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WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

## **Saints and Stirrers: Christianity, conflict, and peacemaking [Book Review]**

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Geoffrey Troughton (ed.), *Saints and Stirrers: Christianity, Conflict and Peacemaking in New Zealand, 1814-1945*, Victoria University Press, 2017, ISBN: 9781776561643

In *Saints and Stirrers: Christianity, conflict and peacemaking in New Zealand, 1814-1945* Geoffrey Troughton has assembled a collection of essays by New Zealand scholars that chart an engaging historical arc of Christian peacemaking and resistance to war from the early days of European conflict in New Zealand through to the close of World War Two. An anthology that covers the period from World War Two up to the present is due for publication in 2018.

The editor Geoffrey Troughton devotes the introductory chapter to surveying the historical relationship between Christianity and New Zealand peace traditions, locating each of the essays against that historical background. The central theme of this anthology is the commitment to peace as a non-negotiable element of Christian witness. The contributing authors, mostly historians, are generally surefooted in engaging with the theological and ecclesiological issues that emerge in the course of their examination of the historical evidence.

These essays on Christian peacemaking, resistance to war and the conflict that this resistance generated both within the churches, and between churches and the state, should be of interest to Australians as well as New Zealanders, hence this review. While Australia and New Zealand have much in common in a shared colonial heritage, they have done some different things with that heritage, not least in the relationship between church and state. This collection provides a helpful starting point for exploring the differences and similarities in that relationship between the two nations.

The memorialisation of Australian participation in war has now become so egregious as to have become a civil religion. Troughton without discussing developments in New Zealand at length suggests that a similar trend can be discerned there. In beginning the task of recovering the stories of Christians and Christian communities who have challenged the status quo of commitment to war and its uncritical memorialisation Troughton has challenged a shared default setting for historical research and laid the basis for developing an agenda for research into peacemaking in Australia as well as New Zealand.

The shadow side of the memorialisation of war is the lack of attention paid to the stories of individuals who refused to serve in the military, or of social movements opposed war. This is particularly important for contemporary discussion of the nature of Christianity. In contemporary critiques of religion, Christianity whether regarded as an institution, or an ideology, is commonly identified as a source of violence. Such critiques of Christianity have often failed to note that there

has been a recurring tradition of dissent within it that have claimed peacemaking and abstention from violence as being at its heart.

The first issue that I want to draw attention to relates to conflict and peacemaking arising from colonisation and negotiating the relationship with indigenous peoples. The early chapters in Troughton provide accounts of the engagement of Christian missionaries and Maoris in episodes of peacemaking. While the appearance of Samuel Marsden in a starring role in this context in the first chapter may well raise Australian eyebrows, the case made for this assessment is substantial. These opening chapters represent an acknowledgment of the conflictual character of the European occupation and the active agency of both Maori and Pakeha in seeking a resolution of specific conflicts as an expression of deeply held Christian commitments.

The relevance to the Australian context of the recognition of conflict and the recovery of stories of peacemaking, is that increasing recognition of the frontier wars between the first nations and the European invaders in Australia paradoxically opens the door for recovering and retelling stories of attempts at conflict resolution. Without the acknowledgement of the reality of war and violent occupation in Australia the possibility of identifying and retelling stories of peacemaking will continue to be overlooked.

The second issue raised for Australians concerns the implications of the rejection of the referendums on conscription during World War One. The accounts offered of conscription in New Zealand in World War One, particularly the heavy-handed treatment of dissidents by both government and judiciary raise an interesting hypothetical for Australian historians. What would have been the result had either of the conscription referendums in Australia been narrowly passed, followed by an increased number of conscientious objectors and treatment along the lines of that in New Zealand been applied? The potential for further political upheaval and long lasting social division arising from the campaigns was certainly there.

The third issue concerns the relationship between the claims of the state and that of religious communities when they come into conflict. The essays dealing with conscription in New Zealand in World War One examine in some detail the ways a variety of Christian sects and their members engaged with government and the judiciary around issues of conscientious objection. These essays document the increasingly powerful reach of the state and its ability to enforce its will when confronted with religiously empowered sectarian opposition. This is an opposition that refused to recognise the overriding claims of the state, claims that from the point of view of dissidents can only be described as being religious or perhaps sacral in character. What also needs to be noted is the difficulty that magistrates and the defence department had in coming to grips with theological arguments and ecclesial identities that came from disorganised rather than organised groups.

These agencies of the state were clearly much more comfortable in dealing with institutionally structured forms of religiosity rather than unstructured though clearly tenacious communities of practice and belief. Even when Christendom is in decline then it still shapes the relationship of church and state. These essays make clear how much courage was required to maintain a conscientious stance against participation in war in the face of legal and social pressure. Stories of Australian conscientious objection are hard to find and the civil courage involved in this witness against the majority view needs to be explored and understood.

Conscientious objection while it was embodied in individual witness was in many cases grounded in a community of witness. There are two fascinating chapters on a range of sectarian groups who rejected in various ways, and for diverse reasons, the call to participate in the military in both world wars. These chapters are particularly revealing in what they say about the response of the state to dissent from the call to participate in war. Groups which had a clear organisational structure, and a documented account of their beliefs, were able to make strategic choices about how they would respond and how they would direct and support their members. Members of the 'Testimony of Jesus' a group without a formal institutional structure and written statements of belief fared relatively poorly in their efforts to have their claims to conscientious objection recognised.

The different choices made by the Seventh-day Adventists and the Jehovah's Witnesses during the Second World War in their approach to conscription, the impact it had on their respective members during the war and the longer-term impact of that choice on their organisation by the close of the war are also very revealing and likely to be of interest to the sociologist. The Adventist approach in World War Two was to present a united administrative front with a self-initiated patriotism and non-combatant cooperation. Adventists worked to convince the government of Adventist loyalty in all matters except carrying arms and working on the Sabbath, while marginalising and expelling deviating members. The result was schism, the emergence of an Adventist Reform Movement that combined the theology of the Adventist movement with the social outlook of the Witnesses. In 1940 the Witnesses were declared a subversive organisation and all their activities were banned. Witnesses continued to test the ban as an attack on religious freedom before it was lifted. Witnesses continued to fail to report to the authorities for military service and ended up in detention camps. The experiences during the war enhanced the solidarity of the Witnesses.

Resistance to war was not the sole prerogative of sectarian groups. Several of the chapters deal with witness of individual conscientious objectors from Methodist and Presbyterian churches. The story of Archibald Baxter in World War One and the Reverend Ormond Burton during the Second World War are striking and challenging accounts of individual refusal to go to war against the call of religiously informed conscience. They reveal in both cases a government prepared to use strong

measures against individuals who in response were willing to stand firm in their convictions at considerable personal cost.

The stories in this volume offer accounts of Christian witness that provide food for the imagination in lively examples of embodied commitment to peace and resistance to participation in war. These are stories we need to hear and retell both inside and outside the church in a time in which remembering war and fearing violence equally dominate public discourse and social imagination. For Australian Christians this anthology also offers an agenda for research into the churches and individuals who have opposed the state's call to participate in war and undertaken peace-building as an expression of Christian discipleship.