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The Pope's Army

The reality of the Crusades becomes more shabby the more one knows about it.

—DIARMAID MACCULLOCH¹

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”

Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

—MATTHEW 4:8–10

Modernity has an unexpected genealogy. It was midwived by Christianity—not by the faith itself, but through faith in political power (Christendom) and its adoption of the practice of war.² Some people have called Christianity in power a heresy, others a temptation, that is, the “Constantinian” heresy or temptation. What that means is not directly related to Constantine, the murderous Roman emperor who famously converted, though his name serves as a kind of historical and semiotic marker. What it marks is

1. MacCulloch, “Holy Beach-Towel Hypothesis,” para. 4.
2. Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*, 1–2.

the temptation of the church to *impose* Christianity, punish heresies, and criminalize sin, using the organs of armed political authority. As some theologians point out, the Constantinian temptation is any temptation for the church to try to rule society.³ This temptation is still around, on the “right” and the “left” within Christianity.

The ultimate political power is the power to legally kill. Once we started killing heretics, the next step into war was difficult to avoid. We had already substituted killing for love as our way of being with others. Many early Christians first accepted the Roman Empire, frightened as they were of some of the people outside of the Roman Empire. Then Christians began cooperating with the empire. Then they found themselves holding political power. Finally, they began using it.⁴ Before long, Christians came to apologize for, define the parameters of, and participate in organized warfare, though on a small scale. But the door to war had been opened, and it just took martial leadership and the right circumstances for the church to go to war on its own, which is exactly what the Western Church did during the Crusades. Christopher Tyerman takes us back to a scene in Europe a little more than a thousand years ago:

On 12 April 1096, a young castellan, Achard of Monmerle, pledged property to the great Burgundian monastery of Cluny in return for 2,000 Lyons shillings and four mules so that he could accomplish his intention to join “the journey to Jerusalem to fight for God against pagans and Saracens.” In a similar deal with the abbey of St. Victor at Marseilles four months later the brothers Geoffrey and Guy were reported as wishing to seek Jerusalem “both for the grace of pilgrimage and under the protection of God, to exterminate the wickedness and unrestrained rage of the pagans by which innumerable Christians have already been oppressed, made captive and killed.” The experience of that campaign, which cost Achard his life near Jaffa in 1099, convinced his companions that they were the army of God “fighting for Christ,” their casualties martyrs, their cause supported in battle by the saints of heaven themselves, George, Demetrius and Blaise, “knights of Christ,” their success assured because “God fights for us.” They were no more than pursuing the task given them by [Pope] Urban II on his preaching tour of 1095–6, who, in his own words to the Flemish in December 1095, hearing that the Turks had “in their frenzy invaded and ravaged the churches of God in the east” and “seized the Holy

3. Cavanaugh, “Stan the Man,” in Berkman and Cartwright, *Hauerwas Reader*, 29–30.

4. Tyerman, *God's War*, 1–24.

City,” had at Clermont “imposed on them the obligation to undertake such a military enterprise for the remission of all their sins.”⁵

That’s right: the Vicar of Christ told members of the Roman Catholic Church that if they fought, they would receive a free pass to heaven. So begins Christopher Tyerman’s 1,024-page account of the Crusades, *God’s War*. Church historian Diarmaid MacCulloch calls the Crusades “the bizarre centuries-long episode in which Western Christianity willfully ignored its Master’s principles of love and forgiveness.”⁶ The Crusades were that, but they were also the church being swallowed whole by the politics of secular power, and by the logic of power being seen through the lens of war. In this logic, the enemy is never loved, but destroyed.



Stanley Hauerwas is a committed Christian pacifist who has had an immeasurable influence on me. He is also very good about giving soldiers the benefit of the doubt. Influenced by Alasdair MacIntyre, who sees vestiges of a virtue-ethic in soldiery—for example, the emphasis on honor—Hauerwas likewise, and charitably, abstains from demonizing soldiers. Neither will I demonize soldiers, having been one for quite some time; but I do want to look at soldiery in a way that also challenges these most charitable views. In MacIntyre’s account of goods and practices, he notes that there is a moral difference between being a good farmer and a good burglar;⁷ and I am going to suggest that soldiery is closer to the latter than the former in terms of what it contributes to the common good. My experience of war is that war, as a practice, does not inculcate honor as often as hatred, hostility, cruelty, and the fragmentation of the soldier’s personality. Bad soldiers do not make war a bad thing. War invariably makes soldiers do bad things, and we become what we do.

Moral degradation is *inherent* in the practice of war. Once the determination is made that some will have to be killed, those targeted have had the value of their existence erased in the minds of soldiers. This objectification of the enemy is not the end of it. Soldiers learn how to demonstrate their solidarity with one another through acts of escalating cruelty against the enemy. Nothing in “just war” theory or doctrine accounts for this inevitability, this transformation of the person of the soldier into a brute, or the transformation of a society that has accepted the logics of war into a brutalized and

5. *Ibid.*, 27.

6. *Ibid.*, from a blurb on the dust jacket.

7. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 187–94.

brutalizing society. The nearer a society is drawn toward totalizing power, the greater the potential for totalizing degradation. The more totalizing the military is in any society, the more likely that society will generally manifest the kinds of degradation associated with war; and war as a transhistorical phenomenon has been transhistorically male, which leads me to conclude that men are those who are most *degraded* by war—not victimized, *degraded*. Many more people than soldiers are victimized by war. “Degradation” here means degeneration into a lower moral condition.



In 1098, Christian soldiers en route to Jerusalem forced the capitulation of the Muslim town of Ma'arra. When the residents surrendered, the Christians massacred all eight thousand or so of them. It was getting cold, and food was in short supply. Christian soldiers began eating the massacre victims. Journals describe men carving hams from the buttocks of murdered adults and cooking murdered infants on spits.⁸ This was facilitated by Pope Urban II, a brilliant politician who designed the First Crusade and who finalized the corresponding church doctrine leading to actions like the massacre at Ma'arra. He accomplished the latter by taking the church's apology for war embodied in “just war” doctrine and reinterpreting that doctrine into a new one called “holy war.”

The story begins with a church crisis.

“The oldest institution in western Europe in the eleventh century, self-consciously tracing an uninterrupted history back a thousand years, was the papacy,” writes Tyerman.⁹ The reason, of course, is that political institutions were emerging and disappearing throughout most of Europe, which was in a state of near-constant, low-level warfare. A cauldron of ethnic displacement driven by war had destabilized one regime after another, and the church, given its Constantinian charter to play at power, was caught in the middle more than once. This was sometimes advantageous to the church and other times not. Prior to the Reformation, there was only one church in western Europe, and that was the Roman Catholic Church, putting the church in a position of power by default, even as instability continued to be the norm. And all was not well *within* the institutional church. A series of forty-one “antipopes” had been seated against the will of the church since 235 CE, by factions of political leaders and bishops. Some controversies were doctrinal;

8. Peters, *First Crusade*, 84.

9. Tyerman, *God's War*, 4.

and many were plain political calculation. The church had managed to hang onto its primacy, but at the cost of its autonomy.¹⁰

In 800 CE, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne, king of the Franks. This created the Holy Roman Empire, which would persist until 1806. The power to appoint popes shifted from the bishops to the emperors, who selected several outrageously inappropriate people for the job, who in turn sanctified the crown for political purposes. In one example, in 955, Otto I was crowned in Rome by twenty-five-year-old Pope John XII. The young pope himself was a mediocre intellect, and his completely debauched lifestyle led to his death at age twenty-seven, apparently from a stroke suffered while coupling with a married woman.¹¹ Such was the corrupted, symbiotic state of political and papal authority. In response, a powerful reform movement developed in the church that advocated for papal autonomy (and clerical celibacy). The straw that broke the camel's back was Holy Roman Emperor King Henry IV, a.k.a. King of the Germans. Kings had appropriated the power to appoint popes when Henry IV was crowned at the ripe old age of fifteen. The very idea that an adolescent might appoint the Vicar of Christ was anathema. And so the Investiture Controversy was on.¹²

Henry grew up. He learned the art of warfare and used it liberally. At the age of twenty-six, King Henry IV was told, and none too gently, by Pope Gregory VII that popes had the God-given authority to appoint or depose kings. The struggle between young King Henry IV and Pope Gregory VII led the king to appoint sycophant bishops and publicly contest church decrees. In 1075, Gregory VII began excommunicating bishops, letting Henry know he was on the short list himself. Gregory was kidnapped in Rome, then freed by Roman supporters. Gregory claimed (quite possibly accurately) that Henry was behind the kidnapping. In 1076, the pope made good on his threat, excommunicating Henry. Henry then convened the Synod of Worms, deposing Gregory from the papacy. Gregory defied Henry, remaining in Rome at the head of the church. In 1080, Henry launched an expedition that took four years to invade Rome, whereupon he installed the "antipope" Guibert of Ravenna, who in turn crowned Henry as the emperor. Antipope Guibert (Clement III) remained in place for a decade, supported by German military power. The reform movement had facilitated its opposite. The church was in exile.¹³

Desiderius succeeded Gregory VII in 1080. Renamed Pope Victor III, this reformer died in 1087, and the cardinal bishop of Ostia, Oto de Lagery,

10. *Ibid.*, 991–92.

11. Mann, *Lives of the Popes*, 891–999.

12. Chisholm, "Gregory VII."

13. *Ibid.*

became Pope Urban II. When he inherited the throne of Peter, Urban II inherited a western Europe in a state of near political collapse due to constant warring between unstable principalities.¹⁴

Feudalism was a system based on preparation for war. Lords were military men who served their commanders in exchange for land. The leader of any fiefdom was above all a soldier. More precisely, *soldier* meant heavy cavalry—a man on a horse, who could stick sword-bearing opponents with a long lance extending well past the head of his mount, thus keeping him out of harm's way.

By the time Pope Urban II took office, Europe was crawling with landed cavalymen, many of whom were continually seeking war as economic opportunity and exercising unspeakable cruelty to enforce their wills. These soldier-lords *were* by and large Christian as Christians had come to understand themselves within the Constantinian church. Their predominant interpretation of their own faith was that once having become a member of the church, they could sin rather boldly so long as they did adequate penance to ensure admission into heaven.¹⁵ So while they did engage in terrible cruelty, it would be inaccurate to suggest they did so with impunity of conscience. They accepted the existence of heaven and hell, these rough believers, living in a time when death was more ubiquitously in evidence, and were constantly looking over their spiritual shoulders at eternity. There are accounts of men who had killed in war living in a state of near panic until they could find absolution, a process they firmly believed to be mechanically efficacious.¹⁶

Urban II looked at Europe in this situation—saturated with competing military powers, the church bent before the political authorities—and seven years into his tenure he struck out on a course to consolidate the power of the church in Europe, via Jerusalem. Beseched by Christian Byzantine Emperor Alexios I Komnenos for assistance against invading Turks in what is now Istanbul, Urban II devised a plan to create an Army of the Church. That army would transcend European polities; it would be the Army of Christendom, directed by the pope himself. Augustine's careful writings on war in his "just war" explications were replaced by something that, at the time, sounded to the medieval ear like a prelude to the *eschaton*, the apocalyptic fulfillment of the Scriptures: *the holy war*.¹⁷

14. Tyerman, *God's War*, 45.

15. Glaber, *Historiarium*, 61.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Tyerman, *God's War*, 45–50.

Holy war, first conceptualized by Gregory VII, was something qualitatively different from anything in history. Gregory VII had used the idea to limited effect in his investiture struggle with Henry IV, with an army he called the Militia of St. Peter. Gregory VII actually tried to organize a venture against the Seljuk Turks in 1074, selling the Crusade as a means for the reconciliation of the East-West schism; but his project never gained traction.¹⁸ Pope Urban II, however, was a brilliant administrator, a charismatic communicator, and a skilled public relations strategist. His campaign in support of a Christian army that would march to the Holy Land to assist Christian brothers and sisters in peril at Constantinople caught fire.

The Byzantine emperor who had requested assistance had no idea how enormous (and enormously unpredictable) this force would eventually be. Urban II himself was shocked at the success of his mobilizations for war. Urban explicitly promised the “pilgrims in arms” that they would be shriven of all sin from now until death. Participation in war would be counted as *penance for all sins*. The Crusades were actually publicized as *penitential war*.¹⁹ Urban made war commensurate with religious devotion, with prayer, guaranteeing absolution in advance for *anything any Crusader did* while on mission. This turned out to be the historical equivalent of striking flint in a mine full of gas. He had cynically deployed an idea that, for the medieval European noble and his retinue, proved irresistible—eternal bliss in exchange for combat.

During the campaign to recruit and mobilize Crusaders, Urban’s public relations machine worked overtime to sell the war. The propaganda described Turkish and Muslim atrocities against fellow Christians from Constantinople to Jerusalem. Most of these stories were complete fabrications, prefiguring much modern war propaganda²⁰ (such as the false stories in 1990 of Iraqi soldiers dumping Kuwaiti babies out of incubators to die).²¹

One demagogic preacher called Peter the Hermit took up the call and assembled a rabble army that beat the main forces to the gates of Constantinople. Peter’s troops arrived with a bloodlust that had been heightened by conducting pogroms and massacres against Jewish villages along their route of march. They plundered as they went and arrived in Constantinople with “a lean, hungry look”; Emperor Alexios locked them out of the city with justifiable anxiety.²² This ominous beginning set the tone for a series of

18. *Ibid.*, 49–51.

19. *Ibid.*, 49–50.

20. *Ibid.*, 67–68.

21. Stauber and Rampton, “How PR Sold the War.”

22. Tyerman, *God’s War*, 78–81.

wars—Crusades and Reformation wars—that would span nearly five hundred years.²³

Historian of the Crusades Steven Runciman concludes, “Holy War itself was nothing more than a long act of intolerance in the name of God, which is the sin against the Holy Ghost.”²⁴ According to Tyerman, it was necessary to find ways around the Sermon on the Mount: “Being extravagantly well versed in the highest traditions of classical learning, the Church Fathers did this rather well.”²⁵

During these holy wars, chains of command broke down, objectives were changed and opportunities exploited, alliances shifted and atrocities occurred. Constant, savage atrocities, gratuitous in their cruelty, were visited upon not only Muslim combatants but also civilians, including Christian civilians, and en route on Jewish communities.²⁶ The propaganda took no account that most of the Muslim communities had Christians living peacefully among them, or that Catholics were living alongside “heretics.” Christians were killed along with Muslims during massacres in Muslim communities; and in 1209, when anti-heretic Crusaders appealed to their chaplain, Abbot Arnaud Aimery, for guidance on distinguishing Catholic from Cathar (Christian!) heretics at Beziers, the abbot is reported to have told them to kill the entire population. He was afraid some would claim to be Catholic in order to escape the sword. “Kill them all,” he said. “The Lord knows who are his own.” An estimated twenty thousand were killed in an orgy of violence. “The legates laconically recorded ‘our men spared no one, irrespective of rank, sex, or age.’”²⁷

During the seven-month siege of Antioch in 1097–98, when things were looking grim for the pope’s army, the leaders decided to make some gesture to mollify God in their hour of doubt. That gesture was to gather all the females who had followed the Crusader camps, everyone from wives, to washerwomen, to servants, and expel them to a distant bivouac. The perception was that women were somehow an impurity, casting a bad mojo on the camps.²⁸

The stories after this First Crusade were just as unsavory when subsequent Crusades broke out over the next two centuries. Europe, the church, and the headmen of the period were being formed by and were perpetuating

23. *Ibid.*, 78–81.

24. Runciman, *History of the Crusades*, 3:480.

25. Tyerman, *God’s War*, 29.

26. *Ibid.*, 58–122.

27. *Ibid.*, 590–91.

28. *Ibid.*, 138.

a constant state of warfare. All war conducted by Christian leaders came to be euphemized as “crusade,” no matter how cynical or corrupt the actual motivations. In 1095, Pope Urban II issued his summons to Jerusalem; by the beginning of the fourteenth century, crusades were taken up routinely against Christian neighbors in Europe. It had become a way of life and a vehicle for social mobility. The militarism of men had become the organizing principle within the church itself.

The great “Wars of Religion” that plagued Europe from 1524 to 1697 were but a continuation of crusading, which had begun and ended with political maps that were changed with the frequency of undershirts. But war itself, the developmental dynamic of war, led to a new, uniquely war-based form of polity, namely, the nation-state.



Wars required recruitment propaganda, administration, funding, and logistics. As certain emerging states proved, centralization of power grew alongside the ability to conflate secular adventures with holy war.

The French were following the Maccabees in seeking God’s assistance, confident that those who died “for the justice of king and realm will receive the crown of martyrdom from God.” The argument embraced central elements of repeated attempts in the later Middle Ages to elevate national secular conflicts into holy wars, analogous or, occasionally, synonymous with crusading: monarchical holiness; the identification of king and nation; the providential destiny of a specially favored *patria*; the consequent perfidy and evil of that nation’s enemies; the translation of crusade and holy war privileges to lay warfare; the promise of salvation; and the testing of unrelated political contests against the requirements of the recovery of the Holy Land. The success of such efforts profoundly affected western political culture and marked one of the most significant of the crusade’s legacies to succeeding generations.²⁹

The rising cost of warfare required greater centralization of taxation, which gave the winnowed remainder of regional rulers increased authority within ever more geographically specific and stable boundaries. The church, now having gone through dozens of popes and dozens more political alliances and breakups, was left on the sidelines. The church had been a pioneer in the processes of mustering for perpetual war; but lay rulers were

29. *Ibid.*, 906.

poised to best take advantage of these methods. The princes made war, and their monopoly on its practice, with its inhering centralization of secular authority, would eventually usurp the church. William Cavanaugh writes, "The eventual elimination of the church from the public sphere was prepared by the dominance of the princes over the Church in the sixteenth century."³⁰

Propaganda convinced people that their own nations were the elect. Military hierarchies elevated war leaders to the status of quasi-deities identified with a particular people. Military necessity consolidated and centralized power and legitimated these secular authorities. The *patria*, or fatherland, came to be consecrated as holy and its defense a religious obligation. This was the genesis of the modern nation-state, and for it to work, *war itself* became sanctified in order to associate national interests with some universal good.

Christians had acquired a centuries-long habit of making war, an easy norm of war, a ready resort to war; and that was shaped principally and directly by crusading. War has its own instrumental logics, not amenable to characterizations of virtue outside of war. The object of war that is common to all war, regardless of other justifying rationales, is victory—which is synonymous with the defeat, conquest, or destruction of the enemy. Those who pursue the most pragmatic, not the most "moral," solutions to the problems encountered on the way to victory are more likely to win. The decisive moral move in elevating pragmatism above morality is to set aside the moral rationale for war—for example, to end an injustice or defend a people or protect a way of life—as the final word on the morality of the enterprise. When the victory is declared "the higher good," then moral questions about the actual *conduct* of war are subsumed; and with that, the illusion of "just war" is effectively and *inevitably* undermined.

Because success in war requires unity of command as well as secrecy, those at the top of military hierarchies—even if there is, as in the United States, a civil authority above actual military commanders—become the *custodians of the higher good*, and the soldier becomes an instrument, a means, who no longer carries the burden of moral decisions. Morality is outsourced, and the soldier, traditionally a man, is allowed and encouraged to direct his focus on "his job," which is to destroy lives and property. Given that character is formed by habituation, it becomes almost inevitable, barring some epistemological crisis for the soldier himself, that he will come to associate virtue with his ability to kill people and destroy property.

30. Cavanaugh, "Fire Strong Enough to Consume," para. 16.

Psychologically, this requires compartmentalization, the dehumanization of enemies,³¹ contempt for occupied peoples, and inoculating oneself against the danger of fusion. It requires learning hard-heartedness. Empathy, nurturing, and relationality are understood by the soldier and by his male apologists, in any culture where war interacts with a sexual division of labor and sexual hierarchy, as “womanly” and as a threat to the efficacy of soldiers. No soldier today, even the few female soldiers, wants a reputation as “a pussy.”

So what is learned in the formation of the soldier is contempt for what is “womanly,” which translates in his mind to contempt for women—so much the easier when that contempt for women is in place prior to the initiation of hostilities.

SAMPLE

31. Beck, *Unclean*, calls this *infracumanization*.