

Moral Equality among Soldiers

BY SCOTT A. STERLING

Though soldiers are not responsible for the declaration of war, they bear appropriate responsibility for how enemy soldiers and non-combatants are treated within war. How might the character of American service men and women be formed to recognize the inherent dignity of the enemy soldier?

In the just war tradition is a relatively obscure concept that Paul Christopher calls the “moral equality among soldiers.”¹ He traces the idea to Ambrose of Milan (ca. 340-397), who lifts up David as a military leader who showed love toward an enemy. Ambrose observes that David believed “justice should be shown to those who had borne arms against himself the same as to his own men,” a commitment that was sorely tested during the civil war that broke out after King Saul’s death. David’s formidable opponent and chief rival for the throne was Abner, Saul’s cousin and commander-in-chief. Yet “[David] admired Abner, the bravest champion of the opposing side, whilst he was their leader and was yet waging war,” writes Ambrose, referring to the events recorded in 2 Samuel 3, “Nor did he despise him when suing for peace, but honored him by a banquet. When killed by treachery, he mourned and wept for him.”² As Christopher suggests, “David accepts Abner as a moral equal because of the way he fights in war—independent of the rightness or wrongness of the war itself.”³

Likewise Augustine, whom Ambrose tutored in the faith and baptized in 387, startles us when he advises a warrior “even in waging war, [to] cherish the spirit of a peacemaker, that by conquering those whom you attack, you may lead them back to the advantages of peace; for our Lord

says: 'Blessed are the peacemakers; for they shall be called the children of God.'⁴ This is surely oxymoronic, for how can peace have anything to do with war? Yet Augustine reminds us that what is most evil in war "is not the death of some who would soon die in any case," but rather the "love of violence, revengeful cruelty, fierce and implacable enmity, wild resistance, and the lust of power, and such like."⁵ In this opinion Augustine is

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not naively dismissing the loss of human life, but is pointing us toward the grave spiritual dangers of warfare.

The ghastly images of U.S. soldiers torturing and pornographically humiliating Iraqis detained in Abu Ghraib prison are not only a deeply shameful embarrassment to our country, but also an unambiguous warning sign of the horrible spiritual destruction wrought by

the war. In the Abu Ghraib photos we see in our own soldiers "the real evils of war" of which Augustine warns, and they prompt us to wonder how soldiers today can practice justice in the treatment of individual enemy combatants, including even the terrorists who target innocents and violate the canons of the just war tradition.

TREATMENT OF THE ENEMY

Though individual soldiers are not responsible for the declaration of war, they bear appropriate responsibility for how enemy soldiers and non-combatants are treated within war. Two aspects of the just war tradition—the doctrines of right intention and proportionality of means—give shape to this responsibility and define the moral equality among soldiers.

Usually we think of right intention as the goal of the military enterprise, which according to the tradition must be the restoration of peace. John Howard Yoder calls this the "objective sense" of intention.⁶ "We do not seek peace in order to be at war, but we go to war that we may have peace," writes Thomas Aquinas. "Be peaceful, therefore, in warring, so that you may vanquish those whom you war against, and bring them to the prosperity of peace."⁷ Waging war for national glory or to weaken or destroy enemy regimes are not valid goals according to the doctrine of right intention.

Soldiers also must have proper motives in carrying out wartime duties.

This is right intention in a “subjective” sense, and it must never be hatred, revenge, cruelty, annihilation, the desire for power, or hunger for material gain. War is not glorious, and while we may celebrate military victory and the cessation of hostilities, this celebration must not include rejoicing over an enemy’s loss of life or devastation of their land. In place of such attitudes, right intentions include care for the victims of aggression and the desire to restore peace for the nation, dignity for individuals, and justice.

The doctrine of proportionality of means requires that the damage inflicted by the war not exceed the assumed injury prevented or offense avoided, and be proportionate to the guilt of the offender. Proportionality of means also refers to maintaining the dignity of humankind in the conduct of war, by avoiding unnatural cruelty (e.g., mutilation or torture), keeping faith with the enemy and not lying (with exceptions for ambush or subterfuge), not pillaging or destroying property (unless the enemy might use it for making war), not poisoning wells or rivers, not profaning of places of worship or cemeteries, and by “giving quarter” (i.e., not killing, even in combat, an enemy soldier who surrenders).

I believe that every service member would assent to these doctrines, at least in a classroom discussion, conversation with a chaplain, or interview by CNN. The challenge is to maintain these principles of right intention and proportionality while in combat, even when the enemy has absolutely no intention of following suit. Contemporary combat may only complicate how soldiers will behave, if, as many assume, when warriors have less face-to-face contact with enemy fighters, it becomes easier to dehumanize them.⁸

BEYOND CODES OF CONDUCT

How might the character of American service men and women be formed to recognize the inherent dignity of the individual enemy soldier? How can they take up the principles of the just war tradition not merely as a checklist to be scrutinized, but a lifestyle to be lived out both in peacetime and war?

Codes of conduct—in international laws and conventions, or merely informal—help many service members to act appropriately in times of war. Most soldiers, like most people in general, want to “do the right thing,” and this desire helps deter unlawful behavior. Yet when soldiers are consumed with fear or anger in battle, it is unrealistic to expect them to conduct themselves appropriately merely because they have studied abstract codes or manuals.

Some may internalize the moral equality of soldiers through their experiences in war. They may acknowledge that nobody on either side wants to be on the battlefield; they’d all rather be home with their families. Soldiers value courage, honor, loyalty and obedience, and when they see these characteristics in enemy soldiers, they are no longer just enemies in

the abstract; they are human beings, "poor sods like me."⁹ Stories are told of soldiers feeling compassion as they listen to the cries of wounded enemy soldiers screaming for their loved ones, or when coming upon slain enemy soldiers who are clutching pictures of their spouses and children. They realize these soldiers are not the criminals who started the war, but the unfortunate souls who were sent to fight the battles, "just like me." Soldiers also learn from one another by example in wartime. Chaplain Leroy Ness describes an experience regarding the treatment of slain enemy soldiers:

In my first action there were some Vietnamese enemy killed. We were back on a firebase with bodies. I said to the battalion commander, "Before...the slick [helicopter] comes in to take them away for whatever intelligence purpose they have, I would like very much to have a memorial service for these two dead enemy soldiers.... It's important to remind soldiers that these soldiers had mothers, wives, and sweethearts who grieve and whose hopes had been dashed. We pray for the enemy. All of us must learn to love the enemy. As a Chaplain or as a pastor in the military or in a civilian context, I cannot abide trying to make myself believe, or the people whom I serve, believe that my enemies are the enemies of God." This position got me into a little trouble. But it set a new tone for how we behave with prisoners and how we treated the dead."¹⁰

The moral formation of soldiers will only be successful when military communities inculcate the character traits that embody their moral equality with enemies. From the first day of basic training, ROTC, Officer Candidate School, and the Military Academies through the end of a service person's career, we must consistently teach, model, and expect soldiers to embrace the virtues of a just warrior. Every aspect of military life is important in achieving this end. "Almost all the songs played while the soldiers march are songs about peace," writes composer Pnina Isseroff, who was struck by the music performed when she visited her two sons in the Israeli Defense Forces, "About the end of war. About how glorious it will be when we can take off our uniforms and live in peace. About flowers in the barrels of our guns. About using destroyers to transport oranges. About the dove with the olive branch." She goes on to describe what she sees as a consequence of this philosophy of military music:

We know of the reservist guys who took up a collection from their own pockets and gave a Palestinian family 2000 shekels to repair the hole they had to break in the wall of their house when looking for terrorists. We know the guys who rolled up the carpets and washed the floor of the house they had to occupy, so they could

return it in good condition to its owners. We know the soldiers who volunteered to give blood to help the Arab civilians that were wounded during a battle.¹¹

The process of moral formation of soldiers takes time—perhaps a few generations of training. Schools, religious institutions, government, media, and the larger community should also embody the principles of just war for this to be most effective. But it is a process worth undertaking in order to enable our soldiers to live into the moral equality of soldiers.

NOTES

1 Paul Christopher, *The Ethics of War and Peace* (Upper Saddle, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999), 25. Michael Walzer uses an equivalent phrase, “the moral equality of soldiers,” in *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 34.

2 Ambrose, *On the Duties of the Clergy*, II.VII.33 (www.newadvent.org/fathers/34012.htm, accessed May 31, 2004).

3 Christopher, *The Ethics of War and Peace*, 25.

4 Augustine, *Letter to Boniface* (189), 6 (www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102189.htm, accessed May 31, 2004).

5 Augustine, *Reply to Faustus the Manichean*, 22.74 (www.newadvent.org/fathers/140622.htm, accessed May 31, 2004).

6 John Howard Yoder helpfully distinguishes the objective and subjective senses of right intention in *When War is Unjust: Being Honest in Just-War Thinking* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 152-153.

7 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II.II, Question 40, article 1, citing Augustine’s *Letter to Boniface* (189) (www.newadvent.org/summa/304001.htm, accessed May 31, 2004).

8 Lieutenant Colonel (Ret) Dave Grossman addresses this in *On Killing* (New York: Little Brown & Company, 1995), quoting Ben Shalit’s observation: “Increasing the distance between the [combatants]—whether by emphasizing their differences or by increasing the chain of responsibility between the aggressor and his victim allows for an increase in the degree of aggression” (156).

9 Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 36.

10 Gaylord T. Gunhus, in the monthly newsletter from the Office of the Army Chief of Chaplains, March 2002, (accessed from a website restricted to registered users).

11 Pnina Isseroff, “Choose Your Music” (www.aish.com/jewishissues/israeldiary/Choose_Your_Music.asp, accessed June 1, 2004).



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