

# The Military Monastic Orders in the Holy Land: Some historical-sociological considerations

George Cassar

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Religion was the principal push factor that prompted men from the elite of society, families of the old nobility, to become warring monks. Religion was, no less, the pull factor which attracted such upper class exponents to give up their largely mundane advantages for other, more spiritual, gratifications. After all, they were monks in the service of God and they made it their duty to defend God to the last drop of their blood. They were thus convinced that this was the correct way to fulfil their religious duties and their dedication would ultimately gain them the reward of eternal happiness in Heaven.

These were no ordinary men. As Seward puts it, "The knight brethren of the military orders were noblemen vowed to poverty, chastity and obedience, living a monastic life in convents which were at the same time barracks, waging war on the enemies of the Cross."<sup>1</sup> Their religious fervour needed to be very strong, and their vocation unflinching, as otherwise their monastic life would have been sheer madness. To set aside wealth and power as offered by their noble inheritance was only justified if it were replaced by a more worthy substitute. Indeed, such noblemen would have remarked, the

substitute concerned a much more creditable cause - a life totally dedicated to God and to Him alone.

The phenomenon of the warrior monks goes back to very early times. In fact what triggered off the setting up of such monastic orders was the Christian Crusades against the Muslim in the Holy Land. This was the spark, the inspiration, for various groups of men, each of which banded together into a close-knit, organised, dedicated and disciplined body geared at helping those who went to the land where Jesus Christ was born, lived and died. These altruistic men were bound by religious rules and as such were considered to be monks.

Each monastic order constituted what Goffman would call a total institution where the brethren became 'owned' by the organisation and consequently the monks had nothing of their own but everything now belonged to their order, no less their personal life and future. Thus the total institution as a hierarchical organisation would have absolute control over the members. The brothers to all intents and purposes became a defined class - persons in the charge of the institution. They are more or less "cut off from the wider society" and "lead an 'enclosed' formally administered life together."<sup>2</sup> The concept of total institutions implies that the persons joining these monastic orders would have been re-socialised in such a way as to strip from them their old roles and identities and remodel their personality and actions in the rule of the particular order. This involved mortification as the novices and brothers were deprived of family and friendship networks from their past and became vulnerable to the institutional control and

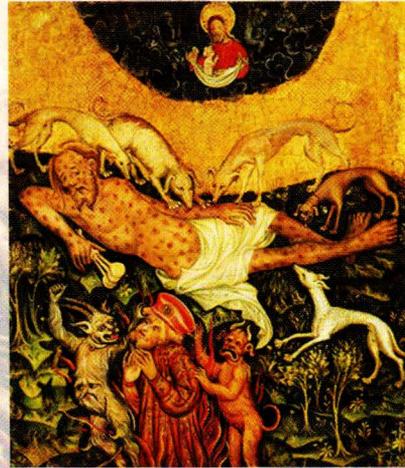
<sup>1</sup> D. Seward, *The Monks of War: The Military Religious Orders* (London, 1995), 17.

<sup>2</sup> E. Goffman, *Asylums* (1961) (Harmondsworth, 1968), 11, as quoted by D. Lee & H. Newby, *The Problem of Sociology* (London, 1983), 334.

discipline of their order not being permitted to have any personal items. They were consequently divested of their former selves to put on the identity of their order.<sup>3</sup>

The oldest of such monastic associations whose affiliates separated themselves from their worldly trappings to embark on a spiritual Christian call is the Order of St John. It first appeared around 1070 in the form of a hospice for the care of pilgrims in the Holy Land. By 1113 one could speak of an order of brothers, with Brother Gerard emerging as the undisputed organiser of what became known as the Hospital. These Hospitallers were thus given formal recognition by papal bull through which Pope Paschal II put them under his protection and granted them privileges.<sup>4</sup> It was under the leadership of Raymond du Puy, successor to Gerard, that the Hospitallers were given a second role - that of protecting the Christian pilgrims travelling from the coast to Jerusalem. They thus now became warrior monks.

Though the Knights of St John were the first of the monastic orders who would later also delve in the art of war, the Templars could claim to have been the first military monastic order, as the use of arms was contemplated from the order's inception in 1115. When the Burgundian Hugue de Payens and the Flemish Godfrey de Saint Adhemar convened with seven other knights in northern France to set up this order, they did so with the intention of escorting pilgrims from Jerusalem to Jericho. Swearing an oath before the Patriarch of Jerusalem in 1118, they bound themselves with the vows of poverty, obedience and chastity. As they had vowed to own nothing but their weapons and to wear only those clothes which were given to them, this group of confreres was first known as the Poor Knights of Christ. This appellation gave way to the more permanent designation of Knights Templar, or Knights of the Temple, when they took up quarters in a wing of the palace of King Baldwin which was supposed to have been erected on the site of the Temple of Solomon.<sup>5</sup>



*As in Christ's parable, Lazarus was a leper, the Order of St Lazarus was dedicated to the care of lepers*

Besides these two monastic orders there were others operating in the Holy Land. One such order was that dedicated to St Lazarus which traces a common origin with the Order of St John. Both, it is believed, were under Blessed Gerard. Indeed, they were one. The papal bull of 15 February 1113 makes reference to "Gerard, Founder and Governor of the Hospital at Jerusalem and his Legitimate Successors". With time developments took place and some hold that in 1120 the Order of St Lazarus took on a separate identity when Boyand Roger, Rector of the Hospital of Jerusalem, was elected Master of the Hospitallers of Saint Lazarus. Though starting as a caring order run by leper knights who operated lepers' hospices, the Order of St Lazarus developed its military arm when knights from the Order of the Templars who contracted leprosy left their order of origin and moved to that of St Lazarus. These knights taught their new brethren the warring arts.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> M. Hughes, C.J. Kroehler & J.W. Vander Zanden, *Sociology: The core*, 6th ed. (New York, 2002), 113-4.

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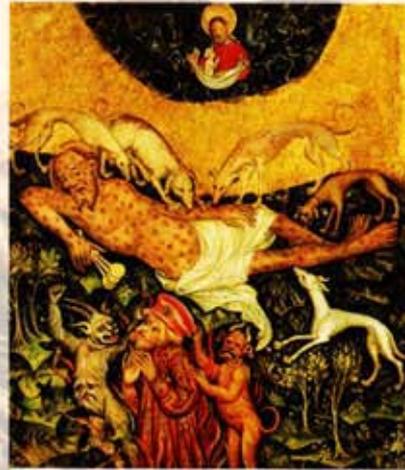
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*The poet Tannhäuser in Teutonic garb - from the Codex Manesse*

The Crusades gave birth to another two warring monastic orders. While the first three just mentioned were multi-national in composition, accepting within their ranks knights and other personnel from any Christian nation, the next two were created by and for specific ethnic groupings. Thus the Hospitallers of St Thomas of Canterbury in Acre was for Englishmen while the Teutonic Knights accepted only ethnic Germans. Both orders were set up to nurse their compatriots wounded during the sieges and battles taking place in the Holy Land. The English order was born during the siege of Acre in 1189-91 as was the order of the German brethren.<sup>7</sup> Both also developed their military role later on.

These five orders were thus born and lived the first part of their existence as carers of the sick who went to the Holy Land either as pilgrims or as soldiers. Their primary vocation was charity, in that they were there in support of the needy. They nurtured the moral conviction that they should deprive themselves of their own ego so that they could be of service unto others. This selflessness thus became the force that made them

<sup>7</sup> Wise, 18.



function. Though not to the same degree, the caring vocation was thus a characteristic of the work and deeds of these various monastic orders. Referring to the Knights Hospitaller of the Order of St John, Jacques de Vitry observed that these knights "abounded in works of mercy, and lived sparingly and austere themselves, but were kind and open-handed to the poor and sick, whom they used to call their masters."<sup>8</sup>

Notwithstanding this charitable disposition, a second resolve was no less important. This was the defence of the Holy Land, the place where their Master had threaded during His mission in this world to save humanity. This was no common territory. This was the place where Jesus had set up His religion to which they now adhered. This was the place they could never allow any unbeliever to conquer. Such a reality was identical to why these orders were there. It was indistinguishable from their existence. They were convinced that fighting for God was righteous, indeed, it was indispensable. It was their precise duty. As Bernard, the Cistercian abbot, ardently believed, there was no contradiction between being a monk and killing Moslems. Writing about the Knights Templar - or as he knew them, the Poor Knights - Bernard emphatically stated in his pamphlet *On the Praise of the New Knighthood*, "... the soldiers of Christ wage the battles of their Lord in safety. They fear not the sin of killing an enemy or the peril of their own death, inasmuch as death either inflicted or borne for Christ has no taint of crime and rather merits the greater glory..."<sup>9</sup>

Such religious ideal was the core of thought and practice in the Middle Ages. As Auguste Comte would put it, during this period - described by him as the theological stage - everything was "dominated by feeling and imagination, with only a slight restraint from reason." Theology, Comte explained, operated on a purely subjective level and this sidelined it from the objectivity of practice in the real world.<sup>10</sup> These monastic orders saw nothing of this world in what they were doing. They were simply following their subjective moral feeling. Religion is after all "a system of beliefs and practices related to an ultimate being, beings, or to the supernatural."

Or, alternatively, religion is "that which is sacred in a society, that is, ultimate beliefs and practices which are inviolate."<sup>11</sup>

In the writings of great Christian theologians of the period there was nothing unnatural for religion and war to mix together. Indeed, Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (died 430), made this quite plain. In *The City of God*, while condemning war in itself, Augustine saw nothing wrong in meeting violence with violence if this meant safeguarding the peace. St Augustine wrote more on this theme elsewhere. Observing that the Bible showed that God does not disapprove of soldiers, it was thus possible to be a soldier and please God at the same time. This statement was of course based on a specific maxim: war had to be waged with the correct intention, that is, it had to be waged in the quest for peace. In this case war became justifiable. St Augustine however did not refrain from adding that fighting was not the highest form of the religious life; God's approval would be best gained if one were to withdraw from the world and live a life of contemplation and prayer.<sup>12</sup>

These early knights had thus this double purpose in life. They were monks, and thus they were bound to pray, withdraw from the world and concentrate on God and the spiritual. Yet they were also defenders of the land and the people of God, and thus were justifiably prone to fight to protect this land from being violated by persons who did not respect it. To keep the peace in the Holy Land they needed to wage war. After all the other side was doing the same thing. Thus Christians and Muslims were on the same wavelength. They were on a head-on collision as both found their religious convictions (besides other motivations) overwhelmingly important. In a paradoxical twist, cross and crescent were in agreement. It was a contorted accord to wage war on each other. Both believed it was legitimate to kill in the name of their religion, in the name of their God.

As has been noted, the religious fervour was imperative. All these Christian monastic orders started off their existence by choosing a rule by which to live.

<sup>8</sup> A.J. Boas, *Jerusalem in the time of the Crusades: Society, landscape and art in the Holy City under Frankish rule* (London, 2001), 27.

<sup>9</sup> Wise, 5.

<sup>10</sup> G. Ritzer, *Classical Sociological Theory*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1996), 105.

<sup>11</sup> J. Haynes, *Religion in Global Politics* (London, 1998), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Nicholson, 14.

## The Military Monastic Orders in the Holy Land:



*"The patron Saint adopted in the early years was St John the Almoner"  
(painted by Tiziano in the church of San Leone - Venice)*

The Hospitallers began by adopting the Benedictine rule when they were in their initial years but by 1113 Gerard switched to the Augustinian tradition when his order became independent as proclaimed by papal bull.<sup>13</sup> The patron saint adopted in the early years, that is St John the Almoner, was now also changed "for a more important St John" - that is, St John the Baptist.<sup>14</sup> The change of rules was a natural process dictated by the developments in the Order. Adopting and keeping the Benedictine rule would have constrained the Hospitallers within the walls of their hospitals. Taking up the Augustinian rule gave them more leeway to move out and reach the needy in the field. This change was the cue to a mission 'in the field' where the Hospitallers participated fully in the every-day affairs of campaigning in the war against the Muslim without forgetting their original role, that of carers and curers of the sick and the needy.

The Templars too adopted a monastic rule. Being a military-religious order, its military role was guided by the statutes given to the Order by the Council of the Catholic Church sitting in the French town of Troyes. On the other hand, its religious statutes and rules were the work of Bernard, abbot of the Cistercian

<sup>13</sup> Wise, 10.

<sup>14</sup> Seward, 30.

monastery of Clairvaux. It was thus the Cistercian rule which the Poor Knights followed.<sup>15</sup> It is evident that the Templars too had been inspired by the Benedictine philosophy as the Cistercian monks had been established through a Benedictine reform at Citeaux in 1098 by St Robert in an effort to restore as much as possible the literal observance of the Rule of St Benedict.<sup>16</sup>

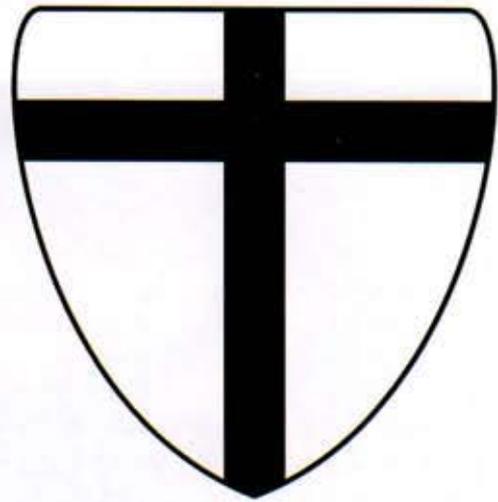
Regarding the Order of St Lazarus, an offshoot from the Order of St John, this adopted the Rule of St Augustine and by 1256 had been recognised by Pope Alexander IV. By this time the Order had grown considerably and established itself in the Holy Land but also spread into neighbouring territories continuing its hospitaller mission.<sup>17</sup> Their patron saint was the Saint Lazarus.



*"The Knights of St Thomas Acon showed how much St Thomas Becket was revered at the Third Crusade"*

The English Hospitallers of St Thomas of Canterbury, on the other hand, established as it is commonly held by Richard the Lion Heart, also adopted the Cistercian rule as the monks of the Order became known as the Knights of St Thomas Acon (the Anglicised version for Acre). The saint adopted was typically English and showed how much St Thomas Becket, or St Thomas of Canterbury (c. 1118-1170), was revered at the time of the Third Crusade when this order was established.<sup>18</sup>

The other ethnic monastic order was the Teutonic Order of Holy Mary in Jerusalem. The Order normally accepted within its ranks Germans by birth and was put under the patronage of St Mary. Established in 1190 it was confirmed by the German Crusader leader, Duke Frederick of Swabia. At first it was under the Hospitallers of St John but later on became independent of any other order.<sup>19</sup> As reported in the earliest chronicle of the



*The Black Cross on a white field was adopted by the Teutonic Order as their distinctive sign*

Teutonic Order, *Die Statuten des Deutschen Ordens*, the Rule of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem was adopted to guide them in their role as carers of the sick and the poor. To regulate their clergy, knights and other brethren, the Teutonic Order adopted the Rule of the Templars. This German order was officially granted papal recognition in 1199.<sup>20</sup> It thus transpires that the Teutonic Knights were guided by the Augustinian rule with regards to their hospitaller work while the Cistercian rule led them through their more day-to-day affairs outside their hospitals.

All the five orders of warrior-monks in the Holy Land were thus anchored in the religious tenets of the Catholic religion. There was nothing strange in this as they were, after all, Christian organisations. Yet the purpose for their being, that is, religious organisations geared for war, does today sound strange to say the least. Not so at the time of their inception. The brethren within these orders found a *modus vivendi* in the way they operated. This bipolarity of engagement - the role of monk cum soldier - was, even at the time of their inception in the 12th century, *a priori* contrary to canon laws which forbade the cleric from taking up arms. Yet a formula was struck

<sup>15</sup> Wise, 5.

<sup>16</sup> 'Cistercians', *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03780c.htm> (accessed on 8.i.2008).

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.st-lazarus.net/international/index.html> (accessed on 2.i.2008).

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.stthomasofacon.org/history.htm> (accessed on 8.i.2008); Wise, 18.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.imperialteutonicorder.org/>

<sup>20</sup> Wise, 19.

forbade the cleric from taking up arms. Yet a formula was struck by which this *vinculum* could be circumvented. A distinction was drawn between those members of the order who were chaplains and those who were knights. While the chaplains were those who practised the religious duties, the knights were laymen who led a religious life within the organisation but were not clerics in actual fact. This produced a system where warfare and welfare could be combined without infringing the Church's canon laws.<sup>21</sup> Thus the monks of war<sup>22</sup> could operate without inhibition in Jerusalem and its environs.

Religion was at this time the bond which generally held the brethren in these orders in unison. It was the common element which prompted their actions; which made them what they were. As Durkheim would put it, religion is a system of mutually reinforcing beliefs, rites, and symbols. Such beliefs trigger off the rites by prompting people to keep their religious duties ever-present in their minds.<sup>23</sup> This is precisely the dynamic by which these monastic orders functioned. All their actions were derived from their beliefs in Christianity. Keeping their duties in front of them, the brethren could not falter in their actions. This could be seen for example in the rigorously plain and austere life of the Templars. They led a life as military Cistercians. Silence was emphasised to the extent that at times signs were used in the refectory so that no words would be uttered. Prayer routines were strictly adhered to and when particular prayers could not be said alternatives were set so that the religiosity of the members would be kept vivid and alive. Meals were eaten in silence and Biblical readings were recited. A special focus was reserved for the Books of Joshua and the Maccabees and of particular inspiration to one and all were the ferocious deeds of Judas, his brothers and other war-bands to recapture the Holy Land from the cruel infidels.<sup>24</sup> For the warrior-monks these exploits were tantamount to their own existence. It was their *raison d'être*, the symbol of their Order. Deriving the

the significance of all this from the theories of Emile Durkheim, symbolic objects are essential to serve as a persistent reminder of religious beliefs and duties.<sup>25</sup>

And the Hospitallers of the Order of St John were no less convinced that they were fighting in the name of their Lord. Through their actions they were interpreting the religious beliefs contemporaneous to their actions. They were following the creed of the holy war as interpreted by the Christian belief. The origins of holy war are found in the Old Testament where God is seen as a warrior fighting for His people. Thus, holy war was seen as the furthering of God's war and it was assumed that those who participated and fought directly for God would be granted eternal reward. Christian thought held that using violence directly to defend the Church secured for the participant warrior the eternal prize, the forgiveness of all his sins.<sup>26</sup> It was truly a solid incentive. Religious fervour could not go further than this. One died for a reason; and what a reason! These military monastic orders had thus a double purpose. They cared for God's children while fighting God's enemies. Charity and fighting were considered quite compatible in the medieval mind of the time.

War, violence, intolerance, and their effects were a direct cause for the blooming of a new concept in the religious set-up of the Catholic Church. For the first time monks were allowed to fight, to use force and aggression against fellow humans. Of course this did not mean a license to kill indiscriminately. What it meant was that the concept of war was carried to its limit. It became a holy war, therefore a war which could be condoned; justified even. As Erdmann put it, "Just as the rulership earlier had been Christianized ... so now was the military profession; it acquired a direct ecclesiastical purpose, for war in the service of the church or for the weak came to be regarded as holy and was declared to be a religious duty...."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Boas, 26.

<sup>22</sup> As they were called by Seward.

<sup>23</sup> W. Pope, 'Emile Durkheim', in R. Stones (ed.), *Key Sociological Thinkers* (London, 1998), 53.

<sup>24</sup> Seward, 32.

<sup>25</sup> Pope, 53.

<sup>26</sup> Nicholson, 15, 17.

<sup>27</sup> C. Erdmann, 'The Origin of the Idea of the Crusade' (Princeton, N.J., 1977), 57, as quoted in J.P. McKay, B.D. Hill, J. Buckler & P. Buckley Ebrej, *A History of World Societies* (Boston, 2000), 347.

Motivation for the actions of these monastic orders at this early stage was principally religious and devotional. Later on other considerations would become more rampant. Power, grandeur and rivalry would override the more sober and spiritual connotations. Till more mundane temptations began to crawl into the monastic orders, the observation made by Boas suffices to show as an example what the two more important orders did achieve: "By making the roads less hazardous the Templars promoted travel within the Holy Land. By establishing hospitals and lodgings and providing food, the Hospitallers looked after the basic needs of the visitors."<sup>28</sup>

In their initial years the military monastic orders generally struck a balance between their charitable works and the defence of their beloved Holy Land. They were truly the soldiers of Christ.

*Editorial Note:*

*This article is being herewith reprinted as, due to a technical misprint, in the first issue it had appeared devoid of references. Any involuntary omission is regretted.*

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<sup>28</sup> Boas, 26.