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THE CONVERSION OF THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH: THE TRANSITION FROM SACRED PEACE TO HOLY WAR

By John L. Frizzell

> *"One soul cannot be under obligation of two, God and Caesar. . . . But how will a Christian war, indeed how will he serve even in peace without a sword, which the Lord has taken away? . . . The Lord, in disarming Peter, unbelted every soldier."[1]*

Throughout history, Christianity has been marked by varying degrees of separation from society, beginning with its inception in the early first century CE and proceeding to the modern era. At times this separation has been large, and at times this separation has been largely nonexistent. Yet at no time in history has Christianity been more one with temporal society than during the middle ages. During the time from the establishment of the early Church to the Crusades, the Church underwent a metamorphosis of its beliefs on war. At its beginning, the Church was stridently against all militancy, yet nearly a thousand years later during the Crusades, the Church did not merely approve of war, but instituted the Crusades and guaranteed salvation to all Christians who died questing against the infidels. This militarization of the Church occurred as a direct result of the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity.

Prior to the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity, the Church was an entirely peaceful organization, exemplified by its teachings, its lack of participation in the military, and its consistently meek acceptance of persecution. The crucial divergence of Christian teachings from those of Roman and Greek moralists was the Christians' abhorrence of war and espousal of nonviolent living.[2] A study of the gospels venerated by the early Christians does much to explain the peaceful nature of the early Church. For example, in Christ's Sermon on the Mount, one of his longest recorded sermons in the gospels, he proclaims "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they

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[1] Tertullian, *On Idolatry* 19, quoted in Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak*, 3rd ed. (Abilene, Texas: Abilene Christian University Press, 1999), 216.

[2] Robert M. Grant, *Augustus to Constantine,* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1970), 273.

shall be called sons of God" (Matt. 5:9). Christ is also recorded stating later during his trial, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world" (John 18:36). Furthermore, one of the Christ's most emphatic passages is his order to the apostle Peter as Peter attempts to defend Christ from his captors: "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matt. 26:52). Tertullian, an early Church Father of the third century, employed this command to Peter as a rationale for Christian abstention from the Roman Army.[3] Tertullian held the belief that Jesus, in ordering Peter to sheath his sword, ordered all Christians to a peaceful life; for what great audacity would it be for any later Christian to presume himself permitted to take up the sword when Peter himself was not?[4] These few passages serve as a representative of the whole body of text and illustrate clearly the reason for peaceful Christian lives: it was how they believed God wanted them to live.

If the peacemakers were to be called sons of God and followers of Christ were not expected to fight for him because he was not of this world, then Tertullian's statement regarding the unbelting of every soldier rings with greater clarity and aligns well with much of the gospel teachings. In fact, Tertullian's claim that Christians had no business in the army was well supported by a number of other Early Christian writers including Justin Martyr, Origen, and Hippolytus of Rome. Hippolytus went so far as to suggest that "if a catechumen or a baptized Christian wishes to become a soldier, let him be cast out. For he has despised God."[5] The very existence of Hippolytus' condemnation of Christian soldiers points to the presence of Christians in the Roman Army preceding the conversion of the Empire; however, given the severity of the extant Christian texts relating to the disavowal of war, it is fair to conclude that Christian participation in battle was the exception rather than the rule. However, this paradigm began to shift with the conversion of Emperor Constantine.

Emperor Constantine the Great reigned from 306-337 CE; Eusebius, a great chronicler of the church and a contemporary of Constantine, remembered Constantine as "standing . . . alone and pre-eminent among the Roman emperors as a worshiper of God; alone as the bold proclaimer to all

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[3] Grant, *Augustus to Constantine*, 273.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 16.19, quoted in Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak*, 3rd ed. (Abilene, Texas: Abilene Christian University Press, 1999), 216.

men of the doctrine of Christ; having alone rendered honor, as none before him had ever done, to his Church."[6] Constantine was, indeed, an emperor of firsts. He was the first Emperor to give Christianity favorable legal standing in the Roman Empire, as evidenced by his Edict of Milan.[7] He was also the first emperor to espouse the Christian faith, shown by his baptism at the end of his life, although the sincerity of his devotion is rather debated by scholars.[8] And finally, he was the first emperor to lead the Roman army into battle under the Christian cross.[9] Though Constantine was the first Christian emperor and declared Christianity a legal religion in the Edict of Milan, Rome was not yet converted. It was not until later in the fourth century that Christianity became the official prescribed religion of Rome by the words of an edict issued by Emperor Theodosius in 380 stating:

> It is our desire that all the various nation which are subject to our clemency and moderation, should continue to the profession of that religion which was delivered to the Romans by the divine Apostle Peter, According to the apostolic teaching and the doctrine of the Gospel, let us believe in the one deity of the father, Son and Holy Spirit, in equal majesty and in a holy Trinity. We authorize the followers of this law to assume the title Catholic Christians; but as for the others, since in our judgment they are foolish madmen, we decree that they shall be branded with the ignominious name of heretics, and shall not presume to give their conventicles the name of churches.[10]

Theodosius, with this edict, effectively made the Roman state Christian and outlawed all other religions, labeling them as heretical. With the Empire's adoption of Christianity as the religion of the state, a mingling of values could no longer be avoided; the church was now tied to an Empire that had made itself great by war. At this moment in history, Christianity began to intertwine and slowly merge itself with temporal society. As the power of the Church grew, so the lines between proper and improper

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[6] Eusebius. *Life of Constantine,* LXXV. ed. Paul Halsall, *Internet History Sourcebook: Medieval,* (accessed November 22, 2014).

[7] "Edict of Milan", ed. Paul Halsall, *Internet History Sourcebook: Medieval,* (accessed November 22, 2014).

[8] Eusebius. *Life of Constantine,* LXII.

[9] Ibid. XXXI.

[10] *The Codex Theodosianus: On Religion,* XVI.1.2, ed. Paul Halsall, *Internet History Sourcebook: Medieval*, (accessed November 22, 2014).

Christian behavior in war began to blur. This blurring, though it first began with Constantine and Theodosius, proceeded through the Barbarian invasions, encompassed Pope Leo the Great, led to Pope Gregory the Great, continued on through Charlemagne to Pope Gregory VII, and finally to Pope Urban II and the crusades, where the blurring of the lines completed its work. What remained was a fully militarized Christianity, each soldier of God with a cross emblazoned upon his tunic and a blood slaked sword in his hand.[11]

But the growth of the Church's power was a slow process, and even after Rome's adoption of Christianity it would be centuries before the Church would truly be militarized. Indeed, from the late fourth century to the end of the fifth century, certain Barbarian tribes continually harassed the now Christian Roman Empire until 476 CE when the Roman Empire finally fell to the Germanic chieftain Odovacar.[12] During this period of harassment, Pope Leo I made great strides in increasing the power of the papacy, the greatest of which was his dramatic face-off with Attila the Hun. In 455 CE, Prosper, a Christian chronicler, recorded the event with a brief account written a mere three years after its occurrence saying:

> To the emperor and the senate and Roman people none of all the proposed plans to oppose the enemy seemed so practicable as to send legates to the most savage king and beg for peace. Our most blessed Pope Leo – trusting in the help of God, who never fails the righteous in their trials – undertook the task, accompanied by Avienus, a man of consular rank, and the prefect Trygetius. And the outcome was what his faith had foreseen; for when the king had received the embassy, he was so impressed by the presence of the high priest that he ordered his army to give up warfare and, after he had promised peace, he departed beyond the Danube.[13]

Leo I, acting as an agent of the empire, successfully treated with Attila, warlord of the Huns. This is a pivotal turning point in Church History; up until Leo I, no church official had ever represented the Roman Empire and

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[11] Alfred Duggan, *The Story of the Crusades*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 22.

[12] R.H.C. Davis, *A History of Medieval Europe: From Constantine to Saint Louis*, ed. R.I. Moore, 3rd ed. (London: Pearson Education Ltd., 2006), 25-26.

[13] Prosper, "Leo I and Attila," ed. Paul Halsall, *Internet History Sourcebook: Medieval*, (accessed November 20, 2014).

treated with an enemy of the state. This moment serves as an important touchstone in the growth of the militarization of the Church. Even though Leo I met with Attila as an agent of peace, he did so invested with the power of Rome.

Throughout this period of barbarian invasion, but prior to the fall of the Roman Empire, Rome suffered from increased lawlessness and great disorder. As a result of these invasions, central government in the West began a decline that would lead to the eventual fall of Rome.[14] To maintain order in the land, the power vacuum needed to be filled. Accordingly, Justinian, the Emperor of the East, issued an edict in 554 CE ceding authority to Pope Leo I and other bishops and church leaders, to "elect officials for each province who shall be qualified and able to administer its government," exclusively entrusting the Pope with the duty of overseeing "the purchase and sale of produce and in the payment and receipt of money, only those weights and measurements shall be used which we have established and put under the control of the pope and the senate."[15] At this point the church officially began to take over secular duties of the Roman government.

Only a few decades later, Pope Gregory I, whose papacy lasted from 590 CE – 604 CE, enlarged these secular duties. Gregory had been born into an aristocratic family and was well educated; he even served as the prefect of Rome in 573, which afforded him with the opportunity to learn the important details of the municipal administration, details he would put to use during his time as Pope.[16] During the time from the Fall of Rome to the Papacy of Gregory I, the West had become increasingly fragmented, broken into several different and smaller empires. Due to this fragmentation, a power vacuum existed that was even greater than in the time of Pope Leo I. Gregory, out of necessity, took over several functions of the civil government such as appointing governors of Italian cities and administering properties bequeathed to the Roman church.[17] These properties were located in Italy, Corsica, Sardinia, Sicily, and even North Africa, and because they had been

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[14] Everett Ferguson, *Church History: From Christ to the Pre-Reformation,* vol. 1 of *The Rise and Growth of the Church in Its Cultural, Intellectual, and Political Context* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2013), 299.

[15] Oliver J. Thatcher and Edgar Holmes McNeal, "The Emperor Gives the Pope Authority in Certain Secular Matters," No. 36, *A Sourcebook for Medieval History*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), 87.

[16] Ferguson, *Church History: From Christ to the Pre-Reformation*, 319.

[17] Ibid., 320.

entrusted to the church at Rome, they were called "the patrimony of Peter."[18] Pope Gregory I essentially found himself as the head of his own empire, complete with its own land from the patrimony of Peter and its own aristocracy, consisting of lesser church officials and his appointed governors of Italian cities. Yet at this point, the Roman church still operated peaceably; it possessed temporal power, but chose to exercise it by decidedly non-militant means.

Because the papacy was endowed with lands from the patrimony of Peter but did not possess the means to defend its wealth from kingdoms and nobles who might want to take these lands for themselves, the papacy often found it necessary to request the aid of nearby Christian kingdoms, most notably the Franks. The requested intervention of the Franks in the early seventh century came at a very opportune time for those in power in Francia. The Merovingian dynasty, which had led the Frank since Francia's founding, was fading away and was ready to be replaced by the Carolingian line. However, the Carolingians needed the help of the Church in order to become official kings of Francia. As such, the Carolingians agreed to defend the Roman church under the condition that the Pope, on behalf of God, declared the Carolingian line the God-ordained kings of Francia. This agreement led to the marriage of the church to the Franks in which the Frankish kings relied upon the Church for their legitimacy and the Church, in turn, relied upon the Frankish kings for protection from those seeking to steal its lands. Of these Frankish Kings, none was greater than Charlemagne. By coronating Charlemagne, the church showed that as great as Charlemagne was, the church was greater, for the church had given Charlemagne his authority and Charlemagne, thereby, owed allegiance to the church. In the centuries prior to Charlemagne, any unity which Rome claimed to possess was theoretical; the church had established unity within itself, but there was no unity in the political world.[19] Charlemagne's empire, however, brought together all the Christian nations of the West under one banner.[20]

During this marriage of the church with Francia, the occasion arose in the mid ninth century for the Pope to issue a certain promise to the army of the Franks, an army that served to protect the papacy. This promise was the first concrete evidence that the papacy had begun to approve of war in the

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[18] Ferguson, *Church History: From Christ to the Pre-Reformation*, 320.
[19] Ibid.
[20] George Burton Adams, *Civilization During the Middle Ages*, rev. ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), 164.

service of God. This promise, given by Pope Leo IV to the Frankish Army stated, "We hope that none of you will be slain, but we wish you to know that the kingdom of heaven will be given as a reward for those who shall be killed in this war."[21] This notion of holy war was not idiosyncratic of Pope Leo IV, for a few decades later in 878 CE, Pope John VIII issued a similar statement to the Frankish Army stating that he "confidently" assured them that "those who, out of love to the Christian religion, shall die in battle fighting bravely against pagan or unbelievers, shall receive eternal life."[22] Pope Leo IV and Pope John VIII officially instituted the concept of warring for Christ, or holy war. From this point on, a Christian crusade became a real possibility in synchronization with the ideals of a papacy that was growing increasingly militant.

Two centuries later, this militancy finally began to manifest itself boldly. In 1074 CE, Pope Gregory VII, drawing on the precedent for holy war set by Pope John VIII and Pope Leo IV, issued a letter to "all who are willing to defend the Christian faith" reporting that "a pagan race had overcome the Christians and with horrible cruelty had devastated almost everything almost to the walls of Constantinople, and were now governing the conquered lands with tyrannical violence, and that they had slain many thousands of Christians as if they were but sheep."[23] Gregory went on in his letter to cite I John 3:16 as a rationale for a crusade, quoting that because "Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. . . we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers." Gregory interpreted this passage to mean that Christians ought to war against the infidels as a means of laying down their lives for their brethren suffering at the infidel's hands. This interpretation was directly in opposition to the behavior of the early Church who, when persecuted, went willingly to prison and even to death itself.

Pope Gregory VII's crusade was delayed when he became embroiled in a power struggle with Henry IV, the Holy Roman Emperor. However, instead of simply fading away, the call to arms was reiterated by Pope Urban II, who held the papacy shortly after Pope Gregory VII. Pope Urban II issued a speech at the Council of Clermont in 1095 CE echoing the sentiments

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[21] Pope Leo IV, "Forgiveness of Sins for Those Who Dies in Battle With the Heathen," ed. Paul Halsall, *Internet History Sourcebook: Medieval*, (accessed November 11, 2014).

[22] Pope John VIII, "Indulgence for Fighting the Heathen, 878," ed. Paul Halsall, *Internet History Sourcebook: Medieval*, (accessed November 11, 2014).

[23] Gregory VII, "Call for a 'Crusade,'" ed. Paul Halsall, *Internet History Sourcebook: Medieval*, (accessed November 13, 2014).

formerly expressed by Pope Gregory VII stating, "an accursed race. . . has invaded the lands of those Christians and has depopulated them by the sword, pillage and fire" and urging the people to "undertake this journey for the remission of your sins, with the assurance of the imperishable glory of the kingdom of heaven."[24]   Pope Urban II ordered that all who answered the call of the crusade were to "wear the sign of the cross of the Lord on his forehead or on his breast."[25]   And so began the first of the Crusades, with a horde of men bearing the cross of Christ upon their chests and brows, armed with the guarantee of eternal life, and fortified by the Pope with the assurance of the justice of their cause in the eyes of God.

This first crusade battled its way deep into the Infidel lands and reached all the way to the walls of Jerusalem. After besieging the city, the crusaders captured it for the Christian cause. Though centuries before Tertullian had claimed Christ had "unbelted every soldier," the Church of the Crusades had discovered in itself a love of war.[26]   The sword that the Church had previously discarded in favor of peaceful living, it now picked up and discovered that, much like the formerly pagan Roman armies, it enjoyed wielding it. In fact, in the aftermath of the siege of Jerusalem, the Christian crusaders engaged in burning the bodies of the Muslims, searching for gold coins that many Muslims chose to swallow instead of surrender to the invading Christians.[27]   This action echoed the actions of a pagan Roman army that had, a thousand years previously, sacked the city of Jerusalem and eviscerated the bodies of the Jews that had occupied the city in a search for the gold many Jews had chosen to swallow before attempting to escape the invaders.[28]

Though the two events are a thousand years apart, the similarity between them offers a unique opportunity to view exactly how militant the Church had become. The behavior of the two armies shows the completed metamorphosis of the Christian opinion of war; the behavior of a Christian army, emblazoned with the cross of Christ and marching in the name of God was identical to the behavior of an entirely pagan army that, a thousand years

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[24] Robert the Monk, "Urban II: Speech at Council of Clermont, 1095," ed. Paul Halsall, *Internet History Sourcebook: Medieval*, (accessed November 13, 2014).

[25] Ibid.

[26] Tertullian, *On Idolatry* 19, quoted in Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak*, 3rd ed. (Abilene, Texas: Abilene Christian University Press, 1999), 216.

[27] Fulcher of Chartres, *Gesta Francorum Jerusalem Expugnantium*, XXVIII, ed. Paul Halsall, *Internet History Sourcebook: Medieval*, (accessed November 13, 2014).

[28] Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews* 5.13.4.

previously, had marched, emblazoned with the mark of Rome and in the name of the Emperor, to conquer Jerusalem. The similarity between these two instances is shocking. In the first century CE, the Christians stridently eschewed war and strove to live as peaceful a life as possible. Yet by the end of the eleventh century, it is clear that the Church no longer viewed war as sinful, but instead held the belief that war could, in fact, be holy. The conversion of the Roman Empire tolled the death knell for the pacifism of the Church, and set it on a trajectory that would lead it down the path to militancy. The culmination of this path to militancy was the capture of Jerusalem when the crusaders, as though to consummate the relationship between the Church and war, burned the bodies of the slain infidels. In this moment, the Church revealed the horrible truth that its armies were no different from the pagan armies that had gone before her. The Church, after centuries of non-violence, picked up the sword and brought it to bear upon its enemies.