
Defenders of the Faith: Augustine, Aquinas, and the Evolution of Medieval Just War Theory

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Christianity has always had a difficult relationship with the concept of war. After all, it is impossible to follow Christ's command to "love one's neighbor" on the battlefield. Indeed, "turning the other cheek" in such a situation is very likely to allow one to meet God face to face. Christian pacifism was particularly prevalent in the early years of the Church, when many Christians steadfastly refused to join the Roman army, a move that caused governmental authorities some concern. As the empire began to crumble in the third century, the Christian repudiation of violence eventually led to persecution by the state. Guided by the pacifist theology supported by the early theologians Origen and Tertullian, many Christians went meekly to their deaths, winning the crown of martyrdom.

By the fourth century, however, the relationship between Christianity and the Roman state had radically changed. Under the protection of Constantine the Great, Christianity had not only achieved legitimacy, but had also become an important arm of the state. Later, under Theodosius the Great, Christianity became the official religion of the empire, effectively marginalizing the pagan belief systems that had once tried to destroy it. However, with this political victory came a host of theological problems, including the question of whether or not Christians should wage war. The attempt to reconcile Christ's injunctions against violence with the unfortunate necessity of war resulted in the development of what philosophers now call the "just war theory," the conditions under which war can be waged without sin. It is fitting that the first great philosopher to write about the just war, Augustine of Hippo, lived during the death throes of the Roman Empire, in a world plagued by the strife of nations. Over eight hundred years later, the man who would further develop this theory, Thomas Aquinas, lived in a world where warfare had assumed a truly spiritual function through the concept of the crusade and the blending of monastic and knightly traditions. Faced with this new idea of positive warfare, Aquinas reinterpreted Augustine's theology to fit this context.

When discussing Christianity and war, modern pacifists tend to focus on portions of the New Testament that specifically forbid any type of violence, the most famous of which is Christ's command to "not resist an evil person. If

someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matthew 5:39). Almost as famous is his rebuke to Peter in Gethsemane after the apostle struck a servant with his sword: “Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus said to him, “for all who draw the sword will die by the sword” (Matthew 26:52). These isolated comments would seem to confirm that the Bible absolutely forbids Christians from taking part in any sort of violent action, especially when paired with Christ's meek acceptance of death at the hands of his enemies. Yet curiously, alongside these injunctions are examples of acceptance of soldiers and their violent profession. John the Baptist, for instance, did not denounce the soldiers who came to him as “baby-killers” and demand that they give up their swords, but told them, “Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay” (Luke 3:14). Similarly, when the centurion came to Jesus asking him to heal his servant, Jesus told the crowd, “I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith” (Matthew 8:11). Then there is Jesus' own use of violence in a righteous cause:

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!” (John 2: 13-16).

Indeed, prior to going to Gethsemane, when the disciples told him that they have brought two swords, Jesus did not berate them for bearing weapons, but merely said, “That is enough” (Luke 22:38). So the New Testament is not a paean to non-violence, rather, there is no strict conclusion on these issues and the Christian's approach to questions of the morality of violence seems to depend on the circumstances in which he finds himself.

Though many historians have tried to characterize the early Church as broadly anti-military, a deeper look at the history reveals a far more complicated situation. Some Christians seem to have been serving in the Roman military throughout the second and third centuries while others refused because of their faith. The Church fathers of this period tend to prefer that Christians avoid military service for the good of their souls. In the late second century, Tertullian connected military service with idolatry, in part because it involved the Christian in traditional pagan worship. He relied on Christ's rebuke to Peter in Gethsemane to support his pacifism:

Shall it be held lawful to make an occupation of the sword, when the Lord proclaims that he who uses the sword shall perish by the sword? And shall the son of peace take part in the battle when it does not become him even to sue at law? . . . Shall he carry a flag, too, hostile to Christ? And shall *he* ask a watchword from the emperor who has already received one from God?¹

The third century theologian Origen held similar views on violence and the Christian:

[Christ] nowhere teaches that it is right for His own disciples to offer violence to any one, however wicked. For He did not deem it in keeping with such laws as His, which were derived from a divine source, to allow the killing of any individual whatever.²

Though both these men admitted that Christians were serving in the Roman army during their times, they certainly believed that a true Christian should avoid a way of life so seemingly antithetical to the commands of Christ.

By the late third century, these theological musings must have seemed rather moot. The strains of empire were taking their toll on the Roman state and more and more often, the Christians found themselves as the scapegoats. The empire-wide persecutions of first Decius and then Diocletian followed the general attitude of “don't ask, don't tell” which had prevailed during the Pax Romana. Christians were not even fulfilling the basic requirement of worshiping the divine emperor; how could Rome expect them to serve loyally as soldiers? As the Church fought to survive the persecutions, questions of the morality of military service must have been far from pressing.

All this would change when Constantine came to power in the early fourth century. After his victory over Maxentius at Milvian Bridge, Constantine acted quickly to legalize and support the religion that he believed had given him victory. A year after Milvian Bridge, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan which allowed anyone “who wishe[d] to observe Christian religion [to] do so freely and openly, without molestation.”³ Constantine went great lengths to show his preference for Christianity, granting its bishops land and wealth, making them part of his circle of advisors, and enforcing the decisions of their councils. Scholars continue to debate what exactly he hoped to achieve through this patronage, but what is clear is that Constantine set Christianity on the path to dominance in the Empire, a dominance achieved by the end of the century when Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the empire. Throughout this process, the empire now considered the once-disenfranchised Christians full citizens and thus expected

them to aid in its defense. After centuries of mere discussion, Christian theology would now have to grapple with the problem of war.

The theologian who would take on this challenge and thus give birth to the concept of the “just war” was Augustine of Hippo. Born in 354 in North Africa to a pagan father and a Christian mother, they raised Augustine in a world where rival religions were struggling for the soul of the empire. This struggle reflected in Augustine's own spiritual journey, he initially rejected the faith of his mother Monica, seeking answers to his questions about human nature in the dualist philosophy of Manichaeism. Eventually, however, he returned to Christianity; Ambrose of Milan instructed and baptized him in 386. Soon after, he returned to North Africa with the intention of building a monastic community in the desert and living there in prayerful seclusion. That was not to be, for the Church “shanghaied” him into becoming the bishop

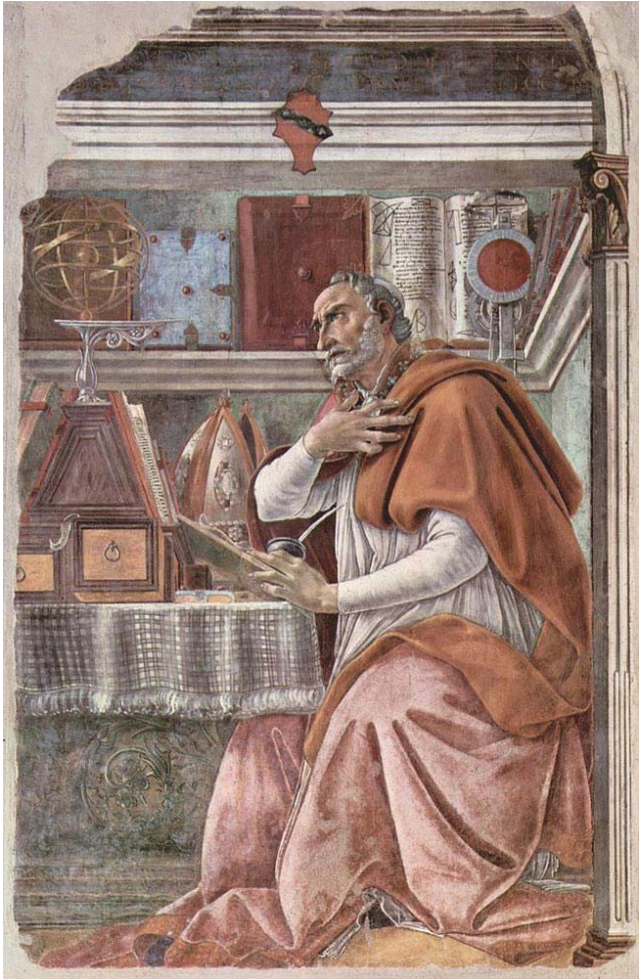


Figure 1 *St. Augustine in His Study*. Fresco by Botticelli, c. 1480. Located in the Church of Ognissanti, Florence, Italy.

of Hippo, whose Christian community needed his learning to guide them. In the over thirty years that he was bishop, Augustine produced more than one hundred works in Latin that would become the foundation for Western Christian theology.

Indeed, he wrote so much over such a long period of time that he felt it necessary to publish some retractions at the end of his life to “set the record straight.”

Augustine was certainly no stranger to the horrors of war. In his lifetime, the Western Empire began to disintegrate under the weight of multiple invasions by Germanic tribes. In 410, Augustine, like most Romans, was aghast to learn that the Visigoths had sacked Rome, signaling the start of the end of civilization in the West. Naturally, those pagans who remained in the empire blamed these misfortunes on Rome having abandoned its traditional gods. Never one to back down from a challenge, Augustine took up his pen to refute them. His work entitled *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans* is a defense of Christian truth in the face of such disasters. It also serves as a synthesis of Augustine’s thoughts on politics, including the function of war in a Christian world. Although Augustine had addressed the issue of just warfare in some of his earlier works, *The City of God* presented this concept in its finished form.

Augustine viewed the lack of worldly peace as an obvious result of man’s fall from grace. He was the great developer of the Christian concept of “original sin,” which he defined as the human preference for the inferior pleasures of the physical world, such as food, human love, and wealth, as opposed to the higher, spiritual pleasures, such as loving God and living morally. When discussing the peace that God promised Israel in the Old Testament, he wrote, “But if anyone hopes for so great a good as this in the world, and on this earth, his wisdom is but folly.”⁴ According to Augustine, there can never be true earthly peace so long as human beings exist in a state of sin. As such, secular society waged wars merely for the enjoyment of inferior secular pleasures: “Thus, the earthly city desires earthly peace, albeit only for the sake of the lowest kind of goods; and it is that peace which it desires to achieve by waging war.”⁵ The taint of sin makes the ideal of true everlasting peace unattainable; man must transcend his worldly nature in order to achieve it.

However, Augustine was quick to point out that earthly victory in a war and the peace that follows it are “gifts from God” and form the basis for the relationship between secular society and the Church.⁶ The Church needs the stability that secular society provides so that it can perform its function, which is to lead people to God. In accepting this earthly peace, the Church places itself under the direction of secular government in all matters that are unconnected to the faith and “makes no scruple to obey [its] laws,” which would necessarily include the

declaration of war.⁷

In this context, Augustine argued that Christians should not refuse to join the army simply because the role of a soldier entails the use of violence. For him, peace is indeed worth the fight. However, Christians must fight the enemies of the state in the correct frame of mind, remembering that their purpose in fighting is neither the joy of slaughter nor the chance to plunder, but the establishment of peace, however ephemeral it might be. Augustine first addressed this issue in a letter to a friend who was afraid that his vocation as a soldier might lead him to damnation. He assuaged his friend's fears with the following words:

Peace should be the object of your desire; war should only be waged as a necessity, and waged only that God may by it deliver men from the necessity and preserve them in peace...Therefore, even in waging war, cherish the spirit of a peacemaker, that, by conquering those whom you attack, you may lead them back to the advantages of peace.⁸

In *The City of God*, Augustine further developed this theme by describing the attitude of the righteous man towards war:

But the wise man, they say, will wage just wars. Surely, however, if he remembers that he is a human being, he will be much readier to deplore the fact that he is under the necessity of waging even just wars. For if they were not just, he would not have to wage them, and so there would then be no wars at all for a wise man to engage in. For it is the iniquity of the opposing side that imposes upon the wise man the duty of waging wars.⁹

Thus, even the just war is a necessary evil, fought only for the purpose of preventing greater evils. The Christians who engage in such wars must therefore remember to fight according to what Augustine calls the "law of charity," that is, with compassion and without malice.

Thus, the first criterion for a just war is its motivation: the establishment or preservation of earthly peace. To that end, Augustine went on to establish the second criterion: the initiation of war by a legitimate authority. It is this declaration by a higher power that removes the stain of sin from a soldier's violent actions provided, of course, that the soldier is behaving in accordance with the precepts of the first criterion. Augustine specifically stated that "when the soldier, obedient to the power under which he has been lawfully placed, slays a man, he is not guilty of murder."¹⁰ For Augustine, Christ's rebuke to Peter at Gethsemane was not for his violent act, but for perpetrating such an act without Christ's authorization. That authority also need not be merely terrestrial; Augustine addressed divinely sanctioned violence in the Old Testament, such as the wars of the Israelites in the

Promised Land, by stating, “And if this is true when the command is given by a general, how much more is it when it is given by the Creator!”¹¹ Without the endorsement of such a legitimate authority, no war can be truly just.

Augustine’s just war must have both the correct motivation and the appropriate authorization. What then constituted a just war to Augustine? It seems that the only war that Augustine would unequivocally support would be a war of defense against an aggressor. When discussing the early wars of Rome, Augustine claimed that the Romans “were compelled to resist the savage incursions of their enemies; and they were compelled to do this not by greed for human praise, but by the necessity of defending life and liberty.”¹² In the case of offensive wars, *The City of God* is less clear. However, one of Augustine’s earlier works, *Questions on the Heptateuch*, certainly implied that an offensive war is entirely just in the following circumstances, “if some nation or some state which is warred upon has failed either to make reparation for an injurious action committed by its citizens or to return what has been wrongfully appropriated.”¹³ Very few secular wars can uphold these criteria. However, Augustine justified the ancient wars of the Israelites, waged under God’s authority, as just because the Israelites “acted not in cruelty, but in righteous retribution, giving to all what they deserved, and warning those who needed warning.”¹⁴ The justice of these wars depended on their divinely ordained nature; God promised the Holy Land to the Israelites and the Israelites had to conquer it to fulfill God’s plan. Yet even these wars were primarily secular in nature in that they fought them for territorial and political domination.

Augustine never seemed to have considered the concept of religious war as being relevant to his discussion. To him, war was a purely secular activity that, although sometimes necessary, was always regrettable. It is ironic, then, that Augustine’s words became the basis for justifying a war with a distinctly religious character—the First Crusade.

In the seven centuries separating Augustine and the crusading movement, the West had fallen to the Germanic hordes (Augustine himself had died while the Vandals besieged his city) and created a new fusion of Roman and Germanic cultures. The greatest embodiment of this cultural exchange was, of course, the reign of Charlemagne, the first Frankish emperor of the West. According to his biographer Einhard, Charlemagne’s favorite book was Augustine’s *Concerning the City of God*. He took great pains to paint the king of

the Franks not as a mere seeker of loot and glory like earlier Germanic kings, but as a fighter of just wars to keep the earthly peace, especially against non-Christian enemies like the pagan Saxons and the Muslims of Spain. Whether Charlemagne truly embodied Augustine's ideas of warfare is debatable; after all, Einhard himself admits that he has a considerable bias in favor of the king. Still, Charlemagne's example would prove to be vital to maintaining the idea of just warfare into the High Middle Ages.

By the year 900, his successors had shattered the earthly peace achieved by Charlemagne as they divided his empire amongst themselves. New threats, particularly the raids of the Northmen, would create further chaos and inspire a new military ideal—chivalry. Based on the concept of heavy cavalry and wedded to older Germanic traditions, the new warrior elite would revolutionize the fighting of wars. These early knights were not the pious and courteous figures of romantic tales; indeed, most of them engaged in what we would consider most unchivalrous behavior. In response, the Church attempted to rein in the knights by setting definite limits on their behavior. These efforts took many forms. The Church insinuated itself into the knighting ceremony until it became a secular version of the rite of baptism, reminding the knight that his first “liege lord” was God Himself. The Peace of God movement sought to limit the damage that knights could do by threatening to excommunicate any knight who showed violence to the poor, the clergy, or the property of the Church. Similarly, the Truce of God should limit fighting only on specific days of the week (typically sunrise on Monday to sunset on Wednesday). Though these edicts of the Church were largely unenforceable, they did make the Church the ultimate arbiter of which types of wars to fight and under what circumstances. The crusading movement would be the ultimate expression of this theoretical power.

Prior to the First Crusade, Pope Gregory VII had commissioned the canon lawyer Anselm of Lucca to compile Augustine's texts on just war for use against his adversary, the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV during the Investiture Controversy. Indeed, Gregory seemed to have wanted to launch an expedition to the East as early as 1074, but his conflict with Henry preempted those plans. In 1096, Gregory's protégé Pope Urban II used Anselm's *Collectio canonum* in his preaching of an armed expedition to Jerusalem. At the Council of Clermont, Urban preached a sermon that launched the crusading movement as an Augustinian just war with both defensive and offensive characteristics. In the first case, Urban

emphasized the need to defend the eastern Christians, “you must help your brothers living in the Orient, who need your aid for which they have already cried out many times.”¹⁵ To justify the offensive nature of the crusade, Urban characterized the Moslems as pagans who have unlawfully seized and defiled the Holy Land, describing them as “despised, degenerate, and enslaved by demons.”¹⁶ To this traditional Augustinian view, however, Urban added an innovation: the idea that the crusade is a positive form of warfare waged not only for the punishment of evildoers, but also for the salvation of the crusaders’ souls:

Remission of sins will be granted for those going thither, if they end a shackled life either on land or in crossing the sea, or in struggling against the heathen . . . Let those . . . who are accustomed to wage private wars wastefully even against Believers, go forth against the Infidels in a battle worthy to be undertaken now and to be finished in victory. Now, let those, who until recently existed as plunderers, be soldiers of Christ; now, let those, who formerly contended against brothers and relations, rightly fight barbarians; now, let those, who recently were hired for a few pieces of silver, win their eternal reward.¹⁷

Urban believed unequivocally that real knights go on crusade. In Urban’s hands, the crusade became a war waged not out of necessity, but Christians can eagerly embrace it as an act of penance and a means of attaining grace.

By the birth of Thomas Aquinas in 1225, the crusading movement had matured into a true religious tradition. Saladin’s re-conquest of Jerusalem had reversed the victory of the First Crusade in 1099. They dispatched the Third, Fourth and Fifth Crusades in an effort to restore Christian rule of the Holy Land to no avail. During Aquinas’s lifetime, they launched two more crusades with no appreciable result. What is more, in 1215, the Church extended the indulgence promising crusaders forgiveness of their sins to those involved in the Albigensian Crusade in southern France against the heretical Cathars. The advent and indeed frequency of religiously motivated warfare naturally necessitated a second look at the concept of just war in this new context. As the greatest theologian of his age, Aquinas restated the concept of just war and applied it to the new circumstances in which Christendom found itself.

Like Augustine, Aquinas was no stranger to the art of war. He was the seventh son of a powerful noble family in southern Italy. His father and his elder brothers were all knights, though his family intended young Thomas for the Church from a very early age. Rejecting his family’s plans to install him as the abbot of Monte Cassino, a position from which he could aid the family’s political fortunes,

Aquinas instead joined the newly formed Order of Preachers, also known as the Dominicans. This order founded expressly for the purpose of combating heresy through disputation and its members soon became the theological “shock-troops” of the Church. As Aquinas continued his education at Paris and Cologne, he devoured the newly re-discovered works of Aristotle and joined in the attempt to reconcile his philosophical approach with the Christian faith. In doing so, historians eventually recognized him as the greatest of the scholastic theologians.

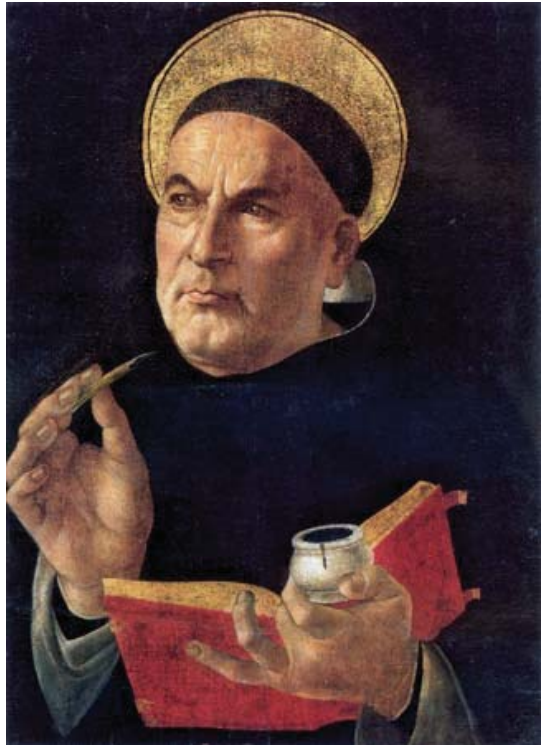


Figure 2 *St. Thomas Aquinas*. Attributed to Botticelli, c. 1481-1482.

Aquinas addressed whether war is always sinful in the *Secunda Secundae Partis* (Second Part of the Second Part) of his

masterpiece, the *Summa Theologica*, which discussed the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. In doing so, he placed the just war squarely in the category of charitable acts, an assertion that Augustine stopped just short of making. How does Aquinas complete the transition from Augustine’s just war of unfortunate necessity to the new crusader ideal of war as a charitable act?

For Aquinas, a just war required three conditions that are rooted in Augustinian theology. The first and third conditions were essentially the same as Augustine presented; a just war requires “the authority of the sovereign by whose command the war is to be waged” and that “the belligerents should have a right intention, so that they intend the advancement of good, or the avoidance of evil.”¹⁸ It was in Aquinas’s second condition that a subtle shift in perspective becomes evident: “Secondly, a just cause is required, namely that those who are attacked should be attacked because they deserve it on account of some fault.”¹⁹ Although he

cited the passage above from Augustine's *Questions on the Heptateuch* as justification for this, Aquinas did not fully define "just cause" in his usual exacting manner. On the contrary, he was content to allow this definition to remain somewhat vague, most probably in an effort to create a palatable context for the crusading ideal. By defining a just cause of war in a deliberately vague manner, Aquinas retroactively justified the crusades, incorporating Urban's interpretation of Augustine's theology into the canon. Nowhere in this discussion of just cause (or indeed anywhere in the article) did Aquinas make mention of war as a necessary evil, something that Augustine consistently focused on in his writings. What's more, through this definition of just cause, Aquinas made no distinction between defensive and offensive wars, a distinction that Augustine was very careful to define. Since the Church preached that the crusades were offensive wars with a defensive character, the merging of the two different types of war seems inspired by the advent of the crusading movement.

Another crusade-inspired alteration appeared in Aquinas's description of right intention: "For it may happen that the war is declared by the legitimate authority, and for a just cause, and yet be rendered unlawful through a wicked intention."²⁰ In this statement, one can hear an echo of the great preacher of the Second Crusade, Bernard of Clairvaux, who claimed that the failure of that crusade was not the fault of the cause itself, but of those knights who answered the call. These knights, like the Israelites of Exodus, "were . . . in their hearts returning to Egypt."²¹ In Aquinas's theology, the crusade was a just cause betrayed only by the sins of the crusaders.

As the community of the faithful grew from a minority within the Roman Empire to a dominant force throughout Europe, it became necessary to reconcile Christ's pacifist teachings with the necessity of warfare in the secular world. Augustine established the Christian rules for warfare, creating a theory of just war based on necessity to maintain earthly peace and purity of intention. Aquinas took Augustine's framework and transformed it to meet the requirements of an age that regarded spiritual warfare as an act of charity and the secular world took on a religious identity. In expanding the concept of just war, Aquinas blended the secular and religious needs of Christendom into a theology that justified the Crusades. In doing so, he created the foundation for the modern concept of just war.

Notes

1. Tertullian, *The Chaplet*, trans. S. Thewall, from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight, chap. 11, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0304.htm>.
2. Origen, *Against Celsus*, trans. Frederick Crombie, from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight, 3.7, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0416.htm>.
3. "Galerius and Constantine: Edicts of Toleration 311/313," Internet Medieval Sourcebook, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/edict-milan.asp> (accessed January 1, 2013).
4. Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 17, 13.
5. Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, 15, 5.
6. Ibid.
7. Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, 19, 17.
8. Augustine, "Letter 189," quoted in Herbert Andrew Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 159.
9. Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, 19, 8.
10. Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, 1, 26.
11. Ibid.
12. Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, 3, 10.
13. Augustine, *Questions on the Heptateuch.*, 6, 10, quoted in Deane, 312.
14. Augustine, *Contra Faustum*, XXII, 74, quoted in Deane, 161.
15. Fulcher of Chartres, "The Chronicle of Fulcher of Chartres, Book I," trans. Martha E. McGinty, in *The First Crusade: The Chronicle of Fulcher of Chartres and Other Source Materials*, 2nd ed., ed. Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 52.
16. Fulcher of Chartres, 53.
17. Ibid.
18. Thomas Aquinas, "Summa Theologica: War (Secunda Secundae Partis, Q. 40)," <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/3040.htm> (accessed January 1, 2013).
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Bernard of Clairvaux, "Bernard of Clairvaux: Apology," Internet Medieval Sourcebook, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/bernard1.asp> (accessed January 1, 2013).

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