Ecological Aspects of War: Religious and Theological Perspectives from Australia

Introduction

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Australian cities and suburbs present a veneer of peace as we appear to have no war on our shores and much-reported terrorist incidents remain infrequent here in practice. Nonetheless, as ANZAC day commemorations attest, war remains part of the Australian cultural imagination. Australia has officially engaged in wars for most of the years since the end of World War II in 1945—including Korea 1950–1953, Vietnam 1962–1975, Iraq 1990–91, Afghanistan 2001–present, Iraq 2003–2009, and Iraq [Operation Okra] 2014–present—and has been a partner to the US in the Cold War with the USSR (1945–1991).¹

Security anxiety has been one characteristic of an Australian cultural imaginary over this period. This anxiety has both planetary and national referents. At a planetary level, nuclear arms proliferation has exemplified a threat to the whole Earth community, prompting multiple forms of resistance including the Palm Sunday Peace rallies of the 1980s. The danger of nuclear arms, while not diminished in the post-Cold War period, has receded in the popular imagination, replaced (despite the phenomenon of climate change denial) by the reality of anthropogenic (human-induced) climate change.

Nationally, security anxiety has focused around the trope of ‘border protection’ and the Palm Sunday Peace rallies have become Rallies for Refugees, where participants protest Australia’s treatment

of asylum seekers, especially the cruel practices of offshore detention. War and state sanctioned oppression have been critical dynamics in the serious global refugee situation, which increasingly has environmental factors, including in the Western Pacific, Australia’s oceanic neighbour.

At the same time, in Australia ongoing colonialisat policies towards Indigenous people and Country, and the pressure of mining—even where it is ‘welcomed’ for its economic ‘benefits’—effect a violence that is arguably akin to ‘war’. For novelist Tim Winton, white settler Australia has a ‘siege mentality’ with respect to Indigenous people and their lands.

On 28 September 2015, at a conference entitled ‘Ecological Aspects of War’ from which the essays in this issue arose, former president of the Medical Association for the Prevention of War, Dr Jenny Grounds, spoke of ‘Planet Earth as a Victim of War’. She said:

The direct effects of war on humans are so great that the environmental effects might seem insignificant in comparison. But war also contributes greatly to environmental degradation including worsening climate change.

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4 Tim Winton, Island Home: A Landscape Memoir (Docklands, VIC: Hamish Hamilton, 2015), 91–93, 95
5 Jenny Grounds, ‘Planet Earth as a Victim of War’, keynote address
The link between contemporary wars and climate change is one that Mick Pope takes up in his essay “Oil and Blood on the Bayonet”: Empire, Oil, War and Ecology. Deborah Guess points out, however, in her ‘Oil beyond War and Peace: Rethinking the Meaning of Matter’, that Earth might also be seen as a victim of so-called ‘peace’. As Jurgen Brauer comments, ‘when the guns are silent, nature does not necessarily recover because by all appearances peace (economic development) is a continuation of war on nature’. For John McDowell, in his ‘Political Imaginings to Cultivate Eco-Lively Reflections on Violence’, the idea of a ‘war’ on nature may be less useful than analyses of human violence against more-than-human (including human) others, and of the deep causes of this violence.

Important to these issues of war and violence is not so much the question of the extent to which Earth is impacted by human warfare, or more generally the multiplicities of violence certain humans perpetrate against other humans, other creatures and our often shared habitats, critical though these questions are. Rather, the crucial question concerns the frame of reference we bring to thinking about ecology and war. Usually, such questions are addressed from an anthropocentric frame and with a set of barely conscious anthropocentric assumptions. While the questions of the impact of human violence on the wider Earth community are critical in themselves, what if theologians and scholars of religion were to address thinking about war and peace through the lens of the wellbeing of the entire Earth community?

In gathering the essays in this issue, we had two main aims: first to situate questions of war and peace in a wider ecological framework particularly in relation to Australia; second to bring insights from religious traditions to bear on the complex, seemingly impossible global situation which touches almost (and arguably) every people and place.

to Ecological Aspects of War: Religious Perspectives from Australia conference, 28 September 2015, Trinity College Theological School, Parkville, Victoria.

As a medical professional, Grounds spoke about the links between human health and environmental health; such links stem from and give evidence for our interconnectedness and interdependence with more-than-human beings. Moreover, the experience of peoples seeking refuge as an adaptation to climate change exemplifies the interconnectedness of social and ecological justice. Not only do humans now influence the lives and habitats of other than humans in multiple and complex ways, but the interconnectedness of social and ecological justice highlights also the inter-influence of humans and their own habitats. Humans are embedded in more-than-human habitats, affecting and affected by the interconnected fates of more-than-human others.

Concerns about human security, then, are ill-founded if they are not embedded in wider concerns for more-than-human others and for Earth itself. ‘We have a very narrow and simplistic concept of security’, Grounds said. She noted that the kinds of security fears that took shape in the twenty-first century, particularly after 9/11, were a setback for action on climate change and nuclear disarmament. Nonetheless, argued Grounds, as ‘intelligent beings’, humans are not only ‘responsible for our behaviour toward others and the environment’, but also that we have the capacity to act with and for the good of the planet. ‘We have developed ways to encourage and enforce good habits, and to prevent crimes and antisocial behaviour,’ she said. For Grounds, these ways include religious traditions and systems of law. Her activist challenge to theologians and scholars of religion was to articulate these ways in terms of a planetary good.

In different ways, the contributors to this issue take up this challenge. In his essay ‘Ecology and Peace: Responding to the Ethos of Exclusion’, Joseph Camilleri comments:

What renders the present situation unacceptable are not simply the symptoms of our contemporary ailment, be it carbon emissions or casualties on the battlefield, but the underlying psychological and social structures that exclude, whether it be on the basis of identity as defined by gender, sexual orientation, class, caste, race, ethnicity, religion, culture or ideology, or on the basis of dualisms that separate mind and body, matter and spirit, the human
species and other living systems.

Drawing on Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’* and other contemporary prophetic voices, Camilleri calls for a radical inclusivity in the ‘new’ epoch toward which we as humans are moving. He labels this ‘the holoreflexive epoch’, a planetary, ecocentric time which ‘represents, at least embryonically, a holistic response to the logic of exclusion’ in its embrace of ‘the totality of relationships between the human species and the rest of the biosphere’.

Like Camilleri, McDowell is concerned with the structures—social, cultural, political—that promote and authorise violence. He begins with the idea that there are habitual pathologies associated with the ‘death-drive’ which give rise to systemic violence. Drawing on the ‘conflictual ontologies’ found in literary images from a diverse group of writers—Nietzsche, Shelley and Euripides—McDowell suggests that the underlying preoccupation with death and violence can be exposed and fractured. Cultivating theologian Grace Jantzen’s ‘life giving metaphor of natality’ offers an alternative version of cultural politics.

Life-giving is implicit in Shelini Harris’s approach to non-violence. In her essay ‘Our War with Nature and Each Other from a Buddhist Perspective’, Harris makes strong connections between human conflict and our attitudes to nature. Both types of conflict, Harris argues, derive from our inability to recognise the interrelatedness of all life. Particularly in Western culture this has led to an ethic of power and control over nature. Drawing on Sharon Welch and Vandana Shiva, Harris argues from a Buddhist perspective that a greater understanding and appreciation of the relationship between humans and other forms of life may enable us to relinquish the urge to control and so invite non-violent ways of living, both with each other and with the Earth.

Deborah Guess builds on the new materialism to suggest a Christological basis for such understanding and appreciation of the relationships between humans and other beings, not simply other forms of life. She calls into question a ‘life/matter’ dualism, by affirming with thinkers such as Jane Bennett the agency of matter. Moving beyond the generally secular approach of new materialist studies, Guess argues that the concept of ‘deep incarnation’ offers a
basis for rethinking not only divine relationship with more-than-humans but more particularly the way matter has agency in matters of war and peace. Taking the example of ‘the spillage and firing of oil in the Gulf War of 1991’, Guess asks:

how might our actions change if we see the spillage, even the extraction, of oil, whether as the consequence of the workings of our peace-time economy or as an act of war, as similarly involving something which is not only a resource/fuel for human consumption but also, like garbage, is ‘lively and potentially dangerous’?

Thinking about matter as active and ourselves as coagents with other matter, in an incarnational context where Christ is deeply embedded in the material world, unsettles the problematic dualisms that support human domination of the rest of creation. Moreover, this unsettling suggests a more complex way of thinking about our impact as part of the natural world that decentres human agency.

Such decentring of human agency does not take away human responsibility, but does suggest a kenotic approach to human response to violence. In her essay, ‘Bonhoeffer and “the right to self assertion”: Understanding Theologically the Mastery of Nature and War’, Dianne Rayson takes up Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s theme of self-assertion, understood as the assertion of rights over against the rights of others. Although Bonhoeffer discussed the theme in relation to the violence of war, Rayson argues that Bonhoeffer’s ideas on assertion can also be extended to a discussion of violence in relation to ecology. This is possible because war and ecology are ‘connected at a conceptual level where theological interrogation of mastery, power and violence can occur’. Bonhoeffer’s insight that there is a contrast between the Eastern way (surrender) and the Western way (mastery) can lead, Rayson argues, to a Christian kenotic way of responding to, and preventing, both the violence of war and violence against Earth.

In what ways do religious traditions negotiate these questions of response to and prevention of violence in practice? Lawyer, Asmi Wood takes up this question in relation to Islamic Law with reference to International Humanitarian Law (IHL) in his essay ‘Some Limits to the Use of Armed Force under the Shari’a’. In a contemporary context
where radical militant groups such as IS claim allegiance to Islam, Wood explores in careful detail the provisions and prohibitions on engagements with the ‘enemy’, non-combatants, and treatment of prisoners of war in armed conflict and examines the lawfulness of certain practices claimed by such groups as being permissible under Islamic law. At the same time, Wood suggests that aspects of Islamic law could helpfully inform IHL. He proposes a form of words for contemporary shari’a law in relation to war, including a focus on other creatures. Under Islamic law, other animals should not be killed except for food. The Islamic prohibition of fire as a means of war has implications for the use of many modern forms of weaponry, and Wood argues that based on this prohibition: ‘Muslims should take the opportunity to use shari’a norms to join in and promote weapons ban treaties, particularly weapons that cause slow painful deaths to animals and humans.’

Mick Pope’s essay, mentioned above, is the final essay in this issue and considers a biblical Christian response to the violence of empires. Pope, with a background in mathematics, science and meteorology, carefully and passionately describes intersections between oil, climate change, wars in the Middle East in recent centuries, and US imperialism. He then draws on contemporary biblical scholarship, to consider responses to empire, in early Christian writings of the first century CE, with a particular focus on Pauline letters. He argues that: ‘Paul’s declaration of the gospel in Rom 1:1–5 is anti-empire … presenting Jesus as the world’s true Lord in contradistinction to Caesar.’ For Pope, the ‘Lordship of Christ’ has practical implications for twenty-first century Christians who are called to ecological and social justice in this pressing context of the geopolitical impacts of oil. It is ‘a matter of Christian duty to repay the historical debts incurred by fossil fuel extraction and use.’ The ‘Pax Christi’ becomes a kind of yardstick which ‘is nothing like the Pax Romana or Pax Americana’. The peace of Christ is counter-imperial and implies such practices as ‘a sharing of energy technologies’ to ‘help replace the violent acquisition of energy resources that now takes place’.

As each of the contributors to this volume attests, there is no simple description of the impacts and causes of the violence of war and the violence against the planet, or their intersection. The complexity of the situation invites humility. The entanglement of humans with other creatures, with their own habitats and with the habitats of others far
from them, implies a decentring of humankind, especially of Western notions of human supremacy, and a conversion from anthropocentrism in activism, theology and religious discourse. Religious traditions, while sometimes seen as part of the problem, offer ways of countering the ideologies and imaginaries of human mastery, through kenotic, life-affirming and inclusive orientations toward peace. There is a long way to go, but the task for scholars is to engage their own traditions alongside those of others in multidisciplinary, inter-faith conversation. Scholarship in this area will necessarily be a form of activism and will call forth cooperation with activists for justice, peace and ecological wholeness in what Camilleri calls ‘the holoreflexive epoch’ where we affirm and embrace the planetary relationality of which we are part.

Although not often seen in this way, one aspect of the planetary relationality of which we are part is our scholarly collegiality. We are grateful not only to the contributors for sharing their scholarship in this volume, especially to Associate Professor Asmi Wood for sharing his expertise in Islamic and International law at our invitation. We very much appreciate the work of our anonymous referees who peer reviewed the other six essays in this volume. Finally, the Ecological Aspects of War conference in 2015 and early work on this project was enabled by a small research grant from the University of Divinity, and the support in kind of Trinity College Theological School, Whitley College and the Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy. We offer our thanks.