“They Might Have Guns, but We Have Flowers”: The Integrity of Creation and Peacebuilding

by Abbey Schumacher

Shortly after the attacks in Paris last November, a video of an interview with a father and son by France’s Le Petit Journal went viral. In the interview, the child expresses concern about remaining in his hometown: “They have guns. They can shoot us because they’re really mean, daddy.” The father, however, refuses to let his child be defeated: “They might have guns, but we have flowers.” The child protests, but the father explains that the flowers are there “to fight against guns.” The boy considers this for a moment. “It’s to protect?” he asks, a smile creeping across his face. At last the child tells the reporter, “I feel better.”1 After watching this interview, however, I found myself weeping—finally breaking under the weight of a mountain of suffering in multiple cities that week alone. If only the answer were that simple, I thought. Yet Pope Francis offers me a crucial reminder: “Everything is connected.”2 From this perspective, a healthy heap of flowers may very well point the way to peace.

Widening the scope, environmental health is in fact tightly tied to peace among the human community. According to Amy Goodman, host of the independent news program Democracy Now, “The world is beset with twin crises, inextricably linked: global warming and global warring.”3 I suggest that a deepened understanding of this relationship, further illuminated in light of the relational worldview foundational to the Christian tradition, enables us to build a more loving and effective response to these twin crises. As Francis contends, “We can hardly consider ourselves to be fully loving if we disregard any aspect of reality.”4

Abbey Schumacher is currently a third-year Master of Arts in Theology candidate at Catholic Theological Union, concentrating in systematic theology and ethics.

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4 Francis, Laudato Si’, no. 92.
On the one hand, both preparing for war and waging war causes environmental destruction. First, militaries are leading consumers of natural resources, particularly fossil fuels. In fact, a federal greenhouse gas inventory reported that the United States Department of Defense produced 95.4 million tons of carbon dioxide in 2010, a carbon footprint about equal to that of Chile. Second, contemporary warfare damages the capacity of the environment to sustain life. During the first Gulf War, the United States used high-density depleted uranium (DU) shell casings designed to penetrate armored vehicles. Medical doctors Barry S. Levy and Victor W. Sidel site DU as one factor likely related to “Gulf War syndrome,” which refers to the multiple illnesses and neurological impairments suffered by at least forty thousand veterans involved in the war from August 1990 to June 1991. The effects of nuclear weapons are even more devastating. In addition to the two hundred thousand people immediately killed by the two nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, the detonation of nuclear weapons has resulted in widespread radioactive contamination and increased rates of cancer in many places throughout the globe. Third, the destruction of the environment is often a deliberate tactic of war. One well-known example is the US military’s use of napalm, a flammable petroleum-based gel, and the chemical defoliating Agent Orange to destroy the thick jungle vegetation that the opposing forces used for cover during the Vietnam War. War not only produces fatal consequences for human beings, but also for the planet as a whole.

On the other hand, ecological degradation fuels violent conflict as human beings seek access to scarce resources or migrate due to forced displacement from uninhabitable or unproductive land. Sallie McFague, for example, cites “the struggle for arable land and water” as one of the root causes of terrorism. More specifically, the executive director of Greenpeace International, Kumi Naidoo, concludes that one of the “major catalysts” for resistance to the Assad regime in Syria was the fact that nearly “40 percent of fertile land, as a result of climate-induced drought, was wiped out.” Marcus D. King of George Washington University substantiates this claim, noting that the drought caused migration to Syrian cities and “triggered situations where youth were more susceptible to joining extremist groups.” Democratic presidential candidates Bernie Sanders and Martin O’Malley have also made similar claims. In fact, a report published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences last year concluded that the drought in Syria was a catalyst for the social unrest that sparked the Syrian civil war in 2011 and the subsequent rise of ISIS. The connection between violent conflict and environmental degradation is abundantly clear.

8 Levy and Sidel, “War,” 278.
A relational worldview not only deepens our understanding of the deteriorating cycles of violence we face, but may also contribute to building a more holistic and lasting peace. Such a worldview is foundational to the Christian tradition. In a unique way, Christian theology affirms the unity of all things in Christ (Col 1:17). Through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God is not only mediated through the created world, but also transforms it. In the gospel of John’s proclamation that “the Word became flesh” (Jn 1:14), the word “flesh” comes from the Greek sárkh, which actually “points beyond the humanity of Jesus and us to the world of biological life.” Niels Henrik Gregersen refers to this understanding as “deep incarnation.”18 As St. Bonaventure once said, “For as a human being, Christ has something in common with all creatures. With the stone he shares existence; with plants he shares life; with animals he shares sensation. . . . Therefore, all things are said to be transformed in Christ.”19 The entire Earth community is one in Christ, united and made sacred by the indwelling grace of God,20 and therefore both worthy of love and called to love.

Furthermore, Christian theology not only affirms the deep interrelatedness of all created things, but also their ordered interdependence. Far before contemporary evolutionary and ecological consciousness penetrated the realm of Christian theology, patristic and medieval theologians believed that “God lovingly endowed the world with everything it needs to function internally, and its proper functioning yields the common good of all.” St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, maintained that all of the distinct elements of creation “act in relation to one another to achieve the universe’s common good.”21 Such an understanding also appears in the writings of an unnamed twelfth-century Cistercian monk who “conveyed deep appreciation of and gratitude for the cooperative interactivity of humans, other species, water, air, and land to achieve their mutual flourishing and the overall sustainability of the monastery site.”22 Furthermore, the scriptures repeatedly demonstrate the connection between a healthy earth and peace.23 In her discussion of Leviticus 25, Dawn Nothwehr summarizes, “The fruitfulness of the land is a sign of the blessing of peace.”24 We exist as part of an interconnected whole, which requires “the healthy functioning of all the parts” in order to be sustained and flourish.25 The connection between war and environmental degradation becomes clearer in light of this relational perspective, which demands deep attentiveness to the ways in which our actions impact the web of relationships in which we exist.

Violent conflict is both fueled by and exacerbates the environmental crisis. The better we care for our Earth home, the less likely violent conflict will be; the less we rely on violence, the healthier our Earth home will be. “It cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected,” states Pope Francis. “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental.” Acknowledging the interconnectedness of our crises is the first step to developing the “comprehensive solutions” and “integrated approach” necessary for building peace.26 The relational worldview basic to the Christian faith constitutes a deep spiritual well from which we may draw to better understand our world and more lovingly and creatively respond to its needs. In Syria and neighboring countries, many forms of creative, nonviolent, grassroots resistance have already taken shape.27 Especially in a region where military action has repeatedly served

19  Nothwehr, Ecological Footprints, 320.
22  Schaefer, “Integrity of Creation,” 131.
23  Hosea 4:1–5, Psalm 85:9–14, Leviticus 25:18–19 are just a few key examples of this connection.
to exacerbate tension and spawn greater violence, it is these efforts in particular that should be the locus of international support. Flowers do protect us from guns, because their presence is “a sign of the blessing of peace”\(^{28}\)—a symbol of the life and beauty we must treasure and by which we must move forward.

\(^{28}\) Nothwehr, 246-247.