blessed Virgin, are imaginatively reproduced. The sufferings of saints, and especially the martyrs, get at least honorable if rather generic mention. But at the bottom of this hierarchy even human suffering, when endured in good causes and motivated by the right intent, yields some measure of satisfaction for the unmanageable debt owed for sin.

Sir Henry wants to suffer for the lord he sometimes calls "Sire Dieux (Sir God)." Wishing to avoid pride, he says he would henceforth serve not worldly inconsequentialities or worse, but God "in hardship and in pain." For his great sins, he declares "I would put myself in pain, so that I might find some way to please you, sweetest Lord" (116). In fact, his suffering must in some infinitesimal measure not only resemble but repay Christ's own suffering, as he recognizes:

I pray you, Lord...that I might so suffer all pains and sorrows patiently for love of You, sweet Lord, to repay you some part of what I owe for the most horrendous griefs, pains and vilanies that you suffered, Lord, so graciously for wretched me (191).

Or, again, he prays,

That I can understand that through the slight pain I endure on earth I am quit of the great pains of hell. This is a good deal (Ceo serroit une bon marchandise) as for a little suffering in this world, which is nothing to endure, one can escape the pains of hell, which are so terrible and joyless: and a man certainly cannot earn more by well enduring your gift of suffering than to have by this a reduction of the pains of purgatory (197).

These sentiments come from the pen of a man who refers regularly to "my wretched body (cheitif corps), and who says that his body deserves literally to be boiled, fried, and roasted in hell (en enfern boiller, roster et frire).(124).

The ascetic, religious sentiment could not be clearer; but is there any chivalric connection here? Is it likely that any knight, a joyful practitioner of prowess--as proudly physical a creed as I can imagine--would sincerely denigrate the body and long for its sufferings? Do such sentiments not emanate from clerics rather than knights and is not Henry of Lancaster merely aping such language as his confessor might use? Even that would be evidence of interest, of course, but I want to suggest that much more is at work. In the first place the imaginative context that he has constructed for his work must be kept in mind. The sites of sin for which cures are needed he describes as wounds (not fevers to be cured or boils to be lanced). And wounds come from weapons. Henry sometimes also speaks of fractures (*viles brisures*), which I am sure he did not imagine resulting from an unfortunate tumble down a castle staircase. The context of combat in this treatise directs our reading.

Moreover, Duke Henry sometimes reveals his train of thought marvelously, if indirectly. In discussing how the tears shed by the Blessed Virgin will wash his own wounds, he comes to nasal wounds, a topic which puts him in mind of the blows that struck Christ's nose during his scourging. He comments, in all piety, that Christ's nose must have looked like that of an habitual tourneyer, and that his mouth must have been discolored and beaten out of shape. Warming to his topic, he says that indeed Christ did fight in a tournament--and won it by conquering the Devil, securing life for humanity (138). In Lancaster's imagination, Christ and his knights share the suffering caused by such blows.

It seems to me not too much to claim, then, that Henry of Lancaster conceives of the strenuous knightly life itself as a form of penance acceptable, even pleasing, in God's eyes as satisfaction for sin. In its own way, militia (chivalry) is a form of the imitatio Christi (following Christ's example). We should note, above all, that Henry of Lancaster is not talking about crusade. Although he had personally gone on more than one crusading venture, and although he does mention pilgrimage with some regularity, never in his treatise does he specify fighting the unbelievers; his references to pilgrimage seem to indicate travel to sacred places, not the armed pilgrimage that was crusade. He thinks that the hard life and the hard blows that knights endure repay some of their vast debt to God, even, we must assume, if that means the campaigning of what we would call the Hundred Years War, rather than any crusade in the Mediterranean or in company with the knights of the Teutonic order. It is knighthood in general that represents a life of expiatory suffering, not crusade solely.

This point of view emerges even more clearly in the second treatise I want to put in evidence, that written by Henry's contemporary, Geoffroi de Charny, the leading French knight of the age and author of a Livre de chevalerie (Book of Chivalry),<sup>18</sup> Charny was in the fullest sense a strenuous knight who apparently wrote this treatise for what was intended to be a grand, new, royal chivalric society, the Company or Order of the Star of King John of France (1350-64). Only the utter failure of this order under the hammer blows of defeat suffered by French knighthood in this phase of the Hundred Year's War, I believe, condemned Charny's treatise to obscurity in its own time. However, in company with Lancaster's book, it has much to tell us.

If Henry of Lancaster wrote a religious treatise for which chivalry functions as a subtext, Geoffroi de Charny wrote a chivalric treatise with intensely religious overtones. Thus in analyzing knightly religion in Charny we can reverse the process by which we approached Henry's book. There we looked for religiously significant suffering and then found a link with knighthood. Now, with the Book of Chivalry we must first examine Charny's emphasis on suffering through knighthood, and then turn to find the linkage with religious expiation.

In company with Lancaster, Charny undoubtedly thinks physical suffering is good, the mere body is nothing. In fact, he refers regularly to the wretched body (*cheitiz corps*), using the very phrase beloved by Lancaster. They could sing harmonious duets on the dangers of sloth. Charny's part would include truly vigorous denunciations of self-indulgent concern over choice dishes, fine wines, the best sauces; he can denounce soft beds, white linens, and sleeping late, in language that would do credit to a crusty monastic reformer. Lancaster, we should note, would add his voice especially against the vice of gluttony; he was a noted gourmet, though he denounces this delight as a sin, and was suffering from gout when he wrote his treatise. "Too great a desire to cosset the body is against all good," is Charny's summary statement covering all forms of bodily indulgence.

Instead, the obvious goal in life is vigorous military effort, disciplining the body, taking the endless risks and suffering that campaigning entails without fear or complaint. Charny even advocates embracing the dangers and pains with joy at the opportunity for doing deeds that will secure a man the immortality of human memory. It will also, he says, secure a man the sighs and admiration of soft ladies.

Yet the emphasis is on masculine physical effort, struggle and heroic suffering. The very process of getting to the scene of serious military action is worthy; as long as one travels to fight, he is honored by Charny:

For indeed no one can travel so far without being many times in physical danger. We should for this reason honor such men-at-arms who at great expense, hardship and grave peril undertake to travel.(90-1).

Although he warns that “The practice of arms is hard, stressful and perilous to endure,” he insists that for good men “strength of purpose and cheerfulness of heart make it possible to bear all of these things gladly and confidently, and all this painful effort seems nothing to them” (116, 119).

To some extent bodily suffering and effort represent goods in themselves; but they must be seen as the necessary accompaniments of what I have argued is to Charny the greatest masculine quality, prowess. Skillful, courageous, hands-on violence, the bloody and sweaty work of fighting superbly at close quarters with edged weapons is the glorious means of securing honor, which Charny (in company with all professional fighting men in all ages) knows is well worth purchasing at the price of mere pain or even death. Prowess and honor as a linked pair represent the highest human achievement. Suffering is good because it is bonded to prowess which secures honor. At the very opening of his book he constructs an ascending scale of the several modes of fighting. All are worthy since they demonstrate prowess and yield honor; but some are more worthy than others. Individual encounters in jousting are good, tourney (involving groups of combatants) is better, war is clearly best. Tournament, for example, is better than individual jousting, not only because it involves more equipment and expenditure but because it also entails “physical hardship (*travail de corps*), crushing and wounding and sometimes danger of death” (86-7). Obviously, real warfare involves even more effort and greater danger of death. As Charny says concisely, “By good battles good bodies are proved (*par les bonnes journees sont esprovez les bons corps*)” (90-1).

These good men who prove their worth with their bodies in combat bear a heavy burden as models for the rest, a burden carried only with “great effort and endurance, in fearful danger and with great diligence” (108-9). Their great deeds of prowess,

“have been accomplished only through suffering great hardship, making strenuous efforts, and enduring fearful physical perils and the loss of friends whose deaths they have witnessed in many great battles in which they have taken part; these experiences have often filled their hearts with great distress and strong emotion” (110-111).

We should recall here Henry of Lancaster’s identical comment on “suffering of body, of goods, of friends.”

Charny laments that he can hardly tell fully of the lives of such good men, "hard as they have been and still are" (110-111). But men of worth "do not care what suffering they have to endure" (116-17). Charny lives so fully within this code that he cannot understand men who fail to realize the need for prowess, suffering, and honor. How vexing and shameful it must be, he muses, to reach old age without doing great deeds (112-13).

Near the end of his treatise he provides a capsule statement one more time, in the hopes of reaching his audience with a message that seems to him not only vitally important, but self-evident:

And if you want to continue to achieve great deeds, exert yourself, take up arms, fight as you should, go everywhere across both land and sea and through many different countries, without fearing any peril and without sparing your wretched body, which you should hold to be of little account, caring only for your soul and for living an honourable life" (194-5).

Here, as elsewhere, he pairs the soul with honor, raising our question of the relationship between basic religious belief and the putatively secular triad of prowess, honor, and military suffering. What is the connection in Charny's view?

Of course Charny is convinced, in the first place, that God is the source of a knight's prowess. As every good and perfect gift, it comes from above. Possessing the qualities of a great man-at-arms has nothing to do with mere fickle fortune. For,

if you have the reputation of a good man at arms, through which you are exalted and honored, and you have deserved this by your great exertions, by the perils you have faced and by your courage, and Our Lord has in his mercy allowed you to perform the deeds from which you have gained such a reputation, such benefits are not benefits of fortune but...by right should last" (134-5).

The pious response, as Charny insists tirelessly, must be to thank God heartily for the great gift and to use it well.

But are the hard life and valorous suffering of a knight religiously meritorious? Do they enter into the calculations that figure so prominently in the medieval economy of salvation--sin balanced by atonement-- by the fourteenth century? With a vengeance, Charny asserts that the knightly life counts. He first approaches this topic when opening a discussion of the various orders (divinely intended ranks or groupings) in society. The several specifically religious orders, he grants, pray for themselves and others and disdain the world and the flesh appropriately. Yet "they

are spared the physical danger and the strenuous effort of going out onto the field of battle to take up arms, and are also spared the threat of death” (166-7). He declares knighthood to be the most rigorous order of all, especially for those who keep it well. Though tough regulations constrain eating and sleeping and require vigils of the monks,

“this is all nothing in comparison with the suffering to be endured in the order of knighthood. For whoever might want to consider the hardships, pains, discomforts, fears, perils, broken bones, and wounds which the good knights who uphold the order of knighthood as they should endure and have to suffer frequently, there is no religious order in which as much is suffered as has to be endured by these good knights who go in search of deeds of arms in the right way (174-77)..

Like the monks, they suffer severe restrictions on eating and sleeping, but “when they would be secure from danger they may be defeated or killed or captured and wounded and struggling to recover,” and to this daunting list must be added the perils of travel, shipwreck and robbers. “And where are the orders [of monks] which could suffer as much?” Charny asks rhetorically and in triumph.<sup>19</sup> “Indeed,” he says, capping his argument, “in this order of knighthood one can well save the soul and bring honour to the body.” Charny completes his case by denouncing “those who perform deeds of arms more for glory in the world than for the salvation of the soul,” and praises “those who perform deeds of arms more to gain God’s grace and for the salvation of the soul than for glory in this world.” “Their noble souls,” he is convinced, “will be set in paradise to all eternity, and their persons will be forever honored.” The parallelism between salvation and honor achieved by prowess is complete. By working the body, by hazarding the body in deeds of prowess, the merely physical is transcended, in one direction to achieve glorious and imperishable honor, in another direction to help conduct the soul through purgatory to join its glorified body in paradise. Henry of Lancaster termed this the safe-conduct that leads to joy “sans fyn (without end).”

Like Lancaster, Charny is thinking about the knightly life in general, not about crusading. Again, like Lancaster, who went as a crusader against Moors in Spain and in North Africa, and (during a lull in the European war) against Slavs in Prussia, Charny went on crusade to Anatolia in 1345 (again, during a slow time in the Hundred Years War), and termed such fighting “righteous, holy, certain and sure” (164-5). But in no way does either knightly writer privilege crusade. Charny is, in fact, careful to assure his readers that they can fight in all proper wars



without danger to their souls. This insistence in both of our fourteenth-century knights is significant. Crusade ideology as developed by clerics traditionally distinguished between the sinful fighting of knights at home and their redemptive and meritorious battles with the enemies of the faith. Yet all their arduous travel, all their privations, all the dangers and suffering in fights with worthy opponents in licit causes seemed to Lancaster and Charny to prove their love for God, and to repay some portion of their debt for sin which had necessitated Christ's sacrificial love.

This line of thought, which seems so logical and necessary to Charny and Lancaster, will probably strike any modern, investigator who harbors liberal religious views as unfortunate, to say the least. Cutting, killing, and destroying--whatever the personal suffering or risks involved--will not seem like religiously meritorious practices to most of us. In fact, it did not seem so to some medieval writers. But their views represent a minority opinion. Most medieval scholars and theologians held views on warfare and the will of God that modern people find difficult.

Hewing to strictly historical investigation, we should think what remarkable benefits this line of thought guaranteed the knightly order in medieval society. William James writes in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that "the impulse to sacrifice" may be "the main religious phenomenon" and he describes "the undiluted ascetic spirit" as "the passion of self-contempt wreaking itself on the poor flesh."<sup>20</sup> Medieval asceticism usually involved giving up something truly important: clerics gave up sex; women (as Caroline Bynum has taught us) sometimes gave up food.<sup>21</sup> But the knights can have it both ways with regard to suffering and violence. What chivalric ideology did with sacrifice and the poor flesh is surely a remarkable tour de force. The knights acquire turf on both sides of a great divide; they work both sides of a basic contradiction; and this yields power. Are they not both victors and victims, self-exalters and self-abasers? They can praise hands-on prowess as the glorious practice of their beautiful bodies, which, of course, ensures their status as it wins them foaming praise and glittering loot. They can groan over their sufferings in hard campaigns and battles in which their bodies may be bruised, cut, and broken. The very exercise of their professional labor thus helps to secure the pardon for its inseparable wrongs. God himself gives them the great physical strength and capacity by which their dominance in the world is secured. Yet he is also pleased when they suffer meritoriously, in a good cause, as did his son. Thus bodily superiority proved sword in hand and celebrated in both epic and romantic literature with pride and style, stands alongside the sacrifice and suffering of hazarding the body, risking all, being on the receiving end of all that edged weaponry. The chivalrous are laying a

claim to participate in the dominant religious paradigm, based on suffering and bodily atonement, which is essentially clerical and specifically monastic in origin. At the same time they are enthusiastic practitioners of a chivalric paradigm based on prowess, honor and bodily exaltation (which seems to be the eternal warrior code and specifically that originating for them in the Germanic West).

Yet though the lines of thought seem contradictory, they in fact, merge, for chivalry in its religious dimension becomes knightly practice in good causes, suffering in atonement for sin and thanking God for the strength to do it all. And doing all that chivalry entails seems truly glorious to the knights, whatever the qualifications necessitated by religious sentiment. Surely Henry of Lancaster did not truly believe he was a worm. Many a religious order stood ready to accept a noble ex-worm. Some knights did, indeed, take that step and became monks, classically when age and infirmity had largely closed a vigorous chivalric career. Most knights, however, clearly remained in their status. I mean no disrespect to Henry of Lancaster, a man whose piety must have been real and whose emotions were surely powerfully focussed in a religious vein. But I think he wants to have it both ways. He wants to be a powerful lord who can (as he confesses) stretch out his beautiful legs in the stirrups of his great horse on the tourney field or the battlefield; he also wants to relate the sufferings he endures as a knight to the passion of Christ. His piety need not be thought foreign to chivalry, but it surely stands near the end point of any scale measuring its incidence among knights. Charny, I believe, scores more typically on that scale. He is so convinced of the rectitude of his chivalric life, so happy God has given it to him, so sure his own sufferings are meritorious that he does not even sense the gap he is bridging.

In coming to a close, I want to emphasize an important factor in the interaction of ideas. If I were a chemist I might term it the catalyst making the reaction work. What I have in mind is the formative attitude of the knights to religious truth and authority. Scholars have emphasized anticlericalism and heresy for generations; more recently some have advanced counter-arguments insisting on loyal and enthusiastic orthodoxy at the parish (that is, the local) level on the very eve of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. I want to suggest another emphasis. The knights were indeed loyal (and prudent) participants in the sacramental system of the medieval church. These warriors whose literature emphasized their hands-on violence, knew how to respect the work done by the priests' hands. They followed most of the standard forms prescribed for lay people and they staunchly opposed heresy. As both Lancaster and Charny show us, they could be immensely and verbosely pious.

But certain modes of thought and ways of life were crucial to the knights, and on such issues they required accommodation-- or at least tacit non-interference-- from the medieval church. In fact, on such issues I am convinced that they knew God was on their side, and that he would understand. He was, of course, the Lord of battles, whose vengeance was a wonder to behold and a thrill to hear described. The knights imagined that their relationship with Dominus Deus (the Lord God) was ideally like that which should obtain with dominus rex (the lord king). Both sovereigns had, sadly, created troublesome if necessary ranks of official mediators (often of no great social status) who stood between the good knights and their good Lord--that is, the clergy and all of those fussy royal bureaucrats, both sets armed with endless parchment books or rolls scribbled with Latin, and outlining a restrictive world of do's and don'ts. The ways of the Lord are truly inscrutable. If the world were really right, the knights would simply circumvent all these bureaucrats and relate to the Lord God or to the lord king directly and personally on the basis of their good and hard service.

Since in actual life neither the Lord God nor the Lord King had continued this imagined and idealized primal arrangement, prudence required the knights to cooperate with the intermediaries as much as possible. But wherever bureaucratic or ecclesiastical restraints cut into chivalric flesh, the knights refused to comply, indeed to believe that they should comply, and this refusal was backed by that fundamental, proud sense of a personal understanding with the God of hosts.

In a mass of evidence that could be brought in proof, the fate of tournament provides the classic case in point. No scholar doubts that this was the quintessential knightly sport, essential to chivalric self-definition. Clerical opposition is likewise a well-established historical fact, as my opening story from the Book of Bees illustrated. Sermon exempla and miracles regularly claim that tournaments are the spawning ground for every one of the seven deadly sins. Sometimes in a typically clerical fashion the writer plays with words to assert that tourneyers should better be called tormentors. These arguments roll on across the medieval centuries and even beyond. I have found them still laid out for preachers as late as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Of course clerics had clearly lost the fight by the time of our two pious knights, Lancaster and Charny, both of whom assume tournament to be a licit part of the chivalric life. Lancaster was an avid tourneyer and in the midst of all his pious contrition on all other topics he manages to say that knightly pleasures such as tournament and dancing are not evil in themselves. Two of Charny's rungs on the

ladder of chivalric perfection, as we saw, involve individual jousting or the more virtuous *melée*.

More than a century earlier, the dying William Marshal, the model knight of the late twelfth century, was reminded by Sir Henry Fitzgerald, one of his household knights, that the Church required him to give back what he had taken on the tournament field. Here is his response:

“Henri, listen to me for a while. The clerks are too hard on us. They shave us too closely. For I have captured five hundred knights whose arms, horses, and entire equipment I have appropriated. If for this reason the kingdom of God is closed to me, I can do nothing about it, for I cannot return them. I can do no more for God than to give myself to him, repenting all my sins, all the evil I have done. Unless [the clergy] desire my damnation, they must ask no more. But their teaching is false--or no one could be saved.”

To this speech John d’Erlée, the Marshal’s friend, responded, “Milord, this is the very truth.”<sup>22</sup>

This degree of lay independence is worth emphasizing because it does such major social or cultural work. Without it how would the spokesmen for chivalry (and this must be a mixed set of clerics and knights) have managed to square the circle? How could they manipulate the malleable language of religious imagery, or imagine that the hard work of campaigning, the discipline and the risks of hands-on cutting and thrusting can be a form of *imitatio Christi*, even when both sides in a fight are Christian? Marshal’s deathbed pronouncement speaks volumes about a lay independence that, moreover, has a long future with some rattling implications. Perhaps the final chapter of the book I have in mind will have to be entitled, with apologies to Max Weber, “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Chivalry.” But that is another paper.

## Notes

- 1 British Library, Harley 3244, f 27b, 28.
- 2 Ephesians:6, 10-18.
- 3 Ramon Lull, *Libre qui es de l’ordre de cavalleria* (in Catalan), *Livre de l’ordre de chevalerie* (in French)
- 4 Matthew: chapters 5,6,7.
- 5 Georgius Colvenerius, ed., *Thomas Cantimpratanus, Bonum universale de apibus* (Douai, 1597), II, xlix, 5 (66-7)..
- 6 Caesarii Heisterbacensis ... *Dialogus miraculorum. Textum ad quatuor codicum manusccriptorum editionisque principis fidem accurate recognovit Josephus Strange.Coloniae, J.M. Heberle* (H. Lempertz &

- Comp.) 1851, Ridgewood, N.J., U.S.A., Gregg Press, 1966 2 vol. II, 149-142 But is this the Eng tr??]
- 7 (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1999).
- 8 Eugène Vinaver, ed., Malory. Works (Oxford, 1978), 23.
- 9 Ibid., 198.
- 10 William W. Kibler, tr., "Lancelot Part V", in Norris J. Lacy, gen. ed Lancelot-Grail (New York, 1995), vol. III, 161-2. Original French: Alexandre Micha, ed., Lancelot, IV (Paris, 1979), 198-9.
- 11 Matthew P. McDiarmid and James A. C. Stevenson, eds., Barbour's Bruce, 3 vols (Edinburgh, 1980-85) bk XII, lines 51-61, bk VI, lines 67-180.
- 12 "Honour and Social Status," J.G. Peristiany, ed., Honour and Shame: the Values of Mediterranean Society (Chicago, 1970), 29.
- 13 Esther Cohen, "Towards a History of European Physical Sensibility: Pain in the Later Middle Ages," Science in Context 8 (1995).
- 14 Quoted in Eric Auerbach, Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages, tr. Ralph Manheim (New York, 1965), 70.
- 15 Quoted in Mitchell B. Merback, The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel (Chicago, 1998), 61.
- 16 What follows draws on a book in progress, "The Holy Warrior," which will provide full analysis and documentation.
- 17 E.J. Arnould, ed., Le livre de seyntz medicines (Oxford, 1940). All translations are my own. I will note pages quoted from Arnould's French text in parentheses.
- 18 R.W. Kaeuper and Elspeth Kennedy, The Book of Chivalry of Geoffroi de Charny: Text, Context, and Translation (Philadelphia, 1996).
- 19 See 174-77 for the quotations that follow in this paragraph.
- 20 The Varieties of Religious Experience (New York, 1929), 298.
- 21 Holy Feast, Holy Fast: the religious significance of food to Medieval women (Berkeley, 1987).
- 22 Paul Meyer, ed., L'histoire de Guillaume le Marechal, 3 vols. (Paris, 1891-1901), lines 18480-18498.