

Is Just War Spirituality Possible?

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IN THIS essay, I wish to explore a topic that I find troubling and difficult—and about which I suffer a number of disadvantages in even attempting to address. But it is a fundamental question that lies at the heart of the cogency of the entire enterprise of Christian just war thinking. The question is this: is it possible, in the midst of combat, to maintain the kinds of attitudes and the psychological states that Christian just war writers hold out as the moral ideal for the Christian soldier? Following that discussion, I will take up a perhaps even more troubling issue: the rise, among some in the ranks of the US military, of a new “holy war” mentality, which frames much of the current US military engagement in the world in terms of “spiritual warfare.”

The Classical Normative Christian View of Soldiering

From the very beginning of an explicit embrace of the moral legitimacy of military service by Christians, there has been a strong normative view of the special moral attitudes appropriate to Christian soldiering. Even though that tradition is ancient and relatively consistent, there are reasons to be skeptical about it from the outset. The most obvious reason for skepticism is that neither I, nor most of the Christian writers who advocate this unique spirituality for the soldier, have themselves ever experienced the emotions and terror of an actual combat environment. So my exploration of this topic will be an attempt to frame a fundamental question, an attempt to which I hope others will contribute. The reasons

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given for a unique Christian spirituality of soldiering are theological and normative. But the possibility of actually sustaining those attitudes in the midst of the reality of war is a question which invites comment from the social science perspective. Perhaps even more importantly, the question of the feasibility of those attitudes in combat requires observations from reflective and experienced combat veterans who often (and understandably) question whether those of us who haven't "been there and done that" can possibly say anything useful about their moral world.¹

So, with those fears and qualifications firmly before us, let us commence. From the very beginning of Christian just war thinking, the idea that what fundamentally distinguishes the Christian soldier from other kinds of warriors and that what makes his or her conduct in combat morally permissible, is a unique mental set of attitudes and beliefs. We find this, for example, in one of the most famous of all early Christian just war documents, Augustine's famous Letter 189 to Count Boniface, the military commander of the Roman army in his area. Since the Letter is rich in many ideas, I wish to cite it at some length:

Do not think that it is impossible for any one to please God while engaged in active military service. Among such persons was the holy David, to whom God gave so great a testimony. . . . Among them were also the soldiers who, when they had come to be baptized by John,—the sacred forerunner of the Lord, and the friend of the Bridegroom, of whom the Lord says: Among them that are born of women there has not arisen a greater than John the Baptist, Matthew 11:11—and had inquired of him what they should do, received the answer, Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages. Luke 3:14 Certainly he did not prohibit them to serve as soldiers when he commanded them to be content with their pay for the service.

They occupy indeed a higher place before God who, abandoning all these secular employments, serve Him with the strictest chastity; but

¹ I'm grateful to my colleague Dr. Tim Demy of the Naval War College for pointing out a possible misunderstanding of this point. I don't wish to be misunderstood to suggest that ethical norms are context dependent to an extent that would undermine claims to their universally binding character. I do, in fact, believe that norms are of that sort. Nevertheless, one should approach these questions with humility in light of the reality that combat experience—especially at its most brutal and sustained—is a sphere of human experience fortunately not experienced by most human beings. This is true even of human beings who happen to serve in the armed forces. And it is a common source of exasperation from those who have undergone those experiences that they are reluctant to even attempt to communicate to the rest of us the full scope of that experience. We would be naïve not to acknowledge the gulf between their experience of the outer edges of the normal human moral world and our own.

every one, as the apostle says, has his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that. 1 Corinthians 7:7 Some, then, in praying for you, fight against your invisible enemies; you, in fighting for them, contend against the barbarians, their visible enemies. Would that one faith existed in all, for then there would be less weary struggling, and the devil with his angels would be more easily conquered; but since it is necessary in this life that the citizens of the kingdom of heaven should be subjected to temptations among erring and impious men, that they may be exercised, and tried as gold in the furnace, Wisdom 3:6 we ought not before the appointed time to desire to live with those alone who are holy and righteous, so that, by patience, we may deserve to receive this blessedness in its proper time.

Think, then, of this first of all, when you are arming for the battle, that even your bodily strength is a gift of God; for, considering this, you will not employ the gift of God against God. For, when faith is pledged, it is to be kept even with the enemy against whom the war is waged, how much more with the friend for whom the battle is fought! Peace should be the object of your desire; war should be waged only as a necessity, and waged only that God may by it deliver men from the necessity and preserve them in peace. For peace is not sought in order to the kindling of war, but war is waged in order that peace may be obtained. Therefore, even in waging war, cherish the spirit of a peacemaker, that, by conquering those whom you attack, you may lead them back to the advantages of peace; for our Lord says: Blessed are the peacemakers; for they shall be called the children of God. Matthew 5:9 If, however, peace among men be so sweet as procuring temporal safety, how much sweeter is that peace with God which procures for men the eternal felicity of the angels! Let necessity, therefore, and not your will, slay the enemy who fights against you. As violence is used towards him who rebels and resists, so mercy is due to the vanquished or the captive, especially in the case in which future troubling of the peace is not to be feared.²

Among the major ideas represented in Augustine's reflections here are the following. First (and most obvious) is Augustine's endorsement of the life of military service as a legitimate calling for the Christian (albeit with the qualification that it is not the highest form of Christian life). But it is a calling from God. Second (and somewhat ominous) is the suggestion that if "one faith existed in all" there would be no occasion for military conflict. I call this "ominous" because it seems to invite militarized utopianism's hope of imposing one faith on all as a means to earthly peace. Further, it seems significantly dissonant with the more somber estimate of the highest possibilities of the "earthly city" as we find them articulated in

² *From War and Christian Ethics*, ed. Arthur F. Holmes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1975), 61–63.

The City of God—a view that is, I think, Augustine’s more considered opinion. Third, Augustine applies Jesus’ saying “Blessed are the peacemakers” to the conscientious soldier, seeing him as being forced by “necessity” and not by his own will to do the fighting. This suggests the morally legitimate Christian soldier is always fighting on the defensive side—the disruption of the antecedent peace having come from the adversary. Hence, peace is the object of the soldier’s actions. Most provocatively, Augustine counsels the soldier, even in the midst of fighting, to “cherish the spirit of the peacemaker.” Needless to say, the psychological plausibility of that admonition is worthy of some serious critical reflection. And lastly, Augustine stresses the mercy due to the vanquished adversary, implicitly endorsing the idea of the fundamental moral equality of soldiers on both sides and planting the seeds that will flourish in the Geneva Convention many centuries later.

A couple of points about the specific historical context in which Augustine writes are in order. The peace Augustine is concerned to protect is, of course, the *Pax Romana*. That is important to note for a couple of reasons. First, it is a “peace” built on the foundation of Roman conquest and occupation of the entire Mediterranean area. That fact deeply informs Augustine’s sober reflections on the kind of “peace” that is possibly for the Earthly City in *City of God*. Second, the disruption of that peace is not merely a local conflict. Augustine is writing after the city of Rome itself has already fallen and when what lies on the horizon is the collapse of the whole of Roman civilization itself, at least in the Latin Western part of the empire. Consequently, the military defense Augustine is endorsing is not a mere garden-variety interstate conflict (to speak anachronistically, since the nation-state lies far in the future). Rather, he is endorsing the use of force to maintain an entire interconnected web of culture, civilization, art, and tradition, which is being threatened at its very foundation (and which, indeed, does fall in the near future!).

A number of facts about this context point to important questions about the transferability of Augustine’s moral permission for military service to the contemporary context. Although he assumes Boniface’s actions are legitimate because the latter is engaged in an attempt to restore a condition of peace which was the *status quo ante*, only a small minority of contemporary uses of military force conform to that pattern. On the other hand, the fact that the challenge to Rome was indeed an attack on the very foundations of Roman civilization itself points to suggestive parallels with the aspirations of groups like *al Qaeda* in the contemporary situation. At the very least, the nature of the contemporary conflict more closely resembles Augustine’s context than it does most of

the wars fought between nation-states since the creation of the Westphalian international system in the seventeenth century.

But for the purposes of this essay, the most important and challenging aspect of the Augustinian permission for military service lies in his attitudinal requirements. Christian ethics generally has reserved pride of place for what the Germans call *Gesinnungsethik*, or ethic of intention. In other words, the emphasis in Christian ethics has always been placed on the intentional state of the actor as much as, if not more than, on the action performed. For example, Jesus says in Matthew 5:27: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'; but I tell you that everyone who gazes at a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart." Thomas Aquinas argues that one of the reasons that the natural and human law (moral requirements knowable by human reason) must be supplemented with a divine law directly from God is that "man is not competent to judge of interior movements, that are hidden, but only of exterior acts which appear: and yet for the perfection of virtue it is necessary for man to conduct himself aright in both kinds of acts. Consequently human law could not sufficiently curb and direct interior acts; and it was necessary for this purpose that a Divine law should supervene" (*ST I-II*, q. 91, a. 4).

From these quotes (and many similar ones one could cite from other Christian authors) one can see clearly the core of the uniquely Christian view of legitimate soldiering. It lies in the attitude of the soldier (assuming the overall justice of the cause in the first place). The soldier kills, but not from personal animus. The soldier fights, but with a sense of "sad necessity" (as Augustine says regarding the judge who must condemn the criminal). The soldier sustains, even in the midst of battle, the "spirit of the peacemaker." The soldier maintains awareness that the adversary he must slay is not evil, but merely a human being who at the moment poses a threat. Further, this awareness requires that surrendered, wounded, or captured adversaries deserve benevolent treatment the moment they no longer remain a threat. Of course there are behavioral constraints as well, but assuming the soldier's conduct falls within the range of permissible behaviors, the distinctively Christian moral requirement is attitudinal.

All of this carries over, of course, into much of the secular international legal framework for modern war. Soldiers in the Westphalian system are traditionally viewed as moral equals. They are normally not held responsible for the *jus ad bellum* aspects of the wars they fight. The POW conventions capture the idea of moral equality in their guarantees of benevolent quarantine in the case of capture. But to reiterate, these secular understandings deal only with the externals of behavior, and

would not necessarily concern themselves (as a spiritual understanding of the question would) with the interior state of the agent.

Despite these pretty clear in-principle guidelines, it is (of course) common knowledge that atrocities against the surrendered occur in every war. Few conflicts have even approximated the normative standards for treatment of prisoners on both sides. Many soldiers, especially in prolonged conflicts and in unconventional war, find their attitudes toward the enemy—even the enemy civilian population—devolve into contempt and even hatred.

But the question of greatest interest from a normative perspective is not addressed by merely noting *descriptively* that such things happen. The *normative* question is whether the attitudinal expectations of the Christian tradition are realistic in the first place—these having been crafted, it must be noted, almost entirely by theologians and academics far removed from the realities of combat. Further, the author of this essay falls into the same class of writers far removed from the realities of the central question—and is therefore painfully aware of the limits of his own authority to opine on the question. Nevertheless, since it is the central question of the normative Christian tradition on this point, we must at least make the effort to clarify it.

One place to start is J. Glenn Gray's profound and important classic, *The Warriors: Reflection on Men in Battle*. A trained philosopher, Gray entered WWII with the intention of writing a philosophical reflection on his wartime experience, and the book that resulted is one of the most profound reflections on combat experience. He begins his chapter on "images of the enemy" with this reflection: "The basic aim of a nation at war in establishing an image of the enemy is to distinguish as sharply as possible the act of killing from the act of murder by making the former into one deserving of all honor and praise."³

He then continues as follows: "Most soldiers are able to kill and be killed more easily in warfare if they possess an image of the enemy sufficiently evil to inspire hatred and repugnance" (133). Further, "The more cramped, painful, and unbearable his physical and psychological environment becomes, the more he is likely to be filled with a burning vengeance, which demands action for its alleviation" (139). If that is right, of course, Gray is implicitly suggesting that even the attempt to maintain the normative "Christian" attitude about the enemy would make the soldier's job at a minimum psychologically extremely difficult—and, perhaps, impossible.

³ J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959), 132–33. In-text page references in the following several paragraphs are to Gray's book.

Gray goes on to distinguish four common attitudes soldiers typically have toward the enemy. This is, of course, what social scientists would call an “ideal type” characterization. In the actual psychology of individuals, no doubt some or all blur. Nevertheless, the typology is useful for purposes of analysis.

The first he calls “comrades in arms” (142). In this understanding, the soldier sees him/herself as a “technologist,” a possessor of specialized competencies and skills. Those skills are used in service of nonpolitical service of the state. The fact that the adversary is also a skilled professional is a cause for professional admiration, and defeating the adversary is a source of pride in proportion to those perceived skills. “The enemy was simply doing his duty, as you are expected to do yours. The more damage he has wreaked, the greater your pride in subduing him” (144).

About this image, Gray says, “[T]his image of the enemy may be preservative of human integrity, as some other images are not” (145). It is also, in secular guise, perhaps the closest analogue to the classical normative Christian image of the enemy. But Gray notes it is increasingly hard to maintain—and indeed, inspires dislike. The sources of the dislike he suggests are many—the sense that it treats war as too much like a “game,” and fails to give due weight to its moral gravity, for one. But the deeper source he identifies as follows: “Increasingly, we cannot fight without an image of the enemy as totally evil” (146). Gray points to Eisenhower as an exemplar of this shift. It was Eisenhower who titled his autobiographical account of WWII *Crusade*, and who saw the struggle against the Nazis as a struggle for far more than national interest—indeed as a struggle against a completely evil conspiracy (as indeed it was). But, Gray points out, once one sees one’s conflict in crusading terms, one denies the humanity of the adversary. So, if Gray is right, and this attitude is to a large degree unavoidable—or even necessary—in modern conflict, it raises deep questions as to the psychological viability of the normative admonitions and expectations of the Christian traditions.

The third image Gray expounds is one of the enemy as “a creature who is not human at all” (148). This image, he suggests, is the most fear filled of all. Killing in war is like hunting a beast possessed of “mysterious potencies.” Armed with this image, he suggests, soldiers “are freed from the possibility of remorse for their deeds” (149).

This freedom, Gray suggests, comes at a price: “The lack of compunction in such taking of life deprives the destroyer of any emotional purification. . . . Consequently, soldiers permeated with this image of their opponent are subject to rapid brutalization” (151). Indeed, this image can easily shift beyond “enemy as loathsome animal” to “being a devil, or at

least demon-possessed and, as such, an enemy of God" (153). About this image, Gray says, "His image of the enemy is a logical consequence of his own dogmatic certainty about being in the right" (154).

Needless to say, this image is totally at variance with the normative Christian notion articulated above—although it is hardly absent from the whole sweep of Christian history. Although we applied the term "crusade" to the previous image, in fact this image is the one that framed the literal Christian crusades of the Middle Ages. It is always a possibility in war—perhaps especially for the Monotheistic Western religions with their reliance on God's revealed will that can always assert its right to trump all other considerations and rational reflection.

The last image Gray considers is one that "appeals most to reasonable men after a war is past." It sees the enemy as "an essentially decent man who is either temporarily misguided by false doctrines or forced to make war against his better will and desire" (158–59). Gray notes, however, that during conflict it is a view held "by the minority of combat soldiers who are at the same time reflective and relatively independent in their judgment" (158).

About this view, Gray writes:

It is nearly impossible for a combat soldier to prepare himself psychologically for bloody combat with a will to victory while holding such an image of his foe. How can he become enthusiastic about Operation Killer or look forward with eagerness to carrying out a superior's orders to close with the enemy. The war itself is more likely to seem the greatest folly and criminality ever perpetrated. If he kills, he is troubled in conscience, and if he does not do his share in the communal life imposed by combat, he is also tormented. . . .

. . . The combat soldier who refused to yield to abstract hatred in forming an image of the enemy is accordingly isolated and lonely on the modern battlefield. (160; 163)

So where do we stand, if we rely on Gray's typology, with respect to the central question of the practical applicability of the attitudinal prescriptions of the classic normative tradition? Among the attitudes in Gray's classification, the two that come closest to that norm are the "comrades in arms" and the "essentially decent man" types. Unfortunately, both are among the most problematic, perhaps especially in the kinds of conflicts the US in particular is most engaged in today.

The "comrades in arms" model made the most sense (if it ever did) in the post-Westphalian European context. There, you had uniformed militaries lead by professional officers all of whose training was essentially equivalent. In that context it was not wholly unreasonable for officers to

see themselves as members of a common profession who just happened to work for different sides. A bit humorously, this attitude is well captured in the classic film *Patton* (which, apparently captures a real historical event). After defeating Rommel's forces in North Africa, Patton exclaims, "Rommel, you magnificent bastard, I read your book!" And when (increasingly rarely!) modern conflicts resemble this pattern, it is not unusual to see some of the "comrades in arm" attitude reassert itself. It does, as Gray noted, have the advantage of being preservative of the integrity of both sides—they are honorable professionals, engaged in applying their body of professional knowledge to the tactical and operational challenge set before them. As such, it is not surprising that a degree of professional respect and even admiration can be shown to one side by the other.

But when the adversaries see each other in starkly morally asymmetrical terms, this image is not sustainable. For Eisenhower, the fact that German officers worked for the Third Reich made such respect impossible—despite the fact that many were indeed superb military professionals in the traditional sense. Needless to say, when the conflict is with non-uniformed, non-state actors who are minimally (if at all) in any meaningful sense "professionals," such an attitude is impossible. This is even more true, of course, when the sides see each other in Manichean terms of a struggle of good versus evil, as is the case in al Qaeda's view of the West and, at least in some quarters, the West's perception of al Qaeda—like groups (a point to which we will return).

The other view, that the enemy is a fundamentally decent person in the grip of mistaken ideology or the victim of deception, seems psychologically untenable for all but a negligible number of combat-effective soldiers. If it is the case that "ought implies can," then it is meaningless to suggest that this ought to be the attitude appropriate to Christian soldiers since it appears to be impossible to sustain while being an effective soldier.

So we are led by this analysis to an uncomfortable conclusion. It appears that the normative Christian tradition's central idea that Christian soldiering is acceptable only if accompanied by a continual "spirit of a peacemaker" who approaches his or her distasteful task mournfully is fundamentally at variance with psychological possibility. It must be reiterated, of course, that this is an analysis made by one inexperienced in the realities of the question of combat psychology, and dependent on Gray's analysis of the possibilities. It invites, therefore, criticism, supplementation, and correction, both by empirical social science and by the testimony of experienced and reflective combat veterans. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this essay, we will treat the conclusion as established. The

implications of this are profound, and we will return to some suggestions regarding reconciling this apparent reality with the hope for ethically responsible soldiering at the conclusion.

Contemporary US Christian Soldiering as “Spiritual Warfare”

In this section, we will explore a way of framing the role of the soldier in contemporary American Christianity. It differs significantly from what we have been calling the normative Christian pattern. Its influence in the contemporary US military, however, is pervasive to a degree often astonishing to outsiders. It is important, therefore, to put it clearly on the table for examination.

Although this pattern has its natural “home” in Evangelical Protestant Christianity rather than Roman Catholic patterns of thought, it is so influential among US forces that its influence extends certainly to all self-conscious Christians serving in U.S. forces. Its impact is even strongly felt by the non-religious and those of other religious persuasions in a variety of ways. Superior officers who hold the attitudes I’m about to describe often feel quite free to articulate them freely in their official capacity. Language and ritual conveying the attitudes are a fairly routine part of official events in some military organizations. Well-organized groups (most notably, the Officer’s Christian Fellowship, or OCF) propagate these ideas and attempt to persuade others in the ranks to join them.⁴ Indeed, so pervasive are these practices that a very visible organization has arisen to attempt to suppress them by means of lawsuits arguing that many of the practices are unconstitutional breaches of the non-establishment clause of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution (the Military Religious Freedom Foundation).

⁴ This point was made quite clear to me in a private conversation with a Ph.D.-educated Colonel (now a Major General). This officer was a Roman Catholic, but was attracted to many aspects of the OCF’s work with military families. He had just returned from an OCF retreat with his family and wanted to discuss a nagging sense of discomfort he had with the organization. Although on the surface he felt accepted by the group, he sensed a deeper strain of the perception that he, as a Roman Catholic, was not really a Christian in the sense in which the organization understood it. As I recall the conversation, I pointed out to him a number of aspects of the OCF that were, indeed, distinctively Evangelical Protestant. I further told him (to his great surprise, I might add) that indeed, in the eyes of many Evangelicals, a Catholic was marginally Christian at best, and in the minds of many Evangelicals, not really Christian at all. According to Jeff Sharlett (*Harper’s Magazine*, May 2009, 33), OCF has 15,000 members and is active at 80 percent of military bases, growing at a rate of 3 percent a year.

The simplest shorthand for the attitude of these military members is that their military conflict is best framed as “spiritual warfare” which transcends the aspects of the conflict visible to merely secular eyes. An example which perfectly captures this mindset is a speech given by Brigadier General Donald C. Wurster, USAF, at an OCF Appreciation Dinner for Chaplains and Pastors. General Wurster said the following:

We face a formidable enemy, who is defeated in eternity, but who continues to plague the human race. For, as Paul says, “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”⁵

So, for Wurster and like-minded soldiers, the literal combat with temporal enemies is not the essence of the conflict. They, and they alone, perceive the real conflict, which is the one occurring on the supernatural plane:

The struggle of demons and holiness is invisible to the unenlightened. The most caring of the unsaved have no realization of their unfortunate alliance with evil. All around us, though, we see the casualties of the battle. Many do not even perceive that the battle is joined or know that they are spiritual casualties in need of a Savior.⁶

According to this line of thought, the “unsaved” (including the unsaved in our own ranks) are in an “unfortunate alliance with evil.” One wonders, as a bit of an aside, how an officer who holds such attitudes would lead a diverse unit and make unit cohesion his or her priority if the underlying belief is that a goodly fraction of one’s comrades are in alliance with evil!

The answer to that question is that, at least ideally, they will not have to lead a diverse unit. They will convert them. According to one OCF bible study, their mission will not be complete until they bring Jesus as “Lord of all” to the entire military.⁷ A clear example of this is found on the website of Rocky Mountain High, a retreat program for Air Force Academy and ROTC cadets and NCO’s sponsored by the OCF. One of the three central objectives of the retreat is listed as follows: “Impart a clear vision for serving as a missionary while in the military.”⁸ This effort is

⁵ www.ocfusa.org/articles/wurster_centurions.php.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jeff Sharlett, *Jesus Killed Mohammed* (Harpers, May 2009, 34).

⁸ www.springcanyon.org/rmh/rmh.htm.

aided by the growing belief in Evangelical quarters that, as one Evangelical quoted in Sharlett's article put it, "The idea of separation of church and state. . . . There's this whole idea in America that it's in the Constitution, but it's not."⁹ That whole rejection of the idea that part of one's loyalty to the Constitution (to which American military personnel swear their oath of ultimate allegiance) includes defense of rigorous support for separation of church and state receives powerful support in the Evangelical world by alternative "histories" of the American founding. Most notable of these is propagated by David Barton and his organization Wallbuilders, which wrongly claims that the Founders intended the US to be an overtly Christian country.¹⁰ Indeed, in July 2012, the History News Network voted Barton's recent book, *The Jefferson Lies*, "the least credible history book in print."¹¹ His publisher, Thomas Nelson (an Evangelical publishing house) has elected to stop publishing and distributing it as a result of criticism from many quarters of its factual inaccuracy.¹²

Although there are obviously ways of squaring the idea of serving as a missionary while in military service that are consistent with the US Constitution, the emphasis on evangelism inevitably invites the kinds of abuses of authority that the Military Religious Freedom Foundation and other groups routinely document. And indeed, if one's core conviction is that one's colleagues, no matter how otherwise professional and disciplined as military personnel, are (as General Wurster expressed it) in an alliance with evil, I suppose distrusting them and trying to change them is virtually inevitable. As Sharlett puts it, "Today, fundamentalism, based as it is on a vigorous assertion of narrow and exclusive claims to truth, can no longer justify common cause with secularism."¹³

⁹ Sharlett, *Jesus Killed Mohammed*, 34.

¹⁰ See www.wallbuilders.org for a sampling of Barton's books, videos, etc., which are distributed widely in Evangelical circles in support of this completely distorted view of US history. A useful factual critique of such claims can be found in Chris Rodda, *Liars for Jesus: The Religious Right's Alternative Version of American History*, vol. 1 (2006), available at www.amazon.com/Liars-Jesus-Religious-Alternate-American/dp/1419644386?SubscriptionId=0TBPMRS0W3G0CB5F0902&tag=afncaie-20&linkCode=xm2&camp=2025&creative=165953&creativeASIN=1419644386#.

¹¹ See "Hard Truth for Author: Publisher Pulls 'The Jefferson Lies,' artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/08/14/hard-truth-for-author-publisher-pulls-the-jefferson-lies/ See also "Publisher Pulls Controversial Thomas Jefferson Book, Citing Loss of Confidence." www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2012/08/09/158510648/publisher-pulls-controversial-thomas-jefferson-book-citing-loss-of-confidence

¹² artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/08/14/hard-truth-for-author-publisher-pulls-the-jefferson-lies/.

¹³ Sharlett, *Jesus Killed Mohammed*, 42.

Although the question of the spiritual struggle within our own ranks is a source of considerable tension and dissension in the contemporary US military, the deeper question brings us back to the question of the “image of the enemy.” For those deeply committed to this vision of American history, the kind of event Jeff Sharlett documented in *Harper’s Magazine* last May starts to seem plausible if not inevitable. According to Sharlett’s account, a unit of the 109th National Guard Infantry decided it would be a wonderful idea to spend part of their Easter painting “Jesus killed Mohammed” on the side of a Bradley Fighting vehicle and driving it through the Muslim sacred city of Samarra, while simultaneously having their Arabic translator repeat the taunt over the vehicle’s loudspeaker. Sergeant Jeffrey Humphrey (according to Sharlett) said “he’d never witnessed a maneuver so fundamentally stupid,” but the rest of the unit “thought the lieutenant (whose idea this was) was a hero, a kamikaze on a suicide mission to bring Iraqis the American news: Jesus killed Mohammed.”¹⁴

Sharlett’s article goes on to document the pervasiveness of such attitudes throughout sectors of the US military. It would certainly be wrong to think such beliefs and attitudes constitute a majority opinion. But it would equally be wrong not to note that expressions of such ideas in word and deed are pervasive in the US military, and very rarely if ever do commanders (when not themselves the perpetrators) take effective action to curb them.

I will refrain from further documenting these attitudes and return to the central question of this essay: is a just war spirituality possible? We have already seen the difficulties of maintaining the attitudes advocated by the classic and normative just war tradition in the deep traditions of Christianity—and those which carry over into contemporary Roman Catholic tradition. When we consider the question from the perspective of the beliefs and attitudes I’ve just reviewed, however, the story is complex.

It certainly seems as if it is indeed possible to approach the warrior’s task if one holds the beliefs and attitudes inspired by the Barton-like view of American history. On the other hand, one might well hesitate to consider them truly “just war” views. In many respects, these attitudes sound much more like Crusader beliefs or worse—since one confidently knows one is on God’s side, and that the adversary is in alliance with evil, their defeat becomes an event of cosmic proportions. Conflict now appears to approximate (to cite the title of one of the Dead Sea Scrolls) “the war of the sons of light against the sons of darkness.”

As Gray pointed out, this kind of attitude is perhaps psychologically rather helpful for maintaining the warrior spirit. On the other hand, it’s

¹⁴ Ibid., 32.

hard for this author to see how it can seriously claim to be speaking for the Christian tradition—but perhaps that is as irrelevant as the true (but also irrelevant) point that al Qaeda’s particular understanding of jihad and martyrdom are not representative of the Islamic deep tradition either. In fact, the parallels between Christian spiritual war understandings and radical Islam’s jihad are striking. Insofar as both Christian “spiritual warfare” and al Qaeda’s understanding of jihad are accepted by significant numbers of their respective communities as legitimate beliefs of those communities, perhaps it is meaningless at some point to deny them status as at least one of the perspectives accepted by those communities. Both then are subject, at best, to the internal dialogues of their respective religious traditions to sort out their long-term acceptability as articulations of the views of those traditions. But since such attitudes typify a significant and vocal minority of self-described Christians in the modern US military, one must treat them seriously.

Recovering the Mournful Soldier

I wish to conclude this discussion by returning to the question of the sustainability of the normative Christian attitude of the mournful warrior in conflict, and by offering a modest suggestion for recovering an aspect of the Catholic tradition that might well serve the broader Christian community’s attempt to think seriously about individual moral and spiritual welfare in war.

If the discussion of Gray’s typology earlier was broadly correct, it seems likely that most military personnel engaged in combat operations (at least those that directly place them in confrontation with the enemy) are unlikely to consistently maintain the attitudinal expectations of the tradition. To put it in traditional Christian language, they will sin.

The Church, therefore, is both honest about the moral reality of war and faithful to its core mission of ministering to the spiritual welfare of its members if it honestly deals with that reality and takes pastoral steps to deal with it.

This traditional spiritual concern is powerfully supplemented by our deepening understanding of the pervasiveness of post-traumatic stress syndrome among our personnel returning from current conflicts. Although this condition clearly has a psychological dimension that needs to be addressed by the methods of secular psychology and psychiatry, it also is a legitimate sphere of spiritual concern for the Church as well.

Let me propose a modest suggestion: it may be time to reconsider what might be the modern equivalent of the medieval requirement that military personnel who have killed in war (even just war) are subject to

a period of penance. Frederick H. Russell writes in *The Just War in the Middle Ages*:

Clerical disenchantment with lay violence was also translated into systematic suspicion of warfare and killing expressed in the penitential literature. . . . The *Poenitentiale Arundel*, written at the end of the turbulent ninth century, imposed a penance of a full year for homicide committed in a royal battle and a penance of two years in a war of doubtful justice waged by a prince rather than by a king. Even if a war was clearly just, a one-year penance was still necessary.¹⁵

Obviously it would not make sense to attempt merely to revive this tradition as it might have been practiced or imagined in the Middle Ages. But it does seem there is wisdom at the core of the idea that might usefully inform our thinking about military spirituality in our own time. First, it clearly indicates that killing in war is morally grave and, to that extent, puts a brake on the ever-present danger of countenancing the most extreme excesses of a “spiritual warfare” model that utterly demonizes the enemy and neglects the human reality of killing. Second, something like the penitential tradition in a modern form might bring the moral ambivalence, guilt, and post-traumatic stress explicitly into the spiritual conversation. In other words, it opens the pastoral dimension of the moral ambiguity of what even conscientious military personnel have done and experienced in war in a way that uncritical “hero” talk does not.¹⁶ I suspect, although I

¹⁵ Frederick H. Russell, *Just War in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 31.

¹⁶ I will add a note from personal experience here. When I was Professor of Ethics at the Army War College, I had numerous conversations with relatively senior officers (Lt. Colonel and Colonel in rank) which seemed to me upon reflection to be essentially confessional in the traditional religious sense—i.e., they were asking for a kind of absolution. The form of the conversation was always that an officer would come in the office, close the door, and tell a story of something he or she had done or witnessed in combat. What they wanted from me, as far as I could tell, was an explicit acknowledgment that what they had done seemed to be reasonable and maybe even necessary, given the details of the situation. In almost all cases, it was clear they had gone over the events they were recounting many, many times in their own minds, trying to reassure themselves that they had done the best they could under the circumstances. But why were they telling me? It was clear they wanted to hear from someone else (and, I suppose, as the “ethics professor,” someone they considered somewhat authoritative) that they were right in their thinking. This suggests to me there is a dimension of guilt, shame, and second-guessing for virtually all combat veterans that the Church would minister to effectively if it created the “safe space” for those conversations as a conscious part of its pastoral practice.

don't claim to know, that excessive adulation of returning combat veterans, which doesn't acknowledge the "shades of gray" of their own experience, may actually not serve them well in their complete reintegration into the noncombat world.¹⁷

I think it prudent to leave the matter there. I defer to those more knowledgeable of and more responsible for the sacramental and pastoral dimensions of practice to imagine how this might be made a part of church practice. Further, although this is a conference on Roman Catholic just war where the tradition of confession and penance is already in place, it seems to me there is wisdom here that might find appropriate analogues in other Christian traditions. And opening the conversation itself would be helpful in restoring an appropriate sense of moral ambiguity to Christian thought about war—which threatens to be lost in the growing "spiritual warfare" mode of thinking increasingly permeating many self-described Christians in the US military. **N-V**

¹⁷ Interestingly, just as this essay was being written, the local newspaper in Colorado Springs, CO (home of Ft. Carson, where many Iraq and Afghanistan veterans return after deployment) ran a story indicating a greatly increased focus, among local pastors, on the problem of post-traumatic stress disorder. See www.gazette.com/articles/pastors-55332-ptsd-among.html.