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Benedictinism, Non-violence, and the *Rule* *

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Abstract

Why in the Rule of St. Benedict is there so little mention of the wars and violence of the world around the monasteries? What are the thoughts of Benedict on violence and nonviolence? This essay attempts to answer these and related question.

What I want to do this afternoon is talk about a question that both intrigues and baffles me. Why in the *Rule of Benedict* is there so little mention of the wars and violence of the world around the monasteries? Indeed one finds a lot about welcoming the guests from the outside, but little points, as far as I can tell, to an awareness of the big, bad world out there, except to be careful when you go out there, and even more careful when you return that you do not bring anything of the outside world back. But what are the thoughts of Benedict on violence and nonviolence? Surely the emphasis on the reception of guests, no matter who they might be, is deeply tied to non-violent acceptance and trust. But Benedict never quite says what his attitude might be toward the rest of the world. What I want to do in this talk is begin a reflection on that issue. Let me give a quick outline of what I will be doing. I am going to begin with the story of Pachomius (c. 292-348), the founder of non-hermetical monasticism. I want to put his story in the context of the earlier writings of Tertullian (c. 160-250) and Origen (185-254). That will lead me to the shift created by Augustine as he moves from the tradition of nonviolence for the whole church to an embracing of Cicero's just war theory, acceptable for all Christians except for monks and clergy, who were still to manifest the fullness of the Gospel, in what I think is a disastrous turn into a two-tiered Christianity—the high road of the fullness of the Gospel for religious and clergy, the other low road, which still would get people to union with God, for the lay people. Then I want to note briefly some reflections of my own on the reasons why Benedict is silent on the issues of violence and war and capital punishment.

Let me begin with Pachomius, who lived from c. 292-348. He bridges the gap between the pagan emperors and the conversion of Constantine. Born of pagan parents, Pachomius was unaware of Christianity until he was one of those drafted by the provincial governor of Egypt to fight against Constantine. As Father Columba Stewart explained to me—and I am not sure that I am quoting him accurately, to be drafted in 310 of the Christian era meant that you were forcibly and violently rounded up by recruiters and then you were locked up in a sort of prison until you were brought to the battle field, where you either fought or you were killed—and sometimes, often even, both. During the lock up time, some of the local Christians came to the prison and ministered to the recruits. Pachomius was so impressed by the Christians, who acted out of their love for Christ, that he prayed to their God to deliver him from the mess he was in. Shortly before he and the other recruits were to go to the front lines, the war ended. Pachomius felt that the Christian God had answered his prayers. He converted and was on fire with the idea of living the Christian life as fully as possible, an ideal incidentally that we find in the early Christians in general. His early biographer from his monastery at Tabenna which he founded wrote that Pachomius, from the very beginning of his Christian life, prayed this verse: "O God, Creator of heaven and earth, cast on

me an eye of pity: deliver me from my miseries: teach me the true way of pleasing you, and it shall be the whole employment, and most earnest study of my life, to serve you, and to do your will."¹ This sense of "the whole employment of his life" meant for him the living of the complete Gospel of Jesus. That for the many Christians who had preceded him included the realization "I cannot fight. I am a Christian," as Martin of Tours had put it, following his conversion. But, as far as I could discover, Pachomius doesn't address that issue directly. St. Martin of Tours, according to the tradition did. Benedict didn't. Pachomius didn't. I wonder why.

For the first three centuries, that full Gospel included non-violence. Pachomius' own resistance to the violence of war, even as a pagan, to being caught up in the violence of killing, was only strengthened by his conversion. Like St. Martin of Tours, he could have said, "I am the soldier of Christ: it is not lawful for me to fight."² But little enters into the Rule of Pachomius, as doubtful as the text of the Rule of Pachomius might be, which would indicate any commitment to nonviolence. Here again one asks why?

Important in understanding this silence is the issue of **continuity** and **discontinuity**. To be a Christian meant for the early church, especially for the church of the East, to be radically **discontinuous** from the rest of the world. The full demands of the Gospel must be met by all Christians, by everyone. Everyone must live a radically different sexual ethic. The demands of the Gospel to "put away the sword, lest you perish by the sword" were meant for every Christian. To love one's neighbor, even if that neighbor is a soldier in an enemy's army, was an absolute demand. Jean-Michel Hornus in his book *It Is Not Lawful for Me to Fight: Early Christian Attitudes toward War, Violence and the State*, paraphrases Tertullian, "How inconsistent it would be, Tertullian observed, religiously to respect the life of a fetus or a murderer and yet thoughtlessly to sacrifice the life of a man whom circumstances had placed in the ranks of an enemy army."³ Though Tertullian moved deeper and deeper into a kind of rigorism which eventually separated him from the larger church, his insight on nonviolence was not all that different from the tradition which he received from the early church, which was unanimous in its rejection of violence.

This same strain occurs in Origen, who reflects, according to Peter Brown, the real feeling of the early church. Let me begin with Origen's very strong censure of participation in violence

If a revolt had been the cause of the Christians existing as a separate group...the lawgiver of the Christians would not have forbidden entirely the taking of human life. He taught that it was never right for his disciples to go so far against another person, even if that person should be very wicked; for Jesus did not consider it compatible with his inspired legislation to allow the taking of human life in any form at all.⁴

But, at the same time, as we discover in the same text, the *Contra Celsum*, the pacifism here is of a peculiar type, typical, according to both Peter Brown and Gerard Caspary, of the early Christian pacifism, which absolutely forbade participation in killing by Christians but nevertheless believed that it was perfectly legitimate for the pagan empire to go out and kill in a just war.⁵

Let's listen to this famous paragraph of Origen from the *Contra Celsum*.

We would also say this to those who are alien to our faith and ask us to fight for the community and to kill men: that it is also your opinion that the priests of certain images and wardens of the temples of the [pagan] gods...should keep their right hand undefiled for the sake of the sacrifices, that they may offer the customary sacrifices...with hands unstained by blood and pure from murders. And in fact when war comes you do not enlist the priests. If then, this is reasonable, how much more reasonable is it that, while others fight, Christians also should be fighting as priests and worshipers of God, keeping their right hands pure and by their prayers to God striving for those who fight in a righteous cause and for the emperor who reigns righteously, in order that everything which is opposed and hostile to those who act rightly may be destroyed?...We who offer prayers with righteousness, together with ascetic practices and exercises which teach us to despise pleasures and not to be led by them, are cooperating in the tasks of the community. Even more do we fight on behalf of the emperor. And though we do not become fellow-soldiers with him, even if he presses for this, yet we are fighting for him and composing a special army of piety through our intercessions to God.⁶

This particular quotation from Origen does much to explain the later transition from the opposition to Christian participation in war and violence and capital punishment in the early church to the switch that occurs with Ambrose and Augustine. No Christian could fight according to Origen and the rest of the early church, but Origen and the vast majority of the early church writers could not envisage a time when Christianity would become the state religion. As a result, writers like Origen could count on the Empire enforcing peace through the sword. They could even applaud the killing of enemies of the empire. But they as soldiers of Christ could not participate in such killing. They could only **imagine** a world in which Christianity, in spite of its growth, would remain **discontinuous** with the rest of the society, not only in the morals and beliefs of the Christians in contrast to their pagan fellow citizens, but also **discontinuous** as a church which did not belong fully to the empire—a city of God in progress, though surely not yet achieved. Origen believed that in the far-fetched possibility that the whole empire would become Christian and be under a Christian emperor, then all opposition would be overcome by prayer. Caspary quotes Origen⁷ from the *Contra Celsum* 8:69-70: “If the whole empire were to believe, the Romans would in fact be able to subdue their enemies through prayer alone; indeed they would no longer fight wars at all since they would be protected by divine power.” But Origen believes that such a state of absolute peace is probably impossible before the parousia.⁸

This belief that the Roman empire would last and last and that the church would continue to be a remnant church ill-prepared Christians for the conversion of Constantine in about 312. Now, of a sudden, the question of **continuity** and **discontinuity** was posed directly and urgently. If Christianity was in charge of the empire, if indeed the possibility of all people in the empire becoming Christian, then how should one live? Who was to take care of things in the empire if not the Christian? Surely the vision of Origen would be nice—that prayer would take care of everything, but few of the Christians at the time of Constantine had any illusions that prayer would move that kind of mountain. Surely rigorists were around who called the church to continue with its radical **discontinuity** from the world, from the state. That will be in part the response of the Donatist heresy to the new situation. But there were others who dreamed the dream of the whole world being Christian. And that would mean that the Christians would eventually take over the whole administration of the civil society—the army, the police, the courts. The Christian and the

pagan would be indistinguishable as they walked to work and did their jobs and enforced laws and judged those who did not carry out the law.

Though I feel that the Church took a wrong turn at that moment, the dilemma is clear. If the head of the empire is now Christian, whether for convenience or out of deep conviction, nevertheless the question raised for a Christian is a new one and an extremely difficult one. What shall the relationship between the state and the church be? How is the force of evil embodied in the human city to be overcome? When the church was only a small remnant, then the answer was clear. But now what?

Augustine was the Christian thinker who formalized the understanding of the relationship of the Christian to the state.⁹ His ingenious but, from my perspective, fatal solution to the problem was to split the Christian community into those who were required to be **discontinuous** with the world around them and those who were more **continuous** with the world. Those who were henceforth to live as the full Christians were the clergy and the religious. Those who would take the slow road to salvation were the laity. The distinction has proved disastrous, I believe, both for the laity, who often have felt throughout the ages an unreal admiration for the religious and clergy—an admiration which allowed far too much self-aggrandizement on the part of the clergy and religious, coupled with a downgrading of the responsibility of every Christian to be a full and complete Christian. For far too many centuries, lay Christians had considered themselves as second-class travelers on the road to salvation.

Perhaps nowhere as clearly in his writing does this two-tiered Christianity come forward as well as it does in his struggles with the Donatists, who took over the camp of the pure ones, those who would retain a radical **discontinuity** with the rest of the world or even with those who claimed Christianity but did not live out its fullness. Brown writes, “Briefly, the Donatists thought of themselves as a group which existed to preserve and protect an alternative to the society around them....They were unique, pure....The Catholicism of Augustine, by contrast, reflects the attitude of a group confident of its powers to absorb the world without losing its identity.”¹⁰ Augustine’s Christians are not so radically **discontinuous** with the world as their ancestors in the faith had felt imperative. His Christianity embraced the tasks of running an empire, even by force and war and punishment.

Augustine in his polemical writing, *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians*, describes a Christian who doesn’t seem to have a radical **discontinuity** with the world in the way that he gets angry or she is unready to forgive, or he lusts after sexual pleasure, or she is a bit greedy but does not steal—such a one may not be radically different from the people in the world—indeed some of those who have no faith may be more generous, more chaste, more generous with their goods, but still the person without the radical **discontinuity** from the practices of the world, as long as she or he is more or less on the good track, will as Augustine say “be delivered from this life and depart to be received into the company of those who shall reign with Christ.”¹¹ As one of my confreres put it, that person will only be welcomed into paradise after a good long stay in purgatory.

But Augustine was too steeped in the tradition and in the Scriptures to forget the demands of Jesus to be perfect as was the heavenly Father.¹² Somewhere the life of perfection must be preserved, a life of radical **discontinuity** with the world, even radically **discontinuous** from those low-road

Christians, who bumped along toward salvation without carrying out the fullness of the Gospel. And so there begins to be the clergy and the religious on one side and the laity on the other side, the one called to the high road of radical **discontinuity**, the other mired in the slow, slow journey of **continuity** with the world.¹³

With the instruments of power now in their hands, Christians—even Augustine himself—felt the need to call on the state to punish heretics, to take civil action against those who were not following the truth. They wanted to bring to completion the Christianization of the world, at least of the Roman world. The standard of conduct in this world would not be as radical as it had been for the Donatists or for the earlier followers of Tertullian, but would ensure that the culture would gradually be Christianized. No longer would the radical **discontinuity** be required of “the ordinary Christian” in the “ordinary church.”

And so it was to the monasteries that one would look to see the radical **discontinuity** with the world. Here people were to live the radical Christianity of the desert fathers and mothers. Here would be the successors of the pure ones. Here would be the people who would live the radical call to sell all their goods and follow Jesus. Here would be the ones who would never kill, never fight in a war, who would not punish with death those who had broken away from the truth. Here would be a group of men or women who would live in peace, not letting the sun go down on their anger. Here would be people who would live the radical call to set aside sexual expression in favor of a complete and total love of God.

And so it was not long before the emperors after Constantine began to give religious and clergy immunity from military service. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* in an article called “Immunity” reports “As to military service, in countries where it is compulsory the condition of the clergy varies. They may be entirely exempt, as in Austria and Belgium, or they may be under restricted obligations, as in Italy or Germany; finally, they may be placed on an exact equality with the other citizens, as now happens in France. Such a violation of their immunity is not one that the Church tolerates and accepts in silence; **the opposition between military service and the vocation of the clergy, ministers of peace, is only too violent and apparent; the bishops and the popes have, [my emphasis] therefore, protested against the laws which in divers countries compel the clergy to serve in the army.**”¹⁴

A former monk, now deceased, Vern Kroening, was working on an article at the time of his death in the seventies about ideal cities. Apparently these Renaissance people liked to draw up maps and descriptions of imaginary and utopian cities. The cities were meant to be places of peace, of justice, self-contained, places where a utopian life could be lived and reflected in the architecture of the place. In his research Vern had discovered that the model for these ideal cities were the medieval monasteries. The utopian cities were drawn on a much larger scale, but they were ultimately large monasteries. As important as the architectural aspect of these imaginary cities was the zone of **peace** and mutual **support** that they were meant to reflect and effect.¹⁵

And that brings me to the why that Benedict and other monastic founders have so little to say directly about the importance of nonviolence for the monastic. First, they accepted that just by joining a monastery, one embraced the fullness of the Christian life, which meant that one got on the high road—though obviously monastic history tells us that there are as many of us who fall off

the high road as there are those who walk that road assiduously throughout their lives. The first answer to the “why” question, “Why doesn’t Benedict talk about nonviolence?” is that religious and clergy were called upon by emperor and pope to live nonviolently.

But far more important is what the monastery was meant to be. Here was to be the place where people lived the life of the fully redeemed. Here was the setting where the swords were to be made into plowshares and the spears into pruning hooks. Here is the setting where the sun was not to set on anger. Here is the place where young and old will be loved. Here is the environment where everyone will be received like Christ, with special attention to the poor, just as will occur in the heavenly city. Here is the imperfect and shadowy realization of what the heavenly city of God will be. Here we are called upon to live in chaste love of one another and of those who come to us. Here in the midst of a United States culture that doesn’t pay a lot of attention to environment, we try to let beauty of architecture and grounds come forth reflecting the beauty of the city of God.

Obviously, as each of us knows so well from our own lives, that model is far, far from perfect. We are not often zones of peace and forgiveness. We struggle with the same acquisitiveness as do our sisters and brothers outside of the monastic city. We fail at least as often as they do in the same ways as our counterparts. We are not a higher calling. We just have a different calling. At the same time, however, the monastic calling is to let Christ create that zone of the heavenly city within our monastic houses.¹⁶ What the monastery is meant to seek is the creation of a place, a sense of place, where the model of the peaceful reign of Jesus will be shown. Here the Jesus of beauty is meant to shine forth. Here old and young and middle-aged are all to be valued. Here the forgiveness of Christ should be made manifest. Here the praise of our God is to be central. Here is meant to be the shadowy foundation of the ideal city. Here is the tiny mirror of the grand City of God in which we move with the nonviolence of the Gospel.

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- ¹ <http://www.ewtn.com/library/MARY/PACHOMI.htm>
- ² <http://www.users.csbsju.edu/~eknuth/npnf2-11/sulpitium/lifeofst.html#4>
- ³ Jean-Michel Hornus: *It Is Not Lawful for Me to Fight: Early Christian Attitudes toward War, Violence and the State*. Katchener: Herald Press, 1980. p. 113, paraphrasing Tertullian, *Apology* 46:15.
- ⁴ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, III, 7. Trans. Henry Chadwick. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965, p. 92.
- ⁵ Peter Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of St. Augustine*. Essay 14: “St. Augustine’s Attitude to Religious Coercion.” London: Faber & Faber, 1972, pp. 260-278. Gerard E. Caspary, *Politics and Exegesis: Origen and the Two Swords*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979. Especially pp. 128-134 and the whole of chapters two and four.
- ⁶ Origen, III, Chapter VIII: 73.
- ⁷ pp. 133-134.
- ⁸ Caspary, p. 134.
- ⁹ The temptation to name the city of God as the church and the human city as the state may be strong, but as Augustine lays out his understanding in his major work, *City of God*, he makes it quite clear that he is not talking about the city of God as the church and the human city as the state. Rather the City of God and the Human City are two different ways of organizing human life, two spiritual elements—the one closely allied with paganism and the other associated with the spirit of Christ.
- ¹⁰ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967. p. 214.
- ¹¹ Augustine, *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians*, Book 3, Chapter 14.
- ¹² *Matthew* 5:48.
- ¹³ I like Augustine’s sense of the slow journey throughout life to the fullness of the Gospel. I think however that he has done a great disservice by placing that distinction between clergy and religious on the one side and laity on the other side. All, I think, are called to the fullness of the Gospel, even though the journey for all is a slow, slow progress.
- ¹⁴ *Catholic Encyclopedia*. “Immunity.” <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07690a.htm>
- ¹⁵ The material which I am addressing here is made purely from memory. I do not have access to Vern Kroening’s papers or research. Hence what I have here in these final paragraphs is based on discussions with Mr. Kroening when he was working on this article shortly before his death.
- ¹⁶ I often think of why the major temptation of monasticism is to settle down and forget that we are pilgrims on this earth—we build as though we are going to be here eternally. On the other hand, the temptation of the mendicants would seem to be toward that of the gyrovagues.