Ronald J. Sider


This book is an important contribution to the reflection on Christians' attitude towards human life and death. The author's aim is collecting all texts from early Christian writers on this issue before the Constantine era. He also added the relevant passages of non-Christian authors who deal with Christians and killing. In the introductions of the texts, and in an additional chapter, the author gives interpretations of the texts and draws conclusions. Though some passages of early Christian writers are missing in the book, these would not influence the conclusions, but rather support and confirm these.

The importance of the book is that almost all relevant texts are collected in one volume and that the readers can make their own decisions. Most studies on early Christians and killing deal with the topic systematically, so that the ancient texts are used in a discourse that is built up by a present day theologian. Citation and interpretation go hand in hand, then, and it is not easy for the reader to test the solidity of the argumentation. By providing the reader with the ancient texts in a chronological sequence, the readers can now draw their own conclusions. I intentionally first read the texts and only afterward the introductions in order to minimize the author's influence on my conclusions, though I was not a _tabula rasa_ because it was not the first time I read the texts.

When I subsequently read the author's conclusions, I noticed that these were not different from mine. The main conclusions are (I give them in brief and thus without the subtleties of Sider's evaluation of the texts):

- Early Christian authors categorically reject abortion and capital punishment. From the moment of conception, human life must be respected and nobody is allowed to kill it.
Early Christian authors reject killing in any circumstance, also in the case of war. The only exception is the esoteric *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, which is far from mainstream orthodox and even ‘heretic’ Christianity.

Christians were not allowed to enter the army.

Those who were in the army when becoming a Christian were allowed to remain in this position on condition that they should not kill or give order to kill (a great deal of the administration of the Roman empire was done by the army so that most people who were in the army were actually administrators and not soldiers).

There were nevertheless Christian soldiers in the army, at least from the second half of the second century. Their numbers were obviously very low, for Origen can confirm Celsus’s reproach that Christians refuse to go into the army and thus to defend the emperor. This statement would be valueless (and thus immediately refuted by opponents) if reality would have been totally different.

During the last decades of the third century and the beginning of the fourth century, the numbers of Christians serving in the army increased, in spite of an ongoing rejection of this practice by theologians such as Lactantius.

Participation of Christians in the army, also as real soldiers, does not mean that the church agreed with this practice. As often in the church, doctrine and theological ethics differ from what members do. From the perspective of history it must be concluded that Christians in the time before Constantine participated in war. However, from the perspective of Christian theology and ethics we must conclude that this practice was rejected. Not all Christians kept to the standards, as was the case, on any topic and at any place, during the whole Christian era.

An interesting analogy can be made with the issue of abortion. Hippolyte tells us that in the time of bishop Callistes of Rome (± 220) even in the church women slept with many men and, when getting pregnant, committed abortion, thus, according to Hippolyte, ‘inculcating adultery and murder at the same time’ (*Refutation* ix,7). It is one of the texts that Sider does not mention, though it could have confirmed his conclusions. On the one hand one must say that abortion was not as generally absent among Christians as Sider concludes. On the other hand, however, though historically this happened in the church, it is clear that the vast majority of Christians and Christian theologians agreed with Hippolyte’s comment. Actually the situation with regard to abortion is not different from that of being a soldier: theologians rejected it and the majority of Christians as well, but some did things that were forbidden in the church. When at the end of the third century their numbers increased, the way was paved...