

# Introduction

The early twenty-first century has witnessed a continued, heightened, and widespread interest in the idea of just war.<sup>1</sup> This renewal of interest began early in the twentieth century prior to and especially after the First World War, after a centuries-long period when the idea was largely banished to the realm of moral theology.

As the idea of just war gained increased visibility in intellectual discourse, it also acquired a history. In this account it emerged that the idea of Western just war was ancient, its origins traceable to statements made by St. Augustine in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. As James Turner Johnson recently expressed it, “the origins of a specifically Christian just war concept first appeared in the thought of Augustine.”<sup>2</sup> This Augustinian just war was first systematized in Gratian’s *Decretum* and received its classic formulation in Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* in the late thirteenth century, from which point the just war idea became part of the Western Christian intellectual tradition.

What I have just outlined could be considered a summary of the standard narrative of the development of the just war idea in the West. Unfortunately, there are a number of serious interrelated flaws in this narrative. Like all such reductive narratives, it tends to efface the influence through time of ideas divergent from a privileged “main” line of development by ignoring or even attempting to appropriate what are actually opposing intellectual trajectories, an approach that has been termed “tunnel history.”<sup>3</sup> The prevailing narrative of just war’s development also tends to view the idea as a set of propositions transmitted by a series of intellectual “torch-bearers,” a view that tends toward rendering the idea ahistorical, at its core little influenced by contemporary historical circumstances. This view also emphasizes the ideational aspect of the justification of war and largely ignores its reality as an expression of political culture.<sup>4</sup>

1. One measure of the idea’s topicality is in the references to just war in President Barack Obama’s Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in December 2009; for a transcript, see [www.csmonitor.com/World/Global-News/2009/1210/text-of-barack-obamas-nobel-peace-prize-acceptance-speech](http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Global-News/2009/1210/text-of-barack-obamas-nobel-peace-prize-acceptance-speech) (accessed 14 May 2013).

2. James Turner Johnson, “Just War, As It Was and Is,” *First Things* 149 (January 2005): 14.

3. David Hackett Fisher, *Historians’ Fallacies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 142–44.

But the fundamental flaw in the prevailing narrative of the history of just war in the West, a notion that binds together the narrative with all its other flaws, is the role it assigns to Augustine. The African Father provides the authority necessary for privileging a core set of propositions on just war ascribed to him, a core that is always potentially recoverable by reverting to his original statements. Since by this view just war is an idea transmitted by a series of intellectuals, there must have been an originator of the idea, and that individual was Augustine. As will be shown, however, Augustine himself did not originate the Christian just war idea. This view of his role perverts what he thought and wrote about war and military service, and any subsequent scholarly interpretation of that material. More importantly, such a view tends to obscure and misrepresent what Christians in the first millennium, and later, actually thought about these matters.

This book's origin lies in work done for my article published in 2001 on the views of Gregory of Tours on war.<sup>5</sup> There I noted that Gregory seemed to have a conception of the justification of war that apparently did not stem from Augustine.<sup>6</sup> Subsequent reflection on the issues raised in that study, and research in the relevant texts and the body of scholarly interpretations intervening between Augustine's time and our own, led to my realization that the standard narrative linking Augustine to the origination of the Christian just war doctrine was fundamentally flawed and, in the most important sense, utterly wrong. Such considerations inform the background for the current work, which basically has two goals. First, I have attempted to determine the content of and the context for early Christian ideas on war and military service, having set to one side the erroneous notion of Augustine's magisterial influence on such thinking during this period. Second, I have tried to set Augustine's actual thinking on the matter in its original historical and literary context, and to illustrate how he began to become a Christian authority on war. What

4. On the tendency of intellectual history to treat ideas as "autonomous abstractions which, in their self-propelled journeyings through time, [happen] only accidentally and temporarily to find anchorage in particular human minds," see Stefan Collini, "What Is Intellectual History?," in *What Is History Today?*, ed. Juliet Gardiner (London: Prometheus, 1988), 106. Regarding the particular issue of Augustine and the just war idea, Robert Markus wrote in 1983 that "ideas do not lead a disembodied existence; they encourage individuals and groups to take very definite attitudes towards their cultural and social environment" (Markus, "Saint Augustine's Views on the 'Just War,'" *Studies in Church History* 20 [1983]: 1-2).

5. Phillip Wynn, "Wars and Warriors in Gregory of Tours' *Histories*I-IV," *Francia* 28, no. 1 (2001): 1-35.

6. *Ibid.*, 34-35. Here I recant much of the conclusion of that article, as I now do not think of Gregory's ideas as reflecting an "underlying Christian tradition."

follows is therefore necessarily *not* the early history of the Christian just war idea, though the beginnings of that history could be derived from it.

Although the history of early Christian attitudes toward war and military service seems well-traveled ground, if one removes Augustine from the central role he has usually played in such works, there is a need to revisit the evidence used in many of the prevailing standard narratives on the subject. In attempting to construct anew the story of the intersection between early Christianity and war, this study will address the following questions, among others:

- What were Christian attitudes toward war and military service before Constantine's conversion?
- What accounts for those attitudes, and how and why did they evolve over time?
- How were Christian attitudes toward war and military service affected when the religion became dominant in the late fourth-century Roman world?
- How did "official" propaganda act to reflect and/or create the image, or the reality, of a normative Christian attitude toward war?
- What were the spiritual consequences of Christian participation in the army and in war, and how were such consequences addressed?
- What role did Scripture play in determining Christian attitudes?
- What are the terminological and ideological origins of just war?
- What is the history of the development of just war in the Roman republic and empire, both as an idea and as a term of political rhetoric?
- How did just war, as an idea and as a political practice, come to be associated with Christianity?
- Finally, since his statements were later—much later—used to construct him as a Christian authority on war, what did Augustine actually think about war and military service, once his relevant statements have been restored to their original historical and literary contexts?

In what follows, as much as anything I am trying to capture a mentality and an attitude. Such an approach is necessary, because nothing like a sustained intellectual engagement with the question of how Christianity should regard war and military service exists until centuries after Augustine's death. Significantly, no treatise was written specifically on the subject for the first thousand years of Christianity's history, and for some time thereafter. Why?

Indeed, anyone who confidently wades into the mass of Christian literature of the first millennium seeking to discover an authoritative early Christian

attitude to war is bound for a frustrating dead-end. This is true for two reasons. First, there is simply no singular, authoritative Christian attitude toward war to be found, then or later. Second, the sort of detached and theoretical rumination on issues today associated with theological disquisition is actually relatively rare at this period, and is never found applied to war. This is because surviving Christian literature of the first millennium is overwhelmingly pastoral in intent, even in such apparently non-pastoral genres as biblical commentary and *computus*. It is therefore unsurprising that as late as Gratian in the early twelfth century, the early Christian texts that we moderns privilege as related to war actually treat at greater length and in greater detail issues related to Christians serving as soldiers. Then and for some time to come, one cannot find even one Christian writer explicitly theorizing at length about war as a general proposition. More immediate pastoral concerns were paramount, and naturally when it came to war such concerns had to do with Christian military service. Since one must go where the evidence lies, this study will examine issues related to both war *and* military service in the writings of Augustine and other early Christian writers.

My attempt to engage sympathetically with the attitudes and feelings of early Christians toward war and military service also explains what at times might seem an uncritical approach to sources. In evaluating sources to determine the ideas and attitudes that inform them, it is possible to take the hermeneutics of suspicion too far, and to emphasize what rhetoric conceals rather than what it reveals. For example, the historicity of hagiographic accounts of events in their saintly heroes' lives is often justly suspect. It thus might seem naïve and credulous to use the life of Martin of Tours, for example, to uncover something of contemporary Christian views of war and military service. Yet it is precisely because such texts can present an overly idealized and overly simplified point of view that they are valuable for the historian of ideas: the events described in them may not have *actually* happened, but according to the hagiographer's ideology and worldview they *should* have. In accordance with the same sympathetic reading of the relevant texts is my use of the word *pagan* to denote non-Christians and their beliefs. For although the existence of a uniform pagan "Other" opposed to Christianity is itself a Christian construction, its usage accurately reflects the early Christian worldview, and is one of the more significant bipolarities in Christian thinking that conditioned developments in ideas connected with war.

The period under investigation is one that is notorious for its supposed scarcity of sources. Those familiar with those sources know better. Therefore, it has been impossible to treat everything. To give just one example: certain of the

nave mosaics of the early fifth-century church Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome arguably provide a visual repertoire that can be interpreted to give information on how early fifth-century Christians in Rome regarded the military. Unfortunately, what I know of the scholarship on those mosaics has convinced me that more work needs to be done on them by art historians before such an interpretation can be safely made. I have therefore aimed at being comprehensive, while recognizing it is impossible to be exhaustive.

Part I lays out the historical and ideological backdrop for the modern view of Augustine's role in the development of the just war idea, and that for his actual ideas concerning war and military service. Chapter one surveys the modern construction of Augustine as the originator of the Christian just war idea. Chapter two pivots to a treatment of the development of Christian thinking on war and military service from the earliest extant writing on the matter in about 200 to the conversion of the emperor Constantine. Chapter three deals with the more immediate historical and ideological context for Augustine's own thinking in the late fourth century, when the scale of the "Christianization" of the Roman empire made more acute issues regarding Christianity's relationship to the state and its ideology. Chapter four then goes back to look at the origins of the Roman just war, emphasizing more its reality as a practice of political culture rather than simply a disembodied idea.

Part II examines in detail those passages in Augustine's writings that touch on issues of war and military service. Chapter five briefly addresses certain issues involved in the interpretation of what Augustine had to say on war and military service. Chapter six looks at what Augustine had to say about *militia*, a term that in that period encompassed both civilian and military service to the state. Chapter seven surveys what Augustine wrote on war, including his relatively few remarks on just war. Chapter eight treats Augustine's subversion and appropriation of the words "peace" and "victory," words of fundamental significance in contemporary imperial ideology. Chapter nine outlines the significant steps in the process whereby medieval ecclesiastics transformed Augustine into an authority on war.

The translations of original texts are my own unless noted. Often when I have used existing translations I have modified them slightly in order to bring out more clearly information central to the argument.