

The Christian Militant

*“The trowel in hand and the gun
rather easy in the holster”*
—Nehemiah, according to T.S. Eliot

*“Say you got two Gucci jackets, you
hock one and you get yourself a gat.”*
—The “Bad” News Bible

Jesus, contemplating His departure from this world, instructed His disciples to arm themselves, and, ever since, Christians enrolled in the Church Militant have made use of whatever defensive weapons the technology of the age produced—swords in the first century, automatic rifles in our own. In the struggle against evil, Christians who decline to fight comprise a fifth column, doing the enemy’s work on the home front.

Christian pacifism is a contradiction in terms. A self-described Christian pacifist—or Christian vegetarian or Christian socialist—is only a pacifist, vegetarian, or liberal who wraps himself in the comforting language of the Christian Faith. Christians are called upon to make peace, treat animals decently, and practice charity, but these virtuous practices derive from the Faith; they do not determine it.

Many American Catholics, in rebellion against both their Church and the Christian faith, say that it is always wrong to take a human life. To pick apart the moral theology of “Christian” liberals would be an easy but disagreeable task. (Breaking butterflies upon a wheel is the waste of a good piece of torture equipment. Better to save it for the next Inquisition.) And serious Christians who want to know what to think about war, capital punishment, and self-defense should not waste time debunking the non-Christian theories of Thoreau, Gandhi, and King, Jr., or the heresies of the Amish. Instead, we should look directly at what the principal Christian traditions have taught. But, to decide whether a Christian is permitted, say, to use a gun to defend his property, we first have to understand the Church’s more general moral teachings, not only on justice but on life and death.

Christians know that our life on earth is, as Shakespeare’s Prospero declares, “rounded by a sleep.” On this earth, life

without death would be poetry without rhythm: limitless and therefore pointless. A virus might live for ever, feeding off bits of protein and constantly tangling and untangling its symmetrical spaghetti of DNA. The genetic variations made possible by sexual reproduction make the death of individual organisms inevitable. Without sex and death, life might have evolved into one great superorganism, immortal as well as immoral, resembling the modern pantheists’ conception of Gaia, the vast living ecosystem and planetary consciousness of which each human individual makes an infinitesimal part.

“Mere existence” of any kind, for the Christian, is never the issue, though a fearful Dr. Johnson once declared that it was “so much better than nothing, that one would rather exist even in pain than not exist.” That was the voice of Johnson’s fear and self-doubt talking. He knew as well as anyone that death is central to the Christian creed: It is punishment for sin. Christ Himself endured the torments of death in order to redeem mankind, and each of us must die in order to enter eternal life.

Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal [John 12:24-25].

It is death that makes life so precious. Even Adam and Eve lived under the shadow of the death that might come to them if they rebelled against their Creator, and some protoplasmic earth-blob that were to go on growing throughout eternity would endure an existence without moral, much less spiritual, significance. It is the moral dimension of life that makes it sacred to the Christian.

Saint Thomas speaks of man’s rational life or soul as the quality distinguishing him from the beasts, and some rationalist philosophers have concluded that it is reason (as opposed to humanity *per se*) that must be protected. Since unborn babies and the mentally defective are no more rational than fish, their lives would

not necessarily be covered by prohibitions against murder, while computers might some day possess a higher right to life than human beings of ordinary intelligence.

For Christians, however, reason is significant because it enables people to make moral choices and not because creatures with highly developed rationality can solve mathematical puzzles, pass the exams for Harvard Law School, or make a six-figure income working to subdue the planet for Bill Gates. Birds and beasts are not moral creatures, even potentially; the fact of their low intelligence is incidental, and, if we are occasionally obliged to preserve their lives or protect them from suffering, it is an obligation we owe not to them but to ourselves and to the God Who created birds and beasts and man.

There is no unqualified right to life, even to human life. Human life *per se* is precious and is to be preserved, but within certain limits. Christians are required to believe that, in committing sins, we earn, once again, the wages of sin that our original parents passed down to us, and, whatever a believer might think about the inhumanity of the death penalty, no philanthropic illusion should blind him to what the cold-blooded murderer has deserved by carrying out his decision to take an innocent life.

From the Pentateuch, we learn that we have a human responsibility to preserve the sanctity of life by killing those who have abused it. “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man” (Genesis 9:6). In other words, it is precisely because life is a divine gift that the murderer deserves death. The Law lists a great many crimes for which the penalty is death: homicide, witchcraft, idolatry, bestiality, incest. It is even permitted to kill a thief with impunity: “If a thief be found breaking up, and be smitten that he die, there shall be no blood shed for him” (Exodus 22:2). And the Christ Who came not to change one jot or tittle of the Law did not overturn its foundations.

The Church more than once declared executions to be right and proper, and the current Roman Catholic Catechism, while recommending mercy in language whose vagueness approaches equivoca-

tion, includes the concession that:

[T]he traditional teaching of the Church has acknowledged as well-founded the right and duty of legitimate public authority to punish malefactors by means of penalties commensurate with the gravity of the crime, not excluding, in cases of extreme gravity, the death penalty.

This power over life and death, according to a passage of Paul (Romans 13), which good Lutherans love to cite, has been entrusted to secular rulers, whose authority comes from God.

In his article on homicide (Summa Th. II ii, 64), Saint Thomas bases his argument on the Scriptural injunction (Exodus 22:18) that we are not to suffer those who do evil (*i.e.*, sorcerers) to live. Although human rulers are entrusted with the sword, punishment is sometimes sent directly against guilty men, when they refuse to enforce the divine law. Thomas points out that only two crimes have merited a mass extinction: sodomy, the crime for which Sodom was destroyed, and homicide, because of which the Flood was unleashed upon the world. Nonetheless, he stipulates, the power to kill sinners belongs not to private citizens but to the rulers, who function as physicians in society. It is never right to kill the innocent, even for the best of reasons, and patriotic Christians who endorse the terror-bombing of civilians are as wrong in their way as the Episcopalians who selected a homosexual bishop.

According to Thomas, the only occasion on which a private person is permitted to take a human life is when his own has been threatened. A thief may be killed, however, if the primary object is to protect a human life and not to prevent a theft. We should apply the principle of "*vim vi repellere*" (repel force with force) with moderation, but we are not obliged to risk our own safety in order to avoid killing another, "because a man is bound to look after his own life more than another's."

Like most Catholic writers, Thomas viewed the subject of self-defense in the light of the Roman tradition. The Romans, like most Indo-European peoples, were truculent and violent, and the Roman authorities, both under the republic and under the early empire, took steps to prevent the revenge killings and street fights that were as common in the age of Cicero as they were in the Renaissance

Verona that Shakespeare depicts in *Romeo and Juliet*. Early Christians, notably Saint Paul, assumed that Roman law, despite the defects of its judges and officers, was a force designed primarily to punish the wicked and protect the innocent. Acts of self-help and personal vengeance, even when they seemed justified by circumstance, were to be discouraged, because they undermined a public order that was fundamentally good.

Although this view persisted, to a great extent, in the Eastern Roman Empire down to the fall of Constantinople in 1453, conditions in the West made such an approach impossible. The Goths and Franks and Lombards, who snatched up fragments of the Western empire, had preserved the violent habits of primitive Indo-European man. Free men went armed, quarreled, dueled, and sought revenge from their enemies. Churchmen could preach themselves hoarse, but it took many centuries before our barbarian ancestors could be made to listen, and the reality of life in, say, medieval Denmark was that a man who would not avenge a murdered father or brother was saying to all his enemies, real and potential, that he and his wife and children and friends were soft targets. It is easy for us to tell Hamlet that he should not avenge his father by killing his uncle, but where else is justice to be sought? Not from the Danish court, certainly, when the murderer is the king of Denmark.

In its social teachings on marriage and revenge, the Christian Church has always upheld the ideals of civilized life, even in ages when barbaric customs hindered their implementation. It took centuries of preaching and diplomacy to persuade the Frankish nobility to abandon their traditions of polygyny and blood revenge. In more recent years, postcivilized America faces a worse problem. After all, polygyny is a kind of marriage, and vengeance is the natural foundation of capital punishment. We, however, are living in a society where fewer and fewer people get married and fewer still preserve the Christian view that executions are an expression of the divine power of vengeance that has been delegated to human governments.

Refusal to punish homicide with death is something new under the sun that has shone on Greeks and Jews, Franks and Saxons. The last age in which murders went unpunished was the time preceding the Flood. "And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for

the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth" (Genesis 6:13). After the Flood, when Noah and his family leave the ark, blinking in the bright sun, to return to the dry land, they make a sacrifice of burnt offerings. The Lord resolves that He will not "again curse the ground any more for man's sake, for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth."

After the Flood, man is to be given a second chance in a restored creation, where he will build a civilization. All that is demanded of him is to turn away from his violent ways. He must give up eating meat with the blood of life in it, and he must punish killers with death: "at the hand of every man's brother will I require the life of man. Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man." These words are more than an expression of divine approval for capital punishment, which would have been carried out, in the days of the patriarchs, by means of the revenge taken by brothers and blood-kin. Joseph de Maistre, in other words, was right: Civilization does rest upon the hangman.

God, as the Governor of the universe, has the power to give and take away life, and He has instructed us, who are made in His Image, both to increase life ("be fruitful and multiply," He tells Noah and all living things) and to take it away from those who have broken God's law by killing another human being without justification.

More hangs on this explicit commandment than the legitimacy of capital punishment or even the flourishing of civilization. The very existence of mankind, we are told, depends on our willingness to kill killers. If we refuse to execute murderers, we are breaking our part of the bargain, and, if the entire human race were to follow in the footsteps of Europe and the more liberal states of the United States, we can only assume that we are courting our own destruction.

Even a reasonable atheist, surveying the ruins of American cities, where the murder rate is 20 to 30 times that of Austria or Switzerland and only a tiny fraction of convicted murders are actually executed, would suspect that human life, as we have lived it since the Flood, is on the verge of extinction. The world of the future, the way we are going, will belong to clones and homosexuals and the violent humanoid insects that prey upon defenseless humanity.

Lies and More Lies

Having come across several references this spring to a French literary critic, Jean Sévillia, who is criticizing leftist historical reconstructions, I read his two most recent books, *Le Terrorisme Intellectuel* (2000) and *Historiquement correct: Pour en finir avec le passé unique* (2003). An associate editor of *Le Figaro* magazine, Sévillia makes clear that he is sick of “anti-fascist” polemics and has set out to demonstrate their dishonesty. What make Sévillia’s investigations especially useful are his caustic refutations of leftist orthodoxies.

He is merciless in going after the now widespread and deeply embedded lies that the communists in France were always the backbone of the anti-Nazi resistance, while Catholics and monarchists happily collaborated with the German invaders. Particularly since the 70’s, with the appearance of Marcel Ophuls’ interminable pseudodocumentary on Clermont-Ferrand during the occupation (*Le Chagrin et la Pitié*) and with the publication of the book *The Jews in Vichy France* (1973), by Michael Marrus, the view has come to prevail that wartime France swarmed with pro-Nazi collaborators, typically identified with the Church and the nationalist right. The older historical account, typified by de Gaulle’s memoirs and Robert Aron’s *Histoire de Vichy*, which emphasized the difficult situation caused by the French military debacle in June 1940 and the harsh peace subsequently imposed by Hitler, has gone out of fashion. Although well documented, the heroic view of resistance has come to represent, for the French left and for the holocaust lobby, proof positive of the unwillingness of the French to “confront” their fascist-stained past. The antisemitic legislation enacted by the Vichy government in 1940 and 1941 and the deportation of foreign Jews from the Vélodrome d’hiver in Paris on July 16-17, 1942, became the ultimate expressions of what Bernard-Henri Lévy has called the “unpurged French national past.” Such grim accusations have also surfaced among neoconservatives, at least since France refused to join our crusade for democracy in Iraq. As Richard Brookhiser observes in *American Heritage*

(Fall 2003), France has yet to deal with its “ultra-royalist past,” which has produced antisemitism and the “rabble-rouser Jean Le Pen.” Putting aside the question of whether Le Pen is an “ultra-royalist” — something that would undoubtedly be a revelation to him — one has still to explain how the revised p.c. version of what went on in France during the occupation is more accurate than what noncommunist *résistants* had said before.

Sévillia insists with justification that it is not. Moreover, the attempts to impose this version, he says, fit the communist agenda of distorting the past for ideological purposes while decrying those who do not go along as “Holocaust neglectors,” an accusation that has been visited on those proud few who dare to notice Stalin’s atrocities or the ramifications of communist-Nazi collaboration in 1940. Sévillia rakes over the coals those mendacious French soldiers of conscience, perpetually forming “committees of vigilance” to denounce Solzhenitsyn, Alain de Benoist, Hector Berlioz, or anyone else alleged to have contributed to “European fascism.” What these partisans studiously avoid noticing is who really dragged down France in 1940 — the Communist Party, which actively discouraged resistance to the German invasion and whose head, Maurice Thorez, ran to offer his cooperation to the occupying Germans on June 26, 1940. What the French left and, unfortunately, some Jewish organizations in France have done is to exaggerate the influence and wickedness of a certain preferred enemy.

Most of the French nationalist right, including the members of the largest conservative nationalist league, Croix de Feu, fought and died in the struggle against Nazi Germany; Croix de Feu director François de La Rocque was a republican, not a monarchist, and was killed by the Nazis as a *résistant*. There is simply no evidence that French Catholic prelates sympathized with Nazi ideology; in fact, the archbishops of Toulouse, Marseille, and Lyons all denounced fiercely the humiliation of French and foreign Jews. In June 1944, the bishop of Clermont-Ferrand, the city featured in Ophuls’ supposed exposé, was arrested and



deported to Dachau for having protected Jews in his diocese. Most foreign Jews in France were never collected and sent to the Vél because French Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, and even the Vichy police shielded them.

Sévillia has no trouble proving the gross exaggeration of the association of the French right and the royalist right with Nazi ideas and policies. De Gaulle came from a Catholic monarchist family; Philippe Pétain benefited in his initial rise in the French military from his family’s anticlerical, Radical Republican connections. The nationalist monarchist newspaper *Action Française* had called for an immediate invasion of Germany when Hitler occupied the Rhineland in 1936. Vichy cabinets were full of former leftists and even those who came from families that had been Dréyfusards 40 years earlier. Pierre Laval and Jacques Doriot were hardly the exceptions in this regard. Although the French “national revolution” did appeal to nationalist and religious symbols, it also invoked French pacifism, long represented by archcollaborator Marcel Déat. The antisemitism that the Vichy regime whipped up was by no means a rightist monopoly. It was strongly present on the French socialist left since the early 20th century.

France and Italy *did* “come to terms” with their collaborationist pasts, when, in 1944 and 1945, communist partisans shot tens of thousands of their countrymen and incited postwar governments to try hundreds of thousands more for being exactly what the communists had been — Nazi collaborators. While the French left continues to propagate self-serving historical lies in multiple publications and documentaries, Sévillia is there to shine the light of truth. Unhappily “anti-fascist” laws springing up all over Europe may soon turn such work into a crime. ©