

The Christian Soldier in the 21st century – What does society expect?

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1. The ideal of the Christian Soldier

The legend of King Arthur, his best friend Lancelot and the other knights of his Round Table at Camelot have formed the imagination of the noble soldier for centuries. Whether King Arthur ever lived as King of England, Scotland or Normandy or not, he exists in our collective imagination.

The idea of the noble soldier was formed during the 10th century.¹ Endless wars are destructing medieval Europe, as feudal lords are constantly fighting their neighbors over small territories. The central authorities in most of Europe are weak. People are suffering under the threat against their lives and their property. Far too often their homes are burned down and their families get killed simply because the neighboring landlord takes them for hostage to harm his opponent, who has secured himself behind the massif walls of his castle. The life of the rural population has become intolerable, when the monks of the famous monastery of Cluny in France finally decide to stand up.

Abbot Odo of Cluny outlined the ideal of a Christian soldier, who protects the poor and the weak instead to robbing and killing them. The monks of Cluny and many of their brothers mainly in France engaged in not only reshaping the model of a soldier but also in reducing war at large: Safe havens like churches and monasteries were introduced, as were days and periods of cease-fire. The first peace synod of Charroux in 989 marks the highlight of what later became known as the “Truce of God” movement, a real success in reducing the intolerable situation of constant war in 10th century Europe. With it the ideal of a Christian soldier, the noble knight was created.

¹ See Althoff, Erdmann, Zotz, Wilfried Hartmann, Der Friede im frühen Mittelalter, Beiträge zur Friedensethik 12, 1992

In limiting the timeframe and object of his fighting, the medieval warrior is confronted with the moral quest. Instead of simply serving his master, he is asked to serve a higher end. It is not partial interest of one landlord that may serve as legitimation of his fighting, but rather the impartial interest of all, peace within the society. At a time in which public authority is weak and will remain weak for some hundred years, the church in France had successfully managed to set an ethic that reshaped the profession of the early medieval warrior into the ideal of the Christian soldier, the noble knight. To meet the requirements the soldier was – first of all – obliged not to fight against women, peasants, merchants, pilgrims, and clerics. Fighting against anyone who was unarmed was prohibited. Secondly, he was obliged to respect restricted areas, safe havens such as churches, where people would be secure. Later on these areas were extended and included settlements and cities. Finally, defined periods during the year such as Christmas were excluded from fighting. To confirm the young knight in his orientation towards these virtues, the medieval Church blessed the knight and his sword. The Christian soldier or noble knight has to bring peace, not destruction and death. The Church reformer Bonizo von Sutri painted the picture of the ideal of the Christian knight in his famous book “Liber vita christiana” at the end of the 10th century. The popular version is the legend of King Arthur and his noble knights of Camelot, which were rooted in the 12th century.

It is obvious that we find the roots of the principle of discrimination that is part of humanitarian law as well as in professional ethics for soldiers today in the 10th century movement of God’s peace. Ever since, moral theology and philosophical ethics have been discussing the moral limits of the soldier’s profession.

Another legendary knight shows almost modern traces of a personality that have been long forgotten: King Frederic II of Sicily, later elected as Emperor Frederic II, was not only a soldier but also a diplomat. With a remarkable education, which was rather an exception for a medieval king, he had learned Arabic and had quite an extended knowledge of the Muslim high culture of his time. Instead of fighting the Muslims in the Holy Land as many of the barbaric crusader kings, he transformed the crusade into diplomatic activity, and in 1228, he negotiated a peaceful co-existence of Muslims and Christians in Jerusalem with Sultan al-Kamil. Frederic was not only a

Christian king and knight; he was a visionary with cultural competence far beyond his time.

Let us sum up our brief historic excursion:

The Christian soldier was created as an ideal in the Middle Ages at a time of disorientation and crisis. The obvious injustice of the use of military forces for partial interests needed to be overcome. The modern idea of war that should be overcome by a peaceful and stable juridical order, as the UN Charter states, is far beyond imagination even for the 10th century Abbot Odo, who initiated the most important military revolution for centuries: Instead of serving the particular interests of their masters and in doing so, bringing death and destruction to the weak and the poor, the soldier should be oriented towards the peace of the society. Since at this time a strong central authority able to subdue the outbreak of violent conflicts was lacking, it should be up to the individual soldier to overcome this deficit through his virtue. The currency in which the Christian soldier was to be paid was respect and honor. We admire King Arthur even today in literature and films as the incarnation of the noble knight. With King Frederic of Sicily we encounter the soldier and diplomat using his cross-cultural education to rethink the traditional categories and overcome a conflict that cannot be won by military means. While having preserved much of the gains of our tradition such as the principle of discrimination and having overcome the idea of blessing weapons, Abbot Odo of Cluny and King Frederic of Sicily have yet another message for us. Both of them raised their heads beyond the limits of what was accepted and looked for ways to overcome violence and to create peace. To do so they had to leave the beaten path and find new ways. Isn't it surprising how modern the medieval monk Odo and King Frederic appear?

What does society expect from a Christian soldier at the dawn of the 21st century?

2. Orientation towards peace

Any soldier serves the peace and security of his nation. Having signed the UN Charter, each and every state is obliged to abstain from going to war but recur to collective defense through the solidarity of the states. We all know that this is still more theory than political reality. But it is mandatory international law and thus ethical

obligation for all states. From an international law point of view as well as from an ethical point of view, political leaders are obliged not only to respect the UN Charter but to promote its continuous development until theory becomes reality.

Having said so, what is excluded? Any military service that put national interests first without any respect for the legitimate interests of other peoples and nations. This is not only an ethical quest but seems to be prudent, as Generals McChrystal and Petraeus have switched the US strategy in Afghanistan in exactly this direction.

If Abbot Odo of Cluny had to write down the ideal of the 21st century Christian soldier, he would certainly demand to aim at this ambitious goal: The Christian soldier should not only orient himself towards the constitution of his own country but at the same time at the UN Charter as the fundamental constitution of the international community. Therefore Odo would not be surprised to hear of the very similar idea of the fathers of the II. Vatican Council saying that the soldier shall behave himself as a defender of peace and security of all peoples and nations, not only of the interests of his own nations.

One important means to overcome the cold war was the creation of the OSCE, a security structure overwhelming the confronting states. Armies and soldiers became part of a regional structure of collective security that has become a model for crisis regions in other parts of the world. We strive for security not against Russia, for example, but in respect for and under consideration of their security interests.

In a situation of crisis, it is up to the soldiers to point to the risk of using military force in the concrete situation. In doing so, the soldier promotes peace as he prevents politicians and public opinion from the premature use of military means and encourages them to make any attempt possible for a political solution of the crisis at hand. The soldier of the 21st century has to have a political awareness distinguishing him completely from his colleagues of the early 20th century, as it is mirrored in the military virtue ethics of Max Scheler.² This was the last attempt to write a military ethics completely excluding the question of the aim and purpose of military action.³

² Cf. Max Scheler, Über Gesinnungs- und Zweckmilitarismus, in: ders., Schriften zur Soziologie und Weltanschauungslehre, Gesammelte Werke, Bd. 6, Bern/München 1963, 187-203.

³ Cf. Lothar Bendel, Menschenwürde und militärisches Handeln, in: Meinen Frieden gebe ich Euch. Aufgaben und Alltag der Katholischen Militärseelsorge, Köln 1999, 308-314, 309.

After the 20th century World Wars, the questions of the political strategy behind any military mission cannot remain unanswered. Each soldier needs to make sure that his military action serves a political end that is morally justifiable – within the limits of what he can see and what he knows.⁴ If any soldier would refuse to take this responsibility, how could we distinguish him from any mercenary who serves any political goal no matter what he is told or where he is sent?

3. Human dignity as basis of military ethics

Human dignity is the basis of any modern juridical order: our constitution as well as the constitutional treaty of the European Union and the UN Charter. A soldier who is orienting his professional life towards the realization of a more peaceful international order respects the human dignity of any human. The mutual respect of one's human dignity implies the responsibility to give reason for what one does to his fellow human being: all the more if one uses military force. In other words: The acknowledgement of human dignity implies the responsibility to give reasons to those who are affected by what we are doing. Wouldn't we want to know if there was really no alternative for a military action that unintentionally killed our beloved ones? At least I myself would like to know whether the killing of my grandfather on May 9, 1945 who then was a soldier in the German *Wehrmacht*, was unavoidable and in that sense understandable for me. Would not any spouse or mother or father want to know whether it was unproportional killing or unavoidable and tragic that led to the loss of their beloved ones? The destruction that military force implies and the killing of people have to be justifiable vis-à-vis anybody who is affected by them. The cross check is: Could I see the reasons if somebody else would do the same to me? This is a hard question, but only then can we really claim to commit a morally justifiable action.

A military virtue that is based on the mutual respect for human dignity will itself limit the use of military force to the least necessary and be most cautious in using this force.

⁴ This position can already be found in the military ethics of the Spanish Scholastics, cf. Francisco de Vitoria (1483-1546), *de iure belli*, _____, in: Francisco de Vitoria, *Vorlesungen II*, U.Horst, H.G.Justenhoven, J.Stüben (eds.) Stuttgart 1997, _____

4. Fighting terrorists beyond any limits?

It is obvious that the allied soldiers in Afghanistan are confronted with irregular fighters that do not respect these moral limits, neither towards their own people nor towards the coalition troops. There is a considerable discussion whether these irregular fighters can be fought at all successfully by soldiers whose hands are tied by a western moral that is not met by their opponents. Is our society, are we – am I – limiting our soldiers' options to fight the Taliban and Al Qaida in an irresponsible way? Are we tying our soldiers' hands instead of giving them all the necessary means against an opponent who shows no respect for anything?

The US soldier Donald Abenheim points to the danger that the democratic society, in its own defense, may not apply means beyond its own value base without destroying these values. Abu Graib had shown which road as a society we would be marching down if we did.⁵ But what shall I do - is the question that each soldier having been sent to the Afghan conflict will justly ask? Shall I give in if I may not use the same means?

The Generals McChrystal and Petraeus have pointed in the right direction as they implement a new strategy. Their key answer is that this conflict cannot be won by a military strategy but only by a political strategy of winning the heart and minds of the Afghan people. The military answer to the immoral strategy of the Taliban and Al Qaida is a political strategy that tries to include the Afghani population. Only if they reject the Taliban and their military actions that show a lack of respect for human dignity, only then can our soldiers win against the Taliban. It's a game played now by three parties, and the Afghans and their judgment are playing a key role as well as our soldiers that have to stick to our moral basis of respecting human dignity.

5. A timely military professionalism

The German defense minister zu Guttenberg is currently suggesting to end the draft system in our army and to rely only on volunteers and professional soldiers. As you all know, there is a German phobia against military professionalism, suspecting the

⁵ Cf. D. Abenheim, 38f.

resurrection of Prussian militarism. Without cultivating this phobia, I would like to take a shot at summarizing the essence of the arguments being discussed.

Draftees - that is one argument - are from the midst of our societies. It is the citizen himself who is responsible to defend his country and therefore has to serve in the army. Furthermore all families are affected when the parliament discusses the use of the military. This will limit the willingness of political leaders to use military force and look for any political means possible. The use of military means is only a last resort. Reality has gone beyond this position since the early 1990s when the army has been diminished to less than half its size and only volunteers were sent abroad to international military missions. The draftees were not considered to be fully usable soldiers because the time available to train them is insufficient. Therefore, for some 20 years, our parliament did not really have to take into consideration the public opinion when deciding on military missions. And it did not! The most controversial military missions were decided by a parliamentary majority of the social democrats and the green party, traditionally more pacifist parties.

Are we losing the pride of the modern German army, the “citizen in uniform” as it is called? This concept is a direct response to the cruelties of the *Wehrmacht* being a willing instrument in the hands of a ruthless dictator. The “citizen in uniform” in the end is obliged to respect the values of the constitution, not just the will of whatever government. The army is controlled by the parliament. This will be true more or less for all democracies.

But the international missions of the last two decades open up more questions: The soldier of the 21th century needs soft skills that were out of sight for many of his older comrades. Like King Frederic in the 14th century, he or she will not succeed by only relying on his or her ability to fight, handling of weapons and the use of military tactics. Like Frederic, our soldiers need to understand the environment to which they are sent. They have to have soft skills such as intercultural competence and communicative ability. Whether they are in Afghanistan, Iraq, Congo or any other country outside their familiar environment, they need to be sensitive to cultural specifics and self-conception. Both the Iraq and the Afghanistan mission have shown that combat troops with high performance in military skills alone could not achieve the

political leadership's military goals. Soldiers with little sensitivity and respect for the cultural environment will fail. The McChrystal and Petraeus strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan is a response to this insight. This means that we have to educate young soldiers with these virtues.

High ranking officers have an important task in counseling the political leadership. As military experts it is up to them to make a prudent judgment about what can be achieved with military means and to clearly communicate the limits. Loyalty to the truth has to rank higher than a false loyalty to the political leadership. We have seen a number of political decisions over the last two decades that were based on wishful thinking with regard to what can be achieved by military means. False political decisions regarding the achievable goals in Iraq or Afghanistan are just two well-known examples. But did we hear military experts publicly voicing their concerns? My feeling is that there is room for improvement.

6. Education of a moral personality

The education of the leader is a subject that the philosophical and theological tradition has been dealing with for a long time. Thomas Aquinas, for example, points to the fact that leading a human being is a service to him or her. The education of a soldier in the end does not make a difference. It is not a question of breaking his will to then create a functioning soldier. Beyond military discipline and necessary toughness, the ethical education of any soldier aims at respect for human rights. His or her fundamental rights have to be respected as well. Furthermore, the soldier has to understand that respect for human rights and military professionalism are not contradictions, but go hand in hand. This is true in regard to the formation of an officer or sergeant, i.e., the military leadership. Respect for human rights in day-to-day life means for example to explain the reasons behind a command. A soldier who is able to see the reasons his military leader offers will develop trust in his leader and will more and more give credit to him or her. At the same time he or she will be able to meet the moral need of a conscientious soldier to understand what he is doing and to see the moral limits of a command and the obedience he is asked for. For a soldier defending a democratic society, unconditional obedience is a contradiction. How

could he or she defend values that are contrary to his or her profession?

Unconditional obedience is fitting for a dictatorship, not for a human rights-based democratic system. It seems obvious that soldiers that command others, especially officers, need not only ethical but also political education to meet the needs of their profession.

Respect for human rights as the basis of military professionalism is also true with regard to the tactics implied in a concrete situation, as I explained earlier. If an army manages to form its soldiers this way, they are true representations of a democratic state based on the respect for human rights. Soldiers then abstain from living in their own military environment and culture but have an understanding as democratic citizens with the noble task of defending their nation if the need arises and being willing to intervene on behalf of the defense of human rights if the United Nations mandates.

The respect for human rights is at the same time the basis for an applied military ethics, on which I will not elaborate today. Rather I would like to talk about the ethical demands ahead of us.

7. Political integration and national armies

The process of political cooperation and integration of the 20th century has led to new questions regarding soldiers and armies. Until the end of World War II, the soldier was serving in his national army, every now and then side-by-side with allies of other countries. But the founding of the NATO and the European Union led – on two different tracks – to new questions:

- a. Within NATO, soldiers of many different European and North American nations learned to cooperate together. Confidence and mutual understanding was built in a way that had been unthinkable for a 19th century soldier. But the close cooperation showed at the same time that leadership philosophies with the different armies had developed quite differently. This was not a problem as long as cooperation was mostly reduced to the level of staff and headquarters. While the troops, i.e., the regular soldiers, were not integrated but remained exclusively under

national command, diverging leadership philosophies could co-exist side-by-side causing only few conflicts. It appears to me that time has changed, and we need to develop a “joint leadership philosophy” based on a common moral understanding of the soldier’s duties and the limits of his profession.

- b. This is even more urgent in Europe. According to the EU constitutional treaty, the so-called Lisbon Treaty of 2007, the EU member states decided to take the next step of integrating their foreign and security policy. For the first time the EU member states outlined a common position towards Africa in 2000⁶, and more has to come. The EU foreign minister Lady Ashton is about to organize an EU foreign service as the EU constitutional treaty foresees. It is only logical, looking at this development, that the integration of European armies has to proceed. The German, French, British, Polish, Hungarian, Italian, etc. soldier of today will be a European soldier in the future. The political and military demands that the European states are facing in the 21st century call for the development of an EU army and for soldiers that develop a European loyalty.

The Eurocorps and the many bi-national and tri-national brigades and divisions already existing are to be understood as the nucleus of the European army that European political leaders will have to create in the 21st century. But how is it possible to develop a European loyalty for soldiers being raised and educated in their national armies with a deep loyalty towards their nation?

This will take time and needs a corresponding European education and a model of transition. Let me only point to the US National Guard which could be a road model for the European national armies. The National Guard is the militia of the individual states of the Union States existing long before the creation of the US forces. These national guards are under the command of the states’ governors and only in case of war are they called for a national mission.⁷ To me this could be a model preserving the national identities of the armies in Europe and at the same time developing a transnational, a European identity.

⁶ Cf. www.europa.eu/scadplus/leg/de/lvb/r12106.htm.

⁷ See Donald Abenheim, *Das Ethos und die Ethik der Soldaten*, in: *Ethica* 2005, 25-39, 28.