
Faith and Honor: The Influence of Christian Ethics on Medieval Chivalric Ideals

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Abstract: This paper explores the relationship between Christian ethics and medieval chivalry. After the fall of the Roman Empire, the Church worked with Germanic warrior traditions and gradually reshaped them. Knights were no longer only fighters, but also defenders of faith and protectors of the weak. This change can be seen in knighting ceremonies, the Crusades, and religious teachings. By studying both historical events and literary works such as *The Song of Roland*, this paper shows how Christianity gave new meaning to honor, loyalty, and courage, and helped turn knighthood into both a social role and a religious duty.

Keywords: Christianity; The Middle Ages; The chivalric system

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1. Institutional Construction and Codes of Conduct under the Integration of Knighthood and Religion

Following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, Germanic peoples gradually emerged as the dominant political and cultural force in Europe, establishing a series of early medieval kingdoms. In order to ensure its survival and security amid this transformation, the Christian Church entered into alliances with certain Germanic rulers. Over time, however, tensions between secular political authority and ecclesiastical power intensified, and the struggle between temporal rulers and the Church became one of the central structural conflicts of medieval European society. Within this broader context, the chivalric system and Christian ethical ideals increasingly interacted and eventually fused with one another. This process of mutual influence constituted one of the most significant features of social transformation in medieval Europe.

This integration manifested itself in several ways. First, the knighting ceremony underwent a process of religious reinterpretation and ritualization. Second, the Crusades further accelerated the religiousization of the knightly vocation. Finally, Christian moral ideals provided behavioral norms and ideological guidance for the knightly class.

1.1. The Religious Significance of the Sword-Girding Ceremony

The religious transformation of the knighting ceremony represents not only a significant reflection of medieval church-state relations but also a valuable historical reference for understanding the relationship between political authority and

religious belief.

Among early Germanic tribes, rites of passage into adulthood centered on demonstrations of strength and courage. Young men were required to prove their worth through hunting or mock combat, and the ceremonial presentation of weapons symbolized their formal admission into the ranks of warriors. This custom was closely tied to the survival needs of tribal society and emphasized loyalty to the collective as well as martial prowess.

Christian doctrine, however, introduced a fundamentally different interpretation of honor. Within Christian moral teaching, honor derived from faithful service to God, strict adherence to divine law, and selfless commitment to others. Consequently, the integration of religious elements into the knighting ceremony became particularly significant.

During the ceremony, knights typically swore solemn oaths within a church, pledging before God to defend the Christian faith and to protect the Church and the weak. Bishops would consecrate the knight's weapons, thereby transforming them from instruments of violence into symbols of a sacred mission. The blessing of the sword frequently emphasized the obligation to "defend the faith and protect the weak," thus linking secular military force with divine duty and establishing the ideal of fighting *pro Deo*—for God.

Through this ritual process, the concept of knightly honor became inseparable from religious devotion and acquired a distinctly sacred dimension. The communal ideals of early Christianity, reflected in passages such as Acts of the Apostles—which describes believers sharing all things in common—were incorporated into the ideological framework of chivalry^[1]. Knights were therefore understood not merely as individual warriors but as members of a broader Christian community.

This transformation had a dual effect. On the one hand, Christianity reinterpreted Germanic martial traditions. The Germanic reverence for strength was incorporated into a framework of "sacred justice," and the symbolic meaning of the sword shifted from representing martial authority to representing divine duty. Knights increasingly viewed the pursuit of honor as a means of glorifying God through courageous action and moral virtue.

This ideal is vividly reflected in medieval literature. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Sir Gawain readily accepts the Green Knight's challenge, interpreting it as both a defense of personal honor and a demonstration of loyalty to God. Throughout his journey, Gawain adheres to Christian moral principles and resists the temptation of the lady of the castle, recognizing that moral failure would stain his honor and constitute an offense against God. Ultimately, his steadfast adherence to moral virtue leads to the restoration of his honor.

Through this process of sacralization, the Church gradually incorporated the knightly class into the ecclesiastical order, legitimizing military action as a form of "holy warfare." The symbolic association of the sword with justice—already present in Germanic tradition—was reinterpreted as a divine mandate to combat heresy and injustice.

At the same time, this transformation weakened the traditional authority of Germanic tribal leadership. Knights increasingly owed loyalty not only to secular lords but also to the Church, thereby laying the groundwork for later political tensions between ecclesiastical and secular institutions. During the reign of Charlemagne, for example, the introduction of Christian rituals into political and military life helped strengthen centralized authority while reducing the direct influence of local aristocratic leaders over knightly warriors.

1.2. Institutional Catalysis during the Crusades

In medieval Europe, the Christian doctrine of holy war profoundly shaped the military conduct of knights and served as a powerful spiritual motivation for participation in warfare. Chivalric literature vividly reflects this transformation.

Knights came to view military service not merely as a secular obligation but as the fulfillment of a sacred mission entrusted by God. They believed themselves to be *milites Christi*—soldiers of Christ—fighting to defend the Christian faith and expand the realm of Christendom.

This fusion of martial duty and religious devotion appears clearly in *The Song of Roland*. Before battle, Roland confesses his sins to Archbishop Turpin and seeks absolution, a scene that symbolically illustrates the integration of knightly warfare with Christian ritual practice.

Historically, the most significant institutional expression of this idea occurred at the Council of Clermont in 1095, when Pope Urban II called upon European knights to undertake the First Crusade. In his speech, Urban urged warriors to “take up the cross” and fight for the recovery of the Holy Land, promising remission of sins for those who participated. By linking military service with spiritual salvation, the Church effectively transformed warfare into an act of religious devotion.

Urban’s rhetoric skillfully drew upon the Germanic tradition of heroic narrative, presenting crusaders as defenders of sacred territory and champions of Christendom. In doing so, he successfully converted secular ambitions for land and prestige into a powerful religious movement centered on redemption and pilgrimage.

The military orders that emerged during this period further institutionalized the fusion of religion and warfare. The Knights Hospitaller, for example, adopted a unique structure in which members assumed the dual identity of monk and warrior.

They were required to observe monastic vows—including poverty, chastity, and obedience—while also performing military duties.

This institutional innovation blurred the traditional distinction between monastic life and secular warfare, creating a new model of sacred military organization. According to their statutes, combat was not merely an act of defense but also a means of practicing Christian charity. Protecting pilgrims traveling to the Holy Land was therefore interpreted as a form of service to God.

Through these institutions, the papacy gained access to military forces directly under its authority, thereby reducing the monopoly of armed power previously held by feudal lords.

The Crusades themselves represented the most striking manifestation of the religiousization of chivalry. Although they appeared outwardly as military campaigns against the Islamic world, they were fundamentally an attempt by the Church to sanctify violence.

Knights who participated in the Crusades often perceived themselves simultaneously as warriors and pilgrims. During the siege of Jerusalem in 1099, for instance, crusaders reportedly walked barefoot around the city walls in prayer, imitating the Israelites described in the Book of Joshua.

In *The Song of Roland*, the ideological framework of holy war is expressed in Roland’s exhortation to his companions:

“Now must we each lay on most hardily,
So evil songs neer sung of us shall be.
Pagans are wrong: Christians are right indeed.
Evil example will never come of me.”^[2]

In this passage, the Saracens are depicted as enemies of God, and fighting them becomes both a moral obligation and a sacred duty. Roland repeatedly invokes the name of God in battle, encouraging his companions and reinforcing the belief that their struggle is divinely sanctioned.

Nevertheless, this religious fervor also contained the potential for extreme violence. The massacre that followed the capture of Jerusalem in 1099 revealed the profound contradiction between the lofty ideals of holy war and the brutal realities of medieval warfare.

2. The Formation of the Core Values of Chivalry under Christian Moral Influence

Medieval chivalry did not emerge spontaneously; rather, its central values—loyalty, courage, and the protection of the weak—were deeply rooted in the moral teachings of Christianity and were widely represented in chivalric literature. Through biblical teachings and the theological system of the Church, Christian doctrine integrated religious ideals with secular responsibilities, gradually shaping the ethical framework that governed the conduct of knights.

One of the earliest systematic descriptions of knightly virtues appears in the early thirteenth-century chivalric manual

Liber Honorum (The Book of Honor), which articulated a moral code combining Christian virtues with aristocratic ideals. This code emphasized fortitudo (courage), fidelitas (loyalty), pietas (piety), humilitas (humility), castitas (chastity), misericordia (mercy), and iustitia (justice).

Examining the Christian moral foundations of chivalric ideals not only helps illuminate the transformation of medieval European values but also provides insight into how religious beliefs and secular responsibilities were reconciled within medieval society.

2.1. Courage: The Encounter between Germanic Warrior Tradition and Christian Ethics

Early Germanic warrior culture valued revenge, battle glory, and honor gained through fighting. As described by Tacitus in *Germania*, warriors showed their bravery through violence and strengthened their groups by sharing war spoils^[3].

However, Christian teachings such as “Thou shalt not kill” and “love thy neighbor as thyself” challenged this way of thinking. The Church faced a problem: how to limit violence while still using military power to protect Christian society.

A solution was offered by Augustine of Hippo in *The City of God*. He divided wars into unjust and just ones. Wars fought for justice or to protect the weak could be accepted.

This idea helped justify knightly warfare. Knights were no longer seen only as fighters, but as defenders of justice and servants of God. Later^[4], Thomas Aquinas developed this into the “just war” theory.

This idea became clear in 1095, when Pope Urban II called for the First Crusade at the Council of Clermont. He promised that those who joined would receive forgiveness of sins, linking war with religious reward.

These ideas also influenced literature. In many stories, knights fight not only for glory but also for faith. In Spanish literature, battles between Christians and Muslims are often shown as religious missions. In French literature, knights pray and confess before battle, showing that courage is connected to faith as well as strength.

2.2. Loyalty: From Feudal Allegiance to Sacred Devotion

Loyalty constituted one of the most fundamental virtues within the chivalric moral framework. Under the influence of Christianity, however, the meaning of loyalty gradually evolved from a purely secular obligation within the feudal hierarchy into a religiously sanctified moral duty.

During the early development of chivalric culture, loyalty primarily referred to the relationship between a knight and his lord. This bond was rooted in the feudal contract: knights provided military service and personal loyalty in exchange for protection, land, and social prestige.

One of the most celebrated literary representations of this ideal appears in *The Song of Roland*. The *Song of Roland* was composed during the buildup and outbreak of the First Crusade. The religious fervor of the 11th century sparked a wave of pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and both the number of pilgrims and the scale of these journeys far exceeded those of any previous era^[5]. In the epic, Roland—nephew and vassal of Charlemagne—remains steadfastly loyal even when surrounded by overwhelming enemy forces during the campaign in Spain.

Facing certain death, Roland declares:

“ Strike with thy lance, and I with Durendal,
With my good sword that was the King’s reward.
So, if I die, who has it afterward
Noble vassal’s he well may say it was. ”^[6]

In this passage, loyalty is closely linked with feudal honor and service to the sovereign. Roland’s devotion to Charlemagne exemplifies the feudal ideal of absolute fidelity between lord and vassal.

Yet as Christianity exerted deeper influence upon European society, this secular concept of loyalty was gradually infused with religious meaning. Knights increasingly regarded their service to earthly rulers as part of their duty to God. Since medieval political theory held that kings ruled by divine sanction, loyalty to the monarch could be interpreted as obedience to the divine order.

Thus, loyalty was elevated from a contractual relationship to a sacred obligation. Knights were expected to demonstrate fidelity not only to their lord but ultimately to God and to the Christian community as a whole. This fusion of feudal allegiance and religious devotion became a defining feature of medieval chivalric ideology.

2.3. Piety: The Integration of Monastic Discipline and Military Life

The composition of *The Song of Roland* took place during a time when religious belief was becoming stronger in Western Europe. Church reforms, especially the Cluniac Reform, increased the authority of the Church and encouraged people to be more devoted to religion.

One important change was the use of monastic ideas in daily life. The Benedictine motto *ora et labora* (“pray and work”) showed the importance of balancing faith and daily work. This idea also influenced knights, shaping their training and daily routines.

Military life began to follow a pattern of prayer and discipline. Knights prayed in the morning before training, discussed plans at midday, and maintained their weapons in the evening. In this way, military service became closely connected with religion.

The Church also called knights to fight against religious enemies. In the thirteenth century, Pope Innocent III launched a crusade against the Cathars in southern France. Knights were promised both spiritual rewards and land, showing how religion and politics were often linked.

However, conflicts between ideals and reality still appeared. During the Fourth Crusade, knights attacked and looted Constantinople, a Christian city. This showed the gap between religious goals and actual behavior.

Even so, the Church kept its influence through practices like confession and indulgences, which allowed knights to seek forgiveness for their actions.

At the same time, chivalric literature began to show the inner struggles of knights. In *Le Morte d’Arthur*, Sir Lancelot feels deep guilt for his actions and later chooses a religious life. This shows the growing importance of moral self-control.

In the end, medieval chivalry was formed by combining different traditions. Germanic values like bravery and loyalty remained, while Christianity added ideas such as humility and compassion. As a result, knights became not just warriors, but also “soldiers of Christ.” As the historian F. S. Shears observed, the knight was fundamentally “a product of the religious spirit,” entrusted with a sacred mission to defend the Christian faith and serve the Church.

In *The Song of Roland*, the fusion of martial valor and religious devotion is vividly illustrated by the presence of Archbishop Turpin, who fights alongside the warriors while also tending to their spiritual needs. Before battle, he exhorts the knights:

“My lords barons, Charles left us here for this;
He is our King, well may we die for him:
To Christendom good service offering.
Battle you’ll have, you all are bound to it,
For with your eyes you see the Sarrazins.
Pray for God’s grace, confessing Him your sins!
For your souls’ health, I’ll absolution give
So, though you die, blest martyrs shall you live,
Thrones you shall win in the great Paradis.”^[7]

This scene reflects the profound integration of religious authority and knightly conduct. The alliance between Church and chivalry not only shaped medieval political structures but also left a lasting cultural legacy that continues to influence Western concepts of honor, duty, and moral responsibility.

3. Conclusion

The development of medieval chivalry shows how religion and warfare became closely connected in European history. The Church did not simply stop violence, but instead gave it new meaning by linking it to faith and moral duty. Knights were expected to be both strong fighters and good Christians, serving their lords while also serving God.

This combination changed the meaning of key values such as courage, loyalty, and piety. At the same time, there were clear tensions between religious ideals and real actions, especially during events like the Crusades. Even so, this system played an important role in shaping medieval society and culture.

The influence of this tradition can still be seen today, especially in ideas about honor, responsibility, and moral behavior, showing the long-lasting impact of the connection between Christianity and chivalry.

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Disclosure statement

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