Some Thoughts on Anzac Day, April 25th, 2020

The Anzac Tradition, 'Personally'

My family did not do very well in war: World War I saw two grand-uncles – my grandfather's brothers on my father's side – lose their lives on the Western Front, while another lost his leg at Gallipoli. World War II, saw my uncle – my mother's brother – lose his life. Having survived the Burma Road, he drowned in the South China sea, on a Japanese prisoner of war ship the SS Rakuyo Maru, sunk by a torpedo of the U.S. submarine, the USS Sea Lion II. 1158 other Australians and British POWs from the Rakuyu Maru died that day, from an original contingent of 1318.

My father returned from fighting in Palestine and Tarakan, Borneo, Indonesia – just south of infamous Sandakan – a subdued figure, who spoke little of the experience, although when I was just 9 years of age, he took me to see the newly released film, "The Great Escape". I clearly remember the queue outside the Paris Cinema in George St, holding Dad's hand tightly, scared of being lost, but also deeply aware that this was a special event: there was a solemnity to it. My father, occasionally went on the Anzac march, but not frequently, and as time moved on, he preferred to allow the distance to allow precisely that: distance. Progressively, as his attitudes to military adventures changed, he saw the events with greater subtlety. I recall, when we saw the play, "The One Day of the Year" by the playwright Alan Seymour, which questioned the ANZAC tradition, or at least, its interpretation, Dad was philosophical and even sympathetic toward the criticisms laid at the door of Australia's military memory.

So, what to make of the ANZAC story? On the one hand, we remember the sacrifice of so many – and I feel justified in that, since among those many, were my family. Yet, the romanticisation of our military history, the accompanying stories and mythologies which at times reflect disturbing world-views, sit heavily with me. In part, the challenge is how to commemorate ANZAC Day in a nuanced manner, aware of the incipient, inchoate danger of 'wrapping ourselves in the flag': something that quite literally has taken place at Anzac Cove's Dawn Service each, April 25th, for many years. I guess the problem is this: we human beings do not do nuance very well. We swing wildly between extremes: in one decade, simplistically patriotic, and in another, hostile to anything that even savours of remembrance. To hold these things in a sort of intelligent balance is difficult for us, with our proclivity for things 'black and white', not to mention simple. Of course, the difficulty involved, is not just due to our personal and collective psychologies at any given time, but also, the times in which we live, and equally importantly, the cultures and institutions that shape our opinions: not least, the nation-state. I clearly recall, that the period when the ANZAC story was being most questioned in my youth, was at the very time of the Vietnam conflict. This was no mere coincidence. There was a distinct correlation between when the state 'was on the nose' and when the ANZAC story as a legitimate expression of Australian identity, was itself put under the microscope.

So, all of this, leads me to the problem of how Christian theology tends to see, to interpret, the stories that societies and nation-states generate about themselves. To attempt to answer that comprehensively, requires more space than is available, but I would like to provide some ideas, through two lenses: the first, Scripture, and the second, more recent theological history: the period of World War I and its aftermath.

The Lens of Scripture

The Hebrew Bible records the struggle between the God of Israel and the "foreign gods" (*élohê nekar* – "gods of the foreigner"). In the world of the ancient east, the gods were a tremendously effective symbol of the political strength of a people. It could be said that all the gods were at battle with each other, which was really a projection of the socio-political conflicts, being played out between groups and states. In turn, the numerous creation stories of the various empires – and there were many – reflected in a mythical way, the meaning of social and political reality, the claims of nation states. For instance, the Mesopotamian creation story *Enuma Elish,* made claim to the political superiority of the Babylonian empire, as the political representation of the cosmos. Enuma Elish is also pure mythology, as the

emphasis is upon the birth, lives and actions of the gods as lords of the earth, with no place for real human beings, apart from being slaves: as the story puts it, "human beings are strangers in their own land".[1] On the other hand, the first Hebrew creation story – there are two – written in the light of the Exodus experience, creates a totally different worldview.[2] The story is *not* mythological in the sense that it is preoccupied with the gods and their games, and humans as mere appendages. Instead, in Genesis, Yahweh, the God of the Exodus, pre-exists creation, and the emphasis is upon creation – the earth and the cosmos – as a liberating event *for* human beings, called to be partners, co-creators with God. In other words, in the Hebrew creation story, human beings are made to be free: they are not slaves, destined to serve the gods, nor to be 'canon-fodder' for mythologically justified empires like Babylon. This tribal egalitarian community – originally referred to as the *apiru* – born from the Exodus rebellion, had the temerity, the sheer nerve, to challenge the power of Babylon with all its religious, mythological and political paraphernalia. To sum it up, the first creation story of Genesis, turns Enuma Elish on its head.[3]

The New Testament has a similar view, although expressed quite differently. In the New Testament, the situation is not one of a rebellious society of Hebrews questioning the theological and political foundations of surrounding empires, but of a burgeoning social group – the church – finding a place for itself in communities, societies and nation states, that for various reasons, considered them a destabilizing influence. For their part, the Christians were in turn, deeply suspicious of the dominant political and religious powers around them: a suspicion crystallized and justified in the acute memory of the conspiracy of state and religion to eliminate Jesus Christ, their Lord and Saviour

In the epistles – Corinthians, Colossians and Ephesians in particular – this sense of concern about the religious, social and political powers, is synthesized in the term "the principalities and powers", or just powers (*exousias*) The world view behind this is a spiritual-material construct, where the concrete, tangible powers that exist in the world, are understood to have behind them, corresponding spiritual realities; and in reverse, the spiritual realities, tangible real-world expressions. The basic insight is that the world is made of powers that exist to serve God's life-giving purposes in creation, but that as often as not, these same powers turn against such purposes, and become dominant forces in their own right, creating chaos, injustice and human suffering. For centuries, Christians struggled with this New Testament language of the powers, or *exousias*, assuming that it referred to distant invisible and metaphysical realities, far from human experience: something not worth talking about. It was not really until after World War I, that the 'penny dropped', when German theologians in particular, 'cottoned-on' to the insight that the term powers did not refer to irrelevant disembodied spirits floating around in the air, but impersonal rulers of our societies – the state, economies, politics, religion, the press, nationalism, colonialism; even public opinion, to name but a few. The insight was that these very concrete realities, amid which we live and which shape our lives, have a certain spiritual presence about them, that may be constructive or destructive.[4] Latin American liberation theology, sensitive to the realities of state and institutional injustice, drew from the well of this earlier German theological insight, and in the 1970s, were the first to speak of "structural sin": in other words, sin as not just an act of the individual alone, but of social, economic and political entities, directed by human beings and human thought, but which come to assume a life of their own.

In sum then, Scripture – Hebrew and Christian, Old and New Testament – both are cautious about the powers; among them, the nation state, and the stories, narratives and mythologies that societies and states recite to themselves, as rationalizations for oppression. The suspicion, is that the powers are prone to lose their way, to run-riot. History tends to support that view.

The Theological Lens of World War I and After

Turning to more recent times, let's think about Christian theology around the time of World War I.
The First World War began on August 1st, 1914. Sometime later, the most influential Protestant of the 20th century, the Swiss, Karl Barth, reflected on those events with these words:

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[1] Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis: The Story of Creation*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1963)

[2] The first, the story of the creation of the cosmos, to *which we are referring* is called P, the Priestly account, Genesis 1:1-2:3. The second, the story concerning Adam and Eve, is called J, the Yahwist account: Genesis 2:4b-24.

[3] Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel,* ch. 1 (New York, Schocken Books, Melton research Centre, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1976), J. Severino Croatto, "The Gods of Oppression", in *The Idols of Death and the God of Life: A Theology* (New York, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1983), and Jorge Pixley, *Reino de Dios,* Ch 2, "El reino de Dios como proyecto politico de Israel" (Buenos Aires, Editorial La Aurora, 1977_,.

[4] Albert van den Huevel, *These Rebellious Powers,* ch. 1, (London, SCM Press, 1966). There is another more recent discussion, Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millenium* (New York, Galilee Double Day, 1999)

Ninety-three German intellectuals issued a terrible manifesto, identifying themselves before all the world with the war policy of Kaiser Wilhelm II, and Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg…And to my dismay, among the signatories, I discovered the names of all my German [theological] teachers.[5]

For Barth, his much-revered teachers – among them, Adolf von Harnack, who had actually composed the manifesto – had "hopelessly compromised" Christian theology by their gnawing ethical failure. This in turn, led to Barth's attempt to systematically rethink western theology, leading to a school of thought called the "dialectical school". Some years later, during the 1930s, as World War II began to cast its shadow, Barth's acute sensitivity to the way Christian theology deferentially makes itself the handmaiden of the state, re-appeared, in his attack upon the respected German theologian Emil Brunner, who had written a small book called, "Nature and Grace" (1934). To that book, Barth responded with a fiery article, simply entitled "Nein", in English, "No". In his reaction to Brunner, an intense argument ensued, and it concerned God and institutions. For Brunner and many other liberal German thinkers, God is revealed to us not just in an immediate God-person-God experience, but also through human corporate life, the life of society. Arising from this observation, was the importance of the so-called "orders" (ordnungen) of society; especially, marriage, the family and the state. For many German theologians of the time, these orders were considered a major part of God's fixed plan, that required preservation. Barth saw the difficulty and danger of this thinking, the opening it provided for political authoritarianism to harness the Christian church as its own, for its own purposes: church and state together in an unholy alliance. And so it has been countless times since: Hitler and the German Protestant church, Franco and the Spanish Catholic church, Milosevic and the Serbian Orthodox church, Putin and the Russian Orthodox church. But then, there have also been Latin American variants: Pinochet in Chile, Videla in Argentina, Castelo Branco in Brazil; each harbouring the desire to make the Catholic church a submissive partner in a fascist, authoritarian arrangement. Barth was not mistaken in his insight about the state and the national mythologies to which it is prone, and the way the Christian church is susceptible to being appropriated as the religious 'conscience' for such mythologies.

So, what would I say as someone who carries the memory of multiple family members who paid the ultimate price in Europe and in Asia? That ANZAC Day, as a moment of remembrance, is a good thing, and even better, if we recall that at Anzac Cove, we lost. The recollection of our national day in the context of loss, hopefully furnishes some humility and realism to an event that can so easily and dangerously become mythologized. Additionally, I am a Christian, and I carry within me, Christianity's own very proper theological agnosticism about and caution toward the state. That is also a good thing.

An elderly Karl Barth, meets Martin Luther King outside the chapel of Princeton University, 1962

[5] James C Livingstone, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, Sarah Coakley, James H. Evans, *Modern Christian Thought: Vol II The Twentieth Century* (New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 1997), Ch. 3. Barth wrote amply on the powers, *Kirchliche Dogmatik III/3*, pp. 426-625. See in the English, Church Dogmatics III/3.