

HOW CAN WE BE MORE EFFECTIVE IN OUR SEARCH FOR PEACE?

By Fr Bruce Duncan

Some of the victims and survivors of armed conflicts and wars find their way to Australia as migrants, refugees or asylum seekers, and church agencies often play a role in helping them settle with a range of services, including trauma or torture counselling. Unhappily Australia is also faced with the possibility of terrorist attacks even on our own soil, as well as overseas.

This is a disturbing situation for Australia and raises questions beyond the immediate scope of our agencies, about what role can Australia play in helping to prevent these tragedies from occurring. Our agencies and parishes in the Christian communities certainly contribute creditably to helping some of these people who manage to find a haven here. But the larger question concerns ways to avoid wars and civil breakdown in the first place.

Australia can boast significant numbers of scholars in the universities, government and defence establishments to debate the morality of war and who are well informed about the significance of just war theories. Internationally of course, war presents a major field of studies, with dimensions in political philo-

sophy, international relations, communications, history, law, medicine, conflict resolution, development and religion.

The Catholic Church over time has been one of the most important contributors to this tradition in the West, which has parallels with a slightly different just war tradition in Islam. For those in the Judeo-Christian heritage, the problem has been to reconcile the commandment against killing with the need in extreme situations to protect the innocent and restore justice, as for instance recently in East Timor.

The discussions on the morality of war are dotted with the names of Catholic scholars and activists, notably Augustine, Aquinas, Suarez, Las Casas, along with Popes John XXIII, Paul VI and John Paul II, and of

course the US Catholic bishops. Thinkers from other Christian traditions have also made marked contributions, Paul Ramsey among them.

This religious thread in the tradition is of course enmeshed in a wider cultural and political context, and developed in an especially close encounter with the military tradition in Europe. In the early years of the crusades a thousand years ago, the two strands of tradition were closely enmeshed, tragically so with hindsight; at other times the religious and military traditions developed with considerable friction or conflict between them.

The relationship between the religious and military traditions in Europe provides a key to understanding its cultural development,

and it is very enlightening to reread church history in the light of the military tradition.

Church leaders have repeatedly and urgently stressed the need for Christians to actively participate in thinking and decisions about war and peace, none more so than John Paul II himself. And indeed many people do this in accord with their expertise and opportunities, and various church agencies in Australia perform a valuable educational and lobbying role.

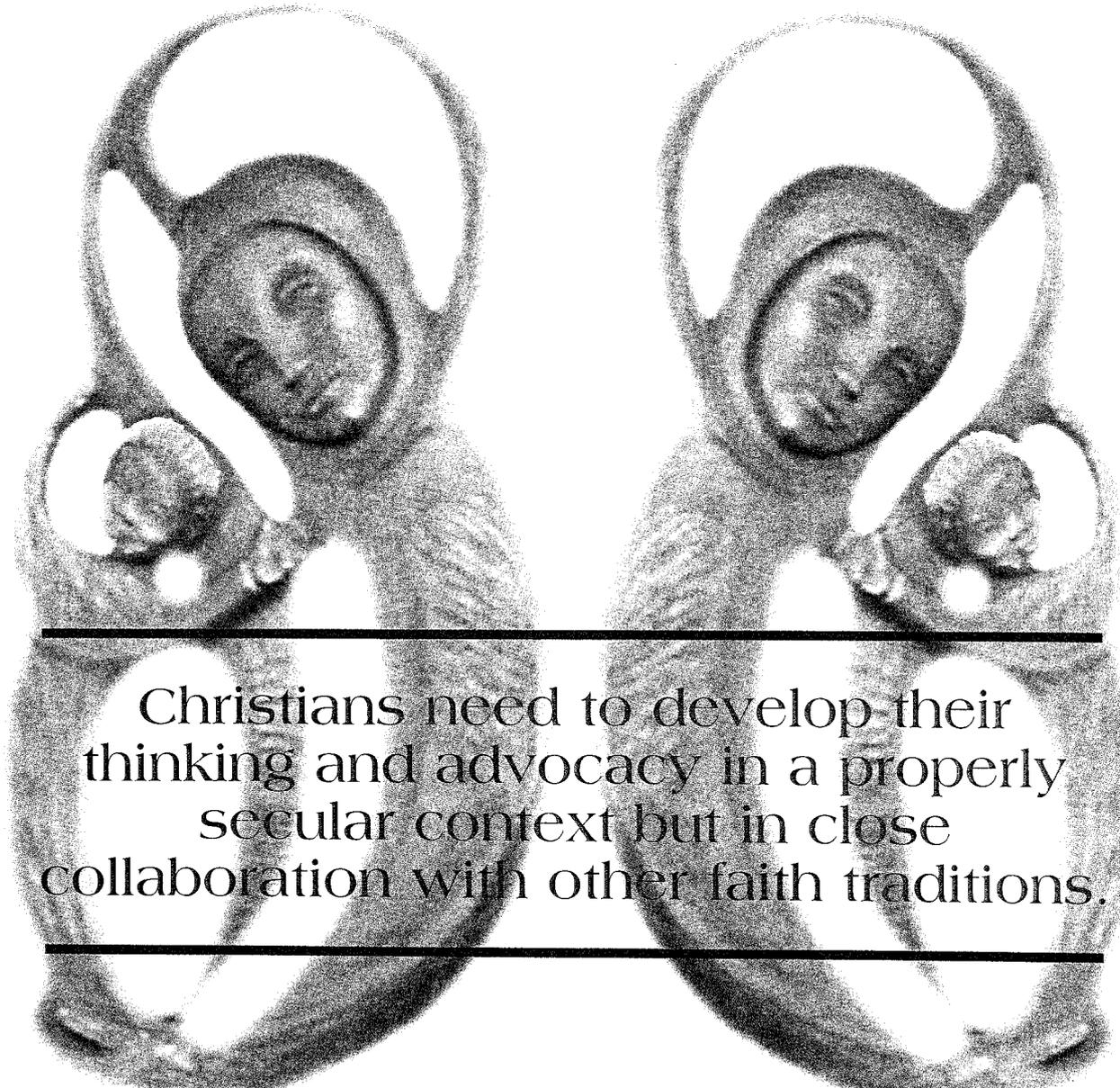
However, one might ask if we take our own tradition on these critical moral issues seriously enough. Are we producing enough scholars devoted to close studies of these matters? Do

we have adequately funded organizations engaged in vigorous public debate on such issues? Have the churches developed a robust constituency of well-informed conscience on war and peace issues among their members?

There are always exceptions, of course, but in general I suspect we would have to say not. In the training of clergy, studies on war and peace are usually a tiny part of a packed program of studies. Our other Catholic institutions of higher education also give such studies little place, though most of the other universities do. And sterling organizations like Pax Christi struggle to make their voice heard.

Even the bishops can find it hard to receive a hearing on such matters.

The current debate over military intervention in Iraq reminds us that even though the issues are complex we need to have a view informed by a lively understanding of our own tradition. Just repeating church statements will not get us very far in an increasingly secular or multi-faith world. Christians need to develop their thinking and advocacy in a properly secular context but in close collaboration with other faith traditions. This is preeminently the task of lay people, and to be successful must be characterised by excellent scholarship and intelligence. *



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