



[Tertullian, On Idolatry XIX](#)

Christians and military service

Name of the author: Tertullian

Date: 203 CE to 211 CE

Place: Carthage

Language: Latin

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Rhetorical treatise

Title of work: On Idolatry

Reference: XIX

Commentary:

For a general introduction to Tertullian, please see the commentary on [Apology V](#).

Tertullian's treatise *On Idolatry* discusses the challenges of living as Christian in the wider Graeco-Roman world, particularly in relation to religious practices which are ingrained in almost every aspect of life, including commerce, weddings, entertainment, and the Roman army. Tertullian advises Christians on how to live their lives within an essentially pagan world, while maintaining a distance from it and retaining their own religious identity. He is completely intolerant to idol worship, and while elsewhere he speaks positively of the relationship between Christianity and the Roman empire (e.g. Christians will honour and pray for the emperor and the empire's stability), in this treatise, he is quite unbending on various issues, including whether Christians can be part of the Roman military. The date of the treatise is much debated (for a helpful summary of the arguments, see Jan Hendrik Waszink and Jacobus van Winden, *Tertullianus, De Idololatria*, p. 10-13), largely because many have argued that Tertullian's thinking on the issue of the military seems more accommodating in his treatise *On the Military Garland*, written in 211 CE, leading some to suggest *On Idolatry* is a later progression in his intolerance. However, not all agree, and scholars such as Hendrik Waszink and van Winden prefer to date *On Idolatry* prior to 208.

The resounding conclusion in the present passage to the question of whether Christians can ever serve in the army appears to be no. However, we will see that this is not solely due to any overwhelming objections to the violence and death which Christians might be forced to enact on behalf of a political regime which at times oppressed them, proving itself to be at times counter to God's will, but rather due to its association with idolatry. The first part of this passage has been the subject of some debate, as it is uncertain whether the relative clause in verse 1 "*de militia ... quae inter dignitatem et potestatem*" is explicitly suggesting that the entire military service is "between dignity and power," or whether Tertullian is just referring to the higher ranks of the army, which he has previously discussed in the preceding chapters. Willi Rordorf is of the opinion that the former is correct, and understands the lower ranks as being incorporated also ("Tertullians Beurteilung des Soldatenstandes," p. 109). However, the question arises as to precisely what is meant by "between dignity and power." Does Tertullian suggest that the army is somehow neither perfectly dignified/honourable nor powerful? An alternative is possible. Waszink and van Winden argue that Tertullian actually only refers to the higher ranks here, and that "*inter*" should actually be replaced with "*intra*" making it so that the higher ranks of the army are "within the domain of dignity and power" (i.e. they consist of both these qualities) (*Tertullianus, De Idololatria*).

When Tertullian states that "now inquiry is made," it is possible that by "now" he refers to the time when he was writing the present tractate, at which point the question of Christian participation in the military was still an open question. Scholars who take this view tend to see his treatise *On the Military Garland*, which is much more accommodating of Christians in the army, as later, arguing that by the time he wrote this latter piece the militarisation of Roman administration meant that he had to contend with the fact that there were numerous Christians in the military, in various roles. Therefore, he was forced to find a way to justify this, and encourage them to remain steadfast (see Rordorf, "Tertullians Beurteilung des Soldatenstandes," p. 107, 118, 120). This is not the position taken by Waszink and van Winden, who suggest that the present *On Idolatry* is the later text (*Tertullianus, De Idololatria*, p. 272). Therefore, these scholars understand "now" to refer to this particular point in the treatise, with Tertullian outlining his current topic of concern.



Verse 2 essentially argues that military service is fundamentally incompatible with Christianity, before providing justifications for Christians joining the army from an imaginary opponent, who draws upon examples from the Bible, where key figures furnished themselves with military items (both weaponry and clothing) or led armies. Tertullian then proceeds in verse 3 to refute these arguments. One way of reading verse 3 is to understand Tertullian's argument as follows: if Moses can carry a rod, Aaron can wear a buckle, John the Baptist can wear a belt, and Nun's son can lead a march, then why can Christians not do the same? However, Hendrik Waszink and van Winden argue for something different. They suggest that *populus* in verse 2 is actually a scribal error, with the text intending to read *petrus* ("Peter"). According to this argument, Tertullian is alluding to the Gospel story where Peter, the disciple of Jesus, cuts off the ear (thereby symbolically "waging war") of the servant of the high priest when the mob comes to arrest Jesus, who promptly reprimands him and compels him to cease this violence. When Tertullian then states later in verse 3 that by disarming Peter Jesus symbolically disarmed all soldiers, his meaning is that Christians should not commit such acts of violence (*Tertullianus, De Idololatria*, p. 269).

The suggestion of verse 1 is that while the higher ranks of the army are absolutely out of bounds to Christians (see chapter XVII), because the lower ranks do not involve sacrifice or executions, these might be acceptable. Chapter XVIII has previously argued that the jobs required of those in the higher military ranks often consist of the wearing of "ornaments," which at the end of the present passage Tertullian states are unlawful for Christians if specifically associated with "unlawful actions" (presumably sacrifices). This would seem to suggest that idolatry is the main reason why Tertullian does not want Christians to join the Roman army (this is the view of Waszink and van Winden, *Tertullianus, De Idololatria*, p. 270; see also John Helgeland, "Christians and the Roman Army," p. 740). However, if the interpretation above relating to the actions of Peter is correct, then Jesus's "disarming" of Peter, and subsequently "every soldier," implies that physical violence at least plays some part in Tertullian's argument against Christians in the Roman army, even if this is only a rhetorical device.

While the "human sacrament" of verse 2 refers to the military oath sworn by soldiers (the *sacramentum militare*), the "divine sacrament" likely refers to the sacrament of baptism, when "one binds oneself to God" (Waszink and van Winden, *Tertullianus, De Idololatria*, p. 272). Tertullian argues that it is impossible to serve two masters (c.f. Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13)—one can either commit himself to God, and undergo the initiation of baptism, or one can commit himself to serving Caesar in the army. While the general point Tertullian is making here is that the army is incompatible with Christianity due to the potential for duties that may conflict with faith, the specific notion that both God and Caesar cannot be served at the same time is actually contrary to Tertullian's arguments elsewhere that Christians are not only perfectly capable of rendering their service (mainly through prayers) to Caesar, but are happy to do so (see *Apology* XXX). A subtle distinction is implied between praying for Caesar, and acknowledging him as "master." Chapter [XXX.4](#) of the *Apology* even explicitly states that Christians offer prayers specifically for the bravery of the army, suggesting further that Tertullian is happy with the army performing its functions of protecting and expanding the empire, just as long as Christians do not need to be involved in this particular aspect. The references to "the standard of Christ and the standard of the devil, the camp of light and the camp of darkness," in verse 2 of the present extract, however, imply that the Roman army (seemingly represented as bearing the "standard of the devil") serves a force directly contrary to God's will, which again presents a conflict with Tertullian's understanding of the empire as sanctioned by God (see, for instance, *Apology* [XXXII.2](#)). It may be that Tertullian's rhetorical listing of directly oppositional forces, intended to make the clear point that Christians must choose either the army or their faith, presents an excessively negative view of the military that is more a consequence of literary style than a deep hatred for the imperial army per se. Helgeland has argued that the "camp of light" is the Church, while the "camp of darkness" may refer to the subterranean sanctuaries where the cult of Mithra was observed ("Christians and the Roman Army," p. 739). While this would fit with the polemic against pagan religion standing behind the entire treatise, it cannot be determined for certain that Tertullian had this specific cult in mind here.

In conclusion, this passage clearly expresses that the problem with Christian membership of the Roman army was not simply the potential for violence (if, as Rordorf argues, he wrote in response to Christians joining the army largely because of a militarisation of administration, then this makes sense), but the potential exposure of Christians to what were viewed as idolatrous practices. When considered alongside Tertullian's insistence elsewhere that Christians offer prayers not only for the emperor's safety, but also for the expansion and continuation of the empire, aided by its army, we see that his objections to Christian participation on the military were essentially religious, and not borne out of political aversion to Rome.



Keywords in the original language:

- [animus](#)
- [bello](#)
- [Caesar](#)
- [centurio](#)
- [dominus](#)
- [fidelis](#)
- [illicitus](#)
- [licet](#)
- [miles](#)
- [militia](#)
- [pax](#)
- [populus](#)
- [potestas](#)
- [sacramentum](#)
- [signum](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [centurion](#)
- [devil](#)
- [divine sacrament](#)
- [dualism](#)
- [idolatry](#)
- [military oath](#)
- [military service](#)
- [military standard](#)
- [peace](#)
- [Roman army](#)
- [Roman rule](#)
- [sacrifice](#)
- [soldier](#)
- [war](#)

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