“Not Turning the Other Cheek: 
The Conversion of Christianity to Warlike Purposes”

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When Constantine the Great witnessed what was believed to be a sign of divine favour before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 C.E., a chain of events was set into play that would see, within less than a century, the wholesale conversion of the vast and populous Roman Empire to the fledgling faith of Christianity.

This battlefield-inspired religious transformation is not only one of the great turning points in Western history, but one of the most surprising. Since the Roman execution of its spiritual leader during the reign of Tiberius, Christianity had been little more than an oddly monotheistic and religiously-intolerant movement that had repeatedly attracted the ire of imperial authority. We read in the *Annals* of Tacitus,¹ the first extra-biblical account of Christianity, that as early as the reign of Nero (c. 64 C.E.) these followers of Christ were already ‘hated for their abominations’. Explicitly distinguishing these ‘evil Christians’ from their Jewish co-religionists, Tacitus would refer to their faith as little more than a ‘mischievous superstition’. Nero would, as some of us may know, infamously scapegoat these ‘mankind-hating’ Christians for the great fire of Rome by turning them – with truly ironic sadism – into living Roman candles. Over the next two-and-a-half centuries the ongoing Roman persecution of Christianity would become proverbial: Christians and lions going together even more distastefully than bread and circuses. With their unique insistence upon passive non-resistance, many a Christian martyr would be rendered unto Caesar.

So when Constantine’s heavenly vision in the early fourth century produced a sort of religious domino effect – knocking over the many other ‘official’ religions of the pagan Empire to leave Christianity as the last domino standing – Christianity’s ultimate triumph emerges as little short of astonishing. While there remains many gaps in our historical understanding of how Christianity achieved this religious revolution, what appears to have left even less of an imprint upon our collective understanding is what I will refer to as the Roman ‘counter-conversion’. And by that I mean how Rome would, in turn, instigate the transformation of Christianity from an essentially peaceful, if not downright pacifist, faith, into one that was primed to lend her theological weight to war. In order to shed some light upon the dark history of this ‘counter-conversion’, three broad areas will be concentrated upon in this paper:

1. The historical context.
2. Constantine: his ‘beliefs’ & legacy.

¹ Tacitus, *Annals*, XV.44.
In order to explain how Constantine began the process of effecting this counter-conversion, it will first prove beneficial to briefly examine the historical traditions he inherited as a would-be reformer.

When the legendary founders, Romulus and Remus, had their Cain and Able moment, their murderous dispute would endure for over a thousand years as a highly-effective Roman foundation myth. This tale of fratricidal violence became emblematic of not just the many civil wars that blighted Rome’s history, but it spoke volumes about the means whereby Rome achieved and maintained her territorial supremacy. We read in Polybius, an early Greek analyst of her imperial growth, that it was a distinguishing characteristic of the Romans to use – and I quote – ‘…violent force for all purposes.’\(^2\) So pronounced were these tendencies that, upon the sack of a city or town that had refused to surrender to them, Roman warriors would not only raze the buildings and massacre all men, women and children, but they were known to even slice the dogs of their enemies in half. The Roman historian Livy goes on to tell us, quite proudly, that his countrymen were so fiercely committed to waging war that the doors to the temple of the god Janus were – throughout some 500 years of Republican history – only opened twice to signal peace.\(^3\) The modern Roman historian William V. Harris has examined this sensational claim quite closely and he contends that Livy was hardly exaggerating.\(^4\) According to Harris:

“One of the most striking features of Roman warfare is its regularity – almost every year the legions went out and did massive violence to someone – and this regularity gives the phenomenon a pathological character.”\(^5\)

This ‘pathological character’ that Harris writes of is no idle speculation. The walls of Romulus housed a city-state that displayed the bounty of warfare at every opportunity: the prows of captured enemy ships loomed above the main forum; the doorposts of homes were studded with the memorabilia of enemy armour and weapons won in combat; while statues and other forms of art taken as battle-spoils beautified the city. Even Rome’s infamous Coliseum would sport a plaque that attested to it having been erected from the wealth acquired through the destruction of Jerusalem’s Great Temple.\(^6\) Commanders whose legions slew more than 5,000 ‘worthy’ enemies in a given battle were, after satisfying these qualifications for victory, allowed to then triumph through the crowded streets of Rome: numerous bullock-drawn carts would display the material wealth they had seized, as well as three-dimensional dioramas and large painted scenes of the battlefield indicating how the legions had destroyed their opponents; while captured dignitaries – kings, queens, tribal chieftains, defeated generals and high priests – would march in chains at the

\(^2\) Polybius, *Historia*, I.XXXVII.VII.

\(^3\) Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*, LIX.23.


\(^5\) *Ibid*, pg. 53.

head of the triumphantly singing legions, to be later ritually strangled before Rome’s premier deity, Jupiter Optimus Maximus.7

All these physical hallmarks of martial fervour in the city of Romulus underscored the social values the Roman’s cherished most. As historians like Polybius and Sallust remind us, Roman fighting men competed fanatically before each other to scale the ramparts of enemy cities, to slay foes and collect prizes from their bodies without suffering the social disgrace of losing their own sword or shield, or even to challenge opponents in single combat. Contrary to popular belief – and far too many misleading Hollywood depictions – Roman legionaries, centurions and even more senior officers regularly challenged and fought in combat-by-champion duels. The emphasis in these dramatic man-to-man encounters was not just upon skill-at-arms and the undying fame that victory bought a Roman combatant, but they highlighted a behavioural trait the Romans esteemed above all else. Referred to extensively in Roman writings as virtus, this much-prized quality was the very lifeblood of their masculine and warrior self-identity. Again, if we can look past those sensationalising and bloodthirsty depictions we have all encountered in Hollywood movies, one-on-one arena fights were significantly more about how much virtus a gladiator revealed when he faced the prospect of death by combat, than entertaining the crowd with a gory dismemberment or death. This is why Roman audiences came to despise Christians who were thrown before predatory animals, or given weapons and told to battle for their lives: the early Christian doctrine of non-violent passivity, whereby they martyred themselves rather than fight, stood at great extremes to the traditional Roman adulation of virtus displayed through mortal combat.8

In fact, so pronounced was this behavioural compulsion for Roman fighting men to demonstrate their virtus – and thereby acquire some of the many signifiers of military fame – that Rome even developed a complex that saw peace regarded as alien and emasculating. Known as the metus hostilis complex, Rome was known to have deliberately broken treaties or engaged in unprovoked warfare simply to keep the fighting tempo of the legions at fever pitch. Any period of time where it was ‘All Quiet on the Western Front’ was greatly feared by the Senate, as it could have drained the legions of their virtus and collective fighting spirit. It was not until the last century of the Republic under the bloody-handed dictator Sulla that the concept of pax (or peace) first begins to enter the historical record; and even then it was only pax between fellow Romans.9 Remarkably, no Roman author ever devoted a work to a consideration – philosophical or otherwise – of the benefits of peace; there was no such thing in the Roman mindset as pacifism or conscientious objectors: and even when Augustus, the first emperor, inaugurated his famous pax Romana, that actually proved to be a period of intensely warlike activity and ruthless territorial consolidation.

Warfare and religion were also deeply intertwined amongst the Romans. The Roman pantheon was dominated by gods associated with the principal cultural activity, or who possessed military attributes: here we can list Jupiter, Mars, Neptune,

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9 Harris, W.V., op cit, pg.36.
Hercules, Apollo, Vulcan, Quirinus, Janus, Orcus, Sol, Minerva, Diana, Bellona, Nerio, as well as ‘abstracted’ or ‘personified’ war-related concepts like Victoria, Virtus and Invictus that received significant cultic worship.10 The Romans took these associations to be much more than just a comforting fiction: they proudly traced their lineage back to the legendary founder Romulus, onto his surrogate mother – a giant ‘she-wolf’ – and through to their premier war-god, Mars. They came to think of themselves, almost literally, as sons and daughters of Mars, and his animal ‘familia’, the wolf that had suckled Romulus and Remus. Quite remarkably, they even carried this identification into battle. When the enemies of Rome confronted her legions, the first troops they would encounter were lightly-armoured skirmishers known as velites – these troops were draped in actual, full-length wolf-skins, thereby projecting a direct link to their supposed lupine ancestry.11 The sight of thousands of these wolf-skin-clad warriors streaming across a battlefield must have been an unnerving sight for those brave enough to challenge Rome’s legions. Moreover, her reputation for invincibility can only have been bolstered by the knowledge that Rome had in her military service fighting men who so strongly identified with one of the natural world’s fiercest predators.

Like many imperialistic peoples, the Romans also believed that their empire had been bestowed upon them by the gods. Characteristically, though – and in quite marked distinction to other imperial powers like the Persians, Mongols or even the British – they took this sense of divine providence to extremes. Unlike any other ancient Italic people we know of, the Romans dedicated an entire priestly order – known as the fetiales – to initiating wars and accepting the surrender of their foes. The fetiales would even announce hostilities in a uniquely Roman manner, by symbolically casting a sacred spear of Mars into enemy territory to signal an invasion of Roman forces.12 Again, it was not enough for them to simply implore their own deities for success in battle, but they developed a ritualized formula known as evocatio whereby Roman priests would call upon the chief deity of an enemy to desert his or her people. Once these priests were convinced that they had seduced these gods and goddesses away from an enemy force – having promised them a new temple in Rome’s sacred precincts, where they would be honoured through prayer and sacrifice – the legions would then be sent forward to destroy a foe they believed no longer had supernatural protection.

Conversely, the Romans’ belief in the protection of their own gods could produce a suicidal fatalism. Three generations of the patrician family Decius who commanded legions in battle – at differing times having faced the prospect of imminent defeat – turned to the most fabled of all Roman religious rites, the so-called devotio, to re-attract the favour of their gods. After standing on a spear of Mars and incanting a religious formula which consecrated themselves and their opponents to Orcus, Lord of the Underworld, they remounted their horses and single-handedly rode straight into the ranks of the enemy, to a certain death. This fanatically brave act was believed to lift the spiritual dread of their own men, while re-attracting the good will of Rome’s martial deities. Remarkably, in each of our recorded cases of the use of devotio this rite helped turn the tide of battle, with Rome’s forces proving triumphant.

10 Harris, W.V., op cit, pgs.35; 123-8.
12 See, on a ‘divinely-ordained’ empire and the fetiales, Harris, W.V., op cit, pgs.118-123.
Not only would Roman authors like Cicero, Virgil and Livy all celebrate the ‘kamikaze piety’ of the Roman aristocrats who performed these devotional acts, but even our Christian writer St Augustine – who so harshly rebuked pagan Rome for its false gods and beliefs - would refer to them as icons of virtue.¹³

To turn, now, to the second portion of this paper, it should come as no surprise given this aggressive militarism and aggressive religiosity, that Constantine faced a truly daunting task. The ambitious scion of a nobleman sympathetic to Christianity and a mother known to have converted to this outlaw faith, he sought to break away from traditional patterns of behavior that had evolved and endured for over a thousand years. His task was only further compounded by the age-old Roman reverence for their ancestral customs – which provided a sort of ‘everyman’s guide to success’ in a traditional society – as well as having to find a way past the brutal new assault upon Christianity ushered in by the emperor Diocletian.

Although he had created a new form of governing the Roman empire, known as the Tetrarchy, whereby power was shared between four separate rulers, Constantine’s predecessor Diocletian apparently retained sufficient power to initiate empire-wide policies. The most severe of these, for the purposes of our topic, was his so-called Diocletianic or Great Persecution of the Christian faith. Possibly disturbed by cases of Christians enlisted in the military who refused to fight for religious reasons and certainly outraged at their refusal to offer sacrifice to Rome’s traditional gods, Diocletian spent some 15 years of his early reign purging the legions of Christian soldiers.¹⁴ Joined by his senior co-ruler Galerius, an ardent hater of Christianity, Diocletian sought advice from an oracle to Apollo in 303 C.E. and then – joined by their more junior rulers, Maximian and Constantius (father to Constantine) – they issued a series of edicts which specifically targeted all followers of Christ. Ejected from the military and the imperial administration, stripped of their legal rights and property, their scriptures and places of worship destroyed and, in some provinces, mutilated or burnt alive when exposed if they failed to apostatize, Christians endured these depredations until a deathbed proclamation by Galerius repealed the edicts of persecution in 311 C.E. After his father’s abdication in 306 C.E., Constantine had ascended to the purple and asserted himself as a champion of Christianity, while also engaging in a deadly ‘Games of Thrones’ battle royale with his many imperial rivals.

By 313 C.E. when he and his co-ruler Licinius issued the so-called ‘Edict of Milan’ – which again enforced tolerance for Christianity and a restoration of the rights of its followers – Constantine finally stood at the crossroads. Having put an end to the anti-Christian apocalypse and forestalled the attempts of his more orthodox peers to revive Rome’s traditional cultic worship, it rested upon his shoulders to restore the battered image of a now-decriminalised Christianity.¹⁵ In fact, a golden opportunity to elevate

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¹³ For an extensive examination of evocatio, devotio and other heavily-militarised Roman religious rites, see Martino, J., Cultures of Violence: Republican Rome and the Mexica, (PhD dissertation), University of Melbourne, 2006, Chpt.IV.
¹⁵ This paragraph borrows heavily from Hill, J., Christianity: The First 400 Years, Lion Books, Oxford, 2013, pgs.203-225.
this image had presented itself only the year before, when he stood with his army before the city of Rome, seeking to wrest it away from one of his more tyrannical fellow emperors.

Before we turn to a closer examination of this battle that entirely transformed the prestige of Christianity, it should be acknowledged that Constantine does not appear to have been exactly a single-minded Christian zealot – the evidence actually suggests that he was much too much the Roman, and too astute a political animal to play his hand that openly. Whatever his personal religious convictions may have been – and these we may never entirely know – throughout his time as a ruler of the Tetrarch and, later, as sole emperor, he certainly had no compunctions about presenting himself publicly as a liberator or champion of Christianity, or even a ‘new Moses’ as our ecclesiastical writers commonly wrote of him. To some this distinction between a private and public Constantine may seem a little provocative, but it does need to be remembered that – almost Janus-like – he looked back upon a full millennium of traditional and indisputably successful Roman piety and then forwards to a projected Christian future that was in no way certain. On our best modern estimates at least 90% of the empire still subscribed to religions other than Christianity by the year 300 C.E.\(^{16}\), and Christianity – after being literally decimated by purges and pogroms – had only just emerged from the scorched earth of the ‘Era of the Martyrs’. So when we read a little-referred-to fact that - before he witnessed his apparently life-changing apparition in battle – Constantine also claims to have been visited by an epiphany of the god Apollo in 310 C.E., and that he would issue coin types and commission statues in honour of this Olympian deity having assured him of world domination, then we can see how he at least publicly sought to straddle the old and new worlds of Rome.\(^{17}\)

The last time that the Roman empire had experienced as profound an upheaval as that being imagined by Constantine was during the chaotic and bloody transition from Republic to Empire some 3 centuries earlier. At that time the emperor Augustus had finally emerged victorious, to then monopolise both temporal and spiritual powers in order to assume the enduring status of a semi-divine, military dictator. All subsequent Roman emperors sought to emulate his supreme authority, being rewarded at their deaths with worship as part of the imperial cult in the West, and, in many cases, with actual living deification in the East. Hence, imperial rulers acted as not just conduits for the will of Rome’s traditional gods, but invariably expected – given sufficient public faith in their \textit{virtus} and achievements – to be elevated to the ranks of the divine.\(^{18}\) When Constantine stood before the Milvian Bridge contemplating the seizure of Rome in 312 C.E., this latter-day ‘Rubicon moment’ also carried another echo of the Romulus and Remus foundation myth. Again, a type of fratricidal or ‘brotherly’ violence was to be enacted to decide the fate of Rome. With his fellow emperor Maxentius safely holed up within the massive walls of Romulus’ city and in possession of a much larger military force, Constantine was in need of aid – whether

\(^{16}\) Hill, J., \textit{op cit}, pg.207.  
\(^{17}\) See Van Dam, R., \textit{Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge}, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, pgs.11-12, on the Apollo epiphany; cf. pgs.1-18 of this work for a masterful examination of the interpretive complexities associated with these ‘literary’ visions.  
mortal or divine – to both cross this bridge and then somehow infiltrate the near-impenetrable defences of Rome.

Remarkably, Constantine’s prayers seem to have been answered. For some strange reason the emperor Maxentius chose to leave the safety of Rome and advance with his legions to the city-side of the nearby Milvian Bridge. Here his forces crossed the bridge or a makeshift causeway they had erected, and then engaged Constantine’s troops at this bottleneck point. Just as if they had stayed within the monumental walls of Rome, Maxentius’ troops should never have been defeated at this juncture of the battle save for one near-miraculous mishap: the emperor Maxentius had joined his men at the pointy end of hostilities and somehow, in the fog of war, slipped off his horse and drowned in the river Tiber. Maxentius’ fatal ‘own goal’ has led one modern-day commentator to explore the possibility that it was not just Constantine who was seeking to mythologise this victory, but that in direct imitation of exemplary, semi-legendary Roman heroes he had wanted to stand in single combat on the bridge and vanquish all who would try to take his city. In any event, this failed, tragicomic emperor’s men were demoralised by his untimely death and the following day Rome opened her gates to the victor, Constantine. Maxentius would go on to be dismissed in our records as a humiliated tyrant whose memory and achievements would be officially damned, while, after his death, Constantine would be commemorated every October 29 as the ‘divine savior’ of the city of Rome.

What is particularly remarkable about Constantine’s great victory over Maxentius are our competing ancient accounts of how it came about. When the ancient Christian author Eusebius came to write his Ecclesiastical History he detailed Constantine’s battle for Rome, but – in line with the account that I have just given – he made absolutely no mention of Constantine witnessing any divine omen or signs. Similarly, Eusebius records nothing about Constantine having apparently communed with the god Apollo only two years earlier, although he would most certainly have witnessed the emperor’s widespread identification with this Olympian during his latter reign. It is only much later, in another work penned by Eusebius and apparently dictated to him by Constantine, that the tale of an illuminated cross in the heavens emerges for the first time. If we turn to our other major primary source for this era, the Church writer Lactantius (who was even closer to the imperial court than Eusebius, as he would tutor Constantine’s son) we find that, he too, makes no mention of the emperor witnessing a heavenly sign from Christ before the fateful battle, let alone receiving any earlier messages from pagan deities. Lactantius does make mention of Constantine experiencing a dream where Christ delivers him a vision – as would Eusebius in his later account – but of that spectacular, Hollywood-esque sign of the cross in the heavens, there is no word. What - we may well ask - is going on here, and how did the story of that heavenly vision most of us identify with Constantine’s victory emerge through the ages to become synonymous with the rise of Christianity?

If we look carefully through our primary sources, we may just be able to detect traces of what is occurring with our ancient writers and their relationship to

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19 See Van Dam, R., *op cit*, pgs.253-258.
20 Hill, J., *op cit*, pg.211.
21 Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, XLIV.
Constantine’s experience of the supernatural. On the one hand – and early in his reign – Constantine closely identified himself with Rome’s traditional martial deities like Apollo and Sol Invictus, while on the other hand we know him to have been deeply influenced by Christian beliefs and had emerged as a champion, or at least a protector, of the Christian faith. In this regard, he was very much a traditional Roman, as his city-state had, by and large, always promoted religious tolerance. But the burning question remains, when and why did our ancient accounts of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge come to so dramatically reflect supernatural events and when did Constantine, himself, come to believe that a sign from the Christian god could be publically associated with victory in battle?

Rather than thinking of Constantine as having ‘placed a bet each way’ with one foot in the camp of both Christianity and Rome’s traditional faith-system, it is more productive – I believe – to think of early Christianity as something of a ‘work in progress’ under the influence of the imperial court. As most of us would probably know and from what has hopefully been reinforced through examples I have provided, Christianity was far from a warlike religion in her earliest guise: quite the opposite, in fact, with its celebration of the humble, gentle, impoverished, downtrodden and weak who flocked to its banner of peace on earth. Rome’s traditional religious system, as I have also sought to highlight, stood at complete loggerheads to this insistent pacifism, and Romans of all classes had for many hundreds of years looked to the heavens for the will of the gods to be exercised through victory in battle. Romans could not only readily identify which of their innumerable deities they needed to call upon, or reward, for success in given combat situations, but had over hundreds of years developed a dense lexicon of priesthoods, rituals and beliefs that spiritually articulated a clear message of faith for the combative Roman. Of course, in 312 C.E. – when Constantine seized Rome and then began his slow climb to imperial autocracy – no such warlike lexicon existed for Christianity. If Constantine was to then somehow reconcile the seemingly incompatible, he would need to either re-align the people he ruled or the faith-systems he had inherited.

From the later writings of Eusebius, in his Life of Constantine, an answer to this dilemma seems to have emerged. The very fact that Constantine’s rule proved long and successful, that his rule was not been marred by ill-fortune for moving away from Roman paganism or through defying the religious expectations of his more-orthodox subjects, clearly encouraged him to relay a message of renewed faith to his biographer, Eusebius. Far from being credulous himself, Eusebius would convey the emperor’s much later tale of Christly intervention to us in a most cautious manner:

“...And while he was thus praying with fervent entreaty, a most marvelous sign appeared to him from heaven, the account of which it might have been difficult to receive with credit, had it been related by any other person. But since the victorious emperor himself long afterwards declared it to the writer of this history, when he was honoured with his acquaintance and society, and confirmed his statement by an oath, who could hesitate to accredit the relation, especially since the testimony of after-time has established the truth? He said that about mid-day, when the sun was about to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens above the sun, and bearing the inscription,

CONQUER BY THIS. At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole army also, which happened to be following him on expedition, and witnessed the miracle.”

Stunned by this epiphany, though uncertain as to its full meaning, Constantine goes on to dictate to Eusebius a second vision:

“He said, moreover, that he doubted within himself what the import of this apparition could be. And while he continued to ponder and reason on its meaning, night imperceptibly drew on; and in his sleep the Christ of God appeared to him with the same sign he had seen in the heavens, and commanded him to procure a standard made in the likeness of that sign, and to use it as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies.”

What arises from these two revelatory passages is the most concrete example of what I have called the Roman counter-conversion of Christianity. Despite some 15 years elapsing between the final changes to the *Ecclesiastical History* (324/6 C.E.) where there is no mention of these divine apparitions and his *Life of Constantine* (337/340 C.E.) where such things now emerge, Eusebius appears to me to be clearly playing his role in the creation of a new foundation myth. Working with Constantine himself, both men are engaged less in the ‘miracle-manufacturing business’ than in replacing the Romulus story – with all of its explicitly violent associations - with the genesis myth of a Romanised Christian god who, through direct intervention, lends his support to only the true believer and righteous in battle. In fact, this is the very first occasion where the formerly peace-loving god of the Christian New Testament is directly associated with warfare: a bold and formative step undertaken by the emperor and his biographer to now permanently record this new-found function. This is a stunning new behavioural paradigm, fundamentally altering the divinely endorsed, though largely amoral, normative recourse to violence that had characterised pagan Roman military success for nigh on a thousand years.

As both head of the traditional state religion, or pontifex maximus, as well as Rome’s first Christian emperor, Constantine was uniquely positioned to be able to recount the events he and his army had experienced decades earlier. As Eusebius records, Constantine could swear by sacred oath that the events he later relayed were entirely truthful, with biographer and subject also being emboldened by the simple *post facto* reality of what had transpired. In other words, where Eusebius informs us that “…the testimony of after-time has established the truth…” he is advising us that we need not doubt the emperor’s words because reality had proven the veracity of this new Christian genesis myth. After Constantine’s defeat of his final rival, Licinius, and his rapid convening of the Council of Nicaea, where any doubts about the divinity of Jesus were quelled, a now-warlike Christian Rome – and its sister city, Constantinople – could prove themselves fit successors to the endless bellicosity of pagan Rome. Where once Jesus of Nazareth, the Prince of Peace, had proclaimed a new path, one with little if any relationship to warfare (other than its sad inevitability), Constantine had employed his position of worldly authority to usher in a new age of Christian power and confidence. Now the portfolio of earthly concerns a Christian god would oversee had been expanded to cover that most Roman of all activities – the waging of war. While, just as importantly, the Christians of

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23 Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, I.XXVIII.
24 *Ibid*, I.XXIX.
25 See within: Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, I.XXVIII.
Constantine’s day no longer had to offer up any form of sacrifice, animal or human, for victory in this deadly pursuit as Rome’s bloodthirsty traditional pantheon had always demanded.

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In the final section of this paper, I will make some brief remarks about the further evolution of Christian war exegesis under St Augustine and the literary birthing of the Christian just war doctrine, before wrapping up what we have covered with some concluding remarks.

So potent had Constantine’s reforms proven that by the end of the emperor Theodosius’s rule in 395 C.E., Christianity had become the sole state religion of the Roman empire. All imperial rulers between Constantine and Theodosius, with just one exception, had also been devout Christians. However, Theodosius’ reign marked a turning point in the remarkable climb and empire-wide spread of Christianity. Upon his death, the empire would split into two distinct halves – East and West – never to be re-united again. And Rome would, within 15 years, be sacked by the intensely warlike, pagan Goths. This traumatising event, where the Eternal City fell into the hands of barbaric invaders in 410 C.E., to be burned and looted by them, led many Roman voices to be raised in protest. They argued that there had been a fatal weakening of their collective fighting spirit under Christianity. These protests also coincided with what had been a decades-long undermining and eradication of the traditional Roman state religion, and these critics of Christianity would claim that Rome’s fall had been further hastened by the anger of her deserted old gods and the impious treatment of their shrines and temples.26

Writing his City of God in direct opposition to this assault upon his faith, Augustine would, somewhat reluctantly, also seek to advance the image of Christianity as a religion capable of coping with the demands of a warfare-infested world. A revered figure within the Christian church to this day, Augustine had published his monumental work soon after the calamitous events of 410 C.E., and for more than a 1000 years he had a singular impact upon how the West contemplated the ethics of waging war. In order to instill faith back into the Christians of his own day as well as to silence their critics, his work struck out in a number of theological directions: while never missing an opportunity to deride those Romans, ancient and contemporary, who held pagan beliefs, the loftiest ambition that his work contained was a novel,

“...refusal to identify what he called the City of God, that invisible community of the saved, or even the visible organization of the Christian church, with the Roman empire, Rome or any other earthly city.”27

By relocating this identity-centre of faith onto a distinctly spiritual plane, Augustine offered clear hope to the Christian faithful that despite what may happen to Rome – or any other civic congregation in a mortal setting, for that matter – their

26 Hill, J., op cit, pgs.279-291.
27 Dawson, D., The Origins of Western Warfare: Militarism and Morality in the Ancient World, Westview Press, Oxford, 1996, pg.171: much of what follows on St Augustine’s writings owes a direct debt to this work by Dawson; far and away the most sophisticated treatment of its subject matter.
eternal salvation would not be jeopardized. While this line of reasoning would prove both hugely influential and enduring, it was essentially a defensive argument given the immediate fate of Rome: apparently realising this, Augustine also grudgingly went onto the attack. Although not composed in the most systematic of manners, he would separate his arguments on the ethical justice of Christians waging war into two distinct areas. The first of these concerned the right or the ethics of going to war (known as *jus ad bellum*) and the second with actual moral conduct within war (or *jus in bello*).\(^\text{28}\)

Augustine was dealing with highly-complex and relatively novel ethical issues and, while we normally credit him with being a true ground-breaker in these areas, he was actually assisted in his task by a work called *On Duties* written by his great mentor, St Ambrose. Ambrose’s work was, in turn, an adaptation of a work by the distinguished Roman lawyer, author and politician Cicero, who had composed his own *On Duties* several centuries earlier. Cicero’s *On Duties* contained the definitive rationale for just warfare in the classical age and Ambrose had reworked Cicero’s arguments on the necessity of just warfare, universal empire and the moral obligation of Romans to defend their allies into workable precepts for the Christian community. What is important to note in Ambrose’s work – and his subsequent impact upon Augustine – is how he ‘narrowed the gap’ between the Old and New Testaments in his interpretations of the Christian duty to engage in warfare.\(^\text{29}\) Where the more Judaic Old Testament described virtual Holy Wars being fought under the commands of Yahweh, the New Testament conveyed an almost completely contradictory message of extreme non-violence. Ambrose sought to break down this essential incompatibility by writing on the importance of military responsibilities for Christians, while also noting how Old Testament heroes like Joshua, Samson and David had won great glory by fighting with divine approval.\(^\text{30}\)

Augustine took these initial literary advances by Ambrose as well as his admiration for Constantine – who he noted in the *City of God* had been divinely blessed in his victorious conduct of wars – and tried to form them into a coherent doctrine for Christian warfare. He was largely successful. On the one hand, he argued that virtuous Christians would have to internalise their repugnance for violence by adopting a certain ‘inward disposition’ in order to wage war on evil. This stoic, personal acceptance of the need for warfare to combat sin worked in tandem with his second fundamental conviction. Augustine also arguing that collective violence done to the wicked or in obedience to divine command did not infringe upon the holy commandment that ‘Thou Shalt Not Kill.’ As Doyne Dawson reminds us:

“War, like other social and political evils, is a punishment for original sin, but it is also a restraint upon sin, the instrument through which the just punish the wicked...Augustine said nothing to suggest that a just war should not be offensive, so long as our motives are pure...[and he defined] a just war simply as a war to avenge injuries, a definition that was to enter the medieval canon of law and become the classic statement of this view.”\(^\text{31}\)

\(^{28}\) See Dawson, D., *op cit*, pgs.1-9; pg.56 & pg.115 (on the Roman – and Ciceronian - fetial law application of these principles).


\(^{30}\) Dawson, D., *op cit*, pg.170; see, also, pgs.42; pgs.169-170.

\(^{31}\) *Ibid* pgs.172-173.
However, Dawson also points out to us that to read Augustine in his entirety, rather than focusing on just a few ‘juicy quotes’, is to encounter a writer so deeply obsessed with the punishing moral criteria for Christians to engage in warfare that it actually raises the question of whether there ever was, or ever can be, such a thing as a just Christian war.\textsuperscript{32} His pessimism in this regard, that a just person who believes in god can ever justifiably engage in the act of killing another person on a state-wide scale, infected not only Augustine’s \textit{City of God}, but has troubled the entire Christian world since his time, as well – we might add – as all other self-reflecting religions.

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As we have now seen, one type of event in the ancient world had a profound impact upon how Christian faith evolved to meet the harsh realities of warfare. The capture of Rome by Constantine in 312 C.E., like the seizure of Rome by the Goths in 410 C.E., had a remarkably similar effect – it jolted Christianity out of its admirable, but somewhat unworldly, stance on violence, and forced it to confront the human folly of war. Two men played a pivotal role in shaping – or ‘counter-converting’ - how Christianity responded to such mortal threats. Constantine sought to provide what I have referred to as a new ‘foundation myth’ for a Christian Roman empire, one which replaced predatory violence with divinely sanctioned conflict, while Augustine would grapple with the ethical burdens of Christians slaying for seemingly just purposes. In quite pragmatic ways, the once-entirely peaceful character of early Christianity had been subverted, thereby transforming the \textit{pax Romana} into a sort of \textit{pax Christiana}. That both Constantine and Augustine found what might now be thought of as flawed solutions to the dilemmas they faced says less about their individual faith or the integrity of their religion, than it does about the fundamentally unjust nature of war itself.

\textsuperscript{32} Dawson, D., \textit{op cit}, pg.172. Such thinking would, in particular, go on to plague St Augustine’s more immediate successors - “When the [emperor] Nicephorus, who had lived altogether too long ‘in the shadow of swords’, had made the shocking demand of his bishops that they sanction a matching doctrine, one that would grant to any soldier who died in defence of the Christian empire a martyr’s crown, they had recoiled in the utmost horror. The Church’s ruling on the matter, they had pointed out with icy finality, was clear. Any soldier who shed blood, even in defence of his fellow Christians, existed in a state of sin: only three years of the strictest penance could serve to purge him of the offence.” Extract from, Holland, T., \textit{Millennium: The End of the World and the Forging of Christendom}, Little, Brown Book Group, London, 2008, pg.83.