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Christianity from "Militia Christi" to "Pacem in Terris"

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Abstract¹

Throughout its two-thousand-year history, Christianity has viewed war in extremely varied and changing ways. Outlining the main stages of this journey, four can be identified:

- Early Christianity was in radical antithesis to the idea and practice of war:

"[...] the very nature of the Gospel, as the first generation must have understood it," observed Protestant theologian and Christian historian Adolf Harnack in his essay, "Militia Christi," published at the beginning of the twentieth century and still a reference text on the evolution of the relationship between Christianity and the idea of war in the first centuries AD, "was opposed to everything bellicose. [...] Those who can tolerate injustice are called blessed; the meek are promised possession of the earth; "peace" is proclaimed to all men, and the Gospel itself is called "the Gospel of Peace."

Thus, in the first centuries AD there were several cases of "conscientious objectors" *ante litteram* who were martyred because they refused, as Christians, to fight. Among the best known is that of Maximilian of Tabessa (then Teveste, a city in Numidia). The Acts of his trial and martyrdom—which took place on March 12, 296—report his conversation with the proconsul Dion, who was charged with evaluating him for enlistment. "It is not lawful for me to perform military service," Maximilian tells Dion, "because I am a Christian. I am not a soldier because I cannot commit evil." Dion responds: "I will send you immediately to your Christ. Since you have rebelliously refused to serve as a soldier, you will receive the sentence you deserve, so that you may be an example to others." The sentence—"May Maximilian, who rebelliously refused to serve as a soldier, be struck by the sword"—and martyrdom immediately follows. Proclaimed a saint, Maximilian of Tebessa was recognized by the Church as the patron saint of conscientious objectors.

- With the Christianization of the Roman Empire, accomplished under Constantine, a radical change occurred in the Christian idea of war, dictated by a close alliance between political reason, that of the State, and reason "of the Church." This turning point, already heralded in the language of the early "Fathers of the Church," beginning with Paul, who often uses military allegories (he was the first Christian author to use the expression "miles Christi"), was consolidated by Augustine and then definitively by Thomas. Augustine writes in the *Quaestiones*: "[...] those who wage a just war do not act unjustly. Therefore, the just man who finds himself forced to wage war [...] should think of nothing more important than waging a just war. Once a just war is waged, it makes no difference to justice whether it

¹ This essay is an excerpt from my book published in 2025: *Pacifisms: A Plural History of a Controversial Idea*, Mimesis, Milan.

is won in a pitched battle or by ambush. Wars are also commonly called just that avenge injuries, if a nation or city, which is about to be struck by war, has neglected to punish the injustice done by its citizens or to restore what has been unjustly taken. Undoubtedly, however, this kind of war, commanded by God, is also just, in which there is no injustice, and He knows what ought to be given to each. In relation to this war, the army commander and the people themselves must consider themselves not so much its promoters as its executors [of God's plans]."

- For over a millennium, the concept of "just war," more or less extensively defined, would guide Christianity's judgment on war—with notable but minority exceptions such as Franciscan thought and, within Reformed Christianity, the "nonconformist" conceptions of the Quakers, Anabaptists, and Waldensians. Thus, the Church would directly promote "holy wars" with the Crusades and actively support the violent, military colonization of the Americas, conceiving it as a prerequisite for the evangelization of indigenous peoples.

A new turning point, in the wake of the cosmopolitan and then Enlightenment thought that had established itself in Europe in the modern age, would be the birth of the first "peace societies" in the early nineteenth century in the Anglo-Saxon world. These were all direct expressions of "dissident" Christian groups, from the Quakers to the Anabaptists. At the same time, the process of secularization of the Catholic Church would also produce a significant shift in Catholicism's view of peace and war. Two of the first "secular" popes, Leo XIII and Benedict XV, would view war as a negative value in itself: Leo personally promoted international arbitration, Benedict expressed opposition to the "useless slaughter" of the First World War (in stark contradiction to the national Churches, from France to Germany, which supported their countries' war efforts).

- Then, in the mid-twentieth century, the Catholic Church's "pacifist conversion" arrived: it arrived with John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963), in which the absolute "no" to war was largely motivated by the beginning of the era of nuclear weapons in which "war" could mean the annihilation of humanity. The encyclical reads: "There is a growing conviction among human beings that disputes between peoples must not be resolved by recourse to arms, but rather through negotiation. It is true that, historically, that conviction is more closely related to the terribly destructive force of modern weapons; and it is fueled by the horror aroused by the mere thought of the immense destruction and suffering that the use of those weapons would bring to the human family. It is therefore almost impossible to imagine that in the atomic age, war could be used as an instrument of justice."

Over the course of its twenty centuries of existence, Christianity has not only profoundly changed but has repeatedly reversed its perspective on war and peace, effectively following an adventurous and circular philosophical and cultural journey that has led it from the proto-pacifism of its origins to the full-blown pacifism of the Church of Francis and Leo, passing through the idea of "just war" and the practice of "holy war."

The religious interpretation of the concept of "just war" does not belong only to Christianity. It has deep roots in Judaism and the Greco-Roman world, and throughout human history, all religions, including the great Eastern philosophical and religious traditions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism—generally considered to be "pacifist" worldviews, have simultaneously been justifiers, and sometimes catalysts, of war, and inspirers of peace. Historian Robert Scott Appleby (1999) has given this apparent duplicity that runs through the history of all great religions the name "ambivalence of the sacred": religions, Scott Appleby observes, must immerse themselves in the historical process to assert themselves in the "world." This almost inevitable path of "politicization" has seen, in the evolutionary flow of each religion, positions of support and direct inspiration for wars alternate and be juxtaposed with opposing positions of teaching and militancy in favor of peace.

And yet, the relationship between Christianity and the ideas of peace and war has experienced particularly intense oscillations, also because it has constantly been intertwined and mutually influenced by another history born and developed in the West: that of pacifism, whose beginnings two hundred years ago occurred within the narrow confines of the Christian world with the birth of the first "peace societies" in England and the United States, all direct expressions of "nonconformist" Christian groups.

The Ultrapacifism of the Early Christians

The beginning of this complex and controversial path can be described as "ultrapacifist." Early Christianity, until the beginning of the third century AD, was radically opposed to the idea and practice of war. In the sensibility of early Christians, and even in the thinking of early Christian theologians, the reference to the Gospel was the immediate premise for an absolute rejection of war.

Adolf Harnack (1905-2016, 61) wrote an essay, "Militia Christi," published at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is still a reference text on the evolution of the relationship between Christianity and the idea of war in the first centuries AD:

[...] the very nature of the Gospel, as the first generation must have understood it was opposed to everything bellicose. [...] Those who can tolerate injustice are called blessed; the meek are promised possession of the earth; "peace" is proclaimed to all men, and the Gospel itself is called "the Gospel of peace."

The first cracks in this absolutism can already be seen in the early centuries of the Christian era: on a theoretical level in Paul, whose writings often feature military metaphorical references and who uses the expression "miles Christi" for the first time in his First Letter to Timothy; on a practical level in the attested and voluntary presence of Christians in the legions, explicitly justified by theologians such as Clement of Alexandria.

The First Turning Point: Constantine

The Christian Church's view of war underwent a radical transformation at the beginning of the fourth century with the Roman Emperor Constantine, who initiated the Empire's conversion to Christianity, establishing the foundations for an alliance between political reason, state reason, and Christian reason. This reversal of perspective occurred in the midst of a war—the civil war between Constantine and Maxentius—and it occurred primarily within the army. Harnack (2016, 152) in *Militia Christi* described this truly epochal transition as follows:

During the campaign against Maxentius, Constantine decided to raise the cross with the initials of Christ as a military ensign. In this way, not only would the Christian religion be tolerated, but it would also be elevated above all other religions. The reversal of universal history from paganism to Christianity was thus accomplished primarily within the army. From here began the public recognition of the Christian religion.²

In 314, the Council of Arles, convened directly by Constantine, sanctioned the exclusion from communion of those who refused to serve in the Roman army in times of peace. It was a sign of a radical reconsideration by the Church of the relationship between the Christian religion and military life: the Roman army was preparing to become a "Christian army." As historian of Christianity Sergio Tanzarella (1993, 577) observes, with the Council of Arles "Christianity transferred the idea of the enemy from the non-Christian persecutor to the barbarian, transforming the spiritual *militia Christi* itself into an armed *militia*."

From then on, Christian theology would begin to theorize, and the Church would sometimes practice, the concept of "just war," partly reworking concepts and reflections present in both Greco-Roman classicism and Judaism. In ancient Greece, war was considered an essential aspect of human history and a direct expression of the will of the gods. Herodotus (5th century BC - 2012, 1402) in his *Histories* quoted these words from the Athenian general Themistocles, one of the commanders of the Greek armies fighting against the Persian army led by Persian king Xerxes I, uttered to celebrate the victory in the Battle of Salamis (480 BC): "This victory is not our work, but that of the gods and heroes, who were jealous that an impious and wicked man reigned over Asia and Europe, who, burning and demolishing the statues of the gods, held sacred things as equal to private ones, and who even had the sea whipped up and cast chains into it."

The notion of "just war" took explicit form and name—*iustum bellum*—in pre-Christian Rome, founded on strictly juridical foundations. Its main theorist was Cicero, for whom "*iustum*" was the "*bellum*" that respected the *ius belli*, that is, declared and fought according to codified rules, and in defense or to redress a wrong suffered.

The idea that there are "legitimate" wars, "according to religion," was also widely held in Judaism. We read in Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Pentateuch, which would later be incorporated into the Christian Bible:

When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace. If they accept and open their gates, all the people in it shall be subject to forced labor and shall work for you. If they refuse to make peace and they engage you in battle, lay

² Christian tradition has identified the turning point with the Edict of Constantine, or of Milan, in 313, with which the emperors Constantine (of the West) and Licinius (of the East) recognized freedom of worship for the citizens of the Empire, but its existence as an act with legal value – affirmed by some and questioned by others – has given rise to a broad historiographical debate in recent decades.

siege to that city. When the Lord your God delivers it into your hand, put to the sword all the men in it. As for the women, the children, the livestock and everything else in the city, you may take these as plunder for yourselves. And you may use the plunder the Lord your God gives you from your enemies. This is how you are to treat all the cities that are at a distance from you and do not belong to the nations nearby. However, in the cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy^h them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the Lord your God has commanded you. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God. (Deuteronomy 20:10-18, New International Version).

Iustum bellum: Augustine, Thomas

Among the Church Fathers, the idea of "just war" was extensively developed by Augustine, who wrote about it in three of his works: *De Civitate Dei*, the *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum*, and the *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*. In the *Quaestiones*, Augustine specifically cites the expression *iustum bellum* from Cicero. But while in Cicero's sense the concept of "iustum" was entirely juridical, Augustine understood it as morally, or rather, Christianly, acceptable:

[...] those who wage a just war do not act unjustly. Therefore, the just man who finds himself forced to wage war [...] must think of nothing more important than waging a just war. Once a just war is waged, it makes no difference to justice whether one wins in a pitched battle or through an ambush. It is also customary to call just wars that avenge injuries when a nation or city, about to be struck by war, has neglected to punish the injustice done by its citizens or to restore what has been unjustly taken. Undoubtedly, however, this kind of war, commanded by God, is also just, in which there is no injustice and He knows what ought to be given to each. In relation to this war, the commander of the army and the people themselves must be considered not so much its instigators as its executors [of God's plans] (*Quaestiones*, 6, 10).

Scholastic theology reinforced and systematized the notion of "just war." In the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas devoted a "*quaestio*" to the concept, in which, referring to Augustine, he detailed the list of requirements necessary for a war to be "just":

For a war to be just, three things are required. First, the authority of the prince, by whose order it must be proclaimed. Indeed, a private person does not have the power to wage war [...]. Second, a just cause is required: that is, a fault on the part of those against whom war is being waged. [...] Third, the intention of the combatant must be right: that is, he must aim to promote good and avoid evil (*Summa Theologiae*, II, II, 40).

Thus, in the scholastic view, a "just" war must simultaneously satisfy three conditions: it must be declared by a legitimate and recognized political authority; it must be decided for a "just cause"—primarily defense from external aggression; and it must be fought with the intention of limiting as much as possible the destruction and human suffering it causes. In particular, the legitimacy of the ends and the correctness of the ways in which a war is waged will remain the fundamental criteria on which all the multiple theories—religious as well as secular—about what constitutes a "just war" will be based.

From Just War to Holy War

But Christians, according to the scholastic canon, are not only authorized to fight in "just wars," they are also urged to wage "holy wars" against the "infidels." As early as the ninth century, when the Saracens, having conquered Sicily and advanced through southern Italy, directly threatened Rome, two popes—Leo IV and John VIII—invoked the intervention of the Carolingian army, promising "eternal life" to soldiers who died in battle defending Christianity. This is the premise, in terms of the history of ideas,

of what historian Christopher Tyerman (1998-2000) has called—this is the title of one of his essays—"the invention of the Crusades," that is, the construction of a theology and a language according to which fighting and killing the "infidels" was not only not a sin but a demonstration of Christian virtue.

A symbolic act of baptism of the "ideology" of the Crusades was the speech given by Pope Urban II during the Council of Clermont in November 1095:

You must hasten to help your Eastern brothers [...] because the Turks, a people who come from Persia and have multiplied wars by occupying Christian lands, killing, destroying churches, and devastating the Kingdom of God, have reached the Mediterranean Sea [...]. I therefore exhort you all of every rank, knights, infantry, rich and poor, to rush immediately to the aid of the Christians to sweep that evil race from our lands [...]. For all those who depart, if they meet death on the journey or in battle against the infidels, there will be immediate remission of sins, which I grant by the authority God grants me [...]. Let those who until yesterday were bandits become knights of Christ; let those who fought against their brothers fight the infidels, thus obtaining eternal reward (cit. in Fumagalli Beonio Brocchieri, 2007, 38).

A few months later, the First Crusade began, which would lead to the conquest of Jerusalem in 1099.

Until the 13th century, Jerusalem and the southeastern shores of the Mediterranean in general—from Egypt to Syria to Constantinople—were the scene of constant clashes between Christians and Muslims, as well as other crusades, which concluded with the definitive conquest of Jerusalem by the Muslims of Egypt in 1244. All were promoted by the papacy and all conducted in the name of "holy war" and in the name of the exaltation of the "Knights of Christ." Bernard of Clairvaux, a French monk of the Cistercian order canonized in 1174 and declared a "Doctor of the Church" in 1830, was one of the leading voices of medieval Christian thought. Around 1130, he wrote a "praise"—*De laude novae militiae ad Milites Templi*—celebrating the Order of the Templars, founded a few years earlier in Jerusalem and composed of monks and knights who had taken it as their Christian duty to protect the "holy places" and those who traveled there on pilgrimage from Europe against frequent Muslim incursions. Thus Bernard wrote:

The knights of Christ fight confidently in the Lord's battles without fear and without sin when they kill the enemy [...]. Death given or received for Christ entails no sin and, indeed, deserves great glory [...]. [The Templar] kindly accepts the death of the enemy as reparation and even more willingly gives himself when he falls in battle. With serenity he kills, with serenity he dies, and [...] if he kills, he renders a service to Christ [...]. When he is killed, it should be said not that he is dead but that he has achieved his purpose [...]. From the death of the pagan, the Christian draws glory because Christ is glorified, but when it is the Christian who dies, then divine generosity shines even more brightly because the King calls the knight to himself to give him his reward (cit. in Faloppa, 2000, 41).

Converting the Infidels, Even With Weapons: the "Conquest" of America

For the official Church, the European conquest of the Americas was also a "just war," or at least a "justified" one. Two prevailing, and generally contextual, arguments made it legitimate: the Christian peoples had not the right but the duty to convert the Indians to the worship of the "true God"; anyone who refused to convert was considered a rebel, and war against rebels was, according to Christian doctrine, "just". Furthermore, according to Spanish jurist and theologian Juan de Sepúlveda—one of the founders of Christian colonialist thought—the indigenous people of the "New World" were crude and barbaric, destined to be the slaves of civilized peoples. Other theologians supported, but with greater moderation, the right of the Spanish "conquistadors" to subjugate indigenous peoples. Among them was Francisco de Vitoria, a Spanish Dominican friar and leading figure of the "School of Salamanca," which expressed the final phase of scholastic philosophy. In the *Relectio de Indis*, delivered at the University of Salamanca in 1559, de Vitoria (1538-2006, 37), after a lengthy introduction in which he

affirmed that the Indians, like all human beings, are entitled to rights, argued that Spanish domination over indigenous populations was itself the fruit of rights: the right to emigrate and settle in new territories, the right to trade, the right to enjoy "common goods" such as gold found in nature, the right of those born in a country to acquire citizenship. De Vitoria concluded:

If the Indians wish to prevent the Spaniards from exercising the rights of nations, the Spaniards must first, through words and persuasion, avoid scandal and demonstrate by every means that they are not coming to harm them [...]. Nevertheless, if, after the reasons given to them, the Indians refuse to yield and resort to violence, the Spaniards could defend themselves and take every precaution necessary for their safety [...]. And not only that, they could also build fortifications and defenses [...]; if they then suffer injury, they could avenge it through war with the sovereign's authority and assert the other rights of war.

Another Spanish Dominican, Bartolomé de Las Casas, was instead strenuously committed to the defense of the Indians. Las Casas lived for a long time in the Spanish dominions in America. In his writings – *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*, *Historia de las Indias* – and in a famous public dispute in Valladolid in 1550 against Juan de Sepúlveda, he denounced as "Christianly" unacceptable the conditions of servitude to which the indigenous peoples were forced after the Spanish conquest.

In *Historia de las Indias*, Las Casas also expressed regret for having spoken out, in his youth, in favor of "importing" slaves from Africa to replace the natives in the gold mines. Regarding the "trade" of millions of Africans forcibly brought to America by European colonizers and reduced to slavery, the Catholic Church maintained an ambiguous position. Even more than war, moreover, the institution of slavery—the ultimate expression of organized violence and the oppression of one human group over another—has been accepted and justified in all the great religious traditions. Thus, in Judaism and Christianity, the full acceptance of slavery is attested in the Old and New Testaments, in the writings of many "Church Fathers"—from Ignatius of Antioch to Augustine—and subsequently in the documents of various councils. The phenomenon of the slave trade from Africa was met with open approval from the Catholic Church, overshadowed by a benevolent silence, made all the more opaque by the fact that the ecclesiastical structures in Spanish America made abundant use of black slaves for centuries, first and foremost the Society of Jesus, which still "owned" 17,000 of them in 1767. And while Pope Paul III, with the papal bull *Sublimis Deus*, had already explicitly prohibited the enslavement of Native Americans in 1537, the practice of slavery itself, and in particular the "slave trade," would be explicitly condemned by the Catholic Church only in the nineteenth century. In the apostolic letter *In supremo* of 1839, Pope Gregory XVI stated:

[...] we warn and enjoin in the Lord all Christian faithful of every condition that no one, from now on, dare use violence, or deprive anyone of their property, or reduce anyone to slavery, or lend aid or favor to those who commit such crimes or wish to engage in that unworthy trade by which Blacks are reduced to slavery, as if they were not human beings, but pure and simple animals, without any distinction, against all the rights of justice and humanity, sometimes condemning them to very hard labor. [...] We, deeming these atrocities unworthy of the Christian name, condemn them by Our Apostolic authority: we forbid and prohibit with the same authority any clergyman or layperson from defending the slave trade as lawful, for any purpose or disguised pretext, and from presuming to teach otherwise in any way, publicly or privately, contrary to what We have declared in this Apostolic Letter.

The slave trade lasted from the 16th to the 19th century, transporting approximately 10 million Africans to America as slaves. It also extensively affected North America, where the European colonists were predominantly Protestant. Here too, the various Protestant churches, with the exception of minority religious groups such as the Quakers, did not oppose the slavery of blacks, which remained legal and systematically practiced in the Southern United States until the victory of the abolitionist North in the

Civil War in 1865. More than half a century earlier, in 1808, the trade of new slaves from Africa had been banned, and starting in the early decades of the nineteenth century, slavery would be abolished, first in many European countries, then in the colonies in Asia and Africa, and in the former colonies of South America that had become independent.

No to War, No to Military Service: Minority Christian Pacifisms from the Middle Ages to the Modern Age

The issue of the "just war," and more generally the issue of the relationship between theology and morality and the idea of war, has marked the entire history of Christianity. Until contemporary times, official Christian doctrine continued to admit cases in which war was fully legitimate, as did all the various separate confessions into which Christianity would gradually fragment: the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Churches, and the Reformed Churches. The two main protagonists of the Protestant Reformation, Luther and Calvin, had a positive outlook on war. For Luther, war "is a divine instrument in itself and as indispensable and useful to the world as eating and drinking [...]. Is a just war different from the punishment inflicted on criminals? The name of the sword is the wrath of God" (cited in Fumagalli Beonio Brocchieri, 54). Calvin considered war legitimized by nature and the Bible: "Nature itself," he wrote, "teaches us that it is the duty of princes to use the sword not only to punish the sins of individuals but also to defend the countries subject to them. Likewise, the Holy Spirit shows us in Scripture that wars are legitimate."

Yet, already beginning in the Middle Ages, and then with greater force particularly in Reformed Christianity, precociously pacifist Christian visions took shape, albeit in a minority and sometimes in open opposition to ecclesiastical officialdom: from the twelfth century with the Cathar and Waldensian movements, with more radical expressions of the Franciscan movement, in the Protestant world with the "nonconformist" movements of the Anabaptists, the Mennonites, the Quakers, and the Adventists, and from the late nineteenth century with the Christian movement—neither Catholic nor Protestant—of Jehovah's Witnesses. A recurring feature in the behavior of members of these "dissident" Christian groups has always been conscientious objection to war, long persecuted by political power as illegitimate but in many cases, for example in sixteenth-century Holland under the reign of William of Orange, precociously recognized as a privilege reserved precisely for "nonconformist" Christian movements. Only starting in the nineteenth century did forms of conscientious objection to war, or more generally to the use of weapons, dictated by purely secular ethical convictions, begin to spread. This led to the formal recognition in the laws of many Western countries during the twentieth century of refusal of military service as a universal human right.

The Early Pacifism of Christian "Peace Societies"

The earliest philosophical reflections on peace as an absolute value took shape in Europe starting in the sixteenth century, first under the influence of cosmopolitan thought—from Erasmus of Rotterdam to Hugo Grotius—and then of the Enlightenment, especially with Immanuel Kant. *Zum Ewigen Frieden (For Perpetual Peace)* is the title of a book by Kant from 1795. It is a text with "revolutionary" content, in which the idea of a "league of peoples" already developed in a previous essay from 1784 – *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht* (Ideas for a Universal History in a Cosmopolitan Intent) – finds fulfillment in the organic plan of peace "through law", of a universal system of

democratically founded civic constitutions from which a condition of “perpetual peace” would almost naturally arise:

(...) if (as in this constitution it cannot be otherwise) – writes Kant (1795-1992, 14) – the consent of citizens is required to decide whether war should or should not be waged, nothing is more natural than the fact that, having to decide to make all the calamities of war fall upon themselves [...], they will think long and hard before embarking on such a vicious game: while in a constitution in which the subject is not a citizen, and therefore such a constitution is not republican, war is the easiest thing in the world because the sovereign is not a member of the state, but its owner. He has nothing to lose because of war - his banquets, his hunts, his pleasure houses, his court festivities, etc.; he can therefore decide on war as a kind of pleasure game, for insignificant causes, and to save appearances he can calmly leave the task of justifying the causes to the diplomatic corps, which is ready to do so at any time.

If the pacifist idea took root mainly in continental Europe, it was in the Anglo-Saxon world that the first "peace" associations were born, at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The oldest one known to us today was the New York Peace Society, founded in August 1815. In December of the same year, the Massachusetts Peace Society was founded in Boston, followed in June 1816 in London by the Society for the Promotion of Permanent and Universal Peace, better known as the London Peace Society. All three, at least initially, had a distinctly religious focus.

The founder and first president of the New York association was Presbyterian theologian David Low Dodge, while the Massachusetts Peace Society was founded at the initiative of Unitarian pastor Noah Worcester, and the main promoter of the London association was Quaker William Allen. The founders and members of the first peace societies belonged to narrow social and cultural elites: Christians of "nonconformist" strands—Quakers, Unitarians, Presbyterians—and enlightened bourgeoisie; they were, as historian of pacifism David Cortright (2008, 29-30) writes, “middle-class liberals, wealthy and influential people who believed that through educational work it was possible to end wars.”

This embryonic pacifist movement would soon experience internal debates and divisions, especially in the American case, over the ethical boundaries of a no to war and, more generally, the use of violence. Dodge was an "absolutist" pacifist, and as he observed in an 1809 essay—"The Mediator's Kingdom not of this World: but Spiritual, Heavenly, and Divine"—for a true Christian, there could be no such thing as a "just war":

Peace admits of no strife, no war, no tumult, whether between individuals, groups, or nations. It prohibits anger, clamor, and backbiting. It prohibits resistance to evil and revenge; it demands that evil be responded to with good, curse with blessing, persecution with prayer (1809, 11).

Worcester's pacifism was more moderate, "possibilist," and he never expressed himself on the issue of a "just war", and for this reason was accused by Dodge of lacking pacifist rigor. In 1815, a few months before founding the Massachusetts Peace Society, Worcester published an essay entitled "A Solemn Review of the Custom of War; Showing That War is the Effect of Popular Delusion and Proposing a Remedy," signed with the pseudonym Philo Pacificus. The essay was widely circulated among the early American pacifist groups. In the book, he called for peace in a "humanistic" as well as religious spirit: "War," he writes (1815, 4), "has been so long in fashion among all nations that its enormity is little considered, or, when thought of, is generally regarded as a necessary and unavoidable evil. But the question to be asked is this: Cannot the state of society and the opinions of civilized men be so transformed as to abolish so barbarous a custom, and render wars unnecessary and avoidable?" For Worcester, more than the will of God, it is that of men, especially influential men, that can erase war from history:

Christianity [...] is not [...] a God, nor an angel, nor a man. It is only a system of divine precepts, [...] which every man must follow for his own benefit, for the benefit of his neighbor, and to honor its Author. Like all precepts, it is of no use unless put into practice (Philo Pacificus, 1815, 21).

The disagreements between "absolutist" and "possibilist" American pacifists gradually shifted, beginning in the 1820s, from a theoretical level to a dramatically concrete one: the commitment against slavery, still fully in use in the Southern states and only in the process of being overcome in the North. The first American peace societies were staunchly abolitionist, but among their promoters were those, such as Dodge, who believed that the "evil" represented by slavery should be responded to with the "good" of non-resistance.

In 1828, the peace societies of New York and Massachusetts, along with others founded in New England, merged into the American Peace Society. One of the new association's key proponents was journalist William Lloyd Garrison, a leader of the abolitionist movement but also an advocate of non-resistance to evil as an irreducible precept for every Christian. Garrison's pacifism was rooted in the idea that the original values of Christianity, first and foremost "thou shalt not kill", should and could be the sole guiding principles of human action, superior to the will and laws of any state. A radical reformer, with his newspaper *The Liberator* he waged passionate public opinion campaigns against slavery in the South, in favor of peace, and for women's suffrage, always within the framework of a literal appeal to the evangelical message and to his inescapable imperative of non-resistance. He always viewed with profound distrust—in an almost anarchic spirit—the state as an emanation of a human authority that claimed to be superior to divine law. Among the founders of the American Anti-Slavery Association in 1833, in 1838 he abandoned the American Peace Society, whose pacifism he deemed excessively moderate, founding the New England Non-Resistance Society. At the outbreak of the Civil War, revising his original pacifist "absolutism", he actively supported the North's "just war" against the slaveholding South. Here are two excerpts from his letters written the day after April 1861, the start of the fighting:

Now that the Civil War has begun, and a whirlwind of violence and excitement is about to sweep across the country, daily increasing in intensity to its bloodiest climax, it behooves abolitionists to "stand still and see the salvation of God," rather than attempt to add to the general tumult. This is no time to minutely criticize Lincoln, Republicanism, or the other parties, now that they are fusing for a life-and-death struggle with the Southern slaveholding oligarchy, for they are instruments in the hand of God to advance and help achieve the great object of emancipation, for which we have so long striven. The war is fearfully lashing the nation, but mercy will mingle with judgment, and great results will follow [...]. All our sympathies and desires must be with the government, against the desperate and pirate Southerners; but, of course, without any compromise of principle on our part. [...] Technically, the war is to restore the old state of things, the Fugitive Slave Law and all; practically, it is a geographical struggle between North and South, and between free and slave institutions. Of the great body of soldiers who have enlisted in the North, relatively few have the intention or desire to overthrow the slave system; but God, "who is above all and greater than all" and who "moves in mysterious ways, working his wonders," is using them to perform a "strange and terrible work" in justice. I do not deprecate his justice, nor do I wish to see peace through compromise. I think this state of affairs is hopeful, compared with what it was six months ago (cited in Ziegler, 2001, 163-165).

Like Garrison, during the Civil War the American Peace Society unhesitatingly supported the Unionist cause, theorizing that the war against the secessionist South was not actually a real war but rather a legitimate and indispensable "police" intervention conducted by the state to defeat criminal and ungodly behavior such as the attempt to perpetuate slavery and the choice of secession. The state, therefore, had not only the right but the duty to harshly repress such crimes, and in supporting this "police" action, the association in no way contradicted its own pacifist beliefs.

A distinctly religious foundation and a strong abolitionist sensibility also marked the birth of the London Peace Society in 1816. The association, whose promoters were predominantly Quakers but also included

Anglican Christians and other Reformed communities, promoted the establishment of local pacifist groups in many English cities and initiated contacts with American peace societies. In 1817, the London Society published Noah Worcester's text on the "custom of war": this was the initial step that gave shape to a sort of transatlantic pacifist "cenacle," which was responsible for organizing the first world pacifist congress in London in 1843. Over 300 activists from various American and British peace societies participated, and the congress concluded with the approval of a call for the establishment of international arbitration bodies to peacefully resolve disputes between sovereign states.

The Catholic Church Converts to Peace: John XXIII, Francis, Leo XIV

Beginning in the final decades of the nineteenth century, a process of true "pacifist conversion" began within the Catholic Church. Among the most symbolically significant stages of this journey, which began when the more than thousand-year-old era of the "pope-king" had ended and Catholicism and the papacy itself were freed from the constraints of temporal logic and, as a result, conceptions of peace as a Christian value were maturing, were Pope Leo XIII's repeated appeals for a peaceful resolution of conflicts between states. During his 25-year pontificate (1878-1903), these appeals would also find political expression in the Church's interventions of diplomatic mediation and arbitration, aimed at averting the risk of war, as would Pope Benedict XV's invocation of the First World War as a "useless slaughter" in his Letter to the Leaders of the Belligerent Peoples in August 1917. Finally, Pope John XXIII's 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, which would establish "no to war" as a founding principle of the Church's teaching, was also published.

The brief but intense pontificate of John XXIII—Pope Roncalli—truly marked a momentous turning point in the Catholic Church's view of peace and war. This turning point was paved by the "protopacifist" reflections of leading figures in Catholic culture—Marc Sangnier, Luigi Sturzo, Primo Mazzolari, Giorgio La Pira—and by the commitment of novel ecclesial movements like "Pax Christi." This turning point was the direct result of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, which tragically ushered in the era of nuclear weapons and changed the very meaning of the concept of war, linking it practically, "technically," to the possibility of a global, definitive war of humanity's self-destruction. This "specter" seemed to materialize in 1962 with the Cuban Missile Crisis. Khrushchev's Soviet Union, "protector" of Fidel Castro's revolutionary government in power in Cuba since 1959, was installing nuclear warheads on the island, just a few dozen miles from the United States, in response to American nuclear missiles installed in Italy and Turkey. US President Kennedy responded with a major naval blockade around Cuba, urging the Soviets to withdraw the missiles. For days the world seemed on the brink of a third world war, this one potentially nuclear. Then the crisis was resolved by Khrushchev's decision to withdraw the Soviet missiles from Cuba in exchange for Kennedy's public guarantee to respect the inviolability of Cuba's borders (in 1961 the United States had organized an attempted invasion of the island by a group of Cuban exiles, which quickly failed) and the American commitment - which remained secret and would be implemented a few months later - to remove the missiles installed in Italy and Turkey. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, John XXIII made public appeals and even privately pledged a peaceful solution to the conflict between the Soviets and the Americans. In April 1963, two months before his death, he issued the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*:

There is a growing conviction among human beings that disputes between peoples must not be resolved by recourse to arms, but rather through negotiation. It is true that, historically, that conviction is more closely related to the terribly destructive force of modern weapons; and it is fueled by the horror aroused by the mere thought of the immense destruction

and suffering that the use of those weapons would bring to the human family. It is therefore almost impossible to imagine that in the atomic age, war could be used as an instrument of justice.

Pacem in Terris did not definitively resolve the Church's debate on whether to reject war completely. Paul VI—Giovanni Battista Montini—who succeeded Pope Roncalli in 1963, was more cautious than Pope John Paul II in articulating the Church's position on peace and war. Paul VI played a role, albeit a secret one, in seeking a mediation solution to the war between the United States and North Vietnam, but on that occasion he made it clear that this commitment did not mean adherence to a generic pacifism:

“Our service to the cause of peace,” he said in a January 1966 speech to members of the Catholic Union of the Italian Press, referring specifically to the Vietnam War, “is not intended to be pacifism, which ignores the rights and duties related to the conflict in question and fails to see the negative consequences that an unjust and unfair solution could produce” (cited in Menozzi, 2008, 186).

A similar caution on this issue would characterize the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Yet the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* undoubtedly marked a decisive step on the path that would lead both ecclesiastical and associative expressions of the Catholic world to increasingly move toward a direct, declared pacifist sensibility, culminating in the explicit pacifist invocations of Pope Francis and Pope Leo XIV.

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