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Once a soldier, now he's fighting Caesar

by Tom Roberts



Joshua Casteel teaches rhetoric to freshmen at the University of Iowa. (Cecelia Hanley)

The prisoner before him this day had already admitted that he'd come from Saudi Arabia to kill people like Casteel. He was soft-spoken, deliberate, intensely religious. He tried to convert his interrogator to Islam and drew him, against all the canons of interrogation, into an extended conversation about ethics and Christianity. "Coming from an evangelical background," Casteel later wrote, "I felt in familiar territory, as if I were speaking simply to my Muslim counterpart."

The discussion ranged to war and violence. Casteel asked him why he came to kill; the prisoner asked him the same question. And then the prisoner accused him of not following the teaching of Christ to "turn the other cheek" and "not resist an evil person." Casteel felt himself agreeing with him. "I did believe that my participation in systems of violence debilitates my Christian witness," he wrote. He wanted to say so much more to the prisoner, about Jesus, about alternatives to violence, but realized his example -- his uniform, his weapon, his membership in an occupying force -- said something else.

He also knew that he had crossed a line so significant that he had to tell a superior officer. He would ask to be removed from the case.

From conservative evangelical to ardent Roman Catholic, from West Point appointee to crusading pacifist and playwright, Joshua Casteel has crossed boundaries enough for a lifetime in his 29 years.

It may be misleading, actually, to use boundaries to speak of him. For though he himself cites broad categories to mark his rather far-ranging journey -- he was, in fact, a soldier, a conservative evangelical, an Anglo-Catholic and much else along the way -- in every phase, it seems, the borders quickly became porous to yet another set of questions or intellectual insights, another level of faith.

So it is with conversions. They can make us feel unsteady, but they get us to new places. His project now, as a writer, teacher and much sought-after speaker, is simultaneously a working-out of several conversions and inherently divisive: His experience of war has turned him against war; his experience of nationalism has turned him against nationalism; the fierce sense of obligation he once felt to commitments he made has given way to a dismissive attitude toward civic oaths and instruments of the state.

Yet the turmoil he has known is placed at the service of a search for clarity and, even more, for a sense of unity -- his own. The question he posed -- it's on a YouTube video -- as a 25-year-old just returned from Iraq and just having acquired conscientious-objector status, was this: "As a follower of Jesus Christ, what does it mean to be authentic?"

In mid-August, on the University of Iowa campus, where he's in graduate school for nonfiction writing, Casteel appears perfectly congruous with his surroundings, more convincing to this observer as an academic than as the soldier in Internet photos. He is tall and lean, with Scandinavian good looks, yet he can come across as affably tousled in his second-hand chic. From the outside, no one would think him terribly out of place here, certainly not a suspect in conducting great struggles with the social order. He used to work in the coffee shop where our day of interviews begins. The staff at the library, where we go to find a quiet room to continue the conversation, seem to know him. He's a hometown kid here who's made good, or who's at least become somewhat famous.



Behind his easy smile, however, lurks a kind of Augustinian restlessness, a

constant wrestling with big questions about God and Caesar, church and state, personal holiness. The questions evolve out of his experience, out of the realization that his desire to imitate his father and grandfather as military men led him directly into a deep and profound conflict with the assumptions not

only of his family, but of his church, his state and his culture.

This “child of homeschooling and Bible quizzing,” as he wrote in a biographical essay, this high-school valedictorian and president of the high-school Young Republicans, “was not supposed to be the kid who gets upset by violence, ambition and proto-imperialism. I was the patriotic, evangelical Christian ... I was supposed to ascend the ranks of the military and then the ranks of Washington.”

But the deeper he dug into the Bible verses, the more troublesome they became.

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“I cannot continue as an American war fighter. I just won’t, Dad,” he wrote in one of many e-mail correspondences to his parents and friends from Iraq. They were collected into a book, *Letters from Abu Ghraib* (Essay Press, 2008). “It sickens me day in and day out, and it’s treason against my King, against my real Kingdom and home.”

The writing in these missives, private and informal correspondence at the time, is at best uneven. But the writing wasn’t the point. Casteel chose some of them for public disclosure, and, as a book, the power of the writing lies in its very open revelation of a conscience, a sometimes almost tortured conscience, in formation.

In October 2004, just preceding the declaration to his father, he writes: “I’m not at the end of the road yet on what exactly my conviction, my understanding of a call to discipleship means. But I will take deadly serious Christ’s call to Peter that he drop his nets and follow.”

By May 2005, Casteel was discharged from the Army having “strapped myself to a new cross.” Three years later, some conclusions in place, the working out of his convictions, like fire leaping to new fuel, constantly continues to happen upon new questions.

Gradual conversion

“There is in the last second of time or hair’s breadth of space, before the iron leaps to the magnet,” wrote G.K. Chesterton in *The Catholic Church and Conversion*, “an abyss full of all the unfathomable forces of the universe. The space between doing and not doing such a thing is so tiny and so vast. It is only possible here to give the reasons for Catholicism, not the cause of Catholicism.”

Casteel will say now that he felt Catholic long before he formally became part of the community, and he will also tell you that it was in Catholicism that he discovered the rationale and the reinforcement for his stand against war and violence that has made him far wider-known than his religious conversion.

But it was not an easy discovery. He didn’t happen to pick up flyers on Christian nonviolence in the back of the parish church. He wasn’t encouraged by the words of the military archbishop in the United States or the Catholic chaplain in Iraq to act on his growing instinct that there was something inherently contradictory between war and love of enemies, a tenet he has come to believe is the core of the Christian scriptures.

The conversion to Catholicism (it ultimately became a family event; see accompanying story) was not unrelated to his conversion from militarism to pacifism. But at least at the beginning it seems that it was a separate matter, both as small a step for him as Christianity’s relationship to Catholicism, and as wide a leap as American evangelical Protestantism can be from Rome.

During his high-school years, Casteel attended a charismatic Protestant church, where the gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as praying in tongues and healing, were regularly said to be manifest. It was a curious doubt that entered his head. A beloved parishioner was battling a serious illness, and the pastor “gave lots of sermons [saying] if you cry out loud enough and with enough faith, God will hear and God will heal. I kept on struggling with this idea of necessary faith healing,” said Casteel. He kept saying to himself, “Well, when Paul wrestled with the thorn in his flesh, Jesus said, my faith is sufficient” and the ailment, whatever it was, remained.

This matter of suffering became a significant issue to Casteel. He considers pain “the single most unifying experience that humans have.” The ability to empathize with another’s pain, he said, is “the single most critical element in human maturation. ... It’s really easy to be happy when things are going great, but things rarely go great.” So there came a point in his later high-school years “when I couldn’t sit through the services. ... I’d maybe come for the worship but go out to my parents’ car during the sermons.”

Then other matters began to irritate him. “When everyone had their hands raised, like you could never be sad in church. You always had to be happy. And I kept saying to myself, ‘Jesus told us to pick up our crosses, not our tambourines.’ There’s something critical about the fact that the most pivotal moment in the history of Christianity is a moment of torture and execution. And the fact that in Catholic churches the body of Christ is still on the cross, I think that is important.”

He would eventually find new dimensions to his faith and expressions of it in liturgy, which provided the opportunity to be “really joyful or really sorrowful,” a setting where he could “pray the words of scripture rather than your own words.”

In retrospect, he sees himself as part of a considerable movement of young evangelicals to either the Anglican Communion or Roman Catholicism, a path he said is often fueled by intellectual inquiry. “As soon as we start reading church history, the floodgates are torn open. When I first learned that Martin Luther had a very pious devotion to Mary, my world was turned upside down.” At one point during his college years, he studied in England, and he can remember “looking at the stonework, at the walls that exist from ancient, ancient England, and thinking, ‘Those walls are older than my faith.’ ”

In his Protestant experience, he said, “history goes back to Luther, and then it skips the entire Middle Ages and goes back to the Apostles. Apostles, Luther, America,” he said, laughing.

“For those of us who are encountering history and wanting to investigate our own origins, growing up in the world of nondenominational Protestantism is incredibly isolated. It’s purely American. The more that you ask questions about historical trajectory, about the origins of theology, the more you start realizing that apostolic teaching existed before the assembling of the New Testament. It’s pretty difficult to remain devout to *sola scriptura* and the rest.”

He read deeply. Church fathers, popes, modern radical Christian writers, theologians. Central to his formation was then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI. “He saved my faith, seriously,” Casteel said. He read Ratzinger’s *Introduction to Christianity* while studying Arabic at language school in preparation for deployment to Iraq.

“I mean that book is the most beautiful baptism of existentialist philosophy I have ever encountered. It’s a remarkable book,” he recalled during the interview. “I was reading a lot of Ratzinger, I was reading a lot of John Paul II, I was reading a lot of St. Francis, and then as well Dorothy Day. The more I found myself reading Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton, the more I found myself in conflict with my Anglo-Catholic church,” with which he was then associated. By that point, he had traveled quite a distance beyond his

evangelical Protestant church, which, he said, “more or less conflated America and Christianity.”

He was confirmed in the Anglo-Catholic church, a small splinter denomination with roots in the Anglican Communion, and it wouldn't be until after he returned from Iraq, where he regularly worshiped at Catholic services under a “pastoral provision,” that he would formally join the Roman Catholic church.

“He scared me when he showed up in my class,” joked Fr. Michael Phillips, pastor of St. Wenceslaus Parish in Iowa City, recalling when Casteel arrived to take the course required for those who wish to join the church.

“He comes from a very educated background, but I found him rather humble and reserved,” said Phillips. He recalls Casteel as a good listener, even to the person in the group who was an ardent and vocal supporter of the war in Iraq, even to the significant portion of the class who came from evangelical Protestant backgrounds.

“One of the characteristics is that he listens, even when he has strong opinions. He listened to things that made him cringe,” said Phillips. “He has a real respect for the other person. I think that's the mark of a true Christian.”

The law of God

So here is the point at which Joshua Casteel has arrived as a result of his conversions: He can no longer take a military oath or an oath of office. “If the oath itself did not explicitly contain a caveat that said, ‘unless in conflict with the teachings of Jesus,’ I would never be able to promise that I would do what was in the best interest of a constituency according to constitutional parameters or whatever was the local law of the land. I would have to be very honest in saying I won't necessarily do what's in your interest if I think it's contrary to the law of God.”

Whether that constitutes a gratuitous way out of civic activity or a further taking-up of the cross is a debate that will probably be with the Christian community as long as it endures.

In one of his letters from Iraq, Casteel writes: “Give unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's. But I have given unto Caesar what is in fact God's.”



That is, of course, always a slippery determination. In his book *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, then-Cardinal Ratzinger, in dealing with the question, writes: “The faith of the New Testament acknowledges not the revolutionary but the martyr who recognizes both the authority of the state and also its limits.” The Christian, then, while obeying leaders even if they be “indifferent or hostile to his faith ... will not obey when he is commanded to do what is evil, that is, to oppose the will of God. The resistance fighter who dies with his weapon in his hand is not a martyr in the New Testament sense.”

It is, perhaps, relevant to note that Ratzinger as a young man joined the German army for a period of several years before deserting, and as pope elevated to the state of blessed an Austrian farmer, Franz Jägerstätter, who emerges as a singular figure in resisting the German call to arms, an act for which he was beheaded.

In Casteel's construction, Christians may best exist in society by “becoming actual servants to a society as opposed to the kind of lukewarm servant leadership -- heavy on the leadership, low on the servanthood” that is spoken about in contemporary circles.

And what if, in some new era, his view was prevalent? Wouldn't Christians be excluded from holding office?

"Well, the military is 30 percent Catholic. Congress is more than that, as far as what the baptismal records state. The Iraq war could not have happened were it not for Catholics. If Catholics wish to stop the spread of evil in the world, they need only refrain from doing it. Stop committing it and stop cooperating with the organizations that are doing it."

He notes the prevalence of war despite Catholic just war teaching, as well as the prevalence of abortion despite teachings against it.

"The movement is away from Catholic teaching, so I would simply say, what is the best way for Catholics to contribute to society? And I think that there is far more freedom to do so outside of the vowed life of civil order."

Even when he relents a bit, it is only by placing a heavy burden of Christian expectation on an officeholder. "Take any office you want," he finally says, "just don't compromise."

To some, these words might sound as unrealistic as the arguments for nonviolence, but at the same time they come with a certain weight and credibility from someone who has struggled so deeply and at such length with the questions.

The religious conversion that had its beginnings in high school continued through his single year at West Point. He was, indeed, attempting to build on a family legacy in the military. His grandfather served honorably for decades; his father was a captain in the Army. But West Point conflicted with the other conversion that was beginning to bud.

He left West Point in 1998 and that same year attended the University of Iowa, where he graduated with honors in 2002, with a brief interruption to attend Colorado Christian University in Lakewood, Colo., for the 1999-2000 academic year.

After graduation, he spent a year studying at the Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at Oxford University. Upon his return to the States, though he was delving deeper into questions of nonviolence and the Christian's place in the military, he was also haunted by a sense of obligation. He had received a commission to the military academy and felt a sense of obligation to fulfill some manner of commitment. Then 9/11 occurred, and he decided to enlist.

He attended a basic interrogator course in Arizona, followed by a stint at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center in Monterey, Calif.

And it was off to Iraq.

The struggle became more intense, as did the reading and the praying. He said the daily office of the Anglican church and regularly attended Catholic Mass, and sought in vain for a chaplain who might take his concerns seriously. He actually found a greater understanding among his superior officers of his point of view than among the chaplain corps.

He intended to leave his political literature and political theology behind for the duration of his stint, concentrating more on spirituality and prayer and leaving the big ethical questions for another day. Before long, however, he was ordering books from Amazon.com and spending time with the works of Stanley

Hauerwas of Duke University, theologian and biblical scholar John Howard Yoder, *The Cost of Discipleship and Ethics* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* by Richard Hays, among others. “If I was not on duty I was either reading about the nature of my moral quandary, reading exegetical commentaries of the New Testament, or brushing up on my biblical Greek (which I had studied in college) and Aramaic in order to reread key passages of controversy concerning soldiering and violence.”

He opens his conscientious objector application with the stark declaration:

“To take another’s life is the quintessential statement of divine judgment, and faithlessness toward the possibility of reconciliation and redemption. It is better for a righteous man to die at the hands of an enemy than to defend himself with lethal force, because the mere entity of life itself is not what is of greatest importance, but rather the manner of one’s living -- living virtuously and loving all, especially enemies.”

The manner of his living today revolves around the campus, his writing, and his speaking engagements. In December, his play, “Returns,” was produced by the Abbey Theatre in Ireland. He has a loose association with the Jesuits and earlier gave thought to joining, but he would have to get three years past his acceptance into the church, which was Easter 2006, to be seriously considered.

In a recent e-mail from England, he wrote regarding the Jesuits, “I’m lowering my gaze for a time, focusing on ‘normal life’ things.”

In the meantime, borders continue to fail to hold him. “Churches are really interested in the fact that I’m a soldier and Christian until they hear I was a conscientious objector,” he said. “And being in the literary world and the political world, people are really interested in the fact that I’m a conscientious objector until they find that I like Jesus.

“I keep on saying, wouldn’t it be great if both worlds coincided and you could like Jesus and also not like wars? Who’d a thunk?”

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