Soldiering: Can Christians serve in the armed forces?

by Martin L. Cook in the July 4, 2001 issue

When Martin Luther asked “Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved,” he was struggling to find a theologically defensible balance between two competing demands. As he penned the 1526 essay, he was feeling the force of the New Testament’s condemnation of violence and Christ’s exhortation to nonresistance of evil. But Luther also faced the demands of political reality. The survival of the Reformation, he realized, was dependent on the fighting power of the German princes. Finally, Luther was unwilling to sacrifice political prudence and practicality on the altar of biblical literalism, or to identify Christianity with sectarian withdrawal from the political sphere.

I propose a similar approach to military service in our time. Christian ethics has generated much scholarly work on “just war” theory, and recent literature is rich in discussions of violence—both the literal kind, and the kind embedded in institutional structures. But there is a notable lack of attention to the moral concern most typical of early Christians: the legitimacy of military service.

This is all the more surprising at a time when tens of thousands of Christians are serving in the U.S. armed forces. For more than 20 years now, the U.S. has relied entirely on volunteers to fill the ranks of the armed forces. Anyone familiar with the culture of the American military knows that many officers and enlisted soldiers identify themselves as pious Christians. In their minds, there is no tension between their commitments to faith and to the military. Indeed, many military personnel believe that their commitment to a cause larger than self, and to possible self-sacrifice in defense of that cause, is one of the highest and most noble of Christian callings.

Given the generally antimilitary ethos of many mainline Protestant traditions and clergy and most Roman Catholics, one might expect them to suggest that it is moral failure that causes these individuals to volunteer for military service. Such views are

rarely articulated. As a result, there is little serious dialogue about whether Christians ought to serve in the military.

Christian ethicists and leaders are remiss in not initiating such a discussion. Most denominations feature a culture gap between their civilian members and military members. At best, it is a gulf of mutual noncomprehension. At worst, the gulf fuels distrust and suspicion.

Given the nature and function of U.S. forces at this historical juncture, how should Christians think about voluntary military service? What advice can Christian leaders give regarding the meaning of choosing voluntary military service?

The contemporary American military is used for many purposes. It fights wars. It provides disaster relief in cases of flood, hurricane and earthquake. It deploys peacekeeping and peacemaking missions all over the world, from East Timor to Bosnia to Kosovo. Each of those missions presents a different moral frame for the meaning of military service. Clearly, the moral meaning of any profession is tied to what someone who joins it imagines he or she will be doing as a result of making that choice.

Let’s start with the core function of the military—its essential reason for being. All activities in the military ultimately serve to sustain the “pointy end of the spear.” In its most formal and sterile formulation, their purpose is “national defense.” A more direct expression is “fighting and winning America’s wars.” When military people talk among themselves, they state the unvarnished truth: it is “killing people and breaking things.”

The prima facie case against Christians’ performing this function is unquestionable. The message of the New Testament, the early church and the example of Jesus himself all point to nonresistance to evil as the model of Christian life. Yet those texts and examples fail to address a perennial problem: How do we protect innocent people and maintain order in a world where wrongdoing is a permanent feature of life?

For Augustine and Luther, the Christian soldier is justified in his military service because he is performing an essential service for the good of the society. Properly used, the military protects a sphere of civil life within which a relatively peaceful existence is possible.

I think this view of morally legitimate military service is correct. But it is too easy to conclude that this argument alone justifies service in the contemporary American military. There is no foreseeable scenario in which our military will need to be used in defense of the nation in the strict sense. By “strict sense” I mean the defense of our borders from an armed incursion that threatens national survival or political institutions.

When we use the war-making capabilities of our military around the world, we are using them for purposes that can rarely be labeled honestly as national defense. At some risk of oversimplification, I would identify two uses of military force in modern American deployments. On some occasions, the U.S. uses military force in pursuit of vital national interests; on others, it applies force in support of international moral and political ideals. In the post-cold-war world the latter type of interventions are likely to increase.

Most exercises of American military power in recent decades fall into the first category—the service of national interests. The invasions of Panama and Grenada, the attacks on Sudan and Afghanistan, and the deployment in the gulf war fit into this framework.

I’m not endorsing the judgment that American interests were at stake in each of these cases. But the individual member of the armed forces who was involved in any of these situations is the agent of the National Command Authority, and pursues objectives which in that authority’s judgment are weighty enough to be sought through use of the military instrument.

Is a morally conscientious Christian justified in joining a profession in which he or she voluntarily accepts the obligation to serve as such an agent? Before tackling this question directly, let me set aside one matter immediately. I take it to be obvious that no one should be willing to serve in a campaign or conflict known to a moral certainty to be unjust, or conducted in clear violation of just-war reasoning. Nor should they volunteer to serve a state whose leadership, in their judgment or that of their Christian community, routinely uses soldiers in ways that are not justified.

But military personnel are entitled to give their leaders a large benefit of the doubt. They may in conscience assume that decision-makers have weighed the moral and personal costs of using them in conflict against the weight of the national interests involved and deemed it an acceptable equation.

It follows that citizens should not in conscience volunteer for military service unless they believe in the general moral seriousness and competence of the command authority that will be in control of them. It is not necessary to believe that leaders are omniscient or infallible or even morally pure. On this point, Shakespeare's soldiers have it exactly right in their reply to King Henry V. Henry asserts that soldiers may die contented in the king's company, "his cause being just, and his quarrel honorable." The soldiers reply with appropriate skepticism concerning the decision to use them in this war in the first place: "That's more than we know. Ay, and more than we should seek after; for we know enough, if we know we are the king's subjects: if his cause be wrong, our obedience to the king wipes the crime of it out of us."

I do not mean to give soldiers a moral blank check. The permission is, rather, hypothetical: if one believes that military forces must exist to protect the common life of the state and the lives of the innocent, and if one sincerely believes that he or she serves a relatively good state, led by reasonably competent and responsible leaders, then one is morally justified in that service.

But what justifies the soldier's willingness to fight, kill and possibly die in the service of national interests as determined by national command authority? At root, this question is about the moral status of the sovereign state itself. For Christians, the sovereign state is necessarily a morally ambiguous thing.

In principle, Christianity is cosmopolitan. From its inception Christianity was committed to Isaac Watts's claim that "In Christ there is no east or west, in him no south or north."After Constantine, the attempt to convert religious and moral universalism into institutional and political form led to the corruption of both church and state.

The Reformation shattered the church's grasp on the whole of Europe, but without rethinking (except in the case of the Radical Reformation) the principle that a single all-encompassing church should be yoked with a single state. The result was relentless religious warfare until the Peace of Westphalia (1648) set the stage for an international order of sovereign independent states. The system Westphalia established was, morally and religiously viewed, always a compromise arrangement. It was a pragmatic accommodation between the ideal principle of religious universalism and the practical reality of political and confessional fragmentation.

In the Westphalian international system, military service takes place in a less-than-universal nation-state. The soldier serves his or her state and strives to protect and advance the interests of that state in the inherent competition between similar states. The American state serves to protect the lives and interests of Americans.

In the current international context, the U.S. serves as what former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright called the “indispensable nation.” In peacekeeping and diplomacy, U.S. participation is expected and sought by almost all other states.

Only the politically naïve could fail to realize that being the “indispensable nation” depends on the appearance and reality of American power. For the U.S. to continue to play that role in the world, it must defend and advance its interests effectively and maintain its credible military leadership. Service in the U.S. military supports those requirements. It is not necessary to claim American moral purity to justify that service—any more than Augustine felt the need to join Roman pagans in the glorification of Rome’s rise to power and empire, or Luther to exaggerate the purity of the motives of the German princes.

The ability to threaten and to use coercive force is a morally necessary instrument of worldly power. We who benefit from the voluntary service of our fellow Christians (and others) who take on the moral, physical and spiritual burden of that service honor them poorly when we simply wish those sad necessities away.

Ancient Athenian leader Pericles put the matter most honestly, I believe, in his address to the Athenian assembly. His words come after Athens’ first encounter with military defeat and plague in the Peloponnesian War. They are words of striking relevance to the place of the United States in the modern world:

It is right and proper for you to support the imperial dignity of Athens. This is something in which you all take pride, and you cannot continue to enjoy the privileges unless you also shoulder the burdens of empire. . . . Nor is it any longer possible for you to give up this empire, though there may be some people who in a mood of sudden panic and in a spirit of political apathy actually think that this would be a fine and noble thing to do. In fact you now hold your empire down by force: it may have been wrong to take it; it is certainly dangerous to let it go. And the kind of people who talk of doing so and persuade others to adopt their point of view would very soon bring a state to ruin. . . . For those who are politically apathetic can only survive if they are supported by people who are capable of taking action. They are

quite valueless in a city which controls an empire, though they would be safe slaves in a city that was controlled by others.

In the contemporary geopolitical circumstance, service in the American military is, on balance, a force for relative good. That good is grounded in a balance of power and coercion, a balance that Reinhold Niebuhr argued is the closest approximation to justice and peace achievable in this world. To the fundamental question then—is military service to defend and advance American national interest and security a valid Christian vocational choice—my answer is yes.

I would also point to Pericles' wise counsel. All of us in the U.S. benefit from the service of those "willing to act" on our behalf. Because they have been so successful for such a long time, we have a luxury that is very rare in human societies. For us citizens, the connection between the peace and prosperity of the society we live in and the reality of our military power is largely invisible to us.

Unless we are really willing to give up the "empire"—the place America has secured for itself in the economic and political sphere of the world—we must also accept the burdens, practical and moral, of maintaining that place. It is simply bad faith to derive the benefit and then condemn a major source of that benefit.

Furthermore, unless we really believe the world as a whole would be better off without the U.S. to play the "indispensable nation" role, we must think clearly about the fact that our power serves not merely national but global welfare and stability.

Naturally, there's lot of room in this framework for determining what are American national interests, and for criticizing ways in which that has historically been construed to justify questionable policies. There's room to ask, for example, what degree of redistribution of the world's wealth and debt forgiveness would be acceptable to the U.S. and other economic major powers without destabilizing the world order. There's room to ask whether we understand the tensions of other societies clearly enough before we use their conflicts as a reason to intervene. But any such assessment must be made in the clear light of political reality, and not in terms of universalizing an idealism that cannot be practically implemented.

The other typical use of contemporary American military force—service of internationally defined moral and political concerns—is not tied strongly to American national interest. The "ideal type" of this use of American force is as part of a coalition deployed in the name of humanitarian intervention, peacekeeping or

peacemaking.

Although resembling in some ways domestic police work, such use of military power is inherently less discriminate than policing. Only very rarely will military force be able directly to act against “the perpetrator,” especially if we mean the command authority behind military atrocities. In the ideal police model, to take Kosovo as an example, one would wish to apprehend or attack Serbian leaders themselves, and individual soldiers and commanders responsible for ethnic cleansing and atrocity. But in practice, all the standard just-war concerns about noncombatant immunity and discrimination are present, perhaps even more strongly so, because of the inherently imprecise nature of the military instrument.

The Clinton administration has established use of American forces in operations such as peacekeeping, peacemaking and nation-building as a fundamental part of our present national security policy. It is the stated policy of the secretary general of the United Nations that the world should move toward a uniform policy of preparedness to reach through the borders of sovereign states whenever and wherever the defense of fundamental human rights requires it.

What should be our moral assessment of military service in this form? How should the Christian view military service in a blue-helmeted or internationally authorized coalition force? This kind of military service comes closest to the Christian understanding of military service. If an effective international consensus were to build up in support of consistent and principled use of coercive power in support of universal principle, it would represent true “self-less service” by military personnel.

But there are numerous obstacles to making U.S. military forces resemble this kind of international law-enforcement force. On the side of international political structure, the presently constituted United Nations is too weak to exercise such force effectively and consistently. Consequently, agreement in the Security Council to authorize such actions is inconsistent, and heavily influenced by the interests of the major powers.

Also, because international law enforcement depends on the voluntary participation of the militaries of sovereign states, those states inevitably are averse to running significant risks to their own forces in defense of the lives and rights of individuals who are not their own citizens. The felt sense of international solidarity is not yet to the point where sacrifice of American military lives in defense of, say, Kosovar

civilians, feels as justified as would the defense of the same numbers of American lives.

But even the glimpses of effective action by “the international community” hold out a promise that corresponds well to the kind of vision of global human community that Christian ethics should advocate. A Christian realist vision would encourage and support Christians (and others) in their military service—especially if the military they serve increasingly approximates the ideal of Christian universalism.

The war criminal, the aggressor, the practitioner of genocide and the terrorist are not fading from the scene. In such a world, only the presence of effective military forces makes possible the maintenance of relative peace and security in international politics. Voluntary service in support of that relative peace is a self-sacrificial Christian calling.