"Their Hands Are Not Clean": Basil the Great on War and the Christian State

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For most Orthodox, the practices and theological views of the early Church have a normative value extending to the present day. Of course, this can cause tensions within Orthodoxy, since there was no single view on some topics of great importance, including war and military service. Nevertheless, we may discern a certain congruency of perspective—a theological, pastoral, and pragmatic approach which is distinctively Eastern Christian or Orthodox, and which may help inform contemporary discussions of the morality of war and of various military strategies pursued in armed conflict.

This article focuses on the issue of war promulgated by a Christian state, specifically as viewed through the lens of the writings of the bishop, monastic founder, and theologian Basil of Caesarea (330–79). Known even in his own lifetime as Basil "the Great," he was intelligent, devout, and pastoral, but also supremely pragmatic and politically astute. With his younger brother, Gregory of Nyssa (335–94), he lived during the post-Constantinian era of the mid-fourth century, when Christianity was not only legal but favored, enjoying the not-always-desirable patronage and attentions of the sons of Constantine, one of whom (Constans) supported Arianism.

The Church did briefly lose its position of religious privilege after the death of the last of those sons, when Constantine's nephew, Julian, ruled as emperor (361–63). Julian had been raised as a Christian and counted among his former schoolmates at the Academy in Athens the young Basil and Basil's friend, the future fellow Cappadocian bishop and theologian Gregory of Nazianzus (329–90). Nevertheless, Julian later renounced Christianity and became a pagan, at least in part out of disgust with ecclesiastical politics. Christianity returned to favored status, however, with Valens's accession to the imperial throne, even if his Arian leanings put him at odds with Basil.

In the decades following Constantine's promulgation of the Edict of Milan, the Church's earlier insistence on Christians' avoidance of military service became more and more untenable, since the assumption (expressed by influential theologians such as Origen) that Christians could serve the empire by praying while pagans served it by fighting no longer worked demographically: by the late fourth century, Christians probably constituted well over half the empire's population, so there simply weren't enough pagans to fill the military ranks without sharply increasing the

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Detail from an icon of Basil the Great painted by Theophan the Greek, 1405.

proportion of the pagan population in the army relative to the general populace.

The issue of the "justness" of Roman military encounters was also seen as less morally problematic since Christian emperors appeared to internalize the limitation of warfare to self-defense, no longer seeking to expand the empire's borders beyond the shape it had taken. In fact, the notion that one had to belong to the faith of the empire in order to be "patriotic" and to serve as a soldier—the very principle which had made Christians suspect for the preceding three centuries—was turned on its head only a century after Christianity's legalization, when Theodosius II demanded in 439 that *only* Christians serve in the military. In such circumstances, the basic question of whether military service was moral was no longer a theoretical one, concerned with the abstract ethics of violence against others per se, and debated from the relatively safe position of a religious minority who could leave the responsibility for protecting the empire to the majority pagan population, as it had been in previous generations. Rather, the rapid change in religious demographics following Constantine's conversion and consolidation of the *imperium* as sole Roman emperor introduced further moral complexity as the military became responsible for protecting what was quickly becoming a predominantly Christian empire.

Moreover, in addition to noting the effect of the changed religious dynamics of the empire between the pre- and post-Constantinian periods, it is important to observe other, non-chronological distinctions. Some of these are: (1) the distinction between soldiers who became Christians and Christians who became soldiers; (2) the related distinction between the passive continuation of a soldier in a noncombat position and his active participation in battle or other acts of violence or injustice, especially the persecution and capture of Christians; (3) the military activity of a non-Christian, invasively conquering empire (or emperor) versus the military activity of a Christian, self-defensive empire; and (4) the question of literal versus metaphorical

or allegorical scriptural hermeneutics, particularly for the Old Testament. Sensitivity to these distinctions is necessary if contemporary conversations on this important topic are to avoid anachronistic projections of modern arguments and issues into the early Christian period, and, conversely, if retrieval of still-valuable patristic insights is to be done in a nuanced, contextualized, and intellectually honest manner.

In general terms, despite the rapidly-changing context of the post-Constantinian Christian empire, Basil and the other Cappadocians stand in continuity with the earlier Christian tradition on war. This tradition, plaited from several interwoven strands, underlies their individualized situations and temperaments as they treat questions of war and military service in a manner that balances their positions on a tripod of ethical, pastoral, and pragmatic considerations. Those complex and remarkably nuanced strands include: (1) an utter rejection of war for anything but self-defense; (2) a rejection of moral justice, much less holiness, even in wars of self-defense; (3) an allegorization of, if not outright silence regarding, divine commands to violent action in Old Testament texts; (4) an acquiescence to Christian military service for those already serving at the time of their conversion to Christianity or, later, for those serving under Christian emperors; and (5) a simultaneous recognition of the immorality of certain actions required of those in military service which, depending on the action, must either be refused or dealt with penitentially afterward.

Given all the changes in circumstance from the early to the late fourth century, what is perhaps most notable about Basil and the other Cappadocians is how little any of them discusses the twin issues of Christians in military service and a Christian nation engaging in warfare. Claudia Rapp observes, for example, that Basil corresponded with "praetorian prefects, the masters of offices, military generals, and provincial governors" for various types of waivers and privileges.[1] In none of this correspondence, however, does he either chastise or laud these officers for their choice of career, nor does he address to them disparaging remarks or moral condemnations of war and military service from his perspective as a bishop and theologian.

While a Christian's individual entry into military service in the early Church was seldom praised or condemned by fourth-century Christian writers, much more complex were the related questions of a Christian soldier and, more broadly, of a Christian state actually making war. Pre-Constantinian antimilitary arguments regarding the pagan rituals endemic in the army became moot, and the Pax Romana which Christians had formerly assessed positively—mainly for its ability to secure safe passage for missionaries and evangelists spreading throughout the empire—was now seen by some as a divine peace protecting and promoting Christianity more generally, and, as such, worthy of protection, even if the idea of protecting peace through war was admittedly oxymoronic.

Only one of the three Cappadocian bishops, Basil, dealt straightforwardly with the question of the morality of war and of Christians killing in war, and even then only because of a specific question put to him by the young bishop of Iconium, Amphilochius (who happened to be Gregory of Nazianzus's cousin). Basil was, without a doubt, the least "countercultural" of the Cappadocians. For instance,

[1] Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 265.

unlike the renowned Greek and Latin bishops and theologians of the next generation, John Chrysostom and Augustine, who forcefully argued that extramarital relations by married men should be considered adultery regardless of imperial law and social custom, Basil acceded (if somewhat reluctantly) to the legal and canonical double standard which considered a married woman to be guilty of adultery for extramarital sexual relations, but defined a married man as guilty only of fornication for his extramarital relations, explicitly citing custom.

Basil was also the most politically astute, combining the genuine compassion underlying his monumental *Basileias* charitable complex with a savvy pragmatism. His ease at navigating political waters may be why he appears to be the only one of these three Cappadocian bishops who actually desired the episcopacy. It is therefore all the more remarkable that Basil, given his political pragmatism, his voluminous correspondence with high-ranking military officers, and the sheer fact of Cappadocia's proximity to the eastern borders of the empire, did not give soldiers a moral or ecclesiastical "pass" for their service in defense of the empire. In his letter 188 to Amphilochius, in which he responded to questions on various moral matters, Basil asserted in a section which has become known as Canon 13: "Our Fathers did not reckon killings in war as murders, but granted pardon, it seems to me, to those fighting in defense of virtue and piety. Perhaps, however, it is well to advise them that, since their hands are not clean, they should abstain from communion alone for a period of three years."[2]

Christ as a Roman army officer, Ravenna, 480–500

John McGuckin believes that the "Fathers" to whom Basil refers in his Canon 13 are simply Athanasius of Alexandria in his (in)famous Letter to Amun (McGuckin argues that Basil used the plural form to blunt any direct criticism of the Alexandrian church father).[3] He may be correct, or perhaps Basil was thinking of both Athanasius and Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, court historian to Constantine, and perhaps the only early Christian author to write in positively glowing terms about military exploits and conquests as God-ordained acts of violence. Basil frequently used the phrase "our fathers" in the context of theological polemics to refer to previous generations of theologians and church leaders, particularly bishops. In any case, laudatory rhetoric for Christians engaging in bloody battle was not widespread, at least among generations earlier than Basil's, so it is difficult to imagine whom Basil might

[2] Saint Basil, *Letters, vol. II, trans. Sister Agnes Clare Way* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1955), 23.

[3] John A. McGuckin, "Non-Violence and Peace Traditions in Early and Eastern Christianity", in *"Religion, Terrorism, and Globalization: Nonviolence—A New Agenda,* ed. K. K. Kuriakose (New York: Nova Science Press, 2006), 196–97; and idem, "A Conflicted Heritage: The Byzantine Religious Establishment of a War Ethic," Dumbarton Oaks Papers 65/66 (2011–12): 37–38.

have had in mind beyond Athanasius and Eusebius.

There are two important words and phrases in this short "canon" that illuminate Basil's feelings on this subject. The first is the Greek word *phonos*, "murder." Contrary to most translations of Canon 13, including the one above, Basil did not use different words to distinguish between killings on the battlefield and other types of killing, although he certainly could have, given the massive number of Greek terms meaning "to kill." Rather, he used the term *phonos*—murder—for both. The first sentence of the Canon should more accurately read, then: "Our Fathers did not reckon murders in war as murders, but granted pardon, it seems to me, to those fighting in defense of virtue and piety."

This usage is echoed in Canon 43 of another letter of Basil to Amphilochius, Letter 199, where he asserted that anyone who strikes his neighbor and kills him is a murderer (*phoneus*), "whether he gave the first blow or was retaliating."[4] Basil's use of the word *phonos* for battlefield slayings, then, is enormously significant since, together with the second half of the sentence, it shows clearly that Basil did not consider violent acts in war to be qualitatively different, but, rather, that pardon or forgiveness (*syngnōmēn*) be extended to soldiers because they murdered "in defense of virtue and piety."

Basil's reasoning here is consistent not only with his passing statement in a homily on theodicy that war is evil, but with what he expressed several paragraphs earlier, in his Canon 8, where he distinguished among categories of killing that we would today define as involuntary manslaughter, voluntary manslaughter, second-degree murder, and first-degree or premeditated murder. For Basil, all are forms of killing and require some penance, but they must be treated differently from one another because of the intent of the witting or unwitting perpetrator.[5]

Basil's classification of all forms of killing as murder is the interpretive key, then, with respect to the second significant phrase, that the hands of a soldier returning from war are "not clean." Fighting and endangering oneself to preserve the lives of others is noble, but taking one life to preserve others is still the taking of a human life; thus, the hands of a soldier returning from war are "not clean." Nevertheless, following the philosophy of differing intent he enunciated in Canon 8, Basil's recommendation of three years' penance (as excommunication) treated the soldier returning from war much differently than a murderer who acted out of rage or premeditation, and who would thus normally suffer excommunication for thirty years.

At the same time, the period of penance, in spite of its relative lightness, recognized the moral ambiguity of taking one life to save others, and—what was no doubt also in Basil's mind—the effect that the taking of human life was bound to have on the soldier himself, no matter how "just" or "righteous" the reason for the war might be deemed.

Basil's response to Amphilochius is, in fact, despite its brevity a very thoughtful and well-considered pastoral response that recognizes not only military violence's deviation from the absolute standard of not taking human life, but also the deep moral and spiritual conflict that warfare brings upon those in the military,

[4] Basil, *Letters*, 59.

[5] Gregory of Nyssa articulated similar distinctions, offering varying lengths of penance in accordance with whether a slaying was voluntary or involuntary.

whom society sends out to kill for its own protection.

John McGuckin is thus quite correct in his overall assessment of Basil's advice to Amphilochius: What this Basilian canon does most effectively is to hold up a "No Entry" sign in front of any potential theory of just war within Christian theology. It should establish a decided refusal of postwar Church-sponsored self-congratulations for victory. All violence—local, individual, or nationally sanctioned—is here stated to be an expression of hubris that is inconsistent with the values of the Kingdom of God. Although in many circumstances that violence may be considered necessary or unavoidable—Basil states the only legitimate reasons as the defense of the weak and innocent—it is never justifiable. Even for the best motives in the world, the shedding of blood remains a defilement such that the true Christian afterward would wish to undergo the cathartic experience of a temporary return to the lifestyle of penance, that is, to be a penitent.

In conclusion, Basil and the other Cappadocians—despite living in a very different political and demographic context than earlier Christians, such as Origen, who had been marginalized in the pre-Constantinian empire, and thus had the "luxury" of maintaining their pacifist ideals precisely because they were a religious minority who benefited from the safety provided by the legions of pagan soldiers defending the borders of the empire—did not develop any theological refection wholeheartedly supporting a Christian army in defense of a Christian state, nor did they extol the virtue of a Christian soldier killing presumably non-Christian enemies, even invaders, out of self-defense, to keep Church and society peaceable and free. Like the earlier generations of theologians on whose backs they stood, they allegorized those Old Testament passages which could most conveniently have provided biblical and theological support for a theory of God's people waging war in God's name. On the contrary, they explicitly rejected such literal interpretations, operating from an eschatological perspective and so choosing instead to interpret the violence in such passages as references to the ongoing spiritual war against evil. Every Christian is a soldier in such battles. Basil and the Cappadocians certainly evince a pragmatic acceptance of the reality, and even the necessity, of Christian soldiers serving in a Christian army in defense of a Christian state: the luxury of a pure pacifism is no longer practicable in a world where Christians dominate. Nevertheless, even within the limits of defensive action, the common thread of a moral abhorrence of war so forcefully argued by Origen and other pre-Constantinian Christian writers continues to underlie the more nuanced and pragmatic approach of the Cappadocians. As Basil's Letter 188 makes abundantly clear, that pragmatism does not negate the piercing moral evil of one human being, created in the image of God, ending the life of another human being, who bears that same image. ✠

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