

CULTURE, SPIRITUALITY, CIVIL AND MILITARY LIFE

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The vast theme before us necessarily requires a simplified analysis. Let us start with a theological overview. There is no doubt that the military presence within the history of different civilizations is a constant component, so much so that different lexical games have developed on military words in many languages. These reflect the structures underlying society, such as the Italian four S's "*Sacerdoti, Soldati, Sesso, Soldi*."¹

The Bible and Military Themes

Biblical Revelation, which is based on history and on the Incarnation, tells of a systematic sequence of wars, armor, armies (chariots, cavalry, camps, trumpets and so on). One moving example can be taken from the *Book of the Prophet Nahum*, where one of its few pages impressively describes a scene of war: "the crack of the whip, the rumbling sounds of wheels; horses a-gallop, chariots bounding, cavalry charging, the flame of the sword, the flash of the spear, the many slain, the heaping corpses, the endless bodies to stumble upon!" (3:2-3)

Indeed, military metaphors are often used in the New Testament too. Jesus himself uses the example of military strategy applying it to Christian existence that needs to be lived with intelligence and wisdom: "What king marching into battle would not first sit down and decide whether with ten thousand troops he can successfully oppose another king advancing upon him with twenty thousand troops? But if not, while he is still far away, he will send a delegation to ask for peace terms" (*Lk* 14:31-32). The radical choice for the Kingdom of God, the real *leit-motiv* of Christ's preaching is captured in a paradoxical declaration, which is obviously symbolic: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace upon the earth. I have come to bring not peace but the sword" (*Matthew* 10:34).

There is a well-known definition of the Word of God in that great New Testament homily, the *Letter to the Hebrews*: "Indeed, the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart" (4:12). For this reason the solemn portrayal of Christ in the Apocalypse has this emblematic trait: "A sharp two-edged sword came out of his mouth" (1:16; 2:12).

We also need to note the awareness of the demythologizing of these profiles. Already the New Testament had introduced a picture of the Messiah no longer behaving as a warrior but as a king of peace proceeding like a civil authority on an ass, not as a military leader on a horse: "Rejoice heartily,

¹ A popular song during the First World War had the tongue-twisting chorus:
"Sister Suzie sewing shirts for soldiers
Such skill as sewing shirts
Our shy young sister Suzie shows
Some soldiers send epistles
Say they'd sooner sleep in thistles
Than the saucy, soft short shirts for soldiers Sister Suzie sews."

O daughter Zion, shout for joy, O daughter Jerusalem! See, your king shall come to you; a just savior is he, meek, and riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass. He shall banish the chariot from Ephraim, and the horse from Jerusalem; the warrior's bow shall be banished, and he shall proclaim peace to the nations. His dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth." (*Zechariah* 9:9-10).

And Isaiah celebrates the Messianic era thus: "For every boot that tramped in battle, every cloak rolled in blood, will be burned as fuel for flames. For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace. His dominion is vast and forever peaceful, From David's throne, and over his kingdom, which he confirms and sustains By judgment and justice, both now and forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this!" (*Isaiah* 9:4-6). Christ went as far as to make a radical choice of love for the enemy so as to almost transform the *hostis* into *hospes* (the host into guest) and he introduced the principle of non-violence: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (*Matthew* 5:43-44). St. Paul, finally, will reach the point of defining Christ synthetically as "our peace" (*Ephesians* 2:14).

War and Religion

There is, however, no doubt that both the bible and Christian history share one thing that is culturally and socially significant. If we peruse the pages of scripture and the history books, we often find they are full of blood. In the Bible alone, think of the holy massacres – the so-called *herem* or "sacred slaughter" – that were seen in the conquests of the promised Land by the people of Israel, or the hundreds of violent texts present in the Scriptures and the military symbol used to speak of the "God of Hosts" (which was originally a reference to the Creator's army of the stars even if it was then applied to the battles of Israel in the presence with the Ark of the Covenant).

This matter extends across the history of Christianity where, next to the wars of religion, the relationship with our military theme is more complex, variable, and articulated. For example, there is an interesting distinction made by Tertullian, the second century Christian writer. In his *De idolatria* he distinguishes *bellare* in war, seen critically, and the *militare* in times of peace as a necessary protective service. In 1905 the famous German scholar, Adolf von Harnack, published an historical study of this notion through the early Christian centuries. His essay, *Militia*, shows a variety of approaches. On one side we have the holy soldier martyrs (think of St. Sebastian), the vision of the Christian life as a fight against evil and error, the rhetorical celebration of the entwined sword and cross, and then the Crusades (an important work on this is St. Bernard's *Liber ad milites Templi*).

On the other side, though, there is the critical position of the third century African Church Fathers such as Cyprian and Lactantius and the aforementioned Tertullian, or the emergence of the objection of conscience, as is seen in the *Passio* of the recruit called Maximilian. The procurator Dion interrogates him "Can you not see how young you are? You should be a soldier. What must the young

do if not enroll in the army?” Maximilian replied, “I am a soldier for my Lord. I cannot be a soldier for the world... I am a Christian and I cannot do evil.” Now it is clear that many and delicate issues arise as we seek a synthesis of all these different experiences, not least because of the different historical and cultural contexts. We will now consider just some general trajectories.

Toward a Proper Theological Hermeneutic

Above all, we have the historical quality of the Hebrew-Christian Revelation that appears in the Bible not as an abstract sequence of speculative theological theses but as a “history of salvation.” Within human events, often marked by sin, injustice, violence and evil, the work of God come progressively and patiently, seeking to lead humanity toward a purer, righteous and peaceful level of life. The peak is in Christ who proclaims “blessed are the peace makers” (*Matthew* 5:9), in the spirit of the *shalom*, the messianic, old testament “peace.” The same Judaic tradition, in the person of Rabbi Meir of Gher, would declare that “God has created nothing more beautiful than peace.”

In this light, precisely because the Word of God communicates with human words, we need to put aside every form of literalist fundamentalism that blindly clenches the text, and instead adopt a proper hermeneutic to gather the real meaning. Not to do so would be to adopt a stance that is sadly practiced in some Muslim and also some Christian areas, and confirm the Pauline admonition that “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (*2 Corinthians* 3:6).

Moreover, as witnessed by a long series of theological and philosophical research over following decades, many other important, necessary and difficult issues converge on this theme. They bring with them various components that are often in conflict with each other and are the object of debate and dialectic. We think, for example, of legitimate defense, protection of the weak, protecting one’s own cultural and religious identity against oppression, rebellion against a dictatorial and freedom-killing regime, recent “peacekeeping” operations and so on. The papal magisterium over the last century, and now with Pope Francis, has produced a wide range of documents in this area, as well as a concrete pastoral commitment by the various Churches, considering and confronting the complexities of the current geopolitical situation.

The Cultural Dimension of the Military Phenomenon

Military “service” needs to be seen in this light, considering it exactly that, a “service” for the common good, removing from it the excesses that still today can be seen in the frenetic race for arms and for military high-tech with all the relevant economic-social consequences. This is where the strictly “cultural” dimension comes in, something that must be carried out by any Christian engaged in national and international military institutions. The great nightmare is always that of war, “the father and king of all things,” as the philosopher Heraclitus affirmed (fragment 14), while St. John XXIII

underlined something often overlooked but nevertheless significant: “Mothers and fathers hate war,” as a source of death and pain.

Stances have always been fluid due to the various components mentioned above. For example, another great philosopher such as Kant oscillated between two conclusions in his *Critique of Right Reason*. On one side he declared that “war is an evil for it creates more evil people than it removes,” while on the other side he was paradoxically convinced that “war, despite the terrible calamities by which it oppresses humankind, is a stimulus to develop all cultural talents to the highest level.”

Alongside a mass of literature in its favour – often apologetic and full of excesses of nationalism or a more simple patriotism (how could we not cite the *dulce et decorum est pro patri mori* of Horace’s *Carmen saeculare*?) – there is also the critical, and often self-critical awareness, of those who perceive the dramatic waste of every war as, for example, Louis-Ferdinand Céline wrote in his famous *Viaggio al termine della notte* (1932): “War is the massacre of millions of people who do not know each other in the interests of those few who do know each other but are not massacred.”

Or as Voltaire ironically noted in his *Le sottisier*: “Soldiers kneel when they shoot: perhaps to ask forgiveness for the assassination they are carrying out.” A French writer who did die in battle at the beginning of the First World War was Charles Péguy, who in his work *Il Mistero dei Santi Innocenti* (1912) put into the mouth of God this despairing soliloquy when faced with the violence of the massacres: “Men prepared by war such monstrosity that I myself, God, was scared. I could hardly bear the idea. I had to lose my patience, yet I am patient because eternal.”

Such an anthology could go on at length and would be a positive stimulus to build a culture of peace, an anthropology of dialogue, a choice of encounter instead of a clash, bearing in mind the fact that currently the concept of “culture” is no longer only the Enlightenment one of the aristocracy of thought, the arts and the sciences. It is instead, the transversal awareness of being able to elaborate in multiculturalism, indeed, in interculturalism, a shared project of civilization, wellbeing, freedom, creativity, of solidarity, starting with the simple, limited and modest contribution of each person

The “Gospel of Peace”: Military Spirituality

At this point an institution with a Christian status such as the International Military Apostolate, as well as its cultural and working commitment for peace and support of peoples in war or poverty, must arm itself with a spirituality that draws on the Gospel message. This has often been the witness of notable figures at the highest level: suffice it to remember UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld whose Christian spiritual life was strong. He was killed in 1961 during a peace mission to an African theatre of war. Today, we suggest a model offered by St. Paul in his *Letter to the Ephesians* (6:11-17) where, through an articulated military symbolic language, the Apostle proposes a project of courageous and sincere spiritual life.

He speaks explicitly twice of the *panoplía*, that is the “armor” of God that is not aggressive against others but only against evil, the diabolic powers, the violence of the persecutors, the test of a trial: “Put on the armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the tactics of the devil... put on the armor of God, that you may be able to resist on the evil day and, having done everything, to hold your ground” (vv. 11.13). What is being fought is actually a *pálê*, that is a “battle,” a challenge against the planetary power of satanic evil: “For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens” (v. 12).

At this stage the apostle goes on to list the military kit to be worn in this battle: sheath and breastplate, footwear, shield against arrows, helmet and sword, “So stand fast with your loins girded in truth, clothed with righteousness as a breastplate, and your feet shod in readiness for the gospel of peace. In all circumstances, hold faith as a shield, to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (vv. 14-17).

And through this list of military kit – mentioned in a metaphorical key and almost as an antithesis to their function in a military context – emerges the beautiful definition of the message of Christ: he, who is “our *eirène/peace*” (*Ephesians* 2:14), sends the Christian into the world of wolves (*Matthew* 10:16) to proclaim and propagate the *euanghélion tês eirênês*, “the Gospel of Peace” (6:15).