Destructive Obedience: US Military Training and Culture as a Parody of Christian Discipleship

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“War is not an accident. It is the logical outcome of a certain way of life. If we want to attack war, we have to attack that way of life.” – A.J. Muste

“The soldier, above all other men, is required to practice the greatest act of religious training—sacrifice.” – General Douglas MacArthur

Semper Fidelis (“Always faithful”) – Motto of the United States Marine Corps

Church leaders, even when pronouncing “radical” messages on the topic of war and peace, are often content to allow ethical teaching to float comfortably above concrete reality. For example, the leaders of my own ecclesial communion, the Roman Catholic Church, have since the Second Vatican Council issued inspiring, hopeful messages like “never again war” as well as universalized moral guidelines about the involvement of the faithful in the state’s wars, such as this often-invoked statement from the Catechism of the Catholic Church that soldiering in general can be a noble form of Christian life: “Those who are sworn to serve their country in the armed forces are servants of the security and freedom of nations. If they carry out their duty honorably, they truly contribute to the common good of the nation and the maintenance of peace.”

The tendency in the Catechism, in the statements of the US bishops, and in the thought of many Catholic ethicists, is to make universalized claims that are of little help when considering concrete questions in particular contexts. Pacifist views are often just as unhelpful, pronouncing for all times and places that violence is “always” wrong and that Christians “may never” serve in the military. The result is that whichever approach Catholics happen to embrace – nonviolence or “just war” – the universalizing tendency ensures the dominant trends of the culture remain untouched by Christian
reflection, analysis, or critique. For example, “just war” Catholics claim to adhere to the traditional principles of that ethical framework but are largely able to ignore them in real life by relying on the fact that the Catholic Church does not condemn war outright, allowing for war in some circumstances.\(^7\) Likewise, the universal claims of Catholic pacifists seem too abstractly moralizing and are thus not taken seriously by many Catholics, nor do they always speak to the concrete experience of Catholics in the military. Indeed, few Catholic soldiers, even today, become conscientious objectors.

This paper will resist the very Catholic temptation to make universalized pronouncements about whether military service is ever justified for the Christian. Rather, this paper comes out of attention to my own context as an American Roman Catholic theologian educated in Canada in conversation with Mennonite and other “peace church” perspectives. Having been influenced by the emphasis on “discipleship” found in the witness of the peace churches, I will use this theme to interrogate some concrete practices of military training and culture in the contemporary United States as a form of discipleship.\(^8\) The use of the category of discipleship is a helpful way to discern concrete aspects of military life that often go unnoticed in romanticized depictions in American popular culture and consciousness. Ultimately, I will argue that military training is a process of discipleship, conversion, and deliberate conscience (de-)formation that is fundamentally at odds with Christian discipleship and ultimately destructive to both the soldier and the victims of the US military. Finally, I will suggest that American Catholics can learn much from the peace churches in terms of ecclesial praxis.

This focus on a very contextual, particular issue of military service in the US is important for several reasons. First, it can contribute to specifically Catholic discussions of war and peace in pastorally relevant ways, recovering a lost focus on concrete practices of discipleship and bridging the gap between moral pronouncements from above and the reality “on the ground.” It will also help to correct a reliance in Christian ethics on an idealized view of the military that has been so pervasive in American society, especially since the presidency of Ronald Reagan.\(^9\) Absent any concrete information about actual military service, discussions on war and peace will remain on this unhelpful, idealized level. Finally, through its focus on particularities,
this contextual analysis will likely resonate with those who observe similar patterns of military discipleship in other contexts, generating insights and norms with more universal relevance through their very groundedness in the concrete. It is in this spirit that I offer these contextual reflections in a Mennonite journal as an act of appreciative cross-cultural and ecumenical sharing.

Discipleship in Catholic Theology and Ethics: Widening the Picture
Unlike the theologies of peace church traditions, Roman Catholic theologians and ethicists are not known for attention to the theme of discipleship and indeed have been criticized in this regard. Whenever discipleship is noted as a theme, it is hardly taken as seriously as it should be. For example, in *Love Your Enemies*, Catholic social ethicist Lisa Sowle Cahill brings discipleship into Catholic discussions of war and peace, arguing that pacifism is not simply a commitment to an absolute moral rule derived from the Bible or from theoretical frameworks. In contrast to the just war position, a rule-based *theory* that has been adopted throughout Christian history, pacifism is rather an entire *way of life* and a matter of discipleship: “Christian pacifism is essentially a commitment to embody communally and historically the kingdom of God so fully that mercy, forgiveness, and compassion preclude the very contemplation of causing physical harm to another person.” It is a “communal practice in imitation of Christ’s servanthood and cross” that is “embedded in a concrete, shared, and converted way of life” in contrast with the just war option, which is merely “analytical” and “not communal in any specific sense” – in other words, *not* a matter of “discipleship.”

Cahill’s description of pacifism as rooted in the life of discipleship is welcome. But her approach is insufficient because of its very narrow understanding of discipleship as simply “following Jesus,” leaving her unable to see, let alone criticize, that military service – and the wider militarized culture – in the United States involves a process of formation that can rightly be called a type of discipleship. Further, it is a type fundamentally at odds with Christian discipleship because of the de-formation that must take place within human beings to enable them to kill other human beings on command. In the context of the American imperialist “War on Terror,” it is necessary to develop more critical perspectives on militarization as
discipleship, something that Cahill’s description does not allow.

Cahill’s assumption that the concept of discipleship applies only or mainly to following Jesus is a common one. But the idea that there are non-Christian forms of discipleship should be uncontroversial. Throughout the social environment of Jesus, for instance, other religious figures recruited disciples, both within Judaism (e.g., John the Baptist) and within other religions and spiritual movements of the age. Indeed, followers of various religious leaders are frequently referred to as “disciples” today. We also casually refer to adherents of non-religious thinkers and movements as disciples of those movements, but only by way of analogy.

This view of other “disciplines” as merely analogous to “religious” discipleship has much to do with the assumptions of dominant society and mainstream Christianity about what “religion,” “spirituality,” and “discipleship” mean. As countless thinkers have noted and criticized, White European modernity’s creation of the secular sphere has relegated the spiritual to an internal, private, and individual realm. “Common sense” definitions of discipleship have followed this same trajectory. In response, religion scholars such as Sandra Schneiders have sought to recover an understanding of spirituality that includes the entire lived experience of the human person, including bodily, psychological, social and political dimensions. Spirituality in this sense is a fundamental activity of human beings and of human communities in which people strive to integrate their lives according to a particular ultimate value within a historical tradition and a system of symbols. Such views of spirituality include more than what we typically think of as “religious” and make room for “civil religion” and other aspects of life assumed to be “secular.”

Scholars of religious studies are often attuned to these inclusive understandings of religion and discipleship. Martin Jaffee, for example, discerns patterns among different cultural-religious traditions, defining discipleship as “a particularly intense mentoring relationship in which a body of knowledge deemed essential to the wise conduct of life is transmitted from the mentor (or master) to the protege (or disciple).” Discipleship processes usually involve a hierarchical ordering of power and authority for transmitting the master’s way of life such that disciples develop an “intense psychological identification with, and dependence upon, their mentors,”
showing humility, self-effacement, and subordination to them.  
Discipleship often takes place in “discipleship communities” analogous to social institutions such as schools in which “the disciple returns to the psychological situation of childhood to be fundamentally reformed as a human being.” Processes of discipleship are transformative of persons, “hold[ing] out to the disciple the promise of becoming in some fundamental sense a new being.” Discipleship communities are embedded within larger cultural contexts and often take the form of a subculture, either as a way of life in continuity with the wider culture but living out its values in an “intense and concentrated form” (such as monastic communities), or by taking an “adversarial relationship to the larger cultural and religious tradition” as countercultures.

Such an inclusive definition could be criticized for being too broad and for neglecting the distinctive aspects of discipleship as understood by Christians, that is, the distinctiveness of following Jesus. But broadening the view can help rediscover what is distinctive about Christian understandings. The critical edge of Christian discipleship can be restored, allowing Christians to discern how following Jesus can come into conflict with other ways of life at odds with patterns of Christian discipleship. In a time and context in which willingness to kill for the nation-state is assumed and “Catholic identity is simply merged into American identity, as if the two are perfectly harmonious [with] absolutely no conflict between them,” this kind of discernment is needed because the lives of human beings are at stake.

**Practices of US Military Discipleship**
Assuming Jaffee’s inclusive view of discipleship, it becomes easy to see that US military training and militarized culture are a “way of life” and a form of discipleship. With Jaffee’s description in the background, I will sketch some basic practices of US military discipleship, focusing on how military training (de-)forms the conscience of the recruit. A sketch is all I can provide here. For example, I will not deal with the role of narrative in the process of military discipleship, even though narrative theologies remind us that “narrative is crucial for understanding human life” because individuals and communities are shaped by the stories they tell and believe about themselves. Certainly citizens of the United States and members of
the military are story-formed communities. However, I will follow the lead of Jesuit ethicist John Kavanaugh, who argues that, despite the insights of narrative theology and virtue ethics, ethics has become “de-personed” through overemphasizing these categories. An essential task of ethics, he says, is to “investigate just what kind of being the human being is and to examine what human beings uniquely introduce to the world,” grounding ethics in the human person. What makes us unique is that we are ethical beings who are not “mere hapless creatures of culture and passive victims of history” but who can reflectively “mount a self-critical questioning of our particular space and time.”

Thus my stress will not be on how narratives about the US military conflict with narratives of the Christian faith, but on what the practices of the US military do to the concrete persons shaped by them, especially their effect on the conscience that Kavanaugh sees as the ground of the human person. “Conscience” in Roman Catholic theology has three dimensions: (1) “a characteristic of human persons whereby they experience themselves as accountable for their behavior”; (2) “a process of discernment whereby they attempt to discover whether a particular action ought or ought not to be performed”; and (3) the resolution of the process of discernment through a judgment of right and wrong in a particular instance. As we will see, US military discipleship affects and deforms the conscience of the recruit on all three levels, but at its most successful it attempts to extinguish the recruit’s conscience by effecting deliberate change on the first, most basic level.

This choice of emphasis on personhood and conscience is no mere arbitrary methodological option. Although other aspects are important, it provides for a radical critique of concrete military practice, “radical” because it “gets to the root” of why US military discipleship is a rival or parody of Christian discipleship. Military discipleship ultimately seems to say, “Believe or reject whatever stories you want about ‘America,’ we are going to act directly upon your mind and body through transformative practices.” Taking US military training seriously as a process of discipleship radically shaping human conscience is necessary for exposing its destructive, life-denying processes as incompatible with Christian discipleship.

The US military shapes the consciences of recruits by fostering a complex set of “military virtues” through practices of initiation in order
to produce particular patterns of action. I will limit my discussion to three: group loyalty, obedience, and sacrifice. Military historian and journalist Gwynne Dyer calls the practices instilling these virtues “a conversion process in an almost religious sense.” The depth of this process is rarely seen for what it is, a “brief but intense indoctrination whose purpose is not really to teach the recruits basic military skills but rather to change their values and their loyalties.” Primary among these changes is the “revers[al of] the moral training of a lifetime,” i.e., the notion that killing is wrong. Each of the military virtues discussed here is ordered toward the sole purpose of enabling the soldier to kill.

*Group loyalty* is a primary virtue of the military discipleship community. At boot camp recruits are “fundamentally re-embodied” individually and communally in order to form the group into an unbreakable social body. First, they are physically set apart where they “observe an ascetic vocation” that mimics Christian monasteries through codes of purity and cleanliness and special vows of obedience. In the process they give up their civilian clothing, receive uniforms and identical haircuts, and are taught common responses to basic commands, “surrender[ing] . . . all the physical evidence of their individual civilian identities.” By living, sleeping, eating, and even being rewarded and punished together, they begin to function as a group, identifying with one another as a collective fighting unit “hostile to outside invaders and insiders who fail to act as group members.” In addition to official drills and “ceremonial rituals” or “liturgies,” bonding also takes place through unofficial initiation practices designed to humiliate soldiers who have difficulty “fitting in.” Recruits who question this culture of conformity are charged with disloyalty that will leave the group vulnerable. The injury or death of fellow soldiers in his unit becomes the soldier’s greatest fear.

This culture of fear and absolute group loyalty lays the ground for the virtue of *unquestioning obedience.* Physical tests of strength and endurance and regular inspections of dress and appearance contribute to an “unquestioning submission to military authority” in which “orders have to be obeyed automatically and instantly.” Obedience is strengthened and made automatic through positive reinforcement connected to firing drills.

Finally, obedience is deepened through repeated systemic abuse by one’s
superiors which reduces recruits “to a position of helplessness and need.”

Again, this pattern of hierarchy and submission mirrors the dynamics Jaffee discerns in discipleship communities across various religions and social groups.

A third key virtue is *sacrifice*, the soldier’s willingness both to sacrifice himself and to “sacrifice” others, i.e., those he or she will be taught to kill. This willingness is a relatively easy virtue to instill, as it flows from the group camaraderie formed in basic training, building on pre-existing ideals of self-sacrifice learned from American culture and religious traditions. Idealistic images of the soldier dying for his country are presented to Americans from a young age; military training merely taps into and intensifies these ideals. What requires more effort and more intentional practices of discipleship is the willingness to kill other human beings. Despite popular images of virtuous, self-sacrificial soldiers, the ultimate goal of military training is not self-sacrifice and the death of soldiers, but the killing of others on command. Militaries win wars by killing, not by sacrificing themselves.

The US military has perfected the art of teaching soldiers to kill on command without reflection. Until fairly recently, it was not widely understood that a real conversion is necessary for soldiers to kill automatically and effectively, as it had been assumed that killing is something ordinary people are capable of doing in the context of war. But as military writers such as Dave Grossman and Gwynne Dyer have pointed out, human beings have a built-in resistance to killing made up of a “combination of instinctive, rational, environmental, hereditary, cultural, and social factors,” and research shows this resistance has prevented efficient killing in the earlier wars in US history. While distance between soldier and victim (such as in the bombing of far-off targets) creates a “buffer” protecting soldiers from the visceral knowledge that they are killing human beings, the need to make them “get over” killing is nevertheless “now recognized as a centrally important part of the training process.” “These days soldiers are taught, very specifically, to kill.”

The ability to kill human beings is fostered by the community formation and sense of accountability to the unit generated in training, a process of extreme desensitization to the act of killing, and a routine of dehumanization of the enemy. Accountability to the unit, combined with the anonymity that
comes from killing as part of a group rather than as a solitary individual, enables killing to come more easily. Killing is normalized through training exercises in which relentless violence is encouraged by drill instructors, collective chants and songs such as “kill, kill, kill,” and gruesome rhetoric used in weapons instruction. Soldiers are also encouraged to dehumanize and demonize the “enemy,” turning killing from their viewpoint into a morally neutral act.

Soldiers come to see themselves as killing expendable creatures of another race or class rather than human beings like themselves. Combined with the repetition and positive reinforcement of target practice in which practice and “real kills” in combat become indistinguishable, these practices teach soldiers to kill automatically, on command, without reflection or guilt. In the process, they must develop “denial defense mechanisms” or the ability to rationalize and accept their actions. Those who do not will often become victims of post-traumatic stress disorder. This has led even some military officials and thinkers to emphasize that the military’s increasing ability to create human “killing machines” is a tremendously dangerous power that should not be wielded lightly.

This examination of the virtues and practices of US military discipleship clearly shows how such training severely damages the soldier’s conscience on the first two levels described by Timothy O’Connell: the sense of feeling accountable for one’s actions, and the process of discernment by which one chooses right and wrong. Military training is determined to extinguish the sense of accountability, to cause the soldier to bypass moral reflection – “I was just following orders” – and to de-form the conscience at the level of concrete decision-making. Theological ethicist Samuel Wells likens decision-making in the Christian life to the act of improvisation, not simply following a script embedded in Christian narratives but creative living that is faithful to, but different from, the narratives. In William Spohn’s terms, living out of one’s conscience means learning how to live “by analogy,” imitating the story of Jesus (the “prime analogate”) in ways both similar to, and different from, him by improvisation.

Although soldiers’ training teaches them to kill on command, it also shapes conscience by encouraging the improvisation of killing practices. As Major Peter Kilner of the US Army writes, “military leaders must move beyond reflexive training. The US Army requires soldiers to make life-
or-death decisions in the absence of fire commands or obvious stimuli. In operations other than war, soldiers must make judgment calls that cannot be trained in the traditional sense." Soldiers have little choice, however, but to engage in improvisational killing based on the dehumanization and desensitization they experienced in their training, backed up by the military law’s severe punishments for disobedience. This kind of improvised mass killing in war has been documented by journalist Chris Hedges, who shows how soldiers bypass moral reflection and “improvise” dehumanization, often going beyond the “necessary” killing of battle and into the realm of deliberate murder and massacres: “These soldiers and Marines . . . can instantly give or deprive human life, and with this power they became sick and demented. The moral universe is turned upside down. All human beings are used as objects.” He recalls one particularly gruesome episode from the US-led war in Iraq:

At one point the unit was surrounded by an angry crowd protesting the occupation. Mejia and his squad opened fire on an Iraqi holding a grenade, riddling the man’s body with bullets. Mejia checked his clip afterwards and determined that he fired 11 rounds into the young man. Units, he said, nonchalantly opened fire in crowded neighborhoods with heavy M-240 Bravo machine guns, AT-4 launchers and Mark 19’s, a machine gun that spits out grenades.

“The frustration that resulted from our inability to get back at those who were attacking us,” Mejia writes, “led to tactics that seemed designed simply to punish the local population that was supporting them.”

He watched soldiers from his unit abuse the corpses of Iraqi dead. Mejia related how, in one incident, soldiers laughed as an Iraqi corpse fell from the back of a truck.

“Take a picture of me and this m----f----r,” one of the soldiers who had been in Mejia’s squad in third platoon said, putting his arm around the corpse.

The shroud fell away from the body revealing a young man wearing only his pants. There was a bullet hole in his chest.

“Damn, they really f----d you up, didn’t they!” the soldier laughed.
It is almost impossible to keep up with similar reports as the War on Terror continues. Early on, such occurrences were generally reported only by alternative media sources such as Democracy Now!, but the sheer volume of reports and growing dissatisfaction with the wars have caused even mainstream outlets to feel compelled to report on massacres by US soldiers. As a result, the findings of whistleblowing groups such as WikiLeaks have become more widely known by the general population.

Finally, military life is not isolable from the wider American culture often described as “militarized.” Its signs are clear and fairly well-known: the overwhelming support that US warmaking receives from citizens, the extent and reach of the “military-industrial complex,” and the presence of the military in entertainment media and popular culture. Andrew Bacevich has tracked the militarization of US culture and the normalization of war as politics, industry, and culture gradually became centered on “planning, preparing, and waging war,” creating a war-centered society. Soldiers have increasingly come to be seen as the exemplars of American life:

Since the end of the Cold War, opinion polls surveying public attitudes to national institutions have regularly ranked the armed services first. While confidence in the executive branch, the Congress, the media, and even organized religion is diminishing, confidence in the military continues to climb. . . . Americans fearful that the rest of society may be teetering on the brink of moral collapse console themselves with the thought that the armed services remain a repository of traditional values and old-fashioned virtue.

A 2003 poll of US soldiers revealed that two-thirds of them agreed with such sentiments, believing they have “higher moral standards” than the rest of society. Bacevich observes that honoring soldiers is virtually obligatory, and refusal to “support the troops” amounts to an “unforgivable sin.” He also notes a paradox: since the end of the Vietnam War and the institution of a voluntary military force, American elites have left military service to poor, Black, and/or Latina/o Americans and mostly “admire soldiers from a safe distance.” Soldiers have come to be seen as an elite class of virtuous exemplars “culturally and politically set apart from the
rest of society\textsuperscript{78} who nevertheless represent the supreme manifestation of various American values.\textsuperscript{79}

This idealized military class, distinct from the average citizen, mixed with the pervasive individualized mentality of American gun culture\textsuperscript{80} and systems of patriarchal and racist domination are only a few aspects of a society drenched in what Walter Wink has called the “myth of redemptive violence.”\textsuperscript{81} The violence of American society, centering on this myth, is infinitely complex, featuring values and attitudes in conflict with each other, but the basic attitudes of American nationalistic civil religion are powerful forces influencing what average Americans believe about their country. Although the militarization of society tends to penetrate and affect the whole, there remains a perpetual honoring of soldiers as a special class of violent exemplar-disciples.\textsuperscript{82}

**De-formation of Conscience as Dehumanization**

Military training practices have been designed and refined over time to act radically on the recruit’s conscience on all three levels distinguished by O’Connell, including perhaps especially the basic human characteristic of feeling accountable and responsible for one’s actions. Indeed, the ideal result of the training is that the soldier will bypass moral reflection and suppress any feelings of unease that may arise in carrying out orders, particularly when it involves killing human beings.

Although this process may seem like “common sense” to many American Catholics, something necessary for militaries to accomplish their missions effectively, military training comes into profound conflict with official Roman Catholic teaching on conscience. Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, states

Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells him inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. His dignity lies in observing this law, and by it he will be judged. His conscience is man’s most secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths.\textsuperscript{83}
The notion that the capacity for ethical reflection gives human beings dignity is grounded philosophically by John Kavanaugh, who contends that our reflective capacities “distance and free us from unquestioning passive acceptance. They liberate us from a forcibly imposed world.” Following Aquinas, he says that as ethical beings, we have the ability either to “freely say yes to the intrinsic value of beings in the world” or to negate the goodness of existence, a negation that we call moral evil. Every conscious act is a “yes” or “no” to the human actor and to the world. Our actions “reveal the stance, attitude, and free responsibility of a human agent.”

Acting against one’s conscience, even if it is in error, is considered sin in Catholic teaching: “A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself.” Each person has a right to act according to conscience and must not be forced to act contrary to it. Of course, the right to follow one’s conscience entails the duty to form one’s conscience, a process considered a “lifelong task” informed by the Word of God, prayer, the “witness or advice of others,” the teaching of the Church, and so on. Part of this duty is the integration of the duties of Christian conscience with those of “secular” life. No part of life can be separated from Christian conscience.

Actions flowing from conscience do not merely reflect pure intentions but are influenced by forces external to us; for example, by the information we have regarding the action. Such influences and distraction can lead to a misinformed or even deformed conscience. “It is important for every person to be sufficiently present to himself in order to hear and follow the voice of his conscience. This requirement of interiority is all the more necessary as life often distracts us from any reflection, self-examination or introspection.” According to Catholic teaching, ignorance of the good that is not the fault of the moral subject diminishes the person’s responsibility for acts of an erroneous conscience. But the person is responsible if he or she “takes little trouble to find out what is true and good, or when conscience is by degrees almost blinded through the habit of committing sin.”

John Kavanaugh discusses this “blinding” of conscience: “Moral judgments … can be misinformed. They can be formed by distortions, lies, incomplete information, ignorance, or propaganda. Like any judgment, they can be distorted by fear, force, terror, deprivation, addiction, or psychological
distress.” These distortions reach their extreme when denying the objective value of the human person becomes embedded in cultures and traditions through “corporate behavioral practices,” such as when mis/disinformation is “corporately orchestrated to repress the truth.” One might immediately think of Nazi Germany, but Kavanaugh accuses the United States too: “It happens in our own nation as well – whenever, because of cultural propaganda, we are willing to render the human person expendable in the name of our own self-interest.”

For Kavanaugh, the cultural relativism leading to the denial of the dignity of persons can be challenged only “if there is a foundation for ethics other than the heritage one finds oneself lodged in.” That foundation is the human person. “We cannot ‘do’ ethics or ‘be’ ethical if at the same time we negate personal existence.” After establishing this foundation, he formulates the primary law of ethics: “Affirm the reality of personal existence;” that is, love persons and love personal existence. Put negatively, it is “Do not treat persons as non-persons. Do not reduce persons to the status of an object.”

Because the very impulse to be ethical affirms the personal reality from which ethics springs . . . one cannot be faithful to the moral universe in doing any act that in itself negates personhood in oneself or another. Fidelity to human personhood, the affirmation of the intrinsic value of persons and adherence to the truth of personal moral dignity, requires that we never reduce a human person to the condition of being a nonperson, that we not negate the personhood of ourselves and others, that we not treat a person as a mere thing or object. . . . To be willing to kill a human person is to be willing to kill the foundation of ethics itself. It is to disengage oneself from the moral universe.

This depersonalization is precisely the process involved in military training. Through training that inspires unquestioning obedience divorced from moral reflection, soldiers are dehumanized so they can dehumanize others on command in the name of national interests. As Jessica Wolfendale describes it, “Killing is experienced literally as a thoughtless action. . . . This training therefore not only modifies combatants’ emotional responses to
killing . . . but aims to remove the act of killing from the moral awareness of military personnel.” In the moment, killing is not seen as an act with moral significance, and any moral qualms that the soldier might have come after the fact. Military and cultural norms justify the removal of the soldiers’ consciences by claiming they are not really responsible for their actions since they are only “following orders.” Despite these claims, the idea that they need not worry about their acts and can follow orders “in good conscience” simply does not square with a Catholic theology of conscience. When seen for what it truly is, military training is a process of moral “blinding” or conscience de-formation, not moral conscience formation. And no matter what justifications are made, Kavanaugh insists that our actions still belong to us and we are still responsible for them. “To give up our conscience is to give up our moral judgment itself. It is to give up our moral freedom. It is to give up the ethical life. It is to reject personal life,” that is, to give up what it means to be a human person.

Wolfendale notes how this insight exposes the falsity of military rhetoric about the soldier’s “moral integrity,” as it is precisely the systematic removal of that integrity which makes the recruit an effective killer. Rather than instilling reflective obedience, as the rhetoric brags, that would allow soldiers to disobey illegal and immoral orders, the military instills a perverted, detached unreflective obedience that in the end amounts to destructive obedience. “Far from training military personnel to be reflective moral agents . . . military training at both elite and basic levels not only inhibits the expression of the capacity for reflective moral agency; it undermines the capacity itself and further entrenches the dispositions of destructive obedience.”

Kavanaugh asserts that “if we desire to do ethics,” to be ethical, “we cannot repress or negate the very personhood that drives us to do ethics in the first place.” The negation of personhood by intentionally destroying, if temporarily, the capacity for moral reflection is fundamental to the functioning of US military life. As Emmanuel Charles McCarthy and John Carmody have it,

To say, “I will not kill a fellow human being,” is an expression of consciousness flowing from a profoundly catholic, empathic awareness of the “other” as “self.” To say, “I will kill a fellow
human being,” is the consequence of an external, patterned, repetitive, cultural and parochial undermining of the pre-existing human faculty and tendency toward empathy, by means of intentional information-deprivation or distortion. The “other” becomes an abstraction that is less than “self.”

The “empathic awareness of the other as self” is arguably the central impulse according to which Christian disciples improvise lives analogous to the life of Jesus. While the parables and the narrative of Jesus’ life do not offer a simple blueprint for action, they analogically imply “distinctive behavioral consequences,” namely by “call[ing] people to enter into the reign of God by doing the sorts of things that [Jesus] did with the same motives.” Although there is a certain openness to the many ways disciples will follow Jesus in various contexts, the particularity of the person of Jesus grounds and sets limits to the interpretations that could be imagined. “The figure of Jesus cannot support any and every interpretation, because he was a particular person with a specific way of being human. The universality of the story must be grounded in its concreteness. The Christian moral imperative is not simply ‘Be human,’ but ‘Be human in the way in which Jesus Christ is human.’”

The parables, words, actions, and especially the cross of Jesus “exercise a normative role because they rule in certain dispositions and rule out others. They make some actions seem appropriate and others inappropriate.” In our Christian lives, we are “called to be analogies of the prime analogate, the life of Jesus Christ” and the values and virtues to which we hope to be conformed must be Christocentric, “tak[ing] seriously what Jesus took seriously,” i.e., “inclusive love, compassionate service, radical trust in God, gratitude, forgiveness, courage, a thirst for justice, nonviolence, freedom from anxiety, dependence on God, obedience.”

To cultivate these virtues and values, Christian practices are oriented toward widening our empathy beyond the myopic limitations of our moral perception. Unlike the practices of military discipleship, geared toward intensifying moral myopia and extinguishing empathy, Christian practices such as the Eucharist and intercessory prayer widen our moral perception, inviting us to see what was formerly invisible. These practices invite us into deeper moral awareness and broader solidarity with the human family.
that is infinitely wider than that of any nation-state or empire. Exclusive allegiance to the American nation-state, especially the uncritical kind fostered by military culture, represents a national sectarianism at odds with the ever-expanding solidarities demanded by Christian discipleship.\textsuperscript{117} And just as nationalistic conceptions of the nation-state represent a heretical parody of the social bonds of the Church,\textsuperscript{118} the process of conversion embodied in US soldiering represents a perverse parody of Christian discipleship.

Military discipleship is a cycle of dehumanizing conversion that seems condemned always to end in death,\textsuperscript{119} making authentic Christian life impossible. In the context of the United States today, Christians should refuse military service as a way of life incompatible with Christianity. Insofar as militaries in other national contexts bear resemblance to the dynamics of discipleship demonstrated in the American military, Christians in those contexts may come to the same conclusion. In the words of McCarthy and Carmody, “Be not deluded. Abstractions can kill. Here the battlefield is the human mind. All is won or lost there. All nations, all militaries, all institutional religions, all corporations know this – and Jesus knows this, which is why His first public word was \textit{metanoiete}, ‘change your minds.’”\textsuperscript{120}

\textbf{Toward an Ecclesial Praxis of Counter-Recruitment and Reconciliation}

This final section suggests necessary changes in ecclesial praxis that can contribute to the liberation of current soldiers, their victims, potential targets of military recruiting, and citizens of the United States at large who are constantly bombarded with the mythology of military civil religion.

Practices can be implemented at various levels in the churches. At the level of official church teaching, ecclesial leaders must not only make universalized pronouncements on war but offer practical pastoral guidance based on real-life circumstances, especially the actually existing process of discipleship that takes place in recruiting and forming soldiers. On all levels, the churches can support counter-recruitment movements from the distinct perspective of Christian discipleship.\textsuperscript{121} Ecclesial high schools and universities can refuse to welcome recruiters to their campuses and publicly deal with the consequences, which may include loss of federal funding.
Churches not already doing so can offer scholarships to students who lack the financial means to attend college and feel pressured to join the military to obtain the perceived monetary rewards, or who opt not to register for selective service based on their objection to war, paying particular attention to how class and race factor into military recruitment patterns. "Mainline" churches must recover a robust understanding of discipleship, learning especially from the peace churches, that would enable them to resist rival, destructive forms of discipleship and give witness to a way of life animated by one’s dying and rising to new life in Jesus.

In service to current soldiers, churches can support denominational organizations such as the Catholic Peace Fellowship as it counsels soldiers on their particular churches’ teachings on specific wars, and give assistance to those seeking conscientious objector status. Given the uphill struggle in mainline churches such as the Roman Catholic Church, however, it will be difficult to persuade soldiers to leave the military completely. But these churches should make clear that discipleship still makes radical demands even for those who cannot immediately follow the path of pacifism. Soldiers who take Christian discipleship seriously deserve concrete moral guidance in which just war teaching is used as a pastoral device resituated within the language and dynamics of peacemaking discipleship. Use of just war teaching for the personal guidance of soldiers, as opposed to merely a set of criteria for heads of states, will require serious consideration of selective conscientious objection – a refusal to fight in particular wars rather than an aversion to all war – as a real possibility for the individual Christian soldier.

Because US law does not currently allow for selective conscientious objection, the churches should advocate for the right of soldiers to refuse to fight in particular wars without penalty, perhaps by providing them with a “temporarily non-deployable” status. The US Catholic Church’s Archdiocese for the Military Services should be particularly active in this regard. The pastoral use of just war criteria must also reconnect these teachings to the custom of confession and penance, as was the church’s practice in earlier periods, as John Howard Yoder reminds us. Churches can institute processes of post-conflict counseling for soldiers returning from war that attempt to help them unlearn the psychological effects of military training.
within a context fostering the sacramental embodiment of reconciliation with God and with the church.

Reconciliatory practices would not only benefit the soldier; mainline churches themselves need the healing, reconciliation, and transformation that can come from taking the soldier’s experience seriously.\textsuperscript{126} None of these practices, however, should be isolated from the radical challenge that Christian discipleship should pose for US soldiers and that questions the authenticity of their “vocation” and urges them to lay down their arms.

Discussion of ecclesial praxis surrounding these issues cannot neglect the recent suggestion posed by theologians such as Gerald Schlabach and A. James Reimer calling for a reframing of the pacifism vs. just war debate through a new theory of “just policing.” According to such arguments, it is not possible for Christians to engage in war but it is possible, and even necessary, for them to engage in state police activity for the sake of “civil order.”\textsuperscript{127} I am skeptical of such suggestions, as they often allow for the same patterns of conscience (de-)formation geared toward the killing of human persons discussed in this essay. In earlier issues of this journal, Andy Alexis-Baker has persuasively shown the problems with the “just policing” approach.\textsuperscript{128} Policing in the US, as elsewhere, has become increasingly less distinguishable from military activity. As I write these words, for example, reports are emerging about police brutality during the protests of the G20 summits in Pittsburgh in September 2009 and in Toronto in 2010. Such cases are certainly not rare. Even more disturbing are reports of the trial of a former Chicago police lieutenant who oversaw the systematic torture of more than 100 black men over two decades.\textsuperscript{129} If discussion of “just policing” as a permissible option for Christians is to avoid merely placing a new name on the same old practices of violence, it will have to remain committed to Christian nonviolence, defining “policing” in terms of nonviolent conflict resolution.

The path of discipleship, following Jesus, fosters the ability to improvise a life of radical transnational solidarity with the human family and a profound reverence for the dignity of the human person made in God’s image and likeness. Taking the narratives, virtues, and practices of Christian discipleship seriously deepens that reverence and leads Christians to say “no” to rival discipleships denying this dignity in themselves and others.
The issue of war and peace is one area of ethics in which mainline churches, such as the Roman Catholic Church, need to recover the ability to draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable forms of discipleship, joining the cloud of witnesses to Christian nonviolence present throughout the Body of Christ. By doing so, churches in the US context can radically challenge “the capacities of American power projection” and offer a stronger witness to another way of life in which the myth of redemptive violence is exposed and rejected in all its forms.

Notes

1 Quoted in Aimee Allison and David Solnit, Army of None: Strategies to Counter Military Recruitment, End War, and Build a Better World (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 177.
2 Quoted in Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 100.
3 Catechism of the Catholic Church, updated ed. (New York: Image/Doubleday, 1995), no. 2310. Compare also The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, no. 502: “The requirements of legitimate defense justify the existence in States of armed forces, the activity of which should be at the service of peace. Those who defend the security and freedom of a country, in such a spirit, make an authentic contribution to peace. Everyone who serves in the armed forces is concretely called to defend good, truth and justice in the world. Many are those who, in such circumstances, have sacrificed their lives for these values and in defence of innocent lives” (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church [Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2004], emphasis in original).
4 Liberationist theologians and ethicists such as Traci West argue that simply beginning with universal ethical claims will make those claims less relevant and easily dismissible. But the more attention given to the concrete and the particular, the more universal relevance those ethical claims will have. See Traci C. West, Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women’s Lives Matter (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 41-2.
6 The post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Church has upheld both just war and pacifist positions as compatible with the Gospel.
8 Military recruitment practices in the US, also relevant to an exploration of military “discipleship,” cannot be explored here because of limited space.
9 See chapter four of Andrew J. Bacevich, The New American Militarism: How Americans


11 Ibid., 2.

12 Ibid., 235.

13 Ibid.


17 Ibid., 684.

18 Ibid., 693.

19 Robert Bellah famously described civil religion in America as the “apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or, one could almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people. Like all religions, it has suffered various deformations and demonic distortions.” See “Civil Religion in America,” Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences 96.1 (Winter 1967), available at http://www.robertbellah.com/articles_5.htm.


21 Ibid., 2361.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.


27 Emphasis on the category of narrative in the theological analysis of American history and
culture is characteristic of the work of Stanley Hauerwas: “‘America’ names for me sets of some of the most powerful stories that grip our lives” (Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence [Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004], 147). Hauerwas and those influenced by him level important critiques against the mythological character of US narratives, but tend to reduce such narratives to a singular “American narrative.”


29 Ibid., 23.
30 Ibid., 26.
31 Timothy E. O’Connell, “Conscience,” in The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 199-200. The Catechism’s discussion of conscience also suggests a threefold understanding: “Conscience is the judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed. In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be right and just.” (Catechism, no. 1778).
33 Ibid., 35.
34 Ibid., 31.
35 Marvin and Ingle, Blood Sacrifice and the Nation, 109.
36 Ibid., 100.
37 Ibid., 103.
38 Dyer, War, 41.
39 Ibid., 47.
40 Marvin and Ingle, Blood Sacrifice and the Nation, 110.
42 Ibid., 133.
43 Chris Hedges, What Every Person Should Know About War (New York: Free Press, 2003), 78.


Ibid., 46-7.


Ibid., 54.


Ibid., 58.

Ibid.


Take, for example, this excerpt from a lecture on mines at Parris Island in 1982: “Well, first off, what is a mine? A mine is nothing more, privates, than an explosive or chemical substance made to destroy and kill the enemy. . . . You want to rip his eyeballs out, you want to tear apart his love machine, you want to destroy him, privates, you don’t want to have nothing left of him. You want to send him home in a Glad Bag to his mommy!” (Dyer, *War*, 59).


This is the whole premise of Grossman’s book *On Killing*, which is extended into a critique of the desensitization to killing that is taking place in American society in general.


In addition to his countless writings in the *New York Times* and elsewhere, see his powerful and much-cited book *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002).


Ibid.


When US military action begins, an estimated 65-85 percent of Americans support the war. The number decreases as the war rages on and American casualties are compiled. See Hedges, What Every Person, 3.

In addition to 1.4 million active duty personnel, the US military directly employs about 627,000 civilians and the defense industry employs 3 million Americans. In total, 3.5 percent of the US labor force is military-related. (Hedges, What Every Person, 5).


Ibid., 23.

Ibid., 24.

Ibid.

Ibid., 28.

Ibid., 29-30.

The militarization of society is only one part of a larger dynamic of a discipleship of domination in American society. Feminist theologians such as Gloria Albrecht have rightly criticized Hauerwas and others for a narrow understanding of violence that denounces Christian participation in war-making but overlooks other kinds of violence involved in patriarchal capitalist societies, particularly violence against women committed by men. The creation of peaceable communities must involve more than just the renunciation of war and soldiering and must see the connection of these realities to socially constructed ideals of masculinity (Gloria H. Albrecht, The Character of Our Communities: Toward an Ethic of Liberation for the Church [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995], 158). The process of military training works, in part, by building on ideas recruits already have about masculinity that are found in American culture. As Dyer notes, this sexist “raw material” is widespread among teenage boys who typically have “a fair amount of aggression, a strong tendency to hang around in groups, and an absolutely desperate desire to fit in” (Dyer, War, 42, 52).


Wink, Engaging the Powers.

Chris Hedges writes: “We make our heroes out of clay. We laud their gallant deeds and give them uniforms with colored ribbons on their chest for the acts of violence they committed or endured. They are our false repositories of glory and honor, of power, of self-righteousness, of patriotism and self-worship, all that we want to believe about ourselves. They are our
plaster saints of war, the icons we cheer to defend us and make us and our nation great. They are the props of our civic religion, our love of power and force, our belief in our right as a chosen nation to wield this force against the weak and rule. This is our nation’s idolatry of itself” (“The Death Mask of War”).

83 *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16.
85 Ibid., 85.
86 Ibid., 98-99.
87 *Catechism*, no. 1790.
88 Ibid., no. 1782.
89 Ibid., nos. 1783-85.
90 Ibid., no. 912.
91 Ibid., no. 1779.
92 *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16, quoted in the *Catechism*, no. 1791.
94 Ibid., 105.
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid., 106.
97 Ibid., 107.
98 Ibid., 108.
100 Wolfendale, *Torture and the Military Profession*, 139.
101 Ibid., 139-40.
103 Ibid., 101.
105 Ibid., 160.
106 Wolfendale, *Torture and the Military Profession*, 5. Wolfendale’s reformist approach holds out hope that this destructive obedience might be curbed through an extensive rethinking and revision of training practices that would include formation in reflective obedience and the morality of killing. I do not share the optimism that US militaries can be reformed such that this aspect of training would be removed. See Wolfendale, *Torture and the Military Profession*, 189-92.
109 Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 68.
110 Ibid., 69.
111 Ibid., 144.
112 Ibid., 69.
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113 Ibid., 152.
114 Ibid., 153.
115 Ibid., 100-12.
116 Ibid., 112-19.
119 “It is crucial to understand that while the military makes much of team cohesion, and plays heavily on the human desire to belong, its ultimate purpose is the calculated killing of other human beings. Buried under the lofty goals of self-sacrifice and denial for the good of the whole, the noble end of training is nothing other than death” (Hallock, Hell, Healing, and Resistance: Veterans Speak, 39).
121 Allison and Solnit, Army of None.
122 I am indebted to Michael Budde of DePaul University for this suggestion.
124 I am indebted to Iraq War veteran Nate Wildermuth for discussions of selective conscientious objection. For his reflections on becoming a conscientious objector, see his “Christ’s Centurion,” Sign of Peace: Journal of the Catholic Peace Fellowship 5.2 (Fall 2006): 6-8, available at http://www.catholicpeacefellowship.org/nextpage.asp?m=2499. For information on the Archdiocese for the Military Services, see http://www.milarch.org.
126 “Of the many things that veterans with PTSD have to say, perhaps the most important is the call to love one another, to create ‘spaces’ in which to share each others’ pain. We need to listen and to understand; most of all, we need to believe them when they cry, ‘No more war, ever again!’” (Hallock, Hell, Healing, and Resistance: Veterans Speak, 107).
130 Budde, “Selling America, Restricting the Church,” 81.
131 I thank Jim Reimer, Nate Wildermuth, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on this essay.

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