Violence and the Church

Look at any medieval or early renaissance picture of one of the innumerable saints of the Church, and the odds are that they will be carrying the instruments of their often ingenious martyrdom: St Lawrence and the griddle on which he was roasted, St Bartholomew and his flaying knife, St Catherine and her wheel. In the later middle ages, the extreme sadistic tortures suffered by the saints are graphically, even lovingly, described in the *Golden Legend* – the source for many paintings. In the religious plays, especially the Cornish ones, the depiction and enactment of cruelty is graphic and generous. For most people, the expectation of Hell is not metaphoric of the pain of final separation from the God who is the ground and meaning of our existence, but ingenious physical torment executed by gleeful devils. Prelates of the Church rode out to war; some churches, indeed, were fortresses, using the castle architecture developing with increasing sophistication.

Albi.

And if you look at the castles that litter the countryside, you realise that they were put there not to keep a future English Heritage in business, but because mediaeval society was inherently violent, and had been time out of mind. Private wars made Europe a battlefield, harassed by armed bands who respected nothing, not even sanctuaries, clergy, or days the church had declared holy like the great festivals and the saints' days. The Church, part of that society and one of its major organs, must be

implicated in this, and one thing I want to do in this talk is to look at how it catalysed change and how it related itself to the actuality as well as the metaphors of conflict.

What is the church? As Hoppenbrouwers and Broekman say, in their fine book I urge you to read, Christianity ideologically and institutionally informed absolutely every aspect of everyday life. Throw away any idea you might have of 'the church' as a structure distinct from, repressive of, the society in which it operated. The relationship is far more complicated, far more symbiotic, like the relationship between a tree and the soil and water and light on which it feeds. And just as trees have many individual leaves and branches, so the Church at any time is a collection of different people united in a common ideology but aware of differences and distinctions within it: and with different agendas. The church drew its clergy and its officers from those very people we are slickly told it oppressed, its ideologies reflected structures and concerns of changing societies and, indeed, *criticised* them by reference to its transhistorical agenda - the Gospel, remember, is inherently subversive of all earthly power structures, *including* those of the Church: and we see that very criticism in a lot of the sermons. This is where it differs from other institutions: it has at its heart an ideology, which it cannot abandon without ceasing to *be* the Church, which judges and criticises the behaviour of every single one of its members by reference to an absolute and transcendent standard. And recognise

how many people were involved in this huge organism: one estimate is that 30% of English people before the Black Death were either church tenants, workers, officials, religious or dependants. Those people will be variously good and bad as we all are: people, *who* is in power, make a huge difference. No institution is ever monolithic. Institutions can only function through fallible individuals. Individual Churchmen are and always have been fallible, confused, contradictory people of like passions with you and me: a high calling does not inoculate you against error, folly and misjudgement. And there is a vast difference between what the wise and the devout said and what the opportunist and cynical did – as can be seen in the deplorable behaviour of the Spanish rag tag and bobtail, and worse, we dignify with the name of *conquistadores* in America. Read the seventh chapter of St Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* and see just how well it fits your own case. But nevertheless individuals argue, and can make change. Over our period people did argue furiously over the use and control of violence: when could it be legitimate? When could you set aside the Commandment, Thou shalt not kill? When did you *not* need to follow Christ's hard saying about turning the other cheek?

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The Church was born in violence: an arrest violently resisted by Peter – and Jesus rebuked him: the horrible death of a willing but howling victim on a Cross; Saul, who would become Paul, watching Stephen stoned to death. Early Christians

were often mercilessly persecuted with the full weight of the state. Even so, especially among the middle ranks of society, the Church grew: the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church. Ironically it was through the legions of Rome that the Faith spread rapidly through the empire. Some of the earliest hymns of the Church are based on the tunes and rhythms of legions' marching songs, and position the great narrrative of Palm Sunday, the Passion, Good Friday, of Easter, in military terms.
Pangue Lingua on handout 1
Singing together is a very effective way of bonding, as St Ambrose knew and any football crowd knows, and the army metaphor exploited by Venantius and Ambrose in the fourth century continues right down to Victorian hymns like *Onward Christian Soldiers* with Arthur Sullivan's rousing tune sung by peacable citizens in their best Sunday clothes, before going home to meat and two veg for lunch. The triumph of love and sacrifice in the Resurrrection was conceptualised as a royal or imperial progress. Note that the finest *passus* of Langland's pilgrimage poem has in it a vision, utterly conventionally, of Crucifixion as a joust, the Harrowing of Hell as a successful siege of a castle.
Quote on Handout 2

Basic metaphors
Two of the earliest metaphors for Christian life are pilgrimage (Heb. XI) – here is no abiding city, here is no eternal stay – used by innumerable spiritual books and poems, including Langland's - and the Christian soldier, *Miles Christianus*:

Eph VI: **Quote on Handout 3**
You will recall note that the *Gawain* poet echoes that very passage. The personal Christian life is configured as a struggle against forces of evil. These are not just abstract, but an active Devil: who seeks to capture the castle of Anima, **handout 4** the soul with its five vulnerable gates, the senses.
PIC from castle of Perseverance
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Yet despite this embedded imagery of conflict, the early church was largely pacific. But in 311 Constantine, who like so many emperors waded to power through Roman blood and broached the purple on his sword, began the process by which Christianity became the empire's official religion. There was much opposition, and the Church tried every means of persuasion from reasoned argument to brute political force. Under Justinian non-Christians were actually persecuted, and sometimes pagan shrines were simply destroyed, as the Taliban have done with Buddhist monuments in Afghanistan, or as the Turks are doing to Christian ones. For that baleful link between political power and religious ideology had been made by the peculiar, and enduring, position of the Eastern emperors as religious hierarchs as well as secular rulers. In the West, the Donation of Constantine **Handout** 5 appeared to legitimate the claim of the popes to secular power, including that of compulsion by all available means: the line in Christ's parable of the wedding feast, 'Go out into the highways and byways and compel them to come in' seems to licence compulsion.

And so the story goes on, to encompass Crusades, heresy trials, conquest, slavery. But it *also* encompasses selfless sacrifice, profound spiritual adventure, and a move towards the genuine betterment of the idea of the human and what humans can do.
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Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all see themselves as fighting dark forces, be they human, or be they spiritual: the devil and all his angels, who prowl about, as I Peter says, like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. Their ideology therefore is inescapably combative. Christianity and Islam both draw on the historical Old Testament narrative of when the Jews were indeed threatened by enemies. In Exodus, Numbers and Judges, Israel is an aggressive small nomadic tribe seeking a home: tough on those people who were already there, whom the Jews found understandably to be less than delighted. Because they were convinced they were indeed God's chosen people, the Jews cast those enemies as God's enemies. In Kings, the story ends with the fall of the Kingdom and the people carried off into slavery in Babylon. Psalm 137, *super flumina Babylonis* **Handout 6** was written there, and the grief of the exiles climaxes in that terrible prayer that the heads of the children of the heathen may be dashed against the stones. There are other psalms, like 68, *Exsurgat Deus* – let God arise, and let his enemies be scattered. **Handout 7** The concept of Holy War, Crusade, *jihad*, call it what you will – the wars which

humans wage in the certainty that God is on their side – is rooted in the national myth of the Jews.

The Church readily cast itself as a New Israel, and could see its contemporary political world as a struggle between Good and Evil which started before the creation of the worlds, with the war in Heaven, when Michael cast down Satan into the pit,
PIC
That is the first act of the drama that will end with a new heaven and a new earth, with the last battle, the *eschaton*, the end of all things. In early mediaeval art Jesus, the Prince of Peace, is the young warrior god of Revelation XIX, **handout 8** reigning from the tree (he whom the AS poem *Dream of the Rood (69)* calls *sigora wealdend*.Wielder of Victories.), not the suffering man,
PIC AABY crucifix.

But there is a counter tradition, at least as important. In Rabbinical commentaries on *Exodus*, for example, the angels are described rejoicing at the drowning of Pharaoh and his chariots of war in the Red Sea. But God rebukes them: 'Are not the Egyptians my people too?' There is a recurrent awareness not only of the love of God for *all* his creation (Psalm 104), including those bits *we* don't like, but also an intuition of the overwhelming, irresistible love of God and each soul's intimate surrender to it as a lover willingly surrenders to the beloved: the violence is now that sweet combat of lovers, where there are no losers, no conquerors.

The Bible includes a series of love poems we call the Song of Songs, with strong links to traditions of love poetry not only later in the West but also in the East - for example, the Persian *Perfumed Garden* or the Indian *Kama Sutra.* The rabbis linked it to Solomon, and interpreted this anthology, (some of the most sensuous love poetry ever written) as celebrating the mutual love of the soul and God. The Psalmist yearns for the union with the divine, yearning for the losing of the self in the love of God – the theme that runs through the poetry and thought of St Augustine, or St Bernard, or Lady Julian, or Margery Kempe, or John Donne, or George Herbert. That yearning is accompanied by an agonized sense of failure and shortcoming, a desire for cleansing from that unworthiness, in overwhelming love: read Psalm 51 **handout 9**, which many of you will know superficially through its setting by Allegri, *Miserere* Some of the prophets, particularly Second Isaiah - three people wrote the book– stress a God who is the suffering servant, who gives himself wholly and patiently to those who smite him, spit on him, pluck out his hair: a God all loving, all bearing, swift to mercy, giving himself like a sacrificial lamb to slaughter,r to a terrible and shameful death for love of his creation. The prophet Hosea uses a wonderful image of Israel as a wife who has turned harlot, constantly forgiven by her husband, God, who is unconditionally in love with her. To quote the Psalms again, ‘Like as the hart desireth the waterbrooks, so longeth my soul, for thee O God.’

These contradictory traditions – the violent and the self-sacrificial - are at the very heart of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In Islam there is a strong mystical tradition, as in the Sufis and the great Jalal ed din el-Rumi the founder of the Mehlevi dervishes, whose followers, like the Christian mystics of the mediaeval centuries, are on fire with the desire for God, seeing through the material to the ineffable light of the divine, lost in wonder and love and praise – indeed, there might be a good deal of contact between these two mystical traditions.

But at the same time, you have the armies of the Arabs bursting out of Arabia, and later the Turks, forcibly converting those under their rule.
Alongside the great Christian mystical tradition you have the Crusades, the First in 1096 preached by Pope Urban II and launched with the war cry 'Deus le vult!' 'God wills it'.
The Cross is the symbol of the ultimate sacrifice, the loving God who dies for his people. Yet Constantine,
PIC
at the crucial battle of the Milvian Bridge, is said to have seen the Cross in the Heavens and heard a voice saying '*In hoc signo vinces* – in this sign you shall conquer'.
PIC (Raphael)
The damaged Anglo-Saxon cross
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found in the Staffordshire Hoard, could have been a processional cross for use in the services of the church, or it might have been a war standard: it

could have been both. On it is inscribed a verse from psalm 68, 'let God arise and let his enemies be scattered'
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This fundamental challenge remains, of how to reconcile the heart of the Christian ethical message with the circumstances of the actual world in which we find themselves. Briefly, you can’t. But you can escape neither the one nor the other. For *any* society implies a power structure, and power means control over others. How do you come down from the raptures of the Sinai of the mind and deal, for their own good, with people making a mess of things? Power corrupts…When, if ever, can violence by those who profess the faith of Christ be justified?

The first systematic answer was proposed by the great Augustine (354-430), whose thought has indelibly marked the West and who is one of the people who has made the world you take for granted. Make no mistake about the profundity, the humility and the passion of his spiritual journey *as an individual*: read the *Confessions* and see. But think of his position: as the Roman state progressively imploded in the late 300s when the Germanic armies took first one, then another, of the centres of power, Augustine as Bishop of Hippo in North Africa was not only spiritual leader but effectively magistrate as well. How should the Vandals be resisted, if at all, or should the other cheek be turned? It’s possibly easier to think about this if only oneself is concerned; but a bishop, a

magistrate, has responsibilities, a duty of care, to those under his charge. Could he earnestly ask his flock to endure unresisting martyrdom? It is from this context that Augustine's *City of God* emerged, a response to the invasions and the sack of Rome, the Eternal City, by Alaric. That great book is where we get the first full enunciation of the Just War **Handout 10**, the sort of war a Christian polity can legitimately fight. Briefly, to be just war (1) must be proclaimed by a legitimate ruler; (2) the cause must be just, like self defence, defence of one's land or recovery of property; (3) the intention must be just, that is, the securing of peace and justice, not conquest; and (4) the attitude must be just, one of
sorrow and regret, even love, for the enemy.

But this discussion is part of Augustine's model of the **two cities Handout 11.** The emperor, or later, the prince, is a fallen man under judgement like anyone else, but *as emperor* he has a responsibility to God for the people he rules, and his duty is to provide conditions of security in which they can follow their own Christian calling. The City, the State, then, which one day will, like Rome, fall, is a shadow of that heavenly state that will not fall. It shadows its absolute justice and perfect freedom which in this fallen world they are not achievable. Hence the earthly City has got a legitimate if limited authority over its citizens, and that authority extends to the use of force and compulsion for their correction and defence.
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So what about the Crusades? **Handout 12**.For four hundred years Moslem states had held the Holy Places of Palestine. It is a fact that for much of our period many of the Moslem states were aggressive, successful and intolerant, and Christendom was afraid of them. That is not to deny the reality of important and fruitful trading and cultural contacts at individual level - individuals tend to do things better than polities - but the growing power of the Turks was a constant threat to the Eastern empire and to the trade in the Mediterranean on which Western Europe depended. In 1071 the Seljuk Turks defeated the Byzantine emperor Manuel at Manzikert. Intolerant and hard line, they also blocked the long established Christian pilgrimages to Palestine across the old route through Anatolia. Pilgrims that did get through were often treated very harshly. The Byzantine empire, bulwark of Christendom against advancing Islam, seemed doomed. Manuel appealed to the Pope for help. The long delayed result was that in 1096 Pope Urban II at the Council of Clermont preached a crusade against the Moslem states holding Jerusalem: in one sense, crusades can be seen as an armed pilgrimage. He promised those who took the Cross – the 'Crusados' – plenary absolution from their sins if they died in battle against those who were configured as God's enemies. Despite reasoned opposition to Urban's call, the idea caught the imagination of many, not just of the knightly class: a draggle of people of all walks of life followed Peter the Hermit across the Alps and the Balkans and joined up with the main military force in Syria.

And, as we all know, the First Crusade was triumphant. The motley collection of quarrelling lords, led by Godfrey of Bouillon, ably seconded by Bishop Adhemar of Le Puy, a bonny fighter if ever there was one, took Jerusalem on Christmas Day 1099 with appalling slaughter, and till 1187 there was a Norman King in Jerusalem. **Handout 13**

The preaching of subsequent Crusades by figures sometimes of the towering moral stature of St Bernard of Clairvaux, might erect an apparently legal and theological justification for what in Augustinian terms was in fact an aggressive war But the issue was much more confused. Right from the start there was steady opposition to Crusades, **handout 14** from churchmen and laymen, on moral, theological and practical grounds, and the reputation and success of crusading steadily diminished. That is not to deny that Christendom genuinely felt under threat. But was it coincidence that Urban preached the Crusade at precisely the time when the growing Norman practice of inheritance by primogeniture **handout 15** was filling a Europe already prone to endemic violence with a host of unemployed younger sons trained to the profession of arms who had zero prospect of any means of support? To attempt to turn the internecine violence inside Christendom outwards, against Christendom's enemies, might make excellent political sense; and to those younger sons it gave *carte blanche* to find principalities for themselves in the Eastern Mediterranean and Palestine – sometime indeed at the expense of

fellow Christians, who, like the Orthodox or the Nestorians, could be conveniently classed as heretics.

It was axiomatic that to convert the heathen the church should use loving persuasion – this is what Augustine argued, this happens to Queen Bramidonie in the *Song of Roland*, and is the explicit reason Peter the Venerable, Abbott of Cluny, gave for his commissioning a translation of the Quran from Robert of Ketton. But against heretics, who have known and rejected the truth, the church, again following Augustine's line, was sterner. The Inquisition was set up to defend the purity of doctrine and to rid the church of false prophets and when examination and persuasion failed, force was called in. The crusades preached, and horribly carried out, against the Albigenses in southern France, or the Waldenses, when for example in one day, Mmarch 19, 1244, before the fortress of Montsegur

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over 200 heretics were burned, were little more than terror. Some causes in which crusades were preached are hard to credit now. A crusade that to pay what it owed the Venetians turns aside to sack one of a Christian town on the Adriatic to please the Venetians and then sacks Constaninople itself and never gets near a Saracen; Crusades like those of the Teutonic Knights in the Baltic states against the pagans Letts and Ests were no more than wars of settlement and conquest. And worst of all, the crusades rival Popes at the end of the fourteenth

century hurled at each other. No wonder that by the fourteenth century the anger at the worldiness of many high churchmen was increasingly eliciting cries for root and branch reform. There were many attempts to reform this scandal from within the hierarchy, but like all such things,only for a short time successful: then people slip back into bad old ways in new forms. Human nature does not change much. Throughout our period sermon after sermon protests about the worldliness of the higher clergy especially and their disregard of the Gospel they preach: all the devastating and cogent criticism of the church, on this as other fronts, comes from churchmen who are appalled by what their fellows are doing. (**Handout 16**).

I mentioned Adhemar, Bishop of Le Puy. How did churchmen fit in to actual warfare? With the military exhaustion and collapse of Rome's centralised empire, the only structures able to organise things were Church structures: the dioceses. One of the few victories of the Roman-British against the Saxons was in 431, when Bishop Germanus of Auxerre hid his troops behind a hill and then had them come forth shouting Alleluia... the Saxons turned and fled. Like Augustine, churchmen could not escape power, authority, exercising judgment - being territorial administrators at all levels *faute de mieux*, and essential components, as it developed, of the medieval state. They were, moreover, not just running the office, so to speak. The greater ones were actual secular lords with a military and

financial call on their lay feoffees just like any other lord. Some held palatinate* jurisdictions: like Cologne, or Salzburg, or Durham, and as such, they had to organise armies and fight. Archbishop Turpin of Reims, celebrated as such a bonny fighter in the *Song of Roland* - a fine poem which, incidentally gives you a pretty good insight into the complexity of the crusading *mentalite avant la letttre*, Adhemar of le Puy, Reinald von Dassel of Cologne – there were more than a few.6Turpin even has his own *chanson de geste*. Many of these prelates were men of family and ambition first and churchmen a long way afterwards: they were looking for a career rather than a calling, and their connections raised them to great power. Their only concession to canon law, which forbade churchmen to shed blood with the sword, was to use maces. Yet their consecration as bishops gave them the authority of that office despite their personal shortcomings.

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The violence endemic in early mediaeval society, the casual resort to arms, presented an obvious social problem as soon as Western society began, so to speak, to settle down, as trade and economic growth required some stability. Individuals, and groups, within the Church - the thinkers and teachers, in fact – can begin to alter perceptions, to develop news ways of thinking about old problems. Churchmen won increasing support, and not just among churchmen, for the concept of a moral framework regulating violence – they knew they

would never eradicate it - and inevitably many of their arguments, their ‘ought’ concepts, were drawn from their theological background. One way of coping was to establish ground rules which people might be shamed into keeping either by threat of excommunicatiom or simply by social pressure: ‘it is not done’ is one of the most powerful sanctions we humans have, but there will always be those few who ignore it. The history of the concept ‘knight’ for example shows how rapidly a moral and ethical framework can be developed which will act as a social and personal conscience both for those who do and those who do not practice it. ‘Cniht’ in OE means originally simply a boy or servant, then it came to be applied simply to a follower who fights. Yet by 1200 or so it means someone of an elevated social class, with an ethical framework round the use of force, and an expectation of civilised and indeed courtly behaviour. Much of this shift in the field of meaning of the word ‘knight’ is the result not of top down legislation, but of imaginative shifts: and here the poems that explore the ethics of knighthood, like those of Chretien de Troyes, **Handout 17** are powerful catalysers. And these poets were more often than not clerks: that is, with an education fundamentally based on church structures and concepts of learning. By the fourteenth century there is a whole theory of proper knighthood, as there is of kingship – the King’s Two Bodies **Handout 18**- and of the **Just War**. By the C12 the Church had come explicitly to disapprove of tournaments. In 1027 a Council at Elne forbade war from Saturday night until Monday

morning: the germ of the ‘Truce of God’. **Handout 19** This prohibition was extended to the weekdays consecrated by the great mysteries: Thursday, in memory of the Ascension, Friday, the day of the Crucifixion, and Saturday, the vigil of the Resurrection. Then the 40 days of Advent and Lent were added, and the penalty for breaking the Truce was excommunication.. The Truce spread from France to Italy and Germany; an ecumenical council in 1179 extended it to the whole Church as part of canon law (‘De treuga et pace’).

The theorisation, if I may use the word, the erection of a scale of values and ethics, to counter the arbitrary exercise of simple power, the mere observance of customary law – often as much to do with property as with morality – and the duty of generosity to one’s followers – the values of a heroic society, in fact – was a work undertaken over a very long period unquestionably by churchmen, each responding to what had preceded his thought and to situations as he found them in a changing society. The division of Society into three Estates, which we first find articulated in the translation of Boethius’ *Consolation* made for King Alfred, **handout 20** is a concept originating with churchmen. Each Estate has clearly defined reciprocal rights and duties to and with the others. The estate of chivalry, as texts from at least as early as the tenth century stress, *canno*t practise the contemplative life of the religious: is has to be active, with all the moral muckiness of engagement with the world’s affairs. In that activity it has to

show, as Chaucer says of his Knight, 'trouthe and honour, fredom and curtesie'. The use of force must be on the instigation of a properly constituted legitimate authority, which in turn will have its own moral responsibilities: so the Knight fights 'in his lordes were.' It ought to be for the defence of the Christian community against its enemies: so the Knight fights against the heathen 'for oure feith'. It ought to be generous to the powerless, humble in self-esteem, and continent and courteous towards women. As John of Salisbury, friend of Thomas Becket and later Bishop of Chartres, puts it in his *Policraticus*, 'the office of the duly ordained soldier is to defend the church, to assail infidelity, to venerate the priesthood, to protect the poor from injuries, to pacify the province, to pour out their blood for others and … if need be to lay down their lives (VI.8; (see also VI 7 and 10.)'.**handout 21** The most important manual of Chivalry in the mediaeval period, *le livre de l'ordre de chevalerie* by the Catalan mystic and missionary, Ramon Lull, **Handout 22**who for the latter half of his life was desperately concerned about the Church's duty to convert the Moslems – and he himself went alone to preach among in North Africa, and one tradition records that he was stoned to death at Bougie in Algeria in 1314. Lull stresses the special divine 'election' of the knight and his duty of selfless service, and there grew up a sort of military international law, codified by John of Legnano in about 1360 (*De Bello, de represaliis at de duello*) a book highly regarded by jurists. In 1387 Honore Bonet, Benedictine monk and Prior of Salon,

drawing on Legnano, wrote the *Arbre des batailles,* making the code available to laymen who might not have Latin. Bonet's book, like its source, is modelled on the Canon Law based on the decretals of the Church. The argument is that violence in the cause of God's Justice must be accepted, and the code seeks to regulate by elaborate conventions the brutality inherent in war. It's interesting that this book was written at the very time when the ending of the Babylonish captivity **handout 23** when the Popes were at Avignon, started the dreadful process which would have Pope levying crusade against rival Pope. And so it goes on: work after work addresses the issues of Christian violence: in 1484 Caxton translated Lull for the very different world of an England just taking breath after the Wars of the Roses.

On the **handout 24** I have given you the *Ballade du bachelier d'armes*, by Eustache Deschamps, Chaucer's contemporary, which summarises many of these ideals. Even more interesting is how the ceremonies of the coronation of a King and of the making of a Knight were reconstructed in and after the twelfth century deliberately to echo the ordination of a priest. As early as the tenth century there are examples of services for the blessing of arms, and by the time of Guilelmus Durandus in the late C13 an entire liturgy had been developed which became official practice from the fourteenth century. Geoffroi de Charny was killed at Poitiers, as he carried the French King's standard: his *Book of Chivalry* gives exact details of the vigil, the fast,

the ritual bath which echoed baptism, the donning of symbolic clothes, the context of the service in church where the candidate is sponsored as worthy by those who will be his fellow-knights, and then he takes up the sword to 'guard and uphold right, reason and justice everywhere without contradicting for anything the rights of the faith of holy Church'. The actual ritual arming with real, not metaphoric, weapons literalises the arming of the Christian in *Ephesians* VI and the awakening into new life in *Ephesians V* and Colossians III. Those weapons might themselves be in some sense holy, for if he could afford it a knight might well have holy relics in his sword hilt: In the *Song of Roland* Roland's sword, *Durendal*, has in the hilt 'A tooth of Saint Peter and some blood of Saint Basil,/ And some hairs from my lord saint Denis, / Something from the clothing that the Blessed Mother wore…' In the same poem, laisse 213: 'Charlemagne sleeps in his armor with Joyeuse, his sword, whose blade is the head of the lance that pierced Christ's side, by his head.'

Chaucer's Knight and Squire focus the issues beautifully: the one austere and not exactly a laugh a minute, but fighting as was the perceived role for a 'good' knight, as we have seen, sober and modest in his deportment, while the Squire in point by point juxtaposed contrast, is flashy, and attractive, and we would far rather spend an evening with him than his father – which says a lot about ourselves. BUT he, Chaucer stresses, has only fought against fellow Christians, in Artois and in Picardye. That

reference is meaningless to us, but to Ch's audience, the sense of shock roused by John of Gaunt's devastation of those counties in his disgraceful *chevauchee* was a very recent memory. Which is the legitimate and which the illegitimate use of force? The fact that there *are* parameters for that discussion, here secularised, we owe to churchmen arguing from the theoretics of theology to the practicality of this puzzle of being human.

Did knights follow these codes? Perhaps some did, more or less: but in Chaucer's fiction there are many who are judged and found wanting by his ideal picture of the Knight. Gower's *Vox Clamantis* is very aware of how chivalry can fall short of ideals; Langland's half acre requires the knight and his lady do their share of the work that is proper to them for the wellbeing of the whole. Just war could degenerate into mere war of conquest, as it does in the Alliterative *Morte*, or in real life, when the just use of force can become a *chevauchee* leaving a scorched countryside and a terrorised or slaughtered peasantry. Even the Black Prince, that paragon of courtly behaviour according to the Chandos Herald's account, perpetrated the most horrendous sack of Limoges, one of his own cities. And Edward III's remark. 'War without fire is like sausages without mustard' suggests far more about his appetite for the excitement of wear than it does for any concern for its morality.

Yet however they might be transgressed, the moral frontiers erected by the church, which ultimately

have their sanction in theology, were better than no ideals at all, and certainly were the ancestors of ideas about the morality of conflict we say we take as given. Every state, now as then, needs Rottweilers, but you need to be able to make those Rottweilers behave like spaniels when necessary. We have not solved that dilemma yet, and we may never do so: but it is crucial to make the attempt, for else, as Ulysses puts it in another context

Strength should be lord of imbecility,
And the rude son should strike his father dead:
Force should be right; or rather, right and wrong,
Between whose endless jar justice resides,
Should lose their names, and so should justice too.
Then every thing includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into appetite;
And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last eat up himself.

We shall get nowhere if we do not face up to what we are and what humanity always has been: it may profess high ideals, but their practice is another matter. But that does NOT mean the ideals are valueless or meaningless. The fact that a child may constantly gets its sums wrong does not mean that mathematics is nonsense.   Many – perhaps most - men actually enjoy fighting, are excited by war: Othello talks of ‘pomp and circumstance of glorious war’. Remember how when the First World War started Rupert Brooke could write ‘God

be praised who has blessed us with this hour' – and think of the terrible aftermath with which we still have to live. Look around you, look simply at the violent rubbish that fills TV screens and cinemas now, and which alas, provides the mythology with which too many children now grow up: and we have not reaped that harvest yet. And how dare our time, with its history of state-sponsored industrialised murder in the concentration camps and the gulags, with its development of nerve gases, weapons of mass destruction, claim it is in any way morally superior to those who preceded us, who faced stark choices as we do, and who made the same mistakes we do? At the very least, even if hypocritically, the mediaeval centuries officially recognised a set of moral and theological values by which people stood condemned: a challenge was implicit. Our societies seem to have abandoned any coherent morality altogether, and when that happens, chaos might well come again. God help us in these dark times.

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