Val Noone*

Changing tides of the great war

*While Catholic leaders joined their Christian brethren in supporting World War at its outbreak, attitudes at home and abroad changed as the conflict took its deadly toll. As we prepare to mark the anniversary of this devastating conflict, historian **Val Noone** looks back at the experiences of Australian churches at the time.*

In August 1914, when the government of caretaker Prime Minister Joseph Cook announced that Australia was joining Britain in a war against Germany, most leaders, clerical and lay, of the Christian churches in Australia said that right was on the side of the British Empire. This, along with the enthusiasm of the daily press, helps to explain why so many young men rushed to enlist.

In those days, most of the soldiers in the Australian Imperial Force – as it was deliberately named to emphasise its role as part of the empire – were Christians. They left home to fight against the German Army, which was also a predominantly Christian army. True, with Turkey entering the war while they were on the high seas, the Australians went first to fight at Gallipoli in a Muslim country.

On the eve of the departure of the first convoy of soldiers from Albany, Western Australia, at the beginning of November, Archbishop Thomas Carr of Melbourne said the Australians who were going "had the satisfaction of knowing that it was a just war. They could always live with the consciousness that they had done what was right and praiseworthy." The Catholic archbishops of Sydney, Brisbane Adelaide and Perth had already spoken in similar terms. From their side, German bishops echoes their sentiments.

After expressing a hope that the war would not last long, Archbishop Carr explicitly argued that the refusal of the early Christians to join the Roman army was not a relevant example in regard to assessing the present war.

Protestant ministers did likewise, but usually with greater enthusiasm. On the night that war was declared, lay canon Alexander Leeper, the warden of the Anglicans' Trinity College at the University of Melbourne, made a stirring speech to the student body in support of the war, with the result that of the 50 men in the college eight volunteered immediately. Leeper and the college, like the Federal government, had been preparing young men for war for a few years through a program of compulsory military training.

In welcoming the war but ignoring its complexities many preachers said not only that German crimes had to be stopped but also that the war would test Australians, give them a baptism of fire, make up for their sins and free them from materialism. An exception was B Linden Webb, a Methodist minister of Hay, New South Wales, who echoed theologians such as Saint Thomas Aquinas by warning his congregation that what the King or the State commands is not automatically the will of God.

Away from the pulpits there was more opposition to the war, which was strongest among the handful of peace organisations, certain women's groups and the radical trade-union group known as the Industrial Workers of the World. Among the labour movement leaders for peace were Maurice Blackburn and John Curtin. Some Christians, Catholics and Protestants and mainly working class, were among the voices for peace.

In Victoria, Charles Strong of the breakaway Presbyterian group known as the Australian Church chaired the first Melbourne Peace Society. With a son in the war, he nonetheless spoke out against the war and conscription.

In Queensland, Margaret Thorp, then in her twenties and a member of the Quaker religion, reflected on the commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill', and on the teachings of Jesus about loving one's enemies. Critical of support for the war given by the mainstream churches, she started a branch of the Women's Peace Army, which had been founded earlier by Adela Pankhurst, Vida Goldstein, Cecilia Johns and others.

The Women's Peace Army had a favourite song, which the government tried in vain to ban, namely 'I didn't raise my son to be a soldier'. The song and the women activists stressed that it was not fear of battle that made a conscientious objector to war but fear of killing other human beings. This minority opinion was mocked and persecuted.

About 400,000 Australians, including stretcher-bearers and nurses, joined up for World War One. Many were injured and one in seven of them died. To this day, new aspects of their stories emerge almost weekly – in print and on screen. Some were brave, others not, some were humorous, others despaired, some went mad, others came through unharmed, some found their faith a help, others became atheists. All suffered greatly, as did their families.

Four hundred and fifty-seven chaplains were with the Australian military forces during the war. The padres, as they were called, are mainly remembered for their courage in ministering to the spiritual needs of the soldiers. An exceptional Catholic chaplain was Father John Fahey of Perth diocese, the first chaplain ashore at Gallipoli, who spoke of leading a bayonet charge there. He later wrote to his bishop about the first battle of the Somme that "you would not believe that such destruction is possible". From Ballarat diocese, Irish-born Father John Heneghan, too young to be a chaplain, signed up as a private in the ambulance corps and was killed in action on the Western Front in 1918.

Two small religious groups, the Exclusive Brethren and the Seventh Day Adventists, produced a number of conscientious objectors who gave important witness against war and for peace. Conscientious objectors in Australia suffered too. The army harassed those in its ranks by court-martialling them on other charges.

In summary, most people of faith in Australia were initially in favour of what became known as the Great War but over time their reactions were many and varied. Indeed, among believers as among Australians in general, divisions became bitter and government repression of dissenters severe.

As it became clear that the war would not be over quickly, as prices rose and wages did not, as wounded men returned with some of them begging on the

city streets, as mothers and wives learned to live with the loss of their loved ones or their shell-shocked state on return, as suspicion mounted that this was the same old story of empire versus empire without concern for the workers and farmers who supplied the troops, most Australians changed and wanted the war to end. This change is often ignored.

Consequently the numbers enlisting dropped, and so, in 1916 and 1917, as Britain asked for more, Prime Minister William Hughes tried to introduce conscription for military service. In a victory for democracy, which is to this day outstanding in world history, Australia voted No in two referendums.

While the anti-conscription campaigns were led by Labor Party activists, the Industrial Workers of the World, the women's groups and so on, one church figure came to play an outstanding role, namely the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne, Daniel Mannix. He became an ally of the trade union militants on conscription for overseas service, and also on wages and prices: he said it was "an ordinary trade war" and he recommended putting Australia first and the Empire second.

In contrast to other religious leaders who exercised their moral leadership in support of the state's social control apparatus, Mannix was exceptional among public figures in scrutinising the moral and practical implications of the government's war policies.

Mannix did this in public disagreement with lay Catholic leaders such as journalist Benjamin Hoare and clerics such as Father James O'Dwyer, Jesuit rector of Xavier College. On the other hand his principled stand won respect not only among Catholics but also among people of other faiths and philosophies.

Extra weight was given to Mannix's speeches against compulsory military service by two aspects of the policies of Pope Benedict XV. Firstly, the Pope was neutral on the war; and second, he declared that military conscription was an evil which made the present war possible, and was prolonging it. His views infuriated the British rulers and their Australian supporters such as Anglican archbishop of Melbourne Henry Clarke, and Baptist minister Thomas Ruth, both of whom publicly condemned the Pope. Whether or not the war had started with just grounds, the Pope was convinced that its continuing conduct was immoral.

Within four years, some eight million people died. The soldiers and civilians involved deserve to be commemorated. However, World War One was a calamity which could have been avoided, and not a cause for celebration.

In 1219, in the middle of the Fifth Crusade, Saint Francis of Assisi, a returned soldier, went behind enemy lines to meet Al-Kamil, the Sultan of Egypt, and tried to make peace. Much more was needed to bring peace but Francis had started a move to establish good relations between Christians and Muslims.

In a similar way, Anzac commemorations in parishes, schools and other church groups can be improved by including representatives of the Turkish and German peoples, thereby highlighting the suffering on all sides during and after the war.

* [Val Noone](#) is a historian and former Catholic priest.