Doss on Nakashian, 'Warrior Churchmen of Medieval England, 1000-1250: Theory and Reality'

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The early eleventh-century Book of Sainte Foy's Miracles (Liber miracula sancte Fidis) relates the story of a monk named Gimon. Gimon kept his weapons and armor at his bedside and a warhorse in the monastic stable so that when under attack he could ride out at the head of a small armored contingent in defense of his monastery. Apparently, he rarely lost. In the story of Gimon we find an early and vigorous defense of clerical violence in the pursuit of a just cause, a type of argument that Craig M. Nakashian claims remained highly influential even as warrior-clerics increasingly faced criticism between 1000 and 1250 CE.

Warrior Churchmen of Medieval England, 1000-1250: Theory and Reality continues the conversation about the ways lay culture influenced church discourse and practice. Alongside other recent works, like Richard Kaeuper's Holy Warriors: The Religious Ideology of Chivalry (2009), Katherine Allen Smith's War and the Making of Monastic Culture (2011), and Lawrence Duggan's Armsbearing and the Clergy in the History and Canon Law of Western Christianity (2013), Nakashian interrogates, either directly or implicitly, the cultural embeddedness of European Christian morality in a violent warrior society. He achieves his goal of providing an important counterpoint to historical interpretations that present reform rhetoric as normative articulations of ideal Christian morality. Nakashian shows that warrior-clerics were neither wholly unacceptable nor the highest priority of eleventh- and twelfth-century reformers. Indeed, the demands that pressed a cleric into the fray remained relatively consistent over the 250 years Nakashian treats. To be sure, debate existed around the propriety of arms-bearing clerics, and canon law increasingly forbade the clergy from fighting, but Nakashian demonstrates that the wider high medieval society accepted priestly belligerents as long as they exhibited pious motives.

The book is divided into two parts. In the first part, "Prescriptive Voices of the Debate," Nakashian reviews the arguments concerning clerical arms-bearing. He begins with a review of the scriptural sources, then examines the evolving debate in canon law, and ends with the evidence from chivalric literature to understand how secular elites interpreted fighting clerics. The second part, "The Debate in Practice," is a collection of English case studies in chronological order stretching from the Odo of Bayeux and Norman invasion of 1066 to the Angevins and Peter de Roches in the mid-thirteenth century.
Part 1 includes chapters 1 through 3. The first chapter examines the evolving debates about clerical participation in violence from the Gospels up to the Peace and Truce of God movements in the early eleventh century. Nakashian finds that critics condemned warrior-clerics who they believed harbored "worldly" motivations for power, booty, and fame, while lamenting that fighting distracted clerics from their true spiritual profession. On the other hand, fighting clergy might be ignored, accepted, or praised if they fought in defense of their church, their flock, or the innocent. Though canons, church councils, and numerous writers repeatedly condemned clerical violence, the reality remained that some of the clergy fought and would continue to fight.

Chapter 2 explores the effects of eleventh-century papal reform on attitudes toward warrior-clerics. Nakashian finds that though reformers grew increasingly vocal about disarming the clergy, and even gained ground in the realm of canon law, many of their contemporaries accepted warrior-clerics, especially as popes like Leo IX, Gregory VII, and Urban II directed their own wars. Indeed, reformers were generally much more concerned with promoting clerical chastity and eradicating simony than curbing clerical arms-bearing.

In chapter 3 Nakashian addresses the portrayals of warrior-clerics in the *chansons de geste*. Here we find sacrificial, heroic clerics who exhibited prowess and bravery akin to lay warriors when pressed into battle. The authors of these deeds contrasted clerical heroes with selfish and greedy clergy who hid behind prohibitions against clerical bloodshed to avoid fighting for righteous causes.

The second part encompasses chapters 4 through 8. Chapters 4 and 5 treat the role of warrior-clerics during and immediately after the Norman Conquest. Especially important were Odo of Bayeux and Geoffrey of Coutances. These two examples used their royal connections to their advantage while relying on the norms of warrior culture to pursue their ecclesiastical goals. In Odo and Geoffrey, Nakashian argues that we see a unification of "chivalry" with high ecclesiastical office. These men show how warrior-clerics could leverage their political connections and loyalties to accumulate wealth and power. This authority they then used to benefit their diocese, to promote reform, or to reach their ecclesiastical ambitions. In the aftermath of 1066, powerful clerics, like the two archbishops of Canterbury, Lanfranc and Anselm, and the bishop of Worcester, Wulfstan, remained intimately involved in military planning and defense of the realm. In all of this they did not escape critique. Nevertheless, the benefit they brought to the church tempered the critiques of Odo's and Geoffrey's worldliness. Later, Lanfranc, Anselm, and Wulfstan's contemporaries lauded their supposed humility and sense of spiritual duty to their God and king.

The case studies in the last three chapters (chapters 6 through 8) bear out the tensions identified throughout the book. Elite clerics, who often hailed from a noble background, frequently participated in military campaigns in a variety of roles, from overseeing logistics, to serving as strategists and battlefield commanders. Some inevitably fought. The way contemporaries interpreted a particular cleric's role in warfare often depended on the writer's politics (both ecclesiastical and/or lay) or personal like or dislike of a particular clergy member. For example, in chapter 6, Nakashian shows that the critics of Bishop Henry of Blois and Archbishop Thurstan of York were less concerned about their military service for King Stephen in his war against Empress Matilda and more concerned about them acting like knights. Likewise, in chapters 7 and 8 on Angevin England, Nakashian shows that writers praised notable prelates like Thomas Becket, Geoffrey Plantagenet, and the Cistercian monk and archbishop of Canterbury, Baldwin, for their military exploits and fidelity to...
their ruler. What is striking about Nakashian's in-depth attention to so many different warrior-clerics is that despite reform movements, evolving philosophical arguments, and different political contexts, conceptions of clerical violence remained relatively stable. The clergy ought not fight, but if they did it should be in defense of Christians or church property or out of humble loyalty to God and ruler. Any hint of ostentation, pride, or worldly ambition signaled that the cleric had forgotten their spiritual duty. In this, Nakashian's overarching argument, that high medieval society at large accepted the presence of and occasional need for warrior-clerics, is well taken.

There is much to praise about this volume. Despite signaling that England was the main geographical focus, Nakashian brings together evidence from across western Europe (he strategically left out the German context, which would require its own extended treatment), making it apparent that warrior-clerics, even if small in number, remained a widespread and accepted phenomenon. Though there is significant scholarship that shows the close relationship between the nobility and clergy, Nakashian's work shows the importance of violence to medieval elite identity, both clerical and lay.

One may question the "theory and reality" paradigm Nakashian employs to frame his exploration of warrior-clerics. This framing gives the impression that when the reality did not match the theory, violent clergy somehow failed in their vocation for not adhering to a nonviolent ideal. Nakashian states, "The goal is to illuminate the creation of a set of prescriptive rules for the military behavior of clerics, with the tacit understanding that the reality of clerical behavior was far different" (p. 27). What Nakashian actually shows is that theory and reality were always in conversation. Christian attitudes toward violence were contested and were (and still are) unsettled. The relationship of the church to violence was always under negotiation, and violence could be an acceptable part of a successful clerical career. This book is a compelling reconsideration of the scholarly narrative about reform clerical arms-bearing that will be valuable for graduate students and specialists alike.


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