

# Conscience and War: Saying Yes, Saying No

Jim Forest

Terrence Malick's new film, *A Hidden Life*, is closely based on the life of Franz Jägerstätter, an Austrian farmer who was beheaded in Berlin in 1943 for refusing to make an oath of allegiance to Hitler or serve in the armies of the Third Reich. For Jägerstätter, his conscience became his cross. Malick vividly portrays all that Jägerstätter had to leave behind in bearing that cross: his beloved wife, their three daughters, his fields, his neighbors, his village, his beautiful world. Jägerstätter's letters to his wife, extracts of which are over-voiced in the film, reveal a man who struggled to find a way to survive Hitler's regime without betraying his faith or ignoring his conscience.<sup>1</sup> His conscience had few allies. We see both his pastor and his bishop attempting to convince him that God would not judge him for submitting to conscription even if the war it served was unjust. Jägerstätter was assured that God would judge the sinful ruler, not his obedient subjects. The message was *in dubio pro auctoritate*—"in uncertain matters, defer to the authorities." This was the standard guidance that had been given to Catholics in regard to participation in war for fifteen hundred years. Much the same would have been said by Orthodox pastors. Partly thanks to the case of Franz Jägerstätter, Catholic teaching regarding war, conscience and obedience was radically revised two decades after Jägerstätter's death at the Second Vatican Council in

1965. In 2007, during the pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI, Jägerstätter was beatified.<sup>2</sup>

A similar witness was given in the same period and context by Alexander Schmorell, an Orthodox Christian and medical student who was one of the founders of the White Rose, a group made up of German university students who clandestinely distributed anti-Nazi leaflets. Schmorell too was executed in 1943.<sup>3</sup> In 2012 he was formally added to the Orthodox Church's calendar of saints at services in the Cathedral of the New Martyrs and Confessors in Munich, a church that is only a short walk from Schmorell's grave. An icon inside the church shows Schmorell holding a scroll with three sentences taken from his last letter to his parents: "This difficult 'misfortune' was necessary to put me on the right road, and therefore was no misfortune at all. . . . What did I know until now about belief, about a true and deep belief, about the truth, the last and only truth, about God? Never forget God!"<sup>4</sup>

But how few were the German and Austrian Christians who refused to take part in Hitler's wars or who undertook acts of resistance! Though several church leaders denounced Nazi ideology and anti-Semitism, most notably two Catholic bishops, Clemens August Graf von Gale of Münster and Johannes Maria Gföllner of Linz, none

<sup>1</sup> Franz Jägerstätter: *Letters and Writings from Prison*, ed. Erna Putz (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed biography, see Jim Forest, "Franz Jägerstätter: A Solitary Witness," <http://jimandnancyforest.com/2008/09/jagerstatter/>.

<sup>3</sup> Jim Forest, "Alexander Schmorell: a Witness in Dark Times," <http://jimandnancyforest.com/2011/02/alexander-schmorell-a-witness-in-dark-times/>.

<sup>4</sup> Jim Forest, "A Canonization in Munich: Saint Alexander Schmorell," <http://jimandnancyforest.com/2012/02/schmorell-canonization/>.

dared to declare Hitler's wars unjust or warned that it would be sinful for a Christian to take part in them.<sup>5</sup> The few Christians of the Third Reich who refused military service did so without the support of their bishops. For the vast majority, conscience seems to have been hibernating.

What do we mean by conscience?

Until the nineteenth century, there was no Hebrew word for conscience, though such metaphors as "the still small voice" heard by the prophet Elijah are descriptive of conscience (1 Kings 19:12). The prophets, from Moses to John the Baptist, who habitually stood up to kings, were themselves voices of conscience before the word "conscience" emerged.

The coining of a single word for conscience—*syneidesis* (συνείδησις)—had to wait for the Greek philosophers. *Syneidesis* means to know within one's own mind, to have inward moral knowledge of right or wrong, the capacity to apply general principles of moral judgment to particular cases. Adapted into Latin, it became *conscientia*. "The Greek term," comments Andrew Louth,

has a wider meaning than in English, covering not only conscience but consciousness, and even conscientiousness. As a moral term, it seems to mean, primarily, the process of coming to a decision (bringing considerations together, precisely con-knowing), and that is what the Western notion of conscience typically meant, a faculty of moral judgment. In the modern period (eighteenth century onwards) it acquires another sense, that of a moral sense, that is personal, individual, and not to be reduced to moral judgment: this is

part of a general shift in intellectual consciousness . . . an indefinable sense of moral conviction.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the most complete modern definition of conscience is found in *The Constitution of the Church in the Modern World*, issued in 1965 by the Second Vatican Council:

In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart more specifically: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of man. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor. In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution of the numerous problems which arise in the lives of individuals and from social relationships. Hence, the more right conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by objective norms of morality. Conscience frequently errs from individual ignorance without losing its dignity. The same cannot be said for a man who cares little for truth and goodness, or for conscience which by degrees grows practically sightless as a result of habitual sin.<sup>7</sup>

The same Council document sees as its focal point "man himself, whole

<sup>5</sup> See Gordon Zahn, *German Catholics and Hitler's Wars: A Study in Social Control* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Letter to the author, January 11, 2010.

*Gaudium et Spes*, promulgated December 7, 1965, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_cons\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).

and entire, body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will." Those who "willfully shut out God from their hearts and try to dodge religious questions are not following the dictates of their consciences, and hence are not free of blame." A healthy conscience draws us "to make ourselves the neighbor of every person without exception and of actively helping him when he comes across our path." In extreme situations, the text continues, the refusal to obey invalid laws and orders is not only necessary but laudable:

The council wishes, above all things else, to recall the permanent binding force of universal natural law and its all-embracing principles. Man's conscience itself gives ever more emphatic voice to these principles. Therefore, actions which deliberately conflict with these same principles, as well as orders commanding such actions, are criminal and blind obedience cannot excuse those who yield to them. The most infamous among these are actions designed for the methodical extermination of an entire people, nation or ethnic minority. Such actions must be vehemently condemned as horrendous crimes. The courage of those who fearlessly and openly resist those who issue such commands merits supreme commendation.

In the same section of the text, the Council endorsed conscientious objection: "It seems right that laws make humane provisions for the case of those who, for reasons of conscience, refuse to bear arms, provided that they agree to serve the human community in some other way."

"Conscientious objector" is a modern term that only came into widespread use during the First World War, but if

the label is understood to refer to anyone who refuses to obey a command which he or she regards as a violation of religious obligations, we can find many thousands of conscientious objectors down through the centuries. One can be a conscientious objector not only to war, but to any other life-terminating activity society may seek to impose on the individual person, including refusal to assist in abortions, euthanasia or capital punishment. The refusal by early Christians to make sacrifices or offer incense to pagan deities can be described as acts of conscientious objection.

Understood in that sense, the first conscientious objectors to be mentioned in the Bible were two midwives in Egypt, Shifrah and Puah, who ignored Pharaoh's order to kill any sons born of Hebrew women. "But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live" (Exod. 1:15-17). And thus the baby Moses was saved.

The first conscientious objector to appear in European literature is another woman, Antigone, protagonist of Sophocles' play that bears her name. It was written in Athens, four centuries before the birth of Christ. Ignoring the command of her father, King Creon, that the body of her dead brother Polynices be left unburied outside the city gates as food for vultures, Antigone buries Polynices herself. Like the Hebrew midwives, she is guided by an inner voice so compelling that she is willing to risk execution. Creon commands a sentry, on pain of death, to find the as yet unidentified guilty party. "By Zeus I swear," the king warns the sentry, "except you find and bring before my presence the very man who carried out this lawless burial, death for your punishment shall not suffice. Hanged



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Jules-Eugène  
Lenepveu, *Antigone  
Gives Token Burial  
to the Body of Her  
Brother Polynices*,  
nineteenth century.  
Metropolitan Museum  
of Art.

on a cross alive, you first shall make confession of this outrage." A chorus then sings the praises of the king and the rule of law: "If he honors the laws of the land, and reveres the gods of the State, proudly his city shall stand; but a cityless outcast is the person bold in his pride, who from the path of right departs." When Creon learns that it is his own daughter who is guilty of the burial, he is shaken but unbending about her punishment. Antigone is walled inside a cave to die of starvation. Then a repentant Creon has a change of heart and reopens the cave to free his daughter, but he is too late—Antigone has hanged herself. Her death in turn triggers the suicides of her sister and brother. The tragedy ends with Creon in a state of desolation. Conscience is at the heart of Sophocles' drama—Creon whose conscience has been suffocated by pride, and Antigone whose conscience burned like a bonfire.

Centuries before the birth of Christ, the Greeks were thinking a great deal about conscience. Obedient to his God-channeling inner voice, his *daimon*, Socrates preferred to drink deadly hemlock rather than adjust his thinking to the requirements of his fellow Athenians. Inspired by Socrates, conscience—*syneidesis*—became a key word in the vocabulary of the Stoic philosophers. They saw conscience as the key to the inner person, conscience transforming morality from mere conformity to valid laws to a virtue that cleanses the heart. A vital conscience reveals that human beings possess a spark of divinity that distinguishes them from animals. One of the late Stoics, the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, wrote that conscience is the human capacity "to move from one unselfish action to another with God in mind. Only there, delight and stillness . . . the only rewards of our existence here are an unstained character and unselfish acts."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Gregory Hays (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003), 70, 75.



Was Saint Paul influenced by the Stoics? Very likely. It is striking how often he makes use of the word *syneidesis*—twenty-five times in his letters, for example when referring to the law “written on our hearts . . . to which *conscience* also bears witness” (Rom. 2:15). *Syneidesis* is also used in Acts: “Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, ‘My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day’” (23:1). Saint Peter, in his first letter, referred to *syneidesis* three times, in the last instance describing baptism “as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (3:21). In the account of the adulterous woman whose life is saved by the intervention of Jesus, the word is also found in some but not all early manuscripts of Saint John’s Gospel: “[Jesus] said unto [those poised to kill her], he that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her. And they which heard it, *being convicted by their own conscience*, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest even unto the last and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst” (John 8:7–9, KJV).

For the emerging communities of Christians, conscience was not only the law written in all human hearts, as it was for the Stoics, but refers to a way of living shaped by Christ’s teaching and example. A Christian was someone following Christ not only through intellectual assent but as the guide of one’s daily life.

Reading the martyrologies of the early Church, we see that many became martyrs for actions that, in today’s terminology, would be described as conscientious objection and civil disobedience, often the refusal to worship the official gods. One of the challenges Christians faced concerned any form of killing human beings. Their model

was Jesus, who took part in no wars, blessed no wars, and killed no one. The only one of his disciples to shed anyone’s blood was Peter, injuring the ear of one of the people who had come to arrest Jesus. Peter was immediately admonished by Jesus, “Put away your sword, for whoever lives by the sword will perish by the sword” (Matt. 26:52). Christ’s last miracle before his crucifixion was to heal the sentry’s wound. In the early Church, Christ’s disarming words to Peter—“put away your sword”—were understood as being addressed to every Christian.

In the Church’s first four centuries, Christians were known, indeed notorious, for their refusal to take part in war.

The *Didache*, a text most scholars date to about AD 100, demands of those preparing for baptism: “You shall not murder a child by abortion nor kill that which is born. . . . You shall not take evil counsel against your neighbor. You shall not hate any person.”

In a widely-circulated criticism of Christians written in the second century by the Roman philosopher Celsus, Christians were sharply condemned for what today would be called conscientious objection. “If all men were to do as you,” wrote Celsus, “there would be nothing to prevent the Emperor from being left in utter solitude, and with the desertion of his forces, the Empire would fall into the hands of the most lawless barbarians.” Defending the nonviolence of the Christian community, in the following century the theologian Origen of Alexandria responded to Celsus’s critique, “Christians have been taught not to defend themselves against their enemies; and because they have kept the laws that command gentleness and love of man, they have received from God that which they would not have achieved if they were

permitted to make war, though they might have been quite able to do so.”<sup>9</sup> The Christian refusal of military service, Origen argued, does not indicate indifference to social responsibility, but rather is a response to enmity at the spiritual and transcendent level: “The more devout the individual, the more effective he is in helping the Emperor, more so than the soldiers who go into the lines and kill all the enemy troops they can. . . . The greatest warfare, in other words, is not with human enemies but with those spiritual forces which make men into enemies.”

In the same period the Great Martyr Saint Justin wrote along similar lines: “We who were filled with war, and mutual slaughter, and every wickedness, have each through the whole world changed our warlike weapons,—our swords into ploughshares.”<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere he wrote, “We who formerly used to murder one another do not only now refrain from making war upon our enemies, but also, that we may not lie nor deceive our examiners, willingly die confessing Christ.”<sup>11</sup>

Writing late in the second century, Clement of Alexandria described the Church as “an army which sheds no blood.” “If you enroll as one of God’s people, heaven is your country and God your lawgiver. And what are His laws? You shall not kill. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. To him that strikes you on the one cheek, turn to him the other also.” “In peace, not in war, we are trained.”

In the *Apostolic Tradition*, attributed to Hippolytus of Rome and apparently written in the mid-third century, the renunciation of killing is a precondition of baptism:

A soldier under authority shall not kill a man. If he is ordered to,

he shall not carry out the order, nor shall he take the oath. If he is unwilling, let him be rejected. He who has the power of the sword or is a magistrate of a city who wears the purple, let him cease or be rejected. Catechumens or believers, who want to become soldiers, should be rejected, because they have despised God.

In narratives of martyrs of the early Church, some concern those who refused military service. One of the most detailed accounts, apparently a trial transcript, concerns a young North African conscientious objector, Saint Maximilian of Theveste, who was put on trial in 295. Maximilian told the proconsul, “I cannot enlist, for I am a Christian. . . . I cannot do evil.” “You must serve or die,” said the proconsul. “I will never serve,” responded Maximilian. “You can cut off my head, but I will not be a soldier of this world, for I am a soldier of Christ.” The proconsul pointed out, “There are Christian soldiers serving our rulers [the emperors] Diocletian and Maximian, Constantinus and Galerius.” Maximilian replied, “That is their business. I also am a Christian, and I cannot serve.” He was executed by sword<sup>12</sup>. His relics are now within the altar of Sacred Heart Church at Notre Dame University in America.

Saint Martin of Tours, born only twenty-one years after the execution of Saint Maximilian, is another saint especially linked with conscientious objection. Martin was the son of a tribune in the Imperial Horse Guard. When only ten, in the year 316, Martin had been drawn to Christ and, despite paternal opposition, became a catechumen. Christianity was at this time no longer illegal, but was far from being the dominant religion. In 321, Martin—still a catechumen—was obliged, as the son of a

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<sup>9</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 3.8, 133.

<sup>10</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, in vol. 1 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff et al. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913), ch. 110.

<sup>11</sup> Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, in vol. 1 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff et al. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913), ch. 39.

<sup>12</sup> *Butler’s Lives of the Saints*, rev. Teresa Rodrigues, vol. 1 (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1990), March 12, 572.

veteran officer, to join the Horse Guard himself. At about the age of twenty, on the eve of a battle at Worms, Saint Martin's company was called to appear before Emperor Julian to receive a bounty. Refusing to accept it, Martin explained to Julian, "Up to now I have served you as a soldier. Now let me serve Christ. Give the bounty to these others—they are going to fight, but I am a soldier of Christ and it is not lawful for me to fight." The emperor accused him of cowardice, to which Martin replied that, in the name of Christ, he was prepared to face the enemy on the following day, alone and unarmed. His superiors planned to take him up on the offer, but the Gauls sued for peace and the battle never occurred. Martin was discharged, after which he became a monk under the guidance of Saint Hilary in Poitiers. Following his mentor's death, Martin was chosen as bishop by the clergy and people of Tours. Regarding himself as unworthy, Martin went into hiding, but the noisy geese with which he took shelter gave him away. Modern geese still suffer for it. In Austria, Germany and France, many geese are roasted on the eleventh of November, Saint Martin's feast day.<sup>13</sup>

Conscientious objection was, in Christianity's early centuries, something normal. Why did conscientious objection not remain the Christian norm? Why is it surprising, even disturbing, for us to hear that it ever was the norm?

In the year 313, the co-emperors Constantine and Licinius issued the Edict of Milan, with the consequence that it was no longer a crime to be a Christian. The first age of martyrdom was over. Relations between Church and state began to warm. The emperor, historically the arch-enemy of the Church, now became its protector and patron. Monumental church buildings were

erected with imperial financial assistance. In 380, during the reign of Theodosius I, less than half a century after Constantine's death, Christianity was proclaimed the official religion of the Roman Empire. Far from being persecuted, Christians were favored by the state. Baptism, once a dangerous choice, was now advantageous. No longer was the Church only concerned with a kingdom not of this world; now it was seen as the emperor's partner in maintaining the kingdoms of this world. "When church and state dance," goes the proverb, "the state takes the lead."

Christian attitudes toward relations with Caesar gradually took a new direction, yet remarkably the Church still maintained a profoundly critical attitude regarding military service and participation in war. The bishops present at the First Ecumenical Council, held at Nicea in the year 325 in the presence of Constantine, declared,

As many as were called by grace, and displayed the first zeal, having cast aside their military belts, but afterwards returned, like dogs, to their own vomit, so that some have regained their military stations; let these, after they have passed the space of three years as hearers, be for ten years prostrators. [Hearers and prostrators are categories of penitents who can be present, like catechumens, for the Liturgy of the Word, but excluded from the Eucharistic Liturgy.] But in all these cases it is necessary to examine well into their purpose and what their repentance appears to be like. For as many as give evidence of their conversions by deeds, and not pretense, with fear, and tears, and perseverance, and good works, when they have fulfilled their appointed time as hear-

<sup>13</sup> *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, rev. Sarah Fawcett Thomas, vol. 11 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), November 11, 84.

ers, may properly communicate in prayers; and after that the bishop may determine yet more favorably concerning them. But those who take the matter with indifference, and who think the form of not entering the Church is sufficient for their conversion, must fulfil the whole time.<sup>14</sup>

Christians had once been notable for their abstention from war, but by the fifth century they were found in the military in every rank. Even so, church canons still required soldiers not to kill. Periods of penitential exclusion from communion were imposed on those who had killed in combat. For example, Saint Basil the Great suggested a three-year fast from the eucharist for those who had ended lives on the battlefield.<sup>15</sup>

It wasn't until late in the fourth century that the theological foundations permitting participation in war by lay Christian men were

developed by Saint Augustine, bishop of Hippo in North Africa. While maintaining the traditional view that the individual Christian is barred from using deadly violence in self-defense, he argued that defending one's community was a different matter. Augustine argued that not to resort to armed defense in the face of invasion would be sinful. Defense of one's community could be a duty, especially if authorized by a legitimate authority. In *City of God*, he wrote; "They who have waged war in obedience to the divine command, or in conformity with His laws, have represented in their persons the public justice or the wisdom of government, and in this capacity have put to death wicked men; such persons have by no means violated the commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill.'" Augustine insisted, however, that under all circumstances Christ's command that his followers must love their enemies remained in force.

<sup>14</sup> "Canons of the First Ecumenical Council," trans. Henry R. Percival and John Fulton, <http://www.orthodoxa.org/GB/orthodoxy/canonlaw/canons1er-concileGB.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> *For the Peace from Above: An Orthodox Resource Book on War, Peace and Nationalism*, revised edition, ed. Hildo Bos and Jim Forest



First Ecumenical Council, Nicaea. Fresco, Church of Stavropoleos, Bucharest, Romania, eighteenth century.



Augustine's writings, all in Latin, circulated widely in the West and were influential but had little impact in the Greek-speaking Church in the East. Language was gradually dividing Christians, culminating at last in the Great Schism of 1054. This linguistic division may account for the fact that Augustine's just war theory was little known and never embraced by the Orthodox Church. Even in the case of warding off invaders, war was never seen as something which could be described as "just," still less as "holy." In situations where there seemed to be no alternative to violent defense, war was regarded as an evil, albeit a lesser evil, as inevitably war involves killing and the commission of other grave sins. For this reason clergy were and still are forbidden by Church canons to be combatants in war—even to kill another person in self-defense or by accident bars a person from serving at the altar. (One finds Orthodox priests who do not drive a car because of the danger of accidentally causing someone's death.)

After searching through patristic sources and Byzantine military manuals for texts concerning war, Father Stanley Harakas, long-time professor of Orthodox Theology at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Massachusetts, noted:

I found an amazing consistency in the almost totally negative moral assessment of war coupled with an admission that war may be necessary under certain circumstances to protect the innocent and to limit even greater evils. In this framework, war may be an unavoidable alternative, but it nevertheless remains an evil. Virtually absent in the tradition is any mention of a "just" war, much less a "good" war. The tradition also precludes the possibility of a crusade. For the

Eastern Orthodox tradition . . . war can be seen only as a "necessary evil," with all the difficulty and imprecision such a designation carries.

Harakas discovered what he referred to as "the stratification of pacifism" in the Church. The discipline of not killing others under any circumstances, applied to all baptized Christians in the early Church, in time came to be required only of those serving at the altar and iconographers.<sup>16</sup>

The question arises: If war is seen in the Orthodox Church as an innately sinful endeavor, even in the case of fighting off invaders, how is it that there are "soldier saints" on the Church calendar?

In the early Church converts were found in every profession, including soldiers in the military, for whom no provision for resignation or special discharge existed. One such convert, the Great Martyr George, has become the best known of all "soldier saints." In icons we are used to seeing Saint George wearing armor and battling a dragon. This is an image that arose centuries after his death. In icons of the first millennium, George stands erect, dressed as a soldier, face to face with whoever is praying before the icon. He died a martyr's death similar to that suffered by the thousands of Christians of his generation. George lived in the time of the persecutions of the emperors Diocletian and Maximian (303–11), when many Christians were taken away to slave labor, torture and execution. George had the courage to walk into a public square and announce, "All the heathen gods are devils. My God made the heavens and is the true God." For this he was arrested, tortured and put to death. His witness is said to have led to the conversion

<sup>16</sup> Stanley Harakas, "No Just War in the Fathers," *In Communion*, August 15, 2003, <https://incommunion.org/2005/08/02/no-just-war-in-the-fathers/>.

of many and to have given renewed courage to others who were already baptized. The icon of Saint George and the dragon, though non-historical, is a treasure chest of appropriate symbols. The “dragon” George fought against was his own fear as he confronted the demands of his rulers to renounce his Christian faith. The white horse Saint George rides represents God-given courage. The pencil-thin, cross-topped lance that rests lightly in his open hand represents the power of God. George’s passion-free face shows not a trace of anger, hatred, fear or anxiety.

While there is no record of Saint George having taken part in war, one does find saints in the church calendar whose life stories include combat on the battlefield. In the Orthodox Church, one of the best known of these is Saint Alexander Nevsky, a prince of Novgorod. In his early life he led successful military campaigns. Russians still commemorate his victory against the Teutonic Knights on the ice of Lake Chud in 1242. However, when we study Russian history, we meet not only a warrior but the person Alexander Nevsky later became. Exchanging his armor for the robe of a diplomat, Prince Alexander succeeded in normalizing relations with Khan Batu, saving Russia from a war it could not win and winning concessions protecting Church life. Finally he retired from both military and diplomatic roles to put on monastic robes and led a penitential life. After he died, the people of Russia remembered him as the prince-warrior who became a peacemaker and, in the end, embraced the ascetic life of a monk. It was as a monk that he was shown in early icons. It was only in the time of Czar Peter the Great that icons of the prince-turned-monk were revised so that he was shown dressed as a warrior rather than a monk. “In this way,” noted the Russian biblical scholar, Fa-

ther Georgi Chistyakov, “a monastic saint was made into a Russian version of Mars, the god of war, whose worship is connected with the cult of arms. The modification of the icon was pure paganism, Orthodox only in its form, a slander against the saint himself.”<sup>17</sup>

Like Alexander Nevsky, at some time in their lives many saints were soldiers whose acts of courage and endurance on the battlefield still excite admiration. Nonetheless, no one has ever been canonized for his military skills, heroism in battle, or achievements in war.

*The problem of nationalism:* To consider the question of why conscientious objection to war has become exceptional requires considering the ways nationalism shapes our self-perception and may damage or silence conscience. Often we are more defined by national than religious identity.

It is not possible to assign a date to the emergence of nationalism as a popular ideology. Some see it as being a major factor in the European Reformation movements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the schisms that followed. The French Revolution, at the end of the eighteenth century, is seen by others as a starting point. In the nineteenth century, nationalism emerged with vigor in many countries as well as former countries that had been swallowed up by their more powerful neighbors—Ireland, Wales and Scotland by England, Serbia and Greece by the Ottoman Empire, etc. Such modern nations as Italy and Germany had been a patchwork quilt of smaller political units until the late nineteenth century. For many, nationalism meant the recovery of linguistic and cultural life as well as at least some degree of political and religious autonomy. In a country like the United States, nationalism was a means of cre-

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<sup>17</sup> Georgi Chistyakov, “Spiritual Combat Against War,” *In Communion*, August 3, 2005, <https://incommunion.org/2005/08/03/spiritual-combat-against-war/>.

ating a unifying bond between people whose roots were in numerous other countries.

Nationalism posed, and still poises, a huge challenge to Christians. Am I first of all a member of the nation into which I happened to be born, or am I first of all a member of the borderless body of Christ into which I was baptized? If the state orders me to act in one way and Christ's Gospel in another, which has priority? Am I even capable of recognizing that there might be a conflict between God and country? It can be an agonizing dilemma. The state has at its disposal extremely powerful persuasive methods of winning submission. If these fail, it has the power to punish. One also risks the censure of family, friends, neighbors, co-workers and even of fellow Christians.

We are easily influenced by the society and times in which we live, not only by nationalism, in the sense of unswerving devotion to a particular nation, but also by the ideologies the nation promotes. Had I been a German in the Hitler years, I would have been under immense social pressure to greet my neighbor with a raised right hand and the words, "Heil Hitler!" Had I been a Russian in the Lenin and Stalin years, I might have succumbed to atheist propaganda and been destroying icons rather than reverencing them. Had I been born in a slave-owning society and been among those benefiting from such cheap labor, the arguments (some of them biblical) in favor of slavery might have seemed convincing. Had I been a white South African in the *apartheid* years, going along with *apartheid* would have been much easier than opposing it. When all my neighbors display the national flag, dare I not do the same?

Nothing is more personal than conscience, which always draws one closer to the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. Were I to pay closer attention to the whispering of my own conscience, what tough questions might I be challenged by?

The answer will vary from person to person. In my own case, I recall the long hours I spent one night in the chapel of my Navy base in Washington, D.C., reading the New Testament and praying for God's help as I struggled with the question of whether or not to remain in the military. As part of a team of Navy meteorologists working at the headquarters of the US Weather Service, my work was only distantly related to bloodshed as such. The closest our unit had come to being linked to war was to provide the weather predictions that were used in timing the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in the spring of 1961, for me a shocking event at odds with both American and Christian ideals. I enjoyed my work and respected my colleagues but was faced with a question of basic direction in life: the works of mercy or the works of war? After taking part in a silent vigil protesting the invasion, I found myself in very hot water. I was asked to fill out a security form which included the question: "Are there any circumstances in which you would not obey a command from a senior officer?" The obvious answer was, "Of course there could be orders I might not obey. How can anyone promise unwavering obedience without first knowing what his obedience might require?" But to give such an answer meant I had no future in the Navy and might even be jailed, as officers of the Naval Intelligence Service had threatened.<sup>18</sup>

A major part of that night's struggle was with fear. What would my co-workers think of me? Would my

<sup>18</sup> Jim Forest, *Writing Straight With Crooked Lines* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020).

friendships be damaged? What would happen to me within the military while my request for a special discharge was pending? Might I become an object of derision or even of violence? If imprisoned, could I survive in such an environment? How would this affect my future? Somewhere in the middle of what seemed an endless night, it became obvious to me that, no matter what else happened, anything less than a truthful answer to the question before me would be not only a mistake but a violation of conscience. A Russian proverb kept echoing in my thoughts: "Eat bread and salt and speak the truth." In the days that followed, I ended up filing for discharge as a conscientious objector.

I was extraordinarily fortunate. One of the senior officers in my command gave me his wholehearted support, as did our chaplain, my parish priest and various other people, with the result that I was able to leave the Navy.

I have no regrets about the life-defining choices I made at that time and all that happened as a consequence, but also have great sympathy for those

who have made very different choices. I look back with profound respect for some of the people I worked with in the years I was wearing the Navy uniform. Not often in my life have I met their equal. My colleagues included people who were deeply attentive to conscience and as serious about their Christian faith as I was. In supporting my application for discharge, one of them may well have sacrificed a promotion. On the way to his decision, he had gone without sleep reading a book on war and Christianity. It was, for him as for me, a night not only of reading but of prayer.

Of the many questions Christians face, perhaps the most important is how best to follow Christ in the context of the world we live in, with its temptations, its ideologies, its slogans, its idolatries, its sins, its sorrows, its flags and its wars. Frequent examinations of conscience are essential. Hand-in-hand with examinations of conscience comes the formation of conscience.

May the voice of conscience be audible for each of us and may we have the courage to listen. ✱

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